

CHAPTER IX

TO THE SU-LO-HO DELTA

SECTION I.—BY THE EASTERN COAST OF THE DRIED-UP SEA

MUCH of the night at Camp civ had to be spent in treating the camels, all of which were now beginning to show signs of suffering severely from their long fast. In view of their condition and of the trouble caused by the need for frequent re-soling, I was glad to continue our march to the south-south-east. This course offered the hope of avoiding inlets of the sea, with their hard salt crust, and of keeping to the slightly higher ground with its easy going. After covering about five miles over decomposed clay showing flakes of gypsum, we crossed a wide depression covered by salt-coated gravel and then passed on to a stony Sai. Ledges of disintegrated rock, apparently composed of reddish chalk and quartz, cropped out above it. The ground became increasingly stony as we approached, after eight miles' march, a low but conspicuous ridge, the last offshoot of a hill chain descending towards the sea basin from the ENE. Similar decomposed ridges separated by depressions were in sight ahead.

March over stony Sai.

As the ancient route must obviously have avoided such broken ground I changed now our bearing to SSW, so as again to keep closer to the edge of the dried-up sea which the route was more likely to have skirted. As we passed along the stony ridge above referred to, which rose about a hundred feet above the level of the adjacent Sai, we came upon two small and roughly built cairns at the point marked on the map (No. 32. c. 3). On the larger of them lay the much-weathered remains of some animal's horn no longer recognizable. Near them there was a small triangle laid out on the ground with stones, pointing towards the west. It seemed difficult to ascribe great antiquity to this rough mark, and still more so to account for its presence on ground which for centuries past could have attracted neither travellers nor hunters. From the ridge we could see the greyish plain of hard salt crust extending westwards to the horizon, as boundless as the open sea; its shore-line, which was free from Yārdangs, approached within a distance of about two miles.¹ To the east groups of bold peaks were now clearly to be seen, continuing towards the ENE, the line of the headland towards which our course had been shaped since we had emerged from the belt of Yārdangs. I had taken this headland, the elevation of which was indicated by the clinometer as ranging from 3,210 to 3,840 feet, for the promontory overlooking the entrance to the great eastern bay along which we were to make our way to Bēsh-toghrak. The sight of those bold peaks in line with it, rising, as subsequent readings showed, to about 4,700 feet (Map No. 32. D. 4), now fully confirmed that conclusion.

Cairn found on ridge.

Descending the gentle slope of the stony Sai below the ridge with the cairns, we struck, at a distance of twelve miles from camp, an inlet of the sea-bed. After crossing this, we found ourselves once again on the track of the thieves, which we had lost soon after leaving camp. It was running straight from the terminal headland above mentioned, and thus showed us plainly the direction towards Yulghun-bulak, the point where the rogues had struck off from the caravan track. To

March along Sai above sea-bed.

¹ In Map No. 32. c. 3, by a draughtsman's error which escaped attention, the contour line south of C. civ has been carried too far west, instead of curving round the 'depression

with salt-coated gravel'. The area marked with symbols of hard salt crust should have been extended about two miles farther east.