

CHAPTER VI

A PLUNGE TO WHITHER-AWAY—THE AKSAI CHIN OR WHITE DESERT

THIS dissertation on survey methods seems not to belong to the narrative which brought us up short at the end of a scoriac valley. It is probably here as a reflex from memories of the halting and embarrassment experienced while getting out of that valley. Caliban's desertion led to the discovery of a curious mental phenomenon. He had already deceived us in the important matter of the fort. He seemed brutally ignorant, and we feared he would make a bad use of such small intelligence as God had granted him. Yet we were sorry to lose him. There were seven of us left, but we felt lonely on that great desert without Caliban. It is the power of a word,—and of faith,—irrational faith, I suppose. We had engaged him as a guide, and, indeed, he had taken us to the lakes, which were on the map. We very much needed a guide. After the lake, Caliban had only pretended to know, or had actually deceived us. Yet he was our guide. The word is a noble one, full of sentiment. Trust on the one side, helpful knowledge, all the way up to omniscience, on the other. That is what the word implies. And though all these elements of sentiment were lacking in our case, yet, for a few