

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE DRY RIVER AND THE DRY MOUNTAINS

OUR journey from Altmish Bulak to Tikkenlik was wearisome because of the æolian mesas and the sand dunes, but otherwise it was not difficult. On the first day, January 17, we fell into the muck, as described above — a piece of good fortune, as I soon saw. We had evidently stumbled upon the last remnant of one of the four little lakes marked on ancient Chinese maps as lying in an east and west line north of ancient Lop-Nor. That night, after a détour of two miles to the east, we camped near the old lake shore among some huge red and green æolian mesas, a hundred feet high. Around us in every direction, smaller mesas, only ten feet high, were capped with traces of old reed-beds, which must have covered a broad plain surrounding the lake. While the men, in a hunt for firewood, were picking up pieces of the rare poplars and tamarisks which once dotted the plain, I spied some sticks on top of one of the biggest mesas; and after a dusty scramble, found that they were parts of an ancient reed "satma," or shepherd's hut. A millennium or two ago, some Buddhist peasant, from Lulan perhaps, watched his sheep feed among the reed-beds far below, while he lay idly in the shade above the heat and flies of the jungle, and cooled by fresh breezes from the blue lake. Half a mile away, his neighbor, or his master, had built the good-sized house which I found that same night on the top of another great mesa.