

CHAPTER XXII

TO NIYA AND IMAM JAFAR SADIK

ON the morning of the 18th of January I started in glorious sunshine, doubly enjoyable after the confinement of the last few days. As usual after a halt of some days, my caravan took a good deal of time to set out again. So there was sufficient delay to allow half the boys and idlers of 'Old Keriya' to gather in the road and on the roofs of surrounding houses to watch the exciting spectacle. The jovial fat Begs of Keriya and Niya (the latter away from his charge for the time) duly saw me off. After crossing the river-bed, about a quarter of a mile broad, but now all dry but for a modest streak of water, we passed the little villages of Besh-toghrak and Ghadghang. Scarcely two miles beyond the town we were again in barren sands, the outskirts of the great desert northwards. On the right an absolutely bare plain of coarse sand and pebbles leads up gradually like an enormous glacis to the foot of the mountain-wall rising to the south. It was the outer range of the Kuen-luen, east of Polu, usually hidden by the haze from the eyes of the traveller who follows this ancient route to the Lop-nor region and the confines of true Cathay. One or two peaks, which Ram Singh had triangulated on his trip east of Pisha, were clearly recognisable again and offered safe points for further survey work. The outer range was completely covered with recent snow and thus looked more imposing than it probably does at other times. The high peaks about Polu and behind, which reach up to 21,000 ft. and more, glittered dimly in the distance.