

CHAPTER XLVII

THE LAST OF THE DRY LOP-NOR

ON the morning of February 27th we resumed our journey, with an icy wind blowing in our faces from that usual quarter, the north-east. For some ten miles the route skirted the still clearly marked lake shore over bare wastes of gravel and coarse sand, or else crossed in places small salt-encrusted inlets. Then the ground through which the track led onwards changed to a broad belt of vegetation with plentiful tamarisks and other scrub. On the south the cliffs of the ancient lake shore altogether disappeared, giving way to a gently sloping Sai with numerous wind-eroded clay terraces. Far away to the south the snowy range of the Altin-tagh was just visible in the clear atmosphere. Northward there still extended the level greyish flat of the salt-covered lake bed as far as the eye could reach. But at last there appeared a dark line on the horizon to the north-east, which before the day's march was ended could clearly be recognized as a projecting angle of the Kuruk-tagh. I greeted it with relief.

Where the scrub-covered belt along which we were moving narrowed, it was easy to see that its level lay ten to twenty feet above that of the salt-encrusted bare plain. To the mournful desolation of the latter my eyes had by now grown accustomed. Yet it served to heighten the effect of the fantastically eroded clay terraces which towards the end of this march cropped up in increasing numbers on our right and curiously resembled ruined buildings. At the halting-place known as Panja, which we reached by nightfall, we found springs with water that tasted quite fresh and plentiful scrub for the animals.