

CHAPTER XLIX

FIRST GLIMPSE OF AN ANCIENT FRONTIER

THE interest of the ground we had now reached was so great that for the sake of closer exploration I would gladly have left our camp where it had been pitched at night-fall, though dismal were its surroundings. But the total want of water and grazing obliged us to push on next morning. For two miles or so we continued to thread a maze of steep clay terraces and then emerged on the north edge of a lagoon-like dry bed which stretched away to the south-west. Though bare of all vegetation, it showed shallow but unmistakable shore lines as if it had held water quite recently. Our guide held on to a south-east course, and after another mile or so we found ourselves at the mouth of a broad and deeply cut flood-bed, recalling an Arabian or Egyptian Wadi. As we moved up its bottom, here close on a mile wide, the sandy soil changed rapidly to a coarse gravel. In the haze raised by the windy night the scenery looked doubly sombre and desolate.

As the Wadi could be seen steadily ascending eastward, I soon realized that we had reached a terminal bed of the Su-lo Ho. But we were not to follow it long; for when the guide espied a narrow gorge opening into the Wadi from the south he struck for it as if at last quite assured of his bearings, and with relief pointed to the well-marked track we found leading up it. After a sharp pull up between steep cliffs of consolidated gravel, we found ourselves on a flat pebble-covered plateau fully one hundred feet above the bottom of the Wadi. The latter was cut in so abruptly that, continuing our course to the south-east, we soon completely lost sight of it. This old