

CHAPTER LXXXV

IN THE 'SEA OF SAND'

HAD I known in Kuchar that guides were not to be secured from Shahyar I might, perhaps, have hesitated before attempting to strike right across the desert to the Keriya River; for without such guides I could not for a moment hide from myself the serious difficulty of the task and its inherent risks. Hedin, coming from the south, had left the end of the Keriya River with the certainty of striking the broad goal of the Tarim right across his route at some point or other, if only he kept long enough to an approximately northern course. For us coming from the north the case was essentially different. Our hope of reaching water within reasonable time depended solely on our ability to steer correctly across some 150 miles of high dunes towards a particular point—the termination of the Keriya River which flowed, not right across our route, but practically in the same direction; it involved also the assumption that the river still actually sent its water to where Hedin had seen it.

Now I knew well by experience the difficulty of steering a correct course by the compass alone in a real sea of sand devoid of all directing features. Nor could I overlook the fact that, however justified my reliance in Hedin's careful mapping was, differences in longitude deduced from mere route traverses were bound to be considerable on such ground, and in our case all depended on the assumed longitude being right. If we failed to strike the river end in the confused delta of dry beds which the river has formed since early periods in its death-struggles with the sands, our position was certain