

CHAPTER XCV

ON AN OLD MOUNTAIN TRACK

THE salt lake skirted on our march of September 15th was manifestly the same which is shown, though with very different outlines, in the sketch map illustrating the route Johnson followed in 1865 on his plucky journey from Ladak to Karanghu-tagh and Khotan. This observation confirmed me in my original intention to try and make my way to the upper Kara-kash Valley by keeping a north-westerly course until we struck Johnson's route. I did not disguise to myself nor to trusty Lal Singh that as we were now situated, with our animals more or less on their last legs and the fodder supplies nearing exhaustion, this plan involved considerable risks. I knew from previous experience that Johnson's route sketch done under special difficulties could not be trusted for details; and even if we could discover his track, probably still two marches off, it was doubtful whether the ground he had passed with yaks would be practicable for our worn-out animals. However, I felt that the die was cast.

There was little encouragement when, on September 16th, after a weary ascent of eight miles we gained the saddle of a low barren range to the north-west, at an elevation of about 16,800 feet. Before us lay a huge basin absolutely sterile and showing a series of dry salt-encrusted lagoons disposed somewhat in the shape of a horseshoe. The total area of the dismal depression over which our eyes ranged could scarcely be less than four hundred square miles. Where should we find here vegetation, such as it is on these Tibetan plains, or even drinkable water? Death-like torpor lay over the whole