

cliffs. They proved to belong to a small oblong platform for Muhammadan prayer and to what may have been intended to symbolize a rest-house. There could no longer be any doubt; we had struck the old route, forgotten for more than forty years. By it Haji Habibullah, chief of Khotan at the commencement of the last Muhammadan rebellion, tried to open up direct communication with Ladak and India, while the Kara-koram route was in Yakub Beg's hold. Over this route that ill-fated ruler's envoy took Johnson in 1865 on his adventurous visit to Khotan as already related in Chapter xvii. Haji Habibullah had probably ordered the construction of shelters along this difficult route, such as I had seen at Khushlash Langar near Karanghu-tagh, and his subordinates naturally contented themselves with laying down rough slabs for the ground plan!

Desolate as was the place they had chosen for this symbolic 'Langar,' water would have to be near it. So we were not surprised after another half-mile to come upon a small shallow stream lost farther down in the wide gravel bed. The soil near it was so spongy that we might have found the crossing difficult had not a line of white horse-skulls guided us across the bog. All the men rejoiced at having been rightly led to a route which human feet had trodden before. Yet the valley was as barren and salt-encrusted as the basin behind us, and apprehensions about the night's camp had become serious when at last, four miles above the first cairn, we saw the first stumps of dead Burtze cropping out. A couple of miles higher up living specimens of that hardy plant survived in scattered clumps, and as this would help our half-starving transport, we gladly pitched camp there at an elevation of over 15,700 feet. Reconnoitring farther up, I discovered that we were within one mile of the mouth of a side valley marked by stone-heaps and evidently leading up to the 'Khitai Dawan' meant by Johnson.

All through the evening and night a violent west wind howled, chilling one to the bone in the open and threatening to bring down the tents. Luckily we had fuel in plenty. But the poor animals must have felt it badly in