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Turkestan and a Corner of Tibet

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TURKESTAN AND A CORNER OF TIBET.

By OSCAR T. CROSBY.

NOT hoping to reach Lhasa—whose closed gates can be opened only by disguise or by force—but desiring to see something of Turkestan and of the little-known wastes mapped as Tibet, I left New York last May, passing through London to receive helpful suggestions at the Royal Geographical Society. While *en route* to the Caspian sea, I chanced to stop at Tiflis, and there had the good fortune to meet Captain Fernand Anginieur, of the French army, on leave, who accompanied me to the end. By Bokhara, Samarkand, Kokand, Andijan, and Osh, we reached Kashgar, where we were soon sheltered by the generous hospitality of Colonel Philip Miles, Great Britain's solitary representative in all Chinese Turkestan. I had learned in Africa what a pleasant thing it is to enjoy the comfort and security, physical and moral, of the British officer whom one may meet in the far-away corners of the Earth; yet there was more than the usual reason to appreciate it in this case, as neither Anginieur nor I had any kind of introduction to Colonel Miles. At the last moment a boy of seventeen, Akbar, presented himself at Miles's quarters, and as soon as we heard a few halting English words from his lips, he was at once engaged as interpreter. Happily, we met, through Colonel Miles, a Catholic missionary, Father Hendricks—known to every traveller in Central Asia—speaking an indefinite number of languages, and in all of them uttering always words of charity and helpfulness. He was good enough to go with us as far as Khotan, hence I had nearly three weeks in which to struggle with Akbar before he became our sole reliance.

When M. Petrofsky, Russian Consul-General, knew that we desired to ascend the Tibetan plateau, going as far eastward in Chinese
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Turkestan as Polu, he seemed to discourage our venture. Nevertheless our relations with him remained pleasant. The Chinese officials were courteous, and I believe sincerely helpful. We told them that we did not expect to reach Lhasa, but would come out in India, making a roundabout journey *via* Khotan and Polu, instead of taking the direct Yarkand-Karakoram-Leh caravan route. Polu is a little village on the lower slope of the Kuen Lun mountains. The caravan route from Khotan to this point offers few difficulties, and provisions can be had almost daily, as one passes small oases every 20 or 30 miles.

The number of our horses on leaving Polu was sixteen. Our permanent servants were only five, with eight others to help the horses up the ridiculous trail by which one reaches the plateau. A large part of our too small grain-supply was also temporarily loaded on donkeys, and entrusted to a body of men who started ahead of us with the avowed object of going as far as about one day's march beyond the pass at the top of the tremendous climb that confronted us. We reached the top without serious damage. When we were at last able to camp near the little lake known as Gubolik, or Serakul, at an elevation of about 15,000 feet, and 10 miles south of the pass that had marked our arrival on the great Tibetan plateau, we felt quite happy. But the donkey-caravan had not come. I need not enter into details of the delay caused by the desertion of our donkey-men and other troubles. It might have been wiser to turn back, make a row, then a fresh start, but the thought of the Kuen Lun gorges urged us forward. We had been led to a spot about 200 yards from a sharp bend in the valley, whose main branch became there practically impossible, while a turn to the right, requiring, indeed, the unloading of the horses, permitted a difficult egress to higher ground. Now it was that I bitterly regretted the lost Nautical Almanac and chronometer. Longitudes were impossible. Latitudes could be observed at meridian passage of the sun, but no results could be had without figures for solar declination. Several such altitudes I took by sextant, and the results appear in the sketch-map shown. A rather small and badly built compass had furnished me with azimuths taken at short intervals (average of thirty minutes' march) since leaving Khotan, and estimation of caravan rate gave horizontal distances. Such compass work is very useful, and good enough when checked by astronomical observation; but it is not close enough, in an absolutely trackless country having a complicated mountain system, to keep one on any selected line taken from a small-scale and necessarily inaccurate map. We could only try to keep in the right general direction—west and south—yielding readily to the welcome constraint of favouring valleys, meantime looking out for some indication of a road southward to Rudok. Thus we marched to the end of the valley in which the guide left us, and which must be that of the sources of the Keria, and into which we had come over a pass 18,000 feet high. Between two good openings

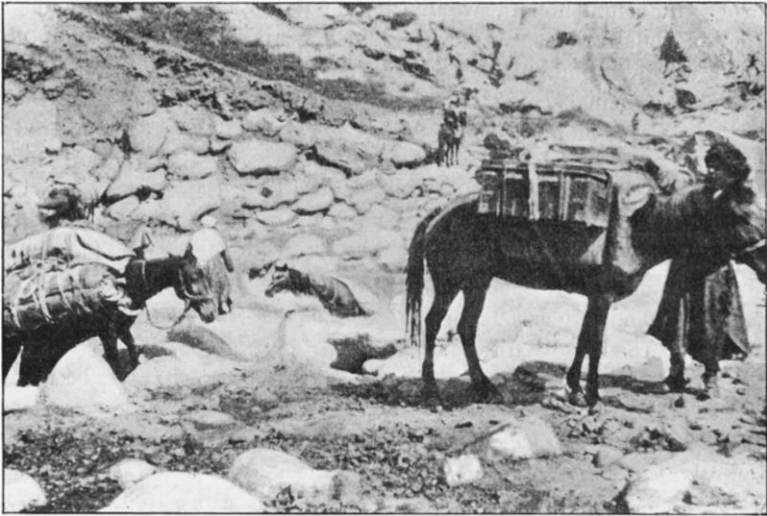
at its lower end, we chose that which trended southward, and after some twisting came into another valley, 10 miles wide, flat and sandy, which, with its lateral mountain chains running east and west, constitutes the dominating topographical feature of the Aksai Chin, or White Desert, whose unknown sands we were now about to cross.

About ten days after we had reached the plateau, being always at elevations between 15,500 and 18,000 feet, the horses began to die. That is the misfortune that overshadows all travel in this fatal region. And without transport animals, man cannot live here. There are no inhabitants in an area several hundred miles square, as has been shown by our experience and by that of other travellers going east and south of our route; hence food must be carried sufficient for long periods. Protection against cold must also be carried, in the shape of sheepskin coats, heavy wraps, etc. These with food-supply cannot be packed on one's back, especially when physical effort is made difficult by reason of the rare atmosphere. It is this condition, together with the extreme nocturnal temperatures, which kills the horses, even before they have begun to suffer from starvation.

The question of water, though always vexatious—particularly by reason of the treacherous mirage—was not a tragic one. We had several dry camps, once moistened only by a single bottle of water, at other times by as much as could be coaxed to stay on a pack-saddle in a rubber pneumatic bed.

When we reached the western end of the valley we plunged into the mountains, putting aside for the present all thought of Rudok, and let Lassoo (who had been with Wellby) conduct the caravan. That we crossed a pass was certain, but we could not find Lanak. The valley into which we had fallen carried us north-west, instead of south-west as we desired. The grain-supply was now so small, and the condition of the horses so bad, that it seemed best to abandon trunks of clothes, books, instruments, etc., thus making it possible to also abandon some of the horses. This was done, and the next day an opening-out of the main valley was found leading south-west. We ascended this sub-valley for two days and a half, increasing our altitude by nearly 2500 feet, cheered at first by finding two small stone monuments and a visible trail, but finally quite discouraged by the dreary prospect of tumbled, snow-clad mountains which we viewed from an altitude of 18,300 feet, through a threatening veil of falling snow. There was indeed a valley in front of us with three breaks in its walls that might give issue, but which of these should be entered—how far they could be followed—we knew not. Lassoo said we must surely die if we continued. We knew that in his long journey with Wellby he had suffered much and bravely; it was not an idle, native whine. We had two bushels of grain. The ten horses that remained alive were scarcely able to travel. Anginieur, though pluckily in the

saddle, was still badly affected by the altitude. Nothing remained but to retreat, and, when a good camp could be found in the main valley, to give to Mohammed Joo and Lassoo the best horses and the remaining bushel of grain (we used one in descending to the main valley), and send them forth as Noah sent the doves; the other five of us to remain in camp until their return, or until such delay had occurred as would argue their return improbable. Our men had set out cheerfully, believing that at any moment they might find a shepherd, and that in any case five or six days would suffice to bring them back with succour. We adopted this theory, though rather for the sake of having a theory than because of any known basis for it. That we were within 50 or 100 miles of some permanent village on the south-west seemed quite



TYING THE LOADS AFTER A HARD CLIMB

certain, but even 50 miles, when one is in a snarl of mountains such as the Karakoram Himalayas, might easily mean the end of all things earthly for men equipped, or non-equipped, as we were.

As to what would be found within accessible distance to the north, we did not know. Our envoys proposed to follow the valley, now carrying a considerable stream, assuring water-supply, and probably offering an easy road for the horses. Nothing else seemed as promising. As to the good faith of these men, of course the question would continue to arise in our minds. Their past record was excellent, and it was a chance we must take with all the others constituting our hard conditions. When they left camp Purgatory, taking the very last ounce of grain, we had played our last card. Mir Mullah, our pious old

Afghan, prayed with more than usual zeal, but confided to Achbar that he expected to die here. If it were Allah's will, then no better place could be found. So the time passed wearily enough, until on the eleventh day. Then, while shooting at the uneducated fish which would not bite, lo! an answering report was heard. Half an hour later our trusty men appeared, behind them three Kirghiz bringing four camels and riding two ponies. The strain was ended; we were safe, and still had four days' rations.

The relief had come from a point nearly 150 miles distant, though three Kirghiz tents had first been found at about 100 miles from our camp. Unfortunately, the Kirghiz refused to go southward. One could not blame them; they knew nothing of the country. Northward back to their camp, the way was known, which, as we now learned in astonishment, would lie, for six days' march, along the valley of the Karakash as far as Potash, which is not a village, but a known camp-ground. Thence they would take us to the Yarkand route, and as far as camels could travel on that road—that is to say, as far as the great Sisera mountain, whose glaciers and snows have been trod for centuries, but only by horses and yaks. It was hard to give up Rudok, but the Kirghiz were not to be moved in their determination, which, indeed, was a necessary one. So we waited one more day to give grain to our surviving horses, a little rest to Mohammed Joo and Lassoo, and to recover our abandoned luggage now that there were four strong camels for the burdens. Then we set out, free from care, but, so far as I was concerned, sadly disappointed.

For four days of march in succession we had good fires, beside the day spent with the hospitable Kirghiz, who put one of their cosy tents at our disposal. It would be very pleasant if one could be assured that even a half of the Christians one must meet were as honest and kind as these simple Mussulman folk. From their camp to Potash; from Potash, leaving the Karakash valley at last, to a junction with the Yarkand-Leh route, and we were again in *terra cognita*. We had still to slip and slide and freeze over the passes and glaciers and in the deep valleys of this world-old route, but now we met caravans daily; we were in touch with the world. Finally we came to trees again in the wonderful Nobra valley, where Lamaism, protected by Sisera's snows on the north, and by Kardung's glassy heights on the south, still turns its prayer-wheels, flutters its painted appeals in the passing breeze, builds its white shrines more numerous than the men themselves, piles its myriad carved stones on roadside monuments, sounds its solemn drums, teaches its charitable precepts—all unmindful of the streams of Hinduism and of Mohammedanism flowing backward, forward, along the road which time and Asia's genius, Patience, have worn through the peaceful valley, over the forbidding mountains—to Yarkand and far Kitai on the north, to Leh, Srinigar, and the Indian world on the south.

Memory lingers lovingly over the beauty, the quaintness of this valley, and of all the great panoramas, the monuments, the men of Ladak, and of further Kashmir; it lingers thus until startled back to our life of iron and unrest by the locomotive's shriek as it approaches Rawal Pindi.

Let us, however, before shutting ourselves in a compartment, recall for a moment the aspect of the unexplored region that was traversed, and see what changes may be suggested in the map of this lost corner of the world. While ascending the mountains from Polu, one sees rapidly at work the forces of disintegration attacking the vast masses



A KIRGHIZ FAMILY.

of exposed friable material. Slates, shales, conglomerates, loose sandstones—such are the abounding substances which the torrents wear away. One also sees some large pebbles of the harder materials scarcely to be found now represented by the strata above them *in situ*. Great as are these changes now, they must be pigmy efforts compared to the titanic movements of the past. On the plateau one sees and travels in veritable rivers of sand, whose large limits mark the boundaries of some great slow stream whose waters came down from vanished heights. Again, where the slope is greater, the course of a mighty torrent is marked by close-packed, rounded boulders. In one such case, we followed the bank of such a silent river of stones to an

elevation of 18,000 feet, where a flat area about 3 miles long showed boulders laid so accurately to the level, so cemented by sand, sometimes so regularly formed in circles, that one would have thought it a pavement of giants leading to the foundations of huge temples. Save, perhaps, in some stretches of the upper Blue Nile, I have never seen a stream having at the same time the width, volume, and velocity suggested by these boulders, now for ever dry. Many of them seemed to be granitic, though granite strata were not seen in the neighbouring heights, which here—as generally across the Aksai Chin—rose to an elevation of from 1000 to 3000 feet above the flat areas. The existence of such tremendous hydraulic force acting on materials no longer seen in the position of upheaval, hints of the degradation of complete strata of the towering masses that have been crumbled perhaps from a uniform elevation not less than that of Mount Everest. When one considers the wide-stretching sands of all Central Asia and the empire valleys of India as being probable deposits from these heights, the supposition just made seems not over-bold.

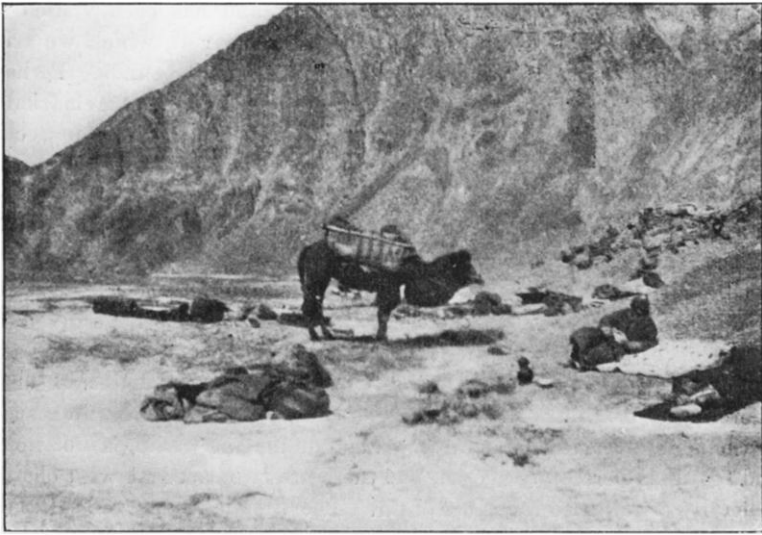
Snow appears on the Kuen Lun range at an altitude of about 14,500 feet, and at about 16,500 on the mountains rising from the plateau, the level spaces of which, in September and October, are substantially clear. The light snowfalls, such as experienced, were quickly evaporated during the warmer hours of the day by the fierce winds blowing quite regularly from the south-west, and constituting one of the serious hardships of travel.

Volcanic action has not been of wide extent. Indeed, one sees so little of it along the whole line traversed by us over the Alai, Kuen Lun, Karakoram, and Himalaya ranges, that I was the more forcibly struck by the two areas in which this action is unmistakable. One is near Lake Sarakul, and is about 5 miles square. Within that area one may see several true craters and numberless black, tortured masses rising about 75 feet above the surrounding coarse sand. On the edge of this area was another smaller one showing petrification of all the stems and roots of a hardy grass. There was nothing to indicate the continuation of any process of infiltration to account for the petrification, though possibly the area, which lay 4 miles from a sulphurous lake, may at times be flooded.

The second volcanic region was noted near the point marked camp Desertion. Here the surface of the narrow valley was covered, for a distance of several miles, with characteristic volcanic boulders, and outcroppings of lava in mass showed in the sides of the confining heights. In the great east-and-west valley, however, nothing is seen save what may be attributed to the ordinary effects of erosion. That which is particularly noted here, however, is the marked difference in material and appearance between the two chains limiting the valley. That on the north is a sort of double chain, presenting toward the

valley a front of foothills, black or dark greyish in colour, and showing the rounded forms that have been subjected to erosive action for a period relatively long. Behind them, and sometimes concealed by them if the intervening distance were considerable, rose the main chain, always snow-capped, and also showing rounded characteristic smooth forms. This chain sometimes receded from the line parallel to our route, but seemed never to lose its continuity until merged in the Karakoram range.

On the south side the colour was bright brick-red, the forms sharp, turret-like, fantastic, suggesting relatively short and violent hydraulic action. So great was the difference that I was led to suppose the



CAMP PURGATORY AND ONE OF OUR DELIVERERS.

southern chain may have resulted from some later earth-movement than that which gave birth to the northern range. These two characteristic forms and colours are found mingled in inextricable confusion at both ends of the valley; and, again, the chapels, towers, minarets of red appeared along the short valley which we ascended near camp Purgatory. This appearance has probably given rise to the misplaced name Kizal Jilga, shown further south on existing maps. The Kirghiz had never heard of this name as belonging to this locality, nor, indeed, of any of the names shown on the R.G.S. or the latest Russian map, as along and near the Karakash. They applied the name Kizil Jilga to a big red mountain on the Karakoram route. As in all this region there are no other inhabitants than the Kirghiz met by us, it would perhaps be well to omit these *noms de fantasia* from future maps.

The two lakes shown on our route deserve, on the other hand, that some name be given them. One, of fresh water, is possibly that called Lake Lighten by Wellby, though it is probable that his route lay a little to the south near the smaller body which is marked with broken lines, and which I saw only from a distance when I had climbed to the top of a mountain, whence the tired eye wandered over a maze of flat, narrow valleys and errant ridges, snow-capped or bare. One affluent, but not a single outlet of this beautiful sheet was seen, though we carefully scanned its borders. This, apparently, is the lake seen at a distance by Captain Deasy, and suggested by Dr. Stein as the probable source of the Khotan river. If this be true, its waters doubtless reappear after flowing through underground channels—a thing not infrequent in these regions. The other lake is salt, and has been visited by natives, we thought, because a trail was seen near it, which we tried to follow, but vainly; it gradually disappeared in the sands. Perhaps it had been made only by wild yak and wild horses. A remarkable lowering in the level of the lake seems to have taken place in recent years. Well-defined banks stand up about 15 feet from the general level of the sand now separating them from the water's edge—sometimes by a distance of two miles or more. These banks are still sharply defined, suggesting that only a few years have passed since they were filled. No such affluents were seen as are shown on the latest Russian map in connection with a lake occupying nearly the position given by my notes to this sheet of salt water. Information concerning the lake, and concerning the mountain system of Aksai Chin, has doubtless heretofore been taken only from the reports of natives. The error in respect to the mountains is considerable. The dominating chain is not north and south, as heretofore shown, but there are two east and west chains, generally parallel to the Kuen Lun. The first lake and the salt lake both lie closely ensconced in bounding hills of the valley, which narrows at these points. Heretofore they are shown as in open plains.

Another correction of some importance has to do with the course of the Karakash, which has been shown heretofore as extending 60 miles or more further south than is the fact. We chanced to come into the valley of this stream above its permanent sources, which come up out of the sand. There was seen, indeed, a small break in the valley wall, corresponding to the point where the assumed southern extension (shown dotted) appears on older maps. But this opening was seen to have a steep incline upward, and no water came from it. Nor can a considerable volume come at any time, as just below this point the valley was crossed completely, from hill to hill, by a very curious line of small stone monuments, about 2 feet apart, and consisting of small boulders piled about a foot high. The line must have been more than a mile in length. I surmised that when the Kirghiz found grass above, as might sometimes be the case, their sheep were driven to a

central opening in this line, and perhaps there divided, or caught for shearing. As there was no human being within many miles, we shall never know.

The plateau which we reached when making our last effort as a united caravan, is a spot of unique interest. The ridge which stretched its forlorn length right and left separates the Hindustani plains from the Gobi desert. The snowflakes that fell around us might be divided as they melted—part going to the hungry sands of the north or the still depths of Lob Nor, part to be warmed in the glistening bosom of the Indian ocean. Throughout the vast length of the Karakoram and Himalaya ranges Nature seems to have



HELPING HORSES ROUND A BAD CORNER.

raised these tremendous masses that here, wrapped in spotless white, she might sleep undisturbed by her inquisitive progeny, her *enfant terrible*, restless Man. But in vain. Children of the desert, children of the delta—led by love of gain, led by lust of war—for thousands of years they have climbed and crawled over the frowning mountains. The pace of commerce is slower now than in the past, I think, for the building of the Trans-Caspian railway to Andijan—sixteen days by ordinary caravan from Kashgar—has greatly affected the relations between Turkestan and the rest of the world. The wonder is that even the present volume of trade with India can be maintained. Let us glance at the routes southward from Kashgar. First, to the west, is the Gilgit route, by which the British representative receives mails from Srinagar. It is short, but not sweet. Caravans attempting that road

are unloaded, the goods being carried over considerable distances by coolies. This is sufficient to class this route as now impracticable for large movements. The Indian Government is now, I believe, doing some work of improvement, but only as far as its own purposes require in the Pamirs, not for curing the defects as far as Kashgar. An alternative route, branching from the former at Karatchunkar, goes by Skando and Kargil to Srinigar. It is no better than that by Gilgit.

Next is the Karakoram route, the worst part of which we traversed. To any European, it must be marvellous that human beings consent to regularly traverse this road. Much has been done of late by the Indian Government—perhaps I should say the Kashmir Government—to diminish the toils of the caravans which here carry substantially all of the traffic between India and Central Asia. The distance from Rawal Pindi to Yarkand—measured in time of ordinary caravans—is about forty-five days, as against less than half that time between Andijan and Kashgar, which in turn is about seven days from Yarkand, the two cities being in themselves of approximately equal importance, though Yarkand is the better distributing point. The Karakoram route is, moreover, more expensive than its northern rival, the mortality of horses at Kardong, Sisera, and Karakoram pass being frightful. The number of skeletons seen is almost past belief. The single fact that between Kardong and Sisera it is always necessary to do away with camel transport, and that on Kardong itself horses must often be replaced by yaks, puts this route out of consideration for the movement of large bodies.

The important question remains—is it possible to reach Leh without passing the glaciers and snow-drifts of Sisera and Kardeng? and if so, is the alternative route better than the one now used? The answer is a probable affirmative. A discussion of the reasons for such answer would be too full of topographical detail to be here undertaken. I shall only anticipate one natural query, “If this be true, why has it never been done?” Because there are yaks enough to meet the present small demand, thus making it possible to use the present, which is the shorter, though harder route. If there were not sufficient yaks, I think a more easterly route would be used. There was more actual difficulty of movements in the five worst days of the Karakoram route than in the whole march across the Aksai Chin and along the Karakash valley, and more than other travellers have met in reaching Lanak pass from Ladok Leh.

It remains to be considered whether the Polu route from the desert to the plateau may have any future importance. It has now been traversed by four different parties of white men. Our visit, the last of the four, found it a little better than in the past, due to the improvement mentioned above. It would be possible, by a small application

of intelligent engineering, to make this a fairly easy ascent. The water-crossings would require short bridges to render them accessible to passage of men on foot. Assuming that the ascent has been accomplished, one asks whether the great plateau, criss-crossed by mountain ranges, may be successfully traversed to reach Leh, lying south-west, or Lhasa, lying south-east—the one distant by best route about 400 miles, the other about 600 miles.

For small parties, specially equipped, giving their few horses advantage of the scant grazing, it has been shown by experience that, though with delay, with hardship, the Tibetan plateau may yet be transformed from end to end. But for large bodies the thing seems to me practically impossible. The yak is the only animal which could make the journey without suffering losses probably fatal to the venture. But of these the number is wholly insufficient. Moreover, when the small caravan finds just water enough, the numerous body must go thirsty.

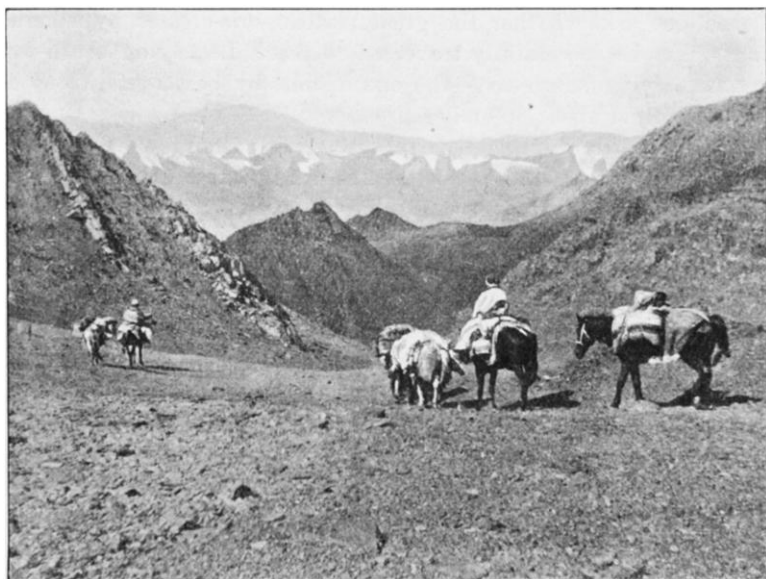
The Kuen Lun range has been scaled yet further eastward—about 150 miles from Polu—by Captain Deasy, but the conditions found on the plateau are substantially the same as those here discussed, save that the distance from Leh is somewhat greater, from Lhasa somewhat less. The conclusions as to movements of large bodies would, I think, be the same for this last route as for the Polu way. Two other suggestions, and I have done: (1) In no one of the cases considered can



MR. CROSBY AT AN ELEVATION OF 18,000 FEET.

wheeled vehicles be thought of; (2) all the routes are subject at divers points to sudden interruption or deterioration caused by land-slides or

changing course of mountain torrents; (3) the roads here mentioned—impracticable as they seem to me—are yet less impossible than any



TYPICAL VIEW OF THE KARAKORAM HIMALAYAS.

approach from the north along lines further east, until one reaches China proper, since the width of desert increases in that direction.

The inhabited portion of Tibet must have its relations along lines north-east of Lhasa, or else southward, unless that greatest of all conquerors, the railway, should miraculously come down over the sands from the Austral forests.

The chief value of the short journey, whose incidents you have heard this evening, lies in this: that it tends to complete the demonstration of this fact—namely, that in itself the Tibetan plateau is valueless to European civilization; and that this plateau, with its great escarpment, the Kuen Lun range, may well be taken as bulwark and barrier between two great empires.

Before the reading of the paper, the PRESIDENT said: This evening we are favoured with the presence of Mr. Crosby, who, many of us will remember, communicated a most interesting paper of his travels in Abyssinia three years ago. Now he has been in a country which at the moment is still more interesting to us—Central Asia. I will now call on Mr. Crosby to read his paper.

After the reading of the paper—

Sir THOMAS HOLDICH: Mr. Crosby has given us a very vivid description of the desolate nature of one of the remote corners of Tibet up in the extreme north-west, and he has expressed an opinion, which I think we most of us share, that it