

FROM THE TIEN SHAN TO THE ALTAI

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THE country between the Tien Shan and the Altai has not been much visited, and an account of a journey through this region, made this spring, may be of interest. The country between these two mountain ranges is not attractive. It comprises desert and salt lakes, with few habitable places and many arid uninviting hills. In some degree there is a resemblance between it and the Tarim basin, south of the Tien Shan. As the great rivers of Southern Sinkiang roll down from the highlands to find a grave in the dismal sands of the Takla Makan, to the benefit of no one, so the streams from the northern slopes of the same mountains bury themselves in the desert or fill some useless marsh or salt lake.

Several days of unusual rain had delayed the start, and it was not possible to leave Manass till April 29, when we bade farewell to the kind Dutch priest in charge of the Catholic mission there. The orchards were in blossom, and spring had driven away all traces of the dismal Dzungarian winter. The weather was now good, and for several days the heights of the Tien Shan were visible. Some features of the area traversed are indicated upon the map on p. 503, illustrating Mr. Lattimore's paper, to the north-west and north of Urumchi.

The early stages of the route were along the right bank of the Manass River. The track lay over a scrub-covered plain capable of cultivation, and in places efforts at irrigation had been made. Below on the left, at the foot of clay cliffs 20 to 60 feet high, rolled the sluggish muddy stream. The snows had not yet melted, so that the river was low. The number of backwaters showed that the Manass river was not faithful to one bed. One looked over great areas full of toghraks (desert poplar), tall impenetrable reed, much tall grass, with glimpses of water full of duck and geese. The vegetation near the river itself was inconsiderable compared with that of the backwaters, which presented, with their dense mass of trees and vegetation, a contrast to the surrounding country.

At Da-Kuai ("Big Bend") the river was crossed, and on both sides as well as towards the north-east, the direction of its flow, there were extensive swamps. The river here had, apparently, begun to find a new channel. Thirty miles farther on is the halting-place of Tang-Chou-Tsu (The Canal of the Tang Dynasty). This was a miserable place, hot, shadeless, insect-ridden, but of much interest. It was by the side of the Telli Nor, the real end of the river. The people here said that the lake was steadily drying up, and that ten years ago there had been more water. One old man said he remembered when the whole lake had been full. In May 1928 the Telli Nor was dry and I rode over it. The marks on the lake-side enabled an estimate of the different levels to be made.

Although the Telli Nor may be drying up, the Manass river certainly is not. Apparently in early May the volume of water was not enough to reach the lake, because part of the water was swallowed by the old swamp on the way, and the rest was diverted into the marshes where the Manass was endeavouring

to make a new course. When the river should rise, the lake would receive part of the water, but never the whole. Consequently in time the Telli Nor will be wholly dry, and a new basin will be formed to receive the end of the new channel of the river. Before Dakuai, at Taipingliang (the abode of great calm) the river was about to cut a chord across a wide curve where sandhills blocked its farther trend, in an easterly direction.

The Canal of the Tang dynasty was a solid piece of earthwork along the east side of the Telli Nor. At the north-east extremity of the lake, where the canal ended, there was a good growth of reeds and poplars. The canal was hopelessly out of repair. Before Dakuai many abandoned canals had been passed, as well as deserted houses, empty fields, and other signs of former cultivation. It seems that some years ago the dam that kept up the irrigation water burst. The cultivators all left, as they could not repair it. The only men able to do the work lived some way off, and could only spare the few weeks between the end of their harvest and the beginning of winter to mend the earthwork. It was said that in 1928 this dam would be repaired, so that a large area should again be under crops in 1929.

At the Telli Nor I left the Manass river. I was told there was a petrol spring to the west of the lake, in a low inhospitable range of hills.

An arid bleak stretch, with desolate hills and black gravelly "sai" glistening in the heat, was crossed before reaching the next water, at the Orchu or Urhu river, 28 miles to the north. Here was the oasis of Urumuhu. The undulating plain, fretted with small jagged hills, suddenly broke. The track abruptly descended 80 feet down a soft clay bank. Looking down into the rift, one saw a valley some 5 miles wide filled with toghrak trees. The leaves were just out, and a belt of delicate emerald filled the gash in the barren plain. The river, hidden by the trees, known locally as the Urumuhu river, flows from the Urkashar hills. Usually it is an insignificant stream, but it happened to be in spate and was crossed with difficulty. The oasis was populated by Torgut Mongols, of disagreeable habits, and there were a few Chinese farmers. The oasis could undoubtedly be developed. The soil is good, and the water ample. The climate is warm, and snow never lies. In May the temperature under the trees reached as much as 100° F. The river flows into the Airik Nor. After widening and passing through much swamp, full of toghraks and reed, the river narrowed about 7 miles from the lake, and was confined by barren hills. The Airik Nor, which lies north-east to south-west and is a long narrow sheet of water, was fringed with vegetation on the oasis side, but barren with arid hills on the far side.

Crossing a desolate dreary stretch, it was pleasant to reach, after 25 miles, the Kobuk river. Flowing from the Saur Mountains, this river watered a large area. There was some cultivation and fair grazing, besides a small bazaar for the farmers and travellers. The waterless region had now been left, and the southern slopes of the Kara Adyr and northern sides of the Salburty range were watered by small streams. Between them was a wide open grassy plain, on which many nomads, chiefly Torguts but a few Kasaks, pastured their flocks.

Though the height was not great, it was bitterly cold crossing the Kara Adyr. In one of the most depressing places, by a small spring, an enterprising

Chinaman had opened "The Inn of Heavenly Fortune." He certainly deserved such. A long 25 miles, over a sloping plain which grew less and less grassy as it descended, finished at the Uliungur Nor. There was a small spring close to the lake, which was here a backwater or stagnant expanse of evil-smelling water, with black sludge and reeds. The water of the lake itself was slightly brackish, but quite drinkable. Opposite, just discernible, was Buluntokhoi, where the Chinese kept a garrison. It is a great name, but not much else. Its chief importance is as a rendezvous for caravans. The lake was a bright green colour, with violet and purple shadows. Its waters were clear, and the duck, teal, and geese, besides a party of swans, dived and floated undisturbed. There were traces of gold-workings by the shore, towards the north-west end. There was a fair growth of reed and grass near the edge. The chief feeder of the lake is the Urungu river, but it must receive much water from the drainage on the eastern slopes of the Saur Mountains.

Since leaving Manass four areas, without a visible drainage exteriority, had been passed, the Manass, Urumuhu, Kobuk, and Urungu river ends. Near the Uliungur Nor the topography is strange. The black Irtish and the Urungu rivers rise in the same range, the Altai. The waters of the former find their way through Siberia to the Arctic Ocean. The Urungu discharges itself into the Uliungur lake, the northern shores of which are but 4 miles from the Irtish. Leaving the shores of this lake, the ground rises steadily, and a range of low hills effectively separates the lake from the Irtish river.

The latter was a whirling flood of black water. Its left bank was bounded by high sandhills, but its right bank had failed to hold the swollen river, and the country was inundated by the flood water. Presumably as the snow-level of the Altai was so much lower than that of the Tien Shan, the snow-water, in spite of difference in latitude, came six weeks earlier. Thus the Irtish was in flood when the Manass was as yet unmoved.

There was a good rope ferry over the river, but although there was some traffic—for the caravans from Ku-Cheng come in here—yet there was no accommodation for man or beast, and no supplies either. This caravan route avoids Urumchi and Manass and other tax-collecting places. Ku Cheng is now the distributing centre in the province for all goods from China, and this direct route is convenient, though in summer the water difficulties were said to be considerable. North of the Irtish the country was flooded and progress difficult. The horses disappeared completely in what seemed ordinary ditches. The Kran river was almost as formidable a stream as the Irtish, and had likewise overflowed its banks.

From now onward many Kasaks, all of the Kirei tribe, were met as they migrated to the mountains. The southern slopes of the Altai mountains were crowded with nomads. Under present political conditions nobody is allowed to cross into Outer Mongolia. The western valleys held Kirei, the eastern Torguts, though in some places in the west there were Uriankhai Mongols.

The capital of the Altai region was a small prosperous town of some 2000 inhabitants. There was an extremely uncivil Taotai, and the usual officials. The town was embellished by the presence of a Bolshevik consul who lived in a bazaar house. The shops were good, the bazaar well stocked, and the price of everything was exorbitant. Though colloquially known as Altai, the

Chinese call the town Cheng-Hua-Ssu (the blooming or blossoming flower) To the Kasaks and Mongols it is known as Sharasume.

The Kran river, a fine rushing stream, flows in three branches below the town, and is crossed by good bridges. The climate was delightful, fresh and invigorating, with bright sun and cold nights. The winter was said to be severe, and the fuel difficulty great. There was much gold-mining done in the warm months, and the population was increased considerably, and not by at all a desirable class of immigrant.

After leaving Sharasume, the journey, by no means under official auspices, was resumed towards the western valleys of the Altai, the Kaba, and Burchun valleys. It was necessary, less for geographical than for political reasons, to return to the Irtish river at its junction with the Burchun. In former times steamers from the Siberian side of the frontier came here. The houses were all in the Russian style, and the local mandarin occupied a particularly fine one, though neglect and other causes were rapidly ruining it. The Irtish here was crossed by a good ferry. It was a fine river, reinforced by the Kran.

The Burchun river was a surprise. It was as wide as the Irtish, and was a roaring uncontrollable mass of water. A ferry, worked by two Kasak women and a small boy, was particularly good. On the farther side, the inundations were so great that a dry place was reached with difficulty. There were four subsidiary rivers to cross, and the water was over the horses' backs. It was only the absence of current that made the crossing at all possible. The flood increased and in a short while it was not possible to reach the ferry—nor the bazaar. Kasaks, stark naked, struggled to swim their horses as far as the ferry, but they had to give up the attempt.

From here it took three days to reach the Altai Mountains. The scenery could not be called fine. There was, though, a freshness about the hills that contrasted agreeably with the plains. The snow had nearly all melted. What the landscape needed was one conspicuous peak, one snow giant to dominate the mountains and to give dignity to them. But the sun-lit glens, full of poplar, birch, and willow, and aglow with flowers, the grassy sides and clear streams, were an unending delight. Everywhere there were flocks. The pastures were a mass of sheep and goats, whilst the Aouls, the felt tents of the Kirei, stood by the dozen on any suitable site. These Kasaks were migrating to the upper pastures, and the narrow paths were choked with their animals.

Leaving the Burchun, the track led to the Kaba river, which is for some way the boundary between Russia and China. There are here two branches, the "White" and "Black" Kaba respectively. The former is the frontier in some places. The Black Kaba flows in from Russian territory, and the two streams united form the Kaba river, which flows into the Irtish.

From the small frontier post on the Ak-Kaba a track led over the watershed into the valley of the Burchun. The forests of larch stretched down into deep grassy meadows, covered with flowers. The big purple gentian, the small blue one, cyclamens, anemones, and other flowers were in profusion. The violas grew in huge masses, purple, violet, cream, and yellow, and made patches of colour in the turf. A "Christmas rose," the size of a single dahlia, and a deep magenta, was everywhere, a noble plant, in some cases over 2 feet high.

Descending into the Upper Burchun valley, we entered a wide plain extending for several miles, green and level, an ideal pasture. The valley, save for a small police post and four or five Uriankhai Kalmuck tents, was empty. Just above this plain the Kanaz lake filled the valley. It should be noted that the valley and river are both called Kanaz in their upper part. The lake itself was an ideal Scottish loch, a long piece of clear water. The western shores were steep and rocky, the eastern were green and wooded, and rose gently up the valley's side. The narrow end of the lake is in the insignificant main Altai range, on which there was some snow, though fast melting. The absence of animal life in the whole of the Altai was noticeable. The ovis ammon and the wapiti, the roedeer and the ibex, had all been killed off. It was sad to see this ideal ground denuded of its fauna. There were said to be a few bears, but the sables had vanished. This was not remarkable, as the price of a sable was £11, and this for the inferior Chinese variety.

The Uriankhai Kalmucks come down in the winter to these levels, and there were low log huts in several places, which were then occupied. Although not too hot for the Kasaks, the Kalmucks fled to higher pastures in the summer. The Kirei and Uriankhai pastures were kept strictly apart. No trespassing was allowed.

The pleasantest feature of the journey was meeting the Kirei. These Kasaks consider themselves the *élite* of their race, and no more agreeable people could be found. They were courteous, hospitable, and intelligent. They made the foreigner welcome, though he must often have been a nuisance. They were quite unspoiled, and long may they remain so.

The distances travelled were as follows:

Manass to Sharasume	..	..	..	..	..	349 miles.
Sharasume to Burchun	..	..	..	..	..	63 „
Burchun to Kanaz Lake	<i>viâ</i>	Ak-Kaba Post	..	..	..	110 „

For the first stage of the journey, as far as M. 255, there is a telegraph line and also a postal route. Hardly any travellers were met on the way.

With regard to maps, it may be noted that War Office Map 1/4,000,000, Central Asia, Sheet 21, gives Tulta as another name for Sharasume. This is incorrect. Tulta is the next valley, just at the C of "Cheng." Sharasume itself should be on the Kran River and not to the east of it.

Stieler's Atlas (Map No. 62) only gives Tulta, and this in the wrong place. The Kobuk river of the War Office map above quoted should be spelt Khobuk, the kh being guttural. This river is spelt Chobuk by Stieler. The Russian "40-verst" map, 1910, agrees with the War Office in calling the river Kobuk, and with Stieler in putting Tulta in the wrong place, and assigning this name to the site of Sharasume.