

# SHIWAKTE, QUNGUR,<sup>1</sup> AND CHAKRAGIL

SIR CLARMONT SKRINE

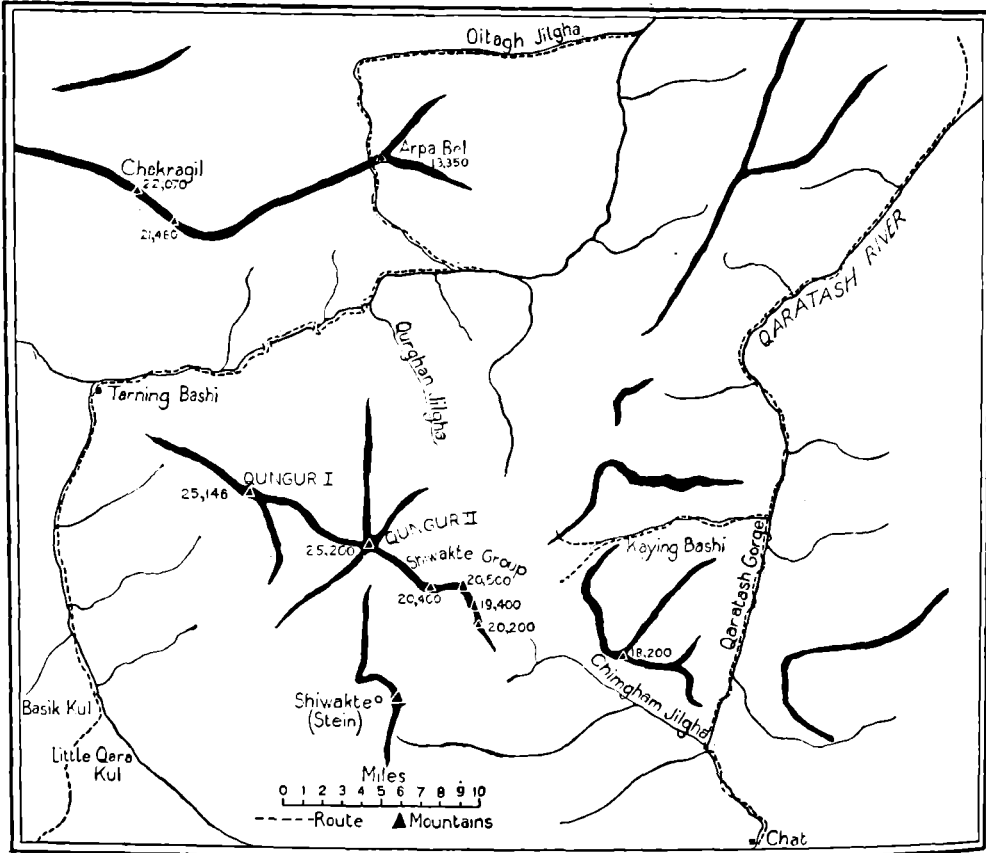
IN *Mountains of Tartary* Eric Shipton describes how in August 1947 he and Bill Tilman met at Tashkurghan in the Chinese Pamirs and discussed various climbing expeditions they intended to do together. One was 'to thread our way back to the north through the Shiwakte group, connecting up some of its unexplored valleys by passes yet to be found'. Another was 'to reconnoitre the east face of Qungur, which had not yet been seen by western eyes'; and a third 'the unexplored valley which leads up into the heart of the Mustagh Ata massif from the south'. The two climbers eventually decided to try and ascend Mustagh Ata (24,388 feet). With commendable frankness Shipton admits that the choice was an unimaginative one due, he suspects, to the 'secret hope of achieving an easy and spectacular victory'. Anyone who has seen it will agree that the 'great featureless dome', as Colonel Kenneth Mason calls it,<sup>2</sup> of Mustagh Ata was not a worthy goal for two famous climbers, even though they had only time for two high climbs in that region. Shipton gives a beautiful photograph of it in his book, mirrored in Little Lake Qaraqul; the routes up to the tops of both sections of the dome involve no difficult climbing, merely an endless slog, slog, slog up a broad and almost unbroken slope at an angle of nowhere more than 17° or 18°. In the event they were defeated, at the cost of frost-bitten feet for Shipton, by nothing but the vast extent of the dome and the mere horizontal distance they had to cover at 24,000 feet.

I have personal reasons for regretting that they did not strike northwards. All they had to do was to cross the 16,338-foot Qaratash pass, a bagatelle for such as they, and turn left up the fine Chimghan Jilgha. They would have found themselves not only within reach of the east face of Qungur but right up against that lovely group of peaks, the Shiwakte, which soar 20,000 feet into the sky. Before Shipton went to Kashgar as Consul-General in 1940 he came out to spend the day with my wife and myself at our house near Simla and we spent several happy hours discussing possible climbs and mountain explorations for him. I remember showing him the chapters on

<sup>1</sup> The spelling of Qungur, as of Qaratash, Qarakul, &c., was adopted by the R.G.S. in 1925 and I have retained it in this article, though later writers including Shipton and Tilman have reverted to the spelling of Stein and previous geographers, who used K instead of Q. The R.G.S. spelling is right, of course, but I refuse to spell Kirghiz 'Qirghiz'—one must draw the line somewhere!

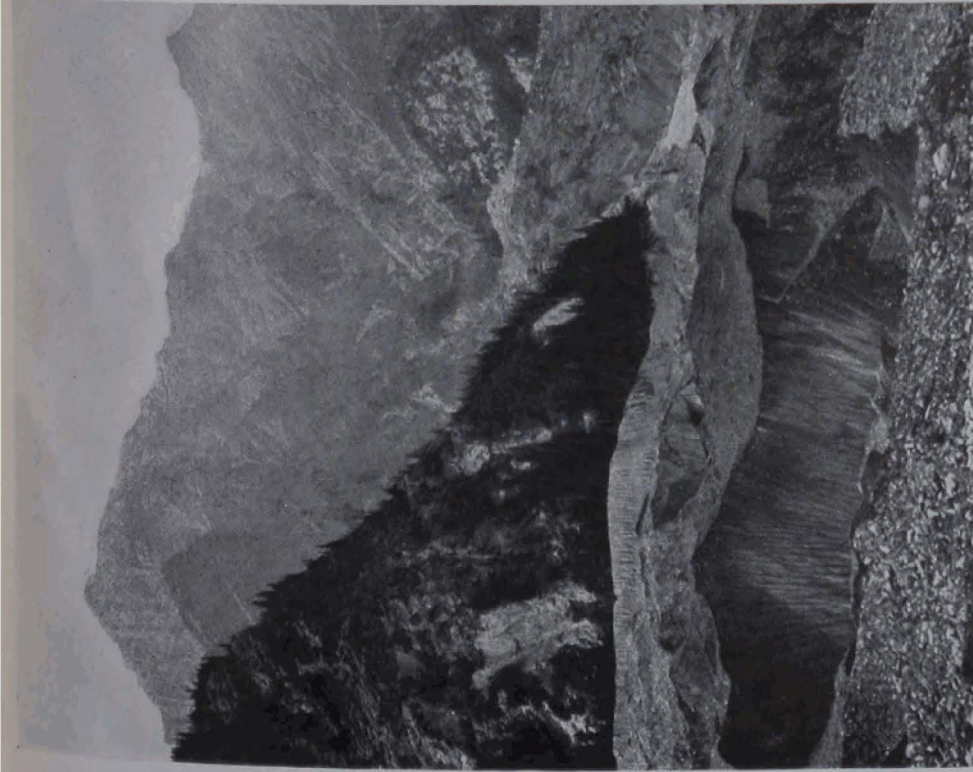
<sup>2</sup> Mustagh Ata. See Mason's note on the compilation of my topographical material in the neighbourhood of the Qungur massif, R.G.S., Nov. 1925, p. 409.

this very region in my book, *Chinese Central Asia*, and the paper I read on it to the R.G.S. in April 1925. Though he makes no reference to these sources it is certain that he had them in mind when he talked over possible alternatives to Mustagh Ata with Tilman. The only other reference to the Shiwakte region in the scanty literature of Central Asian mountain exploration is by the late Sir Aurel Stein,<sup>1</sup> the great explorer-archaeologist whose work, with his Indian assistants,

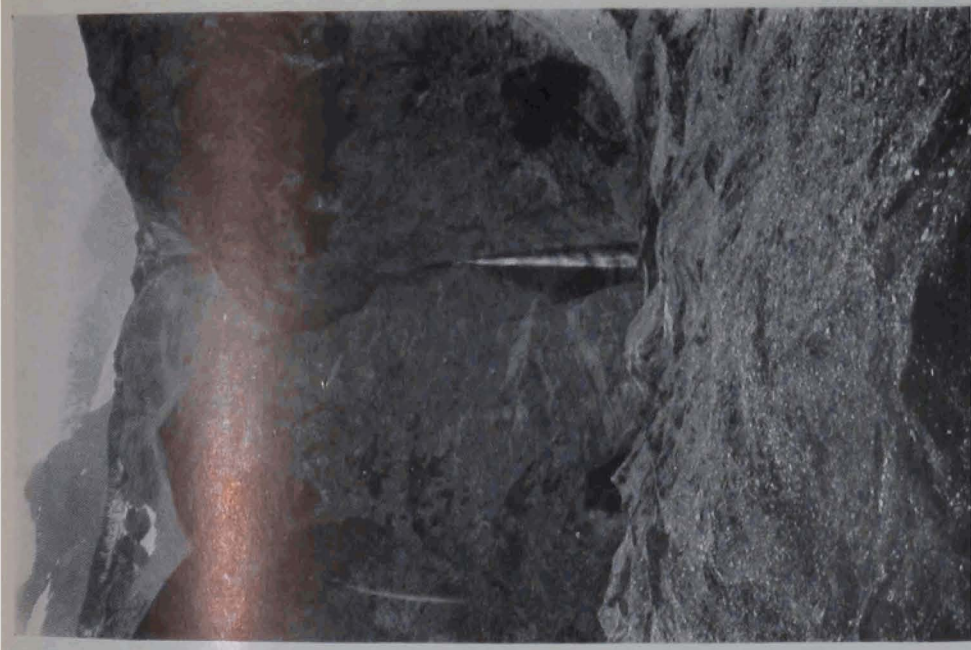


was the main source for the compilation of the Survey of India 1/500,000 map of southern Sinkiang. It was Sir Aurel who, in the spring of 1922, when I was bound for Kashgar like Shipton eighteen years later, told me about the 'Blank Patch' on the above-mentioned map. There were, and still are, many others, but this one appealed especially to me because it seemed to lie only a day's march from the route by which I planned to reach Kashgar and also seemed easily accessible from Kashgar itself. And the tremendous eastern butt-end of the Qungur massif, which no western explorer had seen, much less photographed, attracted me like a magnet. The only route by which, as far as Stein knew, ordinary travellers like my wife and myself, not equipped for high climbing, could hope to penetrate these fastnesses

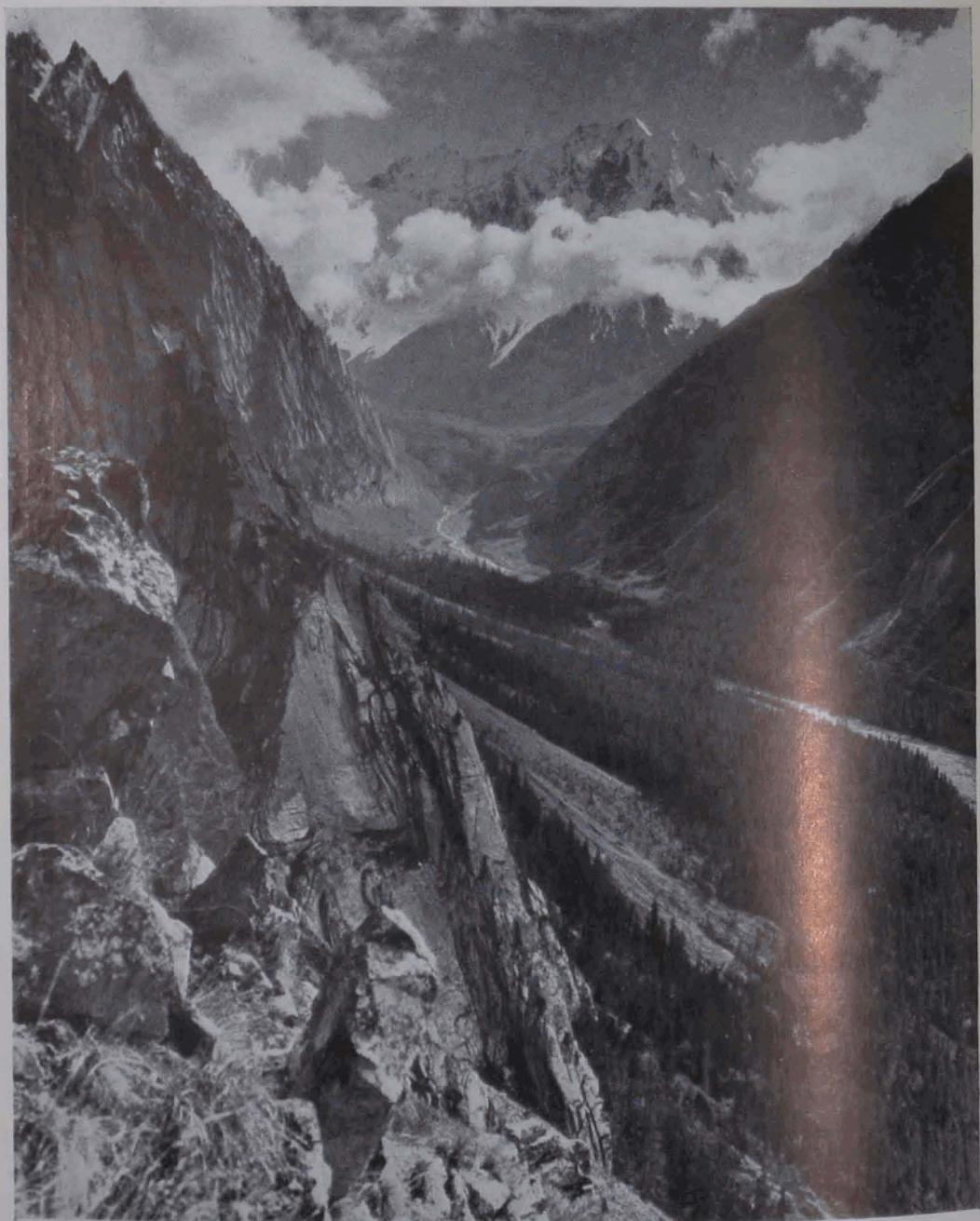
<sup>1</sup> Stein's *Memoir on maps of Chinese Turkestan and Kansu*, p. 11.



*Junction of the Bul Ush and Oi Tagh Glaciers. The Bul Ush runs parallel with the Oi Tagh Gl. in its upper course but at a much higher elevation; it then slopes steeply down and curves to the right. Though smaller, the steepness of its slope at the point of junction causes it to push the Oi Tagh Gl. out of its course, right up against the mountain on its further side*



*Waterfall about 700 ft. high on the left side of Oi Tagh Glacier. The bottom of the fall is hidden by the glacier. High up at the back can be seen the Bul Ush Glacier, from which the water of the fall comes. A 'spout' fall can be seen on the left of the picture*



*The Kaying Jilgha, Alps of Qungur*

lay through the deep gorges of the Qaratash river, and westward up one of its very steep tributary glens. In 1906 he had detailed one of his admirable Indian assistant surveyors, Ram Singh, to try and reach Kashgar from the Pamirs via the Qaratash gorges but the Indian had not been able to get through owing to the great volume of water. Stein himself seven years later managed to penetrate the gorges from the south after crossing a high pass called the Buramsal, and it was then that he had heard from the Kirghiz about a high alpine region to the west called the Shiwakte. But he had no time to explore up any of the glens to the west of the gorges.

On our way to Kashgar I and my party had to give up the idea of using the Qaratash route, but I reconnoitred up to 17,000 feet a snow-bound pass which I ascertained led over to the upper Qaratash. The same October my wife and I, searching for a 'hill station' for the following summer, explored the lower Qaratash basin above Altunluk. To our joy, after crossing with our baggage and tents two exceedingly steep but not snow-bound passes, we discovered a beautiful alpine glen, the Kaying Jilgha, with flourishing woods of Tien Shan pine (*Picea schrenkiana*) not hitherto known to exist in that region, and glaciers at its head coming down from what I afterwards found to be one of the main peaks of the group to which I attributed Stein's name, Shiwakte. This and neighbouring valleys were the summer grazing-grounds of a shy tribe of Kirghiz whose confidence and eventually friendship we succeeded in gaining. Their hospitality, their quaint ways, the picturesque costumes of their womenfolk, and the immemorial antiquity of their semi-nomadic pastoral existence were a perpetual delight to us. The following summer and again in 1924 we camped for two or three weeks at a time at the edge of the forest below the snout of the Kaying glacier, 10,500 feet above the sea. By dint of much panoramic photography and primitive surveying with plane-table, sight-rule, clinometer, and boiling-point thermometer I obtained enough data to enable Major (as he then was) Kenneth Mason of the Survey of India to fill in the Blank Patch which Sir Aurel Stein had recommended to my attentions. In my efforts to get a clear view of the eastern face of Qungur II I did several stiff climbs from camp to 16,000 feet and more, unroped but aided by Kirghiz '*mergens*' (ibex-hunters), but I never succeeded, for always the knife-edge ridges and needle-peaks of the Shiwakte masked all but the top of the huge ice-clad dome.

In August 1924, just before we left Kaying Bashi for the last time, I managed to cross the formidable Kepek pass (15,230 feet) at the head of the jilgha, which I was told was seldom open for more than a few weeks in the year. This gave me access, after an uncomfortable night on the floor of a draughty Kirghiz tent at 12,000 feet, to the inner arcana of the Shiwakte whose peaks (I quote *Chinese Central Asia*,

p. 275) 'stood round the head of the Aq Tash basin in a glorious semicircle, their ice-pinnacles gleaming in the dawn, mighty glaciers hanging from their sides like frozen waterfalls thousands of feet high'. I rejoiced to be able to secure what proved to be one of my favourite mountain pictures (facing p. 78), and a number of rays to familiar landmarks which enabled me to complete my plane-table sketch; but the east face of Qungur II was even less visible from the bottom of the Aq Tash 'cwm' than from the crag-tops above Kaying Bashi.

I have never quite lost my nostalgia for the Alps of Qungur nor did I, until the Iron Curtain closed down over Kashgar a year or two ago, abandon my hope that some successor of mine would one day, preferably with his wife, follow the trail my wife and I blazed to Kaying Bashi and beyond. Alas, no subsequent Consul-General seems to have had both the urge and the freedom to take a summer holiday in the Blank Patch until the last of them, Eric Shipton, and he, as we have seen, rejected the Shiwakte idea (with some regret it is clear) and attempted Mustagh Ata instead. How emphatically I agree with him that 'to climb a mountain for its height and fame alone is infinitely less rewarding than to attempt a peak whose form has charmed, or to cast a new light upon an attractive mountain range'.

Our two climbers made amends for their Mustagh Ata mistake the following year, Shipton's last at Kashgar, when they tried conclusions with two of the loveliest and least-known mountain massifs in Sinkiang, Bogdo Ola, 750 miles east-north-east of Kashgar, and Chakragil,<sup>1</sup> 60 miles south-west of it. We have full accounts of these expeditions both in *Mountains of Tartary* and in Tilman's *From China to Chitral*, and fascinating reading they make. I was unable during my time at Kashgar to get nearer than a month's journey from Bogdo Ola; motor transport was unknown in my time—even a velocipede (bicycle) was a rarity—and the farthest north-east that I attained was the village of Bai on the lower slopes of the Central Tien Shan, twenty-one marches from my headquarters. But Chakragil I knew well by sight and longed to know better, for the same reason as Shipton, who says of it—'Though a mere twenty-two thousand feet, Chakragil forms one of the most beautiful sections of the tremendous panorama of snow mountains seen from Kashgar. During two years of exasperating confinement I had drawn solace from the contemplation of its fluted ice-ridges, glistening in the early morning sun, floating high above dark storm-clouds or silhouetted against the evening sky.'

During our 2½ years at Kashgar I was so preoccupied with Stein's Blank Patch and the Alps of Qungur which it contained that I neglected, to my lasting regret, the Alps of Chakragil which, when

<sup>1</sup> The accepted name Chakragil seems to be an adaptation of Chikir Oöghil, which means 'the shepherd station of Chikir'.

we at last found them, proved to be even grander and more beautiful, more interesting scientifically, and above all more accessible than those of Qungur. Yet they are just as little known to Western geography. They may have been seen, possibly by adventurous mountaineers on holiday at the Swedish Mission's summer camp at Boston Terek in a neighbouring valley to the north-west; but if so I have been unable to find any record of the fact.

Not until my wife and I were on our way southwards across the passes to India in September 1924 did we see Chakragil at close quarters. Making a week's detour from the Gez Dara route up on to the Pamirs, we marched for three days up the Oitagh Jilgha and camped for three more on a delectable meadow amid thickets of pine, ash, and rowan high above the lateral moraines of the Oitagh glacier, some 4 miles above the highest 'Taghlik' village, Pilal. The Arpa Bel Pass, 13,350 feet, which we had to cross with our ponies to get back to the Gez defile, was one of the stiffest we tackled without yaks in all Kashgaria, but it was well worth it. I make no excuse for quoting again from *Chinese Central Asia* on this unforgettable valley:

It did not require a trained observer to realize that the region in which we found ourselves was a perfect paradise alike for the geologist and for the naturalist. Its chief peculiarity is the relatively low elevation of the head of the Oitagh Jilgha. This forms a kind of recess or alcove in the precipitous north-east face of Chakragil, 14,000 ft. high, into which the glaciers fall and thus push their snouts to a much lower level than do those of Qungur. The snout of the Oitagh Glacier is only 8,800 ft. above the sea, as against an average of 12,000 ft. in the case of the smaller and much less steeply-pitched glaciers of the Qaratash basin. The volume of the Oitagh Glacier is really enormous, but its icefall is so steep that the whole glacier is barely 4 miles long. It has several remarkable features. One is its tributary, the Bul Ush, which butts into it from the north-west near its foot, pushing it right across the valley and jamming it against the steep south-western side. A depression about 150 ft. deep is thus formed above the bulge, and into this falls the moraine-stream which travels under the ice for a mile and reappears from a remarkable cave in the black ice of the glacier-foot. Before joining the main glacier, the Bul Ush runs parallel with but about 2,000 ft. immediately above it. A series of magnificent waterfalls descends from the upper glacier at this point; one of them is at least 500 ft. high and falls clear like the Swiss Staubbach, while another spurts from a cleft in the cliff like tea from a spout. Yet another feature of the Oitagh glacier is its three parallel lateral moraines, one of which has a double edge with a trough 2-4 ft. deep between. . . . The vegetation of the 'alcove' at the head of the Oitagh valley, though of the same Tien Shan type, is altogether richer than that of the Alps of Qungur, doubtless owing to the lower elevation and to the shelter afforded by the tremendous precipices which enclose it on every side but the north-east.

In May 1947 the Shiptons camped in this valley for three days; Mrs. Shipton describes it charmingly in *The Antique Land*, pp. 116–22. In September of the following year, after Tilman had been to Chakragil on a reconnaissance, Shipton and he marched up the Oitagh Jilgha to Pilal and thence branched right-handed up another jilgha called the At Oinak. Three nights later, having left all but one tent and one Kirghiz behind, they camped at 17,500 feet on the north ridge which, as Tilman had ascertained on his reconnaissance, afforded the best route to what seemed to be the summit of Chakragil's north-western and higher peak, marked 22,070 feet. One more camp, they thought, would complete the climb; but an acute attack of mountain sickness totally incapacitated their Kirghiz and for his sake they had to give up the attempt.

I cannot help wondering if at 17,500 feet they were in fact as near the summit as they thought. They took for granted that they had only 22,070 feet to climb and planned their assault accordingly. But the map of this whole area is very sketchy; it is based on scanty data including a little Class B triangulation by Deasy and Stein. According to Colonel Mason, Qungur I (25,146) is the only peak that can be said to be fixed for height. The heights given for the two Chakragil peaks are based, he says, on very acute—i.e. not very reliable—fixings by Deasy from Kashgar. Their distances from Kashgar, measured on the latest 1/500,000 scale map, sheet 42N, are as follows: Chakragil north-west peak, 60 miles; south-east peak, 63 miles; Qungur I, 69 miles. Now if these distances and heights are correct the Chakragil peaks, even allowing for their being 13 per cent. and 8 per cent. nearer respectively, ought to look considerably lower than Qungur I. But a glance at the two sections of my telepanorama of the Chinese Pamirs from Kashgar reproduced at page 78 will show that the difference is very slight. The north-west peak looks actually higher and the south-east peak only very slightly (2·2 per cent.) lower.<sup>1</sup>

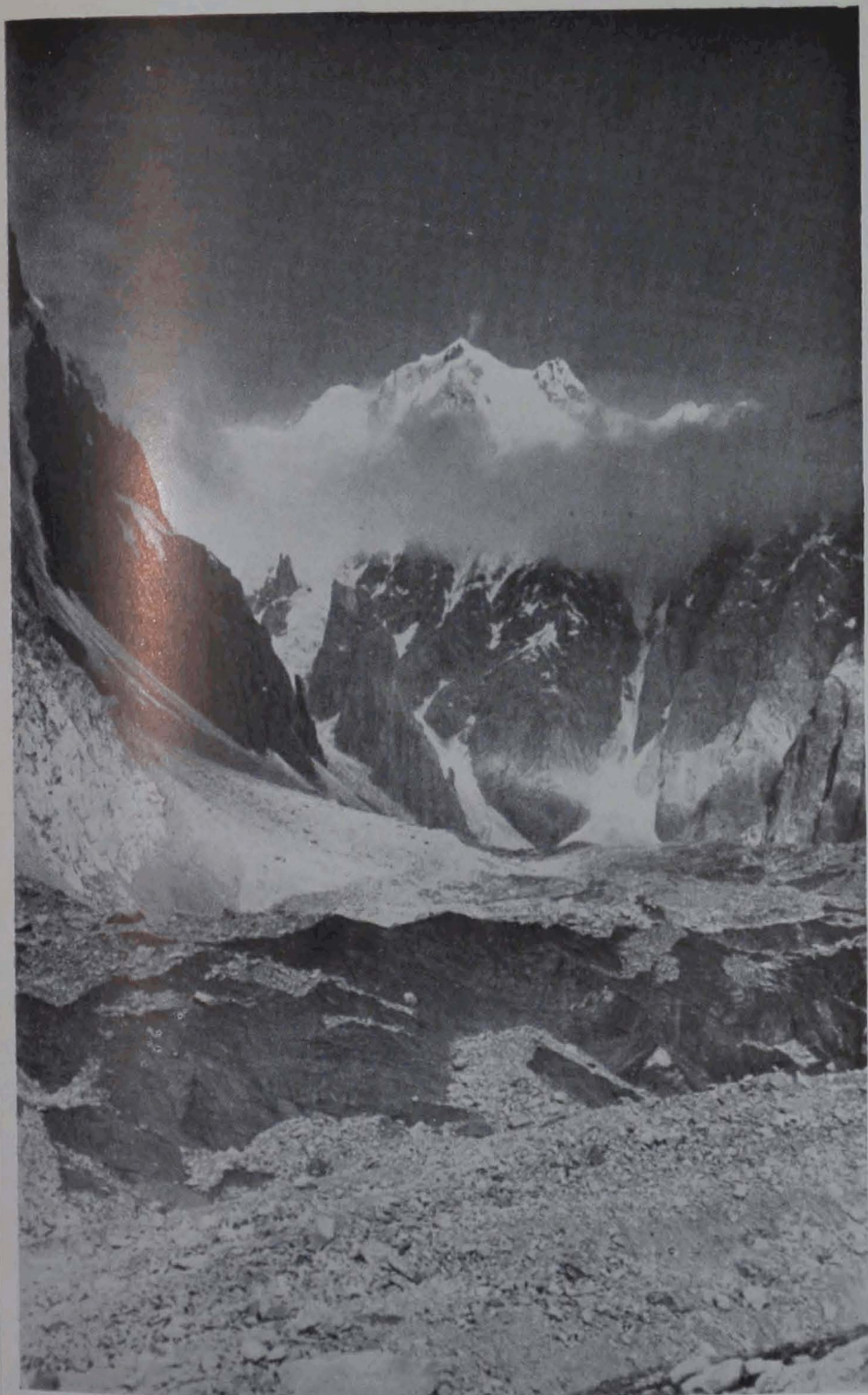
It is beyond my elementary trigonometry to calculate the reduction there would be in the apparent heights of the two peaks if they were exactly the same distance from Kashgar as Qungur I, but it surely would not account for their real heights being as much as 3,076 and 3,666 feet less. Either they are wrongly placed on the

<sup>1</sup> On an enlarged copy of the telepanorama in question I have measured the distances between the nearer horizon (the dead flat Kashgar plain) and the tops of the three peaks. They are as follows:

Chakragil N.W. peak . . . . .	57·50 mm.
Chakragil S.E. peak . . . . .	54·75 mm.
Qungur I . . . . .	56·00 mm.

Allowing for, say, 25 per cent. of the total height of the mountains being hidden by





*Shiwakte Peak III (20,400 ft.) from south side of Kepek Pass  
with Aqlash Glacier*



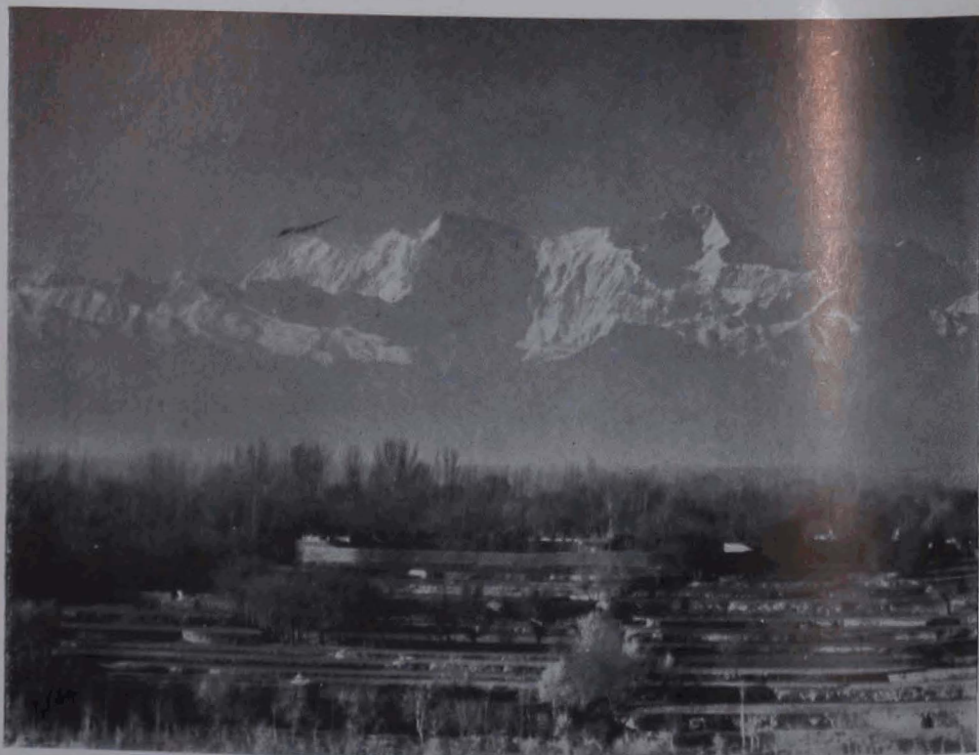
*Hollow 200 ft. deep formed by the Bul Ush Glacier pushing the Oi Tagh across the valley against the mountain on the opposite side. The water has made a tunnel for itself, the lower end of which can be seen in another picture*



*Snout of combined Oi Tagh and Bul Ush glaciers*



*Qungur Range with Peak II (25,200 ft.) and Peak I (25,146 ft.)  
from Kashgar (69 m.)*



*Chakragil Massif from Kashgar (60-63 m.) with Peak II (21,480 ft.)  
and Peak I (22,070 ft.)*

map, or they were wrongly identified from the Pamirs (south) side, or both. Anyway, until refuted, I adhere to the opinion I formed when first I saw the magnificent panorama of snows from the roof of the Consulate-General, that both Chakragil peaks are over 23,000 feet and the north-west one at least 23,500 feet. If so, Shipton and Tilman were considerably farther from the summit than they thought when they sadly gave up their gallant attempt on 'that lovely mountain, Chakragil'.

the curvature of the earth's surface, the percentage differences between the apparent heights of the two Chakragil peaks and that of Qungur I come to:

Chakragil N.W. peak . . . . .	3.0% higher than Qungur I
Chakragil S.E. peak . . . . .	2.2% lower than Qungur I.

In other words, from Kashgar the north-west peak of Chakragil rises 3 per cent. higher above the horizon than Qungur I, though it is only 9 miles nearer, while the S.E. peak, 6 miles nearer, has an apparent height above the horizon only 2.2 per cent. less than that of Qungur I. Yet the former is shown on the map as 22,070 ft. and the latter as 21,480 ft., i.e. 3,076 and 3,666 ft. less than Qungur I respectively.