Seracs of a glacier on south side of Lungmo Che (Valley 1), tributary of Yarkand River from the west.

View of Depsang Plain.

THE CARAVAN ROAD TO SINKIANG.

By Lieut.-Colonel G. K. Gregson, d.s.o., R.A.

THERE must surely be very few who, having once pitched their camp in a remote valley of the Himalaya, escape the longing to return and penetrate further than before into the great mountain barriers which lie between India and the Central Asian Plains. When the opportunity presented itself of travelling the whole road, from the first foothills near Rawalpindi to where the last spurs of the Kuen Lun peter out into the Takla Makan, we at least abandoned all other projects for the summer of 1927 and set about our preparations for this long expedition. Official correspondence in connection with the trip lasted from June 1926 till we left Srinagar in May 1927—by when we were complete with all our permits and Parwanas, letters of introduction and kind promises of help by the way—all, in fact, except our Chinese passports, for the reason that no one knew quite who should give them.

April in Srinagar is much as in England—sleet and slush, raw winds and red noses, or so it was in 1927.

Preparations for the great trek fell under four headings—servants, equipment, supplies and transport.

The first was much simplified for us by my having engaged my old shikari, Mohammed Rattar. For our inspection he produced cooks and coolies, amongst the latter being three of the very best Kashmiris I have known. Ramzana (the name conveys less than Jones in Wales), tiffen coolie and staunch retainer on previous expeditions, Moham Du and Guffara, of good physique, cheerful, willing and as hard as nails. Hyat Loen, the cook, completed our Kashmiris.

As far as Leh the ordinary coolies' and the sweeper's wages were to be ~~Rs~~18 p.m., Rattar's ~~Rs~~40, Hyat Loen's ~~Rs~~35 and Ramzana's ~~Rs~~20. We were advised not to take the Kashmiri coolies beyond Leh but did so and never regretted it, though we could perhaps have managed with fewer. One other personal servant we had—Budloo Bux, my bearer, a Sunni Mohammedan like the Kashmiris with whom he was always on the best of terms. A first-class bearer

in cantonments, Budloo was a plainsman of no great physique nor appearance of hardihood. Yet throughout all our wanderings and hardships he "stuck it" with a solemn cheerfulness, thinking only of our comfort and anticipating our every need.

For tentage we took two 80lb. double fly tents and three servants pals. Of the 80 pounders one, our sleeping tent, had all the walls lined inside with puttoo for warmth. The lining covered the front and back walls to the pole tops, leaving only the roof unlined. In this tent we were able to sleep moderately warm with snow on the ground, 24° of frost and bitter wind. The lining was heavy and the total weight of the tent increased to about 120lbs.

Clothing was cut down to a minimum but had to meet the requirements of extreme cold and the considerable heat of the Sinkiang deserts. Footwear presented a difficult problem since no proper repairs could be carried out at any place on our journey. We took good crepe sole sambhur hide boots which were very light and proved invaluable, and shooting boots which were heavy and soon wore out. Two pair of strong chaplis each and four pair of leather socks for them, and quilted Gilgit boots completed this part of our outfit. Our servants were supplied with chaplis, warm clothing, a thick blanket and a fur-lined coat each. Weapons included one ·275 Rigby-Mauser, one ·375 Mannlicher, one 12 bore gun and a ·32 Colt automatic, with 100, 50, 200, and 25 cartridges respectively.

It would occupy too much space to enumerate every item of our equipment, but though we tried to keep everything down to a bare minimum for tolerable comfort on the journey, there accumulated in our rooms at Nedou's Hotel and the verandah outside a mass of articles which, with our supplies and clothing, spelt many pony loads. Presents such as watches, knives and magnifying glasses for the local inhabitants, numdah saddles and camp furniture, books, chess and writing materials, ice axes, khud sticks and a climbing rope, two cameras and 200 films, kitchen and table utensils and a medicine chest, this last large enough for a small travelling dispensary, which we were warned might be expected of us in Sinkiang. Our list of supplies was based partly on that of the De Fillipi Expedition of 1914, of which we were fortunate enough to obtain a copy, and partly on our own previous

experiences. The list was divided roughly into three groups, i.e. those articles which could be renewed at Leh; from the oases of Sinkiang; and not renewed at all on the journey.

Permission to travel viâ Gilgit and Hunza having been refused we had to go and return viâ Leh and the Karakoram. The trade route from Leh to Central Asia is that known in the Turki language as the road of the five passes. These being, in order from Leh, the Khardong, Sassir, Karakoram, Suget, and Sanju, respectively 17,600, 17,600, 18,300, 17,618 and 16,650 feet above sea level. Alternatives to the first and last are the Digar and Kilian. There is besides a winter route up the Shyok valley, reached from Leh by the Changla, which avoids the formidable Sassir Pass but includes the last three on the main trade route. The winter route is, however, longer and therefore more costly in transport, and, on account of floods a most doubtful passage after the end of April. For these reasons we decided to keep to the main trade route.

This road is seldom open for normal traffic before the middle of July, and since by waiting till then there would be no time to spend in Sinkiang, nor for any exploration off the trade route by the way, we decided to take on the Khardong and the Sassir at the earliest date a caravan could be persuaded to accompany us.

After some adventures and shikar on our journey from Srinagar we reached Leh on 26th June and the next morning discussed arrangements for our journey to Sinkiang with Bahar-ud-din, a Yarkandi merchant with whom we had already corresponded. He said his ponies would cross the Khardong *unladen* at once, but it was for us to arrange with the Tehsildar for yaks to take over our baggage.

After some bargaining we agreed to hire 27 Yarkandi ponies for the whole trip at Rs100 per pony for the outward journey and Rs55 per pony returning, with, in addition, Rs3 per day per pony taken off the trade route for shikar, exploration, or other purpose. For Karakash (caravan leader) we engaged a young Argon (half-caste Ladaki-Yarkandi) named Ibrahim who had been with Major Mason's expedition to the Aghil Range and Shaksgam valley west of the Karakoram Pass the year before.

It was more difficult to arrange for the yaks. The yak drivers funked the pass which was still deep in snow and had not yet been

opened. Every sort of excuse was made to delay our start—the yaks were scattered grazing and couldn't be collected for four days—storms were coming, and so forth. Eventually we extracted a promise that for Rs3 per yak the men would go and that the yaks would be collected at Polu at the foot of the pass by the evening of June 30th. We were warned by the Tehsildar that it was highly probable we should lose several of them during the ascent and that I would have to pay compensation to the owners of any that died.

Apart from other considerations we had to push on as fast as possible since the bridge over the Shyok river below Satti which had been carried away the year before had not been repaired and we should have to ford the river. As the passes open the rivers rise, and soon the ford at Satti would be impassable.

The evening of June 30th found us all assembled at Polu. Ibrahim's Argons were his own choosing and included two first-class fellows in Yasim Beg and Ghulam Hassan. North of our camp lay the smooth untrodden snow slopes leading to the summit of the pass 2600 feet above us. It looked too close and easy to make such a pother about.

The advanced guard, consisting of 8 unladen yaks which were to wait below the worst part near the summit and take the loads from the dead and exhausted, started off next morning at 4 a.m., and the whole outfit was on the move by 5. We had three riding yaks for such as might need them, but they proved quite useless and I sent them back soon after we had begun to climb in earnest.

There was no sign whatever of where the summer track lay and soon every yak was floundering to his belly in the soft snow—the whole twenty of them justifying their scientific name in a chorus of grunts like the firings of an array of oil engines. Progress became slower and slower and petered out entirely at about 800 feet from the top. We stood scattered all over the face of the pass. The arrangement to send on the eight unladen yaks was made without our knowledge. No responsible servant was sent with them, the drivers had stayed for no man and the whole advanced guard had appeared on the sky line long before as it passed over the summit. Of the laden beasts nearly half lay in the snow utterly exhausted from the height and heavy going. One of these staggered to his feet and died, his body and the load of four boxes of groceries racing

down over the snow and ice. A Ladaki driver tried to stop one of the loose boxes and was knocked down with his lip cut and a broken tooth for his pains. Baggage was pulled off and thrown on the snow and a second yak, apparently lifeless, began to slip down the slope, a Kashmiri hanging on to his tail. Far below us on the first white swell of the steep face we saw Ibrahim with his men and ponies turning back towards Polu.

Something approaching panic set in amongst the yak men, and those of us who might have stopped it were too scattered to do so. Between the yaks now staggering unladen down the slope and the retreating ponies was my shikari Mohammed Rattar, using most unparliamentary language to the Lambardar of Leh who had been sent to supervise the yak drivers. This same lambardar had come to me whilst the Polu camp was being struck and asked for baksheesh. He was told he would not get his reward till every bit of baggage was safe over the other side. Whether for this reason, or angry at Rattar's oaths, he never lifted a finger to help us in our difficulty. A few drivers, minus their yaks, still sat about the slope, and these now, with our Kashmiris were persuaded to hump the discarded baggage and by very slow degrees carry it up. Rattar and Ibrahim, almost back at Polu, rallied some more drivers and some coolies who had accompanied the lambardar, and Rattar returning with this party gathered most of our remaining property.

It was by now 10 o'clock and hopeless to make Khardong village as we had intended. The north face of the pass, for 1500 feet or so, is a steep snow field, and down this the baggage, sometimes several pieces lashed together, and the coolies glissaded, fortunately without mishap. We came up with the eight advanced guard yaks about 4 p.m. and decided to camp on a level bit of grass 2000 feet above Khardong village and four miles short of it. By 9 p.m. there was no sign of the ponies and we gave up any hope of their crossing till next day. From the camp we could still see the crest of the pass and were out soon after dawn on 2nd with telescope and glasses searching the slopes. The ponies appeared on the skyline at 7.30 and were at the camp two hours later. They had refused to face the deep snow the day before. Back at Polu, Ibrahim had sent for a goat, and before dawn on 2nd the procession had formed with the goat-herd leading. The goat had followed

him somehow through the snow and the ponies had struggled after the goat. This is apparently an old dodge.

By 11.30 a.m. we had paid off the coolies and yak drivers, giving baksheesh to those who had done well, and reporting in a letter to the Tehsildar the bad behaviour of those who had bolted or had gone on with the eight unladen yaks over the pass against instructions, and were on the stony track to Khardong village with our baggage on the ponies.

Some important pieces of our property were, however, still missing, and we had had to send two of our Kashmiris, Guffara and Moham Du back to find them, collect coolies, and bring them on after us. The rapidly rising Shyok River had still to be negotiated and a day's delay might mean we should have to wait three weeks or more till the pontoons then on their way from Srinagar, had arrived to form a ferry for the caravans. Past Khardong village the track plunges into a deep gorge and through scrub jungle to Shyok valley. Our first sight of this was towards evening, and very beautiful it looked with its broad white beaches and the sunlight on the eastern slopes.

The Shyok river is subject to sudden and dangerous floods later in the year, but now was running slowly and steadily. By 6.30 p.m. we were at the water's edge and Ibrahim and another of the Argons went in mounted to find the bed whilst the caravan waited on the bank. The river ran very smooth but was some 300 yards broad, a heavy water and not a very pleasant proposition in the dusk for the laden ponies. Other caravan men went in on foot, waist deep and singing lustily. Between us we found the twisty shoal water and the caravan followed in slow-moving snake-like formation. All the ponies were soon in over their girths and one put its foot in a hole, plunged and drenched its load. We had other anxious moments but all eventually landed safely on the right bank with no more amiss than some wet baggage. The lambardar and villagers of Satti came down to meet us carrying torches and led us to the camping ground through lanes of dried thorn bushes. Our camp was in a willow bagh and we rested there next day.

On 4th we marched to Tegur in the Nubra valley and on 5th to Panimik, arriving there by mid-day after a five hours' march. This is the last halting place in Ladakh on the Karakoram road,

and except for one small village just beyond it, the last human habitation we were to see for nearly three weeks. Ahead of us lay barren wastes where supplies are unobtainable and across which the caravans hurry to avoid starvation leaving their trail of dead. One needs no map to find the way. If in places the feet of men and animals leave no impress on the stony ground the whitened bones and the stench of rotting carcasses are guide enough. We spent next day in Panimik collecting some more supplies for the men, a herd of six small goats for milk, eight sheep for meat and four zoës—half-breed yak-bail cattle—to carry fuel. A jolly little Ladaki lad volunteered to come with the goats under the impression, we found later, that he was to return after crossing the Sassir. Guffara and Moham Du rejoined us with nearly all our lost property. In four days, in which must be included a day spent near Polu, they had crossed the Khardong twice and had covered about ninety miles.

At Panimik Ibrahim engaged another caravan man, one Wandus, a pure Ladaki, the only buddhist of the whole party, a splendid fellow who rejoiced in doing three men's work and was always ready to lead in the bad places where others doubted. Our eight sheep cost us Rs35. We paid nothing for the goats at the time, but as all perished by the way gave Rs20 for the six on returning to Panimik in September.

A little party of villagers, headed by the jolly old Zaildar, his Munshi, and the Kotiawal, came to see us off on the morning of July 6th. No caravans had yet arrived from Sinkiang, but the Zaildar told us that one party was two days ahead of us. This party had left Leh before us, crossing the Digar Pass instead of the Khardong.

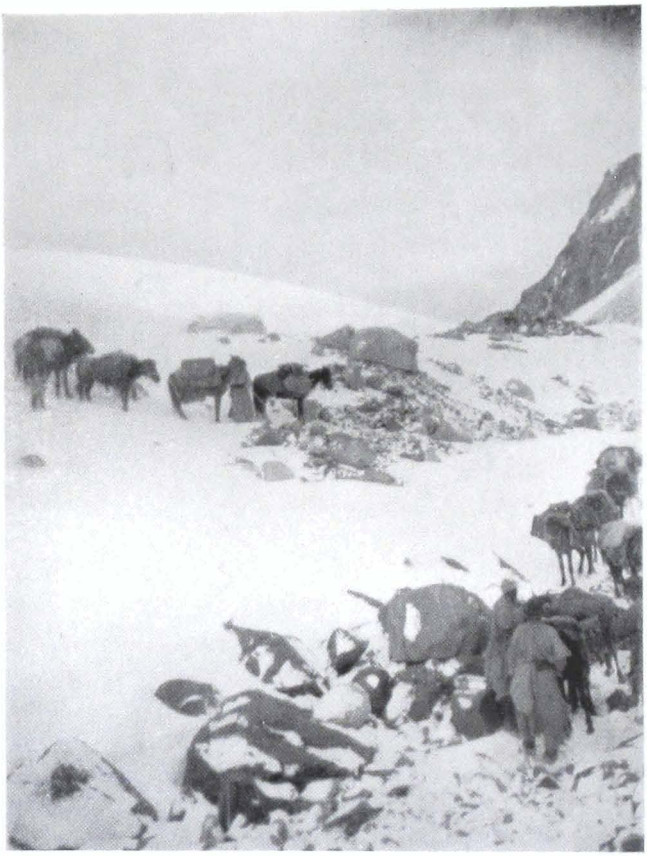
Six miles up the Nubra valley from Panimik is the junction of the Thulanbuti gorge—an impassable gash in the granite cliffs. The track leads up a granite face just north of it, zig-zagging for over 1000 feet in fairly easy gradient and in many places blasted from the rock. As we ourselves reached the top the caravan, looking like a procession of ants, was winding across a wooden bridge at the bottom of the cliffs. For a short distance from the top the track is more or less level and then, by another similar zig-zag drops 500 feet to Umlung—a name without a place, like

so many on that road, but for many miles the only level spot available for camping. The last big loop of the track above the camping ground drops 150 feet from the angle to the valley bottom. Looking up from this the head of the caravan appeared at the angle and I was horrified to see a pony plunge forward off the track and over the edge. It shot down the smooth rock, an almost sheer fall, and crashed across the path behind me. A kindly bullet soon put an end to its suffering. Every leg had been broken and its jaw badly shattered. It was one of our best riding ponies, a Yarkandi stallion, and Rattar had been riding it only a few minutes before the accident.

From Tutyalak, our next halt beyond Umlung, to the summit of the Sassir is about 11 miles, the usual "parao" or march being to Brangsa Sassir five miles the other side and just above the right bank of the Upper Shyok. The snouts of three glaciers block the valley leading to the pass on the west side and have to be negotiated. The party ahead of us had already opened the pass and a few Yarkandi from the caravan from Sinkiang had crossed to the Tutyalak side. We decided, however, not to make the full "parao" in one day, since to reach the glaciers before the crust of the snow was melted by the sun would entail a midnight start and a difficult approach in the dark. On July 9th, therefore, the caravan moved up eight miles to Sartang, and soon after leaving Tartyalak we were in snow again for the first time since crossing the Khardong. About half way a broad tributary valley joins the main stream from the Sassir glaciers. It was completely snow covered but the snow crust was rotten in places above the stream and the crossing cost us a zoë, the unfortunate beast falling through a snow bridge and being drowned in the stream ten feet below the snow surface.

We reached Sartang soon after mid-day on 9th, off-loaded and pitched the camp on about an acre of shale and detritus clear of snow and close by a frozen lake. Glaciers hung on all sides and a wilderness of snow and ice surrounded us with only the moraine banks to relieve the white monotony.

Some of the Argons were despatched with ice axes to find and improve the tracks made by the first parties across the glacier snouts, and to their efforts we owed to a great extent our safe crossing next day. At 4 a.m. on 10th the camp was astir. Snow had



"On the Sassir Pass."

"Drowning of a Yak on way to Sassir Pass."

been falling for some hours and, driven by a bitter wind, continued steadily as the caravan moved off at 4.45. It was pitch dark and the men called to each other and sang to keep touch—no doubt also to propitiate the bogies which they believe haunt the mountains. After negotiating a big moraine we kept along a very narrow cleft between the snout of a glacier (in places a clear ice wall) and the rock face on the north side of the valley. Then up over the glacier itself as the first light began to penetrate the scudding clouds. Ponies slipped and fell, some lying still on the snow till their loads were removed. Progress was very slow and the storm was over by the time the caravan reached the second glacier. The sun, otherwise so welcome, now thawed the snow crust and the going became proportionately worse for the laden animals. The watershed was indistinguishable in the tumble of snow and rocks and it was nearly 9 o'clock before we realised that it was already behind us and the worst over. Here one of the Kashmiris collapsed—the only casualty amongst them during the whole trip. He lay moaning in the snow and for a time seemed pretty bad. His pulse was feeble and over 130. We gave him sal-volatile and got him onto a pony. He seemed none the worse next day and later survived days quite as strenuous and at greater height.

At Brangsa Sassir, a cold and dreary spot, we found a Yarkandi merchant sitting in a big tent surrounded by his merchandise. He offered us refreshment and told us we should find the road ahead fairly good. He seemed a pleasant, kindly fellow and took our mail letters on to Leh with him. At this place the Kashmir Government keeps two men to watch the ford over the Shyok River and report its condition to travellers and guide them over. The water was still low and our caravan crossed without difficulty about 9.30 a.m. on July 11th. A little down stream from the ford the narrow Rang Nala joins the Shyok left bank. We were greeted at the entrance to this gorge by a coffee-coloured flood in which great blocks of ice were being tossed about like corks. This was evidently something more than the normal snow-melt and was no doubt caused by the bursting of a small ice-dam further up. There was nothing for it but to off-load and wait. The gorge is in places only 15 yards broad enclosed by absolutely sheer precipice, and a caravan caught in it by sudden flood water would be in grave danger. We waited

for two hours whilst reconnaissances gradually penetrated further and further through the defile as the flood lessened, and eventually got on the move again at mid-day. We had some difficulty in places and at one time, for about half a mile, found the bottom of the gorge completely blocked by ice to a depth of about four feet. Fortunately the top was sound so we were able to get on over it to where the valley opens out and the track leads over a small pass to Chang Tash lake.

We found our camping ground that evening at Murgo very pleasant by contrast with Brangsa Sassir. It was still, and warm enough, and we walked down to where the winter track from Kataklik joins the Sassir route. We were in limestone country again and fantastic red cliffs faced us above the next day's track up Murgo gorge. Murgo is the last place on the trade route where there is even scanty grazing till Chinese territory is reached. It is also the last place where fuel, in the shape of "Burtsi," can be obtained in any quantity and we took on as much as could be collected and carried. The next day's march to Kizilyat is a nightmare of desolation—20 miles, mostly in a broad stony river bed without sign of vegetation or life. It became quite unpleasantly hot at mid-day and there was no shade.

Our goat-herd having deserted at Brangsa Sassir, the sheep and goats had been handed over to the care of the Kashmiris Moham Du and Habiba. Half the goats had already stopped giving any milk and we began to regret having brought them. The sheep were a necessary precaution in case we should be delayed anywhere where game could not be found. The whole 14 foot-sore hungry little beasts came into camp just before it got dark, having taken ten hours for the 20 miles. The weariest had been carried in turns on the two ponies which accompanied the party.

Arrived at the camping ground, which has literally nothing to distinguish it from the surrounding wilderness except a few more skeletons than the accustomed number by the way, the hungry ponies were tied in pairs head to tail to prevent them wandering off in search of non-existent grazing. This was the usual routine. They remained tied up till about 6 p.m. when they were taken to water and then had about 1½lbs. of barley, half their daily ration, given in a small nose bag. The other half of the ration was usually

given about half an hour before the caravan started in the morning. The ponies are got into fairly big condition before leaving Leh, but those that reach Sinkiang are by then usually reduced to skin and bone from their starvation diet on the road. As they have to carry all their food the best ration to get them across alive becomes a nice matter of adjustment after years of experience. Many die, but Ibrahim's management got his safely through the double journey—excepting only the one killed at Umlung.

On the night 12th/13th July there were 14° of frost in our fairly sheltered camp. On 13th the sheep and goats were on the road by 6 a.m. and the head of the caravan left three-quarters of an hour later. We continued on up the seemingly interminable stony river bed—climbing more steeply. The little stream was soon almost frozen over and it was not until we had begun the last ascent to the Depsang Plain that sunshine reached and warmed us. The so-called pass onto the Depsang is 17,780 feet, and the whole track across the plain, until it drops to the Chip Chak river, is approximately at the same altitude. The plain is stony and undulating and offers no shelter of any kind. Luckily for us 13th was a still, cloudless day. In every direction are panoramas of distant snow peaks. Tehram Kangri and Depsang peaks were distinguishable, and it was with the greatest interest that we saw for the first time the peaks by the Karakoram Pass and the snows of the great glacier region N.W. of it. We found the march pleasant and easy, though the caravan moved at little more than 2 m.p.h. On approaching the Chip Chak we saw some Tibet antelope. They were does, about 1000 yards from the track, and moved off on seeing us. Fording the river one ascends slowly past Daulat-Beg-Uldi and the former Chinese boundary post at Pulo, the latter actually boasting a landmark in the shape of two small ruined huts formerly used by the Chinese frontier guard.

We camped that night at the place known as Chajosh-Jilga, about two miles beyond the Pulo huts. Anything more dreary could hardly be imagined. Conglomerate and rubble surrounded us on all sides. The stream, milky from its source in a snow field, was fouled by the rotting carcases of ponies. A wind howled from the Karakoram Pass and blew the dust in swirls and eddies about the tents. The temperature fell to 14° F. during the night, but

in spite of it and the wind which continued till the small hours we passed a warm night in the puttoo-lined tent. Next morning as we were moving off we met an Austrian journalist and his wife who said they had come from Russia through Sinkiang and were on their way to India—a queer couple who lived and ate their meals with their caravan men.

Nine miles up the valley the trade route bends up to the right to the Karakoram Pass. Here eight caravan ponies and the five donkeys with such of our supplies and baggage as we should not require for the next fortnight, Moham Du, Guffara and three of the Argons, continued on over the pass with instructions to wait for us at Suget Karaul and, with the rest of the caravan, we turned off the beaten track.

To guide us during the détour which we wished to make we had Major Mason's report to the Royal Geographical Society of his expedition to the Aghil Range and Shaksgam valley in 1926, and the map published with it. Ibrahim having accompanied this expedition his previous knowledge was most valuable to us, although his recollection of distances and of the topography generally, was often at fault.

About a mile after leaving the trade route we found the snow field which, lying at a little under 18,000 feet, is the source of two streams, the waters of one flowing S.E. to the Indian Ocean and of the other N.W. to Sinkiang where they disappear in the sands of the Central Asian Deserts. We followed the stream flowing N.W. The gradient is gentle and the going good if one avoids the boggy places. The prospect soon becomes pleasanter. There is more vegetation and one encounters no gruesome remains by the way. Beyond the watershed snow we heard the delightful bubble of sand grouse, and three fat birds were soon added to our larder. We passed the place used by the de Fillipi Expedition of 1914 for a supply depot and saw the traces of one of Mason's camp fires. The stream, a mere trickle where it leaves the snow field, is fed from glaciers in the side valleys, and by 5 p.m., when we were still two miles from its junction with the Yarkand River, it presented a serious obstacle. The valley is here much more restricted and one is forced to ford the stream several times—a most unpleasant operation in the icy water. Tents were pitched that evening under

a shingly bank about half a mile from the Yarkand River at the southern edge of Wood's Amphitheatre.[1] We had marched 18 miles and were all pretty tired on arrival, the ponies being badly tucked up. The latter were turned out onto the grazing which we found fairly plentiful on the far bank of the Yarkand River. "Burtsi" fuel was collected and soon our camp fires were blazing—a prelude to hot baths and good dinners. "Q" Branch, for which M. was responsible, as usual worked perfectly. Make no mistake, you who would go to places beyond even the crudest civilisation or the dwellings of men—your commissariat must be the best you can get and there must be a sufficiency of good food. Lack of it courts weakness and even illness, as to which last your situation may be an extremely unpleasant one.

A "yurrup" morning next day, July 15th. After breakfast M. and I climbed across to a knoll about two miles from camp and took panoramas looking S.W. to the glaciers near the source of the Yarkand River and N.W. including the nineteen and twenty thousand-foot peaks of the Aghil range above the left bank of the river.

On 16th the whole caravan forded the river just above the junction of the stream followed on 14th and continued on past Hayward's Lake to camp under the lee of a cliff on the left bank. The shikar party made a détour through the foothills farther west. Only antelope does were seen during the morning, but when approaching the camp in the afternoon Rattar spotted two bucks on the right bank. The shikar party was able to ford the main river without difficulty but open ground made it impossible for me to approach nearer to the antelope than about 400 yards. I did not then realise how absurdly unsophisticated they are in places where man is almost unknown to them. Both fed down towards us as we lay watching them, and the better head gave me what should have been an easy shot at 200 yards. Unfortunately I wounded it and the pair ran about amongst some rocks so that it was difficult to distinguish them apart. As a result I fired at the unwounded buck and killed it—afterwards despatching the other. The heads were disappointing—24 inches and 23½ inches. I had

[1] So called from the report made by Major (now Colonel) Wood, Survey of India, who accompanied the de Fillipi Expedition.

hoped for 26 inches, but though several others were bagged later both in the Upper Yarkand and Lungmo Che valleys, in each case the best of a herd, none exceeded 24 inches.

We camped again under the shelter of a cliff. Snow fell steadily all night and lay thick on the tents when the shikar party moved off at 4.30 a.m. next morning. We had left the carcass of one antelope on the ground in the hope of finding snow leopard or wolves on it at dawn. On reaching the river we found it rising very rapidly and had to abandon the attempt to reach the right bank. Old droppings of snow leopard were frequently seen in the Yarkand River and Lungmo Che valleys, but never any fresh ones, and the animals were probably all higher up in the side nalas.

That night we camped about 14 miles short of the junction of the Lungmo Che valley, crossing the left bank tributaries of the Yarkand River without difficulty. In the quietness of the afternoon when the tents were pitched we did not trouble about shelter. A stiff breeze sprang up towards evening and with 24° of frost on the ground we passed an unpleasantly cold night. Ibrahim, never happy off the trade route, tried to persuade us that we had already passed the Lungmo Che junction. One object of our détour was to look for the big burhel which were reported[1] to be plentiful in the Lungmo Che. The junction is at the point where the Yarkand River turns north-east, and cannot be confused with those of tributaries higher up the left bank. The caravan did not start till mid-day on 18th and was sent only six miles down stream. From 10 a.m. the sky was overcast. The river remained low and the shikar party was able to cross and recross the main stream with ease. Whilst searching the right bank for antelope we found the skull of a yak, one horn of which had been sawn off. Through a misunderstanding this skull was not brought on with us. At the time we concluded that the animal had been with one of the previous expeditions, but I have been unable to discover that tame yaks were ever taken there. We also found the unmistakable

[1] *Extract from Geographical Journal. Report by Major Clifford, I.M.S.*

"Also on the lower slopes . . . . . of the Lungmo Che there were large herds of burhel, which were undoubtedly the same species as are found nearer towards India, though heavier in the head than those found towards the Karakoram Range . . . . . We found dead heads of 36 inches, which is an enormous size compared with those which are nowadays shot on the nearer ranges . . . . . We never saw a live head of more than 28½ inches."

droppings of yaks, both in the Yarkand and Lungmo Che valleys, and from such evidence as we have since been able to collect conclude that the traces we found are those of wild herds.

On 19th we continued down the Yarkand River to the point where it begins to bend N.E. On the left bank the high cliffs here fall away, and by turning up N.W. across undulating ground we struck the Lungmo Che valley about five miles from the junction.

In Major Mason's report to the Royal Geographical Society of his expedition to this region in 1926 he gives as one of his objects :—

> "To explore for traces of any human occupation or passage, ancient or modern, in this area."

In the discussion following the report he said :—

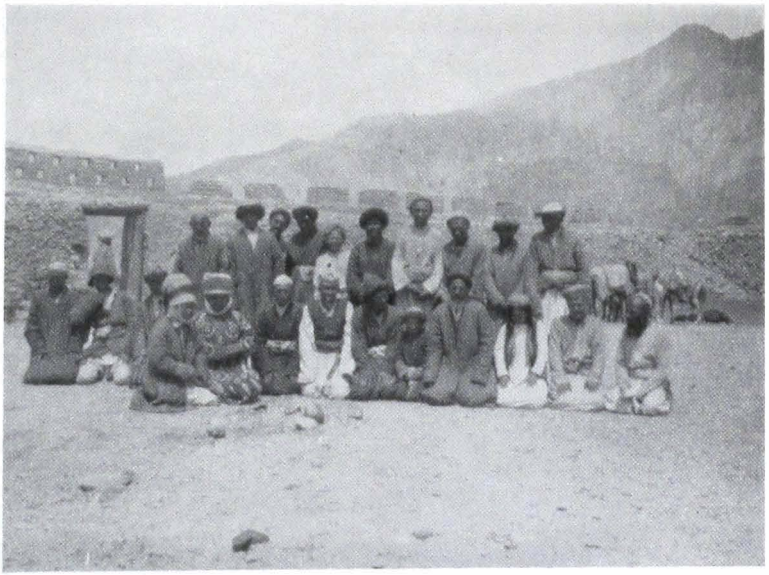
> "Actually we found no traces of treasure or travel, ancient or modern, except the body of a man (in the Lungmo Che, probably died in 1924). But though I believe this corpse to have been a straggler from the caravan route, at least four marches distant, and though the saddle-bag discovered by Wood (in 1914) may have the same interpretation, I still believe that it is possible there was an ancient way, by which a few people, possibly Kalmuck Tatars, robbers, or fugitives from justice, might have migrated or escaped. If they did so, they must have chosen October, for this would be the only month when they could get through the gorge above Khufelang, up the enclosed valleys and gorges of J, over the Aghil Dipsang and Tatar La, across the Shaksgam and its tributaries, and still be fit and ready to tackle the glaciers and passes of the Karakoram, before cold and exposure would exterminate them."

A glance at the map will show that so far as distance alone is concerned it would be far easier for us to return to the trade route from the Lungmo Che valley by Kufelang and Aktagh than by retracing our steps to the Karakoram Pass. It seemed a forlorn hope but worth sending a reconnaissance before deciding what to do. So, early on 20th Ibrahim and Ghulam Hassan were despatched with instructions to report whether a caravan could reach Kufelang. They were warned that the fords might be dangerous and that they must not go on into the narrow part of the gorge if there were signs of serious flood. Meanwhile, on the same day, the shikar

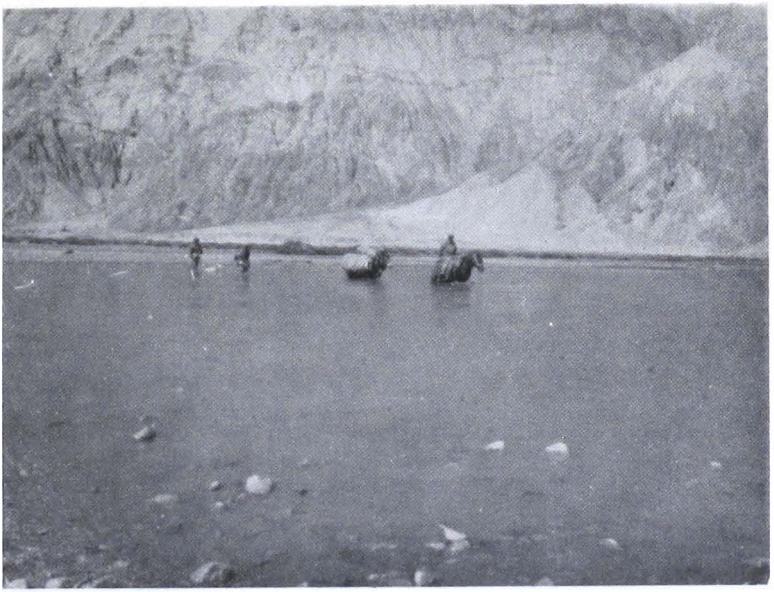
party worked up the left bank of the Lungmo Che to a point midway between the snouts of two glaciers on the opposite bank and about 15 miles above the junction with the Yarkand River. Each of these glacier snouts is broken into a mass of seracs and the scenery at our farthest point was wild and beautiful in the extreme. One herd of 19 burhel was located and approached. Closer inspection proved them all to be ewes and small rams, the biggest head amongst them being no more than 20 inches at most. Burhel make very distinct tracks on the hill sides and we failed to discover any others than those made by the herd seen.

Time did not admit of further exploration in this most interesting country. Indeed, since it seemed very probable we should have to retrace our steps to the trade route by the Karakoram Pass, we decided it would be advisable to move on 21st to near the junction so as to be ready to move up or down the Yarkand River according to the results of Ibrahim's reconnaissance. Soon after mid-day, therefore, on 21st the caravan was on the move again, keeping along the high ground above the right bank of the Lungmo Che. Antelope were seen and another 24 inch head shot. The whole body was left absolutely untouched on the ground for bait about a mile from where we camped that night near the river junction. Shortly before reaching our camping ground Ibrahim and Ghulam Hassan rode up to meet us. They had been through to Kufelang and had found three fords which they reported passable for the caravan before 10 a.m. each morning.

All through the Karakoram, Himalaya and Kuen Lun mountains we found that the rivers began to fill up between 9 and 11 a.m. according to the distance from the glaciers and snow fields. A roaring torrent at 5 p.m. became easily fordable after a comfortable and not too early start from camp next morning. If the day's march included at its commencement the passage of a river, it was better not to get on the move too early. The lowest water was generally to be found between 8 and 10 a.m. On July 22nd the shikar party rode out an hour before dawn to look at the carcass of the antelope shot the evening before. We left the ponies in a hollow and approached with great caution, waiting amongst some rocks 600 yards from the bait and down wind till it was light enough to see. The body was exactly as we had left it, and there was not



"Kirghiz families in Suget Fort."



"In Kufelang Gorge."

the slightest indication that either beast or bird of prey had approached it. We removed the head and returned to camp.

At 8.30 a.m. the caravan moved off to the first ford just above the junction and crossed without any serious difficulty. Wandus and the Argons waded over holding hands and singing at the top of their voices. Moving on down the right bank we were delayed by some deep side nalas but made steady progress and by 5 p.m. found ourselves near the second ford. The river being then in spate we chose a pleasant camping ground under high cliffs near good grazing. Both at this place and at the previous camp we found an abundant supply of low bushes (umbu) for fuel. The narrow part of the gorge above Kufelang still lay before us and we watched the river anxiously, making an early inspection of the next ford on 23rd. At this point the river flows in two main channels and several subsidiary ones. The caravan moved off at 8 a.m., following Ibrahim in single file into the river which by then had fallen about a foot since the evening before and was still falling. The whole crossing, much delayed by getting the sheep and goats over, occupied just under three-quarters of an hour. In the deepest part there was a little over three feet of water—enough to wet some of our baggage and to make us hope it would get no deeper. But the water was nowhere swift and the two main channels not more than 100 yards each. "Khush" the caravan dog as usual was left to his own devices and swam very prettily. "Binks" our bull terrier and the farmyard, the latter by now much reduced in numbers, were carried over.

We were now on a narrow beach on the left bank and in the narrow part of the gorge. Had the river risen suddenly our case would have been difficult. The next and last ford was about five miles on and we lost no time on the way. The ford proved easier than the second, though the water was quite obviously rising, and by 11.30 the whole outfit was safely on the right bank again, the gorge behind us and an open road before us back to the trade route.

We attributed our luck in making the passage to the weather conditions of the past few days. Except in the early mornings the sky had been overcast and the snow-melt in consequence comparatively slight. The same phenomena occurred each day, viz.

a clear morning followed soon by a steady cloud drift from the north. During our first few days in the Upper Yarkand valley these clouds were held up by a south or south-west wind which, however, each succeeding day grew less until by 19th the hours of sunshine were few and the sky by 10 a.m. entirely overcast with clouds from the north.

On 24th we passed the dreary Aktagh hill and joined the main trade route again, meeting two caravans from Yarkand. It was bitterly cold with rain and sleet, and the country desolate beyond description.

On 25th we crossed the Suget Dawan—one of the worst marches on the whole trip. With lowered heads for eight hours we faced a driving storm of fine snow, men and ponies disappearing into the surrounding veil of whiteness often at 50 yards—sometimes at as many feet. On the summit the clouds lifted for a few minutes and across the snow slopes below us we had our first sight of China. We had hoped to make the Chinese customs port at Suget Karaul by evening but owing to the exhausted condition of men and animals we called a halt about four miles short of it. The wind dropped soon after dark and we woke to clear skies on 26th. Below us lay the Karakash valley and beyond it the granite peaks of the Kuen Lun. An easy march brought us to the Karaul, a square mud fort crowded with Kirghiz, and Yarkandis with their merchandise. The two Chinese customs officers and a Chinese girl came out to welcome us and entertained us in their little house in the fort whilst our tents were being prepared. Conversation was carried on through an interpreter who spoke both Urdu and Chinese. In almost all other places in Sinkiang we had to employ two interpreters in conversation with the Chinese—one speaking Urdu and Turki and the other Turki and Chinese. No Chinese official we met spoke the language of the country, Turki, and all their work amongst the people was carried out through an interpreter. We found conversation through two interpreters very tedious since the first half-hour of our lengthy interviews was taken up with a competition in fatuous compliments.

We were still without our Chinese passports, and although H.B.M. Consul General at Kashgar had written that these were being sent to meet us in Karghalik the Suget customs officers pre-

tended that they might get into trouble by letting us through. They made a cursory examination of our baggage—checking my weapons carefully, however, with the list in the Consul's letter. Having displayed their official zeal they at once became most friendly again, and laid the forefingers of each hand together as a sign that we were accepted as comrades for life.

Our flocks and herds were now reduced to one small goat and the fattest and best of the sheep. This last we sent as a present to the Chinese together with Rs10 and a string of beads for the lady. The compliment was soon after returned with interest, when a gaily-dressed Kirghiz servant appeared at our tent door leading an enormous fat-tailed sheep, followed by other servants carrying two fowls, about 10lbs. of rice and three dozen large eggs. This was our first introduction to the Chinese egg—we never really acquired a taste for them. On opening the best one merely had to leave the tent. Others frequently burst from the pressure of decomposing chicken, the resultant mess requiring the offices of the sweeper. We never discovered whether these eggs, which were so frequently bestowed on us by Chinese and Kirghiz alike, were in this condition as being to the donors a special luxury, or with malice aforethought, or merely from carelessness.

We found the servants we had sent on from the Karakoram Pass on 14th waiting for us in the fort. The transport animals, however, had been sent off some miles away for grazing. They could not be collected till the next day, and we were not sorry for the excuse to postpone our departure. The news of our arrival soon got abroad and, as in every other place in Chinese territory where we stopped, the sick and maimed began to arrive by dozens to beg for medicine and treatment. This was M's special department. Her untiring efforts to relieve the suffering of those kindly people will long be remembered by them. The condition of some, however, was beyond our small resources.

The Chinese and a crowd of picturesque Kirghiz assembled to see us off next morning. The Kirghiz and Yarkandi habit of placing the right hand over the heart and bowing for welcome or farewell is very pretty. On meeting us they would sometimes murmur "Khush" (meaning "delighted"), or more rarely "peace be with you"—to which we would reply "and to you also be peace."

We were still four days' march from the last of the great passes, the Sanjudawan, or Grim Pass. For two days our road lay down the Karakash valley enclosed on each side by sheer cliffs of granite rising many thousands of feet. On 27th, favoured again by cloudy weather, we were able to negotiate two broad fords in safety, and also to cross the Tugra Su, a left-bank tributary. The last is a boulder-strewn unpleasant looking place and must be a dangerous crossing if there is much water.

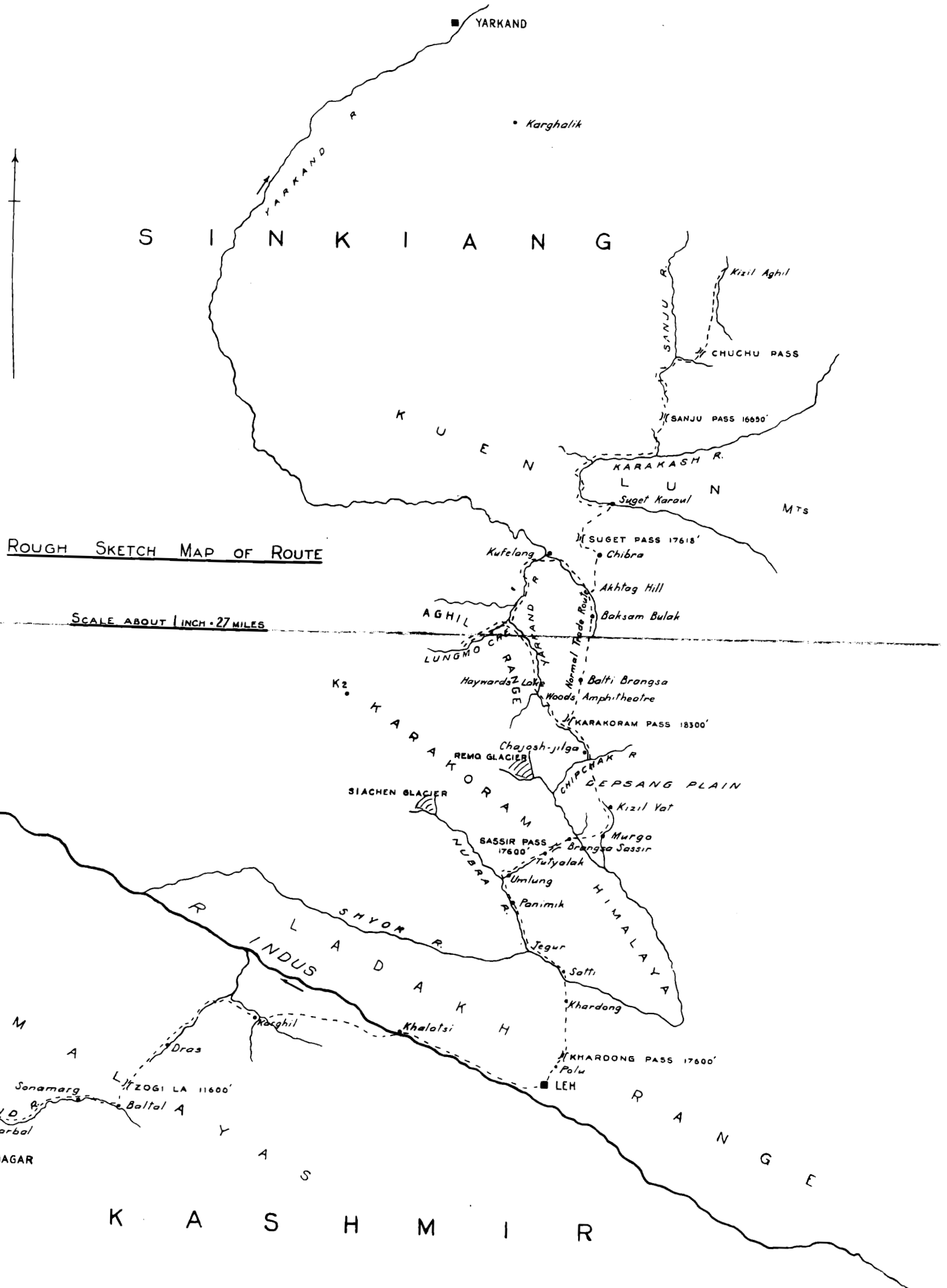
In the road report which A.H.Q. had provided for us we read that on our next day's march, 28th, at one place "there is a bad rocky corner where the track runs along a narrow causeway of rock in about 18 inches of water with the main channel of the river beyond." Before we reached this place the river had risen in good earnest—a chocolate-coloured flood boiling and spouting over the boulders. We found the causeway under a good three feet of water and quite impassable for laden animals. The flood was obviously rising and might last for days. There was no other road. Above the causeway a rock face gave good hand and foot holds and it was decided to go on if possible. All the baggage was off-loaded and half the party climbed onto the cliff. Perched wherever we could stand firmly we passed everything across to a small beach on the other side, slinging the heavier things on ropes. The ponies were led, two at a time, through the water over the causeway, the second of each pair being tied to the leader's tail. One man shoved the ponies off and a long rope, fastened in turn to each leader's head collar was passed across the line of men balanced on the cliff. All the ponies were off their feet at one place, the wretched mokes almost all the way. Had any of them been swept off the causeway we could not have held them in the torrent beyond. The current over the flooded track helped us by driving the frightened animals close in under the cliff. From shore to shore the distance was less than 50 yards. It took us 2½ hours to cross. The men worked splendidly, Wandus as usual much to the fore. Some bruises and a cut fetlock were the only casualties. We had no more water to negotiate that day and were thankful. Leaving the flooded Karakash River we turned up a side nala, past some cave dwellings, climbing, between immense cliffs, up a track which is scarcely ever reached by the direct rays of the sun. High up this nala the caravan

rested on 29th. Two Kirghiz had been sent ahead from Suget to bring yaks from the grazing grounds beyond the Sanju Dawan to take our baggage over since the pass is too steep for laden ponies. The shikar party spent 29th climbing 3000 feet odd and down again to look for a reputed herd of ibex. Small burhel only were found and one of these was shot for the pot. On 30th, the yaks having arrived, we crossed the Sanju—a razorback unfortunately wrapped that day in cloud, or the view should have been magnificent. After descending 2000 feet on the north side we saw below us for the first time a big Kirghiz encampment. Their tents, called "yurts," scattered on rolling grass-land and all about them great herds of sheep and cattle.

The Kirghiz welcomed us most charmingly and an old greybeard made a long speech in Turki to which I replied in Urdu—neither understanding a word of what the other said but both being none the less satisfied that eternal friendship had been offered and accepted. We camped that night amongst them in more peaceful surroundings than we had known since Panimik. From this place, called Jandar, the road to Sanju Bazaar follows the Sanju defile—the river being known as the Sanju or Sarigh-Yar.

Flood being now a serious menace to our progress we were early on the road next day, reaching the junction of the Kichik-Yallak stream by 7.30 a.m. The main stream has to be forded many times owing to the cliffs falling sheer to deep water on alternate banks, but all the crossings were safely negotiated until a mile below the junction of the Gezge stream. Further progress on the left bank being here impossible an attempt was made to cross to the right bank. The river, a torrent 30 yards broad, looked a very ugly proposition. Wandus, Ghulam Hassan and Yasim Beg plunged in. All three were swept off their feet, Yasim Beg disappearing completely for a few seconds. They scrambled out laughing, nothing daunted from their ducking in the icy water and tried another place farther up with much the same result. A Kirghiz who had managed to find a way across the cliffs from lower down told us that many caravans were held up by the floods—but that he had passed a party of 8 camels only a mile below us carrying charash to Suget. Soon after this the camels appeared moving up the right bank and waded without difficulty through the heavy water where we had

tried to cross. After prolonged and at times acrimonious bargaining the head camel-driver was persuaded to take our baggage as far as the branch nala leading to the small Chuchu Pass for ten rupees and a packet of cigarettes. Our baggage was then transferred to the camels which made the first crossing without difficulty. But the river had been rising very rapidly and a precious hour had been wasted in coming to terms with the camel driver. As a result we found that the next ford down which the camels had crossed easily a few hours before presented now a serious obstacle. The water reached the camels' bellies and it needed much pulling and pushing to make them go through. One got his legs mixed up with a big rock, fell over and was with difficulty put right side up again. Its load, of course, was drenched. The ponies, as at the previous ford, floundered through unladen, the men holding to their tails or riding the stronger ones. Most of us were well soaked on reaching the left bank, and any thought of crossing the next ford, only half a mile below, had to be abandoned. We were now unable to move up or down the valley and spent that night and all next day in a camp at the water's edge. Fortunately some bushes provided us with fuel and a little grazing was found for the ponies. By evening of August 1st the flood was clearly subsiding and we were able to cross all the fords on 2nd without difficulty. At the junction of the valley leading to Chuchu Dawan loads were transferred again to the ponies and, camping for one night under the low pass, we came at last, on August 3rd, to the pretty little village of Kizil Aghil. A boy ran out to meet us carrying a basket of fruit and we were then welcomed with the whole-hearted cordiality which awaited us wherever we went afterwards in Sinkiang. We had crossed the whole mountain barrier, and before us lay the last low spurs of the Kuen Lun foothills.



ROUGH SKETCH MAP OF ROUTE

SCALE ABOUT 1 INCH = 27 MILES