

CHAPTER III

LAKE PANGONG AND THE KARAKORUM PLATEAU

NORTH of Ladakh a vast desert stretches for two hundred miles to the borders of Chinese Turkestan. It is not a desert of sand and heat and plains, but of snow and cold and mountains. On the north and south respectively it is bordered by yet higher mountains, the magnificent ranges of Himalaya, the "Abode of Snow," and of Kwen Lun, still more inaccessible. In both, the loftier peaks tower to heights of 25,000 feet, and the main passes are 15,000 feet or more above the sea. Between the ranges the mountainous plateau of Karakorum or "Black Gravel," at an altitude of 16,000 to 18,000 feet, forms the main portion of the bleak desert, the dread of caravans. It is not surprising that India and western China, with such a desert between them, have little communication.

My acquaintance with this region began with an excursion of two weeks from Leh eastward over the main range of the Himalayas to the salt lake of Pangong, 14,000 feet above the sea,—an excursion which was described in part in the last chapter. Later, with Mr. Barrett, I spent thirty-five days, from May 15 to June 18, in crossing the main plateau and the bordering ranges from Leh, south of the highest range of the Himalayas, to Sanju in Chinese Turkestan, north of the Kwen Lun range. After traversing the main plateau, we attempted to shorten our journey by crossing the unexplored pass of Hindu Tash in the Kwen