

CHAPTER IV

THE HEART OF ASIA

FROM the sharp ridge of the Sanju pass, at a height of 16,700 feet, the view to the north gave us our first sight of the great Lop, or Tarim basin, in the very heart of Asia. Near at hand, huge glaciers wound their ribbed way down from the unnumbered nameless peaks, which they themselves, by cutting headward, had carved into sharp triangles resembling the famous pyramid of the Matterhorn in the Alps. Two or three thousand feet below us, at our very feet, as it seemed, the steep amphitheatre of a huge cirque, or corrie, formerly occupied by a glacier, ended in a broad expanse of old moraines. Instead of the boulders and rough hollows which one usually sees in moraines, these presented surprisingly soft outlines, for they had been deeply buried in loess deposited from the atmosphere. The loess was covered with thick grass, full, as we soon saw, of countless alpine flowers, and dotted with sleek flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. Farther away the moraines contracted, and finally came to an end where the stream which drained them plunged into a deep gorge and was lost to view among a maze of rough, naked mountains. The brown and gray flanks of these lower heights sloped steeply, and some of the ridges were sharp; but their nakedness, and the absence of snow and of dominating peaks, made them comparatively uninteresting. Our gaze went out far beyond them to where the last low hills gave place to a strange yellow band. It