

CHAPTER V

KHIRGHIZ NOMADS AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE HIGH PLATEAUS

THE great physical difference between the plateaus and the floor of the Lop basin has notable consequences in the diverse human habits and character of the two regions. Apparently, the physical differences are the cause of the human differences. In order to take the first step in bringing out this geographic contrast between the human inhabitants of the two diverse regions, I shall postpone the account of our journey from the Sanju pass down to the zone of vegetation, and shall devote this chapter to a description of the Khirghiz, a race of Mohammedan nomads inhabiting the high plateaus. As the Karakorum plateau is for the most part too high and cold to be inhabited, we saw but a few score Khirghiz on the way from India to Turkestan. In the summer of 1903, however, as a member of the Pumphelly Expedition of the Carnegie Institution, I spent three months among the Khirghiz of the plateaus to the west and southwest of the Lop basin, chiefly in the western and central part of the Tian Shan plateau. During a residence in Turkey I had learned a little Turkish; and now I found that I was soon able to pick up enough of the Khirghiz dialect of Turki, a language very closely allied to Turkish, to dispense with an interpreter in all ordinary matters. A little knowledge of their language went far to put me on terms of comparative intimacy with my Khirghiz servants,