

CHAPTER VI.

SIRIKOL, THE PÁMÍRS AND WAKHÁN.

By Lieutenant-Colonel T. E. Gordon.

CAPTAIN BIDDULPH, Captain Trotter, Dr. Stoliczka and I left Yangi Hissár, Káshghar, on the 21st March. We were preceded by Resaidar Muhammad Afzal Khán, who left the previous day, travelling by rapid marches to Wakhán with a letter to Mír Futteh Ali Shah, the ruler of that country, informing him of our proposed visit. Muhammad Afzal reached Kila Panj on the 2nd April, and rendered admirable service in preparing for our arrival.

Our first day's journey was to Egiz-yar, a large village on the verge of the plain, and the last in the inhabited country towards the hills. The road lay in a south-westerly direction, passing by several flourishing villages amidst extensive cultivation. Six miles beyond Egiz-yar the road enters the hills along the course of a feeder of the Yangi Hissár river. The plain preserves its even surface right up to the high ranges and ridges which stand out, and rise from it, without any undulating or broken ground intervening. The appearance is strikingly like that of bold sea-coast scenery. The population (a very scanty one) between this and Sirikol is entirely Kirghiz. They live almost wholly by their flocks and herds, only attempting a little scattered cultivation in the lower valleys. They are the only people we observed using the horse generally in the plough, oxen being employed in the plains, and yaks in Sirikol.*

The signs of approaching spring were showing when we left Yangi Hissár, but we found ourselves here almost back in the depth of mid-winter. All the streams were frozen, and snow lay everywhere, while fresh falls were frequent the whole way to Wakhán, and during our stay there.

We followed the Yangi Hissár tributary stream by a good road up to the Kaskasú pass (13,000 feet), which we crossed on the fourth day. Snow and ice made the passage of it, which is otherwise easy, extremely difficult. Our baggage animals at the descent had to be relieved by yaks.

For about thirty miles from the plains the hills are bold and precipitous, rising abruptly from the valley, and they are almost entirely devoid of vegetation. Beyond that, they become sloping and rounded, and in summer are covered with grass, affording excellent pasture. The descent from the Kaskasú pass is to Chihil Gumbaz (forty domes), where we expected, from the name, to find some interesting ruins. The place however has evidently been so called from that number of Kirghiz clay-brick domed tombs having at one time existed there. Now only one or two, in a ruined state, remain. A road branches off here to Yárkand, (distant one hundred and ten miles) passing down the Chárling valley and stream. In the time of the Chinese occupation this passage was watched by an outpost. The road is unsuitable for any but small parties, from an absolute want of water on it for a distance of thirty-five miles. The streams from the southern side of the Kaskasú pass and the eastern of the Torut unite here and form the Chárling, which flows into the Yárkand plain.

The fifth day's journey took us over the Torut pass (13,400 feet), which, with the hills all about, was covered with an almost perfect sheet of snow, hardly a rock appearing anywhere through the surface, except on the crests and peaks. Willow and poplar trees are plentiful

* *Note.*—Ploughing with horses has been a custom from the earliest times throughout Eastern Turkestan. Captain Chapman made a sketch of one which he saw at Kizil in March last.—(Sd.) T. D. F.