

6 BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF INNERMOST ASIA CH. I

as arteries for the trade and cultural relations which link China and the Tarim basin with the Oxus region and thence with India.

If we follow eastwards the routes just referred to we reach through tortuous arid gorges the western margin of the huge trough, appropriately known as the Tarim basin. Before we proceed to visit the great drift-sand desert of the Taklamakan which fills most of it, we may pass in rapid strides along the big mountain chains enclosing this basin; for were it not for the water which their glaciers send down into it and which the Tarim river gathers before it gets dried up in the Lop-nor marshes, the whole of this vast area would be barren of life.

On the southern flank of the basin there extends in an unbroken line the mighty mountain rampart of the K'un-lun. Starting from the side of the Pamirs we find its ranges buttressing, as it were, in several high parallel ranges (Fig. 3) the great glacier-clad watershed which the Kara-koram forms towards the drainage of the Indus. Through these ranges have cut their way the Yarkand river and its tributaries, the main feeders of the Tarim. What grazing is to be found high up at the heads of their valleys is of the scantiest kind and barely suffices for the flocks of a few scattered Kirghiz camps. The routes which lead up these valleys all converge upon the Kara-koram pass. At an elevation of some 18,200 feet above sea-level, this pass is the only practicable line of communication to give access to Ladak and the uppermost Indus valley. But we have no record of its use in ancient times.

Farther to the east the K'un-lun raises a practically impenetrable barrier to traffic of any sort. The two rivers