

That it led up from the Oxus to the Alai had been established long ago by Sir Henry Yule, that great elucidator of early travel, when he proved that 'the valley of the Komedoi', through which the ascent towards Imaos is said to have led, could be no other than Kara-tegin, the valley of the Surkh-ab. Mediaeval Arab geographers still knew it by the name of *Kumedh*. The Kara-tegin valley and its eastern continuation, the trough of the Alai, offer in fact the easiest line of communication from the Oxus to the Tarim basin. But the advantages of the physical features which make the Alai particularly suited to serve as a natural highway between the two were brought home to me best by what the actual journey along it showed most clearly.

For fully seventy miles from where the Russian military road crosses it the open trough of the Alai stretches with an unbroken width from six to eleven miles at its floor down to the Kirghiz village of Daraut-kurghan. Eastwards for another twenty miles up to the Taun-murun saddle, where the route from the Kashgar side enters the Alai, the 'thalweg' is equally wide and easy. Climatic conditions, moister than on the Pamirs to the south, provide everywhere ample steppe vegetation. Hence the Alai forms the great summer grazing-ground for thousands of Kirghiz nomads who annually move up there from the plains of Farghana with their flocks, camels and horses. Well did I remember their picturesque caravans with camels carrying rich carpets, felts and other comfortable possessions of nomadic households as I had met them on their regular migration when I travelled early in June 1901 from Irkesh-tam to Osh and Andijan in Farghana. Now the warmth of the summer had made their camps seek the higher side valleys for the young grass, and