

which I stepped when, a few hundred yards from the Chinese frontier, I entered the well-built, comfortable house, nestling below the Cossack garrison's fort, where M. Dochenko, the hospitable officer in charge of the Russian Customs, gave me a warm welcome.

The scenery next morning showed an equally marked and pleasant change. The barren rock and detritus of the valleys at the head-waters of the Kizil-su gave way to grassy alpine slopes soon after I left Irkeshtam. The usual route over the Terek Pass was closed by the depth and softness of the snow. So I had to take the more circuitous route over the Alai. On the Taun-murun Pass (close on 12,000 feet above the sea), which crosses the watershed between Tarim and Oxus, and on which we had to spend a comfortless night, the deep snowdrifts and inclement weather caused much trouble. The sky did not clear next day when I rode down the broad rolling 'Margs,' as we should call them in Kashmir, of the head of the Alai Valley, and consequently I lost the chance of sighting Mount Kaufmann and other high peaks of the Trans-Alai range towards the Pamir.

The Kirghiz had not yet ventured up to these splendid summer grazings which would force even the most stolid of Kashmir Gujars to admiration. The consequent want of shelter and supplies forced us to attempt the same day the crossing of the Taldik Pass in order to reach less exposed ground northwards. We were now indeed on the good bridle road that leads from Gulcha to the 'Pamirski post,' the well-known Russian fort on the Pamirs; but, it was completely obliterated higher up by deep snow, and a blinding snowstorm came on while we toiled up to the Pass. But for the excellent guidance of our plucky 'Jigit,' a Nogai or Russified Muhammadan from Kazan whom the obliging Customs officer of Irkeshtam had provided as an escort, we might have fared badly. It was late in the night before we struggled through to the deserted Kirghiz blockhouses of Öch-töbe at the northern foot of the Pass. It was a wretched shelter, but all my boxes were safe.

After this experience, the rapid marches of the next three days, which carried me down the valley of the Gulcha River, were doubly