

CHAPTER VII

IN AFGHAN WAKHAN

THE night preceding our passage to the Oxus proved bitterly cold, the minimum thermometer showing 5° Fahr. So when on May 19th we started at 6 A.M. for the pass under a specklessly clear sky the snow was hard frozen. It was a delightful change to see the long string of baggage animals move now over the glittering surface without needing the track which had been ploughed by them the day before with such efforts. But the growing intensity of the sunshine, doubly felt by me with a face still blistered from the Darkot, warned us to hasten on. By 7.30 A.M. we reached the level plain of the saddle where in the summer the waters divide almost imperceptibly between Indus and Oxus. Now the snow lay everywhere to a depth of not less than five or six feet. The descent for the first two or three miles was equally easy, though in places one or other of the more heavily laden ponies would break through where the snow covered small water-courses (Fig. 23). But by 9 A.M. the surface had already softened badly, and with the animals constantly floundering the help of the fifteen sturdy Wakhis who had met us on the saddle proved most welcome. It would have been quite impossible to get the animals, even unladen, through the snow-choked gorge into which the Baroghil drainage passes farther down. So with a good deal of trouble they were dragged up to the crest of a shale-covered side spur where the snow had partially melted, while parties of good-natured Wakhis carried up load after load.

It was a relief to sight at last at the bottom of a small side valley the first bit of fairly dry ground with