

poverty of Upper Wakhan and the strain involved upon its scanty resources by the prolonged presence of the Afghan escort awaiting me. What at the time I felt like a jar on my feelings was the polite refusal of my two Indians to partake of the offered collation. Of course, I knew well that hard-and-fast caste rules would allow neither Surveyor Ram Singh, the Hinduized Gurkha, nor Naik Ram Singh, the Sikh, to partake of impure Mlecchas' dishes. Yet this little commonplace incident made me realize, on the very threshold of Central Asia, that the distant region I was now re-entering after years of absence lay in many ways much nearer to our European horizon than familiar and yet ever-inscrutable India.

When the baggage had turned up under faithful old Kurban's care, we rode in an imposing cavalcade down the steadily broadening valley towards its junction with the Oxus. Near the scattered homesteads of Pitkhar I was delighted to get my first information of ancient walls on the steep spur overlooking the debouchure from the west; for just at this point the Chinese record of Kao Hsien-chih's famous expedition had made me locate that fortified line by which in 747 A.D. the Tibetans attempted to bar his advance from the Oxus to the Baroghil.

There was no time now for further investigation, as I was soon met on my way by gallant old Colonel Shirin-dil Khan, who, mounted on a fine Badakhshi and in full uniform, had galloped ahead with a crowd of horsemen to receive me. He had been sent up from Badakhshan by Prince Nasrullah, brother of the Amir and General Commanding in the Oxus Provinces, to assure my safe passage through the Afghan territory on the Pamirs. After patiently waiting for me at Sarhad for over four weeks he now offered me the warmest of welcomes. From the very first his soldierly bearing and evident kindness of disposition, coupled with a certain rough frankness, struck me most pleasantly. With his six feet of height and burly figure he looked an active Warden of the Afghan Marches north-eastwards, in spite of his years, probably close on sixty, and manifest traces of a hard life. The Russian-looking uniform with a sort of black busby suited him well,