

for all Europeans. But for moments I could almost forget this as I sat on the carpet in the Colonel's neat tent during the long hours it took for my baggage to arrive, and, refreshed by tea and Wakhan dainties, listened to all my host would tell, in a ready flow of sonorous Persian, of his cherished home in beautiful Badakhshan and of his varied experiences up and down the Oxus. For Fortune so willed it that the appointment, which, some seven years before my visit, put Shirin-dil Khan in command of the Afghan frontier garrisons from Badakhshan upwards, had brought the old warrior after many years of arduous soldiering in distant parts of Afghanistan back to ground he knew and loved from his youth. So from this our first meeting a bond of common local interest made him eager to satisfy my curiosity about those lands of ancient Bactria which, by their historical past and their very inaccessibility, will never cease to attract me.

The presence of this delightful and well-informed old soldier would alone have been an inducement to tarry by their threshold on the Oxus. But when my camp had at last been pitched in the evening, at some distance above that of the Afghan commando, and I was free after ceremonial visits from the local head-men to review the situation in quiet, I could not fail to recognize that, apart from my own eagerness to gain rapidly the fields of labour awaiting me in Eastern Turkestan, serious practical considerations urged me onwards. There was reassuring evidence that, for my progress eastwards to the Chinese border on the Pamirs, every help which the scanty resources of barren Upper Wakhan would permit had been provided under the Amir's orders. But it was equally certain that the military force which those charged with their execution had seen fit to send up for my sake to the highest permanently inhabited part of the valley, had been exposed already far too long to serious hardships from the rigours of the climate and from inadequate shelter.

Still more I owed consideration to the discreet but touching applications which reached me in the privacy of my tent from the representatives of the peaceful Wakhi