

presents with my Afghan hosts kept me busy till the evening. Only then could I find time for a ride with the communicative Karaul Beg round the nearest of the small hamlets which, scattered along broad alluvial terraces above the right bank of the Oxus, or Ab-i-Panja as it is here called, make up the present Sarhad, reckoned altogether at some 130 households.

There was little about the low grey houses, or rather hovels, of mud and rubble to indicate the importance which from early times must have attached to Sarhad as the highest place of permanent occupation on the direct route leading from the Oxus to the Tarim Basin. Here was the last point where caravans coming from the Bactrian side with the products of the Far West and of India could provision themselves for crossing that high tract of wilderness 'called Pamier' of which old Marco Polo rightly tells us: "You ride across it for twelve days together, finding nothing but a desert without habitations or any green thing, so that travellers are obliged to carry with them whatever they have need of." And as I looked south towards the snow-covered saddle of the Baroghil, the route I had followed myself, it was equally easy to realize why Kao Hsien-chih's strategy had, after the successful crossing of the Pamirs, made the three columns of his Chinese army concentrate upon the stronghold of Lien-yün, opposite the present Sarhad. Here was the base from which Yasin could be invaded and the Tibetans ousted from their hold upon the straight route to the Indus.

Both Colonel Shirin-dil Khan and Hakim Mansur Khan declared themselves bound by their instructions to accompany me personally across the Afghan Pamirs to the Chinese border. But my well-meaning military protector gave way, not altogether reluctantly I thought, to my earnest representations, and agreed to send the bulk of his little force back to Kala Panja and to take only a portion of his mounted men along. Though he had taken the precaution to establish supply depots at suitable points ahead, I knew that manifold preparations would delay the start of our little column for the first march. So I was doubly glad when the gallant old