

It was interesting, too, to learn that the ancient trade route up the Oxus from Badakhshan to Sarikol and to Yarkand is still frequented during the summer months by enterprising Bajauri traders. That the total amount of merchandise carried was represented by only about one hundred pony loads each way in the year scarcely surprised me, seeing how trade between Afghanistan and Chinese Turkestan is handicapped by present economic conditions in both regions and powerful competition from the Russian and Indian sides. But Hakim Mansur Khan talked of the Amir's intention to have Sarais built at all stages along the Oxus to the Wakhjir in order to facilitate transit, and even without them I could well imagine trade reviving by this old and direct route if only immunity were afforded against fiscal and other exactions west of the Pamirs. The natural obstacles seem small, when compared with those which Indian traders have to face on the route from Kashmir across the Kara-koram and Kun-lun.

I was busy writing late at night in my own camp when to my relief a messenger from the Chinese side arrived. The letter he brought from Munshi Sher Muhammad contained only a query about the route and date of my crossing. Rather belated I thought it after all the trouble I had taken to indicate them well in advance and to keep to them. Still I was now assured of the contact, and within half an hour two hardy Kirghiz rode off in the dark of the night to carry my reply across the Wakhjir and urge timely succour from the other side. How often have I wished on less trying ground for such tough and untiring despatch-riders as are ever ready at hand among Kirghiz nomads!

Fresh snow fell overnight to a depth of two inches, and the drying of our tents delayed our start in the morning. But the march up the Ab-i-Panja to Gumbaz-ötek, our next stage, was only twelve miles, and the track, mostly over alluvial plateaus two to three hundred feet above the river, was quite easy. A number of Kirghas, pitched in advance by our Kirghiz hosts (Fig. 25), were badly needed to afford shelter for all our following. Though the baggage had