

Khotan (Fig. 307). I thought of how he had managed to find me that Christmas Eve in the heart of the Lop-nor Desert, and how another time I had sent him off from the foot of the Nan-shan for a weary ride of months. But whatever the occasion, there was nothing to read in his face but calm unconcern and a sort of canine devotion.

The difficulties began early as we made our way through the confined gorges above Polur towards the high plateaus beyond the northern main Kun-lun Range (Fig. 314). It took us three trying days of toil before we reached easier ground at the point known as Khan Langar, over 13,000 feet above sea, where the Polur stream in its descent enters the cutting it has effected through the ice-clad summit portion of the range (Fig. 315). Yet the track twisted and turned so much that the total distance covered from Polur village to this point amounted only to about twenty-one miles. Most of it was done by scrambling over boulders and rocky ledges in narrow gorges half-filled by glacier-fed torrents. Bad as the going was for us men, the trouble of getting our baggage and supplies safely through was a far more serious business. There were continuous crossings and recrossings of the greyish-white tossing water which our little donkeys had much trouble to negotiate at all times, and, of course, could not ford at all when the daily flood from the melting glaciers at the head of the gorges had once commenced in the early afternoon to come down.

The track was impressively bad, whether winding amidst slippery boulders below, or scaling precipitous slopes of rock or detritus above when the bottom of the gorge became quite impassable for man or beast (Fig. 316). Through the Amban's care some attempt had been made by the Polur head-men to improve the worst places, and we had, fortunately, the help of some twenty hill-men for the laden animals. At a number of points where rocky ribs projected from steep slopes of unstable shale, all loads had to be taken off and carried round the dangerous corners by the men. It all involved a great deal of care and strain, and when we had safely passed the particular precipices where so careful and experienced an explorer as Captain Deasy had lost ponies in 1898,—according to Polur tradition