

Barrenness
of high
plateaus
beyond.

quence, whether in peace or war. The difficulties presented by the precipitous rock slopes of the deep-cut gorges, through which the watershed of the range is gained from the north, are exceptionally great and make portions of the route practically impossible for laden animals. A still more serious obstacle to the use of the route for trade or military movements is the utter barrenness of the wide plateaus and valleys, lying at elevations of over 16,000–17,000 feet, which have to be crossed for weeks before the nearest habitable ground on the Ladāk side of the Lanak-lā can be reached. For a considerable number of marches there is practically no grazing of any sort, while the use of camels, which might meet this serious difficulty as it largely does on the Kara-koram route, is rendered impossible by the nature of the Pölur gorges. It was for this reason that when Habīb-ullah, the rebel 'king' of Khotan during 1863–6, endeavoured to open up a line of communication with Ladāk and India safe from his enemies' interference, his efforts had to be directed, as we shall see presently, towards the shorter route through Karanghu-tāgh and across the high glacier pass of the Yangi-dawān, in spite of even more formidable physical obstacles.

Gold pits of
Zailik.

In my Personal Narrative I have related how a fortunate chance, the encounter with a hunter of wild yaks, less secretive than the wily people of Pölur, enabled me, for our expedition to the glacier headwaters of the Yurung-kāsh, to choose a track which led to the discovery of extensive gold pits in the high valley of Zailik (Maps Nos. 29. D. 1 ; 33. A. 1). There is every reason to believe that the gold-bearing layers of conglomerate overlying the gneiss in the bed of this tributary stream and in the neighbouring portion of the Yurung-kāsh gorge itself, at elevations from 13,000 to 14,500 feet, have been worked for ages. But the hundreds of abandoned pits, often walled up to serve as graves for those poor wretches who had toiled here under all the hardships of a semi-arctic climate and practical slavery, could not tell their story. The output now is greatly reduced. But much of the gold the lavish use of which in gilding Khotan temples was noted long ago by Fa-hsien, and is still attested by the Yōtkan strata,¹³ may well have come from these gorges; certain it is that they are as forbidding as any of the desolate places to which *auri sacra fames* has ever led men.

Glacier
sources of
Yurung-
kāsh River.

It was solely with the help of the human beasts of burden obtained from among the four dozens or so of poor miners who are still brought to Zailik for the few summer months of this gloomy ravine that we were able to penetrate by eight trying marches to the great glacier-girt basin where the easternmost and largest branch of the Yurung-kāsh takes its rise. The tracks we followed across precipitous side spurs and through almost impassable river gorges were those of wild yaks. By climbing to heights between 18,000 and 19,000 feet for survey work, grand panoramic views were obtained of this wonderful mountain region: human eyes are not likely to have ever rested before upon them. Thus we traced the great river to its ice-bound head. It was of geographical and also of quasi-antiquarian interest to find there evidence that the glaciers had in a relatively modern period still spread over many square miles of what is now a huge rolling plateau covered with glacier-mud and detritus (Map No. 33. B, c. 2). That the recession within historical times of all these glacier feeders of the Yurung-kāsh and of the more easterly K'un-lun rivers also must have directly affected the fate of old settlements now abandoned to the desert, such as Dandān-oilik and the Niya Site, appears very probable.

Elevated
plateaus
south of
K'un-lun.

By September 3 easier ground was regained near the Ulūgh-köl lake (Map No. 33. c. 2), where a depot of spare transport and supplies awaited us. Then we marched, much hampered by a succession of snow-storms, along the Pölur-Lanak-lā route to the broad basin, about 17,200 feet above sea, where the Keriya River rises at the foot of a line of great glaciers (Map No. 33. c. 3). They proved to descend the eastern slopes of the same ice-clad range which encircles the easternmost Yurung-kāsh

¹³ Cf. *Ancient Khotan*, i. p. 194.