

“There,” says the Venetian, “occurs a plain, watered by a very fine river, and covered with the most beautiful pastures, so that a lean mare would grow plump and fat in ten days. We rode onward, constantly rising higher, for twelve day’s journeys, and in all that time met with no habitation, nor with any herbage except the desert. Not a bird could be seen, for the place is lofty and bleak. And I tell you that, owing to the great cold, fire burns neither so clearly nor with so much heat as elsewhere, and you cannot cook your food very thoroughly.”

This plateau is the central knot, or focus, whence radiate the chains of the Tibetan mountains. In February 1838, it was visited by Captain Wood, who discovered, 15,600 feet above the sea, Lake Sir-i-Kol, a beautiful and ample expanse of water, shaped like a half-moon, which gives birth to the Amoo-Daria, or Oxus. The surrounding mountains feed several of the principal rivers of Asia, as the Yarkane and the Sin. Captain Wood describes his impressions in the following terms :—

“The appearance of the country presented the image of a winter of extreme severity. Wherever one’s gaze rested, a dazzling bed of snow covered the soil like a carpet, while the sky above our heads was of a sombre and melancholy hue. A few clouds would have refreshed the eye, but none could be anywhere seen. Not a breath rippled the surface of the lake ; not a living animal, not even a bird, presented itself to the view. The sound of a human voice had been harmonious music to the ear, but, at this inhospitable season of the year, no one ventured into these icy realms. Silence reigned everywhere around us ; a silence so profound that it oppressed the heart.”

But during the summer all this is changed ; a fresh nutritious herbage springs up over the plain, and attracts the pastoral nomades, with their herds.

The general elevation of the Tibetan plateau is so considerable that villages at less than 6500 to 7500 feet above the sea are only found in its western region, the Balti.