



Photo by]

SHEEP CARRYING GRAIN.

[F. E. Shawe.

THE PLATEAU OF TIBET.

THIS lofty plateau lies between the Kuen Lun and the Himalayas, which converge towards the Pamirs on the west. On the east the plateau broadens out, and is flanked by many ranges, which, turning southward, separate the gorges of the upper Hwangho, Yangtse, Mekong, and Salwin. Besides these rivers, which rise on the plateau, there are the Indus and Sanpo—the upper course of the Brahmaputra—which have their sources close together, but flow in opposite directions, and finally break through the Himalayas—the one at the western and the other at the eastern extremity in unnavigable gorges.

Tibet is thus naturally difficult of access, and this isolation has caused little to be known of the interior till quite recent times, and has enabled the inhabitants, while owing allegiance to China, to be practically very independent. Exploration has also been handicapped by the barren nature of a large portion of the country, by the continental climate and excessively cold winters, by the rarefied atmosphere due to altitude, which even affects the breathing of some travellers, and by the opposition of the inhabitants. The interior of the country is deficient in rainfall, for the ranges on the south and east cut it off from the wet summer monsoons, and in winter the winds blow outwards.

Tibet falls roughly into two natural regions, the larger consisting of the northern plateau, and the other composed of the valleys in the south.

The Northern Plateau.—This is traversed by a few chains of rounded hills, which separate broad valleys occupied by numerous lakes and wadis. It is at best a poor pasture-land, but has a rich native fauna, including antelopes, yaks, wild sheep, bears, wolves, jackals, etc. The musk deer, from which the valuable musk scent is obtained, is also found here as well as on the Himalayas. Most of the region is uninhabited, but towards the south there are nomadic Tibetans, who tend herds of yaks, ponies, sheep and goats.