

bed. The place was found at last, but the water collected in a small pool proved so brackish that our ponies, sorely tried as they were by thirst after two marches under a still powerful sun, could not be induced to drink it.

The march resumed on October 17th afforded a good opportunity for appreciating the advantages which the 'old route' along the foot of the hills might have offered in days when the difficulty about water was less serious. During the night four of our camels strayed away to the tempting reed-beds in the south-west and could not be recovered until a week later, with the assistance of men dispatched from Marāl-bāshi. Notwithstanding the heavily increased loads and a late start the remainder of the transport covered on that day with ease a long march of twenty-four miles; for it led throughout over the smooth and open ground afforded by the constant succession of small fans along the foot of the hill chain (Fig. 78). The end of a projecting spur, known to Barat as *Vilvil*, formed a conspicuous landmark, and at its foot, about seven miles from camp, we left behind us the long belt of marsh previously described. Beyond it the range became considerably reduced in height, but still retained its uniform appearance of a steep rock wall. To the south the reed-beds completely disappeared, being replaced by small cones with living tamarisks stretching east and south as far as the eye could reach. And the view from this point ranged far; for soon after leaving Vilvil I sighted in the hazy distance the Mazār-tāgh hills beyond Marāl-bāshi.

March
beyond
spur of
Vilvil.

A peculiar feature breaking the easy monotony of the day's march was encountered towards its close. Here lines of dead Toghraks, all fallen and mostly in double rows, stretched for miles along the southern edge of the bare narrow fans that we were skirting. The trunks all looked as if they had for ages lain on the ground, exposed to decay. The trees had obviously grown up along lateral drainage channels, such as could still be traced in places, but without the slightest sign of recent water action. These channels must have collected moisture, which the range immediately above apparently received with some regularity during the prevalence of a less arid climate.

Lines of
dead wild
poplars.

We had now reached a point where it was possible to sight, not only the high Mazār-tāgh peaks overlooking Marāl-bāshi from the east, but also the nearest of the other isolated small ranges that here rise island-like from the plain between the outermost T'ien-shan and the Yārkan river. They had already attracted my special interest on geographical grounds, when I passed some of them in the spring of 1908 on my way from Kelpin to Marāl-bāshi.¹⁵ A long reconnaissance, which I then made from the latter place, had failed to carry me to the old remains reported to exist at the foot of the Lāl-tāgh range (Map 7. B. 4),¹⁶ and as these might have some relation to the 'old route' I was endeavouring to trace, my first intention now was to continue our journey due east until we reached that site. Barat had visited it twelve years before and was ready to guide us straight to it. But he knew of no water on the way, a two days' march, nor could he feel certain that the 'Kak' he remembered at Lāl-tāgh actually held a supply. Regard for the ponies, which had already done three days' travel without a proper drink, obliged me therefore reluctantly to turn south-east towards Marāl-bāshi. Fortunately our survey along the foot of the mountains had extended sufficiently far to make it certain that the range, now trending in a straight line to the north-east and with increasing height, had its direct continuation in the barren hill chain I had surveyed in 1908 south of Kelpin.

Mazār-tāgh
of Marāl-
bāshi
sighted.

The necessity of guiding our convoy prevented a visit to the westernmost isolated little ridge jutting out from the plain at a distance of some six miles to the north-east of Camp XVI (Map 8. A. 1). It was known to Barat and also to the people of Marāl-bāshi by the name of Shikarwai. It was said to be visited periodically by 'Karaulchis' sent out by the officer commanding the Marāl-

Ridge of
Shikarwai.

¹⁵ Cf. *Serindia*, iii. pp. 1309 sqq.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, iii. p. 1312.