river into the Taklamakān in the same SE.–NW. direction that those detached Marāl-bāshi hill chains uniformly present.

Connexion with Mazār-tāgh on Khotan R.

This fact in itself helped, in an important degree, to confirm the theory that the Khotan Mazār-tāgh in its genetic character formed part of a geologically very ancient range that started at approximately right angles from the outermost T'ien-shan between Marāl-bāshi and Kelpin and once stretched diagonally across the Taklamakān.[1] The observations at the Bēl-tāgh and Lāl-tāgh that are set forth above furnished a striking demonstration of the way in which those bold island-like hills east of Marāl-bāshi have been carved out and isolated by the corrosive action of wind-driven sand prolonged through ages. The vastly greater accumulations of drift-sand in the desert south-eastwards would adequately explain the breaking up of the continuity of that assumed ancient range across the Taklamakān.[2] But actual survey of the ground was needed to supply definite proof.

Risks of intended desert crossing.

I was under no illusions as to the serious difficulties that a march across absolutely waterless ground covered with high dunes, to a point more than 130 miles distant, would certainly present. Its risks were sufficiently illustrated by Dr. Hedin's experiences during the bold journey that he undertook, starting towards the end of April, 1895, from the same ground and making his way through the sandy wastes eastward. It had ended in the destruction of his caravan and his own narrow escape from death by thirst and exhaustion.[3] In order to guard against the dangers to which this final disaster had apparently been largely due, I had taken care to choose a season cooler and hence far less trying to men and camels; to assure the provision of an adequate supply of water and to lighten the loads of each animal as much as possible.

Preparations for attempted crossing.

For the latter purpose I brought from Marāl-bāshi six hired camels, all that I had been able to secure, to act as a 'supporting party' to our own twelve fine animals on the initial stages of the desert crossing. Nor had I overlooked the advantage of strengthening the human element in my party. None of my men had previous experience of serious desert travel except Hassan Ākhūn, the trusted camel-man of all my Turkestān travels, and he, I knew, would be too fully taken up with looking after his animals to do my reconnoitring, &c. So I had been particularly pleased when, in compliance with the summons I had previously dispatched, Kāsim Ākhūn, the hunter from Islāmābād on the Khotan river, arrived at Kāshgar with my Keriya camels. Ever since my expedition to Dandān-oilik in 1900 I had learned to value and trust the pluck, sense of locality, and true desert instinct that a lifetime spent in hunting trips and other lonely wanderings in the Taklamakān had bred in this wiry and ever resolute man (Fig. 86).[4]

March to Yārkand-daryā.

The three marches that brought us from Marāl-bāshi to the edge of the great drift-sand desert do not call for a lengthy account. The first lay across the wide, level plain, covered with reeds and scrub, that divides Marāl-bāshi cultivation from the left bank of the Yārkand river. Near Kara-ken we passed a well-marked depression through which flood water reaches the extensive marsh NW.

[1] Cf. Hedin, *Reisen in Z.-A.*, p. 242. This connexion appears to have been already assumed by Prejevalsky, who first saw the Khotan Mazār-tāgh in 1877. (The doubt expressed, *ibid.*, p. 387, note 3, as to the designation *Mazār-tāgh* for this hill chain is not justified.)

[2] Cf. the explanation given below, p. 88.

[3] Cf. Hedin, *Reisen in Z.-A.*, pp. 241 sqq.; *Through Asia*, i. pp. 531 sqq.

[4] Regarding Kāsim Ākhūn and his father Aḥmad Merghen ('the hunter', † *circ.* 1907), see *Ruins of Khotan*, pp. 272, 275, &c. They had both shared Dr. Hedin's memorable march from the Keriya river end to Shahyār; cf. *Through Asia*, ii. pp. 788 sqq., 847.

As an instance of Kāsim Ākhūn's remarkable instinct of locality, a true sense of the compass, I may mention that without any knowledge of the map and without ever having previously been west of Khotan, he was able on our start from the desert hills south of the Yārkand-daryā to point out to me with a very close approach to accuracy the bearing in which he thought his familiar landmark, the Mazār-tāgh on the Khotan-daryā, was to be looked for. Yet since leaving his home he had done a roundabout journey via Yārkand and Kāshgar amounting to a total marching distance of well over 500 miles.