

geographical position and historical importance claim to be a worthy *pendant* of Khotan in the south. So the rapid survey I was able to make of the ruins, and especially of the old Buddhist temples and grottoes which survive in a much-decayed condition at the mouth of the two river gorges, proved very instructive.

Apart from these archaeological visits there was much to keep me busy during my halt at Kuchar. It was there that I finally had to settle all plans and arrangements for the journey which was to take me through the desert to the southern edge of the Taklamakan. Already while near Korla I had learned from a letter of Rai Ram Singh, received *via* Kashgar, that the enquiries set on foot under my instructions from the side of Khotan had resulted in the tracing of several unexplored sites in the desert below Keriya and Khotan. This was confirmed in detail by a letter from Badruddin Khan, my old Afghan friend and factotum at Khotan, which a trader delivered to me at Kuchar.

I was anxious to visit these sites before the heat and sand-storms of the spring made work on that ground impracticable, and to reach them if possible by the most direct route. The heavy convoy of antiquities which had followed after me from Korla by the caravan road could safely be despatched by the well-known route which leads along the dry bed of the Khotan River right through the desert to the Khotan oasis, the prospective base for my labours of the spring and summer. Once freed from the care of these precious but embarrassing impedimenta, I myself could strike due south from Kuchar to where the Keriya River dies away in the sands. It was a march beset with serious difficulties and risks. But Hedin's pioneer journey of 1896 showed that it was practicable under certain conditions, and seeing that there were ruins to be visited near the Keriya River course, I decided to try this 'short cut' and save time. Yet I must confess that, even without this specific reason, I might have found the chance of once more crossing the very heart of the desert too great an attraction to resist.

A sky heavy with snow clouds made the dark and