

well-known track leading along the Tarim and then up the Khotan river bed.

That I should have to abandon all hope of getting local experience for the journey became certain when next morning the fountain-head of all Shahyar topographical knowledge was produced in the person of an age-bowed hunter named Khalil. He was a quaint, withered little man, well over eighty, credited with many expeditions after wild camels, and a great deal of jungle experience. But he had never been across the real desert, and stoutly denied even hearing of a route to the Keriya River. Khalil, still glib of tongue and quick-witted for a person of his age, hobbled along with difficulty, but once lifted into the saddle could do his day's march with ease. So he agreed to guide us at least to the point in the forest belt of the Tarim where Hedin had first touched a shepherd encampment. This, I thought, would now serve as the safest starting-point in the reverse direction.