

## CHAPTER XXXII

### FROM MAZĀR-TĀGH TO MARĀL-BĀSHI

#### SECTION I.—THE RUINED FORT ON MAZĀR-TĀGH

March down  
united Kho-  
tan River  
bed.

Two marches sufficed to carry me from our camp at Miravit to the point where the Mazār-tāgh hill range abuts on the Khotan River. They took me past the confluence of the Yurung-kāsh and Kara-kāsh at the lonely 'Langar' of Koshlash, the 'Junction' (Map No. 26. B. 4), where a watch is supposed to be kept on travellers following the caravan route to or from the Tārīm, and thence down the wide bed of the united rivers. Fully a mile or more across in most places, this bed was practically dry at that season. What running water there was in a narrow winding channel did not reach further than about 5 miles below Koshlash. Beyond this there was only a chain, growing thinner and thinner, of pools with fresh water left behind by the last summer's flood. During July and August, when the glacier streams at the head-waters of the two rivers in the ice-crowned main K'un-lun ranges send down their full quota, the enormous volume of water completely fills the bed, wide as it is. The route then passes through the dune belt of riverine jungle on the left bank, and in places is difficult to follow. But during the rest of the year the route lies along the open smooth expanse of the river-bed, which makes excellent going. There is always sufficient subsoil water percolating in the bed to keep fresh such water as is found at intervals in pools below the banks where the current of the summer flood has set; or else it is obtainable by digging wells.

Desert route  
by Khotan  
River.

The route by the river provides the most direct line of communication between the Khotan region and the northern half of the Tārīm Basin, and on account of its shortness it must have claimed considerable importance all through historical times. Yet there can be no doubt about its having borne always the character of a desert route. The physical conditions implied by the constant vagaries of the river, which the numerous dry branch beds and islands below Mazār-tāgh attest, make it very unlikely that permanent settlements of any size could ever have existed along the terminal river-course. At the same time it is clear that the grazing to be found in the riverine belts of jungle, confined as they are for the most part by the close approach of the high barren sands of the desert on either side, must have greatly facilitated traffic and regular intercourse. Thus during Yāqūb Bēg's rule a line of postal stations was maintained here from Khotan to Ak-su. Now, too, shepherds from both districts are in the habit of visiting the more attractive grazing-grounds by the river for a great part of the year. These brief notes on the character of the route and of the ground along which it leads will help to account for the finds that rewarded my exploration of the Mazār-tāgh.

Hill chain  
of Mazār-  
tāgh.

It came into view first on the morning of April 16 as a long-stretched bare ridge rising above the left bank of the river and half hidden by the dust haze of the desert. On nearing it, the dark pink colour of the sandstone in that portion which immediately overlooks the river (Fig. 335) showed off vividly against the yellow sands enveloping most of the hill range and against the dark green of any tamarisk and Toghrak jungle that is to be found at its foot by the river. I may note here that the Māzar-tāgh, as surveyed on this visit by R. B. Lāl Singh, proved to extend as a narrow but continuous hill chain north-westwards for a distance of at least 24 miles. Though it rises nowhere to