

CHAPTER IV

KHOTAN—DREAMS OF THE PAST—DOUBTS OF THE PRESENT

REINFORCED by Mohammed Joo and another helper (his pay was five dollars per month), we fared forth from Yarkand and in nine days reached Khotan, last of the big oases in Turkestan. The two hundred miles intervening between these cities, like the shorter stretch between Kashgar and Yarkand, is chiefly desert. The big towns and the little intermediate ones may all be said to lie on the irregular border of the Taklamakan desert, which the general reader may perhaps best consider as the south-western corner of the Gobi. The streams that fall from the Alai and Kuen Lun ranges crawl as best they can across the sandy wastes. The smaller are lost. The larger conjoin to make the Tarim, and eventually reach Lob-nor, a great inland basin. The towns are found not far from the mountain range, whose cold white heights may be seen to the south, as one swelters across the hot sands. This distant line is about sixteen thousand feet high, the desert from which we gaze is not more than four thousand. Some of the reaches of sand are close to forty miles in width—*i. e.*, from irrigated tree to irrigated tree. In certain exposed stretches where the wind has a habit of putting the traveller into a