

CHAPTER XII

ARRIVAL IN KHOTAN

A LONG march on the 10th of October was to bring me at last to the very confines of Khotan. Up to Ak-Langar, the regular stage some fourteen miles from Pialma, the route lay over an absolutely barren plain of hard loess and gravel. Two half-decayed pillars on the road a few miles from Pialma mark the boundary between Karghalik and Khotan. At Takhtuwen, about half-way, there is a well sunk to a depth of nearly 200 feet, and at Ak-Langar another, almost equally deep. After the long lonely marches on the flat of the desert, I hailed with delight the appearance of the mountains which from Pialma onwards showed themselves more and more to the south, though the light haze hanging over the landscape never lifted completely. After Ak-Langar sand appeared in low dunes forming the semi-lunes so familiar to me from Ordam-Padshah. By the time I reached the Mazar of Kum-rabat-Padshahim ("My Lord of the Sands Station") we were again in a sea of sand.

Amid these surroundings the lively scene that presented itself at the shrine popularly known as "Pigeons' Sanctuary" (Kaptar-Mazar) was doubly cheerful. Several wooden houses and sheds serve as the residence for thousands of pigeons, which are maintained by the offerings of travellers and the proceeds of pious endowments. They are believed to be the offspring of a pair of doves which miraculously appeared