

CHAPTER XV

DEPARTURE FROM KHOTAN

SECTION I.—ISLĀM ĀKHŪN AND HIS FORGERIES

THE eight days' halt that followed my return to Khotan had to be passed by me within doors for most of the time, and partly in bed, owing to an attack of bronchitis, brought on by the exposure of the last weeks in the desert. But the arrangement of my collections, their partial repacking, and the endless little agenda which accumulate after a long season of camp work, kept me so busy that this involuntary confinement was scarcely realized by myself. On the morning after my arrival I still felt well enough to call on Pan Dārin, who received me at his Ya-mên like an old friend, and, as I imagined, somewhat like a fellow-scholar. Much I had to tell him of my excavations and the finds which had rewarded them. When next day the old Amban came to return the visit I had ready a little representative exhibition of my antiques to satisfy his curiosity. I knew the Mandarin to be a man of learning and thoroughly well versed in Chinese history. Nevertheless I was surprised by the historical and critical sense displayed in the questions he put to me regarding the relative age, the import and character of the multifarious ancient documents I had discovered. I felt almost in company of a colleague, and the instinctive comprehension shown by him for my palaeographical and archaeological arguments made me forget for moments the irksome circumlocution and confusion involved in conversation through a not over-intelligent interpreter.

Though the explorations which the learned Amban's unwearying help had done so much to render successful had now been concluded, I still needed his co-operation in view of a curious semi-antiquarian, semi-judicial inquiry which it was important to effect before leaving Khotan. Its success has been greeted with no small satisfaction by fellow-scholars in Europe, besides greatly amusing me at the time. It enabled me to clear up the last doubts as to the strange manuscripts and 'block-prints' in 'unknown characters' which had since 1895 been purchased from Khotan in remarkable numbers, and which not only figured conspicuously in the 'British Collection of antiquities from Central Asia' formed at Calcutta, but had found their way also to public collections in London, Paris, St. Petersburg, and probably elsewhere. Seeing that the first publication of the result of my inquiry sufficed to rid research of this *embarras* of forged riches, I need scarcely regret that limitations of space and time, together with my distance from the collections referred to, now prevent me from attempting either a bibliography of these remarkable acquisitions or a review of the learned endeavours which had been devoted to their analysis and decipherment. But a record of my inquiry which resulted in this *dénouement* may well find a place here, even though it can only by few details supplement the facts published elsewhere¹.

I have already had occasion to describe how, on my march to Khotan in the autumn, I had vainly endeavoured to locate the sites where many of the manuscripts and 'block-

Halt at Khotan.

Inquiry into forged MSS. in 'unknown characters'.

Previous suspicions of forgeries.

¹ See *Preliminary Report*, pp. 64 sqq.; *Ruins of Khotan*, pp. 471 sqq.