

CHAPTER XIV

MY RETURN TO KHOTAN

THE night among the dunes near the shrine of 'My Lord of the Sands' proved unexpectedly pleasant, the quick radiation of the drift sand helping to emphasize the change from the day's heat. Dinner did not appear until close upon midnight. But what was the long wait compared to the happy feeling of being once more on the very border of 'the Kingdom,' and enjoying also a foretaste of the peace and freedom of the desert! When I rose next morning at 4 A.M., later than usual in those days, the air was still fresh, the thermometer showing 60° Fahr. While the baggage was getting ready I made my food offering to the sacred pigeons, a duty which my old followers would on no account have allowed me to neglect (Fig. 46). In their eagerness to secure the holy birds' goodwill for the long journey before us, they had caused some additional Charaks of grain to be brought along from Pialma. So the winged host which inhabits the Mazar enjoyed a good breakfast long before I came up from my own. It was nesting-time for the pigeons, and as no calls of the Sheikhs would induce the mothers to leave their eggs, I had to enter the little rooms in order to realize that the multitude of birds was as numerous as ever. Steps had to be careful to avoid crushing eggs; so closely was all available ground covered by nests.

The day which brought me back to 'the Kingdom' will long live in my memory as one of the happiest I spent in Khotan. It is always delightful to revisit scenes to which one's thoughts have longingly returned for years past, and still more delightful to find that the memory of