

was worthy Chandu, the first Shikarpuri money-lender who had ventured to exploit the virgin soil of Khotan. With that community thriving so well elsewhere, it was strange to find Khotan five years before wholly clear of their activity. The field for usury must have been exceptionally tempting; yet the sharp Shikarpuris had been content to abandon it wholly to their Chinese confrères. Among the reasons I heard, the most prominent and, perhaps, the only real one was a virtuous dread—of the women of Khotan and their easy morals. In view of many testimonies reaching back to early Chinese records, it would be impossible to assert that the popular reputation enjoyed by Khotan for the independence of its women-folk and its licence is altogether unfounded. I ought, therefore, to note, perhaps, of the first brave settler from Sind that he faced this danger under the protection of advanced age and a flowing white beard.

I had been riding for nearly two hours in the smothering cloud raised by my big cortège past a good deal of new cultivation in the Lasku and Givos tracts, when news unexpectedly arrived of the official welcome prepared for me under the Amban's orders some two miles outside Khotan town. I had never been treated before in so grand a fashion, and could not now think of putting on a black coat, etc., to be equal to the occasion; for the baggage was miles behind. I almost envied the Beg of my escort, who did all that was needful by taking his official cap, with button, red tassel, and the rest, from the head of an attendant, whom so far he had allowed wear it with the risk of catching a bad headache under this inadequate covering. Even the little dusting I attempted proved futile.

At the reception-hall built by the road-side I found a pompous gathering of Chinese officers in flowing silk robes, and an array of picturesque figures with swords and halberds representing a selection from the garrison. A crowd of followers of all sorts surged after us into the open hall and prevented all study of details. The military Amban who did the honours (Fig. 49) received me with a great show of friendly animation, while the portly chief of the police on my left was a figure refreshing to look at in his