

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A FEAST AT KHOTAN

My Khotan camp had been pitched in old Akhun Beg's suburban garden, which before in the autumn of 1900 had offered me peace and shelter since gratefully remembered. But the absence of my host sadly dimmed my pleasure at this renewed hospitality. Already during my visit in August the most genial of my Khotan friends had talked of his intention to proceed on the Mecca pilgrimage. Seeing how little fitted for such a trying journey the aged gentleman looked, with his asthma of yore increased and also his portly form, I had done my best to dissuade him. To confess the truth, I had refused to take seriously the worthy old Beg's eagerness to earn such saintly merits; for with satisfaction I had noted that he was still fondly attached to the good things of this world of which Fate—and a well-employed career in the service of the heathen 'Khitai' no less than of that champion of the faith, his first master, the rebel Yakub Beg—had given him plenty.

Now I learned with grief that, in spite of his family's well-founded remonstrances, Akhun Beg had set out in earnest. Only two days before my arrival he had started in company of half a dozen lesser people from his own Mahalla or suburb. He had received news of my early return and evidently regretted as much as I did the missed chance of meeting once more in life. But the stars had been consulted earlier about an auspicious time for the start, and regard for his fellow-pilgrims had precluded a change. With tears in his eyes, Akhun Beg's only brother, also well advanced in years, delivered to me my host's message of welcome. He, too, feared like myself that