

CHAPTER LXXXI

AT THE HAMI OASIS

IN the desert, which only knows extremes, the weather had already been getting wintry, with occasional icy blasts. But after reaching, on October 19th, the oasis of Hami, or Kumul as the Muhammadans call it, I was glad to find that its sheltered position at the foot of the easternmost T'ien-shan still promised a few bright days of autumn, in spite of the high latitude of forty-three degrees. So I could not but prefer the fresh air of my tent to the quarters offered in one of the dingy Bazars of the town, and after a long search found a pleasant camping-place in Zahid Beg's garden beyond the spring-fed stream which flows past the west side of the Chinese town. Recommendations from Mr. Macartney and my old friend P'an Ta-jên had preceded my arrival, as was soon shown by the greetings and presents of welcome which poured in from the different Ya-mêns.

Next morning it was a novel experience to commence the round of my official visits with a call on a local Muhammadan chief. Mahsud Shah, the ruling 'Wang' or prince of Kumul, still retained a good deal of power over the Turki Muhammadans of the district. It seemed a genuine survival of the system by which Chinese rule contented itself with leaving the administration of Turkestan in the hands of hereditary chiefs; some recent disturbances, which had caused bloodshed among the Wang's subjects, and of which I had heard through the wire at An-hsi, were directly attributed to his oppression. As I rode under the big vaulted gates of the Wang's stronghold, the presence of a