

THE CAVES OF THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS

At last we reached a dry river-bed, along which we proceeded S. S. W. On our right we had a perpendicular cliff, much eroded by river-water. Here were the first grottoes — black gaping holes in the wall of rock. Driving past them, we reached a little fenced-in enclosure where tall poplars and other trees grew.

There is a shelter here where pilgrims are received when they attend certain religious ceremonies at the place on the eighth day of the fourth month. Three Taoist priests lived there; one of them conducted us to a guest-room in a temple, consisting of two large, ruined halls, adorned with only three statues. Our host, who seemed depressed and absent-minded, told us that his home was at Kanchow, and that he had taken up his present post four years earlier. He was unmarried, though marriage was not forbidden in his community. The temple owned land, and leased its fields to farmers, who obeyed and supported the priesthood. The monks also bought millet from Tun-huang. There were two lama monasteries at the place; their seven monks were Chinese from Kansu.

Our priest affirmed that there were 1,800 cave-temples; but he had only to perform *k'ou-t'ou* in nine of them twice daily. As twilight was coming on, we only had a look at one or two of the nearest grottoes. There were some pictures painted on the walls; but they had been done after the revolution (1911) and were quite without interest. The priest told us that they intended to collect money for the restoration of all the faded or badly damaged pictures that were over a thousand years old. This would of course entirely destroy their historical and artistic value. Nothing remained of the famous library that was once hidden in one of the cave-chapels and that was examined by STEIN in 1907 and 1914, and by PELLLOT in 1908. What was left after the bulk of the manuscript rolls had been taken to London and Paris had been stolen by officials or sold to the first bidder. Happily, a great number of them are preserved in the National Library in Peking.

Our journey to Tun-huang had, as I have said, quite another object than a visit to the »Caves of the Thousand Buddhas«. These had already been thoroughly examined and described by experts. I visited them partly out of curiosity, and partly because it seemed absurd to have been at Tun-huang without having seen the famous grottoes. It would be like going to Agra and not seeing the Taj Mahal.

Nor will I make any attempt to describe that multitude of square rooms cut in the cliff, with their vaulted curb-roofs, the religious paintings on the walls and sculptured figures of gods, saints and patrons, and with narrow entrances facing east. The ground-floor grottoes are on a level with the soil outside. I visited twenty-one of them. As a rule each grotto has a main group of sculptures in the centre, opposite the entrance, and three figures on each of the side walls. In the background are a couple of animals resembling dogs or gryphons, guardians of