

CHAPTER LII

TO THE 'CAVES OF THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS'

IT was impossible to submit to this desk-work for long without a break while a site of exceptional interest was temptingly near, and awaiting as it were my first visit in fulfilment of a promise long made. Already in 1902 my friend Professor L. de Lóczy, the distinguished head of the Hungarian Geological Survey and President of the Geographical Society of Hungary, had directed my attention to the sacred Buddhist grottoes, known as the 'Caves of the Thousand Buddhas,' or Ch'ien-fo-tung, to the south-east of Tun-huang. As member of Count Széchenyi's expedition and thus as a pioneer of modern geographical exploration in Kan-su, he had visited them as early as 1879. I had been greatly impressed by his glowing description of the fine fresco paintings and stucco sculptures which he had seen there, and the close connection with early Indian art which he thought to have recognized in some of them without himself being an antiquarian student. It had, in fact, been a main cause inducing me to extend the plans of my expedition so far eastwards into China.

On the 16th of March I could at last pay my first visit to the famous cave temples to which my thoughts had turned for so long from afar. Chiang-ssü-yeh, Naik Ram Singh, and one of Lin Ta-jên's subordinates were to be my companions. The sky had cleared more rapidly than I could hope after those days of icy north-east wind and driving sand which greeted us on our arrival. It was a fairly bright morning, but still cold enough to make a wait trying. Yet, of course, we had to submit to that as an