

there emerged from among the folds of the gravel-covered alluvial fan a lonely small shrine. It could not be very old; for the carved brickwork adorning the wall-tops and friezes showed tracery such as I had noted in the shrines of the city, and the bright yellow plaster looked recent. Yet, nevertheless, the whole bore every mark of premature ruin. The tiled roof with its fluted bricks was breached in more than one place, and that of an adjoining small cella had fallen entirely. But the coloured stucco images representing a Buddha, and some attendants whom I could not readily identify, were, in spite of missing limbs, still objects of worship. In front of them were the little sand-filled boxes which serve to keep lighted tapers upright. Red-coloured strips of paper inscribed with Chinese characters, probably short prayers or votive dedications, covered the base and wall surface.

Outside the gateway there hung from a stand a big bell, rusty and showing ominous cracks. About the closely packed Chinese characters which covered the outer surface, I could gather from Chiang's remarks only that they contained some Buddhist text. But more specific and satisfying was the indication that the inscription bore a date. It is true, it was not an old one, going back only to the first half of the last century; but it gave me the first assurance that the chronological precision so characteristic of Chinese ways was not ignored by Buddhist piety in these parts. How often have I wished that such sense for the value of exact dates might be met with among Indian worshippers!

The little Buddhist sanctuary, with its air of decay and desolation, was a fit preparation for the sights awaiting me at the sacred caves ahead. After less than a mile they came in view as we turned into the silent valley by the side of a shallow little stream just freed from the grip of winter. There was not a trace of vegetation on the curiously eroded grey slopes which the spurs of the low hill range eastwards send down to the debouchure of the stream (Fig. 157). But all thought of slowly dying nature reflected in these shrivelled barren ridges and hillocks passed from me when, on the almost perpendicular con-