

glomerate cliffs rising on our right, I caught sight of the first grottoes.

A multitude of dark cavities, mostly small, was seen here, honeycombing the sombre rock faces in irregular tiers from the foot of the cliff, where the stream almost washed them, to the top of the precipice (Fig. 158). Here and there the flights of steps connecting the grottoes still showed on the cliff face. But in front of most the conglomerate mass had crumbled away, and from a distance it looked as if approach to the sanctuaries would be possible only to those willing to be let down by ropes or to bear the trouble and expense of elaborate scaffolding. The whole strangely recalled fancy pictures of troglodyte dwellings of anchorites such as I remembered having seen long, long ago in early Italian paintings. Perhaps it was this reminiscence, or the unconscious vision of rich rubbish deposits which such holy cave-dwellers might have left behind in their burrows, that made me in my mind people these recesses with a beehive of Buddhist monks, and wonder what awkward climbs they might have had when paying each other visits.

But the illusion did not last long. I recrossed the broad but thin ice sheet to the lowest point, where the rows of grottoes did not rise straight above the rubble bed, but had a strip of fertile alluvium in front of them; and at once I noticed that fresco paintings covered the walls of all the grottoes or as much as was visible of them from the entrances. 'The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas' were indeed tenanted, not by Buddhist recluses, however holy, but by images of the Enlightened One himself. All this host of grottoes represented shrines, and I hastened eagerly to take my first glance at their contents.

The fine avenues of trees, apparently elms, which extended along the foot of the honeycombed cliffs, and the distant view of some dwellings farther up where the river bank widened, were evidence that the cave-temples had still their resident guardians. Yet there was no human being about to receive us, no guide to distract one's attention. In bewildering multitude and closeness the lines of grottoes presented their faces, some high, some low,