

CHAPTER LVI

TO THE NAN-HU OASIS

OUR march on April 3rd from Shih-tsao back to Tun-huang was short, and, I confess, we all felt glad for it. The prospect of shelter was pleasant after the icy blasts we had faced for the last week along that desolate 'Great Wall.' Whether it was the protection afforded by the trees of the oasis, or at last a sign of approaching spring, the air seemed warmer in spite of the continued north wind. Being with Chiang-ssü-yeh far ahead of the baggage, I could use the time gained before pitching camp for a visit to the large shrine which at the time of my start I had noticed near the west gate of the town. It boasted of a high pavilion-like structure, the first 'Pagoda' of the conventional type I had seen, and seemed in exceptionally good repair for this place of somnolent nonchalance. The frescoes of the outer gate showed that it was a Taoist temple, and by their new look prepared me for the inferior art of the decoration within. But there was compensation in the glimpse I unexpectedly gained here of one of the main schools of Tun-huang.

As soon as we had entered the inner court, a swarm of boys, mostly chubby and well clad, gathered around us. The teacher had repaired to his house in the town on some business, and his score or more of pupils were hugely enjoying the unearned recess. The halls on either side of the court bore so unmistakably the impress of scholastic use that for a moment I almost underwent the not altogether cheering sensation of having come for 'inspection duty.' There were lumbering big black desks near the windows, each covered with the 'copy-slips' and exercises of three or four pupils. The walls were hung appropriately with