

CHAPTER LXIV

RETURN TO THE 'THOUSAND BUDDHAS'

I HAD scarcely returned to the shelter of Tun-huang from the fascinations and trials of the ancient desert border when my eyes began to turn eagerly towards the cave temples of the 'Thousand Buddhas' at the foot of the barren dune-covered hills to the south-east. It was the thought of their sculptures and frescoes which had first drawn me to this region. But since my visit to the site in March, and the information then gathered about the great collection of ancient manuscripts discovered in one of the temples, the antiquarian attraction of the sacred caves had, of course, vastly increased. Eager as I was to commence operations at once, I had to contain myself in patience.

Just after my return to Tun-huang the annual pilgrimage to the shrines commenced, and it did not need the polite hints of my Amban friends to convince me that this was not the best time for a move to the site. The great fête, a sort of religious fair, was said to have drawn thither fully ten thousand of the pious Tun-huang people, and from the endless string of carts I saw a few days later returning laden with peasants and their gaily decked women-folk, this estimate of the popular concourse seemed scarcely exaggerated. I knew enough of Indian Tirthas to realize that such an occasion was better for studying modern humanity than for searching out things of the past.

So my start had to be postponed for five days. I found plenty to keep me busy in the meantime, what with adjusting accounts in that excruciatingly primitive currency of uncoined, and often far from pure, silver; with repairs to be effected in tents and kit, which those last weeks in