

wearing their bright holiday dresses. I could never look at the poor crippled feet of these peasant women without a feeling of amazement at the power of fashion which here bows into cruel subjection even the humblest folk. What their well-to-do sisters in town may more easily forget must be a constant hindrance to these women of the country-side. It needs the iron grip of an ancient civilization to assure obedience to such conventions of self-inflicted torture.

Once beyond the edge of the oasis there was no trace of life stirring on the broad track which skirts the grey gravel waste at the foot of the sombre hill range, though thousands had passed here so recently. It remained the same when we turned into that strangely impressive desert valley and approached the point where the sombre conglomerate cliffs begin to be honeycombed with the gaping mouths of cave-temples big and small (Fig. 158). Long ages ago the little stream had carved out the valley, when there was still moisture to clothe these forbiddingly barren hills; but now it was dying away just here by evaporation on the thirsty rubble-filled bed. There was indeed gratifying shade beyond, where the narrow fringe of irrigated ground masked with its elms and poplars the approach to the main temple caves (Fig. 186). But otherwise the scene was not changed since my first visit in March, and I soon felt assured that the sacred site had once more resumed its air of utter desolation and silence.

There were special reasons for me to appreciate this assurance. The months passed since my arrival had provided abundant proof of the zeal with which the good people of Tun-huang remained attached through all vicissitudes to such forms of worship as represent Buddhism in the queer medley of Chinese popular religion. It scarcely needed the experience of the great annual fair just past to make it clear to me that the cave-temples, notwithstanding all apparent decay, were still real places of worship 'in being.' I knew well, therefore, that my archaeological activity at them, as far as frescoes and sculptures were concerned, would, by every consideration of prudence, have to be confined to the study of the art relics by means of photography, drawing of