

CHAPTER LXXIII

THE 'VALLEY OF THE MYRIAD BUDDHAS'

THE heat of the season and the consequent impracticability of employing our camels for transport precluded more extended surveys on this interesting but terribly arid ground along the foot of the outer ranges. So, after despatching honest Turdi under old Mullah's guidance with my heavy mail-bag to Tun-huang, whence they were to make their way across the mountains to Abdal, I started on the morning of the 29th of June for our expedition into the Westernmost Nan-shan. It seemed almost too soon to leave my cool and peaceful temple quarters at Ch'iao-tzŭ; but I thought of the huge mountain area which it was my intention to survey, and for which the next two months were all I could spare.

Our first march was very pleasant, taking us westwards through a delightfully green grassy plain to the oasis of T'a-shih. Like Ch'iao-tzŭ, it seemed to count about two hundred homesteads; but they were much scattered, and the numerous uncultivated strips of land within the oasis suggested want of water—or of people. I had by now learned enough of Chinese notions of life not to wonder at the total absence of cattle on the magnificent grazing we passed through. For had not all the people I had met since first reaching Tun-huang shown in many significant ways that the nation's traditional abhorrence of anything akin to the herdsman's semi-nomadic existence was as strong among these settlers of the border as it might be among the most town-bred folk farther east? So by sad experience I had learned that milk was never to be hoped for, however splendid the grazing, unless there were Chinese