

so far; for I was now anxious to get into the mountains, where the greater coolness would make it possible to rely for a short time on our own camels without risk of a breakdown, even though their summer holiday was long due. We had followed the bed of the T'a-shih river, deeply cut into its own alluvial fan of Piedmont gravel, upwards for over ten miles, when, close to the point where the river debouches through the outermost hill range, we came face to face with a group of about ten small cave-temples cut into the conglomerate cliffs above the right bank. The place bore appropriately enough the name of the 'Little Ch'ien-fo-tung'; for the frescoes, though far less varied and extensive, showed exactly the same style in design and composition as those of the 'Thousand Buddhas.' In most of the little grottoes the paintings were badly effaced and in all of them the stucco sculptures recent.

So after a short halt I pushed up the picturesque river gorge to find there to my pleasant surprise a narrow but beautifully green expanse, with luxuriant shrubs and trees embedded between the most barren of hillsides. After a couple of miles this fertile strip, watered by the river, again gave way to uncompromising bareness of rock and detritus; and at a point where this contracted to a narrow winding defile, some fifteen miles above T'a-shih, I found the route defended by a massive stone wall extending across the valley bottom and for some distance up the steep slopes. It was a regular 'Klause' of unmistakably old appearance, and clearly suggested that the Chinese settlements on the ancient line of communication along the Su-lo Ho Valley had been exposed to attacks from the side of the Tibetan plateaus quite as much, perhaps, as to raids across the desert north and west.

A couple of miles ahead the valley expanded into a little basin filled with plentiful shrubs and trees, known as Mo-ku-t'ai-tzū, which promised excellent grazing for our brave camels if only we could spare them to take their badly needed 'long vacation.' Accordingly they were left behind, at least for the night, while we moved on with the carts over a steadily rising Sai on the right bank, until after another four miles we found ourselves above that point of the