

to feel that, apart from the genuine interest which Wang Ta-lao-yeh, the learned sub-prefect of Tun-huang, had from the first shown in my antiquarian labours, I could to some extent rely also on the favourable impression which gradually had spread among the people of Tun-huang about my scholarly aims and methods.

When by May 21 I returned to the caves for the eagerly planned operations, it was satisfactory to find the site completely deserted but for Wang Tao-shih with his two acolyte-servitors and a humble Tibetan Lāma, knowing no Chinese and obviously harmless. The Tao-shih had come to welcome me at what for most of the year he might well claim as sacred ground entrusted to his own exclusive care. He looked a very curious figure, extremely shy and nervous, with a face bearing an occasional furtive expression of cunning which was far from encouraging (Fig. 198). It was clear from the first that he would be a difficult person to handle. Purposely avoiding any long interview with him, I started next morning what was to be ostensibly the main object of my stay at the site, a survey of the principal shrines and the photographing of the more notable frescoes. While thus engaged at the northernmost caves near the great shrine restored by Wang Tao-shih, I cast a glance at the entrance passage, behind the wall of which the manuscript hoard was declared to have been discovered and to be still kept (Fig. 200). To my dismay I now found the narrow opening of the recess, about 5 feet above the floor of the passage, completely walled up with brick-work. It seemed like a special precaution taken against my inquisitive eyes. Necessarily the sight recalled to my mind the similar device by which the Jain monks at Jesalmīr had endeavoured to keep the store of ancient palm-leaf manuscripts in their temple vault hidden from Professor Bühler.

The chief task at the beginning was to make sure that I should be allowed to see the whole of the manuscripts in their original place of deposit. With a view to sounding the priest in a confidential fashion about the facilities to be given for this purpose, I had dispatched Chiang Ssü-yeh to another cave-temple which Wang had partially restored and annexed as his living quarters. In spite of the Ssü-yeh's tactful diplomacy, the negotiations proceeded very slowly. The promise of a liberal donation for his work of pious restoration had, indeed, the initial effect of inducing the priest to explain that the walling-up of the door was a precaution primarily taken against the curiosity of the pilgrims who had recently flocked to the site in their thousands. But, being wary and of a suspicious mind, he was careful to evade any promise about showing the collection to us as a whole. All that he would agree to, and that with manifold reservations, was to let me eventually see some manuscript specimens within convenient reach of his hands. A hint cautiously put forward by my zealous secretary about the possibility of my wishing, perhaps, to acquire one or other of these specimens had caused such manifestly genuine perturbation to the Tao-shih that the subject had promptly to be dropped.

However, in one direction at least some reassuring information emerged from these hours of diplomatic converse. From statements heard by us at Tun-huang it had appeared likely that, when the great find of manuscripts had been officially reported through the Tao-t'ai at Su-chou to the Viceroy of Kan-su, orders had been issued from the latter's Ya-mên for the transmission of specimens, and subsequently for the safe keeping of the whole collection. Fortunately, Chiang's apprehension about an official inventory having been taken on that occasion was dispelled by what the Tao-shih in a talkative mood let drop in conversation. Some rolls of Chinese texts, apparently Buddhist, had indeed been taken from him and sent to the Viceregal Ya-mên at Lan-chou. But they had failed to attract any interest there, and to Wang's undisguised chagrin no further notice had been taken of his treasured old manuscripts or, indeed, of his pious labours which had led to their discovery. Officialdom had been content with a rough statement that the manuscripts would

Return to
'Thousand
Buddhas'.

First over-
tures to
Wang Tao-
shih.

Official
inquiry into
find.