

CHAPTER XXII

EXPLORATION OF A WALLED-UP HOARD

SECTION I.—FIRST OPENING OF HIDDEN CHAPEL

ALL-IMPORTANT as was the question suggested at the close of the preceding section, it would not have been safe at the time to approach Wang Tao-shih with it. So I left Chiang Ssü-yeh behind to make the most of the favourable impression produced, and to urge an early loan of the promised manuscript specimens. But the priest had again become timorous and reserved, and vaguely postponed their delivery until later. So I remained in suspense until late that night Chiang, in silent elation, came to my tent with a small bundle of Chinese manuscript rolls which the Tao-shih had just brought him in secret, carefully hidden beneath his flowing black robe, as the first of the promised 'specimens'. The rolls, as regards writing and paper, looked as old as the one which the young Ho-shang had shown us on my first visit in March, and probably contained Buddhist canonical texts; but my zealous secretary, ever cautious in scholarly matters, asked for time to make sure of their character.

Chinese manuscript specimens delivered in secret.

By daybreak next morning Chiang came to inform me, with an expression of mingled amazement and triumph, that these fine rolls contained Chinese versions of Buddhist Sūtras (*ching*) which the colophons distinctly declared to have been first brought from India and translated by Hsüan-tsang. He was much impressed by the strange chance which had thus at the very outset placed in our hands texts bearing the name of Hsüan-tsang and undoubtedly early copies of his labours as a sacred translator. I, too, was struck by this auspicious omen—especially when I realized how useful an argument with the timorous Tao-shih was supplied by the interpretation which Chiang Ssü-yeh unhesitatingly put upon it. Surely it was 'T'ang-sêng' himself, so he declared with a tone which had a sound of genuine superstitious faith, very different from his usual scepticism, who at the opportune moment had revealed the hiding-place of all those manuscripts to an ignorant priest in order that I, his admirer and disciple from distant India, might find a fitting antiquarian reward awaiting me on the westernmost confines of China.

Rolls containing versions by Hsüan-tsang.

Wang Tao-shih in his ignorance could have had no inkling, when he picked up those specimens, of their connexion with Hsüan-tsang's sacred memory. Chiang Ssü-yeh realized at once that this discovery was bound to impress the credulous priest as a special interposition of the Arhat, my 'patron Saint', on my behalf. So he hastened away to carry the news to the Tao-shih, and on the strength of this manifest proof of T'ang-sêng's support to urge afresh the plea for free access to the hoard of hidden manuscripts. The effect was such as we both hoped for, and shortly Chiang came back convinced that the portent would work its spell. When after a few hours he returned to the Tao-shih's temple, he found the wall blocking the entrance to the recess in the passage removed, and, on its door being opened by the priest, he caught a glimpse of a small room crammed full to the roof with bundles of manuscripts.

Tao-shih impressed by portent.

All through the morning I had purposely kept away from the Tao-shih's quarters and temple. But on getting this news I could no longer restrain my impatience to see the great hoard myself.