

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MARCHES OF OLD KUA-CHOU

SECTION I.—THE OASIS OF KUA-CHOU AND ITS HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

ON June 13 I left the caves of the Thousand Buddhas with my acquisitions of manuscripts and art relics safely packed in twelve cases, and, after a rapid visit to Tun-huang town to thank my Mandarin friends for all the kindness and friendly support by which they had facilitated my labours, set out eastwards for An-hsi. Three hot marches aggregating a total distance of about 55 miles were covered on the cart road leading along the barren foot of the absolutely denuded outermost hill range of the Nan-shan before I reached Kua-chou-k'ou, a humble roadside station which derives its designation from the ancient name of the oasis and marks its southernmost outpost.¹

Departure
from
'Thousand
Buddhas'.

The route followed is likely to have served from the earliest times as the main line of communication. It leaves the cultivated area at a distance of about six miles from Tun-huang town and leads beyond across wholly desert ground, scrub-covered in parts and elsewhere bare gravel. The character of this ground cannot have changed greatly since the troops and caravans of Han times moved along it; for the torrent beds which break through the range of foot-hills, and in which the few wells are found, are not likely in historical times ever to have carried enough water for irrigation. Only at one point is spring water with good pasture to be found in plenty. It is at *Lu-ts'ao-kou*, where the bed of a stream debouches in a narrow gorge, draining the high outer range of the Nan-shan and passing the little oasis of Tung-pa-t'u.² It is manifestly to this point that we must refer an old legend recorded in the *Tun-huang lu*. It is of interest as affording indirect confirmation for the above statement that the general character of the route must have already been the same in ancient times.

Route from
Tun-huang
to An-hsi.

That valuable little text which Dr. L. Giles has edited and translated from one of my Ch'ien-fo-tung manuscripts³ tells us of a miraculous spring situated 'three days' journey eastward from the town of Sha-chou'. It was called 'the Êrh-shih spring' after Li Kuang-li, the 'Êrh-shih general', whose expeditions undertaken against Farghāna or Êrh-shih in 104-102 B.C. under the Emperor Wu-ti are well known from the Annals. 'In the Han period, Li Kuang-li's army, when on the march, was suffering greatly from thirst. Having prayed to the spirit of the mountain, he pricked the mountain-side with his sword, whereupon a stream of water gushed out and flowed away to the west for several tens of li into the Huang-ts'ao [Yellow Grass] Lake. At a later date there was a general who drank of the water when he was very thirsty, which caused him to fall dead beside the spring. In consequence of this the water ceased to flow, only rising up to the level of the ground. Ever afterwards, when many people came to drink, the flow of water was abundant; when few came, the supply was scanty; . . . and these phenomena continue down to the present day.

Local
legend of
'Êrh-shih
spring'.

¹ See Maps Nos. 78, 81.

² For *Lu-ts'ao-kou*, 'the Nullah of green grass', see Map No. 81. c. 3. The stream of Tung-pa-t'u, usually dry in its lower course, passes west of Wang-fo-hsia and drains the

range, third from the Su-lo Ho valley, which stretches north-west of Shih-pao-ch'êng; see Map No. 82. d. 1.

³ Cf. Giles, *Tun Huang Lu*, *J.R.A.S.*, 1914, pp. 705 sqq.; also *J.R.A.S.*, 1915, pp. 41 sq.