

CHAPTER XIV

THE CAVES OF THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS

AFTER all these years and all these miles, and the hours spent examining the reproductions of M. Pelliot's photographs, there was nothing to do but to gasp. Hardly in the ten days, during which I never left the caves except for food, could I bring myself to the task of critical study. For the holy men of fourteen centuries ago had left their gods in splendour on those walls. Tens of thousands of them, walking in slow procession, seated calm on flowering lotus blossoms, with hands raised to bless mankind, or wrapt in meditation or deeper still sunk in thoughtless Nirvana. They were the very gods whose existence I had only guessed. Sir Aurel Stein shows one or two in his book, and Professor Pelliot has five volumes of them and another volume still to come. Learned gentlemen, in books costing seventy-three shillings and sixpence net, discuss the ancestry and the progeny of the Chinese pantheon and base their findings upon their study of these reproductions.

But in the very presence, such things are not. These dim figures, half fading from the walls in an irreligious age, and lit only by a half-reflected twilight from the winter sun outside, are a company of the elder gods who have not left the earth with their noble companions long since fled. They people those high halls in silence so profound and full of meaning that for the first time I understood why I had

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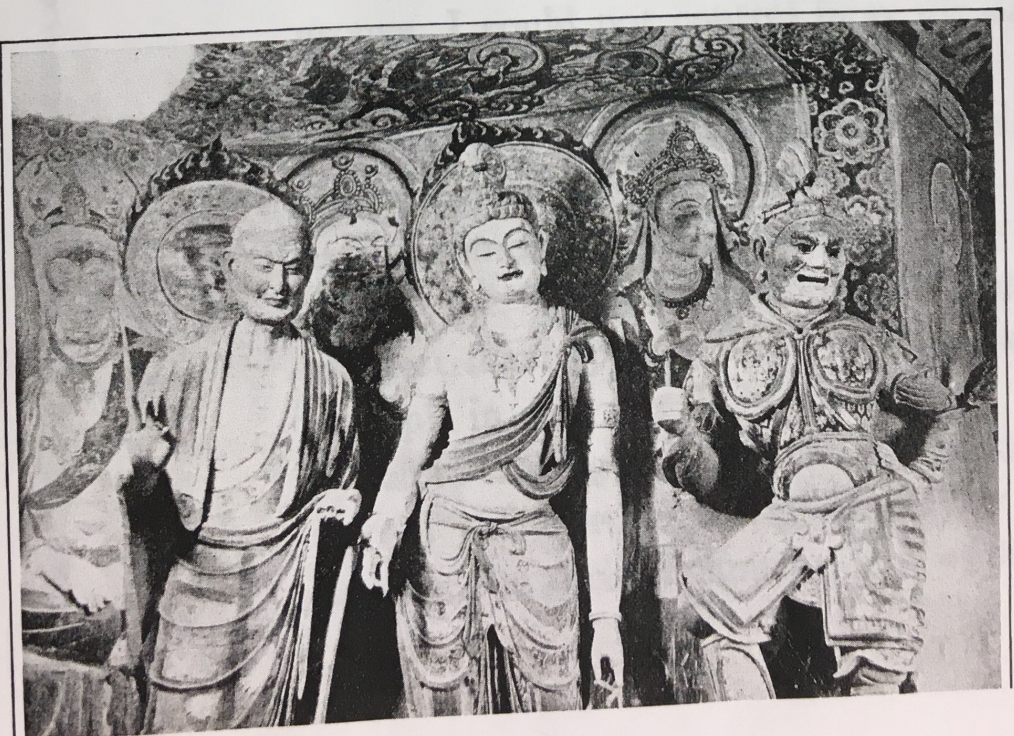
crossed an ocean and two continents, plodding beside my cart these weary months, to assure myself of their presence. It was not so much active realizing of their surpassing beauty that made me satisfied and dulled my critical sense: it was this reality of the unreal. They were there not as living beings, certainly not as dead ones. I, who had come to attribute dates and glibly to refute the professors and to discover artistic influences, stood in the centre of a chapel with my hands dug deep in my pockets and tried to think. Surely I, an American and no Buddhist, in the year of Our Lord one thousand nine hundred and twenty-four, had been vouchsafed a vision. . . . It grew dark and I strolled back to my room wondering.

It was veritably Chien Fo Tung, the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, for big and little, half-obliterated or almost perfect, there were tens of thousands of figures on those walls. Many of the most superb were so nearly gone that one must stand at a distant and discreet angle to know that they were there at all. They seemed to be retiring gradually from the light of common day. Perhaps they were already gone to the peak of the Sumeru Mountain, whence the storks fly off with pine boughs in their long bills and where there is a gentle rain of lotus petals all the sunless, shadowless day, which stretches nightless to eternity. Often it seemed as if they were indeed gone and had left but shadows and pictures of themselves upon the walls. And yet among the shadows and the pictures I came on figures which gave forth a sombre glow and looked through and past my gaze with such ineffable, dispassionate calm that I knew them to be there in the very spirit, a spirit much more themselves than

the blood and flesh which made up my body and was the real I.

But it was with a shock that I traced, on the oval faces and calm mouths, the foul scratches of Slavic obscenity and the regimental numbers which Ivan and his *polk* had left there. Two years before, a little group of four hundred Russian soldiers, harried from pillar to post, beaten and pursued by the Red armies, had fled through Turkestan. The Chinese governor, more fearful of the Bolsheviks than of the thinning ranks of the old regime, had stripped them of their arms and their horses and interned them at the chapels of the Thousand Buddhas, while their general was clapped into the Chinese prison at Urumchi, mercifully supplied with enough opium to forget the filth and the hideous fare and to achieve a reasonably swift death.

If at first I was moved to blind anger at the lonely peasant soldiers who had scrawled their insignificant names and regimental numbers across the irreplaceable treasures of ancient China—the only ones that are left us after the wrack of centuries—I quickly realized how little they knew of what they had done. It was but another of the aftermaths of the Great War. Here in this quiet side pool of the stream of life no man had known how Europe was torn during four of the longest years our generation shall know. No man there but would have stared in dull incomprehension if you had recited the story of French cathedrals outraged and of Louvain Library burnt. But three years after the peace was signed, when the stone flung into the middle of our own pond had sunk to the bottom, the widening ripples had reached this distant shore to wash up



those four hundred ignorant *muzhiks* who smeared the holy place and drifted on, no man knew where. It remained but to examine curiously what they had left and to thank God that so many irreplaceable fragments were still untouched.

Obviously, some specimens of these paintings must be secured for study at home and, more important still, for safe-keeping against further vandalism. I had been revolving the subject in my mind for months. The Germans and the British had attacked frescoed mud walls from the rear and had been able to cut out and preserve important sections of decorated surface. But caves hollowed from the very bowels of the stone cliffs were not so easy a problem.

The adobe mixture of mud and straw had been smeared over the rough surface of the conglomerate rock from half an inch to two inches deep, and over that a thin layer of white-wash had been spread with a brush. On these white walls the pictures had been painted in ordinary water colour. Attempts to pry off the ruined adobe where it was loosest soon proved that, even with a careful saw-cut or a chiselled groove, I could not control large enough flakes of painted mud to save any considerable figure or detail. It remained with fear and trembling to try the technique which had been recommended by the museum experts at Harvard. It was an experiment, and the chances seemed a hundred to one against me. In common decency I must not practise on the greatest masterpieces, and yet I was anxious for a typical example in case the thing succeeded.

Before leaving Peking I had provided myself with a quantity of the fixative recommended by the chemists to tie together the ancient pigment, now as delicate and easily dis-

lodged as chalk dust on a blackboard. Also I had with me the ingredients for the soluble bed which must be applied to the painting after the colour was judged secure.

Being neither chemist nor trained picture restorer, but an ordinary person with an active archaeological conscience, what I was about to do seemed both sacrilegious and impossible. However, I was spurred on by the manners of three bow-legged Mongols who slid from their camels outside the caves and slouched in to gape and worship. They prayed respectfully enough to a hideous modern clay figure with magenta cheeks and bright blue hair but, when they rose and began talking together in a group, one placed his greasy open palm on a 9th Century wall painting and leaned his whole weight there as he chatted. Another strolled to the pictured wall and, in idle curiosity, picked at the scaling paint with his fingernails. As they crowded out through the narrow entrance their vile sheepskins scrubbed a row of saintly figures by the doorway, figures which, alas! no longer had middles, so many hundreds of sheepskinned shoulders and elbows had rubbed there in the past.

This was enough. Any reverent experiments that I might undertake were justified. I grimly set about first to apply the colourless liquid which a Peking chemist had given me to fix the crumbling pigments, and later applied the hot glue-like bed to the paint itself. Here, however, were unexpected difficulties. The temperature in the caves was below zero, and I was far from sure that my chemical had penetrated the plaster wall before it froze, and later the boiling jelly was almost impossible to lay on that vertical surface before it stiffened. Wang and the coolie stuck

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manfully to the brazier over which my stuff was while I made shift to apply it and at the same time boiling gouts like hot molasses candy on my upturned top of my head, and my clothes, and then to fingers together in a gelatinous mass just at the moment when I needed every bit of deftness and nicety which I was capable. The experiments made on or hopelessly ruined surfaces had convinced me of failure nor of success. I must drive ahead on a mission, transport it to Cambridge, and let my friend Fogge Museum rescue it from its hard bed if indeed possible.

Without touching the 6th Century work, of other example is known to exist, and avoiding the masterpiece of the Tang period, I chose some Turkestan which were left in fair condition from partly groups. Though far from being the most important place, these would prove treasures the like of which never seen in America and which even Berlin wealth of frescoes sawn in squares from the stucco Turkestan, might envy.

Five days of labour from morning till dark and of remorse for what I had done and of black despair, queried with difficulty each morning, saw the framed paintings securely packed in felts and lashed between flat boards, ready for the eighteen-week springless jolting cart, railroad, and ship to Museum at Harvard.

Though I had been putting off the evil moment, I realized that I must screw my courage up and try

manfully to the brazier over which my stuff was heating, while I made shift to apply it and at the same time to drop boiling gouts like hot molasses candy on my upturned face, the top of my head, and my clothes, and then to fasten my fingers together in a gelatinous mass just at the moment when I needed every bit of deftness and nicety of touch of which I was capable. The experiments made on unpainted or hopelessly ruined surfaces had convinced me neither of failure nor of success. I must drive ahead on a real painting, transport it to Cambridge, and let my friends at the Fogg Museum rescue it from its hard bed if indeed that were possible.

Without touching the 6th Century work, of which no other example is known to exist, and avoiding the greatest masterpieces of the Tang period, I chose some Tang figures which were left in fair condition from partly destroyed groups. Though far from being the most important in the place, these would prove treasures the like of which we had never seen in America and which even Berlin, with its wealth of frescoes sawn in squares from the stucco walls of Turkestan, might envy.

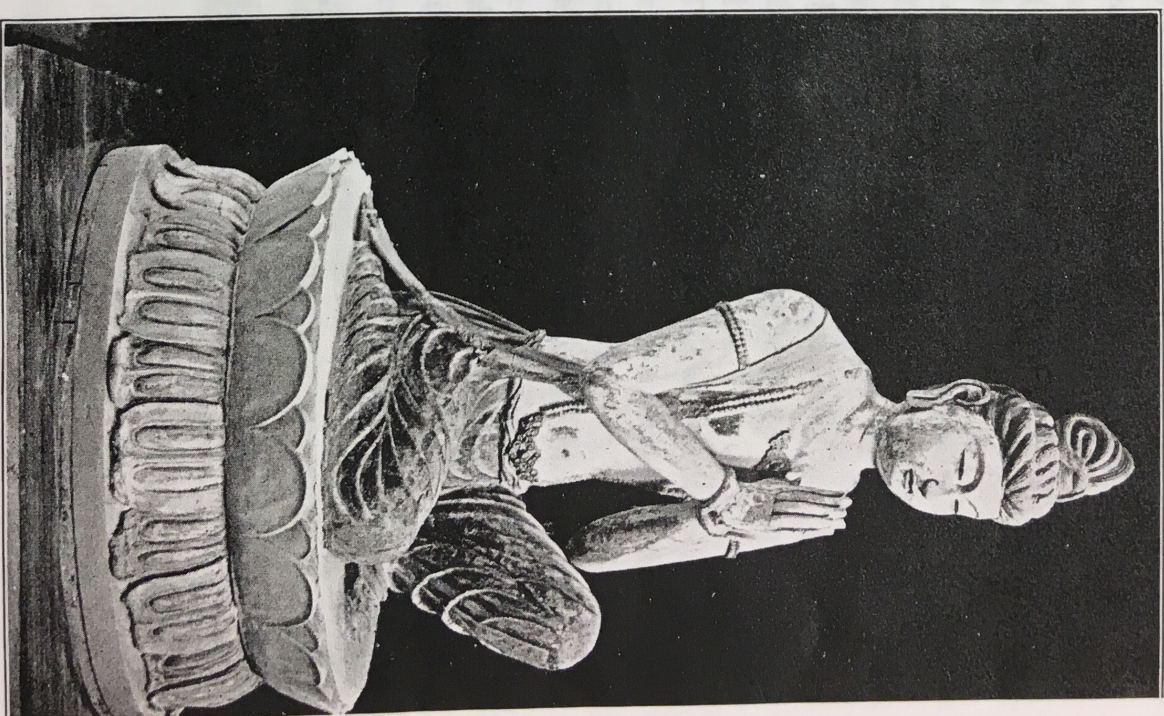
Five days of labour from morning till dark and five nights of remorse for what I had done and of black despair, conquered with difficulty each morning, saw the fragments of paintings securely packed in felts and lashed tightly between flat boards, ready for the eighteen-weeks' trip by springless jolting cart, railroad, and ship to the Fogg Museum at Harvard.

Though I had been putting off the evil moment, I now realized that I must screw my courage up and try to save at

least a single piece of sculpture from the mud-trowel and the paint-box of the local image-maker who was to appear in a few weeks from the market town for his annual orgy of vandalism.

The old priest had seen no harm in my smearing the masterpieces on his painted walls with hot jelly; indeed he had been much more philosophic about it than I, though he smiled when I explained that I hoped to find a picture in that mess. But the matter of a statue was different. It seemed that these statues were his pride. He had spent months in begging from oasis to oasis for money to have them made, and now came a mad foreigner who, though he had given a handsome present, expected to carry one away. He suggested that one could save trouble and carriage by stopping at the market town and ordering a statue made by the very sculptor whom he employed. One might even wait till Peking was reached to have one constructed by the metropolitan artists. Reasonable as this suggestion was, I insisted that I valued more an image hallowed by his chapels. We finally compromised, much to the relief of the priest, and I agreed to take only an old and tarnished example instead of one of his recently constructed and paid-for works of art.

Thus it was that I was enabled to set about a labour of love and reverently to pry from its pedestal a figure halting upon one knee, and with sensitive hands clasped in adoration before its bosom. No vandal hand but mine had disturbed it for eleven hundred years. Dusty though the colours were on the prim folds of the garment, a gentle breath and the flick of a silken scarf cleared them to fresh



COLOURED CLAY STATUE FROM TUN HUANG, NOW AT THE FOGG MUSEUM, HARVARD COLLEGE.

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blue and crimson and gold. The yellow ivory of the shone out anew and the necklace glowed.

Though the little figure seemed slight enough, its unbaked clay mass proved unexpectedly heavy, and six of us to shift it from its seat and on to a padded stool and four stalwarts to carry it to my sleeping room. From the odds and ends of lumber which we had brought with us, was constructed a clumsy box which we lined with cotton from the Tun Huang market and then we added bed felt and more coverlets.

The little saint itself was wound with the oddest collection of garments that ever a Buddhist figure wore: blankets, my sheepskin breeches turned Brian C. fashion, the incomparable underthings constructed of woolly Doctor Jaeger, and the very B. V. D.'s to be in shameless display in our American magazines were in that box by the museum officials who unpacked Cambridge. If I lacked for underwear and socks *for the* return journey my heart was kept warm by the *thought of* the service which my things were performing when they that fresh smooth skin and those crumbling pigment harm.