

CHAPTER LV

DISCOVERY OF HAN RECORDS

NEXT morning broke with an icy north wind which later on shifted round to the north-west without losing any of its violence. My first business was to despatch one of the Ya-mên messengers with a letter to the magistrate asking for more labourers to push on excavations. Then I set out with every available man for the ruin sighted due south of our camp and next to the one prospected in the evening. The camp was to follow with a supply of water in tanks. It was essential to spare our handful of diggers all needless tramps to and fro; for I rightly suspected that with such shifty folk, all confirmed opium-smokers, the stimulus supplied by liberal rewards for finds would not hold out long, but only increase the craving for a good smoke and sleep in a warm den.

The watch-tower, for such it was, proved badly decayed; but thick layers of refuse covered the south slope of the low clay ridge on which as usual it had been built for the sake of better look-out, over some ten yards of length. At the foot of the slope they were fully three to four feet high. The chief ingredients were straw, twigs and bark of tamarisks, dung of horses—evidently mainly stable refuse of some watch and post station thrown down here. But from the very edge on the top there protruded the fragment of an inscribed Chinese tablet, and as more wooden records cropped up I promptly settled down to work here.

The harvest was abundant. Before mid-day two dozen or so of inscribed pieces had emerged, and the precious refuse heap was far from being exhausted. Chiang was