

## CHAPTER LVIII

### FIRST EXCAVATIONS ALONG THE WESTERN LIMES

At first the extent of the line to be explored was far from giving assurance. The party of labourers I had managed to bring along, even when reinforced by the contingent from Nan-hu, looked disproportionately small for the task, and the loss of the two missing men had still further weakened it. I had every reason to husband my time; for the mid-day heat of the last few days showed me that work on this desolate border was bound before long to become very trying. It was important to make the most of my resources. So, while the Surveyor was to move westwards and trace the line of towers as far as it might extend from the bend previously noticed near Toghrak-bulak, Ts'ao Ta-lao-ye, the officer of the Tun-huang levies whom Lin Ta-jên had attached to my camp, was hastily despatched to headquarters to bring up more labourers and supplies.

I thought it best myself to commence excavations on that part of the line which, owing to its distance from any suitable camping-ground, was likely to give most trouble. From Toghrak-bulak to our first lake camp the road had lain throughout over a gravel plateau destitute of water and fuel, and over these sixteen miles the old *agger* could be traced almost unbroken. About half-way I had then noticed some posts protruding from the pebble-covered slope of what looked like a small natural mound. Its position close to the inner side of the wall suggested, however, a ruin, and a little hurried digging had then shown that some structure was buried beneath. It was