

CHAPTER LIX

RECONNAISSANCES ALONG THE ANCIENT WALL

WITH Chiang-ssü-yeh and Naik Ram Singh once initiated in the work of clearing these ruined watch-stations, I was free to start on reconnaissance rides along the ancient wall. They were to show me in advance the task awaiting us at each ruin, and to enable me to select the most suitable camping-places. The latter consideration was important; for with so limited a number of labourers and with ruins so widely scattered, it would have been a serious loss to waste what little energy and strength the party possessed by long daily tramps to and fro.

Never did I feel more the strange fascination of this desolate border line than during the days I spent in thus tracing the remains of wall and watch-stations over miles and miles of gravel desert and past the salt marshes. There were, indeed, the towers to serve as guides from a distance. But when on the east of our first lake camp I began to search for the wall they were intended to guard, I soon found my task complicated by peculiar topographical features. Already before, when first following the Lop-nor route, we had noticed lakes and marshes in the depressions north of it. But only when I set out to visit each ruined tower we had seen rising far away to the north over what then looked a uniform dead level of gravel desert, did it become clear how broken the ground was over which those engineers of the Han times had here carried their frontier line.

What had seemed a plain extending to the very foot of those bare lifeless hills of the Kuruk-tagh now proved to be in reality a series of low gravel-covered plateaus