

CHAPTER LXII

ON THE WESTERN FLANK OF THE LIMES

WHEN on the morning of May 1st I set out to visit the neighbouring ruins and reconnoitre this new ground, I was obstructed not a little by the strange combination of water and fire. Most of the ground separating our camp terrace from the three watch-towers within view was marshy, and it cost much care and many détours to avoid hopeless bogs. At the same time, where the soil on the edge of the wide depression was firmer, the fire in the reed-beds was still smouldering, and a passage had to be picked with caution. All over the low ground salt efflorescence was abundant, and its contrast with the blackened tamarisks and Toghraks and the singed reeds very striking. It seemed cruel to see this hardy jungle vegetation, which had held its own amidst such deterrent conditions of soil and climate, succumb to fire just when it was preparing to greet its short-lived spring.

But physical drawbacks were soon forgotten over the absorbing antiquarian interest of the site. A careful survey of the ground soon convinced me that I now stood within the westernmost extension of the *Limes*. With that unfailing eye for topography and all its strategic bearings which the Chinese have proved again and again to possess, the engineers of the Emperor Wu-ti had carried their fortified border line right up to the point where it could rest its flank safely upon a huge depression—once, no doubt, a great lake basin and since historical times an impassable bog in most places. A look at Map i. and its inset *A*, much reduced as is the scale, will fully explain this; but a much larger map would be needed to illustrate