

the mountain slope is too rugged in its upper portions, and too arid lower down, to be occupied by man except in the larger valleys. At the heads of these valleys, hardy nomads graze their flocks amid the magnificent scenery of loess-covered moraines and steep valley walls, while far downstream, beyond almost impassable gorges, charming villages lie like green ribbons on narrow terraces of loess. At the ends of the valleys, a rude transition brings one into the wearisome desert of the zone of piedmont gravel, like a huge beach of dark, monotonous shingle. Sometimes the gravel bears on its lower edge isolated areas of sand-dunes like lagoons of the great dry sea beyond; but oftener it abruptly gives place to the refreshing verdure of the zone of vegetation, a jungle of tamarisks and poplars, broken by broad expanses of feathery reeds, or by areas of cultivation. The zone of vegetation is not all a zone of life; frequent areas contain little except dead plants, slowly worsted in the hopeless fight against a changing climate. In scores of places in this, the sole zone where life is abundant, great mounds from ten to fifty feet in height, capped with the feathery shoots of dying tamarisk bushes, — easily legible records of desiccation, — stand like huge boulders capped with seaweed between the green tide-flats, so to speak, of the zone of vegetation and the encroaching waves of the great interior desert of sand. The desert, white, yellow, or gray on the edges, reddish in the centre, is beautiful in spite of our presuppositions. Life, to be sure, is absent, but the graceful curves of dune and ripple and the harmonious blending of tints are a continual delight, provided the mind is free from anxiety.