

route I proposed to follow, and to tell her exactly what I hoped to do. Then, as I traced out a pencil line along the map of Asia, I first seemed to appreciate the task I had before me. Everything was so vague. Nowhere in Peking had we been able to obtain information about the road across the desert. I had never been in a desert, and here were a thousand miles or so of desert to be crossed. Nor had we any information of the state of the country on the other side of it. The country was held by the Chinese, we knew, but how held, what sort of order was preserved, and how a solitary European traveller would be likely to fare among the people we knew not. Lastly, at the back of all, looming darkly in the extremest distance, were the Himalayas, to cross which had previously been considered a journey in itself.

All the terrible vagueness and uncertainty of everything impressed itself on me as I traced that pencil line on the map. I was indeed about to make a plunge into the unknown, and, however easy the route might afterwards prove to future travellers, I felt that it was this first plunging in that was the