

*Physical features.*—The prevailing character of the region thus surrounded is a vast plain surface extending east and west. But it may be conveniently described under the natural divisions of Highland, Lowland, Desert, Swamp, and Lake. And we will now briefly notice each in turn.

*Highland.*—This portion is constituted by the elevated plateaux and deep valleys of the lofty mountain barriers which form three sides of its area, and is characterized as much by the rigour of its climate as by the nakedness of its hills. Glaciers are found on its more elevated ranges, and there is everywhere an absence of forest trees.

Nevertheless its glens and hollows are the home of numerous tribes who are mostly nomads in their habits—who during the winter nestle in the nooks and sheltered gullies that border on the lowlands, and in summer migrate with their flocks and herds to roam over the rich pastures that sprout so soon as the snow melts off the wide plateaux or steppes which buttress the main ranges.

The peculiar features of these highlands are the general barrenness of the hill slopes and the narrowness of the channels by which they drain into the central plain or basin, not less than the steppes of rich pasture and tablelands of inhospitable waste which constitute the progressively higher parts of the several mountain ranges up to their water-sheds.

The mineral resources of these tracts are not well known, though there is ample evidence to prove that the rocks contain rich veins of the most useful and precious metals, besides mines of some highly prized minerals. These will be noticed in detail hereafter under the head of Natural Productions.

The vegetable kingdom is, as a rule, very sparsely represented, and, except on the northern slopes of the Alátágh—which indeed is beyond the limits of the country—there is a notable absence of forest trees everywhere. The deep valleys through which the mountains drain, however, and the elevated steppes or plateaux between their parallel ridges are clothed with a more or less rich vegetation which in some respects is peculiar to the region.

In the valleys, along the river courses, it is met with in the form of thickets of brushwood which line the banks in narrow belts with patches of tall reed grass interspersed; or where, as in the higher altitudes, the river courses expand into wide and more level channels, it is found in long island strips in the river bed itself. The composition of these brushwood thickets varies in different localities, but the characteristic and most generally diffused plants are species of tamarisk, myricaria and buckthorn; different species of the willow, the poplar and the rose; the dwarf juniper, arbor vitæ, with several species of the astragalus, and some of the barberry. Varieties of hedsarum, sedum, clematis, &c., and many other plants of herbal growth are found in the lower valleys where, too, pasture is the most abundant, and the poplar and the willow grow as forest trees in small clumps of few or many. For the rest the mountains may be described as a vast wilderness of desolation with glaciers on the highest ranges and snow for half the year on the next subordinate ridges.

Animal life at these elevations is most scarce if not absent entirely. The wild ox=*cútás*, the ibex=*takka*, two species of wild sheep—the ovis Poli=*ghúlja*, and ovis Ammon=*ráós*—and a species of antelope=*jírán* haunt the snow line where, too, the marmot=*sughúr*, and rats of sorts have their burrows. In the more sheltered glens, lower down the river courses, are found the wild horse=*cúlán*, and the hare=*cúyán*. The bear=*arik* is found on the Alátágh, where it is said to dig out and devour the marmot whilst in its state of hibernation, and troops of wolves=*borí* with the stealthy leopard=*caflán* hunt on the Atbáshí plateaux of Alátágh and the Pámir of Bolortágh where the wild sheep do most abound.

Birds are represented by the solitary raven and the only less so chough at the highest altitudes, where too the eagle loves to soar. In the lower valleys the Grecian or red-legged partridge=*kíklík* is common everywhere, as are sparrows, finches, larks, wagtails, tits, rock martins, &c., &c., but the snow pheasant=*úlár* is only found at the snow line.

*Lowland.*—This division comprises the belt of hill skirt lying at the base of the bounding ranges, and varies in width in different localities. It is the most populous part of the country, and is the only portion of it which is permanently settled and cultivated. In it are situated all the cities and towns of the country together with their respective suburban settlements.