

the ancients, which connects the T'ien-shan with the Hindu-kush and on its western flanks gives rise to the headwaters of the Oxus.

On looking at the map it might well seem as if this vast region had been intended by Nature far more to serve as a barrier between the lands which have given to our globe its great civilizations than to facilitate the exchange of their cultural influences. For within this area, measuring some 1500 miles in a direct line from east to west and, at its widest, more than 500 miles from north to south, the ground capable of settled life is strictly limited to strings of oases, all with a few exceptions comparatively small. The rest of this area is occupied by huge stretches of desert. Whether they extend over high mountain ranges, or wide barren belts of foothills with their gravel glacis, or over plains overrun by moving sands, these deserts are almost everywhere devoid of water.

It is this extreme deficiency of water which invests by far the greatest portion of the area we are considering with the character of what I may call 'true desert'. I lay stress on the epithet 'true' in order to make it quite clear that the ground over which I shall have to ask the reader to follow me differs so largely from those deserts with which Biblical stories, descriptions of Arabian, American or South African scenery, and the like have made many of us, in a certain sense, familiar. These 'tame deserts', as I should venture to call them by way of distinction, may well impress the town dweller, especially if he comes from our centres of congested humanity, with their sense of solitude, emptiness and, let me add, peace. But deserts in which whole tribes can wander about for long periods sure of finding water and