

reaching the pass, and our horses were soon struggling up the steep slope past countless skeletons of unlucky pack animals that had fallen in the effort. The clouds gathered so rapidly that the pass, the elevation of which is 11,600 feet, was in a sea of mist when the summit was reached. On the southern side the snow

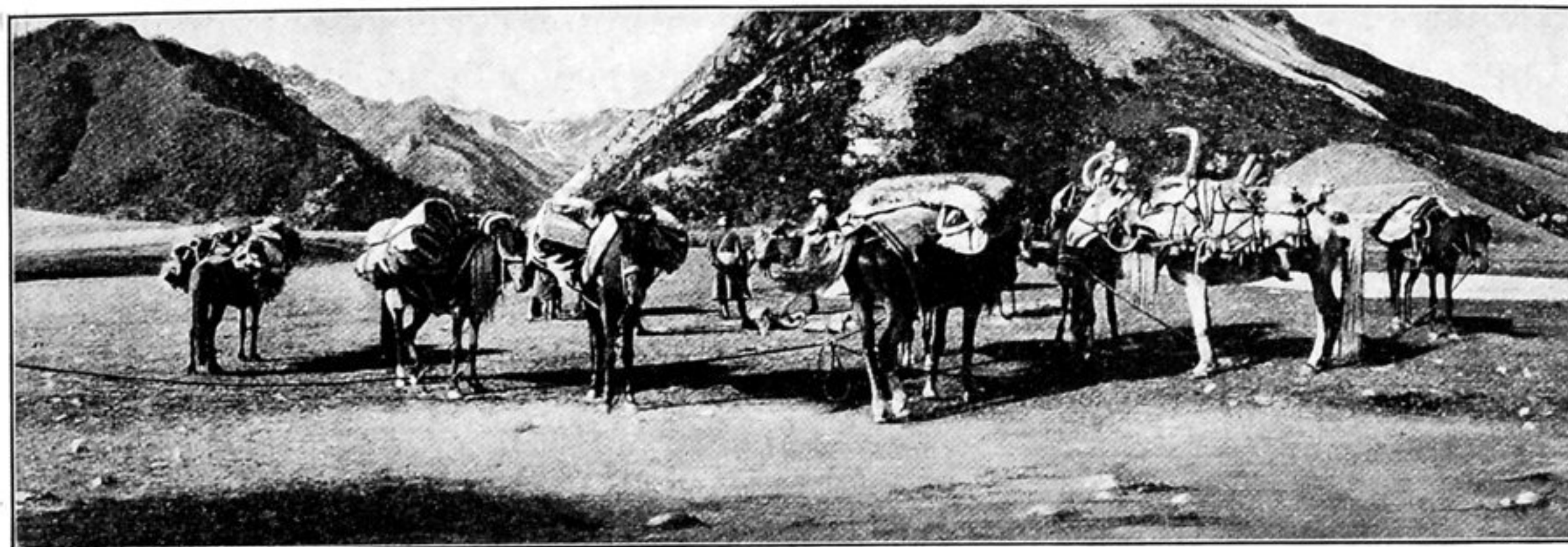


Fig. 86.—Ak-Busa-Ga.

was much deeper and the drifts so heavy that our guides had difficulty in remaining on the trail, but a short descent led us below the snow-line and down to Sari Tash, on the edge of the Great Alai Valley. There we halted for a day to rest the horses.

The Alai Valley, as it is first seen (fig. 87), looking across from the foothills at Sari Tash, is one vast expanse of smooth green lawn, abruptly bordered on the south by a magnificent wall of snow-clad mountains, and extending east and west nearly as far as the eye can reach. It is 75 miles long, averages 15 miles in width, lies

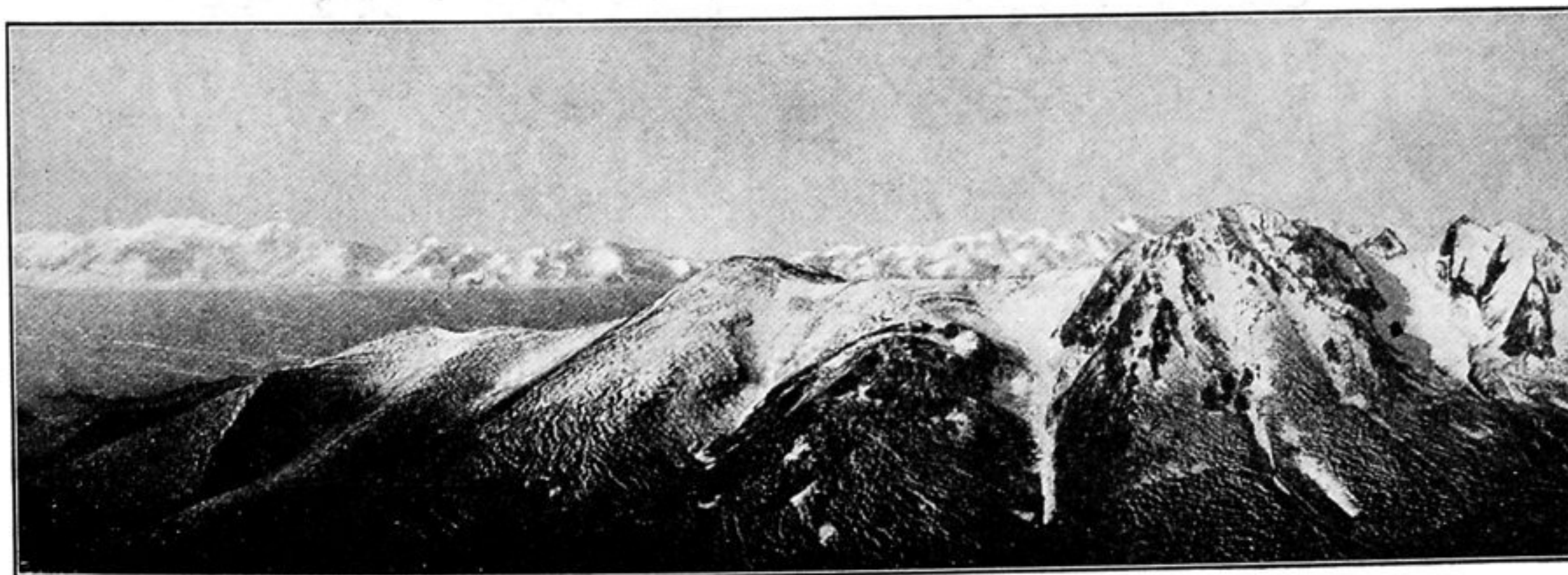


Fig. 87.—Looking across the Alai Valley to the Trans-Alai Mountains. Taken from a peak north of Sari Tash.

10,000 feet above the sea, and is walled in by the Alai and Trans-Alai mountains, two of the lofty ranges of the world. For nine months of the year snow several feet thick lies upon it. Then it is void of human habitation, and the wolves hunt undisputedly the wild sheep and ibex. By the beginning of July this snow has melted. Like magic the grass turns green, the poppies and buttercups bloom, the marmots come out to sun themselves and call in shrill notes to one another, and