

cut features of dark complexion, high foreheads, strong chins, and prominent noses. If it were not for their dark complexions, many of them would pass for Europeans. Some are lighter in complexion and some freckled, and one or two were seen with reddish hair and blue eyes. They live in houses grouped into village oases, the high-valley type, from 200 to 600 feet above the river, where the waters of tributary streams may be diverted for irrigation. Standing in contrast to the desolate slopes of barren rock that surround them, these oases with their gardens and apricot orchards and grain-fields are a welcome sight to the traveler who has struggled over miles of the rough trails that wind up their desert gorge. Lying as they do, surrounded by a wilderness of cliffs and bare declivities, each is isolated and self-supporting, separated from the next by miles of dangerous trail often cut as a half-tunnel in the canyon wall hundreds of feet above its river; and there are long rock-hewn flights of steps up which pack-animals must struggle. Sometimes the cliff-cuts were so narrow and low-roofed that our packs had to be taken off and carried by hand.

For about a hundred miles above Samarkand all houses are built of sun-burnt brick. They are rectangular in plan and sometimes two-storied, with a courtyard for the horses and stalls on the ground floor; but most of them are

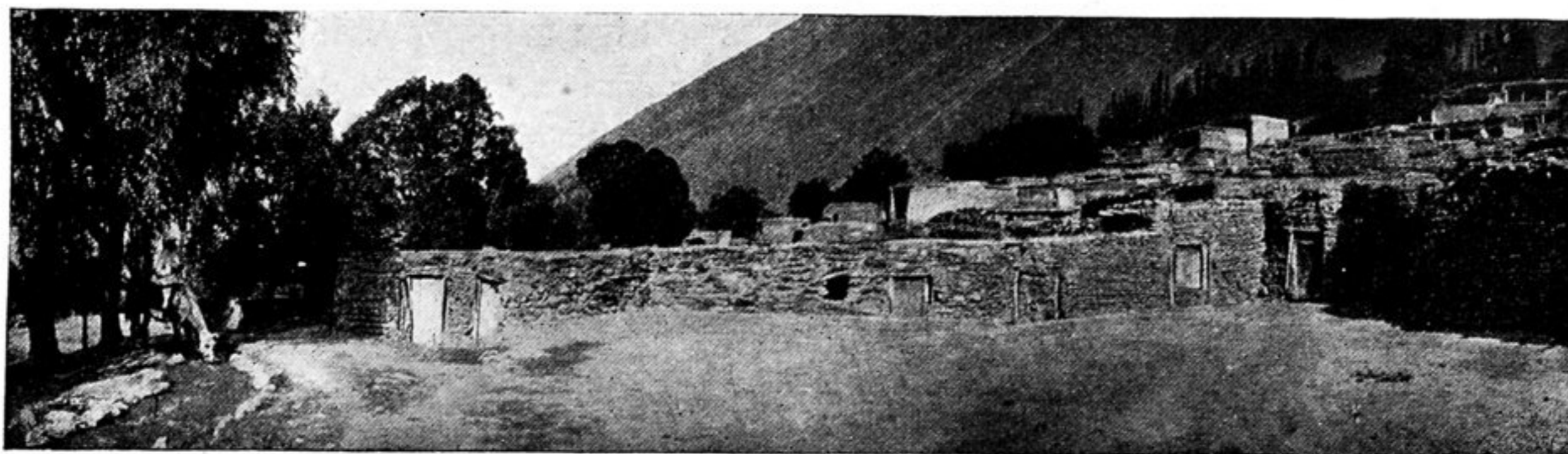


Fig. 476.—A Village built of Cobble-stones laid with Sun-dried Brick (Zerafshan Gorge).

smaller and only one-storied, about 8 feet high. All have flat roofs of ordinarily 8 inches of clay over brush laid on split saplings and hewn timbers. Proceeding upstream we find occasional courses of cobbles built into the house walls, and the proportion increases as we proceed till in the upper part of the valley we see houses built entirely of cobbles, cemented with clay, while even this cement is lacking in the last two or three villages near its glacier, where many of them are mere squalid huts with rounded corners and brush roofs, usually protected with felt.

An important fact about these people is that they have no tradition of arrival in the land, but boast of having been there from the beginning of man. All the old mullahs questioned insisted upon this, and it points to a very ancient Aryan civilization of the valley. For thousands on thousands of years they may have lived there, undisturbed and isolated from the rest of Asia, building up a simple civilization uninterrupted, hardly feeling an echo from the tumultuous struggles that so often destroyed all culture on the plains.