

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

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The Callejón and the Santa

Uphill Farm
Conway, Massachusetts
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Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The old woman had been dead five days. She had been poor during her life - so poor that no one had killed a cow to honor her in death. There was no money to pay for luxuries like fresh beef or perhaps a wooden coffin. The old woman had few relatives living on the hacienda who could afford anything more than the alcohol for the bearers and chanters. Therefore, when they carried her to the cemetery the old woman was swathed in a rough shroud and lashed to a pole stretcher. What is more, she had begun to smell a little by that time. Even in the altitude five days is a long time for the dead to remain above ground.

There was no priest at the hacienda chapel; in the mountains there are too many chapels and very few priests. The chapel doors were closed to the old woman and her party, but the bearers brought her to the portal and placed her on the stones. The chanter screwed up his face and bugged his eyes at the quechua translation of the Catholic burial service printed on the filthy pages of his book. It was necessary that he should do this in order to show the handful of spectators the concentration and the physical effort involved in reading. The chanter threw back his head and wailed, and his helper leaned against him and tried to follow the chant. He was very drunk but he was trying hard to become a professional chanter himself.

One bearer took off his cap and stared at the shroud and the crooked poles of the stretcher. He scratched himself carefully under his poncho and then joined his colleagues in the shade of the chapel. Soon the chanter became impatient to start the funeral march; he pushed and shoved the bearers until the old woman was supported in the air by six shoulders. Then the bearers followed the chanter across the open ground toward the cemetery. The ground was rough and, because they were drunk, they stumbled and reeled. The old woman was almost thrown to the ground on several occasions. The going was hard and the day warm, so the party halted after a few hundred feet and went to sit in the shade. The aguardiente bottle was brought out and the liquid poured into a tiny metal cup. Each man drank and passed on the empty cup; then the bottle was sent to a group of hacienda officials standing near the funeral party. A stocky, short-legged man poured the liquor for those who wanted it and spoke Spanish to them. This was rare, for not many of the Indians in the region spoke anything but Quechua. Well, said the bi-lingual one, he remembered the old woman's wedding. He had been a sponsor of the wedding. It was a pity that she did not have enough money

when she died to pay for the slaughtering of a cow.

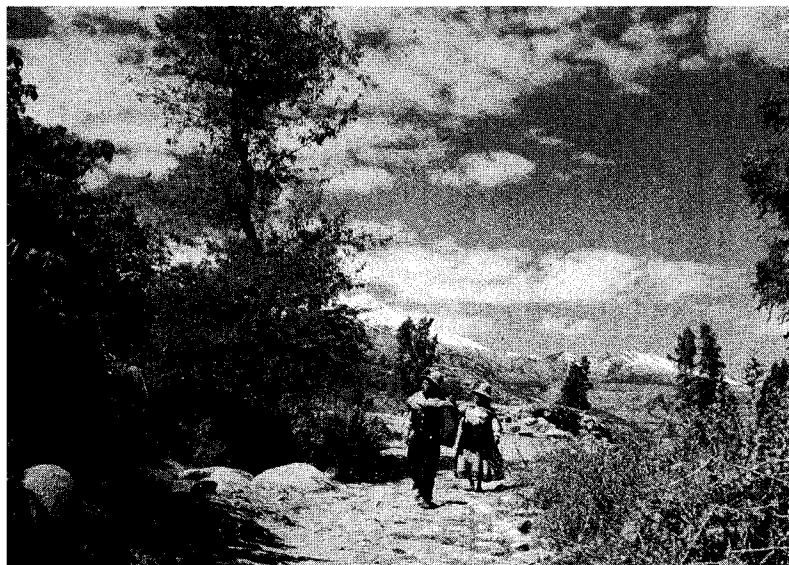
The sun was well down in the west when the bearers and the two chanters struggled to their feet. They giggled as they took their places and raised the old woman to their shoulders again. Down the path by the long lines of eucalyptus, over the foot bridge and into the cemetery; it was not a long way, but no one could decide when to move and when to stop and listen to the chanter. An argument broke out between two bearers, and they glared at each other across the shrouded belly of the old woman. The chanter got them to move forward again while he postured and filled his lungs for another tortured wail. A few women and girls carrying flowers followed the procession and giggled when the bearers stumbled with their burden. Near the cemetery the men began to dance in a circle, and the old woman whirled like a top. In the late sun the staggering, weaving group entered the burial ground.

The dead woman had been old and, therefore, the burial party and the spectators felt no compunction to mourn her death. If the corpse had been that of a young child, there would have been an equal lack of sorrow, for young children are pure and go directly to a good place when they die. It is the young man or woman whose death brings sadness to the people, for the demise of a young person reduces the labor force of the community by one. The old woman had been old and relatively useless, and there was little cause to be sad. On the other hand, the funeral provided the chanters and bearers with a good opportunity to get quickly and thoroughly drunk.

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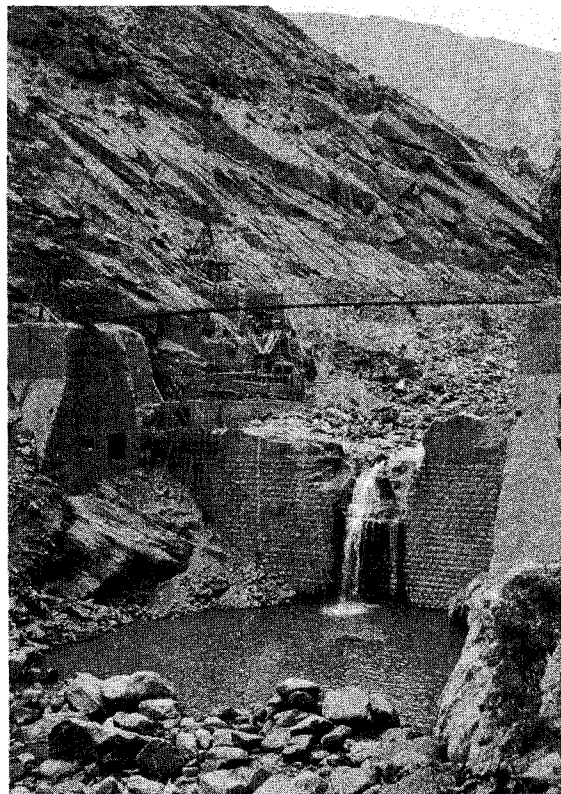
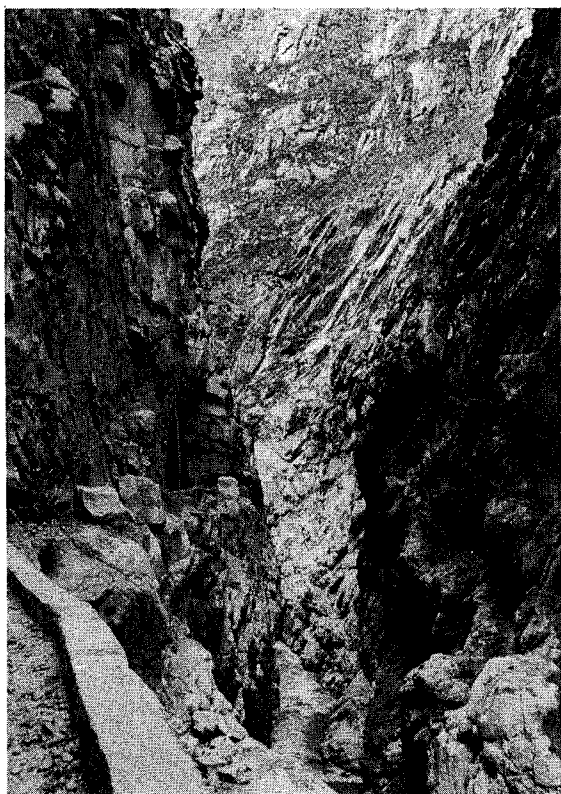
The burial of the old woman took place in the Callejón de Huaylas (the Alley of Huaylas), a lovely valley in the north-central section of the sierra. There is a beauty in the greens of eucalyptus and willow and in the sunbursts of Scotch broom growing by the river; there is a beauty in the patchwork fields on the steep slopes and the tongues of wheat and pasture lands. But these are sights to which any sierra traveller becomes accustomed. There are trees and flowers, rivers and slopes cultivated to the ridgeline in many sheltered valleys from Cuzco to Cajamarca. What sets the Callejón de Huaylas apart from other valleys are the black, ice-milled rocks and the white, jutting peaks of the Cordillera Blanca, the White Cordillera of Perú. Against the greens and golds of the lower valley the scarred slopes are black and barren, the peaks unbelievably white in the upper air. There to the south is Hondoy and, closer, Miró Quesada mountain. Beyond, to the north, the giant of them all - Huascarán.

Whether distorted by the cloud banners that stream from his flanks or standing clear and hulking in the sun, the twenty-two thousand foot monster looms over a large stretch of the valley. People in Marcará or in Yungay live their lives under the sweep of snowfields at the peak and crumpled tongues of glaciers on the long slopes. The mountain is in their talk and their songs:



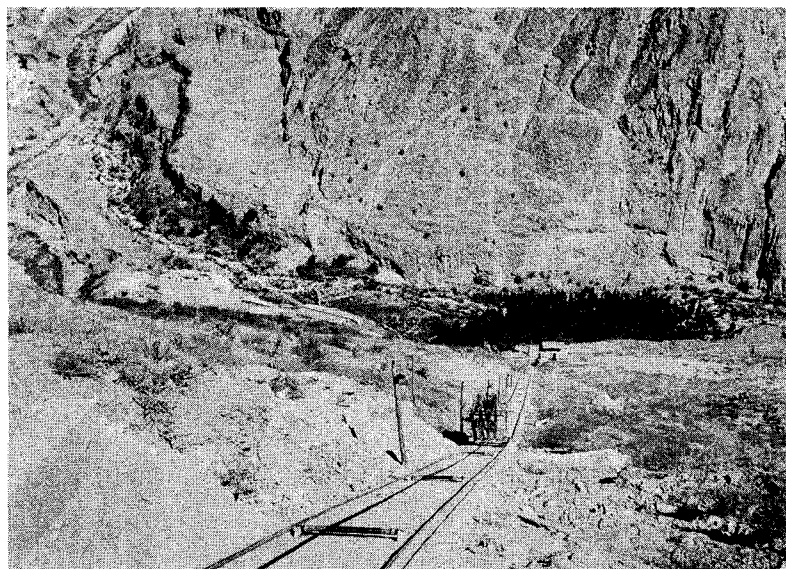
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Hacienda Vicos, Callejón de
Huaylas
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Road, tunnel and Santa river
in the Cañon del Pato.
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Dam destroyed by flash flood in
1950. Boulders tore hole in
central dam face.
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Funicular car bringing supplies
to workings near vertical tubes
at Huallanca
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"Huascarán stands in whiteness
Above the plaza of Yungay;
And my love is white also,
As white as Huascarán.
I would like to go there
To abandon my love.
And never will I love again
An ungrateful girl from Marcará."

When the sunset fires race and die on the lesser peaks, Huascarán still holds the full red light of the sun. In a country of mountains, Huascarán is king.

The sprawling glaciers of the Cordillera Blanca, beautiful as they may be, have caused the deaths of thousands of people in the Callejón de Huaylas. Glacial morrains form weak dams across valleys high in the range, and water from melting ice backs up to form ponds and lakes. One day in 1940, a natural earth dam in a canyon above the city of Huarás (capital of the Department of Ancash) gave way. The wall of water picked up boulders the size of small houses in its rush through the canyon. Before huaracinos knew what was happening, the flood tore through one of the most heavily populated sections of the town. Not a tree or a house was left after the flood had done its work. Today, what was once a part of the town is now a wide swath of huge gray boulders. The exact number of deaths caused by the flood is not known, but estimates run as high as several thousand. As a safeguard against repetitions of the tragedy, glacial dams throughout the area are constantly inspected and the weaker ones destroyed by controlled dynamiting. There is a lonely guard equipped with a transmitter posted on the shores of the lake above Huarás ready to give warning should the dam break again.

Huarás lies in the central portion of the Callejón de Huaylas. to the south the land rises until it passes that elusive boundary beyond which certain bushes and almost all flowers refuse to grow and where the yellow grasses of the puna carpet the wide depressions between the hills. There, in the highest part of the valley, is the small, marshy lake of Conococha and a settlement of a few huts. Beer sold in the one store in the settlement tastes musty and flat in the thirteen thousand foot altitude. The southern peaks of the Cordillera Blanca jut in sawteeth above the puna, and except for the wind and the wavelets on the lake, there is no sound and nothing moves. The altitude and vegetation are ideal for alpaca, but there are no animals on the yellow valley floor. In this high, dead place the Santa river is born, a meandering brook tracing a thin line to the north, following the sloping valley. Green water flowing from scores of glaciers swells the brook to a river as it drops down into the eucalyptus plantations and the golden slopes of Scotch broom. The Santa becomes a river which irrigates several hundred kilometers of rich valley land and, in its final break through the mountains to the sea, will eventually drive the turbines of a giant hydroelectric project at Huallanca.

At the northern end of the Callejón, the two ranges - the

Black Cordillera to the west and the White Cordillera to the east - merge in a tangle of peaks and blind valleys. Through this mountain knot the Santa has sliced a blade-thin canyon. It is the Cañon del Pato, the Canyon of the Duck. The Peruvian Corporation of the Santa has built a narrow road into the river corridor to connect its hydroelectric project with the Callejón. From the level of the road it is possible to see into short stretches of canyon bottom where the Santa roils in its tight curves, to hear the sound of angry water forcing its way through the spills and sluices of gray rock. When the sun is high, it is also possible to feel the weight of air caught between walls thousands of feet high and, near the bottom, less than twenty feet apart. When there is no wind in the Cañon del Pato, the air is fetid and dead.

The canyon road is another proof that the impossible is accomplished regularly in Peruvian road building. Clinging to niches in the canyon wall, burrowing through rock spurs that jut over the whitewater river below, the roadbed drops toward Huallanca in easy grades which attest to its origin (the roadbed was initially laid out as part of a railroad system which would have connected the Callejón de Huaylas with the port city of Chimbote. Now, with the railhead at Huallanca and the dirt road climbing into the Callejón, it is doubtful if the Chimbote-Callejón railroad will ever become a reality.

The flash floods of the Callejón have taken their toll in the deep canyon. Six years ago hydroelectric project workers were putting the finishing touches on a dam thrown across the canyon bottom. Suddenly a spur canyon upstream from the dam vomited a flood of rock, mud and water into the Santa channel, and the men working on the dam's face were doomed. The flash flood tore a great chunk of steel and masonry from the dam before it buried the structure under tons of muck and boulders. Long steel beams were dragged downstream for more than thirty miles. The flood rose to tangle the tracks of the Chimbote-Huallanca railroad and leave snarls of steel rails rusting on the river bank. Even today, when kilometers of tunnels and chambers have been completed, flash floods can still cause headaches among the project engineers.

The main Santa Corporation installation is at Huallanca, a great bowl where the canyon walls fall away into steep hillsides. A funicular railway hauls men up the slopes to the vertical tubes, the inspection galleries and the miles of tunnels in the rock. The tunnels are hot and dusty in the glare of the working lights; men sweat in the heavy air and shout instructions in both Spanish and French (French industry has invested heavily in the project). Electricity generated by the turbines mounted in their rock chamber will run the electric furnaces of Perú's first steel mill, located in Chimbote. French engineers are at Huallanca to make sure that the French and American heavy equipment is properly installed. Even so, it is strange to hear a torrent of guttural, Parisian French profanity echoing along rock corridors in the foothills of the Peruvian Andes.

There is only one way to travel west from Huallanca - by train. The narrow-gauge railroad follows the Santa as it flows down ever-widening valleys to Chimbote and the sea. The bare rock of the Santa valley floor turns to sand, then arable soil, and the first small fields appear. Then the mountains are behind, and the river splits into countless channels as it idles toward the sea. Here the valley is green with sugar cane and banana trees, and the burst bolls of hundreds of acres of cotton plants are bright spangles in the late light of afternoon. The grinding mills and villages of the haciendas stand among the long rectangles of the fields, and along the valley roads the field hands are walking home slowly in the dust. The sun has touched the sea's rim, and night rises swiftly from behind the mountains. The train passes through a long cut in the hills bounding the valley, and steel shutters are pulled over the windows to keep falling stones from entering the cars. On the far side of the cut, beyond rigid limits of irrigation, is the monotonous desert with the lights of Chimbote in the distance marking the coast and the fringing sea.

From the weedy lake at Conococha to the many-channeled mouth north of Chimbote is only a few hundred kilometers. The Santa is a small river and a short one. But to the inhabitants of its lower valley, the Santa is the great giver of the vital gift - the water which allows them to live in the midst of this dessicated land.

Sincerely,

William H. MacLeish
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Received New York 7/26/56.