

brown felt sombreros were playing a dice game and drinking the native "aguardiente", a mighty powerful drink consisting of rum and cana (sugar cane). When our Swiss driver left the car to make enquiries the group seemed to break into gales of laughter and there in the lonely countryside we suddenly felt helpless and frightened and almost expected someone to draw a machete (sharp knife). However, our imaginations were working overtime for we drove off without incident and headed for Valera, our destination for the night.

Valera in the rain seemed almost deserted for the hour was late. However, there were plenty of people in town for every little hotel, no matter how primitive, was full. Finally, we were given permission to sleep at the Hotel Gran Atlantica but we had to sling chinchorros (hammocks) in a corridor off the patio. Luckily we had brought our own chinchorros with us, in case such an emergency arose, and after much giggling and many hopes expressed as to the durability of the hammocks, we fell asleep to the background music of a squeaking mouse and a snoring hotel guest. We caused quite a furore next morning when the hotel guests peered at us from the balconies opening onto the patio and when a large door at the end of the corridor was opened, there were more eyes peering at us - vultures' eyes. Four of these birds of prey were sitting on the back fence of the hotel. Wanting to add a gracious note to our stay at the hotel, the Italian proprietor summoned a waiter and had him serve us demi-tasses of coffee in our chinchorros. Que elegancia!

After Valera came the "big climb" and on dusty gravel roads we started upwards into the clouds. And this is not a figurative expression, for very soon the vision was almost zero because of the dense clouds - but what was more frightening: we knew that chasms a mile deep flanked the road, and quite often we were just able to discern the small wooden crosses that the Andean people erect to prevent spirits from returning when poor unfortunates do go over the side. We inched our way along with a couple of backseat drivers not helping out in the least, when "que momento tan glorioso" we had reached the Pica Aguila (The Peak of the Eagle). Peering through the clouds we saw that there were quite a number of cars parked at the Chalet Hotel. It was rather hard to breathe and the air was extremely cold for we were some 4118 meters or 13,000 ft. above sea level. Snow often falls here and we had hoped to catch a nostalgic glimpse of

a snow-capped mountain but the clouds had not cleared around Pica Bolivar. We rushed inside the pine panelled Chalet and over to an open grate fire and ordered a great dinner of Spaghetti and minestrone soup. This hotel also was run by an Italian.

We Canadians felt quite homesick in the atmosphere of the chalet with its Quebec heaters, fireplace, and guests in ski clothes. However, we soon had to leave the safety of the chalet and once again we crawled along the tortuous roads. Soon we left the cloud curtain behind and began to enjoy the scenic beauty and the quaintness of the tiny Andean villages. The people are quite handsome with high colouring and bright eyes and many of them wear colourful ruanas or ponchos mostly of dark blue wool lined with red. The children are sweet (though dirty) in their tiny ponchos and men, women, and children seem to wear fedoras, or large sombreros. We took a picture of a child of some 4 years wearing a poncho and a paddy green fedora. This is a wheat growing district but the farms seemed barren for this was the dormant season. The steep slopes were encircled by miles of stone fences and there were many circular grain threshing pits. The orange-tiled roofs of the haciendas were the only bright spots against the drabness of the stones and bare fields. When we came to the town of Mucuchies with its pretty pastel coloured "casas" lining the several streets we decided to make reservations in its only hotel "The Bavaria" which was owned by a fairly young German. The hotel was quite primitive but clean and our host promised us some fresh brook trout for supper. We were interested in seeing Mérida, the only city in the Venezuelan Andes, so once again we started off along the hairpin bends. En route we stopped to bathe far below in a fast-rushing mountain stream, complete with tiny waterfalls, and paddled around like school children at the old swimming hole. When we climbed up to the highway we were rather horrified to find that we had a flat... what if we had had a blow-out on the road!

After more time spent twisting and turning we finally saw the city of Mérida far ahead across a mile-deep ravine and also noticed rows of crosses marking a spot where a school bus had gone over the side. Mérida is noted for its University de Los Andes, one of the oldest on this continent, and its pretty girls. We saw many of them at the grilled windows of the narrow streets and many, wearing lace mantil-