

Then we began our march in the bright moonlight, obscured now and then by a dark cloud, which obliged us to stop for some moments, the path being difficult to find. It led upward among sharp loose stones. Our two tramps started with us, and I allowed one of them to hang on to the tail of my mule, which was some help to him in scaling the steep mountain sides.

By the time we reached the level of the snow-fields daylight appeared, which was lucky, for the path was scarcely marked, very little traffic having yet taken place; and in many parts it had been entirely effaced by land-slips or snow drifts. We had now got well on to the snow, which was often six or eight feet deep, but so hard that the hoofs of our mules scarcely left any impression. We overtook two companies of travelers going one way, and as they also had extra mules we formed quite a large caravan. The mountains closed in, forming a series of regular gulleys, through which we journeyed, constantly expecting that each would be the last; but it took four hours to cross all these fields of snow. At last we came to the foot of a steep mountain rising about two thousand feet above the already elevated point we had attained, nearly covered with wide and deep snow-drifts. This was the last barrier on the Chilean side, the very summit of the Cordillera of the Andes.

The morning was cool but still; and the deep blue sky overhead, the wild and sterile mountains covered with snow, formed such a perfectly grand and lovely scene, that even my Chilean companions, who had often crossed, and, as a rule, are little susceptible to the beauties of nature, were roused to admiration. As we now began to ascend the mountains, our mules and horses had hard work to wind their zigzag way over the steep drifts of snow, and I often wondered they did not lose their footing and precipitate riders and baggage into the depths beneath. We had arrived about half-way up, when we found it too steep on that side to proceed, and were obliged to cross a ridge to the brow of the opposite mountain. The ravine between the two mountain spurs was one sheet of dazzling white, and we dismounted to enable the mules to cross, for their hoofs were hardly able to get firm hold, and any false step would have sent them and us into the valley far below. On seeing my two Chileans in front of me crawling on hands and knees along the side of the ravine, their mules reluctant to move on, and after slipping with one foot, I felt very nervous, and took good care to place myself higher up the slope than my mule, holding his rein loosely, and getting firm hold of the snow with my large Chilean spurs, for my boots could not grip it. I had one hand on my large hunting knife, ready to thrust it into the snow as a support in case of need, and I almost required to do so, for at that height, twelve thousand feet above the level of the sea, the least exertion makes the lungs work fearfully, so that I

felt short of breath, and after a very few strides panted or waut of air. The men ahead of me now reached the desired spot, and I soon followed. Then the rest of the party came up, and we were now in comparative safety, for, though the ascent was still precipitous, the snow was in this part ploughed up by the wind, and our animals could get a firm grip of it.

Half an hour more of uphill climbing brought us to the summit, and beneath us lay the valley leading to the Argentine Republic—filled with a glacier from which rushed forth a muddy river, the Mendoza, along which lay our route to the town of the same name, when our mountain journey would end and we should once more find a railway.

Here, on the top of the Cordillera, we met with a drove of Argentine cattle, the first that had ventured over this season. The drovers have hard work, and many a good ox leaves his bones on the road; proof of which we found in some skeletons we came across, picked clean by the condors which frequent the mountain-tops. We perceived several of these large birds hovering overhead, their immense wings extended and motionless, drifting on that rarefied air as if they were suspended from the stars.

We had soon a striking example of the dangers of the cattle-driving trade. An animal near us loosened a big round stone, which went bounding down the steep mountain-side, right among the drove which was winding its way up. The missile singled out a big black ox as its victim, and, with a fearful crash, caught him full in the ribs and hurled him downwards, racing in front of him, till both stone and ox lay immovable at the bottom, scarcely discernible by us above. In spite of the evident danger of a similar occurrence, we could not wait till the whole herd of about seven hundred animals had reached the summit, so dismounting, we went on our way, finding good footing in the loose volcanic earth and stones; and in thirty minutes we had reached the valley. Halfway down we passed some broken trunks, which, with the mule that carried them, had fallen and rolled over some two hundred feet till stopped by a protruding rock. The mule had been badly hurt.

The sun had just scaled the mountains when we halted in the valley for rest and breakfast. A roaring fire was soon going and the kettle and pot simmering merrily. But with the sun a cold wind had sprung up, which caused us to hasten our proceedings. The tramps whom we had left behind whilst crossing the summit, and for whose safety I felt much concerned, turned up, to my great relief, in time to share our breakfast. They had suffered horribly at the summit, for their rapid climbing had brought on the "puna" (shortness of breath, palpitation of the heart, and bleeding), and one of them had lain insensible for several minutes. Still they had found a better road than we, and had

not been obliged to cross the place which I still remember with a shudder.

We followed the course of the river, along the broad and stony valley, gaining successive and most picturesque views of distant mountains and rocky gorges, very different in character from the Chilean side of the Cordillera. Here all was dead and stony; no trace of vegetation, even at a lower level than where, on the Chili side, the scene had been beautified by pretty shrubs and numerous flowers.

As the path was now plain, I hurried on before my guides, anxious to get away from the piercing wind and blinding dust. At 2 p.m. I came to a place where, on the opposite side of the impetuous river, which rushed between high banks of sandstone, there appeared a small stone house, and near it the Puente del Inca, a natural bridge of rock. It completely crosses the river, and close above it hot mineral springs bubble out of the ground and flow beneath it, depositing strong sulphurous and iron solutions, so that the cliff is painted with all the colors of the rainbow—a beautiful spectacle. I had heard much of these springs and was anxious to get to them, but, to my disgust, found that a branch of the river intervened. Following a path to the bank of this branch I found that the usual bridge had been carried away, and in its place a couple of two-inch gas-pipes had been laid about a foot apart, and on these, over the boiling and gushing waters, I had to creep across. I hope I may never again be obliged to use such a primitive bridge, where sudden death in the shape of a cataract beneath awaited a slip or the accidental breaking of the pipes. When I got safely across, some men were waiting to levy their toll for the use of this excellent piece of engineering, and one, had the impudence to demand ten dollars to go across and fetch my mule and things by way of a ford higher up. I was not much pleased with my first reception by the natives of the Grand Republic, and told them so pretty plainly, relying on the intimidating powers of my six-shooter, should it come to quarrel. The small house, or rather stone hut of five rooms, was both an hotel and a shop, the first I saw stocked with goods from Buenos Ayres. I refreshed myself and then inspected the natural springs, whose reputation for healing various diseases brings every year many persons willing to undertake the long journey to bathe in the waters and breathe the pure mountain air. A Belgian engineer, on his way from Chili to Europe, was just leaving the inn, and as my men and baggage had overtaken me I joined him, preferring to pass the night lower down, and so shorten the next day's march. Besides, my men had had a quarrel with the innkeeper about some clover, and had nearly come to blows, so it was more prudent not to stay under the roof of this man, who is known for his brutal and overhearing ways towards strangers, especially if they come from Chili, which country the Ar-