NOT TO COME

Forward by Dr. Julio Vargas

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FORWARD

The author, his wife, Juanita and family lived and worked for a number of years in the Departamento de San Martín, Perú in the late sixties and seventies of the last century. They continued to live, serve and work among Quechua/Quichua (Kechwa) speaking peoples until the turn of that century. This, his novel, is based on notes and life experiences at that time and can be read on two levels:

The first level can be described in "art-deco" terms as a "rattling good yarn"; while the second is a serious attempt to describe the tensions and tragedies of First Nation Peoples throughout the world, whose world-views, land and language come under threat from socio-economic change.

As a close friend and fellow academic, I have never doubted the author's sincerity and Christian holistic commitment to the Amerindian world and though I believe his use of this Quechua dialect may be a little "creaky", it gives a flavour of a dialect that may well disappear, as so many others have done in the world. I am happy to commend it to you, 'gentil lector' (dear reader).

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IN MEMORY OF THOSE...

Who walked and loved a land
they never owned.....

Who speak a language of the heart,
but known to a few...

Who live the vision of a dawn
that is 'Beyond the Andes'…

And for our own Lamista, Ruth

THE BEGINNING...

I noticed that the old man was weeping silently. He stood there alone, shading his eyes with one hand, gazing across the valley to the blue-green mountains, and into the golden sunset, just as I had seen in that picture all those years before.

He turned away from me and I barely caught his words in that quaint musical dialect of North-east Peru:

I*f I had read the future, I'd have asked them not to come…*

I was about to go over and speak to him, when a young woman appeared, it seemed from nowhere, and touched his arm and whispered softly,

Acu, tatiytuyni, ña horana samanayquipaca. Sham', yaycúm', sham'… (Listen, my dear father, now it's the time to rest. Come, let's go in, come…)

I realized that she must have been speaking to him in his Indian language. She turned and smiled shyly at me as she led the old man off.

Si quieres conversar con mi abuelito, has de venir mañana a mi casa a la vueltita no más. De don Hildefonso su casa es. (If you would like to converse with my grandfather you must come tomorrow to my house that's just round the corner. It belongs to don Hildefonso).

I was still haunted by the unexpected vision of the way the old man had been standing there, so I nodded dumbly and turned towards the *Hostal Dorado* across the *Plaza*. It was growing

dusk now and the *chicharras (crickets)* with their shrill reverberations were announcing the fact. I began, almost unwittingly, to slap my neck and hands as the mosquitoes came out for their evening's entertainment under the flame trees surrounding the square. I was surprised that they could even bite me through my London safari shirt.

What was I doing here in this town of Lamas, in this remote Province of San Martín, Perú? As I look back now, I have often asked myself that. Why had I decided on that year's trip round the world? Was it because I was tired of life and work at home; was it because of a failed marriage; was it because of a shrinking world economy that made it a now or never thing; was it because it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience to bore folks later in a bar and office with colourful anecdotes; or was it because I always had needed some sort of project in life...? Only the Lord knew!

Yes…, I suppose it might have been all and none of those things combined. Yet it seemed to me in that quiet late afternoon that it had been something deeper, something to do with a photo that I had seen in my younger days... Had it been in a magazine in the dentist's or doctor's waiting room; in the Uni' students' common room; in a newspaper left in the corner of Manchester commuter train on a dismal Monday evening, somewhere inconsequential in itself at any rate?

Yet that picture had always lain there among the windmills of my mind. The vision was of a South American Indian, standing on a hill-top, shading his eyes and gazing over the mountain ranges into the sunset. That vision had haunted me all my life. In times of quiet, in moments of jubilation, even in the hurly-burly of everyday existence, that man would be there – always watching, always looking...

And now, I had actually seen him, this very afternoon, doing exactly what was in that picture in my mind…!

So, who was he? What had he, if anything, to do with me? And, most of all, why was he weeping?

To make matters more curious still, how was it that I had ended up being here, way off the beaten tourist track, in Lamas, in the *Montaña* of Perú, of all places?

You see, I'd been doing the regular touristy-sort-of-thing one does in the world, just as one does to get a flavour of a place, yet avoid difficulties, hazards, etc. In fact, well, to avoid any real contact with the place itself and its people, just to obtain that sort of "plastic" version of reality that most tourists experience. So, of course, in Peru I did things like Lima with its gold museum, its Cathedral and the *Plaza de Armas*, and a well structured evening *peña (national dance-bistro);* then, on to a quick flight over the Nazca lines (bit pricey!); Arequipa and the monastery; off next day up to Lake Titicaca and the floating islands (photos of the Urus - they wanted to charge me!); popping over to Bolivia to see La Paz and the Tiahuanaco ruins; back via Cuzco and Macchu Picchu (got the usual postcards sent off!); back down to Lima, laden with llama rugs and dolls, and pan-pipes (for the relations and kids back home); and the next morning that horribly early flight to Iquitos (*Ick-quick-toss*, as my English friend pronounced it) for a night or two in a jungle, native "village" sort-of-thing, to round the experience off, thus making me the "expert" on Peru on returning home!
But I hadn't planned on this unforeseen and unscheduled stop at the foot of the eastern Andes' slopes, at a place called Tarapoto.

Se ha presentado un pequeño desperfecto en el avión, Señores y Señoras, que nos obliga pernoctar aquí en Tarapoto. (*A small technical hitch, Ladies & Gentlemen, that requires us to stay overnight here in Tarapoto).*

The captain's voice had crackled over the loudspeaker of the aircraft as we came in to an unexpected landing on the dusty tarmac of an airport some forty minutes short of Iquitos. What I would come to understand later, much later, was that his "apology" was his metaphorical language for:

My niece, who lives in Tarapoto, is fifteen today and the family are having her quinceañera, (Fifteenth, coming-of-age, birthday party) to which myself and the crew are invited.

And so I found myself stepping out on the baking soil of Tarapoto air-field to be soon surrounded by motor-tricycle rickshaw drivers offering to take me to the town or to see the "city" of Lamas nearby.

Lamas, más fresquita es y hay chunchus para ver. (The air is fresher and there are "Chunchus" - a derogatory term for Indians - to look at.)

So I had chosen to come to Lamas, along some thirty kilometres of dusty highway, passing the villages of Morales, with what appeared to be a shiny new concrete bridge, and later climbing up through Cacatachi and Rumisapa on the way. Proper conversation with the flamboyant driver had been impossible due to the shaking, dust clouds and open exhaust of the sprightly machine. Hanging on for dear life while being directly behind the driver, I thought I did hear him shout something about Rumisapa being called that because in the local Kechwa language it meant *'Lots of stones'* and certainly

the maize crop was being challenged numerically by the number of boulders in the field.

The driver finally deposited me in the *Plaza de Armas* (the main square) before a tired-looking, three-storey building called the *Hostal Dorado*. He grudgingly accepted, with little grace, my two tatty dollar bills, and turned to a large florid lady, standing next to me. After some lengthy haggling, the pair charged off to some other destination with a sack of what appeared to be pineapples balanced precariously on the handlebars of the motor-tricycle.

The *Hostal Dorado* (lit. *The Golden Hostel*) was no better or worse than other places of refuge that I had stayed in around the world. It had received its name from the peeling yellow-orange paint that was liberally daubed on its ceilings, walls, and shutters. That contrasted strangely with odd pieces of faded blue colonial furniture that "graced" the entrance area.

I was given a room that fared little better in design and content. The twin shutter-type doors met grudgingly for some of their length and were held together by a large iron hook and clasp. The en-suite facilities were literally that! The toilet in the corner of this upstairs room was discoloured and cracked. It had neither seat, nor a lid on the cistern. A piece of wet string hung forlornly from one corner of the tank and I perceived that by hauling fiercely on it, it caused the toilet to flush. A liberal supply of neat newspaper squares hung on a hook and the old cooking-oil tin below suggested that one should not flush such paper down the toilet. The sink carried a small section of carbolic washing soap and a thin cotton towel. The one tap dripped half-heartedly until the town supply of water went off from 6 p.m. until 6 a.m. I did not

have the courage to enquire if there might be a bath or a shower around.

Sitting on the edge of the bed that evening, I read the tattered copy of the *Guía Turística de Lamas (The Lamas Tourist Guide)* that I had found lying in a corner of the room. It boldly portrayed a picture of the Church across the square, although I had a feeling that the picture was not quite right and saw later that the *Guía* had been printed in the late sixties, before the last big earthquake in the eighties. It proudly stated that the city's full name was *El Triunfo de la Santa Cruz de los Motilones y Lamas* (*The Triumph of the Holy Cross over the Motilone and Lamas Tribes*) and had been established around 1650 by a group of Spaniards. I was to find out later that there was more to it than that, much more. The city appeared to be also nicknamed "*La ciudad de los tres pisos*" (*The city on three levels*) due to its topography, being built on three ridges of the hilltops, on the last range before two thousand miles or more of the Amazon basin stretched eastward to the Atlantic Ocean.

The fly-blown forty-watt bulb dangling on a wire from the ceiling did not encourage reading or other pursuits. So, after glancing at my watch and seeing it was eight-fifteen, I lowered myself carefully on to the wafer-thin mattress and the creaking bed-frame, and covered myself with the thin cotton sheet provided. Would tomorrow bring the answer to the riddle of the vision of the man with the shading hand? Sleep prevented me from reflecting more on these strange coincidences.

It was still quite dark in the room when I awoke, although I could see the outline of the dawn round the edges of the closed shutters.

I did what I had to do, though the string snapped in my hand, and I had to grope around in the cistern for the plug to release the water. I then realized that it must be six-o'clock at least, for the tap began protesting, as if it had indigestion. Sure enough, when I turned it fully on it burped and spat out a mouthful of brown, oily water and then slowly began to stabilize itself and run clear and tepid.

There were sounds of activity below in the square. On opening the shutters, I was confronted by a ragged, spotty youth perching precariously, at balcony level, on the roof of what appeared to be the local bus. He was, as I had seen before in Bolivia, in the plaza in Cochabamba, the *ayudante,* the driver's mate and conductor, and general whipping-boy. This one was on the roof of the bus, busy stowing away sacks of coffee and bales of cotton; together with gargantuan bunches of cooking bananas and three roosters tied up in bags with just their heads protruding.

He grinned at me and shouted: *Hola, gringo, ¡cara de papaya!* (*Hi there, gringo with a face like a pawpaw!*)

He was probably right. *Gringo* was a derogatory term for white-folks and my face had been burned and blistered in the ride up from Tarapoto. I smiled back, not knowing what to say, as my Spanish was fairly rudimentary, and I was not at the level of trading jokes or insults. I had yet to learn magic words like *Acaso…, 'stás loco ché…* or *no te pases, cholo,* (*Do you really think.., you're off your head, mate, watch it buddy*) so I retreated through the bedroom door and went down to look for breakfast.

There were pleasant cooking smells wafting through a door at the rear of the hall and I ventured out into a small patio where

there was a large person, poised on the edge of a tree stump, fanning an open fire on a platform of mud and brick.

Buenos días, I said… *Desayuno*? (*Good morning ... Breakfast?),* as a sort of question.

Buenos días, came the reply from the large rotund man. *Hay tacacho y cafecito,* (*There's tacacho and coffee).*

I had no idea what *tacacho* might be nor did it figure in my pocket Spanish dictionary when I checked later. It turned out to be boiled green plantains, mashed and mixed with raw eggs, fried onions and pieces of fatty bacon. Its consistency was that of Plaster-of-Paris and after several mouthfuls I was so glad that the proffered tin mug of sweetened black coffee was close to hand.

Oi Gordo…, (*Heh, Fatty...*) someone called from the hut at the back, *apuráte pues* (*get a move on then*).

Ya, ya, mi Negrita, he replied. (*O.K. then, Blackie dear*)

I was amazed how people used such terms of endearment that would have produced a fight or a law-suit in politically correct circles back home!

In halting Spanish I asked *El Gordo* about the place.

He shrugged, ¡*Qué se puede decir! no tiene porvenir sin carretera, la Marginal, y con todos esos indios y "shipicos", ¡estamos fregados! (What can one say! The place has no future now without the Marginal, the new main trunk road, passing through here, and with all those Indians and immigrant folks from the highlands, we're sunk!)*

Había tiempos cuando Lamas era el centro, todos los 'caminos de herradura' pasaban por aquí… (*There was a time when Lamas was at the hub of things, all the mule trails went through here*).

Y esos "filibotones" trabajaban nuestras chacras por sus traguitos y las "yanacitas" como empleadas en nuestras casas. (*And the Indians-who-wore-jackets-adorned-with-rows-of-buttons worked our fields for payment in aguardiente, fire-water, and the "little black girls" were maids in our houses*).

Todo está fregado… desde la Reforma en '68 y ahora con los narcos cojudos… (*Everything has gone to pieces… since the Agrarian Reform in 1968 and now with the f**** drug-traffickers*.)

El Gordo spat in the fire and trundled off into the hut at the back.

All this seemed a bit more complex than the story of the valiant Incas and the *Jungle Travelogues* that I had seen on several series on the TV back at home. Real life here appeared to be so different even from the stereotyped, potted history that was presented to us by the immaculate, languid young lady, the Peruvian guide at *Macchu-Picchu*, with her stories of Inca prowess, Spanish *hidalguismo* (*chivalry*), and modern *hai-life* in Lima and Cuzco, etc.

I paid for my lodging and meal with a crisp twenty dollar bill. The *Gordo* examined it closely, scratching its surface with a dirty thumb-nail. I was surprised to receive in turn, such a large pile of smelly, tatty Peruvian notes and a few battered coins as change. They were to be the first of many such

items, as I discovered that small denomination notes and coins were the usual currency, these notes gaining their own particular consistency and odour, having been stored in places twixt sweaty breasts, sweaty feet, greasy pockets, etc!

But, it was time to look for that man...

The unmade street, that led away from the square, was baked hard and of a sandy, yellowish consistency as I followed it and climbed the small slope up to the top of the town. I noticed there was no formal drainage conduit and in street, so the run-off had gouged a gully three feet deep or more. Not a street to wander down on a dark night! There was a pleasant early-morning smell about the place, which I guessed was the combination of wood smoke, belladonna trees lining the roadside and *paiche,* a strong-smelling, salted, smoked and dried fish from the Amazon that hung on poles in the store-fronts. The mist was rising slowly from the valley floor to my left, and there was still a little hint of chill in the air.

I discovered that the top end of the town was actually called *Quilloallpa* (literally, Y*ellow earth*) and I asked a passing schoolboy in my "best Spanish" where don Hildefonso's house might be. The boy grinned and pointed with his chin:

Arribita no más, meester...

I puzzled over the reply as he ran off down the slope – *A little way up, no more…*? It was to be much later that I understood that *no más* was something in local dialect that was tacked on to comments, just as I had heard in Scotland Fifers sticking '*eh'*, and Dundonians '*ken*', on the end of their sentences for no apparent reason either!

The girl I had seen yesterday was standing at a doorway about twenty metres further up the street. She must have been looking out for me and she beckoned me over. I noticed that she waved to me, palm down, the opposite to the way I would have done it. She told me later that *gringos* were insulting, for their way of waving people over was one only used to call animals!

She said nothing to me but went inside. I followed her through a mud-floor room and out into a back patio, a shady place with a huge mango tree, groaning under the weight of mangos, the size of small soccer balls. And there he was again… that man of my vision!

We shook hands silently and he motioned me to sit facing him on a sort of stool, while the girl brought him a fierce looking *machete* and two large coconuts. With a few deft strokes he sliced off the husks, cracked the tops open and offered me one to drink. The coconut milk was sweet and cool.

The girl retired to the kitchen, but the man did not speak as he sat there, slowly rocking and sipping his drink and observing me.

I looked at him more closely. Hildefonso, for I gathered later that that was his name, was maybe five feet tall, thin, wiry, with straight dark hair cut in a fringe, olive skinned with one or two hairs on his chin and chest. He wore only a pair of coarse woven cotton trousers which were secured by an intricate patterned woven belt. His hands and body had many scars and pock-marks and I noticed that one of his eyes was in need of a cataract operation. His fingernails were long, especially his left thumb which had begin to curl into a sort of hook shape. I was to discover later that many Kechwa Indians

grew that nail long in order to hold nails, hooks and the like. His feet, crossed before him, were stumpy and calloused, almost as if he had some sort of leather boots on them. I realized that he could have never worn, nor ever wear, shoes.

After we had eaten the soft inner layer of coconut, he stuck the point of the machete in the ground, where it swayed to and fro a minute, and then he spoke in a low, soft musical voice:

Ari, chashna wauquicillu, canga mushcucuynipi chayamushcanguiñá. Chaymanda tucuyta yachachishcayqui ñuapa pachamanda cay Cristopa shamuctin tiemponcama.

Of course, I had no idea what he was saying, so I just smiled sagely and grunted, but I notice the look of fear that flickered across the girl's face as she peered out through the kitchen window.

What did he say? I asked her.

Nodin' Señor, he's a leedel loco. 'e remembers de old time' an' w'en 'e was a brujo, an 'ealer. Now we are educated, we don' belief' all dat.

I had the feeling that what Hildefonso had said was not that and that what he had **actually** said was somehow important for me.
*Por favor, Señorita, just tell me **exactly** what he said…*

Well, he said: 'It is true, my little brother, I saw your arrival in my dream, so I will teach you everything from…', she hesitated and twisted her long pig-tails, '*long ago until Christ's coming-again-time'.*

Hildefonso continued to watch me closely and, although his eyes were old and runny, yet, they were as deep and mysterious as the pools I had seen in the caverns in the Yorkshire Dales.

Don Hildefonso, I said taking his hand and speaking slowly in Spanish, *how will you teach me these things?*

His hand tightened on mine and he smiled and said, *Uyaripuway, taqui-mushcuynipi…* (*Listen to me please, in my dream-song...*)

The sun was beginning to break through the tree shade in the patio and I could feel its warmth on my back, caressing me almost like my gentle mother's hand as I remembered it from long, long ago.

Don Hildefonso had produced a small bamboo-penny-whistle sort of thing with a small tambourine-like drum hanging below it. He began to play a haunting melody in a minor key and at the same time tap the little drum with the long finger-nails of his other hand.

Di-ding, di-ding, di-ding, di-ding,
Di-ding, di-ding, di-ding, di-ding,
Di-ding, di-ding, di-ding, di-ding,
Di-ding, di-ding, di-ding…

The drum went on and on… and then he began to chant in a high falsetto. I couldn't make out all the words, something like:

Tingunahuay mariri,
Tingunahuay mariri,
Tingunahuay mariri,
Tingunahuay mariri,

Apallahuayquisapami,
Apallahuayquisapami,
Tingunahuay mariri,
Tingunahuay mariri,
Tingunahuay……

I closed my eyes to listen more intently...

THE MIDDLE...

Then a funny thing happened...

Hildefonso and I were standing in a clearing in the jungle. He seemed a lot younger and I guess I too felt I was in my later twenties or early thirties. I noticed he still had that *Collins machete* that he had used on the coconut, though now it was cradled in the crook of his left arm.

The funnier thing was that I was able to understand most of what he was saying to me in Kechwa, and he, in turn, appeared to understand my English!

Where are we? I asked him in utter astonishment.

Nueva Zelandia, he replied.

It didn't look like New Zealand to me and I realized that this must be a local name for this particular clearing in this beautiful mountainous virgin forest all around us. As I gathered my senses and looked about me, I could see a group of young Kechwa men and women, some with axes, others with spade-like machetes, standing close by. They were all looking at me also in some astonishment! Most of them had obviously never seen a *gringo* before and certainly not one here with them deep in the *Montaña* (hilly jungle). Some began sharpening their axes and machetes on small sandstone rocks beside a little stream; others began again to playfully wrestle each other. All their children were smiling and laughing as they splashed about in the stream.

We're doing a 'cuchuna', Hildefonso informed me, *cutting down the forest to make a clearing for planting manioc*.

All of the underbrush had already been cut and piled into small mounds, not that there was much of it, as I realized that this virgin forest jungle had so many large trees that their canopy prevented small, scrub-like growth. This jungle was awe-inspiring, cathedral-like in many ways, quiet, shady, solemn and cool, with birds flitting to and fro high up the canopy and an occasional iridescent blue airmail-envelope butterfly passing lazily by, then a yellowy-green flash of a flock of parakeets calling a greeting as they also swooped past.

I noticed that the folks greeted Hildefonso by name, but when they approached me they merely muttered,

Winus deeas mmmm…. (*Good morning, mmmmm….)*, dribbling and spitting, a sure sign of Kechwa embarrassment.

For them, I had appeared as if off another planet, parachuted into their world where everybody and everything was part of the whole, all related by name and purpose in some complete and comprehensible cosmos. So, as being from another alien world, they had no name or category for me, at least no pronounceable one, save maybe *gringo*, that term of scorn used for foreigners. I did so feel that I wanted to be like them, and be liked by them, so, not wishing to be defeated, the only thing I could think of doing was to offer to help them.

Lend me an axe and I'll help cut down some of the trees…

This produced quite disparate reactions, from ribald laughter on the part of the younger folks, to questioning among some

of the older men as to whether this "thing" could do any sort of skilled labour! Eventually one of them grudgingly handed me his axe.

Go well away, mmmm…, over there by yourself. We don't want you dropping trees on our heads…

This produced more laughter and clicking noises from the men; grins, behind hands over the mouths, from the women and crude monkey-like movements from the children.

The men then set off up a slope and began to work in two's or three's, chopping away at the massive trunks of sixty foot *cedro, aguano, uchu-mullaca, capirona, mashonaste* and other varieties of beautiful virgin timber. Soon these huge denizens of the jungle began to fall, accompanied by whoops from the fellers, and were then pounced upon by the women who began to strip them of their smaller branches. The trunks would be left to dry for six weeks until the area was set ablaze and the manioc would then be planted in ground now fertilized by the ashes.

I found myself a nice tall thin tree with a bush-like head, its trunk oozing resin here and there. Running my finger along the blade, to test its sharpness, I then spat on my hands, as I had seen in the movies, and took an almighty swipe at the trunk. There was a satisfying *clunk* and the shock of the blow travelled back through the handle and into my arms. Here I was at last, a woodsman, in the jungles of Peru!

In that same moment, hundreds of red, biting ants dislodged from their nest in the tree above, fell on me and started biting my head, neck and arms. The pain was intense. My face was puffing up like a balloon, as I yelled out in agony, vainly

slapping away at hands, face and body. Recalling the small stream I had seen at the foot of the clearing, I ran full tilt for it, bruising my shins in the process, and plunged as much of me as I could in its crystal waters. The Kechwa had all stopped and run down the slope after me, puzzled at what was taking place. I eventually struggled out of the water, a soggy, sorry, itchy, painful mess.

They looked at me in puzzlement, and then… fell about laughing! Tears poured down their faces, not of sorrow, but in sheer delight! Through my pain and shame I heard their comments when they, at last, were able to speak…

¡Qué bruto! ¡Qué sonso! ¡Iden llullushina! ¡Wañuchiwanchi, de veras! ¡Ashwan wayra-umaca makisapamanta! (*What an idiot! How stupid can you get! Just like a baby! Right, he'll kill us all! He's more air-headed than a spider-monkey!)*

¡Ari, cumpa, paypish puricú'cun quiquinllami! (You're right, compadre, and he also walks just like one too!), added another. That produced more gales of laughter, mimicking and falling about.

I stood there, sore, sorry for myself, not knowing what to do or say…

Then one called Rufino Tuanama, older and more heavily built than the others, spoke out,

He'll die here by himself and if he does, the authorities will come and blame us. We'd better take him home to Chumbakiwi; he can stay with us until we find out more about him. We'll call him 'Makisapa' (Spider-monkey)…. Pati iden

tunchishina mantequerollapish causac carca…(*Perhaps he used to be a ghost/spirit or even a mantequero – a ghoul that kills people for their fat*).

Some looked a little frightened at the thought.

Rufino turned back to me, *Sham' upiyayra, chaymanda wasinisapaman rinayqui tian…* (*Come on then, drink up now, and then you must go to our house.)*

His wife, Natividad, Nati for short, handed me a hollowed half of a gourd filled with a yellow, thickish liquid. The surface was laced with small ants and a few little dead flies. She laughed, a high-pitched tinkling laugh, as she saw me recoil in disgust and she took the '*pate'* and blew carefully across the surface of the liquid until all the ants and flies were at the other end.

Ama manchacuychu, turicillu, upiyayra mishqui sara-aswata…. (*Don't be scared, little brother, drink up this sweet maize-beer…*)

I sipped carefully, with one eye looking down my nose at the flies and ants at the far end! But the drink itself was refreshing, cool and pleasing.

Thanks, I said.

Maymana, (*Don't mention it*), she replied, and wiped the bowl out with the bottom of her petticoat.

Then the men went back to work and I limited myself with lopping off branches, along with the women and children, until the setting sun was level with the tops of the trees.

It was then that I suddenly realized that my wedding ring was no longer on my finger. I remembered it was still there after I had clambered out of the stream and begun lopping branches. I began searching feverishly around the area where I had been working. It must have slipped off when I was resting and scratching there. Hildefonso noticed my disconcerted action and came over.

What's up? He enquired.

I've lost my wedding ring somewhere here, still poking around in the underbrush.

It's there on that stump... look!

There it was glinting in the last rays of the sun.

However did you know it was over there? I asked in astonishment and I didn't remember being as far over as that.

Orashpaynipica, Tata Dios cawachiwashcanmi. (In my prayer, Father God made me see it), he replied matter-of-factly.

I didn't know how to reply to that... I went over to the stump and placed the ring on my finger again.

Gracias, wauki, (Thanks, brother), I muttered.

Mana ni imachu... (It's nothing...) Hildefonso replied.

It was time to return through the jungle to their home in Chumbakiwi. The men went first in single file, axes over their shoulders, *machetes* in the crook of the arms or stuck

down their belts at their backs. I was motioned to follow after them and the women brought up the rear. I was amazed at the women's agility in balancing pots and machetes on top of their heads, cradling babies on their backs or in their arms, as they jumped down gulleys, climbed muddy slopes and squeezed between giant roots of trees, without ever seeming to break step. Rufino's wife, Nati, appeared to be the oldest. She was thin, wrinkled, small in stature but graceful in her own way, although she was probably just in her late forties. She wore only a deep-purple hand dyed waist petticoat hitched up over one shoulder, several brightly coloured ribbons in her hair, and a twisted black bracelet round one wrist, to ward off evil spirits.

Are you blind? she had asked quizzically, staring at my eyes as we had started to move off.

No, of course not, why do you ask?

Bueno, she laughed, *the only things I have seen with blue eyes are dogs and mules that have gone blind!*

She continued, *Can you see that weesh-winchu in the top of that tree over there?* pointing with her chin. I had 20/20 vision and could see the tree and the branches perfectly well, but could see no bird at all.

Can't see it, I admitted.

She laughed her tinkling laugh again…

Ay, madre mía, what use will you be to us, turi makisapa (brother –feminine form- "spider-monkey"), you don't know anything, and you can't see anything! She went on; *Can you*

tell the different trees by their smell like the Asnak muena, canela muena, kiwi muena, uchu muena? (Smelly mahogany, cinnamon mahogany, twisted-grain mahogany, chilli tasting mahogany?)

I shook my head…

Then how will you know which to cut down for firewood, for charcoal, for fishing spears, for furniture, for what?

She had set off down the trail telling the other women what a silly boy this was; why, he didn't even know that the tree he had attempted to cut down was a *Tangarana,* the only tree that one never bothered with in a *cuchuna.* This silly boy didn't even know that when they set fire to the clearing and its fallen sun-dried timber, the resin in the *Tangarana* would cause it to burn like a candle, and the ants who were its "mother" and had come out and attacked me for attacking their "son", they too would be consumed by the fire!

Ah, ta'shay, what a silly boy! she kept repeating, and all the women laughed again and kept on laughing and sniggering all the way home!

We came to a river now in the semi-darkness, flowing from right to left. This is the *Sisa mayu – the Flower river,* I was told.

We were evidently going to wade or swim across and it was very difficult to judge how deep it was although the water itself ran clear, as its source was in the heights of the Andes some fifty miles up-stream.

Everyone stripped off and began washing themselves with home-made soap that several of the women had carried in little gourd pots. Then, with their clothes perched on their heads and all their other gear likewise, everyone set off to wade across the river which turned out to be about waist to chest deep. I could not balance my clothes on my head, so I held them high in one hand and attempted to balance with the other as I felt my way over the rocky bottom.

The inevitable happened…!

I stumbled and went under, clothes and all! An angular Kechwa man caught me and yanked me up on my feet as the current pushed me downstream.

I'm Teoberto Amasifuen, he said, laughing all the while. *That was my chacra we were preparing… I live back there. Come and see me sometime and I'll tell you some stories.*

As he half hauled me, guided me, to the other bank, he began one of his many stories that he was evidently famous for:

They say, a gringuito once fell over in this river, lower down, and was eventually fetched out half-drowned a hundred yards further down-stream. The people took him on a stretcher to Agua Blanca and laid him out before the altar in the church. People came from all around to see a dead gringuito. Fascinating thing! Some Christians prayed there all night. Next morning, guess what, the gringuito got up and walked out of the templo (church-building), by himself! The people were astonished. Some said, perhaps he is an evangelista (an Evangelical), others said, no, he is a pishtacu (a ghoul), and a shishacu (a highlander) who was there said that it was Santo Tomás (Saint Thomas), for he had seen that saint's footsteps

in the rocks just above his village up by Mito near Chachapoyas. That's how it was…

After reaching the other bank, we continued for an hour or so more by starlight, and the odd glow-worm, until we saw the faint light of an *alcusa* (small home-made oil lamp) in Chumbakiwi.

Caya cama, pacarincama cachun... (*Until tomorrow, until the dawn then...*) as they turned off to their respective houses.

Rufino's house was one of the few that had tamped-earth walls, windowless, but with a big double-leaved door and a hole in the rear wall into a kitchen area covered by an overhanging thatched roof. It was difficult to see in the dark how many people were living and sleeping there in the big room. Rufino motioned me to a corner where there were four bamboo posts in the earthen floor and with a sort of woven bamboo frame on top, about a metre off the floor.

You can sleep there; tomorrow we will talk, Rufino said, as he went off.

Caya cama cachun…(*Until tomorrow then…)*

Caya cama, wau', (Until tomorrow, bro'), I replied sleepily.

I was dog tired, still damp from the river, my ankles were swollen and the odd ant bite was beginning to suppurate on my arms and face. I ached all over yet the rough wooden structure seemed like an advert for '*Slumberland Mattresses as seen on TV'*. It had been a funny day, I thought. I couldn't even remember how it had all begun! With my head cradled on my fore-arm, as a pillow, I was soon fast asleep.

I became conscious of a set of unusual noises when I awoke. The first was that of raindrops and a swishing sound, then a rumble of thunder. Then there was a violent squealing noise somewhere outside and the sound of a cock crowing, or was it a hen after laying? I opened one sticky eye and saw a little girl of about five or six scattering drops of water all over the earth floor and then brushing up corn husks, dust and dirt, in a highly skilled manner, with a bunch of what appeared to be evergreen rushes tied together. When she saw me peering, she stood on one leg, the other foot on her knee, with her earthen water-pot on her head and stared and stared.

Rufino entered, *Sucaman tamiyanayan, wau'…* (*It's wanting to rain hard, brother*).

As far as I could see it was raining, but then I heard the sound across the forest like an approaching express train. I could not believe that rain could fall as hard as it began to do. Visibility dropped to a few feet, it was impossible to hear anyone, and within seconds the ground around the houses was a lake; people, pigs, chicken and ducks all crowded into the room to escape the deluge. Pots, firewood, planks, all started floating off and great bolts of lightning crackled and snapped around the clearing.

Here comes the llocllada (the flood), Rufino yelled in my ear.

The creek that ran past the back of the clearing in a gorge some thirty feet deep, suddenly filled to the brim with a thick chocolate-brown mixture of water, soil, and vegetation. Great trees, an odd chicken house, even a cow, all went sailing past at twenty to thirty miles an hour. We sat huddled together in the room for warmth for the next two hours as some ten inches of rainfall dowsed us from top to toe. Through the

doorway we vaguely saw Amado's house, a ramshackle affair at the best of times, lean drunkenly on its four posts and settle, like a large dame on her bottom, into an a odd wedge shape, while from somewhere upstream we heard the roar of a mudslide and the snapping of great trees as a hillside plunged into the valley below.

As suddenly as the rain-storm had started, the rain abated and through wreath-trails of rising mist, the sun appeared like a great golden ball.

Vam' kawasunchi, (*let's go and take a look*).

I followed nervously as Rufino splashed through the mud and debris all around. We went across to see Amado's place. He was his usual happy self with his sixteen year old wife and two children already rescuing bits and pieces from the collapsed end of the house and starting a fire to dry themselves and their meagre possessions out at the other end.

¿Ñachu? Rufino spoke. (*Okay, now?)*

Ñapish, mashu... (Yep, Okay, brother-in-law), replied Amado, with a grin... *Rosita says it's time to modernise the house anyway!*

We all laughed.

Rufino and I went on up the trail to see where the mud-slide was and if it had affected the *platanal,* the clearing where the bananas were growing. The trail was quite narrow and soon I was soaking wet with the drops off the leaves and bushes. Rufino only had underpants on, whereas I was fully dressed. He turned and laughed when he saw me.

You don't understand about the shullma! (raindrops on bushes). It's a great way of getting washed, but you need to take your clothes off! We often run though the undergrowth just to do that. Aye, Makisapa, you have so much to learn.

The mud-slide was just beyond the *platanal* and I was amazed at how quickly it was solidifying and becoming a fixture in the landscape. Broken trees stuck out of it like toothpicks. It had blocked the stream's path but, as Rufino said, water was cleverer than earth and it had found a new way around this obstacle, although it had taken with it several of the banana plants in doing so.

Yacu-mama (Water-mother) *and Pacha-mama* (Earth-mother) *will never agree, but yacu-mama is always the stronger and we love her, for she provides sweet water (mishki-yacu) for us and fish. We fear her too, so we do not grudge her the odd banana today for she might have eaten all our houses as well!*

Rufino cut off a huge bunch of cooking bananas and a smaller bunch of eating bananas, then with a deft movement he tied them to his *pretina* (a six-inch wide, woven cotton belt about two metres long for carrying loads), and swung them up on his back, supporting the weight on his forehead and neck.

On the way back, Rufino told me a story about all the *yacu:*

We use the yacu as signposts on the trails, for each yacu is different. We can look at her and taste her and we know where we are. For example, Yanayacu is a stream that has dark waters on the way to Santa Marta; Yuraqyacu is a stream with many white-water falls on the way to San Pablo; Cachiyacu is just round the back here and its water is salty; Pucayacu runs through clay soil; Armanayacu is a good

stream to bathe in with its deep sunny pools and smooth rocks to sit on; Mishquiyacu, sweet-water, is the one that runs by here although we call it Chumbakiwi because it turns and twists and is very narrow just like "a twisted-belt" that has fallen on the ground. Then there's Sic-sic yacu, and Huingoyacu further up the valley where the sic-sic lianas grow that are holding your bed together and the place where we get the gourds we use for bowls!

He laughed again, *So much to learn, Makisapa, to know us properly! Now, let's eat a caimitu fruit as they are very refreshing, a bit like sweet lemon.*

Rufino picked one off a bush by the side of the trail, split it in two with his thumb and scooped out the pink flesh. I reached for one and attempted to do the same operation with my thumb. It split quite nicely and I put the half up to my mouth to suck out the flesh.

Mana, mana…! (*No, No...!)* shouted Rufino.

But it was too late! I found that my lips had been glued together by the resin from the husk! Rufino dashed around and found a lemon tree close by and squirted lemon juice over my lips and mouth. Gradually they became unstuck.

Alao, waukicito, what are we going to do about you? We use the caimitu resin for glazing pots in the fire, not for shutting people up!

Rufino went on down the trail half-laughing and half muttering to himself until we arrived back at the clearing.

That evening after we had eaten our boiled plantains and beans, and had a cup of coffee sweetened with *chancaca (coarse cane-sugar),* Rufino began to tell us all one of his stories:

A long time ago, they say, we lived happily deep in the jungle. We had our own tribal names and we were all different. There were the Tuanamas, Amasiguines, Fasabis, Pashonasis, Yuris, Omaguas, Satalayas, Tapullimas, Shupingahuas, Sangamas and many, many more. We all had our own languages, our own territory, and we all hunted and fished when we needed food. They say we lost our languages and the Jesuits taught us Kechwa, long ago. The jungle was always our mother and she looked after us and provided us with all kinds of jungle meat. There was wild pig, wild cow, deer, monkeys, just like Makisapa here….

Everybody fell about laughing for a little.

And there were other animals too like carachupa (armadillo), majás, sacha vaca (tapir), tigrillu, puma, jaguar and many others…And we could speak to the animals and call them, just as some hunters like Marcelino and Lucho Chumpita can still do.

These two wrinkled old men grinned toothlessly and made whistling noises like the *shansho* bird and a *majás* looking for its mate.

Lucho spoke in a quiet quavering voice,

Marcelino and I still hunt with a pucuna (a blowpipe) so we have to be able to call the animals and birds close to us as the pucuna's range is a lot less than a shotgun. But nobody wants

to dietar (fast) now and abstain from salt, chilli and sex for three weeks before we go, so the animals can't smell us.
Nobody wants to walk for three weeks deep into the forest to montear (hunt); then skin, smoke and dry off all the sacha aicha (wild game) and then maybe have to carry 50 kilos of meat on our backs for days...

Marcelino interrupted,

It's true, the animals have all gone from close to here now, and it's difficult to get curare poison now for the darts. We used to go up Ampi Urcu (the Curare Mountain) and there was lots of ampi liana (curare vines) about but it's practically all gone now and they say that the shishacus are coming to make chacras (plantations) up there soon.

There were murmurs of disapproval round the room, and someone called out, *¡Tapiachish', ñacadu puro! (We should bewitch them and kill them off!),*

Who could do that now? Lucho Manteca asked. *We have lost all our strong brujos (shamans); just a few vegetalistas (herbalist shamans) about now who can heal people, although they say that Pedro Satalaya in the Banda of Pishwayo still has lots of power. He promised to kill that evangelical preacher, don Victor Cenepillu, who came to Sisa last year.*

Man' valek, it didn't work out! Didn't you hear? the Buchisapillu (lit. Big Belly) grunted. *They say don Pedro went and told don Victor that he was going to bewitch him and he'd be dead by the morning, but don Victor and his friend El micio-nero (a pun on 'missionary' meaning 'the tight-fisted person'), went and prayed all night.*

In the morning Don Pedro was singeing a pig he'd killed to celebrate the death of the evangelista and his ramadón (thatched sloping-roof kitchen) caught fire and his whole house burned down, just four horcones (rough-hewn corner posts) left! Worse still, don Victor and the micio-nero came and helped him build a new house!

The Petromax paraffin pressure lamp was gradually losing its pressure and its light was growing dimmer by the minute. Bodies were gradually creeping off into the dark or becoming shapeless masses on the woven palm mats round the periphery of the speakers.

Chasna causac canisapa... (That's the way we used to live…), concluded Rufino.

De veras, chashnallán. (That's the way it was), muttered some of the old folks.

I didn't remember anything more until I felt something tickling my face as I awoke on my back on the palm-mat. I brushed it away and saw in the early dawn light it was a tarantula! I reached out to wallop it with a stray shoe, but it jumped adroitly and scrambled up the wall into the thatch. It was no monster one in size, for I was to meet the big-daddy of them all on the trail next day as I went on horse-back to Agua Blanca. Why I had to do that, I don't recall.

My horse was called *Brashico* (*the Brazilian*), perhaps of his colour, for the Kechwa liked to make fun of Brazilians who sometimes came as *cambalacheros,* folks who exchanged western goods for chickens and colourful wild birds. One such had visited the community a couple of days earlier and had asked who this *gringo* was among them.

That's no gringo, that's Makisapa, he is one of us, and we're looking after him, Rufino had replied.

I had felt honoured but humbled, for I knew I could really never be one of them; acculturation could only take one so far.

Brashico had all the full list of defaults that a montaña horse could have! In fact he was the kind of horse that only an unqualified *gringo* would have purchased! *Brashico* was slow, had flat feet, making him slip and slither on the many downward muddy slopes; an *haba* – growth in his mouth - that prevented him from grazing properly, thus making him thin and lethargic; he was a *pajarero* – a horse that would jump and rear at any unknown object - ; and a *cutiysapa* one that possessed a propensity to wander off to his former owner in Santa Marta, some three hours' walk away!

That morning, having chased *Brashico* round and round the large enclosure, I eventually stopped him by throwing a halter rope across his neck. Then, muttering soothing words (or imprecations!), I looped the rope into a combined bit, halter and reins, as someone had evidently taught me.

Rufino explained: *The Agua Blanca trail starts a kilometre further down the valley by the big, black rock called Cachi Warmi (Salt Woman). They say a woman who caused her husband lots of grief was struck by lightning there, long ago, and turned into a salty rock. When you get on that trail you'll have to cross the Pao stream seven times before you reach the village.*

No es lejos, he added, being a kindly local euphemism, *'it's not far',* for a journey of six hours or more. He grunted as he pulled the girth of the bamboo and deerskin saddle tight.
Este bandido (this rogue) likes to stick his belly out so that when you are mounted the saddle gets loose and he'll jerk you off. Check it when you get to the Cachi Warmi.

I had set off in the early morning mist at a walking pace, *Brashico* pausing now and then to rip some leaves off a tree and wanting to forage deeper into the brush, thus entangling me in the creepers, many of which had wicked thorns. I remembered to tighten *Brashico*'s girth at Cachi Warmi and on tasting the rock found it quite salty.

By mid-morning we had splashed across the Pao five times. On approaching the sixth crossing at a slow trot, *Brashico* suddenly braked and jumped sideways. I shot over his head and landed in the undergrowth. What appeared to be a big black cat was crossing our path up ahead. It was, however, a monster tarantula, minding its own business. *Brashico* was evidently aware of it and knew that that size could actually kill him. Retrieving my hat and my dignity I calmed him down and walked him on down to the stream's edge. The crossing looked straightforward enough, pebbled bottom on the entrance and a sandy bottom on the far side, the stream only being about twenty to thirty metres wide and knee deep for the horse. All went well until we approached the further bank. *Brashico* neighed in terror as he began to sink into what was turning out to be a quicksand! Slowly his legs were completely immersed in the bubbling silver sand until his belly rested on the bottom with just his neck and head now above water. What to do? I was scared to step into the water for fear of sinking myself, so eventually I stood upright on the saddle and launched myself over his head at the bank,

clutching the reins in one hand. As I landed in the water by the bank, two horsemen appeared above me.

Idiota de gringo (Stupid gringo), one shouted.

Your horse is a gonner, laughed the other.

Porfa' (Please) help me to pull him out, I begged.

With the reins tied to the pommel of one of their horses and us making encouraging noises, *Brashico* struggled and heaved and managed to make it out of the sand and up the bank, where he stood trembling and wild-eyed.

Idiota de gringo, don't you know a chupadero (quick-sand) when you see one? Didn't you see the bubbling coming out of the sand? growled the taller of the men.

Are you blind, sonso de gringuito (mindless gringo) didn't you see the trail went down-river to a crossing? Loco de remate (worthless madman), you'll have to walk your beast to Agua Blanca, though he'll probably die on the way of susto (fright), added the other.

With these words of "encouragement", they tapped the hind quarters of their *paso-finos* (thoroughbreds) and wheeled away, charging down-stream to the proper crossing.

Brashico and I plodded slowly on towards Agua Blanca, feeling more and more like *Don Quijote and Roscinante* by the minute -yet another failed, romantic venture!

As we finally approached the seventh crossing of the Pao, the trail led out into an open clearing with large pools of

rainwater and a few low trees. *Brashico* snorted and went into reverse!

C'mon, c'mon, what's the problem now? I asked him in exasperation, as I struggled to halt him from bolting. I could see no reason for this sudden new fear.

Then I saw it. It was a *Loro Machacuy!*

This green and gold snake, thin as a pencil, a *fer de lance*, as some knew it, was coiled like a spring at head height some twenty yards away at the side of the trail. It would have launched itself and struck as I walked past all unknowing and unaware. *Brashico* had Indian's eyes! As he and I backed away, the snake jumped off the branch and into the long pool of rain water and in seconds was swimming torpedo-like towards us. It was time to run. We retreated down the trail and waited some thirty minutes before cautiously approaching the area again. I watched *Brashico*'s reaction and he seemed quite assured that the snake had gone. What the Kechwa told me was right; it was the small, skinny snakes that were the most dangerous.

We crossed Pao for the last time in the declining rays of the sun and walked up the steep embankment to the village. Don Victoriano, the village elder, greeted us:

Welcome, everything's ready... Ay, don Makisapa, we knew you were coming, for we dreamt about it last night, so we had a place for you and someone will rub your horse down with a hot liniment and he'll be fine for tomorrow. Come in and eat, you must be hungry.

That evening, after a plate of soup, that had included a lamb's eye staring at me, and boiled manioc, I asked don Victoriano about this business of dreaming.

Oh, yes, we do it all the time. When we sleep our spirit goes walk-about so we can go and sit by another's fire or speak to the spirits of the animals in the jungle. That is why you must never waken us suddenly because it might not give our spirit time to return and we would amanecer muerto, (wake up dead).

He looked at me intently. *You remember Teoberto whose chacra you helped in? Well he was very, very ill and one night Jesus came to him in a dream and said: Why have you been going to that brujo (shaman) in Santa Rosa for a cure? You need to go and see the evangelistas (Christians). And Teoberto-in-his-dreaming saw a small mud-hut church in the Banda de Pishhuayo. So when he awoke he said to his family, 'My family, make a stretcher and carry me to San José de Sisa'. When they got him there they put him down at the door of the templo and the evangelistas prayed for him all night and Jesus came and touched Teoberto. He got up, thanked God, and walked all the way back home, the next day.*

Así es.... (That's so...) added Victoriano's wife Primitiva as she cleared the plates away. *Tell Makisapa about Marcelino Tapullima from Huapinalla.*

Don Victoriano began: *You know that Marcelino who lives way up there in Huapinalla, well, one night Jesus came to him and said he was going to whip him for all the bad things he had done and for all the people he had bewitched, killed and made sick. He told Marcelino to get out of his bed and out of his house and go right away and say sorry to God and ask*

Tat' Vishu how he could become a Christian. He jumped out of bed in terror, and you know, don Marcelino was so scared, he did what no-one would do, walked two hours through the monte (forest) under a full moon with all pishatcus (ghouls) and demonios (demons) around at that time of the moon and he saw Tat' Vishu and they prayed and Marcelino became a changed man.

Don Victoriano leaned over and took my hand in his. *Wauki Makisapa, we knew that you will come here again one day, for we have seen you leave your home, far, far away and we have seen a big iron canoe with a fire in it and smoke, carrying you and a beautiful woman with a baby... Así es tu destino (That is your destiny).*

Chashnallán mushcuycunamanta (That's the way it is with dreams)

I didn't say anything, what was there to say?

I did wonder however where I was going to sleep that night for this house just had one small room. Don Victoriano, his wife Primitiva, his six children, all boys, called, Primero, Segundo, Alfonso, Alberto, Alonso and Sixto, all slept on woven palm mats in one corner, on the floor, with their several hens and chickens perching on the table. The family provided me with a *batán* for a bed, a large hollowed out wooden board affair used for kneading dough. As I lay on my back and wondered why it seemed that *gringos'* bones were so near the surface of their bodies, I could see a mass of spiders moving about in their webs in the bamboo ceiling above my head. At least they weren't tarantula, I thought. It didn't occur to me that they might have included the deadly, small Black Widow spider!

Suddenly, in my sleep, I felt several knives stabbing me in the chest. I awoke to find a cock that had been asleep on the table, standing on me and crowing loudly. It was four a.m., the hour of the first cock-crow.
After breakfast of toasted plantains and coffee, I set out on foot for Chumbakiwi leaving *Brashico* to recover. I thanked don Victoriano and his wife for their hospitality while Segundo, their son, volunteered to accompany me. I guessed Segundo to be about twelve. He was cross-eyed, thin and wiry and had a permanent smile. I noticed that he had many small scars on his bare arms and legs. After an hour or so *bien-andado* ('well-walked', a way of measuring distance on a trail) we came to a grove of wild tangerine trees and Segundo suggested we stop and pick some. The trees were quite low and bushy but had fearsome spines. I reached up to pick a nice ripe fruit and received what, at the time, seemed to me to be a massive electric shock and a searing pain down through my arm. The shock threw me on my back and my heart raced and thumped as if to burst out of my body. Segundo leapt across to me, grabbed my thumb, pulled out something with his fingers and then with his *balishu* (*spade-shaped machete)* made an incision in it and sucked out the blood and poison, spitting it out on the dusty ground.

Wayranga…(a type of hornet), he exclaimed, all the while smiling, but now with red lips!

Idiota… ¡has de ver, antes de coger! (Idiot, you ought to look before you pick!)

I looked up at the branch and saw beside the luscious fruit a hornet's nest of sorts. But this was no ordinary hornet. Its sting was so powerful that it could kill a horse and give a

human severe shock and paralysis if the poisonous barb were allowed to continue its work in one's body.

Would I ever learn, I thought?

We continued slowly on our journey, pausing in each crossing of the Pao to bathe my throbbing, swollen hand in its cool, clear waters.

As we crossed the Pao for the last time I watched a procession of *curu-winsi* ants, each carrying a postage stamp of cut leaf, like a procession with banners, off towards their massive earth home. How was it that they could make their way safely around this place called the *Montaña*, yet I could not? I was so engrossed in the sight that I failed to notice a much larger type of ant crawling over my tatty baseball boot. It was, as I found out later, an *izula*, roughly four centimetres long and shiny deep-purple in colour. Again my first knowledge of its presence was a sharp, searing pain in my right ankle. The *izula* had bitten me through the canvas of my boot and my cotton sock, so perhaps these two flimsy barriers had prevent me from receiving the full dose of venom. Again I collapsed on the ground, while Segundo went on smiling, observing me, and scratching his calf with the heel of his other foot.

Idiota…. Ñausa-ñausa puricu'cungui (*Idiot, you are walking like a blind man!)* was the twelve-year olds only comment on my predicament.

When we eventually reached don Rufino's house in Chumbakiwi and gathered round to drink some *chapo de maduro* (*hand-mashed ripe banana in water*), Segundo, of course, had to recount the tale of my woes! The events were received by all with the customary gales of laughter and crude

imitations of my antics after being stung and bitten, and much slapping of each other on the back; while I crawled off into a corner and lay down to nurse my pains.

The next morning I still had a headache, a swollen ankle and a stiff hand as we all discussed the day's tasks. I also discovered an itchy rash round my stomach and groin due to walking in the open grass clearings where *isangues* (*chiggers*) loved to live. It was decided that we should all go fishing in the *Pishwayo*. Men, women and children would all go. It was obviously going to be a major event and the river was about three hours' walk away. Babies were slung on backs in shawls, woven *tamshi* (thin split cane) baskets and pots were balanced on women and children's heads and several men carried large baskets of a root-like substance on tumplines round their foreheads. The usual machetes and *balishus* were held in the crooks of arms or stuck through the back of their *chumbis (woven cloth belts),* giving the impression of having metallic tails! Everyone set off walking in single file, silently, purposefully, with Rufino leading. Around eleven a.m. we arrived at a portion of the river that contained several large pools interspersed with gentle rapids. The women set up camp and soon had a fire going and the *inguiri (plantains)* in earthenware pots on the fire to boil. The men used their sleeping mats to make a barrier across the river about a hundred metres below where we were and then proceeded upriver to the top end of the first big pool.

Yanaparipuway (Help me, please), Rufino called out to me, signalling that he needed a hand and threw me a metre length of liana from one of the baskets. I wondered what to do with it until I saw the others beating their liana on the rocks in the rapids until its white milky sap flowed out into the stream. The stain spread though the pool below and suddenly fish

began to appear on the surface gasping as it were for breath. The women and younger children plunged in and began scooping them up into baskets. In the shallow rapids below, other women and children were lifting stones, looking for fresh-water crabs and *carachama*, a small stickle-back sort of fish with a big suction-type mouth. They all were placed in the earthenware pots and put on the fire to cook.

All was going well when suddenly, a boy of ten appeared to go into a fit, grasping his throat and flailing about in the shallows. I shouted to the person nearest to him, but don Benigno, who was quite infirm himself, having lost an arm in an explosion using dynamite to catch fish in the river Mayo, appeared unable to help the boy. Gradually others joined him, but the boy now appeared to have become lifeless. Had he been poisoned, I thought? But no, it was another sort of tragic occurrence that life in the *montaña* was fraught with. Francisco had been fishing for *bujurki*, a small spiny type of fish about three inches long. He had no basket and so he carried them between his teeth while he used both hands to 'guddle' at the bank-side. In the fever of catching another, one of the ones he was holding slipped down his gullet and began to choke him. There was no way to pull it out by the tail as its spines prevented any reverse movement and slowly he choked to death in his father's arms.

The whole atmosphere of *fiesta* changed to that of a *velorio (a wake).*

All the women began wailing and in their dirge recounted the birth, life and death of Francisco who had been suddenly taken from them. The men sat around, silent throughout the evening, and as the full moon came up over the river, they began to dig a shallow grave near the spot where the boy had

died. There was no carpenter handy to make a crude wooden coffin for the lad. His body was washed by the family and wrapped in some cloths that the women had for carrying their babies. Francisco was laid in the grave and beside him was placed a gourd of *chicha (maize-beer)* and some *mazorcas* (corn-on-the-cob) for his journey to *Anac pacha (The land above).* His younger brother Mauro placed his wooden spinning-top there, so that Francisco would have something to play with. The grave was carefully filled in and some thorns were placed on the mound of earth and a cactus plant at its head. The thorns were not only to protect the grave from being grubbed up by wild boars, or the like, but to stop the lad's rising as a *tunchi (wandering spirit*) and forever frightening the community. His spirit would feel the thorns above and think it was fire-rain judgement from heaven. The cactus, for its slow growth, would be a reminder of eternal life.

As I sat by the river bank, with the sound of the water over stones and the *tok-tok-tok* of a *carpintero (wood-pecker)* in the forest, I asked Francisco's parents what they felt about what had happened. They were quiet for a long time; then they talked of the *pesca (fishing)*, and the way the sun lighted the hill-tops of *Ampi Urcu* and *Wamanwasi (Eagle Mountain)* and what the woodpecker far away was saying with his *tok-tok-tok* on some hollow tree. No-one ever blurted out their true feelings for the first five minutes of a conversation. Looking straight ahead and dribbling saliva, as the Kechwa did when they were under strain, and spitting with emotion, his father said in a low voice in poor Spanish, *nacidu para morir no más, (he was born just to die)* and then his mother sobbed in Kechwa – *he has gone as a little angel to Heaven to intercede for us so that bad luck will not follow us.*

I had begun to realize that life here was neither rosy nor idyllic, like some latter-day garden of Eden, although it could be incredibly, speechlessly beautiful and arresting. This suspicion was to be reinforced later the next day when I crossed the *Chumbakiwi* creek to visit the Fasabi household. I found Creshu and Marcelo in the house alone. Marcelo was picking ticks off his two mangy skeleton-like dogs, which would not have even made it to the kennels of a respectable RSPCA care home! Yet Marcelo's dogs were renowned in the Sisa valley for their ability to trek wild animals and he was immensely proud of their ability and their tenacious viciousness for all who would seek to lay a hand on their master. I eyed them with caution.

Sham' yaycúm, (Come on in). Marcelo greeted me and kicked the dogs off into a corner. I entered and wondered at what was wrong with his brother Creshu. The other day at the *cuchuna*, he had seemed bright, strong and cheerful; today he sat crumpled in a corner holding what appeared to be the remains of a pair of tatty, stained trousers.

I sat facing him in silence for about five minutes; one did not rush into conversation, before he spoke quietly,

My only son went off to work up the river Huallaga on an hacienda, but he found out that the hacienda was long gone and the place was overrun by narcos (people in the cocaine business). They offered him work clearing the forest to plant coca bushes and he did that for two years… They always promised him money, but all he got was some rice, beans, bananas and trago (cane alcohol). They always said they would pay, but they never did.

So, my son said, Ñami cutimuynayani, (I want to go home now…).

The narcos said, Nadies salen vivos.. (No-one leaves here alive…).

My son said, Man' importanchu, rishará (Doesn't matter, I'm off anyway).

Creshu paused... *The narcos shot him in the stomach and threw him in the river. His bloated body was washed up twenty miles downstream at Tingo de Sapo, and my compadre, Eleazar Cardenas, recognised his body lying there on a sandbar….They buried him there and my cumpa Eleazar sent me his pantalones (trousers)…*

Creshu turned the torn trousers over and over in his hands and his eyes were wet with tears.

Marcelo spat out the door in disgust. *They say the narcos are all around now. They need virgin forest to grow the bushes. They get four crops a year from the leaves, more than we could ever make from coffee, rice or bananas. But the coca bushes kill the soil and it takes fifteen years or more before you could ever plant anything again…*

Creshu sniffed and added, *Our llactamasicunas (our neighbours) have heard tunchi's (wandering spirits) above Huapinalla calling in the night, 'fin, fin, fin, fin, fiiiiiiiin…' so they've stopped going up that way to hunt, but I think it is the narcos just trying to scare us off the land…*

You heard the other day, down by Lucho Chumpita's house, how his primo (cousin) Wilfredo was sleeping in the 'terrado'

(attic) and someone climbed up and hacked him to pieces with a machete. The people said it was because he was a shepleco (homosexual), but I reckon it was because he was a courier for the drug traffickers and that he had tried to get out of taking the 'pasta' (crude cocaine paste) from up Waha way down to Santa Rosa to that airstrip that the narcos are using.

Creshu went on to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand and blew his nose holding it between his fingers. He managed a half-smile…

Makisapa... You know why you gringos are 'cochinos' (filthy like pigs), don't you?

I shook my head.

Well, he continued, *we Kechwa blow our noses and get rid of all the muck in it and it goes on the ground, but you gringos wrap it up in a cloth and stick it in your pocket! What cochinos!*

Marcelo laughed, spat in agreement and continued,

At that grass airstrip in Santa Rosa, my puric-masi (trail-companion) Juandela told me he had seen sacks and sacks of dollars lying in the bushes there from an inbound flight, in exchange for the pasta… And sometimes they bring in boxes of machine guns and ammunition for the terrucos (terrorists) who guard the area for the narcos.

The milicos and the tombos (the military and the police) are no better, added Creshu.

Those so-called 'Fuerzas del Orden' (Forces of Order), what "order" have they brought! Many of them are from la Costa (the coastal area) and don't understand how we live and who we are. Just because we don't speak fast city Spanish, they think we're stupid or have something to hide when we can't understand them. So they class us all as narcos or terrucos. Why, they wiped out a whole village up Shatoja way just because the evangelistas there sheltered some wounded terrucos. Then the village survivors sheltered some of the hungry soldiers and the terrucos came back and finished off all the rest!

¡Chashna cunan causanchi wau'!... (That's how we live now, bro'!)

Lucho *Singasapa (Big nose)* had been listening in the doorway.

It's just not the problems with the narcos, the milicos, the terrucos and the tombos (police), waukicillu makisap' (little brother Makisapa). Little by little all the good timber is going by loggers, who pay us a pittance to find cedar, mahogany and the like; then to cut it, haul it and to float it down the Sisa river in the wet season to the Huallaga and then on downstream to Yurimaguas and across the sea.

Alau, waukicillu (Oh, Little brother), when we were young like you, in the times of our father Pedro Tuanama, the only trouble we had was with don Jesús Reatigui who used to shoot at us and try and take our land, or not pay us the right amount for our cotton and coffee!

Right, that's true... added Marcelo. *We were always in debt to him and other mestizos (mixed race people) for sugar,*

medicines, trago, and he was always after our sisters. It wasn't safe for them to go into town to sell eggs or chickens or even to go to the Posta Médica (First-aid post) for treatment without getting raped or molested by the local police or the pharmacist, and...
We were interrupted by two voices from outside. One was Camila, calling the pigs for their evening meal of corn… The other was Alejandro's younger brother, Filemón.

Tush, tush, tush, tush… Camila called and grunts and squeals could be heard in the surrounding thickets and seven large pigs appeared. They were the local sanitary machine that followed you into the *monte* (undergrowth) when your bowels moved! When her pigs had finished gobbling up the maize and banana skins , they plonked themselves down in the shade and began scratching themselves against the house wall, a sound that I had grown familiar with most nights at Rufino's.

Filemón, in the doorway, grinned sheepishly. After talk about this and that and how was so-and-so; when was it going to rain; had-we-seen-the-*zorrillos (rat-like animals)* in the tree by the trail; did we know that Lucho *Manteca* (*with a lard-like birth- mark on his neck*) had fallen in a mud-pool when he was drunk last night, etc., finally, as was Kechwa custom, he got round to the real reason for his coming…

Pati ganiwanguichiman…. Perhaps you would help me….

This was the Kechwa *quid-pro-quo* way of working, you work for me then we work for you. No money or goods would pass between us but only the provision of food and drink by both parties. It turned out that Filemón needed to re-roof his house as the palm thatch was ten years old, or more, and the last *venturón* (whirlwind*)* had blown most of it away.

May mana … Why of course… Creshu replied. I noticed there was no indirect form of speech in their language, no dissimulation, a concrete world in which 'yes' was yes and 'no' was no. Abstract thought and ideas had no place here.
Aycapití…. When?

Cayara, mana tamiyaptinmanchu… It'll be tomorrow, for it ought not to rain…

Chasna.. O.K.

Chasnallán.. Okay, then.

I was awakened next morning by a curious swishing noise. I dragged myself to the open door and through the faint dawn light I saw, Macbeth-like, what appeared to be bushes moving across the ground between the houses. It was Filemón, Lucho, Creshu and Marcelino dragging long bunches of *poloponte* palm fronds on their backs from the jungle for the roofing process. A quick trip to the *monte*, a splash or two of water over my face and hands in the *quebrada (stream in the gully)* on the way back and I was off to help them.

I watched carefully as they wove the fronds a six-foot length of pole to make a long one sided "skirt" of thatch by bending over one side of the frond and tucking it to the other side round the pole.

Acu wau'… (*Look bro') just don't stand there. Come and help us*, Marcelo called.

Yachachishcayquisapa criznejacunata rurashpa, wau' (We'll teach you to make criznejas (woven thatch), bro').

I followed their guidance as best I could, but the sharp fronds began to cut into the palms of my softish hands. The rest just grinned at me as I struggled and carried on at three times the rate I was able to do. Then came the task of hoisting the *criznejas* up on the roof and tying them to the *mantallas* (*the upright poles of the gabled roof*), until at last, late in the afternoon, the sections of roof that had been damaged were all watertight again. They appeared shiny green as compared to the rest that had faded and dried over the years in the sun.

Falta la cumbrera (Lacks the ridge covering)… shouted a passing *cambalachero*, weighed down with fifteen to twenty hens tied round his neck and a bolt of brightly coloured cloth strapped to his back.

Ari, de veras… ¡cumbreracunaca cayllañapím! (*That's true… but the ridge coverings are just here ready!*), Filemón shouted back and waved from his precarious stance, balancing on the bare ridge pole thirty-five feet above the ground. The *cumbreras* were a much larger, stiffer and longer type of palm frond, not unlike that of a coconut palm. They were hoisted up on a rope made of twisted sheep's wool and pegged and tied down with *sic-sic huasca* (*a type of liana*) that the folks had cut early that morning as well.

¿Tucushcanguiñachu? (*Finished now?)* called Lucho, shading his eyes and peering up to the roof-ridge in the setting sun.

Ñapish, wau'… (*Yep, ready, bro'...*) called down Filemón and began a perilous slide down the thatch, finishing off with a ten foot leap to the ground!

Acu, ña horana micunanchip'… armacushpa huashanrá ura'pím. (It's really time we all ate now… after we've had a

wash, away up there), pointing with his chin towards the rocky pool some five hundred yards upstream.

I stood there gazing at their handiwork, bathed in a golden glow in the light of the setting sun and thought how was it, that I, a person from the so-called, post-modern, technological world, could never have even begun to build something like that, let alone know what things the forest could provide to bring it to birth.

I watched them all go, chattering and laughing, clapping each other on the back from time to time, their machetes and *balishus*, through their woven belts, dangling behind them, in their ragged, mid calf-length trousers. And there too went Filemón, with his torn, sweat and *plátano (plantain)*-juice stained T-shirt, which at one time had proclaimed '*Oxford University*' on it as he had stood, a master of his universe, on that ridge-pole earlier in the afternoon. They were joined by the others from the houses around, men, women and children, all soon to be splashing and laughing together in the rock pools of the Chumbakiwi.

It had been a good day...

As we sat round the fire that night, the story-telling began again.

Tell me, Rufino, how did you become a brujo (shaman)? I asked in a lull in the conversation.

Mananayarajmi huillayta chataca (I never want to speak about that), he grunted tersely. A distinct chill pervaded the atmosphere. Some cracked their fingers and other slapped at imaginary mosquitoes.

Bueno, tell us the story about the alligator called Alfonso, one of the young boys called out.

Rufino began to smile and the scowl left his face. *They say there was a young lagarto (alligator) who lived in Wamacocha (Lake of the floating lilies) near Pucallpa. He was so happy, for all he ever had to do was to float in the sun and keep his mouth open and the fish swam in and he ate them all day long. So, he got big and fat. Allimata causarca, de verasmente, (Truly he lived really well). But tipi-tipimanta (little by little), the cocha began to dry up in the summer heat, until one day Alfonso found himself sitting on the sand and there were no more fish to be had!*

The audience clicked and muttered in disappointment for Alfonso.

Chaymanda (Then) Alfonso decided he must set off to look for food, so he crawled through the jungle, but there was no cocha or fish to be found. He went on, day after day, getting thinner and thinner and weaker and weaker...

There were more clicks of condolence from the room and sharp intakes of breath.

Ras... (Suddenly...) Alfonso fell over the edge of a small cliff and found himself in water, So, as was his custom, he lay back and relaxed, opened his mouth, and waited for the fish, but nothing happened!

Groans of disappointment filled the room.

Chaymandapish (Then also) he noticed that the whole world was flashing past him and that this was not viviendo tranquilo (living comfortably) as he had lived before. So he began to patalear duro, y duro había sido (paddle hard and it was tough going). He had never been in a river before, only a lake! So Alfonso learned that in "the river of life", life is hard to make a living and we can't just lie around waiting to be fed!

Chasnallán, Alfonsopa causayninmanta (so that's that, the story of Alfonso's life).

There were mutters of agreement from the older people in the room and the evening continued with other stories like that of the sun eating the moon; the puma and the ant; and *mana wasiyucchu* bird that sleeps by the side of the trail and has no home... The stories were all illustrated by imitations of the animals, birds and situations by the audience.

As the fire died down, people began to drift away and I found Rufino's grandson, Ramoncillu, sitting beside me. He whispered,

Rufino doesn't like to talk about when he was a brujo. He told me how he became one, all the things one must do before he made a 'pacto con el Diablo' (a pact with the Devil), finally meeting the Devil himself far away from here, deep in the forest, in the shape of a jaguar and he had to embrace him. Then after a while he got very sick and thought he was dying. Then Tat' Vishu came and prayed hard for him, but the demonios (evil spirits) wouldn't let him alone. They picked him up and threw him about; they grunted and howled around the house in the night; they picked up his chamber-pot and

threw it all around the house; they smashed pots in the kitchen, tucuy laya ruranata (all sorts of goings-on).

I made no comment, only bent closer as Ramoncillu's voice became a muffled whisper. *You see the Devil got so mad and he wouldn't let Rufino go back on his pact and my granddad was getting thinner and thinner and weaker and weaker – puro tullusapa (just all bones)!*

What happened then? I whispered.

Well, Tat' Vishu called all the Christians together and told them to pray all night in the templo (church). Then Tat' Vishu went back and looked Rufino right in the eye and told the demonio to 'go and jump into the river Sisa' and said, 'Chuya-chuya Tata Diospa Esperitun ashwan poderniyuqmi cay sacra demoniolayamanta' (Father God's Holy Spirit is more powerful than this kind of dirty devil)! And from that day Rufino has been a free man.

Well, he's certainly not skinny any longer! I said, and we both laughed.

Rufino glanced up from across the room and smiled. It was time to sleep.

The next day it appeared to have been decided that I should go overland on the old trade-route trail to Lamas, with Daniel and Gustavo, to see what it used to be like being a *carguero* – Indians who were used to carry 50 kilo sacks of coffee and other goods, over the rough mountainous trails of the Montaña. Of course, I wouldn't be carrying that sort of weight myself!

Wauki Makisapa, ¡mana fersayuqchu! (Brother Makisapa doesn't possess any strength!), called out Creshu who had come to visit. That statement produced the usual sniggering and hilarious laughter, and Alejandro's four-year old, who already could carry a fair-sized pot on her head, got up and staggered about with an imaginary load on her back and that produced more good natured ribaldry.

So, at four a.m. the next morning, as the full moon went down over Ampi Urcu, we set off at a quick trot up the trail by the Pishhuayo river. Daniel was carrying about 50 kilos of coffee in a sack on a tumpline round his fore-head. Gustavo, who was small and wiry, was carrying around thirty kilos. I had a small *alforja* (saddle-bag) over one shoulder with our *fiambre* (snacks).

The first part of the trail presented no great challenges as it ran alongside the river, save a large wooden horse-gate that slammed back against an unwary follower. As we approached the houses of Santa Rosilla, the Lamas trail swung up and into the virgin jungle, snaking its way uphill to a clearing called *Sapote* after the bread-fruit trees surrounding it. The rising sun filtered though the morning mist and we took our first break after two hours of continuous walking. We munched on a couple of toasted green bananas and drank from a little stream nearby.

¿Ñachu? (Ready?) grinned Daniel, backing on to his heavy sack that he had perched on a rock. We pulled him upright and he did the same with Gustavo's.

Acu'...(Let's go...)

The next three hours were much more difficult. The trail got narrower and each picked his own way among the tree roots up the muddy steep gradient. *La escalera* (*the Ladder*), as the section was called, was well named and I found myself falling and slipping back more times than the sure-footed Daniel and Gustavo. We were now on the steep shoulder of Ampi Urcu with the sun shooting thin shafts of light through gaps in the forest's canopy.

Gustavo then called a halt when we reached Pucayacu, a small, clear streamlet running between mossy, reddish boulders. We drank again and ate our *fiambre* there and stretched out on the soft moss for a *siestita (snooze).*

Ña horana rinanayninchipa... (It's time to be going...) said Daniel, cracking his fingers and stretching. It seemed to me we'd just lain down, but a good twenty minutes had passed!

The trail now wound on over an undulating jungle plateau and we made good time with Gustavo leading, me following and Daniel behind. Suddenly Daniel let out a sharp cry accompanied by the sound of machete blow behind me. I turned and saw a large green snake writhing in its death-throes on the trail at my feet!

Daniel looked at me and grinned. *Ñausa-ñausayuc... (A very blind person). Didn't you see that jergón (python) lying across the path to trap something. Good job you stepped over him, otherwise he would have grabbed you and squeezed you like a lemon! ¡Ponte las pilas, wau'! (Get switched on, bro!)*

My knees which were now wobbly anyway from the trail, became even more so. Would I ever learn to live here and be safe.

We pressed on into the afternoon, past Lejía where the water was dark and alkaline from the rotting vegetation and the soil content, and on down to the *Bajada (Descent).* This final section was to last some two hours or more of steep down-hill and finally pass through a banana plantation to the Mayo river bank. Gustavo and Daniel went downhill at a fast trot, occasionally jumping over logs and small rocks even with the massive weights on their backs. I was beginning to tire and was finding the downhill stretch the hardest of all on my calves and knees. There was nothing else for me to do, however, except to follow them in this crazy race in the fading light to the river Mayo below. It was almost dark when we burst out of the banana plantation on to the river bank and saw the settlement of *San Antonio del Mayo* on the far side.

Daniel whooped and called, *¡Oooooh... trae canooooaaa...! (Bring a canoe over!)*

Hope we're not too late, he confided, *they don't like crossing in the dark, too dangerous with the current when there's a creciente (flood-condition).*

We waited anxiously for a sign of movement in the houses on the far bank. Daniel and Gustavo called again and after some long anxious moments, we made out a shadowy figure moving toward a tethered canoe on the bank. The *canoero* (ferryman) began poling slowly and steadily upstream close to the far shore, then when he was about five hundred yards upstream he set out to cross. The roiling muddy currents began to sweep the big log canoe across and down to us at an alarming rate. Surely he would be swept past and off down the rapids to San Miguel! The *canoero* threw a long line as he swept past to Daniel standing in the shallows. Daniel held on and the *canoero* squatted down as the long, hollowed-out log

canoe swung round and almost heeled over. It rocketed into the bank on the end of the line.*Sucaman manchihuanmi. (It didn't half scare me)* admitted the *canoero. Utcami risunchi, tutanayanrá (Let's go quickly, it's getting dark!)*

Daniel and Gustavo, with their cargoes, arranged themselves in the centre of the canoe.

Oi, flaquito, ponte en la proa, ¡apuráte pues! (Hoy, skinny, go up into the bow, get a move on then! the *canoero* told me sharply.

With an extra heave to get us going off the mud, the *canoero* then jumped into the stern and Gustavo took up a spoon shaped paddle and began to help us upstream against the current close to the bank.

The *canoero* yelled, ¡*Vam'... vam'..! (Let's go!).* The canoe swung round, shipped a load of muddy water and began to hurtle over and downstream again.

¡Boga, boga, boga! Paddle, paddle, paddle!) shouted the *canoero* to Gustavo.

The river was too deep in the middle to pole so we were relying on Gustavo's skill to paddle and steer towards the San Antonio side. At last, the canoe hit the bank with a thump, just below San Antonio, catapulting me on top of Daniel and his cargo. But we had made it!

Daniel rubbed his bruised head and grinned, ¡*Chayamushcanispa iden balashina! We arrived from over there like a bullet!*

The villagers waiting on the bank above laughed too.

That night we all slept soundly on the *canoero*'s floor and even the fearsome river valley *zancudos (mosquitoes)* didn't keep us awake!

The last part of the journey, that next morning, would be the three hour climb uphill from San Antonio del Mayo to Lamas.

We started later in the morning than anticipated, as the *canoero*'s family had decided to kill a lamb, and Daniel was known in the region for his skill at butchering animals. Daniel strung up the animal by its hind legs and attempted to cut its throat with a blunt knife that the *canoero* used for sticking pigs. It took some time as the lamb's life blood drained away into a basin. I was surprised at the difference between the death of a pig and a lamb. Rufino's pigs had squealed and squealed until that last drop of blood had left their bodies. The lamb made no complaint whatsoever. It reminded me of the story in the Bible of the *Lamb of God* being silent in his death on our behalf.

We eventually got on the move around mid-day, on a full stomach of roast leg of lamb, and thus faced the open climb up through the *chacras* (fields) with the full glare of the sun facing us. My head was beginning to ache a little as I gazed, with screwed-up eyes, at the town of Lamas shimmering way above us. By four in the afternoon everything always seemed to reach that point of shivering, shimmering, ethereal, vice-like heat, before the sun dipped behind the last range of the Andes and turned the valleys into a deep indigo farewell.
I was feeling distinctly strange… I felt I was going to faint, and I sank down slowly in the warm, sweet-smelling, yellow dust of the trail.

THE END...

All was silence and peace....

Then slowly, a blurry face began to appear, one I faintly recognised and a voice that was soft and mellifluous, filled my left ear....

Ay, Señor, duro has durmedo (Oh, Sir, you've slept so soundly).

I opened half an eye and recognised the girl from don Hildefonso's house in Lamas. I opened both eyes and realized I was back in their patio, no longer in the dust on the trail leading up to the town. I sat up and looked around....

What had happened, where were Daniel and Gustavo, where had I been?

And there was the old man, don Hildefonso, watching....

He went on watching as the girl replaced my overturned stool and helped me sit back on it.

Mushcucuyquipi tucuyta cawashcangui, unay tiempomanda (In your dream you saw all from long-long ago), the old man whispered.

Had it been a dream or a vision or what? I started up, rubbing my eyes and trying to take it all in.

Vente conmigo, (*Come with me*), he ordered and marched off, in a frail sort of manner, out of the house over to where I had seen him standing - was it just yesterday? I didn't know.

I followed dazedly and then I looked out across that Mayo valley to the hills above the Sisa valley, where I had evidently been in my dream, or vision, whatever it was. But the view now was so different from the dream.

There was no virgin forest there before me, only brown scarred slopes where the cocaine, maize and rice grew. There also were the signs of a recent massive landslide that had dammed the Mayo river and vomited its mud and torn up debris over the village of San Antonio del Mayo. A metalled road was now snaking its way over Ampi Urco into the Sisa valley. Now no trails, no *cargueros*, no forest animals, no cotton for clothes and belts and shirts and trousers, not even sugar-cane for *chancaca* for *ventishu* or *trago*...

I turned away, fighting back the tears, and followed the old man down the street until he stopped at the door of a small *Museo* (*Museum*). There through the entrance were the tools, the *tamshi* baskets, hand-woven *pretinas* and *chumbis*, wooden spinning wheel and *batanes*, stone axe-heads, blow-pipes and on a shelf, some little painted clay models of the Kechwa of the Sisa valley.

Above them, a fly-blown caption –

Los Indios del Valley Sisa - $2.00 c/u
(Sisa Valley Indians, two dollars each).

How ironic!

Where are all those I met now? I turned away to ask the old man.

He looked at me sorrowfully...

Rufino and the old folks died years ago and their grandchildren had to move to the city. Some got works as porters, caretakers, builder's mates, ayudantes, and the girls became empleadas (house-maids).

A few died from drugs and alcoholism…. he added.

I noticed the old man of my vision was weeping again…

Aypacuna huañurcansa' llaquiypa shungunmanta… (Many of them died from a broken heart...)

If I had read the future, I'd have asked them not to come, he went on, sobbing quietly.

I stood there for a long, long time, staring at the small clay figures on that dusty shelf…

I wept as well...