Our Foreign Letter.

LIFE IN THE ANDES.
By Miss Lina Mollett.

"We crossed the Cumbra of the Andes on mule-back, above Las Cuevas on the 26th January. It was hottest summer down below, but here we had a cold wind and snow—and a panorama of everlasting snow-peaks before us. Then we passed down some thousands of feet into the valley of Las Cuevas, by paths a hand-breadth wide—over soil that crumbled under every step the mule took, and rolled noisily into the depth. And in Las Cuevas we slept—in an hotel 'that seemed to be built of old packing cases,'—at least we tried to sleep, for the cold kept us awake a long time, and we realised that we were 10,000 feet high, and that the stream outside the airy shelter was freezing. Still no one had sarochi (or puna=the mountain sickness), and though next morning most of us were skinned, and, with red noses, cracked lips and blood-shot eyes, were anything but ornamental, we were all well and hungry for an excellent breakfast, and fit to go on to the wonders of Puente de Las Incas. 'Puente de Las Incas is famous for hot mineral springs, about which I will write later on."

Thus, writing to a home friend, I described one of the most interesting experiences of my life. To which my friend promptly answered (and the answer reached me in three months' time).

"By the bye, what *is* your sarochi? I suppose some sort of ordinary giddiness called by a grand name?"

By the time the answer came, I had been touring some time in the Andes, and the sickness my friend had referred to so lightly had grown so familiar to me in many forms—from a slight touch of breathlessness to deep unconsciousness, even death—that it was difficult to imagine that millions of intelligent, cultivated, people had never even known there was such a malady in existence.

As I can safely say all London, with all its great host of suffering humanity counts not one afflicted with puna (or sarochi), the vagaries of this curse of the heights may not be uninteresting to readers of the Nursing Record.

To begin with: Every body, even the strongest, coming suddenly from a low-lying land into an altitude of above 8,000—even 7,000 feet—experiences some sort of physical discomfort at first, and no one who is anyway organically delicate, should undertake such a journey without medical advice.

On some, the effect of the thin pure air is so slight as to be scarcely noticable. At our second halting-place—Juncal (a tiny station between 7,000 and 8,000 feet high) we formed a very merry party, not one of whom was otherwise than well. However, my botanical friend found her nose bleed at intervals all day long for several days—and I myself acquired a capacity for sleeping that cut me off from all evening festivities. I think 12 or 13 hours of dreamless sleep was my average during the first three or four days in Juncal, although we were taking hardly any exercise, but spent our days on a rocky terrace, before our little deal 'hôtel,' with its three tiny bare-board rooms, idly listening to the roar of the white-foaming Mendoza river just below. We are both rather good at gymnastics, and fond of walking under ordinary circumstances, but we very soon discovered that climbing in the Cordillera is five or six times as exerting as climbing the Santa Lucia in Santiago (Santiago is 1,500 feet high), and so we took to riding for good during all our tours and learnt to trust the wise sure-footed—if necessary even swift, and strong—mule implicitly, to ride fearlessly down any (all but vertical) mountain side he might approve, and to avoid the "safest looking" path he objected to. And so we had no accidents. Mountaineers don't if they keep to mules.

And in three or four days we were acclimatised, and began to enjoy ourselves, and delight in the absolute freedom, the safety of apparent danger, the cold wind that always was blowing, the glorious scenery, the unvarying courtesy and gentleness of the wildest-looking muleteers, the strange plants, stranger minerals, weird insects and majestic Condors of the heights.

And so we painted and botanized and rambled away on mule-back, dusty with the Cordillera dust, and happy with the Cordillera air, and liberty unbounded, and passed, rejoicing at new wonders at every step—over the Cumbra and away into the Argentine in quest of greater marvels yet.

And while we were eating tough meat (goat's flesh was a luxury), and consuming bread a week old, we grew stouter and stronger and dustier every day—more satisfied with bare-boards to lodge in, and less certain than ever that civilization is worth the price men set upon it.

But others were not so fortunate. I met an English engineer on duty between the Cumbra and Juncal, who had been at work some two months, and who was a picture of misery. He had puna every day, and all days, and walked about afflicted with breathlessness, giddiness, nausea, while the sun was in the sky, and at night he lay awake and could not sleep. Every now and then he was obliged to ride down to Las Andes, a town lower down, to give himself a little peace. He used to tell us that work in Central Africa was preferable to work in the Andes.

There were cases of distressing puna every week among the passengers who crossed the Via Cordillera into the Argentine. Some people fainted, others became hysterical, others suffered from extreme nausea and giddiness,—a sickly woman died, and our muleteer told me of other cases that had ended fatally, not of course including travellers who have undertaken the passage at unsuitable times of the year, and perished in the snow. Since writing, two cases of fatal accidents to travellers in the snow have occurred.

It is impossible to leave unmentioned the care and thought the officials of the Transandino and Trasportes Unidos Companies bestow upon the travellers under their care. Not only is every mule used for riding a tested and perfectly reliable animal, on whose back one is incomparably safer than on foot, but the very muleteers are chosen men, trustworthy and capable, as well as intelligent and equal to any emergency. They are all splendid equestrians. More than once *en route* our guides would suddenly break from the general cavalcade, and urging on their beasts by a peculiar whoop—give us exhibitions of their mules' powers of climbing, and their own fearlessness, that were far ahead of any ordinary circus performance. More than once I have thought that they had overtasked the possible, and that the picturesque rush up the steep slipping slope, or the wild gallop down, would end in a horrible accident but it never did, and before we left the Andes we had realised that the mountain-mule is absolutely sure-footed, and far more fitted for its work than any horse.

(To be continued).

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