THE ANDES OF COCUY

By EVELIO ECHEVARRÍA C.

The name ' Cocuy ' seems to be of Indian origin ; perhaps long before the advent of the white man to the New World, the Indians of the Orinoco plains, gazing at the glistening wall to the west, called it the ' Shining Ice '. The Spaniards named the massif Chita, perhaps after the Chitarero Indians that once populated its western valleys.

It is difficult to find out who its discoverer might have been ; the Conquistadores left no record, but in their restless marches in search of El Dorado, passed near the northern slopes in 1538 ; almost at the same time, a German officer, Georg Hohermuth, serving the Welsers, penetrated the Apure and Casanare rivers, on the eastern side ; and Sir Walter Raleigh on his trip to the Orinoco may also have been very near. Or perhaps the Sierra was concealed from them all by the persistent mist that hangs around the higher zone. Anyhow, the earliest records to be found date back to no further than 1910, when the modern name Sierra Nevada de Cocuy appeared in the official maps and its height was more or less established.

Geographical features

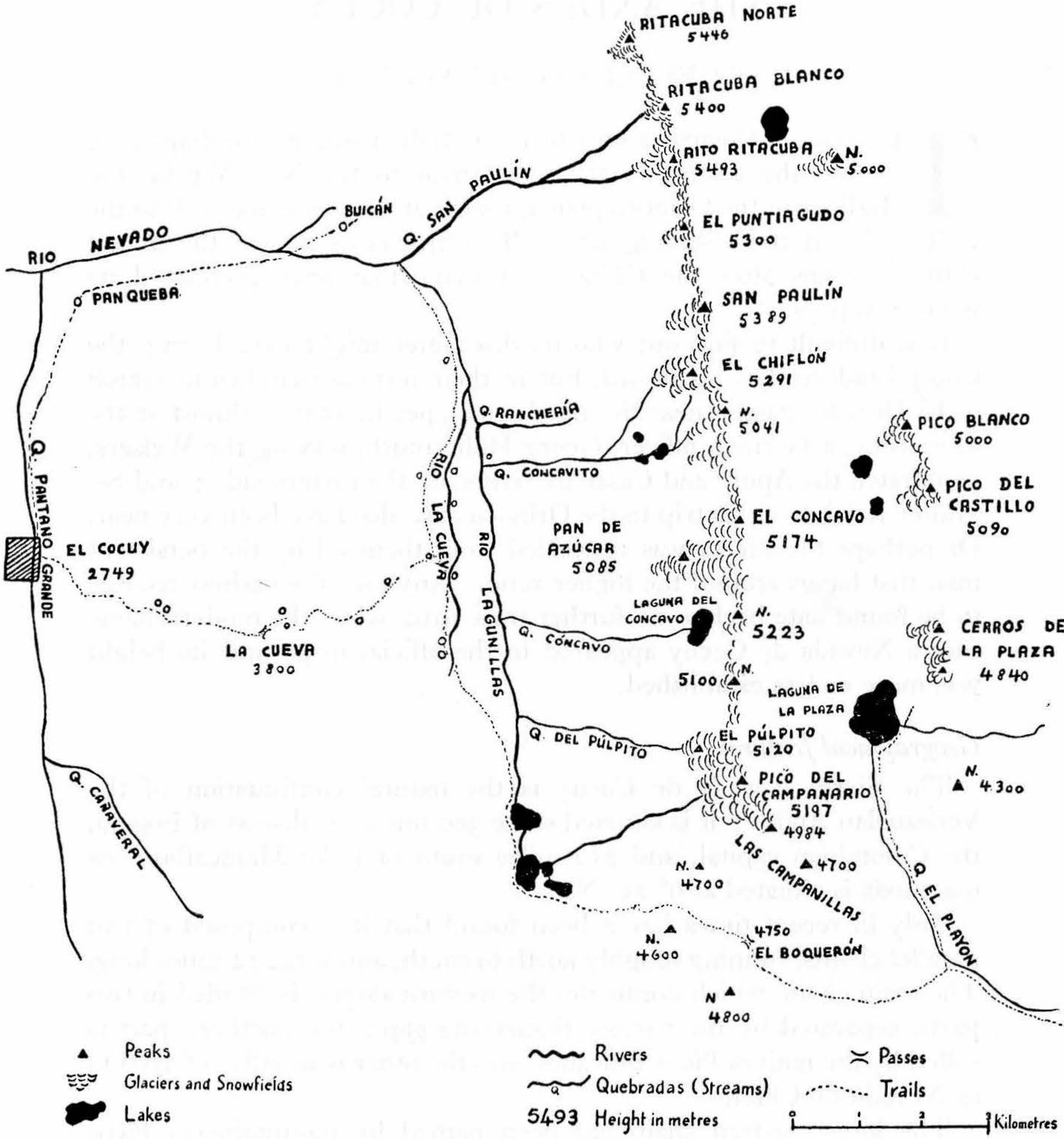
The Sierra Nevada de Cocuy is the natural continuation of the Venezuelan Andes ; it is situated some 300 miles north-east of Bogotá, the Colombian capital, and 210 miles south of Lake Maracaibo ; its main axis is situated at 6° 25′ N.

Only in recent times has it been found that it is composed of two parallel chains, running roughly north to south, and some 12 miles long. The main chain, which dominates the western slopes, is divided in two parts, separated by the narrow Buenavista gap ; the northern part is called by the natives Picos Buicanes, and the other is usually referred to as Nevado de Chita.

The lower eastern chain has been named by mountaineers Picos Orientales.

Both to the north and to the west the Sierra rises over deep tropical valleys ; to the south, over an arid range which divides the Magdalena from the Orinoco river ; and to the east, over hot, damp plains called *llanos*. Because of this particular situation heavy masses of damp air, originating in the plains, converge on the Sierra as the only gathering point. Most of the year the snow peaks are rarely seen.

However, mist, rain, and height have combined their effects to make this region a peculiar one. No other range in the Andes can boast of 10-ft.-tall plants of *Espeletia* and lupins so close to the snow line.



Sierra Nevada de Cocuy, Colombia. Based on sketch published in the *Geographical Revie* (July 1932, p. 424) with additions and corrections by Evelio Echevarría, C. 1957.

Nowhere in the Andes north of the Equator are found a finer glaciation and more bizarre peaks than in the Cocuy.

The mountains themselves are unknown to the natives that dwell on the western side, yet the lower valleys are populated and cultivated.

The eastern slopes are seldom visited, except occasionally by a solitary Tunebo Indian, for hunting or herding.

The Sierra can be reached in only one or two days from Bogotá, via the international highway to Venezuela, by bus or car, and by a four-hour ride on horseback from the town of Cocuy (9,000 ft.) ; the easiest approach is through La Cueva valley, which offers access to either the eastern or the western face of the range.

The Sierra rises only two or three miles from the cultivated fields of La Cueva valley. The timber line reaches almost 14,000 ft., but a fine mountain flora begins just where the trees end. The *frailejón* (*Espeletia*) and the blue spike of the lupin (*L. alopecuroides*) seem to be for this part of the Andes what the senecio and the lobelia are for Ruwenzori ; they blossom in the months of October and November but the flowers last until January. The *duende* (*Castilleja*) and the purple and yellow arnica are seen in every valley or tarn. Queen of the Cocuy flowers, however, is the *blanquizco*, a *Compositae*, with dashing yellow daisy-like flowers on tall, white branches. Most of the mountain flora is concentrated between 10,000 and 14,500 ft., pretty close to the snow line, which in this part of the tropics descends to 15,000 ft. above sea level.

In spite of the green aspect of the adjacent plains and the high valleys, no animal is seen, yet there are records of deer, pumas and white-spectacled bears. Strangely enough, the condor, the characteristic vulture of the Andes, is unknown to the natives ; no birds are seen or heard. Yet the bright *blanquizco* impart a warm feeling to the traveller ; on the whole, the range is solitary and gloomy ; the cloudy belt leaves a sensation of mystery and immensity ; and above all a strange silence reigns.

Just where the *frailejones* end the glaciers begin. None of them looks particularly crevassed, but they are compact and the higher ridges are corniced. Yet the ice is in retreat, though, in spite of the fierce tropical sun, this is not so evident as in other parts of the Andean cordillera. Some travellers have suggested that low temperatures peculiar to high mountains are responsible for this slow receding, but I found in a short trip to this Sierra in the dry season of 1956, that the temperature for the higher zone ranges, from day to night, only between 30° and 40° F. I believe that the persistent cloudiness that characterises this range not only precipitates snow, but also shields the glaciers from the sun. This can be proved by the clear waters of the streams ; mud is seldom seen in them, or at least in the *quebradas* I visited on that occasion.

The eastern face of almost every peak of the Sierra is a sheer wall, crowned by hanging glaciers ; the slopes falling to the west are gentle and smooth snow-fields ; the north and north-east faces are beautifully

carved by avalanches, or perhaps by the combined action of the sun and the wind. Ice incrustations and snow cornices, mist and perpetual rain, and a phantom vegetation make of the Cocuy the fascinating region it is.

Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada de Cocuy

In the following lines data concerning mountaineering expeditions has been compiled by reference to publications, by personal observations and by discussions with other mountaineers. It is incomplete ; a good part was assembled with the invaluable help of Herrn E. Kraus and F. Marmillod.

The first climb in the Cocuy was by the Swiss diplomat, W. Röthlisberger, and H. Weber, in July of the year 1929. They reached the top of a peak some 16,700 ft. high of the main chain and named it Nevado de Cocuy. This peak has now been identified as Pan de Azúcar (Sugarloaf) and is 5,085 m. high. It is the only prominent one seen from La Cueva valley. Perhaps Röthlisberger, when asking for the particular name of the mountain, was given its denomination as Nevado del Cocuy, which, I learned while in Colombia, also applies indiscriminately to the whole range or to any single peak. Few natives, indeed, know the range itself and mountaineers, lacking adequate maps or references, must have necessarily been confused. When I visited the range in 1956, one of my ambitions was to obtain a list of all mountain names existent in the region with the greatest accuracy possible.

Röthlisberger reported to the mountaineering world the rediscovery of a chain with a fine glaciation. It was perhaps his report which inspired the expedition of two American geologists, Messrs. R. E. King and F. B. Notestein, in September 1931. They accomplished a partial survey of the range and also did some geological studies ; the onset of a violent storm prevented their reaching the top of Alto Ritacuba, highest in the range (18,020 ft.).

Herr Röthlisberger returned to the Cocuy in 1934 with a larger party ; together with E. Garl he climbed El Cóncavo (16, 975 ft.), in the central part of the range and immediately to the east of Pan de Azúcar, which was also climbed in the course of the same expedition by a Chilean engineer, Enrique Hubach ; two other members of the party, one of whom was the British scientist A. P. Coleman, made glaciological studies in the glacial cirque of Cóncavo lake.

In March 1938, Herrn E. Kraus, who can be declared foremost in Colombian mountaineering, and A. Lampe made the first ascent of El Campanario (17,053 ft.), in the southern end of the chain. This mountain is often mistaken by travellers for Pan de Azúcar.

It was in 1939 that methodical conquest of the Cocuy peaks began ;

however it will be noted that only a few mountaineers took part, returning to the field year after year. The Swiss geologists, C. Cuénet and A. Gansser, took the lion's share. In the month of January, which seems to be the best for partially settled weather, they placed base camp by the Cóncavo lake and ascended a minor peak *ca.* 16,700 ft. high north of El Campanario, and then pushed on to the north, to tackle the unnamed mountain 5,223 m. (17,135 ft.) high of the King–Notestein survey. This noble peak can be regarded as the finest of the entire range; it has been negligently treated because it is hidden behind morainic ridges and is not visible from the lower valleys. Cuénet and Gansser followed the steep western ridge and descended to the north, thus traversing the mountain. In the following days they made ascents to El Cóncavo and Pan de Azúcar (second and third ascents, respectively).

In January 1942, now carrying skis as part of their equipment, Cuénet and Gansser explored the northern group, which contains the highest peaks of the massif. They ascended first Alto Ritacuba, using skis in part of the climb, and then Ritacuba Norte (17,870 ft.), which was rather a rock climb, yet skis were used again in the lower snow-fields. It was in this expedition that the lower and unknown chain to the east was sighted in full by the climbers. In December 1942 they explored routes aiming for a breach that would offer a way to the La Plaza valley, between the eastern and the western chain, on which now they stood. But it was not until January 1944 that a gap securing a safe descent was found; they crossed it and climbed down to the La Plaza valley and lake, near which they established camp; their goal was the ascent and traverse of the twin mountains Pico Blanco (16,400 ft.) and Pico del Castillo (16,700 ft.), of the chain of the Picos Orientales.

At the same time that the Swiss were working their way across the range, a strong party formed by Herr E. Kraus and the Swiss couple, M. and Mme. F. Marmillod, had accomplished the first ascent of Pico del Castillo, which, as we know, was the aim of the Cuénet–Gansser team. In his account M. Marmillod names this peak Pico Helvetia, but according to Herr Kraus the accepted denomination is the one I quote above. The Kraus–Marmillod party had entered La Plaza valley from the south, crossing the Boquerón gap, at the end of the Sierra and, placing a base camp near the lake, they also made the first ascents of Cerros de la Plaza (15,900 ft.), the wild Grande Campanilla (16,360 ft.) and Púlpito del Diablo (16,800 ft.), a rock bastion with a strange cubical form, rising amid the glaciers of El Campanario.

Some days after the Kraus–Marmillod ascent, Cuénet and Gansser reached the top of Pico del Castillo; it seems that their ascent took place only a few days after the other. Cuénet and Gansser had climbed

first Pico Blanco, the twin mountain to the north, and traversed to the peak already visited by Kraus and Marmillod, using the corniced ridge that links both, in a north to south direction.

The last exploit by the indefatigable Swiss pair was the exploration of the San Paulín group, in the northern part of the Sierra. In their account they stated that ascents were made of two peaks of the group, but no hint is given of their location ; no doubt one of them must be San Paulín itself (17,680 ft.) ; the other, perhaps, the broad massive Nevado del Chiflón (17,360 ft.). In the same expedition, which took place in January 1945, Cuénet and Gansser failed to conquer the fine Puntiagudo (which they name Picacho) ; however, this mountain, some 17,400 ft. high, was nearly stormed by both friends ; they reached within 100 ft. of the top before being compelled to retreat on account of the instability of the snow cornices and lack of time.

In the year 1946, Herrn Kraus, Drees, and Hüblitz, climbed an unnamed mountain north of the eastern chain, some 16,400 ft. high and repeated the ascent of Ritacuba ; they also scaled, with difficulty, the icy Ritacuba Blanco, *ca.* 17,600 ft.

In 1953, an Italian expedition under Signor Alfonso Vinci made the third ascent of Alto Ritacuba, the highest peak of the range. In the same year, Herr Kraus and two Germans, probably the same as those of 1946, climbed El Cóncavo (third ascent) and the peak 16,700 ft. high north of El Campanario, already visited by Cuénet and Gansser in 1939. In August and September 1957 a British expedition from Cambridge operated in the northern sector and did considerable botanical work.[1]

With such intense activity it could be said that a range no longer than 12 miles has little to offer to pioneer mountaineering, but the whole region is still unmapped ; its flora and meteorology should deserve better attention and there are several fine climbs to be done. Puntiagudo is at present the highest and also the most attractive of the unclimbed peaks of the Sierra Nevada de Cocuy, while the eastern faces of El Campanario and San Paulín will require several bold attempts before being subdued.

A trip in 1956

It was with high ambitions but little hopes that I undertook a visit to the range in December 1956. I had no companions—indeed, in all Colombia no more than two or three mountaineers can be found—but I left for the mountains with excellent hints by Herr Marmillod and, once in Bogotá, Herr Kraus gave me invaluable advice. There are

[1] Members of this expedition made the ascent of Alto Ritacuba and what is believed to be the second ascent of San Paulin. They also climbed three virgin peaks to the south of Alto Ritacuba.—D. F. O. D.



THE UPPER VALLEY AND GLACIER OF CONCAVITO VALLEY. THE SNOW DOME TO THE LEFT CORRESPONDS TO THE PEAK MARKED AS 16,540 FT. IN THE AMERICAN SURVEY OF 1931.

[*To face p.* 38.



LAKE AND VALLEY OF LA PLAZA. PICO DEL CASTILLO (16,680 FT.) IN THE DISTANCE.



THE LAKES OF THE LAGUNILLAS VALLEY, FROM THE BOQUERÓN GAP. FRAILEJONES IN THE FOREGROUND.



El Concavo (16,975
from the north, ta
during the attempt
Nevado del Chiflón

more famous and more elevated ranges in South America, but the Cocuy has been described as the finest ice-chain of the Andes north of the Equator, and this was sufficient. I left Bogotá under rain and, after crossing *en route* picturesque tropical valleys, reached the town of Cocuy. The drivers are punctual and competent and charge moderately for their services ; the bus fare cost only some 18*s*., inexpensive indeed for 300 miles of rough road, but the travel—18 hours of bus ride—is far from being comfortable.

Once in the town, where there is a small hotel, I engaged the services of an *arriero* (muleteer). He agreed to provide a saddle-horse and a pack-horse for my modest equipment and food supplies, as well as to put at my disposition his knowledge of the region ; he proved to be a fine *arriero* indeed ; he charged $150 (Colombian currency, about £8) for ten days' service. Being myself a Chilean, with a fluent command of Spanish, I had no trouble in making myself understood.

The *arriero*, Senor Pedro Leal, with his two animals, was punctual next morning and we left the town of Cocuy riding east, to cross La Cueva pass, which gives access to La Cueva valley, on the western side of the Sierra. Although we had had an early start, we did not reach the pass in time to enjoy the vista of the mountains it commands ; dark clouds covered the region and they soon were above our heads, pouring rain and sleet. We reached at last, after three and a half hours' riding, the little farm where the *arriero* lived and which became my starting point for the two trips I subsequently made to the mountains.

Next morning, December 8, was fine, and above low white clouds rose the crystal dome of Pan de Azúcar (16,680 ft.), against a pool of deep blue sky. So close this mountain seemed that I suggested to march at once and try to climb it from the farm without making an intermediate camp ; but the *arriero* predicted rain in a few hours. It turned out to be true. We had just started with our horses when mist began gathering in the lower subtropical valley of Chicamocha. It soon reached us, bringing rain and sleet and also limited visibility. From time to time the superb ice-pyramid of El Campanario emerged over a bank of clouds, but soon everything was concealed and we marched along the Lagunillas valley to ascend the high pass of El Boquerón (15,600 ft.) which offers the easiest access to the eastern face of the range. We crossed it under sleet and dropped down to the La Plaza valley, searching for a protected place or for a rock shelter where to pitch my little tent. Soon we were on the shore of the big La Plaza lake, unable to go any further on account of the restricted visibility and the rocky floor of the valley. At last the *arriero* found a rock shelter and under it we placed our camp. Its height was about 13,500 ft. Several tall *frailejones* stood as ghostly guardians of our unattractive cave.

The night was uncomfortable in the limited space of the rock shelter, and I was glad to start next morning on a short reconnaissance back to the lake, while the *arriero* looked for a better place for camp. The skies were dark, but visibility was possible for a distance of some two or three miles and soon the high mountains that encircle the lake on three of its sides came into view. The Cóncavo group looked unimpressive with yellow and grey rock walls falling abruptly to the western end of the lake, but to the north rose the very noble Pico del Castillo (16,700 ft.), a two-headed ice-pyramid, and to the south-east of it, the massive Cerros de la Plaza (15,700 ft.). The latter seemed to offer the best chances for a solitary climber and it would also afford a fine panorama from its summit. I returned to the cave to collect some equipment and food for a climb which, I supposed, would not last more than five hours.

The *arriero*, meanwhile, had located a better cave and we were busy for an hour carrying loads to our new home ; but as usual at about 10 a.m. mist and then rain began. We spent the rest of the day eating and resting ; the *arriero* assured me that poor weather was customary in the Sierra, even in the dry season. January, and, I believe, also part of August, are said to be the best for partially settled weather and clear skies, but mist comes almost every afternoon ; it is advisable for mountaineers to make an early start in order to reach the summit and return to camp before noon.

Next morning it was cloudy, but rain had stopped. I returned to the lake and was struck in admiration of the fine scenery ; once more Pico del Castillo showed beyond the water of the lake and the oblique rays of the sun, ascending from the low plains of the Orinoco, illuminated the bastions of El Campanario and Campanillas. But what almost frightened me was the weirdness of the scene : instead of the usual dark clouds there were grey cirri slowly converging to the high peaks and a green light pervaded the skies ; the air was motionless ; no sign of life appeared and a strange silence aroused in me a feeling of anxiety. I returned to the cave.

A few minutes later it rained again ; once more we had to resign ourselves to inactivity and wait for a break in the clouds, but no change came, and, on the morning of the third day, realising that dampness had rendered our garments, blankets, and sleeping-bag useless, I decided to withdraw to La Cueva. We loaded the horses and retraced our way to the Boquerón Pass, which we crossed against a bitter wind and reached the farm where the *arriero* lit a good fire to dry the equipment. Life was good again.

On the morning of December 12 I was ready for another go, but now, eager to break new ground, I had in mind an exploration of Concavito valley, which runs east to west, separating the southern part of the

Sierra from the Buicanes massif. As far as I knew, no mountaineer had ever visited it. I thought it would yield an easy access and short approach to the big snow peak the hillmen call Nevado del Chiflón, which seems to correspond to the peak marked as 17,360 ft. high in the King–Notestein map. It showed to the west a smooth, gentle snow-field leading to the final dome ; I could not see any obstacle so severe as to prevent a mountaineer reaching it.

With the *arriero* and also with another hillman, who claimed to know the valley perfectly well, we entered it, after fording on horseback the Lagunillas river. Though we started with clear skies, it soon became clouded and, shortly before noon, when we had covered most of our way up to the morainic ridges that descend from the big snow peak to the south and the south-west, it began to rain. We left the horses on the moraines and shouldering our modest loads, climbed a rock gully which left us on a broad platform that offered good camping sites. I ordered the hillman to return to the valley and pitched my little mountain tent in a morainic flatground, which I deepened with my ice-axe, to make it protected from the wind ; this turned out to be an unwise decision. Usually, in my Andean experiences in Chile and Bolivia, I have selected as a camp site a hollow with a rock shelter, if available ; but in the Cocuy a ridge, even if exposed to wind or rain, is advisable. Soon water flooded the morainic ground where the tent was placed and I had to leave it several times to dig out drainage for the water that ran across the platform. Rain soon changed to sleet and snow, but it brought no improvement in the situation, as it melted as soon as it touched the ground. I spent most of the afternoon wondering as to the impermeability of my little Holubar tent, but it proved to be quite waterproof.

Shortly before dusk the snow stopped and I set out for a short reconnaissance. Uncertain of my position I had in mind, first, to attempt a minor snow cone, marked as 16,540 ft. high in the King–Notestein map, north of El Cóncavo, but a deep gash separated my morainic platform from the base of the peak and I looked around for a better chance of success. El Cóncavo itself, and Pan de Azúcar, seemed too difficult, even for a larger party, on account of steep ice-slopes carved with avalanche channels. But once on the highest of the morainic ridges the big snow peak came into view. I had unknowingly placed camp on its southern foot and the way to the top seemed easy and short. I judged the height of the camp as some 15,000 ft. thus leaving a difference of only 2,000 ft. to be covered by an evidently easy route. I returned to the tent in high spirits.

December 13 dawned cold and with clear skies. I could not believe my eyes, but the sun shone. In a few minutes I had breakfast and set out for the climb. I stopped often to photograph the glistening ice-wall

of El Cóncavo and the big snow peak itself, which, if unimpressive, showed two fine ice-cliffs cascading to the south-west. I climbed by the rock first, combining several easy gullies which led to the gentle snow-field of the south face of the peak. I thought success was in my grasp, as I had covered 1,000 ft. in one hour and the final snow dome did not seem too far away. But when I had stopped for my first rest clouds hurried from the lower valleys to the top. I had already learned the incredible rapidity of the local storms and there was nothing to do about it. I turned back, from a height I would estimate just a little over 16,000 ft. When I had reached the tent sleet and snow were falling. It seemed useless to wait for a calm in the storm, so down I went and reached the floor of the valley completely soaked by the downpour that followed. My last misfortune was the crossing of the Lagunillas river, which offered no easy fording. Finally, I jumped to a big boulder on the opposite side, but my rubber-soled boots slipped on the wet surface of the rock and I fell flat on my back in the water—an event the Colombian hillmen found pretty amusing.

With bad weather firmly in control of the range, nothing induced me to stay in the mountains ; besides, it was obvious that I could not do much without a suitable companion. On December 16 I left for the lower tropical valleys, where the sun smiled.

The Sierra Nevada de Cocuy is at present almost ignored ; mountaineers give the best of their attention to Peru and Patagonia ; perhaps rightly so. Indeed, it has not the height of the Peruvian peaks, nor the extensive glaciation of the Chilean cordilleras. In what, then, lies its charm ? Perhaps in its evil weather and eternal storms. Ruwenzori, I have read, would lose its lure without its mist and everlasting rain. The Cocuy peaks, too, deprived of their cloudy veil, would fail to produce that exhilarating feeling of unreality and mystery. As for me, the few moments when the cloud-curtain lifted and the sun revealed the mountain grandeur, seemed ample reward for a record of discomfort and failure.

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MAPS

So far no detailed maps have been produced ; the King–Notestein expedition established accurately the heights of some ten of the thirty-odd peaks that form the range, but did not delineate contours of the actual glaciers and peaks. The sketch-map included is based on the King–Notestein survey, with additions and corrections made from observations by other mountaineers or by the writer.