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TABLE TOP

by
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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

TOM AYLMER: At the time the story opens is living in Peru, managing silver mines belonging to his father.
FELICE PARDO: A Peruvian who, although young, has been fifteen years in the service of the Aylmer mining enterprise. He is the most trusted native employee.
MRS. MERCY AYLMER: Tom's mother; egotistical and exacting.
JANE BRADSHAW: Tom Aylmer's fiancée. At the time the story opens, the expectation is that these two will marry on Tom's next leave in England.
ANGUS MAINE: A young Scot on Aylmer's staff, and close companion of Tom.
JACOB FERNANDEZ: A rich, elderly South American whose hobby is the study of bird life. He is a bachelor and is engaged upon a monumental literary work on the subject of bird life.

been before them, but now Macdonald Maine was dead.

The young men had visited the mine and were at present spending their summer holiday under canvas among the hills. Next year they would be due for home and were already looking forward to six weeks in England, but for the present their annual vacation neared an end.

"Will your governor ever come out here again?" asked the Scot.

"I doubt it, Angus. He's getting on and hasn't been too fit lately. I wouldn't say he's awfully happy about the mine. Sometimes in his letters he talks of selling; but he always adds that it wouldn't be easy. There's unlimited silver in the Cordillera no doubt but we're getting rather the worse for wear and a good deal of money ought to be spent on Mount Atajo."
"So Hipolito said," answered Maine, referring to the manager, whom they had recently visited. "He's full of trust and enthusiasm, but he's praying for new machinery."

CHAPTER I

YOUTH ON THE HILLS

Two young men lay upon their backs with a mighty vision of earth and sea stretched around them.

From beneath the shelter of their Panama hats they gazed upon the edge of the world, with the Pacific Ocean arranged in dim lapis lazuli beneath the foothills of the Maritime Cordillera, and the peaks of the Andes stretching mightily northward.

Immediately about him spread enough happiness for one young wanderer who rejoiced in field botany above all other pursuits; but the mind of the other roamed far away. He was an archaeologist and yearned for the ruins of the Incas and exploration in those forests and perilous places where still stood vast fragments of a vanished civilization.

Meanwhile fate had ordered that the pair of them should be clerks in a business office at Lima, and at the capital of Peru they worked for a living. But their status in the Mount Atajo Silver Company differed, for while Tom Aylmer was the son of the owner, his friend, Angus Maine, occupied a minor position. Aylmer's father lived in England, and Tom represented the little private company on the spot, within a few hundred miles of the mine; while his friend's home was Scotland, and he had to thank a dead parent for his present excellent appointment. As these two boys were closest friends, so had their fathers

nothing but short, cotton vests and shabby "blazers."

Far beneath, on the roads that would like white threads among the hills, went mounted men on grazing driving herds of llamas from one grazing ground to another, or companions afoot trudging beside loaded mules; but now the unexpected happened, and a solitary rider appeared in the scrub above them, drew up his mule and lifted a thin shout that travelled to their ears.

They both jumped up to wave and yell an answer; then they climbed to join the stranger, but quickly recognized that he was none. Maine and his friend soon recognized a familiar figure, and his appearance staggered them, for of all men, Felice Pardo was the last to have been expected here.

"Good Lord! It's Felice!" cried Aylmer, and Angus admitted it.

"Pardo all right. Something's happened, Tom—looks sinister if you ask me."

PARDO THE PERUVIAN

Had all been well, Felice Pardo, should now stand at the helm of their affairs at Lima, for when Tom made holiday, he took command; but he had left his post and must have been absent from it at least a week. Pardo was third in the closest possible union. He, too, was young and possessed of character. He had sprung from the people, claimed mixed blood and indeed revealed it. He was vague as to his ancestry and confessed that it admitted of considerable doubt, but he declared an English streak and believed his great-grandfather to have been half an Englishman.

Felice Pardo had lived all his life in Peru and most of it at Lima. He was a year or two older than his friends, had worked at the office of the Mount Atajo Silver Company for fifteen years and now, from office boy, risen to a position of authority and trust. He lived with an widowed mother and spent most of his leisure with his two inseparable companions. He was abler than they, and had many desires and theories for the betterment of the earth. He spoke perfect English and Spanish, and he possessed a sense of humor that the others lacked, but with it there always went a sub-acid flavour, and he often puzzled them by accidental glimpses of thought and the innate bitterness bred of his convictions.

Pardo never spoke of his relations and had never asked either Tom or Angus to his home. They knew Anita Pardo, his mother, for she came to see him at the office sometimes. She, too, spoke English to them on these rare occasions, but lapsed into the vernacular when addressing her son. Signora Pardo was dark, handsome, and inscrutable; but while they sensed as being entirely hidden from their knowledge, she never failed in a courteous attitude to them and declared her son's appreciation of their friendship.

"But I do not know very much about her and have no memory of my father, who died when I was a child," he told them.

Felice's delight was photography, and he rejoiced in making moving pictures.

And now Pardo appeared, dismounted, greeted them with affection and holding Aylmer's hand declared himself the bearer of bad news. They took him to their tent half a mile distant, tethered the mule and prepared a meal.

"I will speak after I have eaten and drunk and not sooner," he said, and knowing him Tom did not press him. He ate quickly, drank a roll bottle of red Peruvian wine, then rolled himself a cigarette and broke his tidings.

"Prepare yourself for very bad news, Tom," he began. "Six days ago the telegram came, and I open all telegrams, of course, when you're not there."

He took the message from a pocket-book and handed it to Aylmer. It was brief:

"Motor accident. Father has passed away. Come home.—Mother."
Felice continued while Tom stared at the telegram. The Peruvian was a man smaller than his friends and would have passed for a native, or a Spaniard. His eyes were lustrous, his mouth almost grim in its hardness, his face clean-shaven. It was not a prepossessing face, for a habitual frown sat upon it and his broad brow had wrinkled permanently.

"I telephoned to the mine at once hoping to catch you there," said Felice. "But I missed you by 24 hours. Hipolito said you had gone over the hills southerly with your outfit; but he had no idea where you were bound. I came up at once to track you if I could, seeing a fortnight must pass otherwise, before you heard the news. It was a big order to find you, but I knew where you could most likely be counted upon. I've slept in the open two nights. There are any number of vicuñas—the wild llamas—higher up."

Angus praised him.

"You're a marvel for finding the needle in a bundle of hay, old man," he said.

"You'll strike camp and go down, Tom?" asked Pardo.

The other, who had been staring before him lost in thought, came to his senses.

"Yes, Felice. We'll go down to the nearest village and leave our stuff and hire horses. With luck we might get

a car. Today's Tuesday. I ought to get the Saturday mail boat."

"We must make for Canta," said Pardo. "That's the nearest civilized spot, and we can get a car there with good roads home. We ought to reach it by tomorrow night, and might pick up mules lower down to help us there. I'd say it isn't much above two hundred miles and mostly downhill."

The little camp was quickly struck, and the tent and baggage loaded on Pardo's mule. They then began the long descent, making good progress, for all were powerful walkers. Over many leagues but little was said, while each young man followed the trend of his own thoughts and, from his own angle of vision, considered what the death of Martin Aylmer was likely to signify. A preponderating reflection occupied the minds of Maine and the Peruvian alike, while the significance of their aspect had not even as yet entered into the mind of Aylmer.

He was solely occupied with the vision of his father, and the recollection of a kindly and somewhat stern parent; one who had been just but never lenient. They were close in friendship and understanding, and Tom knew that his father trusted him in all things, and had left his property to him, together with the care of his mother. None else would be involved, for he was an only son and might now consider himself a fairly prosperous man—free in every respect, and without obligations save to his surviving parent and the girl he was engaged to marry.

He had known his father's purpose since his last visit to England, and doubted not that the terms of the will would confirm it. Nor were his friends ignorant of the future, for Aylmer made no mystery about it. They knew that he would inherit; but Martin Aylmer was no more than sixty-five, and though delicate had promised to survive for many years. Now the case was altered and the paramount thought in the minds of Tom's friends centred upon it. Their chum was now their master, and their future must largely depend upon what course he might determine as to the mine.

SOUTHAMPTON BOUND

Neither man felt anxiety, however, for

the union existing between all three was too close to admit of any doubt. Both guessed that the change was likely to advantage them, whatever Aylmer might decide to do, and for the moment Angus began to concern himself with the other's natural sorrow. He knew that the affection between Tom and his father was genuine, and appreciated the shock that his friend must now be called to endure. Indeed, he presently voiced his sympathy and declared commiseration.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said.
Tom nodded, but did not answer, and then Pardo, who possessed a more realistic mind, spoke of the new situation.

"You'll be top-dog now, Tom," he said. "Mount Atajo's yours and the fullness thereof."
But the other scarcely heard him. They travelled till night fell instantly at set of sun; then they made their camp beside a stream, lifted the tent and lighted a small fire.

Before dawn they were moving again and made renewed progress as soon as light allowed it. Their return to civilization was swift and uneventful for soon after noon they reached a considerable farm, where horses were at their service and fair roads extended to the town of Canta, where a motor car and a good road awaited them. From Canta they telephoned to the mine and told Hipolito where his mule might be found; and then they entered upon the last stage of their journey after directing the return of their horses to the farm from which they came. Arrived at Lima they parted for a night's rest; but not before Aylmer had planned the following day and made a somewhat unexpected proposition.

"Tomorrow, Angus," he said, "I want you to go to Callao and look after the boat. Take two passages, please. The ship goes through the Panama Canal to Jamaica, and from there we pick up a Royal Mail steamer for home. She

only stops for a few hours at Barbados and we ought to be at Southampton nine days later. You'll meet me at the office tomorrow, Felice, and take charge of everything while I'm away."
"Why two tickets?" asked Maine. "Who do you think to take with you?"
"You," replied Tom. "You and Pardo are my right and left hand in future—anyway as far as the mine's concerned—and I shall want you at home when decisions have got to be made. Of course, my mother is the first thought, but a mighty deal depends on what my father may have left as to his future wishes, and it will save a lot of time if you come with me."
"Delighted if you think so," declared Angus, while Pardo made no comment but left them together.



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