

# A PERUVIAN PARADISE ~~~~~ A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

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"Yes," said Fitch, "while you was a-riskin' your life for that 'ussie, we saw one of 'em among the rocks up there. We've got to run for hit!"

Keeth picked up his coat and started to put it on. But a cry from the girl caused him to look up. Out of the timber before them came a crowd of men armed with spears and clubs. They were Indians—a lighter complexion than those usually seen in Peru—and were dressed in all the savage magnificence of an uncivilized people.

They were clothed in little but a short tunic and sandals, but there were brilliantly colored feathers in their hair and their arms and ankles were adorned with heavy bands of gold. They were fierce looking, keen eyed men, and without noticing the white men's superior weapons, marched solemnly toward them. Their huge spears were advanced threateningly, and two or three had already fitted arrows to their bowstrings. At their head walked an old man with wrinkled, parchment-like face, dressed in a long white robe of finely woven llama wool.

"Great Scott, Keeth!" ejaculated Ford. "We're in for it. Shall we fight or run?"

Fitch had already unslung his rifle, and raised it up to his shoulder; but Keeth roused himself in time to strike the weapon up.

"Not on your life, man!" he cried. "One of those fellows with the bows would spit you like a dried codfish. Keep still and let's see what they want. It will be time enough to fight when they try to disarm us."

"But they'll surround us in a minute," growled Fitch.

"Stand back to the tunnel here. They can't get behind us eyes," returned Keeth. "Keep your ears open and don't let them get the better of us by a sudden sally."

The Indians had halted a few yards away, and the old man advanced a step. He addressed some words to the white men which none of them understood. It did not sound like the dialects of either the coast or the mountain tribes with whom they had previously fallen in.

"What's that he's saying?" demanded Ford. "Can you understand the gibberish, Fitch?"

"Not Hl. Try them with Spanish, Mr. Keeth," suggested the trader. "Most Hijnuns understand that."

Keeth, thus adjured, exercised such knowledge as he possessed in that direction. The Indians' faces did not show that they had understood him. They waited in silence a moment and then the old man said something to his followers.

At once the spears were raised and again the bows bent.

"It's fight, I reckon," said Keeth, between his teeth. "Get ready to jump behind that wall yonder. If we can once get under cover we can wipe 'em out before they can send for reinforcements. Be sure your magazines are full."

But at this critical moment, when it seemed as though hostilities would at once begin, the girl, who had looked on in silence, suddenly darted between the hostile parties. She knelt gracefully at the old man's feet and began to speak. He listened attentively, and as she continued he waved his hand to the men behind him and their spears were lowered again. The three white men looked on with anxious faces, uncertain as to the outcome.

## CHAPTER VI.

### GUESTS OR CAPTIVES?

The girl was explaining to her people the incident which had taken place just before their appearance, and was pleading for the lives of the white men who had rescued her. Keeth was sure of this, and as he watched the old man's face he gathered hope. It kindled with love and pride as he gazed down upon the kneeling girl, and the young American shrewdly saw that through their effort in her behalf they had reached the old Indian's heart.

They were nearly an hour in crossing the plateau. Then they descended through a narrow ravine, which turned and twisted like a snake, and suddenly, without warning, came out into a most luxuriant valley. The white men could not suppress exclamations of surprise at the view which met their eyes.

A long, gently undulating stretch of prairie lay before them. It was surrounded on all sides by unbroken cliffs. As far as they could see, the opening through which they had entered the miniature paradise was the only entrance to it. At its widest point it might have been three miles broad. There were great patches of luxuriant grass and here and there small gardens. There were three or four groups of houses, but by far the larger number were just at the left of the ravine through which they had come, and stood in a rude circle about a great, flat roofed structure which covered surely an acre of ground.

All the houses were of gray stone, without the least ornamentation. They looked as stern and forbidding as the cliffs which surrounded the valley. A little stream, like a crinkled silver ribbon, crossed the prairie and disappeared at the base of one of the towering cliffs. Herds of llamas were grazing in the meadows; but no other animals were visible.

The old man and the girl led the way toward this nearest group of dwellings. As they approached, the people began to swarm out. But al-

though they were evidently very curious regarding the three white men they stood respectfully aside at a motion of the old man's hand. Evidently he was a power in the tribe.

In a few minutes they reached the center of the little town, where stood the great building. Its front was a vast porch, the mighty roof upheld by rudely graven pillars, and before the porch, in the center of what might be termed the plaza, was a broad, low altar. The armed escort went at once into the main building (the temple, Keeth decided); but the old man and the maiden led their guests to a row of small houses just in front of the principal entrance. The man opened the door of one, and motioned Ford and Fitch to step within; but when Keeth tried to follow them, he waved him back and pointed to a somewhat larger house beyond.

Keeth hesitated; he did not fancy being separated from his friends. But Ford, who saw his hesitation, said:

"Go ahead, Ronald. We're in for it now, and might as well go the whole figure. His Nibs evidently thinks you are a great chief and you'll get better treatment than we. I wouldn't mind taking dinner with that girl myself."

"If anything happens, fire your pistol," Keeth said, in a low voice, and then suffered himself to be led to the other dwelling. He found that it consisted of but one room; nevertheless it was light and airy. The windows were mere slits in the thick walls; but the door was a heavy wooden one, hung upon roughly wrought hinges of some kind of metal—just what he could not decide.

He was left to himself but a few minutes, and then a tall woman entered with a jar of water on her head and a pile of garments over her arm. She placed the water on the floor and laid down the garments. Then, bowing deeply, but without looking at him, she went out.

"Good!" thought Keeth. "A chance for a bath and something better than these rags, I hope, to put on. I wonder if the other boys will fare as well?"

But when he came to look the garments over he was a little doubtful

about donning them. There was a shirt of finely spun llama wool, cut very low in the neck and sleeveless. In clung close to his body and reached half way between his waist and his knees. The tunic of cured skin (probably from the same useful animal) was likewise sleeveless and fell scarcely lower than the shirt. There were sandals, too—and queer enough they were. The soles were covered by a series of small scales of metal, and upon examination he found that metal to be gold!

"Talk about the riches of the Incas!" he gasped, when he made this discovery. "Why, these people don't know the value of the stuff."

But he was a sight when he was dressed!

"Won't Ford guy me!" he thought, as he tried to see his manly proportions as he stood in the light from the window. "But I can't wear those tattered and torn clothes I had on. Then, I might offend my entertainers if I refused to wear these."

At that moment there was a gentle rap at the door. He turned about and hastened to throw it open. The girl who had already so well proved her friendliness for him and his comrades stood without, and the tall woman, who was evidently a servant, was with her.

They entered, and the girl, taking a small jar from the woman's hands, approached him. She smiled up into his face and touched the wound on his cheek and pointed to his bruised hands. Removing the cover of the jar she began to bathe his wounds with its contents. It was an ointment which gave relief at once as she rubbed it gently in with her fingers. Keeth thrilled beneath her touch and felt himself blushing furiously. Somehow he couldn't make himself look upon her as merely an ignorant savage, and felt vexed with Ford because he had laughingly referred to her as "Pocahontas."

When she had gone the woman spread a cloth upon the floor and brought an abundant supply of food. There was some boiled meat—Keeth thought it probably kid—with vegetables not unlike mealy potatoes, and cakes of coarse flour. There was also a jar of liquor which, although of a rather pungent odor, was not unpleasant to the taste. He made a hearty repast, and when he had finished saw by the waning light that it was almost night.

He was left undisturbed until it was quite dark. Once he heard the loud clangor of brazen cymbals from the direction of the temple and the hum of many voices in the courtyard. But after a while the concourse of people dispersed and then there came a commanding knock upon his door. He opened it. Two gigantic Indians, armed with their ever present spears, stood outside and beckoned him to

come with them. His belt was buckled around his waist beneath the tunic, and he felt of the butts of his revolvers to make sure they were in place before he obeyed. Then he stepped forth and was led toward the temple porch.

Before the door the armed men were relieved by a priestly looking Indian in a long white robe, who motioned Keeth to follow him. He carried a torch, which lit the labyrinth of passages through which he guided the white man. Finally they halted before a heavy door and his guide rapped. Keeth was sure that they had descended some distance beneath the level of the ground, yet the air in the passages was cool and sweet. These wonderful people had some knowledge of ventilation.

A voice—a voice which he recognized—replied to the knock. The guide touched the door and it swung inward. He motioned Keeth to step within, and when he had done so the door immediately closed and the young man found himself in a long, gloomy apartment, the high roof of which was upheld by sculptured columns. At the farther end of the room a single lamp, hanging by chains from the roof, shed a dim glow upon a stone table. At the table sat the old man whose acquaintance he had already made.

Keeth walked slowly down the room and came at length to the table. The light revealed the brown face of the patriarch, with all its innumerable wrinkles. But despite his appearance of extreme age the eyes glowed brightly to the half darkness. Keeth found himself strangely attracted by those eyes. They seemed to scrutinize his very soul and hold his own gaze captive.

For a few moments there was silence between them. The old man was looking his visitor over and a little smile curled the corners of his mouth as he noted his fine proportions, now so well displayed by the Indian dress. Upon the table before him were some rolls of what looked like parchment, frayed and yellowed by time. Keeth saw that they were

saved by the rescued—extract from chapter VI.

"The girl was explaining to her people the incident which had taken place just before their appearance, and was pleading for the lives of the white men who had rescued her.

"Keeth was sure of this, and as he watched the old man's face he gathered hope. It kindled with love and pride as he gazed down upon the kneeling girl, and the young American shrewdly saw that through their effort in her behalf they had reached the old Indian's heart.

"But the affair was too serious to admit of much thought upon the girl's beauty.

"The fierce looking men who were gathered in the background could not be driven back by one discharge of the rifles. Keeth knew that they would suffer the greater punishment."

CHAPTER VII.

### THE FIAT GOES FORTH.

Keeth was astounded. Upon the occasion of his first meeting with the aged Indian, the latter had not made even a sign which led him to believe that he understood Spanish. He now stood dumb before him.

"Speak, senior," said the Indian, somewhat sternly. "What dost thou seek?"

"Then the young man found his voice. He realized that he had a very delicate task before him. It would never do to tell the entire truth. The principal reason for the presence of his friends and himself in the mountains must remain hidden.

"We had lost our way," he said, bowing respectfully to his interrogator, "when you and your people found us. We entered the mountains many leagues to the south of here. He stretched out his hand from in what he supposed to be the right direction. "Our guide fell from the cliff at the three pines, where the tree is laid across the canyon, and was drowned."

The old man inclined his head to show that he knew the spot.

"We climbed down the bluff to find his body and were unable to get back. Therefore we pursued the path by the river's edge until we found the road to the summit of the cliff, made by your people."

"Built by our fathers," murmured the Indian.

"Then, senior, you know how we came suddenly upon the girl, your daughter—"

"Not my daughter, stranger," interposed the old man gently. "My son's child. I am an old man, senior, an old man. I have been a priest of my people since my youth. But how comest thou in these Sierras? Who was thy guide?"

"An Indian," replied Keeth.

"His name?"

"Mannuel was all the name we knew him by."

"It is not an Indian name," said the old priest quietly.

"No, senior. He probably was named by the Spaniards."

A cloud crossed the other's face. "And, senior, art thou not a Spaniard?"

"No. I am of a different nation. I am an American."

"We have no knowledge here of nations and peoples," said the old man sadly. "The world is large, senior?" He asked the question with childish curiosity.

"Very large, indeed," replied Keeth. "And our mountains—these mighty peaks—are but a small portion of it?"

Again Keeth replied affirmatively.

"Then why do you come here, senior? Why do you seek to disturb the unfortunate children of the Incas?"

The old man's face flushed, and he rose suddenly to his feet. "We have been conquered. The brutal Spaniards drove our fathers into these fastnesses ages ago, senior. They lusted for gold—for treasure. Why dost thou, and thy companions, come here?"

"It is not our own choice that we are here," replied Keeth pacifically. "Not here—no! But you came into our country—you seek out the hiding places of my unfortunate people. Dost thou lust for gold, too?"

Keeth was silent. He did not know how to reply to the old priest's vehement query.

"You are not a Spaniard, senior—I can believe it, for I can scarce understand your speech. The knowledge of the Spanish tongue has been handed down from priest to priest since our fathers came into these mountains to escape their conquerors. We are all that are left—this handful of my people—of the true descendants of the Incas. We have kept ourselves free from contamination of the Spanish. We await the time when Quisacocha shall return and re-establish his people in their former power."

He dropped the Spanish, and with hands clasped before him broke out into a hymn, or psalm, in his own tongue. His face kindled, his body swayed backward and forward as he recited the rhythmic lines. Keeth stood in awe. Suddenly the other ceased, and coming quickly from be-

hind the table, seized the young American by the wrist.

"Senior, answer me truthfully, by the God thou serve! Why dost thou come here? Is it for riches?"

"These mountains are full of mineral wealth," replied Keeth lamely.

"The Spaniards searched out our old mines, and our treasure houses," said the priest. "Gold is their god. We have no rich mines now. We only work those which were abandoned by our fathers. And their treasure caves are even hidden from their children, by the will of the gods. We have naught for thee, senior. Why dost thou come to disturb my people?"

"We will gladly go from you, oh priest," responded Keeth. "Put us on the trail to Hualpa and we will never trouble you again—I swear it!"

"Nay, nay! That cannot be. My people would not hear of it," said the old man sadly. "Besides, I know not the place thou namest. We have no knowledge of the outside world. Our intercourse with the poor creatures from among whom thy guide must have come is very slight. Nay, senior; thou art here, here thou must stay!"

Keeth turned pale at the words. A prisoner for life among these people! Death were better.

"Thou palest, senior—yet thou art a brave man," said the priest. "Hadst thou not been I would have had no Imozene to bless my last days. I am an old man; soon I shall go to my fathers. But while I live thou and thy companions shall be well treated."

"But, priest," cried Keeth, "why should you keep us? It was no fault of ours that we fell upon this place."

"Senior," said the old man, shaking his head, "thou hast not told me a Spaniard; but all men of thy fair skin esteem gold above all other possessions. If thou couldst thou wouldst bring into our mountains many like thee, to dig for treasure. This is our refuge." The old man drew himself up to his full height. "My people are brave. They have all the courage of the great Incas. But they cannot withstand the onslaught of thy people. They would fight for their homes till the last drop of blood was shed. But it would avail not. We cannot let thee go."

"I think you look for that which would not occur, senior," murmured Keeth. Yet he knew the old man spoke the truth. The time would come when white men would overrun the Andes and wrest from their serried sides the treasure which he believed was hidden there.

The priest suddenly seized both his hands and gazed deep into his eyes.

"Look upon me, my son!" he commanded, drawing Keeth's gaze, despite his will, to his own flaming eyes. "Thou shalt see what the result of thy search for gold would be."

The young man fought against the

influence which he felt was slowly overpowering him. His brain reeled; the columns upholding the dimly lit room seemed circling about him; he strove to withdraw his hands from the priest's grasp. But the will which enthralled him conquered all opposition. Slowly he sank back upon the rough bench beside the table. He fought no longer. He was passive in the priest's hands. The voice of the wonderful old man seemed to reach his dulled ear from a great distance.

"Look!" commanded the priest. "Behold the end of thy plans, oh worshipper of the god of gold!"

"Keeth's eyes slowly closed, and yet he saw. The walls of the cavernous room seemed like a cloud. It was a cloud in motion, rolling, writhing, changing form continually.

Suddenly it opened, and through the mysterious gloom a picture took shape and grew under his gaze. It was a precipice, and hanging from its verge by a slender thread of hemp was a man upholding the slight figure of a woman. The man's face was his own; the girl was the Indian maiden whose life he had saved that very day. Quickly this picture passed. He saw his companions and himself in the strange city of the descendants of the Incas. These first visions were indistinct, but as he looked those which followed were plainer.

He saw himself, and Ford, and Fitch, in what looked like a great arched cave. The walls glittered with gems. Heaps of golden bars, such as Jose Rodriguez had brought from the Incas' treasure cave, flashed back the light of their torches. But always with them was the face of the girl, Imozene. No picture, as they passed in kaleidoscopic rapidity before his eyes, was complete without her.

Then the cloud writhed and twisted like a mortal in agony, and from out of it appeared visions of great rocks, seamed with glittering gold. He saw men mining the precious metal; first himself and his comrades; then others joined them. Houses and towns sprang up on the rugged plateaus of the mountains. The miners increased. And then he saw the peaceful valley of the Indians again—but, oh, how changed! The light on this picture was dim, but he beheld the prostrate forms of dead men, and pools of blood, and fearful strife. The miners were battling with the ancient occupants of the valley.

He saw himself fighting in the ranks of the victorious white men. He gave and received blows. The din of battle was in his ears. Then the awful carnage ceased. The valley was dotted with the bodies of the dead. There were no more of the children of the Incas to battle for their homes and altars.

Yet the man whom he recognized as himself fought on. He was opposed by but one enemy—a figure so slight, so ethereal, that it evaded his fierce onslaughts, and for a long time escaped his vengeance. It was covered with a mantle and its face he could not see. But at length his sword clove his enemy through. He pulled the dripping blade from the inert body and waved it over his head in triumph. But, as the body of his foe fell, the mantle came away from the face and it was revealed. It was the white, dead face of the girl, Imozene!

Keeth shrieked aloud at the awful sight. He struggled with unseen hands; he fought for breath. And then, of a sudden, he found himself lying in the old priest's arms, who held a cup of some liquor to his lips.

"Drink!" he commanded, and as Keeth obeyed the old man said: "What thou hast seen, remember. As thou seest, so shall it be if my people let thee go. Forget not, oh, rash man!"

CHAPTER VIII.

### REVIEWING THE SITUATION.

It was some minutes before Keeth regained his composure. The nervous strain engendered by his involuntary trance had shaken him terribly.

"You are a wonderful man, priest," he murmured. "No one ever took my will from me before and showed me what was in his thought."

The old man smiled quietly. "Thou art mistaken, senior," he said. "I did not show thee that which I imagined. Think not I have played thee some child's trick. I know not what thou didst see. If the gods revealed to thee that which would follow thy rash purpose, be warned thereby. I am but their servant."

Keeth looked upon him earnestly. He understood something of the power which the old man had shown him. It was a form of hypnotism; but evidently what he had seen had not been suggested by the priest. Never could the old man have beheld that last awful picture and remained so calm. The American was greatly perturbed.

"Thou are a noble young man, stranger," pursued the priest. "Although we must detain thee, thou shalt have such courtesy as befits thy rank; thy companions, too, shall be well treated. I shall esteem it an honor to take thee into my own household; but now thou wilt return to the house where thou art lodged." He struck a sharp blow upon a brazen gong with a little hammer, and the priest who had guided Keeth through the temple appeared, and beckoned him to accompany him.

They passed swiftly through the silent corridors once more, mounted the long flights of stone steps, and at length reached the porch. Here the two waiting guards conducted him back to his house.

The heavy door was closed, but it was not barred. He could have gone

out at any time, for he doubted if a watch was set upon his movements. But it would be of no use to leave the town. There was only one way out of the valley, and without doubt that way was well guarded. The lack of sentinels assured him that his captors considered escape absolutely impossible.

He found a pile of robes at one side of the room, and after arranging this bed lay down and slept soundly till morning. He was awakened just before light by a terrible clangor on the plaza, and springing from his couch ran to the window. A great crowd of Indians were gathered before the temple, but it was still so dark that he could not see what was going on. So, after a moment's hesitation, he opened his door and slipped out.

The sky in the east was aglow with the rising sun, but as yet it had not appeared above the rugged cliffs which shut in the valley. Here it was still dark. He could see the people thronging into the open court before the temple. There must have been nearly a thousand of them—men, women and children. The noise which had awakened him was made by two white-robed priests, standing at either end of the porch, beating great gongs which they held in their hands.

Soon a procession appeared at the entrance of the temple, and the gongs ceased. But the priests leading the procession had small cymbals which they continued to clash most noisily; but these tiny cymbals gave out a high, shrill note not at all displeasing to the ear.

The priests marched slowly out upon the porch, two by two. Those who had no cymbals swung metal dishes of burning incense which filled the whole place with its pungent odor. The priests filed down the steps and arranged themselves about the altar; and then the old man appeared. An attendant led forward a kid, and it was seized and thrown upon the altar, on which a pile of fuel had already been laid.

The high priest held the struggling animal down with his left hand, raising a huge bronze knife aloft in his other. The people chanted in their musical tongue, while the light increased in the sky and the shadows stole away from the valley.

Suddenly the sun appeared. It shot up from behind a peak of the mountain and its first beam rested full upon the face and figure of the high priest. The chant changed to a shout and the knife was plunged into the throat of the sacrifice. Another attendant ran with a blazing torch, and in a moment the flames from the pile on the altar were flashing skyward. The voice of the concourse of Indians rose like the deep, full notes of an organ. The chant was the most solemn thing to which the American had ever listened.

Then they dispersed, and Keeth went back to his place, wondering exceedingly.

After his breakfast had been brought him and he had eaten it, he started out to find Ford Kinsale and Bob Fitch. Nobody molested him and he easily discovered the house in which they were lodged. He saw that the door was open and looked within. His friends were still at breakfast, sitting crosslegged on the floor and evidently enjoying their meal extremely.

"There's one thing about it, Fitch," Ford was saying, "these barelegged heathens don't intend to starve us." "Mebbe they're fattening us up for to sacrifice us," responded the Cockney, gloomily.

"Nonsense!"

"Ye can't tell, sir. Hi 'ad a cousin—a sailor 'ee was—an 'ee was wrecked among the South Sea cannibals. 'Ee said 'ee was never treated better in 'is life, as regarded eating."

"Oh, get out! These people aren't cannibals. Hullo! here's one of 'em now."

Ford glanced up sideways at Keeth standing in the doorway. He didn't recognize him until his eyes reached his face, and then he eat stock still, with a bowl of something in one hand and a cake in the other, and stared in round eyed amazement. Fitch's attention was attracted also by his companion's long silence.

"W'y, Hl'm blest if it hain't Mr. Keeth!" exclaimed the trader.

"Of course it is," responded Keeth, in some disgust. "What's the matter with you, Ford? Don't be an idiot!"

But Ford dropped his eatables and fairly rolled on the ground in the excess of his hilarity.

"Oh, oh, oh!" he shouted. "Just look at him, Fitch! 'The White Chief of the Incas'! Oh, this is rich, Keeth. Won't you be burnt a deep, rich brick red if you go dancing around in those tegs? You look like a Scotch broad sword dancer, you. What you going to do? Marry Pocahontas and settle down with these people?"

Keeth couldn't help grinning himself.

"Get up and don't act so like a fool," he said. "I had to put on something besides those rags of mine, and this was all they had. I shall have to wear 'em till I can get my measurements to my tailor in New York and he sends me something different."

"That's nice," said Ford cheerfully. "Don't laugh so loud, though," pursued Keeth. "Both you fellows may come to it yourselves."

"How so? Are they going to make us don their attire?"

"No; but what you've got on won't last forever."

"What do you mean?" demanded Ford, sobered at once.

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