

The Mummy Miner

By Charles F. Lummis

There was certainly nothing suggestive of antiquity about Faquito's appearance. His droll, brown face, his thickset boyish figure and the alarming tatters of his scant apparel were all undignified as his name—which had got to the most disrespectful distance possible from the stately Francisco of the baptismal font. There could be no worthier name for a boy of Peru than that worn by the great *conquistador* Pizarro. But it is hard to live up to the dignity of the christening, and Francisco degenerates into Francisquito, which is fond; and then to Franco, which is familiar; and finally to Faquito, which is positively rude. Probably it never occurred to the lad to be comforted with thinking that the greatest conqueror of the Americas was called Faquito, too, when he was herding his pigs in Truxillo; and that if one Faquo could grow up to be Don Francisco, so might another. These consolations of philosophy never do come to us until we are too old to need them so much.

But perhaps you are thinking: "Well, why *should* a twelve-year-old *cholo* boy look antiquated? Are lads of that age in Peru expected to be ancient, any more than in New York or Boston?"

N-no, not exactly that—though in the quick tropics a boy *is* older at twelve than is one of the same years in the temperate zone; bigger and more mature. But it was Faquito's occupation rather than his age which made me think of him as rather paradoxical. You will admit that to find this irresponsible, twinkling face set in one of the most century-worn frames on earth might well seem incongruous, not to say startling. The sight of this half Spanish, half Indian¹ boy of to-day, playing with lives and thoughts that were forgotten five hundred years ago—aye, and some of them, perhaps, that long before the Old World dreamed there was a New—was enough to make any explorer rub his eyes.

Doubtless we shall understand each other better by a little translation. *Huaco* is a word not found in the Spanish dictionaries, for it belongs only to Peru. It is from the Quichua, or speech of the Incas, of whom you have heard so many remarkable (and not very accurate) stories; and as adopted into the Spanish of Peru means specifically a relic of the ancient Indian "civilizations" which occupied this strange land before the coming of Europeans. *Huaquero* is the Spanish derivative to mean a digger of these antiquities—in other words, a *mummy miner*. This is a regular profession in Peru, just as much as gold mining. A competent huaquero commands as good wages as a skilled laborer in the marvelous silver mountain of Cerro de Pasco; and, if he works "on his own hook," *may* earn much more. Peru is dotted everywhere with the ruins of large towns of the Incas and other tribes—some of them that we have so long been taught to regard as "kings" and the like, while in fact they were tribes very much like the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico; remarkably advanced in some things, but still entirely Indians socially, politically and mentally. Some of these ruins have been deserted for uncounted centuries, and no man can say who built them nor when they were abandoned. In fact, Peru is the American Egypt in antiquity; and a more than Egypt in richness. It was in its time the richest country in the world. Even before Europeans came to tap its peaks of silver and valleys of gold, the ancient Peruvians had discovered a way to treat the precious metals, and used them to adorn themselves and their temples. Like the Indians they were, they had the invariable Indian idea of the next world; and

¹ For that is *cholo* means.

always buried with their dead the best clothing and other property, to give the wanderer a handsome start beyond the grave—precisely as our aborigines do still. And as the dryness of the Peruvian desert preserves mummies indefinitely through the ages, you will begin to see how mummy mining has become one of the important industries of Peru. There are mummies everywhere; and each mummy has still what was its wealth in life. The gold and silver trinkets, the exquisite cloths and potteries of these strange folk of old, and all the other relics of their handiwork, fetch high prices from museums and collectors.

So that was Faquo's business—and a very hard and unpleasant business it is. *Taita*² Pedro should have provided for his family; but *taita* Pedro much preferred to lie around the great sugar plantation in the next valley beyond the arm of desert, and keep his swarthy hide full of the cheap rum which is the last and worst gift of the sugar cane. He never came home to the little cabin at Lurin—a hut of *quincha*, or wattled bamboos plastered with adobe—except to get money. Poor, fat Maria would have had a very rough time caring for her fat brood, if it had not been for Faquito. She worked in the cane fields of the nearer hacienda, and washed for the priest; but the few *reales* she could earn would not have been enough to put a cotton shirt on half the backs she was responsible for, after feeding all the mouths. Mariquita was a perfect little woman for ten years old; but she could only attend to the babies—which was indeed contract enough for a much older nurse. So it had been a great relief when Faquo got big enough to be a producer—with the equal good fortune that the sandy headland only two miles away was crowned by the mighty ruins of Pachacámac.

Every day, except Sundays and *fiestas*, Faquito was early trudging the dusty road to the ruins, his spade over his shoulder, his fat face screwed up sometimes to whistle a doleful yaraví (the only air he knew), or as often equally twisted with munching sugar cane. It was very convenient to have one's candy growing by the roadside—particularly as there were no stores. All a boy had to do was to clamber over the adobe wall, cut a stalk of the *caña dulce* from amid its dense bristle of sword leaves, and clamber back to chew upon this pithy molasses candy at leisure. There was generally a culm in Faquito's hand as he trudged across; and when he got tired of chewing the obstinate fiber, he would rest his jaws with whistling.

When he had crossed the flat, and waded the shallow brook of Lurin, there was a great scramble up the precipitous bluff which is the jumping-off place of the desert; and even Faquo was always puffing hard by the time he came to the top. An ancient wall was there; and under the long, morning shadow of this he used to sit down a moment—partly for a bit of a rest, and partly because he liked to gaze upon that strange vista in the hot, level light. Behind was the lovely valley, dense green with tropic cane-fields and bananas and palms; but in front was the great, gray desert, unspotted by one living blade. On the rolling sand hills close before him was a wild, mysterious huddle of mighty walls, tall and broken and gray in the sunlight, with black shadows lurking in their angles—walls and walls in a bewildering labyrinth. At his left was the huge castle on its tall headland, boxed about with tier after tier of walls thirty feet high; and in front of him the central hill, crowned with an enormous building. In a hollow at the foot of the castle, fifty acres were thick-dotted with dark, irregular holes, around which thousands of white specks gleamed in the sun. Momently, too, little puffs of dust flew up here and there. Castro and Juan and Pancho, the grown-up huaqueros from Lima, were already at work down there amid the bleaching skulls, each at the bottom of his dusty shaft, hoping at any moment to find a rich tomb—perhaps even the “Big Fish” of Peruvian folk lore. That is what Faquito was dreaming about, too. How many times he had heard of the hundreds of man-loads of gold that the Yuncas

² Papa.

buried in Pachacámac when Hernando Pizarro came pricking down from the mountains, every horse of his cavalcade shod with silver!

If he could only find the *Pez Grande!* Or even the tail of it! He got up from under the wall with a sigh and started down the dusty trail toward where the men were at work. His “mine “was there too—where he had dug a week without finding any but the poorest graves.

Just then an owl—the little brown owl of the desert—flew up almost at his very feet and alighted upon a wall a few rods away. How Mariquita would like it for a pet! Faquo crept up behind the wall; but just as he was about to clap his hat over the bird it fluttered off a few rods farther.

It was so stupid with the sun that Faquo felt sure he would get it this time, and again he crept up. But stupid as the owl was, it was just too smart for Faquo. A dozen times it was almost in his hands; but a dozen times, too, it fluttered away again—until it had led him up the central hill, through the great ruined building there, and down the other side.

At the foot of an adobe wall sixty feet high it settled upon the edge of some deep-sunken rooms. Faquo scrambled down a gap and stole out along the parapet; and suddenly reaching up from this shelter caught the astonished bird by the wing. But he had forgotten the beak and claws, which the very field-mice know. As they hooked savagely into his brown fist he drew back sharply—and just too far. The ledge was very narrow; and overbalanced by his recoil, he fell sprawling twenty feet into the great cell below.

Luckily there was at the bottom nothing harder than the universal in-blown sand; and though sadly shaken up by the fall Faquo was not seriously hurt. For a few moments he lay there half stunned; then slowly gathered himself up and looked about in a dazed way.

The owl was still in his hand—less by his grasp thin by the obstinate clenching of its own curved claws, which now began to hurt again. He unhooked them painfully, one by one, tore a tatter from his shirt and tied it about those mischievous feet. A rather stubborn boy, Faquo. It was very hard to turn his attention from anything upon which he had once started, until it was finished.

At last, when his prize was safely anchored to a clod of adobe, he was free to think of more important matters. *Pues!* He had walked into a bad trap. There were no doors nor windows down here—clearly the ancients had descended into these cellar-like rooms by ladders, which had long ago disappeared. And how was he to get up that twenty feet? In this adobe he could cut steps to the top; or even, in time, burrow through the base of that eight-foot wall—but his spade stood away up there on the ledge, leaning against the parapet where he had left it.

“Castro! Cas-tro-o!” he screamed at the top of his lungs—but it seemed that his voice did not rise at all out of the sunken chamber. How buried and pent it was! He shouted until he was hoarse; but knew as well that the huaqueros did not hear him, as if he could have seen them still digging stolidly away, far down the other side of the hill.

The place grew terrible to him. In such a maze of ruins they might not find him until too late. Maria would come to look, surely, if he were not home by dark; but how could she expect to find him so far from where he always worked?

He knew well, this boy of the edge of the desert, that one does not last long on such a gridiron of the tropics. Without food one may do for several days; but without water, under that sun! Already his mouth was parched.

And that *maldito* owl—that was to blame for it all! He started up angrily with a clod of adobe to throw at it. But his arm dropped suddenly. “No! *Nana* says always that the birds, too, are

children of *Taita Diós*, and that He loves best those who are good to them. So perhaps I am punished for catching it. *Pobrecito!* For now we both are caught.”

The owl did not seem to mind so much. It sat bunched upon its tethered feet, blinking back at Faquo. It looked so very grave, so very wise! *Quiza* it knew very much about the ruins; for here it had lived, and its people, very long now. Perhaps it even knew where was the Big Fish!

Even as Faquo looked at it with these thoughts, the owl turned its head down on one side, and looked at him soberly along its shoulder. Some might have laughed at this proceeding, but not so Faquito. He was too good an Indian to despise the wisdom of them that talk not; and suddenly he asked with great earnestness: “In truth that thou dost know, friend owl! No?”

At this direct question the owl turned its head down upon the other shoulder, and looked wiser than ever. Surely, he knew!

“But where?” cried the boy. “Tell me, owl friend!”

But the bird said not a word. Only it gazed at Faquo very seriously; and then, turning its head as upon a pivot, began to spruce up the feathers upon its back, as much as to say: “Oh, that you must find out for yourself, as I did.”

Such a wise bird, but so unspoken! Really, how convenient it must be to be able to turn one’s head square around that way, and look straight back! It must be that he can even see that spot on the wall just behind him and above his head—that round place where the adobe is yellower than the rest. Probably the plaster was broken there, and they patched it.

Faquo got up idly, and set the owl carefully to one side, and passed his hand over the spot. It was somewhat larger than his head—just a round patch of adobe plaster, centuries old, yet evidently newer than the rest of the wall.

He picked aimlessly at its edge. A pebble came out under his fingers, and showed, behind, a small crevice—as if a deep hole had been filled up, instead of a little break in the wall plaster. Instantly the boy’s eyes waked up, and a queer, professional look settled upon his face.

“It will be a wall niche,” he said gravely. “And sometimes they filled them up to change the wall; but why did the owl sit by this one, if that was all?”

He pried and pulled until his fingers were sore, and pounded with his fist upon the yellow patch; but the adobe was very stubborn. How aggravating to have the spade perched away up there, when he wanted to open this niche! For by now he had quite forgotten about getting out of his prison. The strange fascination that all miners know was upon him.

Plague take the spade! He picked up again the strong lump of adobe which had fallen with him from the upper wall, and flung it at the offending spade. It struck the sandy shelf, and a little stream of sand fell down with the missile. That gave him a thought; and he picked up his clod and threw it again and again and again.

Each time it fell back a little smaller, but each time a little more sand sifted down. Then the sand, thus started, began frittering down of its own accord, and the undermined shovel began to creep, stopped, slid a little, and at last pitched down and fell at Faquo’s feet.

He jabbed at the adobe with the corner of his spade, and the hard lumps showered down upon his bare toes. In a few moments a smooth-rimmed opening was revealed, and he thrust in his arm.

It was not like any of the niches he knew—the ones that have never been closed, but remain as they were 500 years ago, when the people of Pachacámac kept on these odd shelves their ornaments and trinkets. This one was like a nest of the “God-give-you” bird—with a small opening, but large inside. In the big hollow was something soft; and Faquo drew out his hand full of beautiful yellow floss.

“The wool of the vicuña, only,” he mumbled, disappointedly, but with the expert’s air. “But why should they cell *that* up? Perhaps there is also cloth.”

In went the brown fist again; and rummaging down through the silken fleece, his fingers met something firmer. In a moment he had it out—a long bundle of that matchless weaving of old Peru; of cloth as soft and strong as silk, woven with strange figures of men and gods and beasts; such fabrics as never unthinking loom has woven, nor any machine less wondrous than the fingers of a man.

“Ay! It will be worth twenty *soles!*” cried Faquo softly. “But it is so heavy! Perhaps they have wound it on a stone.”

Very tenderly he unrolled it, that none of those bright threads—stronger than all the centuries, but brittle to a careless touch—might be broken. But when the last fold came off, this very stupid Indian boy fell down on his knees in the sand, and cried and cried. For it was not a stone at all.

If you will go to the *Exposicion* in Lima, among the bewildering collections of Peruvian antiquities, you can see two priceless idols, each big as a large doll. They are like human figures, excellently sculptured; and the strangest thing about them is that they are made of alternate zones of gold and silver from feet to head, so that they remind one of that great image we read of in Revelations.

That is the nearest Faquito ever came to finding the *Pez Graude*—and quite near enough for one poor boy. And that is what took my breath away when I had wakened and hauled up with my reata the little, ragged cholo I accidentally spied in the trap where he had cried himself to sleep over something hugged in his arms.

When he had laid the precious images and the spade on the broad top of the wall, and told me all about it, he insisted on being lowered again on the rope to get the owl, which he loosed and let go, saying, in the tone of an old man:

“*Taita Diós—God* our Father—sends us friends we know not. For the owl brought me here and showed me the place, so that now we are very rich. And even so, I could have died there without the help of you. So I think your grace may be even as wise as the owl, which knows where is the *Pez Grande*.”