

The Black Pearl

SCOTT O'DELL



Illustrated by Milton Johnson

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[About the Author](#)

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In that day, the Lord shall
punish the piercing serpent . . .
and he shall slay the dragon
that is in the sea.

ISAIAH

EVERYONE who lives in our town of La Paz, or along the far coasts or among the high mountains of Baja California, has heard of the Manta Diablo. There are many who live in the great world outside who have heard of him also, I am told. But of these thousands only two have really seen him. And of the two, only one is alive — I, Ramón Salazar.

There are many people in the town of La Paz and in Baja California who *say* they have seen the Manta Diablo. Old men around the fires at night tell their grandsons of the meetings they have had with him. Mothers seek to frighten bad children by threatening to call from the deeps of the sea this fearsome giant.

I am now sixteen, but when I was younger and did things I should not have done, my own mother said to me solemnly, “Ramón, if you do this thing again I shall speak a word to the Manta Diablo.”



She told me that he was larger than the largest ship in the harbor of La Paz. His eyes were the color of ambergris and shaped like a sickle moon and there were seven of them. He had seven rows of teeth in his mouth, each tooth as long as my father's Toledo knife. With these teeth he would snap my bones like sticks.

Mothers of my friends also threatened them with the Manta Diablo. He was a somewhat different monster from the one my mother knew, for he had more teeth or less or eyes shaped in a different way or only a single eye instead of seven.

My grandfather was the most learned man in our town. He could read and use a pen and recite long poems right out of his memory. He had seen the Manta Diablo several times both at night and in the daytime, so he said, and his descriptions were nearer the truth as I know it.

Yet, I say to you, that of all the old men and the mothers and even my grandfather, not one has been able to give a true picture of the Manta Diablo.

It is possible that if Father Linares were living today he could tell us the truth. For it was he who first saw him, more than a hundred years ago.

That was the time when the Manta Diablo was a thing with claws and a forked tongue. It roamed our land back and forth and where it went the crops would wither and die and the air was foul. It was then that Father Linares commanded it in the name of God to disappear into the sea and remain there, which it obediently did.

I do not know whether Father Linares saw it again or not, but I do know that while it lived there in the sea it lost the claws and forked tongue and the evil smell. It became the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. Yes, beautiful. And still it was the same evil thing that Father Linares banished from our land many years ago. This is strange.

It is strange also that long ago I did not believe in the Manta Diablo. When my mother would threaten me I would quietly laugh to myself. Maybe I did not laugh but surely I smiled, for how could such a monstrous creature be alive in the world? And if it were alive how could my mother know it so well that she could speak a word and summon it to her side?

My blood felt cold nonetheless, and my scalp tingled when she spoke because I liked to feel this way. I wanted to believe that the Manta Diablo was really alive somewhere and that he would come when she called. Then I could see him and count his eyes and teeth while my mother explained at the very last moment that I had promised to be good so she did not want him to snap my bones after all.

That was long ago. Now that I have seen the Manta Diablo and struggled with him during the whole of one night and part of a day, in the waters of our Vermilion Sea, along with Gaspar Ruiz, the Sevillano, I wonder that I ever doubted.

But before I speak about that time and the three of us there on the quiet sea in a struggle of death, before I tell what I know about the Manta Diablo, I must also tell about The Pearl of Heaven.

IT SEEMS NOW as if it were a long time ago, but it was only last summer, on a hot day in August, that I sat at the window and watched our pearlers make ready to sail.

My father is Bias Salazar and for many years he was the most famous dealer in pearls anywhere on the Vermillion Sea. His name was known in Guaymas and Mazatlan and Guadalajara, even as far away as the City of Mexico, for the fine pearls he wrested from the sea.

Last July on my birthday he made me a partner in his business. It was a grand fiesta and people came from the town and from miles around to drink chocolate and eat pig roasted in a deep pit. The biggest part was at the beginning of the feast when my father brought forth a sign, which he had hidden until that moment, and nailed it over the door of the office. The sign said in tall gilt letters SALAZAR AND SON, and under this legend in small letters was the word *Pearls*.

My father beamed with pride. "Ramón," he said, pointing at the sign, "Look! Now there are two Salazars to deal in pearls. Now they sell twice as many pearls as before and finer ones. They sell pearls in all the cities of the world, these Salazars!"

I looked at the sign and blinked my eyes and felt like shouting. But at that moment my father said something that made me feel like a boy and not like a partner in the House of Salazar.

"Ramón," he said, "pull down your cuffs."

I am not scrawny, yet I am small for my age and thin. My wrists are very thin and my father was ashamed of them. Being so big himself, he did not like to think that his son was puny nor that anyone else thought so.

Afterward my father took me into the office and showed me how to open the huge iron safe. He showed me the trays lined with black velvet and filled with pearls of all shapes and colors and sizes.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I will begin the education. First I will teach you how to use the scales with accuracy, for the weight of the pearl is very important. Then I will explain the many shapes, which is also very important. Last of all I will show you how to hold a pearl up to the light and tell just by looking at it whether it is of excellent quality or good quality or only poor. Then, by the time you are as old as I am, you will be the best pearl dealer in all of our country and you can teach your son everything I have taught you."

That was the happiest day of my life, that day four months ago, and yet it was not all happy. Besides the embarrassment when my father had said, "Ramón, pull down your cuffs," there was also a big fear that kept worrying me.

As my father explained everything I had to learn, I feared that not soon would I have a chance to sail with the fleet. For many years I had dreamed of the time when I would be old enough to go. When you are sixteen, my father had said, you can sail with me and I will teach you how to dive in the deep water. Many times he had said this, and I had counted the weeks until I would be sixteen. But now that I was sixteen at last, I could not learn to dive for pearls until I learned many other things.

There is a small window in our office. It is only a slit in the stone and set high in the wall, and it looks more like an opening in a jail than a window. It was built that way so that not the smallest thief can squeeze through. Yet it gives a fine view of the beach and the Bay of La Paz. Furthermore, the men who work there on the beach opening the shells cannot tell whether they are being watched or not, which sometimes is a good thing.

On this morning as I sat at my desk I could see the five blue boats of our fleet riding at anchor. Water casks and coils of rope and supplies lay on the beach ready to be carried aboard. My father strode back and forth, urging the men to hurry for he wanted to catch the outgoing tide.

The tide would turn in less than three hours, but in that time I hoped to examine all of the pearls

that lay on my desk. There were still nine of them to look at and weigh and duly note in the ledger, so quickly I set to work.

Under the desk, wrapped in a neat bundle, were my singlet, cotton pants, and a long, sharp blade my grandfather had once given me with which to fend off sharks. I was ready to sail with the fleet if my father would give his consent, and I had made up my mind to ask him, whatever happened.

The largest of the pearls was as big as the end of my thumb, but flat in shape and with several dimples that could not be peeled away. I placed it on the scales and found that it weighed just over thirty-five grains. In my head I changed grains into carats and set down on a fresh page of the ledger: 1 baroque button. Dull. Wt. 8.7 cts.

The second pearl was smooth and pear-shaped. I held it to the light and saw that it gave off a soft amber glow, whichever way it was turned. I set it on the scales and then wrote down in the ledger: 1 pear. Amber. Wt. 3.3 cts.

I had put the seventh pearl on the scales and was carefully setting the small copper weights to make them come to a proper balance when I heard my father's steps outside the office. My hand shook at the sound and one of the weights slipped from my fingers. A moment later the heavy iron door swung open.

My father was a tall man with skin turned a deep bronze color from the glare of the sea. He was very strong. Once I saw him take two men who were fighting and grasp them by the backs of their necks and lift them off the ground and bump their heads together.

He came across the room to where I sat at the desk on my high stool and glanced at the ledger. "You work with much rapidity," he said. "Six pearls weighed and valued since I left this morning." He wiped his hands on the tail of his shirt and took a pearl from the tray. "For this one," he said, "what is your notation?"

"Round. Fair. Weight 3.5 carats," I answered.

He rolled the pearl around in the palm of his hand and then held it to the light.

"You call this one only fair?" he asked. "It is a gem for the king."

"For a poor king," I said. After four months of working with my father I had learned to speak my mind. "If you hold it closer to the light, you will see that it has a flaw, a muddy streak, about midway through."

He turned the pearl in his hand. "With a little care the flaw can be peeled away," he said.

"That, sir, I doubt."

My father smiled and placed the pearl back in the tray. "I doubt it also," he said and gave me a heavy pat on the back. "You are learning fast, Ramón. Soon you will know more than I do."

I took a long breath. This was not a good beginning for the request I wanted to make. It was not good at all, yet I must speak now, before my father left. In less than an hour the tide would turn and the fleet sail from the harbor.

"Sir," I began, "for a long time you have promised me that when I was sixteen I could go with you and learn how to dive for pearls. I would like to go today."

My father did not reply. He strode to the slit in the wall and peered out. From a shelf he took a spyglass and held it to one eye. He then put the spyglass down and cupped his hands and shouted through the slit.

"You, Ovando, leaning against the cask, send word to Martin, who leans against the tiller of the *Santa Teresa*, that there is much work to do and little time in which to do it."

My father waited, watching through the slit, until his message was sent forward by Ovando.

"If you go with the fleet," he said, "then all the male members of the Salazar family will be on the sea at once. What happens if a storm comes up and drowns the both of us? I will tell you. It is the end of Salazar and Son. It is the end of everything I have worked for."

"The sea is calm, sir," I answered.

~~"These words prove you a true landsman. The sea is calm today, but what of tomorrow? Tomorrow it may stand on end under the lash of a chubasco."~~

"It is still a week or two before the big wind comes."

"What of the sharks? What of the devilfish that can wring your neck as if it were the neck of a chicken? And the giant mantas by the dozens, all of them the size of one of our boats and twice as heavy? Tell me, what do you do with these?"

"I have the knife that grandfather gave me."

My father laughed and the sound bounded through the room like the roar of a bull.

"Is it a very sharp knife?" he asked scornfully.

"Yes, sir."

"Then with much luck you might cut off one of the eight arms of the devilfish, just before the other seven wrap around you and squeeze out your tongue and your life."

I took another breath and brought forth my best argument.

"If you allow me to go, sir, I shall stay on deck while the others dive. I shall be the one who pulls up the basket and minds the ropes."

I watched my father's face and saw that it had begun to soften.

"I can take the place of Goleta," I said quickly, to follow up the advantage I had gained. "There is an apology to make, sir. At noon Goleta's wife came to say that her husband is sick and cannot sail. I forgot to tell you."

My father walked to the iron door and opened it. He looked at the sky and at the glossy leaves of the laurel trees that hung quiet on their branches. He closed the door and put the tray of pearls in the safe and turned the bolt.

"Come," he said.

Quickly I picked up my bundle and in silence we went into the street and up the winding path to the church high on the bluff. My father always came here before the fleet sailed to ask the protection of the Madonna against the sea's dangers. And when the fleet came home the first thing he did was to hurry here and offer thanks for its safe return.

The church was deserted, but we found Father Gallardo and aroused him from his afternoon siesta. While he stood beside the Virgin and held his arms outstretched in benediction we knelt and bowed our heads.

"We ask Your mercy for these men," Father Gallardo said. "Give them good winds and good tides. Guard them against the hazards of the deep waters, make their journey fruitful in all ways, and bring them back in health."

I glanced up at the Madonna as Father Gallardo finished his benediction. She stood calmly in her niche fashioned of seashells, dressed all in white velvet. She had the face of a child, but she was really a young woman, neither Indian nor Spanish, with broad Indian cheeks of a golden brown, and eyes of the women of Castile, large and shaped like almonds.

I had always loved her, yet never so much as I did at this moment. I was still gazing at her when my father gave me a pinch on the shoulder and motioned me to follow.



We went outside and stood for a moment under the laurel trees.

~~“I note the bundle under your arm,” my father said, “so you must have told your mother when you left this morning.”~~

“I said nothing to her. But I shall go now to tell her that I am leaving.”

“No, I will send someone with a message. If you go it will take time. We are already late. Besides, there will be tears and lamentations, which are poor heralds for a voyage.”

He summoned a boy who was watching us from a distance and gave him a message to take to my mother. Then we went down the hill toward the beach. The sun was setting, yet I could clearly see the fine blue boats of our fleet riding at anchor. In the fading light they looked silver, like live silver fish floating there. Beyond them the harbor stretched away for leagues between the headlands to the island of Espiritu Santo and the open sea.

I wanted to ask my father many things as we went down the hill, but my head was buzzing with excitement and I could think of nothing to say.

THERE WERE FIVE BOATS in our fleet. Each was about twenty feet long and broad-beamed, with a high prow and stern like a canoe, and a small square sail. They were built on the beach of our town, but the wood came from the mahogany forests of Mazatlan. Each was named after a saint and all were painted blue, the blue of the sea where the water is very deep.

Each boat carried four or five men. On our boat, the *Santa Teresa*, there were besides my father and myself an Indian and a young man named Gaspar Ruiz.

This Ruiz had come to our town about a month before from Seville in Spain, or so he said, and therefore we called him the Sevillano.

He was tall and his shoulders were so wide and powerful that they seemed to be armored in steel instead of muscle. His hair, which was gold-colored, grew thick on his head like a helmet. He had blue eyes, so blue and handsome that any girl would have envied them. His face was handsome, too, except that around his mouth there always lurked the shadow of a sneer.

Besides this, nowhere on the Vermilion Sea could you find a better diver for pearls than Gaspar Ruiz. There were some who could stay under water for longer than two minutes, but to the Sevillano three minutes was an easy dive. And once when he had to hide from a large gray shark he was down four minutes and came up laughing.

Also he was a great braggart about the things he had done in Spain and elsewhere. Not only did he brag about these things, but many of them were tattooed on his body. There was a picture in red and green and black ink of Gaspar Ruiz fighting an octopus that had a dozen tentacles. Another showed him thrusting a long sword into a charging bull. Still another showed him choking a mountain lion to death with his bare hands.

These scenes were tattooed on his shoulders and arms and even on his legs, so that he looked very much like a picture gallery walking around.

We had not sailed far that night before the Sevillano began to talk about himself. He sat with his back against the mast and told a long story of how he had once dived in the Gulf of Persia and there found a pearl bigger than a hen's egg.

"What did you do with it?" my father asked.

"I sold it to the Shah."

"For much money?"

"Much," said the Sevillano. "So much that I bought a pearling fleet of my own. It was larger than yours. Today I would be a rich man if it had not foundered in a bad storm."

The Sevillano went on to tell about the storm, which must have been the greatest ever seen in the world, and how he saved his own life and the lives of his crew.

Before I became a partner with my father, sometimes I used to see him on the beach when the boats went out or when they came in and sometimes in the plaza. He always had a group around him, listening to his tales, but somehow I felt that he was talking to me more than to the others. Once when I questioned him in fun about one of these tales that I knew to be a lie, he turned on me.

"You do not believe that I tell the truth?" he said, clenching his teeth. Before I could answer, he said, "You are the son of a rich man and you live in a big house and you eat good food and all of your life you have done little. Nor will you ever do more."



Too surprised to speak, I was silent. He watched me for a moment and then took a step toward me and lowered his voice. ~~“Your father is a rich man. My father was a poor man whose name I do not know. From the time I could walk I have done something and in my life I have done many things and what I have done I talk about truthfully. So guard your tongue, mate.”~~

I mumbled an apology and walked away, but when he thought I was out of hearing I heard him say to his friends, “That one who just left us. Have you noticed the red hair that sticks up on his head like the comb of a rooster? Well, that comes from Africa. It is from the infidel blood of Moors and Berbers.”

I was about to turn around and confront him. He was older than I and stronger and he carried a knife at his belt, but it was not this that held me back. I knew that my father would think it an insult to the Salazar name for me to start a brawl in a public place, no matter what the cause. So I swallowed my pride and I walked on as if I had not heard.

I said nothing to my father about this encounter, and afterward when I met the Sevillano I said nothing to him. I acted as if I did not remember what he had said to me or what I had overheard. And when I became a partner in the firm and he would come to the office to get his pay, I acted no differently. Yet I had not forgotten the encounter nor, I am sure, had he.

On this night as we sailed out of the harbor and he sat and told the tall tale about the storm and his rescuing the whole crew of his pearling fleet, I felt that he was talking to me more than to the others. I felt that he was trying to goad me into saying something as I had before, so that he could make me uncomfortable in front of my father. I therefore listened and kept silent.

We reached the pearling beds at dawn and anchored the five boats in a cluster over a reef where the shells grew.

Everything was new to me. I had heard many stories of the pearling beds since the time I was old enough to listen, from my father and grandfather and from my friends who were the sons of pearlmen. But to be really there on the sea with the sun coming up in a coppery haze and watch the men slip out of the boats into water clear as air, was to me a part of a long dream come true.

My father showed me how to pull up the basket when it was full and how to stack the shells in the boat. Then he took the sink stone in one hand, carefully coiled the rope that was attached to it and tied it to the boat, picked up the basket and its rope, and went over the side. Down he went with the heavy stone until he reached the bottom.

Through the clear water I watched him drop the stone, take the big knife from his belt, and start to pry the oyster shells from the rocks. When the basket was full he gave a tug at the rope and I pulled it up. A moment later he rose, trailing a stream of bubbles from his mouth, and I stacked the shells as I had been told and drew up the sink stone for the next dive.

The Sevillano had gone down before my father and was still down as he dived again. When the Sevillano came to the surface he held onto the side of the boat and glanced up at me.

“How does the work go?” he said.

“I learn.”

“There is not much to learn, mate. You pull the shells up and then the sink stone and you stack the shells and then you wait a while and do it all over again. It is work for children.”

He spoke softly and smiled, but I knew what he meant. “It would be fun to dive,” I answered him.

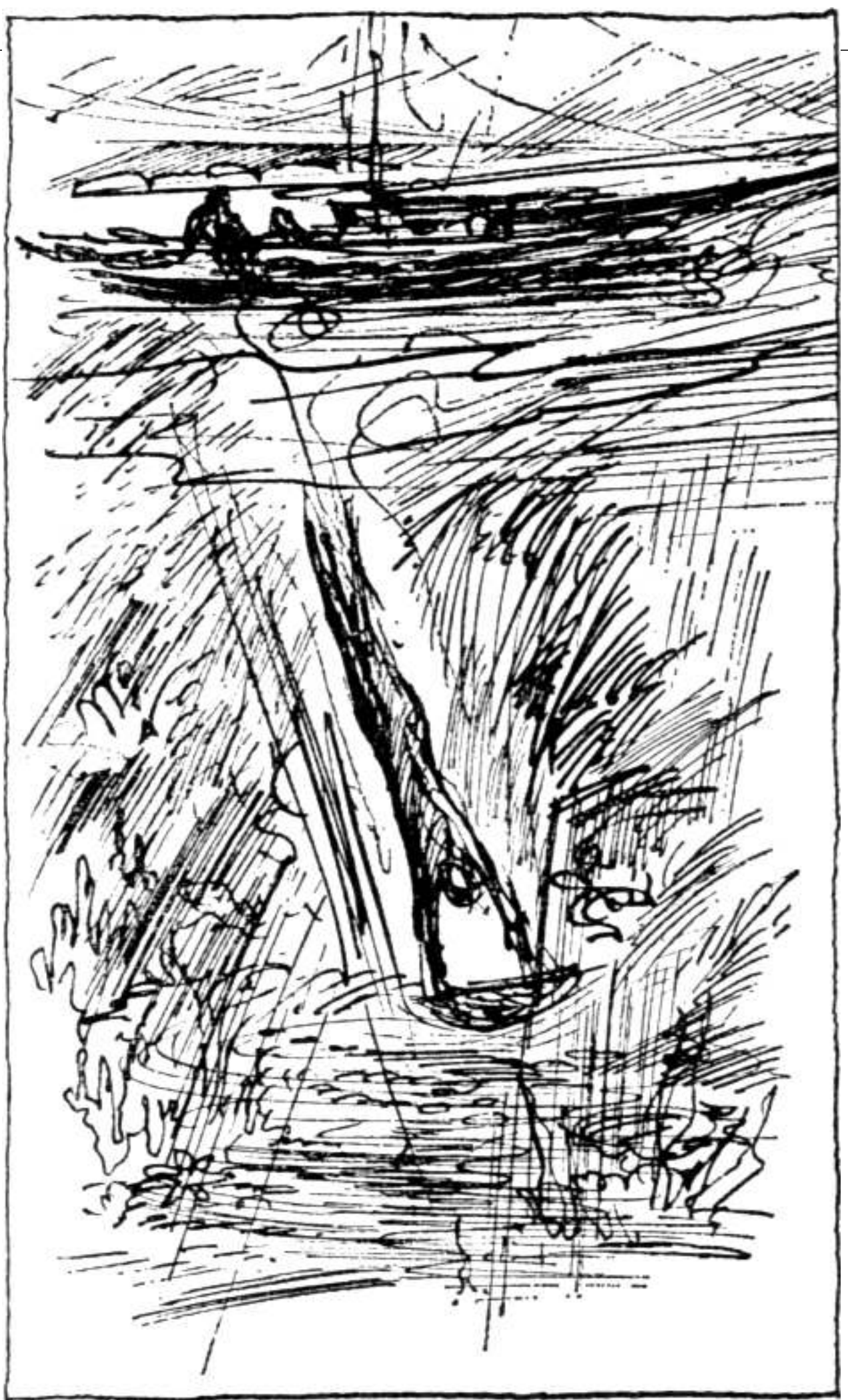
“More fun, mate, but more danger too.”

He pointed to the arm he was resting on the gunwale. From his elbow to wrist ran a long, jagged scar, as if the arm had been pulled through the jaws of a steel trap.

“This one,” he said, “I got from a burro clam. I put my hand down deep into a crevice and snap, it was not a crevice but the mouth of a burro, the father of all burros. Señor Clam had me tight, but I did not leave my arm with him, as you can see. That was in the Gulf, yet there are many burros here in the

Vermilion.” He looked up at me again and smiled. “It is better, mate, that you stay in the boat.”

~~The Indian who was working with the Sevillano handed him the sink stone and the Sevillano went down, saying nothing more to me. Nor did he speak to me again that morning. At midday the *Santa Teresa* was loaded with shells and low in the water, because the Sevillano did the work of three divers so my father sent him out to help in the other boats.~~



From time to time during the afternoon, when he came up for air, he would call over to me, “Be careful, mate, and do not get your foot caught in the rope,” or “There are sharks around, Señor Salazar, mind that you do not fall in the water.”

Such things as that I heard during the whole of the afternoon. My father also heard them, though the Sevillano usually spoke to me when he thought my father was not listening.

“He is a troublemaker,” my father said, “but let him talk. What do you care what he says? Remember that he is the best gatherer of pearls we have. And it is for pearls that we are here on the sea, not for other reasons.”

By dark the boats were piled high with cargo and we set sail for La Paz. The moon came up and a brisk wind that filled the sails. The Sevillano was in good spirits, as if he had not made dozens of deep dives that day. He perched himself on the mound of shells and once more told how he had found the great pearl in the Gulf of Persia, the same tale he had told before but longer. Again I had the feeling that his story was meant for me more than the others.

And as I listened to him a dream began to take shape in my mind. It was a fanciful dream that made me forget the insults that I had suffered silently. I saw myself in a boat anchored in a secret lagoon somewhere on the Vermilion Sea. I put a knife in my belt and grasped the basket and the heavy sink stone and plunged to the bottom. There were sharks swimming around me in slow circles, but I gave no heed to them. I pried clump after clump of shells from the rocks, filling my basket. After I had been down for three or four minutes, I floated to the surface through the circling sharks, and climbed into the boat and pulled up the basket. Then I pried open the shells, one after the other. Nothing. At last there was only one shell left. Discouraged, I opened it and was about to toss it away when I saw before me a pearl larger than my fist that shone as if a fire burned inside . . .

Right at that moment, just as I was about to clutch the pearl in my hand, the Sevillano stopped talking. Suddenly he stood up on the mound and pointed astern, along the path the moon was making on the sea.

“Manta,” he shouted, “Manta Diablo.”

I jumped to my feet. I could see nothing at first. Then the boat rose on a wave and I made out a silvery shape swimming half out of the water not more than a furlong away.

Truthfully, I must say that for all its beauty the manta is a fearsome sight to those who sail our Vermilion Sea. There are small mantas, no larger when they are full grown than ten feet from one wing tip to the other. But there are some that measure twice that length and weigh most of three tons.

Both kinds are shaped very much like a giant bat and they swim through the water with a regular upward and downward beat of their flippers. And both have a mouth so enormous that a man may easily put his head into it and on either side of this maw are large lobes like arms, which the manta pushes out and then draws in to capture its prey.

Their prey surprisingly is not the shoals of fish that abound in our sea, but shrimp and crabs and such small things. Most of the mantas have a pilot fish that swims along beneath them. These fish swim in and out of their mouths, it is said, to clean up the pieces of food that catch in their plate-like teeth.

And yet for all of his friendly ways, the manta is a fearsome beast. When aroused by some careless insult, it can break a man’s neck with a flick of its long tail or lift one flipper and wreck the strongest boat.

“Manta,” the Sevillano shouted again. “El Manta Diablo!” His Indian helper quickly scrambled away and crouched down in the bow of the boat and began to mutter to himself.

“No,” said my father, “It is not the Diablo. Him I have seen and he is bigger by twice than this one.”

“Come where you can see better,” said the Sevillano. “It is the Manta Diablo. I know him well.”

I was certain that he was trying to scare the Indian and my father was certain of it, too, for he lashe

the tiller and climbed to where the Sevillano stood. He glanced astern for a moment and then went back to the tiller.

“No,” he said, loud enough for the Indian to hear, “It is not even the small sister of the Diablo.”

The Indian fell silent, but he was still frightened. And as I watched the manta swimming along behind us, its outstretched fins like vast silvery wings, I remembered that once I had also been frightened at the very sound of the name.

At last the manta disappeared and near dawn we rounded El Magote, the lizard tongue of land that guards the harbor, and anchored our boats. As my father and I walked home in the moonlight, he said

“About the Sevillano, let me repeat to you. Treat him with courtesy. Listen to his boasts as if you believed them. For he is a very dangerous young man. Only last week I learned from a friend who lives over in Culiacán that the Sevillano was born there. And that he has never been in Seville nor any part of Spain nor in the Gulf of Persia nor anywhere except here on the Vermilion. Also, that he has had many fights in Culiacán, one of them fatal.”

I promised my father that I would obey him, but as we walked toward home I again thought of my dream and the big pearl I had found and how surprised the Sevillano would be when he saw it.

FOUR DAYS PASSED and I was standing at the desk, with a pen over my ear and the leather-bound ledger open in front of me. I was watching a canoe that moved around the tip of the lizard tongue. It was a red canoe and came swiftly, so I knew it belonged to the Indian Soto Luzon.

I was glad to see old Luzon. He had sold pearls to my father for many years. He came about every three months and never brought more than one, but it always was a pearl of good quality. Soon after I began to work with my father he had brought in a beautiful pearl of more than two carats.

As I watched Luzon beach the canoe and come up the path, I hoped he was bringing another like it, for the yield from our last trip had been poor. Five boatloads of shells had yielded no round or pear-shaped pearls and only a handful of buttons and baroques, all of them dull.

I opened the door at his timid knock and invited him to come in and sit down.

"I have traveled all night," Luzon said. "If it pleases you, I would like to stand."

Luzon never sat. He had an Indian's thin legs but a powerful chest and thick arms that could wield a paddle for hours and not grow tired.

"I passed your boats this morning," he said. "They were near Maldonado."

"They are going to Isla Cerralvo."

The old man gave me a shrewd look. "The fishing is not good around here?"

"Good," I said. It was not wise to say that it was poor, when he had come to sell a pearl. "Very good."

"Then why, señor, do the boats go to Cerralvo?"

"Because my father wants to search there for the black ones."

The old man fumbled in his shirt and pulled out a knotted rag and untied it. "Here is a black one," he said.

I could see at a glance that it was round and of a good quality, like the pearl I had bought from him three months before. I placed it on the scales and balanced it against the small copper weights.

"Two and a half carats," I said.

My father never haggled with Luzon and always gave him a fair price and had told me to do the same. For that reason old Luzon always brought his pearls to Salazar and Son, although there were four other dealers in our town.

"Two hundred pesos," I said.

This sum was about fifty pesos more than my father would have offered, but a plan was taking shape in my mind and I needed the old man's help. I counted out the money and he put it in his shirt, probably thinking to himself that I was not so smart as my father.

"You always bring in good pearls. Black ones," I said. "There must be many in your lagoon. If you permit me I will come and dive there. All the pearls I find I will pay you for."

The old man looked puzzled. "But you are not a diver," he said.

"You can teach me, señor."

"I have heard your father say many times, since the time you were a child, that he did not raise you to drown in the sea or to give an arm or a leg to a burro shell."



“My father,” I said, “has gone to Cerralvo and he will not return for a week or more.”

“And your mother and your sister, what will they say?”

“They will say nothing because today they go to Loreto.” I paused. “You will teach me to dive and will look for the big one and when I find it I will pay you what it is worth.”

“The big one I have searched for many years,” Luzon said. “How is it found in a week?”

“You can find the big one in a single dive.”

The old man pulled at his stubbly chin. He was thinking, I knew, about his wife and his two unmarried daughters and his three young sons, and all these mouths he had to feed every day.

“When do you wish to go?” he said.

“I wish to go now.”

Luzon hitched up his frayed trousers. “After I buy a sack of frijoles and a sack of flour, then we go

The old man left and I put the pearls away and locked the safe. I took the bundle from under the desk, my pants, a shirt, and the knife. I closed the door and locked it. As I walked down to the beach, thought about the great pearl I had dreamed of while the Sevillano was bragging. I thought of how surprised he would be when he came back from Cerralvo and found the whole town of La Paz talking about the monster pearl Ramón Salazar had found.

It was a dream so wild that only a very young man and a stupid one could dream it. And yet, as happens sometimes, the dream came true.

THE LAGOON where the old man lived was about seven leagues from La Paz and we should have reached it by midnight. But the currents and the wind were against us, so it was near dawn before we sighted the two headlands that marked the lagoon's hidden entrance.

You could pass this entrance many times and think that it was only an opening in the rocks that led nowhere. As soon as you passed the rocks, however, you came to a narrow channel that wound like a snake between the two headlands for a half mile or farther.

The sun was just rising when the channel opened out and suddenly we were in a quiet oval-shaped lagoon. On both sides of the lagoon steep hills came down to the water and at the far end lay a shallow beach of black sand. Beyond were two scraggly trees and beneath them a cluster of huts where breakfast fires were burning.

It was a peaceful scene that lay before me, much like many other lagoons that dot our coast. But there was something about the place that made me feel uneasy. At first I thought it must be the barren hills that closed in upon the lagoon and the coppery haze that lay over it, and the beach of black sand and the quiet. I was soon to hear that it was something else, something far different from what I thought.

The old man paddled slowly across the lagoon, carefully raising and lowering the paddle, as if he did not want to disturb the water. And though he had talked most of the time before we reached the lagoon he now fell silent. A gray shark circled the canoe and disappeared. He pointed to it, but said nothing.

Nor did he speak again until we beached the canoe and were walking up the path to the huts. Then he said, "It is well to hold the tongue and not to talk needlessly when you are on the lagoon. Remember this when we go out to dive, for there is one who listens and is quickly angered."

Indians are superstitious about the moon and the sun and some animals and birds, especially the coyote and the owl. For this reason I was not surprised that he wished to warn me.

"Who is it that listens and grows angry?" I asked him.

Twice he glanced over his shoulder before he answered. "The Manta Diablo," he said.

"El Diablo?" I asked, holding back a smile. "He lives here in your lagoon?"

"In a cave," he answered, "a big one which you can see just as you leave the channel."

"The channel is very narrow," I said, "barely wide enough for a canoe. How does a giant like El Diablo swim through it? But perhaps he does not need to. Perhaps he stays here in your lagoon."

"No," the old man said. "He travels widely and is gone for many weeks at a time."

"Then he must swim through the channel somehow."

"Oh, no, that would be impossible, even for him. There is another opening, a secret one, near the place where you enter the channel. When he swims out to sea, it is this one he uses."

We were nearing the huts clustered beneath the two scraggly trees. A band of children came running out to meet us and the old man said nothing more about El Diablo until we had eaten breakfast, slept the morning away, eaten again, and gone back to the lagoon.

As we floated the canoe and set off for the pearling reefs, the old man said, "When the mist goes, that means El Diablo has gone, too."

It was true that the red mist was gone and the water now shone green and clear. I still smiled to myself at the old man's belief in El Diablo, yet I felt a little of the excitement that I had felt long ago when my mother threatened me with the monster.

"Now that he is gone," I said, "we can talk."

"A little and with much care," Luzon replied, "for he has many friends in the lagoon."

“Friends?”

“Yes, the shark you saw this morning and many small fish. They are all friends and they listen and when he comes back they tell him everything, everything.”

“When he leaves the lagoon, where does he go?”

“That I do not know. Some say that he takes the shape of an octopus and seeks out those pearlers who have done him a wrong or spoken ill of him. It is also said that he takes the shape of a human and goes into La Paz and seeks his enemies there in the streets and sometimes even in the church.”

“I should think that you would fear for your life and leave the lagoon.”

“No, I do not fear El Diablo. Nor did my father before me. Nor his father before him. For many years they had a pact with the Manta Diablo and now I keep this pact. I show him proper respect and tip my hat when I come into the lagoon and when I leave it. For this he allows me to dive for the black pearls which belong to him and which we now go to search for.”

Silently the old man guided the canoe toward the south shore of the lagoon, and I asked no more questions for I felt that he had said all he wished to say about the Manta Diablo. In two fathoms of water, over a reef of black rocks, he dropped anchor and told me to do the same.

“Now I teach you to dive,” he said. “First we start with the breathing.”

The old man lifted his shoulders and began to take in great gulps of air, gulp after gulp, until his chest seemed twice its size. Then he let out the air with a long whoosh.

“This is called ‘taking the wind’,” he said. “And because it is very important you must try it.”

I obeyed his command, but filled my lungs in one breath.

“More,” the old man said.

I took in another gulp of air.

“More,” the old man said.

I tried again and then began to cough.

“For the first time it is good,” the old man said. “But you must practice this much so you stretch the lungs. Now we go down together.”

We both filled our lungs with air and slipped over the side of the canoe feet first, each of us holding a sink stone. The water was as warm as milk but clear so that I could see the wrinkled sand and the black rocks and fish swimming about.

When we reached the bottom the old man put a foot in the loop of the rope that held his sink stone and I did likewise with my stone. He placed his hand on my shoulder and took two steps to a crevice in a rock that was covered with trailing weeds. Then he took the knife from his belt and thrust it into the crevice. Instantly the crevice closed, not slowly but with a snap. The old man wrenched the knife free and took his foot out of the loop and motioned for me to do the same and we floated up to the canoe.

The old man held out the knife. “Note the scratches which the burro shell leaves,” he said. “With a hand or a foot it is different. Once the burro has you he does not let go and thus you drown. Take care therefore, where you step and where you place the hand.”

We dived until night came, and the old man showed me how to walk carefully on the bottom, so as not to muddy the water, and how to use the knife to pry loose the oysters that grew in clumps and how to get the shells open and how to search them for pearls.

We gathered many baskets that afternoon but found nothing except a few baroques of little worth. And it was the same the next day and the next, and then on the fourth day, because the old man had caught with his hand on a shell, I went out on the lagoon alone.

It was on this day that I found the great Pearl of Heaven.

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