

ALEXANDER BELAYEV

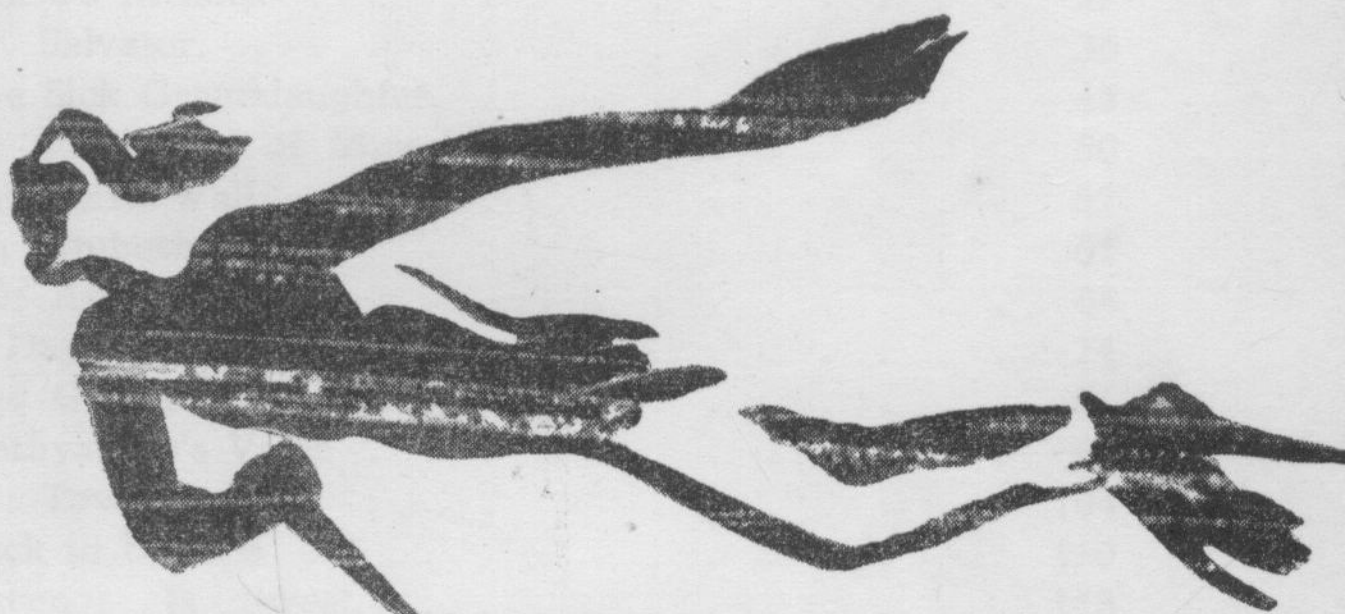
THE AMPHIBIAN



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW

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Translated from the Russian by L. Kolesnikov
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PART I



"THE SEA-DEVIL"

The close night of the Argentine midsummer came down on the sea. Stars pricked out in a sky that was a deep violet. The schooner *Jellyfish* lay quietly at anchor, with not a splash round her, not a creak on board. Ship and ocean seemed in deep slumber.

Half-naked pearl-divers sprawled on the deck. Worn out by the day's work under a parching sun they tossed and groaned and cried out in

their nightmarish sleep. Their limbs would jerk and twitch; perhaps they were fighting off sharks—their deadly enemies. The hot windless weather of which they were having a spell made people so tired that they couldn't even hoist the boats on board at the end of a day's work. Not that it seemed necessary: nothing indicated a change in weather. So the boats were left afloat, made fast to the anchor chain. Nobody had thought of tightening the shrouds or sheeting home the jib which fluttered faintly at each stray whiff of wind. From bowsprit to taffrail the schooner was strewn with heaps of pearl shells, pieces of coral, lengths of diving cord, canvas sacks for putting shells in and empty barrels.

Against the mizzen-mast stood a big water barrel with an iron mug on a chain. The deck immediately round was stained dark with spilt water.

Every now and then a diver struggled up and staggered along, sleep-drunk, to the water barrel. Never opening his eyes he swallowed a mugful and dropped down anywhere on his way back, as if it were not water he had drunk but neat spirit. The divers were always thirsty. They went without morning meals, for underwater pressure made diving on a full stomach dangerous, so they worked without eating all through

the day, till it grew too dark underwater. They had their meal before turning in—and that was of salt meat.

The Indian Baltasar, right hand of the schooner's owner Pedro Zurita, had the night watch.

In his time Baltasar had been known far and wide as an excellent pearl-diver. He could stay underwater for as much as a minute and a half or even two minutes which was about twice as long as an average diver.

"How did we do it? They knew how to train in my day and started early," Baltasar would say to the young divers.

"Just turned ten I was. My father took me to José, who owned a tender, for training. There were twelve of us, all kids like me. And this is the way he trained us. He'd throw a white pebble or shell into the water and order one of us to go and get it. And each time he found deeper and deeper places. If one of us had nothing to show for his diving José'd give him a lash or two of his whip and shove him overboard to try again. And it worked. Then he started to train us to keep longer times underwater. An experienced diver'd go down and make a basket or piece of netting fast to the anchor chain. Then down we went to untie the knots. And we weren't allowed to come up before all the knots were undone. If we did we got the whip again.

"The amount of beating we took! Not everybody could stick it out. But it made a diver out of me—and the best in the district. And earned me a pretty penny too."

Then the time had come when Baltasar had to give up the hazardous trade of a pearl-diver. He was no longer young and his left leg bore the terrible scars of a shark's teeth and his side the marks of an anchor chain. He bought a small shop in Buenos Aires and started a trade in pearls, corals, shells and sea curios. But shore life bored him and once in a way he decided he needed a break and put out to sea with pearl-divers.

He was always sure of a welcome, for what he didn't know about the Rio de la Plata and its pearling grounds was just not worth knowing. He was welcomed by all—he knew how to please divers and owners alike. The young divers he taught the tricks of the trade: how to hold their breath underwater and to fight off sharks, and—when in especially expansive mood—how to keep an extra fine pearl out of the boss's sight.

The owners he helped to sort out pearls and evaluate the best.

Baltasar was sitting on an upturned barrel, a thick cigar between his fingers, his face picked out of the darkness by the light of a lantern

fixed to the mast. It was an elongated face with a finely cut nose and large handsome eyes—the face of an Araucanian. He was drowsing. But even when his eyes were asleep, his ears were not. They registered sounds and gave him warning in the deepest of sleep. There was nothing but the divers' sighing and murmuring to hear. The smell of rotting pearl oysters wafted from offshore. It was part of the job: the shell of a dead mollusc opens more easily. What would have been an overpowering stench for an unaccustomed nose was near perfume for Baltasar's. For him, a sea tramp that he was, it meant all the pleasures and dangers of life at sea.

After the last pearl was extracted the largest shells were brought on board the *Jellyfish*. Zurita wasn't one to let anything go to waste. He sold the shells to a factory where they made buttons and studs out of them.

Baltasar was asleep. The cigar had slipped from between his fingers. His chin rested on his chest.

A sound from far out at sea broke in on his sleep. Then it came nearer. Baltasar opened his eyes. What seemed to him the blast of a horn sounded again, followed by the cheerful ring of a young voice, repeated after an interval in a higher pitch.

The blast of the horn bore no resemblance to

the harsh blare of a ship's siren, nor the cheerful voice to the cries of a man, fallen overboard. In fact it didn't sound like anything Baltasar could think of. He rose. His sleep seemed blown away by a breeze. He went up to the rail and peered into darkness. His eye and ear detected nothing. Baltasar prodded with his foot a sleeping Indian into wakefulness.

"I heard a cry. That must be him," he told the diver softly.

"I can't hear a thing," the Guroña Indian, now up on his knees and listening, said as softly. Suddenly the horn and voice pierced the heavy silence again.

The Guroña shrank as from a whip lash.

"Yes, that's him," he said through his clattering teeth.

Other divers were waking up. They crawled towards the blotch of lantern light as though seeking in the yellowish beam protection from dreadful darkness. There they squatted, huddling together and straining their ears. The horn and voice came from far off again and was heard no more.

"That's him—the 'sea-devil'," the divers were whispering.

"We ought to be clearing out of here."

"A shark's a kitten compared to him!"

"Let's speak to the boss."

There was a patter of bare feet. Yawning and scratching a hairy chest Pedro Zurita came on deck. A pair of canvas trousers was all he had on; a revolver holster dangled from a broad leather belt. Zurita approached the divers. The lantern light revealed a swarthy face, crumpled with sleep, curls of thick hair escaping onto the forehead, black eyebrows, a pointed moustache and greying goatee.

"What's up?"

His self-assured voice and deliberate movements calmed the divers.

They spoke all at once.

Baltasar raised a hand to silence them.

"We've heard him—the 'sea-devil'," he said when order was temporarily restored.

"You dreamt it," Pedro said sleepily.

"We didn't. We all heard his horn," shouted the divers.

Again Baltasar waved them to silence.

"I heard the horn myself. That was him all right. There's nobody at sea can blow a horn like that. We ought to be getting away from here, and lose no time about it."

"Old wives' tales," said Pedro Zurita. He didn't like the idea of sailing from the pearling ground with all those oysters on board, stinking and still not ready for opening. But it was like running his head against a stone wall, trying

to talk the divers into staying. They shouted discordantly, flung their arms about and threatened to abandon the schooner and walk to Buenos Aires if Zurita didn't weigh anchor.

"Curse you and the 'sea-devil'," he said finally. "You win. We'll weigh anchor at dawn." And grumbling and cursing he went below.

He was no longer sleepy. Lighting the lamp he got a cigar going and began pacing up and down his small cabin. His thoughts turned to the mysterious creature that had been haunting their part of the estuary for some time now, striking terror into the fishermen and seaside villagers.

Sailors and fishermen would tell tales about it, with many a timid glance over the shoulder, as if afraid that the monster might surprise them even as they spoke about it.

The creature was believed to have helped some people and harmed others.

"It's the sea-god," said the older Indians, "him as comes out of the ocean once in a thousand years—to restore justice on earth."

The Catholic priests exhorted their superstitious Spanish flock to seek salvation in religion, saying that the sea-monster was a visitation of the wrath of God for their neglect of the Holy Catholic Church.

Rumours spread and at last reached Buenos

Aires. For weeks the "sea-devil" made headlines in the sensation-hungry press. Any unaccounted-for loss of schooner or fishing-craft, any theft of nets or fish catch were all the "sea-devil's" doing. But there were other stories as well—of big fish mysteriously deposited in fishing boats, of men saved from drowning.

At least one of these swore that when he was going under for the last time somebody caught him from behind and sped him shorewards and onto the beach, disappearing behind the surf the very moment he struggled to his feet and looked back.

Nobody had seen the "sea-devil" or rather nobody was credited with having seen it. Though, of course, there were some who called heaven to witness that the creature had a head adorned with horns and a goat's beard, the legs of a lion and the tail of a fish or described it as an enormous toad with legs shaped like a man's.

At first the authorities paid no attention to all these rumours and newspaper articles, hoping for the sensation to fizzle out as newspaper sensations do. But rumours led to apprehension and apprehension to alarm, especially among the fishermen. They were afraid to put out to sea; catches declined; Buenos Aires was experiencing a shortage of fish. The authorities decided it was time to intervene. A force of coast-

guard cutters and police launches was mustered and given orders "to detain a person of unknown identity that is causing alarm and panic among the seaside population."

For a fortnight the task force combed the Rio de la Plata and the coast with nothing to their credit but several Indians detained for spreading rumours likely to cause alarm and panic.

The chief of the police issued an official announcement to the effect that the "devil" only existed in the rumours spread by some ignorant people, already detained and about to receive the punishment they deserved, and admonished the fishermen to scorn the rumours spread and resume their useful trade.

This helped for a time, but not for long: soon the "devil" was up to new pranks.

Some fishermen were awakened in the dead of night by the bleating of a kid that nothing short of magic could have put into their boat, lying as she was a goodish way offshore. Other fishermen hauled in their nets to find them slashed to pieces.

Overjoyed by the reappearance of the "devil" the newspapers now clamoured for the opinion of science. Nor had they to wait for long.

Scientists claimed that a sea-monster capable of intelligent acts could not exist in that part of the ocean unknown to science. They went on