

LAUREL-LEAF  **NEWBERY**

Scott O'Dell

Author of the Newbery Award Winner *Island of the Blue Dolphins*

The Black Pearl



THE
Black Pearl

SCOTT O'DELL



Published by
Dell Laurel-Leaf
an imprint of
Random House Children's Books
a division of Random House, Inc.
1540 Broadway
New York, New York 10036

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ISBN: 0-440-90803-5

RL: 5.2

Reprinted by arrangement with Houghton Mifflin Company

Printed in the United States of America

November 1977

70 69 68 67 66 65 64 63 62 61

OPM

PRAISE FOR
The Black Pearl

A Newbery Honor Book

An American Library Association Notable Book

A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year

"A gripping story that will hold practically any age enthralled, and so well written that it can be read aloud with pleasure."

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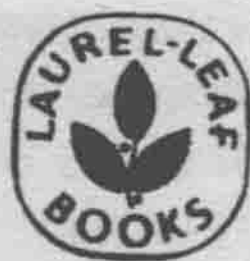
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In that day, the Lord shall
punish the piercing serpent . . .
and he shall slay the dragon
that is in the sea.

ISAIAH

1

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 mon-

ster 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 to-day 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.

2

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 Blaś Salazar and for many years he was the most famous dealer in pearls anywhere on the Vermilion Sea. His name was known in Guaymas and Mazatlán and Guadalajara, even as far away as the City of México, 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, "put 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 a 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 to-day."

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 Martín, 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.