

Scott O'Dell



YEARLING

The
Black
Pearl



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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

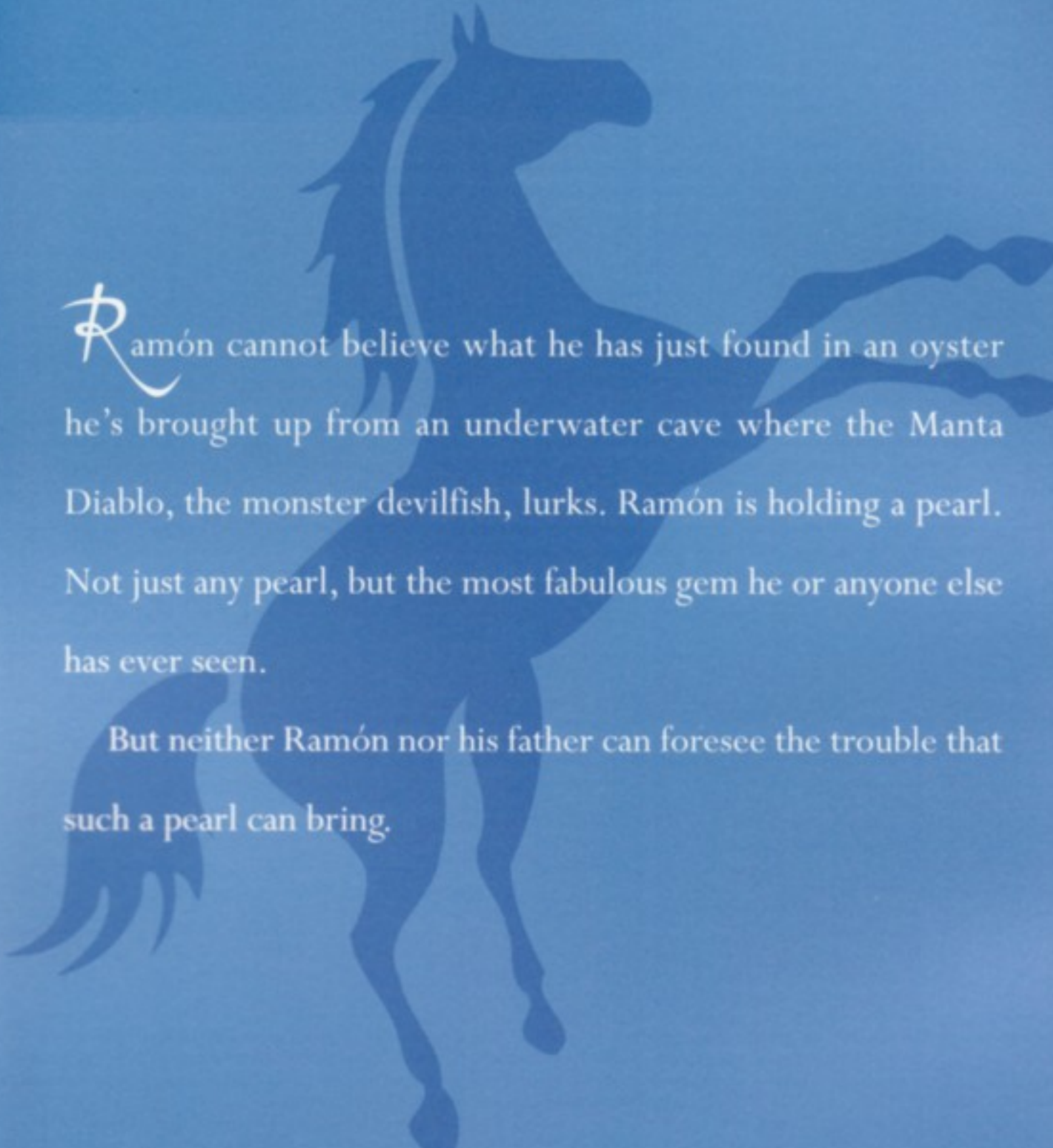
not, but I do know that while it lived there in the sea it lost the claws and forked tongue and the evil smell. It became the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. Yes, beautiful. And still it was the same evil thing that Father Linares banished from our land many years ago. This is strange.

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.



Ramón cannot believe what he has just found in an oyster he's brought up from an underwater cave where the Manta Diablo, the monster devilfish, lurks. Ramón is holding a pearl. Not just any pearl, but the most fabulous gem he or anyone else has ever seen.

But neither Ramón nor his father can foresee the trouble that such a pearl can bring.

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