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The Pearl Robber

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, Jr.

Kanaka Johnny swallowed the stolen pearl, but the malicious intelligence of Captain Strokher penetrated his thoughts

JOHNNY'S pearl was absolutely perfect. It was pink and round and transparent and Johnny eyed it covetously and ran his fingers through his fragile black hair. He sat on the edge of the raft and kept his back resolutely turned upon the malicious intelligence of Captain Strokher. Far to the east, barely visible above the rim of the malachite-colored sea five small albatrosses hovered like flies about a sugar bowl.

Johnny idolized pearls. He seldom thought of them in terms of tobacco and gin, but under his tender regard their shadowy sheen crystallized into pictures of dim lagoons and glimmering lava-mountains and the splendor of them whispered into his blood until his heart sang within him. White men, he mused, were outrageously indifferent to the strange, mystic beauty of pearls.

It pleased him particularly to discover that his treasure changed color when he caressed it. He had never before imagined that a pearl could be so beautiful. With a grin of satisfaction he leaned forward and brushed the dried salt from his knees. Then quickly, very quickly, for he feared the intelligence of Captain Strokher, he raised his hand to his mouth and swallowed the pearl. His lean brown body stiffened. Did Captain suspect?

The raft went swimming about before him in a mist as he rose from his knees, and when the dark shadow of Strokher fell athwart the water his heart started and ceased to beat. If Captain did *not* suspect, the pearl would be his to have and to hold, to dream over and to wor-

ship forever. But Captain had once boasted that he could read every thought in a Kanaka's narrow brown head! To be sure, Captain would not ordinarily stoop so low as to read a Kanaka's thoughts, but there was always the risk, the possibility. A great fear came upon Johnny. As he stood swaying unsteadily back and forth on the lurching raft his teeth chattered and perspiration broke out on his low forehead.

But now Captain was shouting at him. "Down—you fool! Didn't you hear the whistle?" Johnny groaned. The tremendous act of theft had strained his nerves to the breaking-point, and he no longer had any desire to risk his skin for other men's pearls. But disobedience was an offense of which he dared not be guilty. Reluctantly he loosened the weight at his waist and slipped into the water.

The heavy stone descended beneath him and pulled him rapidly down. Tiny bubbles formed merrily in his wake and as the water deepened and darkened about him his courage revived. The raft and the malicious intelligence of Captain dwindled to abstractions when his thoughts returned to the magic and mystery of pearls. He would steal more pearls, and no one would suspect him. It was so simple and pleasant to steal pearls. Captain was apparently blind to some things, and pearls were enough to tempt any man. He would exchange a few, a very few, for gold, and then he would marry or buy a mangrove plantation. But the round and pink ones he would keep to handle and admire.

He opened his eyes and stared at the white coral bottom. Immediately beneath him fantastic fishes streaked with vermilion and blue and gold darted warily through pellucid shafts of warm sunlight. He chafed under the painful limitations which the water pressure placed upon his movements. He wanted to swim at random, to splash about and explore. But his stone weight carried him relentlessly down.

His keen eyes discriminated between the clusters of living oysters and selected in advance the most promising. The basket would be let down and he would quickly fill it, and then, quite on his own responsibility, he would insert a sharp knife into the putrid and half-opened oysters on the sea floor and extract—perhaps pearls!

Johnny knew that the dead and decaying oysters often contained treasures, drop pearls of unusual girth and occasionally a perfect pearl—round and pink and transparent! But he would put no putrid oysters into the basket. He would save those for himself. He would skillfully remove the pearls and swallow them and no one would suspect. It was absurd to imagine that Captain could read every thought in such a clever head.

Johnny reached the bottom and the basket descended beside him. He was amazingly happy and his heart went thumping and bumping about inside of him. As he tumbled in the shells with bleeding fingers he found himself counting them automatically. Oysters as large as coconuts rapidly accumulated in the web. Johnny almost sang under water.

He had consumed two minutes. The basket was full and he had begun a rapid, almost hysterical exploration of the ocean floor. In a moment the basket would be hauled up and Captain would expect him on the raft. Knowing this, he worked feverishly, prying with his fingers

into rotting shells, and showing the clusters apart with his feet. His head swam and the blood pounded in his ears, but he did not spare himself. With the aid of his knife he at last managed to secure a single drop pearl. For a moment he clutched it, and then, in his eagerness and excitement he let it slide between his fingers. It was when he swooped to recover it that the great clam fastened on his hand.

JOHNNY awoke in a blaze of sunlight. He saw the raft and the hushed, expectant figures through a haze that lifted gradually and painfully. Fear shone in his eyes. He distrusted the raft and the men upon it. Captain was bending above him. Captain's shrewd, boyish face was anxious but not friendly. The sunlight splashed red and green and gold over Captain's youthful head and shoulders. Johnny's perception of things was for a long time blurred. He found himself wondering why Captain's head was wet.

Then Johnny remembered the clam under water. He remembered and sat up. He felt horribly weak and the raft and the men upon it were going round and round, and he had a dull awkward pain in his chest; but he somehow wanted to ask Captain why his hair was wet. Then Johnny understood. Captain had gone down and rescued him from the clam. It was fine and noble of Captain to do that. He would thank Captain as soon as the breath came back into his body. He would thank Captain profusely; he would kneel in the dust before him. That, of course, would be necessary.

He thought of the pearl that he had swallowed and shame flushed red over his cheeks and ears. If Captain knew! He asked himself again whether Captain knew, and then he remembered that Captain could read every thought in his head.

They were pouring something between his swollen lips. He recognized the taste at once. They were giving him gin. He detested gin. He tried to push the flask aside but they forced him to drink. They seemed diabolically determined to make him suffer. And yet with his fear and hatred for the men who were forcing him to drink against his will his gratitude to Captain increased.

Suddenly Captain was speaking. His voice sounded harsh and far away and it frightened Johnny. "You were not worth saving!" Captain said. Johnny got that distinctly, but the rest of the sentence he couldn't catch. Captain was speaking with great seriousness, but his sentences trailed off disastrously. "The pearl . . . in your hand . . . thieves deserve to be thrashed!" And then: "Other pearls! Perhaps he's swallowed dozens. Curse his yellow hide! I never did trust these——" A blank followed, and then Johnny caught a few words again: "X-ray. The only way we can be sure. When he recovers . . . give him more gin!"

"X-ray!" thought Johnny. "What does that mean?"

They poured more gin down his unwilling throat. The liquid burned and horrified him. He wanted to get up, to shout, and assure Captain that he was quite well. His vision cleared. He felt his strength coming back to him. He could move his arms freely now and his whole body tingled. He raised his right arm and looked at his hand. The fingers were slightly bruised, but that was all! Johnny heaved a sigh of relief and gazed gratefully at Captain. But the look of fury in Captain's eyes humiliated him. He knew that he deserved Captain's wrath. He had done a vile and inexcusable thing, and men had been shot for less.

But now that his strength had returned his gratitude to Captain diminished. He

thought: "Captain is saving me because I am useful. Why should a white man sacrifice himself for a Kanaka? Out of pity? No, he did not pity me. He hates me. He knows I stole a pearl—he found it in my hand. And perhaps he saw me swallow the large one. He'd shoot me quick if I wasn't useful!"

An expression of contempt stole along Captain's boyish lips and he nodded to the men on the raft. Then—an instant of commotion, confusion of bodies hurling themselves forward and clutch of iron fingers on struggling brown arms—Johnny was bound hand and foot and hurried into a launch that had drawn up to the raft at a signal from Captain.

Johnny was horrified. He screamed and pleaded, but Captain was deaf to his appeals. "You are vile—vile!" Captain shouted. "You steal pearls under water. You pry with your filthy fingers into other people's property. How did you get it into your silly head that you own this lagoon? Tell me that?"

Johnny squirmed beneath the cords that bound him and beat his head against the wet planks. "It was a little pearl," he pleaded. "What is one little pearl? You throw them away—I have seen you throw them away in disgust!"

Captain shrugged his shoulders and spat in Johnny's face. "You shall be made to pay!" he affirmed.

Johnny was taken ashore and stripped. He was left alone in a dark room, and his mind slowly filled with horror. What did they intend to do with him? If they suspected they might—they might cut him open! The thought was horrible. He put it resolutely from him. They would never be so cruel; they would never dare!

HE WAS left alone for several hours in the dark room. No one spoke to him, no voice gave him comfort. He was left alone with his thoughts and

he shivered, and groaned and gibbered meaninglessly.

A man with a gun came for him. He prodded him unmercifully with the barrel and ordered him to walk. "Where to?" pleaded Johnny. "Walk!" shouted the man with the gun. "Pearl stealer!"

Johnny staggered out into a long dark corridor. The man at his heels prodded him cruelly. Johnny walked and his mind was filled with unspeakable foreboding. He threaded several long corridors and dark, humid passageways. Then he came suddenly into a large, brilliantly lighted room. There were tools of fantastic patterns on chairs and tables and several men in ridiculous white aprons stood about as though expecting something—Johnny didn't know what.

Captain was standing in the center of the room, with a bored, peevish expression on his thin face. He wore no apron, but he had a peculiar shade over his eyes.

When he saw Johnny he scowled and spoke abruptly. "Strap him down," he said.

Johnny tried to flee, but the man with the gun pushed him forward. He screamed and fell on his knees. "Please don't!" he pleaded. "It was only a little pearl!" Captain grinned maliciously.

He said something which impressed Johnny, although its meaning was obscure. "A white man can look through and beyond a Kanaka," he said. "A white man sees everything. A white man can see every pearl in a Kanaka's lean yellow body."

Johnny was seized and strapped to a board. The board was hard and cold. Johnny shook and his under lip trembled. He was whiter than Captain.

"Now!" The order was sharp and sudden. A large, disastrous contrivance that glittered was swung directly at Johnny. At first Johnny thought that it would crush him, annihilate him. He

screamed again and again. But the monster stopped several inches short of Johnny's body.

"Pity me!" shrieked Johnny. "I didn't mean to steal. I filled up the basket, and that is what you paid me for. What is one little pearl when I have worked to please you?"

Captain laughed. His laughter was shrill and menacing. It destroyed the last spark of resistance in Johnny. Great beads of sweat came out on his chest and his chin sagged, but he said no more.

A light was turned on. Captain ignored Johnny's hoarse breathing and glued his eyes to the machine. He would not, for anything, have missed this opportunity of looking through a Kanaka. As he stared and stared he was suffused with a feeling of immense power.

He loved the sensation, the joy, of not knowing precisely what he would find. Would he find one pearl, or two pearls or a dozen pearls? It was a delicious game. Johnny was soon forgotten and only the pearls within his lean body mattered.

The white-aproned men had clustered eagerly about the machine. They were smiling and joking like happy schoolboys. There was nothing sinister about their appearance. They were genial and blue-eyed and obviously animated by a fine scientific curiosity.

"I've found it!" shouted Captain. "It's a pippin! Perfect—a perfect pearl. Round and pink and as clear as crystal. See, right there, above the little intestine!"

There was a general exclamation of surprise and delight. Captain was congratulated. Johnny was forgotten—completely forgotten. Curiously enough, no word came from Johnny—not a sigh, not a complaint.

He seemed no longer to care. Perhaps he was glad that they had discovered the

pearl. It would, in a sense, lift a burden from his mind, and the suspense.

Captain's good luck had softened him. He stepped forward with a pleasant smile. "Don't worry, old fellow," he said. "I don't intend to discharge you. The lesson was needed, but we'll forgive and forget. You thought something terrible would happen, didn't you? Well, I wanted you to suffer. You deserved it. But now we'll shake hands. When the pearl is secured in a natural way, it's back on the job for you!"

Suddenly he drew back. Johnny lay motionless, with shut eyes and gaping mouth, and his arms hung limply at his side.

"Hello," said Captain, "he's fainted. The X-ray gave him a frightful shock. Poor fellow! Well, that means more gin. Get gin somebody!"

One of the white-aproned men stepped solemnly forward. His face was a mask. "Let me examine him," he said. He bent and laid his ear to Johnny's chest. For several moments he remained in a stooping posture. When he unbent, his face was gray.

"He didn't faint," he said.

"No?" Captain seemed surprized.

"No. He's dead. The fright killed him. Kanakas have weak hearts. Poor devil!"