

THE PEARL LAGOON

By

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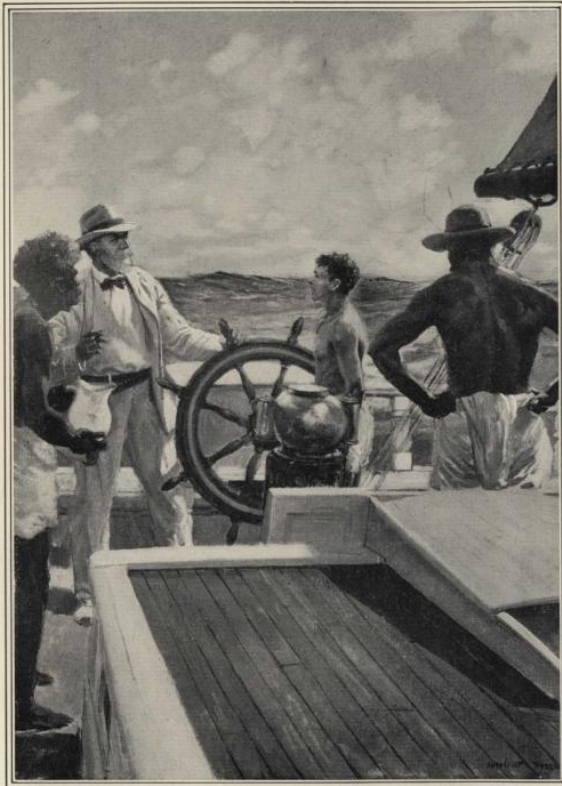
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THE PEARL LAGOON



I had my first look at the helmsman.

I had my first look at the helmsman.

To

WALTER AND SARAH C. W. NORDHOFF

DEAR PARENTS AND UNDERSTANDING FRIENDS
WHOSE GRANDCHILDREN, I HOPE,
WILL ONE DAY READ
THIS BOOK

PREFACE

For some months past, my daily stint at the typewriter has been cheered by an ambitious hope: that this story might prove entertaining to the young—the finest of all audiences. They are too wise even to glance at so dull a thing as a preface, but to you older people, who are responsible for what the young ones read, I have a word to say.

I make no claim, in the pages which follow, to have done more than muster the familiar marionettes and put them through their paces before your eyes. In one respect, nevertheless, I venture to commit myself. I know the islands fairly well—white man and native; skipper, trader, and pearl-diver; the sea, the lagoons, the small and lonely bits of land; and I can vouch for the genuineness of the story's atmosphere.

As for the story, there is nothing in it which has not happened, or might not happen to-day—for Romance, like the sea itself, is ever old and ever new.

C. N.

TAHITI, 1924

THE PEARL LAGOON

*O Kahiki, land of the far-reaching ocean,
Land where Olopana dwelt!
Within is the land, outside is the sun!
Indistinct are the sun and the land when approaching.
Perhaps you have seen it?
I have seen it.
I have surely seen Kahiki.*

I

THE COMING OF THE SCHOONER

We lived on the coast of California, on the Spanish grant my grandfather had purchased from the mission which still stands, deserted and crumbling, in the Santa Brigida Valley. Our house, built long before the Civil War, overlooked the lower end of the valley, from a knoll above the salt marshes at the river-mouth. The house was built in the form of a hollow square, surrounding a paved court. The walls were of adobe,—sun-dried bricks of clay, mixed with a little straw,—four feet thick, and pierced by small grated windows, designed for loopholes more than for the admittance of light and air. The beams and rafters were of roughhewn pine, carried down from the mountains by the Santa Brigida Indians, a tribe long since extinct, and the same patient workers had moulded and baked the old red tiles of the roof.

My father and my uncle Harry Selden had been brought up to the half-Spanish life of old California. For ten miles along the coast and six miles inland the land was theirs, and in those days three thousand head of cattle, bearing my grandfather's brand, grazed on the mesas and filed down in long lines to drink. When the brothers were young, the grizzly still lingered in the hills, the tracks of deer and mountain lion were everywhere, the quail trotted in thousands along the river-bottom, and in the winter months the plains along the seacoast were clamorous with flocks of wild geese, feeding on the rich grass. But times were changing, and little by little, civilization was creeping in. A church and a schoolhouse were built in the township north of us; taxes were raised; and

finally a party of surveyors appeared, running a line for the new railway. My grandfather abhorred the idea of a railway passing through his land; he made a bitter fight and would not give in till his own lawyer showed him that if he refused to accept what was offered for the right of way, the law would force him to do so for the public good. He died a short time after the trains began to run.

The brothers were young men at that time, and as their mother had been dead for many years, their friends supposed that they would carry on the ranch in a sort of family partnership. But Uncle Harry, in his love of a wild and independent life, was my grandfather over again. He announced that he had had enough of civilization, persuaded my father to buy out his share of the Santa Brigida, and bade his brother and his friends good-bye. I remember, when I was very small, how eagerly we looked forward to the letters my father used to read aloud to us: accounts of African gold-mining; of wanderings in Central America and Mexico; of great cattle-ranches—estancias, Uncle Harry called them—in the Argentine; of voyages along the barren Chilean coast: of storms and shipwrecks among distant archipelagoes. In the end he settled as a trader, a buyer of copra and pearl-shell, in the South Seas.

As for my father, he was content to marry and to stay at home, but he clung to his cattle stubbornly, refusing to farm or to sell an acre of his land and growing poorer with each year that passed. He often said that we would never starve and that our land was constantly increasing in value, but at such times my mother used to rise from her chair with a sigh and walk out alone among her roses in the court. She was a patient woman and she loved my father dearly, but I knew that the sale of only a few acres among all our thousands would have provided her with many things she craved. What with dry years and low prices, our taxes ate up nearly all the

profits from the cattle. We could never afford a motor-car or the occasional trips to San Francisco of which our neighbors' children gave me glowing accounts, yet outside of such luxuries, I must own that we had little need of ready money. Our own fat steers provided us and our men with beef; my mother was superintendent of a garden which furnished more vegetables than we could eat; and in the fall and winter game was still plentiful enough to be a real resource.

Our circumstances had made me a rather serious boy, fond of solitude and given to endless day-dreams—dreams of returning from vague gold-mines or speculations in land with a fortune, to be invested in the ranch and to provide my mother with travel, and rest, and pretty clothes. On my rides to school along a five-mile stretch of coast, where the pearly fog billowed about the hills and the Pacific broke lazily beyond the dunes, I lived in a world of pure fancy, from which the sight of San Isidro, with its single dusty street, its stores, and hideous frame schoolhouse, recalled me daily with an unpleasant start. All through the week I lived only for the coming Saturday, when I would be free to shoot, or fish in the surf, or ride out with our men to track down some band of half-wild steers, hidden in the thick oak scrub of the foothills.

It was on a Saturday that my uncle came. I was fifteen that winter, and ten years had gone by since he had visited us last, but I had not forgotten his lean powerful figure, or the black eyes lighting up a face tanned to an unfading brown, or the stories he had told a wondering youngster of five, sitting on his knee by the fireplace.

The month was February, as I remember it, for the wild mustard was tall and green on the hills and scattered cock-quail

were perched on the fence-posts, filling the air with the long sweet whistle of their mating-time. We were early risers, all of us, and at dawn, as I was eating the breakfast my mother had prepared, she asked me if I would take my gun and try for some wild duck on the marshes. There would be guests from San Isidro to-morrow, and a few brace of duck would be a treat for people from the town. I assented joyfully, for such a request meant that ammunition would be furnished from my father's store, and I loved nothing more than the long lazy hours in a blind, where one could watch the strings of wild fowl trailing across the sky.

I had good sport that morning, hidden close to a shallow pool behind the dunes. As I waded across the marsh, carrying my gun and half-a-dozen wooden decoys, a cloud of teal rose quacking from the grass and headed seaward on beating wings. The redheads were beginning to fly northward from their wintering grounds on the lonely Mexican lagoons; small flocks of them, led by drakes with heads glinting like burnished copper in the sunlight, rose from the creeks ahead of me and sped away, low over the sand hills. At the place that I had chosen for my shooting, I unwound the anchor-lines of the decoys, tossed them far out into the pool, and built myself a rough shelter of pickle-weed, strung on stakes pounded into the mud. I found an old piece of board for a seat, loaded my gun, laid out a box of cartridges within easy reach, and settled myself luxuriously to wait.

Next moment I glanced upward and crouched down lower than before, cocking my old-fashioned hammer-gun. High in the air above the marsh, a flock of sprig was descending in great spiral curves, the wind humming musically through the rigid flight-feathers of their wings. Lower and lower they swung, while my pulse raced as I peeped over the edge of the blind. I could see the

snowy breasts of the drakes, the feathers of their long forked tails, and their heads turning this way and that as they scanned the marsh warily for signs of danger. They had seen the decoys, and as they swept past me, still out of range, I called to them, imitating the feeble quack of the hen bird. Then, while I held my breath, they turned again, low over the pool, and came sailing straight at me—necks up and feet dropping to settle among the decoys. My hands were trembling a little, but I took careful aim at the old white-breasted leader, pulled the trigger, and saw him crumple and strike the water with a mighty splash. Wild with alarm, another drake came towering above my head, and leaning backward till I nearly fell off my seat, I let drive with the left barrel and watched him fold his wings and come down plunging to the grass.

I can recall that warm winter morning as if it were yesterday: the steady thunder of the breakers, the perfume of the salt marsh, the wisps of cloud drifting across a soft blue sky. Flock after flock of wild fowl came speeding in from the sea, circled the marsh, set their wings to alight, bounded upward, scattering, at the reports of my gun, and headed back for the ocean—fast-vanishing dots above the dunes. Once a wedge of geese passed at a great height overhead, flying northward with slow steady wing-beats, thrilling me with the hoarse music of their voices. My life seemed cramped and narrow as I gazed at these free rovers of the sky, travelers beyond the far rim of the horizon north and south.

The warm sun and the drowsy chirping and buzzing of insects in the grass brought on a nap that caught me unaware. It must have been mid-day when I awoke with a little start, to sit up and rub my eyes, wondering for an instant where I was. Unloading my gun, I waded out after the decoys and strung my dead birds on a thong of leather. Then, yielding to a habit of those days, I climbed to the top

of a sand hill, for a look at the beach. Next moment I nearly shouted aloud in the excitement of what I saw.

Close inshore, not far beyond the outer line of breaking seas, a two-masted schooner was rounding into the wind. She was painted white and her sails shivered crisply in the light air. One needed small knowledge of ships to appreciate the beauty of the little vessel: the high sharp bows, the graceful sweep of sheer, the slender masts, the taut lines of shroud and stay. The sight of a ship was rare along our stretch of coast. At long intervals we saw a trail of smoke far out to sea,—the steamer trading between San Francisco and the west coast of Mexico,—but this was the first time within my memory that a vessel of any kind had passed so close to shore. And she was not merely passing, for I saw now that her crew was sliding a long double-ended boat over the rail. Three men sprang into the whaleboat: a pair of oarsmen who seated themselves and began to pull toward shore, and a man in blue, who stood in the stern, holding a steering-sweep with one hand and waving good-bye to a gigantic figure at the schooner's wheel. The giant raised his hand in an answering wave; the schooner bore off, her sails filled, and she headed out to sea, heeling gracefully to the breeze.

There had been a storm in the north and the swell was high that day. Even from my perch on the dune, the approaching boat was invisible each time it swung down into the trough. It was just beyond the breakers now, and as it rose on the crest of a wave I saw that the oarsmen had ceased to pull and that the man with the steering-sweep had turned his head and was watching the rearing seas astern. The ground swell, as I have said, was very high, rolling shoreward a good ten feet from trough to ridge, and I began to wonder how these three men would win the beach through the

turmoil of white water ahead of them. Rearing and tossing as the water shoaled, three or four great waves passed under the boat and crashed forward, racing toward the beach in walls of foam. Then, clear above the thunder of the surf, I heard a vibrant shout—a command in some strange foreign tongue. The men on the seats tugged with a sudden desperate effort at their oars; the man astern, with a single heave of his sweep, turned the boat straight in toward where I lay. He was smoking a cigar, and I felt a thrill of admiration at the easy, careless way he stood at his post. A tremendous comber, with patches of foam beginning to appear along its crest, lifted the boat high in air and swept it forward tilting on the brink of a foaming wall. The wave tumbled and crashed and came rushing far up the beach.

The boat grounded with a gentle shock and the two oarsmen leaped overboard to hold her against the strong backwash. They were brown men, I saw: great brawny fellows more than six feet tall, with handsome, good-natured faces and teeth that flashed when they smiled. The steersman sprang out on the damp sand and gave an order, at which his men dropped a pair of light rollers on the beach and began to drag the boat up beyond highwater mark. Then he came strolling toward the sand hill where I lay hidden in the grass.

He was dressed in blue serge—a double-breasted coat with brass buttons—and a blue yachting-cap with a white crown. His age must have been forty or forty-five, but he was straight as an Indian and carried himself like a boy. His face, of a humorous and rather reckless cast, was tanned almost to the shade of the brown sailors toiling with the boat, and his black eyes were the most brilliant I have ever seen.

His eyes betrayed him. He tossed away the burned-down cigar, folded his arms, and came walking slowly toward my hiding-place, gazing about him with a half-smile on his lips, as if this lonely beach recalled a train of pleasant memories. I was peering down over a clump of rank salt grass when he glanced up and looked directly into my eyes.

"Uncle Harry!" I shouted as I came sliding and tumbling down the steep face of the dune. His strong hands seized me and lifted me to my feet.

"You're Charlie, eh?" he said, when he had looked me up and down with a smile that took me back to evenings by our fireside, ten years before. "You've done well to remember me all this time! By Jove! I'd never have known you in the world! Here, let's have another look. A chip of the old block, I reckon—you're going to have your grandfather's mouth. Well, I never liked a soft man. How are you all? Did you sight me from the house? Been shooting, eh—let's see your birds."



"You're Charlie, eh?" he said, when he had looked me up and down with a smile that took me back to the evenings by our fireside, ten years before.

I led him across the dunes to where I had left my gun and string of duck. At his request I undid the thong about their necks and laid them out on the sand, while he took them up one by one, spreading a wing to admire the changing colors of the speculum, or smoothing the feathers of a glossy head. At last he sighed, as he cut the end of a fresh cigar and looked up at me.

"Ah, Charlie, it takes me back," he remarked. "Many and many a time I've shot over this pond! I had an old muzzle-loader, twice the weight of that gun of yours. On a Friday night your grandfather used to say: 'Which one of you is going down to the marsh tomorrow to get me a mess of duck?' and I always landed the job.

Your daddy liked to work with the cattle; he reckoned shooting was a chore, like splitting kindling, or driving the milk-cows in from pasture. But it's time for *kaikai*, and I'm keen to see Ben and Mary after all these years. And Marion—she'll be seventeen now, eh? I'll bring my boys up to the house for a bite; the swell was too high to drop anchor, so I told the mate to stand off and on till I came out."

He turned toward the beach and called the sailors in his strong vibrant voice: "*E Ivi! E Ofai e!*" A moment later I saw the two brown men trotting across the dunes. Their feet were bare and they wore sailor jackets and trousers of dungaree. Their round caps bore the schooner's name, Tara, woven in silver thread upon the bands.

"Good lads," remarked my uncle, as they drew near. "Paumotu boys from Rangiroa—they've been with me since the Tara was built. Shake hands with them before we start." He spoke to the sailors in their own tongue, telling them that I was his brother's son, and they smiled as they gazed at me with the frank curiosity of savages. At a word from Uncle Harry, one of them picked up my gun and birds, and I led the way around the marsh to the Santa Brigida road.

We had not walked more than half a mile when we met my father, who had sighted the schooner and was now riding down to the beach.

"Harry!" he exclaimed, his bearded face transformed by an expression I had never seen; and in an instant he was off his horse and wringing my uncle's hand. "It's like you to drop in this way, without an hour's warning, but your welcome will be all the warmer for that! It's good to see you, old fellow! You're looking

well—your cannibal islands must agree with you. What do you think of this uncle of yours, eh, Charlie? He wouldn't for the world drop me a wire a day or two ahead, or arrive by train or motor-car, like a civilized man. Nothing will do but to come in a schooner and land like a pirate on the beach! But come along to the house and bring your men; I can't offer them missionary, if that's their usual diet, but we killed a steer yesterday, and there's plenty of fresh beef."

"Well, Ben," said Uncle Harry, still clasping my father's hand, "ten years haven't changed you, after all! I can't tell you how good it is to be back on the Santa Brigida again! Your boy says that Mary and Marion are well—come, I want to see them; let's be getting along. I'll bring my sailors, if I may. No need to ask how you are—rugged as an old grizzly, eh?"

At sight of Uncle Harry my mother forgot her cares, and only the joy of preparing dinner for him persuaded my sister Marion to leave his side. We dined at midday in the old-fashioned manner, and that afternoon we lingered long at table, until a whispering buzz of talk from the courtyard told us that the news had spread—that my grandfather's old retainers were assembling to greet the boy they had known so many years before. Motioning us to keep our places, Uncle Harry rose from his chair with a smile and walked out through the door to the sunny court beyond.

I heard a chorus of exclamations in Spanish: "Don Enrique! Patroncito! Ay, Dios Mio!" and the voice of old Juana, the white-haired woman who had nursed him as a child, sobbing aloud as she murmured over and over: "My child, my child—you have not forgotten old Juana, no?" He had an almost uncanny faculty for winning people's love.

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