

The Blue Lagoon

FIVE STAR FICTION

By Whit Wellman

Mystery Of Micai Pearls Solved As Johnny Cardinal Returns Home From Quest Of Father's Secret

Part II
(Conclusion)

JOHNNY Cardinal moved easily. "Father told me about you," he said. "You and mother. Mother is in San Francisco, alone. Father didn't leave her anything, Mr. Harden. She has one black pearl, worth a lot, I guess. But she won't part with it. Even when he needed money badly, she wouldn't sell it."

"She knows you came here?" Timothy's voice grew harsh. "No, I couldn't tell her. She wouldn't let me come." Timothy filled his glass again, his hands shaking a little. "Better have a drink," he said. But the boy refused.

The room grew darker as the sun fell. There wasn't much dusk in that part of the world no margin of half-light between day and night. Timothy raised his glass. He could find the pearls and go home to the States. To San Francisco and Carmel, who hadn't forgotten. She still wore his gift. He'd get Torello to go into the lagoon. It would be good to begin life again with the girl he'd loved. He didn't owe John Cardinal anything, or his son, who now sat studying him, strangely sure that Timothy Harden would send divers down for him. Timothy recognized that Micai was dead, that he'd been dying with it. Pearls from the Tiger Head lagoon would take him into the world again, where Carmel lived.

"We'll start tomorrow," he said. Johnny Cardinal found Timothy at early breakfast, the sun striking red over the village. Torello served silently, padding around the table.

Timothy said, "I've got two divers from the town. Torello will work with them." "It's good of you to help," John Cardinal smiled, sitting beside him.

"Good for me," Timothy muttered. His own pearls, for himself!

TWO dugouts were drawn up in the lagoon, a few natives grouped about them. Timothy called two of the men for the smaller dugout, and stepped into the larger one with Torello and the boy.

"You won't need the map," Timothy said, as Johnny Cardinal spread it on the bottom. "If you know, without—"

"Just inside the natural breakwater. The spray coming over the reef hits the spot. Down in that dark blue patch." He gave orders to Torello.

A hundred yards wide, the lagoon was shaped like an aspen leaf, its stem opening into the bay. The boats moved toward the inlet, over the water of a deep basin.

"Here—" Timothy said.

FIVE STAR WEEKLY

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The dugouts came close together, Torello fastened them end to end, making a shadow on the surface, and let them drift.

Johnny Cardinal leaned over the side.

"Careful. You'll tip us out," Timothy warned.

"What can you see?"

"Don't have to see anything! The divers can see enough when they get down, if you don't spill the dugout."

A yellow cloth about his middle, and a short knife stuck through it, Torello stood ready to dive. He threw overboard a weighted basket attached to a stout cord. The basket came to a stop thirty feet below. Torello dove after it.

Tiny, steady bubbles drifted up. One of the natives in the second boat followed Torello.

JOHNNY CARDINAL studied his map. "I don't think we're right, Mr. Harden. My map indicates—"

"Be quiet, will you? I knew this lagoon before your father thought of a map." It wasn't easy to remember a shell bed that long. But before he'd touch the boy's map . . . His memory, Torello's hands, those were sufficient.

Torello, gasping, clung to the edge of the dugout. He grinned, taking in the air, resting. The native from the other boat broke the surface. It was deep, they could not stay down long.

Timothy asked, "You found the place?"

"No luck, señor!" Torello shook his head. No shells of merit inhabited that spot. "It is the place, but empty . . ."

"We can use the map, Mr. Harden," Johnny said.

Timothy muttered, "It was exactly here. I can't be off very far. They haven't been taken from the lagoon in my time. Torello, what did you see?"

Torello's face was blank. A clean ship's deck, he said, was like the floor of the lagoon. Some broken shells, thrown back years ago. Weeds, small fish . . .

"We'll go in toward shore twenty yards."

Hopefully, they paddled away from the coral reef. Torello and the native of the other dugout



"Here . . .", Timothy said. The dugouts came closer together. Torello fastened them end to end, making a shadow on the surface, and let them drift. Johnny Cardinal leaned over the side. "What can you see?"

went down again and again. Torello bobbed up, grinning, sputtering. "No luck, señor!", and disappeared. The dugouts moved in a circle which contracted until a fifty yard area had been covered.

NOON, and a merciless sun drove them from the water. Timothy was silent, saying only that they would return. He knew valuable shell had been there, and he felt queer about it.

In the cool shelter of the consulate, Johnny Cardinal asked useless questions. Torello served lunch as the boy flung suggestions.

"Tomorrow," Timothy said. "We'll take the map and use it!"

"Look at it now!" Timothy placed his finger on the cross marking the stem of the lagoon.

"We spent the morning there!" "The tide may have drifted the shell, Mr. Harden. Or, someone else must have known about it . . ."

Timothy talked through the afternoon, trying to think what was wrong as he spoke. He sipped whiskey and soda, told of the yellow pearls of Panama. He'd worked with a pearl fishery back in one of the early years, he'd gone down for shell himself. Pure white pearls came mostly from Ceylon, and pink pearls from around the West Indies. You didn't often make a fortune, but wages were good, and it was exciting. He was surprised to find that searching the Tiger Head lagoon had brought back the old restlessness . . . Not a lust for riches, but a new expectation of freedom. As he talked he thought of San Francisco. Fog, north winds, Carmel Laveaga.

"How many colors do you find?" the boy asked. His glowing eyes were fascinated.

"As many as there are in a rainbow. You find some in clams, occasionally . . . They're not proud, the purple and light blue pearls." He went on until dinner time, to keep Johnny Cardinal quiet. For the finest, you went to Thursday Island, or the west coast of Australia, or the Persian Gulf. He'd been there. "Got plenty without a map," he said.

JOHN CARDINAL'S son finally went up to bed.

"Tomorrow," Timothy said every night.

For weeks he had repeated it. They had swept the lagoon with the dugouts and the diving boys, but the shell was not located. Stubbornly he kept them at it, refusing to dismiss his dreams. With luck, he could give comfort, wealth, to the girl with olive throat and eyes like the boy's who had come to Micai.

Clarkson's steamer was due in the morning, gleaming white, puffing smoke, Torello would take the visitor's bags to the beach.

"We've done everything but drain the lagoon," the boy said. "If it wasn't for mother, I wouldn't care. I've got to take care of her, but there'll be other ways."

"Your mother wears a black pearl?"

"She always wears it, I think she keeps it on when she goes to sleep." Johnny Cardinal stood up and stretched. "I'm off in the morning, Mr. Harden. And I want to say you've done all you could—"

"Good night," Timothy said. He hadn't thought of the boy as Carmel's son. The boy had meant John Cardinal to him, someone sent after pearls by a dead man Timothy didn't want to remember. He'd been mistaken. The girl was alive, and her son wanted to take care of her. Alone in a strange country, she must love the boy.

Torello padded in, clearing the table, filling Timothy's empty glass.

"We'll take a last look before breakfast," Timothy said.

"Si," Torello pointed to the ceiling. "He will go?"

"Yes, on the steamer. If we're early at the lagoon, we might . . ."

He knew it was hopeless to search the blue floor of weeds and sand, but it was hard to have failed. In the last week his plans had

shaped. He'd wiped away the shabby boarding house, and saw a great white home on a hill overlooking San Francisco Bay. A wide drive, a green, rolled stretch of grass. He saw himself sitting in the garden in his bamboo chair, waiting for the carriage. It drove up, and a girl called to him.

"To look more is not good," Torello said. "No shell is there."

"I know it, fool. Haven't we proved it?"

"The young señor—he goes?" Satisfied at Timothy's nod, Torello grinned, went to the fireplace. He reached above his head and pulled out a loose brick. His hand slid into the opening. A small, plump sack came from it, which he gave to Timothy.

THE sack fell to the table. The cloth broke, spilled a handful of black and gray gems. Several were large, magnificent specimens.

"Why did you do it?" Timothy asked sharply. He leaned over the table, gathering the pearls which rolled to the edge. "Torello, you damned fool!"

Torello said softly, "In the dawn of the day he comes, I get dugout, go down. The señor seal of pearls before the white boat comes . . . When boat comes, the señor not like stranger. I watch from kitchen. When he smile and talk, you hate him, no? Many morning before sun up, I work in lagoon. Night time I open shell."

"You thought I didn't want to find these?"

"You think to give to him, señor. These yours."

Timothy muttered in relief. "Pack everything I have, Torello. Pack anything you want yourself. We're going north with Clarkson."

"Torello, señor?"

"I can't get along without a nurse, fool."

At breakfast, Timothy said, "I'm going with you. Need a change." He ate quickly, there were things to do before the

steamer came. He'd keep quiet about the pearls, take them north himself . . . do for Carmel Laveaga what Johnny Cardinal had planned. He drank his coffee hurriedly.

THE boy looked at him curiously. "That's fine," he said.

Pushing back his chair, Timothy was aware of weariness and of a new elation. The hours on the lagoon hadn't done him any good, but there'd be no more of that. Heat drained the vitality of a man, and he'd soon be away. Tired or not, he began to feel comfortably young again. What if his flesh was soft here and there? The tropics did that to anyone, and he was glad to leave. With Cardinal in his grave, there was nothing to hold him in Micai. He'd send in his resignation from San Francisco, and a government clerk would stop sending checks to the village.

Timothy's worn suit case, strapped carefully, was ready for Clarkson's launch. Johnny Cardinal's bags stood beside it. A large sealed box of Timothy's belongings was carried down the beach by four natives. In it were curious, native implements, a collection of Indian knives, a silver bell from an old church.

Timothy called out as Clarkson landed: "I'm going north with you!"

"Old town won't be the same," Clarkson laughed. "Be away long?"

"Forever." He said to Torello, "Put in what the boat can carry, and come back for the rest of it. The box goes last. You, Johnny, go with Torello."

"I'll see you aboard, Mr. Harden." The boy climbed into the motor launch.

Clarkson and Timothy watched the boat meet the steamer, Torello and Johnny Cardinal go up the rope ladder. The sack of pearls was heavy in Timothy's pocket, seemed to weigh him down. His hand sought the bag, fingers closed.

ing around the secret of his new life.

"Your steamer looks fast, Captain. How long do you make it to port?"

CLARKSON muttered something vague. The motor launch was chugging back to the beach.

It was hard to look around at the village. Timothy stared and turned away. The same town, homelike and still, undisturbed by change. Impossible, before the visitor had come, to think of sailing with Clarkson. Now his blood raced, a little, slowly at first, then surging, beating in his throat. The boat scraped the sand, and Clarkson waved him aboard.

"Ready? Then we're off!"

"Wait," Timothy said. There was something unnatural, childish, about his going with Clarkson. Like a youth reaching out for adventure, careless and confident of new countries and people. Micai had done that to him, made him unsure of everything but what he knew. The sleepy days, the sprawling village, had sapped his strength. Making up his mind to go had been more of an effort than he'd known, and it had left him tired. Remaining, he would live again with the illusion, the image of a girl's face. He was old, suddenly, remembering that her sweet face would be as worn as his own.

"Go along, Captain. I'm not coming with you."

"The devil you're not!" Clarkson exclaimed. "You change as fast as a woman—"

"But no faster," Timothy murmured. She wouldn't want to see him, old and fat. He took the sack of pearls from his pocket. "Give these to the boy. Tell him they're for his mother."

"I'll do that. You want another case of White Horse next trip?"

"Same as always, Captain."

Clarkson stepped into the launch, which immediately backed away.

"Tell him," Timothy called, "for his mother . . ." The sound of the launch blurred his words.

TIMOTHY walked up the curved rim of the sand, his body erect and straight. Then his broad shoulders sagged to their slight stoop. He caught himself, brought them square. A few yards more and he forgot about it, contenting himself with getting nearer to the shadow of the consulate. A sense of peace and accustomedness came to Timothy, he was alone again, safe.

At the top of the beach, he turned to see the mail steamer churn its way north, move steadily past the white foam of Tiger Head. A small figure ran to the rail and dove overboard. Timothy shaded his eyes, pulling down the palm hat. Torello was racing toward the surf with long strokes. He splashed through the shallow and came panting up the wet border of sand.

The End

My brother kneels, so saith Kabir, To stone and brass in heathen-wise.

But in my brother's voice I hear My own unanswered agonies, His God is as his fates assign His prayer is all the world's— and mine.

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