

Captain John Paul Jellyfish Serialized



11.

The Men-of-War

The presence of a large fleet of Portuguese men-of-war on the coast explained a great deal. No wonder children were forbidden to swim at the beaches. No wonder Charlie Vanilla was scolded for skinny-dipping. A Portuguese man-of-war is a fearsome jellyfish, the scourge of any sea it sails. It packs one of the most painful stings of any sea creature. No wonder when the warm currents bring these loathsome creatures northward, people watch out.

At the crack of dawn the next morning, Captain John Paul Jellyfish dished out orders to his officers. "Lieutenant, see to it I am not disturbed for an hour. Mr. Brown, keep a sharp eye on the mouth of this harbor. If the enemy knows we are in here, they will come after us with the morning tide."

Once alone, John Paul sailed to the end of the dock to survey the scene. A stone quay, whitewashed with seagull droppings, surrounded the harbor. Behind a bustling waterfront stood a row of white shops. The stale water, the stench of fish guts, and the gurgling sound of motors all reminded the captain of many other fishing villages he had visited back home.

The water on this warm, clear morning was swarming with boats--sailboats, lobster boats, fishing boats, houseboats, tugboats, canoes, kayaks, and speedboats. But one particular boat caught the captain's interest. A small skiff with a big-muscled man at the oars made regular trips back and forth across the harbor. It ferried people from the far end of the quay to the end of the dock.

Here, the rowboat came now. John Paul shot out of harm's way as its bow bumped the dock hard. *Clump! Clump! Clump!* went sneakers upon the wooden planks above. Four people in T-shirts and Bermuda shorts stepped down into the waiting ferry. With a series of mighty pulls upon the oars, the ferryman turned his craft about and headed along the course he had come.

When the first puffs of morning breeze brushed the captain's sac, and the tide pulled his tentacles, he knew it was time to act. "Time and tide wait for no jellies," he said inwardly. "Time to get these jellies out of this jam."

Returning to his officers, he gave the orders no one expected. "Lieutenant! Make all hands ready to sail at one! We are heading out to meet the enemy!"

Moments later, the jellied mariners were beating across the choppy waters of the harbor. None of them could guess what plan had gelled inside their Captain's mind.

"All hands heave to!" John Paul commanded when the fleet reached the harbor's entrance. "Clear for action!"

The jellyfish grew tense and quiet. Strung out across the mouth of the harbor like so many beads on a necklace, they waited. Not only did the flooding tide and steady breeze make it impossible to maintain position, but the ferryboat also sent them dancing in its wake each time it passed.

In no time, the lookout cried, "Sails ahoy!"

There on the horizon appeared the giant blue floats of two Portuguese men-of-war. Their number quickly multiplied to four...eight...sixteen...thirty-two...*sixty-four* men-of-war, all running before the wind straight toward the harbor.

The sight was staggering. Resembling the great Portuguese galleon ships of old, the inflated football-size blue sacs came bowling across the water, their rigid crests raised like gleaming sails. Beneath the surface each man-of-war carried maybe twenty feet of the deadliest tentacles.

Meanwhile at the harbor's mouth, the yellow lieutenant swished back and forth. "We're finished, sir! Done for!" he wailed. "They'll sink us all, sir! They'll drag us to the bottom!"

"Stow it, Lieutenant!" John Paul fumed.

The first mate gaped at the advancing man-of-war flotilla. "In all me days at sea, cap'n, I never imagined such monsters. What *can* we possibly do against them?"

John Paul replied coolly, "When outnumbered, Mr. Brown, a sailor must remember his advantages."

"Beggin' your pardon, Cap'n, but I see nothin' that will prevent those blue devils from squeezin' the jelly out of us as easily as jelly doughnuts."

"Ah, Mr. Brown, but you have forgotten your marine biology," the captain said. "Jet propulsion! That is what we have, and they lack. The Portuguese men-of-war, mighty though they are, remain at the mercy of the wind and current. They are just full of hot air, really. And we, Mr. Brown, are about to knock the wind out of them."

"Aye, Cap'n," said the moon jelly. "Just give us the orders-o."

John Paul spent the last tense moments studying the scene. His plan required precise timing. The ferryboat was now moored at the dock, collecting new passengers.

Seaward, the men-of-war were so close he could see sunshine shining through their translucent blue floats.

Open, shut, the captain's jelly sac throbbed like a beating heart. As if mad, he snarled, "Come at us faster, blue blowhards! Speed it up, foul garbage bags! Faster! Faster!"

Suddenly, a cry, more like a shriek, came from the lieutenant. "*Sir!* Rowing craft bearing down on us, sir! We're right in its path, sir!"

John Paul remained steadfast. He knew the tide had pushed his fleet back into the ferry's route. Without turning, he could picture the skiff's tall prow plowing through the water straight toward them.

"Stand fast, lads!" the captain cried with only the slightest shake in his voice. "No one move until I give the word! Steady now! Steady!"

When the men-of-war stood a mere yard before the waiting jellyfish, and one more stroke of the ferryman's oar spelled disaster from the rear, John Paul gave the orders, "All hands! All hands reverse full speed!"

In one swift motion, the jellyfish closed their bells and shot back into the harbor. At the same moment, the sixty-four men-of-war sailed across the rowboat's path. As they did, the craft plowed right through them.

"Heave to!" cried John Paul Jellyfish, and he turned to witness the devastation.

One, two, three, four men-of-war exploded upon impact with the skiff. Six more disappeared under the churning water.

"Blasted nuisances!" cursed the muscled ferryman, who swatted three more blue floats with his oar. The remaining men-of-war scattered to the far reaches of the harbor, helpless to move until the tide took them out again.

A mighty cheer rose from the jellyfish fleet. "Victory! Hurrah for Old Ironsides!"

John Paul's jelly sac puckered. As he ran an eye along the perimeter of the harbor, he spotted plenty of blue forms still stirring. What is more, a familiar fat seagull stood on a nearby piling.

"This was no victory, gentlemen," the captain said to his officers. "Once the tide turns, these men-of-war will regroup and come after us with greater fury. And next time, I doubt there will be a handy rowboat to do the dirty work. This battle is won,

gentlemen, but not the war."

