

Captain John Paul Jellyfish Serialized



16.

A Cormorant

Winter came early that year. Overnight, the temperature dropped twenty degrees, and the sky turned as flat and gray as a blackboard.

One dank, gusty morning, Captain John Paul Jellyfish scanned the wobbly line of a horizon surrounding him. "The season grows short," he told his officers. "Riding out a winter in these treacherous waters would be rough and unwise. We must sail for warmer seas."

All morning, the jellyfish prepared for the voyage south. They checked the trim of their sac and stocked their tentacles with fish. Shortly before departure, however, the lookout cried, "Ahoy, Captain! Sea bird off your port bow!"

"Bother birds!" snapped John Paul, who had seen dozens of waterfowl already that day.

"Captain, this bird appears to need assistance!" called the lookout. "He's swimming in circles!"

"Oh, very well," John Paul grumbled. "The first law of the sea is to aid any creature in distress. Lieutenant, follow me."

The two jellyfish approached a slender, black bird that was swimming in circles in the water.

"May Day! S-O-S!" he cried. "May Day! S-O-S!"

"Attention, bird!" called the captain.

The bird craned his long neck upward while continuing to loop. "May Day! S-O-S!"

"Lieutenant, what is this bird trying to spell?" John Paul said. "And why does he call this May Day when the present month is October?"

"Perhaps, sir, this pitiful creature is spelling his name. Sos, sir. And perhaps, sir,

in this miserable weather, he's just longing for the merry month of May."

"Very well," said John Paul, addressing the bird again. "Attention, Sos, what seems to be your problem?"

"Good golly! Goo! Goo! By golly!" the bird ranted.

"The bird's loony, sir," said the lieutenant. "Let's leave him be."

"Correction, Lieutenant. This bird is not a loon but a double-crested cormorant. And something is undoubtedly troubling him."

The bird flapped his long wings as if wanting to fly but couldn't. "Golly gee! Goo! Goo!" he said. "S-O-S! S-O-S!"

At this point, the first mate sailed up. "Cap'n, the crew is ready to sail-o," he said. "Shall I give the orders?"

One moment, Mr. Brown," said the captain, still studying the rotating bird. "Observe this cormorant's feathers, if you will. Aren't they smeared with black gook? No wonder the poor bird cannot fly."

"That's crude oil-o, Cap'n," the moon jelly said. "It leaks out of oil tankers and floats on the water-o."

"Is that what it is, Sos?" John Paul asked the bird. "Did you sail through an oil slick?"

The cormorant stopped his swimming and faced the jellyfish trio. "Good golly! That's what happened, by golly," he said. "Golly! Just before starting my winter migration to Florida, I dove for some delicious fish. Golly gee, I came up through this black goo."

The lieutenant sailed close to the captain. "Poor blighter, sir," he whispered. "The bird's a goner. Oil will never come out of those feathers, sir. He can't fend for himself. Sir, there's nothing we can do for him. Let's leave, sir."

"Lieutenant, I believe we have a saying in our navy: *Don't give up the ship*. I believe I know a way to save this bird."

At this moment, the blue lobster shot up from the depths. His tall, stalked eyes swiveled toward the cormorant.

"Good golly! May Day! S-O-S! S-O-S!" the bird started again.

"Stow it, Sos," the captain snarled. "He's one of ours."

"Beggin' your pardon, Cappy," said the lobster. "But seeing that the fleet is sailing south and all, I thought I'd take my leave and head back to the city."

"Hold on, Navigator," John Paul said. "Your services are still needed here."

Lieutenant, set a new course. We are returning to the beach where I was stranded. I know a boy there who will help this bird."

