

Captain John Paul Jellyfish Serialized



17. Return to the Beach

With wide V's of geese overhead pointing the way, the jellyfish fleet returned south. The old blue lobster glided silently along the ocean floor, while the oil-soaked cormorant swam in the rear.

The good bird tried his best to keep up with the fleet. With his webbed feet paddling hard and his long bill held upward at a proud angle, Sos kept saying, "I'm coming! I'm coming, by golly! Golly gee, here I come!" But with his feathers coated by the black, sticky mess, he weakened fast. Each hour saw him lagging farther and farther behind.

The lieutenant talked to the captain. "Sir, I don't think the bird will make it. It's rough going for him, sir. And even if we make it to the beach, sir, how can we be sure this boy of yours, this King Charlie Vee, will help Sos?"

"Because the lad is kind to creatures, Lieutenant," John Paul answered. "Even to the most humble and squishy of us. I am willing to bet a tentacle that when we reach the beach, the freckled-faced boy will find a way to scrub the cormorant's feathers."

All that morning, the crew grumbled and griped about the change in plans. Having to spend another week on this cold, dreary coast caused more than one jellyfish to think of desertion. But these complaints ended quickly when the first mate appeared before the captain with two mangled pink sea nettles in tow.

"I found these jellies floatin' nearby-o, Cap'n," he said. "These are the two nettles who deserted when we first encountered the men-o'-war."

The captain glowered at the pink jellyfish. Both were in ghastly condition. Their jelly sacs were thin and tattered. Several tentacles were missing.

"Do you jellies know the penalty for desertion?" John Paul snarled in his all-hands-beware voice. "Flogging! Twenty lashes with the strongest tentacle."

"Take pity on us, Captain," pleaded one nettle. "The men-of-war have already had their tentacles across our backs."

"So you met the enemy after all," John Paul sneered.

"Aye, Captain," said the second deserter. "They held us captives for days."

From here, John Paul could guess the rest of the story. After the men-of-war had forced their prisoners to spill the information they needed, they released them for the captain to find as a warning.

"Take these jelly-bellies away, Mr. Brown," the captain growled.

For the rest of the afternoon, the coastline remained visible to starboard. The fleet sailed past the small harbor into which the men-of-war had chased them and the bathing beach where they first made land. Next appeared the dark cliffs where the boys had bombarded them, and just before sunset, they dropped anchor off Charlie Vanilla's beach.

The cormorant arrived an hour later, nearly dead in the water. As he glided to a stop among the jellyfish, his head rose. His long neck craned toward the shoreline.

"May Day! S-O-S! S-O-S!" he said weakly.

"The bird's keen eyes have spotted somethin' close to shore-o, Cap'n," said the First Mate.

"What is it, Sos?" John Paul asked. "Why have you started spelling again?"

"Golly gee, balloons!" gasped the bird. "Lots and lots of blue balloons, by golly!"

"Balloons?" said the lieutenant.

"Lots of them?" said the moon jelly.

"Bags!" said the captain. "Those aren't balloons, Sos. Those are Portuguese men-of-war. And they have been waiting for us."

