

Captain John Paul Jellyfish Serialized



18.

Running the Blockade

In every great university up and down the Eastern seaboard, marine biologists were wondering why the jellyfish species *Physalis physalis*, commonly called Portuguese man-of-war, had stayed so late this year in the cold waters of the North Atlantic. These experts had been certain that *physalis* was a warm-water jellyfish. Now they were stumped. Little did they know that the Portuguese men-of-war remained for the sole purpose of hunting down Captain John Paul Jellyfish.

In all, Sos reported fifty-six “blue balloons” strung out the entire length of the beach.

“It’s a blockade, all right,” John Paul muttered to himself. “Somehow those blue devils found out where, when, and why we were coming here. Now they want to stop us from bringing our bird to the beach.”

That night, the captain called a meeting of his officers. “Gentlemen, we have a crisis,” he said. “In order to get our bird, Sos, to Charlie Vanilla, one jellyfish must escort him through a tight blockade of the enemy. The cormorant must be on the beach by sunrise. That’s when the freckled-faced boy does his beach combing. Owing to the extreme danger of this mission, I will ask for volunteers.”

The moon jelly and yellow sea nettle swished side to side. The lieutenant spoke first. “Sir, I regret that I’m not the jellyfish most suited for the job, sir. You see, sir, my yellowness stands out in the dark. Those Portuguese would spot me at once, sir.”

“Sorry, Cap’n,” said the first mate. “But I’ve got a wife-o and four-hundred and thirty-two little jellies waitin’ for me back home. If it weren’t for my family needin’ me, I’d be the first to volunteer-o.”

“Very well,” said the captain. “I shall take the bird myself. Lieutenant, see to it that the crew remains here. If I’m not back in twenty-four hours return to England without me.”

"You can count on me, sir," said the yellow sea nettle a tad too brightly.

"Good luck-o, Cap'n," added the moon jelly.

In the darkest hour of the moonless night, John Paul Jellyfish set off with Sos swimming close behind him. Despite the darkness, the captain knew when he had reached the enemy lines. The men-of-war's rowdy voices, boisterous laughter, and lousy singing drifted over the still water.

"Sounds like the lot of them are drunk on grog," John Paul whispered to the bird. "From now on, Sos, not a word. Not a sound. None of your spelling. Understand?"

The pair sailed ten more yards. From here, the captain could eavesdrop upon the enemy. A voice on his port side cried, "Oi! Oi, Henry! My tentacles are turning to icicles! How long will the commodore keep us in this blankity-blank-blank water?"

"Until that John Paul Jellyscum gets here," a reply came from starboard.

The captain's sac tightened. "Bags! We're sailing between those two blue sad sacks. Both are within a tentacle's length of us."

"Oi! Oi, Henry!" the man-of-war on the left called. "How's the commodore so sure that English jelly will come to this blankity-blank-blank beach?"

"The old man's got a spy," said the other. "Some seagull reports the British fleet's position to him. I heard this seagull spy tell the commodore that the great jellyfish has a sick bird with him. Har! Har!"

"A bird?" the first man-of-war replied. "So when can we expect this brave captain--Har! Har!--and his blankity-blank-blank bird?"

"I'll let you know," was the answer. "I can smell the blood of an English jelly a mile away!"

"Har! Har! Har! Har! Har! Har!" And while these louts laughed, John Paul and the cormorant slipped by them.

The danger, however, hadn't passed. Seconds later, a slight breeze swept across the water.

"Back, Sos!" John Paul cried. "Reverse, full speed!"

Before the terrified bird could move, a giant, blue bulk drifted out of the darkness. Shoved by the wind, the man-of-war and cormorant collided.

The captain's mind whirled. In seconds, the man-of-war would sound the alarm. Seconds later, the entire Portuguese squadron would swarm around them.

Then a miracle. As swiftly as the blue float appeared, it vanished. The sea simply swallowed it up, leaving only a stream of gas bubbles in its place.

"Follow me, Sos," the captain ordered, and he shot toward shore. Not until he

heard waves spilling on the beach a short way ahead did he stop.

"We're safe in the shallows, Sos," John Paul said. "Still, I haven't a clue what sunk that man-of-war."

As he spoke, the captain felt a tickle on his underside. Shortly, two antennae swirled around him. "Navigator? Is that you?"

"By Neptune, Cappy," said the blue lobster close astern. "You ought to be more careful, don't you know. Lucky I got a good grip on that man-of-war's tentacles and took him under with a single yank."

The captain figured the lobster had trailed him from the ocean floor. He debated whether to give him a good tongue lashing for disobeying orders or praise him for saving his life. Instead, he said nothing.

Meanwhile, the cormorant had drifted to shore. Limp and lifeless, he rocked side to side in the small waves.

The jellyfish and lobster looked on in silence. They had run the blockade. They had brought the crippled bird this far. Now all they could do was wait for dawn.

