

Captain John Paul Jellyfish Serialized



20.

The Chase

“Quark! Quark!” screamed the seagull.

Captain John Paul Jellyfish shook a clenched tentacle skyward. “Wretched stool pigeon!” he snarled. “Lieutenant, make ready to head for the open sea! Bear due east. Mr. Brown, send a good jelly to the rear as a lookout.”

The jellyfish fleet was underway in seconds. Nevertheless, before they had traveled far, Smucker, the lookout, cried, “Sails ahoy!”

The three officers turned to see a string of blue beads dotting the horizon.

“Sir! They’ve found us, sir!” wailed the yellow sea nettle.

“Those blue floats have the wind advantage, Cap’n,” said the moon jelly. “This brisk wind is pushin’ them straight toward us.”

The captain gauged the current and wind speed. “Gentlemen, we still have a half-day’s head start,” he said. “Navigator, keep us on this easterly course, if you please.”

The chase was on—an armada of some fifty-odd Portuguese men-of-war pursuing a meager fleet of pint-size jellyfish. All that day came the lieutenant’s driving commands, “Press on, jellies! Faster! Faster,” mixed with the first mate shouting, “Keep those sacs trim! No slack! No slack there!” But each time the two officers looked back, the enemy was closer.

The captain sailed at the rear of the fleet. He knew the Portuguese pursuit tactics well. They advanced in a crescent formation—one large U. The speedier ones, he confirmed with a glance astern, sailed forward at the two ends of the U. The man-of-war commodore would be sailing at the crescent’s middle.

That evening, John Paul explained the situation to his officers. “If we cut north or south, the two ends of their formation would close in and cut us off. Being heavily outnumbered, our only chance of escape is to continue eastward, straight from shore.”

All night long, the jellyfish fleet pressed out to sea. All night long, the wind beat on their back and the waves rocked them to exhaustion. But despite this hard work, in the morning, the jellies were in for a shock. The men-of-war had cut the distance between them by half.

"Press on! Press on, jellies," cried the yellow sea nettle.

"Faster! Faster!" barked the moon jelly. "Let those blue whimps-of-war chase us all the way back to England."

By the third day, the chase began to take its toll. The continuous running before the wind was too much for the large cannonball jelly named Big Welch, and Big Welch died. Immediately, the captain ordered his crew to stop for a precious few minutes so they could give their mate a proper sea burial.

"Big Welch was every inch a sailor, from the top of his sac to the tip of his tentacles," the captain eulogized. "Big Welch's body now returns to the ocean depths, where it will decay and become food for small fish, who in turn will become food for us jellyfish. Thus, the cycle of life in the sea goes around."

All that day and night, the chase continued. By morning, the men-of-war crescent had nearly overtaken the fleeing fleet. By evening, John Paul knew running any longer was useless. At his command the jellyfish heaved to. Some fifty yards away, the men-of-war armada did the same.

The captain studied the long line of blue floats facing him. "The wind has died," he told his officers. "The Portuguese commodore will wait for the morning's breeze to begin his attack."

The night passed fretfully for the jellyfish. Few slept. The ones who did had ghastly dreams. Every jelly knew that when the next sun appeared, they would engage in a fierce battle.

The captain spent these long, dark hours deep in thought. Sometime during the night, he felt a tug on a tentacle and heard the blue lobster's voice.

"Cappy, the way I figure it, you knew all along it would come to a fight with those men-o'-war, don't you know. I figure you knew they would eventually find us and give chase. You wanted to draw them away from the beaches where the children might play, ain't that right? That's the real reason we're far out to sea like this."

"Indeed, Navigator," said John Paul. "Is that all?"

"Well, Cappy," said the lobster. "I also wanted to tell you that whatever happens in the morning, it's been a privilege to serve under you. Aye, a right honor indeed."

At dawn, John Paul Jellyfish assembled his

fleet. Swimming before the shaking jellies, he delivered this address:

"Fleet company, it is time to meet the enemy. This blue scourge has pestered the American coastline far too long. All summer, they made it unsafe for any American girl or boy to go swimming. Now it is time to teach these scoundrels a lesson. Any man-of-war we sink today will make the beaches safer in the future for the little people. They might never know what you have done for them, but if you fight bravely this day, you will be able to hold your jelly sac high and know you have done your duty."

