

Captain John Paul Jellyfish Serialized



3.

People

Early the next morning, the jellyfish fleet bopped in choppy waters off the coast of the new land. A short distance away lay a stretch of sandy beach carpeted with people.

The captain ran a trained eye along the crowded shore. "Lieutenant, notice that sign beyond the beach, if you please," he said to the yellow sea nettle drifting alongside him. "It reads: AMERICA HOT DOGS. That's what I shall call this new continent."

"Hot Dogs, sir?" said the lieutenant.

John Paul's jelly quivered. "No, *America!*" he rasped. "I shall call the land *America.*"

Again, the captain checked the crowded sand. He had seen people before, plenty of them. Each summer, they packed the seashores of southern England. Although none had ever done him any harm, they were creatures he cared to avoid.

"But something's not right about *this* beach," John Paul said inwardly. "Something I can't quite put my tentacle on. Something's off, and I'd give an ounce of jelly to know what it is."

The captain turned. "Mr. Brown!" he cried, and the brawny moon jelly appeared alongside him. "Prepare the fleet to sail, if you please. We shall prowl the shallows for a closer look at this American beach."

"Right-o, Cap'n," replied the first mate, but then he remained floating by the captain's side.

"Well, what is it, Mr. Brown?" John Paul asked.

"Pardon, Cap'n," the moon jelly said. "But in all me days at sea-o, I've seen miles of beaches covered with people-o."

John Paul scrutinized the sand some more. "Yes, what about it?"

The first mate's short tentacles rippled bow to stern. "You see, Cap'n, I know how the landlubbers like to sometimes splash around in the water-o. Especially the wee ones. They find it clever to float on their backs and belly-os."

"I'm well aware of the habits of people, Mr. Brown. Please make your point."

"Well, Cap'n, notice the water around here. Not a single soul is swimmin' in it."

Yes, *that was it!* John Paul thought. *Although the air is warm, the water is empty. So what is keeping the people from taking a dip?*

"All hands, make ready to sail at once," came the moon jelly's command. "And keep it quiet, crew. Not a sound."

Without further delay, John Paul spread his speckled jelly sac wide open. A quick pucker of the bell forced jets of water from his body, propelling him toward shore. His tentacles fluttered behind him like kite tails.

Closer in, the surf was gentle. Small waves lapped and hissed upon the sand like crooked tongues. John Paul knew better than to venture in farther. Any wave, no matter how small, could sweep his entire fleet ashore and strand it there as lifeless lumps of gel.

Nonetheless, the captain had a sufficient view of the people sprawled on the sand. He marveled at the variety of shapes, sizes, and colors in which this creature came-short, long, flabby, curvy, white, black, and most shades in between. Plenty of little ones were busy with sand. Still, no one entered the water.

"People! Revolting creatures!" John snorted.

"Imagine having ghastly furry heads in place of handsome jelly sacs. Imagine having spindly legs and arms in place of splendid tentacles. And few people have enough jelly inside them to wobble whatsoever."

Spying nothing suspicious here, John Paul led his fleet down the length of the beach. He had become bored with people watching when a small girl in a pink bikini suddenly jumped to her feet. Flapping her arms like a bird, she shouted, "I'm a pelican! Pelican! Pelican!" and dashed toward the ocean.

The commotion this caused was remarkable. The instant the girl entered the water, grown-ups from all over sprang off their towels. In one grand chorus, they shouted:

"SUSIESTOPSTAYAWAYFROMTHEWATERIT'SNOTSAFETOSWIM!"

Waves rocked the jellies as the girl in the pink bikini splashed back to shore.

"I'm a pelican! Pelican!" she cried, returning to her towel.

John Paul was baffled. Spinning a full circle, he spied nothing in those waters that spelled danger. To be sure, close by swam two genuine pelicans that were eyeing the girl indignantly, but they appeared harmless.

The lieutenant swam up to the captain. "Sir, could the people be leery of us sea nettles in the fleet?" he suggested. "You know, sir, what a smart sting we can deliver if provoked."

"In our present position, we are not visible from the beach, Lieutenant," replied John Paul.

The moon jelly, who had dropped underwater to search the sea bottom, now resurfaced. "Nothing below, Cap'n," he reported.

"Well, something is striking fear into these American people, Mr. Brown," snapped the captain. "Something is making these waters off limits to those youngsters."

John Paul turned to address the entire fleet. This marked an historic moment. Years later, when old jellyfish tell their young ones the tale of this voyage, they still recite the famous words the captain spoke that day.

Captain John Paul Jellyfish clenched a tentacle and tucked in his jelly. In a commanding voice, he gave this pledge:

"Fleet company, together we crossed a vast ocean. We have discovered a new land. However, there is peril here, and our mission is not complete. Now we must scour the coastline and track down the menace that is terrorizing its subjects. We must fight this scourge, whatever it is, wherever it is, and eliminate it from these shores forever."

