

# Captain John Paul Jellyfish Serialized



1.

## The Fleet

The jellyfish fleet sailed over the grape-dark sea. Out from England for over three months, the jellied sailors had seen nothing but wrinkled ocean and smooth blue sky. Long Atlantic swells rolled under them. Salt spray stung their jelly sacs. Choppy white-capped waves pitched and tossed them dizzy. Up peak, down valley, up, down, up, down, that's how it was mile after mile, day after day.

With every wave, Captain John Paul Jellyfish let out a low groan. His tentacles hung limply beneath him. His stomach turned somersault. In short, this bold sea captain, the most celebrated jellyfish who ever sailed the seven seas, was seasick.

The captain turned a full circle. The horizon appeared as a teeter-tottering gray line where ocean met sky.

"Bags! Oh, bags!" John Paul swore, as another wave broke over the bow of his red-speckled jelly sac. "If only *something* would stand still!"

A shout came from starboard. "Sir! Captain, sir! Over here, sir!"

John Paul turned to find his lieutenant, a yellow sea nettle jellyfish, cruising beside him.

The captain, who hated being disturbed in this queasy condition, fumed, "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"There's grumbling among the crew, sir," reported the yellow sea nettle. "There's more doubt than ever about this voyage, sir. Not one jelly in the lot thinks we'll reach India by sailing west like this. Sir, the crew believes we'll end up burning in the setting sun. Begging your pardon, sir, but they think your jelly has gone fruity, sir. There's talk of mutiny."

More water slipped over John Paul's jelly sac. His reply came over the howl of

the wind and the swish-swash of the waves.

"I'm well aware of the crew's concerns, Lieutenant. Those jellies still believe the earth is flat. Please remind them, I never said this journey would be a joy ride. But I can guarantee them this, the world is round, and we'll soon be across this wretched ocean, resting our sacs in some calm, windless cove."

"Aye, aye, sir," the lieutenant answered. "The earth is round like a pancake, you say, sir?"

"No, like a beach ball, Lieutenant!" John Paul rasped. "This world is as round as a beach ball! You are dismissed!"

As the sea nettle turned, the captain noted the wobble of disbelief in his first officer's sac. Soon after leaving England, he realized the lieutenant was not a jellyfish he could count on.

"We *must* make landfall soon," he told himself. "Or there *will* be trouble with the crew."

The captain ran a keen eye down the length of his fleet spread out on either side of him. Their number was small. Having scoured through the back coves and under every pier in Plymouth Harbor, he had found only two dozen jellyfish willing to set sail with him. A slovenly bunch at first, few of the jellies could sail a straight line without getting their tentacles tangled, let alone knew the meaning of *trimming your sac* or *beating jelly bells to windward*. Yet over the past weeks, the officers had drilled and shaped them into crack sailors. Their umbrella-shaped hulls now floated like silk parachutes in the water. Fine ribbons of tentacles dangled below each one.

Another rolling billow hoisted the string of jellyfish onto a snowy crest and then dropped them like stones. John Paul Jellyfish thought he left his stomach behind.

"Mornin'-o, Cap'n," chimed the first mate, a brawny moon jellyfish, who came sailing up to John Paul's side. His short tentacles rippled around the rim of his broad, gray jelly sac.

The captain's jelly sac puckered. "Good day, Mr. Brown," he muttered.

"Beggin' your pardon, Cap'n," said the first mate. "But you're lookin' a tad green-o around the jelly bell-o this mornin'."

John Paul gave the moon jelly an icy stare. "Stow it, Mr. Brown," he growled. "Attend to your duties, if you please."

Being a seasick jellyfish and a sea captain at that was something of which John Paul was not particularly proud.

“Right-o, Cap’n,” came the first mate’s snappy reply, and he hastened away.

This day passed like all others. The sun, a bright buttery ball, followed its usual course across the sky and sank into the sea ahead of the fleet. As night came on, a stiff easterly wind sprang up. It whisked the jellyfish along at a terrific speed.

The night passed sleepless for the captain. Not only did the wind keep his jelly wobbling, but self-doubts plagued him as well. According to his stellar observations, he should have reached land weeks ago. Could he be wrong? Would his fleet ever reach India? Could the earth be flat after all, and he was leading his fleet to folly?

To add to his concern, the reports from an occasional passing fish were not encouraging. A humpback whale migrating south described huge chunks of ice afloat in the water to the North, while a swordfish, only yesterday, spoke of warm southern waters infested with teams of sinister hammerhead sharks.

Miserable, John Paul bobbed in the inky-black water. As sea spray slapped his sides, he gazed up at the spinning stars. Rolling a tentacle into a clench, the captain cursed at the universe,

“Bags! Oh, *bags!*”

