THE EQUATION OF EQUINOX

Drawings by Frank Tenney Johnson

BY S. TEN EYCK BOURKE AND CHARLES FRANCIS BOURKE

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BLIM! "The navy's bustin' up Gridiron Reef!" said Flotsam, son of a life saver.

And "Listen to Quin!" said Jetsam, of the same age and service, admiringly. "Better'n a 'lectric foghorn and patent exploding detonator rolled in one. Quin is!"

Simultaneously came the thrumpp of one of the big turret guns of the North Atlantic squadron, making premature Fourth of July on Barnegat Beach, of spring maneuvers and the attempted destruction of the murderous Gridiron that Ships Bottom Life Saving Station was set to guard, and the shriek of an electric siren, and then the roar of explosion, and the excited braying of a burro, in prolonged emulation of the triplicate din.

"Whatever's got into that donk now?" the big voice of Captain Jem Casco came booming across the sands from Ships Bottom's little, white-painted, red-roofed station, to the dunes where the two boys forgathered with their been comrade, the little, long-eared burro. "W'en beauty was handed out," the big life saver went on, "Quin was sure behin' the door; but he made up on voice. Cain't you two sojerers choke him off?"

It was not the first time the little burro had given the long-suffering crew of Ships Bottom proof of his leather-lunged capacity. As a matter of fact, they had had much to endure from Quin's eternal, and generally nocturnal, complaints since he first landed on Barnegat, sole survivor of an Andean cattle-ship, via a disastrous storm cycle that bore his name, just when Ships Bottom, through the grim joking of the Gridiron, stood sorely in need of a mascot. The little derelict promptly elected himself to fill the vacant berth. Thenceforth he belonged to Ships Bottom, and the big life savers named him, as they had Flotsam and Jetsam, for purposes of identification, and voted him a pension and a home.

"Though why, in Heaven's name, it's hard to tell!" as Big Jem Casco ponderously speculated. "It's not for his winnin' ways, nor his looks, nor yet his voice that 'ud do for the foghorn out on the Grid. It mus' be for the troubles that donk's been through—an' is in, along o' them two chums he's picked."

INDEED, he was no hero of the Life Saving Service, was Equinox, or rather Quin; though the Brothers of the Trinity—the Navy, the Revenue, and the Life—came later to pay him high honor. Rather a shirker of work, unfaithful, a trouble hunter, filled to his hairy ears with qualities that would make an outcast of any mere man, he viewed with puzzled amusement the big, mahogany-faced, hard-working boatmen who spent their lives saving wet folk from the sea; folk who forgot to thank them, or fought to be let alone, when first aid measures were applied.

What these things meant he did not know, nor yet the great, wooden-walled ships that flung themselves on the Gridiron reefs, strewing the beach with largesse of fruit and stuff for which he fought with the beach-combers and ground sharks. One other thing puzzled him,—some strange creature, far out on the Gridiron, who lifted up his voice in deep-throated braying in rivalry of Quin whenever the coast fog fell, and terrified liners fled seaward from the longshore smother, and the life saving crew went forth on expeditions with sand wagon and breeches buoy, rocket and Coston light, with the little Andean burro solemnly umpiring that queer game in which men lost their lives and ships their charters.

But for companionship and comprehension Quin turned to Flotsam and Jetsam; for the burro was born enduring. They at least did not look on him as a living joke, as though his shaggy hide and solemn, graying head did not contain possibilities of finer feeling, romance, and affection. In their company was always feasting and frequently flight. But whether they stood by or abandoned him, there was always serious work at hand. And some day, when the tide was low and the coast clear of sharks, with them he would investigate and have it out with that other homesick burro out on the reefs! In the meantime, with shaggy head and tail upended, feet braced in the sand all four ways of the compass, Quin was for the moment apparently bent on proving once for all that foghorns and naval squadrons might come and go; but that in the matter of voice none could outclass him—leastwise not in his own bailiwick.

"I should think Quin'd be mos' wore out. Seems like he knows what the navy came for, the way he's been talkin' 'bout it these three days. Shucks! Le' go my hair; my head ain't carrots," Flotsam said to the puzzling Equinox, who suddenly subsided, and thrust a shaggy head and wagging ears between the pair.

IT was all of three days that the practice squadron of two or three viperish looking torpedoboats, a couple of cruisers, and some battleships (twenty thousand tonners which could shoot fifteen miles and bowl over a church) had been prowling around the Gridiron's terrible parallels of reefs and shoals, stretching tunnelwise into the sea, and long a menace to outward craft on this, one of the worst stretches of the Atlantic seaboard,—three days of boat racing and target shooting, trying out various forms of destruction devised by twentieth century civilization. Now with the revenue cutter Onondaga, the "Guardian Angel" beloved of the coast, planting dynamite and land wires on the rocks for the final blast, and Ships Bottom's new hydroplane circling the air, sea and sky craft were leagued for its destruction, with dynamite, aerial bombs, and torpedoes,—vandalism that filled Flotsam and Jetsam with despair.

As a matter of fact, Fate was only setting the scene for a spectacular marine drama; only the star performers, wriggling their toes in the sand, and wagging their ears, had not yet got their cue.

"Where's the use of growin' up to be life savers when there ain't no place left to get wrecked?" said Jetsam dolefully.

"'Tain't no use anyhow, that ding ole reef, sence the wireless 'n' the 'lectric foghorn warns the hookers off 'fore they can come in," said Flotsam, each according to nature. And "Le's make a hyderplane," said Flotsam, apropos of nothing at all, except that the mechanical, man-carrying, skip-the-water craft was the latest addition to the Barnegat beach apparatus of these degenerate times that they had seen.

The combined qualities of the hydroplane appealed to the pair of adventurers of a dozen and two years; whose general trend of mind and mischievousness was the same, like their own abbreviated, bare, and sunburnt legs. The "hydro" part of the new marine monster presented no difficulties of construction, beyond personal hazard in the way of a couple of "borrowed" clamming skiffs and a few planks, to nautical geniuses like Flotsam and Jetsam, toiling manfully on the landward side of the forty-mile sand strip that guarded the reaches of Barnegat Bay, adjacent to Ships Bottom Station and the inlet.

NATURAL-BORN boat builders they were; but, like boys, accustomed to do one thing at a time. It was only when the pontoon was finished and floated in the inlet that they realized they had on hand nothing more than a waterlogged catamaran that would take the derrick of one of the visiting warships to hoist out of the water, to say nothing about flying.

"She ain't even got motion power!" said Jetsam, disgusted with their lack of foresight.

"What's the matter with Quin?" said Flotsam, who had a way of making the best of things, looking up at the sleepy head nodding between them, awaiting the boys' imagination.

"I don'no what we c'n do with him," said Jetsam dubiously. "'Sides, it's whitenin' up to east'ard thick. Murk's comin' in ag'in the land breeze."

"Reg'lar blanketer," Flotsam agreed, with a sailor's wisdom of fogs, wise to these latitudes.

All their brief lives the boys had lived on the Barnegat coast, and knew it like a book.

"You three pirates from Borneo better look out for that fool catamaran!" Casco's warning came booming across the sands. "You'll lose her through the inlet, this wind; then where'll ye be?"

"Le's be pirates," Flotsam said, grasping at the thought. "Le's kidnap Quin, an' carry him off to sea, an' hold him for ransom—"

"An' write Black Hand letters, an' cut off one of his ears once in awhile, an' send 'em to Ships Bottom to show we mean business," said Jetsam. "Say, Sam, ain't that the old Gridiron foghorn braying again? Sounds like them navy ships're gettin' ready to give them far-out rocks one more blast, an' then quit for the night."

"Gee! If we could on'y work out to 'em in the smother, an' take 'em by storm, an' force 'em over the side!" Flotsam said, glancing at the uneasy fleet.

Out at sea the big warships, lined up, bows shoreward to wind and tide, were fast becoming slanty blurs. Closer in, on the far side of Gridiron Reef, the revenue cutter was having trouble setting off her final charge of dynamite, and a reconnoitering torpedoboat was fussing round on the same side of the rocks, eager to lend a hand—or a torpedo.

But Flotsam and Jetsam were not bothered with maneuvers already become too familiar. The trend of the wind and the tide and Casco's warning had suggested a substitute "motion power" in the shape of an old cotton umbrella, relic of some feminine wreck, left unguarded. Mounted on the catamaran's bow, and its ribs stayed down, it made a first class round sail—and all the work of a few minutes to such expert hands.

But Quin was a different matter. The buccaneers did not need him particularly; but he was handy for "ballast." Besides, for some esoteric reason of his own, the burro balked on going to sea. Neither Flotsam nor Jetsam nor Quin, not one of the precious three of a kind, ever dreamed that the safety of the entire North Atlantic squadron, men, money, and guns,—twenty million dollars' worth of battleships, including the Onondaga, R. C.,—depended on this whim of two boys and the *tertium quid* in the shape of Quin.

AS they were arguing the matter out on the deck of the pontoon the double catastrophe happened. The struggles of the victim, the swift current of the inlet, and the pull of the open umbrella combined to slip the catamaran from her moorings, an old oar stuck