

Blood of the Albacore



AN ARGOSY ODDITY

By NARD JONES

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IN THE first place, it was curious that there should be albacore along the coast of Oregon and Washington. So far as anyone knew, they had never schooled that far north.* The albacore likes tropical and semi-tropical waters, and the sea off the coast of the Pacific Northwest is not either.

Scientists really know very little about the albacore, and there were a dozen answers to why they were in northern waters. Some claimed that the Japanese current was growing warmer. Others insisted that the albacore had always been there at that season, but that the fishermen had not been getting far enough out to get them. Nobody really knew.

But the moment the albacore began to run out there, the fishermen of Astoria forgot all about the salmon which they

had fished for years—the salmon which had made a living for their fathers in the days when gillnet boats used sails. The albacore, iced down in cars and shipped to California canneries, would bring fancy prices. The fishermen began to take out everything that would float. Landlubbers bought up rotten hulks and got into the chase. Sportsmen heard of the run and chartered boats never meant to go beyond the mouth of the Columbia River. And because the albacore played from fifty to a hundred miles at sea, and the weather grows nasty off the north coast, there were many casualties. The timid said that there was no protecting fools from their own foolishness. But some of the older fishermen had a different notion. I talked to one of them there on the bank of the Columbia. He was a gray and windburned specimen who had fished since he was a boy of eleven.

"They're gettin' lost out there because they're doin' something that just ain't right," he said. "Albacore ain't got any business up here. Albacore is a tropical fish, and it ain't right that they can stand the cold of these waters. Somethin's happened to 'em, and I don't like it."

The old man had other misgivings about it, too. "Another thing, we shouldn't desert the salmon to go after a crazy fish that don't belong here. The salmon has made a living for us all these years. The Indians knew better. They figured that the salmon was a kind of a god and they had ceremonies to him. And maybe they were right." The ancient fisherman looked up at me with his wrinkled face. "Maybe they were right," he repeated. "And if the salmon is a god, then, the way I look at it, the albacore is a devil. Did you ever see one?"

"No," I admitted. "I hope to, though, tomorrow. I came down here to try my hand at catching some."

He shook his head dubiously. "Well, I hope you come back all right. And if

* It was in the summer of 1938 that albacore appeared in commercial quantities for the first time, although several fishermen claimed to have caught an occasional one in their nets in previous years.—N. J.

you get hold of one of them fish, just take a look at it. They ain't like a fish." He paused. "They got a hard skin like blue steel. They got big round eyes that look right at you when you throw 'em into the ice. They got a tail like a trip-hammer and I've seen them tails slap for hours—not feeble, but powerful—after the fish is out of water. And another thing—their blood is warm and red and thick, like a human's."

I didn't laugh, partly in deference to the old man and partly because I really didn't feel like it. "I take it you've been out after them."

"Just once," he said. "That was enough for me. You see, when you get an albacore inside the boat you got to stick him and let him bleed before you throw him on the ice. And he bleeds like a murdered man, that albacore. While he's doin' it he pounds that tail—so strong that you can't hold it still with two hands—and them big eyes look at you. Sure, I know that these science fellows say it's a fish. They say it's related to the mackerel. But then those fellows got to say something. They're like the old Indian medicine men that used to be around here. We ask them something and they got to answer—but we don't know whether the answer is right or not."

IT WAS difficult for me to get the old man's words out of my mind as I went to bed at the hotel that night. I was to be up at four in the morning to meet the owner of the boat I had chartered, and more than anything I wanted to sleep. But I did not doze off until at least two, and when I did I dreamed of bleeding tuna.

That in itself began to seem significant to me, for I am not one given to falling under the effects of gloomy prophecy.

When the hotel clerk called me at four and I set about getting myself dressed for the trip I decided that it was something more than the old man's pessimism that was affecting me.

I dressed in the dark, as is my habit on winter mornings or when I arise before

sunup in the summer months. My room faced the river, but beyond the windows I could see nothing. It occurred to me that it was more than the mere blackness of night. It was like a thick cloud, pressing against the window panes. I had the sensation that at any moment the glass might burst into the room.

When I reached the street this feeling was not dispelled. The town was deserted at that hour. From the hotel to the waterfront I encountered not a single soul, saw not a single light. You may imagine my relief when I reached the riverfront street and saw the lights of an all-night restaurant and, bathed in their feeble glow, Pete Forrest, the man from whom I was chartering.

He greeted me as jovially as a man may at such an hour and asked me if I wanted breakfast. "You'd better eat," he added. "Won't do you any harm to lose it—and if it should be a smooth day you'll be getting mighty hungry before we break out sandwiches."

I wondered how the weather might be out there, but I didn't want to ask Pete. We went into the all-night café where the owner-cook-waiter threw ham and eggs and coffee at us with the air of a man who did not expect to see us again. I found that my appetite was not nearly as keen as I had believed, but I made an attempt to eat as much as Pete.

"How many charter parties have you taken out?" I asked.

"Oh . . . maybe ten or eleven."

"Ever hit very bad weather?"

Pete looked at me. "Depends on what you'd call bad weather. I didn't call it bad except twice, but some of those I had out with me thought it was rough. After all, we got to go out there sixty or seventy miles and the boat's only twenty-five feet long and seven at the beam. The ocean ain't hardly ever a mill pond."

"Of course not," I agreed, trying to appear hearty.

"We'll be all right," Pete said, as though to reassure me. "I keep my engine in good shape—and I got a 50-watt radiotelephone

set that will pick up the Coast Guard station if we get into trouble."

That made me feel better, but somehow I did not care for the fatalistic tone of Pete's voice.

I began to feel alone, there in that greasy, dimly lighted all-night café. It was as if Pete and the restaurant man and I were alone—and in a few minutes Pete and I would be getting onto a stick of wood twenty-five by seven feet and going out there sixty or seventy miles. Going down the twelve miles of river from the town to the bar—and then out . . . out to catch and kill a strange, alien fish which bled like a human being.

"Well," I said, "I'll get some cigarettes and let's get out of here and on our way, Pete."

"Yeah . . ." He slid off his stool, and I followed him down to the lonely pier. The river was down with the receding tide and I had to peer over the edge of the wharf to see the boat. I had examined her the day before, but she had looked much more competent in the daylight. I followed Pete down the ladder and stepped into the little craft. It seemed damp and unfriendly as I sat gingerly on the aft seat.

It wasn't much of a boat, as boats go. There was the seat athwart the self-bailing cockpit, and a box over the engine amidships, and a little doghouse forward in which Pete kept his gear, and life-jackets, and the radiotelephone set. There was a wheel and a compass under the shelter, but Pete used the steering wheel that was set into the outside after-wall of the dog-house.

I watched him start the motor and cast off the lines, and we began going astern into the channel of the river. He seemed to know what he was doing, but he had a surly, what-the-hell way of doing it that reminded me of his fatalistic speech.

His actions seemed to say, "We don't know what we're getting in for, but it doesn't make much difference whether we get back or not because we don't matter in the scheme of things." I suppose

that fishermen and those who have to do with the sea get to be like that.

I had been around small boats most of my life, although always on bays and rivers, and I had made ocean voyages in liners. But I had never been in a small craft on the open sea, and after we were out a way I began to understand this attitude which Pete Forrest represented. Out there you begin to realize your insignificance. You begin to know that the sea can, at any moment, do what it wishes with you and the little shell which is preserving your life for you.

WITH an outgoing tide and the current, we boomed down toward the mouth of the majestic Columbia. The little boat pitched and tossed and I found myself hanging to the gunwales as Pete steered for the outside.

Once I looked back and saw that the sky was lighting just a little in the east, but ahead of us it was still that oppressive black, broken only by the blinking navigation lights that marked the channel. Even those seemed eerie. It was only by an effort that I could convince myself that they were man-made and man-controlled.

In no time at all we were outside, and to my astonishment it was smoother there.

When we passed the huge red bulk of the lightship the sun had risen pinkly and out before me I saw the ocean stretching as smooth as a lake in summer.

I sighed with relief. We were going to have good weather. And this little boat possessed such speed that undoubtedly we could run away from sudden squalls. Should the motor fail, by some remote chance, there was Pete's radiotelephone. I began to feel pleased that I had decided on a tuna fishing trip. This was going to be a pleasant experience which I could retail at the club—and make exciting with a bit of verbal embroidering. Inwardly I laughed at myself for my misgivings of the earlier morning. And I smiled as I remembered what the old fisherman had said down there on the river bank.

Beyond the lightship we began to pass an occasional trolling vessel, bound out for albacore. Then we encountered three large purse-seiners. The crews of all these boats waved us on, and seemed quite amused at the sight of Pete and me bouncing along in our water flivver intent on catching a dozen albacore for the sport of it.

But after the purse-seine vessels, there was nothing. Once, far off to the southwest, I did see the trailing smoke of a freighter. But the birds which had followed us a little way from shore were now nowhere to be seen. The ocean seemed smoothly lifeless.

I looked back, and by straining my eyes could still make out the shore—but the river mouth seemed to have closed up. The shoreline appeared to me just as it had to old Captain Vancouver when he had failed to discover the Columbia and left it to Gray. Then, as I watched, the thin line of shore seemed to drop slowly down into the water.

I stood up in the cockpit as we boomed along. I turned in a complete circle, and could see nothing.

Nothing.

PETE FORREST and I were two men alone on a great gray disc of sea. It seemed incredible to me that the ocean could be so smooth, and suddenly Forrest echoed my thought: "I ain't ever seen it so smooth this far out," he said.

"How far have we come?"

He looked at his watch. "About twenty-five miles." He turned to the wheel again.

The motor was roaring along at almost top revolutions and I suspected that it would not take us very much longer to reach the place where the tuna ought to be. The further west we ran the more smooth the sea became. There was literally not a ripple. There was not even the long slow swell that you will encounter when the ocean is behaving. Only our little boat marred the surface and it gave me an odd feeling—a lonely feeling—so that I got up and stood by Pete at the

wheel, pretending to watch for albacore.

"Never seen it so smooth," said Pete again. I looked at him. His face was troubled, and it struck me that this quiet worried him far more than a storm.

As we headed further out a faint haze settled down. It was not a light fog, for the visibility was still good. It was more like a light veil of smoke. But there was neither the smell of smoke nor the wet tang of mist.

"Take the wheel a minute," Pete said. "Let's see who we can pick up on the radiotelephone just for the hell of it." His voice tried to be casual, but it was fraught with a loneliness. Pete was feeling the same thing that I was feeling, though he would not admit it.

While I held the boat to her course I watched Pete fussing with the dials of the radiophone through the open doorway of the dog-house. I heard him calling: "This is WXYZ calling and standing by. This is WXYZ calling and standing by." Then he would flip the transmitter switch and listen. There was only silence.

"That's funny," he said, and tried again. Still without success. "I'll see if I can get the Coast Guard station—it's a different wave-length."

But he heard nothing from the Coast Guard station, either. "I can't figure it," he said at last. "The weather is perfect."

"Maybe the outfit is on the fritz," I suggested.

He shook his head. "I had it gone over yesterday, and last night I picked up a dozen boats with it." He came out of the dog-house, his forehead wrinkled, his eyes puzzled. "Well," he said, taking the wheel, "one thing—we won't need any radiotelephone this kind of weather, anyhow."

On we went . . . forty miles out . . . fifty . . . fifty-five.

The smoothness of the sea continued, and the mist persisted. Then I noticed something else. It was a different sound from the motor—not the motor itself, but the sound as it reached my ears. There seemed to be an echo, as though the motor were operating inside a huge room.

"Does the engine sound funny to you?" I asked Pete.

He looked at me for a moment before he answered. "Yeah. I been noticing it for the past half hour. It's like—well, like the noise was hitting against the sky and bouncing back at us."

"Do you suppose it's this haze?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's nothing wrong with the motor. The sound's all right—it's just that damned echo."

He had been steering generally west and now, I suppose to determine our position in relation to the river mouth, he looked inside the shelter at the compass. I saw him go suddenly pale. "My God! Look at that thing!"

I looked at the needle. It was revolving, slowly but surely, clear around the compass rose! There was a steady pace to the needle; it was making, I should judge, a complete revolution about every two minutes.

"Listen," Pete said, his voice shaking. "Let's get out of this. Let's get back—and if I can hit that river anywhere close I'll be lucky."

"Well . . . we ought to be getting into some albacore pretty soon," I answered. "But you know more about what we ought to do than I. If you think—"

"I don't think anything. I just figure we ought to get out of this—if we can."

"Would there be any albacore here?"

"There might be. We're running in the Jap current. But I'm going to put her about and hope I can keep her fairly on east."

"That's okay with me. But I'd like to get out a line and see if I can pick up an albacore."

He nodded. "You'll find a pole under the aft seat. Put one of those three-pronged lures on the line, and a big weight. Let out about thirty feet astern. You'd better hang tight to the pole. They hit hard when they hit."

I FOLLOWED his instructions and presently was standing with feet wide apart, waiting. Suddenly my pole jerked out of

my hands. "I've got one!" I yelled, and Pete reluctantly throttled down the engine.

"Pull easy," he advised.

I had to pull easy, so great was the force on the line. Inch by inch the line came in. "Bring him around to the side," Pete said, standing ready with the gaff. I thought I would never get the end of that line in—it must have been at least a five-minute job.

But at last the albacore seemed near the boat. I peered over, anxious to glimpse the steel blue, powerful fish the old fisherman had described. Then my heart whirled inside my breast like a frightened pheasant. On the tranquil surface was a trail of thick, red blood!

Pete saw it as soon as I did, and the gaff hook dropped from his frozen fingers. Determined, I reeled in another foot or two. There, just a few inches below the surface, I saw the albacore. Yes, it was steel blue—that much I could discover from a spot near the tail. But the rest of the body was bloody—with blood that seemed to flow as fast as the water carried it to the surface. The great round eye gazed up at me through the quiet water balefully. With a choked scream I threw the pole and line into the water and turned to Pete.

I expected him to be astonished and chagrined at my lack of nerve. After all, he had not heard the yarn of the old fisherman. But his expression was as fearful as my own must have been. Without a word, he turned and took the wheel of the boat and pressed the motor into action.

Over that terrible, smooth surface we plunged—and neither of us called the attention of the other to the streaks of red that striped it everywhere. . . .

WE RAN into the storm suddenly—a howling Southeaster that seemed to pounce upon us from nowhere. When it struck, I thought that surely we were lost. Our radiophone was useless, and our compass—

"The compass!" Pete yelled suddenly.

"It's quieted down. He veered his course back and forth to test the action of the needle. It seemed to be normal.

We were taking green water over the bow, and I had to clutch at the coaming to keep from being pitched overside. As I stood there it occurred to me that we had overtaken none of the vessels we had passed on the way out. Perhaps, I thought, they had seen the storm coming and made a run for it.

"There she is!" Pete cried. "The river mouth!"

He was right. The compass had corrected itself the moment we had hit the squall.

I would not want to go over that bar again in such weather. Yet to Pete and me the experience was a relief. It was somehow much less terrifying than that awful quiet we had experienced.

Even inside the bar the river was so disturbed that we moored at the pier with the greatest difficulty. A group was on the wharf to greet us. They had been watching our progress up the waterfront, and when we finally got our boots onto the pier they regarded us dubiously.

"How'n the devil did you make it, Pete?" one of them asked. "This is the worst blow we've had in eight years. How're the rest of 'em coming? Those other boats?"

"The rest of them?" Pete repeated. "We were out fifty-five miles and we never passed a vessel coming back!"

They couldn't believe that—because we were the only boat that had come back over the bar. More than that, none of the others came back over the bar that day. It has been more than a year now since I went out with Pete Forrest. On the same day there were four purse-seiners and eighteen trollers went out over the bar. They have not come back.

In Astoria they refuse to believe Pete Forrest when he tells them that, thirty miles from shore, the ocean was like a mill pond that day. They knew that the storm started at ten o'clock that morning, blowing in hard from outside. They know that the freighter *Arline* was pounded to pieces twenty miles down the coast, and that the passenger liner *Denman* was two days off her schedule, bucking seas and headwinds.

They believe that those four seine boats and those eighteen trollers, husky vessels all, were lost in a storm. Pete and I know better—but only a little better. We know that they were lost in a tranquil sea, a sea streaked with blood.

And Pete is even more puzzled than I, because he did not hear the old fisherman talk. But I have often wondered what might have happened that day if I had tried to bring that albacore into the boat.

Argosy Calender of September Hits

September 9 Bright Flag of Tomorrow, a splendid short novel by Arthur Leo Zagat

September 16 Beginning Theodore Roscoe's great new serial: Remember Tomorrow

September 23 Lords of Creation, the first installment of a fine fantastic novel by Eando Binder

September 30 The Devil's Diary by William Du Bois—the third of Argosy's top-notch September serials



With that last shove the wagon went rumbling down the hill; the camp exploded awake

Hurricane Range

By LUKE SHORT

ON THE vast grazeland west of the Chisholm Trail arrives Frank Christian with his small crew and herd, certain that his partner, Morg Wheelon, has already bought a claim from the Indians. All too quickly Frank learns the truth. Morg Wheelon has been killed by an unknown hand; his lease has been taken over by the powerful Reservation Cattle Company; and Christian cannot even get grain delivered unless he releases through Scott Corb, leader of a band of tough gunmen, who controls the Indians by selling them whisky. Christian is caught between the big cattle company and Corb's ruthless organization.

But Frank Christian isn't going to take it sitting down. Determined to find Morg Wheelon's killer and to get back his claim, he drives the Cattle Company riders out of the camp and establishes his crew there. Christian's one ally is Hopewell Barnes, but the latter's pretty daughter, Luvie, warns her father not to get in trouble by aiding Frank. The grain, promised by Barnes, is never delivered.

AGAINST the advice of his wise old foreman, Otey, Frank decides to go to work on Scott Corb. So, with a wild Irishman named Red Shibe, Christian descends on Corb and forces him at the point of a gun to deliver grain. The dangerous Corb does so, promising eventually to drive Frank out of the territory.

The next day an Army troop arrives at the camp—and arrests Frank Christian for peddling whisky to the Indians. Obviously the charge is false, but Frank is thrown in jail. Then once again Hopewell Barnes comes to his aid, with money for bail. That night Otey and Red Shibe, who dislike each other intensely, guard the gold—and the next morning it has mysteriously disappeared.

BUT finally, by a shrewd trick, Frank escapes from the jail. Picking up Red Shibe, he searches out the Indian who testified that he peddled whisky. After a sound beating, the Indian admits that the whole thing was framed by Chet Milabel, foreman of the Reservation Cattle Company.

A hunted man now, Frank pays a swift night visit to the Barnes. He convinces Barnes that he is playing straight with him; and privately Frank warns Luvie to stop

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