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Cover illustration by Chesley Bonestell

(Space ship in trouble with meteor swarm; Europa and Jupiter in background)

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Even the specialists who read everything published in every fantasy magazine have only a partial idea of the extent and variety of American fantasy fiction. Odd and imaginative stories keep turning up from the least suspected sources; and perhaps as unexpected a source as any we've yet met up with is Mast Magazine, a publication of the United States Maritime Service, which in October 1947 published The Man Who Could Smell Land. John Langdon has written many stories of many types, including the often anthologized The Girls of Tongatabu — and we don't need to tell anyone who reads the story which follows that he has served in the merchant marine. We're glad to welcome Mr. Langdon to the domain of fantasy — though we're a little uncertain as to whether this story should be so classified: he calmly tells us it's based on fact!

The Man Who Could Smell Land

by JOHN LANGDON

QUEEREST thing I ever did see —

Jorgensen, the Chief Mate, hoisted himself up on the tarpaulin-covered hatch and fingered his thin blond fringe. Nobody said anything.

It was just after the war started, he began. I was Chief on the Christabel. And when I see this Pickering — Augustus A. Pickering — I figure I'm a man short on deck. Funny-lookin' little guy, skinny and shrivelled up like a dried cocoa bean — and no teeth. His eyes are watery and the lower lids 're pulled down till you can see the red. What forehead he's got is all wrinkled and worried-lookin'. If it wasn't for his long, sharp-pointed nose, you'd a' taken him for an oversized monkey.

I'm wrong; Pickering's a first-class seaman. But not much of a mixer. Likes to get away by himself. Mornings, he goes up to the fo'c's'le-head and stays till breakfast. And after supper, too, till it's dark.

He don't smoke, so they ain't no lighting matches after blackout. Nothing wrong in it, but naturally I'm curious.

One evening I'm comin' along the catwalk when I see him leanin' over the bow. I slip behind the pillar of a gun mount. The door is swung open and I can see him through the crack at the hinges, his face a quarter turned to me.

All of a sudden he starts sniffing. He raises his head, strokin' the air with his nose. He does this in a half-circle, takin' about a point a' the compass to a sniff, raising and dropping his head at each stroke, his eyes closed.

At the end, he moves his head a bit more and takes another sniff. Then he stiffens. His eyes pop open and he jerks around.

"Evenin', Mr. Jorgensen —"

The hair on the back of my neck clean rose up. All I can figure is he can see through a solid steel door! No use pretendin' I'm not there. I step out, but it's like I ain't hardly touchin' the deck — with them cold chills lifting and dropping me.

"Evening, Pickering," I say, coming up. "How'd you know I was there? *And how'd you know it was me?*"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"I want to know how you knew I was there. Not that I was spyin'. Just an accident I happen a' see you."

"Of course, sir. I was sure of it."

"Sure a' what?"

"That it was an accident —"

"You hear or see me?"

"No sir, not that I know of."

"Not that you know of! Are you one a' them psy — psychos or Yogis?"

"If I am," he says, "I ain't never knowed about it."

"Well, I'll — ! There's somethin' mighty queer here. Was you prayin', Pickering?"

"Oh no, sir."

"Then what *was* you doin'?"

"Well, I . . . ah —"

"And how could you know it was me — with your eyes closed and your back turned?"

Pickering shuffles his feet and wipes his face and blows his nose. He twitches and he fidgets. Then he heaves a long sigh.

"Well . . . when you come up I was practising —" He coughs and clears his throat.

"Practising what?"

"Smelling."

"Smelling!"

"The wind was kind a' off from your quarter or I'd a' knowed you was there before. I didn't get a whiff of you till —"

"Wait a minute! Are you saying you *smelled* me?"

"Yessir —"

"Don't tell me I smell that bad! Of course, this shipboard soap —"

"Oh no, sir! As a matter a' fact, you don't smell bad — not near as bad as the Second and the Junior Third Mate —"

"Well! *That's* a relief —!"

"— but I'd a' smelled anybody at that distance. I was sorta set. That is —"

"Set? Set for what?"

He twitches some more and gives me an anxious look. "To — to smell land."

"*Smell land!* What're you talking about? They ain't any land within a hundred and fifty miles —"

"I know," he says, backing like I was goin' to hit him. "A low island with a lot a' sandy beach. Only —" He looks up, pleading, worried-like. "Only it's around a hundred miles. Hundred to hundred and ten — over that way —"

That stops me! We're in a war and ain't letting nobody but the Master, the mates, the radio operator and the gunnery officer know the ship's exact position. So when I said a hundred and fifty, I'm shadin' it about fifty miles. And here he hits it — the kind of island, the direction and the distance!

"Now, Pickering," I say, careful and easy. "That's remarkable. But just between us — you tell me who's been showin' you the charts — and I'll forget the whole thing right here."

He stares at me. His face works and he looks so thin and slumped. Then he sighs and turns away, starin' out to sea.

"I just knew you wasn't goin' to believe me."

"Believe you can *smell land*?"

"But I can — I *can!*"

Well, I kept it up and he kept it up, and it wasn't no use. He didn't know a thing about charts. So at last I give up. Didn't tell no one about him but from then on I keep my weather eye on him. About a week later we're passin' another island.

"Evening, Pickering — how's the nose? Smell any land?"

He gives me a tired, sorrowful eye. "Yessir — right over there." His skinny arm shoots out a few points aft of starboard.

He's hit it again! But this time I play him easy. "And what kind of land is it?"

"Big island. Got some mountains. Natives and whites. Lot a' farms. Even a factory. . . ."

Better'n I expect! If I can keep him goin' he'll tell me who's givin' him this dope.

"Fine. Fine. And how far would you say it is?"

He puts his nose up in the air. He keeps sniffin' and smackin' his lips. I have to keep a straight face.

"Between eighty and ninety miles. Not more 'n ninety — not less 'n eighty."

Wrong, and I was ready to bet he knew it. I figure he's been wised up. Matter of fact, I took the reading myself at sundown — two shots just as the sun sets on the horizon.

"Come, come, Pickering. Wouldn't you say it was a hundred miles?"

"Eighty to ninety, Mr. Jorgensen."

"Damn it, Pickering! You know as well as I do it's a hundred and twenty!"

"Eighty to ninety."

"All right. Like to bet twenty-five bucks?"

His face lights up, then he looks worried. "Wouldn't want to take your money, Mr. Jorgensen."

"Never mind about that!"

It's dark now and I go to the bridge. I shoot Scorpio. Then I hurry down to the chart-room. Our speed and my new figure would make Pickering's guess just about right. It was my sunset shots that were off.

I hand Pickering the money. It don't make sense but it can't be a trick. All I can say is:

"Land ain't got no smell. Away out here it ain't."

"Everything's got a smell. And land's got a smell — even way out here."

"How come I ain't smelled it? I been sailin' forty years."

"Takes time, Mr. Jorgensen. I been practisin' twenty-odd years. Took me eighteen years to smell up to a hundred miles —"

"All right, if you can smell land — what does it smell like?"

Pickering works this one over. "Well," he says, "if I was to ask you how a dog smelled — what'd you say?"

"Doggy."

"That's it. And land smells like land."

Well, the long and short is I put Pickering through every test I could think of. I'm not sayin' I believed him — and I'm not sayin' I didn't. But we had a lot a' time shuttling, and believe me, he never missed! He had a reach a' smell up to near two hundred miles!

Humans is funny, Pickering told me. They think a' smells as big stinks — just good or bad stinks — not little hard-to-find smells you can make use of. Why can animals pick out different smells? Because they have to. And ain't *humans* better 'n animals?

First time he noticed this different smell near land, a funny kind a' damp green smell a little like wood or charcoal burning with a whiff a' meat fryin' in it — and come to think of it, there is that smell near port — he started tryin' it out. Every morning 'n' evening up on the fo'c's'le-head. Couple a'

times he thought he had it but he wasn't sure. Then one morning he got it — sharp and clear. Wasn't no land to see but he asks the Mate on watch. Sure enough, they was passin' a small island about sixty miles away.

It got so he could tell about the land, what kind and if they had mostly farms, or was there big cities and factories. Got so he could even tell different countries by their smell!

For a couple a' months I'm like a man with a miracle. Can't leave it alone. But Pickering won't never let me tell nobody about it and after a while we get started back, our old rust-pot wallowin' along.

One evening about sundown we get it — tin fish in number three hold. We're down in the belly, listin' bad, but goin' slow ahead — when she gets it again, square in her engine room. Blowed the guts out a' her. She starts to sink fast. Guys hit the water but we manage to put over a couple a' boats. In the morning we take stock. Lose only three men who were down in the engine room. Two sailors are hurt, the skipper's got a crack on the head from a swinging block and the Junior Third Engineer's sick from oil and water.

They decide to head for a big island — one a' ours — about four hundred and fifty miles northwest. Some small islands are closer but they figure chances a' hittin' one is slim.

Course, I could a' told 'em about Pickering, but I could imagine tryin' to convince 'em. I sometimes didn't know if I was convinced myself. Anyway, with good luck, we ought to make it in a couple weeks. Even without luck three weeks. Longer'n that I wouldn't bet a penny on our chances.

Luck ain't with us. The fourth day a squall rips our sail and carries away the other boat's, mast 'n' all. We can't leave 'em, so we break out oars. Ten days — two weeks — still goin'. Skipper's in a bad way with that crack on the head. All a' us are feelin' low and some are pretty sick. One injured sailor dies. An oiler in the other boat goes over the side at night. All a' the men got salt-water and sun sores. Everybody's light in the head and flighty.

Nineteen days . . .

Pickering's in our boat. All the time he's been actin' strange, sniffing and givin' me the eye. The others don't pay no attention and the Old Man seems in a sort of a daze. Finally Pickering crawls up beside me.

"Gettin' close," he says. "About seventy miles."

"Figures show a hundred and ten," I say.

"Nearer seventy or eighty, Mr. Jorgensen. Been gettin' closer. But now it kinda seems —" He shakes his head and won't finish. "Tell better in the morning."

In the morning, he still ain't sure. Next morning, he looks more worried than I ever seen him. Keeps sniffin' like a huntin' dog on a cold trail. His eyes are sort a' desperate-lookin'.

"Just can't get it," he whispers. "We're goin' too slow. And the wind keeps shiftin'. Mixes me up. But I'll get it."

"Better be soon. It's three weeks today. One more week's our limit."

Next morning, soon's I see his face, sharp and sure a' himself, I feel better. But his news ain't good.

"We're passin' it! That's what had me fooled — that 'n' the wind. We're due west and a little north a' the main part. About ninety-five or a hundred miles."

"You're sure?" Somehow it just don't seem right. Still, figurin' like we got to, nobody can be sure.

"I tell you I'm sure, Mr. Jorgensen."

"Pickering, this is one time you can't be wrong!"

"Mr. Jorgensen, I'd stake my life —"

"That's what you'd be doin', Pickering. Yours 'n' mine 'n' about eighty other guys' lives."

"I know, I know! That's why I waited till I was dead sure. I tell you, there's nothing within smellin' distance the way we're headed now. Nothing!"

Pickering's so worked up he forgets to whisper. The others are watchin' us, their faces tight and drawn and their eyes glitterin'. The skipper raises his head.

"Mr. Jorgensen!" His voice is hoarse and cracked. "What are you and that seaman up to?"

This is it! Me 'n' Pickering's nose — against hard, careful figurin' on wind and current-drift. If I talk — at best I'm goin' to look silly; at the worst, they'll tie me and Pickering up. But if I don't talk, I can't change course. And if we don't change course —

It was enough to take the heart out a' any man. But I *got* to do it.

"Captain," I say, starting easy. "When I tell you, you're goin' to think I'm out a' my head. But — I know we're passin' east a' the island. It's almost due west right now — about a hundred miles."

He blinks a couple a' times. When he speaks, his voice is quiet. "And *how* do you know that, Mr. Jorgensen?"

"Captain," I say, talkin' right up to him but makin' my words count, "this is the hard part. For forty years I've sailed the world over. I've seen some strange things — things you nor I nor any man could explain. Yet if anybody'd told me, just four months ago, what I'm goin' to tell you now — I would of called 'em crazy and had 'em locked up. But things is desperate, and I'm goin' to stick my own neck out, no matter how crazy it sounds. I only want you should hear me out."

The skipper's eyes been gettin' narrower and his face more grim. "That's reasonable, Mr. Jorgensen."

"Very well, sir. When I say land's over there, I'm depending on Pickering here. And Pickering knows land's over there and we're passin' it, because —"

"Because, Mr. Jorgensen?"

"— he's able to smell it."

For a full minute there's a dead silence. Then the skipper sits bolt upright for the first time.

"Smell it! Smell land — at a hundred miles?"

Well, sir, that gets a laugh — the first laugh anybody's had in twenty-two days. They pretty near pass out from laughin'.

When it quiets down, the skipper's smilin' a little. "Pickering," he says, "what kind of horsing is this?"

"No horsing, sir! I really *can* smell land. Been able to for twenty years. Didn't tell no one. Even Mr. Jorgensen wouldn't a' knowed except he caught me at it."

"That's right," I said, and told them the whole story. When I come to the part about the thirty-five mile error, the Captain remembers. It kind a' sets him back for a while.

I told 'em about the tests, and how Pickering never missed. When I finally wind up I hear enough wisecracking and name-callin' to do me the rest of my life. A couple a' guys are all for tyin' me and Pickering up, right then. The men get to arguin'. Some is for it, some against, some doubtful. . . .

The guys in the other boat, two hundred yards astern, must've thought we'd all gone crazy at once.

Then the skipper, whose face's been gettin' grayer, raises up.

"Mr. Jorgensen! I think we've had enough of this nonsense of steering by a nose. I'd rather die at sea than take a chance on any such silly thing!"

That does it! Even though I can see some a' the guys still believe in me and others are mad at the skipper for actin' that way with their lives, I just can't go on. Better save my fight for later, I figure.

While I'm sitting there, bluer 'n battle-smoke, Pickering whispers something in my ear. At first it don't mean nothing. Then, all of a sudden, it goes off in my head like a gun — light, noise, everything!

"Men!" Everybody jerks up. "Listen! Pickering just told me something. He says, back in the other boat, less'n a minute ago — a man just died! That man is the Junior Engineer who's been sick from oil and water!"

They stare at me, mouths open.

"See what that means, men? If he can smell the minute a man dies, and that man a couple hundred yards away — he's got a nose that can out-smell any dog alive! If he can smell that, he can sure smell a big piece a' land — even if it is a hundred miles!"

Just then the other boat pulls up. They holler over that the Junior Engineer has just kicked off. Then they drop behind like before.

"Men, this is it!" I don't lose no time. "The Captain has no authority over your lives in an open boat." I knew better, but I had to put it over. "It's up to you. With me and Pickering's nose, you'll be ashore in a week." Five days, Pickering thinks, but I ask a week. "It's your lives. What say?"

To my surprise, they're with me — all except the two guys who wanted to tie us up, the Junior Third Mate . . . and, of course, the Captain.

"Remember — you're givin' me a week. Seven days —"

"Mr. Jorgensen!" The skipper can hardly talk and he can't raise his head. His eyes are burnin' like live coals. "This is mutiny! I'll break you for this! I'll put you in prison —"

"Captain — right now I'm so anxious to see land — I don't care if I have to see it from a jail window!"

The skipper's all in. He sort a' lays back, groanin'. I turn the boat west. The other boat hauls up and calls out, wantin' to know what's up. I tell 'em we've got an error in our figures . . . the skipper's passed out and I'm in command.

I don't mind tellin' you it was a terrible week I went through. The guys kidded a lot at first, but after a while they just settled down, their faces tight and hard, watchin' every move me 'n Pickering made. It was bad enough to see doubt and suspicion creepin' into them — 'twas a lot worse when I knew the same was creepin' into me, too. For all the tests, there were times when I couldn't stay convinced. You know how that is? Yes, sir, take my word for it — a terrible week!

But Pickering? He's in his glory, sittin' up there like a pointin' dog, his nose in the air all the time, sniffin', correctin' our heading. Even at night you could hear his voice, "Little north" . . . "Steady on course" . . . "A bit more south . . ." Seems like he never slept a wink.

When the fifth day broke, I thought I could see murder in some of the eyes. Maybe it was me — I hadn't been sleepin' too good. Anyways, they started whisperin', their eyes like burnt holes in their heads. Once one a' them laughed — and I'm tellin' you, it made my hair curl.

Then, late in the day, we spotted some coconuts floatin'. We scooped them up with a shout. We know we're near now. Sure enough — next mornin' we see land — dead ahead of us!

Well sir, you'd a' thought the cheerin' and yellin' for Pickering would a' never stopped. Dried up as we was, we was all cryin'! Yessir, cryin' and laughin'. Damn fools near upset the boat tryin' to get to Pickering, fightin' to hug him, to shake his hand and slap him on the back.

And Pickering! His face, blistered and squeezed up like a dried-out old

tomato, was shinin' and glowin'. Long nose, wrinkled monkey-face and droopin' hang-dog eyes and all — he sure looked beautiful — just beautiful!

Well, long about noon one a' them destroyer-escorts came steamin' out and got us all aboard. Finally, we all got ships back to the States. The last day before I'm to leave, I hear the skipper's up, so I go to see 'im to find out the charges he's goin' to press.

"Charges, Mr. Jorgensen?" He stares at me as if I don't make good sense. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. You see, I can't recall a single thing since we was lowerin' the boats and something hit me, here —"

He touches his bandaged head, then looks up at the ceiling.

"That so, Captain?" I say. "Too bad. Well, see you in the States."

"Umm — yes. Thanks. By the way — that fellow — Pickering. Remarkable man!"

And Pickering — he's a hero, a seven-day wonder and a scientific curiosity all in one. Government don't let newspapers get the story, but scientists, I hear, swarm all over him, tryin' to prove he's a fake, I guess. The Navy and Coast Guard are interested till they find out it takes twenty years hard practice to become really proficient. Uncle Sam takes him to Washington and shunts him from one agency to another, tryin' to find the best use for his smeller.

Finally he can't stand the life no more. Now he's back to sea on some rust-pot or other. I like to figure him, come evenin', leanin' over the bulwarks of the bow, sniffin' like a huntin' dog at some two-by-four island about a hundred miles away. . . .

Jorgensen broke off. If he was aware of the dead silence evoked by his story, he gave no sign. He stared out over our heads at some point just above the horizon.

"Yessir," he went on. "He could smell land like a burro smells water on the desert. Seems to me these last few years that there ought to be a way to make use of all those little, hard-to-find smells —"

He stopped again. He slid off the hatch and turned around.

"Evenin', Cap'n. . . ."

There was no one in sight — absolutely no one. Then the skipper, a slight smile on his lips, came from behind number three masthouse aft of where we were. This was the first time any of us had seen him down on the main deck where the crew gathered in the evenings.

"Good evening, Mr. Jorgensen. Would you mind coming up to my office for a few minutes?"

We stared after them. Someone said, "That Chief and his yarns —" and shut up. Nobody said anything.