

THE ALBATROSS  
A short story by James H. Pyle

Customers of our boat yard are pretty *old world*: none of that yuppie crowd with big fancy fiberglass boats and pretty girls in bikinis lying on the foredecks. No. That bunch keeps their boats at Brewster's Yard down river where they've got a swimming pool, a restaurant, sparkling rest rooms, electric power outlets at each dock and a flotilla of carts to haul your gear from car to boat. Here at French Wharf we've got four outhouses, a coffee shop two blocks away and a place to tie up your dinghy. That's about it. But like Jacques, the owner, always says, "We've got the cleanest outhouses in Maine."

Folks here are friendly enough, though. Everyone seems to know everybody else and all seem willing to help a guy into his dock when the current runs against him and the wind's howling at twenty knots. Helps, too, that the marina only holds 50 boats compared to 700 down at Brewster's.

Another good thing about the yard: rates are cheap and you get good quality work if your boat needs repair. Wooden boats are particularly drawn here by the skills of our carpenters. For years, the lead shipwright was Harry Kernowski. Hank retired last year at age eighty-three. Two others, Bill and Sven, are equal in talent but not experience; they've only been here for thirty-two and twenty-seven years respectively. Sven learned his trade in Denmark and Bill has sailed every type of ship from square-rigger to daysailer. Both are blue water sailors with lots of years at sea.

Not to say we won't work on fiberglass vessels, but wooden boat owners love the French Wharf. . . Guys like George Filbert. If a movie director asked Central Casting for a crusty old Yankee sailor – George would pop up. He's not exactly a fashionista. He looks like he just jammed his finger into an electrical outlet. His hair stands straight up on top but is tied in back with a rubber band into what he calls a ponytail. His eyes bug out and he has a frog-like jumpiness, due in large measure to the fact he's hard of hearing and his eyesight is failing. His face and hands are covered with what dermatologists call pre-cancer cells. He never got treated for it so he always looks like he's got the chicken pox - and it's pretty obvious he never bought any clothes since he quit working. His pants are held up by a piece of rope instead of a belt. George, it turned out, retired a few years back from being a dentist in Ellsworth, the next town over. I often wondered how he had appeared to his patients, especially young kids.

I arrived at the yard five years ago on the same day old George first decided to have his boat, *Albatross*, hauled for repairs. George never used the marina in the summer. He preferred to keep his boat on a mooring nearer his home. He did, however, bring her every fall for winter storage. She's what's called a lobster boat. He'd never trapped one lobster but loved the design and had her built to his specifications thirty years ago over in Penobscot. Over the years he's done most of the maintenance work himself. He knows every plank and screw in that boat.

When I first met him, he'd just turned seventy and reluctantly conceded that *Albatross'* maintenance was getting to be more than he could handle. The forward

cabin needed to be rebuilt as he'd taken in water from the anchor hatch and some rot was beginning to appear in the frames and floors. He also wanted a large hanging locker installed in the cabin where he'd store his foul weather gear. While we assessed the work to be done, I learned a bit more about him.

Turns out he didn't retire from dentistry by choice. His partner was a tall, rugged man named Willard Dixon. The two of them were social friends as well as business associates. Then, three years ago, Willard's wife died. So George and his wife took to helping poor old Willard recover – things like cooking his dinner now and then, inviting him along on vacations, arranging parties so he could meet new women and other friendly acts that you'd do for a good friend. A year later, out of a clear blue sky, George's wife announced that she and Willard had fallen in love and they were leaving to go live in Arizona. "Didn't mind her leavin' so much but takin' my partner along was a bit much," he said.

Being a pragmatic Yankee, George figured it might be time to dissolve the dentistry practice and take some time off. Funny thing was - he didn't seem bitter when telling me the story. It was like he'd thought it through and concluded there was nothing he could do-- so why not get on with his life? His wife had been a big woman and handy aboard the boat. With her gone he'd need to do some things to make the boat more manageable so he could handle it alone. They never had children so *Albatross* became his obsession, and he spared no expense in fixing her up to spend his retirement cruising New England waters.

Anyway, Sven and Bill eventually did the work George requested and a fine job it was. Not only did Sven use the very best white oak for the new door into the forward cabin, but he carefully cut the lumber using a technique called “bookmarking” so that all the separate panels in the door looked like they’d been split down the middle and turned back like the opposing pages in a book. Then they installed a new bronze hasp and lock that matched the hinges on the door - a ‘no charge extra’ for a good customer.

Last year was colder than usual, even for Maine. By October, most customers had delivered their boats for storage to have them covered before the first snow fell. But by late November George Filbert hadn’t shown up. We began to worry. Since he’s hard of hearing it made no sense to call him on the phone so I drove to his home and found him sitting in the kitchen with a cup of coffee reading a copy of *Cruising World* magazine. Claimed he’d lost track of time but promised to bring *Albatross* to the boat yard early the next week.

The next day the temperature dropped like a lead anchor and snow began to fall. It snowed steadily for two days while the wind howled. On the third day I was sitting in Jacques’ office going over the schedule for winter work when we looked out the window and here came *Albatross* into the marina, covered with snow, looking for a dock space. We could see George in the pilot-house with his wool cap covering the wild hair.

“Oh, Lord,” said Jacques. “What are we gonna do with him? It’s too dangerous to haul him now with all this snow and ice on the ground.” He began to imagine the worst possible scenarios. Jacques is one of those nervous type guys. Seems he was sued once by an unreasonable customer and never got over it. He had visions of *Albatross* slipping off the straps of the ‘Travel Lift’ (the large crane-like device we use to lift boats from the water). “Even if we get her successfully out of the water there’s still a danger the Travel Lift could get stuck in the snow,” he said.

Nevertheless, we had to make the effort. Also, we had to off-load George and get him home. Since he arrived by boat there was no car waiting for him. As a precaution, Jacques called our insurance broker to be certain we weren’t violating any of the many clauses in their policy. Assured the risk was covered, we hauled *Albatross*, and like most things we worry about – nothing untoward happened. The boat was safely out of the water and I delivered George to his home.

During the drive I tried to engage old George in conversation but was concerned by his inability to stay focused. He would stare off into the distance and sometimes respond to my questions with a nonsense answer. I assumed it was just the strain of driving the boat during the storm combined with his advanced age.

We covered *Albatross* with that new plastic wrapping they call ‘shrink-wrap’. She looked like a Christmas present tucked into a remote corner of the yard, adjacent to a wooded lot, awaiting spring and her return to sea. That was last fall.

Spring came a little late this year. The snow and ice hung around into April and most customers were slow to get their boats ready for launching so we didn’t

think it strange we hadn't heard from George by mid-May. I was in the office one Saturday morning with Jacques when he asked, "Have you heard from George Filbert yet?"

"No," I replied, "Have you?"

"Not a word. Maybe we should check on him. Do you have his phone number?"

"I do, but it won't do any good to call. He can't even hear the phone ring."

"I guess I should send somebody over there to check on him," said Jacques.

But that was a problem left for another day and was soon forgotten given the press of other work. It wasn't until early July that we checked our records and realized that *Albatross* was still here. By then we figured we should check on George. Maybe he was in poor health. So I drove to his house and found it all closed up. Looked like it hadn't been lived in for months. As I was leaving, a neighbor approached.

"Seen old George lately?" I asked. "I'm from the boat yard where he keeps his boat."

"Oh, I guess you haven't heard. He's in the state mental facility down at Portland. Police found him wandering around town in his pajamas. Couldn't remember his name or where he lived," said the neighbor. "He's been there five months now."

Despite our concern for George, a big problem facing boat yards is abandoned boats. It's time-consuming and costly to obtain legal title to a derelict

boat and you can't legally dispose of it just because it's a nuisance. Plus, it sits on land that could be generating revenue from a paying customer. So there we were: no way to communicate with George and facing the prospect of having his boat in our yard for months, even years. His having no wife and no known heirs only complicated the problem. It became just another dilemma relegated to the future.

Summer was in full swing and our other customers were mostly enjoying their boats. The black flies of spring had come and gone and lobster parties were common weekend occurrences in our little picnic area. George and *Albatross* had been relegated to our mental back-burner. The world was looking pretty good until one day a customer, came into the office and said, "Have you guys noticed the smell coming from the north end of the yard?"

"No," I said. Haven't been up there lately. What's is smell like?"

"Like a dead animal. Has that cloying sweet smell of decomposing flesh. Maybe you should check it out. It seems to be attracting stray animals."

"Thanks," said Jacques. "I'll send somebody up to check on it."

I left the office and ran into Bill and Sven who were coming off coffee break. "Come up to the north yard with me. A customer says something up there smells like a dead animal."

We didn't have to look far because there were only four boats remaining in that section and three stray dogs were running around in circles, leaping and barking at *Albatross* which was still up on her storage stand. And the smell was indeed unpleasant. There was a hole in the cover on the side facing the adjacent

wood lot. A plank lay on the ground. It appeared it might have been leaned against the side of the hull and then fallen away.

I dragged a ladder to the boat and climbed up to open the shrink-wrap cover. The stink coming from inside made me gag. With a rag over my nose and mouth I managed to take a quick look around the cockpit and into the main cabin. Nothing was obvious so whatever it was must be in one of the lockers or in the new forward cabin, which was locked.

Two minutes of that stench was all I could take before retreating down the ladder. Neither Bill nor Sven volunteered to go aboard for a second look. "We'd better call animal control," suggested Bill. The dogs, by this time, were trying desperately to climb the ladder. We chased them and removed the ladder. They crouched by the edge of the tree line waiting for us to leave.

Waiting for the animal to people arrive, Jacques became increasingly worried. Pacing around his office he began to spew questions. "What if we can't clean the mess out and the boat is unusable? Did we leave a hole in the shrink-wrap for the animal to get in? Would George sue us if he thinks we were negligent?" We scoffed at his anxiety.

It took Animal Control an hour to get there. We were waiting by the boat when they arrived. An older guy and a teenager were unpacking their haz-mat suits when the older one said: "Doesn't smell like any animal I ever encountered. You guys been aboard to see what it looks like?"



We all shook our heads. "I went up but couldn't see anything. Must be in a locker or the forward cabin," I volunteered.

"Hate to tell you this, boys, but that smells like we might have us a dead person in there," he said.

Jacques went ballistic. "I'm gonna call the police." He ran back to the office. Bill and Sven began to rip off the shrink-wrap material. The smell wafted over the entire yard.

Within minutes the yard was filled with police cruisers, fire rescue trucks and an ambulance. A police detective donned a haz-mat suit and joined the animal control guy inside the boat. The detective soon appeared over the cockpit rail and asked: "Do you have a key for the forward cabin lock?"

Sven responded: "We keep spare keys for all the boats stored here. I'll get it."

No sooner was the cabin door opened than the detective reappeared. "Looks like we've got a homicide here. Call the meat wagon," he called to one of the uniformed policemen. Then he climbed down and approached our little group of three.

Jacques was ashen. "Can you tell who it is - was?"

"No way to tell. Body's badly decomposed. Must have been there for months. The warm weather hasn't helped. Not even sure if it's male or female. The coroner's gonna earn his money on this one. I suggest you boys wait in your office. This won't be a pretty process. They'll need a bag or a bucket to get it out of there. Whose boat is it, anyway?"

“A guy from Madison named George Filbert. But he’s in the state mental hospital in Portland now. Been there about eight months. A bit detached from the world if you know what I mean,” I responded.

“Christ, just what I needed,” he sighed. He turned to Jacques again. “Since the yard had a key to that cabin we’ll need to interrogate each of your employees. I’d like the name, address and phone number of everyone who’s been anywhere near this boat since it arrived in your yard.” That meant everyone in the yard because the keys were kept hanging on a board in the tool room.

“I need to make sure nobody leaves town ‘til this thing’s resolved,” said the detective.

It took a week before the crime scene investigation was finished and we could hire somebody to clean and scrub the boat. Those guys are hard to find, and expensive. Not too many people line up to clean a messy scene like that.

Two weeks later the detective returned: “The coroner’s report was inconclusive due to the severe decomposition of the body. And no fingerprints were remaining but from the size of bone fragments, he thinks the victim was probably an adult male; though a couple of bones were missing. Could be an animal got in there and made off with them. We tried to talk with Mr. Filbert in the hospital but got nowhere. The doctors down there told us it’s unlikely he’d ever be competent to testify about anything. So we got us a body, but no way of tellin’ whose, no exact fix on time of death, and no motive. Damndest case I ever seen.”

“Did you try and find his wife or ex-partner?” I asked. “Maybe one of them would know something.”

“So far that’s a blind alley. The partner was a guy named Willard Dixon. No records exist from their former office, but we did learn from neighbors that Dixon ran off with Filbert’s wife to Arizona.”

“Right. He told me about that,” I said.

“Problem is - that was seven years ago. Trail’s gone stone cold. I’ve got feelers out there. But so far, no record of a dentist named Dixon or the wife. There’s about 8,000 people named Dixon in Arizona, but none with a first name of Willard. Local police in Phoenix and Tucson are checking but it’s not a priority for them.”

“Looks like a dead end, huh?” I asked.

“Aye yep, but one thing keeps gnawin’ at me,” said the detective.

“What’s that?”

“Coroner says that, among the remaining bones, there were no teeth.”