

THE COMPLETE MAN'S MAGAZINE

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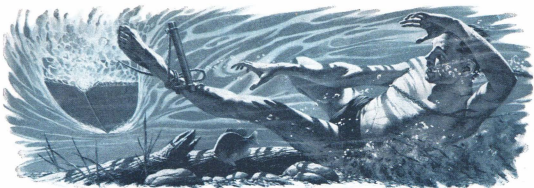
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MY MOST EXCITING ADVENTURE

I WAS A HUMAN ANCHOR

by JAMES KEVIN

ILLUSTRATED BY H. R. VAN DONGEN

TO THIS day I'm not sure how it happened. I'd used the free board hundreds of times without mishap. A free board works just like water skis, except you have one board instead of two. You hold onto a rope that is attached directly to the moving speedboat. The board rides free in the water, guided only by the pressure of your feet.

Maybe my grandfather's warning to me had made me try too hard to prove that you could do almost any trick on a free board and get away with it. "Burn that damn free board," my grandfather said. "Or one of those smart alecks you bring up here weekends will kill you with it."

All I knew at first was that I had spilled and I was in the water, trying to find which way was up. I relaxed to let natural buoyancy carry me to the top. I moved upward. I *thought* it was upward. But I didn't break into the air. Instead I hit bottom. I realized with horror that I was being dragged along underwater, near the bottom, and feet first at that. The rope I'd been holding had somehow tangled around my feet. And the boat was still pulling me.

I had a little air left, but I panicked when I saw what was happening. I tried to battle my way to the surface, but the pull of the boat kept forcing me to the bottom. I tried reaching for the rope around my ankles but the pressure of the water against me was too great. Then I tried riding it out. That was all right until my head banged the bottom. Then my back scraped over a log. I was literally being dragged along the bottom of the lake like a big, inefficient anchor. I finally just prayed.

Without warning, my forward motion slowed. My foot was still in the rope, but the pull had slacked off. I rose

toward the surface. When my head broke water, I looked wildly around for the boat. It was about 50 feet off, slewing to a halt. My friends were finally standing up and looking around for me.

I shouted and waved. One of them saw me right away. He spoke to the guy at the throttle and the boat started a wide circle back to me. But as soon as the boat started up, the rope pulled me under again.

I was being dragged again, scraping over rocks, logs, mud. It was a nightmare, a crazy dream I couldn't break out of and that had the taste of death to it.

There was one gamble I could take. They didn't know they were pulling me. They knew I had fallen off the free board but they didn't know I was being dragged by its rope. The next time I rose to the surface they would come for me again, figuring they had miscalculated my position. I would go under once more and I knew I couldn't stand another dunking. I had one choice.

The next time I stopped—if there was a next time—I had to stay down and give up the air I so desperately needed to go to work on the knot once more.

At last I felt myself slowing and rising toward the surface. This was it. I ached for the air that was just above me. But maybe the breath I took would be my last. The thought steeled me, and deliberately, though it literally almost killed me, I refused the air I needed. I pulled my head down and reached for my throbbing ankle. I found the rope. It was in a hopeless snarl. I tried to move fast, but it was as if my fingers were immersed in molasses. I picked at the knot, but nothing gave. My lungs were coated with fire. I started to breathe in water. I seemed to be jelly inside, no longer sure whether I was alive or dead.

Then I found a loop that gave. I yanked. Another loop moved. The knot came loose. I arched to the surface, thrusting my head into the air. I gulped and gulped. I want to tell you, nothing ever tasted sweeter. Now that I think back on it, I guess I was a pretty funny sight, when I surfaced. As it happened, no one on the spot could see the humor of it, especially me. My helpful friends in the boat looked as if they'd never smile again.

I didn't make them swim home, but as soon as we got back, while my grandfather watched smugly, I assembled them all on the dock. With a drink in my hand and my bandaged ankle on a stool, I supervised as my handgrog friends sawed the free board in two, and with bold red paint made up two huge signs reading: GRANDPA DON'T ALLOW NO FREE-BOARDING AROUND HERE. • •