

# THE PERILOUS DESCENT

*into a strange lost world*

Bruce Carter



A PUFFIN BOOK

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David Willis

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THE PERILOUS DESCENT

The descent was perilous all right – by parachute, and under strange conditions. Johnny Wild and Danny Black were two airmen, returning from a bombing raid at the end of the war. They were shot down over the North Sea, but managed to reach a sandbank. They crawled ashore to rest, fell asleep in a little hollow, and woke to find that the dip seemed deeper. They tried to scramble out, but found the sand slipping beneath them, going down, and they with it, down and down. What happened after that has the powerful thrill of a Wells romance, or a Jules Verne yarn – yet it is very much a story of today. Powerful it certainly is, and told with a strong effect of veracity, as though describing something terrible that really happened, and was really lived through by these young airmen. The tension never slackens. The suspense holds to the very end.

For ages eleven to sixteen, boys mainly, but by no means exclusively.



BRUCE CARTER

THE PERILOUS  
DESCENT

INTO A STRANGE  
LOST WORLD

*Illustrated by Janet Duchesne*

PENGUIN BOOKS

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To G. S. H.  
*with affection*

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## IMPORTANT NOTE

THIS astonishing document, which I have called 'The Perilous Descent', came into my hands early in 1945. I was on a mission for the Foreign Office – I cannot say more than that – in the South American republic of Santeuala, where there had just been one of those violent and destructive civil wars which, in the excitement of the last Allied onslaught on Germany, had been almost unreported in Britain. The admiral of the Santeualan fleet (two gunboats) had overthrown the dictator Guiseppo, murdered him, half the army, and about two thousand civilians. The capital city of the republic was almost entirely destroyed.

I was searching the ruins for one of my lieutenants who was missing. It was terribly hot. A blazing sun was beating down on the ruins of the buildings, a thin haze of dust lay over the remnants of the city, and there was a faint smell of rotteness and of cordite in the dry air. A few wretched, homeless citizens picked among the ruins for their possessions, and I stopped and asked them in turn: 'Have you seen a tall, fair Englishman in the uniform of a lieutenant?' They would look up, eye my revolver, and then slowly shake their heads – 'No, no, *Ingles*.'

Near one of these sad little groups was a boy of eight or nine, a tough, dark-haired little fellow with shining black eyes. Ignored by the others, he was busily tearing up sheets of paper. He had a little pile of wood too, and I think he was going to light a fire to heat up some watery-looking soup in a pail. After hearing the usual 'No, *Ingles*' from one of the men, I had turned away to make my way back to the track through the rubble, when my eye was caught by one of the sheets. It was covered with writing, which to my astonishment was in English.

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I picked up the sheet and began to read the shaky, pencilled words:

... how awfully alone we were, shut off by miles of impenetrable solid rock from humanity. It sent a shudder of real fear through me...

and again:

... I saw Johnny pulling at the butt of his gun ... and then I was over the side, throwing my weight far out into space...

It sounded preposterous nonsense, but my curiosity was aroused. What on earth were these scribbled notes in English doing lying in the rubble of a blasted South American city in which, even during the rare quiet periods, only a handful of English people lived? Bit of a mystery yarn, I supposed. How wrong I was!

As soon as the sharp little boy saw my interest he quickly gathered up the scattered sheets and hugged them to his chest, eyeing me craftily.

'You want to buy? Only ten pesos,' he asked in Spanish, flashing his black eyes.

I beat him down to three, gave him a bar of chocolate, and carried off the bundle of loose sheets.

In the afternoon I found my lieutenant, badly wounded, in the shell of a church. Two days later we took off from the bomb-spattered aerodrome on the outskirts of the city and flew away from Santeuala.

It was some weeks after my return home before I was able to examine the mysterious pile of papers. I had to make a full report on my mission, and every day was spent between the War Office and the Foreign Office, advising and planning, and when at last I could take a spot of leave I had almost forgotten about it. The bundle was in the bottom of my steel trunk, roughly tied with string, and one or two of

## *Note*

the sheets had fallen loose and were scattered among my clothes.

I began to glance through the sheets at my desk before dinner; it was 4.30 a.m. before I rose, dazed, weary, my eyes dancing, but in such a state of excitement at what I had read that I still could not go to bed. Instead I went for a brisk walk through the village and into the open country, trying to clear my head and settle my mind. For, after sorting the sheets into some sort of order, I had read during that night one of the strangest, most exciting and extraordinary documents that can ever have been written. The journey, the terrifying adventures that the two young men who had written it had experienced in a few months, made my years in the Army and the Special Branch, and even my period with Dept. N.X.2, seem tame by comparison.

AND I BELIEVED, AND STILL BELIEVE, EVERY WORD TO BE TRUE.

It was impossible to check the Service facts of course; there was no indication of the date their adventure had begun, only that it had been in the summer of 1944 – and many fighter-bomber pilots had been lost over the Continent at that time. There was no means of narrowing down the dates at all. It was probably some time between June and August, for the Second Front had opened, but more likely early on, for later that summer our forces were sweeping across the Continent. All that the Air Ministry records could tell me was that five men with the name ‘Black’ and three with the surname ‘Wild’ had been lost at night on fighter-bombers that summer, and no trace had been found of any of them. I was refused permission – very properly, for it might have caused distress – to interview the next-of-kin of these men.

But I could check on the last part of their narrative. On the outskirts of the capital city of Santeuala such a prison as they describe existed. It housed political prisoners in

### *The Perilous Descent*

times of 'peace'; almost anyone found carrying a gun – and that included all males – during a civil war. It was blown up and utterly destroyed in the last conflict.

The concrete evidence is thin, I know. But I am a man of much experience; I know my fellow men better than most; I have interrogated hundreds of criminals, crooks, international spies, riff-raff of all sorts, in my time. I can tell in a second when a man is lying and when he is telling the truth.

The reader must judge for himself. But after reading the incredible narrative of Danny Black and Johnny Wild, which opens in the moonlit sky over Europe and concludes in the dirtiest prison cell in the little republic of Santeuala, I challenge him to dispute my absolute verdict *that every word they wrote was the truth.*

*(signed)*

MARK STEPHENSON, D.S.O., M.C.  
(Lieutenant-Colonel)

## CHAPTER 1

*Johnny Wild*      *Danny Black*

WE have five days to live, so they tell us. But it might be one day – with luck it might be seven. Conditions here are crazy. Nobody seems to be in charge, though orders, mixed with curses, are shouted day and night. The harsh voices echo up and down the stone passages and boom in the prison yards outside. The clanking of arms and the beat of heavy boots on the pavings are incessant.

During one or two moments of near silence we have heard, very distinctly over the mountains, the quick spatter of a machine gun, the roar of a field gun, and once, very far off, the faint note of an aircraft engine.

In this still air, sound is all our life; there is nothing to see but the almost perpendicular face of a mountain three hundred yards from our cell window, just beyond the prison wall, and the ragged squads of half-uniformed marines and soldiers marching to and fro – and the shootings, which we avoid watching now.

Food and water we have almost forgotten, though once or twice some wretch has thrust a bowl of soup between the bars of the door. With only a few days to live we have little taste for greasy cabbage water.

But now, after a hundred appeals, we have got our paper; dreadful yellow tattered stuff, but paper. And we have two pencils, by some odd chance. We can try to forget the present: this crazy, hopeless prison with its surrounding ring of mountains, our miserable fellow prisoners, the half-savage rebels who have torn this country from end to end,

## *The Perilous Descent*

killed thousands, captured this prison, and thrust us, among others, into it.

Writing the story of our last few months will help us forget the awful heat, the pitiless sun outside, the dust, the stench, the flies in our cell, the still, leaden air that presses us down and half-suffocates us.

Besides helping us to forget we can try and pretend that what we write will somehow survive, though in our hearts we know it will not – and if it should no one will believe it.

We are writing together, each taking certain periods in our journey; the two narratives should finally link up into a complete story.

## CHAPTER 2

*Johnny Wild*

*Target for Tonight – Lone Night Mission – Target Located  
– The Strike – They Strike Back – Blackie Joins Me – We  
go for a Swim*

WE would choose for ourselves a likely-looking target on the big, perspex-covered map in the Operations Hut – railway sidings, lock gates, an aerodrome, a bridge. The Intelligence Officer would have it passed by Group Headquarters – if it was not on the ‘banned list’ – and we would work out our course to target and examine the surrounding country on the map, picking out the railways in particular for possible strafing targets after we had bombed. Then we would walk out to our aircraft, have the right fuse fitted to our two 500-pounders – 0.075 for aerodromes, where we should not be going in low, 5 seconds for train-busting, where we should be very low indeed – take a good look at the weather, and return to the Operations Hut for clearance.

It was all very informal – ‘free-lance’ work it was called – and everybody wanted to be in on it. At each moon period the home-based Typhoon fighter-bomber squadrons would draw lots and each send two pilots with their aircraft to the Kent airfield.

Blackie and I had been waiting for the weather to clear for three nights now. That night it looked fine: clear full moon, not a cloud anywhere, the air warm and almost still, no ground mist even. Although working independently, we had chosen targets near to one another, Blackie some promising-looking railway sidings just north of Lille, while I

## *The Perilous Descent*

had picked a small factory, which the Intelligence Officer told me was assembling Mauser machine-pistols, just to the east.

While I was putting on my parachute that night I think I had a presentiment that this would be my last mission. I walked round my great, tough aircraft eyeing it with some affection. It had been good with me, flying me through many nasty patches of flak,\* over great stretches of sea without a cough from its engine, raising me smoothly from the ground, rushing me about the sky, and placing me gently down again. But I couldn't look at the four ugly cannon thrusting out from the wings, or the two menacing-looking bombs hanging beneath them, with any sort of love. It always rather scared me to look at them, knowing how much damage they could do, and though I was good at it, I hated using them.

Then I jumped in, started the big engine, and, after getting the green light, taxied slowly out across the grass to the end of the runway. The radio crackled in my ears, and the Controller's voice from the Watch Tower came over clearly: 'O.K., Simon Red One; O.K. to scramble.'

Night take-offs are always exciting – the quick surge of power in the engine thrusting you against the back of your seat; the runway lights flashing past each side faster and faster as you slowly ease forward the throttle; the gentlest little bumps as the aircraft half-rises; then the clearance, the steadiness, the release from the engine roar when you slam the cockpit cover shut and ease back the throttle. All the night world is suddenly yours, and the moonlit fields are something apart.

That night the air was very clear. The moon picked out the white cliffs beyond Folkestone and faintly the sudden rise at Beachy Head; and the French coast, only four

\* Anti-aircraft fire.



## *Johnny Wild*

minutes flying time away, seemed just below. Far away to the West the white gun-flashes from the Invasion armies flickered on the horizon.

I saw the dark shape of Blackie's aircraft leave the runway right below me and the landing lights flick suddenly off when he was clear. Then I steadied course and climbed slowly to cross the French coast at 8,000 feet – the 'safe' height, where you were rather low for the heavy flak, and out of range of the light.

Once over the coast I put my nose down and made quickly for the comfortable 100 to 200 feet where we normally operated, banking slowly from side to side to watch my tail for fighters and flak and to get a better view of the country, spinning past now – fields, farms, little black villages, little white rivers and canals, shining tarmac roads – all clear in the brilliant moonlight.

I found the factory tucked in an intersection of two railway lines. I could see the dark mass of Lille to the west when I climbed a little; the searchlights were criss-crossing over it, and some heavy flak sparkled, following an unseen aircraft high above.

The factory might have been a big, deserted barn. I could see the shadows of some old craters in the fields near it, but no sign of activity. No flak came up at me, so I circled it slowly twice, estimating the best approach, then banked and came in very low and fast from the south against the most vulnerable-looking side. Just before I lifted my nose over its roof I pressed the bomb release, felt my aircraft rise in the air with the reduced load and climbed fast at full throttle, banking again to get a good view.

Under these conditions I couldn't have missed. Both 500-pounders were deep inside the building when they exploded, throwing off the roof on one side, and lighting the fields and railway lines in a brilliant white flash. When I came down again, hoping to set the debris alight with an incendiary

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shell, I was firing into a cloud of dust and smoke, and had to pull out high.

As I left some light flak came up from the north, the tracers arching towards me slowly and fading out well out of range. I wasn't worried. Then three searchlights flashed straight on to me and three more guns, much nearer, opened up. Coming up at you from below, the tracers always looked three times as fast and dangerous. They came very close very quickly, and I dived for the ground, kicking alternate rudder hard, slewing and jinking. The searchlights lost me, but the flak – green, red, yellow, white; green, red, yellow, white – followed me lazily for a while. One by one the guns lost interest and stopped, and I climbed a little to get my bearings.

My luck was in that night. A few minutes later I saw almost beneath me a train with steam up. Few travelled at night in Belgium now – it was far too risky – but this one, with a full load of trucks behind, was steaming slowly along a slight embankment beside a canal. I could have seen the red glow from its cab miles away. Wasting less time now, for I had fuel for only ninety minutes, I swung down at it in a steep bank and approached it from the front, firing too early in my excitement. The shells flicked off the permanent way, the tracers striking the rails and ricocheting high into space. Then I raised the nose, aiming steadily above the faint light from the cab, and the shells spattered all over the front of the engine. Quickly as I came nearer I lifted again and sent one quick burst along the length of the trucks. I held my fire a fraction too long and almost sank into the train as I hauled back the stick and climbed quickly to starboard, jinking in my climb in case the flak came again.

It came. It came up from three of the trucks; from one behind the tender, from half-way along, and from the guard's van, all tracer and all very accurate. The three lines of fire met a little in front of me, but quickly drew nearer

## *Johnny Wild*

until I jammed down the nose so hard my engine cut for a second.

I shall never know whether that train was a trap or just a well-guarded one with very important supplies for the front. All trains carried one flak truck, but few as many as three.

Hundreds of good pilots were lost by not controlling their anger at moments like this, and here was I being another fool! At low level in sustained combat three light flak-guns will always beat the low flying raider – and they did this time. Instead of carrying on well out of range and admitting defeat, I swung round a copse of trees and came in broadside on to the train again. The engine blew up as I made my approach from thirty or forty feet, throwing a quick red glow over the whole train, a clear sitting target on the embankment.

Their searchlight caught me immediately. I opened up from about four hundred yards on the middle flak-wagon, and all the way in we fought it out. At about a hundred yards I knocked it right out, but it was already too late to swing on to one of the others, and I put a few last shells into the truck beside it.

They got me in the same old way – as I pulled up from my attack, a big vulnerable target even at 450 m.p.h. I felt the shells thudding into my fuselage; then one caught my left aileron and the plane swung gently over on to its back, resisting all pressure on the stick. There was no chance at all of getting out and using my parachute at 400 feet, and even with the stick jammed right forward, I was still losing height.

It is always unpleasant when a machine that has answered every command exactly suddenly behaves madly; there is a moment of panic as you experiment with the controls that suddenly try to resist you – and there's only a split second at low altitude for one of you to win.

But I won in time, dragging the machine with every ounce

## *The Perilous Descent*

of power I had through a half slow roll, pulling out a few feet above the trees, then quickly wrenching the stick right back to try to gain height.

They had hit the engine too. Its roar had a new tone; it was only just dragging the five tons of machine through the air, and as I tried to climb, the air-speed needle slid back across the illuminated dial—240 m.p.h., 220, 200, steadied at 180, and I was only just gaining height.

The train was forgotten, and I didn't care if they were still firing at me; all my mind was concentrated on nursing my machine up higher, all my muscles on holding the stick hard enough over to keep her straight and level. At about eight hundred feet I gave it up and just managed to hold her steady at that height. If the engine gave out entirely I could bale out with a fair chance of escape.

I felt isolated and very vulnerable up there, unable to evade if the flak found me or a fighter saw me. There was nothing I could do but set course for the Channel and cross my fingers for luck.

To the north some searchlights flashed on, three of them waving their fingers for a second and then settling on a little shining dot in the sky. As they found their target fifteen or twenty guns blazed up, whipping up the little gay tracer shells quicker than the eyes could follow. The little dot twisted and dived and jinked – but I remember whispering to myself, 'Not a chance!' And then aloud, flicking on the transmitter:

'Blackie, is that you they've caught?'

There was silence as I glanced down at my instruments to check my height again – then:

'I can't throw them off, Johnny,' came across the night air.

Group Controller chimed in before I could answer, sitting in an arm-chair, tea and cigarettes to hand, forty feet below ground and 150 miles away in England.

'Transmit for fix,' he called, 'if you are in trouble. Over.'

## *Johnny Wild*

I waited for Blackie's reply, then called, 'Hello Bludgeon, this is Simon Red One. Yes, Simon Red Two and I are in trouble. I'm hit all over and would like a course for home. Transmitting for fix, 9 ... 8 ... 7 ... 6 ... 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1 ... zero. Simon Red One, Over.'

To the east the flak had stopped, the searchlights doused. Blackie had either been shot down or had evaded.

Then he called, 'Johnny, I'm hit too. I can't make it home, but I shall get as far across the Channel as I can. May as well go together if you're near in case there's trouble. I'm above Terneuzen on the Scheldt estuary. Over.'

Group broke in with our course. 'Steer 272 degrees, 272 degrees,' he called calmly from safety.

I had been steering due north after sighting Blackie, and was very near to him now, but losing height slowly again. My arm was numb with the strain of holding the stick over; I could feel the sweat running down my sides and down my face beneath my oxygen mask. The engine was even more sluggish and barely keeping me above 120 m.p.h. I could see the port aileron had almost gone, and a great jagged strip stuck stupidly up from the leading edge of the wing.

'Flick on your lights a second, Blackie,' I called, and immediately a little green pinprick of light shone up from the starboard.

He was even lower than I was.

We had just crossed the coast at one of the most strongly defended points on the continental coast-line, and why nothing had opened up on us was a mystery.

Over the sea we both struggled and gained a little height – perhaps to 800 feet – and came alongside one another. The light of the moon flashed on his perspex cockpit cover (I saw he had it open ready to get out in a hurry) and on his goggles.

'I don't give myself five minutes,' he called. 'How about you?'

## *The Perilous Descent*

‘Any time now.’

‘Not much of a sea, that’s something.’

And we must both have looked down rather nervously, knowing that we should have to hit it soon.

Blackie’s five minutes was optimistic. They must have hit one of his petrol feeds or something: a little blue flame sped along one side of his engine, then it was white and twice the size, then a great blaze that seemed to envelop the whole machine, which plummeted straight down and hit the sea in a flash of white explosion.

I was amazed to see Blackie gently following in his parachute. I could hardly believe that he had had the time to get out, and I still don’t know how he did it.

By chance my engine stopped finally as I circled slowly over the spot. There was a strange dead silence that was so intense it paralysed my mind for a moment, then I jettisoned my hood, dragged off my straps, helmets, and goggles. I leaned out, grabbed the trailing edge of the wing, and thrust myself away from the dead machine. For the fraction of a frantic second I couldn’t find the ‘D’ release ring; when I had my gloved fingers round it I pulled with all my might.

I was even lower than Blackie had been, and can only remember the awful wrench on my body as the parachute opened and arrested my hurtling body, and the almost simultaneous plunge into the sea.

### CHAPTER 3

Danny Black

*The Strange Island – Falling through Space – Trapped –  
Thirst – Death Faces Us – ‘Five Dials’*

THE first I knew that Johnny had come down too was when I heard him shouting. I didn't see his parachute open; I was too busy wrestling with my Mae West\* and clearing the water from my lungs, for I had gone deeper than I thought I would and had swallowed a lot.

'Blackie,' he called, and he seemed quite near. 'Blackie where the blazes are you?'

The shock of hearing his voice after the fall and the struggle with my heavy dinghy, which I thought would keep me under for ever, made me think I must be stunned and dreaming. I was trying to rip open my dinghy, but stopped and looked round for him. There was only a slight swell, but it was impossible to see far.

'Shout again,' I called. 'I can't tell which side you're on.'

'To the north, I can see you now.'

I looked north, but he must have fallen into the trough of a wave. Then I saw his silhouette perched cockily in his dinghy on the top of the swell, waving his paddle.

Even under these conditions I felt like laughing. Johnny, who liked his little comforts, was sitting up already out of the sea and no doubt tucking into his emergency chocolate concentrate. Probably he didn't even get his toes wet!

I saw him paddling as fast as he could towards me

\* Inflatable waistcoats worn by all pilots on war service.

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towing his parachute behind, then I struggled again with my dinghy, and at last got it out. By the time he came alongside I had it inflated, and had twice capsized it trying to get into it.

'One good leap from the stern – that's the way,' he called, as I spreadeagled myself over it.

'Easy enough for little fairies like you,' I said peevishly



Considering we had both been shot down, we felt pretty good

when I had got in and could regain my breath enough to speak.

But it wasn't a very accurate description of Johnny, who is much lighter than me but is also very tall – willowy, with loose, rather useless-looking legs and arms at first sight, but actually quite wiry and deceptively tough. When I wrestled with him he very often had me on the floor first, and he had been something of a boxer at his school.

He was alongside me now, holding on to my dinghy to



## *Danny Black*

prevent us drifting apart in the swell, as I took off my boots and emptied the water in them over the side.

Neither of us was scratched, both our dinghies and Mae Wests had worked perfectly, the night was warm, and the sea had only slightly chilled us. In fact, considering that we had both just been shot down we felt pretty good and ready for what might lie ahead.

Actually only one thing seemed to lie ahead – capture and imprisonment. We were only a mile or two off the enemy coast, and though they might not have seen us come down, we should probably be spotted in the daylight. And, in any case, with the English coast seventy or eighty miles away we could hardly hope to reach it, even with a favourable wind. We should eventually be forced to paddle for the Dutch shore and give ourselves up.

‘You didn’t see where your ’chute went?’ asked Johnny.

I had wondered why he had attached his to his dinghy, and he told me. ‘They may be useful; if we have to land on the Dutch coast and evade, we can dry them out and use them as blankets at night. There’s quite a bit of warmth in that silk.’

I had followed instructions and released mine before I hit the water to avoid getting tangled in the lines, but with difficulty I stood up in the little dinghy and scanned the sea for a sign of it. I could see its flat, white shape floating only fifty or so yards away.

‘Dragging them after us is going to hold us up if we try to sail,’ I told Johnny.

‘May have to let them go, I know,’ he answered, ‘but let’s hold on to them for now.’

Rather reluctantly I got out the paddle and we started to move slowly across the swell towards it. It took a long time, but eventually I had it hitched to my dinghy.

As I was tying one of the cords to the valve, Johnny, who was standing up, called out excitedly, ‘Quick, Blackie, over

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there,' he pointed. 'Is it a wreck or a surfaced sub, or what? . . . No, gone now . . . you'll have to wait till we come up on the swell again.'

We sank into a slight trough, and then slowly rose again. He held my shoulder and pointed north and away from the coast. I could see a low, dark shape against the sea, but could only guess what it was. We watched it until it disappeared from view.

'Whatever it is let's investigate,' said Johnny. 'It's farther away than it looks, and the wind's from the south, so let's try to get up our sails.'

We struggled with our little collapsible masts and unfurled the small red sails, and found them extremely efficient. We made good progress, and each time we rose on a wave the long, dark, torpedo-like shape appeared larger.

I was the first to guess the answer correctly.

'It's a sand-bank,' I shouted, and then in my excitement, 'Land ahoy!' and got out my paddle to speed our progress.

'Don't know what you're so excited about,' grumbled Johnny, trying to keep up with me. 'It'll be covered by the tide later, and anyway we can't live on a sand-bank for the rest of the war.'

On this last point he was obviously right; but the tide, except perhaps at certain moon periods, never covered this bank. As we scrambled ashore and walked a few yards from the waves we felt the sand dry and soft under our feet.

Surveying it quickly, we found it was about eighty yards long and thirty wide, and the highest point was about twenty feet above high-water level.

Feeling ready for a rest then, we dragged the dinghies and our sodden parachutes well clear of the sea and lay down on the warm sand to dry and rest. We talked for a few minutes about our action, and Johnny told me about his well-guarded train, and we both called ourselves fools. Then we were silent.

## *Danny Black*

The moon had gone down, and there was the first faint glow of dawn in the east as we lay down to sleep.

Johnny's shout woke me with a start and I sat up suddenly, cramped and chilled, wondering where I was. He shook my shoulder.

'Lie down, for goodness sake,' he said quickly. 'They're only about a mile away.'

We lay in the sand with our heads resting on our arms, feeling very prominent, for there, across a strip of blue sea that shimmered in the morning sun, was the Dutch coast. Like the whole length of the continental coast, it was guarded by German soldiers, and we could see a party quite plainly, moving about among the sand dunes on the flat shore. Two rather badly camouflaged emplacements were clearly visible, the muzzles of the eleven-inch guns protruding from heavy, domed concrete shelters.

'They've probably seen us already,' I said, 'but I suppose we may as well find what cover we can.'

We crawled on our stomachs across the sand, dragging our parachutes, dried now in the sun, and our half-inflated dinghies, after us. There was nothing for it but to go over the top of the low bank to find what shelter we could on the other side. But as we reached the peak, holding ourselves close to the sand as we dragged ourselves forward, we found there was a little hollow, blown out I supposed by a freak of the wind, and we slipped gratefully into it.

Lying in the shallow hole, we were sheltered on all sides and could feel fairly secure, except from low-flying aircraft. The sun and the exertion of our crawl had warmed us, too, and we felt in better spirits and ready to take stock of the situation.

Between the two of us it is Johnny who usually takes the initiative. He's got a sharper mind and can make decisions quickly. I console myself with the knowledge that both my

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bombing and shooting records are a shade better than his – but only a shade!

It was Johnny who took charge now.

‘First, let’s see what we’ve got between us,’ he said, when we had settled ourselves comfortably. ‘One jack-knife, one .38 revolver, five rounds in the breech, seventy in the holster pouch.’ He took these off and put them in a pile between us as he spoke; then as we emptied our pockets: ‘Two wet bars of chocolate, a wad of letters, also sodden, two bus tickets, and one cinema ticket from you. Two boxes of matches – that’s a bit of luck – two large-scale maps of Flanders, two packets of chewing-gum and a busted propelling pencil. Mine are a bit more use than yours, especially the maps.’

There was also my revolver, with a similar seventy or so rounds, our emergency Very cartridges besides all the uniform escape aids that we both carried in our dinghies, in our Mae Wests, and sewn into our clothes: two boxes of emergency rations each – Horlicks tablets, concentrated chocolate, etc., miniature razors and shaving-sticks, tiny fragments of soap, the silk escape maps of north-west Europe, our torches, the various compasses, cleverly made up in the form of buttons, pencil clips, and so on to deceive German interrogators.

All these, together with our dinghies and parachutes, made a good pile that could equip us either for a short sea voyage or for several days of evasion on land. But Johnny thought the sea voyage was hopeless.

‘It’s very unlikely the wind will stay in the south-east,’ he said – though I didn’t need convincing of its impracticability – ‘and if we’re spotted from the air some rotten Messerschmitt will probably shoot us up, and if he misses us he’ll sink our dinghies . . . or he’ll probably puncture our Mae Wests and call out a Dornier squadron to finish us off –’

‘And spit on us for luck,’ I broke in, laughing.

‘No, definitely the land. We’ll paddle across tonight and

## *Danny Black*

just hope for the best. One chance in a million of getting through, even if we don't step on a mine. Meanwhile let's eat. I'm hungry.'

We had had sausages and bacon and hot tea at ten-thirty the night before. It was now midday, and even the dry, bitter chocolate tasted good, but it was our thirst that was really worrying us – already.

After 'lunch' we dozed and chatted in the hot sun, and at about four o'clock we both fell into a deep sleep.

It was like being in the bottom of a shallow cup, shallow enough, apparently, to crawl up the sides and get out quite easily. But we were both puzzled when we had woken up enough to see what had happened.

'What the blazes!' Johnny exclaimed as he struggled to sit up.

It was a curious position to be in. The little crater we had gone to sleep in had slipped and taken us twelve or fifteen feet deeper down; our pile of possessions, our dinghies, our roughly-folded parachutes, were still with us, but scattered loosely about.

Our slight uneasiness increased when we first of all stood up and then tried to climb out, for at each step our feet sank into the soft sand, more came down from above and the whole cavity seemed to sink deeper about us. After several unsuccessful attempts we lay still again, propped against the wall of the crater.

'This is ridiculous,' I said shakily. 'Let's think a moment; there must be a better way of tackling it.'

We were both too concerned with the situation we were in to try to work out what had happened.

'Let's try it gently, one at a time,' suggested Johnny. 'You try first and take one of the 'chutes with you. If you get out you can haul me up.'

I shook the sand out of the folds of the parachute, stuffed

## *The Perilous Descent*

it in my battledress blouse and eased myself up gently. As I slowly climbed up, cautiously placing my weight on each foot in turn, worried as I was I couldn't help thinking how like an ant or wood-louse I must look clambering from a little hole in soft garden soil, slithering back farther at each step.

Then I lost my temper; I forced my feet deep into the sand and thrust upwards with all my strength, trying to place one foot higher before I sank deeper with the other, my hands clutching helplessly, for the rim above. I got five or six feet above Johnny, lying watching me from the base, then gave up, exhausted, and I slowly, gently slid down the slope again, panting and exhausted, towards him.

But I never came to rest beside him; instead, my body carried on its slow descent, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. The 'floor' of our crater slipped farther beneath my weight, and the sand closed in above, choking me, filling my eyes and mouth, swamping me – and with a great rush I was falling through space.

Over and over, over and over, gently twisting and turning – how close to the real thing was the nightmare drop, the apparent slow-motion twisting of the helpless body, and the roar of the rushing air in your ears, and the complete blackness, the mind gripped by fear.

Of course it could only have been a few seconds – and then with a splitting, splintering, tearing shock my body was still . . . and it might have been death.

For a moment after I found consciousness I wished it had been death. I was tormented with pain – every limb, every muscle, my chest, my head. I was half-covered by sand, it was over my face and in my nose and eyes. The great heap of soft sand on which I was lying had saved my life. It must have been filtering slowly through the hole to form a pyramid on the floor of this – cave? But it was like no cave I had



The 'floor' of our crater slipped and the sand closed in above

## *The Perilous Descent*

seen or heard of, more like a tiny crack in the earth's surface through which, by some crazy chance of fate, I had fallen.

Slowly, painfully I struggled to a sitting position, shaking the sand from my head. Miraculously no bones seemed to be broken, though my whole body was protesting at the awful shock with sickening shots of agony. I looked up, and there far above was a tiny circle of light, like the dimmest bulb from the ceiling of a giant dome. But it cast no light, and around me was impenetrable darkness.

I was still half-stunned by the fall, and my brain was only working sluggishly, trying to distinguish reality from what must be some ghastly nightmare. Surely, common sense told me, I should be woken up by the familiar early morning sound of roaring engines warming up in the dispersal pits, and I would get up to bacon and eggs and dash down to the briefing huts in one of the jeeps. . . .

Then I heard a faint groan, a human groan, and I knew this was reality, and that near me in this strange, terrible pit Johnny was lying too, perhaps badly hurt.

The groan came again, louder this time, and from the way this first human sound echoed hollowly I knew that the walls were close about us.

'Johnny,' I whispered, and my voice sounded strangely dry and hoarse, 'Johnny, where are you?'

There was no answer, but the unnatural silence was broken again by the sound of movement. Hardly knowing what I was doing, I crawled across the soft sand on my knees, feeling with my hands in front for him.

The next time he called my name, 'Blackie, here Blackie,' very softly but quite close to me. My hand slipped over a little heap of sand, and under it I felt the soft leather of a flying-boot. More urgently now I crawled up the length of his body, pushing the sand off him as best I could with my hands. I found his head and lifted it gently up, and the sand fell away from it with a little whispering sound.



## *Danny Black*

Johnny groaned again a little, but I felt him trying to suppress it.

'Gently, Blackie,' he whispered. Then, more like himself, 'I don't think I've got a body any more. I'm numb from . . . the neck . . . down,' he groaned, 'and nothing but aches . . . from . . . the neck up.'

Gradually I got him to sit up, and after careful investigation we found that he too had survived the enormous fall without a broken bone. The shock to our bodies had been terrible, for we had come from a great height, but the sand had cushioned the blow so that no part of our bodies had taken more of a strain than another.

We sat resting side by side in the blackness, waiting for the return of strength and suppleness to our limbs.

It was night again; the little circle of light far above us had slowly darkened to grey. We had strained our eyes staring at the little dot, and when there was no longer anything to see we felt we had lost our last contact with the outside world.

During the afternoon and evening we had slowly been taking stock of our situation again. Both the torches in our Mae West pockets worked, and by their light we had discovered that we still possessed our two parachutes, one dinghy, nearly all the food rations that we had spread about us on the island – and there might be more buried under the sand. We also had our maps, but it didn't seem likely that they would be of much use to us. And we had our revolvers. It is always a small comfort to have a gun with you, even if your death looks like being starvation two hundred-odd feet beneath the earth's surface.

We had also discovered the following points during the long, painful afternoon:

The first was obvious. We were at the bottom of some freak shaft, a natural not a man-made one. The walls of

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the shaft were solid rock, and the rock was in vertical strata that made the walls entirely impossible to climb; in fact, the surface in parts was as smooth as a blackboard.

The mound of sand that had saved our lives was ten feet thick; it must have been slowly filtering through the hole before, finally, the foundations of the island had collapsed, throwing us both into space.

The base of the shaft was about forty feet across, and there appeared to be no possible means of getting out, although it was just possible that some of the big boulders at the base of the shaft walls, half-buried in sea-water, might conceal some further tunnel.

We both did our best to hide our depression, but there just didn't seem to be any hope for us. We had both had a pretty hectic war – two tours on Fighter Command apiece, one of them through the Battle of Britain, and another tank-busting in North Africa with 40-mm.-cannon Hurricanes. Besides a good deal of daylight dive-bombing we had had quite a few scraps – Johnny had nine Messerschmitt 109's to his credit, and I had seven. But we had always had something to fight back with, even in the tightest spots, outnumbered six to one often enough. Here I felt helpless, shut in by these solid walls of rock.

As we broke into our emergency rations again Johnny, almost fully recovered now, was being as cheerful as possible.

'There are two alternatives,' he said practically and only half-seriously as he munched a couple of concentrated Horlicks tablets. 'Either we clamber up these perpendicular walls like a couple of flies, or we stay here for the rest of our lives – which won't be long on these rations.'

By the light of the torch I saw him grinning at me; that strong, lean face, with the long black hair swept back above it gave me confidence, and I knew we shouldn't go down without a struggle. Johnny would find a way out.

## Danny Black

It was strangely cold that night; we wrapped our parachutes closely about us and half-buried ourselves in the sand. We lay close together, sharing the warmth of our bodies, and slept fitfully.

I awoke very early in the morning – it must have been about half past four or five – and saw the little circle of light again high above us. I felt miserable and tired, and I had a raging thirst, but that glimmer from the outside world cheered me a little. I lay still on my back and stared at the tiny patch until my eyes ached and my head spun. I listened to Johnny's steady breathing for some time until it slowly occurred to me that another sound was breaking the cold silence in our cavern. It was a steady hollow tapping, but at first I couldn't be quite certain that it *was* a real sound and not just my imagination.

Johnny slept on beside me, and I strained my ears to distinguish what it could be. Then it struck me in a flash – it was the steady drip, drip of water falling. Somewhere about us one of the pools of sea-water among the rocks had found an outlet. Then, I realized, there must be a break, however small, somewhere in the floor of our pit!

'Johnny,' I shouted, really excited now, 'wake up. Listen to the dripping.'

I shone my torch on him, and I could tell by the expression on his half-asleep face that he thought I had gone mad.

He sat up and held me by the shoulder – he looked pretty ridiculous with his parachute wrapped closely around him like a chrysalis – and spoke gently.

'Quietly now. Just tell me quietly what you mean – dripping?'

'Yes, don't be an ass. I'm not crazy. Just shut up and listen for a moment.'

He sat still, and we both strained our ears. It came again steadily, drip . . . drip . . . drip.

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I didn't have to explain what it must mean; he realized it right away.

'Where water can go, so can we, even if we have to do a month's slimming course to get through,' he said.

'The slimming will be easy enough on this diet,' I replied grimly, remembering the four squares of chocolate and half-dozen Horlicks tablets in my little emergency pack.

'It's going to be some game trying to trace it.'

'I know,' I said, 'but don't let's start on an empty stomach.'

He agreed, and we slowly munched a square of the bitter chocolate and sucked a tablet, which relieved our painful thirst a little. Then we stood up with our torches and surveyed our prison. This was the sort of thing Johnny shone at and I left the organization to him.

'Seems to be a rough circle,' he said. 'We'll both start from the centre and make our way in opposite directions until we strike opposite walls. We'll work slowly round clock-wise close against the wall, and when we've covered half the circumference we'll move a yard towards the centre and do the same thing again, and so on. That way we'll cover every square yard.'

It was a foolproof plan, and we followed it exactly, though it wasn't always easy keeping a steady course over the boulders and through the shallow pools of sea-water. Every yard or two we both stopped and listened for the steady drip . . . drip . . . drip. Sometimes it was so faint I wondered whether it was my own heart; sometimes excitingly close so that I was certain it must be right below me.

We had been twice round the pit using our torches as little as possible to save the batteries, when Johnny called:

'I'm really warm now. I'm going to stop where I am in case I lose it. Come over here.'

I jumped over the boulders and splashed through a pool, across the heap of sand towards him. For a while I could

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hear only my heavy breathing and I had to hold my breath to catch the magic sound. Johnny clutched my wrist tightly; and I heard it, and it sounded louder and – yes – faster than before. We put our ears to the ground and soon both agreed on the exact spot. It echoed up hollowly from beneath a huge boulder.

Without a word we jumped at the smooth, hard surface and heaved and strained, slowly moving the boulder across the wet, pebbly surface.

‘Bit farther,’ gasped Johnny.

We pushed again and shone our torches on to the little pool that was now exposed. The water stopped swirling from the movement of the boulder, and Johnny knelt down and dragged aside the pebbles.

I watched him anxiously, still panting from the exertion. He threw aside handful after handful of the pebbles and then stood up again.

We listened tensely. The water was falling through in a steady stream now. Johnny had widened the gap.

Without a word we both squatted down, throwing aside the pebbles and small rocks, scooping out the sand. The water drained away in a flash, and our torches shone on a hole, the size of a rabbit burrow, at the bottom of the empty pool.

Holding each other by the shoulders, we kicked it wider and wider with our heels. The sides gave way easily, and there between us was our way out – out of the death pit, perhaps only to a deeper and more hopeless one below, but at least a way out of this one.

Calmer now, we made our way back to our little pile of belongings – our one deflated dinghy, our parachutes, and what was left of our food.

‘We may as well prepare for a journey,’ said Johnny, ‘even if we only go down a couple of yards.’

So we rolled our parachutes into bundles and tied them

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on to our backs. I added the dinghy to mine, and strapped on my gun and stuffed the rest of my things, including the emergency hand Very cartridges, into my battledress blouse. Then we returned to our hole, heavily loaded, but ready to ace whatever might lie ahead.

We had a brief argument as to who was to go down first.

'I've done a bit of rock climbing in my time,' I claimed.

'But I've got a longer reach,' said Johnny, which was true, as he was over six feet one.

Finally, we tossed for it, and I won. I wonder if a future geologist, a thousand years hence, will puzzle over a King George VI half-crown discovered 100 feet below the North Sea!

Compared to what we were to face later, it was a simple climb. Dropping carefully through the narrow black hole, for all I knew with a thousand feet drop below me, my toes found a hold, and gradually lowering and twisting my body I found a narrow ledge where I could steady myself and shine my torch. Its beam revealed a fall of about ten feet to a pool – into which the water from above had been dripping – and a branch off that was no more than a narrow chimney on a gentle slope.

We dropped one after the other to the floor, and made our way slowly at first, then with increasing confidence, along the shaft.

We thrust onwards because there was nothing else we could do. All through that first day I think we were both afraid of revealing our growing fears, so we spoke only occasionally – to warn the other of a drop, a sharp turn, or an obstructing rock.

What possible hope of survival was there for us with our meagre remnants of food and no water and little prospect of finding either? An unpleasant death faced us, and there

## *Danny Black*

seemed no way of avoiding it – only perhaps the faintest of chances that somehow or other we might come up somewhere or . . . But it was no use trying to think out what might lie ahead; only to clamber on by the light of our torches, over the uneven, raw surface of loose rock and shale, over and around great boulders, and always down, where no human being had ever been before.

By late afternoon we began to feel the heat, a close, damp heat that made our skin prickle. The air was still pure, yet heavy and damp, like the air in a closed bathroom after a hot bath. But it did little to ease our desperate thirst. My throat and mouth were so dry I could only swallow painfully and with the greatest difficulty.

We could go on no longer without a rest, though I wondered, as we unhitched our parachutes and emptied our battle dresses and lay down on the hard rock, whether we should ever have the strength to rise again. Too tired and weak to talk, depression and fear took hold of us both. Hundreds of feet of solid rock separated us from the outside world. This great long tunnel appeared to lead us nowhere, and we could only expect it to cease suddenly – which is what we had feared at each corner that we had turned.

This was the situation we had to face as we lay exhausted and weak in the dense blackness. Inevitably fear stole over us, numbing our nerves and chilling our sweating skin. Neither of us had known this helpless fear before, a fear that could not be defeated by action, by swift manoeuvring in the sky, by the sudden burst of cannon fire.

We lay still, side by side, half-paralysed as the fear crept over and overwhelmed us, not daring now to break the heavy silence.

It was only the feeling of cold dampness on my right hand, resting against the raw rock wall, that drove it away at last. A cold trickle was falling over my palm down my wrist. I shook Johnny, flashed my torch, and the beam picked

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out the stream of water running down the smooth rock like thunderstorm rain down a window.

As I put my mouth against the rock and sucked the water down my throat Johnny was beside me. 'Is it salt?' he gasped hoarsely, but without waiting for my answer sucked clumsily at the pure, cool liquid.

We drank until we felt sick and then scooped up the water in the palms of our hands and poured it over our heads so that it fell down our necks and cooled our hot bodies.

Afterwards when we felt clean and refreshed, and with the fear gone now, we discussed what we should do next.

'We daren't leave this place,' I said, 'we should never find it again. This is probably the only water for miles.'

In the torchlight I saw Johnny wave his hand across his face in a characteristic gesture when he was irritated.

'Don't be crazy, Blackie,' he said. 'We've got to go on. I suppose you'd like to set up house here for the rest of your life! We've got to find food too sometime, you know.'

'I do know, Johnny, but it's a bit of a wrench to leave here, that's all. I know we can't stay really, but I don't want to feel thirst like that again.'

'We'll take along a reserve supply with us. We could fill the dinghy for that matter, though it would be an awful weight. But we must get moving. There may be no way out of this hole, but if there is we've got to find it quickly.'

He paused. He was obviously right - we must get on right away.

'Quickly,' he repeated, 'before our food reserves run out.' He opened his emergency box. There were two squares of chocolate and a handful of Horlicks tablets left. They didn't look as though they would take a man far. 'Let's have something to eat now and start moving.'

So we chewed a little chocolate and set about the job of filling the dinghy. It wasn't easy. First we had to extract the inlet valve, for the water pressure wasn't strong enough to



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break through it. Then we took it in turns, holding the tiny teat flat against the wall and letting the water trickle in slowly. After a while, as it filled, the other had to support the weight from underneath.

When it was as much as one man could carry, we tied my tie tight across the neck, and staggered off again into the black tunnel, Johnny leading, with my parachute as well as his own, flashing the torch on and off, while I followed behind with the dinghy of water.

The only way of roughly calculating distance down there, with the tunnel twisting and falling interminably, was by time. At two miles an hour I reckoned we had done nearly thirty miles by eight o'clock that night – all on a few mouthfuls of chocolate, over very rough ground, and most of the time in a damp, swimming heat. It was little wonder that we collapsed again, weak and utterly exhausted.

All that afternoon at every flash of the torch we had watched anxiously for the sudden end of the tunnel that would mean we were cut off for ever from the world, or a side turning, that might mean our chances of reaching somewhere – anywhere – were increased. Neither had appeared, and for some curious reason, although it remained very hot and damp, the temperature didn't seem to rise any higher than ninety-five degrees or so. But the tension and uncertainty had worn our nerves as much as the long, grinding scramble had tired us physically.

We were really beaten this time, I thought. What a crazy way of dying in the middle of a war – of starvation and exposure, a few miles under the earth! Almost unable to move my stiff limbs, weary and depressed as I was, I began to laugh quietly at the absurd situation. The laughter took hold of me and became louder and louder, echoing back hollowly from the rock walls about us until I could no longer control myself. My body rocked and heaved with laughter;

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I was half-choking myself, and the tears streamed down my cheeks.

Suddenly I felt a great weight fall on my chest, and my face was being hit hard and repeatedly.

The pain knocked the hysteria out of me, and I lay back exhausted. Johnny was sitting astride me, and before I passed out I heard his voice, as though from far away: 'Don't be a fool like that again, Blackie. Don't let it get hold of you. If once we panic we're done. . . .'

It felt as though a thousand years had passed before I came to again. I had dreamed a succession of strange, ridiculous dreams, mostly frightening, but in nearly all of them I was trying to escape from some fear, but could not move. It was a restless sleep, and I awoke as weary as I had been before.

Johnny was kneeling beside me, shaking my shoulder. He had tied one of our torches to the rock face, and by its dim light the cavern seemed like a small, low-roofed room. Our belongings were scattered about; the dinghy of water was close to my feet. I had a splitting headache, and my mouth was bone dry.

'How are you feeling?' Johnny asked quietly. 'Sorry I had to beat you up last night. It was the only thing to do; you might have gone crazy if you hadn't stopped.'

I nodded my head and grinned to show it was O.K. A fine thing it would have been for him too, stuck in this place with a madman on his hands!

'I've been having a look round while you've been sleeping,' he went on. 'I've finished half of the food that was left; I had to give me the energy to carry on.'

'For goodness sake don't apologize,' I broke in. 'What did you find?'

He stopped to switch off the torch and came and sat beside me again.

## Danny Black

'Things don't look so bad. A few hundred yards farther on there's a sort of Piccadilly Circus. The roof disappears way up and the track opens up and splits into five. I went down two of them and didn't find anything – they both got very narrow and eventually stopped. But the great thing is that as soon as you hit the circus the temperature drops suddenly. The damp heat changes to a cool breeze – almost as if you were up on the surface again.'

'But that's impossible,' I protested hoarsely. And then, 'For goodness sake give me a drink; I can't talk with this throat.'

Johnny flashed the other torch and dragged the dinghy over, and I sucked greedily at the valve. The water was warm and rather sweet and rubbery, but it made all the difference. I tied the tie round the neck again as I went on, less huskily and with a clearer head now.

'We've been going down all the time. We must be miles under the surface now.'

'You don't think that was an illusion? Perhaps it's difficult to tell whether you're going up or down. . . . No, of course not. Of course we were going down. Just the same,' he went on, 'I feel there *is* a hope. If the air is moving you would think there was some sort of shaft or tunnel to the outside world.'

'Oh, it's all so crazy!' I exclaimed, exasperated. 'The earth is solid. Solid all the way through, so the scientists tell us, with a few cracks near the surface where the volcanoes shoot out . . .' I said unscientifically.

'Are you feeling well enough to carry on?' Johnny interrupted patiently. 'We've got, at the outside, twelve hours to find food – after that we'll be too weak to move.'

I was still feeling feverish, but of course there was nothing for it but to put together our things and move on. And I was curious about the breeze. It did seem to provide us with some sort of hope, or at worst a change from this tiring, humid atmosphere.

## *The Perilous Descent*

Johnny led the way, carrying the water and most of the other things, and I followed, feeling ashamed of my feebleness, sucking three of the tablets for breakfast.

It was four o'clock in the morning. We had been underground for twenty-two hours.

The 'Circus' was about a hundred feet across, and the floor, surprisingly, was of soft sand, like the seashore above high-water mark. It was wonderful to have the space about us after the feeling of confinement in the tunnel. When we cupped our hands and shouted upwards, except for a faint echo from the walls, no sound came back. The roof might have been miles high.

Johnny showed me the four other tunnels that disappeared irregularly at varying heights into the rock face, pointing out the two he had already explored.

It was refreshingly cool standing there on the soft sand, with a very slight breeze stirring the air, and it was hard to believe that we were not in a seaside cave – perhaps on the Devon and Cornwall coast – and that down one of the tunnels was the shore with a friendly sea beyond.

Johnny christened it 'Five Dials' with proper solemnity.

'We must make our mark in the usual manner,' he said, as he scratched the words with his knife on the soft sandstone rock. 'Then when we get back we'll make a map of our journey and present it to the Royal Geographical Society. I can see their faces! We'll head it "Map of the Underworld" in Gothic lettering.'

'And what'll we put on it?' I asked, laughing. 'A squiggly line starting half a mile off the Dutch coast and going in the direction of the North Sea or Germany – or where? With "Five Dials" marked thirty miles from the starting-point ...'

'What we've got to discover is where that squiggly line ends,' answered Johnny more grimly. He slung the water-

*Danny Black*

dinghy over his shoulder and made ready to carry on. 'No time to waste here. Let's try this one first.'

He made off across the soft sand into the smallest tunnel.

But before we had gone far I noticed with sinking spirits that the sandy floor changed to the now familiar rough, loose rock. Our progress slowed immediately – even more when we found our way half-obstructed with great jagged boulders that had to be climbed over with care. It became worse and worse – though the air remained cool and stirred by the slight breeze – and twice I shouted ahead, 'This is no good, Johnny. Let's try the other one.' The second time he stopped and explained his plan – a methodical and typical 'Johnny' plan.

'Imagine we're aircraft on a difficult mission. We've twelve hours to find our target – whatever it is. We have four alternate routes, two of which I've tried without result. One of the other two must lead us to the target; that gives us four hours each way on the first one if we don't find anything, and four hours "out time" on the second – there's no point in coming back to base on the second trip. If we don't find anything we're done anyway. We've been half an hour in this tunnel. Three and a half hours to go, then back to "Five Dials".'

With that settled we started off again, and soon the going became easier. There were fewer boulders, and the floor was of small chipped rock and loose shale. Johnny, still leading, though he had now accepted my offer to carry the parachutes, was able to conserve the battery of his torch by only switching it on occasionally, siting a dozen yards ahead with the beam and then walking that distance in the darkness. It was a method we had used the day before when the tunnel had been clear enough, and by that means we had saved the batteries so that they were only slightly dimmer now than when we had started.

But this proved nearly fatal to us – to Johnny at least.

## *The Perilous Descent*

Fortunately I was following a few yards behind, or I should have knocked him over.

I heard his gasp above the sound of my own footsteps. I looked up and saw that, with the torch on now, he had staggered back and was standing frozen in the centre of the tunnel. A yard in front of him the floor of the tunnel dropped into endless space.

## CHAPTER 4

Johnny Wild

*Our Closest Call – Despair – The Final Drop –  
The Lost World*

It was just plain luck that I had flicked on the torch a yard from that yawning drop into space. The last time I had turned it on it had looked all clear ahead – and we were walking quickly. I staggered back too stunned even to give a warning cry. Then I felt Blackie's arm on my shoulder.

'What you call a close call, isn't it?' he said, and we laughed. 'You've got the food *and* the water. How should I have got on if you suddenly hadn't been there?'

We lay on our stomachs and crawled up to the edge of the drop and looked over.

Certainly neither of us had seen anything like it before in our lives, and though we saw many more strange and terrifying things afterwards, nothing approached it in its vast scale and grandeur.

There was the light, the first natural light we had seen since we climbed down from the pit. It seemed to come from thousands of feet below us, a strange red glow that pierced the faint hanging mist, and showed us, as in a reddish moonlight, the huge chasm before us. It lit faintly, without shadows, the rocky precipice that towered above us to a vast roof and fell away irregularly on either side and faded into the distance in a succession of great headlands and bays. The massive, jagged roof, glinting here and there with quartz and strata of unknown minerals, began a few hundred feet above us and faded again into shadow with

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the distance, though we thought we could see – how many miles off? – the cliffs on the far side. But the light was so deceptive that we may have been mistaken.

Instinctively we held on tighter as we looked down. Thousands of feet below us a faint light mist gently swirled and tossed and twisted, slowly, in every direction. Finer than cloud, it formed strange, grotesque shapes, fell apart, coiled and gathered together again, tumbling above the orange-red glow like a huge cauldron of ghostly serpents.

The breeze fanned us more briskly, but silently; the silence seemed more unnatural here, more sinister in this great open space than in the confined corridors of the tunnels. Not a sound reached up from the huge pit as we lay there, and we realized, I think for the first time, how awfully alone we were, shut off by miles of impenetrable solid rock from humanity. It sent a shudder of real fear through me, and I crawled back carefully from the ledge.

Blackie joined me, and we stood up shakily. We were both too stunned to talk for a moment.

‘Well, what do we do now?’ I asked feebly at last.

Blackie tried to grin in reassurance, but it was a stiff one, and we could hardly pretend now that there was any hope for us.

‘Johnny the great planner stumped?’ he said with heavy sarcasm. ‘Can’t you think up a way out of this one?’

I sat down and took a long drink of water to gain time. Blackie joined me, and we sat propped against the hard rock side by side for some time in silence.

To make doubly sure there was no way down, I crawled gingerly up to the edge once more, and as Blackie held my ankles I leaned over farther than before and looked down immediately below our ledge.

Not even a professional climber, equipped with every modern rock-climbing aid – ropes, boots, and all – would think of attempting it. The rock face fell in a sheer drop,



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without so much as a finger-hold, for thirty or forty feet; then there was a narrow ledge, barely wide enough to stand on, then apparently the sheer wall again, though I could not see very clearly in the dim red light.

To satisfy myself completely I called back to Blackie for a boulder. He pushed a big one weighing twenty or thirty pounds within reach of my right hand, and I rolled it over the edge. I saw it skim the wall twenty feet below, knocking off a shower of splinters, and then it went off into space. In that deathly silence I could have heard it strike hundreds of feet below, but I waited for over a minute by my watch and not a sound arose from the pit.

'We've got to face it, Blackie,' I said when we returned to our pitch, 'there's only one more chance left for us.'

I could see his face dimly in the glow of light that penetrated some few feet back into the mouth of the tunnel – a firm, full, friendly face with plenty of toughness in it. We had been together for a long time now, over four and a half years, but this nearness to death, alone in this strange and terrifying place, brought us closer together than anything that had happened before had done. Fear for ourselves was lessened by our concern for one another; it was this, I think, that held panic at bay; this bond and the knowledge that if one of us cracked there would be no hope for the other.

'And what's the chance?' asked Blackie. 'What is this "one more chance"?'

'The last tunnel out of "Five Dials". It's the only way.'

We were both pretty near breaking point, but physically he was nearer to it than me. Although he is bigger and more muscular, I have a greater endurance, and this was showing now.

'And there's no point in us both going,' I added. 'Waste of valuable energy.'

He protested, of course, and stood up and made ready to

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set off. But even as he stood in front of me, belting on his revolver, he swayed and fell on to one knee.

'Darn silly,' he said after a moment, passing his hand across his brow. 'Felt sort of dizzy.' Then added resignedly, 'O.K., Johnny, you'd better go. I expect you've worked it all out already, but don't forget that by the old calculation you can only spend three hours in the last tunnel from "Five Dials" – if you want to get back here alive. . . . And if we're going to be two corpses,' he added grimly, then laughing in the old way, 'let's be two corpses side by side – less lonesome.'

'We're not finished yet,' I assured him firmly, without in the least believing it.

I put two-thirds of the wretched remains of food we had in my pocket and set off with nothing more than a torch and my .38. We agreed that if either of us were in trouble we should fire two shots in quick succession; the sound would travel for miles in those tunnels.

'Good luck, Johnny,' he called as I started off.

I turned and gave him a wave – but I don't think he could have seen me in the pitch blackness of the tunnel.

It was a grim journey, but not a particularly heroic one. It *was* the last chance of saving our lives, and the human body and brain will stand a lot to avoid extinction.

I made good time back to 'Five Dials', and without pausing started down the last unexplored tunnel. Unlike any of the others, it was easy going all the way. It had a firm, sandy floor without any obstructions, and the walls and roof were of smooth rock seams.

In the first hour I must have done five miles, but the pace soon began to tell and my legs began to shake with weariness. I had to sit down and rest. I ate half of the remaining chocolate, and the rich food seemed to prime me with energy again. In the last stages of hunger it is amazing how a small

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amount of nourishment can stimulate the body, like a few drops of petrol in a dry tank.

Now I was keeping my torch on all the time, and at each curve I shone it expectantly ahead, hoping for anything – anything but a sheer face of rock which would close our last hope.

At moments my mind began to wander; I imagined once or twice that I was walking up a path from a dark valley and would emerge in a moment into green fields, with the sun shining, with people in gay clothes offering mountains of rich food and flagons of wine. I tried to suppress these visions, and succeeded enough to make myself turn about when the ninety minutes was up. The temptation to go on a little further was terribly strong; but it would mean breaking faith with Blackie, so I reluctantly turned about and began to retrace my steps, walking now more slowly and with more uncertainty.

I remember little of the return journey. My mind was dazed by the awful defeat we had suffered, and because now that we had tried everything, I knew finally that there was only a useless, stupid death ahead of us. I remember standing in the centre of 'Five Dials' again, thinking of the great mass of rock that separated me from the outside world – and life itself. A great anger swept over me, and I lost my temper and shouted out loud, cursing the hard relentless rock that was slowly killing us both. I remember beating it with my fists, and then having the gun in my hand and shooting off the six chambers quickly against the wall. The noise was terrible, and the whine of the ricochets rang on for a second or two after the sound of the explosions had died. But it brought me to my senses. Blackie, of course, would be thinking I was needing help.

After I stumbled off down the tunnel back to him my mind became a blank, until I saw him leaning over me trying to sit me up, and pouring water from the dinghy over my face.

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We lay side by side, a few yards from the open ledge of the tunnel, talking now of our past life together, and earlier, before we met at the beginning of the war. We had done the same thing often in the past in many parts of the world, but it calmed us to remember now the funny, the ordinary, the sad, and the exciting moments we had shared; the stupid, the cowardly, the fine, and the brave men we had known. Parties, fights, crashes, and earlier incidents in our school life. We talked of all these things by the dim red glow of that strange other world below . . . and as we talked we felt the strength slowly draining from our bodies.

We slept a long time that night, and awoke again in the deathly silence, to which we were now more accustomed. We had finished our last crumb of food twelve hours before, and all we could do was to drink occasionally from the still half-full dinghy of water – and wait.

By the afternoon we were really in a bad way, and it was an effort even to talk. Once I asked Blackie, ‘You don’t think we’re doing it the hard way like this, do you?’

After a moment he answered, ‘I don’t know that I’ve got the guts to do it the violent way . . . jumping over the side . . . or using the gun . . . Anyway I don’t see much point. . . . It’s peaceful like this.’

Your brain works slowly when you’re on the last lap, as we were, and it might have been hours later – for time no longer counted – that Blackie’s words came back to me. ‘Over the side,’ he had said. ‘Over the side,’ a phrase that was often used in the Air Force for baling out. . . . Baling out. . . . What were we lying on? Our parachutes.

Then in a rush the idea had gripped me.

‘Blackie,’ I tried to shout, but my voice came in a weak whisper. I shook him. ‘Blackie,’ I repeated, leaning over close to his ear. ‘Over the side. Don’t you see? Why didn’t you see it before? Why didn’t I see it before?’

He turned his face slowly towards mine. It looked

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shrunken and hollow, and even in the strange light I could see its paleness and the dark lines under his eyes.

‘What are you talking about?’ he asked irritably.

‘We must bale out, Blackie. It’s the last chance we never thought of before. Goodness knows why. It ought to have been obvious enough.’

I had stood up shakily in my enthusiasm, and Blackie was sitting up now.

‘These bits of silk have saved our lives once – let them do it again!’ I said, raising an arm theatrically and half-laughing.

Blackie was laughing too, at no particular joke – I think just because he realized we weren’t going to die after all – not just yet.

The parachutes we had tossed about so carelessly, rolling them into heaps or wrapping them about us, tying the shroud lines in knots, we now treated as carefully as ancient tapestries. Slowly, because we were so weak, and with infinite care we helped each other fold them, as we had watched the professionals pack them at Air Force Stations in England. It took us a long time; we worked in silence to conserve our energy, and half a dozen times we had to stop to rest.

It wasn’t until we had them both in correct neat little piles that we realized we had no harness, no ripcord, nothing to pack them in. We had left all these behind to save weight at the bottom of the first pit. It came to us as a shock, and we soon realized that the only way we could release them was to hold the folded parachute, tied on by the main cord to our webbing belt, under one arm, jump, and after a second let the bundle go and hope that the little pilot ’chute would catch enough air to drag open the canopy. It was a haphazard method, to say the least, but we were past caring about the finer points of chance.

We stuffed all our other goods inside our battledress blouses and took a long drink of the rubbery water. Then we

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drained the dinghy, folded it as tightly as we could, and I strung it on to my back. Fortunately Blackie remembered the Benzedrine tablets in our emergency cases. These were issued with all escape aids; they were a wonderful stimulant, and gave you an extra store of energy for an hour or two to help you out of a tight corner if you crashed inside enemy territory. We swallowed two each and then carefully approached the edge.

It had been easy enough to think of the jump. And even as we knew that we had to do it, we stood hesitating a foot or two from the rim, looking down again into space, staring at the slow, twisting spirals and clouds of reddish tinted mist below. Somewhere there had to be an end to the pit; maybe distance was deceptive in that atmosphere and the clouds were only a short way beneath us, with firm land just below them . . . or maybe it was as deep as the earth itself. The imagination could not grasp a situation so strange.

All we knew was that we had to jump, but though our lives depended on it, it was not easy, not like the sudden leap from a crashing aircraft when you were over the side before you had time to think.

'We'd better do it together so that we've a chance of landing in the same place at about the same time,' said Blackie, without turning his head.

'But not exactly together; we don't want to get mixed up in each other's shroud lines.'

We were silent again, trying to avert the moment, still staring into that unfathomable space. . . . And I knew that there was only one thing to do.

I drew slowly back a few inches, then, carefully watching Blackie's face out of the corner of my eye, a little farther, until I saw I could get some leverage with my right arm. Then I pushed my hand with all my force into the small of his back.

'Sorry, boy,' I shouted.

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He staggered on the edge, then seeing that there was no hope of regaining his balance, pushed off with his toe, like a high jumper. He didn't cry out, he was too surprised.

As he disappeared I ran the three paces and jumped out as far as I could after him.

Blackie always claims that he was about to jump anyway. 'The second before you jabbed me brutally in the back,' he says indignantly, 'I had really made up my mind. I was just going to step back and make a run for it.'

Of course there was the very real danger that he would stumble and just slip over, and that his parachute would fail to open so close to the cliff. But I had to take that chance. With one gone it would be easy enough for the other, I had reckoned.

For several terrible seconds after I leapt into space my parachute refused to open. I released it from under my arm almost immediately, but, as I turned over and over in the air, I had shot past Blackie, who was swinging gently beneath his open canopy, before, with a tearing jerk at my stomach, it unfolded in a rush. I found myself two or three hundred feet below him and, mercifully, well out from the rocky cliff.

We had thought about it as little as possible before, but we had realized how haphazard was our method of opening the parachutes. The chances of them both unfolding perfectly were really quite slight, and it was not far short of miraculous that we should both be coming down safely.

By straining my neck back I could just see Blackie above, and a little nearer to the cliff; he was jerking his shroud lines in an effort to swing out farther. Above him the rocky roof had disappeared in the haze, and all we could see now was the precipitous craggy wall a few hundred feet from us. At all costs we had to keep away from it; one touch and our parachutes would tear to shreds and we would be shot to instant death.

Blackie had accelerated his fall, and he was now on the

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same level as me, and only about thirty feet away. Still the only sound was the faint whistling of the wind in our parachutes, and we could talk easily to one another. I could see him grinning as he turned his head towards me.

'This will make a good story for the boys on the squadron,' he called.

'That Benzedrine's O.K. I feel wonderful now.'

'Could still do with a two-inch steak and chips,' he answered. 'And this belt's nearly sawing me in half.'

'Pull yourself up on the lines, like this,' I told him, drawing the weight off my stomach with my arms. 'It helps a lot.'

The breeze seemed to be increasing to a wind; I noted with relief that it was taking us away from the precipice, but it set our canopies swaying.

'This is going to make me seasick soon,' called Blackie.

The light appeared to become stronger as we fell nearer to the heavy layer of clouds, which glowed up from beneath like the light of a lantern through mottled glass.

The speed with which we shot into the cloud reminded me of the heavy fall ahead of us. If the ground were rocky and the wind did not abate we should almost certainly be badly injured, if not killed. The story goes that landing in a parachute is like jumping from the roof of a bus, but if the wind is blowing twenty-five miles an hour it's like jumping off a bus travelling at that speed . . . and that doesn't sound so comfortable!

In the cloud the wind was even more turbulent and gusty, and though I could no longer see my canopy – or Blackie – I could feel myself being hurled about. I could feel too the dampness against my face and its chill came through to my skin.

It took me some minutes to come through the cloud layer, and when we shot out Blackie was a hundred yards further away.

And then I looked down. I forgot that I was dropping through space supported by only a few yards of fine silk. I forgot that we were miles below the surface of the earth



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involved in an incredible adventure in a place never explored by man. Hanging on to the lines for better support, I stared down in amazement and bewilderment.

Suddenly beneath the cloud the air had become crystal clear. The red light was a hundred times more intense and revealed below us a great wide valley twenty or thirty miles across, perhaps fifty or sixty long, bounded on all sides by the sheer, inaccessible cliffs that towered up and disappeared into the clouds above. The brilliant light shone out from the cliffs, not blindingly as a searchlight or with the hot glow of the embers of a fire, but brilliantly in a cold, uniform glow as though a giant had daubed them with red luminous paint.

Nearer to the ground the cliffs lost their luminosity, and for the last thousand feet or so fell more gently, in a series of irregular plateaux, and hills, and slopes.

‘How high do you reckon we are?’ shouted across Blackie.

‘25,000, 20,000 or so? I don’t know; can’t tell in this crazy place.’

‘Good 25,000 I should say,’ he shouted back. ‘Hey Johnny, what do you reckon we are in for down there?’

‘Who knows!’

It was too early to tell. But we would soon know. That was our destination; we were dropping at about twenty-five feet a second towards the valley floor, and nothing could stop us now.

At perhaps 15,000 feet I could begin to pick out some of the detail of the landscape below us. It might almost have been an English scene. There was the same neat patchwork of fields that we had both seen hundreds of times while flying over East Anglia and the Southern Counties, but it lacked the variety of colour, the fields were bigger, and there didn’t appear to be any woods. At the time I thought it must be the red light that gave the landscape its uniform dull-brown tint.

The crude parachute harness was cutting uncomfortably into my body, and I was desperately weak from lack of food,

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but dropping quickly into this new, unknown land, I was seized with the excitement of the explorer sighting a strange, uncharted shore. And I wondered what sort of people we could expect to find, for this lost world was certainly inhabited.

Dominating the whole valley, we could see now a great city of skyscrapers that towered up a thousand feet into the sky. Row upon row of them were ranged about a central building that was higher than all the others. They were taller and narrower than the New York skyscrapers and set closer together, and there were fewer of them; but because of their uniformity the effect was even more awe-inspiring.

The wind blew us gently across this city, from one side to the other, and for a brief moment we could see it below as a map. In the centre the largest building, then the rows of smaller ones, all built of some form of granite and studded with windows, then on the outskirts a wide belt of low buildings with wide windows and glass roofs to catch the light, which I presumed were factories.

Beyond, on all sides, for mile upon mile, stretched the big, carefully cultivated regular arable fields. There was little grassland, and no sign of an animal of any sort, nor of any human beings. But by then I was anxiously reckoning where we were likely to fall and had no time to scan the landscape with any care.

At a thousand feet we were well clear of the city, and with the open countryside ahead of us the landing, but for the high wind, looked fairly straightforward.

Blackie was still close beside me. I saw him glance towards me, and his familiar grin at that moment worked wonders. It was good to feel that, whatever might be ahead, at least there were two of us to face it.

I waved back and shouted, 'Don't forget to get rid of your belt as we hit.'

And then I was drawing up my knees – as we had so often

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been taught – relaxing my body and waiting for the shock. The wind was even stronger than I had thought, a good twenty-five miles an hour, and I struck the soft soil of a ploughed field with a tremendous thud that ought to have broken my spine. I cartwheeled over twice before I could get rid of my parachute.

Blackie wasn't so lucky. As I sat up, a bit dazed by the shock, I saw him turning violently over and over across the field, struggling with his webbing belt.

I followed as fast as I could on the loose soil, dragging out my knife as I ran. But I didn't have to use it. The wind was too strong to allow him to spill the air from the canopy, but he managed at last to release his 'chute altogether, and it floated off across the field, and he lay gasping for breath and winded as I came up to him.

After a moment he sat up and panted out, 'I should feel better if I had my gun. There's something hostile about the feel of this place.'

Our revolvers were in their holsters attached to our belts, which had blown away with our 'chutes. I felt lost, too, without mine.

'If you've no broken bones let's go and fetch them,' I said. I pulled him up and we looked across the field and saw the two white patches of our collapsed parachutes against a low embankment half a mile away.

As we trudged side by side through the fine, dry soil we glanced back and saw the outlines of the huge city behind us. The skyscrapers, towering up into the red sky, looked now even taller and narrower than from above.

'What are those wires criss-crossing between them do you suppose?' I asked Blackie.

'Your guess is as good as mine. We've got a lot of things to find out.'

I held his arm and pointed to the left side of the field. A pair of stout cables ran between a series of steel towers

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spaced a few hundred yards from each other, rather like the high-tension wires that span the English countryside between pylons. Beyond them we saw more towers and taut cables, and again more and more into the distance, criss-crossing, joining and splitting, a great network that seemed to range over the whole valley.

'Whoever lives here they're certainly as civilized as we are,' said Blackie. 'Perhaps they won't just throw us into the stewpot after all. Just the same, I'd like to feel my gun beside me in case they're an unfriendly lot.'

As we neared the bank and our parachutes we heard a faint humming sound like that of an electric motor or dynamo. We stopped and looked about us, but could see nothing moving . . . and then, running suspended beneath the nearest of the cables, came a long, silver torpedo-shaped object. It flashed towards us at a great speed, and as it approached we saw first a grilled air-intake in the nose, and then along the sides the rows of windows. The hum rose to a high-pitched shriek that rang in our ears. Then as the machine slowed down just before the nearest tower, the sound suddenly ceased, there was a harsh squeal of brakes, and the machine had stopped.

We both ducked down into the ditch, dragging our parachutes after us, and watched in amazement as several figures stepped out through sliding doors let into the side of the machine on to a platform erected near the top of the tower. As they came one behind the other down the narrow stairs to the ground the doors of the machine closed and it shot off again with the humming sound rising to a shriek as it gained speed.

It came within a few hundred yards of us, and as it flashed by, suspended from the cable by three small wheels on equally-spaced brackets, we could see the details of the fuselage, not unlike that of an aircraft's, the line of wide windows, the passengers' heads clearly visible, and right in front

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the round moulded glass or perspex windscreen of the driving-cabin. As it shot away past us it must have been going close to 150 m.p.h., and we caught a fleeting glimpse at the tail end, behind the single stabilizing fin, of a wide oval hole, indicating that it must be jet-propelled.

Electric jet-propulsion; that was an exciting development. In spite of our precarious position my technical interest was aroused.

For a moment after it flashed away there was silence, then farther away this time we heard the same humming sound, and across several fields we saw another of these machines racing towards us. We followed its progress as it stopped at several of the towers to drop and take on passengers until it came very near to us. Then we ducked again into the ditch.

But the driver must have spotted us, or seen the white patches of our parachutes, for, with a violent shrieking, he stopped the machine almost above us.

We saw him clearly, staring down at us from the driving-cabin, and we saw the row of passengers' faces behind pressed against the perspex windows watching us lying frozen in the ditch.

For several seconds no one moved; then we saw the driver take down a small hand microphone, and we could see his lips moving as he spoke into it.

'He's reporting us to his station or headquarters or something,' whispered Blackie. 'We can expect trouble.'

The driver hooked up the microphone again, and turned away from us to restart the motor. There was a gentle humming sound which increased in intensity to a whine, and the big machine surged forward again, quickly gathering speed, the passengers keeping their eyes on us until we disappeared from their sight.

After a while we climbed up again from the ditch and sat down heavily on the embankment. We both felt ill from the shock of the fall, the excitement of landing in this lost

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world, but above all because the effect of the Benzedrine was wearing off and we were returning quickly to a condition of helpless weakness. There was a dull ache in my stomach, and my head throbbed, and even the smallest movement was an effort.

‘What next, Blackie?’ I asked dully.

He shook his head hopelessly. ‘Just wait . . . and see what happens.’

But we hadn’t long to wait. In our dull state of mind they were almost on us before we noticed them.

Two smaller jet machines coasted quietly along the cables from opposite directions, engines switched off, and stopped above us. We noticed a third at the nearest pylon, and from it poured out a dozen or so figures, who ran rapidly down the steps and came towards us across the field.

Johnny gripped my arm and pointed up to the first two machines. I gasped as I saw a long, flexible steel ladder fall from the belly of each; as the ends touched the ground a man dropped from the machine on to the top rung and started down quickly, followed by another and another. They came scurrying down both ladders, and as they reached the ground they fanned out around us, each drawing a long sword from a sheath as he ran.

We both unfastened our guns and dropped down into the protection of the ditch. But we realized at once how hopeless our position was. Three dozen of them completely surrounded us, advancing slowly from every side, their ugly-looking swords poised shoulder high. With unlimited ammunition we couldn’t have lasted for long; weak as we were, I decided that we must give ourselves up immediately.

I told Blackie to put his gun away. ‘Don’t let’s look as though we’re surrendering,’ I said. ‘Just walk towards them appearing friendly and unafraid – as though we’re glad to see them.’

We stood up and approached the ring of advancing men,



'Don't let's look as though we're surrendering'

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who halted uncertainly and then closed about us more rapidly, watching us suspiciously and holding their swords at the ready.

We halted and waited for them. It was a nasty moment; remember, we had no idea what sort of beings we were up against. Despite the obvious technical advances they had made, for all we knew their manners might be those of Borneo head-hunters.

Then the leader of the party stepped forward. Like the others, he was dressed in a loose tunic of rough cloth tied about the waist, and wide trousers of similar material strapped tightly about the calves. But while the uniforms of the soldiers were piped in bright red, his was in a deep blue that contrasted strangely to the drabness of his clothes. A slim, ugly dagger, naked in his belt, also distinguished him from the others.

This officer stood close to us, staring for some moments into our faces without speaking. It was a hard, uncompromising face; his eyes were a cold blue, his jaw close-shaven and firm, and his long brown hair fell loosely about his shoulders. He reminded me of a warrior out of a history book, and when he spoke it was a voice out of the past.

‘Villains! Have you come to create greater disturbance? You can expect no mercy from us.’

The strange old-fashioned language made me want to laugh, and it was difficult to take his crude threat seriously. It seemed incredible that these lost people, living far beneath the surface of the earth, should talk in our own tongue, and as it was spoken three or four hundred years ago.

At last I said weakly, and as formally as I could, for this seemed a moment for ceremony, ‘We are not your enemies, sir. We have landed in your country from high above the clouds, and we badly need food and rest. This country is unknown to us, and we bear you no ill-will.’



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The officer looked at us suspiciously. Clearly he didn't believe a word. He signalled to two of his men, who ran forward and thrust our arms hard behind our backs.

'The Governor finds no mercy for traitors to our land. Away with them, Wardens,' ordered the officer.\*

The hands about our wrists tightened, and we were pushed down from the embankment and across the dusty field towards the base of the steel ladders hanging from the machines. A squad of the Wardens escorted us on either side; the third squad marched back to the pylon to their own machine.

I glanced at Blackie beside me; he was staring straight ahead with glazed weary eyes. His face was drawn, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He was pretty well all in, and could hardly put one foot before the other as we were half-pushed along by the big men behind us.

No further word of command was needed. Silently the Wardens clambered up the ladders, while the officer stood near by, watching us with cold, hard eyes as we awaited our turn.

Blackie was pushed up first. His escort released his arms, and I watched him grasp the rung above his head and try to draw himself up. He made a great effort and managed to bring his feet up to the third rung. Then he halted a second, gathering the last of his strength. 'He'll never make it,' I told myself, at the same time wondering if I would fare any better, for there was a full fifty feet to climb.

'Get on, get on,' shouted his escort, and took a kick at Blackie's feet.

His body tensed for a moment, as if in fierce anger, then it

\* All the inhabitants of Red Valley – as we found they called this land – spoke in this half-developed sixteenth-century English. They also used new words, unknown to us, and at first we had difficulty in following them. Later we became accustomed to adapting it in our own minds as they spoke, and to make this narrative easier we have both reproduced their dialogue in modern English.

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went limp; one hand, then the other lost their grip on the ladder and he twisted, doubled up, and fell helplessly with a thud to the ground six feet below.

I tore myself from the grip of the Warden and ran towards him. He was curled up on the loose soil, and there was an ugly bruise on his cheek. He was quite unconscious and breathing stertorously.

'You swine!' I shouted angrily at the Warden who had kicked him. 'He hadn't the strength to get up there.' And turning to the officer still standing unconcerned a few yards away, 'I told you we needed food. We haven't eaten properly for days.'

I completely lost control. I was at the end of my tether, desperate and weak, but bitter at the way fate had treated us, the way she had threatened us with death again and again, and then had suspended the sentence at the last moment, only to renew it in a more unpleasant form.

But I was not going to give up without another fight. I cursed and swore at the arrogant Warden, who backed away in amazement, piling on the accusations, calling him every name under the sun, and probably not even making sense.

Fortunately I was so angry and dazed that I forgot my gun; if I had had it in my hand I'm sure I should have used it, and they would have made short work of us then. But I was in little better shape than Blackie. The landscape began to swing about me as I knelt beside him, and I put my hands to my head as I felt consciousness leaving me.

## CHAPTER 5

*Danny Black*

*Strange Journey – The City – The Governor’s Suspicion –  
The Challenge – The Leap*

I FELT the cool mouth of a flask against my lips and the taste of a strong liquid in my mouth. I swallowed and choked, coughed . . . and the world, the strange new world into which we had fallen, came back. We were miles below the surface of the earth, I remembered, in an unknown land inhabited by apparently belligerent and unpleasant people dressed like actors pretending to be sixteenth-century peasants. I had been unconscious several times before, but I had never been less glad to come back to life.

The drink, an earthy, vegetable, alcoholic brew, cleared my head quickly. I was still sore from the fall from the ladder, but felt quite able to stand up. Johnny was talking to the officer, but I couldn’t catch what he was saying. Presently he turned to me and grinned.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asked.

‘Groggy,’ I answered promptly.

‘Not surprised. As though we hadn’t had enough falls lately! Look Blackie, this old bird’ – indicating the officer with his thumb – ‘says we’ve got to go with them to the City in one of these wagons – as they’re called – for questioning. He seems a little less unpleasant now he realizes we weren’t bluffing, but the future doesn’t look at all healthy. I think the whole country is in some state of crisis.’

I stood up rather shakily.

## *The Perilous Descent*

‘Well I suppose I had better have another go at that ladder.’

This time I was given some assistance. One of the Wardens followed up behind and supported me, and another gave me an occasional pull from above. Feeling rather like a sack of potatoes, I slowly, painfully, made my way up the fifty or so rungs and was led into the machine and settled into a comfortable padded seat next to a window. Johnny soon joined me and sat down alongside, and our few belongings – our rolled-up parachutes among them – were thrown down at our feet. Two of the Wardens stood in the gangway on guard with their swords at the ready – though anyone could have seen that we were in no condition to put up any resistance. Finally, we were passed the officer’s flask, and we both took another long draught of the liquid. Again its effect was immediate and we felt almost light-headed as the other Wardens took their seats and the driver passed into the forward cabin, the ladder was drawn up and folded neatly into sections along the gangway, and the hatch was slammed shut.

The engine swung into motion, and in a moment we were rushing fifty feet above the fields. The wagon rocked gently from side to side at high speed and rose and fell slightly at each tower, otherwise it was very steady. But the roar of the motor was painful, and we were able to speak only by talking close into the other’s ear.

The view from the window was excellent, and we could see the layout of the country on both sides. All the fields were dry and barren, and it was apparent that a dreadful drought had fallen on the country. The intricate network of ditches that had irrigated the land were all empty, the crops were withered and blackened from lack of water, and far away I could see the dried-up bed of a huge river. Johnny was right about the country being in a state of crisis. But why should they take it out on us?

## *Danny Black*

Then we approached the low factories on the outskirts of the City. Apart from narrow foot-tracks between the fields and between the tightly-packed factories the wagons seemed to be the only means of transport. The nearer we came to the City the more cables we saw; they stretched across the sky like a cobweb, criss-crossing one another, with a platform for ascending and descending passengers on every tower.

When we came close to the first of the huge skyscrapers we could see, as we had first noticed before from our parachutes, that the cables were strung from building to building at different levels and in an amazingly complex pattern. We noticed too the variety of wagons that bustled from building to building and from factory to factory – small five or six-seaters, medium-sized buses, larger buses, similar to the one we were in, and every size of goods wagon, with open tops, carrying packages and crates, sacks of food from the country, girders and cement, granite blocks, almost everything you would see stacked in the trucks in any big shunting-yard. And all these machines were jet-propelled and all appeared to be powered electrically.

With the constant shifting from cable to cable our wagon travelled quite slowly now, and we were able to talk more comfortably. We pointed things out to each other, including the flattened wreck of a big wagon splashed on the 'dead ground' between two skyscrapers. The wreck spread across the ten yards or so between the buildings – a space that was never used – and clearly no one could have got out alive.

'Unpleasant way of being killed,' commented Johnny.

With my eyes on other wagons, running confidently from building to building, I watched nervously to see if accidents were frequent; perhaps these people took them as a commonplace, I thought. Certainly no one seemed at all concerned at the sight of the wreck.

Johnny added, 'I can't think why they don't stick to the

## *The Perilous Descent*

ground instead of floating about on these dangerous-looking wires.'

As he spoke the driver in the enclosed compartment in the nose cut the engine and we slid quietly up to a wide platform extending from one of the skyscrapers. We followed the Wardens out of the wagon and through an archway into a great domed arcade, lit by hanging lights.

Here there was a great bustle as hundreds of people walked to and fro and in and out of the shops, their voices echoing as they clustered in little groups to talk or made their way to the row of lifts waiting to take them up or down to another floor. The walls, the shop fronts, the domed roof rising above us were all made of polished steel that shone brightly in the artificial light, brilliant and white as against the warmer red natural light outside. Far across the opposite side we could see another entrance to the building with more people crowding through the archway or moving out to wait for the next wagon.

After a few words with our two escorts the officer made off through the crowds, followed by the squad of Wardens in marching order; the groups of people split up before them, scurrying aside hurriedly and in some fear, until they walked into one of the big lifts. I saw the steel doors shut, and then they were gone.

We were then led off through the crowds, and many curious eyes were turned on us as we made our way across to the opposite row of lifts.

The great shining lift was as big as a medium-sized room; it took us swiftly and smoothly up a dozen or so floors, and then we left the skyscraper from another platform and shot off into space, five hundred feet above the ground, in a small six-seater wagon which one of the Wardens drove.

As we swung from building to building, making our way towards the very centre of the City, Johnny and I had a chance to talk. He was obviously eager to tell me something,

*Danny Black*

and as soon as we saw the second Warden settled in his seat some way from us, he said quietly but just above the sound of the motor:

'I don't trust these people that far,' indicating a fraction of an inch with his finger. 'I think there must be some sort of police rule in force, perhaps martial law. This thug,' he said, dropping his voice further and indicating the Warden, 'looks as though he would swipe somebody's finger off with that ugly sword if they smiled at him.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'but this drought may have them all on edge. Did you notice how barren the fields were? They're probably expecting food riots and have got the police on their toes in case there's trouble.'

'Of course we're going to look a bit silly if they simply won't believe our story,' Johnny went on.

'But there must be someone who knows about the outside world,' I argued.

'I don't know,' He shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment. 'But it's all so fantastic. . . .'

Johnny stopped as the Warden cut the motor, and we saw a hundred yards in front of us the vast pinnacle of the central building we had first seen as we had floated across the City suspended from our parachutes. It appeared to have been built of a finer material than the others, and the stone sides shone in the red light. The thousands of steel-framed windows sparkled like diamonds, at the top was a polished gold dome that would have dwarfed St Pauls', surmounted by a flag bearing a design of a drawn sword. It was a masterpiece, finer than any building on earth, a tribute to the genius of this strange buried race of people.

We were marched again out of the wagon, past a dozen guards into a hall of glittering pillars and walls, furnished in gleaming chromium, like some fantastic Hollywood film set. Here we reported to an official behind a desk. Then our escort left us without a word, and two more Wardens in the

## *The Perilous Descent*

same uniform came up on each side and led us, still without a word, into a small office, where they inspected our few belongings, our parachutes, which they glanced at without much curiosity, our refolded dinghy, our empty emergency ration boxes, the Very cartridges from our battledress pockets and then our revolvers. They were uncertain about these, turning them over and over, looking down the barrels and trying to pull the triggers, which were fortunately at 'safe'. Finally, one of them looked up at us and asked suspiciously what they were.

Without hesitating Johnny replied, 'They're for finding your way in the dark. You hold them like this' (taking one from him) 'and point them and they send a bright light to show you where to go.'

I waited, horrified, for the explosion. I thought, for one awful moment, that Johnny was going to shoot. Then he lowered the barrel and passed it back. They nodded, only half-believing him, still uncertain. But a weapon to them was clearly something with a good sharp blade. They seemed satisfied and handed them back to us again.

For a while we were left alone in the cold, uncomfortable office. The door was locked on us, and we sat on two hard chairs speculating idly on our possible fate.

At one point Johnny said, 'We've got two assets that may pull us through the questioning—our parachutes and our guns. They may impress them enough to make them believe us.'

Then, an hour or so later, footsteps approached our door and a substantial meal was brought in on a tray. There were two big bowls of vegetable broth and a mixed vegetable and fruit salad – tomatoes, pears, grapes, turnips, and potatoes, chopped up with something that appeared to be a cross between a lettuce and a cabbage – and large chunks of pitch black bread. We were so ravenous that we hardly tasted this curious mixture, but later we grew accustomed to the way they mixed their foods, and also to the complete absence of



## *Danny Black*

meat, milk, butter, eggs, and, the other animal products.

Perhaps another hour passed, and we were feeling fit and strong if slightly sick now, when the door was again unlocked and six uniformed Wardens, led by an officer, marched in and escorted us off, through huge echoing corridors, up several lifts, and past half a company of guards standing duty, one to each step, up a great wide marble staircase, through several swing doors, and finally into one of the largest and most awe-inspiring rooms I have ever seen.

It must have measured at least two hundred feet each way. The flat, low ceiling was of some smooth stone inset with heavy, sparkling veins of quartz and what appeared to be gold. The floor was thickly carpeted to every corner with a soft grey material, and two of the walls were panelled with a glittering polished mineral, which we later discovered was pure silver. The other two sides were window, a great length of glass unbroken anywhere, even at the corner, giving a wonderful uninterrupted view over the City below.

We stood silently with our escort at the door until a tall, bearded man rose from a desk by the window and stared across the length of the room at us. With his hands on his hips he stood without moving for a moment, and then called in a firm voice:

‘All right, Wardens, send them here.’

We walked forward to his desk, and he watched us all the way. I saw what a strong, fine, but ruthless face he had, the cheeks rather sunken above the thick black beard that fell almost to his chest. He was dressed in the usual loose clothes, but the seams were piped with gold braid, round his neck was a brightly coloured nylon scarf, and over his shoulders hung a big wide cape. He might have been a superior robber chieftain out of an old boy’s adventure book, but for the mountain-side cave there was this beautiful, lavishly decorated room, set high above a city more modern and fantastic than New York.

## *The Perilous Descent*

He stared at us silently for some moments with his steel-grey eyes, and then with a nod of his head, dismissed all but two of the escort. It was clear that we were facing the powerful ruler – the ‘Governor’ – of Red Valley. He sat



We were facing the ‘Governor’

down in the chromium chair behind his desk and talking quickly in a hard incisive voice, said:

‘I don’t usually handle the questioning of suspicious characters. We have plenty of experienced people to do that. But your case was brought to my notice because it is the first of its kind we have come across. . . .’

I could see he wasn’t going to give us anything at all. There was going to be no fooling this man – the Governor.

## *Danny Black*

We should have to explain quickly and cleverly before he lost patience and threw us out.

'Your story is that you fell from out of the sky from another land above this, that you had never even heard of Red Valley before, that you were starving when you landed. Then you were found by my men, brought to our City, and fed and revived. Right?'

The words shot out at us, and Johnny answered quickly:

'Quite right so far, sir.'

But before he had time to finish the Governor went on:

'And if I jumped out of this window now what would I look like when I struck the ground?'

'A mess,' said Johnny, and neither of us could help grinning.

The Governor's expression did not change; his eyes did not even flicker.

'And yet,' he went on, 'you fell from the sky, from above the clouds and landed in a field unharmed. Why should I believe that?'

'Because we came down hanging on to these parachutes,' said Johnny, unfolding a corner of his from under his arm.

'And from what point did you start this extraordinary journey?'

And so it went on for some time, Johnny answering most of the questions, though I butted in here and there. We explained about baling out into the sea, the sand-bank, the drop into the cavern, and our days in the tunnels and the final leap into space.

At only one point did the Governor relax the grim, hard expression on his face, and that was when I was trying to explain the war that we were fighting at the time of the crash. A shadow fell across his features, he lowered his eyes, a touch of compassion crossed his features. He did at least understand and believe this part, and at that moment I felt we were saved.

## *The Perilous Descent*

'We have had fighting here too,' he said savagely, 'and it seems as though there will be more war. I have saved our country once from tyranny and bloodshed, and now it looks as though the enemy may defeat us by the slow, cruel way of starvation. That is why we must guard ourselves,' he went on, his voice rising, 'and how am I to know you are not spies?' He suddenly seemed to lose his temper. He stood up and thumped his fist down on the desk. 'Why am I wasting my time with you? Haven't I enough worries?'

He looked above our heads at the guards. I glanced round and saw them walking across the room towards us. The blow had fallen so suddenly and unexpectedly that I was paralysed for a second. The thought flashed through my mind, as it had before in tight corners, 'One second to think up a way out of this one.'

But there were heavy hands on our shoulders spinning us about before I had the inspiration, before I saw suddenly the last card we must play. I had rejected the idea of using our guns; we would terrify them, kill a few, but they would get us in the end . . . and the end would be soon.

'I can show you,' I shouted round at the Governor as we were dragged back. 'I can show you that I can jump from that window and come back up here and be talking to you again in a few minutes.'

The guards stopped, and I saw Johnny glance quickly at me, then at the Governor, who had regained his composure and seemed to be calmly considering the point.

I watched his face, my heart in my mouth. If he had said, 'No', then I think in desperation I should have drawn my gun. There was something so ruthless about these Wardens, particularly now that we had been rejected by the Governor, that I knew we should have only a few minutes to live after we left that room.

'Right,' said the Governor suddenly. 'Let's see you.'

Without pausing, he stepped across to a door at the corner

*Danny Black*

of the room and I followed alone. We went through the door and out on to a balcony that hugged the great double window. There was a slight steel railing, and then, beyond, the great sheer drop of at least a thousand feet to the narrow strip of ground separating this building from the smaller skyscraper below us.

‘Over you go then,’ demanded the Governor impatiently. ‘What are you waiting for if you can fly so well?’

I wasn’t waiting; I was only anxious to get it over with quickly, and was rushing to get some sort of order into the folds of my parachute. The possibility of coming out alive was faint enough, but I thought I might as well give myself some sort of chance.

On the tiled veranda in a steady wind I stretched out the dirty, worn silk with the frayed corners and creases. I didn’t dare to take the time to follow the full routine of folding it properly, and it looked more like a bundle of old newspapers than something on which my life was to depend as I tied the end of the cords to my webbing belt – just as I had done on the ledge before the second jump.

The Governor stood beside the railings, tapping the toe of one of his shoes impatiently on the tiles, watching me coldly. I glanced into his room before I climbed over and was just in time to see Johnny break away from the guards and run wildly for the door. They followed him quickly, drawing their swords as they ran, but he was out before they caught him, shouting:

‘Wait, Blackie, wait, don’t be a fool!’

Held now by his wrists he dragged the guards after him across the smooth tiles, still calling on me to stop.

‘Leave him. Leave him alone,’ said the Governor sharply, stepping towards Johnny. ‘Why are you so afraid for your friend?’ he asked with heavy sarcasm. ‘If you can leap thousands of feet into space, why are you worried about a little jump like this?’

## *The Perilous Descent*

'Because he doesn't stand a chance in this wind. If he touches the wall of the building his parachute will collapse like a balloon – and he can't possibly get through that network of cables.' Johnny turned to me. 'For goodness sake don't try it, Blackie, it's suicide.'

The Governor shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

'All right, Wardens,' he said petulantly, and he began to walk off, away from us along the veranda, his cloak filling out in the breeze.

One of the guards came towards me, and I saw the other grab Johnny's arm again. . . . I saw Johnny pulling at the butt of his gun . . . and then I was over the side, throwing my weight far out into space.

All I had seen in that quick glance before I jumped was the tiny strip of dead ground between the two skyscrapers hundreds of feet below, and the close network of cables criss-crossing at different levels, and the little long shapes of the wagons scurrying between the buildings. Of course it was suicide, but at least I was choosing my own death.

Miraculously my old, battered parachute opened perfectly for the third time. I was swinging ten feet out from the wall of the Governor's headquarters, falling swiftly past row after row of windows, and drifting in the wind away towards another building, still a few hundred feet below.

I sank between two converging cables and then quickly beneath another, then through a few hundred feet of clear air. The breeze veered and I drifted back again; broken by the many buildings, it swung from every point of the compass in turn, twisting me round and round helplessly, and suddenly dropping me in an air-pocket with a jerk.

I grazed past another cable, and I heard clearly from above me the rip of the silk as the wire tore through it. Then I seemed to drop faster; I remembered seeing the ground only two or three hundred feet below now rushing

## *Danny Black*

up to meet me, then the dark flash of another cable as I passed it by a few inches, and the agonizing jerk at my ribs as the cords and canopy of the 'chute gripped fast.

Dazed by the shock, I was swinging like a fish on a line, suspended in space, knowing that the fine silk could not hold me for long, and that then there would be only the last swift drop and the final last crash on to the concrete strip below.

Slowly and with infinite care I twisted round my body and looked up. On three sides the skyscrapers were close, the rows of windows, broken only by the irregularly spaced platforms, rising to a dizzy height right above me. On the fourth side and farther away was the greatest of them all, the smooth stone shining in the red light, topped by the tiny sparkling dome above the Governor's office. . . . And just below the dome, leaning over the invisible railings, I could see four black dots. Johnny was one of them I knew, and I longed to shout to him a few last words.

Anyway, at least my jump had saved him from using his gun; he might stand a chance after all.

The rising hum of a motor made me glance down now. Running below a cable I had not seen before came a big open commercial wagon. The driver spotted me some way off and slowed down his machine until it came to a halt, swinging gently on its cable, twenty feet or so below. I saw the driver in the perspex-roofed cabin forward, with his hands still on the controls, gazing up at me in wonder and alarm.

At first he didn't know what to do and simply stared, then he waved his hands, and I saw his mouth working as though he was shouting. I shook my head helplessly, but even before he had time to crawl out of his cabin into the open truck behind I knew what he was suggesting.

It would be a nasty thing to fall on. First I should have to miss the cable, then there would still be a drop of another

### *The Perilous Descent*

ten feet with nothing but ugly-looking, irregularly-heaped steel packing cases to land on.

The hollow tearing sound, as another strip of the silk ripped above, decided me – it also shortened my fall by three or four feet. It could be only a matter of seconds before the shroud lines gave way completely. The driver, waving his arms excitedly and shouting at me, was becoming impatient, and might soon decide to drive on.

I struggled for my big jack knife and hacked at the lines in front of my body. I got through them all in two swift cuts and let my body go limp as I dropped again, falling immediately on to the heaped cases with a crash that shot stabs of pain through my body.



## CHAPTER 6

*Johnny Wild*

*The Rising – The Rebels' Fight – Reconnaissance – First  
Clash – Counter Attack – We Take a Prisoner*

As Blackie shot from sight the cry of the Wardens stopped the Governor in his tracks; he turned about and we all ran to the railings.

Blackie's 'chute was just billowing open; we saw the dark shape of his body swinging wildly beneath it, and then more gently as he fell quickly, close against the wall below. For a moment the wind took him out of sight round a corner, and then he swung back again, his canopy now only a tiny light patch against the dark ground.

Again and again it seemed as if he must crash against a cable, until the circle of his parachute collapsed and I thought for a second he had miraculously slipped through the criss-cross web of cables and was on the ground. . . . Then I saw the minute black dot of his body swinging like a pendulum beneath it, and I knew he had been caught.

Immediately we saw the wagon carry him away, the Governor turned to one of the Wardens.

'Find out how he is. Hurry, man,' he cried, and he signalled me to follow him into his office.

Then we awaited the report. But Blackie arrived first, on a stretcher, unconscious, lacerated about the face, his clothing torn.

But that desperate leap had proved to the Governor that we were not traitors to his country, that there must be some truth in our strange story, which we told him in greater

## *The Perilous Descent*

detail later, of having dropped from the skies. Blackie saved our lives by that crazy, suicidal jump from the building, and was lucky enough not to lose his own in doing so.

Three days later, with Blackie pretty well recovered now and in a wheel-chair, we were out again on the balcony with the Governor. He had seen that we had every attention, and we had been given a fine suite of rooms close to his own headquarters. He had also visited Blackie several times. He always enquired as to his progress, and he told us something of his country and of the way his people lived.

In the short time he could spare from his duties we compared our own huge civilization with his small self-sufficient country. He found it hard to credit the size of the world above, but was appalled to hear of the constant wars and strife and suffering that filled our history.

In Red Valley, we learned, there was no night, there were no seasons, practically no rain, no sun, no stars; animals, birds, fish were unknown, as was any sort of vegetation taller than the matured crops and vines that flourished all the year round, fed by the rich nitrates and other mineral manures that abounded in the soil.

It was difficult for the Governor to imagine the commonplace things of our world. His half-million people tilled the soil, mined the immensely varied minerals found in the cliffs, worked in the highly developed factories, feeding from a wide and rich variety of vegetables and fruit from the farmland which covered the valley outside the City.

So vital was the land to his people, explained the Governor, that, as the population grew, it became more and more necessary to utilize every acre, saving a precious area by keeping all transport above the ground, and building the City upwards higher and higher rather than allowing it to sprawl over the countryside like British cities.

In the past there had always been enough food, though

## *Johnny Wild*

never a surplus, and by careful use there had always been enough water from the single wide river that flowed through the valley to irrigate the soil.

'Surely then,' Blackie had said from his bed, 'this would mean that the effect would be immediate if the water supply failed?'



... the first humans in Red Valley had been swept down in a torrent

'Yes,' replied the Governor gravely, 'we will talk more of that when you are well again.'

And he had left us.

Now we had been summoned before him, and he stood informally, a fine tall figure in his great flowing cloak, with his long noble beard, his back to the railings of the balcony, talking to us.

## *The Perilous Descent*

He had told us again about the terrible drought that was afflicting Red Valley, that would soon kill the entire population, and had already resulted in serious outbreaks of disease.

‘The land is starving for water, the crops are dead, the food situation desperate. Washing has been forbidden for a long time; even drinking-water is rationed. In perhaps a month the whole of Red Valley will be devastated and soon after no one will be left alive.’

He paused for a moment, then continued, ‘Before I tell more about our present desperate situation I think you should know something of our past.’

This, in brief, is what he told us:

In Red Valley a story had been passed from generation to generation that there was a great country beyond and above the cliffs, that centuries before a handful of people, the first humans in Red Valley, had been swept down in a torrent from this world in the shattered wreck of a boat in which they had been fleeing from religious persecution.

The few survivors from this wreckage, so the story went, at first lived in terrible poverty, and many had died. But they had slowly built themselves a new life, constructing first a village, then a town, draining the land, sowing crops, mining the minerals, increasing their population.

That was the vague, unproved story – or fable – of their origin. Then there was a long, unknown period before their own real history began, a history that was taught in the schools now, of the development of a wonderful civilization, of inventions, of mining, of construction, of the growth of culture and a way of living that was happy, harmonious, truly democratic and peaceful. For a long time these people, living many miles beneath the earth, unaware of any world beyond the walls of their valley, had lived happily without any thought of war. They had had no need to develop any of the weapons we knew, and when, for the first time, the authority of the Governor was disputed by his brother, and

## *Johnny Wild*

some hundreds of the people had risen in arms, the weapons they carried were roughly fashioned swords and daggers, flails and other crude instruments that on earth could now be seen only in museums. In this land that was in many ways far in advance of the people of the world above, gunpowder was unknown.

Many of his citizens, the Governor told us, had been killed in the surprise of his brother's first attack. The Wardens – the police of Red Valley – were at the time unarmed, and it was only by a superiority in numbers that the Governor's headquarters had been successfully defended, though the attackers had fought within a few floors of his huge study.

The rebels had got away in three wagons they had held in reserve, and fled to the farthest point in the valley, where the vital river that provided the land with almost all its water poured out from a vast cavern in the rocks.

Closely pursued by a number of Wardens, who had been hastily armed with makeshift weapons, the remaining seventy or so rebels had left the wagons and clambered desperately along the cavern walls above the torrent and disappeared.

No one had ever succeeded in getting far along that cavern; it had been tried many times, and lives had been lost in the river, which was far too swift to navigate.

For many days guard was kept at the mouth, but no bodies were found in the river . . . and none of the rebels ever reappeared. It was assumed they had been killed or had quarrelled among themselves – for all were unpleasant characters, the scum of the land – until, many months later, for the first time in their history, the people of Red Valley noticed that the level of their river had fallen.

And slowly but steadily over the weeks the river had shrunk; more and more of the bed appeared, the water in the intricate network of irrigation ditches, built up over the

## *The Perilous Descent*

years, had drained away, until at the time we had arrived the land was in a desperate state.

We asked the Governor what action they had taken.

'Isn't it possible to climb up the bed of the river inside the cavern and find out what has happened?' asked Blackie.

The Governor paced with great angry steps to and fro in front of us.

'Yes, of course,' he said irritably. 'As soon as the level of the water dropped I sent a contingent of Wardens up, carrying lights and swords, to investigate. They followed the rough river-bed for several miles until they came to a cliff, three or four hundred feet high, which must once have been a great thundering waterfall. With the use of ropes it was accessible, and preparations were made for the climb.'

We felt keenly for the Governor, who clearly had a great love for his people, as he told us of what followed.

'As soon as a number of the Wardens had started the climb, and the others were about to follow, rocks began to fall on them from above. The first few were followed by an avalanche. Huge boulders came dashing down and tore my men from their precarious holds, swept them to the ground, and crushed them to death.

'The three men who had got away alive told how they had seen by the light of their lamps, far above them on the top of the cliff, the figures of fifty or so men heaving over the rocks, rushing frantically to and fro, pushing, waving their arms in triumph as another boulder fell, then dashing for another.'

The Governor paused for a moment; he turned his back on us and leant on the railings and gazed over the City and his land, dying beneath him while he was powerless.

Then he told us that, in desperation, another party of volunteers had been dispatched. They had approached the barren waterfall in silence and, without lights, had clambered one by one up the almost sheer face of rock. Then one of

## *Johnny Wild*

the party had fallen and the cries of the others had aroused the rebels. Two or three had succeeded in reaching the top, but it was presumed they were killed immediately. Most of the others had fallen to the same terrible death as the first party.

Finally, a larger company of volunteers, armed with swords and daggers and flails, had assaulted the rock face, protected by a great steel shield, which had slowly been hydraulically raised as they climbed up. They had reached the top safely, ready to attack the rebels but had found the old river-bed deserted, and had cautiously advanced up it.

It was steep and rocky nearly all the way and ideal for an ambush, and progress had been slow. The disaster that followed was described by the only survivor.

They had heard a faint, distant roar, but before they realized what it was the torrent came pouring down upon them, a great blinding wall of water sweeping a mass of boulders before it. All but this one member of the party had been dashed away to an instant death. The lucky survivor had been at the side of the tunnel and had managed to find a ledge out of reach of the torrent, which roared past a few feet below him.

After several hours the rebels had apparently been able to stem the flow again. The level of the water dropped slowly, eventually to a trickle, and the fortunate man had made a dash for the waterfall, climbed down the wet rocks, and so home.

The Governor concluded with an appeal to us; he opened his heart, and we saw how terribly the responsibility for the salvation of his people was bearing him down.

'You see,' said the Governor, 'they have us completely at their mercy – if they have any, and I doubt if they have. An evil lust for power has suddenly crept into some of my people – a thing we have never known before. My brother,

## *The Perilous Descent*

I am certain, intends to destroy us entirely, and there is nothing *we* can do about it. *We* are helpless.

'I believe now the story of how you arrived here,' he continued, sitting down in another chair facing us. 'Your leap from this balcony the other day,' he continued, 'showed me that it must be true. But it is difficult for us to believe that any other world exists outside my land. You can see that, I'm sure. You have told me of your larger world filled with millions of humans like yourselves. It is very difficult for us. It means that I and my people must readjust our whole outlook on life. But,' he added more happily, 'it also means that there is a chance for our country.'

'It's absolutely impossible for us to return the way we came and bring back help,' Blackie interrupted. But he spoke kindly.

'No,' the Governor assured us, 'I have given up all thought of that. But you have told me how you have developed the art of fighting far beyond what we have achieved here. I am asking you to devise some method of attacking the rebels and destroying them. Only then can we find out what they have done to our river.'

He sat back and waited for our answer. There was silence on the balcony for some minutes. Then I slowly drew my gun and placed it on the table between us.

'This is the only weapon we have brought with us,' I said. 'We have not told you before that it would kill, for fear of our own lives. But I think you should see them now, and see what they can do – though two of them against seventy men, who can't even be reached, may not be of much use.'

The Governor leant forward and picked up my gun curiously. 'This is what you flourished when I ordered the Wardens to take you away the other day, isn't it?'

I nodded.

'Yes, but fortunately Blackie jumped before I could use it.'



## *Johnny Wild*

A little way along the balcony another table was laid for our dinner. It was covered with glasses and plates and cutlery, and in the centre was a large bowl of yellow flowers. Warning the Governor of the noise, I took careful aim, fired, and blew the vase to pieces.

He got up and examined the fragments with obvious wonder, and then asked to see the gun again. He looked at it closely and fingered the warm, empty shell case, but did not ask me to explain the mechanism.

'Yes,' he said finally, 'we may be able to defeat them with these. Tomorrow I will take you to the head of the valley so that you can see the situation for yourselves.'

But neither Blackie nor I felt that we were going to be able to save these people.

There was no night in Red Valley, for always the red glow shone out luminously from the cliffs, warming and lighting the land. But life followed the same pattern, and for eight hours in every twenty-four the people slept in their small, scattered farmsteads of the valley, or in the skyscrapers of the City. Though they knew in their hearts that their civilization was crumbling about them, they clung to the routine of life as they had always known it, praying that some miracle would still save them. On the farms they still tilled the dusty, barren soil, and in the factories and mines they worked to produce goods that might never be used.

During the weeks that followed, Blackie and I watched the tragedy of a nation dying on its feet.

We both awoke refreshed in our lovely bedroom the day we were to examine the cavern, and after breakfast a Warden led us to the Governor's own wagon suspended ready for the journey at a platform two floors below the balcony. Soon the Governor joined us, dressed in the same impressive flowing robe, escorted by his personal bodyguard. They were well armed and looked a ruthless body of men; it was hard

## *The Perilous Descent*

to believe that only a short time ago the Governor went about confidently unescorted, and the few Wardens there were, for traffic regulation and for dealing with petty offences, were unarmed.

The driver was already in his seat, and immediately everyone was on board, the double doors slammed shut and, to the accompaniment of the now familiar whine, we shot out from the platform away on our dizzy ride above the City.

We soon saw that the Governor's wagon had a specially powerful motor. Rushing smoothly beneath the single cable, we had soon left the central group of skyscrapers behind and were dropping rapidly towards the factory belt. It also seemed that a special clear path had been prepared for us; we were never held up at any of the intersections, and the warning lights on the line flickered green as soon as we approached them. We saw a good deal of other traffic, but it was all stationary and seemed to be waiting for us to pass before continuing on its way.

In a few minutes we were quite clear of the City and running very fast on a dead straight track that disappeared into the distance above the fields. By a strange chance we took the same route by which we had arrived in the City five days before, and as we passed the field in which we had fallen I tapped the Governor, who was sitting silently in front of us, on the shoulder and pointed out the spot.

We were now travelling at well over 150 m.p.h., and conversation above the whine of the engine was impossible. I leant back in the comfortable seat and watched the succession of arid, lifeless fields and the straight lines of dried-up ditches flash past. The landscape was very monotonous; we were somewhere near the centre of the valley, and as far as the eye could see on both sides, the neat, equally-spaced farms stretched into the distance, and faded into the dark blur of the valley walls. The only feature that broke the careful geometrical layout of the land was the wide, winding

## *Johnny Wild*

gash of the parched river-bed that swung from side to side in large loops a mile or two on our right.

Then as we rushed along, the cliffs on either side drew slowly nearer, and we could pick out the details of the sheer rock face that rose several thousand feet, until it was lost in the red light that seemed to spring from the rock in a continuous strip fading into the cloudy, swirling mist high above. We never discovered the cause of that strange red light. It appeared to spring from some radiant quartz in the rock, and, curiously, it was as bright in the centre of the valley, twenty-five miles away, as close to. But certainly it must contain in its rays something of the power of the sun, for without it no life could exist and this rich valley would be a dark damp wilderness.

Blackie was shouting above the sound of the motor. He was pointing forward, and I leant my head towards him to catch his words.

'There's the head of the valley,' he shouted.

I could see it clearly now, like the gentle curve of the stern of a great liner, the cliffs on either side ahead of us slowly converging and swinging round, meeting to form a solid wall of rock that barred any further progress.

All the other cables had converged into one now, which stretched forward on the pylons to within a mile of the valley head, where the last station was placed close to the river-bed. As our wagon slowed down we could see the huge wide mouth of the cavern out of which the river had once poured in a torrent. A small party of Wardens was standing at the base of the pylon, apparently on guard, and several more were on the platform to meet us.

The wagon came to a final halt. It was a relief when the driver finally cut the engine; my head ached, and my ears still hummed with the shrill sound of the motor over the twenty minutes it had taken us to run up from the City.

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The Governor stepped out through the sliding doors first, and the uniformed Wardens closed about him protectively – they were not taking any chances with their leader in this dangerous spot.

As he walked across the platform surrounded by his guards, tall and authoritative, I was reminded of a huge bomber going out on an important mission, escorted by its fussy fighters. We followed close behind, down the steep iron steps from the platform, ignored entirely until the Governor signalled to us to join him with the officer in charge of the Wardens.

‘These are the men, captain,’ he said by way of an introduction. ‘Black and Wild.’

The captain nodded in acknowledgement.

‘We shall all want to come as far as the old waterfall. They need to have a look at the place to prepare an attack later. We want no fighting this time, and though they will certainly see and hear us, we don’t want to give them time to let the river loose on us.’ The Governor smiled grimly and put one hand on each of our shoulders. ‘We mustn’t lose our new allies, captain. They’ve got a weapon that will surprise you. Warden,’ he called to one of the men, ‘put that box on the first girder of the tower.’

The man ran with the tin box, similar to a biscuit-tin, and balanced it on the steel girder, and Blackie and I pulled our guns, feeling rather like a circus act, and fired together.

The Wardens leaped back terrified at the double report, and the tin jumped through the air and fell satisfactorily to the ground three or four yards farther off. The captain examined the tin with its two double holes in wonder, and glanced at us with some awe.

‘May I see, sir?’ he asked, and we clicked on the safety catches and passed them to him.

The Governor said, ‘I don’t think there’s any real danger in this reconnoitring, but just in case they surprise us in some

## *Johnny Wild*

way would you be willing to explain the mechanism of your guns to the captain? If you should both happen to be killed and we were able to retrieve your weapons they would not be of much use to us if we didn't know how to fire them.'

Why not? I thought. They are trusting us implicitly now. But our value to them would be lessened with the precious knowledge of the working of our guns in their hands. I glanced at Blackie, who nodded his head slightly. He was thinking as I was: these were mechanically-minded people, more so than us, and with a little experimenting they could in any case easily discover how to handle them.

So we broke open our guns, while the captain and the Governor watched intently, exposed the six chambers, explained how the firing-pin set off the charge, how the shell shot along the barrel. We unloaded and loaded again and showed them how to hold the butt with the arm slightly bent, sighting along the barrel. The tin was placed on the girder again, and closer this time; they each fired a single shot and hit the target. They were childishly pleased with themselves, and said they were quite satisfied.

Then the Governor and four well-armed Wardens with powerful torches, Blackie and I in the rear, set off along the narrow path to the towering cavern entrance.

'How do you feel about this little pleasure trip?' I asked Blackie quietly.

It was the first time for several hours that we had been able to talk together privately.

'Try anything once,' he grinned. 'Nothing surprises me any more. I suppose we're being quite noble really.'

'I don't know about that. Our skins are at stake too. We've got to eat, same as all the others, and I don't see any way out of this place yet, do you?' He let this question pass, and I went on. 'What seems so incredible is that a few blood-thirsty swine are willing to kill off half a million people just so they can have this place to themselves.'

## *The Perilous Descent*

'You don't think they're trying to starve the Governor into submission?'

'You mean they want to knock the Governor out and establish some sort of dictatorship?'

'Could be,' Blackie agreed.

We were silent for a while.

Then he said grimly, 'Whichever way it is we'll have to figure up some way of getting the rebels out of there.'

We were almost at the base of the cliff now. It rose sheer above us, broken only by narrow crevices and jagged little pinnacles like stalagmites, straight up for five or six thousand feet, quite inaccessible, until it disappeared into the red glow of light. In front of us was the immense black hole of the cavern mouth, out of which the river had once poured.

We dropped, in single file, down to the old river-bed and clambered along the loose boulders to the entrance. Here the leading Warden in charge of the party stopped and turned about.

Before we had started the captain had tried to persuade the Governor to remain behind, and now, once again, the Warden tried to dissuade him from coming.

'They are certain to have guards out, sir, and if they catch sight of you they might easily think it worth while risking a direct attack.'

The Governor shook his head.

'Thank you, but it is important that I should see for myself,' he answered coldly.

'Very well, sir.' Addressing us all now the leader continued, 'Sound travels far in the cavern. A whisper can be heard over several hundred yards, and we want to give them as little notice of our approach as possible. So please walk quietly and do not talk at all.'

With this the four Wardens switched on their big steel torches and we advanced in single file into the darkness.

As soon as we turned the first corner and the natural red

## *Johnny Wild*

light had faded I regretted that we had not brought torches for ourselves. The four Wardens, one at the rear, played the strong white beams continuously on our tracks, and there was no trouble in picking our way along the old river-bed. But it gave us a feeling of helplessness, and in an emergency our guns would be almost useless.

We all stepped as quietly as we could, but the loose rock and stone made complete silence impossible, and the scrunch of our boots echoed hollowly from the cavern walls. It was uphill all the way, and occasionally we had to scramble and use our hands to negotiate the steeper places. After an exhausting ninety minutes of this the leading Warden halted; the word came back along the little column: 'Torches out; proceed very quietly.'

Now it was a matter of feeling our way over the rocky ground, holding with one hand to a length of rope that had been passed back. Then, bumping gently into each other's backs, we again came to a halt. We slowly gathered into a circle, and the Warden in charge whispered, 'We're behind a big boulder. Fifty yards farther on is the old waterfall. If you look over this boulder you will see a faint glow high up near the roof of the cavern. That means the rebels have left a guard. You, sir, if I may suggest -'

'That's all right, Warden,' interrupted the Governor, 'You're in charge; we take orders from you now.'

'Thank you, sir. You, then, will remain here with the three Wardens as rearguard and as observers. I will approach the cliff from the centre. Mr Black will work his way close to the left wall, Mr Wild will take the right-hand side. I will give you both five minutes to get into position, then I will put on my torch and play the beam slowly right round the cavern from side to side, on to the cliff and slowly up it to the top.'

Addressing Blackie and me now, he went on, 'In these few moments you will have to memorize the location. You

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will see the height of the cliff, the best way up, the width of the cavern at the base, the best method of approach, and so on.

‘Probably as soon as they see my light they will start hurling down rocks. I will give you as long as possible to get a clear picture of the whole situation, but if it gets too dangerous I will have to switch off. If they knock out me or my torch, make your way back as quickly as possible. As soon as you rejoin the others retreat immediately. Whatever happens don’t wait for me. I know the cavern like the back of my hand, and I can look after myself.

‘It’s not likely, but if they start to make a direct attack, if they start climbing down in numbers, put all the lights on them, make as much noise as possible to give the impression there’s a big force of us, and try to knock them out with rocks before they get down to us. All right? Any questions?’

There were none, and the party started to break up.

‘One last word,’ added the Warden. ‘Don’t forget we are only reconnoitring. We want to avoid all action if we can.’

I said cheerio to Blackie and began to feel my way over the rough ground to the right-hand side of the cavern. As soon as I was away I glanced up and could see the faint silhouette of the rim of the waterfall high up against a flickering pink glow. The rebels were keeping watch by a fire. I had the unpleasant idea for a moment that perhaps they had heard us coming long ago and had sent down some men to ambush us as we split up. Unlikely though, I told myself, but now I wished more than ever that I had a torch.

The cavern was wider than I had imagined. Before I had reached the side the Warden had switched on his torch and the strong white beam was playing slowly over the rocks, showing us every feature of the approach. I saw at once that we were even closer to the old waterfall than I had thought; it towered up two or three hundred feet right in front of us. The torch beam shone from side to side across



## *Johnny Wild*

its whole breadth, climbing up higher each time and revealing the rocks, worn smooth by the force of the water in the centre, jagged and rough at each side where any ascent would have to be made.

I was trying to get a clear picture, calculating rough distances, the best track to follow, trying to place in my mind any defence points on the long, difficult climb. There were one or two ledges high up which should be clear of the torrent if they released it in the event of a further attack.

Then I thought for a moment that I had seen a slight movement in the beam of light. The beam swung on again over the rocks, to and fro. Had it been a trick of my eyes? I wasn't quite satisfied. With no torch of my own I was helpless.

'Warden,' I suddenly called, and my voice boomed deeply and unnaturally in the confined space. 'Take your torch over to the left again . . . farther than that . . . farther still, now up. . . Yes, look there,' I shouted as the beam picked up the hunched dark figure close to the base of the cliff.

He was pressing himself back against the rock, trying to hide without shelter and shading the glare with his arm.

The Warden kept the light on him and called back calmly to the rear party, 'Switch on your lights and search for any others. I'll hold this one.'

But before there was time to turn on the three other torches there was a great cry from high up at the top of the cliff. Several figures were silhouetted against a red burning ball of fire; they were dancing about like savages and hoisting the fire over the side with long rods. It fell quickly with the whine of a falling bomb, lighting up every corner of the cavern and the old waterfall like a sudden Roman Candle, and splashed on to the rocks below, breaking up into a thousand particles.

I saw by its light the figure of the leading Warden crouched

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behind a rock, Blackie fifty yards away close against the opposite wall, the three other Wardens and the tall, cloaked figure of the Governor all standing paralysed like myself, staring at the fragments of red burning lights on the rocks. And then I saw the rebels, twenty or thirty of them, clambering quickly like little beetles down both sides of the cliff face.

As the rocks started to fall the leading Warden was shouting, 'Get back, get back as fast as you can. . . .' And then his voice was lost in the thunder of crashing boulders. There were a dozen tiny figures at the top now, hurling down rocks as quickly as they could. They fell like rain, splintering as they hit, and the ricochets sounded like shrapnel.

Almost immediately, by a freak chance, the leading Warden was struck, struck directly on the head. It was a big square rock; it must have weighed half a hundredweight; I watched it all the way down, and it caught him squarely and felled him instantly as he was scrambling back. At least he must have been killed outright.

Blackie had his gun out, and I drew mine as I fell back with the others. But the Governor was magnificent. He was standing, huge and it seemed quite unafraid, on the top of a boulder, like some Viking captain at the prow of his ship, his long sword in one hand, hurling rocks at the rebels as they leapt down the last few feet. The other three Wardens were urging him to retreat, but he took no notice, throwing the rocks steadily and accurately, shouting a defiant war cry all the while.

Blackie couldn't leave him fighting alone either. We both stood exposed to the hail of rocks, watching him in wonder and waiting for the moment to open fire. I was filled with a sudden anger, a hatred I had never known in air fighting, for these madmen.

There was still a minute or two before they could reach us. It was a long chance but worth taking. I lay down and steadied the barrel of my gun against the top of a boulder



The Governor was magnificent

## *The Perilous Descent*

and took long, careful aim at one of the tiny figures at the top. I picked on the centre one, whom I thought had killed the Warden, and kept the sights on him as he heaved over rock after rock . . . and fired twice quickly.

Blackie still says he tripped at that moment. He didn't. I hit him with at least one of those rounds, though I'll admit I probably wouldn't have done it again with a thousand shots.

The report echoed loudly above the crashing rocks, and the rebel's body toppled over and twisted sickeningly round and round, over and over. The rebels, the Wardens, everyone had heard the reports, and they watched the fall transfixed as the wretched man's body dashed on to the remains of the burning ball, scattering the fragments farther in hundreds of red sparks. I felt bewildered and sick – but triumphant.

Some of the rebels were already at the base of the cliff and rushing us when my lucky shots went home. One was only a yard or two from the Governor, who stood ready for him sword in hand. But after the shots they turned with shouts of fear and fled with one accord. They were like savages facing the supernatural and nothing could have stopped their panic-stricken rush.

The Governor seemed suddenly to restrain himself. 'Get back now. Let them alone,' he called, and he jumped off the rock and began to retreat down the cavern with the Wardens. I had seen enough, too, though the rocks were no longer falling and it was safe now. But it was useless, with only five of us, to follow up our minor victory.

I looked round to join Blackie, but could see him nowhere. Then a second later I saw his figure move from behind a rock on the far side of the cavern. Two of the rebels were scattering half a dozen yards in front of him. They were both small, and he looked like some lumbering gorilla as he chased them; but he was a good deal faster. He cut them off

## *Johnny Wild*

before they could reach the base of the cliff by clambering over a big boulder. I saw him falling on the first one, who collapsed beneath the weight on his shoulders, and they both went rolling over and over on the ground.

The other rebel was both ungallant and wise; he merely leaped over the struggling bodies and ran for it, while I rushed across the width of the cavern to them. Blackie was on top, beating the man's head against the ground, as I arrived. The rebel was unconscious, and we lugged the limp body on to our shoulders and made off down the cavern as the light from the scattered fire slowly faded.

We did not halt until we reached the mouth of the cave. It had been a hurried but orderly retreat; we were not taking any chances either with the Governor, who obviously had no regard for his own safety, or with our precious prisoner.

We laid our prize gently on the ground and sat round him in a circle, waiting for him to regain consciousness. He was pretty badly knocked about, with a swollen lip, a bleeding nose, and two great black eyes; his rough, coarse clothes were ripped and dirty, and there were two ugly gashes on his temple.

Blackie surveyed him.

'He was tougher than he looks,' he said grimly. 'I didn't want to hurt him too much, but he was a wiry little devil, and he was trying to get a dagger into me.'

'Don't worry,' said the Governor, who was feeling his pulse. 'He'll come round soon. And we'll have some useful information out of him. That was a brave thing to do, Black,' he added, glancing up at him.

'I was angry,' he answered simply. Blackie was not the sort to knock a man about badly for nothing, but surely these men deserved no pity.

We were very different from the orderly party that had disappeared into the cavern three hours before. We had all

## *The Perilous Descent*

been hit several times by rock splinters, and our clothes were torn and dirty. One of the Wardens had a wide scratch right across his forehead, which was still bleeding, and the Governor himself had a nasty long cut down one of his cheeks. My own arms and legs were tingling with dozens of bruises and small cuts – and all of us were about exhausted after the fight and the long rush back, burdened with the rebel.

We were soon joined by the captain and the other Wardens from the post.

‘Sorry, captain,’ called the Governor wearily, ‘we’ve lost one of your men.’

They clustered round us anxiously while the Governor recounted our action. Then later, when we had got back some of our strength, we returned to the City in the wagon, taking the still unconscious prisoner back with us for questioning.

‘That will be done tonight, if they can get him into a fit state,’ the Governor had said. ‘Tomorrow we’ll discuss our plan of attack. We’ve only a few weeks to save the lives of my people. There’s no time to waste.’

## CHAPTER 7

Danny Black

*The Lightning is Built – The Trials – Final Plans for a  
Great Attack are made*

THAT night the Wardens extracted some of the information we needed from the prisoner. He confirmed that there were seventy-five of them altogether; that they had diverted the river and could switch it back down the old bed at a couple of hours' notice; that all the rebels were well armed and had sufficient food to last them indefinitely. What they could not get from him was the position of their encampment, and their leader's plans. Either he didn't know or, despite the pressure put on him, he wouldn't tell whether the leader intended to deliver an ultimatum to demand the handing over of power in Red Valley to himself, or planned simply to starve out the whole population and attack and destroy them when they had no power to resist.

However, with this in our hands, the Governor, Johnny, four of the chief Wardens and I discussed our next move all next day.

The plan was a complicated, dangerous, and original one, considering the awful barrier that had to be negotiated before the rebels had time to send the torrent down on the attackers. But I shall not bother to detail it, for it was never used. Our final stratagem, evolved later, was even more daring.

Like our prisoner, Johnny had not slept much that night, nor did he seem to have had his mind on the long drawn-out discussions we had in the Governor's office. But just as

## *The Perilous Descent*

I was going off to sleep that night he sat up suddenly in bed.

‘Blackie, I think I’ve got it,’ he called excitedly.

‘Got what?’ I said sleepily, uninterested.

‘Have you forgotten how to fly? How long is it since we flew, Blackie? A week?’

He was sitting up with his bony knees clutched to his chest. From his wide grin and sparkling eyes I knew he really had something, so I played his game.

‘Yes, only six days actually. No, I haven’t forgotten how to fly. There is a stick and two things for your feet and a handle to make you go faster or slower. You fiddle about with them and you wander about the sky – and sometimes fall out. . . . Which is why we’re here. Now, tell me your idea, because I’m tired and I was just going to sleep.’

‘What’s your practical engineering like, Blackie?’

I shouted back, ‘Stop these questions, for goodness sake, and get on with it.’

He got out of his bed and came and sat on the edge of mine in his shirt.

‘Can you see any reason why we shouldn’t fit wings on to one of those small wagons, fly up that cavern, with half a dozen lights to find our way, up over the waterfall, over the rebels’ headquarters and attack them from the rear? Think a moment before you laugh it off,’ he said more seriously. ‘The body of the wagon is quite aero-dynamic, you’ve got a powerful jet motor ready-made. On the smaller ones you’ve got two, one each side. Their engineering is certainly as advanced as ours. They could make the tail assembly and wings to our specifications – the undercarriage should be easy. Plenty of flat fields to take off from. The cavern’s wide enough, and it’s nowhere less than fifty feet high –’

‘And how about turning round *if* it gets too narrow?’ I asked, wide awake now.

‘That’s a risk we’ll have to take.’

I thought it over for a minute. I could feel Johnny’s



*Danny Black*

anxious eyes on me. He was always the one with the ideas, and generally the leader of the two of us, but on a thing as big as this he would have to let me make up my own mind.

It sounded crazy, but just possible.

Then I asked, 'And how are the three or four of us who can pack into a small wagon supposed to deal with seventy-five armed toughs?'

There didn't seem to be an answer to this one.

Johnny swung his feet on to the floor and began pacing up and down beside the beds, ruffling his long black hair and frowning frightfully.

'That's a point,' he conceded. 'We shall have to reckon on clever tactics and on terrifying them. They'll think we're some ghastly nightmare rushing about the sky.' We both laughed, then he slapped the side of his head in excitement. 'Of course,' he almost roared, 'a double attack; as we divert them from ahead a second party attacks them from the rear in force. I should have been Tactics Adviser to the War Office. And don't forget what our guns did to them today,' he went on eagerly. 'They were fighting mad and then suddenly in glorious retreat when I shot that one off the edge. With two of us coming out of the dark, shooting rapid fire, they'll be scared out of their wits.'

'Let's go and knock up the Governor and see what he thinks,' I suggested.

By talking hard we got past all the guards and were ushered, half-dressed, into his huge bedroom. It was at the very top of the building, set in the dome above his office, with windows stretching all round and giving a wonderful, uninterrupted view over the City.

The Governor was sitting working at his desk, still dressed, with his cloak flung back from his shoulders. He turned round as we were shown in, and his face was drawn and grey with weariness.

'Yes?' he said coldly. 'What is it?'

## *The Perilous Descent*

Under the burden of this terrible crisis I don't think he had slept for days.

'Sorry to rush in like this,' began Johnny uncertainly.

'That's all right. It must be something important.' He pointed at the papers on his desk. 'Never had so much work to do. The food position gets worse and worse – have to ration everything very strictly. Water stocks are almost exhausted; they'll be down to an allowance of half a pint a day each tomorrow. It all means paper work and worry. The first food riots broke out yesterday while we were away, and I expect they'll get more serious. Can't blame them really, but we've got to try and keep them in hand.'

He got up from his desk and invited us over to some arm-chairs by the window. When we were settled he looked enquiringly at Johnny.

'Well, sir, we've told you about our aeroplanes – flying machines you know –' He grinned at me and went on to outline our plan.

The Governor kept his eyes on him, nodding from time to time to show that he was following. He only interrupted once, to lift the phone at his elbow.

'Call up Freeman right away.' And then to us, 'My engineering adviser; he designs all the wagons.'

'We shall have to synchronize the attack carefully,' Johnny concluded. 'A party of, say, a hundred picked Wardens must time their assault on the old waterfall immediately after we crash-land a mile or so beyond their headquarters. We'll be able to hold them and divert their attention long enough for your men to surprise them with a frontal attack, and before they can open the dam on us.'

'If only we could get some more exact information on their disposition from the prisoner,' I added. 'That would simplify things tremendously.'

'We'll have another shot at him tomorrow,' said the Governor grimly.

## *Danny Black*

Freeman the engineer was shown in then. He had heard about us and, like most of the others, hadn't believed a word of our story. But he listened patiently to Johnny's elementary lecture in aerodynamics. Paper and pencil were brought, and Johnny sketched a rough plan of what was required. Freeman still looked sceptical, and the Governor had to interrupt.

'I know it sounds fantastic, Freeman, but we've got to believe them,' he said. 'A hundred years ago nobody would have believed that a 150-m.p.h. wagon could be built. Just because we've never tried to go upwards it doesn't follow that it's an impossibility.'

'All right, sir,' he said reluctantly.

And Johnny, who was something of an expert and had taken a degree in aeronautical engineering, became more technical. Rulers and drawing-boards were found and, despite the difference in technical terms and language, Freeman followed quite well.

The Governor continued with his desk work, and I stared out of the window and began to feel sleepy. Now and again I listened to odd phrases, and once I heard Johnny saying, 'The vital thing is to have a low stalling speed – that is to travel slowly without losing height – and maximum lift. We shall need a big wing area, large flaps, and, if you can make them, slots at the leading edge of the wings – like this,' and he bent down to the drawing-board again.

By four in the morning I could stay awake no longer and fell off into a dead sleep in an arm-chair. At seven I was woken up by Freeman's departure.

He was saying, 'We'll just get these plans re-drawn, and with any luck we'll start work by midday.'

'How long will it take?' asked the Governor, who was still at his desk.

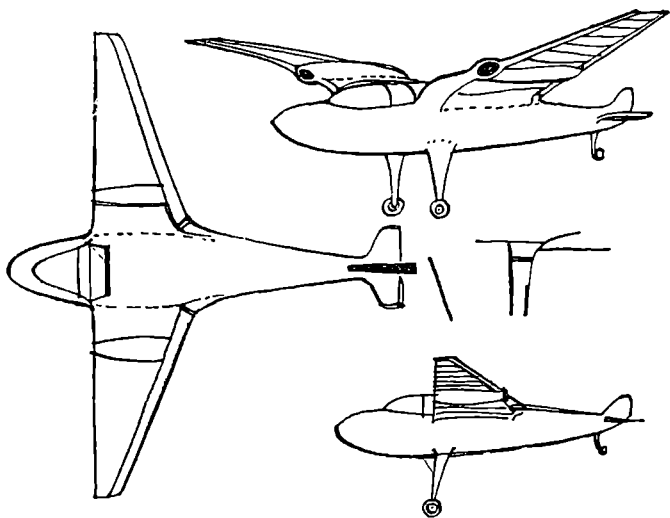
'If there are no snags, perhaps three days.'

'Right. Make it sooner if you can.' He gave a wry smile. 'I don't have to tell you that it's important.'

## *The Perilous Descent*

Johnny was all in, but the Governor asked to see an outline of the completed 'aircraft'. I still have that original rough design. He explained briefly the working of the controls, the functions of the ailerons and rudder and flaps, the need for a strong undercarriage, and so on.

The Governor followed it all intelligently.



'I'm looking forward to watching your trial flight,' he said. 'There'll be some excitement you know.'

'We'll be like the Wright brothers all over again, but with a bigger audience,' I cracked to Johnny.

'There's one thing we'll have to watch, and I'll put the security people on to this right away,' the Governor added more seriously. 'This machine is being built for you to make your escape to . . . back there,' he pointed. 'That's its only purpose. I'll have an official announcement put out to that effect. We don't want to take any chances.'

## *Danny Black*

It took Freeman and his men just the three days he had forecast. During that time we were taken on a complete tour of the City and of several of the factories. It was an interesting but depressing business. Even in the few days we had been in Red Valley things had got much worse. The people had a haunted look in their eyes; they felt death was very near, and they had lost much of their initiative and gaiety. They were already weak from lack of food, their clothes and bodies were dirty, and the whole City was rapidly becoming insanitary from the lack of water. Many of the factories had now stopped work altogether, but we could see how finely equipped, advanced, and efficient they were. Lacking so many of the things we take for granted – animal oils, wool, timber and all its by-products, to mention only a few – they were far ahead of us with much of their machinery and many of their processes. We were impressed by the fine working conditions and facilities for the workers; even the huge steel-forging plants were as spick and span and as comfortable as our most up-to-date offices.

In those few days we learnt much of these people's sociology and economics, their production methods, and so on. But we have no time to write of them now; until someone else finds their way to Red Valley the details will have to remain unknown.

By the time we heard our machine was ready – Freeman had been insistent that after passing final plans we should not interfere until completion – we were both more determined than ever to save this tiny civilized country from destruction. Before the rebellion they had obviously achieved a perfect way of life; though we said nothing to one another at the time, I think we were both prepared to give our lives for them if necessary.

Freeman and his men had worked on the wagon in a small experimental establishment on the fringes of the City. When we arrived with the Governor, accompanied by several

## *The Perilous Descent*

of his senior advisers, it was standing out in a small grass meadow a few yards from the shed – it could hardly be called a hangar. From the platform on to which we stepped from the Governor's wagon it looked pathetically tiny, like a toy aeroplane with its very high undercarriage.

I couldn't help laughing.

'If that thing ever flies I'll eat my hat,' said Johnny.

Freeman and two of his men were the only people about. The area had been cleared, and all wagon traffic had been diverted for reasons of security. Immediately, I saw what a good job they had made of it. The finish was perfect; a single strut had been let in through the fuselage, and the compression ribs had been moulded on to it with some form of plastic-alloy substance, so that the mainplane was in fact a single unit. Johnny was lifting himself off the ground by the wing-tip to test its strength.

'That's all right,' assured Freeman; 'dance a jig on it if you like.'

And he climbed up and did just that. There wasn't a millimetre of give. The tail assembly was as beautifully made, and after we had tossed for first try I got into the cockpit and played with the controls. The stick was a little low for comfort, and we should have to do something about the forward visibility, but it was remarkable how the aileron and rudder movements were almost identical to any small aircraft's.

Johnny and I sat together in the cockpit (there were only two seats side by side) and discussed a few of the technicalities – the stalling speed we could expect, the length of take-off we thought we should need, whether there was enough play on the rudder and so on, while the Governor stood and talked about the machine with Freeman. I heard him pass on a few words of praise for the speed at which he had worked – which he more than deserved.

After a while the Governor put his head inside the cockpit.

## *Danny Black*

‘Well, are you going to fly your machine now, or will you wait till the afternoon?’

I think both he and Freeman only half-believed that anything, let alone this strange-looking contraption, could leave the ground.

Johnny looked up from the unfamiliar instrument panel.

‘Could Mr Freeman give us some advice about the engines? Actually neither of us have flown jets – as we call them – before, though some of our aircraft do have them; we don’t want to start pushing the wrong knobs.’

It was admirably simple. The starter was similar to the booster used on many Air Force planes, though the principle was quite different, and the throttle was a long plunger set into the middle of the instrument panel. We had to expect a different reaction from electric motors – they would probably answer more quickly to the throttle – but I didn’t anticipate much trouble. The battery should give us twenty hours’ flying at cruising speed.

The instruments were all gauges instead of the more usual dials; this would take a little getting used to. And of course we had no altimeter and no air-speed indicator, only an engine-revolution counter. We should have to fly by touch like the early pioneers. I had twice landed without an A.S.I.; it hadn’t been too bad; the tendency was to come in too fast and overshoot.

‘Shall we just taxi about and get the feel of the thing this morning?’ I suggested. ‘If all goes well we could have it taken into the next field and try taking her off the ground on short hops this afternoon.’

We agreed on that, and asked Freeman to start the engines. He adjusted the throttle to the correct setting and operated the booster starter, which accelerated with a rising whine until he pushed down the main switch. There was a slight thud as the big engine thrust into motion, the starter died down, and the main batteries took over. Immediately

## *The Perilous Descent*

she began to roll forward; we had forgotten about chocks, but the wheel brakes worked smoothly and held her still. Then I motioned Freeman off the wing and released the brakes. She jumped forward like a kitten, fast, towards the nearest ditch; I blessed Johnny for specifying independent wheel brakes and swung her to the right and reduced the throttle setting.

I took her up and down the field once or twice, feeling the rudder and ailerons for pressure. Then Johnny took over and did the same thing. We both felt happy about her as we cut the engines and climbed out to rejoin the little party.

'You've done a marvellous job, Mr Freeman,' said Johnny, shaking him by the hand. 'The only thing we want is a little better forward visibility. Can you cut back the hood and let in a strip of perspex?'

Freeman nodded.

'No trouble at all.'

'If it could be done immediately we might get her up this afternoon.'

The Governor looked at Freeman enquiringly.

'Be a help if you could. Every minute is precious.'

'We'll start right away.' And he called over two of his men.

They were already at work as we climbed up the steps to the Governor's wagon.

The Governor could not conceal his excitement on the short trip back to the field in the afternoon. Usually austere and rather reserved, he had to talk about the whine of the engine as we sped down through the skyscrapers to the City outskirts.

'Who's going to drive her first?' he shouted into my ear.

'We've still got to fight that out.'

'Only one of you is to travel in it the first time. And that's an order,' he said.

'Why's that, sir?' asked Johnny, turning round in his seat.



## Danny Black

'In case we have to collect the pieces and start again.' He looked grim. 'No good without any pilot,' he bawled.

We both saw the sense in that, but didn't feel inclined to be depressed. It was useless arguing about who was the most experienced pilot; we had both done roughly the same number of hours and had flown the same variety of aircraft. A penny – the only one we possessed – appeared, and on the platform, in front of the Governor, we solemnly tossed. The coin spun up high from Johnny's thumb, hit the railing and curved off out of sight to the field fifty feet below.

'You ass,' I shouted, 'we'll never find it down there.'

But we raced down the stairs and, assisted by two of the escorting Wardens, searched closely in the short, crisp, dry grass. By a stroke of luck I found it right away, and called over the others before touching it. I had called 'tails'. The coin lay firmly and quite flat, 'tails' up.

Freeman's men had finished the work on the windscreen and had pushed the machine into the next field. They had also, at Johnny's request, erected a rough windsock, which billowed out firmly in the nice steady breeze.

'Only short hops this afternoon, don't forget,' warned Johnny as I eased myself into the seat. 'Just a few feet off the ground and down again. The atmospheric pressure must be much higher down here, so you'll probably be off the ground before you know where you are.'

I remembered hearing about the tremendously long runs needed for take-off from aerodromes at a high altitude, where the air was rarer. The reverse would probably apply down here. Johnny was quite right, but I resented his advice.

'I can look after myself,' I said irritably, and stupidly, because he was only trying to be helpful.

But I *was* feeling the slightest bit shaky; my mouth was dry, and I had to keep a firm hold on my hands. No test pilot, I liked my aircraft to have been flown several thousand times before I finally got into the cockpit.

## *The Perilous Descent*

My parachute had been recovered after the last jump and had been patched up. We had both fixed makeshift ripcords, and had also had small canvas bags made to contain our 'chutes. I hoisted mine under me and passed the release cord to the front of my battledress, where it was firmly fixed by a staple. Freeman had secured the all-important safety straps to the seat, four of them, which met over my chest. I pulled these tight, waved casually to Johnny, the Governor, and Freeman and started the engines before they could come over and make any 'good luck' speeches.

The motors ran beautifully; their smooth roar gave me confidence. Then I released the brakes and taxied quickly downwind, turned and began the first run.

It was rather strange sitting so far forward in the fuselage, without the familiar propeller spinning in front, but otherwise I felt comfortable. At about twenty miles per hour the tail lifted and at perhaps forty-six miles per hour I felt her rise gently. Johnny was right; even with the very low wing loading she wouldn't have taken off at so low a speed on the earth's surface. I cut the throttle and let her fall back quietly. I wasn't half-way down the field when she came to a stand-still.

Twice more I ran her upwind and lifted her ten feet or so off the ground. The third time I tested the aileron control, dipping each wing alternately; it was a little harsh but easy enough. Johnny waved me in then; I could see him squatting on the grass in front of the intent little group of spectators. But I was enjoying myself. I shook my head negatively and took her back to the far end once again.

This time I let down twenty degrees of flap, took off in about forty yards and held her up longer at twenty feet.

Suddenly the temptation was too strong. I pulled the throttle knob full out and held back the stick and she lifted gracefully up to 100 feet. It was already too late to drop her

## *Danny Black*

back on to the field, so I climbed her steadily higher, keeping the nose straight, and closed the hood. As I lifted the flaps, sinking slightly as I did so, I saw the little figures disappearing past the port wing. The group had broken up, and I could see their white faces staring up, the Governor's cloak billowing in the wind and Johnny waving his arms wildly, beckoning me down.

She was beautiful to fly, except for the slight harshness in the aileron control. I treated this gently, banking left and right. At around 1,000 feet and well clear of the City – which looked as we had seen it drifting down only a few days before – I felt I could take a few liberties. So I eased back the throttle and dropped the nose, kicking left and right rudder alternately and testing the reaction. Then I swung her round gently through 180 degrees and came fast and low over the field, below the level of the cables for a moment, twenty feet over their heads.

All of them except Johnny ran for the shed, certain I was diving right in. But I was sorry immediately. It was a stupid thing to do. There was no need to show off, and worse to force the Governor to lose some of his dignity in front of his men.

With some of the exhilaration gone, I did a regulation left-hand circuit and came in in a shallow dive with full flaps and slots right out, the engines just turning over. I allowed plenty of height for the cables and pylons, and once over them felt tempted to sideslip down; I checked myself in time, remembering my comparative ignorance of the machine. I allowed plenty of speed above stalling point, too, and I was more than half-way down the field before I could ease back the stick and sink her down.

The stall was a bit sudden, and though I landed three point it was with a nasty bump. With the flaps, slots, and the nice steady breeze, my landing speed couldn't have been more than thirty-five miles per hour.

## *The Perilous Descent*

'Very smart, very pretty flying,' called Johnny sarcastically as he ran up. He was furiously angry, and I didn't blame him. 'You would have looked pretty silly if one of the wings had come off and all this work had been wasted. It was no less stupid just because it *did* work. You know we were going to examine the spars for strain after a few hops.'

He would have gone on, but Freeman and the Governor joined us by the machine, and they were as excited as two schoolboys.

'Wonderful!' 'I never thought it was possible.' 'What a great flyer, Mr Black!' they kept saying.

'Thanks, thanks,' I said, embarrassed, 'Johnny would have managed it much better.'

But Johnny was not to be appeased. This praise for my foolhardiness was too much for him; he snorted and stumped off.

But by the time we set off back to the City it was all right again, and we could discuss seriously the conclusions of that first flight.

The next morning Johnny soloed *Lightning* – as we christened her for no good reason at all. With the knowledge that no fractures or strains of any kind had resulted from my careless handling, he swung her about the sky as if she were a Typhoon, looping, slow-rolling, and even giving her a couple of turns in a spin.

*Lightning* had been taken off the 'secret list', and it seemed as though half the population of Red Valley had turned up for the trials. All the cable routes within a mile of our airfield were jammed with stationary wagons, and in the nearby field hundreds of families had come out and settled down firmly for the day.

They all stood up and cheered and waved madly when he took off, and there were gasps and cries and shouting when he went through his aerobatics. But I think they were

## Danny Black

disappointed to see him land again; they had been told that we were returning to our own land high up in the sky, and had not expected to see him again.

Johnny took her up finally to about 5,000 feet, still far below the ever-present layer of rolling mist, and let *Lightning* out at full throttle. She made plenty of noise, but the performance wasn't very impressive. There was too much drag in those big wings, and he couldn't have been doing more than 230 or 240 miles per hour. But as she was intended solely for flying at twenty feet very slowly up a long cavern, the low top speed was not very important.

We were in conference all that afternoon and evening, laying down our plans in as much detail as the hazy information allowed. The prisoner had been questioned for hours on end – what methods they had used we didn't dare ask – but he had given no more than what they had learned in the few moments after he had regained consciousness, before the powerful and brave resistance he must have had in him took possession. Eventually he was publicly executed.

This news had shocked us both, and we realized how terribly the sudden impact of rebellion and war, with its inevitable fear and mistrust, had affected these people, who, until the recent surprise revolt, had lived happily and trustingly together without bloodshed for so long.

We met the two Warden captains who were to lead the assaulting parties, and discussed signals, methods of approach, timing, and – most important of all – identification. For with Johnny and I converging on the rebels in the darkness from one side and a hundred Wardens from the other, it would be only too easy to start slaughtering each other. It was agreed that they should begin their attack on the old waterfall half an hour after we passed over them. This should give us time to fly over the rebels' headquarters, land – somehow or other – and open our attack and divert their attention from the main rear assault. The Wardens

## *The Perilous Descent*

would be armed with swords, and some of them carried crude stone slings. They also had evil-looking flails – heavy spiked iron balls fixed to the end of chains, which were swung violently in a circular movement ahead of the attacker.

One of the captains had two of our precious six hand-operated emergency Very lights which would be used for establishing position in the darkness. In addition, every man carried a powerful electric torch, and two between them had something that resembled a small searchlight, adapted, we were told, from a wagon-station signal.

They looked a strange mixture of medieval soldiery and something out of ‘The Shape of Things to Come’ when we inspected them in great secrecy with the Governor in his own private study. But they also looked a strong, determined crowd, and, especially after a fine rousing speech by the Governor, I felt this crazy, desperate expedition might succeed.

After a light supper we sat out on the balcony, alone with the Governor, and we talked about the battle the next day. But mostly we told him more about the world above, of our natural desire to get back to it despite the wretched wars that were slowly destroying it.

‘If we should ever get back to our world,’ Johnny asked him, ‘what do you want us to say? And do you want us to try to arrange an expedition – so that you can be officially “discovered”?’

The Governor thought for a long time about this. It wasn’t easy to answer.

At length he replied, ‘Tell them about us by all means – if you don’t mind being laughed at. I’m sure they won’t believe you. But if our land is saved, I think we should prefer to stay untouched and unknown. Some time, perhaps hundreds of years hence, somebody from your world is certain to find us again. Maybe you will have learnt how to

## *Danny Black*

live without wars by then, as we have always done until now.'

There was silence for a while.

'One other thing, but not so important,' I asked. 'Would you like one of us to fly you around your City before we go off? You might enjoy it.'

His strong lean face eased into a slight smile.

'No, I don't think so. Now that you've shown us how it's done, as soon as things are back to normal we shall start flying ourselves. Our world being so much smaller than yours, there is not the same need to fly, and our wagons are fast enough; but it looks a good sport, and we can at least survey the cliffs of our valley.'

Later he said, 'I shall come up as far as the head of the valley with the main party, but they won't let me go any farther. Of course I could overrule my own captains, but I think perhaps they're right. If you're successful I shall be needed here, and if you're not, well, I should prefer to die with my own people. . . . So I won't see you tomorrow.'

'We'll give you a wave as we go over.'

'Well, we had better say good-bye now,' he said standing up. 'I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again soon. Probably this time tomorrow if all goes well . . . and I'm sure it will. I don't need to tell you how grateful I am for what you're doing,' he said, shaking our hands warmly. 'And let me say how sorry I am for your earlier treatment.'

'That was quite understandable,' I said, laughing. 'And I really quite enjoyed that jump from here. When we get back to our country I shall write articles for the papers on "How I leapt from the top of a skyscraper". Make my fortune.'

We left the balcony together in good humour. I hadn't seen the Governor so high-spirited before. He was sure that his country's troubles were at an end. I only wished that I could feel so confident.

'Has Freeman finished the work on your lights?' he asked as he walked slowly towards his study door.

## *The Perilous Descent*

'Yes, we had a message just before supper,' said Johnny. 'Everything is ready. He has fixed two forward lights and one smaller one on each side all controlled independently. They will reduce our duration very slightly but it will still be many times what we need.'

We said good-bye again at the door. He turned about briskly and strode back across the room towards his desk, a fine, tall figure, with his distinctive cloak flowing behind.

It was the last time either of us saw him.



## CHAPTER 8

Johnny Wild

*Into the Cavern – The Rebels' Stronghold – The Attack on  
the Dam – Holding the Fort – The First Repulse – The  
Great Battle*

BY nine in the morning we were flying up the valley, the now familiar chequerboard of dead, dry fields, the thin tracing network of cables, the wide, irregular gash of the river-bed, passing beneath us quickly.

Altogether we had with us two parachutes, four Very lights, the battered old dinghy – more for sentiment's sake than anything else I think – emergency food and water for five days, useless maps of Northern France and the Low Countries, two compasses, two hand-torches, the lucky penny with which I had won the toss this time for the pilot's seat, and our precious .38 revolvers with a hundred and ten rounds of ammunition.

With surprise on our side we hoped to penetrate a few miles up a wide cavern and hold seventy desperate rebels long enough for another hundred men to round up or kill them. It sounded mad enough, but our luck had held wonderfully since we had first baled out into the night eleven days before. With half a million lives at stake, it would just *have* to stay with us now.

In the clear red-tinted atmosphere we had seen our destination from 2,000 feet above the City. The sheer cliffs slowly closed in, and at the point where they met we had caught sight of the small back hole of the cavern mouth, and, breaking out from it, the jagged, irregular line of the

## *The Perilous Descent*

dry river-bed. We needed no maps or compass to navigate our way there!

A mile or two away I throttled back and lost altitude, holding *Lightning* a hundred feet or so above the straight line of the last wagon cable. Then I banked steeply over the last station, from which we had set off four days before on our reconnaissance. I recognized the guards' huts; several Wardens were standing around, and as we circled very low we saw them wave, and one of them – I think the captain we had met before – pointed to the cavern mouth, indicating that the party was already on its way up.

But there was no sign at all of the Governor; he must have been obliged to return to the City on some important business. Twice we banked round the little outpost, then I reduced the throttle farther, gave *Lightning* twenty degrees of flaps and full slots, and dropped slowly towards the river-bed.

'Cross your fingers, here we go,' I called to Blackie. He grinned back and tightened his straps a notch. I knew how much worse it was going to be for him, sitting there helplessly while I did everything.

The cliff face seemed to be coming at us at an alarming speed, and the cavern looked awfully small. I eased back the throttle even farther, until I was sure she was only just above stalling speed; then I switched on all the lights and threw back the hood so that we could get out quickly in an emergency. The blast of wind struck us like a blow, but there was a greater sense of freedom, and that was going to be important.

I held her about ten feet above the rocky bed of the river and steadied her there. Two hundred yards from the black mouth the thought flashed through my mind, 'Too late, you can't turn back now anyway,' and I felt the sweat break out on my forehead.

We went through easily with fifty feet to spare either side,

## *Johnny Wild*

but immediately I felt as though I had been struck blind, and the engine noise in the confined space was terrific. I fumbled for the light switches to make sure they were on, then my eyes began quickly to adjust themselves to the darkness, and I saw the pale twin beams pointing ahead, and the two smaller ones playing on each wall. Freeman had placed the lights perfectly, one pointing slightly above the other to give greater depth and height. But the side ones were only an irritation, diverting my attention, so I switched them off.

Instinctively in those few blind seconds I had lifted the nose and increased throttle: We were climbing too steeply, and I saw the vicious jagged rocks of the roof uncomfortably close in front of us. I jerked the nose down very suddenly and then I straightened her out and fought off the panic.

I took the first big bend gently, keeping her right in the centre all the way round and quickly gained confidence. So long as we had twenty feet of height I could see no reason why we shouldn't carry on for hours – just so long as the air-pockets got no worse. They took us by surprise, but of course they shouldn't have done, and I couldn't relax for a second.

Slowly we made our way up the boulder-strewn river-bed, climbing steeply up what had once been a series of rapids, and then more gently where the river had flowed at a more leisurely speed. The two big lights cast fantastic, swiftly-moving, deceptive shadows on the rough rock walls and reflected off glittering veins of quartz and thousands of stalactites hanging from the roof. Keeping her always just above the stalling point, I had to give all my mind to the controls, ready to react immediately the lights showed another sharp curve to right or left. So I could only sense the strain Blackie was feeling, but I knew he must be gripping his seat tensely, longing for the feel of the controls in his hands.

After about eight minutes' flying we climbed a long series of old cataracts, and then up over the top of these we

## *The Perilous Descent*

suddenly caught sight of a hundred twinkling lights half a mile ahead. It was our supporting force slowly making their way up the rocky river-bed, and their torches flickered and swung like an army of glow worms.

By arrangement – in order to avoid glaring us – they switched off as soon as we approached. I put on the two side lights and dipped one wing as we passed over, and we saw them clearly among the boulders, staring up at us blankly, no doubt bewildered by the blinding light and tremendous noise.

We were over and past them in a moment, and Blackie barely had time to lean over and flash his torch at them as a greeting. I knew we must be near the old waterfall now, and I pushed up our speed a bit, ready for the great spurt we should need to carry us over. By luck I recognized a very big smooth boulder on a bend, which I remembered was only a few hundred yards from our old 'battlefield'. So I pulled the throttle nob right out and let down a shade more flap. The noise now was prodigious; with the sudden forward thrust the walls seemed to rush past, and I saw Blackie lean forward tensely, waiting, as I was, for the rock face to loom up in the beam of our lights.

Then it was suddenly right before us, higher and more threatening than I had dreamt it would be. For a second I couldn't even see the top, but as I lifted the nose sharply I could see its black, irregular silhouette where the rebels had thrown down the rocks at us.

*Lightning* shook and quivered from end to end as I held her at an impossible angle, forcing her up almost on her tail. I would have given a lot of money for an air-speed indicator during those vital seconds; at any moment I expected her nose to fall in a stall, and then the quick, sudden spin, the crushing, smashing impact on the rocks below.

But somehow she held on and we staggered up two or three hundred feet, closing in all the time to the sheer face,

## Johnny Wild

until with a last desperate drag back on the stick she cleared the top by no more than five feet, and we were over.

If there had been a rebel guard they could have knocked us out with boulders then as easily as they had the earlier forces. But the top of the waterfall was deserted. At least it seemed that we had achieved surprise.

Above the old waterfall the cavern widened out considerably and flying was easier; I even had to swing the nose from time to time to throw the beam of light on to the walls to establish our position, and I could keep the speed up a little higher. Then Blackie grabbed my arm – but I had already seen.

Very faintly, but quite unmistakably, ahead of us there was a glow of light reflecting from the walls. Was it the end of the tunnel or the lights from the rebels' encampment?

I banked round another wide bend, and there, a mile or so in front, was a circle of reddish light. We had watched every yard of the ground closely and couldn't have missed the rebels.

For some reason the fact that the tunnel might have an end had never occurred to any of us. Yet there we were, already suddenly clear of the darkness and in a deep ravine through which the river must once have surged and swirled and poured into the cavern, down towards Red Valley.

The light, the same brilliant red-tinted light of Red Valley, was blinding for a moment. I dragged out the throttle and lifted *Lightning* clear of the ravine, her engine noise now only a whisper after its high-pitched reverberation inside the cavern.

It was as though the cavern had suddenly opened up to a thousand times its size. Ahead and below us was a huge lake, three or four miles wide, stretching as far as we could see, and disappearing round a curve in the valley, ten, twenty miles away. On both sides the rock cliffs fell sheer to the water's edge. Only close to the narrow ravine from which

## *The Perilous Descent*

we had just flown, and on either side of it, was there any shore to the lake. Here the land, rich with vegetation, shelved gently from the cliff base to the water's edge. And it was on the right-hand shore, a few yards from the cavern mouth, that we at last spotted the rebel encampment.

I banked steeply round at 500 feet – flaps up and slots in now, hood closed, the *Lightning* more of an aeroplane again, rather than an unsteady helicopter – and we saw in a flash what clever murderers we were up against.

At the point where the ravine was narrowest they had constructed a great dam of rocks and boulders, reinforced with slabs of peaty turf. It must have been a tremendous task, for the water from the lake must have poured through in a rushing torrent. Slowly they had built it higher and higher, dragging the rocks from the base of the cliffs, the level of the lake rising all the while, until, with the dam completed to the top of the ravine the water had found a new outlet, on the other side of the valley, where we could see it now pouring in a foaming mass down into a wide black hole at the base of the sheer rock face.

So this was the way the precious water supply of Red Valley had been cut off at its source by a handful of unscrupulous men, who were willing to sacrifice half a million lives to gain power over rich Red Valley.

As I circled *Lightning* low over the dam we saw that they could last here indefinitely, or until the Governor capitulated. They had built half a dozen rough stone buildings, with roofs of dry, plaited grass, and they had cleared and cultivated the land to provide themselves with food.

As we had first roared out of the cavern mouth there was no one to be seen – no guards at all appeared to have been posted – but now the clearing was alive with running figures, and a small armed party of a dozen or so had made for the dam and were now posted, as if to defend it from the flying monster, at each end.



We saw in a flash what clever murderers we were up against

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I think we both realized the danger at once; bewildered as they might be by their first sight of an aeroplane, they would see that this must be the beginning of a big attack, and they would release a part of the dam, as they had done before, to sweep away any party coming up the cavern on foot.

‘Try shooting them up,’ said Blackie. ‘It might scare them off.’

I nodded agreement and climbed quickly for height. It wasn't easy to find the best approach in the confined space, for the dam was only a mile or so from the cliffs. At about four thousand feet I levelled off and, with slots out to reduce speed, made for the cliff face directly above the cavern mouth. As *Lightning* neared the rocky face I turned her on her back, withdrew the slots again, and let her nose fall down in a vertical dive . . . just as we had both done many times in the past on dive-bombing missions. The narrow ravine came rushing up to meet us, and I saw the black figures standing hesitant on the dam as I eased out of the dive and aimed straight at them.

*Lightning* had never travelled so fast before; we must have been doing 350 m.p.h. as I dragged back on the stick and we shot at fifty feet over the dam and over the heads of the terrified, fleeing rebels, out low over the great wide lake, the machine vibrating with the strain of the unaccustomed speed.

‘Nice work,’ said Blackie, grinning as I pulled her up and climbed back. ‘Scared the living daylight out of them.’

‘They'll be back to the dam like frightened birds, you watch. What we've got to do is to try to get there before them.’

On the other side of the dam from the rebels' camp there was a patch of sandy beach running down to the lake. I pointed it out to Blackie.

‘Bit of luck. Might just squeeze her in,’ I said.

It was near enough to the dam; we stood a chance of



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beating them to it. I crossed my fingers, blessed *Lightning's* low stalling speed and circled her over the spot for a quick glance at it. Then, with no idea of the wind direction, I lowered flaps and cut the engines and threw back the hood. The air struck us with a cool, roaring rush. We came down low over the lake that broke in little wavelets on the shore, and I banked steeply, lost more height with a gentle sideslip, and brought *Lightning* through 180 degrees so that the strip of sand was directly ahead.

Coming in on the last approach, I could feel the steady beam wind coming off the lake, I could see that the sand was rougher than I had thought, and was littered with rocks, and I knew that it was going to be one of the toughest landings I had faced.

I misjudged the landing speed by about fifteen miles per hour, and we wasted a third of that precious short strip before I could nestle back the stick into my stomach and let her drop. Then, as the wheels bit into the soft sand, I was glad of the vicious rudder reaction; if the rudder pedals had answered sluggishly I could never have kept the nose from turning into the wind and throwing us over, or have avoided the boulders strewn across our path. Hard left, hard right, hard right again, then left; it was to and fro all the time until *Lightning* at last came to a standstill a few yards from a big rock.

Then we had unstrapped ourselves, and were running across the remaining stretch of sand towards the plateau bordering the ravine and the dam, our guns already out.

I was filled with an angry determination to keep these madmen from releasing the water and sweeping away our relief party, which must by then have already been up to the waterfall.

We ran, panting for breath, leaping from boulder to boulder up the slight hill to the flat, rocky plateau, and as

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we reached the top and looked down we saw we were too late. A dozen of them were already at work. We crouched down and saw them tearing away at the dam, hurling the rocks and big squares of moss and peat down into the ravine below. There was already a gap, and the first trickle of water was spouting through.

And we had been seen. There were guards on the other side; they would have watched the strange machine circling, and though the hill had hidden our landing, they were waiting for us to appear on the plateau. The warning shouts of the guards reached us, and we saw the upturned faces of the men working on the dam, and we saw their arms pointing towards us. There was no cover for us. There was only one thing to do. Blackie suggested it in a quiet level voice: 'Have to rush them, Johnny.'

So we ran on, feeling naked and helpless with only our two .38s, waiting for them to turn and meet us. But instead, when we were a hundred yards off and beginning to drop down the slope on the last stretch, the rebels and their guards retreated back quietly from the dam towards their huts.

With a rush of triumph we ran on even faster. So far the water that had got through was only enough to form a small stream. We could hold them back until the party arrived. The rebel workers were scrambling quickly up the opposite slope; we saw them clearly now, 200 yards away, using their hands to assist in the climb, glancing back at us over their shoulders.

I held Blackie's arm and we slowed.

'What about a shot now?' I panted, 'and really scare them.'

He hesitated a moment, tempted too.

'No, if there's to be any fighting let them start it,' he said after a moment, and I agreed.

But as we began to run again, suddenly there was no doubt about who was opening the attack.

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The rocks began to fall about us like huge hailstones. In a second the sky was full of them, whistling down like shrapnel, thudding and splintering or rolling and bouncing about us down the slope to the dam.

For a second we were both stunned by the shock, only instinctively crouching down and covering our heads with our hands in a helpless attempt to protect ourselves. The noise was tremendous. After a quick look up – to see the air black with the fast-falling rocks all seemingly about to fall on me – I shouted at Blackie. But I couldn't even hear my own voice above the uproar. Grabbing his shoulder, I pulled him up and started to run back up the slope.

It seemed utterly impossible that we could get through this hailstorm, which, like a creeping barrage, seemed to follow us up the hill. We were both hit – hit many times about the legs and on the body – by splinters that stung like hot knives on our flesh, but failed to slow us down. None of the rocks could have weighed less than thirty pounds; on the head they would have killed us instantly, on our shoulders they would have maimed us for life.

Somehow, by extraordinary luck, like sweeping through a heavy flak barrage that seems impenetrable, we got through, cut and bruised all over. At the edge of the plateau we were suddenly clear of their range. They beat down on the ground in a torrent a few yards below us, but could no longer reach us.

We could see now where they came from. A hundred yards beyond their huts was a circular stone wall, high enough to close our view to the inside, and from there, like grape shot from a dozen ancient cannon, poured forth the torrent of boulders.

Without any mechanical equipment the cunning rebels must somehow have constructed a number of powerful slings, perhaps on the same pattern as those used by the Romans and Greeks two thousand years ago. With these

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and an inexhaustible supply of ammunition, they had an almost impenetrable artillery defence for their previous dam and their own encampment.

They were firing now at an extreme range, with the rocks soaring up at forty-five degrees from the enclosure; but as we watched, just beyond their range, the barrage slowly died down and eventually stopped. In the deathly silence that followed we saw no movement either from their stronghold or among the stone buildings.

We settled down out of reach, but still in full view, and bandaged our deepest cuts with our emergency first-aid equipment. We were both madly angry but uncertain now what to do next. I was trying to estimate how long it would be before the relief party arrived.

‘How long do you reckon it took us from the waterfall to the end of the cavern?’

‘Twenty minutes, maybe half an hour,’ guessed Blackie wincing as he dabbed ointment on a long graze down his calf.

‘Say we were doing forty-five miles per hour,’ I reckoned quickly, ‘that would make it about twenty miles. Twenty miles at two miles per hour – the Wardens wouldn’t travel faster than that over the rough ground. If they reached the waterfall half an hour ago, we’ve got to wait about nine and a half hours before we can expect any help.’

‘And if they turn the barrage on them as they come up the ravine they won’t stand much of a chance,’ added Blackie grimly.

But I was more worried about the dam. How could we keep them from releasing it now? We racked our brains for some way of using *Lightning* to hold them back, but there seemed to be nothing, beyond dropping a few useless rocks.

‘And next time they’ll be ready for us and put up their

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barrage as flak – and I shouldn't fancy flying through that lot,' said Blackie.

We were quiet for a while, watching for some sign of movement across the dam. This silence was disturbing; if only they would *do* something! Smoke twisted up from one or two of the huts, but not a figure appeared. A steady trickle of water ran through the narrow gap in the dam and splashed fifty feet below on to the old river-bed. Then, as a sort of gesture of defiance, a lone boulder sprang up from the enclosure, perhaps in a last effort to reach us. It soared up three or four hundred feet, a tiny black dot almost above us, and span down with a slight whistle, shattering on the rocks ten yards below.

'Seems to me,' I said later, 'our only chance is to make ourselves comfortable and trust that a few long shots from here will scare them off the dam if they reopen operations.'

'We can't expect to do much damage with a .38 at two hundred yards' range,' he pointed out truthfully.

'Just remember the waterfall the other day. Hit the blighter with my first shot at two hundred and fifty feet – *and* that was uphill.'

Blackie grinned good-naturedly.

'You wouldn't hit a haystack at that range again.' Then more seriously, 'Actually I think you're right. We'll build some sort of protection in case they try rushing us and lob shots at them if they try tearing down any more of the dam.'

There was still no sign of life from the other side of the dam, so we rose stiffly and painfully to our feet and began to collect large flat boulders, piling them up and building them round us to form a little compact fort, six feet across, and the walls five feet high.

We were pretty well exhausted when we had finished, though it was only a couple of hours since we had taken off

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from the outskirts of the City. But we felt pleasantly secure in the protection of this stockade.

'I'm just about ready for something to eat,' said Blackie. 'Could do with a drink too.'

I suddenly realized how ravenous I was.

'I'll go and get some provisions from *Lightning*,' I volunteered, and climbed up over the wall, and set off across the plateau the way we had come.

*Lightning* looked small and weird and rather lonely on the wild, sandy beach. 'And pretty ridiculous,' I added to myself. 'How we ever brought her all this way I can't imagine.' The wings and tailplane were quite orthodox, but it was the cigar-shaped fuselage and the tall, spindly undercarriage that made me want to laugh.

I made my way across the loose sand and dragged out our box of provisions and water-bottle from behind the cockpit. I sat for a moment on the wing before jumping down and looked out across the big grey lake, flecked by the breeze, the steady red light flashing on the wave-tips, to the great sombre cliffs, threatening and barring our way back to the earth. Often during our adventure I wondered at our fantastic situation and the incredible chances that had led us miles below the earth's surface and saved us over and over again. It was like waking for a second from a long, fanciful dream, and then returning to it.

I patted the firm, smooth wing to assure myself of its reality. How far would this valley extend, I wondered. . . .

Blackie's .38 fired twice quickly; the sound of the shots was like two distant whip-cracks, and I was off the wing and running fast again across the soft sand, with the food and water under my arm. Above the sound of my own heavy breathing I heard him fire twice more . . . and prayed quickly that they weren't attacking him.

Up on to the hard, smooth-surfaced plateau again, and I could see our little circular fortress, the dot of Blackie's

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head showing above it. He waved an arm above his head, but whether he was calling for help or signalling that he was unhurt I couldn't tell. I was over the wall and beside him in a few seconds.

Six men were half-way down the slope from the nearest hut, moving towards the dam.

'They started in single file,' he explained, 'but they ran back when I first fired – way short of course – then they started again, spread out. I had a couple more shots, and they stopped but soon came on again. Thought I'd wait until they got a bit nearer before trying again.'

'Just as well, considering we've only got about fifty rounds apiece.'

The rebels seemed to be carrying long wooden poles, but they couldn't have been tree-trunks – there was the same complete absence of trees here as in Red Valley. Stalactites from the cavern perhaps; they would be strong enough, I supposed, to lever the rocks and turf from the dam.

I had a quick look at my revolver, breaking it open to make sure all the chambers were filled, and placed another dozen rounds on a convenient ledge.

We stood close together side by side, resting the barrels on the top of the wall, squinting along the sights, watching the six well spread out figures slowly, a little warily, descending the slope.

'My kingdom for a Bren,' muttered Blackie gloomily, 'or even a .303 rifle – or even a Sten.'

Our little stubby .38s, designed for emergencies at twenty yards' range, felt ridiculous in our hands.

There was still no sign of any other movement among the huts. We heard no sound from anywhere, only our own steady breathing. I glanced down at the cavern mouth to our right, just visible at the end of the deep ravine, in the faint hope that by some miracle the relieving party might suddenly appear. But we couldn't hope for support for a long time yet.

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As the first of the figures stepped across the last ten yards of flat ground to the edge of the dam I saw Blackie tensing his stance, adjusting carefully the angle of his gun, his finger tight, and white at the knuckles, on the trigger. Then he fired once and, as the report rang in my ears, again.

The first shot fell short. I saw a little fountain spring from the still water close to the dam. The second stirred a few fragments of dust just behind the man's feet; he stopped and went forward again, and I fired three times as he stepped on to the edge of the dam. But it was wild shooting – I saw no sign of where they fell – and I swore to myself.

'Wait till two or three gather together,' said Blackie as he reloaded.

The acrid smell of cordite in the air reminded me of that last attack on the train; my hood had been a fraction open, and the acute, not unpleasant, cordite odour from the four cannon had seeped into the cabin.

The first rebel was well out on the dam now, preparing to loosen the rocks and widen the breach; three more were moving out to assist him. Not more than three yards separated them.

'Together this time, and rapid fire,' I said. 'We must really scare them.'

'Allow about an inch and half for drop,' said Blackie quickly, and we both started firing.

I tried to make a pattern with my six shots, in the hope that one would strike home. I saw two of either Blackie's or mine smacking into the water close against the still figures, then the second rebel seemed to lurch, bend forward, head back and with sagging knees collapse from the narrow dam and splash into the edge of the lake.

It may have been Blackie's, it may have been mine; I hoped it was Blackie's shot. I had killed enough men in the war, but not coldly like this, seeing them die close in front



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of me – only the man on the waterfall, but his death in the heat of battle seemed to pass me by.

We reloaded without speaking, watching the other five rebels gather hurriedly around the body, dragging it from the water. They kept looking up at us and pointing; and three of them lifted the heavy dead weight on to their shoulders and began to carry him back off the dam.

Blackie fired twice again, and they quickly dropped the body and ran, leaving the long poles behind, scattering up the slope without looking back.

‘You needn’t have done that,’ I said sharply. ‘They were retreating anyway.’

‘Just as well to terrify them properly,’ he answered. ‘Keep your pity, Johnny. The Wardens won’t have any for them when they get here. They’re a rotten lot.’

He fingered the long wound on his calf, and I remembered the cuts all over my body. He was right. They were out to kill, and to think of mercy was a waste of time – and a risk. But still the sight of the loose, ugly body lying there in the silence, the head and one arm fallen in the water, touched me with pity and sorrow.

For two hours then we were left in peace. The five surviving dam-breakers disappeared among the stone huts, and we saw no further sign of movement. For a while we both watched carefully for any sign of an attack, eating ravenously as we leant on our fortress wall, guns loaded and ready beside us. Then we took quarter-hour watches while the other rested and dozed on the hard rock ground. As the time dragged on we became less careful, discussing casually what they might attempt next. I thought that they would try another assault on the dam, thirty or forty of them at a time, breaking it down in a few seconds and rushing back before we could cause many casualties.

‘If they do that,’ said Blackie, ‘we shall just have to rush

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them and risk the rock barrage. Once we get to close grips they'll have to stop firing for fear of hitting their own men. They can only advance four or five abreast across the dam, and we can pick them off at close range as they come.'

I didn't fancy it, but it would be the only way we could hope to save the advancing Wardens.

'They must know that we're expecting relief,' I mused, 'or they wouldn't be so determined to let loose the water. They must realize that each time they break the dam they're giving the people of Red Valley another day or two of survival.'

Blackie added, 'Do you suppose they know what they're up against – our guns, I mean, and of course *Lightning*?'

'They're not like ignorant natives, you know,' I reminded him. 'Don't forget that mechanically they're probably ahead of us. They won't think we're witch doctors or ghosts with mystical powers. They were surprised and frightened, at first to see a flying wagon and to hear our .38s, and to see one of their men killed at two hundred yards' range. But they know that the Governor will have been thinking up any sort of desperate resort to knock them out, and they probably think we're just a couple of Wardens with two new weapons, determined to smash them.'

'And they won't be far wrong,' said Blackie sleepily, stretched out behind me with his head on our box of provisions. After a minute or two I glanced down and saw that he was asleep.

As I kept a careless watch I tried to imagine what was going on in the huts a quarter of a mile away across the shallow valley. The Governor's brother, we had been told, was a tall, angular man with a hatchet face and narrow slit eyes. He also was bearded, not unlike his brother in appearance, with as brilliant a brain and organizing ability, but with an unsatisfied lust for power and domination over his fellow men that had made him bitter.

I thought of him now, in the centre of a circle of his men,

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discussing the next move with his lieutenants. The men he had infected with his own bitterness, angry, wild men now, would not be too concerned about taking risks and chancing a few casualties to save themselves and to hold their powerful position. Perhaps at this minute they would be planning to move forward the battery of rock slings – if that was what they had turned on us to drive us back before – from the enclosure. I couldn't see why they hadn't done that before. Perhaps they were fixed weapons. Clever devils, I thought, to develop such an effective weapon in this wild waste land, without tools or instruments.

I began to feel terribly tired. A glance at my watch showed another three minutes before I could rest. Six and a half hours before we could expect relief. A lot could happen in that time. The thought of *Lightning* behind us was some comfort, though if we were forced to retreat to her we would know that we had failed.

I turned to shake Blackie awake. Something about a group of tall boulders, looking rather like the famous 'Stonehenge' on Salisbury Plain, far down the ravine and close to the black cavern mouth, caught my eye. Surely they hadn't been there before. I leaned on the wall and shaded my eyes from the bright red glow blazing from high up the cliffs. Then, by staring intently – uncertain if my eyes were playing tricks – I thought I saw them moving, moving steadily towards the edge of the ravine, where a broken crevice showed a way down to the river-bed.

'Blackie,' I called urgently, kicking his outstretched legs at the same time, but not taking my eyes off the slow-moving figures – for I could see now that they were men advancing intently, cautiously to the edge of the ravine.

'What's the matter?' Blackie said irritably as he struggled up beside me.

I pointed to the formation of rebels, and he whistled. There were thirty of them, spread well out. They were

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moving slowly, cunningly, in the hope that we would not spot them. They had travelled nearly a mile before, by chance, I had noticed them.

‘You see their plan?’ said Blackie quietly.

I saw well enough – and I didn’t like it at all. Fearful that they might be wiped out in another direct assault on the dam, they were going to surround us, slowly advancing from all sides and hoping to rustle us out of our dominating position, to overwhelm us by weight of numbers in a sudden attack. Against thirty of them we had two .38s and some eighty rounds. We might knock out a dozen, twenty, of them . . . but there would still be plenty of them left to finish us off.

‘There’s just one advantage we can use,’ I said. ‘They don’t know we’ve spotted them yet, and if we keep hidden until they get within range we shall at least be able to surprise them.’

There were plenty of small gaps between the boulders. We crouched down side by side, each keeping an eye tight against one. We both had a clear view from the lake to the dam, up the ravine to the cavern, and then to the base of the cliffs. There was going to be very little cover for them, and we could watch them all the way. The whole party had dropped down the crevice into the ravine. At their present speed we should have a good half-hour before they arrived.

One by one the little figures reappeared over the edge of the ravine and scattered slowly, advancing by an obviously pre-arranged plan over a wide front. There was something sinister about the way they moved, silently, without gestures or signals, steadily towards us. I remembered watching in Libya an open formation of German Mark IV tanks advancing across the desert; these desperate, well-armed rebels, moving in on us as we nestled in our small fort, had something of the same terrible power.

At half a mile or so we could distinguish their clothes –

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tattered coarse rags, the remnants of what they had been wearing when they escaped months before from Red Valley – and their individual weapons: short, stubby, and very effective-looking swords, unsheathed and resting on their shoulders, long, vicious daggers, naked and loosely strung to their rope belts. One or two at the rear appeared to be carrying a number of long, thin spears. I liked the look of these least of all; our advantage of superior range would be lost if they were going to shelter behind boulders and lob these over on to us.

‘The most important thing,’ I suggested quietly, ‘is the old rule of holding your fire. I think we must leave it until the second before they rush, hoping to surprise us. They’ll be all round us then.’

‘And spread our fire to try to cause casualties everywhere,’ added Blackie. ‘We might demoralize them that way.’

‘One of us had better give the order, then – you may as well do it,’ I said. ‘I’ll take this side facing the dam, you concentrate on the other side, both sweeping round clockwise – and ducking back as quickly as possible. O.K.?’

‘O.K.,’ he said steadily. There was nobody like Blackie to be in a position like this with. I grinned wryly at him and returned to my spy-hole. But it was better to keep talking. We had to move our positions constantly now, for half the force had swung round on each flank, and they were approaching from all sides – as steadily, unhurriedly, and determinedly as ever. The Governor’s brother must have knocked some discipline into them.

‘I signed on to help knock out Germany, you know; this is more in the Battle of Agincourt style,’ I said, whispering now and just for something to say. ‘I see what they mean about cold steel. Much prefer nice clean bullets myself.’

‘Don’t be so cheerful,’ whispered back Blackie.

And we chattered aimlessly as the rebels moved slowly

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nearer. I was trying to spot the tall figure of their leader among them. He was the man to get first of course.

'Let me know if you see him,' I said.

But they were crouching as they advanced now; it would not be easy to pick him out.

Then, at twenty-five yards, they all halted, some of them screened behind the bigger boulders. They must know now that we had seen them, and they must also know that we hadn't escaped, for our fort had been under observation all the way.

It wasn't pleasant for us crouching there waiting for them to throw themselves on us; but, despite their huge superiority in numbers, they couldn't be enjoying themselves out there in the open, exposed to four hostile eyes and a weapon they didn't understand . . . except that it could kill quickly.

'They're going to launch those darned spears first and then rush us,' I whispered very quietly as I saw the men who had been carrying them unloosen them and pass them round to the others; there were twenty in all. There was a peculiar menace in their silent movements, their unspoken commands. I saw them each take one of the long spears, testing them in their hands for balance. I felt every muscle in my body tense and hard; beads of sweat ran stinging into my eyes . . . and I clicked off the safety catch. Blackie followed: two quick, decisive clicks in the heavy silence. They were farther off than I should have liked, and I hated the look of those spears, poised now ready in their hands.

'O.K., here we go,' Blackie said quietly, springing up.

He fired first, twice, before I had my sights steadily on one of the rebels.

For that fraction of a second they remained frozen where they stood, and we both hit two before, with a wild Indian cry – the same unearthly howling shriek we had heard in our first encounter with them – they began to rush forward, hurling their spears in the air to land in our small fortress.

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But our first shots put them off their aim, the spears landing haphazardly about us, snapping as they struck the rocks. Two fell inside our walls, between us, another splintered on the rock beside my arm. I hugged close against the protecting wall, repeating urgently to myself, 'Steady, steady, aim steady,' as they rushed up at us, feeling, knowing for sure, that this was worse than any flak barrage, any dog-fight with 109's I had been in, but somehow controlling my hand, picking my targets carefully so that I hit every time.

I don't even remember reloading. Of course we should



'O.K., here we go,' Blackie said quietly

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never have had time but for that precious moment of surprise before they rushed shrieking, hurling their spears, brandishing their swords above their heads. Neither of us missed once with those first twelve shots, but they came on; a huge ruffian with a beard down to his waist, a short sword in one hand, a thin fine dagger in the other, was only five yards off as I sprang up again. He looked like one of the pirates in an illustrated edition of *Kidnapped* I had had as a boy – long, oily black hair streaming behind him, thick lips tight back in a snarl, revealing black, broken teeth. He was in the air in a huge spring as I fired into the rushing blur of his face, and his big, heavy body crashed against the wall below me, knocking down some of the rocks.

But there were others behind him, many, many more. I missed entirely with the next two shots. Sickened, unnerved, I knew it was all up. Five of the devils were coming in fast, swords above their heads, ready to strike . . . and I had only three rounds. Firing the three chambers into them, I ducked down, waiting helplessly for the sharp fall of the blades.

Then I felt Blackie stumbling over my crouched body, heard three sharp reports from his gun, and glancing up suddenly as I stuffed more shells into the empty, smoking chambers, saw a lithe figure spring on to the wall behind us, sword poised, ready to leap on us. I lurched up at him, swinging the butt of my gun, crashing it into his jaw as he dropped. Our bodies met in mid-air, and we fell together with a sickening thud on to the rocky ground.

‘Get up, get up,’ Blackie was shouting as he smacked my face hard. ‘Get up, for heavens’ sake!’

I had been stunned by the fall, and he had rolled the limp body of the rebel off me. I longed to lie still, to lie quietly and just sleep in peace, away from the hammering pain in my head; but a part of my mind was telling me urgently that my life depended on returning to consciousness, and I



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heard Blackie's voice saying, 'Quickly, Johnny, this is our last chance, wake up, wake up.' And he went on smacking me so that I was forced to try to beat off his blows.

'Quickly, here's your gun. I've reloaded it. Now lean half over the wall, limply, as if you were dead.' He was talking quietly and quickly. I shook my head, trying to clear my brain, and stumbled across the prostrate rebel. Blackie gripped my arm, helping me up. 'When I say "fire" throw yourself back in again and let them have it.'

Still muzzy, I dragged myself up on to the wall and leant over, head and arms hanging loose outside, legs dangling inside, and waited, puzzled but conscious enough to realize I must play my part.

I heard Blackie shouting behind me unintelligibly; with a cry of triumph he hurled the rebel's body over me, and it fell limp and distorted on the rocks below. Then, with the rebel's sword held high above his head, he climbed on to the wall beside me and shouted with a great roar, 'They're both dead, come on it's all clear.'

I saw then the clever bluff he was playing, and watched anxiously out of the corner of my eye to see if the retreating rebels would swallow the bait. His clothes and his lack of a beard might give him away; but in the heat and excitement of battle they might take him for one of themselves.

It worked. It worked immediately and better than Blackie could have hoped. Believing us both dead, killed by their triumphant comrade calling to them, the survivors came running back, ten or fifteen of them, to congratulate him and examine our bodies.

I kept as still as I could, but ready to spring back inside the wall. As they drew close enough to recognize their dead fellow on the ground, Blackie jumped back inside, calling, 'Fire, fire like mad.' And he helped me in, dragging back my shoulders.

With my head spinning, a dreadful throbbing beating at

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my temples, I saw only the blurred, hazy outline of the group of rebels. They had halted, uncertain, wondering at the sudden springing to life of the dead body. I tried to get my finger round the trigger of my gun, but my muscles didn't seem to respond. The horizon was rocking to and fro and I felt sick, dreadfully sick, ready to give up, to do anything to be able to lie still and in peace.

But Blackie was firing, steadily, once, twice and again, and the sharp reports close to my face brought me back to my senses. It must have been only a second or two since he had called, for the rebels had still not fully realized the trap they had fallen into as I forced my eyes into focus along the sights and began dragging at the trigger, firing six times into the group ten yards off.

The survivors – there were only four or five of them – fled. I watched them zigzagging frantically away, dropping their weapons in the panic. And then I passed out again, slipping gently into Blackie's arms.

For two hours they kept away from us . . . but we knew that this was not the end. They must be utterly desperate now, with most of their number casualties. We had to expect a renewed attack at any time.

During those two hours we rested in turn. Blackie soon revived me; it was nothing more than mild concussion. Except for more bruises, I was unharmed. But he had a nasty slash on the left shoulder. A rebel attacking his side had got through, just before I killed the one inside our fort. Blackie, with his gun empty, had grappled with him bare-handed over the wall, and the rebel had struck him with his sword before he had been clubbed with a loose rock Blackie had grabbed from the wall. For a while before we could get it bandaged the cut had bled profusely, and he lost a lot of blood.

Some of the less seriously wounded rebels had dragged

## *Johnny Wild*

themselves away from the horrible blood-soaked area around us. Others in a worse state had called for help, and we had allowed them to be carried off. But the bodies of their dead, eighteen in all, remained scattered about us in grotesque attitudes, nearly all within a few yards of our fort, to remind us of the desperate nature of our fight.

'This is like one of those films about the Foreign Legion,' I said at some moment during that two hours' wait. 'You know, where the handsome, tanned hero and two mates hold the desert fort for three days and nights against an army of howling Arabs. I always thought they were pretty silly. But I was all wrong. It really does happen like that.'

We tried to laugh at our crazy plight, but there wasn't much laughter left in us by then. We had seen a column of at least thirty more rebels cross the ravine and surround us, keeping well out of range for the moment, and we knew that we hadn't much longer to wait.

Earlier we had nearly been surprised by a rush at the dam from the encampment by six rebels. They had already reached the lake edge when Blackie spotted them. They were running fast. We had waited for them to cluster about the end of the dam, and then we had opened fire as before in a concentrated pattern. That time our accuracy had improved; we wounded two straight away, but they had continued to work desperately and even succeeded in widening the breach a few feet before we opened up on them again . . . and two more had fallen immediately, over the edge of the dam, over the sheer drop to crash fifty feet below on to the rocks. Only then had the two survivors fled. Our control of the vital dam had been firmly established, but we knew now that they would be even more desperately determined to overwhelm us.

It was seven o'clock in the evening. We could reasonably expect the arrival of the relief party in an hour, possibly

## *The Perilous Descent*

sooner. Time at last was on our side. And we didn't think they could have left behind enough men to operate the slings, to bombard the Wardens as they emerged from the cavern.

We watched constantly now for the attack to open and for the desperately needed help to appear. We had beaten them off before only with the advantage of surprise – repeated surprise. This time they would be fully prepared. And, weary and low in ammunition, we should be facing the attack of fresh men. Two captured swords lay ready to hand as a last resort. I prayed that we should not need them.

I had just glanced at my watch: it was seven-fifteen, when Blackie called me over to his side. There was no need for concealment now. We peered over the wall together.

'This is it, Johnny,' he said briefly, and I was almost glad. The waiting was becoming unnerving. The outcome would be decided, one way or another, very soon now.

They were advancing slowly, implacably from all sides. They gave the impression of being nearer a hundred than thirty.

Two hundred yards from us they halted, crouching for a full minute, as still as statues, a savage circle of bearded, ragged half-beasts, intent on only one thing – our destruction. A cold sweat passed over my body, but my hands were sodden, I could feel my shirt sticking to my chest, and the only sound was my fast breathing.

They squatted motionless, their eyes fixed on us, then, as one man, they were up, shouting the same wild cry. Again they came in from every direction, but running fast, zig-zagging to and fro, crossing and re-crossing each other's tracks. I steadied my gun against the rock. There was only one thing to do; keep the sights on a single figure, swinging the gun from side to side as he advanced. I suddenly felt ice-calm and composed, as though every tired muscle, every taut nerve in my body was straining to help me in the death struggle.

## *Johnny Wild*

I picked out one of the men and followed him, the others a mere blur on either side, as he approached. I counted off the yards as he ran, his agile body weaving to and fro: 150, 130, 120 yards, seventy-five, sixty, I counted, then, with the sights poised just above his head, when I reckoned he was fifty yards off I carefully, steadily squeezed the trigger. He leaped in the air almost, it seemed, before I fired, his body gave a little twist, and he fell. Quickly I swung on to another, steadied, fired and hit again. Then a third; I couldn't miss – but there were a dozen more . . . and three rounds left in the chambers.

I felt no elation as I stood there, firing steadily, more accurately than I had thought possible with a revolver. Now the figures continued to move, fast and directly towards us, swords poised shoulder high. I fired and fired, and the trigger clicked harmlessly, and with a sudden rush of panic I knew that I had shot every round and that it was no use trying to reload, for four of them were only ten yards off.

Above the shouts of the rushing rebels I heard Blackie's voice, calm and determined. 'Swords, and on to the wall,' he said behind me, and I threw aside my gun and clambered on to the wall with the heavy, two-edged sword in my hand.

Six of them came racing up over those last few yards, each with a sword and, in the other hand, one of the thin long daggers we had seen before at their belts. The first of them, a thin, wiry little man with a cunning grin on his face, raced up without hesitating and sprang in the air with a leap, trying to gain the top of the wall and spin me over in one bound. As he flew through the air I held the sword firmly in his path, and he struck it with his shoulder with a jerk that almost threw me off, and he fell back with a crash to the ground.

Three others came together now, more carefully, running up at a slight trot. The three pairs of eyes, hunted animals' eyes, the eyes of men who would stop at nothing, watched

## *The Perilous Descent*

me warily. A fourth joined them and they rushed at my legs together, and I slashed out at their arms and the swords that swept the air for my exposed calves.

I shall never piece together the next five minutes, only as a roaring, desperate, bloody, mosaic of crashing steel and searing flesh, of desperate parries and sickening shots of pain as a blade came home to my flesh. As they piled up about me and I knew they would have me down if I didn't leap off, I threw myself to the ground over the heads of the nearest of them and turned and caught two before they could follow me. Then they were on me from all sides, and I can only remember flashing and twisting, running and turning again, attacking, slashing, faintly aware of the weariness creeping over me, the sickness mounting in my throat, the dead numb weight of my right arm.

We might have stood a better chance if we had held together and worked more as a team. This way it could be only a matter of time before we went under; but I never had the second needed to look round for him, until I heard his voice above the uproar – 'Johnny, run for it, run for it,' and out of the corner of my eye I saw him streak across the rocks away from the fort, with half a dozen rebels close behind.

With a last lunge at the whirling figures closing in on me, I ducked suddenly and threw myself out of the circle and rushed after him. Vaguely, through a mist of sweat, I saw the outline of him ahead, his pursuers very close behind and about to spring.

Again I heard his voice, desperate now, shouting faintly, but I could not make out what he was calling. Then I saw a great flash of white light spring from him and streak with a hiss at the men behind him, burning into them, stopping them dead in their tracks, then bowling them over.

For a second I thought the supernatural had interceded on our side, but then as I ran nearer I saw the stubby emergency Very cartridge – which we still carried in our battle-

## *Johnny Wild*

dress – in his hand, and I realized that another stroke of luck (or quick thinking) had saved us for a few more moments.

I dragged one of mine from the pouch inside my blouse, turned on the six men behind me, who had hesitated fatally with the flash of Blackie's light, and fired it at them. In the sudden blaze I saw nothing, but instinctively felt for the second one, pulled it out and waited, panting and half-dead from exhaustion. As the rush of light faded I saw what we still faced, and knew that with one Very cartridge between us, there were still more than a dozen unwounded rebels, hesitant and bewildered now, but ready to throw themselves at us in a moment or two.

Blackie and I closed up and waited for the inevitable onrush. Two of the rebels had been killed by the Very cartridges, two more who were badly burned writhed on the ground. The bodies of the other dead lay beyond, and between was the last group, advancing slowly on us.

They came at us in a last rush, their hideous cry filling the air, and I shot the last cartridge. It hissed in a great blinding stream of light from my hand into the mass of them.

But they came on irresistibly, and with a last desperate effort we hurled our unprotected bodies at them, grappling with one or two, crashing out with our fists.

I lost all sense of time in the blow of the pain and the last frantic effort for our lives. But in the seething whirl of blades and arms and legs, the roar of sound suddenly increased. The cries of the rebels grew louder, and there seemed suddenly to be more of them. Then two of them who were on top of me, the long blades of their daggers ready to strike, were dragged roughly aside.

I lay there quite still, on the hard dusty ground, with my eyes closed against the pain from hundreds of blows and

## *The Perilous Descent*

wounds, dimly aware and only half-believing that we were saved. My head and every part of my body throbbed, but there was also the triumph of being alive, knowing that between us we had held the rebels long enough – with about fifteen seconds to spare.

Then I opened my eyes and saw half a dozen of the Wardens about me, two of them kneeling down watching me anxiously. I tried to ask them, and my voice came in a hoarse whisper I couldn't believe was mine. 'Is he alive?' I said, and they nodded, smiling, and I felt better still.

Slowly, painfully, they sat me up. The Wardens were all about us, watching us with wonder and some embarrassment. Blackie was standing a few yards away, supported on either side. His face was a mass of blood; he seemed to be trying to make his way towards me, and they were dissuading him.

Their leader – Captain Grant Green, whom we had met at the planning conference with the Governor – gave orders that we were not to be questioned yet, and for this relief I blessed him. He arranged for us to be carried down, away out of our little 'battlefield', which was strewn with thirty or forty of the rebels' bodies, down to the lake where there was plenty of water. There our filthy, torn clothes were gently taken off, and our wounds cleaned and disinfected and bandaged. Neither of us had any really serious injury, but the numerous slashes all over our bodies had weakened us badly, and we had lost a lot of blood.

The strain of the last ten hours told on us in the end. We both passed out before their first-aid men had finished with us, and we knew nothing of being taken back across the dam to the old rebel encampment, of being lain out on the comfortable straw beds there to sleep off our fight.



## CHAPTER 9

Danny Black

*Recovery – The Breaking of the Dam – Trapped –  
We Set Course Home*

WE spent three days recuperating from the fight, lying stiffly on the straw beds side by side, relaxed and at peace with the world for the first time since we had been shot down, just talking occasionally but mostly sleeping, while our wounds healed.

On the first day Captain Green came to visit us. He was a powerfully-built, short man with wide shoulders and black hair. He had quick, intelligent black eyes, a ready wit, and a voice that spoke with kind firmness and authority. On the two occasions I had met him before I had taken a great liking to him.

He came into the dark hut and spoke in a low voice to the medical orderly who was looking after us, apparently asking if he thought we were well enough to talk. Then he came over and sat on a low stool between our rough beds.

‘How are you feeling now?’ he asked quietly.

‘Not so bad,’ answered Johnny, and I nodded agreement.

‘Nice fight you must have had,’ he said laconically. ‘There were only eight who weren’t casualties when we turned up. Feel like talking about it?’

Johnny nodded and began, and I took over when he got tired. The captain listened carefully, jotting down notes now and again, and asked a few questions. He couldn’t understand about the fort.

‘Can’t see how you built it in the time,’ he said. ‘Some of

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the rocks you used must have weighed nearly a hundred-weight, and there are about two hundred of them in the wall altogether.'

It all seemed a long time ago now, and I could only remember it vaguely.

'Just plain desperation, I suppose. I'd like to have another look at it when we get up. It's what saved us of course,' I added.

When we had finished I couldn't help asking, though I dreaded the answer, what had happened to the survivors. Had they been killed immediately?

The captain looked down awkwardly.

At length he said, 'You know, we didn't know what war and fighting were until the rebellion a few months ago. That's why we don't have the same knowledge of weapons that you have. Swords and daggers have always been known to us, but they were just kept as curiosities and decorations for parades and special occasions.

'Well, this sudden bloodshed, with the bitterness and hate that has followed it, have made our people callous and brutal when they are aroused. This rebellion, which has upset their happy lives and threatened our country with extinction, has made them terribly angry. A year ago, except for the rare fatal accident, they didn't know what a violent death was.' He hesitated again, and we waited. 'Well, I'm afraid when we came up the slope and on to the plateau, and my Wardens saw you at the last gasp, they lost their heads and dispatched them all, all those still alive, the wounded and those about to kill you, without wasting any time.'

Why should we worry? They were – as he said – about to kill us . . . and we had killed enough ourselves. But in the heat of battle. That was the difference. Our code of conduct in war didn't allow the murder of the wounded and the prisoners. It was simpler for these people. The rebels had

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tried to destroy their country, to wipe them out – so they must be destroyed.

Johnny, always more scrupulous than me, liked it even less, I could see. There was truth in what the captain said: ‘If we had taken them back they wouldn’t have remained alive more than a few hours.’

But what of the Governor’s brother? What had happened to the leader of the uprising, the real villain? I put the question to the captain just before he left.

‘After a long hunt we found him finally far away from the scene of the battle, quite unharmed,’ he answered. ‘I never thought of him as a coward. Arrogant, jealous, cruel, and unscrupulous, yes, he was all those. But I had always considered him a brave man. It took courage to start the rebellion, and even more, I should think, to hold those seventy men in check up here over the months. But it seems he took no part in the fight, directing his men from well in the rear, and escaping entirely when we arrived. Oh, well,’ he said, shrugging his shoulders, ‘you never know, perhaps his nerve broke. Anyway he was executed this morning. The Governor told us not to bring him back alive.’

The captain came back again in the evening. He wanted to talk about the future. Naturally, they wanted to release the dam as soon as possible, and they were only waiting for us to get well enough before they moved.

‘We’re going to break down about half the dam first,’ he told us, ‘and the main party will make their way back down the cavern while the water level is low enough for it to be a simple journey. I shall stay behind with five volunteers, and after they have had time to get back we shall release the other half. If the seventy rebels got up here with the river in full torrent we ought to be able to get back the same way.’

Johnny protested at this.

‘You’re certain to be swept away,’ he said. ‘The rebels

## *The Perilous Descent*

were desperate men. Their lives depended on fighting their way successfully up the cavern. It's ridiculous for you to risk your necks like that. If we could fly up the cavern, why can't we loosen the second half of the dam after you've all left, and then fly down again above the water?"

The captain was reluctant to agree to this, but we finally persuaded him. The *Lightning* was in perfect flying order. She had not been touched by the rebels, who had been anxious only to break the dam and to destroy us, which had fully occupied them. Her batteries would still give another eighteen hours' flying – or about 3,700 miles. The journey back to the City could not be more than sixty miles!

'This evening, then,' the Captain said at last, getting up to leave, 'I'll send half a dozen of my men back to give warning that the river will start flowing tomorrow.' He smiled down at us. 'Thanks to you there'll be some celebrating in Red Valley tomorrow. I'd better warn you that when they hear about your action you'll be fêted, dined, and decorated until you're dizzy!'

He called good night cheerfully from the doorway, and we were left alone again.

The next day, still stiff and sore, and plastered with bandages, we were able to get up. As we limped out of the hut we were met with a tremendous reception from the Wardens gathered round in a half-circle about us. There was roaring, cheering, and clapping, and we were carried shoulder high – with many cries of 'Gently with them', 'Steady there, they're bruised all over' – down to the dam.

Six Wardens were ready with picks and crowbars on the dam, but before they started work Captain Grant Green, a fine figure in his gold-edged uniform, delivered a short speech from a platform especially erected for the occasion.

Most of what he said concerned us – how we had descended like gods of deliverance from an unknown world

## Danny Black

far above, how we had planned with the Governor this expedition, designed our flying machine, without which he could not see how the rebels could ever have been defeated, and so on.

The gathering of Wardens kept their eyes on us throughout this part of the speech, and Johnny and I, standing beside him on the platform, waited in an agony of embarrassment for him to finish.

‘Our land has been dragged to the very brink of disaster,’ concluded the captain, ‘by a gang of rogues. We have saved ourselves and destroyed them utterly. But the real victory still lies ahead. We must tell ourselves that these rebels were a part of *us*; we, all of us, are responsible for their behaviour, and we must see that never again do we allow them to grow up in our midst.

‘And,’ he shouted with all the power he could muster, ‘we must return to Red Valley determined to kill the mistrust, the fear, and the hatred that has grown in all of us since the rebellion. For, if we do not, sure enough there will be more bloodshed, more misery ahead for us – and eventually destruction, total destruction.’

He paused a moment, the tension eased, and in a lighter voice he called triumphantly, ‘Pull down the dam, there, let the water flow.’

There was another great burst of cheering, the assembly broke up, and we all gathered about the dam as the six Wardens attacked it vigorously.

Boulder after boulder, mixed with the slabs of turf, fell crashing into the ravine, and the water became, from a mere trickle, suddenly a fast stream, then a great torrent, pouring with a roar over the broken dam, down into the old river-bed.

The men worked with a sort of desperate fury, hacking and heaving, slowly retreating as they broke down the wall; and as the waterfall gained power it broke away more of the



'Pull down the dam, let the water flow'

## Danny Black

dam beneath it, throwing the boulders on to the rocks below with a thunderous roar above its own sound.

Running along the edge of the ravine we followed the first of the water down, watching it hissing and surging over the dried bed. But soon it outpaced us, and we stood and watched it rushing triumphantly over the boulders that had not felt its touch for months, towards the black mouth of the cavern.

The Wardens stopped working only when the river had reached half its normal level. Then immediately preparations were made to strike camp. Leaving behind much of their arms and equipment to make the hazardous journey easier, the first party set off an hour later. In the evening we accompanied Captain Green's party to the mouth of the cavern, and, after assurances that we should be with them again in twenty-four hours, we said good-bye and watched them descend, roped together for safety, down the ravine to the river-bed.

The fifty Wardens, the captain in the lead with a large torch ready to light the way, scrambled over the rocks beside the rushing river and disappeared slowly one by one into the darkness.

We were quite alone now, for the first time since we had fallen into Red Valley. Away from the roar of the river something of the chill loneliness we had known in those early hours beneath the earth stole over us. We had twenty hours to wait, to allow all the Wardens to return safely, before we could begin work on the remaining half of the dam.

'First of all,' Johnny suggested, as we wandered back slowly towards the old encampment, 'let's get everything ready for tomorrow. Stow away the things we need in the *Lightning*, have a good look over the engine - might even give her a trial flight.'

## *The Perilous Descent*

I wasn't so sure about the last idea though.

'One take-off from that strip will be enough for me,' I said, 'and after the last landing I don't fancy another just for the fun of it.'

'Don't mind doing it solo,' persisted Johnny, but it was my turn to take the controls now, and I remained firm, and finally he agreed.

So we gathered together the tools and the emergency provisions and ferried them from the lake shore at the mouth of the river in a small sort of coracle the rebels had built, across to the sandy strip on the other side, close to the *Lightning*.

She was standing there on her comically high under-carriage just as we had left her.

During the remaining part of our wait we examined our little fort and reconstructed the extraordinary battle we had fought, wandered about the encampment, noting how cleverly and meticulously they had built their huts, and studied for some time their own remarkable fort.

They must have worked for weeks building the circular twelve-foot-high rock wall. Inside, at carefully spaced intervals, were the slings that had bombarded us with rocks so successfully. They were a development of the early medieval weapon. Eight-foot lengths of stalactite, slim and as strong as steel, had been sunk into V-shaped ditches and fixed at the base so that they could be swung freely to and fro, and swivelled from side to side to allow fire to be directed to any point. At the end was secured a six-foot looped length of closely-plaited fibrous weed, wide and slightly concave in the centre. Into this bag the rock was placed and the pole was drawn close to the ground away from the target. One man must then have held the rock in its pouch while two or three others had swung the pole rapidly through 180 degrees, the rock releasing itself at the top of its swing. It must have been hard work to keep up a



## *Danny Black*

rapid rate of fire, but the ingenuity, considering they had practically no tools, was amazing. Reserve ammunition – piles of rocks heaped in pyramids like cannon balls – was still scattered about inside the fort.

The strip of cultivated land had been carefully planned, the crops being planted to provide a continuous supply of cereals, root crops, and soft fruit, though we could not understand how they had managed to bring with them the necessary seeds.

The next morning, after a peaceful night in one of the huts, we paddled once again across the narrow bay of the lake, and made our way – past the mound of stones marking the communal grave of the rebels – to the dam to begin work. The pressure of water against the remaining half had broken some of it away, and the level of the river had already risen several feet.

Soon after midday we began work on the last of the dam. Piece by piece, boulder by boulder, we levered and hacked away, and the rocks and sods of earth went crashing into the torrent below. Slowly, retreating all the time to the bank, we broke it down. By mid-afternoon the last of it had been swept away and the enormous force of water was pouring down in its old strength, down the ravine, into the twenty-mile-long cavern and through into Red Valley, where once again it would be harnessed to provide life for the people.

We stood back, wiping the sweat from our foreheads, and watched the torrent tear past us.

Johnny cupped his hands to my ear and shouted, ‘Do you think we had better have a look at the cavern before we take off?’

I shook my head; it didn’t seem necessary.

‘We’d better,’ he bawled and pulled me by the arm.

Reluctantly I followed him along the edge of the ravine away from the lake towards the cliffs.

We turned a slight bend and came into sight once again of

## *The Perilous Descent*

the cavern – and stopped suddenly, stunned by what we saw.

What had we done as we thoughtlessly smashed away the remains of the dam? It was only too clear now. For the fresh torrent had risen higher and higher, pouring into the cavern mouth until there were only nine or ten feet between the tossing, surging water and the roof of the opening. To try to fly *Lightning* through that narrow gap would be suicide.

An hour later we sat side by side in the *Lightning*'s cockpit talking over this new development. Of course it shouldn't have been an unexpected one. We should have remembered the enormous flow of water that must have poured through the cavern before – enough to supply almost the entire needs of the people of Red Valley, for rain fell only very rarely and in small quantities from the high layer of cloud.

But after the first shock of realization that we were trapped, we became less depressed.

'Sometime or other,' Johnny was saying, 'we've got to tackle the problem of getting back to the world. Anyway, I've no intention of staying here for the rest of my life. We know there's no way out from Red Valley –'

'What about finding that ledge again and going back the way we came with a two-hundred-foot ladder?' I interrupted.

'Jump out of *Lightning* as she flies past?' scoffed Johnny. 'Don't be daft, Blackie. Anyway it would take a hundred years to find the spot.'

'Still, we've got to get up again somehow and I don't suppose we ever should from Red Valley,' I agreed reluctantly.

Johnny went on, 'Look, we've got plenty of food, and *Lightning* will fly us for nearly four thousand miles on its batteries. The level of the river will probably drop a few feet after this first surge, but we'll never be able to fly through, I'm sure. And I don't fancy that twenty-mile

## Danny Black

clamber. So why don't we reconnoitre this place?' He looked out across the lake which disappeared away into the distance between the sheer cliffs. 'There's a better chance of finding our way out from here than from Red Valley.'

I had to agree, and I had to admit that the thought of that reception we had been promised had been worrying me. But I didn't like the idea of leaving the security, perhaps for ever, of the Governor and the good people of Red Valley . . . without even saying good-bye!

We decided there and then on this reversal of plan, to explore this huge fissure in an attempt to find a way up through the twelve miles or so that separated us from the surface of the earth. We returned to the encampment and stocked up with more of the reserves of food left behind by the Wardens, enough, we calculated, for at least a month. These we stowed behind the cockpit in the *Lightning*. Then we dragged her back across the strip (no easy job in the soft sand) and cleared away some of the rocks from the 'runway', and started up.

*Lightning's* engines ran sweetly. We made a routine check of batteries and hydraulic pressure, and swung her as near into the wind as we could, and took off. I took her low once over the old encampment, over the ravine with its white-flecked surging torrent, and our little fort where we had battled for our lives, and then out across the lake, setting course between the towering cliffs.

With our useful supply of food and ropes, tools and torches, besides our old dinghy, guns and parachutes, we felt better equipped than before to find our way up – and out to the surface of the earth.

## CHAPTER 10

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Johnny Wild". The signature is written in black ink on a white background. The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent underline at the end.

*The Last of Lightning - The Dark Endless Corridors -  
The Subterranean River - The Chimney*

OUR search for a way back to the earth seemed endless, and from the beginning almost hopeless. Unlike most journeys, we never had an idea where we were, and we never knew when the end might come. We might continue until we fell dead from exhaustion, or the blessed light of day might suddenly at any minute pour down on us through a crack in the surface of the earth.

Blackie flew us for nine hours without incident, across the cold, still lake between the sheer inaccessible cliffs. Then, at the limit of our endurance if we wanted to return, we discussed whether to carry on until our batteries were exhausted, in the hope of finding a break in the valley, or swing round back to the encampment. But we quickly decided to risk carrying on; the more we saw of this dark, deserted fiord the more intense was our determination to get back to the earth again at any cost.

An hour later, after covering over 2,000 miles in all, we sighted the end of the valley. The two walls began to close in, but the lake still lapped the base of the cliffs on all sides. There was no question of landing, so we did the only thing possible - climbed; climbed for over an hour, to and fro, constantly turning between the cliffs.

We rose to the point where the intense red light shone from the quartz in the rock, half-blinding us and warming us uncomfortably. Then the light faded and we were above

## *Johnny Wild*

it, and the lake and the valley below disappeared as we climbed higher into the same swirling mist that we had fallen through weeks before. Blackie's instinct was superb; without any instruments that would be of use, and with only two or three miles between the cliffs, he took us through the cloud layer and into the clear air above.

As we rose above it the scene suddenly changed. By the dimmer light we saw that the cliffs rose now more gently – at a mere forty-five degrees on one side – and they were studded with countless volcanic craters of all sizes from a few feet to a hundred yards across, similar, but on a vaster scale, to a cliffside pock-marked with seagulls' nests. Above us the walls closed in again suddenly in a great concave roof.

This time we faced a more awful decision: we could either glide back down to the lake, 'ditching' and taking to the dinghy when our batteries were exhausted; crash-land on the gentlest-sloping patch we could find; or – fly into one of the craters as we had entered the cavern from Red Valley.

After a quick survey of the rock-strewn slope we knew at once what we should do. Blackie reduced speed to the minimum, lowered flaps and slots and switched on the lights. Crossing our fingers once again, we flew into the gaping black mouth of the largest crater.

Inside, the tunnel rose and widened considerably. We kept the speed down as low as we dared, our lights picking out clearly the rocky floor and walls, and took turns at the controls, for we could not afford to relax for a second. At any moment the walls might close in on us, and then our only chance of survival was to cut off the power and stall her in as quickly as we could.

As each corner and rise or fall showed up in the beam of our lights the controls had to be adjusted immediately; whoever was in the pilot's seat had to be constantly on the alert, while the other rested and snatched brief moments of sleep.

For hour after hour we followed the tunnel, until we

## *The Perilous Descent*

reckoned that our batteries must be all but exhausted. Then we began to look out for a possible place to crash-land.

But one engine died slowly, and the other suddenly cut dead before we found any sort of clearing. We just had time to fling open the hood and tighten our straps before, with a deafening, splintering roar, we struck.

Poor old *Lightning!* Her rusted remains will lie in that uncharted cavern below the earth till the end of time. She had served us well, and she let us off in the end with only a few more bruises – and a nasty gash above my left eye.

Loaded down with as much equipment as we could carry, we left her there and carried on on foot.

It was a long, dull march. For twenty-seven days, walking fourteen hours and resting ten, we carried on, troubled only by the heavy, impenetrable darkness which, despite our torches, weighed down and depressed us – and the shortage of water. We could carry comfortably only enough for three days, but the underground streams were few and at irregular intervals, and many times we had to decide whether to carry on for a few more hours in the hope of finding fresh supplies, or return to the last source and refill our bottles. But we never once turned back, and over all those hundreds of miles we never once allowed ourselves to be diverted up the numerous small side turnings that branched off the main tunnel.

Of our direction we had no idea. We both had compasses, but they were quite unreliable and swung haphazardly from one point to another. As the days wore on and in the dark, heavily-overbearing atmosphere our spirits sank, we often wondered if we were travelling in a great circle and would find ourselves suddenly facing the open crater mouth, helplessly trapped 40,000 or so feet above the subterranean lake.

There was nothing to do but to keep plodding on. On the twenty-eighth day we heard a very faint distant roar. At first

## *Johnny Wild*

we were not sure that our ears were not deceiving us, but as the day wore on it became perceptibly louder, and at eight o'clock in the evening, our normal hour for resting, it sounded so near that we determined to reach it that night.

An hour later our torches shone down on a fast-flowing river that cut at right angles across our path, barring our way.

After so many nights of oppressive silence it was good to lie down by its banks and to eat our dull supper with the rushing and beating of water in our ears. But the next day we had to face the fact that we must either turn back or take to the river in our dinghy – which we still carried, together with the rest of our original equipment – and sail down it until we could land again at the mouth of another tunnel and continue our journey.

We just could not face retracing our steps, with the probability that we should only strike some cul-de-sac; besides, our food supplies, despite strict rationing over the past ten days, could not last more than a week.

So we inflated our little dinghy and, discarding our tools and much more of our heavy baggage, and lashing the rest of our luggage as firmly as we could, we pushed off from the bank and were immediately swept into the fast-flowing current.

This was the most uncomfortable and hair-raising part of our journey, brief though it was. The river twisted and turned between sharp boulders, dropping swiftly over rough rapids and then flowing gently, smoothly towards another drop. Our tiny craft, with no steering-gear and nothing better than the palms of our hands for paddles, was spun this way and that, throwing us out time and again into the icy water. We often found it best for one to hang on behind, roughly guiding the dinghy, holding it down the steepest falls as best we could, while the other hung on tightly, shone the torch ahead and passed directions.

## *The Perilous Descent*

After four hours of this we were all in, and we had to rest a while on a big boulder before we could continue.

Then, at three in the afternoon, we saw that most wonderful of things towards which we had been struggling for so long. Suddenly, totally unexpectedly, as we were manhandling the dinghy over a sharp fall without for the moment the aid of a torch, we noticed that a faint white ray of light seemed to be touching the water about us. We must both have looked up at the same second, for we shouted simultaneously, a great spontaneous shout of triumph.

There, way up a giant chimney above us, shining in glorious splendour, was a tiny circle of DAYLIGHT.

We held ourselves still in the water with the river running past us, the dinghy between us, and stared up until our necks ached with the strain. Then we moored to a flat-topped rock, and lay on our backs, drinking in the good healthy white daylight we had not seen for eight weeks.

Perhaps half an hour had passed before Blackie, echoing my thoughts, said, 'By heaven it's wonderful to see it again – but how the blazes do we ever get any nearer to it?'

The excitement remained, but we had to face that very problem soon, and at first sight it seemed an almost hopeless one. The natural chimney was some forty feet across, and went up vertically perhaps three hundred feet. Our torches shone on only the first fifty feet or so, but the beam showed almost nothing in the way of a foothold. It looked quite inaccessible; just the same, we were going to attempt that climb if it was the last thing we did – as well it might be!

We had talked very little over the past few weeks; for hours at a time a heavy silence had rested between us. Our minds had been dulled by the monotony of the journey; our thoughts had been depressing, and so would have been our conversation. But that evening, half-lying on the up-turned dinghy on the rock, we were too excited to sleep.



## *Johnny Wild*

We talked of the 'Battle of the Dam', of the poor old *Lightning* and of the strange little country we had probably saved from destruction.

At one point Blackie asked, 'How do you reckon Red Valley originated? I mean, as a civilization, it must have had some sort of origin.'

I had often worried about this point since we had dropped into the country. It must, after all, have been a very recent civilization, and obviously with British roots because of the language.

'Don't you think,' I suggested, 'that, like most old fables, the story of the boat-load of refugees being swept into the valley is based on fact. My history is not so good, but couldn't it have been a ship-load of religious refugees fleeing to the new America. They might have got caught in a freak storm or been sucked down by some volcanic upheaval and thrown below the sea-bed, where a few survived, finding their way eventually to Red Valley through some tunnel that had now closed up. Sounds fantastic, but it's the only thing I can think of. If the truth could ever be discovered, what a wonderful story it would make!'

We thought for a while of that strange, highly advanced people living miles below the earth, unaware of the great outside world. And we were the only people alive to tell of their existence! Would anyone believe us? I put it to Blackie.

'Much better not to say a word,' he said firmly. 'I've no intention of landing in an asylum for the rest of my life. Anyway,' he went on, 'they're quite happy without us. Despite the rebellion, they seem to manage things better than we do. By the way,' he said suddenly, changing the subject, 'I wonder how the war is getting on. I wonder if they've finished off old Hitler yet.'

So we chatted on far into the night – or the night as we calculated it should have been. We had both kept our watches, which were good timekeepers, going since we had

## *The Perilous Descent*

first baled out. There was still only five minutes difference between them. Mine was showing eleven-thirty, and yet the light was almost as bright as it had been six hours before. The chill thought struck us that perhaps after all it was not daylight at all but the phosphorescent glow of some white quartz. But, we reasoned, it must be the light of the sun; nothing else could have such power, casting its light through a tiny aperture to such a depth. Then, as confirmation, at half past two in the morning it visibly dimmed, and half an hour later darkness fell.

Neither of us would believe that our watches were so much out – and yet . . .

Suddenly I saw it. Of course, we had been travelling for many hundreds, even thousands of miles. Unless we had kept due north or south or had completed a circle, we were bound to have gained or lost time.

We both did some quick mental arithmetic. Say darkness fell here, wherever we were, at eight-thirty, that meant our watches were six hours ahead. Fifteen degrees longitude for each hour gained indicated we had travelled west across ninety degrees longitude.

‘Don’t forget Double British Summer Time,’ reminded Blackie. ‘That knocks off two hours.’ Which made it only sixty degrees. But it only told us that we were roughly sixty degrees west of Greenwich, and we might be anywhere between the North and South Poles on that line.

It seemed likely, though, that we were going to emerge somewhere on the American continent.

Blackie was exasperated. ‘Let’s wait till we get up and ask someone,’ he said disgustedly.

The following dawn was the finest either of us had ever seen. We watched silently as the blackness turned to a slight grey in the tiny circle above us, then slowly to the full light of day.

Then we began our first reconnaissance, wading through

## *Johnny Wild*

the river to the bank, surveying the first part of the climb up the rocks. There were foot-holds here and there, little cracks and ledges, and while Blackie held the torch I went up twenty feet or so to see how it looked higher up. Looking down at the rock-strewn river I decided we must clear as much of it as possible. 'It would at least give us a chance,' I said clambering down again. 'If we fall we may as well land in the water, even if it's not very deep. Might just save our necks.'

It was heavy work. Waist deep in the strong current, we struggled to move as many of the boulders as we could, rolling them downstream to form something of a dam and so increase the depth of the water. If we kept to one side of the chimney we had a good chance of missing any rocks in a fall.

By midday we were ready to start. Again we discarded – this time more drastically – everything not absolutely essential, taking with us only our soaked guns, a day's supply of food in our battledress blouses, our knives, and the best length of rope, which we tied firmly about our waists. We kept on our tattered old boots and strapped everything else into the dinghy, which we secured to a rock – just in case.

Blackie led off. He'd had some rock-climbing experience in Cumberland and the Highlands. I followed at the end of the fifteen-foot rope.

The first fifty feet was easy enough, then we began to go more cautiously. It was going to be a sheer, almost perpendicular climb all the way, and it was this that worried me most. I am no climber, and have a bad head for heights; I was not at all sure I could resist panicking without a ledge, however narrow, to rest and restore my nerve. Fortunately it was so dark that the river below was hardly visible, and the only measure of our progress was the ever-widening circle of light above.

## *The Perilous Descent*

Blackie soon sensed my fear, though he said nothing. He climbed deliberately slowly so as not to make me feel rushed, passing back quiet, unhurried directions. 'Right foot into that crack, left hand here . . . now swing up your other foot. . . . Never take the weight off a foot until you're sure of your hand-grip.'

Somehow or other he managed to keep the torch on the whole time, transferring it to his mouth when he needed both his hands. Without that light we would soon have lost our balance.

We must have been almost half-way up when Blackie stopped, his ankles close to my face. I saw him shining the torch up, playing the beam over the smooth rock right above us. I waited impatiently, easing my weight from one straining foot to the other in turn. The sweat was pouring into my eyes, stinging and half-blinding me, but I couldn't move my hand to wipe it away. I wanted to keep going. Any halt strained my nerves almost to breaking point. But I held back my impatience; I knew Blackie was trying to map out the next move.

Perhaps we remained like that for only thirty seconds, but it seemed like thirty minutes before he turned his head. 'There only one way up the next bit,' he said. 'There's not the sign of a hold for the next twenty feet, but there's a perpendicular fissure about four feet across. We shall have to crawl up it horizontally. You place your back flat against one wall, feet against the other, and you ease your way up rather like a caterpillar. Easy when you get used to it.'

We moved two or three yards to the right, and he shifted his body into the fissure, shining his torch on to himself to show me the correct position. Then with the rope taut between us I followed him and fitted myself into the gully. After climbing for so long like a spider on a wall it felt wonderfully secure. The back took most of the strain, and I wished we could rise the rest of the way like that.

## *Johnny Wild*

But sixty feet higher, where the chimney narrowed, we had to prepare to climb out to the open face again. I was about all in; my head was spinning, every muscle in my body was stinging with the tension. The drop below us now must be enormous, and I struggled to free my mind of fear.

I could hear Blackie above, breathing in short gasps. 'Only another . . . thirty feet or . . . so,' he panted. 'Don't crack . . . up now . . . Johnny.' He tugged slightly at the rope to indicate that we must start on the last lap.

It was worse than anything we had encountered before. The hard, firm rock had changed to a loose, insecure slate threaded with earth. No hold was really dependable, and before applying any pressure we had to scrape out a niche with our fingers and kick an indentation with our torn boots. Dazed with weariness and strain, I knew this was the real crisis; I realized the bitter irony of being killed here after passing through so many dangers, and gritted my teeth and dragged up a final determination. The daylight, the wonderful pure light of the sun, was pouring down directly above us, but I only felt its heat on my already soaking body.

I was dimly aware of Blackie beside me, placing my fingers into the tiny crannies, directing each movement, but silently now, for his strength too was strained almost beyond endurance.

'Hold yourself . . . just there . . . don't move . . .' he whispered hoarsely.

I clung flat against the rough, earth-smelling face and felt him slip away above me, the loose shale falling on to my head and shoulders as he climbed up.

An eternity passed. My nerve had broken entirely; I was incapable of any further effort, and my mind wandered dazedly. A dozen times I imagined myself twisting over and over, helplessly, to crash a torn and battered wreck below. Only a last animal instinct locked my muscles taut and held me against the rock.

## *The Perilous Descent*

Then the pressure tightened about my waist and I felt the rope easing me up. Blackie's voice came floating down, 'Take it slowly, you're all right now.'

I realized that he was over the top and had the rope securely fixed. My mind awoke and forced me to a final desperate effort. I gripped tightly with one hand, and with the other and with both feet scrambled up the last few yards.

Blackie had his arms under my shoulders. As he hauled me over the edge he gasped in my ear, 'Well done, Johnny!'

And we rolled over on to our backs side by side, feeling the luxury of life flowing back into our torn limbs, with the sun's rays pouring down on to us from a clear blue sky, half-laughing and half-crying with the glory of being alive.

## CHAPTER 11

*Danny Black*

*The Stalled Tank – The Last Clash –  
The Death Prison*

WE had never known such tranquillity, such perfect peace before in our lives. At last, after two months in an underworld where we had known fear and horror and weariness – and for a brief time only, security – we were again in our natural environment on the surface of the earth, with the sky above, a fresh, pure breeze blowing and the warm, life-giving sun beating down on us.

If we had not been young and fit we could never have come through alive. Just for that last terrible struggle up out of the darkness we had needed every ounce of our strength. But after a long rest on the rough grassland close to the brink of the hole, we could both sit up and grin triumphantly at one another.

‘Some climb!’ said Johnny, and his voice in the open air, after the weeks in the booming tunnels, sounded strangely free and toneless. ‘Thanks for the last leg up. I’ll give you full marks for rock climbing in future.’ He stood up stiffly, grunting with the pain, and surveyed himself. ‘All seems to be in one piece, anyway, though I don’t think we can call ourselves glamour boys.’

We were both caked in dust and filth, fragments of our old battledresses were streaked and smeared with blood, and the blood had oozed through the dirt in patches on our arms and legs – and particularly on our fingers where the

## *The Perilous Descent*

nails were torn and splintered from digging into the soft shale on the last few feet of the climb.

He painfully untied with his swollen fingers the rope still around his waist and I stood up beside him. We surveyed together the country about us.

'This must be about the first time in the history of exploration,' said Johnny, 'that anyone has been so completely ignorant of their whereabouts. I suppose we must be on the American continent somewhere, and by the temperature for the autumn it's somewhere south of the middle states of the U.S.A., but otherwise our guess might be about six thousand miles out. However,' he added practically, 'we shall soon find out.'

'Perhaps it's a small island,' I suggested.

'Perhaps it's Mexico, Peru, or Jamaica, but there's no point in guessing. Let's get moving. At least we haven't got much luggage to worry about, but we shall soon need food and drink.'

The chimney had certainly led us to a barren and unpromising bit of country. We were standing now, a few yards from the brink of the narrow hole, in a shallow, desolate valley. On two sides the ground rose gently to low, rocky hills, sparsely spread with tufts of coarse grass and stunted trees. At each end the valley widened out to a flat plain that looked half-desert. Already, well before midday, the heat was becoming intense, bringing with it a low haze that restricted visibility. We were eager to discover what lay beyond.

Considering the state we were in, we set off in high spirits. There was already very little indeed left of our clothes, which were so filthy that it was difficult to distinguish them from our caked, naked flesh; and the blood from many cuts had matted our hair.

But the joy of being back on earth was enough; though our first steps were painful, we were soon talking together



*Danny Black*

excitedly of the future – of meeting people, of giant meals, of long, lingering hot baths, and eventually home – as we started north out of the valley.

We spent some time on that hot afternoon guessing aimlessly what colour the first human being we met would be. Johnny, conservatively, favoured white.

‘There’s no romance in you,’ I jeered. ‘I shall guess yellow, with little slit eyes and a two-bladed sword –’

‘No, not a sword,’ Johnny protested. ‘Anything but a sword. I don’t want to see one ever again, even in a museum. What’s the matter with a nice civilized white man?’

We killed time discussing all the merits of white, yellow, brown, and black skins. But while the sun was still high, and the bare plain, still smudged with haze, was all about us, we saw in the distance a single solitary figure, and we knew we should have an answer soon, as well as food and drink and rest.

At fifty yards we could distinguish his colour; it was a slightly oily brown. ‘South American – Spanish or Portuguese descendant,’ muttered Johnny, and we hurried forward to meet him, a small man shuffling hesitantly towards us.

But it soon looked as though he was in greater need of assistance than even we were. His clothes were torn almost as badly as ours, and he was plastered with mud and grease, and there was a lost, appealing expression on his face.

We both stopped a little way from one another, three lost men in a desert, weighing one another up uncertainly. The little brown man had a heavy Colt revolver tucked in his belt. He touched it nervously with his long, oily brown fingers.

I tried to smile reassuringly at him; Johnny was suspicious. But we couldn’t just stand like this for ever.

## *The Perilous Descent*

'We are lost,' I said, and the man's dark eyes flashed to my face. 'Can you tell us where we are, and where we can find food and water?'

Suddenly he seemed reassured. He shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, but he was grinning back at me. Then he unleashed a torrent of Spanish at us, and we both stepped forward and shook his hand.

He was eager to take us back the way he had come; that at least we could understand. He propelled us about, and taking Johnny's arm with one hand and mine with the other, we set off across the scrubby plain.

The word 'Gonzales' kept recurring in his almost unceasing flow of talk. 'Gonzales', 'Gonzales', over and over again.

'Do you reckon it's his name or the name of the village he's taking us to?' queried Johnny.

'Search me. I don't much mind so long as we get a wash, food, drink and a bed soon.'

After a mile or so 'Gonzales' loomed up out of the haze. It was a tank!

If we had guessed the first thousand things we should meet back on earth a tank wouldn't have been among them. A tank! An old-fashioned, rather battered tank, with a little gun – perhaps a two-pounder – sticking from the turret, stalled in the middle of a desert. And scrawled across the turret in rough white letters was the name 'Gonzales'.

At first we giggled, then as we caught one another's eye we laughed louder and louder, doubling up. We sat down on the dusty earth and nearly burst with laughter at the stupid-looking tank, standing rather high and prim in the middle of the desert. A tank, when after months of semi-starvation, danger, and strain all we wanted was a little comfort!

The little brown man was obviously offended. After a while Johnny got up and was led, still giggling, to 'Gonzales'.

## *Danny Black*

Another man appeared through a hatch, climbed down, and after a brief greeting opened up the engine cover. Johnny bent over the engine; he was passed some tools and began his examination. I joined him and watched his quick, expert survey.

'Petrol feed trouble. That's all it is,' he muttered. He unscrewed the thin feed line to the carburettor and blew hard. His cheeks bulged with the pressure, and then it was clear. He reconnected the pipe and tickled the carburettor and indicated with a twirl of the arm that they should crank up.

The second man, a larger, more formidable soldier, but with a very stupid-looking face, jumped down from the top of the tank and rotated the starting handle vigorously. At the third attempt the ancient engine sprang into life, filling the desert with its wheezy roar. The two soldiers smiled at us, pleased and grateful, and waved us aboard.

'Take us somewhere where we can get food and rest, for goodness sake,' bawled Johnny. They grinned back at us, nodding their heads, but obviously not understanding. I indicated my open mouth and rubbed my hands against my cheeks. Johnny said shortly, 'Don't be daft. They won't know what that means. They've never washed in their lives.'

The first soldier clambered into the driving-seat forward of the turret, the bigger man disappeared through the aft hatch, and we both jumped up on to the hot metal armour plate as the clutch was let in, and with an awful lurch we staggered off across the plain.

We stood perilously each side of the gun, clutching its slim barrel with both hands as we crawled noisily forward at about five miles an hour.

'Quite a triumphant return to civilization after all,' shouted Johnny.

'I'll believe it when I see it.' The driver seemed to have no idea of direction, and it appeared to amuse him to lock one

## *The Perilous Descent*

track and swing through 20 to 45 degrees either way. 'We shall be out of petrol before we get anywhere,' I added.

As the sun began to fall in the west the hazy mist lifted and we could see that the plain about us was not so big as we had imagined. The valley from which we had walked was five or six miles behind us, and on either side some ten miles away was a low range of barren hills. The driver, sure now of his direction, was taking us towards a winding, dirty river, crossed apparently by a rough bridge, while beyond a track led over a ridge, we supposed, to our destination.

Glancing back again, I saw with a shock of surprise a group of riders pounding across the plain behind us. Twelve, fifteen of them? It was hard to distinguish at the distance. I caught Johnny's arm and pointed. He shaded his eyes and watched them closely for a moment. 'Better report them to the boss,' he said.

The little soldier was immediately frantically alarmed. He stopped the tank and stood on his steel driving-seat, gave them a quick glance, drew his heavy Colt and crashed the butt repeatedly on the gun turret. The second soldier appeared like a jack-in-the-box, glanced briefly at the now fast-approaching cavalry, and disappeared as rapidly, banging the hatch firmly shut after him.

The driver handed me his big Colt with a quick incomprehensible explanation. Then we lurched forward again in top gear at obviously maximum speed towards the bridge. The riders, now less than a mile away, were fanning out.

'Why do we always have to get mixed up with other people's wars,' grumbled Johnny. We now lay flat across the hot tank, expecting the gun muzzle to swing round towards our attackers at any minute. But it was soon apparent that the rotating mechanism was as inefficient as the engine. The hatch sprang open again and the big soldier reappeared, looking more flustered than ever. He shrieked at the driver,

## *Danny Black*

who, with miraculous intelligence, swung the tank round, aiming it roughly at the cavalry.

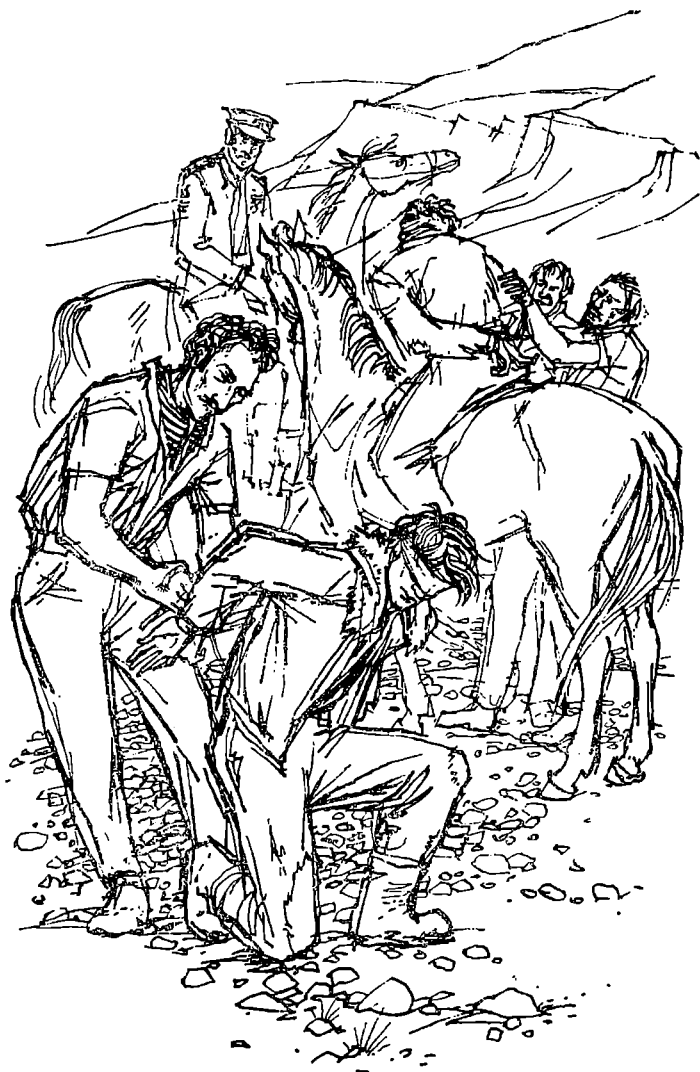
We crouched as far from the muzzle as we could, and I wondered if I ought to fire the Colt; our own guns were clogged with rust and filth and useless. Not having any real quarrel with them, I decided against, and waited for the first shell.

With a sharp crack the gun went off. Aimed haphazardly in the general direction of the advancing riders, there was little hope of doing any damage. A little puff of sand sprang up thirty yards from the nearest horse.

The end came very quickly then. The driver stalled the engine in a hasty attempt to continue the retreat, and I noticed that in any case the bridge had been blown in the centre. The cavalry surrounded us in a few seconds, the riders holding back their impatient horses in a circle some two hundred yards from us. Then they slowly closed in. Twice more the gun fired uselessly. But our two friends did have a little courage left. The driver grabbed back his Colt from me, the other appeared brandishing a similar weapon, and crouching as low as they could, fired carefully at the advancing riders. Their shots passed perilously over our heads, and as the return fire came pouring in in steady volleys, the bullets ricocheting off the steel hull of the tank and whining off into the desert, we dropped to the ground and lay stretched flat beside the tracks.

Our tank crew were carried off slightly wounded. Nothing would convince the attackers that we were neutral. We couldn't speak a word of their language, and we were given only a second, after we realized that we were being made prisoners, to shout, make useless signs and gesticulate. We were riding on an enemy tank that had fired at them. That was enough evidence.

Half a dozen tough, ruthless-looking, swarthy men,



Nothing would convince them that we were neutral

## *Danny Black*

cursing continuously, bound our wrists tightly, blindfolded us with foul-smelling strips of cloth, and took us away on their horses.

Late in the evening, after a long, painful ride, we were dragged off and marched away. We felt a smooth, even surface beneath our feet. All about us rose a chorus of human sound, the first we had heard for so long; but it was an unhappy sound of crying voices, brutal shouts, slamming doors, faint chinks of chains, and stamping of heavy boots. We realized at once that we were in the courtyard of a prison; but it was not before we had been marched a long way, occasionally tripping helplessly against sudden steps and bumping against hard walls, and after we had heard the close slamming of our own cell door, and the blindfolds were taken from our eyes, and we saw about us the stained, cold walls, the small, heavily-barred window of the cell in which we are writing these last words now.

Our captors left us without a word, the heavy door slammed behind us again, and we were alone, helpless, defeated finally after our long, terrible struggle back to the world.

## CHAPTER 12

Johnny Wild     Danny Black

THIS is where our story began, and surely it will end here. By some chance we have escaped being shot along with the hundreds of others who have fallen, riddled with bullets, in the yard outside our cell.

But during these last days while we have been writing, the sound of firing has grown louder. The machine guns have never ceased rattling, and the first shells have landed in the prison, crumpling the heavy stone walls like paper. Once or twice low-flying aircraft have flashed overhead and dropped bombs. Today the noise is greater than ever. Most of the guards have left to reinforce the defending troops. Shells are falling constantly, and our cell is thick with the dust of crashing masonry. It can be only a matter of time now before we are hit. . . .

And yet as we write, frantically now just for something to do, our eyes stinging from the smoke and dust, we can't quite believe that we will die trapped here, helpless against the onslaught, after all the deaths we have escaped. . . .



## POSTSCRIPT

BY

LIEUT-COLONEL MARK STEPHENSON, D.S.O., M.C.

LONG after I assembled and edited this story I read in one of the big daily papers:

### LOST MEN RETURN

#### TWO AIRMEN PRESUMED DEAD THREE YEARS AGO COME HOME

Flight Lieutenants Daniel Black and John Wild, missing on operations in 1944, reported 'Mission Completed' and handed in the report of their last action yesterday at Air Ministry — just three years late. Shot down over Europe after D-Day, they had hitch-hiked from South America in an old cargo boat. . . .

It must have been the strangest combat report in the Air Ministry files, for they took the Governor's advice and said nothing about Red Valley. I know because I traced them to a flat in London soon after. They were both tremendously fit and in high spirits, and burnt nearly black by the tropical sun. They were vague about their 'official' report and would tell me little. But they were excited that I had found the manuscript in the wreckage of Santeuala, amazed that I believed the story, and horrified when I said it must be published. They agreed in the end, however, after a lot of persuasion. And Johnny added a last short chapter.

## CHAPTER 13

Johnny Wild

### *How We Were Not Blown up*

FUNNILY enough, it's much harder to write now that it's all over and we're safe. I should never have thought that a foul, steaming-hot prison cell would be a good place to write in. But it took our minds off things, I suppose.

Just after we threw aside pencils and paper and decided it was time to lie flat and wait to be hit, a shell landed in the next-door cell with a tremendous crash, and almost immediately another exploded in the cell on the other side. We were lying on the stone floor, our arms over our heads, waiting for the direct hit that always follows the perfect straddle, chunks of plaster and stone falling all round us.

Exactly where it did hit I don't know, but the concussion threw us across the cell floor, locked in each other's arms – and out into the passage, for the door had vanished.

Picking ourselves up shakily, we saw vaguely through the thick swirling dust that most of the corridor had gone too; in fact, the whole wing of the prison was honeycombed with shell holes, and the debris lay high on all sides. One or two figures lurched dazedly through the dust, and there were several bodies of the trapped prisoners around.

Blackie tugged my arm and shouted above the uproar, 'Time we left, I think.'

We clambered over the piles of rubble. The shelling died down, then ceased altogether, and obviously the first wave of infantry would be pouring in in a minute. From our experience anybody and everybody was presumed to be

## *Johnny Wild*

hostile in this mad civil war; we had no desire to see either our late captors or our rescuers.

By a piece of good luck we soon came across a half-buried motor-bike. After digging out the wheels we examined it, found the tyres unpunctured, petrol in the tank, and after a couple of kicks at the starter, that it really did work. The exhaust blasted more dust into the air, and the noise echoed alarmingly among the now silent ruins.

As Blackie and I manhandled it out of the rubble several figures – they may have been jailers or ex-prisoners – came stumbling towards us. But we got it clear in time, and with Blackie on the pillion, raced off at full speed up a mountain track, away from the smoking ruins of the fortress and the advancing troops.

It was as simple as that. What happened after would fill a couple more books: we ran out of fuel five or six hours later on a barren plateau miles from anywhere, trekked to some low jungle country, where we eventually fetched up with some very unfriendly head-hunters. We were half-gods and half-captives for two years, and learnt how to keep our heads and even to live in some comfort.

We got away by canoe six months ago, and found our way to an Amazon village where we made our first contact with a European – a scientist – for nearly three years. From then on it was fairly simple, though we had to think up the most incredible stories to explain ourselves, and everyone eyed us suspiciously and obviously thought we ought to be in padded cells.

But it's good to be back in England again. We're not planning a return visit to Red Valley; that would be quite impossible, and we wouldn't even be welcome – the Governor was clear about that. We shall look around for a while, keeping our eyes open for anything that sounds interesting, but I don't think we can ever settle down to a nice quiet job.



NOT FOR SALE IN THE U.S.A.