

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Biggles And The Black Peril

W E Johns

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'There's a telegram for you, Lacey,' called Benton, a club instructor, who came out of the office as he passed.

'Telegram for me?' cried Algy in amazement. 'Who on earth—'He took the buff envelope and tore it open impatiently. It was addressed simply, Algy Lacey, Brooklands Aerodrome.

'Come at once, bring machine, Biggles captured. Waiting for you at Cramlington Aerodrome.

Ginger.'

Captain W. E. Johns was born in Hertfordshire in 1893. He flew with the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War and made a daring escape from a German prison camp in 1918. Between the wars he edited *Flying* and *Popular Flying* and became a writer for the Ministry of Defence. The first Biggles story, *Biggles the Camels are Coming* was published in 1932, and W. E. Johns went on to write a staggering 102 Biggles titles before his death in 1968.

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BIGGLES BOOKS
PUBLISHED IN THIS EDITION

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Biggles Delivers the Goods
Biggles Defends the Desert
Biggles Fails to Return

BIGGLES

and the

BLACK PERIL



CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS

RED FOX

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Chapter 1

Forced Down

The northern horizon, which for some time had been growing more and more indistinct, finally disappeared, and the dull, greeny-black sea merged into the grey canopy of the sky. Biggles leaned out of the cockpit of his Vandal amphibian* aeroplane, pushed up his goggles, and peered ahead anxiously. For a full minute he stared, and a frown creased his forehead as he looked back at Algy Lacey, sitting in the second pilot's seat beside him.

* A marine aircraft, with a boat-shaped hull for landing on water, which was also fitted with retractable wheels for use on land.

'I don't like it!' he shouted above the roar of the engine. 'That stuff'll start coming down presently.' He jerked his head at the forbidding cloud-mass above.

Algy indicated that he had heard by a grimace of annoyance. 'Typical English weather,' he reflected. The sun had been shining from a cloudless, blue, autumn sky when Biggles had rung him up that morning to suggest a joy-ride, a proposal to which he had readily agreed. They had travelled by road to Brook-lands Aerodrome, where they had parked the amphibian after their return from South America**, and after a short discussion as to the most desirable route, they had left the ground shortly after two o'clock.

** See *Biggles Flies Again*.

They had picked up the Thames, followed it as far as the estuary, and then turning north continued up the east coast. It had been their intention to find a suitable cove in which to land if the water was smooth enough, and have a picnic tea from a hamper which reposed in the cabin; alternatively, if the water was choppy, they would turn inland to one of the many north country aerodromes, and land on *terra firma*, leaving the ground in time to get back to Brooklands by dusk, which would be about six o'clock. The change in the weather had first been apparent as they were passing Felixstowe, but Biggles had held on to his course hoping it would improve. On the contrary it had grown steadily worse, until now, with the Wash behind them and the Lincolnshire coast two thousand feet below the keel, it had become definitely forbidding.

A wraith of white mist enveloped the machine with a clammy embrace, and blotted out the landscape. The noise of the engine faded suddenly as Biggles throttled back to lose height, and then sprang to life again as they sank through the vapour and the ground once more appeared below.

'Going back!' he yelled, and suiting the action to the word, swung the machine round and began to retrace his course. His frown deepened as he peered through the windscreen. From east to west, straight across their path, lay a dark, uniform, indigo belt that could only mean rain, and heavy rain at that. Land and sea, at a distance of a mile or two, were swallowed up in gloom. Then, as so often happens in such conditions, the moisture-laden sky above began to close down on them. Twice within five minutes the machine was enveloped in opaque mist, so thick that the wing tips were lost in it, and each time the pilot was compelled to lose height in order to keep the ground in sight. He jerked the

throttle wide open, and the bellow of the engine increased in volume as it jumped from cruising to maximum speed; the revolution counter needle vibrated, and crept upwards, and the air speed indicator leapt from ninety miles an hour to a hundred and ten.

They were now recrossing the Wash, and he touched his right rudder slightly in order to strike the coast, their only landmark, as quickly as possible; they were down to five hundred feet when it loomed dimly ahead. At the same moment a sharp spatter of rain struck them; it formed in curious little globules on the doped planes*, tiny beads of moisture that danced towards the trailing edge and then disappeared into space. Visibility quickly grew worse until he could only just see the ground from a hundred feet; so thick was it that at times it was difficult to tell whether land or sea lay below. He pushed his stick** forward a trifle, staring over the side, and saw that they were passing over a little natural creek. The water in it was smooth, for the storm had not yet had time to beat up a big sea, and he made up his mind with the promptness of long experience. The roar of the engine ceased abruptly; the Vandal tilted in a swift 'S' turn, sideslipped, flattened out, and cut a creamy wake across the smooth water of the creek.

* On aircraft where the wings were covered in fabric material, the fabric was coated in a chemical solution called dope to make them waterproof, taut and airproof.

** Slang for control column, a vertical lever or wheel, controlling the fore and aft and lateral movements of the aircraft.

'And that's that,' observed Algy philosophically, as the machine ran to a standstill.

'As you say, that's that,' agreed Biggles, unfastening the strap of his flying cap. 'And I don't mind telling you that I'm not sorry to be on the carpet. Did you ever see visibility cut right out like that in your life?'

'Never.'

'Nor I. Well, we're down and that's something,' went on Biggles. 'I haven't the remotest idea where we are, except that that bit of oozy looking marsh over there is part of Norfolk, and the liquid on which we are floating is the North Sea.'

'What are we going to do?'

'Taxi along this creek until we find a sheltered place to moor up, and men unpack that hamper. One thing I'm not going to do is to take off again in this soup; my goodness! hark at the rain!'

'If it keeps on it looks as if we're here for the night.'

'We are as far as I'm concerned,' declared Biggles, as he opened the throttle a trifle and began taxiing along the low, bleak shore. 'Here we are, what about this?'

At the spot indicated, a short, narrow arm of the creek felt its way through wire-grass covered sand hills that arose here and there from a swampy reed-covered plain.

'Do as well as anywhere,' agreed Algy. 'Go ahead; taxi right in and beach her here. I'll get out and have a look round.' He jumped ashore on firm sand and ran to the top of the nearest sand-hill. He was

back again in a moment. 'Nothing,' he said tersely, 'not a blooming thing in sight, although I can't see more than a hundred yards if it comes to that.'

'Well, come back in and let's have some tea; maybe the clouds will lift again presently.'

In this hope they were doomed to disappointment however, for an hour later, although the rain had stopped, the air was still thick with mist and visibility practically nil. Presently it began to grow dark.

'Nothing doing,' declared Biggles, 'it's clearing, I believe, but I'm not taking a chance. It will be as black as your hat in a few minutes, and night flying with fog about is not my idea of an amusing evening. What the dickens was that?' he went on in alarm, as the machine gave a sudden lurch. He put his head out of the cabin window and then laughed. 'We're a nice pair of fools,' he observed. 'Well, that settles it anyway, we're here for the night now without any argument.'

'Why, what is it?'

'The tide's gone out while we've been sitting here and left us high and dry; even if we could get our wheels down there isn't room to turn. No matter, it's safe anchorage, and we're well protected in this gully. It could blow a gale without hurting us.'

'But what about grub? We look like getting no dinner.'

'What a fellow you are; always thinking about your stomach. Let's get ashore and see if there is a house anywhere in sight. After all, we're in England, and in my experience one can't go far in England without bumping into a house of some sort.'

In this, however, he was not altogether correct, as a close examination of the desolate landscape quickly revealed. In all directions, as far as they could see in the gathering darkness, stretched a monotonous expanse of flat, bleak moorland, in which the receding tide had left sinister-looking rivers of mud. They tried to find a way through them, but quickly gave it up after slipping knee deep in slime at every other step.

'Come on, let's get back to the machine,' said Biggles disgustedly. 'There's no sense in drowning ourselves in this bog.'

'Hold hard a minute, what's that over there?' asked Algy, peering into the gloom.

'I can see what you mean; it's a building of some sort,' returned Biggles.

They picked their way carefully towards it, but their hopes of finding a human habitation were soon dashed to the ground. As they drew near, the building resolved itself into a small, square concrete structure, with a flat roof; a single window, an open unglazed square cut in the wall, overlooked the sea. A wooden door gave access to it on the landward side.

'Cheerful-looking hole,' observed Algy. 'You know a lot, perhaps you can tell me what sort of madman would build a place like that in a place like this, and what for?'

Biggles grinned. 'I think I can tell you that,' he replied. 'It looks like a relic of the War, one of those pillbox* affairs they built all round the coast. They were used as look-out posts or machine-gun emplacements probably, but I'm not quite sure about that. Watch your step for barbed wire and old

trenches. They had Territorials** putting up wire entanglements and digging trenches all round the east coast, and in many places, where the ground was not wanted for cultivation, they have been left just as they were at the end of the War. There you are, what did I tell you?' he went on, pointing to a zig-zag depression that wound its way through the sand-hills. On the seaward side of it was a row of rotting stakes and a tangle of barbed wire. "Yes, this is a bit of the War, there's no doubt of that," he concluded. 'Come on, let's get back.'

* A small reinforced concrete hut, used as a defensive position by soldiers.

** Soldiers of the British army, used for local defence.

'Wait a minute, we may as well look inside; it might be more comfortable here than in the cabin,' suggested Algy.

'There might be more room, but it will be less cheerful, and colder, I imagine,' replied Biggles, pushing the door open. 'More like a prison cell than anything else,' he went on, striking a match. 'Well, there's nothing here, let's go.'

'Just a minute, strike another match; I saw a piece of candle – it may be useful.'

'Candle!'

'Yes. There's nothing funny about that, is there?'

'No, I suppose not, except that it's odd that a candle should remain here for so long.'

Biggles lighted the candle, of which a good half remained, and they surveyed the blank walls of the deserted building. "Yes, we shall do better in the cabin," he said.

'I'm not so sure. If we could get a good fire going—'

'Fire! What are we going to burn.'

'We could burn the door,' suggested Algy brightly.

'Well, go ahead and pick it to pieces with your fingers,' sneered Biggles. 'It would take an axe to make any impression on that.'

'Don't be funny,' Algy told him. 'What's this, I wonder,' he went on, stooping and picking up a small piece of paper that was half buried on the sandy floor. He held it to the candle and a curious expression crept over his face as he looked at it. 'That's funny,' he said.

'What is?'

'If, as you say, this was a British dugout, how comes *this* here?' questioned Algy, passing him the paper.

'*Gesellschaft Deutsche Gontermann, Berlin*,' read Biggles, turning the paper over. 'Well, I'm dashed. This is a label, and it doesn't look very old.'

'What do you make of it?'

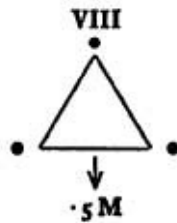
'I don't know what to make of it, unless someone has had some German machinery stored here; a farmer, for instance.'

'I'm not an agricultural expert, but this place doesn't look to me as if much farming has been done around here lately,' replied Algy. 'Has that anything to do with it, I wonder?'

Biggles saw that he was looking at something on the wall, and crossed over to see what it was.

'What about that?' asked Algy.

Someone at some time had drawn a curious device in black paint on the seaward wall. It appeared thus:



'Beats me,' muttered Biggles, 'unless, it's an Admiralty mark of some sort – that may be it.'

'Reminds me of those plates you see on walls – fire hydrants, aren't they?'

'Yes,' replied Biggles slowly. He put out his hand and touched the mark; then he withdrew it and looked at his fingers. 'Why, it's wet!' he said in an amazed whisper. 'Someone must use this place, but what on earth for is more than I can imagine unless it is the Admiralty, or the Ministry of Fisheries – if there is such a thing. But one thing is certain; that sign, or whatever you like to call it, means something. By Jove! I believe that hydrant idea of yours was right; those marks mean distance and position. They couldn't mean anything else. That arrow at the bottom, for instance, and the M. If M means "Mile," it means something is half a mile straight down, so obviously that isn't it. What else could it mean besides mile – metre – that's it. Half a metre – just over eighteen inches.'

'Perhaps it's buried treasure?' suggested Algy hopefully.

'Buried fiddlesticks. Wait a minute,' Biggles began stamping about on the floor. 'Here it is, whatever it is,' he announced, as the solid sound suddenly gave way to a hollow one. 'Just where you picked up that piece of paper. Find a piece of wood or something to dig with. This is rather fun; we've nothing else to do so it will kill time.'

Algy hunted about with the candle outside *the* door, and presently returned with an old rusty piece of iron.

'That'll do,' declared Biggles, and began scraping away the earth from the hollow place.

Ten minutes later, taking it in turns, they struck something solid, and, raking aside the loose earth with their hands, exposed an iron manhole cover.

'Gold!' chortled Algy. 'I've always wanted to find a miser's hoard – strewth!'

The exclamation leapt to his lips as Biggles lifted the cover, exposing what lay beneath. What Algy

seriously expected to find he did not know, but it was certainly not what he now saw. At first glance it appeared to be a complicated piece of machinery, but a close examination showed it to be a row of large electric accumulators,* some intricate wiring, and a switch.

* Rechargeable electric batteries.

'Here, we'd better cover this up; it's an Admiralty gadget all right; must be,' said Biggles seriously.

'What about switching on the switch to see what happens?'

'Don't be a fool, anything might happen. That switch might explode a mine-field somewhere and blow the fleet up for all we know.'

'Admiralty my foot!' cried Algy suddenly, bending down. 'The Admiralty don't use German machines, do they?'

'I shouldn't think so, why?'

'Look at the name on these accumulators.'

'*Gontermann. Berlin.* That's the name that was on *the* paper. Why, of course,' went on Biggles excitedly, 'that label was on the package that brought this stuff over. But we'd better cover this up; whoever it belongs to it's no concern of ours.'

They set to work and in a few minutes had replaced the soil; when they stood up the ground was as smooth as when they entered the hut.

'Come on, it's time we got back to the machine,' said Biggles, blowing out the candle. 'Crumbs! Isn't it dark, watch your step.'

The lapping of the water on the beach guided them towards the sea, and they had almost reached the Vandal when Biggles laid his hand on Algy's arm. 'Hark!' he said. 'Do I hear a machine, or am I crazy?'

'It's an aeroplane all right,' declared Algy, with his head on one side.

'The mist has cleared, and so has most of the cloud, but who on earth would be night flying on such a night as this?' asked Biggles in surprise. 'What a funny sound the engine makes; sounds sort of muffled. By Jingo, it's coming this way, too,' he went on as the sound drew nearer. 'Stand still a minute and see if the engine tells us anything.'

They stood quite still in the darkness, listening.

'Well, I'm dashed if I know,' he growled, 'but if it was daylight I should say there was a formation of machines upstairs; if there aren't several engines up there I'll eat my hat.'

'Big R.A.F. bomber perhaps?'

'The only Service bombers we have are fitted with Rolls Kestrels or Napier Lions, and those we can hear are certainly neither of those. There are half a dozen engines at least, and we've nothing that size in this country.'

'Two or three machines doing exercises perhaps.'

'Must be; can't be anything else as far as I can see. I—'

'Well, I'm dashed,' interrupted Algy breathlessly.

'What's wrong now?'

'There's a light in the hut – or there was. It's gone now.'

'You're getting light-headed.'

'Light-headed my eye. Do you suppose I don't know what a light is when I see it? I saw a light in the window I tell you, as if someone had flashed an electric torch.'

'Impossible!'

'There you are, what did I tell you!' cried Algy triumphantly as the window of the hut became a square of dull orange light. 'Someone's lit that candle.'

'We're beginning to see things,' muttered Biggles. 'What the dickens is happening. Come on, let's go back; whoever it is will be able to tell us where we are, and tell us the way to the nearest village. Har By James, that machine has cut off its engines, which knocks your suggestion on the head. If there is more than one machine, the chances against all the pilots throttling back at the identical instant are too remote to be considered. There is only one machine up there and it's a multi-engined job. But never mind that; let's go and see who it is in the hut.'

They hurried back towards the building, and Biggles, from a distance of about a hundred yards, was about to hail the mysterious occupant, when an event occurred, or rather a series of events, that turned their thought into very different channels, and warned them for the first time that they were on dangerous ground.

The first indication of this was a deep reverberating roar that swept through the night a few hundred feet above their heads. Biggles clutched Algy by the arm.

'Great Jumping Jupiter,' he gasped, 'that kite's coming in to land or I'm a Dutchman. What the –get down, quick!'

The last ejaculation had been forced from his lips by an occurrence that was almost paralysing in its unexpectedness, yet the speed with which his warning to take cover had been followed by both of them showed that their brains had not lost their wartime alertness. As Biggles muttered the words they had dived into an old grass covered trench from which they gazed speechlessly at the phenomenon.

The water of the creek had turned to a sea of shimmering liquid fire, green in the centre, with red edges. The effect was unearthly, but as their eyes became accustomed to it they began to understand. The creek had been flood-lit, apparently from below. In the centre the light was probably white, but glowed pale green through the water. A circle of ruby lights marked the boundaries. The meaning of all may not have been apparent to a landsman, but to an airman the matter needed no explanation. The creek had become an illuminated aerodrome, on which the machine above them was about to land.

This assumption proved correct, for within a moment or two the invisible aeroplane could be heard approaching again from the direction of the sea. Biggles caught his breath and Algy stifled an exclamation as a gigantic shadow loomed up just beyond the submarine beacons and dropped majestically on to the creek; as the keel touched, the water became a living, leaping sheet of phosphorescence. The huge machine turned slowly and began to taxi towards the shore; as it did so, as suddenly as they had appeared, every light was extinguished. An instant later a single beam of light leapt from the nose of the slowly taxiing machine; it settled on the bank, swept up and down it once or twice, and was in turn extinguished. Only a faint luminous glow from the cockpit marked *the* position of the giant stranger.

A hail rang out; it was answered instantly from the hut, and a light began to jerk its way towards the beach.

'Don't move,' whispered Biggles, 'the fellow in the hut is coming down to meet them. Now we know what that switch was for. Hark!' A sound of low voices reached them from the direction of the hut. 'There's more than one of them – sounds as if there may be two,' he whispered. 'Keep still, this is interesting.'

Two figures loomed up, one carrying an electric lantern, and passed them at a distance of not more than ten yards. Presently a sound of greetings being exchanged came from the beach.

'It's a good thing the Vandal is out of sight round the corner,' muttered Biggles, 'or that *would* have put the lid on it.'

'What's going on do you think?' whispered Algy. 'Smuggling?'

'Looks like it – on a big scale, too. That machine is a foreigner; I can just make her out. Looks as big as the Do.X.* There's something fishy here and no mistake; I've never even seen a picture of such a machine, so where it has come from goodness alone knows – S-s-h.'

* The German-manufactured Dornier X Flying Boat. First flown in 1929, powered by twelve engines and designed to carry 72 passengers in comfort, only three were made.

Voices, speaking a foreign language, were approaching, this time from the direction of the water. The faint light in the cockpit disappeared, as if the electrical equipment for illuminating the instrument board had been switched off, and in a moment or two, five figures, walking in single file, loomed up in the night. They disappeared in the direction of the hut and the light reappeared at the window.

'Listen, laddie,' whispered Biggles, 'we've got to see more of this. I'm going down to get a closer view of that machine; we may never get such a chance again. I'll find out its nationality, anyway. You creep up towards the hut and see if you can learn anything, but for the love of Mike don't be seen. I shan't come back here; I'll make for the Vandal – you do the same.' He crawled out of the trench and disappeared into the darkness.

Algy lay still for a few minutes, listening, and then began to creep stealthily towards the hut. It was not difficult to approach unseen, for the night was dark, and the grass covered sand beneath his feet deadened the sound of his footsteps. At a distance of about ten yards he again stopped to listen. He

could hear voices distinctly, but they were speaking in a language he did not understand, so the conversation conveyed nothing to him. Dare he risk a peep through the window? It was taking a big risk, and he knew it, for if any one of the five occupants happened to be looking in that direction, he could hardly fail to see him. He decided to take the risk; one glance at the mysterious voyagers might prove invaluable. He wormed his way to the dark side of the hut and then crept across to the base of the concrete wall. So far so good. Crouching low, he rounded the corner, and crept along until he was immediately below the square of light. Then, slowly, and with infinite care, he began to rise. The voices sounded desperately close, and in spite of his efforts to still it, his heart pounded violently; it was a form of thrill that he had never before experienced. Inch by inch his head rose towards the corner of the light; then it drew level, and he took in the scene at a single glance.

The five men were in the room. One, in a heavy leather flying coat, was holding up a map, which Algy recognized at once as Europe, on the opposite wall; the others were looking closely at it while he spoke. Two of them, obviously the crew of the flying boat, wore sheepskin thigh boots and thick woollen sweat-ers. The other two, evidently the men who had come overland, wore ordinary lounge suits and overcoats. One was a thin, emaciated-looking fellow with a large nose, like the beak of a bird of prey; the other was inclined to be stout, had a straw coloured moustache and wore a bowler hat. There was nothing outstanding about him; he was of a type that could be seen at any place any time of the day.

The man in the leather coat was obviously the leader, for the others were listening attentively and respectfully as he tapped upon the map with a pencil to emphasize his words. As Algy watched, he placed the point of the pencil on a spot which he had no difficulty in recognizing as the Norfolk coast, probably the very spot on which they now stood. Then, with a swift movement, he swept the pencil across the North Sea to a spot on the eastern side of the Baltic. Several other lines had been drawn on the map from the same spot to various points on the east coast of England, but before Algy could memorize them, the man, of whose face Algy could see nothing except the point of a black beard, took down the map and began to fold it up. They all turned towards the middle of the room and Algy sank down silently.

Not until he was on his hands and knees did he realize how great had been the strain of his surreptitious peep, for he was trembling, and his heart seemed to be up in his throat. He crept like a wraith to the cover of a sand-dune as the door creaked and lay still as death while the light went out and the voices faded away into the night. For perhaps twenty minutes he remained thus, and then, deciding that the coast was clear, began to feel his way cautiously in the direction of the Vandal. He was about half way when the engines of the great flying boat were started up; they swelled into a deep vibrating hum that receded swiftly into the distance. 'So she's gone off again,' he mused, as he continued on his way. 'I wonder if those other two chaps have gone with it.'

He reached the Vandal and gave a low whistle. There was no reply, so deciding that Biggles had not yet returned, he went aboard and made himself comfortable in the cabin. Half an hour passed slowly and he began to get anxious; at the end of an hour he was definitely alarmed. He jumped down on to the beach and listened; not a sound broke the deathly silence. No light showed in the direction of the hut.

'Biggles!' he called, not too loudly.

There was no reply.

'Biggles!' he called again, raising his voice.

Still no reply.

Something like panic seized him, and casting discretion to the winds, 'Biggles!' he yelled at the top of his voice.

Silence.

An icy hand seemed to clutch his heart, for he knew that the cry must have been heard by anyone within half a mile. He ran to the top of the nearest sand-dune and stood staring into the darkness towards the creek. The moon appeared suddenly from behind a cloud-bank and flooded the scene with silvery radiance. Nothing moved. Not a sound broke the silence of the night. 'Biggles! Hi, Biggles!' he yelled again. There was no answer.

Filled with a nameless horror he began to run towards the beach where the strange aeroplane had been, searching to right and left as he ran. He found footmarks in the sand by the water's edge, but nothing more. For an hour he hunted, looking for what he hoped he would not find, the dead or unconscious body of his friend. At last, weary and unnerved, he sat down on a dune overlooking the sea. 'What could have happened?' he asked himself a hundred times. Could Biggles have fallen into one of the mud swamps and been drowned? Could he have entered the water to examine the aircraft and been carried away by the receding tide? He did not know. Grey dawn came and found him still alone on the edge of the salt marsh. Before him stretched the sea, cold and deserted. Behind lay the waste of barren land, a vast featureless expanse soul-destroying in its utter solitude. At one place only on the far horizon was there a sign of man's presence; the dilapidated arm of an ancient windmill flung a gaunt finger skyward. The only sound was the plaintive cry of the seabirds.

He rose wearily to his feet, suddenly aware that he was very cold, and made his way to the hut, but was precisely as they had found it the preceding day. 'Well, it's no use staying here,' he muttered bitterly, 'I might as well take the machine back to Brooklands.' He started the engine, climbed into his seat and took off; yet he could not tear himself away from the place. Somewhere there, either in the water, or – he grew cold at the thought – buried under the mud, was Biggles. For half an hour he cruised to and fro, crossing and recrossing his track a hundred times, but there was no sign of the man who was tied to him by bonds of friendship that only years of peril could forge. Suddenly making up his mind he swung the machine round, and with a lump in his throat headed south.

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