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Opening extract from
**Return to 20,000
Leagues Under the Sea**

Written by
**Steve Barlow, Steve
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RETURN TO
20,000
LEAGUES
UNDER THE SEA

STEVE BARLOW &
STEVE SKIDMORE



In 1934, the international crisis caused by the rise of totalitarian governments in many parts of the world is growing more serious by the day. New discoveries in science and medicine promise a bright future; at the same time, new weapons threaten global disaster. This is the new Scientific Age: an age of invention, adventure – and deadly danger...

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1 RECORD...

*Lake Windermere, Westmorland,
United Kingdom
June 1934*

“**A**re you absolutely sure you want to do this?”
Luke Challenger’s question was kindly meant, but Nick Malone greeted it with indignation. “Of course I am! I know what I did wrong last run – I’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

Luke gave a resigned nod and signalled to the speedboat driver, who motored gently ahead until the rope trailing behind the boat tightened. Nick, grasping the handle at the rope’s end and crouched with his waterskis raised almost vertically in front of him, began

to move through the water. Luke gave the driver another signal, and the boat surged forward, sweeping over the smooth surface of Lake Windermere as Nick rose on his skis. He swept across the boat's wake from side to side, increasing speed in preparation for his jump.

As they approached the ramp, Luke found himself muttering encouragement: "Come on, Nick, keep your knees flexible, be prepared for the shock... Go for control, not distance..." He broke off. Nick couldn't hear his instructions, even if he shouted – and anyway, it was too late.

Nick hit the ramp travelling at about seventy miles per hour. For a split second, all seemed well...then he veered off to the left, lifting one ski in an attempt to keep his balance – and by the time he shot from the top of the ramp, he had let go of the rope and lost a ski. With a yell of despair and a confusion of flailing limbs, he hurtled through the air and plummeted into the lake with an almighty splash that echoed mockingly from the surrounding fells. Luke winced.

The boat circled round and Luke hauled his luckless cousin over the side. Nick lay gasping like a stranded fish and rubbing at sore spots (seemingly every part of his body he could reach). In between gasps, he said, "I almost had it that time." At length, he sat up and eyed

the ramp as if it had done him a personal injury. "All right, let's try it again."

Luke ran his fingers through his wet hair and eyed his cousin with concern. Both of them were reasonably proficient waterskiers; but whereas Luke had mastered the ramp on his third attempt, Nick had been struggling all morning. Unhappily, once his mind was set on something, Nick never gave up: he would make a successful jump or kill himself trying. At the moment, the second possibility seemed the most likely, so Luke forced his expression into an apologetic grimace. "Would you mind...? I think I've jarred my back a bit. I wouldn't mind a rest."

"Can't take it, eh?" said Nick breezily. Luke's spade-shaped Challenger jaw tightened as he bit back an angry response, which would have been along the lines of, *I only said that to give you an excuse to stop before you break your stupid neck!* Fortunately, the words remained unsaid and Nick, looking the other way, failed to notice his friend's thunderous expression. "Ah, well," Nick continued while Luke mastered his temper, "I suppose it won't do us any harm to have a break. We can always come back this afternoon."

Hoping that if they did, the local hospital would turn out to have a good fracture clinic, Luke signalled to their driver. The boat's engine whined as they left the

waterskiing area. Barely a minute later, they were stepping onto the landing stage and making for the changing rooms to recover their clothes.

“Pretty fast, that boat,” said Nick conversationally. “Nothing like as fast as your da’s pride and joy, of course.” He gave Luke a conspiratorial wink. “Why don’t we go down to the Challenger boathouse and see how they’re getting on?”

“Because,” Luke told him, “my father said that if he caught me anywhere near his precious boat, he would tear me into little pieces with his bare hands.”

“Ah, now that’s a remark that could be interpreted in several ways.”

“Really?” said Luke sceptically. “I can only think of one. I’m already in his bad books over what I did to his car.”

“You mean, when you used nitroglycerine as a fuel additive?”

“He wasn’t using the car at the time. It was an experiment,” said Luke defensively. “And it was only a small amount of nitroglycerine.”

“It was still enough to blow the cylinder head into the next county.”

“Well, anyway, he made it clear that one more stunt like that and he’d have my guts for garters.”

Nick struggled into his shirt; as his head emerged,

his dark curls fanned out like the fronds of a sea anemone. His mouth curved into his trademark good-natured grin. “Sure, he says these things, but he doesn’t mean them.”

“I’m not sure I want to test that theory.” Luke towelled his mane of fair hair. “I had enough of a struggle persuading him to let us come up here at all. He only agreed because Mother’s digging up fossils in Colorado and he’s running out of relatives to palm us off on...” Luke broke off and bit his lip. In previous summers, while his mother had been away on some expedition or other, Luke and Nick had taken their holidays with Nick’s father. But Edward Malone had died almost exactly a year ago in a blazing Zeppelin over a remote South American plateau; the last thing Luke wanted was to remind Nick of that.

But Nick didn’t seem to have caught the remark. “I thought it was so the security men he brought here to protect the boat could protect us, too.”

Luke snorted derisively. “Waste of time if you ask me. My father’s security is like elephant repellent.”

“Elephant repellent? What does that do?”

“Repels elephants. I sprayed some on this morning. Look around you – see any elephants?”

“No.”

“Good stuff, isn’t it? Dad’s security is like that. It’s

‘protecting’ us from something that isn’t there in the first place.”

Nick struggled with a sock. “Are you sure about that? I seem to recall a Japanese colonel – that Mochizuki woman – who followed us across the Atlantic and half of South America last year, shooting all the way.”

“Yes, but she’s dead. The Sons of Destiny were wiped out a year ago, remember.”

“I guess so. Personally, I’m quite glad that no one has tried to kill us lately. It’s relaxing.”

Luke finished tying his shoelaces and led the way from the changing room, along the lakeside path to the boathouse where the Challenger Industries powerboat was moored.

Britain and America had been locked in a struggle for the world water speed record for several years. Kaye Don, driving *Miss England III*, had set a target of 119 mph on Loch Lomond in July 1932. Not to be outdone, his American rival, Gar Wood, had built *Miss America X* and in September of the same year had set a new record of 124 mph, making it clear that in terms of money and know-how, the USA was unbeatable. Don had given up in despair and *Miss England III* had gone to a museum. Now Sir Andrew Challenger, Luke’s father, planned to steal the Americans’ thunder with a new record attempt. The boat he hoped would be a

world-beater was being prepared, under heavy security, a few yards away from where Luke and Nick were walking.

Sir Andrew had named his boat *Enid II* in memory of his sister. Enid Challenger had married Edward Malone; Nick was their only son. Unhappily, she had died several years before. Perhaps, thought Luke, it was the fact that the Challenger boat bore Nick’s mother’s name that explained why Nick was so determined to get as close to it as possible. Or perhaps, he reflected, it was sheer devilment.

Nick pointed at a group of figures in white overalls walking away from the boathouse. “Look – that’s your da’s people going for lunch.” He eyed the long, whitewashed building hungrily. “It all seems quiet over there. Sure, one little peek won’t cause anybody any trouble at all.” Sticking his hands in his pockets and whistling with studied nonchalance, he sauntered towards the door. Luke glanced around, but, surprisingly, none of his father’s security team seemed to be about at the moment. With a mental shrug, he turned from the path to follow Nick.

The boathouse was dark after the bright sunlight outside. The sleek shape of *Enid II* floated serenely in the small dock that fitted it like a glove. The long shed seemed to be deserted – but a rhythmic tapping indicated

that someone was still at work, and after a few moments a white-overalled figure appeared from behind the boat's engine cowling. He gave the boys an owlish stare. "You shouldn't be in here, you know."

"It's all right," said Nick quickly. "He's Luke Challenger. That's his da's boat you're working on. I'm his cousin Nick, so it's all family, d'you see?" He gave the man a closer look. "You're new, aren't you?"

"That's right – standing in for Mr. Parker. Tummy trouble." The man shrugged and wiped his hands on a cloth. "Look around if you want. I'm a mechanic, not security. It's all the same to me."

Luke and Nick exchanged glances. They knew that the chief mechanic, Hargreaves, had been warned to keep them away from *Enid II* – but, by some stroke of luck, the message didn't seem to have got through to Parker's replacement. Encouraged, Nick stepped forward and looked around. "You on your own?"

The mechanic gave a mournful nod. "That's right. The rest of them have gone to the pub. Suppose I might as well have gone with them – we've been having engine trouble all morning and I'm blessed if I can see what's wrong."

With a casual air that completely failed to disguise his eagerness, Nick said, "Would you like me to take a look? I'm pretty good with engines."

The mechanic looked from Luke to Nick and back again. Luke nodded. "He's a genius."

"Well, I shouldn't by rights..." The man sighed. "Oh well, I don't suppose it can do any harm. I'm off for a cuppa. If anyone asks, I haven't seen anything." Shaking his head, he potted off towards the shadowy end of the boathouse. Moments later, the sounds of a kettle being filled wafted from the gloom.

Nick was beside himself with glee. "That's a stroke of luck!" He dived head first into the engine compartment.

Luke addressed his friend's protruding backside. "I'm not sure this is such a good idea. I'm in enough trouble with my dad already, remember. What if the others come back?"

"What if they do? We're helping, aren't we?" Nick's voice was muffled. He wriggled into a new position. "Ah!"

"Ah, what?"

Nick emerged, grinning. "Try the starter."

"Start the engines? You're joking! We'll be lynched."

"D'you want to live for ever? Go on, give it a try."

Muttering darkly under his breath, Luke jumped into the driver's seat and pressed the starter. Immediately, the two Rolls-Royce engines roared into life. Nick wiped his hands with a modest air.

The mechanic came scurrying from the back of the

boathouse, a steaming kettle in his hand. “How did you do that?”

Nick examined his fingernails. “Oh, the master’s touch, you know.” His voice became wistful. “I don’t suppose we could...test it out?”

The mechanic scratched his head. Unfortunately, in his astonishment he forgot that the hand he chose to do this with was the one holding the kettle. “Well, I – ouch!” He put the kettle down hurriedly and rubbed his scalded ear.

“You should put something on that,” said Nick quickly. “Butter’s good for burns.” As the mechanic retired, rubbing his ear and groaning, Nick started casting off mooring lines. “Come on,” he hissed. “I asked if we could take her out, you heard me!”

Luke gawped at him. “He didn’t say ‘yes!’”

“He didn’t say ‘no’, either!” Nick clambered into the co-driver’s seat. “Let’s go! We’ll never get another chance like this!”

“This is a very, very bad idea.” Scowling ferociously, Luke selected reverse gear. Its engines rumbling softly, the boat pulled out of the shed and into open water. As the bows cleared the short jetty, he swung the stern to the side, selected forward gear and began to open the throttles.

Nick threw back his head and gave an exultant whoop. “Ah, that’s grand!”

“We are going to be strangled for this,” said Luke. “You know that, don’t you?”

Nick gave him a reckless grin. “It’ll be worth it.”

After a moment, Luke returned the grin. “Maybe it will.”

“All right then.” Nick rubbed his hands. “Let’s see what she’ll do.”

Luke opened the throttles further and headed for Newby Bridge at the south end of the lake. “What was wrong with the engines, anyway?”

“Just a bad electrical connection to the ignition. I’m amazed they didn’t spot it.”

“You wouldn’t be if you’d seen half a dozen of Dad’s boffins stripping down an FM radio to find out why it wasn’t working, and not one of them noticing they’d forgotten to plug it into the mains.” As the lake narrowed, Luke swung the craft around and reduced the throttle to idling speed.

“Come on!” Nick was jiggling in his seat, impatient to be off.

“Calm down.” Luke rummaged under his seat and found a helmet and goggles, which he strapped on. Nick followed his lead. “I’m waiting for our wash to die down,” Luke explained. “If we hit our own wake at speed, it could damage the boat.” He watched as the last of the waves generated by their passage rippled along

the lakeshore and disappeared. “Fasten your seat belt,” he said. Grinning, Nick buckled up the safety harness to hold him in his seat. “All right. Here we go.” Luke eased the throttle levers forward.

The engines thundered. *Enid II* shot across the calm blue water, leaving a fantail of spray and white foam behind her. Luke and Nick were thrust back in their seats. Nick’s mouth opened wide in an exultant yell, but the sound was snatched by the wind and lost behind the speeding boat. Luke gripped the wheel tightly, scanning the water ahead for hazards. The boat bucked and skittered like a living thing over the wavelets, but Luke held his course in a long curve, following the centre line of the lake as it swept up the wooded valley.

Far too soon, they were approaching the island chain off Bowness. Luke eased back on the throttles and the speedboat’s bows settled back into the water with the grace of an alighting swan.

Nick let out his breath in a long whistle. “Amazing! Just amazing.”

Luke swung the boat around, back the way they’d come. “One more run, then we’ll have to take her back.”

“Oh, come on!”

“We’re in enough trouble as it is. Anyway, we’ll have to wait for the wash again. We’ve got a few more minutes.”

Nick folded his arms and sulked.

Seeking something to distract his disappointed friend, Luke pointed skywards. “See that?” A sleek silver biplane was banking around, its wings flashing in the sun. “RAF – a Hawker Hart, I think. Wonder what he’s doing over here? Probably training.” Luke watched as the aircraft made a turn and dived towards them. “He’s really low,” he observed. “I suppose—” He broke off as a series of bright flashes appeared above the propeller boss. A split second later, white splashes appeared on the water in a neat, regular line, heading straight for *Enid II*.

Luke stared at Nick in stunned disbelief. “He’s shooting at us!”