

## THE GREEN ABYSS: ON BEING NEARLY DROWNED AT CHAIR LADDER, CORNWALL<sup>1</sup>

BY HUGH KILGOUR

**T**HE ledge in the morning was swept by the sea. We saw a few people crossing getting their boots and socks wet. Dave and I decided to wait for a lower part of the tide.

In the afternoon we looked again: several people were crossing, so we followed. When I was half way over Dave shouted 'There's a big wave coming'. I could only pull myself into a ball against the rock before a light-green liquid atmosphere surrounded me.

My feet were sucked fiercely away. I clung on briefly until my fingers gave and I was sucked along a frictionless slab which then dropped down towards the sea. I entered a green tunnel surrounded by rocks. I travelled down this face upwards and struck the left side of my head on one of the rocks. It didn't hurt but it told me to put my arms round my head. I remember feeling sure that the tunnel would never end or it would be blocked or that it would arrive at a subterranean river into which I would be swept. However, after popping my ears twice it opened out and I rose to the surface, stunned and breathless.

Dave was running along the ledge shouting 'Don't go away', and to other climbers for help.

I was drifting away quickly. I made an attempt at swimming. After a few strokes I realised I could not outswim the current with an action hampered by clothes.

I decided to float and not use up what energy was left in my eight stone. As the swell kept running over my face, I was a bit frightened but more disgusted that I was dying in such an undistinguished manner. It was probably against this that I fought the concept of drowning.

My boots felt like lumps of lead. Oddly enough I didn't notice the karabiners on their slings round my neck.

I seemed to be out there for a long time. All the time concentrating on keeping afloat and holding my breath when heavy swell passed over my head. I wondered about final exhaustion and dropping to the depths of

<sup>1</sup> With the increase in sea-cliff climbing in Britain, there have been a number of drowning accidents and it is to be hoped that this article will draw attention to a serious hazard. Climbers should always be roped where there is any possibility of being caught by a wave: whereas generally it is safe to cross if a series of seven waves (the normal cycle) has left a ledge unswept, there is always a risk from the much bigger occasional wave (perhaps started by a ship or by tides clashing far out) for which a strict watch must always be kept. *Editor*

the amniotic fluid. Perhaps it would be pleasant re-entering one's mother's womb. My normal apathetic life concept radically changed, I had to defy Newton's apple.

I heard voices. They were louder now. A silence in which I hoped but still pessimistically believed. An arm came round my neck. The relief was incredible. I just relaxed and passed into oblivion.

I came round in a helicopter. I was surrounded by clothes and shivering violently. I then remember entering the hospital and being unable to move because of exhaustion. It was a day or so before I was well enough to realise how lucky I had been.