

# **Valley of the Serpent**

**By Alan Reynolds**

*Fear is wisdom in the face of danger*

*Anon*

## Chapter One

The deafening maelstrom of water raged with unbelievable force, pinning him against the narrow exit to the culvert. The mind-numbing cold like a million needles attacked his body, the pain immense from the impact of being thrown against the jagged rock across the only outlet for the torrent. He tried to cling on, but the power of the water sapped all his strength... then darkness. His unconscious state took over.

Leeds Central Railway Station, 30th September 2001

Chloe Grainger looked around, all these people. She nervously tugged on her scarf; it wasn't particularly cold and the fabric was irritating her face. Granny Grainger meant well when she sent it to her with a lovely note attached, *'I hope this will come in useful I know how cold it is in Yorkshire. I can't believe my darling granddaughter is going to University everyone is so proud. Love, Nan Grainger.'*

It had been a three hour journey by rail from Bristol and seeing her mum and dad waving to her as the train pulled away from the station was heartbreaking. She missed them already.

"Hi, are you enrolling?" chirped a friendly voice.

Chloe spun around and saw the enquirer.

"Yes... yes, thank you," she replied.

The girl smiled; she was one of several second year graduate volunteers from the Student Union acting as welcome guides for the arriving freshers, who, like Chloe, were probably experiencing their first time away from home. She was seated behind a makeshift stall littered with schedules and leaflets with maps to the student residences and other essential information for new graduates.

"What course are you taking?" said Trina, the name on her badge.

"Geology," said Chloe.

“Ah yes,” said Trina after a lengthy scan of her papers. “Here it is, the School of Earth and Environment.”

“Hello,” said a voice behind her. “I’m doing Geology as well... Abigail Newton, they call me Abby,” said a bright, fair haired girl, young-looking and fresh-faced.

“Oh, hi, Chloe, Chloe Grainger,” and the two girls shook hands.

Trina looked at the new-comer. “Here you are, directions to the halls... they’re not far, twenty minute walk, or you can take a bus from just outside the station.”

Chloe looked down at her large rucksack and pull-along suitcase. “A bus I think,” and started to laugh. Abby shared the levity. “I’ll tag along with you if that’s ok?”

“Of course,” said Chloe. “It looks as though we might be in the same block.”

The two girls thanked their helper and, armed with various pieces of literature, headed for the exit.

“Hey, wait up... Are you for the geology course?”

The girls looked round.

“Yes,” said Chloe.

“Can I join you...? Harry, Harry Bentham,” said a fit- looking student, pulling a suitcase and carrying a duffle-bag over his shoulder.

“Yes, why not, more the merrier... Where are you from?”

“Norwich... just got in. You?” said Harry who had now caught them up.

“I’m Chloe... from Bristol. This is Abby... sorry I don’t know where you’re from.”

“Swindon,” said Abby.

“Well, someone has to be,” said Harry, and they laughed.

The three made their way to the bus, chatting non-stop.

March 2002, six months later and well into their first year, the students were having their final briefing for a four day field trip. The twelve under-graduates on the course had been split into four groups of three. Chloe and Abby had become almost inseparable since that first day on Leeds station and had opted to go for the caving expedition. Harry Bentham had made his own friends and social life, but saw the girls regularly in lectures and, naturally, had asked if he could make up the three.

After the initial briefing from the tutor, they were sat in the common room discussing their assignment.

Harry was an impressive individual; swarthy looking with a short, stylish haircut. In his sixth form days he had been a county rugby player, his face bearing the scars of many a stray boot or the occasional fist. He was also an accomplished rower and had spent many misty mornings lifting his six-foot frame into a rowing eight on the local river. Sport had unsurprisingly taken up a great deal of his extra-curricular time. He was naturally competitive and the thought of caving was completely in line with his devil-may-care persona. Both girls rather fancied him but there had been an unwritten rule about fraternising with fellow course-mates and rather than create possible friction they decided to all be friends.

“Do you know anything about caving?” he asked, as they sat at one of the tables drinking from cans of coke from the vending machine.

Abby looked at Chloe. “Not a thing, well only the rock formations, obviously,” she said.

“Me neither,” said Chloe.

“It’ll be great fun,” said Harry. “I’ve done loads of rock climbing; it’s why I decided on a geology course in the first place. I’ve always had a fascination with how they were formed.”

“What’s that got to do with caving?” said Chloe.

“Well it’s the same thing. You’re just going in the opposite direction,” he said laughing.

The girls smiled.

“I have to say I wasn’t too sure. I’m not good in enclosed spaces, I don’t even like going in lifts,” said Abby.

“Why did you put your name down, silly? We could have done one of the other field studies,” said Chloe.

“Yes I know, but I knew you wanted to and I didn’t want to be left out,” said Abby.

“I don’t mind,” said Chloe. “We can do the cliff erosion study in Scarborough if you like.”

“No, I’ll be fine... That know-all Dave Chandler’s on that and I don’t think I could stand four days in close proximity with him,” said Abby. Harry and Chloe laughed.

“Hmm, there is that,” said Chloe.

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing to it,” said Harry. “It’s very safe these days and the equipment they use is first class... and it has much better research opportunities. I’ve been reading up on it; they’ve been trying to find the entrance to a new chamber down there. It should be really exciting.”

“What else have you found out?” said Chloe. “I’ve not started yet.”

“Hey that’s cheating, you do your own research,” said Harry mockingly. “Only joking,” he added.

“Go on,” said Abby. “Tell us what you’ve found out.”

“Well, limestone, obviously,” he said. “The cave system we’ll be going to is called Dingwell Cavern, not as big as Gaping Ghyll, but not far off.”

“Gaping Ghyll...? That’s up near Ingleborough isn’t it?” said Chloe.

“Yes,” said Harry. “That was thought to be the deepest cave in the UK until they discovered Titan.”

“Ah yes, Titan,” said Chloe. “I’ve always wanted to have a look at that one.”

“Well you can. We’ll only be about ten miles away. Our base is in Castleton, it’s quite near,” said Harry who was clearly up on his knowledge of British caves.

A week later with all preparations complete they packed their rucksacks. Harry had taken charge of the shared laptop, which was a really expensive piece of equipment and quite heavy. It was an early start and by seven-thirty the three intrepid explorers were ready for the off; just a final check before they walked towards the waiting minibus which would take them to their destination.

Just over two hours later the vehicle pulled up outside the Mountaineering and Caving Centre in the middle of the Peak District, an area of Derbyshire world-renown for its rock climbing and adventure sites.

The approach was along a gravel road through a fir forest and as the trees were left behind a worn white track reflecting the predominantly limestone countryside led the way. After ten minutes or so they reached the centre. It was surrounded on three sides by spectacular scenery; steep hills which formed almost a box quarry. In front was an open space which served as a car park. There were numerous vehicles, mostly Jeeps, Land-rovers and other 4 x 4's parked up. People in serious out-door clothing were standing in groups waiting for their instructions.

The minibus drew up in front of the entrance where they were greeted by Campbell Addison, a wiry Scot with a brown full beard. He looked like he had been hewn from the nearby quarries. He walked towards the minibus and slid open the side door. Chloe exited first, then Abby followed by Harry.

"Och, you must be the Leeds team," he said reading the Leeds University logo on the side of the minibus.

Harry had already assumed the role of leader.

"Hi, yes, I'm Harry Bentham; this is Chloe and Abby." The Scot checked his manifest. "Aye, yes I have you here," he said. "Grab your gear and come with me."

The three collected their rucksacks and followed Campbell into the centre; the minibus drove away.

It was a substantial wooden construction and through the entrance was a large reception area with detailed maps across the sidewalls. There were pictures of the mountain rescue team which also used the base and the helicopter that was available in case of emergencies. Immediately Harry was drawn to the maps and started studying one of them.

There was a line of four people in front of them completing the registration process. While they waited Campbell explained the set up. “There’s accommodation for twenty people... a bit basic, but comfortable and clean,” he said. His Scottish accent was strong and the group had difficulty making sense of his words.

“I’ll leave you to settle in and we’ll meet outside at ten forty-five; that’ll give you an hour. There’s a small cafe through there,” he said, pointing to one of the doors. “It’s help yourself, but it’s fine. There’re some pre-packed ready meals and a microwave.”

Chloe looked at Abby; as students they were used to ‘roughing’ it. The three reached the desk and the receptionist, a ginger-haired girl called Amy, about the same age as Chloe and Abby, welcomed them. The job was part of her gap year she explained while she completed the registration process. She gave the three a room key each plus a leaflet describing the lay-out and emergency evacuation procedures, and then pointed them in the direction of the accommodation area.

It was through a door to the right of the reception. On the left was the kitchen/cafe which had been pointed out to them by Campbell and certainly lived up to his description of ‘basic’. Then through another door and down a long corridor which had dormitories on the left consecutively numbered.

There were two communal bathrooms, male and female, which included a shower room and looked more like a sports-hall changing room but it would suffice for the four days they would be in residence.

“Number seven,” said Chloe, as they walked along looking at the numbers on the doors.

“Me too,” said Abby. “We must be sharing.”

“Here,” said Chloe. They opened the room; Harry was behind them with all their gear.

“Bunk beds,” said Chloe. “Haven’t slept in one of those since I was a kid.”

“Bags me bottom,” said Abby.

“You’re welcome to it,” said Chloe. “I quite like being on top,” and they both laughed at the innuendo.

“Where are you, Harry?” said Chloe.

He looked at his key, number eight. "Next door," he said.

"Let's see yours," said Abby.

"Don't be cheeky," said Harry and Abby slapped him playfully on his arm.

"You know what I mean," said Abby.

"Just a sec," said Harry and he opened up room eight.

"Same as yours," he said. "Wonder who I'll be sleeping with."

"Probably a seventeen stone rugby player with bulging biceps," said Chloe.

"Now steady on that almost sounds attractive," said Harry. "I've met a few you know."

"I bet you have," said Chloe and the girls laughed.

He looked around at the Spartan quarters. "I'm having the bottom one," he said.

"Well you better hope the top one doesn't belong to a seventeen stone prop forward," said Chloe.

There were cupboards one beneath the other large enough to keep toiletries and a change of clothing. There was a big sign behind the door with a picture of a pair of walking boots and a red cross over the top.

"I guess we leave the boots somewhere else," said Harry.

After a few minutes the group had stowed their stuff and clothed themselves in warm woolly jumpers, thick socks, windcheater jackets, and waterproof trousers. As directed, they carried their walking boots with them. They had rucksacks on their backs which contained their note books, snacks and water plus other personal belongings. Harry walked up to the reception desk and handed in the laptop for safe-keeping together with their mobile phones. There was no signal for miles; Campbell had warned them. They would write up their notes when they returned.

They walked back to the kitchen and made themselves a coffee, chatting excitedly about the expedition. "Don't forget to get some chocolate bars, always useful in case of emergencies," said Harry.

“Good idea,” said Chloe and the three hovered around the vending machine in the corner and started selecting their favourite choices and feeding in coins.

There were about fifteen other students now milling about and eventually Campbell came into reception and called everyone together. There were introductions as they joined the Leeds group for the briefing. He led them to a large cupboard which was full of climbing equipment, ropes, harnesses, and hard-hats. Each helmet had an integral battery-operated flashlight but they were also given hand-held torches. Illumination was almost as important as food and water, Campbell explained. “One wrong turn and you could be lost forever,” he said dramatically.

Harry with his mountaineering experience was already taking charge, rather like a protective elder brother would do, and was soon sifting through the gear and handing the girls what they would need. Chloe and Abby were trying on hard-hats finding ones that would fit. Chloe with her thick curly hair was finding it particularly difficult. There were fits of laughter as she tried on various helmets which resembled Christmas party hats. This was a good time.

Eventually they had all the required equipment and left the centre where three elderly, but loved, Land Rovers were waiting. Campbell split the students into their respective destinations. The Leeds group were the only ones going to the Dingwell Cavern and were introduced to their driver and guide, Paul Forest. He opened the back to enable them to stow all their gear before Chloe, Abby and Harry got in and they set off.

Paul gave them a running commentary about the Cavern as he drove. It was about three miles away over fairly rough terrain. The white tracks where tyres had worn away the grass continued for a while but gradually faded away and the route was not obvious to the uninitiated. The Land Rover lurched and bounced on the uneven terrain. After a mile or so they dropped down into a small ravine with trees on all sides, bent by the prevailing winds; the narrow track meandered through the arbour. Then in front of them a fast flowing stream crossed their path. Paul stopped the Land Rover. The ford had obviously been in regular use and the banks had been eroded leaving a muddy incline on both sides. The girls looked at each other with some alarm; Harry was enjoying every minute.

“Hold tight,” he said, and gently eased the vehicle down the two foot bank into the water. It jerked unsteadily as it gained grip on the pebbly bottom and then Paul accelerated. The Land Rover slid then gripped and gradually moved up the other side.

After a few hundred yards they left the trees and were greeted with spectacular views of the hills in the distance. To the right there was a gentle incline before the terrain rose sharply into sheer cliffs. On top it was green with bushes of all description but completely devoid of any human presence; only the occasional hardy hill sheep giving evidence of any living being.

The excitement continued as interesting rock formations appeared and were discussed; Paul concentrated on the driving. After another ten minutes the Land Rover pulled up on a bare patch of ground that had been worn by the weight of vehicles.

“Right, we’ll park here and continue on foot,” said Paul. “Make sure you have everything you need; we won’t be coming back for a while.”

Paul got out and started rummaging around a hold-all in the boot of the car and pulled out some chocolate and his hard-hat.

“Wow, it’s so deserted,” observed Chloe as she got out and started to stretch her legs.

While the students exited the vehicle, Paul went back to the dashboard and picked up his walkie-talkie and called in. “Just a safety measure,” he said to the inquisitive looks.

Harry dished out the equipment and the girls strapped on their harnesses and hard-hats. The torches were checked to make sure they were working and Paul gave them spare batteries each. The rucksacks were now getting heavier.

They congregated at the front of the Land Rover to hear Paul. He was older than Campbell but shared the same rugged features, included what seemed to be the obligatory beard. He was about the same height as Harry, wearing a neoprene wetsuit and gloves, with knee and elbow protectors; he looked more like a deep sea diver. He detailed his own experience, a product of Snowdonia, where he was part of the mountain rescue team for many years. As he spoke there was just a slight hint of his native Welsh accent,

more rural North Wales than the harsh tones of the Gower Peninsular or Cardiff suburbs. He would be good to have around on this trip.

“The entrance is about two hundred yards away and quite narrow; probably why it was only recently discovered. We’ll make our way there now and have a final check before we go inside... Everybody ok with that?” he said with some authority.

“Yes,” said Harry speaking on behalf of the group.

They followed Paul along a footpath which appeared reasonably well-trodden. Paul explained that since its discovery less than six years ago there had been a lot of exploration. As the group walked he continued his briefing.

“There’re still many areas of the cavern not open yet. Several chambers still need to be researched and we’ll be looking at one of these over the next few days so you can start mapping the rock formations. That’s what you wanted to do I was told,” he said. There were nods of approval from the followers. “Great, yes, that’s what we’re here to see,” said Harry.

As they turned a corner the wind hit them full on nearly knocking the diminutive Abby off her feet. The group leaned forward to reduce the drag. “Good grief,” said Chloe. “Where did this come from?”

Paul shouted to be heard. “It’s very exposed up here. Wind’s veered north-west, we’re right in the face of it... straight in from the Irish Sea, nothing to stop it,” he said. “Don’t worry we’re nearly there.”

A minute or two later to the right the cliff face dropped away and seemed to slope backwards, the harsh white limestone replaced by a large knoll about sixty feet tall. There were huge grey splinters of rock protruding outwards and was covered in greenery. In front of them was what looked like a large boulder, although that would be doing the description an injustice. It was a giant column of jagged rock about thirty feet tall and three wide standing like a sentry guarding the entrance to the cave.

Numerous bushes and creeping plants were growing around the rock which served to camouflage the cave; no wonder it had taken so long to discover. A lone tree, bent by years of abuse from the gale-force

storms which frequently buffeted the area was stationed on the other side of the entrance further obscuring the cave's presence.

"We're here," said Paul.

The area in front of the cave was again flat from the footfall of cavers and geologists from all over the country and beyond, anxious to discover its secrets. The entrance itself was somewhat of an anti-climax. This was no Aladdin's Cave with an enormous mouth, but more an unremarkable gash in the rock, no more than a yard or two wide and around six feet tall.

Paul gathered the group together. "Right guys, this is it. Check your helmets, lights and harnesses. It's a bit of a tight squeeze, but you'll be fine. Keep close until we reach the central cavern then you can go to work. If anyone wants the toilet then you need to go behind that rock. It's not very private but they haven't installed any facilities inside yet."

There was a polite chuckle but it was a point. "I'm fine," said Chloe. "It'll take me a week to get this kit off." More laughter, the mood was upbeat.

"I'm ok," said Abby.

"Me too," said Harry.

Abby wasn't smiling though; looking at the black hole in front of her was making her think that the Scarborough trip might have been a better option. In truth she was feeling nervous and could probably do with a pee.

"Ok, I'll lead... Harry you take up the rear. The first part is downhill and slippery, so watch your step. Take it slow and use your hands for balance, I hope you've all remembered your gloves, it's cold down there," said Paul. Chloe lifted her hands in confirmation, Abby and Harry did the same.

"Good... right, let's go," he said and led them towards the entrance.

Paul intuitively bent slightly as he went through although he might just have made it without hitting his head. It was no problem for the girls but Harry too ducked as they entered the darkness.

The temperature plummeted very quickly and there was a dank feel, the atmosphere damp and clammy, like a freezing cold steam room, if the incongruity were possible.

As they turned their heads the four beams of light from their helmets bounced around the tunnel sides. Paul had his hand-held torch and shone it into the gloom ahead of him. Abby could feel palpitations in her chest as the sides of the cave seemed to close in on her. She breathed deeply.

Underfoot the ground was bare rock and extremely treacherous; luckily the soles of their hiking boots gave them some modicum of traction and they made steady progress downhill. They had been walking for about fifteen minutes, the tunnel twisting left and right. Every so often there was an alcove where rocks had broken off and fallen onto the path which they had to negotiate. Then suddenly the narrow path opened up into an enormous cavern.

“Wow,” said Chloe. “Look at this.”

The three students just stood there for a moment; it was an awesome sight.

Paul turned and briefed them again. “This is the main cavern; they’ve named it ‘The Citadel’ because of its size. He turned his flash-light upwards and the beam was lost after about thirty feet. “We’ve measured it at over fifty metres high,” he said. “That’s a hundred and fifty feet, but there’re several tunnels leading away from here. Some are dead ends, blocked by fallen rock but others go a long way back. He shone his beam to their right and illuminated what looked like the entrance to another cave. “That one over there goes on for at least five kilometres before it branches off. There’re several other tunnels leading in different directions, but only two have been explored; the others are too dangerous.”

The three listened with great interest and stared in wonderment; there was something almost spiritual about the place.

“We’ll stop here for a while and you can make some notes,” said Paul.

There were boulders all around which made convenient seats. “Ooohh, that’s better,” said Abby as she removed her rucksack and placed it on the cavern floor next to her. The rest of the group did the same and Abby and Chloe were soon discussing the finer points of geological formations of the cavern.

All three had extracted their note books and were jotting down points of interest in shorthand. They also had small pointed hammers with them for chipping stone to provide samples which they would take back to the University for more detailed analysis.

Harry had a different priority and started on one of his chocolate bars. Paul was walking around the floor of the cavern indicating various features that he thought the students might be of significance.

“Look over there,” said Abby pointing to three smaller caves to her right with her torch. “It looks like phreatic action... What do you think?”

“Who’s been reading up on their speleology?” said Harry.

Paul was intrigued. “What does that mean?” he asked, as he too took on some calories.

Abby was now the authority on cave study. “It means the limestone’s been dissolved by water; look you can see by the shape,” she said. “They’re sort of circular or oval-shaped as opposed to when they’re eroded by a stream which cuts through the rock and tend to be narrower.” The academic free-flow was lessening her anxiety and she was beginning to relax.

“That’s vadose action, by the way,” said Chloe, not wishing to lose out in showing off her knowledge of caves.

“Listen to you two,” said Harry.

“You learn something every day,” said Paul, impressed by his charges’ intellect.

“If it’s phreatic then we must be below the water table,” said Harry.

“Aye, that’s true,” said Paul, in his Welsh brogue. “Several of the caves are impassible, certainly without diving equipment. We think one of these might join up with Titan but it’ll take years to explore all the caves properly. We’ll need specialist equipment and unfortunately it doesn’t come cheap.”

The team was walking about examining every aspect of the cavern.

“Wow, look up there,” said Chloe, pointing at some blue quartz-like formations.

“Aye, that’s Blue John,” said Paul. “Not as big as the Blue John Cavern, the one in Castleton, but it’s early days. We’re uncovering all kinds of things all the time.”

“They’ve ruined that place,” said Harry.

“What?” said Abby, now on her fourth page of notes.

“The Blue John Cavern; I went there when I was sixteen and it’s like Disneyland, illuminated walkways, tour guides, boats... just a tourist attraction.”

“Aye,” said Paul, “but it brings in much needed money so I can’t knock it.”

The group had spent over an hour exploring the gigantic Citadel chamber, collecting samples and making notes. Harry had a small camera and was taking pictures, directed by Chloe. They had agreed to share the results. The flash bounced around the walls like lightening.

After the group taken on some refreshment, Paul addressed them.

“What I wanted to show you is over here,” he said shining his torch onto what looked like a hole in the cavern wall to the left. “Bring your rucksacks,” he ordered.

The group got up and started putting on their gear then followed Paul who was speaking as he walked towards the hole in the wall.

“Just a bit of background... this chamber I’m going to show you was only opened earlier this year. Originally it was thought to be a dead-end but some cavers managed to clear a large rock-fall and followed the cavern down for over half a mile.”

The students were listening closely. “Don’t worry it’s quite safe,” said Paul, looking at Abby who was showing signs of anxiety again. “There are some amazing stalactites, and we’ve found some interesting fossils as well. There’re loads down there.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Harry.

“Yeah,” said Chloe, “Abby, you alright?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Not staying here on my own,” she said.

The group lined up behind Paul in the same order as before.

It was at least fifty yards across the cavern floor to the narrow entrance to the tributary cave about six feet above them, a short climb over some large boulders which formed a natural ladder. “Don’t worry these have been here for about a thousand years, we think,” said Paul. He peered inside the darkness; the beam from the headlight bounced down the corridor.

“Right, we’ll rope up to be on the safe side,” he said.

Back at base there was a degree of consternation; Campbell Addison was growing increasingly concerned. He examined the sky again and checked the wind direction.

“It’s veered round south west,” he said to Simon Porter, one of the other guides who had returned with his group having noticed the change in the weather. He checked his watch, just gone two o’clock but you wouldn’t think it. The lights in the reception area shone brightly as they compensated for the lack of natural daylight. Then it started; just a few drops, and then a cascade.

“They didn’t forecast this,” said Simon who was staring at the sky and sharing Campbell’s concern.

“A chance of showers,” said Campbell.

Weather variations in this predominantly hilly terrain were not unusual; it almost had its own ecosystem and could be very unpredictable. All the guides were aware of this and always erred on caution when it came to taking out parties either climbing or pot-holing. An unexpected downpour or descent of mist could prove fatal to the inexperienced. This time the squall had taken them by surprise; the rain was torrential. A couple of other groups arrived in Land Rovers and made a dash into the centre soaking wet.

“How many groups are still out?” said Simon.

“Four,” said Campbell. “But three of those are climbing; they’ll just get a bit wet. It’s the cavers I’m worried about.”

“No way of contacting them I suppose,” said Simon.

“No, they’ll be too deep for wireless,” said Campbell. “Another hour of this and we could be in trouble. The water table’s already high.”

“Yes, I’m not surprised with the amount of rain we’ve had this past winter,” said Simon.

“We’ll just have to sit it out and hope,” said Campbell. “But I’ll put the rescue team on alert just in case.”

He went to the communications console and made a call.