
A Choice of Miracles

James A. Cox



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You're down in the jungle with death staring you in the face. There is nothing left but prayer. So you ask for your life. But wait! Are you sure that's really what you want above all else?

A Choice Of Miracles

By JAMES A. COX

ANDY LARSON was a hard-headed Swede. He had to be, to be still alive. He hadn't been able to move anything but that hard head for what he estimated to be about three hours since he regained consciousness. And in that time he hadn't heard anything that led him to believe anyone else had survived the crash.

Hurt and helpless, Larson waited for death.

The only thing Andy Larson had heard was the water and the far-away whine of the patrol ship on its grid track search pattern. It had not reached his area yet, and he wasn't at all excited about his chances of being spotted when it did get nearer. He could turn his head, and he could see the tangled interlacing of tree branches and vines above and around him. He remembered, at the first moment of impact, just before the ship began to break apart, a tremendous geyser of mud and water. The picture was indelibly imprinted on his mind. He couldn't see the water now, but he could hear it. The litter he could see by twisting his head as far to the left as it would go told him they had crash-landed on the water—a river by the sound of it—and had skipped drunkenly, in something approximating flat stone fashion, into the forest lining the river's bank. There had been no explosion and no fire, there was no wide swath cut through the trees—and therefore no reason why he should assume the patrol would spot him. There might be pieces of the ship lying where the patrol could see them. But he doubted that, for the river was deep and the vegetation was thick.

He strained his ears, not to hear if the patrol was approaching closer, but listening for the sound of life around him. This was his one hope—another survivor, and of necessity a mobile one. Someone to shout and wave, to climb a tree, to find an open space and build a fire, to light a flare, to do something—anything—that would attract the patrol's attention. Andy Larson wasn't afraid of dying. He felt no panic, no agonies of conscience, remorse or bitterness at the apparent inevitability of the prospect before him. But if he was not destined to die he needed a miracle or the assistance of that almost impossible—but only almost—survivor. And instead of praying for the miracle, he listened with all the hearing power at his command for the sound of human life. That would be miracle enough, and he didn't intend to stop listening until he couldn't any more.

Not that he didn't pray at all; back home in New Jersey, while not considered a pillar of the church, Andy Larson was known as a good, practicing Lutheran. But it was doubtful if the Lutherans, or any other sect for that matter, had sent missionaries this high into the heavens yet; the misbegotten flight he had been on had been only the fourth to reach this strange little planet of Abernathy since its discovery by the good professor back in '92. So Andy was no longer a practicing Lutheran, if practicing meant going to church. But he had prayed more than once during the long outward journey. And he was praying now, while his ears strained for sounds and his eyes strained for movement; praying for himself, yes, but even more for his wife, and for someone he had never seen.

He couldn't help being afraid for Elsie; he had been gone from home almost seven months, and she had been rocked with morning sickness for the last three weeks before he left, moaning over her saltines and begging him not to go even though she knew he couldn't and would not back out. She was afraid of the unknown he was going into, and he was afraid of the unknown that awaited her—it was the first time for both unknowns for both of them.

In a little while he could stop straining his eyes. Greenish dusk was slipping into night. Soon his ears would have to do all the work. The thought of night-prowling creatures disturbed him somewhat; no-one knew for sure yet what, if anything, lived in these thick, isolated jungles. Paralyzed as he was, he was fair game—his choice of words in the thought brought a grimacing smile to his face. He tried once again—was it the thousandth time yet?—to move his arms, his legs, his hands, a finger, a toe. Earlier, he had thought he was moving the big toe on his left foot, but he couldn't raise his head to see past the twisted bulk of metal that lay across him, the toe had nothing to rub upon to give it feeling, and there was absolutely no feeling between it and his head to give it any meaning anyhow. But it would have been a nice feeling just to know it was still there.

He gave up the attempt when sweat beaded out on his forehead and went back to listening and praying. He was tempted to pray for the miracle now, for blackness blotted out even the pitiful remains of the ship, and the whine of the patrol had muted to a singing hum in the distance.

The night turned cold and damp, but Andy Larson, in his sheathing of paralysis, didn't feel it. The loneliness was on him, the awesome loneliness of having to wait for death alone, with no warm hand to hold on to until the parting. He still felt no great fear or bitterness. Only the loneliness, and sadness. He would never know his son, or daughter, would never know that it loved him, that he was the biggest thing in its life. And it—that was ugly; he would call it "he"; if he had a choice a son it would be—he, his son, would never know his father, or how much his father wanted to love him. And Elsie—how lonely it would be for her. Her time must be getting close now, and she would be frightened. The doctor hadn't told her what he had told him—that she was too slight, definitely not built for child-bearing. But she knew. And she would be brave, but frightened and alone.

The hours of night trudged by. The few stars that peeped through the trees were no help in telling the time, and Andy had lost interest in it anyhow. It was night, it had been night for what seemed like years, the blackness around him proclaimed it would be night still for many more years. He dozed off and on, at times waking with a start, thinking he had heard something. For a few minutes he would listen intently, feverishly. But when nothing reached his ears but the little night sounds he had become accustomed to, he would sink back into the lethargy that weighed upon his eyelids.

He wondered if he could be dying. He thought he was getting weaker—but how could he tell for sure? He could feel nothing, there was no pain, no muscular failure, no falling weakly to the ground. There were no muscles left and he was on the ground already. It was a Herculean effort to keep his eyes open, to listen as he had vowed he would. But that might be only fatigue, the need for sleep. And shock! Of course. He had to be suffering from shock, and from exposure, too. So if he didn't die of starvation, and if some beast didn't devour him, and if whatever wounds and injuries he had didn't do him in, he would probably die anyhow from pneumonia.

The thought was almost a comforting one. It took him off the hook, unburdened him of the need to worry about whether or not he lived. The thing was out of his hands, and no stubbornness on his part was going to do any good. He had prayed himself out before, prayed until the words of the prayers were nothing but imbecilic mutterings and mumbblings, meaningless monosyllables swirling pointlessly and endlessly through his tired brain. The thing was out of his hands. He—Andy Larson—he gave up. He quit. He was nothing but a head that was hard and a body that was dead. What right did he have thinking he had any control over what happened to him? He was incapable of doing anything himself—he had to wait until something happened to him. And he knew what was going to happen. So that's what he'd do. He'd just wait.

He closed his eyes and saw Elsie, and before he realized he was going to do it he was praying again, talking to God about Elsie, and then talking to Elsie about God, and then back to God again and to Elsie again, and he knew he was crying because he could taste the tears, and he knew he was going to die because there wasn't anything else that could happen, and he knew suddenly that he was mortally afraid. He could not lay rigidly, tensely—there were no muscles to tighten. But the tension had to go somewhere. He felt a numbness creeping up the back of his neck, felt his eyes bulging as if they would burst, heard a roaring in his ears. He opened his mouth, gasping, trying to breathe deeply, the roaring in his ears reaching a crescendo and then breaking into a cold sighing wind that loudened and softened with the regularity of a pulse beat. He didn't know if he was awake or sleeping, dozing or dreaming, dying or dead. But he heard Elsie.

She was calling him. Over the cold black nothingness that separated them she was calling his name, her voice riding on the mournful wind sighing in his ears. He could hear her—it was as simple as that. He still didn't know if he was dreaming or dead. He didn't care. She was calling to him and he could hear, and although it wasn't the miracle he had wanted to pray for, still it was a miracle. He didn't question it; the comfort of hearing her voice after the terrible loneliness was enough. He didn't wonder how it could happen, didn't doubt that she could hear him answering her, as he was doing now. At first, so overcome with joy and relief, so

thankful for the miracle, he didn't even recognize the tones of pain in her voice.

"Elsie, Elsie, Elsie," he cried out with his mind, reaching for her, wanting to seize her and hold her and never let her slip away again. "I hear you, my darling. I hear you!"

"Thank God!" Her voice broke, and the sound of sobbing carried on the wind reached his ears. For a moment it puzzled him. He had been crying, but her sobs were something different. The night suddenly seemed to turn much colder. "What is it, Elsie?" he called in fright.

The sobbing became a choking cough. He heard her grunt and gasp, and then a small scream turned his blood into ice. After a long moment she spoke again, panting, her voice strained and scratchy. "Thank God you can hear me, Andy. I've called and called. I prayed that I didn't care what happened, just so long as you could be with me. And you are, you are. It's a miracle and I don't know how. But you're with me and I won't be afraid any more. I won't ... oh ... oh ..."

Andy suddenly understood. "Elsie," he cried frantically. "Where are you? Are you in the hospital? Is everything all right? Is the doctor there? *Elsie!*" He shouted her name aloud, angrily, trying to force it through the immense absorbent space between them, cursing and screaming at his own helplessness.

"Be quiet, Andy," she said at last. "Stop carrying on so. I'm all right now—it's just that the pain comes and sometimes I don't know what to do."

"But are you all right? Did the doctor—?"

"Shhh, Andy. Of course I'm all right. I'm in the labor room and there are lots of nice people to take care of me. Dr. Bell says it's like this often with first babies. And since I'm smaller than I should be—that doesn't help any. But I'm going to be all right."

"You called me, though. You said you were afraid of something, and prayed that—"

"You know how big a sissy I can be sometimes, Andy. Remember the time the wasp got in the bathroom while I was taking a shower, and how we got tangled up in the shower curtain where I was trying to hide from him and you were trying to catch him? And remember what happened right after that? Right there in the bathroom?" She laughed lightly.

To hear her laugh again! Andy smiled to himself, remembering. She had been so soft and cool and pretty, snarled in the shower curtain, her hair damp and curly, her cheeks flushed, uttering little squeals and yelps and giggles that were exciting music, and suddenly he wasn't chasing the wasp any more and she wasn't giggling because the wasp was tickling her. She had pulled his head under the shower, and he had got soaked anyway, so he climbed into the tub and she helped pull off his clothes and they soaped each other into a lather and they rinsed and they climbed out together, but they never got dried off and they never got out of the bathroom—at least not for a long time. And oh, how her laugh had tinkled then, and how he loved her when she laughed.

He thought of her laughing now, and a pain shot through his head. He tried to visualize her now, as she laughed—the swollen, hurt-looking belly, the heavy breasts dragging her frail shoulders forward, the drawn, pinched look he knew must be between her eyes as it was always when she felt unwell. He could visualize her this way, but not laughing. Then he heard her, and she wasn't laughing any more, and her moans were needles and her screams were knives.

It lasted longer this time. It lasted so long he could taste the blood where his teeth had ground through his lip, although he couldn't remember the pain of doing it. She came back to him at last, groaning weakly, and they talked, he cheerfully for her sake, she bravely for his. They remembered things they had done together, good times, happy times. They talked of what they would do when he came home, and what would they call the baby? Andy Junior if a boy? Elsie if a girl? Or Karen, or Mary, or Kirsten, or maybe Hermione? They laughed at that, and they laughed again at the thought of twins. But the laughs turned into gasps and cries of pain. And Elsie lay thrashing in the labor room of a hospital in New Jersey, and Andy lay rigidly under a rigidity not of his own making in a jungle far away.

She came back to him and told him the doctors had had a consultation, and had agreed to

wait a little longer. She came back and told him they had decided they could not wait much longer, and would have to undertake a Caesarean. She came back and told him she had begged them to give her a little more time to try and do it herself, but she was afraid they were going to give her something to knock her out. She came and she went, but even when she was gone she was never so far away that Andy could not hear her. He wanted to stop his ears to the hysterical outpourings, but he was helpless, and he hated himself for wanting to.

When she came back the next time, with weakness turning her voice into a hoarse whisper, he begged her to take the drugs. But she wasn't listening to him. "Andy, Andy," she said, "listen to me please. It's important. They've decided on the Caesarean, and I haven't got much time. I've been thinking of the way we've been talking, and I think it happened because I needed you so much. That's how I got all the way to where you are. I needed you with me with every part of me, and somehow part of me found you. But Andy, you must have needed me, too. You must have needed me, Andy, or how did you get back to me?"

Despite the weakness of her voice, the fear in it rang out loudly. He tried to laugh and told her he was perfectly fine, except for worry about her. He made up a story about lying on his bunk, sipping a cool lemonade and listening to soft music, trying to calm his nerves over the prospect of becoming a new father and wondering where he would get the cigars to distribute to the boys.

But she wouldn't believe him. She insisted that he tell her the truth, pleading with him, crying out her love and her fear and her need. At last he told her of the crash, speaking lightly, pointing out that the patrol ship would be back with daylight and all would be well. He didn't mention the fact that he had no body below the neck, but he knew she knew it was worse than he described.

Then she was gone again, for so long a time he thought the operation had started. But the wind still blew raggedly in his ears, and she came back, slowly, but with new vibrancy in her voice. "Andy, you dope," she whispered with a brave attempt at sprightliness. "Why didn't you—tell—me—sooner?" She was gasping, but hurried on. "I can tell the doctor, and he can telephone somebody and they can use the radio and tell the patrol where you are. Oh! Andy—where are you—? Hurry—"

She was going again, and as quickly as he could he told her of the river and the jungle, and where approximately the ship had been just before the crash. Then she was gone and he closed his eyes and let the waves of near-hysterical relief wash over him. He was exhausted, the strain of long concentration had drained his strength, but he could almost feel the nerve ends in his dead body tingling with the exhilaration that sang in his mind. It was the miracle he hadn't dared pray for. It would be the greatest miracle ever performed, and he had almost lost it, almost killed it, almost thrown it away. But Elsie— He prayed feverishly now, thanking, thanking, and praying for the miracle to really happen and for Elsie and his son to be all right.

Then the wind was roaring blackly in his ears and the wind was turning into a shrieking demon and above it he could hear her wild scream: "They don't believe me! They say I'm delirious. Andy! They're coming with something to put me to sleep. They don't believe me, Andy ..."

It ended. The wind stopped abruptly with her voice. The only things Andy Larson could hear were the blood pounding in his head and the grating of insects singing their last to the approaching dawn. It was all over, and he closed his eyes to the lightening sky. It was all over, the miracle was dead, the miracle never was, he was dead, he never was. Elsie— He rocked his head back and forth, wanting to cry, to curse and shout out his hatred of life. But nothing would come out, nothing was left.

It was all over. He lay under his memorial, a junk pile of twisted metal, inching his way toward death, the abortion of an abortive miracle, alone, tearless, wifeless, sonless, helpless.

A faint hum drifted to his ears. He looked up, wondering that the dawn had come so soon. The sky was brilliant with light, but still he could not see the patrol ship, knew that it couldn't see him, no matter how close the hum got.

The hum came closer and closer, grew louder, and then he heard her soft laugh and the hum faded away.

"Andy? Aren't you coming?"

He stared at the sky, his eyes bulging, his tongue swollen in his throat. He couldn't see anything, the light was so bright. He thought he must be dreaming—he had heard that people had strange visions when they were dying. But her voice sounded so real.

"Don't worry, honey," she said softly. "Everything is all right now. Come on, we're waiting."

He strained his eyes to see, and the phrase *we're waiting* struck him just as the other voice let out a cry.

"What—?" he mumbled, stupidly, happily, afraid to believe.

She laughed again, and little pieces of glittering silver tinkled through the gold of the sky. "I guess we'll have to call him Andy, after his father. He was a slow-poke too."

She was there beside him now—or he was beside her—he didn't know which, for he was suddenly free of the great weight that held him down, he had the sensation of floating lightly through the air. But they were together and she was radiant, and he was happier than he had ever thought he could be, even though she couldn't put her arms around him as he wanted her to because her arms were full of his son. His arms weren't full—only his eyes and his throat and his heart—and he put them around her, holding her tightly.

The baby howled a protest, and Elsie, laughed her wonderful laugh again. "He has a good voice, Andy, don't you think?"

"A lovely voice," Andy agreed, and his own voice sounded to him as if he were singing.

THE END

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