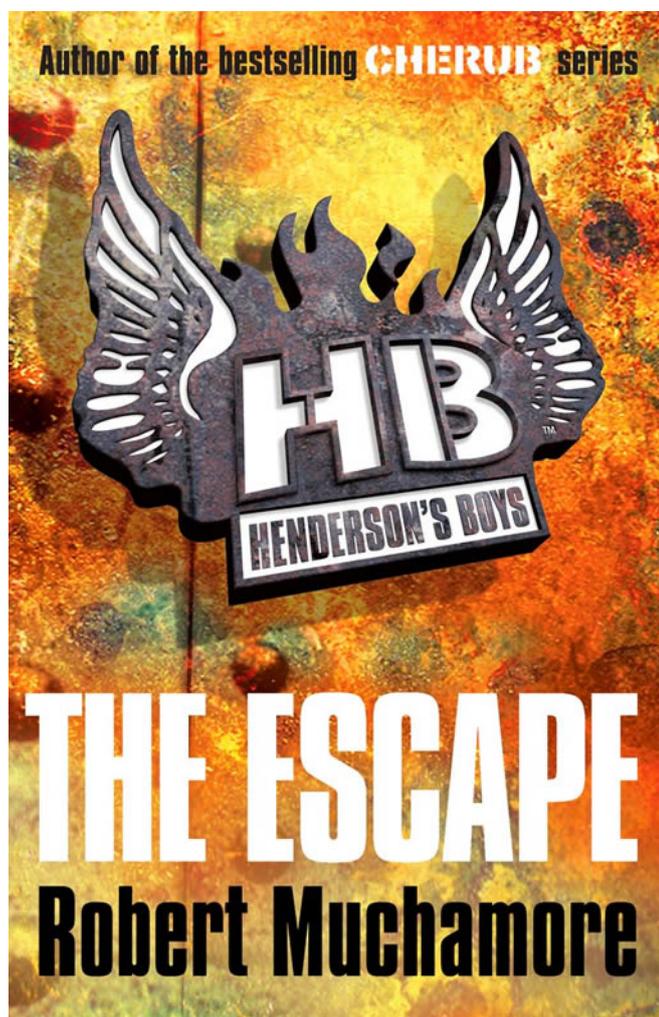


HENDERSON'S BOYS – THE ESCAPE

PREVIEW CHAPTERS



PART ONE

June 5th 1940 - June 6th 1940

Nazi Germany launched its invasion of France on May 10th 1940. On paper the forces of France and her British allies were equal or superior to the Germans'. Most commentators predicted a long and bloody war. But whilst the allied armies spread out in defensive formations the Germans used the radical new tactic of blitzkrieg, massing tanks and armour into huge battle groups and punching through enemy lines.

By May 21st the Germans had successfully occupied a huge section of northern France. The British were forced into a humiliating sea evacuation at Dunkirk and the French army was in tatters. German generals wanted to push on towards Paris, but Hitler ordered them to pause, regroup and secure their supply lines.

On the night of June 3rd, he finally gave orders to resume the attack.

CHAPTER ONE

As a baby Marc Kilgour had been abandoned between two stone flower pots on the platform at Beauvais station, sixty kilometers north of Paris. A porter found him lying inside a wooden fruit pallet and rushed him into the warmth of the stationmaster's office. There he discovered the only clue to the boy's identity, a scrap of notepaper with four handwritten words: *Allergic to cows milk.*

Now twelve years old, Marc had imagined his abandonment so often that his memory of it seemed real: the frosty platform, his anxious mother kissing his cheek before boarding a train and disappearing forever; her eyes moist and her head crammed with secrets as the carriages steamed into the night. In his fantasies Marc saw a statue being erected on the platform some day. Marc Kilgour: fighter ace, Le Mans race winner, hero of France...

But his life could hardly have been less exciting. He'd grown up in a decrepit farmhouse a few kilometers north of Beauvais. Its cracked walls and shrivelled beams were constantly threatened by the destructive power of a hundred orphan boys.

The region's farms, chateaux and forests were attractive to Parisians who came out for a Sunday drive; but it was hell to Marc and the windows into more exciting lives he got through the radio and magazines tormented him.

His days were all the same: the squirming mass of orphans rising to the crack of a walking stick on a metal radiator, school until lunchtime, then an afternoon toiling on a nearby farm. It was brutal work, but the men who were supposed to do it had been called up to fight the Germans.

Morel's farm was the largest in the area and Marc was the youngest of four boys who worked there. Mr Tomas, the orphanage director, knew there was a shortage of labour and received a good price for the boys' work; but the lads saw none of the money and any suggestion that they should was met with a stern expression and a lecture on how much each of them had already cost in food and clothing.

A long history of run-ins with director Tomas had earned Marc the least pleasant job on the farm. Most of Morel's land produced wheat and vegetables, but the farmer kept a dozen dairy cows in a shed, whilst their calves were raised for veal under an adjacent canopy. Morel had no land for pasture, so his cattle lived on fodder and only glimpsed daylight when they were led to a neighbouring farm for a romp with Henri the bull.

While his fellow orphans tended fields, Marc clambered amidst the tightly packed stalls, scrubbing out the milking shed. An adult cow produces a hundred twenty litres of faeces and urine each day and takes no account of holidays or weekends.

Seven days a week, Marc found himself in the vile smelling shed scraping manure down a sloped floor into the slurry pit. When the trampled straw and muck was cleared, he had to hose the concrete and replenish each stall with bails of hay and vegetable waste. Twice a week came the worst job of all: shovelling out the slurry pit and wheeling the stinking barrels to a barn, where they would rot down before being used as fertiliser.

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Jae Morel was also twelve and had known Marc since their first day at school. Marc was a handsome boy, with tangled blond hair and Jae had always liked him. But as the daughter of the area's wealthiest farmer she wasn't expected to mix with boys who came to school with bare feet. At age nine she'd moved from

the village school to an all girls' academy in Beauvais and had almost forgotten Marc until he'd begun working on her father's farm a few months earlier.

At first the pair only nodded and smiled, but since the weather turned fine they'd managed a few conversations while sitting together in the grass and occasionally Jae would share a bar of chocolate. They both sought a deeper connection, but their talk centred on local gossip and reminiscences from the days when they'd shared a classroom.

Jae always approached the cow shed as if she was taking a stroll and couldn't care less, but she often doubled back or hid in the long grass, before standing up and pretending to bump into Marc by accident as he came outside. The process was strangely exciting, even though they'd never exchanged more than words and chocolate.

On this particular Wednesday, Jae was surprised to see Marc emerge from the side door of the cow shed, bare chested and in a vile temper. He lashed out with his rubber boot, sending a metal bucket clattering across the farmyard before he grabbed another and put it under the tap mounted on the shed's exterior.

Intrigued by Marc's fury, Jae hunkered down and leaned against the trunk of an elm. She watched as Marc wriggled out of his filthy boots, then glanced around furtively before removing his under shorts, trousers and the socks into which they were tucked. Jae had never seen a boy naked and clapped a hand over her mouth as Marc stepped up on to a large paving slab and grabbed a block of soap.

Marc cupped his hands and dipped them into the bucket, splashing water on himself before working the soap. The water was cold and even though the sun was hot he moved hurriedly. When he was lathered all over, he raised the bucket high into the air and drained the water over his head.

Soap burned his eyes as he reached out for a grotty towel wrapped over a wooden post.

'You've got a big arse!' Jae shouted, as she sprang out of the grass.

Marc urgently flicked the damp hair off his face and was stunned to see Jae's brown eyes and sweet smile. He dropped the towel and lunged towards a pair of corduroy trousers.

‘Jesus,’ he choked, as the usually simple task of stepping into trousers became a frantic bout of hopping. ‘How long have you been there?’

‘Long enough,’ Jae grinned, pointing at a wooden screen lying flat on the pathway.

‘I don’t usually bother pulling it up... You’re never around until later...’

‘No school,’ Jae explained. ‘Some of the teachers have left. The Boche¹ are on the march...’

Marc nodded as he buttoned his trousers and lobbed his work boots into the shed. ‘Did you hear the artillery shells earlier?’

‘Made me jump,’ Jae nodded. ‘And the German planes. One of our maids said there were fires in town, near the marketplace.’

‘You can smell burning when the wind changes. Your dad’s got that swanky Renault. You should head south.’

Jae shook her head. ‘My mother wants to leave, but Daddy reckons the Germans won’t bother us if we don’t bother them. He says they’ll still need farmers whether it’s French or German crooks running the country.’

‘The director let us listen to the radio for a while last night,’ Marc said. ‘They said we’re planning a counterattack, we could drive the Boche out.’

‘Maybe,’ Jae said uncertainly. ‘But it doesn’t...’

Marc didn’t need Jae to explain further. The government radio stations bristled with optimistic talk about fighting back and broadcast stirring speeches on *turning points* and the *French fighting spirit*. But no amount of propaganda could disguise truckloads of injured troops retreating from the front.

‘It’s too depressing,’ Marc said, buttoning his shirt as he smiled at Jae. ‘I wish I was old enough to fight. Have you heard anything from your brothers?’

‘Nothing... But nobody knows about anyone. The post has gone to hell. They’re probably being held prisoner. Or they might have escaped at Dunkirk.’

¹ Boche – Offensive term for German people.

Marc nodded optimistically. ‘BBC France said over a hundred thousand of our troops made it across the channel with the Brits.’

‘So why were you in such a mood?’ Jae asked.

‘When?’

‘Just now,’ she smirked. ‘When you steamed out of the shed and kicked the bucket.’

‘Oh *that* - I was all set to finish when I realised I’d left my shovel in one of the pens. So I reached in to grab it, the cow’s tail shoots up and VOOM. It shits right in my face, mouth was open too...’

‘EWW!’ Jae shrieked, stepping back in horror. ‘I don’t know how you work in there. Just the smell makes me gag and if *that* went in my mouth I’d die.’

‘Get used to anything, I guess. And your dad’s alright in some ways. He knows it’s a filthy job, so I only have to work half as long as the boys in the fields and he gave me boots and some of your brother’s old clothes. They’re too big, but at least I don’t have to go around stinking of slurry.’

After the initial shock Jae had seen the funny side and she re-enacted the scene, flicking her arm up like the cow’s tail and making a noise. ‘VOOM – SPLAT!’

Marc was irked, ‘It’s not funny. I’ve still got the taste in my mouth.’

But this only made Jae laugh harder and Marc got annoyed.

‘Little rich girl,’ he sniped. ‘*You* wouldn’t like it. You’d be crying your eyes out.’

‘VOOM – SPLAT!’ Jae repeated. She’d made herself laugh so hard that her legs were buckling.

‘I’ll show you what it’s like,’ Marc said, as he lunged forwards and wrapped his arms around her back.

‘*No*,’ Jae protested, kicking out as he hitched her off the ground. She was impressed by his strength, but she pounded bony fists against Marc’s back as he marched towards the open slurry pit at the end of the barn.

‘I’ll tell my dad!’ she squealed. ‘You’ll be in so much trouble.’

‘VOOM – SPLAT!’ Marc replied, as he swung Jae forwards so that her long hair dangled precariously over the foul smelling pit. The smell had the physical presence of a slap. ‘Do you fancy a swim?’

‘Put me down,’ Jae demanded, her stomach churning as she looked at the flies on the bubbling crust of manure. ‘You oaf. If I get one speck of that on me you’ll be *so* dead.’

Jae was starting to wriggle and Marc realised he didn’t have the strength to hold her for much longer, so he swung her around and planted her back on the ground.

‘Idiot,’ she hissed, holding her stomach and retching.

‘But it seemed so funny when it happened to *me*,’ Marc said.

‘Pig head,’ Jae growled, as she swept her hair back into place.

‘Maybe the princess should go back to her big house and practice her Mozart.’ Marc teased, before making a screeching noise like a badly played violin.

Jae was spitting mad, not so much because of what Marc had done, but because she’d let herself get so fond of him.

‘Mother always told me to stay away from your type,’ Jae said, squinting fiercely into the sunlight. ‘Orphans! Look at you, you’ve just washed but even your clean clothes are filthy rags.’

‘Temper, temper,’ Marc grinned.

‘Marc Kilgour, you *should* work with manure. You *are* manure.’

Marc was anxious that Jae calm down. She was making a ton of noise and farmer Morel prized his only daughter.

‘Take it easy,’ Marc begged. ‘Us lads muck around, you know? I’m sorry. I’m not used to girls.’

Jae charged forwards and tried to slap Marc across the face, but he dodged out of the way. She swung around to catch him across the back of the head, but her canvas plimsoll skidded on the dry earth and she found herself doing the splits.

Marc reached around to save Jae as her front foot slid forwards, but her smock slipped through his fingers and he could only watch as she toppled into the pit.

CHAPTER TWO

The first bombs fell on Paris on the night of June 3rd. It was the first sign of the German advance and the explosions were a starting pistol for an evacuation of the city.

The Nazi regime had terrorised Warsaw following the invasion of Poland the year before and Parisians were expecting the same treatment: Jews and government officials shot in the streets, girls raped, homes looted and all men of fighting age taken to labour camps. While many Parisians fled, by train, car or even on foot, others carried on with their lives and were widely regarded as fools.

Paul Clarke was a slightly built eleven year old and one of the dwindling number of pupils who still attended Paris' largest English language school. The school served British children whose parents worked in the city but weren't rich enough to send their offspring to a boarding school back home. They were the children of embassy clerks, low ranking military attachés, drivers and others of similar status in private companies.

Since the beginning of May the pupil roll had fallen from three hundred to less than fifty. Most teachers had also gone south or returned to Britain and the remaining kids – who ranged from five up to sixteen – were now taught a shambolic curriculum in the school's wood panelled hall, overlooked by King George and a map of the British Empire.

The only teacher left was the school's founder and headmistress, Mrs Divine. Her typist had been drafted in as a classroom assistant.

Paul was a daydreamer and he much preferred this emergency arrangement to the years he'd spent seated rigidly amongst boys his own age, getting rapped on the knuckles with a wooden ruler whenever his mind wandered.

The work set by the elderly headmistress wasn't up to Paul's intelligence and this left him with time to doodle. There was hardly an exercise book or scrap of paper in Paul's desk that wasn't covered with delicately inked drawings. His preference was for armoured knights and fire breathing dragons, but he could also make accurate drawings of sports cars and aeroplanes.

Presently, Paul's ink blotched, fingers were pencilling the outline of a French biplane diving heroically towards a line of German tanks. The drawing had been requested by one of the younger boys, at the price of one Toblerone bar.

'Hey skinny,' a girl said, as she flicked Paul's ear and made him smudge the tip of a propeller.

'For god's sake,' he said furiously, as he looked around and scowled at his older sister.

Rosie Clarke had just turned thirteen and was as different from Paul as siblings can be. There was some likeness in the eyes and they shared dark hair and a freckled complexion, but where Paul's clothes drooped as if they were ashamed to hang from his thin body, Rosie had a buffalo's shoulders, a precocious set of breasts and long nails that regularly drew her younger brother's blood.

'Rosemarie Clarke,' Mrs Divine said, in a posh English accent. 'How many times must I tell you to leave your brother alone?'

Paul appreciated having the teacher on side, but it also reminded the entire class that he got bullied by his sister and the mirth that rippled across the room was all at his expense.

'Madam, our father's outside,' Rosie explained.

Paul snapped his head towards the window. He'd been engrossed in drawing and hadn't seen the dark blue Citroen roll into the school courtyard. A glance at the clock over the blackboard confirmed that it was a good hour before home time.

‘Mrs Divine!’ Mr Clarke swooned, as he entered the hall. ‘I’m *so* sorry to disturb your lesson.’

The headmistress showed obvious distaste as Paul and Rosie’s dad kissed her on both cheeks. Clarke was the French sales representative for the Imperial Wireless Company. He dressed flamboyantly, in a dark suit, mirror finished shoes and a polka dot cravat that Mrs Divine found vulgar; but her expression warmed when Mr Clarke handed her a cheque.

‘We’ve got to collect some things from our apartment and then we’re heading south,’ he explained. ‘I’ve paid up until the end of term. I want the school to be here when things get back to normal.’

‘That’s most kind,’ Mrs Divine said. She’d spent thirty years building the school from nothing and seemed genuinely touched as she produced a handkerchief from the sleeve of her cardigan and dabbed her eye.

Paul and Rosie’s played out a scene they’d seen many times over the past month. Boys shook hands like gentlemen, while departing girls tended to cry, hug and promise to write letters.

Paul found the stiff upper lip easy because he’d never been popular and his favourite art teacher and two closest friends had already gone. Feeling rather awkward, he stepped towards the younger boys at the front of the room and returned the exercise book to its eight-year-old owner.

‘Guess I won’t get it done now,’ he said apologetically. ‘It’s outlined in pencil, so you could finish it yourself.’

‘You’re *so* good,’ the boy said, admiring the explosion around a half drawn tank as he opened his desk. ‘I’ll leave it. I’d only ruin it.’

Paul was going to refuse payment until he saw that the boy’s desk contained more than a dozen triangular bars. Toblerone in hand, Paul stepped back to his desk and gathered his belongings into a leather satchel: pens and ink, a stack of battered comic books and the two artist’s pads with all of his best drawings in them. Meanwhile Rosie had erupted like a volcano.

‘We’ll all be back some day,’ she bawled theatrically, as she crushed the wind out of her best friend, Grace.

Upon seeing this, two of Rosie's other friends backed away.

'Don't worry, dad,' Paul said, as he approached the doorway and saw the bewilderment on his father's face. 'It's just the girls; they're all a bit nuts.'

Paul realised that Mrs Divine was holding out her hand and he shook it. She was a cold fish and he'd never really liked her, but he'd been a pupil for five years and the gnarled fingers seemed sad.

'Thank you for everything,' he said. 'I hope the Germans don't do anything horrible when they get here.'

'Paul,' Mr Clarke snapped, gently cuffing his son around the head. 'Don't say things like *that*.'

By this time Rosie had finished crushing her friends and tears streaked as she shook both Mrs Divine and her typist by the hand. Paul waved to nobody in particular as he followed his father down the school's main corridor and outside on to a short flight of steps.

The sun shone brightly on the paved courtyard as Paul followed his father towards the rather impressive Citroen. The sky was cloudless, but the school was on a hill overlooking the city and smoke poured from several buildings in the centre.

'I didn't hear any bombs,' Rosie noted.

'The government's moving south,' Mr Clarke explained. 'They're burning everything they can't carry. The defence ministry has even set some of its own buildings on fire.'

'Why are they leaving?' Paul asked. 'I thought there was supposed to be a counter attack?'

'Don't be naive, you baby,' Rosie sneered.

'We might not be in this mess if our side had decent radios,' Mr Clarke said bitterly. 'The German forces are communicating instantly. The French use messengers on horseback. I tried to sell a radio system to the French army, but their generals are living in the dark ages.'

Paul was shocked to see a cascade of papers come at him as he opened the back door of his father's car.

'Don't let the wind get them,' Mr Clarke gasped, as he dived forwards and scooped manila folders off the pavement.

Paul shut the door before anything else escaped, then he peered through the glass and saw that the entire back seat was covered in folders and loose papers.

‘Imperial Wireless Company records,’ Mr Clarke explained. ‘I had to leave the office in a hurry.’

‘Why?’ Rosie asked.

But her father ignored the question as he opened the front passenger door. ‘Paul, I think it’s best if you clamber in between the front seats. I want you to stack those papers as we drive. Rosie, you get in the front.’

Paul thought his father sounded tense. ‘Is everything OK, dad?’

‘Of course,’ Mr Clarke nodded, giving Paul his best salesman’s smile as the boy squeezed between the front seats. ‘I’ve just had a hell of a morning. I tried four garages to get petrol and ended up having to beg at the British embassy.’

‘The embassy?’ Rosie said curiously, as she slammed the passenger door.

‘They’ve got a reserve supply for getting staff out in an emergency,’ Mr Clarke explained. ‘Luckily I know a few faces there, but it cost me a few bob.’

Mr Clarke wasn’t rich, but his six-cylinder Citroen was a grand affair that belonged to the Imperial Wireless Company. Paul always enjoyed being in the luxurious rear compartment, with its crushed velvet seats, mahogany trim and tasselled blinds over the windows.

‘Do these papers go in any order?’ he asked, clearing a space for his bum as his father drove out of the courtyard.

‘Just stack them up,’ Mr Clarke said, as Rosie looked back and waved at her friend Grace who stood on the courtyard steps. ‘I’ll get a suitcase from the apartment.’

‘So where are we going?’ Paul asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ Mr Clarke said. ‘South, obviously. The last I heard there were still passenger ferries heading to Britain from Bordeaux. If not, we should be able to cross into Spain and get a boat from Bilbao.’

‘And if we can’t cross into Spain?’ Rosie asked nervously, as Paul straightened an armful of papers by tapping them against the leather armrest.

‘Well...’ Mr Clarke said uncertainly. ‘We won’t know for sure until we get down south, but don’t worry. Britain has the biggest merchant fleet and the most powerful navy in the world. There’ll be a boat heading somewhere.’

By this time the Citroen was cruising briskly downhill, past rows of apartment blocks, with the occasional shop or café at ground level. Around half of the businesses were closed or boarded up, while others continued to trade despite frequent signs indicating shortages such as *no butter* on food stores, or *tobacco only available with a meal* on the outside of cafés.

‘Shouldn’t we stop at the florist?’ Rosie asked.

Mr Clarke glanced solemnly at his daughter. ‘I know I promised, sweetheart, but the cemetery’s fifteen kilometers in the wrong direction. We need to pack quickly and get as far out of Paris as we can.’

‘But...’ Rosie said sadly. ‘What if we can’t come back? We might never see mum’s grave again.’

This thought made Paul freeze as he stacked the last of the papers. The cemetery always made Paul cry. Then his dad would cry and stand around the grave for ages, even when it was freezing cold. It was always horrible and he rather liked the idea of never going back.

‘Rosie, we’re not leaving your mother behind’ Mr Clarke said. ‘With luck she’ll be up there watching over us the whole way.’

The Escape will be released in the UK on February 5th 2009 (March in Australia & New Zealand)

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