

Lost Cave

LOST CAVE

by William Murray Graydon

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CHAPTER I Mad Jarrock's Boundboy

At 2 o'clock on a January afternoon Roger Keysbury and his friend Clem Lowther were looking out of the window of Roger's "den," a rather popular place of resort among the boys of the neighborhood.

The "den" had been originally a big closet partitioned off in a corner of Mr. Keysbury's toolhouse. Roger had taken possession of it latterly and fitted it up to suit his own needs.

The door was wide open, so that the "den" might be heated from the outer room, where Roger had kindled a blazing wood fire in the sheet-iron stove. His father was coming in presently to do some carpenter work.

The little square window of the "den" overlooked the farm buildings and the orchard. And to understand the story it is needful to understand the further landscape seen from this little square window.

Half a dozen miles away, across fields and woodland, several bluish peaks were stamped faintly against the murky gray sky. These hills lay amid what was known as "The Barrens," a wedge-shaped tract of lonely, rugged country, which stretches through southern Pennsylvania almost to the Maryland line.

"The Barrens" was inhabited by small game, and an occasional wildcat or bear. It is bounded on two sides by the Conewago and Bermudian creeks. These streams flow northward, and join waters at the little end of the wedge.

The Keysbury farm was five miles from the Bermudian creek, and from the latter point to the Conewago, straight across the Barrens, the distance was 10 miles.

As to the boys themselves, Roger was 16 years old and Clem was a few months his senior. Roger was tall, with crisp black hair and dark eyes. Clem was shorter and stouter, with sandy complexion and hair, and jolly good-humored features.

Mr. Keysbury was a grave, stern man, who seemed to have forgotten that he had ever been a boy. There was no sentiment about him. He held rigid ideas of duty and principle. Mr. Lowther was pretty much the same sort of man as his

neighbor.

But Roger and Clem had good, kind-hearted mothers, who tempered the parental authority in a very discreet manner.

Clem Lowther had come over to the “den” on this Monday afternoon with a special object in view. The country school had closed the previous Friday on account of the teacher’s sudden illness, and the chances were that it would remain closed for a week at least.

Clem’s plan was that he and Roger and two others should go to Lost Cave on a hunting and trapping expedition of several days’ duration.

Lost Cave was a spacious hole in the rocks on the opposite bank of the Bermudian. It ran back a distance of 40 feet, and then terminated abruptly.

Its name was due to a long standing tradition in the neighborhood that the cave had formerly extended for miles under the barrens in numerous winding passages. It was also said to connect with a subterranean stream that had its inlet from the Bermudian, and its outlet on the Conewago.

Not a few scouted the idea of there being a larger cave at all, and cited as proof the fact that frequent search had failed to reveal the entrance.

Tradition held, furthermore, that the bones of countless Indians reposed in the cavern.

But the most popular legend of all related to two soldiers of King George, fugitives from Braddock’s army, who were chased into the cave in 1755 by a pursuing party of Indians, and had never come out since.

Roger and his companions had camped near the cave during the last two summers, and they kept concealed beneath a mass of dirt, at the rear end, a chest containing tin dishes, cooking utensils, an axe, a lantern and a bottle of oil.

“It will be great fun to camp there for a few days, now that it’s cold enough to really enjoy a good fire,” said Clem when he had broached his plan. “The mouth of the cave is always warm and dry in the winter, and we can gather lots of wood. It feels like snow out now, and if we have a fall by tomorrow we can take our traps over on sleds. The creek may freeze, and then we can catch pickerel

through the ice.”

Roger shook his head

“No use, Clem,” he said. “I thought of something like that this morning. I wanted you and the boys to go with me down to the place where the creeks meet, and camp for a while in the old log cabin. But when I asked father he refused right away. He said there was a big snowstorm coming, and we would be drifted up. I don’t believe that’s the reason, though. He just wants to get all the work out of me he can while school don’t keep.”

“Of course that’s it,” asserted Clem, looking very sober and downcast.

A light step was heard outside, and as the toolhouse door slowly opened there appeared, instead of Mr. Keysbury, a strange lad, whom neither of the boys had seen before.

He looked ot be 15 or 16 years old. His boots were ragged, and he wore a baggy coat and trousers that fitted him like meal sacks, evidently made for a much larger person. His hair was long and unkempt, and on his head was a straw hat with a torn brim.

But his face was the most striking feature. It was blue with cold, drawn and pinched with hunger, and in his eyes was a pathetic expression of misery and fear.

“Say, let me get warm, will you?” he pleaded, in a husky voice. “I’m awful hungry. I ain’t had a bite since yesterday dinner.”

Then, without waiting for the permission, he approached the stove and held his hands to the blaze.

The boys had come out of the “den” by this time, and were regarding their visitor with pitying curiosity. “If you will come over to the house my mother will give you plenty to eat,” said Roger.

“I darsen’t,” replied the lad, quickly. “I don’t trust grown-up people. I saw you fellow through a crack in the door, and you kinder looked as though you wouldn’t give me away. You won’t, will you? I ain’t done nothin’ bad, honest.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Clem, in amazement. “Who are you, and what are you afraid of?”

“My name is Golden Akers,” replied the stranger, “but they call me Gid. I run away from Jarrocks’ farm, yesterday evening. The poor directors bound me out to him a month ago. He’s the meanest man I ever saw, and I stood being beaten and starved till I couldn’t stand it no longer.”

“Do you mean Mad Jarrocks’?” queried Roger.

The lad nodded. “That’s him.”

“Well, I don’t blame you for running away then,” said Clem. “They say Madison Jarrocks is the most brutal man in the country.”

“Jarrocks’ farm is 16 miles off,” said Roger. “Did you tramp all the way?”

“I did that,” replied Gid. “I slept in a hayrick last night. I’m purty near done out now, but I’d sooner die than go back. I had to work from the first streak of daylight, and at night I slept on a pile of straw over the wagon shed, and eat the scraps from the table, and wear Jarrocks’ cast off duds. He licked me every day with a big cartwhip, and kicked me around like a dog. You can just look if you don’t believe it.”

He painfully bared both arms and showed the purple welts and bruises.

“An’ that ain’t nothing,” he added. “I’m covered all over with his whip marks.”

The bound boy drew down his sleeves and resumed his shivering attitude by the fire.

“Have you no friends or relatives anywhere?” asked Roger.

“Not a soul,” replied the poorhouse lad. “I had an uncle once, but he went away 10 years ago and never came back. They took me to the poorhouse when my father and mother died, and I’ve been there six years. I used to have a nice home like other folks’” — his lip trembled and big tears began to roll down his thin cheeks.

“Look here, don’t cry,” said Clem, half gruffly. “I’m awfully sorry for you, you

know.”

“Wait here a moment,” added Roger, “I will be right back.”

He hurried out of the tool house, followed by a wistful glance from Gid, who now furtively proceeded to wipe his eyes.

Five minutes passed, and then Roger burst excitedly through the door. His face was flushed, and under his arm was a bulky paper bag. “Old Jarrocks is driving up the lane in a buggy,” he exclaimed.

The bound-boy made a dash for the door, but Clem caught him.

“Don’t go that way,” he cried. “You must slip out the window and hide. The barn will be a good place.”

“No it won’t,” declared Roger. “Jarrocks will hunt the whole farm over. Gid must strike for Lost cave. No one will think of looking for him there.”

Gid looked appealingly at the boys. “I will go anywhere,” he said. “only don’t let Jarrocks’ get me.”

“I’ll take care of that,” replied Roger. “He has the right to take you back, you know, because you’re bound to him by law. That’s why I’m afraid to ask my father to help you. Do you know how to find Lost Cave?”

Gid shook his head dismally. “I never heard of it.”

“Well, you must drop out of this window,” instructed Roger, “and creep along the barnyard wall. Then dodge through the orchard and cut straight for that hill with a clump of pines on it. It is two miles away, but you can see it plainly.

“On the far side of the hill is a road. Follow that till you come to a fork, and then take the left. It ends in a footpath through the woods, and from there you can’t miss your way to the creek. You will find a boat pulled up in the bushes. Paddle straight across, and the entrance of the cave is before you, up a little slope.”

Gid repeated the directions to make sure, and in their agitation the boys did not observe that he made one slight error.

Roger hurriedly added some instructions about digging out the chest, and making himself as comfortable as possible.

“There are bread and meat in the bag,” he concluded. “They will last you until we can find a chance to slip over and bring you more. When you hear a shrill whistle, like a partridge, you are to know you are to paddle the boat across for us.”

The next moment the fugitive had lowered himself to the ground, the paper bag clutched tightly under his arm, and the last the boys saw of him was when he crouched and vanished around the angle of the barnyard wall.

Little did either of them imagine under what circumstances they would next meet him.

Roger lowered the window and looked at Clem. The gaze was steadily returned for a moment.

“Well, we’re in for it this time,” said Clem, finally.

“We are, and no mistake,” rejoined Roger. “I’m not sorry we did it, though. Let’s go out and face the music. Perhaps we won’t be asked any unpleasant questions.”

With forced expressions of unconcern on their faces the two boys started for the door. They stopped suddenly, hearing voices and heavy footsteps outside.

Almost instantly the door was flung open, and a tall, clean-shaven man strode into the room. This was Roger’s father.

Close on his heels came Mr. Madison Jarrocks, a short, thick-set man with a burly red face and a long sandy chin beard. He had a heavy cartwhip in his hand.

“Roger,” said Mr. Keysbury. “This gentleman’s bound boy has run off and he thinks he saw him come into the tool house. Have you seen the lad?”

“I’m sure I saw him,” declared Mr. Jarrocks. “I was driving by the cross road on top of the hill at the time, but I can’t be mistaken about the clothes and hat the young rascal had on. He disappeared right at this door.”

The boys exchanged glances.

“Answer my question, Roger,” commanded Mr. Keysbury, more sternly.

“They know all about it, I can tell by their faces,” exclaimed Mr. Madison Jarrocks.

“The boy was here,” said Roger, after a brief hesitation. For a moment he had been strongly tempted to deny it.

“Is he still here?” demanded Mr. Keysbury, while his companion strode to the “den” and looked eagerly in.

Roger shook his head

“Where did he go?” questioned Mr. Keysbury.

“I can’t tell you now, father,” replied Roger, in a firm tone.

CHAPTER II The Flight by Night

To say that Roger's father was angered and indignant would but feebly express his feelings.

He stared at Roger for an instant in amazement. It was the first time he had ever been confronted with direct insubordination on the part of his son.

"You say you can't tell me now?" he thundered. "We shall see about that! Answer me at once! What became of the runaway lad?"

Roger turned pale. He pressed his lips together.

"Try t'other chap," cried Mr. Jarrocks, angrily. "Here you — where are you?"

Mr. Jarrocks got no answer to his question. While the farmer was searching the "den" Clem had hastily retreated through the toolhouse door.

Mr. Keysbury looked and his face reddened with mission. He stretched out his hand and grasped Roger by the collar.

"Where is the lad?" he demanded. "You speak or you take the consequences." "Let me explain, father," said Roger appealingly. "I wish you yourself could have seen the poor fellow. He was black and blue all over, and he looked just starved. He says he was treated worse than a dog, and I know he was telling the truth."

"That son of yours is a mighty fine fellow, Keysbury," sneered Mr. Jarrocks. "The truth is I treated that poorhouse off-scouring as though he was my own flesh and blood, little as he deserved it. He's the worst young limb I ever seen, and if he has bruises on him he put them there himself — he's cunning enough for it. But, mind you, I'll have him back if it takes a year. He's my property by law, and I ain't going to be defrauded of my rights. You can set that down!"

"Wait until you hear the boy's story, father," begged Roger.

"You impudent young rascal," cried the farmer, moving threateningly toward the lad.

“Hold off, Jarrocks,” warned Mr. Keysbury. He released his grasp on his son and stepped between the two. His glance and words expressed contempt. He evidently knew in his heart what manner of man was Madison Jarrocks.

A ray of hope cheered Roger, but it vanished when his father turned back to him.

“If the law made a mistake in binding out this lad it is the law that must rectify that mistake in the proper way. Neither you nor I have any right to commit an illegal act, and it would be illegal to screen a runaway. Mr. Jarrocks has come here and appealed to me on behalf of the law. It is my duty to aid him as far as possible. I give you one more chance, Roger. I am responsible for your acts. You are a minor. Let us hear where the boy has gone.”

For a few seconds Roger wavered.

“Don’t ask me to tell you, father,” he said at last, lifting his eyes respectfully and frankly, “for I can’t do it.”

Mr. Keysbury’s face was fairly black with anger. He snatched the whip from Madison Jarrock’s hand, and laid it smartly upon his son’s back and legs. The blows must have stung, but Roger never winced; he stood perfectly still during the operation.

“Now go to your room,” ordered Mr. Keysbury, as he restored the whip to its owner, “and remain there until you are willing to answer your father’s questions.”

“Now, Jarrocks,” he added, “we will make a search for the fugitive. He can’t be far away.”

As the men hurried off,” Roger started for the house. He had no thought of disobeying his father’s last command. He was only too eager to hide himself and his shame. It seemed to him incredible that he had been whipped.

He reached his room, a small, plainly furnished bedroom looking out on the roof of the bank porch. A burst of tears came as he closed the door, and he threw himself upon the bed, and tried to stifle the involuntary rush of sobs with a pillow.

He grew quiet after a while, and then for two or three hours he sat by the

window reflecting on the injustice and the shame of his punishment. He was in no mood to weigh the “legal” right and the wrong of his own act. The treatment he had received seemed vastly disproportionate to the offence.

In trying to save the poorhouse boy from his savage master he had obeyed the instincts of a good heart. He felt bitter anger at his father. He had serious thoughts of running away himself.

It grew darker and darker. The snow was falling fast now. Roger heard his father come in. He heard his mother’s gentle voice. The rattle of dishes told that they were sitting down to supper. From scraps of conversation floating up about the stovepipe he gathered that the bound boy had not been caught.

Presently heavy steps ascended the stairs. Roger concluded that his father was coming either to question him or to bring him his supper.

Both guesses were incorrect. Mr. Keysbury locked the door on the outside, and went down stairs again.

He was both cold and hungry, and at last he went back to the bed. He slipped between the blankets without undressing. He had no intention of going to sleep, but drowsiness stole over him as he grew warm, and soon he was sleeping soundly.

He was wakened by a sharp rap on the window. He sat up and was startled to see a dark figure on the porch roof. The next instant he recognized Clem Lowther, and he at once went to the window and softly raised it.

Clem stepped inside, shaking the snow from his clothes. “I climbed up the apple tree and dropped on the roof,” he said in a whisper. “I was awfully afraid your folks would hear me. Did you get licked?”

Roger nodded. He felt his indignation rising again.

“So did I,” returned Clem. “Mad Jarrocks and your father came over to our house and told on me. Father went out and cut a birch, and I can feel the smart yet. Though if I had done anything wrong I wouldn’t have minded.”

“Neither would I,” assented Roger.

“But I would take another whipping rather than see that poor fellow go back to that brute.”

“Well, he won’t go back,” replied Clem. “They didn’t find him, and by this time he is safe in Lost cave. And I’m going over there now to keep him company.”

“Have you run off?” queried Roger breathlessly.

“I have. I don’t propose to be beaten without rhyme or reason. Nor I don’t propose to be a slave catcher. You come along with me, Roger! That’s what I’m here for.”

Roger did not reply. He was startled and a little dazzled too by Clem’s proposition.

“I have my sled down there in the yard,” continued Clem. “It is strapped full of bread, pies, meats, a pair of blankets, and my shotgun. They won’t know we’ve gone until morning, and by that time the snow will be a foot deep, and all tracks will be covered. They won’t think of looking for us at Lost cave. Get your traps and come along. It’s 10 o’clock now.”

“Isn’t it going to be rather a big storm?” suggested Roger, looking out into the night.

“We’ll be all the safer,” said Clem. “I tell you, Roger, we three can live in the cave like a young lot of Robinson Crusoes. When supplies run out we’ll shoot game and catch pickerel — I have fishing tackle in my pockets.

“And after being licked for nothing but decent kindness as we were, no one can blame us for making off. In about a month, if we like, we’ll come home, and I tell you our folks’ll be glad to see us by that time! I think we’ll get treated rather different after this.”

Roger was not sure about the good effects of the step on his father. But his heart was full of bitterness and he longed to assert his manhood in some way.

Moreover the plan rather tempted him. What could be more enjoyable than to live for a month in Lost cave, keeping a constant watch against discovery and capture, and subsisting on the spoils of gun and rod?

And Gid Akers would be there for them to guard and to save him from Mad Jarrocks was a strong incentive. Just one unpleasant thought obtruded itself — the pain and grief he would cause his mother.

“All right. I’ll go with you, Clem,” he said, finally. “I can’t get my gun or other traps, though. They are up in the attic and my door is locked on the outside.”

“It don’t matter,” said Clem. “One gun in the crowd will do. But we ought to have some more provisions. If you could get in the kitchen window — “

“No, I won’t try that,” replied Roger, hastily. “But there may be something in the spring house.”

“Well, come on, then,” said Clem.

Then both lads stepped noiselessly out on the roof and softly lowered the window. It was the work of a moment to gain the ground by the spreading boughs of the apple tree.

The sled was left standing while they examined the spring house: and having taken the first step on a wrong path Roger did not scruple to appropriate two pounds of butter, a pie and a small joint of smoke beef.

He soothed his conscience by the rather satirical reflection that his father was bound to support him, as he was a minor.

At the last moment he remembered that he must have blankets, so he made a noiseless trip back to his room, and returned in safety.

The extra blankets and provisions were strapped on the sled, and then Clem took the rope and started off.

Roger gave a last look at the house, where his parents were sleeping in blissful ignorance of what was taking place. Then he trudged after his companion, the unmerited whipping uppermost in his mind.

The boys traveled rapidly, hardly feeling the weight of the sled as it trailed on behind. In their warm clothes they rather enjoyed the cutting wind.

The three miles to the footpath through the woods seemed a brief stretch; in not

much over half an hour more they were descending through a heavily timbered ravine to the bank of the Bermudian.

Owing to the recent rains the creek was up and the tide ran swift and yellow.

“Gid ought to have a fire burning if he is there,” said Roger, after they had taken a good look about. “But I can’t see any light, I’ll whistle twice. If that don’t fetch him we’ll both shout.”

“Hold on,” cried Clem, excitedly. “Here’s the boat, Roger, just where we left it in the bushes.”

“Perhaps he got astray coming through the woods,” suggested Clem.

“I don’t see how he could,” replied Roger, “and he had lots of time to get here before dark. And certainly he repeated the directions all right.”

However, it was perfectly clear to them both that the runaway lad had not crossed the creek in the boat. That he could have crossed by any other means was extremely improbable.

“It’s no use to wait here,” said Roger. “We had better go over and make things snug. We will build a blazing fire, and if Gid comes along he will see the light.”

A landing was made in some bushes at the foot of the rising ground, but they hauled the boat far enough out to be safe. Then they started up the slope, dragging the sled behind them.

A climb of 20 feet among pine trees and scattered rocks brought them panting to a level plateau two or three yards wide.

Lost cave was now before them — a jagged black hole in the face of a granite cliff.

The sight filled the two with mingled dread and delight. In crossing the creek they had left civilization behind them.

A distant cry from some prowling animal caused Clem to hurriedly draw his gun and a lantern from the sled. With a cheery light shed about on the scene, the boys felt their confidence and courage return.

They advanced jauntily into the spacious cavern mouth, and quickly satisfied themselves that no unwelcome visitor was lurking in the shadowy recesses. The atmosphere felt warm and dry. There was not a trace of moisture anywhere.

“The first thing is a fire,” said Roger. “I’m going to have a good warm supper after waiting so long for it.”

“I had mine,” answered Clem, “but I can easily put away another. Hello — here’s a stack of wood left from last time. This’ll do us until tomorrow.”

Roger eyed it critically. “We must gather a lot before the snow gets too deep,” he said. “Do you hear that wind? It is commencing to blow a regular gale.”

“Yes,” assented Clem, going to the mouth of the cave. “And the snow is going to drift around the cavern mouth like all forty.”

“Let it blow and snow,” replied Roger, cheerily. “We don’t care. I hope Gid Akers is all right, though.”

“He probably changed his mind and took another direction,” suggested Clem. “Perhaps, too, he was afraid to trust us.”

“He needn’t have been,” said Roger, remembering the sting of his bruises. “Hold on, now. Here goes for the fire.”

He touched a match to the little heap of paper and chips and it was soon ablaze. Heavier wood was piled on and caught readily, until the ruddy flames shone out into every nook and cranny of the cavern.

“I’ll go and dig out the chest,” said Clem, producing a rusty fire shovel from a fissure in the side wall. “I’ll empty it of the dishes and other stuff and then we can put in our provisions.”

“Go ahead,” replied Roger, “and when you find the coffee pot and the frying pan bring ‘em out.”

Roger collected some flat bits of stone and piled them up on opposite sides of the fire, whistling softly as he worked. He could hear at intervals from the rear end of the cavern the dull “plunk” of Clem’s shovel.

All at once Clem's voice rang out in a tone of great excitement "Roger! Roger! come here! come quick!"

CHAPTER III What a Gun Shot Did

At the close of their last summer's camping trip the boys had concealed their chest by placing it in a sort of niche in the wall near the end of the cave: they had loosened a sufficient quantity of the overhanging clay and flinty debris to bury it from sight.

This was the only part of the wall that was soft; everywhere else the sides of the cave were hard and impregnable.

Clem had gone in and begun to dig from the top, intending to uncover the lid of the chest first. He had made considerable progress when a fall of rubbish from above filled up the cavity.

Nothing daunted by this misfortune, he had set to work with renewed energy, digging as far back as possible to avoid a repetition of the disaster. He made forcible prods with the shovel, and at the third or fourth thrust it stuck.

When he pulled hard something rattled and trembled as though the entire wall of the cave was coming loose.

The shovel remained fast, and as the circumstances were somewhat mysterious, to say the least, Clem was startled, and he immediately summoned his companion, and Roger had abandoned the fire to hurry to the spot.

"The edge of the shovel must have caught fast," Clem said. "I'm afraid to pull hard for fear of a cave-in."

"Give it here," said Roger. He pulled gingerly once or twice, then dropped it, tore away the debris with both hands until the entire shovel was uncovered to view.

By the light of a lantern a portion of what appeared to be a smooth stone wall could be seen. Across the face of it ran a seam; and in this the blade of the shovel had stuck fast.

When Roger now pulled hard on the handle the lower part of the wall moved to

and fro. The upper portion was seemingly firm.

“What can this mean?” exclaimed Clem.

“We’ll know in a minute,” replied Roger. He ran back to the mouth of the cavern, and returned with the gun. He tapped the wall with the end of the barrel, and it gave forth a hollow, ringing sound.

“You get the rubbish out of the way as fast as it falls,” directed Roger, as he tore the shovel loose by a vigorous jerk.

They worked with might and main, Clem using his hands and Roger plying the shovel. Soon the chest was sufficiently uncovered, and taking it by both ends they lifted it clear and deposited it in the passage, some distance away.

Then they attacked the heap of dirt and stone that remained, and speedily leveled it over the floor of the cave.

Then Roger took the lantern and held it into the recess. The smooth stone wall was not yet exposed to view. In fact, only the original patch was visible, with the straight seam running across it. They could see that the rest was covered with a hard, clayey substance like mortar, and was laid on smoothly and evenly.

“This looks as though it had been plastered by hand,” said Roger. “You must have knocked that piece off with the shovel. If it is all that loose it won’t take long to clear it away.”

So saying, he attacked it with the stock of the gun. At every blow a crumbling piece fell off. In five minutes the entire covering of clay littered the floor, and the boys were startled to see the outlines of a square stone slab fitting closely into the wall.

Roger ran to the chest and took out a small axe. He inserted the blade into the crevice at the top of the slab, then pressed upward on the handle with all his strength. The leverage was a good one, and when Clem lent his aid the slab began to move slowly outward.

“Look out!” cried Roger. Both jumped backward, and the slab fell with a ponderous crash, narrowly missing their feet. In the face of the wall yawned a square, black hole.

“Hurrah!” cried Roger, dancing about with glee. “We’ve found the secret passage!”

“Who could have done it?” asked Clem.

“Indians — or robbers, perhaps,” suggested Roger. “That slab was put in place years and years ago.”

It was some time before the boys realised, to its full extent, the magnitude of their discovery. Then their first impulse was to spread the news, and convince the unbelieving ones that the legendary continuation of Lost cave was no myth, but reality.

But on second thought they were eager to explore the newly found passage, and seek where it led. Dazzling and yet terrifying visions of skeletons, treasures and Indian relics filled their brains.

They forgot that they had run away from home. They even forgot Gid Akers and his mysterious disappearance.

“Shall we start right away?” asked Clem.

“No, we better wait until morning. A couple of square meals and a few hours sleep will put us in trim. Besides, there are several things to be attended to before the snow gets too deep outside. Shall we have a look at the hole before we go back?”

Clem agreed, and they crawled several yards into the mouth of the passage. It was no more than three feet high at first, but it could be seen to widen farther on.

The floor was smooth and hard. The walls and the roof were of stone, fissured and cracked in many places. The air was dry and warm, and evidently quite pure, since the lantern burned freely.

The boys finally turned and retraced their steps, eager for morning to come, when they could explore the cavern to its end.

The slab was too heavy to move conveniently, so they allowed it to lie where it had fallen.

A little examination convinced them that the unknown persons who plastered the slab over with clay had concealed their handiwork by caving in a part of the overhanging wall, and that this, in the course of years, had become as hard and compact as though it were the work of nature.

They sallied out together and searched the adjacent hillside for logs and brush. They made three return trips, piling their heavy loads a few yards inside the cavern.

Then they went back for pine boughs and gathered enough to make two snug beds.

While Clem unpacked the chest Roger built a roaring fire. In a short time the coffee was steaming and a slice of ham sizzling in the pan. Of this, with plenty of bread thrown in, the boys made a hearty meal.

They replenished the fire with a great log, large enough to smoulder until morning, and carefully loaded the gun against a possible visit from a prowling wildcat. Then they wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay on the fragrant pine boughs.

In spite of the recent exciting events they fell asleep readily, and when they opened their eyes the gray light of morning was spreading into the cavern.

There was scant space for it to shine through, however, for the ledge outside was blocked with snow to the height of seven or eight feet. The storm was raging as fiercely as ever.

“We needn’t worry about the storm,” said Roger. “For one thing, there is no danger that any one will trouble us, and as far as provisions go we can stand the blockade for a week. By that time we will be able to get out after fish and game.”

After breakfast the boys began to prepare for their expedition.

They stuffed their overcoat pockets with bread, crackers, slices of cold meat, a bottle of oil, matches, powder and shot, and also took along a small axe.

Rogor had melted some snow in a tin pail, and he now poured the water into an old canteen that belonged to the treasures from the chest.

“We will have need of this,” he said.”

“Unless we find the subterranean river,” suggested Clem, laughingly. “But don’t you think we ought to take more bread and meat along?”

“What we have will be plenty,” replied Roger. “If the cavern is too big to explore in one day we will come back and prepare for a longer trip.”

They bent nearly double as they crept through the narrow part, but at the end of 20 yards the path grew slightly higher, and permitted them to stand erect.

They were now descending at a slight angle. Presently they reached a circular chamber, fully 20 feet high by as many wide. The walls were smooth and glossy, and the floor was strewn with a whitish sand.

Here the young explorers found the first tangible reward for their daring. They picked up half a dozen arrow heads of bluish flint and several broken bits of clay pottery.

“This settles one thing,” said Roger. “The cave has been used by Indians.”

“There are certainly no traces of robbers yet, or King George’s soldiers,” said Clem.

A narrow aperture opened out at the other end of the chamber, and Roger unhesitatingly led the way there with a lantern.

In this passage the boys were compelled to crawl on hands and knees, and even then they frequently bumped their heads and backs.

This cramped and uncomfortable path continued for 30 yards, and then gradually widened out like the big end of a funnel until the boys found themselves in a corridor about 10 feet wide, which stretched interminably into a shadowy distance.

Overhead were incrustations of stalactite that glistened like diamond pendants in the rays of the lantern.

With new emotions of awe and wonder the boys trod softly over the sand-strewn floor, but keenly on the alert for fresh discoveries.

They were rewarded. They had gone but a few yards when two balls of fire glared at them from the darkness ahead, and a low, wailing cry made their blood run cold.

A wild animal was the last thing that the boys expected to find in the cavern; but there was no doubt that something of the kind confronted them now.

Clem quickly drew his gun to his shoulder and sighted between the fiery eyes.

“Stop! stop! don’t do that!” cried Roger.

The warning came too late. Clem’s finger was already pressing the trigger, and as the hammer descended a terrific report, magnified a hundredfold by the pent-up walls, extinguished the lantern and made the boys reel and stagger.

It was followed by an awful roar and crash that seemed to shake the earth. This died away in rumbling echoes.

It was a full minute before they could comprehend what had happened. Their heads seemed to be bursting from the concussion.

Finally Roger fumbled in his pocket for a match and struck it on his knee. He looked eagerly around as the little flame blazed up, and a cry of horror burst from his lips.

Where the funnel-like passage had stretched before them a moment before there was now a great mass of stones and rubbish piled high to the roof.

CHAPTER IV An Unexpected Meeting

The boys could only stare at each other. Their faces were white and frightened.

“Shall we ever get out again?” asked Clem.

“Not by the way we came in, certainly,” answered Roger, with an effort at cheerfulness. “Our only chance is to find another outlet. Why did you shoot? Those walls all around are all probably loose and cracked, and any concussion will bring them down, I expect.”

“I didn’t think,” said Clem. “I just blazed away at those eyes. What became of the animal?”

“Scared off, I guess,” replied Roger. “Let’s take a look at this avalanche — perhaps we can dig through.”

A very short inspection convinced the boys to the contrary. The walls and roof of the funnel-shaped passage had crumbled together behind them in one common ruin, and it was more than likely that this devastation stretched inward toward the cave for yards.

Moreover, among the debris were separate masses of the rock, far too large for the boys to move by their united strength.

“It’s no use,” said Roger, gloomily, “we could never dig through here in a month’s time.”

“Then we will have to die in this horrible hole,” Clem wailed out, his tears coming. “I — I wish we had stayed home.”

“Too late for that now,” replied Roger, himself almost in tears. “But let’s cheer up. We will find a way to escape. The cavern has another outlet, for how else did the animal get in?”

This suggestion contained a grain of comfort for both lads. They resolved to make a thorough search as speedily as possible.

By using it sparingly they had food enough with them to last two days, and the

canteen of water was also adequate for the same length of time. Owing to Roger's forethought in bringing a bottle of oil they were spared the horrors of darkness.

They turned their backs on the avalanche of rock which barred them from the mouth of the Lost cave, and made their way down the spacious corridor.

Roger walked ahead with the lantern. Here and there in the sand were visible the tracks of an animal. From their size and shape the creature was either a wild cat or a catamount. The latter was far more to be dreaded than the former, but the boys regarded this danger lightly in comparison, the greater troubles that threatened them.

They pressed along on the trail of the creature, hoping that it would lead them to the outer air.

The corridor now began to ascend, and the floor, instead of being sandy, was of hard, smooth rock. At frequent intervals little passages were seen in the side walls, some large enough to admit the boys.

They pushed on for what seemed an interminably long time, now rising, now descending; now stooping low in narrow parts of the path, and now transversing big galleries where the roof was far overhead, and the walls wide apart.

As yet they had seen no trace of human occupancy except the Indian relics.

Finally Roger stopped, and faced his companion with an anxious expression. "What idiots we are," he exclaimed. "We have come a half mile since we saw those last tracks, and it never occurred to me until this moment that the creature may have turned into one of those side passages; one of those may lead out, you know."

"Let's go back and try a couple of them," suggested Clem.

Roger assented, and they retraced their steps a hundred yards or more and entered an aperture that was as large as any they had seen.

But the passage narrowed so rapidly that they had to back out before they had gone a dozen feet.

“No use trying any more, probably,” said Roger. “They are probably all alike — large enough for that animal to crawl through, but too small for us.”

“That knocks our hopes on the head,” replied Clem. “I’m sure we’ll never get out, Roger. If the cave had any outlet in the Barrens some one would have discovered it long ago.”

The situation looked equally blue to Roger. But he was determined not to show the white feather.

“Now, see here, Clem,” he said, “It won’t do to become despondent. Let’s not stand here moping. Keep up your spirits, and come along.”

For hours there was no change in their surroundings. The gloomy corridor wound like a serpent, and tunnelled deeper and deeper between the massive, walls of granite.

A conviction that they were destined to perish miserably in the bowels of the earth began to take possession of Roger. Days seemed to have passed since they entered the cavern. They knew, at least, that by this time it must be night in the outer world.

At length a rift, stretching directly across the passage, brought them to a standstill. It was three or four feet wide — a greater distance than they cared to leap.

On the opposite side, a dozen feet distant, the corridor was seen to split, one part branching to the right, the other to the left.

Roger took a bit of paper from his pocket. Ignited it with a match, and sent it fluttering over the brink of the chasm.

It lodged on a bed of stones and sand at a depth of 25 feet, as nearly as they could calculate, and as it flamed brightly for an instant the boys distinctly saw the rusted barrel of a gun, and lying near it a few glistening white objects.

“That gun belonged to one of those two British soldiers,” whispered Clem, in awestruck tones.

“Yes, and those are his bones,” added Roger. “He must have fallen down the

chasm. Look out — you may get dizzy and topple over.”

“Perhaps some one will find our bones some day,” said Clem, dismally. “There is no use in going ahead even if we could jump that hole, and it is worse than useless to turn back. We may as well give up and die right here.”

Roger made no reply, but sat staring moodily at the little flame of the lantern. Not a word of comfort could he force to his lips. He felt it would be a hollow mockery to try to cheer his companion. Reckless to the passing of time, they crouched there in utter helplessness.

Neither observed that the lantern, nearly spent of its oil, was burning more and more dimly.

“Perhaps father was right and I was wrong,” Roger reflected with a pang. “The Bible says obey your parents, and I certainly didn’t do it. Father isn’t cruel at heart. If he could only have seen Gid he would have pitied him and made Mad Jarrocks treat him better. ‘Say, Clem, he added aloud, “If I ever get out of this, I’m going back home and behave myself.”

“All right,” said Clem, huskily. He was already half asleep, his back against the wall, his head dropping forward on his breast.

Roger felt drowsy, too, and he threw himself down beside Clem, using his arm for a pillow, and his troubles were soon forgotten.

Clem was the first to wake. The lantern had gone out. As he fumbled about to find it an amazing discovery almost took his breath away.

Through the darkness shone a ruddy, flashing light, apparently some distance away. He at first believed it to be an optical delusion. But when he rubbed his eyes and looked again the light was still there.

He hastily roused Roger. The strange red gleam was easily located. It came from the distant recesses of the corridor which branched out to the right, beyond the chasm.

The boy’s watched it for a little while with emotions of awe and dread. They remembered tales they had heard concerning ghostly occupants of the cavern.

All at once Roger roused up. "What idiots we are to be afraid," he exclaimed. "Let's have the lantern." As well as he could by the light of the match he filled it and then lighted it. "That passage," said he, "leads to the end of the cave, probably, and the light we see comes from some hunter's campfire outside. We are saved, Clem. Saved! do you hear? Come on, old fellow. Let's run for it."

He snatched the lantern and ran back a few paces. Then he ran forward and crossed the chasm by a leap. Emboldened by his companion's example, and by the hope of freedom, Clem picked up the gun and made the leap too.

They hurried on side by side toward the ruddy light, flashing the lantern ahead of them.

Presently they became convinced of a dim roaring noise in the distance. It increased as they advanced, until it rang loudly and deafeningly in their ears. The red gleam became more and more distinct, and mingled with it they could distinguish curls of smoke and fiery yellow sparks.

The path which had been level so far, now suddenly ascended, at a pretty stiff angle, and when the boys reached the highest point they looked down on the strange scene.

Twenty feet below, and separated from them by a precipitous slope of rock, was a beach of shining sand a dozen yards wide. It terminated in a pool of black water that was constantly heaving in turbulent eddies, and washed, on the opposite side, the steep rocky wall of the cavern.

This subterranean stream — for such it was — cut directly across the corridor that the boys had been following. It issued through a gloomy hole, and where it disappeared by a similar aperture was a great mass of drift — logs, fence rails and brush.

This blockade formed the eddying pool, and the escaping water pouring through the interstices made the deafening roar that the boys heard.

They noted these details at a sweeping glance, and then their eyes rested with amazement on the central objects of the scene — a blazing wood fire near the edge of the beach, and a human figure squatted beside it.

"The outlet of the cavern must be near by," exclaimed Roger, joyfully. "This

man was probably hunting through the Barrens, and came in here to escape the storm “

“But he has no gun,” replied Clem, “and I don’t see how he could get here, anyhow, unless he came by water.”

“Well, we’ll go down and ask him about it,” said Roger, lightly.

He handed the lantern to his companion and lowered himself over the edge of the cliff. There were plenty of projections for his hands and feet, and he was soon two-thirds of the way down. Then a loose stone slipped from under him, and he fell heavily to the sand.

The stranger evidently heard the noise, for Clem saw him rise hurriedly. He seemed on the point of running out on the pile of drift, then turned and came timidly forward.

By this time Roger was on his feet, a little stunned, but otherwise uninjured, and when he turned toward the fire great was his amazement to find himself face to face with Gid Akers.

Both boys were speechless with surprise for an instant.

How — did — you — get here?” demanded Roger.

“I don’t know myself,” replied Gid. Have you anything to eat? I’m most starved.”

“Wait a minute,” answered Roger. “Come down, Clem,” he shouted. “Gid’s here. Look out you don’t fall. Slide the gun down and fasten the lantern to your waist. Blow it out first.”

Clem made the descent in safety, and eagerly shook hands with Gid.

Then all three tramped across the sand and sat down by the fire. Roger gave Gid a plentiful supply of bread and crackers, and he ate ravenously. “First bite I’ve had since you gave me that bag,” he said. “I cleaned that stuff up before I got to the creek.”

“What we want to know is how you got here,” said Roger. “It’s the strangest

thing I ever heard of.”

“You’re just right — ‘tis strange,” replied Gid, with his mouth full. “It beats the creation. But you tell first, I can’t talk when I’m eating.”

This was a pretty severe test of the boys patience, but they related between the story of their adventures and misfortunes. Gid’s face grew more and more sober as he listened to the narrative, and when it was concluded he burst out with:

“Great cracky! we are in a bad fix! I thought sure you fellows had come to show me the way out!”

“That’s just what we want you to do for us,” exclaimed Roger.

Gid looked at them blankly. “I reckon you’ll wait a long time on that,” he answered. “I came through there.” He pointed to a yellow, heaving current that poured forth from the arched hole in the cavern wall.

“Now see here,” exclaimed Roger. “That story won’t go down.”

“I tell you I did come through there,” reiterated Gid. “I’ll prove it to you in a minute. Give me time to eat this cracker.”

A wailing, blood-curdling, cry echoed through the cavern, and when the boys turned their heads they saw a large animal crouched on the very verge of the cliff. Its fiery eyes stared savagely into their own.

“Give me the gun, quick!” exclaimed Clem.

“No, you don’t,” replied Roger, seizing the weapon. “Do you want another avalanche?”

“Yes, sooner than be chewed up,” responded Clem. “That beast ain’t to be trifled with. It’s a catamount.”

“It’s certainly too big for a wild cat,” asserted Gid, in a trembling voice. “I seen ‘em more than once when I lived at home. It is the same animal you fellows shot at?”

“It must be,” replied Roger. “I suppose it hid out in one of those holes, and came

out when we had gone by. It looks awfully fierce and hungry.”

“Look out! The critter is getting ready to jump,” yelled Gid. “Let’s run out on the drift.”

“Stand your ground, boys,” shouted Roger. “grab a couple of those burning brands, quick.

As he gave this order the beast sprang lightly upon a projecting spur midway down the face of the cliff. With another agile leap it bounded upon the beach, scattering the loose sand in all directions.

There it crouched for an instant, its short, wicked ears thrown back, its long tawny-gray body quivering and its tail oscillating to and fro.

CHAPTER V On Subterranean Waters

The three boys were thoroughly frightened when they saw the ugly brute menacing them at such close quarters.

Roger tried to keep a cool head on his shoulders, and stoutly resisted Clem's appeal to be allowed to use the gun.

"Look, how broken and split the root is above us," he said. "A concussion might bring the whole thing down on our heads. Besides, the gun is only loaded with small shot. It would make matters worse to merely cripple the animal."

The catamount was now crawling slowly toward the boys, screeching as he advanced.

They retreated to the other side of the fire, and then, at a word from Roger, all let fly their brands.

Two struck the beast, and it sprang back snarling and spitting. But the next moment it came crawling on again.

"More brands!" cried Clem.

"We can't spare them. The fire is too low," answered Roger.

"And the pile of wood I gathered is all gone," added Gid. "I wish I could get out to the drift."

"Shoot the animal, then, Roger," pleaded Clem. "Now is your time. One shot will finish him."

Roger hesitated. He was resolved to use the gun only as a last resort. Suddenly a bright idea entered his mind.

"Shout with all your might, you fellows," he said. "I've heard of wild animals being scared off in that way."

The plan was quickly put to the test, and as the three voices rang loudly through the cavern the beast turned tail in apparent consternation and hastened off as far

as the base of the cliff.

This was the chance that Gid was waiting for. He darted out on the pile of drift and began to load his arms with wood, while Clem and Roger yelled lustily, hoping to keep the animal at bay until he could return.

But the catamount had become used to the noise and refused to be scared. Fixing its eyes on Gid it slipped stealthily along the cavern wall until it was a little beyond the fire. Then it paused and quivered for a spring.

Clem was too badly alarmed to move or shout. Roger snatched a chunk of burning wood from the fire and hurled it forward.

It struck only the vacant spot, for at that instant the catamount had risen in the air with a screech. The boys expected to see their hapless companion pounced upon and torn to pieces.

But Gid had glanced up in time to see his peril, and with a couple of agile leaps he gained the farthest extremity of the drift, where it lay stacked against the rocks, and the catamount miscalculated its spring.

Instead of hitting the log on which Gid had been standing, it went a foot or two beyond, and vanished through an opening in the drift.

Immediately there arose a great squalling and scratching and splashing of water. The greedy animal had been caught in its own trap.

As soon as the boys realized that the tables were turned they followed up their advantage.

Gid approached the spot from one side and Clem and Roger from the other. The catamount was half submerged in the swift, black water, and was tearing with its forepaws in a frantic attempt to get out.

It screeched with fury when it saw the boys looking down upon it, and Clem beat hasty retreat to the beach.

"I'll fix the brute now," exclaimed Roger. He braced himself firmly on the log and, reversing the shot gun he brought the stock down on the catamount's head with stunning force.

The beast lost its hold and disappeared almost without a struggle.

A few seconds later the current swept it out from the lower side of the brush, and the boys saw it vanish in the darkness of the subterranean channel, squirming feebly among the pitching waves.

“Let me see, where was I?” mused Gid. “I remember I was just going to prove to you fellows that I came through that hole there.”

“That was it,” assented Roger.

“Well, I did come through,” Gid contended, and there is the proof. You fellows were too blind to see it before.”

He pointed to an object that had floated partly under the mass of drift — a small, squarely built boat turned bottom up.

It was quite natural that Clem and Roger should not have observed it, for it resembled a log as much as anything else.

“Well,” began Gid, “I ain’t much good at story telling, but this is the way it was. After I left you fellows I struck across the fields and when I came to the place where the roads forked I turned to the right.

“I walked on for a couple of hours, but never found any foot path. I turned off into the woods. Then I saw a foot path after a while, and followed it until it brought me to the creek. I found a boat there, but I couldn’t see the cave. The other side of the creek was all thick woods.”

“I unchained it, and got in. I tried to paddle across with a stick, but the current carried me down like a streak. After awhile I shot round a bend, and came near upsetting in some rapids. Just below the rapids the water was smooth, and went round in a ring, I guess it was a whirlpool. Anyhow I got caught in it, and the boat went round so fast that it made me dizzy.

“I got nearer and nearer to the other side of the creek, where the rocks were straight up like the walls of a house. I could see a black hole there, and I thought it was the cave you told me about, only the hole was right on the edge of the water. It was too dark to see plain, and the snow was coming down pretty thick.

“The next thing I knew the current took the boat right into the hole. It bumped half a dozen times, and swung from side to side. Something hit me on the head and knocked me flat.

“All of a sudden it got dark as midnight, and I couldn’t see a speck of light. After a while I sat up and struck a match. Cracky! I was scared! The boat was rushing along between two walls of rocks, and there were rocks above me, too. Then I knew I was under ground, I tell you, fellows, that ride was awful! I guess it lasted a good many hours.

“I had only four matches, so I didn’t strike any more. At last I heard a roaring, and just as I got a match lit the boat sailed up against this pile of drift, and you better believe I made a jump for shore!

“I must have fallen asleep on the sand. When I got awake I used the other matches to build a fire. I started it with some paper I had in my pocket. It wasn’t long after that until you fellows came.”

The conversation now turned on a far more important question, namely, how to escape from the cavern.

“There are just two courses open to us,” said Roger. “We can turn back and explore the other corridor, or we can drag the boat over the drift and trust ourselves to the channel. What do you say?”

The plan was fully discussed before they finally decided to trust themselves to the unknown perils of the subterranean stream.

“Have you fellows anything more to eat?” asked Gid. “I’m almost as hungry as I was a while ago.”

Roger examined his pockets.

“About enough for one square meal,” he answered, ruefully. “We will hold on to it as long we can. We have plenty of oil for the lantern, and that is the most important thing. Ready, you fellows? Pitch in, then.”

The order was obeyed with a lusty will, but the boys soon found out that they had undertaken a pretty stiff contract. By dint of perseverance, however, they got the boat to the beach, emptied it, and dragged it over the heap of drift until it

rested on a projecting log in such a fashion that a light push would send it into the foaming water.

Then, not caring to trust the square seats at the bow and stern, and the plunk across the middle, they threw some brush into the bottom of the boat. Roger and Gid selected from out of the drift a pole, and some flat pieces of wood for paddles.

When Clem had carefully filled and relighted the lantern all was ready for the start.

The boys climbed down on the log and slid the boat into the water, holding it fast, meanwhile, by a bit of rope that was attached to the ring in the bow.

Clem entered first and seated himself with the lantern on his lap. Gid came next, holding up his baggy garments to avoid tripping.

“Ready, now,” shouted Roger, and, casting off the rope, he dropped nimbly from the log.

The angry watery snatched the boat, and away it went with a rush into the narrow and gloomy gorge, swaying from side to side and heaving and pitching with the waves.

The subterranean channel varied in width from 10 to 15 feet. On each side was a slimy wall of rock rising a dozen feet or more to the jagged roof of the cavern.

The current ran swift and yellow, owing to the flooded condition of the creek. Occasionally the boat struck the newly-formed fragments of drift ice.

These came from the outer air, and had been sucked through the obstructing mass of debris which terminated Gid’s dark ride.

For several hours the clumsy little craft bobbed on through the winding channel.

Clem held the lantern up so that the rays would shine into the gloom ahead. Roger and Gid crouched beside him on the heap of brush.

So the hours wore on, and at last the lamp began to flicker and grow dim.

“It always lasts about four hours,” said Clem. “That shows how long it is since we started.”

“Well, you fellows strike matches till I fill it up again,” replied Roger, taking the oil bottle from his pocket. He handed the little tin box to Gid, who quickly opened it and scratched one of the matches on his knee.

Clem extinguished the lamp and lifted the top off, while Roger drew the cork from the oil bottle.

At that very instant the boat grated on some obstruction, and, whirling swiftly around with the current, it struck sternwise against the cavern wall.

The crash throw the boys to one side, and they felt the boat tipping over. A dash of icy water splashed them from head to foot, and Gid’s match went out, leaving the scene in total darkness.

CHAPTER VI Out of the Cavern

What might have been a terrible disaster was prevented by Roger, who involuntarily tumbled back when he felt the chilling shower. This restored the equilibrium of the boat, and it righted itself instantly. Before the boys could fully realize their narrow escape they were whirling off on the current again, enveloped in pitchy darkness.

Roger cried out: "Strike a match, Gid. I've dropped the oil bottle."

"And I've lost the globe of the lantern, I'm afraid," added Clem, feeling around. "Something knocked it out of my hand."

There was a pause of breathless silence. Then Gid said dolefully, "I can't find the match box."

"I hope that isn't gone, too," groaned Clem.

"We'll be in a pretty pickle. Search your pockets, Gid."

"I just did," was the reply, "but it ain't there. Wait, I have some matches in my vest pocket."

He quickly struck one, and as the flame shot up three white and startled faces confronted one another. A few seconds later they were, if possible, even more pallid and scared.

The light revealed the irreparable nature of the recent calamity. The boat had shipped an inch or more of water, and on the surface floated the oil bottle, surrounded by a greasy scum. Half the contents were gone, and the balance was mixed with water. Roger held the cork in his hand.

The globe of the lantern was nowhere to be seen. It had probably gone overboard. A sudden lurch of the boat revealed the match box, and Clem made a grab for it. "Worse luck," he cried, in a tone of despair. "The matches are soaked. Not one will light, I know."

"Try to light the lantern," said Roger. "There is a little oil left in it."

Gid touched the wick with the still flickering end of the match, but it only spluttered angrily, and refused to burn. The next instant all was dark again.

“How many matches have you?” asked Roger.

“Only two,” replied Gid. “I thought I had more. Shall I light one?”

“Not now. Keep them for an emergency. We may as well face the worst, fellows, and be done with it, We’ve got to travel the rest of the way in the dark.”

Nothing was said for a long time now. The boat drifted on through the darkness, and the boys crouched close together for warmth. The only sound that reached their ears was the soft lapping of the tide against the rocky walls of the cavern.

The water in the bottom of the boat added to their discomfort, but finally Roger hit upon a happy idea for getting rid of it. He took one of his heavy leather gloves and used it for a bailer with such success that after a while the boat was almost dry.

For the next two or three hours nothing occurred to alarm the daring young voyagers. From the fact that the boat no longer hit any obstructions it seemed evident that the channel was wider.

“At the rate we have been traveling we can’t be far from the end of the stream.” said Roger. “We will know the best or the worst before long.”

“I don’t believe the outlet is underground,” replied Clem, in a hopeful voice. “There is too much current and depth of water for that.”

This sort of talk put the boys in better spirits, and when Gid suggested that something should be eaten Roger took out the remainder of the food and divided it into three shares as equally as the darkness would permit.

They were too hungry to leave any for another time, and the last fragment soon disappeared.

But the anticipated end of the journey was long in coming, and the boys’ spirits sank to a low ebb again when they had drifted a long time through the darkness. On and on went the boat, heaving gently with the current, and at last Clem and Gid fell asleep from sheer weariness and despair.

Roger was drowsy, too, but he determined to stay awake and watch for any danger that might occur. He propped his back against the middle seat and sat there for a length of time that seemed interminable. Then he dozed off into a state of semi-consciousness.

He was aroused from it by a terrible splashing and roaring that seemed to come from all sides. The boat was heaving dizzily and moving at a speed that made Roger gasp.

He wakened Gid and Clem and tried to allay their fears. It was very difficult to speak distinctly owing to the noise.

Gid handed one of his two matches to Roger, who quickly struck it. A blast of air put it out almost immediately, but in the brief interval the boys saw that the boat was dashing through rapids. The channel was scarcely a dozen feet wide, and the roof was so close overhead that it could almost be touched.

“Keep as still as possible,” shouted Roger, “If we upset we are gone.”

The roar of the water now seemed to deepen, and the boat struck rock after rock, whirling from bow to stern, from stern to bow; its flat bottom was probably all that saved it from capsizing.

All at once the heaving motion ceased and the angry roar of the waves seemed to fade away in the distance. A terrible thought occurred to Roger. Was this the end of the subterranean stream? Was its outlet from this point beneath the surface? The fact that the boat was apparently motionless seemed to indicate as much.

“Where are we?” wailed Clem. His voice rang dolefully through the empty space.

“That’s what I want to find out,” replied Roger. “Strike that last match, Gid, and hold it carefully.

As Gid obeyed, and shaded the little flame with both hands, Roger picked up the lamp and poured the few drops of oil that it contained upon his handkerchief, which he put down on the middle seat, and then touched the match to it. Instantly a blue blaze flamed up, diffusing a clear light in all directions.

The boys uttered cries of astonishment. The boat was drifting along one side of a

circular pool, 30 or 40 feet in diameter. It was surrounded by smooth walls of rock, and the roof overhead was vaulted, rising farther than the boys could see.

Behind them, marked by foam and waves was the mouth of the passage out of which the boat had come. At the first glimpse there appeared to be no outlet to the pool; the current seemed to trend in a circle, and return to its starting point.

“We are shut in here forever,” cried Clem despairingly. “I knew how it would be. What fools we were to meddle with this stream,”

“That’s so,” echoed Gid, “and we can’t go back the way we came, either.”

Roger looked the picture of despair, but all at once his face brightened. He pointed to a long low fissure in the rocks, 20 or more feet ahead, out through which the water seemed to flow.

“That must be an outlet,” he exclaimed; “but it will be a pretty tight squeeze for the boat.”

The boys looked eagerly at the spot as they drifted nearer. It was half a dozen feet long, but too low, it seemed, to admit a boat.

“If it gets wider when we are once inside we are all right,” said Roger.

“Suppose it don’t?” asked Clem.

“Then we will either stick fast or upset,” was the reply.

There was a moment of breathless suspense while the boat swung nearer and nearer to the aperture. The sluggish pool was covered with little whirling eddies, but of a sudden an undertow seemed to snatch the boat, and it shot swiftly forward.

The movement was so unexpected that the boys had little time for preparation.

“Down! Down!” cried Roger, “Throw yourself flat. We can’t stop the boat now.”

Clem and Gid had enough presence of mind to obey the order. There was barely room for the three to lie flat on their backs, and just as they got in this position they heard a sharp, rasping noise, and saw, within a few inches of their faces, a

smooth, slimy surface of rock. The boat had entered the fissure.

The oiled handkerchief continued to burn for a few seconds, and then it suddenly went out, leaving the boys in a pitchy darkness that added tenfold to the horrors of the situation. Worse still, they knew they had not a single match left.

Prone on their backs and wedged tightly together the trembling boys waited in agonizing suspense. What was in store for them they could only guess.

Roger ventured to raise one hand, and it touched the slimy rock. He drew it back with a sharp cry that startled his companions. Clem attempted to rise, and received a smart blow on the head for his imprudence.

The boat kept swaying and grating on its course, and each minute, as it dragged slowly by was like an eternity of terror. Beneath them was the unknown depth of water.

Of what duration was this frightful journey the boys never knew. It may have lasted several hours, possibly much more. They woke to a still keener sense of their peril when the boat grated slowly and then ceased to move.

“Push against the roof,” cried Roger, hoarsely, “we are lost if we stick here.”

His companions heard and heeded. They tore at the rocks until their fingers were lacerated and bleeding, and the perspiration started from every pore. The boat moved on with aggravating slowness, swaying from side to side grating and rasping. A roaring noise now filled the cavern and the air, which had been close and stifling, suddenly changed to a cold draught.

“Don’t give up,” pleaded Roger, “One more push, boys! Here we go, now all together!”

The hopeful words animated them, and with renewed energy, all drove their hands against the rocks. The boat moved on, at first with difficulty, and then with perfect ease and freedom as the strain suddenly relaxed.

What followed was almost too joyous to be realized. A dusky streak glimmered through the darkness and widened rapidly. A rush of swift water was heard, and then the boys felt a stinging sensation on their faces as though prickly bushes were smiting them.

They opened their eyes and were blinded for an instant by a bright light. Then, delicious moment! they sat upright and saw around them a broad stream clogged with cakes of drift ice. The sun was shining from a blue sky, and to the right and left were wooded shores and hills covered with snow.

For a time they could scarcely speak. They wept for very joy and took deep gulps of the delicious air.

Presently the boat drifted by the mouth of another large stream, and the boys knew that their subterranean cruise had taken them across the Barrens to the Conewago creek.

The reaction now came and they suffered from cold and hunger and weariness. They were glad to land at a farmhouse several miles below the junction of the two creeks.

When they had told their story they were given food and hot drinks and put to bed. They were surprised to learn that it was Thursday morning. Clem and Roger had been in the cavern two whole days and nights, and Gid had spent three nights underground.

The farmer was acquainted with the boys' parents and he sent his hired man off in hot haste to bear the news.

When Mr. Lowther and Mr. Keysbury arrived they were greeted penitently by their runaway sons. Both fathers were at first inclined to be severe, but when they heard the whole story they concluded that the boys needed no further punishment and readily forgave them.

"You have learned a severe lesson, Roger," said Mr. Keysbury, "and I hope we will understand each other better in the future. It was right for you to pity Gideon Akers, and the impulse did you credit. But your disobedience was none the less a sin, for you might have known that I would look out for the lad's interest in my own way."

The runaways were able to travel and they reached home on Friday night to the general joy of everybody. Gid spent the night with Roger, contented in Mr. Keysbury's assurance that he should never go back to live with Mad Jarrocks.

It proved unnecessary to take legal steps to procure the lad's freedom, for Gid's

uncle unexpectedly arrived from the West, and satisfactorily accounted for his long absence.

The discoveries that the toys had made created a sensation in the neighborhood, but every attempt to clear the debris from the secret passage proved futile and no one was ever daring enough to risk a journey up through the subterranean stream.

THE END