

Chapter 8: Back to the cave

Clare took a small pocket-knife out of her anorak and quickly inserted it into the door catch.

'It's a bit stiff at the moment,' she said. 'The plaster keeps falling off and we have to renew it. Just before you came we'd finished it off and it looked quite good. We found that real moss was growing on it in some places.' She pulled the door open and crawled in. Gavin and Michael followed her.

'Pull the door behind you,' said Clare. 'Mot can open it himself.'

For the second time in two days Gavin found himself crawling along the short passage-way.

'Have you got a torch?' asked Clare. Gavin brought his head-torch out of his rucksack.

'Put it on,' said Clare. 'My batteries are running low.'

Gavin dutifully switched on. Michael also produced a small torch. They entered the cave, the light beams sweeping round, glinting on the boxes and the shield on the wall, throwing the red tartan cloth into sharp relief.

'Sit down,' said Clare, 'and I'll tell you about the cave.'

'How did you find it?' asked Gavin.

'It's an old silver mine,' Michael chimed in. 'We were playing up here one day and saw the opening. So we ran home for candles and then crawled in.'

'To be honest, we were a bit scared,' said Clare. 'A lot of the rock on Dumyat isn't very safe. We call it pudding-stone, though that's not its right name.'

She went across to one wall, kicked a few splinters of a protruding rock, and passed them to Gavin.

He examined them. They were just like rounded puddings stuck together. He glanced nervously at the roof.

'It's all right,' said Michael. 'There's only one patch beside that wall that's loose. The rest is quite firm.'

'Give Mot a shout and we'll take down the shutter. It's silly to waste batteries.'

Michael obediently set off for the entrance.

'The climbing pole is a bit thin for Michael and me,' said Clare, after Michael had disappeared. 'We leave the shutter in place because some rain can blow in. Jackdaws and pigeons would also get inside and make a mess.'

In a few minutes Michael was back with the grinning Mot.

'There's no one around,' said Mot, getting to his feet and dusting himself.

'Open the shutter, Mot,' commanded Clare.

Gavin watched with interest as Mot went to one wall, picked up a long pole and set it against the wall below the gash he had seen when he first entered the cave.

Very carefully, Mot began to climb up, placing his feet slowly in the cut-slots. Soon he was above their heads.

'Hold the pole steady,' he shouted down. Clare and Michael held it on either side. Mot reached up and detached the shutter, lowering it carefully on an attached rope to the floor of the cave. Light flooded in, making Gavin blink. They all switched off their torches.

'We found the cave last year,' said Clare. 'It was made to mine silver and goes much further into the hill. But it's been blocked up. Look!'

She pulled aside the tartan cloth. Behind it was a heap of piled boulders and rubble.

'We tried to move a lot of it to get in,' said Michael. 'But there's too much of it. So we just covered it up.'

'When we got inside the main entrance,' said Clare, 'we found that there were two wooden posts at each side. We don't know what they were for. Perhaps the miners had a little door to keep sheep out when they were away.'

'Anyway,' she went on, 'we asked Dad for some old wood and we made a door to fit.'

'Dad gave us some hinges and a catch,' said Michael, 'but we didn't tell him exactly what it was for. He just asked us to be careful.'

'It took us a day to carry the door up here and to fit it up,' added Mot. 'The plaster was the worst part.'

'We tried everything,' said Michael.

'It kept falling off,' said Clare. 'But in the end we bought some outdoor glue-solution that Dad uses on farm buildings. We mixed that with the plaster and coated the door with it. We painted it like the rock and then stuck moss and lichen into it. When it's freshly done, it looks very like a real rock.'

'I know,' said Gavin. 'I only found it by accident. I didn't know where you had gone and I was simply scraping at the rock to pass the time.'

'The weather affects it,' said Clare. 'But if we keep repairing the camouflage, no one will ever find it.'

She looked affectionately round the cave. 'I bet no one has ever had such a good hideout,' she said with satisfaction.

'Have you shown Gavin the marks?' said Mot.

'What marks?' asked Gavin.

Clare stood up and pointed to one wall. There were patches of red stone seaming the grey rocks and sections of white quartz. Every now and again there were smooth scorings about an inch wide and a foot long.

'We think these are dynamite markings,' said Clare. 'The mine is hundreds of years old, but later miners tried to widen it to see if the silver had all been dug out. Dad says it's all gone now.'

She sat down on one of the wooden benches. 'Sit down,' she said to Gavin. 'It's silly to stand.'

Mot and Michael took off their bows and hung them on the pegs driven into cracks in the wall.

Gavin also sat down. 'Did you make the seats?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Clare. 'Dad gave us some old wood and we brought it up here. Michael and Mot hammered them together to make the seats and the table. It can get slightly damp if there's a lot of rain so we keep everything in tin boxes.'

'That's one of the reasons we made that shutter for the gash,' she went on. 'It stops anyone seeing our light if we're here in the dark, and it keeps the wet out when we're away.'

Gavin sat back on his seat with a feeling of pleasure. It was fun to be sitting in a hidden cave talking to his new friends.

‘What are the sashes for?’ he said, pointing to the wall.

‘Oh, these are the three tartans of the Clan Stewart,’ said Clare. She handed them over to Gavin.

‘The red one is Royal Stewart, the tartan worn by the pipers in the Highland regiments. The green one is Hunting Stewart, a tartan worn for hunting. It can’t be seen easily. The last one is Stewart of Appin, one of the main branches of the Clan. We only wear them on important occasions. There are some other Stewart tartans but we’ve missed them out.’

‘What does the Clan do?’ asked Gavin.

Clare glanced at Mot and Michael. ‘You said he could join,’ said Michael.

‘He’ll have to take the oath,’ said Mot.

‘But I took the oath,’ said Gavin. ‘I swore on the Holy Iron.’

‘That was just to see the cave,’ said Clare. ‘To join the Clan, you must go through the full ceremony of allegiance. But I suppose I can tell you a little. We try and find out about Scottish history...’

Gavin’s face fell. ‘History!?! ... how dull!’

Clare saw his look and said hurriedly: ‘But we make it good fun. We play at being clansmen and we try and teach ourselves to live on the hills and in the woods in all weathers and to move silently like wild animals.’

'And to watch birds and keep diaries and notebooks about them,' said Mot.

'Oh, I'm interested in birds,' said Gavin.

Mot looked pleased. He opened a tin box beside him.

'We keep a list of the birds we've seen. So far, we've seen 88 different species.'

Gavin gasped. 88! Why he had only seen about 20 so far. He studied the notebook Mot gave him, his eyes running down the names: Buzzards ... herons ...three kinds of owls ... sparrow-hawk ... oyster-catcher ... birds he had never even heard of.

'I saw a peregrine,' he said.

'Yes,' said Mot, 'it nests nearby, on the large hill with the crag at the top.'

'Yes, I remember it,' said Gavin.

'We do other things as well,' said Michael. 'Soon Dad is going to teach us how to be proper mountaineers and how to climb in the winter.'

'We picnic and swim in the pool in the hidden valley,' said Clare. 'We build huts in the woods and light fires and cook on them. And we explore the Ochils as much as we can.'

It sounded fun, Gavin thought. Birds, huts, cooking on fires and exploring.

He remembered something that one of the others had said. 'And you don't cook at all in the cave?' he asked.

'No,' said Clare. 'We found the smoke could be seen pouring out of the gash and it smelled the cave. So we just cook in the hidden valley.'

'My aunt has a portable stove,' said Gavin, remembering that he had seen one in her kitchen cupboard. 'I could perhaps borrow that and you could cook a meal in the cave.'

Mot and Michael were visibly impressed.

'That's great!' said Clare. 'We can have a Clan Council for your oath of allegiance and then we can have a feast afterwards.'

'Good,' said Gavin. 'Well, that's settled.'

'There's just one thing,' said Clare. 'You'll have to pass an initiative test first.'