LOST in a HAY-MOW

THERE were seven of us, just out of school, and ready for anything in the shape of fun. It had been a clear race from the school-house—we never could go anywhere without a run or a leap-frog, or something of the sort—and now we were all lying on the grass in the shade of an apple-tree, laughing, panting and eating apples. The ground was covered with small, juicy fruit, mellow on the upper side and hard underneath. They were pretty sour, but we didn't care.

It was only half-past four, and we had two good hours before supper-time all to ourselves. So we lay there, filling our pockets with apples after we had eaten enough, and began to propose plans.

"Let's go down to the mill and see 'em saw logs."

"Too far."

"Well, who says 'I spy,' then?"

This suggestion was well received, and I, who had made it, proceeded to count off, one dropping away every time until the last, who happened to be Bob himself, was "It," and was posted against the tree with his eyes covered.

"Fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty—I'm comin' when I get to three hundred!" he shouted, as we scattered in all directions.

At first I made for a low wall near the house, and had hardly time to gain it when Bob gave a flourish, and with a loud "Three hundred—comin'!" started for his prey.

Peering through a crevice in the wall, and finding he was coming in my direction, I hurriedly glanced about for a new hiding-place.

At that moment a red squirrel bounded lightly along the tops of the stones and disappeared in a crevice between two boards of the barn.

Instantly I followed the hint. Creeping on my hands and knees, I soon reached the corner of the old gray building, and a moment later was in the centre of the mow, burrowing down out of sight, until I was pretty confident that it would take a smarter boy than Bob Andrews to find me that time.

It was remarkably comfortable in that mow. The hay was fresh on top, and although I had reached the under layer of last year's crop, I took care not to disturb it much, so that the dust did not trouble me. I could hear the shouts of the boys as they were discovered, one after the other, and the complaining tones of Bob, who, to my great satisfaction, was ransacking every nook and corner of the place except the right one.

A couple of swallows flew in and out over my head, twittering softly. Perhaps they were returning for a last look at their old home, for it was September, and time they were away.

Whether it was the soft autumn air, or the distant, faint shouts of the boys, or the voice of the swallows, I never knew; but when I roused myself to climb down and have my laugh at the rest of the fellows, to my surprise I found it was quite dark. At the same time I began to experience a smothering sensation, and an almost unbearable heat.

I put up my hand. It instantly came into contact with hay so dry that it made me sneeze.

I tried to push it aside and to rise; but, to my dismay, found myself held down tightly by an immovable mass above, below, on all sides. I had at first supposed the hay had tumbled or been thrown for fun upon me; but all in a flash, I realized the truth. I had fallen asleep, and while unconscious, had been covered by some of the farm-hands, who, I remembered, had been directed that very morning to pitch the entire contents of another mow upon this, as the flooring of the first needed repairs.

I was sixteen, then, and pretty rugged for a boy of my years; but I confess I felt a lump in my throat and a faint, dizzy terror sweep over me from head to foot.

Buried alive in a hay-mow! For a few minutes I was quite frantic. I shrieked for help; I dug furiously with hands and kicked with feet, until my smarting eyes, nostrils and throat, half-choked with fine hay-dust, compelled me to desist.

Then I began to plan more deliberately. It was pitch-dark, remember, and so close that I could hardly breathe. The perspiration, too, was streaming from every pore. If I had known my points of compass, I could have made a bee-line for the nearest limit of the mow; but I had turned in sleeping and struggled so violently afterward, that I was as completely lost as though I had been in the Maine wilderness.

There was no time to spare. My breath came in a quick, heavy panting. I felt my strength growing plainly less. At the same time I began to be hungry and thirsty. How much time had elapsed since I had hidden away I could not tell. Perhaps it was supper-time.

What would I have given to have been sitting in the smooth-floored, old-fashioned kitchen, with my bowl of bread and milk before me, relating my strange adventure to the half-sympathizing, half-laughing faces around the table?

I began slowly to loosen the hay upon my right side, which I judged was toward the centre of the barn. If so, my course would bring me out through the side of the mow, only a few feet above the floor.

It was tedious work, for I dared not hurry lest I should be overcome with heat and the dust, which kept me coughing almost incessantly.

Handful after handful I pulled out and crowded behind me. Every muscle ached with the cramped position, and the air became more and more close. Still, I worked on steadily, desperately. How long it was I cannot tell—I never knew.

I was drawing away the tightly-packed masses of hay, a small bunch at a time, when the air suddenly became perceptibly cooler and sweeter. I dug at the cruel hay wall more furiously. Somewhere beneath me I heard a slight scrambling and rustling, which soon ceased.

A moment later, my finger-ends struck the rough surface of boards, and, as they did so, a cold, delicious draught of air, like spring-water in a desert, blew upon my hot cheek.

I felt about eagerly, still seeing nothing, and soon came upon a small hole or interstice, with roughened sides, as if gnawed by some animal, between the edges of two of the boards, which formed the partition I had met. It did not take me long, country boy as I was, to reason out the nature of that opening. It was a squirrel's hole, without doubt the very spot where my bushy-tailed guide had disappeared, as I watched him from behind the stone wall.

I put my eyes to the opening, and looked out. To my astonishment, the stars were shining brightly. Yes, and the moon! By its position in the eastern sky—for it was past the full—I knew at last how long I had been in that hay-mow. It was between twelve and one o'clock, and for eight hours I had been buried, lost in the hay.

I say had been, for now I felt quite at ease. No more exploring for me that night! When morning came, I could easily call through my squirrel's front-door, and the men who came out early to milk would pitch off the hay, and release me.

The only trouble was hunger and thirst, which, now I had time to think of them, oppressed me more than ever. Then I remembered those apples. I suppose nothing will ever taste so good as that sour, hard apple did that night. After I had made a bountiful lunch, I enlarged my quarters a little, settled back comfortably, and waited for milking-time.

That's all there really is to tell. In due time the stars faded, one by one; the sky flushed all sorts of lovely roses and pinks; the cattle began to stir about uneasily underneath; a distant door creaked, and heavy boots slowly approached.

I placed my lips to the crack, and called in a low tone. You see, I didn't want to rouse all the folks. I knew they wouldn't be worried, for I had planned to go over to Fred Merritt's and stop with him that very night.

Well, ten minutes later I stood on the barn-floor, brushing the hay-seed from my hair and clothes, and stretching my aching limbs. I found the witch-grass had cut my fingers a little, and that was about all the harm that came of it.

I expected them all to laugh at the breakfast-table, and told my story rather sheepishly; but when I got through, and looked round, the folks had anything but smiling faces, and two of them passed me the doughnuts, both at once. Mother cried outright.

"If he hadn't taken the right direction," she said, "or had kept going in a circle—"

Then she stopped; and so will I.