

For a moment no one moved as the entire company gazed in wonder at the object of their quest. Tall and wide it was — taller even than Wigwah — but rounded, as if carved in one giant arc from the rough rock wall. The cavern seemed filled with its massive presence, and the air hung heavy with tense expectation.

After dimming Wigwah's lantern and motioning the company to complete silence, the Indians led them cautiously forward, staying near one wall.

Obeying Grey Wolf's gestured command, Wigwah took up a position directly behind the two men, holding his lantern low. Solomon and Jasper followed in the Giant's wavering shadow, and Zebbie came last, moving with halting footsteps, unsure what he was most afraid of — the black empty tunnel behind him, or the door up ahead outlined distinctly by a mysterious glow.

Step by step the company advanced, silent and secretive, hugging the wall as if to hide, all the while keeping their eyes fixed on the vague but ominous portal. The absence of sound in the dark, empty room intensified the feeling of hushed excitement — and the blackness itself seemed full of eyes.

They had continued along for some minutes, when all of a sudden Zebbie cried out, "*What's dat big black thin'?*" And before anyone could think, the lad took aim and — "*Bang!*" went his gun.

At that same moment, the faint light around the secret door winked out, and a low rumbling sound began echoing all around them. Louder and louder it grew until, all at once, the whole party was engulfed in a terrific whirl of wind that all but swept the boys and Owl off their feet. In the tremendous rush of air, the flame of Wigwah's swinging lantern flickered once and died.

Instantly, pitch black settled down upon the company like a heavy blanket — so thick they could scarcely breathe. Then, as they stood there stunned, the noise and wind receded as quickly as they came. Silence fell again upon the room, as profound as if the very breath of life itself had been whisked away by the strange wind.

"*Great Caesar,*" cried Wigwah upon recovering his senses. "Where's a match? Find the matches, and *hurry!*"

The companions slid their packs rapidly to the floor and rummaged around with clumsy fingers, unable to see anything at all in the total darkness.

"What in the *world* did you shoot at, Zebbie?" the Giant asked.

"Ah dunno, Mistah Wigwah, but it sho' looked like a big black bear starin' at me fru pow'ful red eyes. Ah just *knowed* he was gonna grab me, an' gobble me up *right* down to my little pinkie-toes."