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Trapped (Continued from page 4)

one of us by the half cry, half sigh we would make. At 10 feet, we knew our bodies were locking in rigidity. "Better cut out a ledge here and just sit it out," Jim said. We took turns with the knife, hacking away a shallow indentation with enough room for the three of us to perch on.

"The rescuers will find us soon," Bill said when we scrambled on our shelf. We nodded and dozed off for a while. We couldn't judge how long we'd been under the mountain now. By all the trouble we'd encountered, by our hunger and beard growth, we figured it must be around late Saturday night. That meant our fraternity and families—Jim's and Bill's in Atlanta and mine in Ormond Beach, Fla.—must have realized we were in danger. They'd be after us first thing Sunday. That wouldn't be long, so we sang fraternity and folk songs to pass the time.

BUT TIME didn't pass. It lay as heavily around us as the clammy darkness. My thoughts went back to the rope. "You know," I said, "I think I could climb that rope if it were at an angle rather than straight up and down. Why don't we pull it over to the bank and hold it taut between us and that outcropping of ceiling? That would give me about 20 feet of sloping rope to get a start on."

I knew, too, that there was a splice mark at the 20-foot mark. I could rest there. Another 20 feet up was a shelf of rock where I could get another breather.

It seemed like a good idea until Jim pointed out a drawback. The way the rope would be held placed a climber above some jagged stalagmites that jutted from the floor of the pool like pikes. If I fell, I could be impaled.

We didn't debate it for long, though. Two of our flashlights were soaked and dimming to a dull yellow. Only Bill's would be working soon, and if that went we'd be lost in a deaf and blind world, left only with a groping sense of touch that could lead us in deadly directions.

Jim and Bill pulled the rope as horizontal as possible, and I started up. The exertion felt wonderful, pumping warmth into me and stretching taut muscles. Bill moved his beam of light just ahead of me as if drawing me upward, and Jim called hoarsely, "You got it, boy. Keep going!" I reached out with blistering hands for the knot and clung tight. By now, my lungs were seared, and my arms felt as if somebody were wringing them out like a piece of wet wash. I didn't look down, but I could sense those stalagmites, their spiked snouts sticking up under me.

I got within three feet of the ledge when I realized feeling was draining from my hands. "You okay?" Bill called. "Slide back if not. Don't chance a fall." I thought that over, but as I did the light picked up the shadowy ledge. It was just out of reach. I was almost out of this pit, and I could never start over again. Take it easy, I told myself, it's only a few feet now. But my muscles seemed to be pulling apart, and I could hear my breath come in explosive gasps.

Numbness spread up my forearm, and I couldn't be sure I was gripping the rope. I tried to flex feeling back into my hands, but they were dead. I started slipping back, the ledge fading in the darkness. Feeling rushed back into my hands now—the searing feeling of rope burn.

THE PLUNGE was black and dizzying. Helpless, I plummeted down sideways, most of my body exposed to the rocks below. But I smashed into shallow water and sank against the cushion of mud beneath. Off balance, I bobbed up and staggered only a couple of feet before I struck the knife-sharp edge of crusty rock.

"I'm okay." I managed to call. Bill and Jim moved to my side. Some of the light reflected on their faces, and I saw real fright written in the thin lines of their lips and the set of their jaws. We had come close to the worst, and the thought left us more helpless than ever.

We didn't say much to each other. We just clawed our way back to our ledge and fell limply across one another. There was fitful dozing, broken only by little animal sounds



William Bartee



James Mason, Jr.

as a cramp hit us or as some phantom sound alerted, then disappointed, us. What time was it now? At least Sunday afternoon, we decided. We'd been missed for sure. Rescuers might be right above us!

"Let's give them something to hear!" Bill said with the first vigor we'd managed since my fall. We yelled wildly at first, then common sense told us to organize ourselves. We would count to three, then bellow.

The moment we would stop, all sound would choke off, not fade away as normally. Crushed, we would lapse into a silence as deep as this underworld. The slightest foreign noise, however, would set us on a yelling binge again.

Once we heard what sounded like a firecracker exploding, and we almost fell off our perch shouting. Then came another loud pop, and we realized it had come from the pool. "Bubbles," Jim said disgustedly. "Air bubbles from the ground popping on the pool's surface." We slumped back, angry at the cruel trick.

It was after our 48-hour estimate, a very conservative one, that Bill Bartee laid down the rules for the thing we had never mentioned—dying here. We never doubted we'd be rescued, but obviously something had gone wrong above, and just in case the wrong wasn't righted in time, we wanted to make sure our last moments were not a horror.

THE COLDER and weaker we got, the harder it was to stay awake. We locked arms around one another to prevent a sleeper from tumbling down, and we made sure at least two of us were always on alert for any sound. During my turn at sleep, I felt Bill and Jim go tense as if they'd just taken a shock. They strained forward in the darkness, holding their breath. More listening. I thought sourly.

But something intruded on the pure stillness. A shuffling sound, prolonged, not short and curt like the others. "Let's give it a try," Jim said.

We yelled again, then fell silent. I listened so hard in that muteness that my ears seemed to hum. We shouted again, a little frantic now. But this time we heard an answer—a long, subdued call. We shouted, paused, shouted, paused. Soon we heard: "Keep yelling. We're getting closer."

Old friends had picked up our shouts—Ed Seagraves and Dick Shuptrine, ATO fraternity brothers, and Harry Lange, who had spelunked with Jim before. They were part of a 150-man rescue effort that had been bogged down in a vast expanse of cave we had never realized was so big.

"You fellows all right?" a rescuer called down. "Need anything?" Yes. We needed something to see, hear, smell—but most of all we needed to orient ourselves with time again. We had never realized what a limbo life becomes without a sense of passing time.

"It's about 4 p.m.," somebody told us. "Monday."

Just short of three days, and now I could safely admit I thought we'd been trapped closer to a week. Army Rangers and spelunkers from the Atlanta Grotto of the National Speleological Society soon had looped ropes around us and were dragging us up to the cave. When we finally emerged, blinking, into the outside world, somebody asked Bill if he would ever go into that cave again. "Nope," he replied. "That was my 12th look inside. The 13th might be unlucky."

We laughed—but we haven't been back to Lookout.