

In this extract from Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876), Tom, an adventurous and daring boy and his friend Becky, are on a school trip viewing an underground cave network when they become separated from the rest of the party.

Now to return to Tom and Becky's share in the picnic. They tripped along the murky aisles with the rest of the company, visiting the familiar wonders of the cave – wonders endowed with rather over-descriptive names, such as 'The Drawing Room,' 'The Cathedral,' 'Aladdin's Palace,' and so on.

Presently the hide-and-seek frolicking began, and Tom and Becky engaged in it with zeal until the exertion began to grow a little wearisome; then they wondered down a sinuous avenue, holding their candles aloft and reading the tangled webwork of names, dates, post-office addresses, and mottoes with which the rocky walls had been frescoed (in chalk perhaps or elsewhere scratched into the stonework). Still drifting along and talking, they scarcely noticed that they were now in a part of the cave whose walls were not frescoed. They scored their own names into the rock under an overhanging shelf with a jagged piece of stone and moved on.

Presently they came to a place where a little stream of water, trickling over a ledge and carrying a limestone sediment with it, had, in the slow-dragging ages, formed a laced and ruffled Niagara* in gleaming and imperishable stone. Tom squeezed his small body behind it in order to illuminate it for Becky's gratification. But Tom found that it curtained a sort of steep natural stairway which was enclosed between narrow walls, and at once the ambition to be a discoverer seized him.

Becky responded to his call, and they made a wax mark for future guidance, and started upon their quest. They wound this way and that, far down into the secret depths of the cave, made another mark, and branched off in search of novelties to tell the upper world about.

In one place they found a spacious cavern, from whose ceiling depended a multitude of shining stalactites* of the length and circumference of a man's leg; they walked all about it, wondering and admiring, and presently left it by one of the numerous passages that opened into it. This shortly brought them to a bewitching spring, whose basin was encrusted with a frostwork of glittering crystals; it was in the midst of a cavern whose walls had been formed by the joining of great stalactites and stalagmites* together, the result of the ceaseless water-drip of centuries.

Under the roof vast knots of bats had packed themselves together, thousands in a bunch; the lights disturbed the creatures, and they came flocking down by the hundreds, squeaking and darting furiously at the candles. Tom knew their ways, and the danger of this sort of conduct. He seized Becky's hand and hurried her into the first corridor that offered; and none too soon, for a bat struck Becky's light out with its wing while she was passing out of

the cavern. The bats chased the children a good distance; but the fugitives plunged into every new passage that offered itself, and at last got rid of the perilous things. Tom found a subterranean lake, shortly, which stretched its dim length away until its shape was lost in the shadows. He wanted to explore its borders, but concluded that it would be best to sit down and rest a while first. Now for the first time the deep stillness of the place laid a clammy hand upon the spirits of the children. Becky said:

‘Why, I didn’t notice, but it seems ever so long since I heard any of the others.’

‘Come to think, Becky, we are down below them, and I don’t know how far away north, or south, or east, or whichever it is. We couldn’t hear them here.’

Becky grew apprehensive.

Niagara – a location on the border between Canada and the United States where there is a collection of impressive waterfalls.

Stalactites – tapering structures hanging like icicles from the roof of a cave.

Stalagmites – tapering columns rising from the floor of a cave.