

# JUST A TOUCH TOO MUCH

by Lynette Combs

It was said, in the cheery tumult of a common supper Below, that Mouse was heard to announce plans for his next Big Project.

Mary had been discussing with Catherine the scarcity of fresh vegetables in recent weeks; it was often so, here at the end of winter, and while they remained so dependent on the generosity of their Helpers.

"Not that I'm criticizing, mind you," Mary sighed, "But I sometimes wish there was a way that we could... oh, I don't know ..."

"... Grow 'em?" Mouse looked up with an expression that could only have been called *smug*. "Got a plan. Big changes., lots of work." He eyed his able-bodied friends, at this table, with something like a challenge or a dare. "Won't be easy."

"Eh? What's that?" asked Father, who'd been preoccupied with overseeing the little ones nearest him. "What did he say, Vincent?"

"Big project," Vincent said helpfully. His deepset blue eyes sparkled with mischief at the older man's predictable alarm.

"Potatoes," Mouse pronounced, serving himself another generous portion of those already on the table. "Grow 'em underground."

"Now, Mouse," Father began very reasonably. "You know perfectly well that we haven't enough light down here for that." Indeed, virtually all of their '*natural*' illumination Below was reflected or refracted light, or that given off by certain phosphors; sufficient to nourish some mosses and lichens, but hardly adequate for any more sophisticated flora. "Of course, I'm sure we all appreciate your desire ot help ..."

"Try potatoes first," Mouse went on as though he hadn't heard. "Then, who knows?"

Father had opened his mouth to squelch this *tomorrow-the-world* attitude, when a small voice sang out at his elbow.

"Would they have eyes?"

"Eyes? What do you mean, Naomi?" Father turned, distracted. to look down at the little orphan.

"They *got* eyes. William says, Father." With her fork, she poked at a dimple on the baked brown skin. "But if you grew 'em down here then they wouldn't, would they?"

"Well," Father began, but was interrupted again - this time, by Kipper.

"Why wouldn't they have eyes?"

"The fishes don't," the little girl pointed out. "Vincent showed me."

"Blind cave fish," the boy explained to Father. "That's what she means. From when Vincent took her down to see the Black Pools."

"Oh, er ... yes, of course."

"They got no eyes, Father," Naomi persisted.

"Don't need 'em." Eric agreed, blinking wisely through his spectacles.

"So," the little girl went on, "if the *fishes* don't, then why would the potatoes?"

Even Mouse seemed intrigued by the thought of a burgeoning crop of eyeless cave-potatoes.

"Have to wait and see," he said briskly. "Plant 'em, dig 'em up, take a look."

Vincent felt Catherine's foot nudge his under the table. He saw that her green eyes were full of merriment at Father's growing consternation.

"Oh, really, Mouse," he was saying - for the young man really was the most exasperating mixture of child and engineering wizard. "Of course they would have eyes, all potatoes have eyes." (*At this both Mouse and Naomi looked askance at what they seemed to feel was Father's closed-mindedness.*)

"Now," he went on, "I actually do understand your desire to help, but we haven't any more chance of accomplishing such a grand scheme than we have, say, of having running water in all our bedchambers."

"Do that too," Mouse said eagerly. "Got a plan ..."

"Now don't you think," Father went on sternly. "That your energies might be better put toward repairing that old aqueduct you promised me you'd ..."

"Where were you thinking of trying to do this, Mouse?" asked Cullen, egging him on shamelessly and ignoring Father's scowl of disapproval.

"Need a big place," he said, brightening at this show of interest. "Thought maybe the Quarry."

"Down below the Catacombs?" Kanin asked. He knew that cavern; most of them had seen it at least once, since the consistency of its *'floor'* provided them with the gravel they needed occasionally. It was a vast rectangular space, unusually dark, and had remained uninhabited because of the difficulty of lighting it adequately - and because areas near the Catacombs and

the Maze were generally considered to be unstable.

"It's a big place, all right. You'd certainly have all the room you needed."

"But it's so dark there, Mouse," Catherine pointed out, carefully not looking toward the head of the table. "It isn't like the Chamber of the Falls, is it, where you'd have something to work with. How would you light it?"

"Gro-lights. Those purple ones, special for plants." Mouse beamed at her. "Saw some Up Top. Asked all kinds of questions; know *everything*."

"Now, Mouse," Father broke in sternly, "even if all this were remotely practical, and even if you could acquire - *legally* acquire," he clarified himself, as Mouse tried to interrupt, "all this equipment you're talking about, you know perfectly well there isn't enough real moisture down in that area to grow a radish, much less ..."

"Hydroponics." Mouse spoke as though the word itself were magic. "Going to use hydroponics!"

Naomi looked as curious as the rest of the children. "What's hydro... hydra..."

"Hydroponics," Vincent said, and reached out to turn her plate, so that the peas were foremost. She gave him a reproachful look.

"I'm not really clear on the details of that particular science, myself," Father confessed.

"You've been talking with the people at the plant store, haven't you, Mouse?" asked Mary, joining in the game. "What did they tell you about it?"

"The Quarry's perfect," he said eagerly. "Lots of sand, gravel... Need lumber and chemicals, though ..."

"Chemicals?" Father's eyes narrowed. "What chemicals, exactly?"

Vincent said, "Hydroponics involves growing plants in a solution infused with certain chemicals that ..."

"*What chemicals?*" the old man repeated.

Vincent almost smiled; he was fairly certain that Father was remembering certain *'experiments'* a younger Mouse had conducted in his chamber, and the resulting stench and pyrotechnics. "Only a little calcium, Father ... and magnesium, I think and sulphur ..."

"Sulphur? Isn't that flammable?"

The moment of silence that followed, both Mouse and Vincent gazed back at him with a certain deadpan innocence that differed only in its intent.

*'In the first case',* Catherine thought, *'it was meant to placate; and in the second, to provoke'.* It

was she who broke the silence, chuckling outright at Vincent and taking his hand beneath the table, even as mirth swept their table and was echoed by others nearby.

"All right, all right," the patriarch said, realizing he'd been baited. "It does *smell*, though, as I recall."

"Not so bad," said Mouse, who'd been happy to share their amusement at Father's expense, but was utterly serious about his proposed project. "Anyway, it's a long way off. Too far to stink much. If anything blows up ..."

"Now I've noticed this before," Father said severely. "You're developing a very cavalier attitude, my boy, about this matter of blowing things up."

Mouse looked pained. "Got to get to the *water*."

"Water?!" Now Father looked truly alarmed. "You're not planning to add water to an area as unstable as that!"

"Just on the other side of the wall," Mouse shrugged.

"It's why there's so much sand and gravel there," Vincent explained to Catherine. "It's a dry underground riverbank. At some point in the past, a major cave-in seems to have cut it off from the main current, which flows just behind a barrier of solid rock at one end of the cavern."

"Is that the river Mouse wanted to divert, to try and flood the foundation of Elliot's Tower?" she asked.

"Yes, it is," Father answered her. "And as I have said before, it is too far down, and too unpredictable to trifle with. Why, the very idea of trying to siphon some of it off for some kind of mad irrigation scheme ..."

"Hydroponics," Mouse insisted, obstinately. "Don't worry, Father. Got experience now. Nothing to it. Make a gizmo, righ a wire ..."

"Mouse, I absolutely forbid you to even think of doing such a thing. Do you hear me?" Father appeared to be on the verge of apoplexy.

The looming threat of Burch Tower was not yet so far in their past that he could begin to think of any aspect of the episode with equanimity. And although he'd never been able to get Mouse to admit it, after the Maze cave-in he'd always suspected the boy of secreting a remaining bit of plastic explosives somewhere in his chamber.

"You have no idea what could result from detonating some kind of, of ..."

"Gizmo," Kanin said helpfully, trying not to grin.

"Yeah, *gizmo*, Father," Eric giggled.

"Actually, Father's right," Catherine said more seriously, reluctantly giving in to the feeling that he needed an ally. She tossed the soft, light-brown bangs out of her eyes. "It really *could* be dangerous."

"Why, thank you, Catherine," he went on, surprised and gratified.

She went on, "I was reading in the papers, not too long ago, that in Chicago some maintenance workers turned the wrong valve or something, or opened something they shouldn't have, and flooded the whole city. Store basements, the subway, the sewers and tunnels - it was just incredible."

"I heard something about that from our Helpers," Father exclaimed, momentarily diverted from the hazards at hand. "It was quite serious, I believe?"

"Yes, it was. The pictures were all over the news."

"What happened?" Naomi demanded. "Did they all get drowned?"

"Who?" asked Vincent.

"*Their* tunnel-people," she said worriedly. "Are they okay?"

"Chicago doesn't have any tunnel-people," Kipper told her, with big-brotherly scorn.

"How do you know?" she asked him, frowning.

"Well ... have you ever heard anything about 'em?"

"Maybe they're a secret, like us. Maybe they don't know about us, either!" She turned to Vincent. "There *could* be tunnels there too, couldn't there?"

"There could be," he said gently. "But I like to think this is a magic, one-of-a-kind place ... don't you?"

She smiled up at him, her blue eyes shining with admiration. Vincent always had the right answers.

"So prob'ly nobody was drowned?"

"Probably not," he agreed. He picked up her fork, and adroitly loaded it with now-cooling peas.

She ignored it. "So if Mouse makes a garden with *hydramuppets*, will he have all our own vegetables?"

"Sure," Mouse boasted, ignoring the outbreaks of smothered mirth nearby. "Everything we need."

"If we got potatoes, we could *put* eyes on 'em," she exclaimed. "We could play Mister Potato-Head anytime we wanted!"

"I think it's time to change the subject," Father said dourly. "Catherine, your mentioning the Tower reminded me...I haven't heard you mention Elliot Burch lately. How is the man?"

Catherine understood that his proprietary interest in someone who had, indirectly, saved his and Vincent's lives during the Maze cave-in, was now mixed with a certain wariness. Elliot had, after all, unknowingly come close to destroying their world altogether. "Well," she began, "you know that he's going to be testifying for us on the Avery case. So far, it's all going more smoothly than I would ever have thought possible..."

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"It *was* funny," Catherine admitted later, looking out over the city. She turned to smile up at Vincent. "Between Mouse and Naomi, Father seemed positively beleaguered. I actually began to feel sorry for him."

Vincent was chuckling at the memory. "Just the thought of Mouse with any kind of explosive is enough to set Father off."

She grinned at his inadvertant pun. "I can see how it would worry him."

They all knew Mouse's fascination with instruments of both construction and destruction. Sometimes, this worked to the tunnel-world's advantage. Sometimes, it did not. Catherine's eyes widened with sudden alarm.

"He doesn't have any more of that plastic explosive I brought him during the cave-in, does he?"

Vincent shook his head, the bright long hair danced over his shoulders. "I know that Father suspects the worst ... but I'm almost sure he doesn't. If he had, I don't think he could have resisted finding a use for it before now."

"Now there's a reassuring thought ... I think. It's been awhile since his last '*experiment*,' hasn't it?"

"It has been rather quiet Below," he admitted. "Just as well, Father hasn't forgotten how close we came to discovery, that time."

What little electricity the tunnel-world used, it siphoned from the city's own power system. The Bureau of Public Utilities had grown accustomed to some low-level '*leakage*,' and if kept to a minimum they never bothered to try and track it down.

However, several months ago Mouse, in experimenting with a new *'super-generator'* he was in the process of inventing, had managed to blow an entire grid, and throw several blocks of Manhattan into the confusion of total darkness. Only luck, and long practice in covering their tracks, had enabled the tunnelfolk to divert suspicion from the world Below.

"Mouse is experimenting with television now."

Her eyebrows rose. *"Television?!"*

Vincent leaned back against the low terrace wall, pleased with the effect his words had had.

"He found a small black-and-white set one night, discarded on the curb."

"Broken?"

"Not for long." He folded his arms over his broad chest. "He repaired it and set it up in his chamber."

Catherine shook her head. "I wouldn't think he'd ben able to get any kind of reception, that far down."

"He's been working on the idea of setting up some kind of hidden antenna in the Park. Father's been trying to convince him it would be too easily-traced, should anyone stumble upon it."

"Well," she joked, "why doesn't he just tap into the cable system?"

"Please," Vincent looked pained. "That hasn't yet occurred to him."

Smiling playfully, Catherine came into his arms. "You don't think the tunnels would benefit from having fifty or sixty channels piped in?"

He threw back his head and laughed outright, his sharp white teeth glinting in the moonlight.

"The end of life as we know it," he declared, holding her close, feeling her laughter before he heard it.

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Jacob Wells pattered around the little candlelit alcove that served as his bedchamber, just behind the larger and more public study. Now clad in an oversized, bloussy nightshirt, he was still muttering to himself, as he prepared to retire.

*'The very idea of tampering with something as dangerous as an underground river,'* he thought as he set the usual cup and pitcher of water on the bedside table beside his candle. *'As if that region isn't already unstable enough!'* Hadn't they had quite enough problems with the rising and falling water-tables down here, through the years, without going begging for trouble?...

Father decided to speak with Mouse again, first thing in the morning, and reinforce his decision. The boy could be more than obstinate at times. *'It really would not do,'* he thought, *'to assume he'd been taken seriously.'*

It had been kind of Catherine to come to his aid, he realized, his eyebrows rising once more with surprise. He climbed into bed still shaking his head over Mouse's good intentions and impossible dreams.

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He awakened later ... much later ... to the roar of distant thunder.

He struggled up onto his elbows, blinking into the darkness. No, it wouldn't be thunder - yet there it was again, along with the sound of rushing water.

*Rushing water?!*

He sat up, alarmed and reached toward the bedside table for his spectacles. They didn't make the darkness any brighter. Flipping back the quilt, he threw his legs over the side of the bed - and put his feet into five inches of cold water. His thick wool socks were instantly soaked. Gasping, he groped for his candle; lit it, and looked around horrified.

The chamber was awash. Brown water swirled around his bed, one of his medical journals eddied by, saturated and ruined.

"Dear God!" he exclaimed, coming to his feet and clutching his nightshirt about him. What on earth - *or under it* - was happening?

"Vincent!" he cried.

But Vincent, he remembered, had gone Above with Catherine, and probably had not yet returned. Whatever calamity this was, Father knew he was going to have to deal with it on his own. With an absent-minded glance around for his slippers (*was that one of them, sailing past the end of the bed?*). Father girded his patchwork robe around him, as resolutely as if it were a suit of armor; then, seizing his walking-stick and sloshed toward the door.

The sunken library-chamber, long used as a meeting place for all the tunnelfolk, was nearly knee-deep in water. It lapped at the drawers of his desk, and at the doors of the antique wardrobe across the room. Stacks of books standing on the floor were being engulfed even as he watched.

It was the ruination of the precious books that did it. "Mouse!" he shouted. "Oh, I say - **Mouse!**"

But that young man was nowhere to be seen. Father stepped down into the '*pond*' - feeling the carpet sodden underfoot as he did so - and waded across it, his ire growing, to the short metal stair. Pulling himself up, he splashed through the inch-deep current rippling in from the corridor.

'*Great heavens,*' he thought, his heart sinking, then starting to pound with something more than mere alarm. '*What has Mouse done now?*' For the very presence of a current meant the water was moving – rising - though whether from a leak on this level, Above or further below he had no way of knowing.

'*The Quarry, and Mouse's Big Project.*' That had to be it! The lad had undoubtedly waited until all of them were safely asleep, then put his plan into effect - undoubtedly hoping to '*surprise them.*'

'*Well, surprise,*' Father thought grimly. '*Now let us only hope the boy hasn't drowned himself, and doomed all of us!*'

Now, sure enough, he saw that Vincent's chamber was empty. So too was Mary's, and little Naomi's, and the nursery, where crayons and alphabet-blocks bobbed merrily round his ankles. Where was everyone? Raising his cane, he rapped sharply upon the nearest master-pipe. Nothing; there was no response from anyone. This confounded him. When had their faithful Pascal ever been known to leave the main pipechamber unguarded?

The cold, as he slogged determinedly toward the lower levels, touched more than his feet as he realized how extensive the damage might actually be. If this deluge was swelling up from below, then much of that region must already be flooded. How far had Mouse gone? Had he finally done their world some irreparable harm? Father remembered Catherine's story of the great Chicago flood. As this flood, too, bubbled toward the surface, there was no telling where it might emerge, and then even if they could repair the damage, the world Above would certainly send workers down to investigate.

In this tunnel the lights were already beginning to flicker, and Father quickened his pace with a childish aversion to being caught in the dark - and an uncertainty as to whether the electrical current, once shorted out, would somehow charge the water he stood in.

Fear might have leant wings to his feet had they not been so waterlogged, and the footing so uncertain. It was a feeling he remembered - like being unable to run or run *away*, in the midst of a bad dream. And this whole experience was beginning to take on a definitely nightmarish quality ...

"Mouse?" he whispered fiercely into every doorway that he passed. "**Mouse!**" But no Mouse answered - no one did - as he made his way steadily, if gingerly, over gentle inclines downward.

The water was deepening now (*Rather a bad sign,*) he thought; the hem of his nightshirt began to trail in the wet. After a moment's hesitation, he reached back through his legs and caught the frayed tail of the garment; and pulling it forward and up, he tucked it securely into the belt of his robe. Never mind that his bony knees gleamed whitely in the dimness, he had more to worry about, just now, than his dignity.

In that last bastion of sanity and responsibility, William's kitchen, vegetables and wooden cooking utensils were all afloat and in one corner, a broom still in its stand swayed to the waves like a surreal reminder of the Sorcerer's Apprentice.

If even their over-sized chef had abandoned his sacred domain, than this was indeed a crisis! Father hurried on as best he could. The tunnel began to widen as he descended, slipping occasionally and cursing under his breath.

And then, as he stumbled down water-covered stone steps to a deeper level---wonder of wonders! - he heard voices. '*Young voices*', he thought, even laughter, but no, given these dire circumstances that wasn't very likely.

"Who's there?" he called out, and turned a corner into a tunnel that ran like a stream just below his knees.

"Hi, Father!"

He stopped in his tracks, gasping. Kipper and Geoffrey were sailing toward him - *on a raft!* For a moment he couldn't gather wits enough to speak. Then; "You boys – boys! - jump off that raft at once and go up to the ..."

"Father?! Both ten-year-olds were staring at his attire; at his bared knees, and the diaper-like effect of his bound-up shirttail. They began to giggle. " ... Looks like a swami," Kipper said in a loud stage-whisper.

"Now that is quite enough," Father said severely. "In case you two hadn't noticed, we're in a state of ..."

"Did you see our raft, Father?" Geoffrey sang out. "It used to be Vincent 'a' Devin's!"

"Yeah, see our raft?" echoed Kipper as it swung by. "Isn't it cool? We're Huck and Tom on the Mississippi!"

"Boys, wait ..."

But they were past him now, looking to the course ahead, their delighted voices echoing back toward him. With a feeling of helpless incredulity he splashed along behind the pair. When they turned another corner he hurried his pace to follow.

Where was he? He hadn't been so far down along this particular route for years ... but surely

he was nearing the *'floor'* or basin level of the Chamber of the Falls? That meant he couldn't be far from Mouse's chamber as well, if he could just find his way to it from this unfamiliar *'detour'* he'd taken... He hesitated. What of the boys? And where were the rest of the children? He sloshed to the corner Kipper and Geoffrey had disappeared around, and made the turn -

- And stopped in his tracks, staring. The boys were still in sight, following the current some hundred yards distant. He knew that he must be in one of the lagoon caverns just off the main lake below the Falls; but now of course the shallows had overflowed, covering and obscuring their rocky banks. Father eased forward, trusting his memory, and was enormously relieved to find cool stone still firm under his feet.

He was not, however, as reassured by the sight of something moving steadily over the surface toward him.

"William!" he shouted.

The large chef looked up briskly from the little craft he was piloting. "Yes, Father?" he huffed. His massive legs were pumping steadily, as though he were riding a bicycle, and Father realized he was powering a little paddle-boat of the type kept on one of the ponds in Central Park. In fact, he could see the words *'Central Park'* stenciled plainly across its planking, as William began to pass him broadside. He was sitting in the stern, and it was riding *very* low in the water. The squared box was projecting upward at a ridiculous angle, and in it perched another familiar figure clutching a little fishing pole.

"Hi, Father!" Naomi sang out.

"Naomi – William - hat are you *doing?!*" the old man choked out, hardly believing his eyes.

"Fishing for blind cave fish," the little girl cheerfully informed him. "William's going to cook 'em for dinner."

"That's right, Father," came another voice, echoing along the wall off to his left. He whirled to see Pascal standing nearby in bright yellow hip-waders. He held a beautiful fly-rod in his hand, and as Father watched open-mouthed, he drew it back over his shoulder and cast it out expertly over the water.

"My father told me he used to do this upstate, before he came to live Below," he grinned.

"Well, yes, I know that, but ..."

"I've always wanted to see if this would work down here," the pipemaster went on. He pointed to a floating basket a couple of feet away. "I don't know why I never got around to it before!"

"But - but can't you all see - there's a flood! All our chambers are running with ..."

"You always said you wanted running water in all the chambers," William reminded him.

"Yeah, Father," Naomi piped up. "*You said.*"

"Where are the rest of the children?" he demanded.

"Swimming," said a voice to his right ... and he turned to see Mary bobbing by in a large rubber inner-tube. She was clad in a rather voluminous bathing-costume he was sure hadn't been popular since the thirties.

"Have you all lost your minds?" he cried. "This is no time for - for recreation! We're in the midst of an emergency here!"

"C'mon, Father," William rumbled. "Let's not go *overboard* here, shall we?"

"Father," Mary scolded, with a look she might have given one of the children. "Aren't you dressed a little *casually* to be out in public?"

Clutching the damp folds of his own attire, white bony knees flashing, Father stumbled back around the corner out of sight and pressed himself against the wall, gasping with shock. They'd all gone mad - utterly mad!

When he regained his composure a little, unable to face returning to the lagoon cavern, he made his way back the way he'd come and took another turning. Better if he tried to find Mouse's chamber. If the boy was there, then perhaps together they could find a way to reverse all this.

It wasn't long before he began to recognize certain landmarks that told him he was moving in the right direction. Determinedly, he splashed onward, down the convoluted tunnels and passages that led to what Mouse boasted was the '*deepest chamber of all.*'

It was empty, he saw with disappointment - or at least, it was uninhabited. Mouse's chamber could never properly be said to be '*empty,*' crammed as it was with gadgets and mechanisms of every kind. Even now Father could see that, although the place was knee-deep in flood, all the lights, lava-lamps and static-globes scattered over the worktables still glowed and twinkled and burbled softly as though nothing was amiss. Here, at least, the power hadn't been short-circuited just yet. Of the resident electrician and genius himself, however, there was no sign.

What was that? The sound of a man's voice, coming very faintly from one corner, drew him forward.

'Ah', he thought, '*the television.*' It lit its corner of the room with a soft blue-white glow. As he rounded the corner of the worktable on which it sat, his eyes widened at the unbelievable image presented on the small colorless screen. Lunging forward, he turned up the volume-knob.

*"---Dan Rather, coming to you with an aerial view of New York's greatest tragedy, folks. As you can see, floodwaters from an unknown source arose during the night, and put most of the city to flight. This is truly a disaster of unprecedented proportions. The governor has declared Manhattan a disaster area..."*

Father stood staring, his mouth ajar. It looked to him as though Niagra Falls were coming through the city. The picture clearly showed floodwaters cascading past the Empire State Building at a point midway to the top - as though the water was coming at such a rate that the massed city buildings almost acted as a dam to slow its progress. But *where* was it coming from?

*"The source of this disastrous deluge isn't yet known,"* the broadcaster was saying. *"It can only be surmised that somehow, some underground watercourse of enormous power has been tapped - either accidentally, or deliberately, with evil intent - and that once released, it's pushed to the surface with almost volcanic force. Scientists and engineers are at a loss for an answer to the question of how to stop the awful flood..."*

Hypnotized, Father continued to stare at the black-and-white image. It was astonishingly clear; he could even see the outline of the Chrysler Building, another familiar landmark, being engulfed behind the Empire State Building. *'Dear God,'* he thought dazedly, running one hand back through grey dishevelled hair. *'What has Mouse done?'* Nothing could put this right, he realized. It was too late, the damage far too public and too permanent.

He stumbled out of the chamber and back toward the Chamber of the Falls. He must find Vincent! They had to get everybody out, he realized. With that amount of water geysering up - onto the surface, some of it would certainly drain back into the tunnels themselves. In fact, he couldn't imagine why their little world wasn't already completely under water.

When he emerged at the edge of the vast, light cavern, he could see that the lake at its center was several feet deeper than he remembered, and was already on its way to filling the *'floor'* of this enormous space. The twin waterfalls at the far end of the cave had doubled in size and were pouring out water with great force. Smaller streams and rivulets ran from every surface of the ledges and cliff-faces above him, and the sound of water - running, pouring, splashing, dripping - was everywhere.

There was a cloud of mist at the end of the lake where he knew hot springs warmed the bathing pools; and suddenly, put of this vaporous density came a small boat. Someone stood solidly in the center of it, shaking his long hair back over his broad shoulders. In his hands he held a long pole; and this he used to propel the craft steadily over the surface of the rising water.

"Vincent!" cried Father, his bare knees going weak with relief. "Thank God you're here! You

can't imagine what's happened!"

In the bow of the boat Catherine, wrapped in Vincent's cloak, turned to look at him with eyes as green as the sea.

"Oh, I don't think we need to worry," she said softly, her voice coming to him clearly over the water. "Vincent can handle it."

"Vincent?" Desperately, Father shook his head. "Not even Vincent "But ..."

Lifting one booted foot, he stamped it so that water splashed up thinly all around him. Catherine covered her face, giggling. He looked up, his expression rather sheepish. "Sorry," he said. "Sandbar."

"But ... you don't you understand!" Father persisted. "There's a terrible flood! It's going to fill the tunnels - we'll all be drowned! We've got to get everybody out!"

Vincent returned with the boat. "Come with us, Father."

"Yes," Catherine said, stretching out her hand. "Come with us. We'll ride the boat to the surface."

"*Have you both lost your minds?*" the old man shouted, waving his stick. "Vincent - you can't go to the surface!"

"Stop trying to protect me, Father," he scowled.

"I *am* trying to protect you - because you don't seem to understand! Mouse has done something, used something, to release the underground river ..."

"Just a touch too much," came a young voice, echoing. Father whirled - and beheld Mouse riding the waves as well, quite a bit farther out, and kneeling on a wide plank that might have come from one of his workbenches. He appeared to be wearing something bulky on his head, something furry - and then suddenly, what had appeared to Father to be a sort of raccoon cap, resolved itself into Mouse's pet, Arthur, straddling the boy's shoulders, his mobile forepaws securely wound in his master's blond locks. "Just a touch too much," he said again thoughtfully - '*without*', Father thought, '*the slightest trace of remorse*'. "Should've used just a pinch less."

"Mouse," Father began apoplectically, "Come here at once. Didn't I tell you ..."

At that moment there was a tremendous roaring, rushing sound. Father, guessing at once what it was, gasped out a warning.

"It's the flood! I told you, now it's draining from Above ..."

But even as he spoke every stream and rivulet seemed to triple in size, spilling out their burdens around him like so many burst pipes. A moment later the main deluge erupted

through the openings of the twin falls, geysering outward almost vertically over the surface of the lake. Where they struck down, the catastrophic impact caused a huge wave, rushing out in all directions toward the lake's edge and rising in height as it gained momentum.

"Tidal wave!" cried Father, turning toward Vincent and Catherine - but they were gone, gone without a trace.

"Mouse!" he shouted, turning back, but he was just in time to see Mouse, on his plank, lifted on the crest of the wave like a surfer on a board. Balancing with arms outstretched, he rode the wave toward Father with a delighted smile, the raccoon chittering madly on his head.

It was hopeless, Father knew, to try and run. Just before the wave reached him he dropped his cane and threw up his arms to cover his head, and felt the cold water splashing down on him...

*"Father?"* Someone was shaking his shoulder, calling his name. "Father, wake up."

Then he was struggling up on his elbows, gasping with the shock of the cold water on his face, hearing something go crashing to the floor.

"Father," Vincent was saying urgently. "Are you all right? I just got back, and heard you shouting."

Jacob Wells sat up, breathing hard, and looked around him wildly. His candle had gone out, but he could see Vincent, still in his cloak, sitting on the bedside. Beyond him, the familiar shapes and shadows of the little chamber surrounded them unchanged. The old man rubbed his eyes, feeling unmistakable wetness on his face and beard.

"What happened?" he croaked.

"You were having a bad dream, I think." Vincent reached down and picked up a large piece of broken china. "You must have knocked the water-pitcher off your nightstand."

Father sat up, his heart still racing, and shook his head with disbelief.

"What did you dream?" Vincent asked, obviously concerned.

"I ... I don't recall," Father lied, feeling incredibly foolish and not a little embarrassed by the whole thing. When was the last time, he wondered, that he'd had to be shaken free of a nightmare like one of the children?

"Perhaps you ate something that disagreed with you," his son suggested. "Indigestion has been known to cause nightmares, hasn't it? Did you eat too much at dinner?"

"Perhaps," Father said grimly, "Just a touch too much. Never mind, Vincent. I'm all right now. I assure you. But thank you for coming in."

Clasping the older man's shoulder affectionately, Vincent rose and moved toward the door.

"Oh, and Vincent," Father called after him. "Do me a favor, would you, before you go to bed? Please go and get Mouse. Interrupt him, *whatever he's doing.*"

Father scowled purposefully at the figure in the doorway. "There's something I need to discuss with him."

The End