

"You are not going to faint, Norah!"

"Oh, no—I am—quite well."

There was a long silence, then—"Rex!" said Norah, in a very weak little voice, "did anyone know that you were down in the cellars to-day?"

Rex cleared his throat in miserable embarrassment.

"No, Norah. I am afraid no one saw me."

"Will they miss the keys?"

"They are very, old keys, Norah. Nobody uses them."

A little frightened gasp sounded in his ear, but Norah said no more. Rex clenched his fist and banged it fiercely on his knee.

"Idiot! idiot! that I was. What business had I to let you come. It's all my fault. It was no place for a girl, but the opening looked right enough, and I thought—"

"I know—besides you asked me if I would like an adventure, and I said I would. I came of my own free will. Don't be angry with yourself, Rex; it is as much my fault as yours."

"You are a little brick, Norah," said a husky voice, and Rex's hand gripped hers with a quick, strong pressure. I never thought a girl could be so plucky. I'll never forget—" he broke off suddenly, and Norah's voice was very unsteady as she asked the next question—"If—if we shouted very loudly would anyone hear?"

"I—er—think how far away from the house we must be by this time, Norah!"

There was a long, throbbing silence. Rex sat with his head bent forward on his knees, Norah stared blankly before her, her face looking thin and ghost-like in the dim light. The silence grew oppressive, and presently the lad raised his head and touched his companion on the arm. "Don't look like that, Norah. What is it? Norah, speak! What are you thinking about?" He had to bend forward to hear the answer, for Norah's lips were dry, and her throat parched as with thirst.

"Poor—father!" she gasped, and Rex started at the sound with a stab of pain.

"Don't! I can't bear it. Norah, for pity's sake don't give in—don't give up hope. Something will happen—it will—it must! We shall get out all right."

"But if we can't go forward, and if we can't go back, and if no one can hear us call," said Norah, still in the same slow, gasping accents, "I don't see—how—we can, Rex! How long shall we have to wait before we—"

"If you say that word, Norah, I'll never forgive you! We must get out—we shall get out! Come, rouse yourself like a good girl. I will go back to see what I can do with that grating. It's our only chance. Lead the way until we come to the broadest part of the passage, and then I must manage to pass you somehow or other. It has to be done."

Norah put out her hands and dragged herself wearily to her feet. The feeble gleam of the lantern seemed only to call

attention to the inky blackness, and the air was so close and noisome, that she breathed in heavy pants. It had been a delightful adventure to explore this passage, so long as it was in her power to turn back at any moment; but now that there was this dreadful terror of not being able to get out at all, it seemed like a living grave, and poor Norah staggered forward in sick despair. As they neared the grating, however, it became possible to stand upright, and this, in itself, was a relief, for her back was aching from long stooping.

Rex laid down the lantern at a safe distance, and put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "Now then, Norah, I am going to squeeze past. I may hurt you a little, but it will be only for a moment. Stretch your arms out flat against the wall, turn your head sideways, and make yourself as small as you can. I will take off my coat. Now! Are you ready?"

"Ready!" said Norah faintly; and the next moment it seemed as if the breath were being squeezed out of her body, as Rex pressed her more and more tightly against the wall. A horrible gasp of suffocation, a wild desire to push him off and fight for her own liberty, and then it was all over, and they were standing side by side, gasping, panting, and tremulous.

"That's over," sighed Rex, thankfully. "Poor Norah, I am afraid I hurt you badly, but it was the best plan to get it over as quickly as possible. Now then, hold up the lantern, and let me have a look round!" It was a time of breathless suspense as Rex went carefully over every inch of the door, examining niche and corner in the hope of discovering the secret of the spring by which it was moved. The grating was rusty with age, and had evidently stuck in the position in which he had found it an hour before, when his vigorous shakings had loosened the springs by which it was moved. Try as he might, however, he could not succeed in moving it a second time; there was no sign of knob or handle; he could find no clue to its working.

"It's no use, Rex," said Norah feebly. "You will have to give it up." But the lad's indomitable will would not permit him to agree in any such conclusion.

"I will never give it up," he cried loudly. "I brought you into this place, and I'll get you out of it if I have to break every bar with my own hands—if I have to pick the stones out of the wall! Move along for a few yards, I'm going to lie down on my back, and try what kicking will do."

No sooner said than done, Rex stretched himself at full length on the ground, moved up and down to get at the right distance, and began to assail the grating with a series of such violent kicks as woke a babel of subterranean echoes. Not in vain he had been the crack "kick" of the football team at school; not in vain had he exercised his muscles ever since childhood, in scrambling over mountain heights, and taking part in vigorous out-of-door sports.

Norah clasped her hands in a tremor of excitement. It seemed to her that no fastenings in the world could long withstand such a battery, and when Rex suddenly sprang to his feet and charged at the door with the strength of an infuriated bull, she fairly shrieked with exultation.

"Go on! Go on! It shakes, I'm sure it shakes! Oh, Rex, kick! kick for your life!" It was a superfluous entreaty. The strength of ten men seemed to be concentrated in the lad for the next ten minutes, as he fought the iron grating, changing from one position to another, as signs of increasing weakness appeared in different parts of the framework. Norah gasped out encouragement in the background, until at last, with a crash and bang, the old springs gave way, and the grating fell to the ground.

"Now—come!" shouted Rex. He did not waste a moment in rejoicing; now that the barrier was removed both he and Norah were possessed with but one longing—to get out of the passage as quickly as possible, into light, and air, and safety. Two minutes later they were seated side by side on one of the beams of timber on the cellar floor, gazing into each other's faces with distended eyes. Rex was purple with the strain of his late efforts, his breath came pantingly, his hair lay in damp rings on his forehead. Norah's face was ghastly white; she was trembling from head to foot.

"Thank God!" said Rex, solemnly. They were his first words, and Norah bent her head with a little sob of agitation.

"Oh, thank God! We might have been buried alive in that awful place."

Rex took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead, looking anxiously at his companion the while. "You don't think you will be ill, do you, Norah? You look horribly white."

"Oh no!—oh no! I shall be all right in an hour, but I shall never forget it. Rex! I think we ought to be awfully good all our lives—we have had such a wonderful escape, and we know now how it feels. When I thought I was never going to come out of that passage, I was sorry I had been cross to Hilary, and—so selfish! I made up my mind if I had another chance—"

"I don't believe you have ever done anything wrong, Norah," said Rex, in a low, husky voice. There was a long silence—then—"My father will feel inclined to kill me when he hears about this!" he added shortly.

Norah started. "But need we tell them? I don't think it would be wrong to say nothing about it. We are safe, and it has taught us to be more careful in future. It would only upset every one and make them miserable if they knew we had been in such danger. I'll slip quietly to my room, and it shall be a secret between us, Rex—you and I."

Rex looked at her in silence, with his big, keen eyes. "You are the best and kindest little soul in the world, Norah," he said. "I wish I were like you."

(To be continued.)