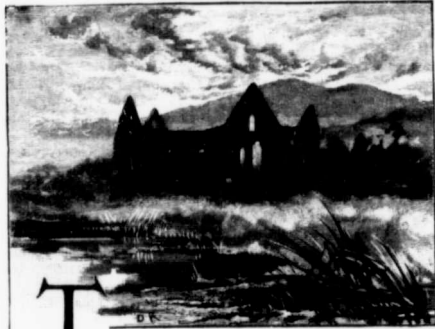


SISTERS THREE.

By MRS. HENRY MANSERGH, Author of "A Rose-coloured Thread," etc.

CHAPTER X.



THE Manor-house dated back for nearly two hundred years, and the underground premises were of an extent unknown in modern houses. Rex led the way through various flagged divisions, and leaving behind washing, wine, and coal cellars, came at last to a large door locked and bolted. Here he stopped, and drawing a bunch of keys from his pocket, fitted one into the lock, and pushed and dragged at the door until it opened before him. "Now then!" he said, turning to Norah, "we will prepare for business. I've got a lantern here and two old coats; button yourself up in this, and you will come to no harm. I found these old keys in a drawer to-day, and it struck me that one of them might fit this door, so I came down to experiment before coming to you. There is a tradition that there was a subterranean passage leading from this house to the lake, and I believe I have discovered the entrance. I'll show you what I mean. Be careful how you tread, for the floor is strewn with rubbish."

He took Norah by the arm as he spoke, and led her forward for two or three steps. At first the darkness appeared impenetrable, but presently her eyes became accustomed to the imperfect light, and she saw that she was standing in a long apartment, filled with all manner of odd, injured, and useless articles. Scraps of broken furniture, balks of timber, probably remains of scaffolding, strangely-shaped pieces of iron lay on every side. It was evidently a lumber-room of past generations, which had been deserted by later tenants, for the grated windows were thick with dust, the cobwebs hung in wreaths on the walls. Rex lighted the lantern, closed the door as quietly as might be, and dodged in and out the piles of rubbish to the far end of the cellar. "Come here! What do you think of this?" he cried triumphantly; and Norah groped her way forward to find him standing before a part of the wall which had been broken down for some purpose and left unrepaired. The stones and mortar were

piled high on the ground, and hidden behind them was a large hole opening into a dark passage. "This looks like the genuine thing, doesn't it? Are you game to explore and see where it leads?" queried Rex, and Norah assented eagerly—

"Oh, yes, yes, I should love it! It looks so beautifully mysterious. There may be hidden treasures. Would they belong to me if I found them?"

"You would have a share, of course; the rest would be mine because I discovered the opening. Now then, I'll go first, and hold the lantern; you will have to stoop, but it may get higher as we go along."

The passage proved to be smooth, and, to Norah's relief, quite dry and free from those "creepy, crawley animals" which were the only things about which she was really nervous; but Rex was wrong in thinking that it might improve in height, for it grew ever narrower and lower as they progressed, until at times they were obliged to bend almost double. "This is the way people have to crawl about inside the Pyramids," said Rex. "It's a queer kind of place, but I mean to go on until I find where it leads. I say, though! don't you come on if you would rather not. You could go back to the cellar and wait for me."

But Norah would not listen to such a suggestion. What if her back did ache, it was not every day that she had the chance of such an adventure; besides, she had no particular wish to be left alone in the dark, while it yet remained to be proved how she was to turn round when the time came for the return journey. For five minutes longer they trudged forward in silence, then Rex's stick struck against some other substance than stone, and his outstretched hand came across a bar of iron. It proved to be a half-closed grating, shutting out the entrance into the further portion of the passage; but Rex was not to be turned aside by such a trifle as this. He handed the lantern to Norah, and after much pushing and banging managed to raise it sufficiently to make it possible to scramble underneath. Norah followed in agile fashion, but hardly had she done so than there came the sound of a fall, and a sharp, metallic click.

"What's that?" cried Rex, quickly, and Norah stretched out her hand to discover the cause of the noise. It came into contact with something hard and cold, and her heart gave a leap of fear, for she realised in an instant that the trap-door had fallen, and that the sharp click which they had heard had been the catch with which it had swung into its rightful position.

"I—I think something has fastened the grating," she said, faintly. "I can't make it move. We shan't be able to get back this way."

"Oh, what nonsense! Let me come and try," said Rex, impatiently, but the passage was so narrow at this point that it was impossible for him to pass, and he had to content himself with directing Norah's efforts. "I'll hold the lantern; look up and down and see if you can find the fastening. Push upwards! Put your fingers in the holes, and tug with all your might. Try it the other way. Kick it with your feet!"

Norah worked with all her strength, and she was a strong, well-grown girl, with no small muscular power, but the grating stood firm as a rock, and resisted all her efforts. "It's no use, Rex," she panted desperately, and there was silence for a few moments, broken by a sound which was strangely like the beating of two anxious hearts.

"Well, we shall just have to go on then, that's all," said Rex, shortly. "A passage is bound to lead somewhere, I suppose. The worst that can happen is that we may have a long walk home, and you couldn't come to much harm in that coat!"

"Oh no! I shall be all right," said Norah, bravely. For a few moments she had been horribly frightened, but Rex's matter-of-fact speech had restored her confidence in his leadership. Of course the passage must have an outlet. She considered where they would come out, and even smiled faintly to herself at the thought of the comical figure which she would cut, striding through the lanes in the squire's old yellow mackintosh. She was determined to let Rex see that though she was only a girl, she could be as brave as any boy, but it was difficult to keep up her spirits during the next ten minutes, for the passage seemed to grow narrower all the time, while the air was close and heavy. A long time seemed to pass while they groped their way forward, then suddenly Rex's stick struck against some obstacle directly in his path, and he stopped short.

"What is it?" cried Norah fearfully. It seemed an endless time to the poor child before he answered, in a voice so strained and hoarse as to be hardly recognisable.

"The passage is blocked. It is walled up. We cannot get any further!" Rex lifted the lantern as he spoke and looked anxiously into the girl's face, but Norah said nothing. It seemed as if she could not realise the meaning of his words, but there was a dizzy feeling in her head as if a catherine wheel were whirling round and round, and she felt suddenly weak and tired, so that she was obliged to sit down on the ground and lean against the wall.

Rex bent over her with an anxious face.