

Stories from the Diary of a Doctor.

SECOND SERIES.

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[These stories are written in collaboration with a medical man of large experience. Many are founded on fact, and all are within the region of practical medical science. Those stories which may convey an idea of the impossible are only a forecast of an early realization.]

II.—THE SEVENTH STEP.



PLEASURE yacht, of the name of *Ariadne*, was about to start upon a six-weeks' cruise. The time of the year was September—a golden, typical September—in the year of grace 1893. The *Ariadne* was to touch at several of the great northern ports: Christiania, St. Petersburg, and others. I had just gone through a period of hard and anxious work. I found it necessary to take a brief holiday, and resolved to secure a berth on board the *Ariadne*, and so give myself a time of absolute rest. We commenced our voyage on the second of the month; the day was a lovely one, and every berth on board had secured an occupant.

We were all in high spirits, and the weather was so fine that scarcely anyone suffered from sea-sickness. In consequence, the young ship's doctor, Maurice Curwen, had scarcely anything to do.

The passengers on board the *Ariadne* were, with one exception, of the most ordinary and conventional type, but a girl who was carried on board just before the yacht commenced her voyage aroused my professional sympathies from the first. She was a tall, dark-eyed girl of about eighteen or nineteen years of age—her lower limbs were evidently paralyzed, and she was accompanied by a nurse who wore the picturesque uniform of the Charing Cross Hospital.

The young girl was taken almost immediately to a deck cabin which had been specially arranged for her, and during the first two or three days of our voyage I had not an opportunity of seeing her again. When we reached the smooth waters of the Norwegian fiords, however, she was carried

almost every day on deck. Here she lay under an awning, speaking to no one, and apparently taking little interest either in her fellow-passengers or in the marvellous beauties of Nature which surrounded her.

Her nurse usually sat by her side—she was a reserved-looking, middle-aged woman, with a freckly face and thin, sandy hair. Her lips were perfectly straight in outline and very thin, her eyebrows were high and faintly marked—altogether, she had a disagreeable and thoroughly unsympathetic appearance.

I was not long on board the *Ariadne* before I was informed that the sick girl's name was Dagmar Sorensen—that she was the daughter of a rich city merchant, and was going to St. Petersburg to see her father's brother, who was a celebrated physician there.

One morning, on passing Miss Sorensen's cabin, my footsteps were arrested by hearing the noise of something falling within the room. There came to my ears the crash of

broken glass. This was immediately followed by the sound of rapid footsteps which as suddenly stopped, as though the inmate of the room was listening intently. Miss Sorensen's nurse, who went by the name of Sister Hagar, was probably doing something for her patient, and was annoyed at anyone pausing near the door. I passed on quickly, but the next moment, to my astonishment, came face to face with Sister Hagar on the stairs. I could not help looking at her in surprise. I was even about to speak, but she hurried past me, wearing her most disagreeable and repellent expression.

What could the noise have been? Who could have moved in the cabin? Miss Sorensen's lower limbs were, Curwen, our ship's doctor, had assured



SISTER HAGAR.

me, hopelessly paralyzed. She was intimate with no one on board the *Ariadne*. What footsteps had I listened to?

I thought the matter over for a short time, then made up my mind that the stewardess must have been in Miss Sorensen's cabin, and having come to this conclusion, I forgot all about the circumstance.

That afternoon I happened to be standing in the neighbourhood of the young lady's deck chair; to my surprise, for she had not hitherto taken the least notice of me, she suddenly raised her full, brilliant dark eyes, and fixed them on my face.

"May I speak to you?" she said.

I came up to her side immediately.

"Certainly," I answered. "Can I do anything for you?"

"You can do a great deal if you will," she answered. "I have heard your name: you are a well-known London physician."

"I have a large practice in London," I replied to her.

"Yes," she continued, "I have often heard of you—you have doubtless come on board the *Ariadne* to take a holiday?"

"That is true," I answered.

"Then it is unfair——" She turned her head aside, breaking off her speech abruptly.

"What is unfair?" I asked.

"I have a wish to consult you professionally, but if you are taking a holiday, it is unfair to expect you to give up your time to me."

"Not at all," I replied. "If I can be of the slightest use to you, pray command me; but are you not under Curwen's care?"

"Yes, oh, yes; but that doesn't matter."

She stopped speaking abruptly; her manner, which had been anxious and excited, became suddenly guarded—I looked up and saw the nurse approaching us. She carried a book and shawl in her hands.

"Thank you, Sister Hagar," said Miss Sorensen. "I shall not require your services any more for the present."

The nurse laid the shawl over the young lady's feet, placed the book within reach, and, bestowing an inquisitive glance on me, walked slowly away.

When she was quite out of sight, Miss Sorensen resumed her conversation.

"You see that I am paralyzed," she said.

I bowed an acknowledgment of this all-patent fact.

"I suffer a good deal," she continued. "I am on my way to St. Petersburg to see my uncle, who is a very great physician. My father is most anxious that I should consult him. Perhaps you know my uncle's name—

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Professor Sorensen? He is one of the doctors of the Court."

"I cannot recall the name just now," I said; "but that is of no consequence. I have no doubt he is all that you say."

"Yes, he is wonderfully clever, and holds a high position. It will be some days before we get to Russia, however, and—I am ill. I did not know when I came on board the *Ariadne* that a doctor of your professional eminence would be one of the passengers. Perhaps Mr. Curwen will not object——" She paused.

"I am sure he will not object to having a consultation with me over your case," I answered. "If you wish it, I can arrange the matter with him."

"Thank you—but—I don't want a consultation. My wish is to see you—alone."

I looked at her in surprise.

"Don't refuse me," she said, in a voice of entreaty.

"I will see you with pleasure with Curwen," I said.

"But I want to consult you independently."

"I am sorry," I answered; "under the circumstances, that is impossible."

She coloured vividly.

"Why so?" she asked.

"Because professional etiquette makes it necessary for the doctor whom you have already consulted to be present," I replied.

Her eyes flashed angrily.

"How unkind and queer you doctors are," she said. "I cordially hate that sentence for ever on your lips, 'Professional etiquette.' Why should a girl suffer and be ill, because of anything so unreasonable?"

"You must forgive me," I said. "I would gladly do anything for you; I will see you with pleasure with Curwen."

"Must he be present?"

"Yes."

"I cannot stand this. If he consents to your seeing me alone, have you any objection to make?"

At that moment Curwen suddenly appeared. He was talking to one of the ship's crew, and they were both slowly advancing in Miss Sorensen's direction.

"Mr. Curwen, can I speak to you?" called out Miss Sorensen.

He came to her at once.

I withdrew in some annoyance, feeling pretty well convinced that the young lady was highly hysterical and required to be carefully looked after.

By-and-by, as I was standing by the deck rail, Curwen came up to me.

"I have talked to Miss Sorensen," he said. "She is most anxious to consult you, Dr. Halifax, but says that you will not see her except in consultation with me. I beg of you not to consider me for a moment. I take an interest in her, poor girl, and will be only too glad to get your opinion of her case. Pray humour her in this matter."

"Of course, if you have no objection, I have none," I answered. "I can talk to you about her afterwards. She is evidently highly nervous."

"I fear that is the case," replied Curwen. "But," he added, "there is little doubt as to her ailment. The lower limbs are paralyzed; she is quite incapable of using them."

"Did you examine her carefully when she came on board?" I asked.

"I went into the case, certainly," replied Curwen; "but if you mean that I took every step to complete the diagnosis of the patient's condition, I did not consider it necessary. The usual symptoms were present. In short, Miss Sorensen's case was, to my mind, very clearly defined to be that of spastic paralysis, and I did not want to worry her by useless experiments."

"Well, I will see her, as she wishes for my opinion," I replied, slowly.

"I am very pleased that you should do so," said Curwen.

"Do you happen to have an electric battery on board?" I asked.

"Yes, a small one, but doubtless sufficient for your purpose. Will you arrange to see Miss Sorensen to-morrow morning?"

"Yes," I answered. "If I am to do her any good, there is no use in delay."

Curwen and I talked the matter over a little further, then he was obliged to leave me to attend to some of his multifarious duties.

The nightly dance had begun—awnings had been pulled down all round the deck, and the electric light made the place as bright as day. The ship's band was playing a merry air, and several couples were already revolving round in the mazes of the waltz.

I looked to see if Miss Sorensen had come on deck. Yes, she was there; she was lying as usual on her own special couch. The captain's wife, Mrs. Ross, was seated near her, and Captain Ross stood at the



"CURWEN AND I TALKED THE MATTER OVER."

foot of her couch. She was dressed in dark, rose-coloured silk, worn high to the throat, and with long sleeves. The whiteness of her complexion and the gloomy depths of her big, dark eyes were thus thrown into strong relief. She looked strikingly handsome.

On seeing me, Captain Ross called me up, and introduced me to Miss Sorensen. She smiled at me in quite a bright way.

"Dr. Halifax and I have already made each other's acquaintance," she said. She motioned me to seat myself by her side. The conversation, which had been animated before I joined the little party, was now con-

tinued with *verve*. Miss Sorensen, quite contrary to her wont, was the most lively of the group. I observed that she had considerable powers of repartee, and that her conversational talent was much above the average. Her words were extremely well chosen, and her grammar was invariably correct. She had, in short, the bearing of a very accomplished woman. I further judged that she was a remarkably clever one, for I was not five minutes in her society before I observed that she was watching me with as close attention as I was giving to her.

After a time Captain and Mrs. Ross withdrew, and I found myself alone with the young lady.

"Don't go," she said, eagerly, as I was preparing to rise from my chair. "I spoke to Mr. Curwen," she continued, dropping her voice; "he has not the slightest objection to your seeing me alone. Have you arranged the matter with him?"

"I have seen him," I replied, gravely. "He kindly consents to waive all ceremony. I can make an appointment to see you at any hour you wish."

"Pray let it be to-morrow morning—I am anxious to have relief as soon as possible."

"I am sorry that you suffer," I replied, giving her a sudden, keen glance—"you don't look ill, at least not now."

"I am excited now," she answered. "I am pleased at the thought——"

She broke off abruptly.

"Is Sister Hagar on deck?" she asked.

"I do not see her," I replied.

"But look, pray, look. Dr. Halifax—I *fear* Sister Hagar."

There was unquestionable and most genuine terror in the words. Miss Sorensen laid her hand on mine—it trembled.

I was about to reply, when a thin voice, almost in our ears, startled us both.

"Miss Sorensen, I must take you to bed now," said Nurse Hagar.

"Allow me to help you, nurse," I said, starting up.

"No, thank you, sir," she answered, in her most disagreeable way; "I can manage my young lady quite well alone."

She went behind the deck-chair, and propelled it forward. When she got close to the little deck cabin, she lifted Miss Sorensen up bodily in her strong arms, and conveyed her within the cabin.

During the night I could not help giving several thoughts to my new patient—she repelled me quite as much as she attracted me. She was without doubt a very hand-

some girl. There was something pathetic, too, in her dark eyes and in the lines round her beautifully curved mouth; but now and then I detected a ring of insincerity in her voice, and there were moments when her eyes, in spite of themselves, took a shifty glance. Was she feigning paralysis? What was her motive in so anxiously desiring an interview with me alone?

Immediately after breakfast, on the following morning, Sister Hagar approached my side.

"Miss Sorensen would be glad to know when it would be convenient for you to see her, Dr. Halifax," she said.

"Pray tell her that I can be with her in about ten minutes," I replied.

The nurse withdrew and I went to find Curwen.

"Is your electric battery in order?" I asked.

"Come with me to my cabin," he replied.

I went with him at once. We examined the battery together, put it into order, and then tested it. I took it with me to Miss Sorensen's cabin. Sister Hagar stood near the door. She came up to me at once, took the battery from my hands, and laid it on a small table near the patient. She then, to my astonishment, withdrew, closing the door noiselessly behind her.

I turned to look at Miss Sorensen, and saw at a glance that she was intensely nervous. There was not a trace of colour on her face; even her lips were white as death.

"Pray get your examination over as quickly as you can," she said, speaking in an almost fretful voice.

"I am waiting for the nurse to return," I replied. "I have several questions to ask her."

"Oh, she is not coming back. I have asked her to leave us together."

"That is nonsense," I said; "she must be present. I cannot apply the electric battery without her assistance. If you will permit me, I will call her."

"No, no, don't go—don't go!"

I looked fixedly at my patient. Suddenly an idea occurred to me.

I pushed the table aside on which the battery had been placed, and stood at the foot of Miss Sorensen's bed.

"The usual examination need not take place," I said, "because——"

"Why?" she asked. She half started up on her couch; her colour changed from white to red.

"Because you are not paralyzed!" I said,

giving her a sudden, quick glance, and speaking with firmness.

"My God, how do you know?" she exclaimed. Her face grew so colourless that I thought she would faint. She covered her eyes with one trembling hand. "Oh, Sister Hagar was right," she continued, after a moment. "I did not believe her—I assured her that it was nothing more than her fancy."

"I have guessed the truth?" I said, in a stern voice.

"Alas, yes, you have guessed the truth." As she spoke, she sprang with a light movement from her couch and stood before me.

"I am no more paralyzed than you are," she said; "but how, *how* do you know?"



"SHE SPRANG FROM HER COUCH AND STOOD BEFORE ME."

"Sit down and I will tell you," I replied.

She did not sit—she was far too much excited. She stood near the door of her little cabin. "Did you really hear the bottle fall and break, yesterday morning?"

"I heard a noise which might be accounted for in that way," I answered.

"And did you hear my footsteps?"

"I heard footsteps."

"Sister Hagar said that you knew—I

hoped, I hoped—I earnestly trusted that she was wrong."

"How could she possibly tell?" I replied. "I met her on the stairs coming towards the cabin. I certainly said nothing—how was it possible for her to read my secret thoughts?"

"It was quite possible. She saw the knowledge in your eyes; she gave you one glance—that was sufficient. Oh! I hoped she was mistaken."

"Mine is not a tell-tale face," I said.

"Not to most people, but it is to her. You don't know her. She is the most wonderful, extraordinary woman that ever breathed. She can read people through and through. She can stand behind you

and know when your eyes flash and your lips smile. Her knowledge is terrible. She can almost see through stone walls. I told you last night that I dreaded her—I do more than that—I fear her horribly—she makes my life a daily purgatory!"

"Sit down," I said, in a voice which I made on purpose both cold and stern: "it is very bad for you to excite yourself in this way. If you dislike Sister Hagar, why is she your nurse? In short, what can be your possible motive for going through this extraordinary act of deception? Are you not aware that you are acting in a most reprehensible manner? Why do you wish the passengers of the *Ariadne* to suppose you to be paralyzed, when you are in reality in perfect health?"

"In perfect health?"

she repeated, with a shudder. "Yes, I am doubtless in perfect bodily health, but I am in—oh, in such bitter anguish of soul."

"What do you mean?"

"I can no more tell you that, than I can tell you why I am in Sister Hagar's power. Pray forget my wild words. I know you think badly of me, but your feelings would be changed to profound pity if you could guess the truth. Now listen to me—I have only a

moment or two left, for Sister Hagar will be back almost directly. She found out yesterday that you had guessed my secret. I hoped that this was not the case, but, as usual, she was right and I was wrong. The moment my eyes met yours, when I first came on deck, I thought it likely that you might see through my deception. Sister Hagar also feared that such would be the case. It was on that account that I avoided speaking to you, and also that I remained so silent and apparently uninterested in everyone when I went on deck. I asked for this interview yesterday for the express purpose of finding out whether you really knew about the deception which I was practising on everyone on board. If I discovered that you had pierced through my disguise, there was nothing for it but for me to throw myself on your mercy. Now you know why I was so desirous of seeing you without Mr. Curwen."

"I understand," I answered. "The whole matter is most strange, wrong, and incomprehensible. Before I leave you, may I ask what motive influences you? There must be some secret reason for such deception as you practise."

Miss Sorensen coloured, and for the first time since she began to make her confession, her voice grew weak and faltering—her eyes took a shifty glance, and refused to meet mine.

"The motive may seem slight enough to you," she said; "but to me it is, and was, sufficiently powerful to make me go through with this sham. My home is not a happy one; I have a step-mother, who treats me cruelly. I longed to get away from home and to see something of life. My father's brother, Professor Sorensen, of St. Petersburg, is a very celebrated Court physician—my father is proud of him, and has often mentioned his name and the luxurious palace in which he lives. I have never met him, but I took a curious longing to pay him a visit, and thought of this way of obtaining my desires. Professor Sorensen has made a special study of nervous diseases such as paralysis. Sister Hagar and I talked the matter over, and I resolved to feign this disease in order to get away from home and to pay my uncle a visit. All went well without hitch of any sort until yesterday morning."

"But it is impossible for you to suppose," I said, "that you can take in a specialist like Professor Sorensen."

"I don't mean to try—he'll forgive me when I tell him the truth, and throw myself on his mercy."

"And is Sister Hagar a real nurse?" I asked, after a pause.

"No, but she has studied the part a little, and is far too clever to commit herself."

Miss Sorensen's face was no longer pale—a rich colour flamed in her cheeks, her eyes blazed—she looked wonderfully handsome.

"And now that you have confided in me," I said, "what do you expect me to do with my knowledge?"

"To respect my secret, and to keep it absolutely and strictly to yourself."

"That is impossible—I cannot deceive Curwen."

"You must—you shall. Why should two—two be sacrificed? And he is so young, and he knows nothing now—nothing. Oh, do have mercy on him! Oh, my God, what wild words am I saying? What must you think of me?"

She paused abruptly, her blazing eyes were fixed on my face.

"What must you think of me?" she repeated.

"That you are in a very excitable and over-strained condition, and perhaps not quite answerable for your actions," I replied.

"Yes, yes," she continued; "I am over-strained—over-anxious—not quite accountable—yes—that is it—that is it—but you will not tell Mr. Curwen—Oh, be merciful to me, I beg of you. We shall soon reach St. Petersburg. Wait, at least, until we get there before you tell him—promise me that. Tell him then if you like—tell all the world, then, if you choose to do so, but respect my secret until we reach Russia."

As Miss Sorensen spoke, she laid her hand on my arm—she looked at me with a passion which seemed absolutely inadequate to her very poor reason for going through this extraordinary deception.

"Promise me," she said—"there's Sister Hagar's knock at the door—let her in—but promise me first."

"I will think the whole case over carefully before I speak to anyone about it," I replied. I threw the door open as I spoke, and went out of the little cabin as Sister Hagar came in.

That afternoon Curwen asked me about Miss Sorensen—I replied to him briefly.

"I will tell you all about the case," I said, "in a short time—there is a mystery which the young lady has divulged, and which she has earnestly implored of me to respect until we reach St. Petersburg."

"Then you believe she can be cured?" said Curwen.

"Unquestionably—but it is a strange story, and it is impossible for me to discuss it until I can give you my full confidence. In the meantime, there is nothing to be done in the medical way for Miss Sorensen—I should recommend her to keep on deck as much as possible—she is in a highly hysterical state, and the more fresh air she gets, the better."

Curwen was obliged to be satisfied with this very lame summary of the case, and the next time I saw Miss Sorensen, I bent over her and told her that I intended to respect her secret until after we arrived at St. Petersburg.

"I don't know how to thank you enough," she said—her eyes flashed with joy, and she became instantly the most animated and fascinating woman on board.

At last we reached the great northern port, and first amongst those to come on board the *Ariadne* was the tall and aristocratic form of Professor Sorensen. I happened to witness the meeting between him and his beautiful niece. He stooped down and kissed her on her white brow. A flush of scarlet spread all over her face as he did so. They spoke a few words together—then Sister Hagar came up and touched Miss Sorensen on her arm. The next moment I was requested to come and speak to the young lady.

"May I introduce you to my uncle, Dr. Halifax?" she said. "Professor Sorensen—Dr. Halifax. I can scarcely tell you, Uncle Oscar," continued the young lady, looking full in his face, "how good Dr. Halifax has been to me during my voyage."

Professor Sorensen made a polite rejoinder to this, and immediately invited me to come to see him at his palace in the Nevski Prospect.

I was about to refuse with all the politeness I could muster, when Miss Sorensen gave me a glance of such terrible entreaty that it staggered me, and almost threw me off my balance.

"You will come; you must come," she said.

"I can take no refusal," exclaimed the

Professor. "I am delighted to welcome you as a brother in the great world of medical science. I have no doubt that we shall have much of interest to talk over together. My laboratory has the good fortune to be somewhat celebrated, and I have made experiments in the cultivation of microbes which I should like to talk over with you. You will do me the felicity of dining with me this evening, Dr. Halifax?"

I considered the situation briefly—I glanced again at Miss Sorensen.

"I will come," I said—she gave a sigh of relief, and lowered her eyes.

Professor Sorensen moved away, and Sister Hagar went into the young lady's cabin to fetch something. For a moment Miss Sorensen and I were alone. She gave me an imperious gesture to come close to her.

"Sit on that chair—stoop down, I don't want others to know," she said.

I obeyed her in some surprise.

"You have been good, more than good," she said, "and I respect you. I thank you from my heart. Do one last thing for me."

"What is that?"

"Don't tell our secret to Maurice Curwen until you have returned from dining with my uncle. Promise me this; I have a very grave reason for asking it of you."

"I shall probably not have time to tell him between now and this evening," I said, "as I mean

immediately to land and occupy myself looking over the place."

At this moment Sister Hagar appeared, carrying all kinds of rugs and parcels—amongst them was a small, brass-bound box, which seemed to be of considerable weight. As she approached us, the nurse knocked her foot against a partition in the deck, stumbled, and would have fallen had I not rushed to her assistance. At the same time the heavy, brass-bound box fell with some force to the ground. The shock must have touched some secret spring, for the cover immediately bounced open and several packets of papers were strewn on the deck.



PROFESSOR SORENSEN.



"I STOOPED TO PICK THEM UP."

I stooped to pick them up, but Nurse Hagar wrenched them from my hands with such force that I could not help glancing at her in astonishment. One packet had been thrown to a greater distance than the others. I reached back my hand to pick it up, and, as I did so, my eyes lighted on a name in small black characters on the cover. The name was Olga Krestofski. Below it was something which looked like hieroglyphics, but I knew enough of the Russian tongue to ascertain that it was the same name in Russ—with the figure 7 below it.

I returned the packet to the nurse—she gave me a glance which I was destined to remember afterwards—and Miss Sorensen uttered a faint cry and turned suddenly white to her lips.

Professor Sorensen came hastily up—he administered a restorative to his niece, and said that the excitement of seeing him had evidently been too much for her in her weak state. A moment later the entire party had left the yacht.

It was night when I got to the magnificent palace in the Nevski Prospect where Professor Sorensen resided.

I was received with ceremony by several servants in handsome livery, and conducted immediately to a bedroom on the first floor of the building. The room was of colossal size and height, and, warm as the weather

still was, was artificially heated by pipes which ran along the walls. The hangings and all the other appointments of this apartment were of the costliest, and as I looked around me, I could not help coming to the conclusion that a Court physician at St. Petersburg must hold a very lucrative position.

Having already made my toilet, I was about to leave the room to find my way as best I could to the reception-rooms on the ground floor, when, to my unbounded amazement, I saw

the massive oak door of the chamber quickly and silently open, and Miss Sorensen, magnificently dressed, with diamonds in her black hair and flashing round her slim white throat, came in. She had not made the slightest sound in opening the door, and now she put her finger to her lips to enjoin silence on my part. She closed the door gently behind her, and, coming up to my side, pressed a note into my hand. She then turned to go.

"What is the meaning of this?" I began.

"The note will tell you," she replied. "Oh, yes, I am well, quite well—I have told my uncle all about my deception on board the *Ariadne*. For God's sake don't keep me now. If I am discovered, all is lost."

She reached the door as she spoke, opened it with a deft, swift, absolutely silent movement, and disappeared.

I could not tell why, but when I was left once more alone, I felt a chill running through me. I went deliberately up to the oak door and turned the key in the heavy lock. The splendid bedroom, was bright as day with electric light. Standing by the door, I opened Miss Sorensen's note. My horrified eyes fell on the following words:—

"We receive no mercy, and we give none. Your doom was nearly fixed when you found out the secret of my false paralysis on board the *Ariadne*. It was absolutely and irrevocably



"IF I AM DISCOVERED ALL IS LOST."

clever enough and have sufficient nerve to act as I suggest. Pay me all the attention in your power — make love to me even a little, if you like — that will not matter, for we shall never meet again after to-night. After dinner you will be invited to accompany Professor Sorensen to his laboratory — he will ask no other guest to do this. On no account refuse—go with him and I will go with you. Where

sealed when you saw my real name on the packet of letters which fell out of the brass-bound box to-day. The secret of my return to Russia is death to those who discover it unbidden.

"It is decreed by those who never alter or change that you do not leave this palace alive. It is utterly hopeless for you to try to escape, for on all hands the doors are guarded; and even if you did succeed in reaching the streets, we have plenty of emissaries there to do our work for us. You know enough of our secrets to make your death desirable—it is therefore arranged that *you are to die*. I like you and pity you. I have a heart, and you have touched it. If I can, I will save you. I do this at the risk of my life, but that does not matter—we hold our lives cheap—we always carry them in our hands, and are ready to lay them down at any instant. I may not succeed in saving you, but I will try. I am not quite certain how your death is to be accomplished, but I have a very shrewd suspicion of the manner in which the final attack on your life will be made. Your only chance—remember, your only chance of escape—is to appear to know absolutely nothing—to show not the ghost of a suspicion of any underhand practices; to put forth all your powers to fascinate and please Professor Sorensen and the guests who will dine with us to-night. Show no surprise at anything you see—ask no impertinent questions. I have watched you, and I believe you are

he goes and where I go, follow without flinching. If you feel astonishment, do not show it. And now, all that I have said leads up to this final remark. *Avoid the seventh step*. Bear this in your mind—it is your last chance.—DAGMAR."

I read this note over twice. The terrible feeling of horror left me after the second reading. I felt braced and resolute. I suspected, what was indeed the case, that I had fallen unwittingly into a hornet's nest of Nihilists. How mad I had been to come to Professor Sorensen's palace! I had fully made up my mind that Miss Sorensen had told me lies, when she gave me her feeble reasons for acting as she had done on board the *Ariadne*. No matter that now, however. She spoke the truth at last. The letter I crushed in my hand was not a lie. I resolved to be wary, guarded—and when the final moment came, to sell my life dearly.

I had a box of matches in my pocket. I burnt the note to white ash, and then crushed the ashes to powder under my foot. I then went downstairs.

Servants were standing about, who quickly directed me to the reception-rooms. A powdered footman flung the door of the great drawing-room open and called my name in a ringing voice. Professor Sorensen came forward to meet me. A lady came up at the same moment and held out her hand. She was dressed in black velvet, with rich lace and many magnificent diamonds. They shone in

her sandy hair and glistened round her thin throat. I started back in amazement. Here was Sister Hagar metamorphosed.

"Allow me to introduce my wife, Madame Sorensen," said the Professor.

Madame Sorensen raised a playful finger and smiled into my face.

"You look astonished, and no wonder, Dr. Halifax," she said. "But, ah, how naughty you have been to read our secrets." She turned away to speak to another guest. The next moment dinner was announced.

As we sat round the dinner table, we made a large party. Men and women of many nationalities were present, but I quickly perceived, to my own surprise, that I was the guest of the evening. To me was given the terribly doubtful honour of escorting Madame Sorensen to the head of her table, and in honour of me also, English—by common consent—was the language spoken at dinner.

Miss Sorensen sat a little to my left—she spoke gaily to her neighbour, and her ringing, silvery laugh floated often to my ears. There had been some little excitement caused by the bursting of a large bomb in one of the principal streets that evening. Inadvertently I alluded to it to my hostess. She bent towards me and said, in a low voice:—

"Excuse me, Dr. Halifax, but we never talk politics in Petersburg."

She had scarcely said this before she began to rattle off some brilliant opinions with regard to a novel which was just then attracting public attention in England. Her remarks were terse, cynical, and intensely to the point. From one subject of interest to another she leaped, showing discernment, discrimination, and a wide and exhaustive knowledge of everything she touched upon.

As I listened to her and replied as pertinently as possible, a sudden idea came to me which brought considerable comfort with it. I began to feel more and more assured that Miss Sorensen's letter was but the ugly result of a mind thrown slightly off its balance. The brilliant company in which I found myself, the splendid room, the gracefully appointed table, the viands and the wines of the best and the choicest, my cultivated and gracious hostess—Professor Sorensen's worn, noble, strictly intellectual face—surely all these things had nothing whatever to do with treachery and assassination! Miss Sorensen's mind was off its balance. This fact accounted for everything—for the malingering which had taken place on board the *Ariadne*

—for the queer letter which she had given to me before dinner. "*When you saw my real name to-day, your doom was irrevocably sealed,*" she said. "*Avoid the seventh step,*" she had continued. Could anything be more utterly absurd? Miss Sorensen was the acknowledged niece of my courtly host—what did she mean by attributing another name to herself?—what did she mean by asking me to avoid the seventh step? In short, her words were exactly like the ravings of a lunatic.

My heart, which had been beating uncomfortably high and strong, calmed down under these reflections, but presently a queer, cold, uncomfortable recollection touched it into fresh action as if with the edge of bare steel.

It was all very well to dispose of Miss Sorensen by treating her wild words as the emanations of a diseased brain; but what about Madame Sorensen? How was I possibly to account for her queer change of identity? I recalled her attitude on board the *Ariadne*. The malevolent glances she had often cast at me. The look on her face that very morning when I had saved her from falling, and picked up the papers which had fallen out of the brass-bound box. She had seen my eyes rest upon the name "*Olga Krestofski*." I could not soon forget the expression in her cold eyes when I returned her that packet. A thrill ran through me even now, as I recalled the vengeance of that glance.

The ladies withdrew, and the men of the party did not stay long over wine. We went to the drawing-rooms, where music and light conversation were indulged in.

As soon as we came in, Miss Sorensen, who was standing alone in a distant part of the inner drawing-room, gave me a look which brought me to her side. There was an imperious sort of command in her full, dark eyes. She held herself very erect. Her carriage was queenly—the lovely carnation of excitement bloomed on her cheeks and gave the finishing touch to her remarkable beauty. She made way for me to sit on the sofa beside her, and bending her head slightly in my direction, seemed to invite me to make love to her.

There was something in her eyes which revived me like a tonic.

I felt suddenly capable of rising to my terrible position, and resolved to play the game out to the bitter end.

I began to talk to Miss Sorensen in a gay tone of light badinage, to which she responded with spirit.

Suddenly, as the conversation arose full and animated around us, she dropped her voice, gave me a look which thrilled me, and said, with slow distinctness :—

"You Englishmen have pluck—I—I admire you!"

I answered, with a laugh, "We like to think of ourselves as a plucky race."

"You are! you are! I felt sure you would be capable of doing what you are now doing. Let us continue our conversation—nothing could be better for my purpose—don't you observe that Hagar is watching us?"

"Is not Madame Sorensen your aunt?" I asked.

"In reality she is no relation; but, hush, you are treading on dangerous ground."

"It is time for me to say farewell," I said, rising suddenly to my feet—I held out my hand to her as I spoke.

"No, you must not go yet," she said—she rose also—a certain nervous hesitation was observable for a moment in her manner, but she quickly steadied herself.

"Uncle Oscar, come here," she called out. Professor Sorensen happened to be approaching us across the drawing-room—he came up hastily at her summons. She stood in such a position that he could not see her face, and then gave me a look of intense warning.

When she did this, I knew that the gleam of hope which had given me false courage for a moment during dinner was at an end. There was no insanity in those lovely eyes. Her look braced me, however. I determined to take example by her marvellous coolness. In short, I resolved to do what she asked me, and to place my life in her hands.

"Uncle Oscar," said the young lady, "Dr. Halifax insists upon leaving us early; that is scarcely fair, is it?"

"It must not be permitted, Dr. Halifax," said the Professor, in his most courteous tone. "I am looking forward with great interest to getting your opinion on several points of scientific moment." Here he drew me a little aside. I glanced at Miss Sorensen: she came a step or two nearer.

"You will permit me to say that your name is already known to me," continued my host, "and I esteem it an honour to have the privilege of your acquaintance. I should like to get your opinion with regard to the bacterial theory of research. As I told you on board the *Ariadne* to-day, I have made many experiments in the isolation of microbes."

"In short, the isolation of those little horrors is my uncle's favourite occupation,"

interrupted Miss Sorensen, with a light laugh. "Suppose, Uncle Oscar," she continued, laying her lovely white hand on the Professor's arm—"suppose we take Dr. Halifax to the laboratory? He can then see some of your experiments."

"The cultivation of the cancer microbe, for instance," said Sorensen. "Ah, that we could discover something to destroy it in the human body, without also destroying life! Well, doubtless, the time will come." He sighed as he spoke. His thoughtful face assumed an expression of keen intellectuality. It would be difficult to see anyone whose expression showed more noble interest in science.

"I see all my guests happily engaged," he continued. "Shall we follow Dagmar's suggestion, then, and come to the laboratory, Dr. Halifax?"

"I shall be interested to see what you have done," I said.

We left the drawing-rooms. As we passed Madame Sorensen, she called out to me to know if I were leaving.

"No," I replied; "I am going with your husband to his laboratory. He has kindly promised to show me some of his experiments."

"Ah, then, I will say good-night, and farewell. When Oscar goes to the laboratory he forgets the existence of time. Farewell, Dr. Halifax." She touched my hand with her thin fingers; her light eyes gave a queer, vindictive flash. "Farewell, or, *au revoir*, if you prefer it," she said, with a laugh. She turned abruptly to speak to another guest.

To reach the laboratory we had to walk down more than one long corridor—it was in a wing at some little distance from the rest of the house. Professor Sorensen explained the reason briefly.

"I make experiments," he said; "it is more convenient, therefore, to have the laboratory as distant from the dwelling-house as possible."

We finally passed through a narrow covered passage.

"Beneath here flows the Neva," said the Professor; "but here," he continued, "did you ever see a more spacious and serviceable room for real hard work than this?"

He flung open the door of the laboratory as he spoke, and touching a button in the wall, flooded the place on the instant with a blaze of electric light. The laboratory was warmed with hot pipes, and contained, in addition to the usual appliances, a couple of easy chairs and one or two small tables;

also a long and particularly inviting-looking couch.

"I spend the night here occasionally," said Dr. Sorensen. "When I am engaged in an important experiment, I often do not care to leave the place until the early hours of the morning."

We wandered about the laboratory, which was truly a splendid room and full of many objects which would, on another occasion, have aroused all my scientific enthusiasm, but I was too intensely on my guard just now to pay much attention to the Professor's carefully worded and elaborate descriptions. My quick eyes had taken in the whole situation as far as it was at present revealed to me: the iron bands of the strong door by which we had entered; the isolation of the laboratory. I was young and strong, however, and Professor Sorensen was old. If it came to a hand-to-hand fight, he would have no chance against me. Miss Sorensen, too, was my friend.

We spent some time examining various objects of interest, then finding the torture of suspense unendurable, I said, abruptly: "I should greatly like to see your process of cultivation of the cancer microbes before I take my leave."

"I will show it to you," said Dr. Sorensen. "Dagmar, my love, light the lantern."

"Is it not here?" I asked.

"No; I keep it in an oven in a small laboratory, which we will now visit."

Miss Sorensen took up a silver-mounted lantern, applied a match to the candle within, and taking it in her hand, preceded us up the whole length of the laboratory to a door which I had not before noticed, and which was situated just behind Dr. Sorensen's couch. She opened it and waited for us to come up to her.

"Take the lantern and go first, Uncle Oscar," said the young lady. She spoke in an imperious voice, and I saw the Professor give her a glance of slight surprise.

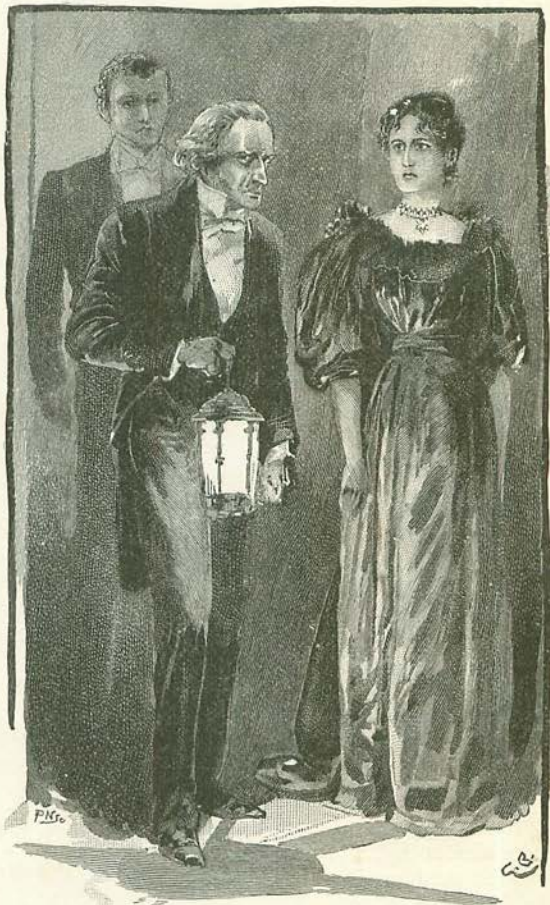
"Won't you go first, Dagmar?" he said. "Dr. Halifax can follow you, and I will come up in the rear."

She put the lantern into his hand.

"No, go first," she said, with a laugh which was a little unsteady. "No one knows your

private haunts as well as you do yourself. Dr. Halifax will follow me."

The Professor took the lantern without another word. He began to descend some narrow and steep stairs. They were carpeted, and appeared, as far as I could see through the gloom, to lead into another passage farther down. Miss Sorensen followed her uncle immediately. As he did so, she threw



"THE PROFESSOR TOOK THE LANTERN."

her head back and gave me a warning glance.

"Take care, the stairs are steep," she said. "Count them; I will count them for you. I wish, Uncle Oscar, you would have this passage properly lighted."

"Come on, Dagmar: what are you lingering for?" called the Professor.

"Follow me, Dr. Halifax," she said. Her hand just touched mine—it burnt like coal. "These horrid stairs," she said. "I really must count them, or I'll fall." She began to count immediately in a sing-song, monotonous

voice, throwing her words back at me, so that I doubt if the Professor heard them.

"One," she began, "two—three—four—five—six." When she had counted to six, she made an abrupt pause. We stood side by side on the sixth step.

"Seven is the perfect number," she said, in my ear—as she spoke, she pushed back her arm and thrust me forcibly back as I was about to advance. At the same instant, the dim light of the lantern went out, and I distinctly heard the door by which we had entered this narrow passage close behind us. We were in the dark. I was about to call out: "Miss Sorensen — Professor Sorensen," when a horrid noise fell upon my ears. It was the heavy sound as of a falling body. It went down, down, making fearful echoes as it banged against the sides of what must have been a deep well. Presently there was a splash, as if it had dropped into water.

That splash was a revelation. The body, whatever it was, had doubtless fallen into the Neva. At the same instant, Miss Sorensen's mysterious words returned to my memory: "Avoid the seventh step." I remembered that we had gone down six steps, and that as we descended, she had counted them one by one. On the edge of the sixth step she had paused, had pushed me back, and then had disappeared. The Professor had also vanished. What body was that which had fallen through space into a deep and watery grave? Miss Sorensen's mysterious remark was at last abundantly plain. *There was no seventh step* — by this trap, therefore, but for her interference, I was to be hurled into eternity.

I sank back, trembling in every limb. The

horror of my situation can scarcely be described. At any moment the Professor might return, and by a push from above, send me into my watery grave. In my present position, I had no chance of fighting for my life. I retraced my steps to the door of the upper laboratory and felt vainly all along its

smooth, hard surface. No chance of escape came from there. I sat down presently on the edge of the first step, and waited for the end with what patience I could. I still believed in Miss Sorensen, but would it be possible for her to come to my rescue? The silence and darkness of the grave surrounded me. Was I never to see daylight again? I recalled Madame Sorensen's face when she said "farewell" — I recalled the passion of despair in Miss Sorensen's young voice. I had touched secrets inadvertently with which I had no right to meddle. My death was desired by the Invincible and the Merciless — of course, I must die. As I grew accustomed to the darkness and stillness—the stillness itself was broken by the gurgling, distant sound of running water—I could hear the flow of the Neva as it rushed past my dark grave.

At the same moment the sound of voices fell on my ear. They were just below me—I felt my heart beating almost to suffocation. I clenched my hands tightly together—surely the crucial moment had come—could I fight for my life?

The Professor's thin, polished tones fell like ice on my heart.

"We had better come back and see that all is safe," he said. "Of course, he must have fallen over, but it is best to be certain."

"No, no, Uncle Oscar, it is not necessary," I heard Miss Sorensen say. "Did you not



"I SANK BACK."

hear the sound—the awful sound—of his falling body? I did. I heard a splash as it fell into the Neva.”

“Yes, I fancy I did hear it,” answered the Professor, in a reflective voice.

“Then don’t come back—why should we? It is all so horrible—let us return to the drawing-rooms as quickly as possible.”

“You are excited, my dear—your voice trembles—what is the matter with you?”

“Only joy,” she replied, “at having got rid of a dangerous enemy—now let us go.”

Their voices died away—I could even hear the faint echo of their footsteps as they departed. I wondered how much longer I was to remain in my fearful grave. Had I the faintest chance of escaping the doom for which I was intended? Would Miss Sorensen be true to the end? She, doubtless, was a Nihilist, and as she said herself, they received no mercy and gave none. My head began to whirl—queer and desperate thoughts visited me. I felt my nerves tottering, and trembled, for a brief moment, for my reason. Suddenly a hand touched my arm, and a voice, clear, distinct, but intensely low, spoke to me.

“Thank God, you are here—come with me at once—don’t ask a question—come noiselessly, and at once. I rose to my feet—Miss Sorensen’s hot fingers clasped mine—she did not speak—she drew me forward. Once again I felt myself descending the steps. We came to the bottom of the sixth step. “This way,” she said, in a muffled tone. She felt with her hands against the wall—a panel immediately gave way, and we found ourselves in a narrow passage, with a very faint light at the farther end. Miss Sorensen hurried me along. We went round a sort of semi-circular building, until at last we reached a small postern door in the wall. When we came to it she opened it a few inches, and pushed me out.

“Farewell,” she said then. “I have saved your life. Farewell, brave Englishman.”

She was about to shut the door in my face, but I pushed it back forcibly.

“I will not go until you tell me the meaning of this,” I said.

“You are mad to linger,” she replied, “but I will tell you in a few words. Professor Sorensen and his wife are no relations of mine. I am Olga Krestofski, suspected by the police, the owner of important secrets: in short, the head of a branch of the Nihilists. I shammed illness, and assumed the name under which I travelled, in order to convey papers of vast importance to our cause, to Petersburg. Professor Sorensen, as Court physician, has not yet incurred the faintest breath of suspicion—nevertheless, he is one of the leaders of our party, and every individual with whom you dined to-night belongs to us. It was decreed that you were to die. I decided otherwise. There was, as you doubtless have discovered, *no* seventh step. I warned you, and you had presence of mind sufficient not to continue your perilous downward course beyond the edge of the sixth step.”

“But I heard a body fall,” I said.

“Precisely,” she replied; “I placed a bag of sand on the edge of the sixth step shortly after my arrival this morning, and just as I was following Professor Sorensen through the secret panel in the wall into the passage beyond, I pushed the bag over. This was necessary in order to deceive the Professor. He heard it splash into the water, and I was able to assure him that it was your body. Otherwise he would inevitably have returned to complete his deadly work. Now, good-bye—forgive me, if you can.”

“Why did you bring me here at all?” I asked.

“It was your only chance. Madame Sorensen had resolved that you were to die. You would have been followed to the ends of the earth—now you are safe, because Professor and Madame Sorensen think you are dead.”

“And you?” I said, suddenly. “If by any chance this is discovered, what will become of you?”

There was a passing gleam of light from a watery moon—it fell on Miss Sorensen’s white face.

“I hold my life cheap,” she said. “Farewell. Don’t stay long in Petersburg.”

She closed the postern door as she spoke.