

The Seventh Step.

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[FROM THE STRAND MAGAZINE.]

A 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 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 three days of our voyage I had not an opportunity of seeing her again. When we reached the smooth waters of the Norwegian fjords, however, she was carried about 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 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 passing 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 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 neighborhood 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. "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 a 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 of sight, Miss Sorensen resumed her conversation. "You see that I am paralyzed," she said.

I bowed an acknowledgment of this all-patient 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—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.

"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?"

"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 humor 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 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 continued 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 handsome 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," 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?"

"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?"

"Sister Hagar said that you knew—I hoped, I hoped—I earnestly trusted that she was wrong."

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 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 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—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 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.

"Pray 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.

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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.

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 Russian—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 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 of escape—is to appear to know absolutely nothing—to