

[CONTINUED FROM SECOND PAGE.]

The Seventh Step.

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 honor of escorting Madame Sorensen to the head of her table, and in honor 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 neighbor, and her 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—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 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 uncontrollably high and strong, calmed down under these reflections, but resolutely 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 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 honor 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 favorite 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 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 the 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 hung 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, arouse 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 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 stop. 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 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 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. "This way," he 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 a 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 shunned 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.

MONUMENTAL IGNORANCE

DISPLAYED BY REV. MR. GUMBART, A BAPTIST MINISTER.

We have refrained from reproducing the many tirades delivered by extremists, because we believed they were only calculated to engender a feeling of bigotry and hatred. But it is well, occasionally, that our readers should know what some of these modern iconoclasts have to say about Catholicity.

Rev. Dr. Gumbart preached in the Dudley street Baptist Church, Boston, last week, on "Is It Wrong to Antagonize Romanism?" His philosophy was very much modern and peculiar in its scope, because, while he was willing to treat a Catholic as a brother, he hated the Catholic Church, and grew furious when he tackled the subject of Purgatory.

To oppose an "ism," he said, is not necessarily to oppose the man who holds the "ism." While we may oppose Catholicism, we have no right to persecute or to abuse the Catholic, or to treat him other than as a brother.

I believe it is right to oppose Catholicism because it is contrary to the Scriptures. Its Mass and beads, its confessional and purgatory, holy water and indulgences, relics and penances, its altars and candles, its incense and vestments, its crucifixes and scapulars, are as unlike the religion of the New Testament as garlic is unlike a tuberose.

Dr. Gumbart also paid his compliments to the doctrine of purgatory, the saying of prayers to Mary, and the hope of salvation through good works. He showed from the Scriptures that the love of God, through the atonement of Jesus Christ, offers a free and complete salvation to all who will receive it by faith.

Dr. Gumbart opposes Catholicism on the ground that his duty to the Catholic is to bring to him the truth of the New Testament, and thus to deliver him from a slavish bondage to superstition. He also denounced the claims of the purgatorial societies who charge a registration fee of 50 cents for prayers offered on behalf of souls in purgatory.

"For six months," said the struggling young author, "I had been sending out manuscripts to the publishers only to have them returned; in all that time I had never a line accepted. Some of them were returned, as it seemed to me, with precipitancy; I would send them out one day and get them back the next; it seemed as though they wanted not only to return the manuscripts, but to get them out of the way as speedily as possible. And then there were some that were kept so long that I built hopes of their acceptance, and when finally they did not come back I fancied that they had been kept for politeness sake, so that I should not be pained by their too hasty rejection; though sometimes I fancied they were kept so long only to stave off as far as possible the coming of the next manuscript, which they must have come to know was in vialable. Two weeks ago, however, from a most unexpected source, I received, from a manuscript returned, not the usual printed form, but a most courteous letter, saying that the editor had read with enjoyment the manuscript I had sent, and that he returned it with regret, but that taking all considerations into account it was not found exactly available. A week later, from another unexpected quarter, I received a letter of similar tenor and of equal courtesy.

"For six months the darkness had been unbroken, but in these letters I see the glimmering of my literary dawn."

A CARDINAL ON BOXING.

MOST REV. DR. VAUGHAN LOOKS FAVORABLY UPON WELL CONDUCTED CONTESTS.

Speaking at an exhibition given recently in the schools of the English Martyrs, London, by two branches of the Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster (Dr. Vaughan), who presided, in the course of his remarks said God had given them bodies and souls, and both should be taken care of and both should be well trained. In these clubs they were occupied in training the body, muscles, sinews and nerves, and they had shown what they could do, and all would agree that they deserved a high meed of praise. There had been some amusing and interesting turns with the boxing gloves. Some people supposed that little could be said for boxing. He thought a great deal could be said for it. First it was called the "noble art of self-defense." [Laughter.] Young and indeed old men sometimes found themselves, without any fault of their own, in difficulties, and they ought to be able to defend themselves. [Hear, hear and laughter.] That was one of the objects for which boxing was learned. But there was another advantage which he thought would be seen in the exercise—it was a splendid training for the temper. Young men stood up to each other, and from time to time inflicted heavy blows upon each other, and they finished by shaking hands and kissing each other

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THE YOUNG AUTHOR'S EXPERIENCE.

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to show that it had been done in good will and in good temper. [Laughter.] Whatever blows they might have sustained they never for a moment lost temper, but received them with patience and calmness, and determining good humoredly to return them as well as each could, and they did it when they were able. [Hear, hear and laughter.] This he considered a great training in patience.

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