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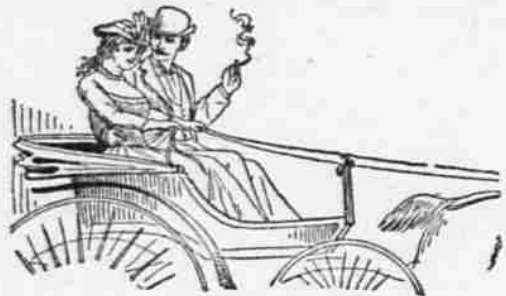
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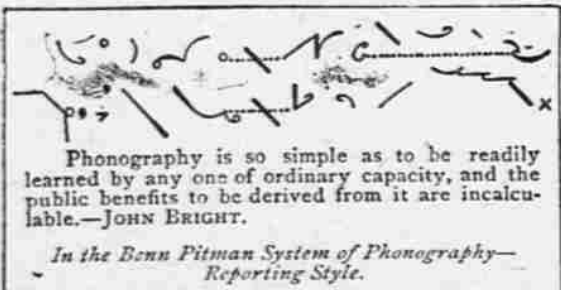
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*The* **SOWERS**

By  
**Henry Seton Merriman**

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

knowledge that you have met—your master."

He bowed in his graceful way, spreading out his hands in mock humility.

"A lenient master," pursued the Frenchman, whose vanity was tickled by the word. "I do not ask much. One thing is to be invited to Osterno, that I may be near you. The other is a humble request for details of your daily life, that I may think of you when absent."

Etta drew in her lips, moistening them as if they had suddenly become parched.

De Chauville glanced at her and moved toward the door. He paused, with his fingers on the handle, and, looking back over his shoulder, he said:

"Have I made myself quite clear?"

Etta was still looking out of the window with hard, angry eyes. She took no notice of the question.

De Chauville turned the handle.

"Again let me impress upon you the advisability of implicit obedience," he said, with delicate insolence. "I mentioned the Charity league, but that is not my strongest claim upon your attention. I have another interesting little detail of your life, which I will reserve until another time."

He closed the door behind him, leaving Etta white lipped.

CHAPTER XXVII.

**P**AUL had requested Catrina and Maggie to drive as quietly as possible through the forest.

The warning was unnecessary, for the stillness of snow is infectious, while the beauty of the scene seemed to command silence. As usual, Catrina drove without bells. The one attendant on his perch behind was a fur clad statue of servitude and silence. Maggie, leaning back, hidden to the eyes in her sables, had nothing to say to her companion. The way lay through forests of pine—trackless, motionless, virgin. The sun, filtering through the snow laden branches, cast a subdued golden light upon the ruddy upright trunks of the trees. At times a willow grouse, white as the snow, light and graceful on the wing, rose from the branch where he had been laughing to his mate with a low, cooing laugh and fluttered away over the trees.

Far over the summits of the pines a snipe seemed to be wheeling a sentinel round. He followed them as they sped along, calling out all the while his deep warning note, like that of a lamb crouching beneath a hedge where the wind is not tempered.

Catrina noted all these things while cleverly handling her ponies. They spoke to her with a thousand voices. She had roamed in these same forests with Paul, who loved them and understood them as she did.

Maggie, in the midst, as it were, of a revelation, leaned back and wondered at it all. She, too, was thinking of

Paul, the owner of these boundless forests. She understood him better now. This drive had revealed to her a part of his nature which had rather puzzled her—a large, simple, quiet strength which had developed and grown to maturity beneath these trees.

Maggie knew now where Paul had learned the quiet concentration of mind, the absorption in his own affairs, the complete lack of interest in the business of his neighbor, which made him different from other men. He had learned these things at first hand from God's creatures.

"Now you know," said Catrina when they reached the hut, "why I hate Petersburg."

Maggie nodded. The effect of the forest was still upon her. She did not want to talk.

The woman who received them, the wife of a keeper, had prepared in a rough way for their reception. She had a large fire and bowls of warm milk.

While the two girls were warming themselves a keeper came to the door of the hut and asked to see Catrina. He stood in the little doorway, completely filling it, and explained that he could not come in, as the buckles and straps of his snowshoes were clogged and frozen. He wore the long Norwegian snowshoes and was held to be the quickest runner in the country.

Catrina had a long conversation with the man, who stood hatless, ruddy and shy.

"It is," she then explained to Maggie, "Paul's own man, who always loads for him and carries his spare gun. He has sent him to tell us that the game has been ringed and that the beaters will close in on a place called the Schapka clearing, where there is a woodman's refuge. If we care to put on our snowshoes this man will guide us to the clearing and take care of us till the battue is over."

Of course Maggie welcomed the proposal with delight, and after a hasty luncheon the three glided off through the forest as noiselessly as they had come. After a tiring walk of an hour and more they came to the clearing and were duly concealed in the hut.

No one, the keeper told the ladies, except Paul, knew of their presence in the little wooden house. The arrangements of the beat had been slightly altered at the last moment after the hunters had separated. The keeper lighted a small fire and shyly attended to the ladies, removing their snowshoes with his clumsy fingers. He closed the door and arranged a branch of larch across the window so that they could stand near it without being seen.

They had not been there long before De Chauville appeared. He moved quickly across the clearing, skimming over the snow with long, sweeping strides. Two keepers followed him and after having shown him the rough hiding place prepared for him silently withdrew to their places. Soon Karl Steinmetz came from another direction and took up his position rather nearer to the hut in a thicket of pine

He was only twenty yards away from the refuge where the girls were concealed.

It was not long before Paul came. He was quite alone and suddenly appeared at the far end of the clearing, in very truth a mighty hunter, standing nearly seven feet on his snowshoes. One rifle he carried in his hand, another slung across his back.

From his attitude it was apparent that he was listening. It was probable that the cries of the birds and the distant howl of a wolf told his practiced ears how near the beaters were. He presently moved across to where De Chauville was hidden, spoke some words of advice or warning to him and pointed with his gloved hand in the direction whence the game might be expected to come.

It subsequently transpired that Paul was asking De Chauville the whereabouts of Steinmetz, who had gained his place of concealment unobserved by either. De Chauville could give him no information, and Paul went away to his post dissatisfied. Karl Steinmetz must have seen them. He must have divined the subject of their conversation, but he remained hidden and gave no sign.

Paul's post was behind a fallen tree, and the watchers in the hut could see him, while he was completely hidden from any animal that might enter the open clearing from the far end. He turned and looked hard at the hut, but the larch branch across the window effectively prevented him from discovering whether any one was behind it or not.

Then suddenly the keeper gave a little grunt and held up his hand, listening with parted lips and eager eyes. There was a distinct sound of breaking branches and crackling underwood.

They could see Paul cautiously rise from his knees to a crouching attitude. They followed the direction of his gaze, and before them the monarch of these forests stood in clumsy might. A bear had shambled to the edge of the clearing and was standing upright, growling and grumbling to himself, his great paws waving from side to side, his shaggy head thrust forward with a recurring jerk singularly suggestive of a dandy with an uncomfortable collar. These bears of northern Russia have not the reputation of being very fierce unless they are aroused from their winter quarters, when their wrath knows no bounds and their courage recognizes no danger.

The bear stood poking his head and looking about with little, fiery, blood-shot eyes for something to destroy. His rage was manifest, and in his strength he was a grand sight. The majesty of power and a dauntless courage were his.

It was De Chauville's shot, and while keeping his eye on the bear Paul glanced impatiently over his shoulder from time to time, wondering why the Frenchman did not fire. The bear was a huge one and would probably carry three bullets and still be a dangerous adversary.

The keeper muttered impatiently. They were watching Paul breathlessly. The bear was approaching him. It would not be safe to defer firing another second.

Suddenly the keeper gave a short exclamation of astonishment and threw up his rifle.

There was another bear behind Paul, shambling toward him, unseen by him. All his attention was riveted on the huge brute forty yards in front of him. It was Claude de Chauville's task to protect Paul from any flank or rear attack, and Claude de Chauville was peering over his covert, watching with blanched face the second bear, and lifting no hand, making no sign. The bear was within a few yards of Paul, who was crouching behind the fallen pine and now raising his rifle to his shoulder.

In a flash of comprehension the two girls saw all through the panes of the



He turned abruptly away.

closed window. It was still singularly like a scene on the stage. The second bear raised his powerful forepaws as he approached. One blow would tear open Paul's brain.

A terrific report sent the girls staggering back, for a moment paralyzing thought. The keeper had fired through the window, both barrels almost simultaneously. It was a question how much lead would bring the bear down before he covered the intervening dozen yards. In the confined space of the hut the report of the heavy double charge was like that of a cannon. Moreover, Steinmetz, twenty yards away, had fired at the same moment. The room was filled with smoke. The two girls were blinded for an instant. Then they saw the keeper tear open the door and disappear. The cold air through the shattered casement was a sudden relief to their lungs, checked with sulphur and the fumes of spent powder.

In a flash they were out of the open door, and there again, with the suddenness of a panorama, they saw another picture—Paul kneeling in the middle of the clearing, taking careful aim at the retreating form of the first bear. They saw the puff of blue smoke rise from his rifle, they heard the sharp report, and the bear rolled over on its face.

Steinmetz and the keeper were walking toward Paul. Claude de Chauville, standing outside his screen of brushwood, was staring with wide, fear-stricken eyes at the hut which he had thought empty. He did not know that there were three people behind him watching him. What had they seen? What had they understood?

Catrina and Maggie ran toward Paul. They were on snowshoes and made short work of the intervening distance.

Paul had risen to his feet. His face was grave. There was a singular gleam in his eyes, which was not a gleam of mere excitement such as the chase brings into some men's eyes.

Steinmetz looked at him and said nothing. For a moment Paul stood still. He looked around him, noting with experienced glance the lay of the whole incident—the dead form of the bear ten yards behind his late hiding place, 180 yards from the hut, 160 yards from the spot whence Karl Steinmetz had sent his unerring bullet through the bear's brain. Paul saw it all. He measured the distances. He looked at De Chauville, standing white faced at his post not fifty yards from the carcass of the second bear.

Paul seemed to see no one but De Chauville. He went straight toward him, and the whole party followed in breathless suspense. Steinmetz was nearest to him, watching with his keen, quiet eyes.

Paul went up to De Chauville and took the rifle from his hands. He opened the breech and looked into the barrels. They were clean. The rifle had not been fired off.

He gave a little laugh of contempt and, throwing the rifle at De Chauville's feet, turned abruptly away.

It was Catrina who spoke. "If you had killed him," she said, "I would have killed you!"

Steinmetz picked up the rifle, closed the breech and handed it to De Chauville, with a queer smile.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

**W**HEN the Osterno party reached home that same evening the starosta was waiting to see Steinmetz. His news was such that Steinmetz sent for Paul, and the three men went together to the little room beyond the smoking room in the old part of the castle.

"Well?" said Paul, with the unconscious hauteur which made him a prince to these people.

The starosta spread out his hands. "Your excellency," he answered, "I am afraid there is something in the village—something in the whole country. I know not what it is. It is a feeling—one cannot see it, one cannot define it. But it is there, like the gleam of water at the bottom of a deep well. The moujiks are getting dangerous. They will not speak to me. I am suspected. I am watched."

"I will go with you down to the village now," said Paul. "Is there any excuse—any illness?"

"Ah, excellency," replied the chief, "there is always that excuse."

Paul looked at the clock. "I will go now," he said. He began his simple preparations at once.

"There is dinner to be thought of," suggested Steinmetz, with a resigned smile. "It is half past 7."

"Dinner can wait," replied Paul in English. "You might tell the ladies that I have gone out and will dine alone when I come back."

Steinmetz shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I think you are a fool," he said, "to go alone. If they discover your identity they will tear you to pieces."

"I am not afraid of them," replied Paul, with his head in the medicine cupboard, "any more than I am afraid of a horse. They are like horses; they do not know their own strength."

"With this difference," added Steinmetz, "that the moujik will one day make the discovery. He is beginning to make it now. The starosta is quite right, Paul. There is something in the air. It is about time that you took the ladies away from here and left me to manage it alone."

"That time will never come again," answered Paul. "I am not going to leave you alone again."

He was pushing his arms into the sleeves of the old brown coat reaching to his heels, a garment which commanded as much love and respect in Osterno as ever would an angel's wing.

Steinmetz opened the drawer of his bureau and laid a revolver on the table.

"At all events," he said, "you may as well have the wherewithal to make a fight of it if the worst comes to the worst."

"As you like," answered Paul, slipping the firearm into his pocket.

The starosta moved away a pace or two. He was essentially a man of peace.

Half an hour later it became known in the village that the Moscow doctor was in the house of one Ivan Krass, where he was prepared to see all patients who were now suffering from infectious complaints. The door of this cottage was soon besieged by the sick and the idle, while the starosta stood in the doorway and kept order.

Paul, standing by the table with two paraffin lamps placed behind him, saw each suppliant in turn, and all the while he kept up a running conversation with the more intelligent, some of whom lingered on to talk and watch.

"Ah, John, the son of John," he would say, "what is the matter with you? It is not often I see you. I thought you were clean and thrifty."

To which John, the son of John, re-

(CONTINUED ON THIRD PAGE)