The SOWERS

By

Henry Seton Merriman

(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

De Chauxville laughed again in an unemotional way.

"You alter little," he said. "Your plainness of speech takes me back to Petersburg. Yes, I admit that Mrs. Sydney Bamborough rather interested me. But I assume too much. That is no reason why she should interest you."

"She does not, my good friend, but you do. I am all attention."

"Do you know anything of her?" asked De Chauxville perfunctorily, not as a man who expects an answer or intends to believe that which he may be about to hear.

"Nothing."

"You are likely to know more?"

Karl Steinmetz shrugged his heavy shoulders and shook his head doubtfully.

"I am not a ladies' man," he added gruffly. "The good God has not shaped me that way. I am too fat. Has Mrs. Sydney Bamborough fallen in love with me? Has some imprudent person shown her my photograph? I hope not. Heaven forbid!"

He puffed steadily at his pipe and glanced quickly at De Chauxville through the smoke.

"No," answered the Frenchman quite gravely. Frenchmen, by the way, do not admit that one may be too middle aged or too stout for love. "But she is on good terms with the prince."

"Which prince?"

"Pavlo."

The Frenchman snapped out the word, watching the other's benevolent countenance. Steinmetz continued to smoke placidly and contentedly.

"My master," he said at length. "I suppose that some day he will marry."

De Chauxville shrugged his shoulders. He touched the button of the electric bell and when the servant appeared ordered coffee. The servant brought the coffee, which he drank thoughtfully.

"And why not Mrs. Sydney Bamborough?" asked Steinmetz suddenly.

"Why not, indeed?" replied De Chauxville. "It is no affair of mine. A wise man reduces his affairs to a minimum and his interest in the affairs of his neighbor to less. But I thought it would interest you."

"Thanks."

The tone of the big man in the armchair was not dry. Karl Steinmetz knew better than to indulge in that pastime. Dryness is apt to parch the fount of expansiveness.

"Who was Sydney Bamborough, at any rate?" De Chauxville asked.

"So far as I remember," answered Steinmetz, "he was something in the diplomatic service."

"Yes, but what?"

"My dear friend, you had better ask his widow when next you sit beside her at dinner."

"How do you know that I sat beside her at dinner?"

"I did not know it," replied Steinmetz, with a quiet smile which left De Chauxville in doubt as to whether he was very stupid or exceedingly clever.

"She seems to be very well off," said the Frenchman.

"I am glad, as she is going to marry my master."

De Chauxville laughed almost awkwardly, and for a fraction of a second he changed countenance under Steinmetz's quiet eyes.

"One can never know whom a woman intends to marry," he said carelessly, "even if they can themselves, which I doubt. But I do not understand how it is that she is so much better, or appears to be, since the death of her husband."

"Ah, she is much better off, or appears to be, since the death of her husband," said the stout man in his slow Germanic way.

"Yes."

De Chauxville rose, stretched himself and yawned. Men are not always, be it understood, on their best behavior at their club.

"Good night," he said shortly.

"Good night, my very dear friend."

After the Frenchman had left, Karl Steinmetz remained quite motionless and expressionless in his chair until such time as he concluded that De Chauxville was tired of watching him through the glass door. Then he slowly sat forward in his chair and looked back over his shoulder.

"Our friend," he muttered, "is afraid that Paul is going to marry this woman. Now, I wonder why?"

These two had met before in a past which has little or nothing to do with the present narrative. They had disliked each other with a completeness partly bred of racial hatred, partly the outcome of diverse interests. But of late years they had drifted apart. There was no reason why the friendship, such as it was, should not have lapsed into a mere bowing acquaintance.

Steinmetz knew that the Frenchman had recognized him before entering the room. It was to be presumed that he had deliberately chosen to cross the threshold, knowing that a recognition was inevitable. Karl Steinmetz went farther. He suspected that De Chauxville had come to the Talleyrand club, having heard that he was in England, with the purpose in view of seeking him out and warning him against Mrs. Sydney Bamborough.

"It would appear," murmured the stout philosopher, "that we are about to work together for the first time. But if there is one thing that I dislike more than the enmity of Claude de Chauxville it is his friendship."

CHAPTER VII.

KARL STEINMETZ lifted his pen from the paper before him and scratched his forehead with his forefinger.

"Now, I wonder," he said aloud, "how many bushels there are in a ton. Ach, how am I to find out? These English weights and measures, this English money, when there is a metrical system!"

He sat and hardly looked up when the clock struck 7. It was a quiet room this in which he sat, the library of Paul's London house. The noise of Piccadilly reached his ears as a faint roar not entirely unpleasant but sociable and full of life. Accustomed as he was to the great silence of Russia, where sound seems lost in space, the hum of a crowded humanity was a pleasant change to this philosopher, who loved his kind while fully recognizing its little weaknesses.

While he sat there still wondering how many bushels of seed made a ton Paul Alexis came into the room. The younger man was in evening dress. He looked at the clock rather eagerly.

"Will you dine here?" he asked, and Steinmetz wheeled around in his chair. "I am going out to dinner," he explained further.

"Ah!" said the elder man.

"I am going to Mrs. Sydney Bamborough's. I shall probably ask her to marry me."

"And she will probably say yes."

"I am not so sure about that," said Paul, with a laugh, for this man was without conceit. "I do not see why she should," he went on gravely. He was standing by the empty fireplace, a manly, upright figure, one who was not very clever, not brilliant at all, somewhat slow in his speech, but sure, deadly sure, in the honesty of his purpose.

Karl Steinmetz looked at him and smiled openly, with the quaint air of resignation that was his.

"You have never seen her, eh?" inquired Paul.

Steinmetz paused, then he told a lie, a good one, well told, deliberately.

"No."

"We are going to the opera, box F2. If you come in I shall have pleasure in introducing you. The sooner you know each other the better. I am sure you will approve."

"I think you ought to marry money."

"Why?"

Steinmetz laughed.

"Oh," he answered, "because everybody does who can! There is Catrina Lanovitch—an estate as big as yours adjoining yours; a great Russian family, a good girl who is willing."

Paul laughed, a good wholesome laugh.

"You are inclined to exaggerate my manifold and obvious qualifications,' he said. "Catrina is a very nice girl, but I do not think she would marry me even if I asked her."

"Which you do not intend to do."

"Certainly not."

"Then you will make an enemy of her," said Steinmetz quietly. "It may be inconvenient, but that cannot be helped. A woman scorned, you know. Shakespeare or the Bible. I always mix them up. No, Paul, Catrina Lanovitch is a dangerous enemy. She has been making love to you these last four years, and you would have seen it if you had not been a fool! I am afraid, my good Paul, you are a fool. God bless you for it!"

"I think you are wrong," said Paul rather curtly; "not about me being a fool, but about Catrina Lanovitch. If you are right, however, it only makes me dislike her instead of being perfectly indifferent to her."

His honest face flushed up finely, and he turned away to look at the clock again.

"I hate your way of talking about women, Steinmetz," he said. "You're a cynical old beast, you know."

"Heaven forbid, my dear prince! I admire all women—they are so clever, so innocent, so pure minded. Do not your English novels prove it, your English stage, your newspapers, so high toned? Who supports the novelist, the playright, the actor, who but your English ladies?"

"Better than being cooks, like your German ladies," retorted Paul stoutly. "Better than being cooks."

"I doubt it! I very much doubt it, my friend. At what time shall I present myself at box F2 this evening?"

"About 9—as soon as you like."

So Paul Howard Alexis sallied forth to seek the hand of the lady of his choice, and as he left his own door that lady was receiving Claude de Chauxville in her drawing room. The two had not met for some weeks—not indeed since Etta had told the Frenchman that she could not marry him. Her invitation to dine, couched in the usual friendly words, had been the first move in that game commonly called "bluff." Claude de Chauxville's acceptance of the same had been the second move. And these two persons, who were not afraid of each other, shook hands with a pleasant smile of greeting, while Paul hurried toward them through the busy streets.

"Am I forgiven—that I am invited to dinner?" asked De Chauxville imperturbably when the servant had left them alone.

"Forgiven for what?" she asked at length in that preoccupied tone of voice which tells wise men that only questions of dress will be considered.

De Chauxville shrugged his shoulders in his graceful Gallic way.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed. "For a crime which requires no excuse and no explanation other than a mirror."

She looked up at him innocently.

"A mirror?"

"Yours. Have you forgiven me for falling in love with you? It is, I am told, a crime that women sometimes condone."

"It was no crime," she said. She had heard the wheels of Paul's carriage. "It was a misfortune. Please let us forget that it ever happened."

De Chauxville twirled his neat mustache, looking keenly at her the while.

"You forget," he said. "But I—will remember."

She did not answer, but turned with a smile to greet Paul.

"I think you know each other," she said gracefully when she had shaken hands, and the two men bowed. They were foreigners, be it understood. There were three languages in which they could understand each other with equal ease.

"Where is Maggie?" exclaimed Mrs. Bamborough. "She is always late."

"When I am here," reflected De Chauxville. But he did not say it.

Miss Delafield kept them waiting a few minutes, and during that time Etta Sydney Bamborough gave a very fine display of prowess with the double stringed bow. She had a smile and an epigram for Claude de Chauxville, a grave air of sympathetic interest in more serious affairs for Paul Alexis. She was bright and amusing, guileless and very worldly wise in the same breath—simple for Paul and a match for De Chauxville within the space of three seconds.

Paul was asked to take Mrs. Sydney Bamborough down to dinner by the lady herself.

"Mon ami," she said in a quiet aside to De Chauxville before making her request, "it is the first time the prince dines here."

She spoke in French. Maggie and Paul were talking together at the other end of the room. De Chauxville bowed in silence.

At dinner the conversation was necessarily general and as such is not worth reporting. No general conversation, one finds, is of much value when set down in black and white. It is not even grammatical nowadays. To be more correct, let us note that the talk lay between Etta and M. de Chauxville, who had a famous supply of epigrams and bright nothings delivered in such a way that they really sounded like wisdom. Etta was equal to him, sometimes capping his sharp wit, sometimes contenting herself with silvery laughter. Maggie Delafield seemed rather abstracted, as De Chauxville noted. The girl's dislike for him was an iron that entered the quick of his vanity anew every time he saw her. There was no petulance in the aversion, such as he had perceived with other maidens who were only resenting a passing negligence or seeking to pique his curiosity. This was a steady and, if you will, unmaidenly aversion, which Maggie conscientiously attempted to conceal.

Maggie was by turns quite silent and very talkative. When Paul and Etta were speaking together she never looked at them, but fixedly at her own plate, at a decanter or a saltcellar. When she spoke she addressed her remarks, valueless enough in themselves, exclusively to the man she disliked, Claude de Chauxville.

There was something amiss in the pretty little room. There were shadows seated around that pretty little table beside the guests in their pretty dresses and their black coats—silent, cold shadows who ate nothing, while they chilled the dainty food and took the sweetness from the succulent dishes. These shadows had crept in unawares to take their phantom places at the table, and only Etta seemed able to jostle hers aside and talk it down. She took the whole burden of the conversation upon her pretty shoulders and bore it through the little banquet with unerring skill and unflinching good humor.

Claude de Chauxville was for the moment forced to assume an humble role because he had no choice. Maggie Delafield was passive for the time being because that which would make her active was no more than a tiny seedling in her heart. The girl bid fair to be one of those women who develop late, who ripen slowly, like the best fruit.

During the drive to the opera house the two women in Etta's snug little brougham were silent. Etta had her thoughts to occupy her. She was at the crucial point of a difficult game. She could not afford to allow even a friend to see so much as the corners of the cards she held.

In the luxurious box it was easily enough arranged—Etta and Paul together in front, De Chauxville and Maggie at the other corner of the box.

"I have asked my friend, Karl Steinmetz, to come in during the evening," said Paul to Etta when they were seated. "He is anxious to make your acquaintance. He is my—prime minister over in Russia."

Etta smiled graciously.

"It is kind of him," she answered, "to be anxious to make my acquaintance."

She was apparently listening to the music. In reality she was hurrying back mentally over half a dozen years. She had never had much to do with the stout German philosopher, but she knew enough of him to scorn the faint hope that he might have forgotten her name and her individuality. Etta Bamborough had never been disconcerted in her life yet. This incident came very near to bringing about the catastrophe.

"At what time," she asked, "is he coming in?"

"About half past 9."

It was a race, and Etta won it. She had only half an hour. De Chauxville was there, and Maggie, with her quiet, honest eyes. But the widow of Sydney Bamborough made Paul ask her to be his wife, and she promised to give him his answer later. She did it despite a thousand difficulties and more than one danger—accomplished it with, as the sporting people say, plenty to spare—before the door behind them was opened by the attendant, and Karl Steinmetz, burly, humorously imperturbable and impenetrable, stood smiling gravely on the situation.

He saw Claude de Chauxville, and before the Frenchman had turned round the expression on Steinmetz's large and placid countenance had changed from the self consciousness usually preceding an introduction to one of a dim recognition.

"I have had the pleasure of meeting madame somewhere before, I think. In St. Petersburg, was it not?"

Etta, composed and smiling, said that it was so and introduced him to Maggie. De Chauxville took the oppor-

(CONTINUED ON THIRD PAGE)