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The SOWERS

By Henry Seton Merriman

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

living over ruts and through puddles, the usual Russian rural thoroughfare; not because Prince Pavlo wanted to give the peasants work, not because he wanted to save them from starvation, not at all, although in the gratification of his own whim he happened to render those trifling services, but merely because he was a great "barin," a prince who could have anything he desired. Had not the other barin, Steinmetz, the hated, the loathed, the tool of the tyrant whom they never see? Ask the "starost," the mayor of the village. He knows the barins and hates them.

Michael Roon, the starosta or elder of Osterno, president of the mir, or village council, principal shopkeeper, mayor and only intelligent soul of the 900, probably had Tartar blood in his veins. To this strain may be attributed the narrow Tartar face, the keen black eyes, the short, spare figure which many remember to this day, although Michael Roon has been dead these many years.

It was late in the autumn, one evening remembered by many for its death roll, that the starosta was standing at the door of his small shop. He was apparently idle. He never sold vodka, and the majority of the villagers were in one of the three thriving inns which drove a famous trade in strong drink and weak tea. It was a very hot evening.

The starosta shook his head forebodingly. It was cholera weather. Cholera had come to Osterno; had come, the starosta thought, to stay. It had settled down in Osterno, and nothing but the winter frosts would kill it, when hunger typhus would undoubtedly succeed it.

Therefore the starosta shook his head at the sunset and forgot to regret the badness of the times from a commercial point of view. He had done all he could. He had notified the zemstvo of the condition of his village. He had made the usual appeal for help, which had been forwarded in the usual way to Tver, where it had apparently been received with the usual philosophic silence.

But Michael Roon had also telegraphed to Karl Steinmetz, and since the dispatch of this message had the starosta dropped into the habit of standing at his doorway in the evening, with his hands clasped behind his back and his beady black eyes bent westward along the prince's highroad. On the particular evening with which we have to do the beady eyes looked not in vain, for presently far along the road appeared a black speck like an insect crawling over the face of a map.

"Ah!" said the starosta. "Ah, he never fails!"

The word soon spread that a carriage was coming along the road from Tver. All the villagers came to the doors of their dilapidated wooden huts. Even the inns were emptied for a time.

As the vehicle approached it became apparent that the horses were going at a great pace. Not only was the loose horse galloping, but also the pair in the shafts. The carriage was an open one, an ordinary north Russian traveling carriage, not unlike the vehicle we call the victoria, set on high wheels.

Beside the driver on the box sat another servant. In the open carriage sat one man only, Karl Steinmetz.

As he passed through the village a murmur of many voices followed him, not quite drowned by the rattle of his wheels, the clatter of the horses' feet. The murmur was a curse. Karl Steinmetz heard it distinctly. It made him smile with a queer expression beneath his great gray mustache.

The starosta, standing in his doorway, saw the smile. He raised his voice with his neighbors and curse. As Steinmetz passed him he gave a little jerk of the head toward the castle. The jerk of the head might have been due to an inequality of the road, but it might also convey an appointment. The keen, haggard face of Michael Roon showed no sign of mutual understanding, and the carriage rattled on through the stricken village.

Two hours later, when it was quite dark, a closed carriage, with two bright lamps flaring into the night, passed through the village toward the castle at a gallop.

"It is the prince," the peasants cried, crouching in their low doorways. "It is the prince. We know his bells, they are of silver, and we shall starve during the winter. Curse him, curse him!" They raised their heads and listened to the galloping feet with the patient, dumb despair which is the curse of the Slavonic race. Some of them crept to their doors and, looking up, saw that the castle windows were ablaze with light. If Paul Howard Alexis was a plain English gentleman in London he was also a great prince in his country, keeping up a princely state, enjoying the gilded solitude that belongs to the high born. His English education had educated a strict sense of discipline, and, as in England and indeed all through his life, so in Russia did he attempt to do his duty.

The carriage rattled up to the brilliantly lighted door, which stood open, and within, on either side of the broad entrance hall, the servants stood to welcome their master. A strange, picturesque, motley crew—the majordomo, in his black coat, and beside him the other house servants—tall, upright fellows in their bright livery; beyond them the stablemen and keepers, a little army in red cloth tunics, with wide trousers tucked into high boots, all holding their fur caps in their hands, standing stiffly at attention, clean, honest and not too intelligent.

The castle of Osterno is built on the lines of many Russian country seats and not a few places in Moscow. The royal palace in the Kremlin is an example—a broad entrance hall, at the back of which a staircase as broad stretches up to a gallery around which the dwelling rooms are situated. At

the head of the staircase, directly facing the entrance hall, high folding doors disclose the drawing room, which is almost a throne room; all gorgeous, lofty, spacious as only Russian houses are. Truly this northern empire, this great white land, is a country in which it is good to be an emperor, a prince, a noble, but not a poor man.

Paul passed through the ranks of his retainers, himself a head taller than the tallest footman, a few inches broader than the sturdiest keeper. He acknowledged the low bows by a quick nod and passed up the staircase. Steinmetz, in evening dress, wearing the insignia of one or two orders which he had won in the more active days of his earlier diplomatic life, was waiting for him at the head of the stairs.

The two men bowed gravely to each other. Steinmetz threw open the door



Paul passed through the ranks of his retainers.

of the great room and stood aside. The prince passed on, and the German followed him, each playing his part gravely, as men in high places are called to do. When the door was closed behind them and they were alone there was no relaxation, no smile of covert derision. These men knew the Russian character thoroughly. There is, be it known, no more impressionable man on the face of God's earth. Paul and Steinmetz had played their parts so long that these came to be natural to them as soon as they passed the Volga. They knew that the people around them were somewhat like the dumb beast. These peasants required over-awing by a careful display of pomp, an unrelaxed dignity. The line of demarcation between the noble and the peasant is so marked in the land of the czar that it is difficult for others to realize or believe it.

CHAPTER X.

FOR a moment Paul looked up from the papers spread out on the table before him—looked with the preoccupied air of a man who is adding up something in his mind. Then he returned to his occupation. He had been at this work for four hours without a break. It was nearly 1 o'clock in the morning. Since dinner Karl Steinmetz had consumed no less than five cigars, while he had not spoken five words. These two men, locked in a small room in the middle of the castle of Osterno—a room with no window, but which gained its light from the clear heaven by a shaft and a skylight on the roof—locked in thus they had been engaged in the addition of an enormous mass of figures.

"Is that fool never coming?" asked Paul, with an impatient glance at the clock.

"Our very dear friend the starosta," replied Steinmetz, "is no slave to time. He is late."

The room had the appearance of an office. There were two safes—square chests. There was a huge writing table—a double table—at which Paul and Steinmetz were seated. There were sundry stationery cases and an almanac or so suspended on the walls, which were oaken panels. A large white stove—common to all Russian rooms—stood against the wall. The room had no less than three doors, with a handle on no one of them. Each door opened with a key, like a cupboard.

The silence of the room was almost oppressive. A Russian village after nightfall is the quietest human habitation on earth, for the moujik, the native of a country which will some day supply the universe with petroleum, cannot afford to light up his humble abode, and therefore sits in darkness.

Osterno was asleep, the castle servants had long gone to rest, and the great silence of Russia wrapped its wings over all. When, therefore, the clear, coughing bark of a wolf was heard both occupants of the little room looked up. The sound was repeated, and Steinmetz slowly rose from his seat.

"I can quite believe that our friend is able to call a wolf or a lynx to him," he said. "He does it uncannily well."

"I have seen him do so," said Paul, without looking up. "But it is a common enough accomplishment among the keepers."

Steinmetz had left the room before he finished speaking. One of the doors of this little room communicated with a large apartment used as a secretary's office and through this by a small staircase with a side entrance to the castle.

Before many minutes had elapsed Steinmetz came back, closely followed by the starosta, whose black eyes twinkled and gleamed in the sudden light of the lamp. He dropped on his knees when he saw Paul—suddenly, abjectly, like an animal, in his dumb attitude of deprecation.

With a jerk of his head Paul bade him rise, which the man did, standing back against the paneled wall, placing as great a distance between himself

and the prince as the size of the room would allow.

"Well," said Paul curtly, almost roughly, "I hear you are in trouble in the village."

"The cholera has come, excellency."

"Many deaths?"

"Today eleven."

Paul looked up sharply.

"And the doctor?"

"He has not come yet, excellency. I sent for him a fortnight ago. The cholera is at Oseff, at Dolja, at Kallshefa. It is everywhere. He has 40,000 souls under his care. He has to obey the zemstvo, to go where they tell him. He takes no notice of me."

"Yes," interrupted Paul, "I know. And the people themselves, do they attempt to understand it—to follow out my instructions?"

The starosta spread out his thin hands in deprecation. He cringed a little as he stood.

"Your excellency," he said, "knows what they are. It is slow. They make no progress. For them one disease is as another. 'Bog dal e Bog vzial,' they say. 'God gave and God took!'"

He paused, his black eyes flashing from one face to the other.

"Only the Moscow doctor, excellency," he said significantly, "can manage them."

Paul shrugged his shoulders. He rose from his seat, glancing at Steinmetz, who was looking on in silence, with his queer, mocking smile.

"I will go with you now," he said. "It is late enough already."

The starosta bowed very low, but he said nothing.

Paul went to a cupboard and took from it an old fur coat, dragged at the seams, stained about the cuffs a dull brown—doctors know the color. Such stains have langed a man before now, for they are the marks of blood. Paul put on this coat. He took a long, soft silk scarf such as Russians wear in winter, and wrapped it round his throat, quite concealing the lower part of his face. He crammed a fur cap down over his ears.

"Come," he said.

Karl Steinmetz accompanied them downstairs, carrying a lamp in one hand. He closed the door behind them, but did not lock it.

When the starosta unceremoniously threw open the door of the miserable cabin belonging to Vasilii Tula, Paul gave a little gasp. The foul air pouring out of the noisome den was such that it seemed impossible that human lungs could assimilate it. There were at least seven persons sleeping in the hut. Two of them did not get up. One was dead; the other was dying of cholera.

A heavily built man reached down from the top of the brick stove a cheap tin paraffin lamp, which he handed to the starosta. By the light of this Paul came into the hut. The floor was filthy, as may be imagined, for beasts and human beings lived here together.

Paul pushed his way not unkindly toward the corner where the two motionless forms lay half concealed by a mass of ragged sheepskin.

"Here," he said, "this woman is dead. Take her out. When will you learn to be clean? This boy may live—with care. Bring the light closer, little mother. So, it is well. He will live. Come, don't sit crying. Take all these rags out and burn them. All of you go out. It is a fine night. You are better in the cart shed than here. Here, you, Tula, go round with the starosta to his store. He will give you clean blankets."

They obeyed him blindly. Tula and one of his daughters dragged the dead body, which was that of a very old woman, out into the night. The starosta had retired to the doorway when the lamp was lighted, his courage having failed him. The air was foul with the reek of smoke and filth and infection.

"We are starving, excellency," Tula said. "I can get no work. I had to sell my horse in the winter, and I cannot plow my little piece of land. The government will not help us. The prince—curse him!—does nothing for us. He lives in Petersburg, where he spends all his money and has food and wine more than he wants."

Paul turned round sharply and shook the man off.

"Go," he said, "with the starosta and get what I tell you. A great, strong fellow like you has no business on his knees to any man. I will not help you unless you help yourself. You are a lazy good-for-nothing. Get out!"

From hut to hut Paul went all through that night on his mission of mercy, without enthusiasm, without high flown notions respecting mankind, but with a simple sense of duty that was his. This was not the first time by any number that he had gone down into his own village insisting in a rough and ready way on cleanliness and purity.

"The Moscow doctor" was looked upon in Osterno and in many neighboring villages as second only to God. In fact, many of the peasants placed him before their Creator. They were stupid, vodka soddened, hapless men. The Moscow doctor they could see for themselves. He came in, a very tangible thing of flesh and blood, built on a large and manly scale. He took them by the shoulders and bundled them out of their own houses, kicking their bedding after them. He scolded them, he hated them and abused them. He brought them food and medicine. He understood the diseases which from time to time swept over their villages. No cold was too intense for him to brave should they be in distress. He asked no money, and he gave none. But they lived on his charity, and they were wise enough to know it.

Paul Alexis, half Russian, half English, understood these people very thoroughly. He took advantage of their ignorance, their simplicity, their unfathomable superstition. He governed as no other could have ruled them, by fear and kindness at once. He

(CONTINUED ON THIRD PAGE)

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