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# The McCook Tribune

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# The SOWERS

By Henry Seton Merriman

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

"I wonder why," she said, looking into the fire, "you hate me."

"I wonder why you think that of me," he replied.

"One cannot help perceiving that which is obvious."

"While that which is purposely made obvious serves to conceal that which may exist behind it," replied the stout man.

Etta paused to reflect over this. Was Steinmetz going to make love to her? She was not an inexperienced girl and knew that there was nothing impossible or even improbable in the thought. She wondered what Karl Steinmetz must have been like when he was a young man. How could she know that his manner was always easiest, his attitude always polite, toward the women whom he despised. In his way this man was a philosopher. He had a theory that an exaggerated politeness is an insult to a woman's intellect.

"You think I do not care," said the Princess Howard Alexis.

"You think I do not admire you," replied Steinmetz imperturbably.

She looked up at him.

"Do you not give me every reason to think so?" she returned, with a toss of the head.

"Not intentionally, princess. I am, as you know, a German of no very subtle comprehension. My position in your household appears to me to be a little above the servants, although the prince is kind enough to make a friend of me, and his friends are so good as to do the same. I do not presume to form an opinion upon you."

"But I want you to form an opinion," she said petulantly.

"Then you must know that I could only form one which would be pleasing to you."

"I know nothing of the sort," replied Etta. "Of course I know that all that you say about position is mere irony. Paul thinks there is no one in the world like you."

Steinmetz glanced sharply down at her. He had never considered the possibility that she might love Paul. Was this, after all, jealousy? He had attributed it to vanity.

"And I have no doubt he is right," she went on. Suddenly she gave a little laugh. "Don't you understand?" she said. "I want to be friends."

She did not look at him, but sat with pouting lips holding out her hand.

He took it in his great, warm, soft grasp, held it for a moment and relinquished it.

"I don't want you to address all your conversation to Maggie and to ignore me. Do you think Maggie so very pretty?"

There was a twist beneath the gray mustache as he answered: "Is that all the friendship you desire? Does it extend no further than a passing wish to be first in petty rivalries of daily existence? I am afraid, my dear princess, that my friendship is a heavier matter, a clumsier thing, than that."

"A big thing not easily moved," she suggested, looking up, with her dauntless smile.

He shrugged his great shoulders. "It may be. Who knows? I hope it is," he answered.

"The worst of those things is that they are sometimes in the way," said Etta reflectively, without looking at him.

"And yet the life that is only a conglomeration of trifles is a poor life to look back upon."

"Meaning mine?" she asked.

"Your life has not been trifling," he said gravely.

She looked up at him and then for some moments kept silence while she idly opened and shut her fan.

"Do you ever feel an unaccountable sensation of dread," she asked, with a weary little laugh, "a sort of foreboding with nothing definite to forebode?"

"Unaccountable—no," replied Steinmetz. "But, then, I am a German—and stout, which may make a difference. I have no nerves."

He looked into the fire through his benevolent gold rimmed spectacles.

"Is it nerves, or is it Petersburg?" she asked abruptly. "I think it is Petersburg. I hate Petersburg."

"Why Petersburg more than Moscow or Nijni or Tver?"

She drew in a long, slow breath, looking him up and down the while from the corners of her eyes.

"I do not know," she replied collectedly. "I think it is damp. These houses are built on reclaimed land, I believe. This was all marsh. Was it not?"

He did not answer her question, and somehow she seemed to expect no reply. He stood blinking down into the fire, while she watched him furtively from the corners of her eyes, her lips parched and open, her face quite white.

A few moments before she had protested that she desired his friendship. She knew now that she could not brave his enmity. And the one word "Tver" had done it all, the mere mention of a town, obscure and squalid, on the upper waters of the mighty Volga in mid-Russia!

During those few moments she suddenly came face to face with her position. What had she to offer this man? She looked him up and down—stout, placid and impenetrable. Here was no common adventurer seeking place, no coxcomb seeking ladies' favors, no pauper to be bought with gold. She had no means of ascertaining how much he knew, how much he suspected. She could never hope to find out whether his knowledge and his suspicions were his alone or had been imparted to others.

She breathed hard, living through years of anxiety in a few moments of time, and she could only realize that she was helpless, bound hand and foot in this man's power.

It was he who spoke first.

"My dear lady," he said, "if you are content to take my friendship as it is,

it is yours. But I warn you it is no slow drawing room article. There will be no compliments, no pretty speeches, no little gifts of flowers and such trumpery amenities. It will all be very solid and middle aged, like myself."

"You think," returned the lady, "that I am fit for nothing better than pretty speeches and compliments and floral offerings?"

"I do," he said quietly.

"And yet you offer me your friendship?"

He bowed in acquiescence.

"Why?" she asked.

"For Paul's sake, my dear lady."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away from him.

"Of course," she said, "it is quite easy to be rude. As it happens, it is precisely for Paul's sake that I took the trouble of speaking to you on this matter. I do not wish him to be troubled with such small domestic affairs, and therefore if we are to live under the same roof I shall deem it a favor if you will, at all events, conceal your disapproval of me."

He bowed gravely and kept silence. Etta sat with a little patch of color on either cheek, looking into the fire until the door was opened and Maggie came in.

Steinmetz went toward her with his grave smile, while Etta hid a face which had grown haggard.

Maggie glanced from one to the other with frank interest. The relationship between these two had rather puzzled her of late.

"Well," said Steinmetz, "and what of St. Petersburg?"

"I am not disappointed," replied Maggie. "It is all I expected and more. Everything interests me."

"We were discussing Petersburg when you came in," said Steinmetz, drawing forward a chair. "The princess does not like it. She complains of—nerves."

"Nerves!" exclaimed Maggie, turning to her cousin. "I did not suspect you of having them."

Etta smiled a little wearily.

"One never knows," she answered, forcing herself to be light, "what one may come to in old age. I saw a gray hair this morning. I am nearly thirty-three, you know. When glamour goes, nerves come."

"Paul took me out in a sleigh this morning," went on Maggie, in her cheerful voice. "I liked everything—the policemen in their little boxes at the street corners, the officers in their fur coats, the cabmen, everybody. There is something so mysterious about them all. One can easily make up stories about everybody one meets in Petersburg. It is so easy to think that they are not what they seem. Paul, Etta, even you, Herr Steinmetz, may not be what you seem."

"Yes, that is so," answered Steinmetz, with a laugh.

"You may be a nihilist," pursued Maggie. "You may have bombs concealed up your sleeves; you may exchange mysterious passwords with people in the streets; you may be much less innocent than you appear."

"All that may be so," he admitted.

"You may have a revolver in the pocket of your dress coat," went on Maggie, pointing to the voluminous garment with her fan.

His hand went to the pocket in question and produced exactly what she had suggested. He held out his hand with a small silver mounted revolver lying in the palm of it.

"Even that," he said, "may be so."

Maggie looked at it with a sudden curiosity, her bright eyes grave.

"Loaded?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then I will not examine it. How curious! I wonder how near to the mark I may have been in other ways."

"I wonder," said Steinmetz, looking at Etta. "And now tell us something about the princess. What do you suspect her of?"

At this moment Paul came into the room, distinguished looking and grave.

"Miss Dehfield," pursued Steinmetz, turning to the newcomer, "is telling us her suspicions about ourselves. I am already as good as condemned to Siberia. She is now about to sit in judgment on the princess."

Maggie laughed.

"Herr Steinmetz has pleaded guilty to the worst accusation," she said.

"On the other counts I leave him to his own conscience."

"Anything but that," urged Steinmetz.

Paul came forward, and Maggie rather obviously avoided looking at him.

"Tell us of Paul's crimes first," said Etta, rather hurriedly. She glanced at the clock, whither Karl Steinmetz's eyes had also traveled.

"Oh, Paul!" said Maggie, rather indifferently. Indeed it seemed as if her lightness of heart had suddenly failed her. "Well, perhaps he is deeply involved in schemes for the resurrection of the Polish kingdom or something of that sort."

"That sounds tame," put in Steinmetz. "I think you would construct a better romance respecting the princess. In books it is always the beautiful princesses who are most deeply dyed in crime."

"I do not think I am," said Etta, with a shudder. She rose rather hurriedly and crossed the room with a great rustle of silks.

"Stop her!" she whispered as she passed Steinmetz.

And the latter did so, and did not betray to Paul the secret of the theft of the Charity league papers.

## CHAPTER XIX.

THE Countess Lanovitch and Catrina were sitting together in the too luxurious drawing room that overlooked the Neva. The double windows were rigorously closed, while the inner panes were covered with a thick rime. The sun was just

setting, over the mountains that border the upper waters of the gulf of Finland and lit up the snowclad city with a rosy glow which penetrated to the room where the two women sat.

Catrina was restless, moving from chair to chair, from fireplace to window, with a lack of repose which would certainly have touched the nerves of a less lethargic person than the countess.

"My dear child," that lady was exclaiming, with lackadaisical horror, "we cannot go to Thors yet. The thought is too horrible. You never think of my health. Besides, the gloom of the everlasting snow is too painful. It makes me think of your poor mistaken father, who is probably shoveling it in Siberia. Here, at all events, one can avoid the window. One need not look at it."

"The policy of shutting one's eyes is a mistake," said Catrina.

"Why do you want to go back to Thors so soon?" murmured the elder lady, with a little sigh of despair. She knew she was playing a losing game very badly. She was mentally shuddering at the recollection of former sleigh journeying from Tver to Thors.

"Because I am sure father would like us to be there this hard winter."

"But your father is in Siberia," put in the countess, which remark was ignored.

"Because if we do not go before the snow begins to melt we shall have to do the journey in carriages over bad roads, which is sure to make you ill. Because our place is at Thors, and no one wants us here. I hate Petersburg. It is no use living here unless one is rich and beautiful and popular. We are none of those things, so we are better at Thors."

"But we have many nice friends here, dear. You will see this afternoon. I expect quite a reception. The Comte de Chauville said he would come on my first reception day, and of course Paul and his wife must return my call. They will come today. I am anxious to see her. They say she is beautiful and dresses well."

Catrina's broad white teeth gleamed for a moment in the flickering fire light as she clinched them over her lower lip.

"And therefore Paul's happiness in life is assured," she said in a hard voice.

"Of course. What more could he want?" murmured the countess, in blissful ignorance of any irony.

Catrina looked at her mother with a gleam of utter contempt in her eyes.



"I wish you happiness," said Catrina.

That is one of the privileges of a great love, whether it brings happiness or misery—the contempt for all who have never known it.

While they remained thus the sound of sleighbells on the quiet English quay made itself heard through the double windows. There was a clang of many tones, and the horses pulled up with a jerk. The color left Catrina's face quite suddenly, as if wiped away, leaving her ghastly. She was going to see Paul and his wife.

Presently the door opened, and Etta came into the room with the indomitable assurance which characterized her movements and earned for her a host of feminine enemies.

"Mme. la Comtesse," she said, with her most gracious smile, taking the limp hand offered to her by the Countess Lanovitch.

Catrina stood in the embrasure of the window, hating her.

Paul followed on his wife's heels, scarcely concealing his boredom. He was not a society man. Catrina came forward and exchanged a formal bow with Etta, who took in her plainness and the faults of her dress at one contemptuous glance. She smiled with the perfect pity of a good figure for no figure at all. Paul was shaking hands with the countess. When he took Catrina's hand her fingers were icy and twitched nervously within his grasp.

The countess was already babbling to Etta in French. The Princess Howard Alexis always began by informing Paul's friends that she knew no Russian. For a moment Paul and Catrina were left, as it were, alone.

"I wish you happiness," said Catrina, and no one heard her but Paul. She did not raise her eyes to his, but looked vaguely at his collar. Her voice was short and rather breathless, as if she had just emerged from deep water.

"Thank you," answered Paul simply. He turned and somewhat naturally looked at his wife. Catrina's thoughts followed his. A man is at a disadvantage in the presence of the woman who loves him. She usually sees through him—a marked difference between masculine and feminine love. Catrina looked up sharply and caught his eyes resting on Etta.

"He does not love her—he does not love her!" was the thought that instantly leaped into her brain.

(CONTINUED ON THIRD PAGE)