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# The SOWERS

By Henry Seton Merriman

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

It had fallen ever since, and the afternoon lowered gloomily. In America such visitations are called "blizzards"; here in Russia it is merely "the snow." The freezing wind is taken as a matter of course.

At the castle all was in readiness for the prince and princess, their departure from Tver having been telegraphed. On the threshold of the great house, before she had entered the magnificent hall, Etta's eyes brightened, her fatigue vanished. She played her part before the crowd of bowing servants with that forgetfulness of mere bodily fatigue which is expected of princesses and other great ladies. She swept up the broad staircase leaning on Paul's arm with a carriage, a presence, a dazzling wealth of beauty, which did not fall to impress the onlookers. Whatever Etta may have failed to bring to Paul Howard Alexis as a wife, she made him a matchless princess.

He led her straight through the drawing room to the suit of rooms which were hers. These consisted of an ante room, a small drawing room and her private apartments beyond.

Paul stopped in the drawing room, looking round with a simple satisfaction in all that had been done by his orders for Etta's comfort. "These," he said, "are your rooms." He was no adept at turning a neat phrase, at reeling off a pretty honeymoon welcome. Perhaps he expected her to express delight, to come to him possibly and kiss him, as some women would have done.

She looked round critically. "Yes," she said, "they are very nice." She crossed the room and drew aside the curtain that covered the double latticed windows. The room was so warm that there was no rime on the panes. She gave a little shudder, and he went to her side, putting his strong, quiet arm around her.

Below them, stretching away beneath the brilliant moonlight, lay the country that was his inheritance. Immediately beneath them, at the foot of the great rock upon which the castle was built, nestled the village of Osterno, straggling, squalid.

"Oh," she said dully, "this is Siberia! This is terrible!" It had never presented itself to him in that light, the wonderful stretch of country over which they were looking.

"It is not so bad," he said, "in the daylight." And that was all, for he had no persuasive tongue.

"That is the village," he went on after a little pause. "Those are the people who look to us to help them in their fight against terrible odds. I hoped that you would be interested in them."

She looked down curiously at the little wooden huts, half buried in the snow, the smoking chimneys, the twinkling, curtainless windows.

"What do you expect me to do?" she asked in a queer voice.

He looked at her in a sort of won-

derment. Perhaps it seemed to him that a woman should have no need to ask such a question.

"It is a long story," he said. "I will tell you about it another time. You are tired now after your journey."

His arm slipped from her waist. They stood side by side, and both were conscious of a feeling of difference. They were not the same as they had been in London. The atmosphere of Russia seemed to have had some subtle effect upon them.

Etta turned and sat slowly down on a low chair before the fire. She had thrown her furs aside, and they lay in a luxurious heap on the floor. The maids, hearing that the prince and princess were together, waited silently in the next room behind the closed door.

"I think I had better hear it now," said Etta.

"But you are tired," protested her husband. "You had better rest until dinner time."

"No, I am not tired."

He came toward her and stood with one elbow on the mantelpiece, looking down at her, a quiet, strong man, who had already forgotten his feat of endurance of a few hours earlier.

"These people," he said, "would die of starvation and cold and sickness if we did not help them. It is simply impossible for them in the few months that they can work the land to cultivate it so as to yield any more than their taxes. They are overtaxed, and no one cares. The army must be kept up and a huge civil service, and no one cares what happens to the peasants. Some day the peasants must turn, but not yet. It is a question for all Russian landowners to face, and nobody faces it. If any one tries to improve the condition of his peasants—they were happier a thousand times as serfs—the bureaucrats of St. Petersburg mark him down, and he is forced to leave the country. The whole fabric of this government is rotten, but every one except the peasants would suffer by its fall, and therefore it stands."

Etta was staring into the fire. It was impossible to say whether she heard with comprehension or not. Paul went on:

"There is nothing left, therefore, but to go and do good by stealth. I studied medicine with that view. Steinmetz has scraped and economized the working of the estate for the same purpose. The government will not allow us to have a doctor. They prevent us from organizing relief and education on anything like an adequate scale. They do it all by underhand means. They have not the pluck to oppose us openly. For years we have been doing what we can. We have almost eradicated cholera. They do not die of starvation now. And they are learning—very slowly, but still they are learning. We—I—thought you might be interested in your people. You might want to help."

She gave a short little nod. There was a suggestion of suspense in her whole being and attitude, as if she

were waiting to hear something which she knew could not be avoided.

"A few years ago," he went on, "a gigantic scheme was set on foot. I told you a little about it—the Charity league."

Her lips moved, but no sound came from them, so she nodded a second time.

"That fell through," he went on, "as I told you. It was betrayed. Stepan Lanovitch was banished. He has escaped, however. Steinmetz has seen him. He succeeded in destroying some of the papers before the place was searched after the robbery, one paper in particular. If he had not destroyed that I should have been banished. I was one of the leaders of the Charity league. Steinmetz and I got the thing up. It would have been for the happi-

ness of millions of peasants if it had not been betrayed. In time we shall find out who did it."

He paused. He did not say what he would do when he had found out.

Etta was staring into the fire. Her lips were dry. She hardly seemed to be breathing.

"It is possible," he went on in his strong, quiet, inexorable voice, "that Stepan Lanovitch knows now."

Steinmetz had not betrayed the secret of his master's wife.

Etta did not move as Paul spoke. She was staring into the fire—staring—staring.

Then she slowly fainted, rolling from the low chair to the fur hearth rug.

Paul picked her up like a child and carried her to the bedroom, where the maids were waiting to dress her.

"Here," he said, "your mistress has fainted from the fatigue of the journey."

And, with his practiced medical knowledge, he himself tended her.

CHAPTER XXII.

"ALWAYS gay, always gay!" laughed Steinmetz, rubbing his broad hands together and looking down into the face of Maggie, who was busy at the breakfast table.

"Yes," answered the girl, glancing toward Paul, leaning against the window reading his letters. "Yes, always gay. Why not?"

Karl Steinmetz saw the glance. It was one of the little daily incidents that one sees and half forgets. He only half forgot it.

As she spoke he half turned toward Paul, as if suggesting that he should give an opinion, and this little action had the effect of putting a stop to the conversation. Maggie had plenty to say to Steinmetz, but toward Paul her mental attitude was different. She was probably unaware of this little fact.

"There," she said after a pause, "I have obeyed Etta's instructions. She does not want us to begin, I suppose?"

"No," replied Paul. "She will be down in a minute."

"I hope the princess is not overtired," said Steinmetz, with a certain formal politeness which seemed to accompany any mention of Etta's name.

"Not at all, thank you," replied Etta herself, coming into the room at that moment. She looked fresh and self-confident. "On the contrary, I am full of energy and eagerness to explore the castle. One naturally takes an interest in one's baronial halls."

With this she walked slowly across to the window. She stood there looking out, and every one in the room was watching. On looking for the first time on the same view a few moments earlier Maggie had uttered a little cry of surprise and had then remained silent. Etta looked out of the window and said nothing. It was a most singular outlook—weird, uncouth, prehistoric, as some parts of the earth still are. The castle was built on the edge of a perpendicular cliff. On this side it was impregnable. Any object dropped from the breakfast room window would fall a clear 200 feet to the sprawling Oster river. The rock was black and shining like the topmost crags of an Alpine mountain where snow and ice have polished the bare stone. Beyond and across the river lay the boundless steppe—a sheet of virgin snow.

Etta stood looking over this to the far horizon, where the white snow and the gray sky softly merged into one. Her first remark was characteristic, as first and last remarks usually are.

"And as far as you can see is yours?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Paul simply, with that calm which only comes with hereditary possession.

The observation attracted Steinmetz's attention. He went to another window and looked across the waste critically.

"Four times as far as we can see is his," he said.

Etta looked out slowly and comprehensively, absorbing it all like a long, sweet drink. There was no hereditary calmness in her sense of possession.

"And where is Thors?" she asked.

Paul stretched out his arm, pointing with a lean, steady finger.

"It lies out there," he answered.

Another of the little incidents that are only half forgotten. Some of the persons assembled in that room remembered the pointing long afterward.

"It makes one feel very small," said Etta, turning to the breakfast table—"at no time a pleasant sensation. Do you know," she said, after a little pause, "I think it probable that I shall become very fond of Osterno, but I wish it was nearer to civilization."

Paul looked pleased. Steinmetz had a queer expression on his face. Maggie murmured something about one's surroundings making but little difference to one's happiness, and the subject was wisely shelved.

After breakfast Steinmetz withdrew.

"Now," said Paul, "shall I show you the old place, you and Maggie?"

Etta signified her readiness, but Maggie said that she had letters to write, that Etta could show her the castle another time, when the men were out shooting, perhaps.

"But," said Etta, "I shall do it horribly badly. They are not my ancestors, you know. I shall attach the stories to the wrong people and locate the ghost in the wrong room. You will be wise to take Paul's guidance."

"No, thank you," replied Maggie, quite firmly and frankly. "I feel inclined to write, and the feeling is rare, so I must take advantage of it."

The girl looked at her cousin with something in her honest blue eyes that almost amounted to wonder. Etta was always surprising her. There was a whole gamut of feeling, an octave of callosity, half formed girlish instincts of which Etta seemed to be deprived. If she had ever had them, no trace was left of their willow presence. At first Maggie had flatly refused to come to Russia. When Paul pressed her to do so she accepted with a sort of wonder. There was something which she did not understand.

When the door had closed behind them Maggie stood for some minutes by the window looking out over the snowclad plain, the rugged, broken rocks beneath her.

Then she turned to the writing table. She resolutely took pen and paper, but the least thing seemed to distract her attention—the cypress on the note paper cost her five minutes of faroff reflection. She took up the pen again and wrote "Dear Mother."

The room grew darker. Maggie looked up. The snow had begun again. It was driving past the window with a silent, purposeful monotony. The girl drew the writing case toward her. She examined the pen critically and dipped it into the ink. But she added nothing to the two words already written.

The castle of Osterno is almost unique in the particular that one roof covers the ancient and the modern buildings. The vast reception rooms, worthy of the name of state rooms, adjoin the small stone built apartments of the fortress which Paul's ancestors held against the Tartars. This grimmer side of the building Paul reserved to the last for reasons of his own, and Etta's manifest delight in the grandeur of the more modern apartments fully rewarded him.

When they passed from the lofty rooms to the dimmer passages of the old castle Etta's spirits visibly dropped, her interest slackened. He told her of tragedies enacted in bygone times—such ancient tales of violent death and broken hearts as attach themselves to gray stone walls and dungeon keeps. She only half listened, for her mind was busy with the splendors they had left behind, with the purposes to which such splendors could be turned. And the sum total of her thoughts was gratified vanity.

"I am glad your grandfather brought French architects here and built the modern side," she said. "These rooms are, of course, very interesting, but gloomy—horribly gloomy, Paul."

"All the same I like these rooms," answered Paul. "Steinmetz and I used to live entirely on this side of the house. This is the smoking room. We shot those bears and all the deer. That is a wolf's head. He killed a keeper before I finished him off."

"And how did you finish him off?" she asked.

"I choked him. That bear knocked me down, but Steinmetz shot him. We were four days out in the open after that elk. This is a lynx—a queer face—rather like De Chauville. The dogs killed him."

"But why do you not paper the room," asked Etta, with a shiver, "instead of this gloomy paneling? It is so mysterious and creepy. Quite suggestive of secret passages."

"There are no secret passages," answered Paul. "But there is a room behind here. This is the door. I will show it to you presently. I have things in there I want to show you. I keep all my medicines and appliances in there. It is our secret surgery and office. In that room the Charity league was organized."

Etta turned away suddenly and went to the narrow window, where she sat on a low window seat, looking down into the snowclad depths.

"I did not know you were a doctor," she said.

"I doctor the peasants," replied Paul, "in a rough and ready way. I took my degree on purpose. But of course they do not know that it is I. They think I am a doctor from Moscow. I put on an old coat and wear a scarf, so that they cannot see my face. I only go to them at night. It would never do for the government to know that we attempt to do good to the peasants. We have to keep it a secret even from the people themselves. And they hate us. They groan and

(CONTINUED ON THIRD PAGE)