

The SOWERS

By Henry Seton Merriman

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CHAPTER I.

IN this country charity covers no sins!

The speaker finished his remark with a short laugh. He was a big, stout man. His name was Karl Steinmetz, and it is a name well known in the government of Tver to this day. He spoke jerkily, as about men do when they ride, and when he had laughed his good natured, half cynical laugh he closed his lips beneath a haggard mustache. So far as one could judge from the action of a square and deeply indented chin, his mouth was expressive at that time—and possibly at all times—of a humorous resignation. No reply was vouchsafed to him, and Karl Steinmetz bumped along on his little Ossack horse, which was stretched out at a gallop.

Evening was drawing on. It was late in October, and a cold wind was driving from the northwest across a plain which for sheer desolation of aspect may give points to Sahara and beat that abode of mental depression without an effort.

Steinmetz looked round over this cheerless prospect with a twinkle of amused resignation in his blue eyes, as if by this creation were a little practical joke, which he, Karl Steinmetz, appreciated at its proper worth. The whole scene was suggestive of immense distance, of countless miles in all directions. The land through which these men were riding is the home of great distances—Russia. They rode, moreover, as if they knew it, as if they had ridden for days and were aware of more days in front of them.

The companion of Karl Steinmetz looked like an Englishman. He was young and fair and quiet. He looked like a youthful athlete from Oxford or Cambridge.

This young man's name was Paul Howard Alexis, and fortune had made him a Russian prince. If, however, any one, even Steinmetz, called him prince, he blushed and became confused. This terrible title had brooded over him while at Eton and Cambridge. But no one had found him out. He remained Paul Howard Alexis so far as England and his friends were concerned. In Russia, however, he was known by name only, for he avoided Slavonic society as Prince Pavlo Alexis. This plain was his. Half the government of Tver was his. The great Volga roiled through his possessions. Sixty miles behind him a grim stone castle bore his name, and a vast tract of land was peopled by humble minded persons who cringed at the mention of his exalted name.

All this because thirty years earlier a certain Princess Natasha Alexis had fallen in love with plain Mr. Howard of the British embassy in St. Petersburg. With Slavonic enthusiasm (for the Russian is the most romantic race on earth) she informed Mr. Howard of the fact and duly married him. Both these persons were now dead, and Paul Howard Alexis owed it to his mother's influence in high regions that the responsibilities of princedom were his, but he entirely failed to recognize the enviability of his position as he rode across the plains of Tver toward the yellow Volga by the side of Karl Steinmetz.

"This is great nonsense," he said suddenly. "I feel like a nihilist or some theatrical person of that sort. I do not think it can be necessary, Steinmetz."

"Not necessary," answered Steinmetz in thick guttural tones, "but prudent." This man spoke with the soft consonants of a German.

"Prudent, my dear prince."

"Oh, drop that!"

"When we sight the Volga I will drop it with pleasure. Good heavens! I wish I were a prince. I should have it marked on my lines and sit up in bed to read it on my nightgown."

"No, you wouldn't," Steinmetz answered Alexis with a wry laugh. "You wouldn't have it just as much as I do, especially if it meant running away from the best best shooting in Europe."

Steinmetz shrugged his shoulders. "Then you should not have been charitable. Charity, I tell you, Alexis, covers no sins in this country."

"Who made me charitable? Besides, no decent minded fellow could be anything else here. Who told me of the League of Charity, I should like to know? Who put me into it? Who aroused my pity for these poor beggars? Who but a stout German cynic called Steinmetz?"

"Hoist, yes; cynic, if you will; German, no!"

The words were jerked out of him by the galloping horse.

"Then what are you?"

Steinmetz looked straight in front of him with a meditation in his quiet eyes which made a dreamy man of him.

"That depends."

"Yes, I know. In Germany you are a German, in Russia a Slav, in Poland a Pole and in England anything the moment you wish."

himself. Ach Gott! It was a wonderful organization, spreading over this country like sunlight over a field. It would have made men of our poor peasants. It was God's work, if there is a God, which some young men deny, because God fails to recognize their importance, I imagine. And now it is all done. It is crumbled up by the scurrilous treachery of some miscreant. Ach! I should like to have him out here on the plain. I would choke him. For money, too! The devil—it must have been the devil—to sell that secret to the government!"

"I can't see what the government wanted it for," growled Alexis moodily.

"No, but I can. It is not the emperor. He is a gentleman, although he has the misfortune to wear the purple. No, it is those about him. They want to stop education; they want to crush the peasant. They are afraid of being found out. They live in their grand houses and support their grand names on the money they crush out of the starving peasant."

"So do I, so far as that goes."

"Of course you do! And I am your steward, your crusher. We do not deny it; we boast of it, but we exchange a wink with the angels—eh?"

Alexis rode in silence for a few moments.

"I wish," he said abruptly, "that I had never attempted to do any good. Doing good to mankind doesn't pay. Here I am running away from my own home as if I were afraid of the police! The position is impossible."

Steinmetz shook his shaggy head.

"No. No position is impossible in this country—except the car's—if one only keeps cool. For men such as you and I any position is quite easy. But these Russians are too romantic; they give way to a morbid love of martyrdom; they think they can do no good to mankind unless they are uncomfortable."

Alexis turned in his saddle and looked keenly into his companion's face.

"Do you know," he said, "I believe you founded the Charity League?"

Steinmetz laughed in his easy, stout way.

"It founded itself," he said. "The angels founded it in heaven. I hope a committee of them will attend to the eternal misery of the dog who betrayed it."

"I trust they will, but in the meantime I stick to my opinion that it is unnecessary for me to leave the country. What have I done? I do not belong to the league. It is composed entirely of Russian nobles. I don't admit that I am a Russian noble."

"But," persisted Steinmetz quietly, "you subscribe to the league. Four hundred thousand rubles—they do not grow at the roadside."

"But the rubles have not my name on them."

"That may be, but we all—they all—know where they are likely to come from. My dear Paul, you cannot keep up the farce any longer. You are not

that one brave man gives when he sees another do a plucky thing.

"Oh, I am all right! I am nobody. I am hated of all the peasants because I am your steward and so hard, so cruel. That is my certificate of harmlessness with those that are about the emperor."

"Then you turn back at Tver?" inquired Paul, at length breaking a long silence.

"Yes; I must not leave Osterno just now. Perhaps later, when the winter has come, I will follow. Russia is quiet during the winter, very quiet. Ha, ha!"

He shrugged his shoulders and shrugged. But the shiver was interrupted. He raised himself in his saddle and peered forward into the gathering darkness.

"What is that," he asked sharply, "on the road in front?"

Paul had already seen it.

"It looks like a horse," he answered. "A strayed horse, for it has no rider."

They were going west, and what little daylight there was lived on the western horizon. The form of the horse, cut out in black relief against the sky, was weird and ghostlike. It was standing by the side of the road, apparently grazing. As they approached it its outline became more defined.

"It has a saddle," said Steinmetz at length. "What have we here?"

The beast was evidently famishing, for, as they came near, it never ceased its occupation of dragging the wisened tufts of grass up, root and all.

"What have we here?" repeated Steinmetz.

And the two men clasped spurs to their tired horses.

The solitary wail had a rider, but he was not in the saddle. One foot was caught in the stirrup, and as the horse moved on from tuft to tuft it dragged its dead master along the ground.

CHAPTER II.

THIS is going to be unpleasant," muttered Steinmetz as he clumsily left the saddle.

"That man is dead—has been dead some days; he's stiff. And the horse has been dragging him face downward. God in heaven, this will be unpleasant."

Paul had leaped to the ground and was already loosening the dead man's foot from the stirrup. He did it with a certain sort of skill, despite the stiffness of the heavy riding boot, as if he had walked a hospital in his time. Very quietly Steinmetz came to his assistance, tenderly lifting the dead man and laying him on his back.

"Ach!" he exclaimed. "We are unfortunate to meet a thing like this."

There was no need of Paul Alexis' medical skill to tell that this man was dead; a child would have known it. Before searching the pockets Steinmetz took out his own handkerchief and laid it over a face which had become unrecognizable.

Paul was unbuttoning the dead man's clothes. He inserted his hand within the rough shirt.

"This man," he said, "was starving. He probably fainted from sheer exhaustion and rolled out of the saddle. It is hunger that killed him."

"With his pocket full of money," added Steinmetz, withdrawing his hand from the dead man's pocket and displaying a bundle of notes and some silver.

There was nothing in any of the other pockets—no paper, no clasp of any sort to the man's identity.

The two finders of this silent tragedy stood up and looked around them. It was almost dark. They were ten miles from a habitation.

Steinmetz had pushed his fur cap to the back of his head, which he was scratching pensively. He had a habit of scratching his forehead with one finger, which denoted thought.

"Now, what are we to do?" he muttered. "Can't bury the poor chap and say nothing about it? I wonder where his passport is? We have here a tragedy."

Paul was still examining the dead man with that callousness which denotes one who for love or convenience has become a doctor. He was a doctor, an amateur. He was a graduate of an English medical school.

Steinmetz looked down at him with a little laugh. He noticed the redness of the tough, the deft fingering which had something of respect in it. Paul Alexis was visibly one of those men who take mankind seriously and

have that in their hearts which for want of a better word we call sympathy.

"Mild you do not catch some infectious disease," said Steinmetz gruffly. "I should not care to handle any stray moujik one finds dead about the roadside; unless, of course, you think there is more money about him. It would be a pity to leave that for the police."

Paul did not answer. He was examining the limp, dirty hands of the dead man. The fingers were covered with scab, the nails were broken. He had evidently dined at the earth and at every tuft of grass after his fall from the saddle.

"Look here at these hands," said Paul suddenly. "This is an Englishman. You never see fingers like this shape in Russia."

Steinmetz stooped down. He held out his own square tipped fingers in comparison. Paul rubbed the dead hand with his sleeve as if it were a piece of statuary.

"Look here," he continued, "the dirt rubs off and leaves the hand quite a gentlemanly color. This—he paused and lifted Steinmetz's handkerchief, dropping it again hurriedly over the mutilated face—"this thing was once a gentleman."

"It certainly has seen better days," admitted Steinmetz, with a grim humor which was sometimes his. "Come, let us drag him beneath that pine tree and ride on to Tver. We shall do as good as my dear Alexis, waiting our time over the possible antecedents of a gentleman who for reasons of his own is silent on the subject."

Paul rose from the ground. His movements were those of a strong and supple man, one whose muscles had never had time to grow stiff. He was an active man, who never hurried. Standing thus upright he was very tall, nearly a giant. Only in St. Petersburg, of all the cities of the world, could he expect to pass unnoticed, the city of tall men and plain women. He rubbed his two hands together in a singularly professional manner which set smiles on him.

"What do you propose doing?" he asked. "To know the laws of this country better than I do."

Steinmetz scratched his forehead with his forefinger.

"Our theatrical friends, the police," he said, "are going to enjoy this. They suppose we prop him up sitting against that tree—no one will run away with him—and lead his horse into Tver. I will give notice to the police, but I will not do so until you are in the St. Petersburg train. I will, of course, give them to understand that your princely mind could not be bothered by such details as this; that you have proceeded on your journey."

"I do not like leaving the poor beggar alone all night," said Paul. "There may be wolves—the crows in the early morning."

"Hah! That is because you are so soft hearted. My dear fellow, what business is it of ours if the universal laws of nature are illustrated upon this unpleasant object? We all live on each other. The wolves and the crows have the last word. Come, let us carry him to that tree."

The two living men carried the nameless, unrecognizable dead to a resting place beneath a stunted pine a few paces removed from the road. They laid him decently at full length, crossing his sole begrimed hands over his breast, trying the handkerchief down over his face.

Then they turned and left him alone in that lustrous night—a wail that had fallen by the great highway without a word, without a sign; a half run race, a story cut off in the middle, for he was a young man still. His hair, all dusty, drooped and blood stained, and no streak of gray; his hands were smooth and youthful. There was a vague suspicion of sensual softness about his body, as if this might have been a man who loved comfort and ease, who had always chosen the primrose path, had never learned the arbitrary lesson of self denial. The inch stoutness of limb contrasted strangely with the drawn meagerness of his body, which was contracted by want of food. Paul Alexis was right. This man had died of starvation within ten miles of the great Volga, within nine miles of the outskirts of Tver, a city second to Moscow and once her rival. Therefore it could only be that he had purposely avoided the dwellings of men, that he

was a fugitive of some sort or another. Paul's theory that this was an Englishman had not been received with enthusiasm by Steinmetz, but that publisher had stooped to inspect the narrow, telltale fingers. Steinmetz, he it noted, had an infinite capacity for holding his tongue.

They mounted their horses and rode away without looking back, but they did not speak, as if each were deep in his own thoughts. Material had indeed been afforded them, for who could tell who this featureless man might be? They were left in a state of hopeless curiosity, as who having picked up a page with "Paul" written upon it fails to wonder what the story may have been.

Steinmetz had thrown the bridle of the straying horse over his arm, and the animal trotted obediently by the side of the Adagty Little Ossack.

"That was bad luck," exclaimed the older man at length; "bad luck. In this country the less you find the less you see; the less you understand the simpler is your existence. Those nihilists, with their impetuous ways and their reprehensible love of explosives, have made honest men's lives a burden to them."

"Their motives were originally good," put in Paul.

"That is possible, but a good motive is no excuse for a bad means. They wanted to get along too quickly. They are pigheaded, exalted, uneducated by a man. I do not mention the women, because when women meddle in politics they make fools of themselves, even in England. These nihilists would have been all very well if they had been content to sew for posterity. But they wanted to see the fruits of their labors in one generation. Education does not grow like that. It requires a couple of generations to germinate. It has to be sown by the hands of fools before it is of any use. In England it has reached this stage. Here in Russia the sowing has only begun. Now, we were doing some good. The Charity League was the thing. It began by training their starved bodies to be ready for the education when it came. And very little of it would have come in our time. If you educate a hungry man you set a devil loose upon the world. Fill their stomachs before you feed their brains or you will give them mental indigestion."

"That is just what I want to do—all their stomachs. I don't care about the rest. I'm not responsible for the progress of the world or the good of humanity," said Paul.

He rode on in silence, then he burst out again in the curt phraseology of a man whose feeling is stronger than he cares to admit.

"I've got no grand ideas about the human race," he said. "A very little contents me. A little piece of Tver, a few thousand peasants, are good enough for me. It seems rather hard that a fellow can't give away his surplus money in charity if he is such a fool as to want to."

Steinmetz was riding stubbornly along. Suddenly he gave a little chuckle—a guttural sound expressive of a somewhat Germanic satisfaction.

"I don't see how they can stop us," he said. "The league, of course, is dead. But here in Tver they cannot stop us."

He clapped his great hand on his thigh with more gleam than one would have expected him to feel, for this man posed as a cynic a sampler of men, a scoffer at charity.

"They'll find it very difficult to stop us," muttered Paul Alexis.

It was now dark—as dark as ever it would be. Steinmetz peered through the gloom toward him with a little laugh, half tolerance, half admiration.

Far ahead of them a great white streak bounded the horizon.

"The Volga!" said Steinmetz. "We are almost there. And there, to the right, is the Tverin. It is like a great catnap. Gott, what a wonderful sight! Ah, there are the lights of Tver!"

They rode on without speaking through the equalled town—the whirling and the victim of brilliant Moscow. They rode straight to the station, where they dined in, by the way, one of the best railway refreshment rooms in the world. At 1 o'clock the night express from Moscow to St. Petersburg, with its huge American locomotive, rumbled into the station. Paul secured a chair in the long saloon car and then returned to the platform. The train waited twenty minutes for refreshments, and he still had much to say to Steinmetz, for one of the men owned a principality and the other governed it. They walked up and down the long platform, smoking endless cigarettes, talking gravely.

Steinmetz stood on the platform and watched the train pass slowly away into the night. Then he went toward a lamp and, taking a pocket handkerchief from his pocket, examined each corner of it in succession. It was a small pocket handkerchief of fine cambric. In one corner were the initials S. H. B. worked neatly in white—such embroidery as is done in St. Petersburg.

"Ach!" exclaimed Steinmetz shortly. "Something told me that that was he." He turned the little piece of cambric over and over, examining it slowly with a heavy Germanic cunning. He had taken this handkerchief from the body of the nameless rider who was now lying stone on the steps twenty miles away.

Then he went toward the large black stove which stands in the railway restaurant at Tver. He opened the door with the point of his foot. The wood was hissing and crackling wildly. He threw the handkerchief in and closed the door.

"It is as well, my prince," he muttered, "that I found this, and not your" (TO BE CONTINUED.)

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Two miles from Raleigh Tuesday morning the boiler of a new mill owned by Edward M. Ferrall, janitor of the State capital, exploded, instantly killing him and dangerously wounding J. H. Moore, a white man of Raleigh. Henry Beddingfield, son of Corporation Commissioner Eugene C. Beddingfield, was employed at the mill, but escaped injury.



It dropped its dead master along the ground.

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