

Mrs. Sembaluk's Vote

By S. G. Mosher

MRS. Sembaluk selected a garment from the icy depths of the big tub, and spread it out on the stool beside the wall. With an implement resembling a baseball bat she began to beat the garment, occasionally dipping it in the water again, and turning it so that a fresh portion was exposed to her blows. Although the day was mild for a western December, the thermometer stood considerably below freezing point; but Mrs. Sembaluk, in her short woollen skirt, high felt boots, and sheepskin coat, did not feel the cold except in her hands and feet.

When the shirt had been pounded to her satisfaction, she immersed it in the clear water in the horse trough, and hung it over a nearby fence, where it quickly froze into the same immobility as the garments which had preceded it. She paused a moment to wipe the beads of sweat from her forehead, and at the same time to stamp some life into her numbed feet.

Here, for sixty dollars I can get it a fine washing machine from the mail order, and do mine washing in the house like an English lady," she thought. "But no, Kosten say we cannot afford. A power pump can he afford for the barn, yet for the house must I to draw water with a pulley."

Stung by her grievances, Mrs. Sembaluk rained vigorous blows upon Kosten's Sunday shirt of homespun linen; it was well that the garments of the Sembaluk family were of strong material. To be sure, there was no reason why she should not have done her washing in the stuffy warmth of her kitchen, but like other Russian women she washed outdoors in all weathers, as her foremothers had done. Only when one had a washing machine, one naturally washed indoors.

The early winter dusk was creeping up before the wash was finished. Mrs. Sembaluk went to the house and lit the fire in the big steel range; then with a sudden resolve tightened her lips. "Enough it is for him, since I must to wash outdoors yet," she thought. So Kosten Sembaluk, who had been hauling logs all day, found his supper to consist of warmed over potatoes and the scanty remains of the chicken left from yesterday's dinner.

"As I sat on the load I thought to myself that there would be hot cabbage soup, and fried pork with much gravy. What for is this a supper for a man who works hard all day?"

"Easier it is to sit all day on a load than to stand with your hands in cold water. And all time must I be running to the house to see if little Wasyl is all right. With a washing machine would the work be done long ago yet, and a good supper ready."

"My mother washed her clothes always in the good, Russian way," Kosten stated, "and she had ten children to look after, instead of one."

"Your father tramped behind oxen when he ploughed, while you sit at ease on a tractor," his wife retorted.

"That makes nothing," was the impatient retort. "With the tractor I work ten times as much land as mine father, and make twenty times as much money."

"What good, since the money buys only more land, and more and more machines to work it?"

"I built this fine house," said the aggrieved Kosten. "Even Mr. Gibson at the big ranch has no better house."

Mrs. Sembaluk looked scornfully at the bare wooden floor, the homemade table and stools, the white-washed walls, ornamented only by a few religious pictures. "From outside it looks fine, but inside it is not better than your grandfather's in the old country. More rooms for me to clean, that is all."

"Never have I seen thee like this, Natalka," Kosten said with a puzzled air. "What more dost want?"

"I want a furnace to warm the house, and oilcloth for the floors, and curtains—lace ones, like Mrs. Gibson has—and proper furniture, and wallpaper for the walls, and a sewing machine, and a washing machine, and a bread mixer, and an egg-beater, and a silk dress and

a hat, and a proper fur coat from the mail order, instead of that old sheepskin thing, and—"

Kosten, who was extremely hungry, had been conveying food to his mouth with both hands; but at this outburst surprise held him immobile, a spoonful of potatoes in his left hand, and a piece of meat grasped in his right.

"Art thus mad, Natalka?" he gasped. "I am not mad. Also, I want knives and forks, so that little Wasyl may learn to eat like a Christian. English people do not take the meat in their hands, or eat with both hands at once—I have watched, when we ate at the Chinaman's, in town."

"Each nation has its own ways," said Kosten, imperturbably. "I might to put in a furnace next fall—if we have good crop. The other things I cannot afford."

"Mineself I could afford, if I had the egg and wool money which is mine—wool from the sheep which mine father gave me."

"But I am the head of the family," Kosten argued. "Even in this country does the government admit that, since it is to me only that it gives vote."

Natalka gave an angry sniff, and they continued to eat in silence. But when Kosten had picked the bones clean, and thrown them to the dogs which prowled under the table, and when he had swallowed seven cups of strong, scalding tea, he felt more amiable.

"Dmitri Chornahuz wants that I should be elected councillor at the next meeting," he said.

His wife, who was washing the dishes, let a cup fall in her amazement. Being of enamelware, there was no harm done. "But never has a Russian been made councillor," she gasped.

"All the more honor if I am the first," replied Kosten. "Dmitri says he can get most of our people to vote for me, if, when I am elected I will get money from the government to mend the road near his place. But Mr. Gibson wants to be councillor, and most of the English will vote for him."

"He may be angry if you go against him," Mrs. Sembaluk said anxiously.

Kosten shrugged. "This not the old country, where one must go in fear of every rich man," he retorted.

The month that followed was a busy one for Kosten. There were meetings to attend, and doubtful voters to be visited. Most of the Russian settlers were pleased with the thought of a man of their old nationality for councillor, but some had announced their intention to vote for Mr. Gibson. Two days before the election Kosten started out canvassing in a rather despondent mood; the evening before he and Dmitri had calculated that their opponent was likely to win by a very narrow majority.

It happened that Mrs. Sembaluk had a big wash that same morning, and as she swung her bat in the crisp January air, she, too, felt despondent. She thought that the foreign born might protest as much as they liked that in this new country they were the equals of anybody; for the women, at least, it was not true.

A loud honk drew her attention to an auto which had stopped at the gate, but she went on with her work. If the strangers wanted anything they could drive up to the house. So presently the driver climbed out, opened the gate, and drove his car up the somewhat steep hill. Mrs. Sembaluk continued pounding a particularly obstinate spot in her best tablecloth; nevertheless she noticed that there were two ladies in the approaching car, and that the younger wore a fur coat of the kind she herself wanted.

The driver politely lifted his cap, and asked Mrs. Sembaluk if her husband was at home. As she turned the tablecloth Natalka replied that he was not.

"That's too bad. We've run out of gasoline, and knowing Kosten had a tractor, I thought he might have some on hand. Do you know if he has?"

"I do not know," Mrs. Sembaluk replied. Though she knew very well that there were four large tins of gasoline in the granary, (Cont'd on page 62)




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