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# FREE LOVE and THE LONG-HAIR QUACK

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Tampa has sheltered its share of bohemians and eccentrics, but for pure unabashed zaniness, Dr. Frederic N. Weightnovel deserves a permanent exhibit at the County Commission.

Weightnovel's origins are as obscure as his morality was base. The physician claimed to be a Russian exile, having escaped from a Tsarist Gulag by swimming across a Siberian river. Arriving in Tampa in the early 1890s, the self-confessed nihilist immediately organized a Free Love Society. His choice of Tampa as an asylum may seem strange, but in fact, Tampa appealed to the emigre. A small colony of Spanish anarchists inhabited Ybor City, while in Fort Brooke, a less discriminating audience preferred adulterated whiskey and painted women over the polemics of free thinking.<sup>1</sup>

Tampa had never been a puritanical city. In 1855, in fact, the Tampa Debating Society argued the question: "Would it be good policy to compel all bachelors and old maids to reside together?"<sup>2</sup> But the presence of the long-haired Russian doctor leading a Free Love Society parade, followed by his disciples adorned in virginal white sashes, pressed Old Tampa's tolerance.

Weightnovel's libertine notions of morality raised eyebrows in Victorian Tampa, especially when the amorous doctor hosted the Free Love Banquet. Held in the Old Havana Hotel in Ybor City, the orgiastic feast featured Oriental teas laced with aphrodisiacs and bottomless mulatto

waitresses. Tampa's Vice Squad busted this ribald marriage of Bacchus and Aphrodite.

Weightnovel championed the cause of squatters as well as the anguish of lovers. After the federal government deactivated Fort Brooke, squatters moved into the garrison area. The Russian hoisted their standard, heading a group of the great unwashed and renaming the garrison "Moscow!", evoking the contemporary spectre of Jacob Coxey's march on Washington.

When not leading Tampa's version of Coxey's Army, Weightnovel could be found relaxing at Picnic Island or at the theatre. One of his legitimate talents was an ability to float on his back for hours, during which he casually read newspapers and snacked on oysters with the aplomb of an otter from a plate resting on his chest. A devotee of the fine arts, Weightnovel occupied a front-row seat during the theatrical season.

Weightnovel diversified his passions and energies in Tampa, never passing an opportunity to decorate his boudoir or portfolio. In an age of medical nostrums, the doctor peddled patent medicines bearing his striking visage, elixirs guaranteed to cure baldness, soothe female complaints, and purge catarrhs. In 1892, a Tampa Grand Jury indicted Weightnovel for practicing medicine without a certificate, but finally, in 1895, the Florida Board of Medical Examiners granted him a license. He

claimed to have secured his degree from the University Of Moscow.<sup>3</sup>

What a pity that the political exile turned gay blade did not write an autobiography, for his role in the last chapter of the Weightnovel novel is clouded in mystery and tragedy. If the Free Love Banquet represented his most blatant public performance, his illegal abortion clinic terminated a madcap career. In June, 1902, Weightnovel was charged with manslaughter for the death of eighteen-year-old Miss Irene Russell of Quincy, Florida. It is believed Miss Russell had been drugged and violated by a young Tampa man, whereby Weightnovel performed an abortion resulting in her death.<sup>4</sup>

The trial scandalized Tampa. An outraged citizenry discovered how the mad Russian was allowed to bring his black valet to prison, where the doctor's food was specially prepared. A whirligig fanned his famous locks of hair. A court reporter described him "wearing a white duckcoat, a collarless silk shirt, light gray trousers, a gay red bouton-nierre, and wielding a palm-leaf fan."<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, Tampa ministers thundered from pulpit and street corner about the plight of their unholy city. Parishioners at First Methodist Church heard a stinging sermon, "Tampa Over a Volcano," while Presbyterians listened to the jeremiad, "Tampa, a City to Weep Over." A crowd of 400 demonstrated at the Courthouse Square to hear the superintendent of school's pontificate, "We swing the rope from the tree limb and feel that he deserves his fate. Should not the scoundrel who entraps a young girl and robs her of her virtue, meet the same punishment?"<sup>6</sup>

Convicted to six years of hard labor, Weightnovel was sent up one river he could not swim, and he died in jail in May 1906.<sup>7</sup> The Tribune eulogized, "It is said that with this old man, died many secrets, which, made known, would shake the social fabric of Tampa."

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> "Pioneer Florida," Tampa Sunday Tribune, Nov. 10, 1946, Jan. 6, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Florida Peninsular, Dec. 29, 1855

<sup>3</sup> Tampa Daily Tribune, May 23, 1892; Tampa Morning Tribune, April 12, 1895.

<sup>4</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, June 19, 20, 22, 1902.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., July 1, 3, 1902.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., June 22, June 27, 1902.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Jan. 27, 1903, Feb. 3, 1903.