

SOLITARY ISLAND

A NOVEL.

BY REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH

CHAPTER XXXII.—Continued.

"There goes the greatest villain this side of the Atlantic," said Peter, half-triumphant, half-disgraced. "A Russian Prince, forsooth! A gentleman, an American gentleman, be-dad! D'ye mind, Frances, how ready he was to give you up? He's gone straight to Widow Merriam now to tell her the whole story and get her ready for marrying him. I'm sorry I let him off so easy. He ought to be made pay for it, and, if it was only to spite him, I'd like to see you married to him. I'll make him pay for it yet."

"You had better," said Madame, "for your work to-night shall cost you dearly. If you are not gone from this house to-morrow the police will remove you. You shall have no further opportunity to show your vile ingratitude."

"No, no, mamma," said Frances; "we have suffered too much to add to our sufferings. Father has done well and he shall stay with us in his rightful position. I am glad to know you, father," she added, throwing her arms about him and kissing him: "only—"

She broke down and wept, and Peter mingled his tears with hers. "You are a fool, Frances," said Madame severely.

"Never mind, dear," whispered Peter; "you'll get over it some time. And you won't be ashamed of your father hereafter. He was born and bred a gentleman, and his Desmond blood was as pure as his milk when the Russian stream was no better than a barbarian's. I've saved you, and I don't care for twenty allowances."

"But I might have saved him," said Frances, "and now he is hopelessly lost."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Count Vladimir was at this moment the most disappointed man in the city. Barbara had made a deeper impression on him than he had deemed possible, and he took her curt dismissal keenly. His vanity had received a more serious wound than his affections. How was it possible that an elegant and titled aristocrat could fall in a quarter so open to any influence of such qualities as he possessed? Was the blade dulling through long service? He vainly tried to account for Barbara's action towards him, and was inclined to suspect Florian of undue interference; but his good sense convinced him that the betrothed of Frances could have very little to do with Barbara at present.

"Unless," he thought bitterly, "my instruction and example have made him a more consummate rascal than I imagine."

This supposition was somewhat wild, however, and he continued to visit Barbara and speculate drolly on the matter until chance revealed to him what reasoning and observation had failed to discover. He paid Florian his last instalment of money two days before election, and at the same time referred innocently but effectively to the oft-mentioned existence of his father.

"The prince, my employer," said he, "trusts that should your father turn up, you will see that he submits to the present arrangement."

"He need have no fear," Florian replied agreeably. "I am sure of my ability to manage him better than the prince himself."

"I doubt it," said Vladimir, with a smile that pierced Florian's heart. "If you failed to deal with him by your roundabout American methods, Russian simplicity would surely make an end of him. I warn you of that now and finally."

"I am glad the whole matter is completed," Florian replied indifferently. "It has been very troublesome and dangerous—" with a placid but meaning look at the count, who was pleased to let the insinuation pass. "You are not improving in health, Vladimir. You look like one suffering from mental trouble as well as dissipation."

"I am always gay," said the count briskly, "but that which Barbara is beyond me. I try to explain her behavior and I cannot. Yet I do not and will not give up hope."

"If report be true she is about to console herself for Merriam's abrupt departure by walking in my footsteps. In other words, she is soon to be married, but rumor does not point out the man."

"Ah!" cried Vladimir, with a gasp, "this is wonderful!"

"These American women," said Florian, "are deeper than Russian in-

trigues and cleverer than Russian cleverness. Where be now your gibes, my Yoriek? Silent, eh? Then be forever dumb and boast no conquests on your return to St. Petersburg."

"I am vanquished partially in this one instance, but I have scores of respectable trophies hanging at my girdle. Alas! not one to compare with Merriam! But there is always hope. This information of yours is based on rumor, which is almost as great a liar as man."

"Well, go ahead," said Florian, petulantly, "and fling yourself to ruin. You would never be warned by me in your dealings with Barbara. You would never admit her superiority to the general run of your acquaintances. If it is not enough to have been flatly rejected, keep on until the coming man shoots you."

"That would be a pleasure indeed," said the count, his dull eyes brightening. "A duel! I have not enjoyed one in years."

"Life is not a superfluous article here, my dear count."

"Nor anything else, although your citizens rate each other's lives less than their miserable dollars. But, really, are you not joking when you say that Barbara is to be married?"

"I give you the story as rumor gave it to me."

"I must make sure of it, then," said the count. "Well, our business relations, dear prince, are ended, and your last hold on your native country is cut off. I wish you all the honor and glory America can give you. Let me advise you once more to keep a bright lookout for your father."

He went away smiling, as if he knew how these last words rankled in Florian's heart. Why did he so persistently refer to the subject? Had he some news of the lost prince, and was the spy still on the trail, seeking to put out of 'he way this last obstacle to his master's security? Florian shook like a leaf at the suggestion, and, half-maddened at its possibility, sought counsel and sympathy from Barbara. Her face was very sympathetic as she listened to him, but she was loyal to him secretly.

"The count has seen," said she, "that you are annoyed by this idea of your father rising secretly to demand his own, and delights in punishing you. I do not think your father can be living. You have shown the most admirable diligence in looking for him. It would not do to be too open or too sharp in the search, for you might meet an impostor who would give you much trouble and expense."

"That is very true," said Florian, much relieved. "I am too scrupulous."

"It is highly probable that the prince is dead, or so hidden, in fear of his relatives, that it is too great a task to find him. I do regret one thing in the late transactions with the count—that in renouncing your rights to your father's estate you did not insert the clause, 'until all heirs of the present family fail.' I have an idea I would look well in a Russian court, and I am so fond of a title."

"When you reign in the executive mansion, ma chere, you will hold a more assured and brilliant position."

"But suppose you do not get elected?"

A senatorship then awaits me. But you must not begin to croak too soon. If money and influence mean anything, the position will be mine."

"But your religion," said Barbara, "is a great stumbling-block."

"I have glossed it over pretty well," he answered lightly, "and my plain utterances on many mooted questions have shut the mouths of my enemies tight. Away with these dismal speculations! You relieved me of my fears for my father, let me now banish your doubts of my election. This is love's hour. Politics and business too rudely intrude on it."

"Don't be foolish. That's the count's talk, and I hate it."

"Poor fellow! his famous to-morrow is almost here. He has hopes of you still, even when I told him to-day that you were to be married to a man who was a world's mystery. He was going to see you very soon and settle matters finally."

"He had an idea," she said indignantly, "that I might fall in love with him after the European fashion. I saw it from the first and resented it. Otherwise he would have made an impression on me, for he is a most charming man."

"That past tense is a hard criticism on him, my dear."



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"There, there, more of the Russian foolishness."

"I beg pardon," said a voice at the door. "I do not think—"

Florian's haughty self-confidence never showed better than at this trying moment. He released Barbara's hand, rose politely and coolly to greet Count Vladimir.

"You will excuse me," said the count, in a vain effort for composure.

"Not at all," said Florian. "Come in. We were just speaking of you, and you fit into the conversation most excellently."

"I am honored," said the count. "Do you converse as tenderly and as often about me with Miss Lynch, your affianced?"

"Not my affianced, count. That little romance is dead."

"I begin to comprehend," said Vladimir, struggling desperately with anger and humiliation. "And am I to suppose that the lovely Mrs. Merriam is soon to console herself for her recent great sorrow, by becoming—"

"Precisely," said Barbara, who had regained her usual coolness.

"I congratulate you both," said the count, whitening to the lips, "and at a more convenient time I shall be happy as a friend to learn more of this extraordinary romance. Good afternoon."

It was with blinded eyes and staggering gait that he found his way out of the mansion. A horrible bitterness and wild rage against himself and Florian filled his heart, and but for the shame of publicity he would have raved and cursed where he was like any madman.

"My teachings have turned on myself," he muttered. "I taught and influenced him to descend, and, by all the gods, he has gone lower than I by degrees. But wait. Have patience, Vladimir."

He rushed into his own rooms and gave way to the passion which consumed him. Never had he been so bitterly humiliated, and never had he so poor an opportunity of revenging himself on his enemy. What was the poor consolation of a duel when he wished to tear his rival limb from limb—what benefit to him when death had placed his enemy beyond his reach? Oh, if he could but inflict upon him some maddening, lifelong torture. When his rage had cooled somewhat he noticed a letter addressed to him lying on the table, and its well-known writing made him seize it hurriedly. It contained but one line: "I have found him."

What am I to do?

A sardonic smile spread over his worn face. He held a match to the letter and stood smiling while it burned to ashes.

"No answer," he muttered, "is a death-warrant. This is the first drop in the bucket."

A little flame leaped up from the paper and scorched his fingers. He started angrily from the reverie into which he had fallen, stamped it under foot, and fell to thinking again. He was not so satisfied with his action when it was done. What had Florian's father done to him that he should wish to murder him? A word from him at this critical moment would save a human life, and he hesitated to give it because he had been humiliated. Humiliated! The word brought on the passion of anger again with twofold intensity. He pictured anew the scene he had just witnessed in Barbara's drawing-room, and, foaming at the mouth, stamping and blaspheming, he shouted, "Let him die! Let him die, and his accursed son with him!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Nowhere as in quiet Clayburg did the coming election excite such interest that fall. In the various parts of the State the Democracy was considered to have, it pretty much its own way, and such doubts

of Florian's success as were expressed were of a shady and disreputable kind and rarely took an injurious form. Clayburg, however, was enthusiastic. Florian's anti-Catholic utterances had been extensively circulated by the squire, much to the candidate's advantage. Mr. Buck was used as a living illustration of his liberal ideas on the subject of religion, and the fact of his being a Clayburg boy was strenuously insisted on.

"I tell you," said the squire to Ruth, "ten years make a big change in a man. You ought to see Père Rougevin grin when he reads Florian's letters, and snort as he took in the meaning. 'That man,' says he, 'would sell his soul for a big place.' All talk, père," says I; 'he's got sense and liberality now, which he hadn't before. The boy is sharp for the main chance, and he's just as good a Catholic as you are.' 'Oh! says the père, 'no one should be afraid to vote for him on account of his religion. He's a Catholic, of course, but he's a greater thorn in our side than if he were an out-and-out Protestant.' Do you know, Ruth, I was prouder to hear him say that, under the very noses of Hubbard and Simmonds, and those fellows, than if I was governor myself. It just floored them. And the père was so worked up against him that it was as good as an argument."

"The père was right," Ruth said, blushing. "Florian is a Catholic at heart, but he would sell his soul for place. He will not be a Catholic much longer."

"Of course you must side with Père Rougevin. That's natural. You belong to his church, and his word is law. I've seen the day, Ruth, when it would take a good deal to make you turn on Florian."

"That was at a time," said Ruth slyly, "when it would have taken more to make Florian turn on his own as he did in that last open letter. As you say, ten years make a great change in a man."

"And just as much in a woman. You've swung round considerably. Ruth—gone back completely on your training."

"There isn't as much expected of a woman, papa. Men say we are naturally fickle. Miss Standage said she other day she hadn't a doubt but I'd swing another way in ten years more."

"Miss Standage be hanged! If I was her papa I'd padlock her tongue. Anyhow, she'll not live to see you change, and I'll tell her so the next time I meet her."

The squire was sorting the morning mail, and he came across a New York postmark.

"Now, who can that be from?" he said. "I don't know that I ever saw that handwriting before."

Ruth suggested that he should open it. He did, and read the name subscribed with a shout.

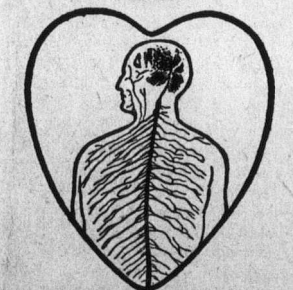
"Carter, by all that's amiable! Wants another invitation, I suppose. And he tossed the letter aside, while Ruth blushed furiously. The squire looked at her puzzled.

"That reminds me, Ruth. Did that young fellow ever turn up you were looking for? I kept a sharp lookout for him, but never heard of any strangers in the vicinity."

"I have heard nothing of him," said Ruth faintly.

"Now, this letter," said the squire,

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taking up Peter's epistle, "might have something about him. It's pretty short for a squire like him. To write: 'Dear Squire' (just so; we're deeply in love with each other), 'I have the honor to announce my success in breaking off the match between Florian and Frances.' Ha! Ha! he's at that business yet."

Ruth trembled with apprehension. "It's a clean break," the squire continued to read, "and I'm proud of it; but I'm sorry, too, for I let the blackguard off too easily. The divine Barbara had a hand in the game. But for her I don't think it would have been such a success. She wanted him pretty bad, and I hear they are going to make a match of it. She has tight hold of him, anyhow, and a worse pair never walked. So the thing is done at last, and I've kept my word almost to the letter. Of course he will not marry your daughter, but since he marries a Clayburg girl it's the next best thing. What do you think?"

The squire said "um" two or three times after reading this remarkable bit of news, looked it over once or twice in a dazed sort of way, and then walked around the house to the stable, where he could indulge in such liberty of expression as was consistent with his feelings.

He found Billy there, and sat down in front of him with a face of such awe and astonishment that the old gentleman trembled involuntarily.

"Do you remember," said the squire slowly and in an impressive tone, "Harry Spelman's daughter—old Harry, who always forgot a story before he got to the end of it, and earned his living by—"

"Pshaw, man!" Billy interrupted. "I can go back further than that. He never earned an honest penny. The devil! It was cheat from night till morn with him. Why, I mind—"

"Just so," the squire said. "You mind his girl, a bold, pretty piece that married a fellow from Brooklyn?"

"Pretty! There wasn't any prettiness about her."

"Not then. But afterwards she got to be the prettiest woman in Brooklyn. Billy, you're her father-in-law; you've got the whole Spelman tribe into your family. She's nabbed Florian, and they are to be married, let us say to-morrow."

But Billy would not believe this misfortune until he was taken to the veranda and shown the letter, which Ruth, with moistened eyes, was studying. As usual, he tore his hair until it occurred to him the consoling thought that Florian was not his son.

"Let him go on," said Billy. "I don't care."

"I can't get over it," said the squire, still dazed. "It's worse than sunstroke. She was always so smart. I know, and so deep; but I had an idea Florian was deeper and smarter. We mustn't let this get round the town; it would ruin the boy's chances in this county. O that smiling, darning Barbara! She turned Catholic just to snare him, and she's got him, she's got him! I tell you, Billy, she's got him body and soul, for that's her way."

Ruth had slipped away sick at heart and ran out into the open air. She saw very clearly the meaning of Florian's new alliance and his reason for rejecting Frances, and her heart was filled with a sort of loathing for the man who could play so poor and shabby a part. Against Barbara her soul rose up in horror. She dared not think of her at all, and

turned her thoughts upon the sweet, gentle, and pious woman who had been made the victim of this unscrupulous pair. The day, though cold, was clear and beautiful. There was a soft murmur from the long beach where she stood, and the shores all about were aflame with the colors of autumn. A single canoe was visible on the bay, and she recognized as its occupant Scott, the solitary. She waved her hand to him, and he came ashore.

"I have news for you, Scott. Florian is to be married to Barbara Merriam."

The hermit looked unusually old and worn as he stood beside her in his averted, slouching manner, and there were deep lines of care or age on his brown face which had escaped her observation. He received her information with his ordinary indifference.

"Poor fellow!" said he quietly, and waited silently for her to speak again.

"You are looking old," she ventured to say in sympathy.

"I am old," he replied curtly, and started when a swallow flew close to his face with a sudden whirr of its wings.

"Have you lost all interest in Florian?" she said, nettled by his manner.

"He has lost so much interest in that part of him which I best liked," he answered gently, "that I can see no use in thinking or talking about him. I suppose this woman is no honor to him."

"Not much. He threw up one that would have been."

"So, so—every step is down. God help him, and us!" he added, with a long, weary sigh that surprised and touched her. It was plain to see that he was suffering, and less stoically than usual. A closer look at his red curls showed that they were thickly twined with gray; there were circles around his keen eyes, and the bearded mouth was tremulous from hidden feeling. She longed to comfort him, and knew not how to begin. It was a new and astonishing phase in his character to see in him such evidences of the weaker man.

"I thought perhaps," she said hesitatingly, "that you might do something for him. He always thought so much of you, was ever so willing to do as you recommended. I would dare to say that in the beginning you might have saved him."

"I hope you don't mean that," he said. "I'm sure you don't. I wouldn't think for a fortune I hadn't done my share in keeping a man from evil. I knew him well. I saw there was no use. Don't you think I would have tried if there was? You know I would."

He was so vehement that the astonished Ruth could hardly believe it was Scott who talked to her, but she dissembled her amazement.

"I suppose you would have helped him if you knew, Scott. But people see farther than you know—simple people, I mean. And he talked so much of you that we saw—Linda and I—poor Linda!—that you had great influence over him. You did not use it—at least we thought you did not. He spoke with pain of your indifference. Now he is almost lost; this last act has completed his fall. I do not think you could benefit him any, yet it might do to try."

"We are all fools," said Scott, with self-bitterness. "I thought I did my best; you had better eyes. No, there is no use now; but if you think it would do any good I will see him when he comes again."

"Thank you, Scott. He needs friends now, if he ever did, and he has but you and me and Frances."

"And one other—never mind who. But he is driving his best friends from him."

(To be continued.)

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