

SOLITARY ISLAND

A NOVEL.

BY REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Count Vladimir met Florian opposite a restaurant one day at noon and hurried him unceremoniously into its cool shade.

"From your elegant make-up," said he, "I judge that you are about to call on the charming Barbara. But pardon me if I think you are acting rashly in paying this visit on an empty stomach. Fasting does not favor the divine flame, so permit me to put you in better condition."

The politician did not feel amused at the count's raillery. There was an indefinable something about it which hurt him.

"You have not chosen a good place," said Florian, surveying the restaurant. "It is a second-rate establishment."

"Wait and see. This is an obscure gem, but when it becomes known all the city will bow to its superiority. You shall have a soup and a dessert whose flavor no other can equal, and you will talk to Merriem as if on air."

What a lucky fellow, to stand so high in her favor, and at the same time to be adored by De Ponsonby's fair daughter! I wish you would choose between them quickly, and give me an opportunity in either place.

"Your special line of action," said Florian, flushing in spite of himself, "is not apt to be encouraged in those quarters. You are not in Paris."

"I know that, but women are women the world over. While you stand in my light I acknowledge I can do nothing; but give me a clear field, remove your Jupiterism to one side or the other, and see if Mercury is not as good a thief as ever. Why do you dally so much? If you are in doubt take my advice and choose Barbara. The divorce court is not pleasant, but it will do if you work quickly and quietly."

"The divorce court!" cried Florian. "That sounds queerly from you, who are a Catholic, by tradition at least."

"I am speaking to a politician," the count answered, "in whose path no difficulties are allowed to stand where his ambitions are concerned. All your good geni urge you to choose Barbara. You have thought of divorce yourself many a time."

Florian did not attempt to deny the assertion, only saying: "You are taking too much for granted, count. I cannot see any weighty reasons for such a step."

"No?" The tone was slightly ironical. "First of all, this charming woman appreciates you. Secondly, she has become a Catholic. Do you desire the thirdly, etc?—for it exists, although you cannot see it."

"Thank you, no," said Florian, hardly able to conceal his agitation. "You have a Parisian fancy, count. You will not be understood or appreciated in this country for many a year."

"These are the days of primeval innocence," sneered the count, "and the republic has usurped the virtue of the world. Well, wear your mask Florian, but when you choose to throw it off let me know. I can close no time where I have already lost so much."

As soon as possible Florian escaped from his friend, and with feelings too mixed for thought, went on his way to Brooklyn. Mrs. Merriem was just preparing for a drive when he arrived. She stood in the hall fitting on her gloves, her graceful form arrayed in a dark green carriage dress. He apologized for his intrusion.

"No, no," said she; "you have come in good time. You shall go with me, and I shall tell you something to surprise you. Or can you be surprised at anything?"

"I was surprised once to-day," he said. "I do not think I could bear another of the same kind with equanimity."

She averted her eyes, half-conscious of his meaning.

"Your training has not done much for you. I thought you were proof against surprises. I suppose you are surprised that you could be surprised."

They went down the steps and into the carriage silently, nor did they speak for some time. Florian was unnerved and discontented, and hardly knew why he was there at all. It was something less, something more, than an ordinary drive, and it vexed him because he could not feel as commonplace as usual.

"How do you like my new mood of utter despondency?" he said, when the silence had grown oppressive.

"I did not know you were a man of moods."

"Because they are not visible to all the world you think I have none. Even the gods can grow sad, and why not I? I am on the eve of matrimony."

She started at the severe emphasis of the words, threw up her hands in feigned amazement, and gasped. "At last!" she murmured. "Ah! you are not mortal. Death could not have proved you more human! When am I to congratulate Miss Lynch?"

"I did not say it was Miss Lynch."

"Not to-day, but last summer. You could not off with the old love so quickly, unless your moods were equal to a woman's."



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because I cannot encourage you cheerfully. I prefer to think of you as I knew you first, not under the shadow of this change. Here is a reason why I am gloomy. We both change, and the old selves are dying. I shall propose this very day," he added.

"Then you must have been gently paying the way to this," she suggested. "Your mine is ready; the match needs but to be applied."

"It has been ready this many years. When two people have lived in the same house a long time they must know each other exceedingly well."

"Yes," she said, sighing again, "they must. If many others had the same opportunity there would be so little bitter talk and thought of the 'might have been.'"

They came back to the house in a sombre mood. They had been talking enigmas during the ride and fencing delicately while suspicious of each other's meaning. There was some evidence of the truth in Barbara's manner, but nothing definite; yet Florian felt one point of the position very keenly, and it was that if he wished to save himself from things which even to his cool fancy looked criminal, the sooner he came back to his common sense the better.

During the next few days he lingered long in Frances's company, eager yet dreading to pluck the flower that grew so near his hand. He had not proposed to her that day, as he said he would; he could not bring himself to do it. What if circumstances should change the state of affairs? What if some one should die? He shuddered at the direction his thoughts were taking, and determined to end the uncertainty by an immediate proposal.

Frances was passing his room one afternoon, and, hearing her light step, he called to her cheerfully to enter. He had fought his last battle with self a few minutes previous, standing before the pure pensive face which hung over the bookcase, and he had turned it to the wall with the intention of removing it forever from his aching gaze when he had won from his new love her promise to share life's joys and trials with him.

"I wished to show you this picture," he said, as Frances came timidly to him. "I am going to put it away forever."

"You know its story," he went on; "every one knows it since Mr. Carter first heard it from Squire Pendleton."

She smiled inquiringly and trembled in secret.

"I have heard it," replied Frances, scarcely trusting herself to speak. "Mr. Carter was very earnest about it, and persisted in telling it more than once."

"Precisely. I know the gentleman and am certain that he told much more than was strictly true. But no harm was done. You did not know Ruth Pendleton?"

"I just met her for a moment. She seemed to be a very sweet girl, and I was glad to hear she became a Catholic."

"Yes," assented Florian; "I suppose it was for her good."

"Will you excuse me?" said she, with a blush which betrayed her fears. "Mamma expects me—"

"I shall detain you so short a time," he interrupted boldly. "I wish you to know the truth of this affair—it was such a garbled story which you heard. Do you not think her face a very strong as well as handsome one? Would you blame a man for loving its owner very dearly?"

"She was so good!" Frances answered nervously. "I thought more of that than of her face."

"She was good, poor Ruth? We grew up together from childhood, and I knew her goodness of heart so

well, and had loved her even as a boy. It was no surprise that when we had grown up I should have asked her to marry me. She accepted me, and but for the difference of religion we would have been married these many years."

"And now that she is a Catholic?"

"Now that she is a Catholic," he said sadly, "we are farther apart than ever. The old love is dead; but we are very good friends," he added, without a trace of bitterness.

"I must marry some time," he continued. "Ruth is so much my friend yet that she wishes I would get a good woman for my wife. I am trying to do so. Tell me, Miss Frances, am I deserving of a good one?"

"If you are not," she replied, trembling, "who can be?"

"That is your natural kindness of heart speaking. But how many women would care for a man whose heart was once given to another?"

"You have it back again," she said with unconscious irony.

"But not sound and whole. The first love broke it, and the second love may find it hard to accept second-hand furniture."

"Your comparison is too literal," she replied, becoming more nervous and frightened. He was growing nervous himself, but his determination came to his rescue. He turned the picture once more to the wall.

"It shall never look this way again," he said, "until my wife turns it with her own hands. Ruth could tell you, Miss Frances, that I am a very faithful, tenacious lover. I could not forget her for many a year after our parting."

The conversation had narrowed down to a monologue. Frances was ready to cry and looked helplessly towards the door.

"I am in love once more," he said, dropping his voice to a gentler key, "and the woman I love is you."

The hot blood surged to her face and back again to her heart. He took her hand in his with tender respect.

"I have hopes," he continued, "that my love is returned. May I hope?"

She burst into tears and sobs and hid her face in her hands. He let the storm wear itself out before he spoke again, and a very sweet face she turned to him when he began to assure her of his love.

"I know it," she said faintly. "Do not tell me. I return it all."

"I need not tell you," he said, "what a responsible position you are taking. You have now on your hands an ambitious, hard-working man. How will so gentle a being manage me?"

"You are so willing to be managed; and that is the secret of every woman's control over a man."

"Ah!" said he, with a smile and a sigh, "but not always."

"You can manage yourself during the 'not always,'" she replied; and seeing that she was on the point of weeping again—for the excitement was too much for her—he led her to the door.

The servant was just then entering with a note for him. The note was from Mrs. Merriem, and read: "Ruth has just arrived in a state of mental excitement. You are not to know she is here, but must discover her by accident. Come, by all means, come. Her presence has a meaning for you."

The note dropped from his palsied hands. What bitter irony of fate

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was this? Sinking into a chair, he almost wept from disappointment and rage.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Far away from the clatter of the town, in a deep enclosure of trees over whose tops the river could be seen, stood the convent where Ruth was passing the quiet days of her novitiate. The doubt and distress had long been ended. The blessed certainty of the faith had found a resting-place in her soul. The mournful past lay behind her, a picture with faded outline, and all those incidents and personages which had made up the circumstances of her life seemed no more than the remembrances of a troubled sleep. Everything about the convent life was so real. Where passions lay dead or asleep there were no heart-breakings. The daily exercises, so little in themselves and seemingly trivial, filled up the day with a pleasant routine and made sleep a sweet need at night. Every voice was so soft and low, every sound was music; the recreation grounds were so neat and orderly, and the cheerful stillness which hung over the place consecrated anew the sacred dwelling. It was a spot where a soul came to know itself quickly. She had not been there six months when the grace of faith was given to her. So far away now seemed the world, and so indifferent seemed she to its people, that she took with ease the resolution to retire from its turmoil forever. Oh! the pleasantness of those days. It was the nearest approach earth could make to heaven and immortality, for the heart beat like a clock, and the head was never clouded and regret and superabundant joy alike were strangers. A calm rested on the soul which, without paralyzing its faculties, took away the wear and tear of the machine.

One person Ruth could not forget. Paul Rossiter had so closely identified himself with her conversion that every prayer of thanksgiving for the grace besought a benediction for him, and no face looked out more strongly than his from the misty past. She saw him always as she had seen him in their walk from the cathedral, with his eyes uplifted and the moonlight shining in their clear depths. She spoke of him often to the lady-superior, perhaps with more enthusiasm than was necessary, for her confidences were received with smiling reserve. As the months passed Ruth found her gratitude to the poet taking a deeper hold on her heart. Self began to fall away by degrees under the friction of daily prayer and mortification. Her enthusiasms began to diminish in number and intensity. The first hot fervors of the convert died away into the healthier and more sustained regularity of the established Catholic, and with this new feeling came the first intimations of the fact that God had not called her to the spiritual life of the convent.

How such a thought fastened in her mind she could not tell, nor when it began, nor why she should continue to entertain it. She was in love with her convent, there was no attraction in the world for her, marriage she never thought of, her literary tastes could be more easily gratified where she was; yet into her spirit, day by day, farther and farther intruded itself the conviction that she was not appointed to this life. It cost her many tears before she opened her mind on the subject to her confessor. He listened to her story with interest, and was a long time in coming to his decision. When he did give one it was imperative. She must go home and find her vocation there. Very sadly, and yet with some relief, she laid the case before the superior.

"I am not surprised," said that lady, to Ruth's great astonishment, "not so much as you were. Have you ever heard anything about your friend Mr. Rossiter? You spoke to me of him often."

Ruth did not see the connection between the first and second half of the lady's remark.

"No, I have not. I shall meet him some time probably, if he is living. I can never forget him."

"And are you absolutely determined to go into the world? Remember it is quite possible that after you are outside your spirit may change as powerfully as it has on this occasion."

"I must take the risk. I am not going to a bed of roses, and I am leaving one. But what can I do? Some restless spirit has taken possession and will not be exorcised until I am gone hence."

"Why not go off as a novice with permission to remain in the world until your mind is settled, and then return if it seems wise?"

"It is kind of you to suggest that," said Ruth slowly, "and I will think of it."

"I may as well tell you," began the superior suavely, in order to conceal her own sense of awkwardness, "that I had a visit from Mr. Rossiter during the spring to inquire about you."

"Oh!" cried Ruth with parted lips and amazed eyes, as if she feared something more from the announcement than the words contained.

"He sent you his regards. I was very glad to meet him, after all you had told me concerning him. He seemed to be ill, or going into an illness."

Ruth grew pale and nervous for no reason which she could understand.

"I think Mr. Rossiter must have a high respect for you. He loitered a long time in the grounds after his visit here, and indulged in some drawing and writing. One of the sisters found a specimen of his work and brought it to me. I have preserved it for this occasion. I would have told you of this long since had I thought it would have been for your good. It is for your good to know it now."

She handed a package to speechless Ruth and dismissed her. The novice took it to her room and opened it in feverish haste. What connection could she have with Paul Rossiter's writings and sketches? It was the bit of Bristol-board on which he had scribbled the day of his visit to the convent. Ruth read and studied it with a flushed face and moistened eye, and into her heart slipped the first spark of love to light anew the flame which gratitude had once lighted there. As much as her vocation had been a matter of doubt before, so much of a certainty it became now. She left the religious life absolutely and forever, though with many tears, and presented herself one sunny afternoon before Barbara Merriem in Brooklyn.

"Why, what in the name of everything uncommon and wonderful," cried Barbara, "brings you here, Ruth Pendleton?" And an angry light shot into her eyes.

"I am too tired to say anything now," said Ruth; "but when I have rested you can give me your opinion on that." And she handed her the bit of Bristol-board. Barbara examined it critically, and a happy smile touched her face when she caught its full import.

"What a happy destiny which threw this in your way," said she, "before you were bound to the nun's life irrevocably!"

(To be continued.)

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