

SOLITARY ISLAND

A NOVEL

BY REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH

CHAPTER XXIV.—Continued.

But the character of this furniture almost took the breath away from the honorable gentleman. On the desk lay a few manuscripts, and an open book beside them suggested copying. The book was the Imitation of Christ. At the back of the desk hung a crucifix; the pictures were of a pious character, and one was a copy of a miraculous picture; the books were either controversial or works of pure Catholic devotion. As he recollected that these things were not intended for his eyes, he withdrew hastily to the outer air.

What new freak was Mrs. Merrion meditating, and was this the quiet and seclusion she had spoken of? Where had she gotten these ideas? He had never spoken to her on religious matters, and he was unaware of any Catholic acquaintances who would lead her to such thoughts and doings. Evidently this freak would spoil Mrs. Merrion without doing her any good, and he thought, with a jealous pang, how much this incident resembled Ruth's conversion. He had been her nearest friend, yet was unable to make any religious impression upon her, when a strange poet comes along, speaks a few words, and forthwith she is all theirs. Who could be the stranger in this instance?

While he was discussing the point and gloomily wondering over its future results, Mrs. Merrion returned, her cheeks very red after a lively walk, and with many meek apologies for her delay. He looked at her curiously and remarked the change which had almost imperceptibly come upon her. Formerly she would have thrown the blame of her own delay on his shoulders, and maintained her position with saucy defiance of truth, reason, and politeness. Now she was a meek, quiet culprit awaiting a well-deserved sentence. She was losing her chic. It was really painful, and he told her so immediately.

"I suppose it's the sea air," she said, with a touch of the old archness; "it makes everything damp and clinging. You can hardly stand up when the wind is full of salt."

"But the wind is blowing off the land now," said he. "It pains me to see you so changed. I hope you are not ill."

"What nonsense!" she cried. "You have been coming and coming all the summer, and never noticed it before. Why should you notice it now? I am happy enough, and one should be different at the seaside from what one is in the city. Wait until I resume my position in society—if I ever do."

You can tell me whether she is capable of sustaining the burden of becoming Mrs. Wallace. You know Miss Lynch?"

"De Ponsoby's daughter? Oh, quite well; and she is of your own religious belief, too, which is an advantage."

"Perhaps it draws me to her out of many indifferent fair ones, and she is very beautiful."

"And very good, I know—pious as an angel, without losing a woman's vivacity or interest in worldly matters."

"Her piety I consider a drawback. Women are not like men in these matters. If moved at all they are carried too far, and they mount a mere ceremonial observance and call it standing on principle. Such women are dangerous."

"Very true. But Frances Lynch will not be dangerous unless you come within reach of her claws."

"You think she has claws, then?"

"Nature always provides her weak children with ugly means of defence, and the weaker the animal the uglier its weapon. Then, you know, woman has a tongue, but that is nothing."

"Oh! yes, it's a great deal. But I came to you for advice. You know the kind of a woman I need. Do you think she is the woman? I am not egotistic. I have not won her, but I shall try to win her if you can make my doubts certain, like the good fairy you are and always have been."

"If I do I shall ask a service at your hands," she answered softly.

"Well, my advice is, never mind so much the general fitness of the lady to be your wife. If she is a lady such as Frances Lynch is, she will be well able to hold the first place in your house. Follow your heart first—"

"I did follow it once," he interrupted, "and you know how it ended. I shall not try again. The first part of your advice seems sensible though. It agrees exactly with what I had thought."

"And the last part, not agreeing with what you had thought, is not sensible. That is fair reasoning."

"Never mind. Shall I take it for granted that you distinctly encourage me to offer myself to Frances?"

"Why, no! That is most unjust. Are you trying to make me responsible for your marriage?"

"Forgive me, but in my haste I misunderstood your meaning. I understand now. You think, as I do, that the lady would be an admirable wife for any man, and therefore for me. Well, the next time you see me it will be at the feet of Miss Frances. I thank you for your very kind advice. Perhaps I might be useful to you in return."

"Perhaps so," she said shyly. Florian was in despair. These manners were not Mrs. Merrion's, and while they became her, as everything did, they did not please him so well as the ordinary sauciness and defiance. If the oratory was the cause of it he would like to abolish it. He waited for some time after her last words before speaking. "I have something to show you," she said reluctantly. He knew it was the oratory and she led the way there. He was now at liberty to express his surprise, while she stood blushing.

"I see it all," he said; "this is the meaning of your desertion of the fashionable world, of your loss of old-time cheerfulness and your increase of melancholy. Who would have believed it?"

"You seem to pay great attention to my moods."

"If you are to pay attention to women you must watch their moods, for their moods are themselves. I don't like to believe that this summer's mood is you. Perhaps it will pass before winter."

"Oh! I hope not, I hope not," she said earnestly. "Would you not wish me to become a Catholic?"

"It is natural, I suppose, to wish it. But it does not suit every soul to get the faith. I hope it will not do you any more damage. I would like to be of service to you and to advise you. The first thing I advise is, don't enter a convent. It's the worst place for a convert."

"I will not, if you say so," she answered mildly, and the bell ringing for tea, they changed the conversation. It was pleasant to Florian how much at ease he felt with Mrs. Merrion, and he thought with some regret of the change which his marriage would make in their present happy relations. He was meditating on this as they walked down



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the beach towards the dock when the hour of departure came. He had offered her his arm, and they had stopped to gaze on a vessel disappearing seaward with its colored lights twinkling through the twilight. The sea was moaning heavily at their feet.

"It makes me sad," she said, "to see a vessel going off like that into the depths of the darkness and the sea. It pictures our lives, doesn't it? Our destiny carries us off out of the old happy paths into the new unknown ones, and we have only the colored lights of past memories to brighten the way. If this could but last forever!"

"It is too beautiful to last forever," he answered.

And they went on their way in silence down the moaning beach.

CHAPTER XXV.

The train which one summer evening rushed into the Clayburg depot with the crashing importance of a special express carrying the highest dignitaries of the land had Florian and the count in one of its coaches. When the old, familiar landmarks which he had known and loved as a boy began to appear, and when for the first time in eight years he saw the strip of bay over which he had sailed so often, and sniffed the fresh-water breeze, lily-scented, a scale seemed to fall from his eyes and a hard crusted shell from his body, and all at once he began to renew old sensations and to feel light as a boy again. "I can tell you it affects me, count," he said, "to come back to these old scenes which twenty-odd years of life have made dear to me."

"It always does," the count answered; "but it's an amiable weakness, and should be discouraged in diplomatists and statesmen."

Florian began to gather his traps together before they had reached the depot, and the count was annoyed.

"What's the need of hurry?" he said pettishly.

"If I know this place," Florian answered, smiling, "there will be a crowd at the station, and one glimpse of me would ruin our night's rest. There would be an immediate reception, hand-shaking till midnight, speeches and a band till morning—"

"That will do," said the count, seizing his baggage; "let us rather return to New York than endure such a trial. This America is awful, awful in its hand-shakings."

When they arrived at the depot both were standing on the last platform, and they jumped off on the opposite side as soon as the train stopped. A small boy standing near was about to rush away when Florian seized him by the collar and pressed a dime into his hand.

"Where do you live, Tommy?" he said kindly.

"Up there," said Tommy, pointing off into the distance.

"Well, git thar," said Florian, "and don't come back for ten minutes."

As the boy disappeared the count said: "I do not understand this bribery."

"He was stationed at this end of the train to notify the loungers of our attempt to escape without being seen."

"Ah! I see you are up to all the tricks of the natives."

"I am one of them," said Florian, with a surge of tenderness in his voice; "it all comes back to me like swimming. I shall give you a sail to-morrow."

They left the bustle of the depot behind them, and on reaching the top of the short hill Florian made the count look at the twilight beauty of the scene. Vladimir was not an admirer of scenery, but he looked and saw the waters covered with long, shifting lights from

the west where a faint, red glow shone, and the distant islands, visible only by the lights of dwellings there. A feeble moon threw silver flashes where the darkness was deepest. The long line of docks was a forest of masts with their red and green and white lights showing like stars against the sky, and over the hubbub of the travellers at the depot could be heard occasionally the singers in their boats far out on the calm river.

"The stillness is quite oppressive," said the count, with a shiver, as they turned into the garden of Wallace's home.

"It's a place to make you think," said Florian pointedly.

"Heaven save me from that!" laughed the count. "It is the one glory of my life, and its joys, that of all men I can think least."

Florian entered the house without any ado, and left his valise in the square room which once belonged to him. To the servant who came to inspect the intruders he gave the message for his mother that Florian had come home. The count was a trifle curious when he heard the hurried, timorous step in the hall, and he watched Mrs. Winifred closely as she appeared dressed in plain black, with her white, pointed cap lying across her smooth hair. She was in an exceedingly nervous state, and hardly noticed Vladimir's title, calling him Mr. Countrenski a moment after the introduction.

Preparing two rooms for the gentlemen, and seeing them retire to brush off the dust of the journey gave her an opportunity to settle down into her usual placidity, which she did in Linda's room, where she sat crying and murmuring to the darkness, "O Linda! he has come back again."

The count was so delighted at not finding in Florian the faintest resemblance to his mother that he grew eager to begin work at once.

"I have still less resemblance to my father," said Florian. "But it would not do to scare my mother by broaching so abruptly an important matter. The idea of trying to prove her son the property of another woman! Your object would certainly be frustrated by such haste. You would get no information at all."

When they went down to the parlor Sara had arrived and was in ecstasies over the presence of her honorable brother and a count. Mrs. Winifred did not know whether he was French or Italian, but thought Florian muttered something about an embassy.

"Oh! he's from Washington," said Sara. "How delightful!" And the curtsy she made before Vladimir was a marvel of grace and dignity. The count devoted himself to her the whole evening, and left Florian to prepare his mother for the examination of the morrow, which he did with great tact and delicacy. For Mrs. Winifred, on hearing of the horrors which the count had prepared for her, was stupefied by fright and despair, muttered "yes" and "no," and "seemingly" and "certainly" to Florian's consoling explanations, and altogether behaved so absurdly as to leave the impression of success on the great statesman. She was quite prepared for the ordeal, laughed in her soft, deprecatory way at the notion of losing her son to a Russian prince, and even expressed a wish to undergo an examination that evening. But Florian demurred and took the count off to smoke a cigar, while his mother fled again to Linda's room to cry her eyes out in consternation.

Billy came home at ten o'clock precisely and found two manly strangers chatting pleasantly on the veranda. One of them took his hand and shook it warmly, saying: "Hallo, father! Wake up to the dignity of a count and a Congressman on your veranda!"

It was very sudden, and in the



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succeeding five minutes Billy ejaculated "divil!" two hundred times at least, following this discharge with a brigade of questions as to the how and when of their arrival. He did not at all wish to go to bed that night—was bound to wake up the village and have a bonfire, or at least get out the squire and have a night of it; but Florian vetoed these resolutions, and quieted him by agreeing to a public reception before his departure.

"Congressmen are scarce in this town," he said to the count in explanation of his father's enthusiasm. "and counts, Russian ones at least, an equal rarity."

"Fortunate town!" said the count knocking the ashes off his cigar.

Mrs. Winifred, after the gentlemen had retired, urged Billy to go to the squire and assist in laying plans for a public reception the next day. "And stay there to-night," she said, "that you may be up the earlier to-morrow." In fear of disturbing the guests the delighted old boy stole out on tiptoe.

The moon was shining clear and full when Florian and Vladimir reached their rooms, and the low-lying islands were distinctly to be seen. Florian called his attention to them.

"Not that you may admire their beauty," said he, "for I begin to perceive that you have other ideas of beauty, but to tell you of a certain old fellow who haunts these islands, and whom we shall visit to-morrow. He lives there solitary, fishing and hunting and reading Isaac Walton, and is full of a homely but keen philosophy, half-human, half-barbaric, which is really unique. He has an idea that politics will be my ruin."

"And looks through a man at the first glance, I suppose."

"No, he is not too acute and observant, but I think he can draw blood even from an elegant attaché. One must be thick-skinned to avoid a wound. It sounds like truth, too."

"If it has the ring it must be the metal," said the count.

As the count had asked the favor of being made acquainted with all the circumstances of Florian's birth as soon as possible, the examination was held the next morning after breakfast. Mr. and Mrs. Buck were present, and with Billy, were informed of the reasons of the count's visit. Billy was highly amused, and Sara felt the inspiring charm of acting a part in a real romance. The count saw in the manner of each member of the family that fate was against him. Father and mother might have shown a little agitation and so have given a hope that their astonishment was but assumed. Billy, however, chuckled constantly, and Mrs. Winifred was as placid as usual.

"Seemingly," said she, with great composure, "we lived behind Russell's Camp for a number of years."

"We might have been there yet but for your tinkering," Billy snapped, with a sudden and vivid recollection of damages sustained in leaving the camp.

"Thank Heaven we are out of it, the horrid place!" said Sara. "I would never have met Mr. Buck there nor anybody; and where would you be now, my blessed Florian?"

"The Protestant brat!" barked the grandfather, patting the child's head with secret tenderness.

"It was there Florian came to us, and Sara, and Linda, and one younger child who died before we left the place. Seemingly, none of the children were baptized in a church."

"How could they be?" Billy jerked out. He was in a chronic ill-temper before strangers. "There wasn't a church in fifty miles."

"How terrible," said Sara for the count's benefit, "to be deprived of the consolations of religion—"

One withering look from Billy ended this speech, and, in fear of an outbreak, Mrs. Winifred burst in with "Pere Rivet baptized our chil-

dren and took the records with him to Montreal, I suppose. I couldn't say where. But seemingly, it troubled me. For if Florian wished to be a priest, we had no certificate of baptism."

"Not much trouble to you now," sneered Billy; "he's a Congressman, the divil!—the very opposite of a priest. And your grandson, with a certificate handy, is to be a minister. Think of that count—think of that, sir."

"We moved here," said Mrs. Winifred patiently, "when Florian was about five years old, and here we have lived since."

"Are you satisfied, count?" said Florian then; and the count nodded in some hesitation.

"I must apologize to you," he said addressing the family, "for the trouble I have given you—"

"Oh! I assure you, count," Sara broke in, "it has been a very great pleasure. Just like a novel, indeed."

"I must thank you for the kind manner in which you have humored me. I am satisfied," laughing gaily, "that your son is your own. I shall never again trouble you in this way."

"But in other ways," said Sara, "we shall be so happy to serve you. Some troubles are real pleasures."

"Not such trouble as you, you divil!" said Billy.

"But such troubles as this," she answered good-naturedly, holding young Florian close to the wrinkled face; and the grandfather was forced to smile and chuckle in spite of himself.

The morning conference was broken up by the stentorian voice of the squire at the front gate welcoming Florian to the arms of his native town. At his back were a half-dozen of the democratic fathers of the village, anxious and happy to greet the lion of the fold, the standard-bearer of an elegant attaché, in the ranks of the Philistines. Count Vladimir shuddered at the grasp which each of the ancients in turn gave to Florian's hand and the pump-handle shake which followed, and kept two books in his hand during the ceremony of introduction.

"Glad to see you, count," said the squire. "You are a rare bird in this part of the country, but I met a dozen of you in New York when I was there. Boys, this is a real, live Russian count, imported from Moscow, and Florian's friend. He's to be included in the reception. You'll make a speech, count, of course."

The very decided refusal of the count was drowned in the clamor which all present raised in behalf of the speech.

"The ladies of the whole town will be present," said Sara, "and it would be too bad to deny them the pleasure of hearing a count talk."

"Is not this a republican country?" said the count.

"Oh! but you are a rarity," Florian replied, "and must be heard as well as seen. You are an exhibition as well as myself."

"It is the one thing of this country—self-exhibition," the count muttered in a disgusted undertone, but aloud he said blandly, "If the ladies wish it I am their slave."

"How delightful!" thought Sara. "He talks just like an earl."

The squire, by request of one of the elders, wished to introduce them singly to the count, but this calamity was prevented by Mrs. Winifred. She had been sitting quietly observant of the proceedings, and now tumbled into her son's lap in a dead faint, whereupon the elders gathered about her in a close-packed gang, and the count, having been caught between them with his protective books in his hands, got such a democratic squeezing as he had never before experienced. The squire, however, hustled out his friends, and left the family to attend to Mrs. Winifred.

(To be continued.)

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