

SOLITARY ISLAND

A NOVEL BY REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH

CHAPTER XXIII.—Continued.

"Sir," said the squire most solemnly, "do I understand you to say 'pah' to my remarks?"

The gentleman bowed and smiled in so doubtful a way that Pendleton did not know how to take it, but concluded that his intentions were not insulting.

"Late," he said, and blushed—yes, blushed like a school-boy; and, regardless of appearances, he fled for the depot with all speed, leaving the stranger to stare in cold surprise after him.

There were a number of enterprising citizens gathered on the dock at another time watching the approach of a sail-boat flying a white pennant—a privilege allowed only to those who had caught a muskallonge on their fishing-trip.

"Who's the lucky man?" said the pere to the squire.

"I rather think it is the hermit," he replied, "but he doesn't usually fly a rag in honor of his victory over the big fish. I suppose he has caught more muskallonge than any other man on the river, but I never knew him to put up the flag. He's a queer fellow, but a good one."

"He ought to take out the devil on a fishin'-trip," said Billy, with a dry laugh. The pere looked at him inquiringly, and the squire for a time could not make out his meaning.

"Oh! you mean the foreigner. Yes, he ought to get a chance at a muskallonge and have his fancy tickled with the idea of a whale."

"You are speaking of the Russian," said Pere Rougevin—"the man with the peculiar face and look, pale and red-haired?"

"Russian or Prussian or Hessian, it doesn't matter; but I think him a pretty hard bit of humanity, and he can have no good object in moving around this place. If I catch him tripping I'll arrange a few months in jail for him."

"And he's a Russian!" said Billy, repeating the word many times, as if it surprised or pained him.

"Who'd think so to look at him? A man might be a devil in this country, and ye couldn't tell from his face where he was born."

"He seems to have made a stir in the town," said the pere, "frightening people; and yet Simmonds tells me he is very well-behaved and pays as he goes. A man is not to blame for his life, I suppose."

"It's the hermit," said Pendleton, as the boat approached the dock and the red beard and sharp blue eyes came into view; "and yet the boat isn't his. He's got his canoe in tow, and there's something covered with a blanket. Halloo, boys! here is an accident, as I'm a sinner."

The crowd wished to cheer as the sail-boat swung into her landing, but Scott stopped it with a gesture, and the loud remark of the squire sent a thrill through everyone. They gathered silently around the hermit as he stepped on the dock and displayed a muskallonge nearly four feet long.

"It's not mine," he said shortly. "The men who caught it are dead. There's one of 'em"—pointing to the blanket in the boat—"the other is at the bottom of Eel Bay. This is their fish and their boat."

The first fish and the first disaster of the season! The squire reverently removed the blanket, and those present took a look at the drowned man, a young fellow in rough clothing; but no one knew him, and the vessel was tied up. The fish was carried, at the hermit's request, to the hotel. Then Scott took his seat in his canoe and prepared to return to the island. Numbers of people came running down to see the dead body, and among them the stranger walked coldly and leisurely as one who goes to be interested. His manner was in contrast so sharp to the hurried steps, pale faces, and sympathetic looks of the crowd that he was visited at once with unpleasant attention.

"We have a curiosity here," the squire said to Scott, "a real Russian that has done more in one week to upset this town than any man could do in a year. I won't say why, for I'm anxious to see if he strikes you as he strikes most people. He's a Russian, didn't you say, Pere Rougevin?"

"I supposed so," said the pere, "from his looks and his language."

"He's pretty far out of his way, then," the hermit said, pulling down his cap in readiness to start.

"Wait and have a look at him," said the squire; "here he is."

The stranger appeared at this moment in the front line of those crowding around the dead body, and stood in profile to the group, unconscious that the hermit's sharp eyes were upon him. Pendleton watched for the change he expected to see in Scott's face, but he was disappointed.

"Hard-lookin' sinner," Scott said, as he swung the canoe around and paddled off.

All the letters which reached Florian from his native town during the summer nearly brought him to despair by their terrific descriptions of the mysterious stranger, and one day there arrived a plain note, posted in a place unknown, warning him to be on his guard against the man, for he meant him evil. It was plain that this individual was making himself familiar with Florian's affairs. A man does not meddle without an object. Florian felt himself in possible danger. His first impulse was to put the matter into a detective's hands, but after reflection he decided to take another course. Recalling the incident of Count Vladimir and the stranger in conversation, he thought it probable that they might be acquainted, or even connected, since the stranger appeared to be a Russian. Then it occurred to him that he had opened himself to the count with unnecessary frankness, and had told him enough about his past life to make the work of a spy trivial and successful. This idea plunged him into a maze of speculation which threatened to have no end, and he cut it short by going to visit the count.

Vladimir and he had become very good friends, and the young nobleman had come to New York for the sole purpose of seeing political life under the guidance of his distinguished friend. He did not trouble himself much about the political life when he had made the acquaintance of a few fast men of the city and had found means to pass his time pleasantly in his usual haunts. Gambling and horse-racing, fine dinners and questionable company, had irresistible attractions for this scion of a noble house. Florian tried often to bring him into the paths of virtue, but desisted on finding that the count considered his advice impertinent and puritanical. It was not difficult to acquire an affection for the young fellow, and Florian deeply admired him. He was handsome, open-hearted, and engaging, and smimed with such thoughtlessness and relish that the grave Congressman often wished his own disposition had as little malice. In the presence of so attractive a scamp his own correct notions looked a little odd and silly, and he occasionally dropped a few of them in order to seem of a similar nature to this butterfly; so that in time he came to like descriptions of doubtful character in which the count was apt to indulge, and to attempt them himself in a constrained fashion which secretly amused Vladimir, and by degrees he raised about himself an atmosphere rather obnoxious to the pure in thought and word. But this was one of the accidents of his position, he thought, as became a man who was destined to meet all sorts of people and to be placed in all sorts of circumstances. He must look upon these things as trifles. He felt very disappointed in himself, however. To think that he should be so thoroughly deceived by this boy, to have all his life drawn from him so apishly that it might furnish matter for a spy's recreation, was galling. He did not allow it to disturb him, however, and when he entered the count's apartments was as offhand as usual and showed no feeling in mentioning the incident of the mysterious stranger.

"My dear count," said he, "I have no objection whatever to an inquiry into my past life, but if I am to furnish the material I have a right to know the object. What possible interest can you or any man have in poring out an open record? My life from birth has not been remarkable and has no mysteries. I could have saved you some trouble if you had come to me in the beginning and stated the matter candidly.

The count had just risen from sleep and looked pale and heavy. "The work I had to do," said he, "required secrecy for two reasons: that it might be more deftly done, and might awake no unreasonable hopes in the bosoms of American citizens whose birthright of freedom they would not exchange for an earldom."

"That," said Florian, "is tolerated on the fourth of July only."

"Well, be it known, my friend, that I am commissioned by the Prince Louis of Cracow, father of that Prince Louis to whom you bear so remarkable a resemblance, to search for two or more of his relatives who came to this country just thirty years ago. It is whispered that the good prince, whose character is not of the best, was under the necessity of doing some dirty work years ago that he might get into his present lordly position. He trumped up a charge against a young and noble relative; said relative fled with his wife and two children to this country; the prince entered upon his relative's possessions, and the story ended.

"Now, in his old age, Prince Louis fears for his wealth and standing. He begins to look for a Nemesis. To avert it he commissions me to find the exiled prince or his children, and settle with them for a respectable sum to remain here and leave him in the enjoyment of his estates. He gave me some portraits to help the search. You so closely resembled one of them that I took you for a possible heir and set to inquire into your antecedents. I shall now show you the portraits. First, do you hold me absolved from any crime against your fame and honor?"

"By all means," said Florian. "You have proceeded admirably, but you are on the wrong scent, my friend, though I must say I regret it."

"And why, if I may ask?"

"I would like to barter for the mess of pottage with Prince Louis; money is more to me now than a princely or a kinship."

"Money, money, money! It is the one cry that makes itself distinctly heard amid the jargon I have endured since I came to this country. I have never met a people with noses so like miner's tools, well fitted for digging up gold. What a nation you will be when your children are educated into this notion!"

"The portraits, count,—the portraits," said Florian impatiently. Vladimir brought them out from an inner room and placed them for his inspection.

Florian noticed the rich cases before he opened them, and tried vainly to make out the monogram. The faces were done in oil and well executed. The first was a young man with reddish hair and smooth, delicate face, of too fine a nature evidently to cope with the gross wickedness of the material villain, his relative; and the second a lovely woman of dark complexion, whose sweet face was indicative of great strength of character.

"I should fancy this woman would not take very well to flight," he said after a pause. "She would hold her castle to the end."

"So she did, and died," the count responded. "There are more ways than one of bringing an enemy to terms."

Two children of lovely appearance took up the third case, and Florian laughed at the idea of these being taken for himself and the dead Linda. There was no resemblance, except that the eyes of the boy were of a brown color and the dark eyes of the girl sparkled with some of Linda's mischievousness. But between himself and the exiled prince



Glady tells about it. 10

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there certainly was a very striking resemblance, and it extended in a lighter degree to the portrait of the princess. The count watched him closely as he examined the pictures, to see what impression they made on him; but Florian felt only disappointment and disgust.

"Has your Russian friend reported to you yet?" he asked. "For I suppose I have some right to know."

"He has," the count answered frankly; "but he had nothing more to say than that you did not resemble your father or mother, and had not been baptized in Clayburg."

"True, and I could not say where I really was baptized. But if you wish it we shall go together to Clayburg and interview my parents and friends. It is a queer time of day to bring up question of my paternity. We shall have to proceed cautiously for two reasons. My mother is nervous and my father hot-tempered, and inquiries among the townspeople, if too open might act unpleasantly upon my good name."

"Oh! I assure you the whole matter will be conducted most honorably and delicately. Allow me to thank you for your kind offer. I accept at once, and having done with you I shall proceed to persecute some other individual. But have I your pardon, Florian, for my want of candor? I was so fearful of—"

"Not a word, count. I only wish you had succeeded in proving me a prince. It would have been a great help in my political life. Let me advise you. Get rid of your troublesome friend, and do not use him as an agent. His face is against him."

"He is a helpful fellow and a good fellow. But his face is against him, although I do not pay attention to it now. He disturbed you, it seems. He impressed you as—"

"An assassin," said Florian, with an outburst of long-restrained disgust and horror.

"Ah!" was all the count said, and Florian could not tell why the simple exclamation set him wondering as he went away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Madame Lynch and Frances were spending the summer among the mountains, and the big house, with its wide halls and staircases, was uncommonly dull. Florian found it so whenever he came in worn out with the day's labor and the jaggedness of life in general. He missed Frances exceedingly, for in the private reception-room she usually sat at the twilight hour, and her music was the first thing he heard on entering the house, her form in its light drapery gleaming through the darkness the first he saw, and he found it pleasant and restful to sit listening to the sweet melodies. He admired Frances for her gentle, lady-like ways and her good breeding, for her small hands, her cleverness, and her beauty, and did not think it a fault, although it might have been dispensed with, that she was deeply religious. He admired Mrs. Merrion from a different standpoint—from what standpoint he could hardly define; only he would not wish to have one the other, for the reason that Barbara's ways would not very well suit a Catholic lady, and if chic was to be admired it suited very well where it was.

Unconsciously, almost, Frances had grown into his life since Ruth was lost to him. Those evenings by the piano had left their impression on him. It would be very sweet to have her waiting in the twilight for him in his own house; and she was so very good and beautiful, not very brilliant as Barbara was, not so full of character as the strong-souled Ruth, but unique and perfect in her way, and made to reign over a household.

It troubled him when he thought what was his idea of a politician's household and a politician's wife: balls and parties and receptions to be given and attended, at which she was often to complete by her charms what he had begun in the busy world. It did not promise much of real home enjoyment, but it would not last always. With her religious feelings so well cultivated, Frances might some time prove an intractable wife in matters which could not grate upon without injuring conscience. The political world had great moral knives, and yet it would be an absolute necessity to receive them hospitably, to feast and entertain and cajole them. It was humiliating, but when one prepares to fly high he must stoop a little at first. Barbara was a brilliant woman, and, though fond of home-life, admirably suited to such a position. If there were such another! But it was idle to think of it.

It might be venturesome to give Frances the position his wife was expected to fill. He did not wish to do violence to so gentle a spirit, but when it came to a question of his life-interests he felt that he could be hard and unyielding as iron. It would never do to make the mistake of marrying a scrupulous and therefore obstinate woman. He had no wish to attempt the breaking of any woman's will or to add domestic infelicity to his political troubles. With such a woman as Barbara Merrion to be asked in marriage, his work was done. Surely there were more like her, but in his experience he had never met them, and now it was too late to begin the search. He might be exaggerating the defects of Frances. Love and association do a great deal towards making a husband's will the will of his wife. She was very gentle, and so unsophisticated that it would be quite easy to bring her to a disagreeable work by plausibly hiding its bad side and bringing out into prominence its best parts. When he sought for instances in the girl's character to support this inference he was surprised not to find any. She was inclined to yield to persuasion, but her yielding was ever of the right kind, towards good, and he recalled an incident to which she had politely ignored rude persuasion. He felt amused at the habit which he had long ago acquired of taking for granted the success of any enterprise he undertook. It was a fashion of successful men. He was not at all certain of winning Frances, but if the attempt was to be made he was determined to do his best, as he always did. It occurred to him to consult Mrs. Merrion. Women know one another thoroughly, and she was a sharp-minded female, generous and over-willing in giving advice, and would be happy to help one of her warmest admirers. She was residing for the summer in a villa on the Jersey coast, whither the count and himself often journeyed to dine, as it was but an hour's ride from New York. It had surprised the gentlemen that she should choose so quiet a spot instead of following the fashionable crowd.

"Well, I am in a mood," said Mrs. Merrion, "a serious mood, and I am going there to read, to think, to listen to the sea roaring, and to enjoy the moonlight nights alone."

"She must have some exquisite plot hatching," was the count's comment; but Florian, who thought he understood her better, saw no reason to doubt the plain meaning of her words.

There was time to catch the noon boat and return late the same evening, and he hurried away at once to the dock. In the hall he met Paul coming in from a walk uptown. The poet looked pale and dragged, and his step had lost its springiness.

"Halloo!" said Florian, with a coldness which his assumed offhandness could not hide. "How is the drama getting on?"

"So, so," answered Paul, with a weary smile, as he climbed the stairs to the attic chamber. A coolness had come between them since Ruth's departure. They avoided one another as much as possible because of the strain which it cost to keep up a semblance of the old familiarity. To Paul it was a real pain, for he saw no cause why they should degenerate into mere acquaintances; but so fate had ordained, and they drifted apart day by day until they had lost sight of each other. When he reached his attic he found Peter in the customary attitude on the bed, snoring as if he had not enjoyed eight hours of sleep the preceding night. He did not wake him, but the noise of moving about brought Peter's eyes into view, much swollen and looking doubtfully.

"I came up, Paul, b'y," said he, "to have a chat and smoke. You are workin' too hard; night and day you are always at it. Pure you are a rich dramatist now an' can afford to be idle for a while. Throw sur-

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row to the winds an' dull care to the dogs, an' take a good glass of whiskey, a good sleep—but I see it's Frances your mourning after; I noticed ye began to look pale from the day she went to the mountains. But she'll be back again, sure."

"With a husband, I think," said Paul, cheerfully.

"No, b'y, no!" cried Peter, jumping from the bed with unusual energy. "If I thought that I'd go to the mountains at once. I'd fight a duel with every mother's son o' them. I'd shoot her husband. She'll never marry unless she takes the man I lay out for her."

"And whom have you laid out?" said Paul.

"Yourself, of course. Well, never mind who," he replied, with a laugh, "but it's not the lawyer."

Paul began to write reluctantly, for he was not in the humor. "Throw away the things," said Peter in disgust; "better for ye to be doing somethin' to save your soul instead of writing milk-and-water dramas. I'm always sick after I review one o' them for the journal."

"No sicker than I for writing them," said Paul, giving way to depression and throwing aside the papers. "This is a poor way of making a living, and very painful. I feel as if I were pulling my brains out piece by piece and putting them on paper."

"It is a butterfly sort of work, which flutters through this season, dies, and next season flutters again. I have no extra pay for it, although I am one of the most popular writers. The manager will not let me out of a certain groove. I shall stay in it till I die."

With an effort he resumed his writing. His face in the afternoon light looked doubly pale and wan. The garret was cool and the waters of the river were shining pleasantly far away, with steamers and sails dotting their surface. Paul's thoughts would rise occasionally from the paper to float off into the realms of the might-have-been with unusual persistence. He was beginning to be haunted again by the face of Ruth. Some words that a stranger had uttered about Miss Pendleton's conversion and her present mode of life had waked what, after all, was but a sleeping image when he had thought it dead and buried. He did not care to indulge the feeling, but the face which had haunted him for years before he saw its substance was not to be so easily loosed from fancy's meshes. So he dreamed and suffered in patience.

Meanwhile Florian had gone on his way to Seagirt, and, arriving an hour after dinner—for the old-fashioned meal-times were kept there—found Mrs. Merrion unexpectedly absent. She had promised never to be away from home when the boats arrived. Neither did the servant know whether she had gone, and he was left to walk the veranda impatiently and to stray through the rooms. The cottage was small and built without any pretensions to beauty. It had a good situation and was comfortably furnished, and many of Mrs. Merrion's latest sea-sketches ornamented the walls. He wandered from room to room, idly inspecting them, and finally intruded into one which perhaps it was intended he should not have seen. It was a mere closet holding a desk and chair and a prie-dieu, some pictures, books and statues.

(To be continued.)



SURPRISE SOAP

A PURE HARD SOAP

SURPRISE