

SOLITARY ISLAND

A NOVEL.

BY REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH

CHAPTER XXI.—Continued.

"We can go to the hotel," said one of the gentlemen to the other, "and rest until that time. You will please tell Mr. Wallace that a gentleman on important business will call upon him after the reception. As he is compelled to leave the city early in the morning, he must see him during the course of the night."

They went away without further trouble, and the servant naturally forgot to mention their visit or message. Coming to his room a little after one, jaded and depressed, deep as was the draught of popularity which he had quaffed, he threw himself on a chair and gave himself up to aimless thought. A pier-glass stood directly in front of him, and he had a full and fair view of the new Congressman—the petted idol of society and fame, the present form of the serious yet light-hearted boy who fished, swam, and loved not many years back on the St. Lawrence. It was a delightful but not a satisfying feeling which his new honors gave him. There was no fulness about the heart, no complete full of that bitter craving of ambition which had eaten him so long. He could hardly realize that this elegant gentleman with brown, parted beard and mustache, and pale, serious face, was really he who had loved Ruth Pendleton and been beloved.

The mirror which reflected his shapely form seemed to centre all its light on him. The background was very dark, and yet while he was looking a shadowy face seemed to grow out of the darkness and come nearer to him. He watched and studied it as a curious phantasm of the brain until a cough reached his ears and notified him that a person had really entered the room. The first look at the stranger led Florian to believe that he was dreaming, for the man who stood gravely there, as if waiting to be welcomed, was the living image of Scott, the hermit of the Thousand Islands, just as he had looked in Paul's play or when he had last seen him at Linda's grave: his cap worn helmet-fashion, his blue shirt and high boots, and the red beard with the sharp blue eyes shining above. He made no movement and uttered no word, but stood looking at Florian until a chill crept down the Congressman's shoulders.

"Scott, is this you?" he said, holding out his hand. "You look like an apparition."

"And so I am," said Scott, taking the proffered hand for a moment—"a ghost of the past. Could I be more out of place than in this grand house?"

"You don't look so," said Florian, who felt that the hermit's simplicity would not be amiss in the homes of kings, and he held tightly to his hand and shook and pressed it as if he never would let go.

"This is the hand Linda held," he said in excuse for his rudeness. "You have overthrown me quite. I am glad, but I can't feel as if anything new had happened, you came so suddenly."

The hermit went around examining the room in his simple way; stopped at the picture of Linda for a moment, for a longer time at the picture of Ruth.

"This should not be here," he said, "if I know what's what in this city."

"True," said Florian; "but it's hard to do right always."

"Not for you," said the hermit, and suspicious Florian felt a harshness in the tone. "Not for one who in the main acts squarely is it hard. Do you think so?"

"Some things are so much harder than others," was the reply, very slowly and smilingly given. "But this is a cold greeting, Scott. I feel the honor you have done me. It is something unusual for you to do, and I am troubled to show you how it impresses me."

"No anxiety on my account," said Scott, coming to take a seat in front of him, with his eyes still studying the beauty of the room. "I must be off before daylight. And so you're a Congressman."

"High up, isn't it?" said Florian, blushing like a schoolboy. "I am pretty close to great things, too close to make much fuss if I should get them. And you remember what you said to me about political life—that it would be my damnation, perhaps. Ah! how many a great man must live to eat his own prophecy."

"I have not eaten mine yet," said Scott, "and perhaps I hold a little

mite stronger to that opinion. Being a Congressman at thirty-one isn't so great a show. It's ordinary in these days, and it's not an evidence of piety, either; do you think so?"

"Well, no," and he laughed. "But then I have not lost the faith. I am the same Florian, fond of speculating, of fishing, of old friends, and of Scott the hermit in particular. I am a boy yet, and I resemble St. Paul inasmuch as I have kept the faith. My course is yet to be finished."

"No doubt you will be able to say that, too, some time," said Scott, and Florian thought his seriousness was intended to mask his sarcasm.

"No doubt, Scott. And you hint that I shall be able to say no more. Pshaw! I went to confession and communion last—last spring, and I never miss Mass. I have no taint of liberalism. I object only to Papal infallibility, and that is not yet defined."

"And do you object to mixed marriages?"

A burning flush spread over Florian's face.

"Well, I am as firm as to the theory if not as to the practice. But I was not aware that many knew of this, indeed."

"Squire Pen'ton knew it."

"Which means that the whole world is in the secret."

"It was a big fall from Clayburg notions," Scott said, with his sharp eyes piercing his very soul.

"I was only a boy then and had no experience."

"If you were mine I would be prouder of the boy's actions than of the man's. It was a fair and square move to keep clear of Protestant wives for the sake of the little ones. I don't think you improved on it."

"Perhaps not; but the world, I find, thinks little of these things. I shall always regret my Clayburg obstinacy on that point."

He looked up sadly to the picture hanging over the bookcase, and his firm lips trembled. He had lost it all forever, and no one to blame but himself. "I shall always regret it, Scott—always."

"I've no doubt," the hermit said shortly; "an' you'll lose more time than that before you wind up."

"See, friend," said Florian, turning with playful sharpness upon him. "I have an idea you came here simply to haul me over the coals. If so, proceed to the coals. I'm still more honored than before for a man must think much of another to travel so far for his sake alone."

The hermit drew a bit of newspaper from his pocket, and, after smoothing out its wrinkles and creases, handed it to him. "Pere Rougevin gave me that," he said; "it is an extract from one of your stump speeches. I kind-a doubted it but I'd like to hear your opinion on the thing. It's something new."

Florian read as follows: "Education belongs properly to the state, and any attempt to rival its systems cannot fail to be hurtful to all. After some experience in the matter I am convinced that our public-school systems is as fair an attempt at governmental education as can be attained at present. All other systems should be frowned upon. Religion must attend to its churches and its catechism, and let general education alone." "It is mine," said Florian frigidly and briefly.

Without a word the hermit dropped it into the waste-basket, and, arising, he began aimlessly to read the titles of the works in the library. Decidedly, Florian was not feeling as pleasant over this visit as he expected, and the hermit's allusion to mixed marriages and the producing of the extract had cut him deeply. What was the next crime? he wondered.

"Them titles and names," said Scott, "don't sound well. Voltaire, Strauss, Schlegel, Heine, Goethe, Hobbes, Hume. If I'm not wrong them's the people have done as much harm in the world as men could do."

Florian laughed at the pronunciation of the names, for Goethe was called Gouth, and Voltaire Voltry. "I bought them out of curiosity," Florian explained. "People talked of them and their authors until I felt ashamed of knowing nothing more about them than what I had read. They did not impress me much. I can tell you."

"No, I s'pose not. They usually don't, such books." He was turning



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over periodical literature, and, recognizing among them some of the worst sheets of the day, pointed to them as one would to a rotten carcass, saying, "I've heard the pere give his opinion of them things."

"And it was not a favorable one, I feel sure. Well, a politician must see and read these things in order to keep abreast of the times. They leave no impression on me, save regret for the folly and the crime which produced them."

"The whole place," said Scott, "has a literary atmosphere. I should think you'd want to keep it pure. You were brought up to pure air, pure thinking, pure doing. But this, with a comprehensive gesture around, 'don't look anything like your bringing up.'"

Florian was gnawing his lips with vexation by this time, for the hermit ignored his arguments, his attack and defence and apology entirely, and spoke as if in a soliloquy.

"Bringing-up was a little roughly done in Clayburg," said he carelessly, "and a little narrow-minded. If I had remained there I would have gone on ignorant of the world and its great though erring minds. It does not injure man to know of his great brethren, even if they be fallen."

"Has it done you any good?" asked the hermit, fixing once more upon him the gentle eyes. "You say you read 'em because you wanted to talk about 'em with people who had them on their lips always. Well, you have done your talking, and your end is reached. What's the good?"

"I have learnt something from their errors and from their story, like the sailor who passes the scene of a comrade's shipwreck. You will never find me advocating Rousseau's civil-government ideas or believing in Hume's idealism or—but I beg your pardon; I had forgotten that you were unacquainted with these things. Dry enough, aren't they, even when compared with dry politics! But there, my dear friend, this is not what you came for from Clayburg. You have some news for me, have you not? How's fishing in Eel Bay? And how do people comport themselves in the steady old town?"

"I don't know much about 'em, but I believe they're well. Your sister's eldest child died, you know—"

he did not but thought it best to say nothing—"and your father, as you heard, had a narrow escape with rheumatism of the heart."

He had not heard that either, and was ashamed to think that letters from home had been lying unopened and forgotten for weeks on his table.

"They was kind of expectin' you'd show up there soon. They don't know your vocation is so well settled, and they thought your likin's was stronger."

"Business with a young man," said Florian, "is usually too pressing to admit of much recreation."

"I s'pose." The tone of these two words was delightful, and, although they stung him, Florian was compelled to laugh.

"When you return, Scott, you can tell them how well I am looking and how neatly my new office fits me. Next year I shall try to deliver an oration at their Fourth of July turnout. And to this you can add your own opinions of me."

"I would not like to," said Scott shaking his head. "It wouldn't please your friends to know you as you are. You've changed, boy, for the worse. The man that reads such books and thinks as you think—he's on the wrong road. I hope for Linda's sake you won't reach it's end. That little grave ought to be a reproach to you. I have a paper that you writ before you left, and I brought it down, thinkin' perhaps you might care to read it."

"Nonsense!" said Florian roughly; "let the buried past stay in its grave."

The hermit sighed secretly, and before either could speak again a knock came to the door, and Pere Rougevin entered and shook hands with Florian warmly.

"Glad to see you in your new honors, Flory," with the gentle, upward wave of the hand that the young man knew so well; "hope they will wear and stand a public washing. Scott here is quite somber-looking. You've been recalling old reminiscences. What a fine library! Standard works, too! Um, um! Voltaire—oh! Schlegel—very good! Goethe—ah! Rousseau—there's the politician! Your reading is comprehensive, Flory, shining, like the sun, on the good and bad indifferently! There's the mind of your true modern statesman."

"See the difference between the two men," said Florian, smiling, yet quite aware of the pere's biting sarcasm. "Here this vicious hermit has been reviling me for reading these things."

"Well, Scott has old-fashioned views," said the pere. "He hardly understands the vigor of the faith in our rising Catholic generation—how easily these assaults of Satan are beaten back by their vigorous arms, and how quickly these storms of infidelity melt from them like water off a duck's back, as the old lady said. But no one can persuade him. He is morbid and melancholy. He would have us all hermits."

Scott rose and prepared to go.

"I am sorry for you," he said, with a long look at Florian, more direct and earnest than he usually gave to any one. "Good-by."

"Good-by," said Florian, but they did not shake hands. The pere was standing with his eyes on Ruth's picture.

"That should not be there," he said, as he offered his hand for the parting salute; "but the old love seems to die hard."

"Shall I see you in Washington this winter?" said Florian, ignoring these remarks. "You are always talking of a visit there; surely you will make it now."

"It is likely, thank you, unless,"—and he looked at him sadly—"you begin to make speeches on education."

He was gone the next minute, and the new Congressman, weary and irritated, returned to his meditations in disgust.

These two men were slowly fading out of his life, and it was hard to endure in silence their rustic sarcasms, but he was determined they would disturb him no more with their allusions. Even if their charges were true, what use in making them? He would not go back to the rusticity of Clayburg, and in minor points a politician could not bathe with the strict laws of conscience. In essentials it was different. The mention of Linda's grave had stirred him and it brought back her dying words and the sweet love she had for him. "I wonder," he thought curiously as he fell asleep—he would once have spurned the thought with indignation—"if I could ever forget that last scene and those last words. O Linda! I pray with all my heart that we may meet again."

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CHAPTER XXII.

The clouds had been gathering over the city of Washington during the whole of a warm afternoon, and a little after sunset the rain began to fall, lightly at first in a troublesome drizzle, and later in a heavy downpour. The city lamps were not lighted. The municipal almanac had that night announced a full moon, and although the threatening of the heavens was plain enough for six hours before darkness, the officials preferred to stand by the almanac and leave pedestrians and thieves to stumble and grow profane in the Egyptian darkness. A private dwelling on one street had lighted the lamp before its own doors, as if in order that thirsty people might the better see the advertisement of a neighboring drink-shop, and under this lamp at the same moment two dripping gentlemen stopped for the purpose of lighting cigars. Both stood in the rim of light that fell from the lamp, and naturally each eyed the other with polite though ill-veiled curiosity.

The Hon. Florian Wallace shivered slightly at the first impression of the stranger's face, it was so white, so dull, so cruel; and the flickering light of the lamp, and the red glow of the match gave it a very sinister expression besides. The stranger looked at him slyly but strangely for a long time, as if he were studying a familiar but long-forgotten scene and trying to place it in his memory.

"It is a queer meeting," thought Florian. "We came from opposite directions with the same intention, and we are interested in each other. I never saw a face that disgusted me more."

In fact, Florian grew very nervous and unsettled while they stood in that central spot of light, and the inquisitive glances of the stranger's little, sharp eyes actually pained him. With a hasty remark about the weather, he plunged into the darkness on his homeward way, and stumbled along the street for a few blocks until want of breath had assisted the wind and rain in restoring his senses. He tried to analyze the circumstances which had induced a sensation so new and so apparently unworthy of its object. He had walked the streets on such nights many a time, had met with people of every shade and manner, some more disgusting than the stranger, had faced dangerous characters even, and had never feared or trembled as he had to-night. It might have been the strain of the day's labor. He was not so strong, or he might be taking a cold, and was prepared, like weak-nerved people, to make ghosts of unusual-looking men and to tremble at presentiments. He was ready to laugh at himself when he reached the hotel in its warmth and brightness and social cheer he felt ashamed of his fears, and amused acquaintances with a description of his feelings and an analysis of the features of the stranger.

It was awkward that in the loneliness of his room the face should return to his mind like the memory of a portrait, shaping its thin lips, sharp eyes, pallor, beard, and coldness against a darkness of wind and rain. He began to think he was going into a fever, but his steady pulse and cool head were not indications. Sleeping, he found the face in every contortion of his troubled dreams. It was the more peculiar because of Florian's cold, steady character. His imagination was warm enough, but habit kept it in a refrigerator. What state of feeling could account for the phenomenon? The rush of business next day prevented him from dwelling on it often, and until he came to speak on some bill in the house he did not once recall the strange face. He was in the middle of a speech, and the house was listening with more deference than young members usually get, when he stopped, stammered through a sentence, hesitated, and then, with an effort, resumed his speech and finished. The cause of the interruption was a glimpse he had gotten of the stranger in the gallery surveying him with an opera glass.

He began to get angry with himself. He determined that if the face were to haunt him forever he would never allow it to disturb him again. When he was preparing to attend a late session next evening he met the stranger in the office of the hotel and shivered involuntarily. The gentleman was a man of ordinary ugliness, and seemed to be a foreigner, of an expression not particularly agreeable nor yet decidedly repulsive. He was dressed well and looked human, but Florian's obstinate fancy persisted in seeing his face as he had seen it two nights before, apart from his neat dress, gay necktie, handsome felt hat, and other pleasant circumstances; yet he had to admit that any countenance



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would look terrible when seen under a strong light with no other part of the human figure visible. After he had addressed him politely and referred to their meeting in the rain and the stranger had courteously replied in a foreign accent, he still was uncomfortable. "Evidently," he thought, "we represent the poles of human feeling. We should be miles apart for our own happiness. I can never take to him."

The stranger was probably a traveller studying life at the capital, for Florian saw him often at remote distances examining buildings and watching the scenes of everyday life. It came to be a positive irritation to meet him, which required all his resolution to keep under restraint. The stranger frequented the hotel, and was occasionally in conversation with a daintily-dressed, dark-skinned young man of light, engaging manner, who made Florian the object of his careful study. However, the face ceased to be troublesome within a few weeks, and almost passed out of his memory.

He was pleased and surprised to find Mrs. Merriam's card on his table one evening. She did not usually spend the winters in Washington, but he was glad to know that she was to be in the city during the session; for of the many women he had met in casual society, Barbara was one of the most charming, and appeared to appreciate him without being capable of matrimonial designs. A rather clever woman he thought her, thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the world—an immense addition to the household of any man. What would stupid Merriam be, whom no one ever heard of except in connection with his wife, if he had not taken this diamond from its rough setting in Clayburg and transferred it to his own bosom? This reminded him—and he needed little reminding—how necessary it was that he himself should soon set up his household. He was heartsore yet with regard to Ruth, and he hardly cared to put any one in her place, except as ambition stirred him.

The ball which Mrs. Merriam gave a week or two later was filled with an assemblage of the highest people in the city, and was really a brilliant scene. Mr. Merriam had come expressly from New York to be present at it, and was assisting his wife in doing the honors of the evening when Florian entered and paid his respects. Uniforms of embassies were sprinkled plentifully through the throng, and Mrs. Merriam gazed upon them in ecstatic delight.

"If there is anything I do like," said she, with a giggle, to Florian, "it is the army, navy and embassy uniforms. They give such an air to a room! By the way," she added, "I wish you to make the acquaintance of one of the nicest young men here to-night."

They proceeded to the music-room and heard a tender voice rolling off some foreign syllables.

(To be continued.)

John Philpot Curran is remembered as the great forensic orator of a day when eloquent advocates were more plentiful than ever since, and as a great wit among great wits. A tall and portly Irish barrister remarked to him:

"If you go on so I'll put you in my pocket."

"Egad! if you do, you'll have more law in your pocket than you ever had in your head," was the neat retort.