

SOLITARY ISLAND A NOVEL BY REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

Such things of course could not happen by mere accident. While the young gentlemen were visiting Merriam house, and spending much time in getting into and out of dress-suits, Squire Pendleton was fretting and roaring in the background. He had never given up the hope that his Ruth would some day accept Florian as a husband. When he saw the position which the lawyer had attained in the metropolis, and got a glimpse of the glories which everybody said awaited him by-and-by, he was enraged at the prevaricance which kept greatness and his little girl apart. He could do nothing, for Ruth would not have it. He had long ago said all that could be said on the matter. It was left to him only to encourage Florian, to sit and watch his advances in Ruth's affection, to growl and swear when the poet came between, to fret one day and expand with extravagant hope the next. Peter Carter had seen and understood these signs. The journalist had an interest in the matter, too. He had a secret dislike for Florian, or rather an indifference which opposition might convert into dislike. Long ago Peter had arranged in his own mind a matrimonial affair between Paul and the daughter of Madame De Ponsby Lynch. It troubled him that the parties cared little for each other, and Madame had spoken with favor of Florian. It troubled him still more when Paul began to show a strong liking for Ruth, and signs appeared of Frances' leaning to Florian. But that the squire's companionship and the squire's uneasiness gave him employment and hope the eccentric gentleman would long ago have created serious disturbance among both parties. He could afford to wait for one reason. Paul was not in danger so long as Ruth remained a Protestant. The poet did not believe in mixed marriages. Religion was a strong barrier between the lovers. They were convinced that man and wife should have one mind and the same practice in religious matters, and bring up their children in the one belief. Therefore Peter was quiet and sympathetic, until the squire in a moment of weakness laid bare his heart to him and wept. It was Peter's weakness that he fancied himself many things which he was not. He thought himself a diplomatist. He had waited for the squire's confidence, and it had come to him. His idea was now to make an ally of Barbara Merriam, with whom the old men were on terms of intimacy, and to get her assistance in bringing about the wish of the squire's heart. The squire objected and stormed a little. He knew Barbara, and he could not trust her. "Well, d'ye see," said Peter, "it's her interest to have your daughter marry the lawyer. She has in this city the name of being a great matchmaker, and it would just crown her with glory to send off the politician and the blue-stocking!" "The what?" gasped Squire Pendleton. "Your literary daughter," said Peter. He won the squire's consent to his scheme, and together they called on Barbara. The little lady must have enjoyed the conversation immensely. She was delighted with their ideas, and flattered the diplomacy of one, and the fond wishes of the other, with great skill. The squire watched her with a suspicious eye, but she captured him wholly and filled him with perfect confidence in her disinterestedness. It was a clear, heaven-made affair, the union of Ruth and Florian. Their courtship had begun so nicely and naturally that really there was little to do for outsiders. But whatever was to be done she would do it with their assistance. She was highly amused. One source of her amusement was that Florian had opened his heart to her in a most unexpected way a few days before, and had hinted the services her good will might do him. She had hoped he would of course, and had played a few feminine tricks to that end. It was all very delightful. Paul and Ruth would now follow suit, the winter would be such a one as she had never enjoyed before. Barbara was tricky and heartless, and sometimes did mischief for the mere love of hurting someone and hearing them moan. The spirit of Puck was in her. She had now the threads of a pretty conspiracy in her delicate and unscrupulous fingers and she was half tempted to set all parties crying. But that might

spoil the fun. She hated Ruth Pendleton and the squire. Not with reason, but out of pure maliciousness. They distrusted her, as any sensible person who knew her could not help doing. She knew of it, and applauded their good sense, but at the same time she was bound to punish them for it. She had them somewhat but not quite in her power. Ruth did not care for Florian. It was yet doubtful if she entertained a special liking for Paul Rossiter. Any interference at present would hurt no one but the squire. She made up her mind to wait patiently until she could punish generously on all sides. Therefore, at this period everything was but commencing, and was a delight to all. The old men planned and debated at all hours of the day and night, painting results long before there was any hope of achieving them. Florian and Paul dreamed pleasantly, and Ruth was dimly aware of a change in her own interior whose form she could not make clear to her preceptions. Barbara, the gracious marplot of the play, received new confidences daily and went about with the pleasant feeling of a cat who has a nest of young mice under her delicate paw. Only Paul Rossiter puzzled her still, and kept her from mischief. However, Florian soon cleared the field for her and left her free to do what mischief she pleased. He met Paul one day in the neighborhood of the post-office, and the poet asked him why he looked so pale and jaded. "You look worse than I ever saw you before," he said. "Work and pleasure," Florian answered moodily, "are too much for me. These soires have upset me, and I must give them up." "When Miss Pendleton leaves," said Paul, cautiously. "Ah! you know that," said Florian quickly, for in all the winter they had rarely spoken about Ruth. "Who could help knowing it, my dear boy? A retired sort of a young man begins suddenly to frequent society, and is always seen at those places where a certain young lady is sure to be. Is not the inference easy?" "Yes, yes; and I never thought of that. Others, perhaps, will talk about it. But then she has not favored me more especially than other young men." "Myself, for instance. I should say not! You are modest, of course; a successful man is always. I wish you happiness, Florian, for I think you are going to marry an excellent woman." "I am not so near to that consummation," said the lawyer, "so your compliments are ill-timed. Did I ever tell you that—that what need to tell it now? I suppose you are aware that Miss Pendleton is a Protestant?" "No," said Paul, in the highest astonishment. "I was not, on the contrary, when I saw the attention you paid to her, and how intimate you appeared to be, I thought naturally she was a Catholic." "Well, that was a queer blunder. And have you been talking of the Mass and confession, and other such topics to a Methodist of the deepest dye?" "No," said Paul; "society is such a hybrid thing that you can talk only nonsense to avoid offending some one. But then isn't this a returning on principle, Florian? Have I not heard you say many times that you would never marry outside the faith, and hinted that you had already made sacrifices that were very great for a mere boy?" "Love," said Florian, concealing his confusion under a gay exterior, "is universal and levels all distinctions." "Or rather, it is irresistible," said Paul, with a laugh. "It can level the lawyer and the common man, not the distinctions. The distinctions remain, the men do not. But really this is a surprise to me, and, as I intended to push my fortunes there after you had failed, it is a very wise and happy knowledge you have given me. I shall steer wide of the Pendleton seas henceforward." Florian could hardly congratulate himself on having a possible rival removed from the field, so very dark seemed his own chances, and he became unpleasantly conscious of one circumstance before Paul left his company. The poet was disappointed in him. Some high standard as to his friend's character Paul had long ago formed in his own mind, and until this moment Florian had acted up to it in word and deed. Now the standard had fallen. Florian felt very sad. He had not yet



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was to blame. I did not belong by conviction to any sect. My dear mother was a Methodist. When I went to church it was to the Methodists I went. To tell the truth I cared little for them. I fell into a kind of enthusiasm over your church, read and thought and prayed a little, and when my enthusiasm cooled I dropped the matter. "May I ask," said Paul, "what you believe in now?" "In everything good," smiling as he shook his head. "You think that too vague? Well, I lost heart, not for religion, but for any particular shape of it—" "Except your own," he interrupted. "True. And I go to any church that suits the taste of the moment, now, and I am quite content, if my reason is not quite satisfied." "You made a mistake somewhere." "Do you think so? Where?" She was pleased at his finding fault with her so candidly and earnestly. "Why," said Paul, dubiously, "that enthusiasm which made you uneasy with yourself and set you hunting for more light, was a special grace from God. If you had used it rightly, you would now be a Catholic, or at least a hearty believer in something. Whereas, you are not much of anything." "That is severe, Mr. Rossiter. I could not take warmly to Methodism nor to any sect. They seemed too cold, too silly, or too unreasonable. Your faith seemed too warm, and too-too-foreign, I suppose that's the word."

He laughed and changed the subject, but his words were not forgotten. They gave Ruth a sudden and clear insight into her former state of mind, and she saw at once the blunder she had committed in resisting the guidance of the Holy Spirit. After her failure to appreciate the claims of one religious belief she had drifted gently away from all, and had acquired a certain distrust of creeds. She had not become a better woman. Her charities were large enough, but the perfecting of her own nature was almost lost sight of, and she was in one respect only a small improvement on a virtuous pagan. Her first impulse was to repair the mischief of omission. But how? She asked Paul the question a week later. "I don't know," said he, "you must find a way yourself. Test your belief by practicing it, and when you get some clear idea of religious duty, the rest will be easy, no doubt." "What could be more prudent and sensible than such a course. She followed it carefully the entire winter, to the intense delight of Barbara, who, not seeing the reason for it, used it as an argument for the squire and Mr. Carter. When they grumbled at Paul's steady attention to Ruth, she pointed out to them the devotion which Ruth displayed in attending the Methodist church and working for city charities. "But Florian won't like it," said the squire. "He can't marry a howling Methodist—" "My dear Mr. Pendleton," said Barbara, "he will marry Ruth if she worshipped idols." "Aye," said Peter, "if she were the grand Lama itself." "Think so?" murmured the squire, and he tried to believe it on the ground that the boy had got more

sense and judgment from his stay in New York. He did not like Ruth's sudden turn to religion. "There is something wrong," he said to Florian. "She always hated the Methodists. What is she so gone on them now for, I'd like to know. You remember, Flory, the last time she kicked on you? It was just after one of those religious spells. And if she doesn't wind up by doing the same thing' now, then I'm not the man who got left with Mackenzie on the north side of the St. Lawrence." Florian quieted him for the time with the assurance that Ruth would not remain long with her present associations. He was quite right. Ruth soon tired of her attempts to get hold of Methodism, but she did not lose the wish to find a resting-place somewhere, and she was bound to avoid falling into her old ways of indifference. She again asked advice of the poet, and he gave it as briefly as before. "Try something else, Miss Pendleton."

"There is nothing left but your church," said she, "and I don't care to come to that." He did not attempt to influence her, and for a time they allowed these questions to drop. It was the end of the season. Lent came along and the people who made up society deserted the theatre and the ball-room and tried to go to church and pray. Mrs. Merriam affected Catholic and Episcopal chapels during this period, and made a reputation by her parties of fashionable pilgrimage, as it were, to the stations at St. Peter's, the sermon at Trinity and so on through the catalogue. A little family affair was arranged by her for the Friday before Palm Sunday. The gentlemen of Madame Lynch's with the exception of Paul were to escort Ruth, some friends and herself to the cathedral. There was a crisis approaching in her affairs. The old men were getting restive, Florian was anxious, and Ruth had fallen into a sadness which home alone could dispel. There was danger in every moment, and she wanted no mishaps. When the crash came, and her victims went their ways raging, she wished to sit unhurt and unsuspected in her parlor, and enjoy the catastrophe. So they all went to the cathedral in the light of an early moon, and accidentally met Paul Rossiter. When they were returning, Paul and Ruth found themselves walking together at some distance from the others. It was Barbara's intention that this should be a special tete-a-tete. It would be so barren of results that Ruth would be in a temper next morning. On the contrary it was rather a momentous affair. Ruth had been thinking and fretting for weeks, and had come to a resolve almost. She said quite suddenly after they had walked for some minutes in silence: "I have nearly made up my mind to take your advice, and study your belief once more."

"In the right spirit," he suggested. "In the right spirit. I do not hope to find comfort there, but constant trying will bring me to a conclusion of some kind." "Very true," and they were silent again until they reached the spot where Mrs. Merriam had ordered her carriages sent. Here they were to part. "Good night," he said, taking her hand. "I hope you will make this resolution, Miss Pendleton, and follow wherever it will lead you. If you do, I am certain you will find rest and happiness. If you do not, you will be a most unhappy woman. Good-night." She replied in a low, trembling voice. He had been standing hat in hand, with the moonlight falling upon his remarkable face, and shining in his honest eyes. In that moment Ruth loved the poet. She was not conscious of it, only of the sadness of the parting and of his goodness, but in after years she knew that her heart went out to him in that moment, and was never withdrawn. This was the entire sum of Barbara's triumph, and the sole result of her winter treachery and dishonesty. For some weeks Paul was not seen again at Merriam house.

CHAPTER XIX. Lightly as Paul received the information of Ruth's religious belief from Florian, it had hurt him deeply. It was not the poet's manner to make much of a hopeless matter, particularly when it bordered on affairs of conscience, and in the present instance he had hastened to remove many old impressions with regard to Ruth, and was very careful to chase from his dreams the sweet fancies concerning her which had beguiled and lightened some heavy hours. He had seen at once what sort of a woman Ruth was—no



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trifler to play hide-and-seek with the serious things of life, but a woman full of the earnestness of deep thought—and he could therefore more easily understand why Florian had not succeeded in making her his wife. Marrying, with her, was a matter of principle, not of feeling or of convenience or advantage. She had deep convictions of the truth and falsity of religions, and of the necessity of one true faith, and her natural mental clearness forbade her imperilling these for the sake of her own likings. It was a firm soul, indeed, which could resist the heavy temptations to which she had been subjected, and he admired her more for it, and prayed sincerely that her goodness might win for her an entrance into the only harbor this side of heaven. All his own hopes and wishes in regard to her were now dead. He took it as a matter of course, and did not attempt to find in the temper and behaviour of his fellow-Catholics excuses for marrying outside of his own faith. It was enough for him that a mixed marriage was prudent, wrong at least, and beyond that he did not attempt to go. In his conversations with Ruth she had seemed to be in a state of doubt, and he had said some sharp, earnest words to her, partly because his deepest interest in her was dead and he was not afraid of offending, but more because he had taken her statement without due attention to the exaggeration of fancy. He did not believe that she was as uncertain about Methodism as she thought. She had read and thought enough, no doubt, to get misty and unsettled in her religious views. But one does not leave old beliefs hastily, particularly so reverent and firm a believer as Ruth, and the very contemplation of a change would be apt to make her cling more tightly to old certainties. Women, too, as a rule, are distrustful to-day of the strength and truth of emotions which moved them yesterday. Of this Ruth herself was an example; and she was probably now laughing over her own sentiment and his severity during their walk from the cathedral. Well, what need to trouble himself with any further speculation? He was resolved henceforward to remain outside Mrs. Merriam's fairy ring. He had taken the determination not to turn himself; he would make sure of it by not even going to look at the fire.

If Florian could have brought himself to the same happy disposition it would have been well for him; but he was madly rushing on to his own ruin. Every day found him at Mrs. Merriam's, and every day saw more completely pictured the utter hopelessness of his expectations. Ruth was gracious as a sister, and Barbara agreeable—that was all. No looks or signs, no tokens of past love; allusions to the earlier times avoided, sentiment abhorred! A plainer, homelier conversation he never endured than when with Ruth, and instead of learning its lesson properly, the cool, far-seeing politician was lashed to an insane fury of passion. He would succeed in this instance, as he had done in others. What reason for failure was there? He began to see omens of success in the trifling occurrences of the day, and was overjoyed when Peter winked at him in his vulgar way and bade him to be of good heart, or when the squire described his own interpretations of Ruth's words and actions in the privacy of home.

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