

SOLITARY ISLAND A NOVEL BY REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

"Good-morning," said Florian, and went away sad and disappointed, and with a feeling that, in spite of fame, influence and wealth, and increased beauty, Ruth was farther from him than ever.

Paul Rossiter went to the music party much against his will, for he was hard at work on a new play, and there were matters of another kind demanding his attention which Paul would not lay aside for an audience with kings. Florian had brought him to see Mrs. Merriion, and the little lady had pressed him so hard, and had made such extravagant promises with regard to the new beauty whom she was to introduce to society, that he consented at last. Ruth was not at home that day, and his surprise was to be reserved until the evening of the musicale.

"Would you like to share our cab?" said he. "There is more room than either of us need." "What!" cried Paul, "art thou, old reverter, bound to the haunts of Terpichore? When didst thou leave underground bar-rooms and the shade of the oyster-saloons to dance attendance on goddesses like Mrs. Merriion?"

Peter looked at both gentlemen with undisturbed countenance. "Thank you," he said stiffly. "I have already engaged a carriage."

They replied with a shout of laughter, and Peter withdrew into the next room with an air of dignity and without a word. But it occurred to him that a carriage would cost a dollar and his allowance was small. He ran out into the hall again with his hat and overcoat in his hands, shouting:

"All right, Paul, I'll go, b'y." But the carriage had rolled from the door. "I guess I'll walk," said Peter then: "you needn't mind waiting." But his inward comment on himself was, "You are a great fool, Peter, an' ye have only the consolation o' knowing that there are greater fools in the city than yourself."

"I rather think," said Paul when they were moving off, "that if we wait a little Peter will come running after us. It's his way."

"Having a carriage of his own, it's unlikely," said Florian, and they went on their way in silence. Paul asked once if he knew who the debutante of the evening was, and Florian stiffly believed it was a friend from his own native district who had never been in New York before, and partly because she was talented, and partly because her country ways had a delicious freshness and charm about them, Mrs. Merriion was glad to bring her out and have the credit of introducing to society a real wonder. Paul began to think of the face that had so come and gone in his dreams and wound itself up in his thoughts like a fantastic repetition in frescoing, and while he was dreaming they had arrived at their destination and were entering the great hall of the Merriion mansion, and a sound of a singing voice was echoing from the rooms in a way that took Paul's ear at once.

Florian seized his arm with unnecessary violence, he thought, and detained him. "That's the debutante," said he. "See what you think of the possessor of such a voice."

Paul listened dreamily and wished to remain indifferent; but there was something so new in that voice, something so natural in its very imperfections, that he was compelled to show emotion.

"She is from the country, evidently," said he, "but there is some strength of character in the singer."

"You will not reverse the judgment when you see her," said Florian, so earnestly that Paul began to think that he was about to meet the one woman of the hard political heart. When they entered and had paid their respects to Mrs. Merriion, that lively lady detained Florian at her own side, and, after introducing Paul to Ruth, sent them off together so naturally that there seemed nothing out of place or incongruous in the matter.

"Has your friend the poet—oh! what a lovely face he has—ever met Miss Pendleton before?" said she, as the pair went off.

"I believe not," said Florian, sick at heart that he could not have Ruth all to himself. "What reason have you to think so?" "Where are your eyes?" said Barbara. "Did you not see the start and stare of the poet when he was introduced, or were you looking at me so intently that you could see nothing else?"

It required a good deal to throw Florian into confusion, but between the announcement and the bold speech which followed it he was quite bewildered. Then Mrs. Merriion's eyes were fixed on him. "O. Mr. Wallace!" she said, "are you politicians so easily overthrown by woman's wit?"—for his confusion was evident.

"No," said he ungraciously, "it is not sharp enough. We are oftener overthrown by woman's eyes."

She pretended that he was serious in the compliment, and said: "I believe you. The eyes are everything to a woman. See under what a spell my ox-eyed Juno has your poet. Don't be afraid to look. They are so pleased with each other that the company is forgotten."

Florian did not look, for the flame in his heart would have surely leaped into his eyes to see how happy Paul and Ruth were. He laughed and asked for the next musical wonder of the evening.

"I heard Miss Pendleton saying—'Pardon me, Miss Pendleton?' said his tormentor. 'You called her Ruth only yesterday. Have you given her to Mr. Rossiter so soon?'"

"God!" muttered Florian, "this creature will drive me mad. I forgot that you are her relative," he said, smiling. "You know yourself I could not call her Ruth to every stranger."

"What a match they would make!" said Barbara dreamily—"he like a tawny Apollo and she like an Arcadian queen. I am something of a matchmaker, do you know, Mr. Wallace, and I have made some very successful ones."

"None more happy than that which you made for Mr. Merriion," said Florian. "How very true! But then that is personal, and others are the best judges of my success in that instance."

Mrs. Merriion was unusually attractive that evening, and had determined on winning away Florian's sobriety after she had pierced his heart through with the arrows of jealousy. The young man was easily impressed by a woman. He liked Frances, he loved Ruth; but here was a woman to admire—a woman who shone like a diamond well cut and polished among her less favored kind. She sparkled in dress, look, and language, and men followed her as their eyes would follow a meteor, and forgot her as soon as she was out of sight. Poor Florian was no exception. In five minutes he was totally oblivious of all mankind save that lovely being before him.

Paul was meanwhile passing through a simple but not less tumultuous state of feeling. When Ruth was introduced to him he saw for the first time the face of his dreams in its living image, although its owner had laid aside the simple evening dress for the voluminous costume of the period; and being unprepared, he had started, blustered, stammered, and not come to himself rightly until he was sitting somewhere and the voice of the lady was talking about Florian.

"And you are a friend of Florian? I am so very glad to know it, for I have never really heard who his friends were. Do you not think him a very nice gentleman? And they tell me he has considerable political influence for so young a man."

"Oh, he's the best fellow in the world," said Paul, wondering all the time if he were really talking with the original of the picture, "and his influence is simply boundless in the city. He has been in the legislature, he will go to Congress, then the governorship, and the presidency. There is nothing beyond that."

"So he finally comes to nothing," Ruth said, smiling. "What an ending for so much greatness and influence! And is it really worth while struggling for all these things, when they come to so little at last?"

"Little and great are all alike," said Paul. "The nothingness we come to, I suppose, makes the worthless earthly honor all the more valuable."

"Florian's exact words," said Ruth. "Ah! now I can see you are very good friends, for you have



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his ideas, and he has yours, no doubt.

"I have his, no doubt," said Paul, "but if he has mine they must be very useless, being mostly fancies about dreams. How easily you recognize his sayings, Miss Pendleton! You must have known him very well."

"We lived in the same town and went to the same school for years; and then we were friends. Oh! I know Florian as if he were my brother. His sister"—her voice faltered—"was a dear friend of mine; and if you know him you must like him."

"And I do, and I shall like him the more if his friendship will place me higher in your favor." He trembled at his boldness, but she received it as a matter of course.

"It will indeed. Florian's friends must all be worth knowing, for they were ever of the choicest."

Paul thought dubiously of his political friends, but speedily put the thought aside as unworthy of a friend. They were only familiars, and not familiars in the sense that Ruth meant. They talked on very pleasantly for half an hour, and then others came to disturb the delightful tete-a-tete and made him and her miserable; for Ruth had formed a sudden and strong liking for this warm-hearted and well-featured child of genius which fell little short of the admiration he felt for her beauty.

If he knew just what relations existed between her and Florian, he thought, as his eyes followed her about the room, he could let his fancy run riot dreaming of the possible, and the evening would be a real pleasure to him. Perhaps it was better to take it for granted that she was already betrothed to Florian, for his name was so often on her lips, and she seemed to think that he was the standard by which all men were to be judged. While he stood in the shadow of the window moodily thinking Mrs. Merriion came along to chide him for his retreating ways.

"Why, do you know," said she, "that there are twenty people here dying to make the acquaintance of the author of Porlorn? You are almost as great a star on this side of the river as Ruth—Miss Pendleton. And now, Mr. Rossiter, please do be agreeable, and give all these people the pleasure of talking to you and inviting you to their musicales, won't you?"

"I would grant more than that at your bidding," said he, charmed by the sparkling manner. "And yet to leave me like Prometheus bound, with twenty tortures instead of one, and heaven in view—you would not be so cruel."

"That's poetry, I suppose," said she. "But people must attend to the demands of society, you know. Now, what do you think of my cousin? You were talking with her. She is very learned and writes for the papers; and has she not charming ways?"

"And then if I tell you what I think," said he, "you will tell her every word I say to-morrow, and put me down as a connoisseur in her beauty. I have heard of you ladies."

"Evidently," said she; "and aren't you a connoisseur?"

"A willing one, but not in earnest, you know. It is not safe to intrude where prior claims exist."

"I do not know of any claims on Miss Pendleton that would prevent her giving her heart to any one; do you?"

"Well, not precisely; but I have heard that Mr. Wallace, my friend—'Pardon me. Did he tell you so?' said the astute lady in her most innocent and convincing way.

"No, he did not; but I inferred—'Pardon me again; never draw inferences that make you unhappy. Miss Pendleton is heart-whole, and

will be until—well, well, how freely I am talking! You will think me bold, Mr. Rossiter, and so I am. But you will forgive me. It is a fault of mine."

"A very sweet one," said the poet, turning a compliment. When she went away he was happy and began to dream dreams in his usual fashion, but the people who were dying for an introduction came trooping up under Mrs. Merriion's guidance and laid siege to his attention for a long time. His eyes constantly followed Ruth, and hers very often sought for him in the crowd of guests, and look pleased when his yellow hair and fair face greeted them.

Florian had vainly tried, when once freed from the conversational charms of Barbara, to secure for himself the long-desired confidential talk with Ruth. Fate, in the person of the guests or of Mrs. Merriion, was against him. When one or the other did not engage him they surrounded Ruth like a city's walls for the fair girl was become a general favorite that evening and was much sought after. She was a little tired of so continuous an adulation, and kept wishing that Paul would make his appearance again, and wondering why Florian did not join those sitting about her. Finding an opportunity to slip unobserved into a recess of some kind, she threw herself on a sofa, relieved to be free for a moment from the glare and heat and noise. When her eyes became accustomed to the dim light of the place she perceived that Florian was sitting opposite her.

"Is it you, Florian?" said she. "Oh! how I have tried to see you and speak to you this evening."

"It is impossible on a first night," he said quietly. "There are so many present, and your face is new to most of them. It's not much like a musicale in Clayburg."

"I think ours was much more pleasant, don't you?"

"Well, I should hardly feel obliged to enjoy them as I used," he said, with the worn air of a man who had exhausted the pleasure contained in such entertainments. "It is so long since I have been there that I have quite forgotten them."

"I can believe you," she said, with the gentlest reproach in her voice. "You seem to have forgotten everything connected with the poor little town and its glorious river."

"Not everything, Ruth. I remember Linda's grave, and how the river looks when only the stars are shining at midnight and the poor child lying there alone."

There was a sob in his voice, and the mention of Linda stirred Ruth deeply. She had felt like an artificial woman moving in her strange plumes through the brilliant company, and had wearied of the unvarying round of formal compliments and praise; but at this touch of feeling she became a Clayburg girl again, and it was Ruth talking with Florian as in the old time.

"I would never suspect you of forgetting that, Florian, nor the hermit, who sent so many kind regards to you."

"You saw him often, then?"

"Not very often, but I presumed a little, perhaps, and he is so obliging, if a little cold, and he spoke of you rarely, but it was always something wise or good. Did you

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CHAPTER XVIII.

ever notice how pure and true his thoughts are—like water from a spring—and how he never offends against etiquette or good breeding?" "I may have noticed it, but it did not impress me, although I made it a point to study him. He has faded from my mind considerably, and I would find it hard to reproduce his features; but I know what he must have said to you about me when you were leaving."

"Do you?" she said in some alarm. "How can you know that when I have not told you, Florian?"

"See if I am right. 'You will find him changed for the worse, my dear, and he will surely make love to you again,' said Scott."

"You are a magician," she answered, very much embarrassed. But then, imagining that Florian's boldness must arise from his indifference to their past state of feeling, she felt relieved and happy, and laughed with him.

"I think he must have said something like it," she said, "but I cannot recall the words used. I wonder how much of it is true? I know you have not been guilty of the last charge, and will not be; but are you much changed in heart, Florian?"

"What can you expect from the atmosphere in which I move?"

"I should expect that if it were very bad you would go away from it," she replied severely; "you have often told me to do that, and common piety teaches it, too."

"Would you accuse a politician of piety?" he demanded, laughing.

Ruth was silent. There was something hard and forced in his manner.

"You cannot be pious in politics," he went on, understanding very well her feelings, "but one can keep from much evil. If you are wealthy or influential, or married to a good woman, you can keep from all."

"And as you are not wealthy—"

"And only moderately influential—"

"You ought to get married," said she; "and, indeed, rumor connects your name with some ladies very closely. I hope they suit you. You were always so particular, Florian."

"No doubt, no doubt," he answered vaguely, and felt a dumb pain stealing over him at her perfect indifference, or rather the friendly and sisterly interest she took in the matter.

"Linda would be so pleased to know you were happily situated in every way," she went on, "and I am sure I would."

"No doubt, no doubt," said he, shaking off the stupor that had seized upon him. "But we can talk of this again. You are not altogether out of my life, Ruth, and you may have as much to say as Linda herself in the matter before it is completed, perhaps more."

With these ominous words they joined the company, and it was at this moment Paul saw them and trembled, without knowing why, at the smiling look on Florian's face and the calm, untroubled face of hers. He scarcely knew what way to turn in the maze of doubt and distrust that folded about him. Mrs. Merriion had declared Ruth's total freedom from any entangling ties. The manner of the two did not favor the assertion.

"There is your friend over yonder," said Ruth, as her eyes fell upon Paul. "You are very fortunate in having him for your friend. I have never seen goodness and genius better impressed in any man's face. Call him over, and we shall form a party of three until the end comes."

Florian obeyed, and they sat down near the piano, and were speedily surrounded by a mob which drove the young men away and kept them away until they made their adieux.

What peculiar feelings agitated them on their way home it would be difficult to describe, since they did not speak during the journey.

(To be continued.)

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