

SOLITARY ISLAND

A NOVEL.

By REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH.

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

"Good-bye, dear, good-bye," he said again, as his eyes filled with tears, and he turned down the hill to the shore and did not look back until far out on the river. Ruth was standing there in the sunshine still, her blue dress making her clearly visible at that distance.

The day shamed his melancholy by its magnificent joy. The wind was not strong enough to roughen the water into ugliness, but white-caps lay along the deep green of the river, and, like the foam at the mouth of a wild beast, gave a fearful suspicion of the cruelty that lurked below. Against Round Island's rocky and flat shore the waves beat with monotonous murmuring, and distant Grindstone showed dimly through the mist. Across Eel Bay—Bay of Mourning it should be named—the afternoon sun sent a blinding radiance. The islands about were still in sombre green, for very few maples found a foothold in the rocky soil. Here and there their warm colors of death relieved the dark background. He paid very little attention to the sights about him. The swish of the water from the bow, the brightness of the sky, the sombre shores, the green waters, the whistle of the wind, and the loveliness of the scene passed before his senses and became interwoven with his melancholy. There was a bitterness even in the cheerful day.

When he arrived at Solitary Island the hermit was away. He took possession of the hut, and, finding some remnants of the squire's tobacco, and a pipe, made himself at home and began to inspect one of the notable volumes on fishing. Scott returned shortly and gave him a most cool reception.

"How do?" he said shortly, bringing his brows together and sending a sharp look into his face. "How's the little 'un?"

"As before," Florian answered wearily. He had made up his mind that no behavior of Scott's would drive him away until he had accomplished his purpose. If coolness were the only requirement for a lengthy stay with the solitary he was prepared to furnish a large supply. And Scott saw it in his easy manner, and seemed willing to submit to the intrusion.

"She bade me thank you for the ferns," said Florian, "and if it would not be asking too much, would you call and see her as often as you visit the town, and would your visits be often made?"

"She is kind," was all Scott replied, and set about getting supper. Florian made no offer to help him, but walked out on the boulder with his book and pipe, and gave his attention to the long shadows that crept through and over the islands and the last feeble whistle of the dying wind. Far away east glimmered a single star.

"Supper's ready," called Scott in a few minutes, and Florian sat down to a table of Spartan simplicity—boiled corn-meal and fish. It was speedily eaten, for neither seemed to be hungry or disposed to talk. The hermit sat silent, and Florian was determined to interfere as little as possible with his humors. He ate less than a child.

"I have met him at an unlucky time," thought the youth; "he is ill and out of spirits." But he said nothing whatever, re-lighted his pipe, and took his seat on the boulder over the river. For a few minutes there was the clatter of tin dishes as the solitary cleaned them and put them away, then he came out and sat beside Florian.

"I am going away," said Florian simply. "I wanted to talk with you first, and so come over."

The stars were coming out more rapidly, as if a mist were being swept off the sky, and the shadows lay very deep around. The water in the channels, like a wizard's mirror, changed from dark to bright and back again, as if veiled forms swept up and down beneath the surface.

"And so you are going away?" said Scott, presently.

"I should have gone long ago. Clayburgh is no place for one who looks to the future. I am smothered and cramped for a better element."

"Your dreams are too big for your brain. Six feet of earth holds a man comfortably when he's not full of nonsense."

"But it takes an eternity to hold the soul."

"Not as I understand it, boy. It's not the soul eyes cramped with such quarters as we have here. It's proud

notions of one's body; what it should eat and wear, how it should look to others, and the niceness of being better than its kind. People don't go looking for eternity to New York. Them who find it suited to their constitutions thoroughly hunted in narrow caves and monks' cells for it long afore New York was known to a soul."

Florian laughed at the reply. It was more than he had heard from Scott in many weeks, and the hermit was a little moved. "I won't dispute your assertions, Scott. But what would you have me do? I am young, able, ambitious. The world must go on as it has from the beginning. Why should not I take place and part in it, using my talents for the good of the many? I have no inclination for any other kind of life, and there I feel that I shall do the most good."

"Why not?" echoed the hermit with a touch of sarcasm, perhaps. "Saints did the same often, I've heard; but they made their talents and high power a means to an end. With you it will be the end. With the big majority these good things of the world are the end. The man that looks after his own soul keeps away from 'em till God calls him to 'em."

He rose suddenly as if he had spoken too much and was just aware of it. There was no moon, and Florian could not see his face nor discover what mood accompanied these words, but he would have given something to catch the light of his eyes at that moment.

"You can have the hut to yourself while you stay," said Scott, starting off down to the shore.

"Thank you," Florian said quietly, and was tempted to ask him to remain, but adhered firmly to his original policy, and kept his mouth shut grimly until the sound of oars down the channel had ceased. It was chilly and dark on the island. There was no wind, only the gentle splash of the waves; and the odd, mysterious sounds which break the vast silence of nature quivered on the air.

He could see nothing but outlines and the shining surface of the water. Like an inverted bowl the sky arched over him. He knew that for miles there was no living man, and he was in utter darkness and solitude; and it seemed to him that he was left nothing to look upon but his own soul. He was too sad to endure thought at that moment, and began to bustle about, lighted a candle in the hut and put on a fire, closed the doors and fixed the curtain to the window.

"I must get a look of civilization about," he said. "Pure solitude is too much for me."

He began to think then, if he was to get much advice from the hermit, or information he must proceed with a system, yet make it appear accidental. He was to find out what the hermit thought of himself, of Ruth, and of Sara, and get a strong opinion on his proposed change of residence. Not that he would give up the idea of a removal for any advice, but for the sake of knowing more about the man. And then he formulated an axiom, "If you wish to know a man, have him talk of his neighbors." With this he was so satisfied that he went to bed.

The October nights were cold and left a touch of frost in bare places. When the sun opened his eyes the next morning at an early hour, Florian looked through the window on the scene without, there was a silvery whiteness on certain objects, beautiful but depressing. An army of individual mists was rising from the river, and every object was bathed in so fresh and deep a color that it seemed to have just been laid on by the great Master's hand. He dressed and bade a hasty good-morning to the hermit, who was getting the breakfast, and ran out on the boulder to say his prayers in the midst of that sublime scenery. He prayed aloud, and never in his life did prayer seem so sweet, so real, so refreshing.

Bowing his head for a moment it seemed as if he had permanently caught the true idea of a divine affliction, and understood how the doctor felt became a paradise when such feelings actuated a man.

"Grab," said the hermit, briefly, from the doorway, and he went in composedly, after that ethereal flight heavenward. The meal passed in silence. When it was over, "I'm going for pike this mornin'," said Scott, briefly.

Florian took this for a gingery

invitation, and coolly removed himself, his pipe and his book to the boulder without answering. The hermit bustled himself in preparing his boat.

"Would you like to come?" said the solitary.

"I have much to think of," he replied. "I am annoyed with knotty questions, and I would like to think them out."

"Better get town cobwebs from your brain first. The fishing is good, an' if you are going away 'twon't be many more chances you'll have after the world's pike take your time."

"To-morrow will do, Scott; much obliged."

"No, I'm in-doors to-morrow."

"Next day, then."

"Not at all if not now," said Scott, and if his voice was not sharp his words were Florian was surprised at his urgency.

"Oh! if you are determined," he laughed, and came down, book and pipe, into the boat. They rowed through the channel out into the broader space that opened into Eel Bay—or rather the solitary did, for Florian lay in the stern idly smoking.

Said Florian, "why in the name of heaven, Scott, don't you write poetry? I couldn't stay in these solitudes an hour without finding words to paint some of its beauty."

"It is like grief, boy; no words can ever express it."

And then a shade came over Florian's face, for his mind went back suddenly to Linda and his own peculiar position.

"At this hour," he said, "Linda is taking a look at the new sun that will shine for her only a little longer."

"Poor little girl!" muttered the hermit, giving a harder pull at the oars and looking keenly at nothing.

"But what of that, Scott? She goes to heaven safely. I know, and her agony will be trifling to her recompense. I would not care but for that other dying at the same time, not in her body but in her soul."

"It is one of the world's chances," said Scott. "She will marry the minister and come to believe what he will preach day and night for her sake. There is no fixin' such accidents."

"You seem to know all about the matter, Scott."

"It is town talk, lad. Ye brought it up yourself, as if ye wanted my opinion, an' I gave it."

Florian smiled to conceal a slight sense of mortification. The hermit had discovered his artful courses, and thus simply laid them bare.

"Well, I did want your opinion," he said; "I wanted to know what you would do in such a case as that of my sister's. If she wishes to marry Mr. Buck I see no way of preventing her except by stratagem. It is not so much love of the minister as a romantic silliness that prompts her to marry."

"If you want stratagem," said Scott, "see Pore Rougevin. That's my whole and only opinion on a family matter. Jes' hand up the minneys, will ye, and I'll drop the line yonder."

There was nothing more to be said for the hermit's manner was decided, and Florian resigned himself to idly gazing and dreaming. In such moments his mind was clouded with melancholy, for his first thoughts were of these three women with

whom the intimacy of years had woven his fate, and the dark mists which seemed to be gathering about the hour of his departure from the scenes and friends of early days. The strong colors of the early morning that glowed around him only added to his melancholy. He merely raised his head and smiled when Scott landed his first pike, a handsome ten pounder, and felt none of that joyful excitement which such an incident raises in the heart of the true sportsman. It was as if life had come to a standstill with him because of his tangle in his affairs, and he was borne away through a fairy region of indifference.

Before noon the hermit had landed a few dozen of the shining pike and Florian had dreamed the hours away. Not unprofitably, perhaps, for he had arrived at the sensible resolve that he would make no attempt to win Scott's confidence, but let the man display himself as it pleased him.

And was he to spend the hours as he had spent the forenoon, in useless imaginings and doleful picturings of his future troubles? He took the rod after dinner and began to whip the water with an energy unnecessary as far as the fish were concerned, but he wished to show himself that he was in earnest. He had come to fish, hunt and study the hermit. The true way to do all this was to fish, hunt, and study at the proper times, and Scott implied by secret smiling that he conjectured his course of thought. As a consequence, when night found them again on the plateau in conversation the hermit was quite humorous and fluent and inclined to talk of anything. When Florian made hold to tell him something of his present sorrows he was sympathetic.

"I am afraid there is little real warmth in his nature, Scott. I contemplate Linda's death, and Sara's apostasy, and separation from Ruth with a moderate degree of sorrow, but a stoicism that one does not often meet with in the young. I foresee how I shall work all the harder afterwards, an' I have that feeling which says: 'Sorrow's even greater shall not disturb thy soul.'"

"A young man's feelings," said Scott, "are not to be depended on. Wait till all these things happen, and then you'll find how to take them. It's much like a man in consumption. He will die in four years, the doctor says. He's resigned, and surprises himself by not thinking of death often at all. When death gets hold on him, though, he finds his former feelings weren't much. Now, I think your Linda will die and Sara marry the minister, an' ye'll go to New York without Ruth. An' it isn't so much these things that ought to bother a man as his steppin' out inter life an' taking a choice of labor. He ought to see that he got the right place. He ought to be sure that he wouldn't do better in all ways whar he is than thar. People are hasty about things of this kind. Money is the object an' high position. If they get these, life is complete. If not, they're lost. They don't think much about the soul. They drag it any where, quite sure they can get along. Some people there are who will be damned for studying medicine, an' they might hev known it before. An' political ambition will damn others, jes' as I think it will damn you."

Florian laughed loud at this remark, which was delivered with innocent solemnity.

"I would like to know your reasons for such a thought," said he.

"Mostly because your weaknesses will be pretty well educated and your strong points led run wild in politics, but entirely because you are cut out for another situation."

"You interest me," said Florian. "Pray what are the weaknesses and the strengths, and the other situation?"

"A young man about to make a jump for sich big prizes ought to be ashamed to ask sich questions from any man. Ye game here to study yer self. Do it; I'm off. A pleasant night to you. I'll not see you to-morrow."

Florian sat silent until the sound of oars had been lost in the distance. It was such a night as the preceding one had been—the earth all darkness, the sky pierced with starlight, and a cool/south breeze beginning to wake strange murmurs from the shore and the trees. A few clouds lay like shadows on the horizon, and above and below was that beautiful stillness, so beautiful yet so painful, like that which lay about the prophet waiting on Horeb's rock to hear the still, small voice of God. It seemed to Florian that some voice must be born of such an agony of silence; perhaps it was born, and his ear too coarse to catch a sweetness so "Fine that nothing lived 'twixt it and silence."

Those were sharp words the hermit had uttered, and they shed a new



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light on the youth's mind. What an idea was this, that some men could be damned for studying medicine? Yet it was true, he had admitted when he found the proper sense of the words. And might not he be placing himself in such a position? He was humbled to admit that, after all, he did not know himself nor had studied the every side of his ambitions. How far was he prepared to go in seeking position and a name? The kingdoms of the world and the glory of them were sometimes easily bought by falling down and adoring Satan. How would he withstand such a temptation? He hardly knew, but stoils to bed crestfallen.

The sound of the morning rain woke him from a very sweet sleep, but when that mournful patter reached his ears the conversation of the preceding evening recurred to him, and a desolation crept upon his spirit. He threw himself back upon the pillow and reviewed that sharp saying, "Some men politics will damn you." Why? The hermit had refused to say, but left the enigma to be answered by himself.

"I am a Catholic of rather a severe type," Florian thought, "with a fair knowledge of the faith and honest principles. My inclinations all run towards political life. I am a good speaker, have a good physical presence and considerable talent, and not a little local influence, all which, with health and determination, promise me high position. Why should the life be dangerous to the soul of me, Florian Wallace? Is there another life for which I am better fitted?"

That other could be but the retired life in Clayburgh with its safe but respectable dullness, and Florian dismissed it with a savage snort as he dressed himself. To look day after day at such a scene as yesterday's, or a rain-storm after the fashion of the present; to study its lights and shadows, and scrape one's soul for a sentiment that would make these act on the mind again—bah! He felt instinctively it was no life for him. He got breakfast, lit his pipe afterwards, and sat in the open doorway singing at the mists that were closing in around him and the melancholy murmur of the rain. How long and how often such a dismal scene had been played upon the island! Perhaps a generation previous a group of savages had sat in their smoky wigwags on such a rainfall, making weird fancies out of the mists and preparing charms against their fatal powers! And all these were dead! Linda was dying! Old affections of his heart were dying! The very scene about him was showing symptoms of decay! In fifty years at most he too would be dead. What difference then between him distinguished and influential and the unknown hermit? Would wealth and station and influence be more than the simple pleasures of solitude? And it was a doubtful matter if the statesman blessed by his country would stand as high as the hermit in the esteem of God! Well, well, what queer thoughts were these in a young man, properly the product of gloomy days and solitude! He let them take their course. They would not hurt him, and there were certain periods of the year when circumstances or passing disease would bring on just such attacks.

The next day towards evening Scott made an unlooked-for appearance with a bright eye and a flushed cheek.

"I'm goin' to take possession of the bed," said he, "and you must shift to the floor. I'm ill."

"Oh!" said Florian, quite surprised that the hermit should make such an admission, but asking no questions. Scott had taken cold and was in a fever, and the youth rejoiced that fate should have thrown them together at a critical time. He was handy about a sick-bed, womanlike in his gentleness and skill and power over his tongue. He made himself master of the situation at once and proceeded to treat the patient according to his own ideas. Had he discovered the true way of dealing with the hermit? Scott made no objections to anything he said or did, but seemed rather pleased with him.

He was sick until the third day, when he became convalescent and began to turn to the old routine of cabin work—meal-preparing, mending and feeding. It was raining still and the mists lay heavier on the island world, and Florian had by intense and desultory thinking wrapped that he felt a positive desire to fly to the town. Therefore on the fourth evening he announced his departure for the next day.

"And I hope," said Scott, "that you got some benefit from close study of yourself, and that you can pretty well answer the questions ye asked me whar ye first came."

There was some irony in the tone, but Florian felt that he was master of the situation for the present.

"I shall go to New York," he replied, "come what may. I shall not trouble myself with much thought hereafter, for I find it confusing, and as to studying myself, my blunders will do that, and my enemies and friends."

"If you wait to know yourself that way, my lad, very good: your political life will be short."

"We must run some risks, Scott. Anyway, I have got enough of solitude, as I have of Clayburgh, and I see nothing in my strength or weakness to tell against success in my chosen life. On the contrary, I find myself longing for it. I shall be alone, I suppose, and for a time grief-stricken, but life will be there and will; while you fish and sleep in this prison and groan over your rheumatism. Before going it would tickle my vanity to know your estimate of my character, and a hint, just a hint, of that situation you spoke of the other day."

Florian had no expectation of receiving an answer to his impertinent request, and turned to the window through which he could see a break in the cloudy sky and the gleaming of a few stars. It was a dreary scene, and his heart was full of its dreariness.

"I'm not anxious to disturb your good feelings," said Scott. "You are bound for to go, and your blunders will teach you better than my words. I can fancy how you won't know yourself ten years from now, and I propose that when you go home to-morrow you sit down and write an account of yer present feelin's and opinions, and leave it with me. I'll see that you git it to read ten years from date. You'll be surprised."

"Done," said Florian eagerly, delighted beyond measure at this evidence of the hermit's interest in him.

"I'll make it minute in essentials, my friend."

(To be Continued.)

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