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In magazine form "The Solitary" appeared under the title of
"Gregory's
Island."_

The Solitary

I

"The dream of Pharaoh is one. The seven kine are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one.... And for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice, it is because the thing is established."...

In other words: Behind three or four subtitles and changes of time, scene, characters, this tale of strong hearts is one. And for that the tale is tripled or quadrupled unto you three or four times (the number will depend); it is because in each of its three or four aspects—or separate stories, if you insist—it sets forth, in heroic natures and poetic fates, a principle which seems to me so universal that I think Joseph would say of it also, as he said to the sovereign of Egypt, "The thing is established of God."

I know no better way to state this principle, being a man, not of letters, but of commerce (and finance), than to say—what I fear I never should have learned had I not known the men and women I here tell of—that religion without poetry is as dead a thing as poetry without religion. In our practical use of them, I mean; their infusion into all our doing and being. As dry as a mummy, great Joseph would say.

Shall I be more explicit? Taking that great factor of life which men, with countless lights, shades, narrownesses and breadths of meaning, call Religion, and taking it in the largest sense we can give it; in like manner taking Poetry in the largest sense possible; this cluster of tales is one, because from each of its parts, with no argument but the souls and fates they tell of, it illustrates the indivisible twinship of Poetry and Religion; a oneness of office and of culmination, which, as they reach their highest plane, merges them into identity. Is that any clearer? You see I am no scientist or philosopher, and I do not stand at any dizzy height, even in my regular business of banking and insurance, except now and then when my colleagues of the clearing-house or board want something drawn up—"Whereas, the inscrutable wisdom of Providence has taken from among us"—something like that.

I tell the stories as I saw them occur. I tell them for your entertainment; the truth they taught me you may do what you please with. It was exemplified in some of these men and women by their failure to incarnate it. Others, through the stained glass of their imperfect humanity, showed it forth alive and alight in their own souls and bodies. One there was who never dreamed he was a bright example of anything, in a world which, you shall find him saying, God—or somebody—whoever is responsible for civilization—had made only too good and complex and big for him. We may hold that to make life a perfect, triumphant poem we must keep in beautiful, untyrannous subordination every impulse of mere self-provision, whether earthly or heavenly, while at the same time we give life its equatorial circumference. I know that he so believed. Yet, under no better conscious motive than an impulse of pure self-preservation, finding his spiritual breadth and stature too small for half the practical demands of such large theories, he humbly set to work to narrow down the circumference of his life to limits within which he might hope to turn *some* of its daily issues into good poetry. This is the main reason why I tell of him first, and why the parts of my story—or the stories—do not fall into chronological order. I break that order with impunity, and adopt that which I believe to be best in the interest of Poetry and themselves. Only do not think hard if I get more interested in the story, or stories, than in the interpretation thereof.

II

The man of whom I am speaking was a tallish, slim young fellow, shaped well enough, though a trifle limp for a Louisianian in the Mississippi (Confederate) cavalry. Some camp wag had fastened on him the nickname of "Crackedfiddle." Our acquaintance began more than a year before Lee's surrender; but Gregory came out of the war without any startling record, and the main thing I tell of him occurred some years later.

I never saw him under arms or in uniform. I met him first at the house of a planter, where I was making the most of a flesh-wound, and was, myself, in uniform simply because I hadn't any other clothes. There were pretty girls in the house, and as his friends and fellow-visitors—except me— wore the gilt bars of commissioned rank on their gray collars, and he, as a private, had done nothing glorious, his appearance was always in civilian's dress. Black he wore, from head to foot, in the cut fashionable in New Orleans when the war brought fashion to a stand: coat-waist high, skirt solemnly long; sleeves and trousers small at the hands and feet, and puffed out—phew! in the middle. The whole scheme was dandyish, dashing, zou-zou; and when he appeared in it, dark, good-looking, loose, languorous, slow to smile and slower to speak, it was—confusing.

One sunset hour as I sat alone on the planter's veranda immersed in a romance, I noticed, too late to offer any serviceable warning, this impressive black suit and its ungenerously nicknamed contents coming in at the gate unprotected. Dogs, in the South, in those times, were not the caressed and harmless creatures now so common. A Mississippi planter's watch-dogs were kept for their vigilant and ferocious hostility to the negro of the quarters and to all strangers. One of these, a powerful, notorious, bloodthirsty brute, long-bodied, deer-legged—you may possibly know that big breed the planters called the "cur-dog" and prized so highly -darted out of hiding and silently sprang at the visitor's throat. Gregory swerved, and the brute's fangs, whirling by his face, closed in the sleeve and

rent it from shoulder to elbow. At the same time another, one of the old "bear-dog" breed, was coming as fast as the light block and chain he had to drag would allow him. Gregory neither spoke, nor moved to attack or retreat. At my outcry the dogs slunk away, and he asked me, diffidently, for a thing which was very precious in those days — pins.

But he was quickly surrounded by pitying eyes and emotional voices, and was coaxed into the house, where the young ladies took his coat away to mend it. While he waited for it in my room I spoke of the terror so many brave men had of these fierce home-guards. I knew one such beast that was sired of a wolf. He heard me with downcast eyes, at first with evident pleasure, but very soon quite gravely.

"They can afford to fear dogs," he replied, "when they've got no other fear." And when I would have it that he had shown a stout heart he smiled ruefully.

"I do everything through weakness," he soliloquized, and, taking my book, opened it as if to dismiss our theme. But I bade him turn to the preface, where heavily scored by the same feminine hand which had written on the blank leaf opposite, "Richard Thorndyke Smith, from C.O." — we read something like this:

The seed of heroism is in all of us. Else we should not forever relish, as we do, stories of peril, temptation, and exploit. Their true zest is no mere ticklement of our curiosity or wonder, but comradeship with souls that have courage in danger, faithfulness under trial, or magnanimity in triumph or defeat. We have, moreover, it went on to say, a care for human excellence *in general*, by reason of which we want not alone our son, or cousin, or sister, but *man everywhere*, the norm, *man*, to be strong, sweet, and true; and reading stories of such, we feel this wish rebound upon us as duty sweetened by a new hope, and have a new yearning for its fulfilment in ourselves.

"In short," said I, closing the book, "those imaginative victories of soul over circumstance become essentially ours by sympathy and emulation, don't they?"

"O yes," he sighed, and added an indistinct word about "spasms of virtue." But I claimed a special charm and use for unexpected and

detached heroisms, be they fact or fiction. "If adventitious virtue," I argued, "can spring up from unsuspected seed and without the big roots of character —"

"You think," interrupted Gregory, "there's a fresh chance for me."

"For all the common run of us!" I cried. "Why not? And even if there isn't, hasn't it a beauty and a value? Isn't a rose a rose, on the bush or off? Gold is gold wherever you find it, and the veriest spasm of true virtue, coined into action, is true virtue, and counts. It may not work my nature's whole redemption, but it works that way, and is just so much solid help toward the whole world's uplift." I was young enough then to talk in that manner, and he actually took comfort in my words, confessing that it had been his way to count a good act which was not in character with its doer as something like a dead loss to everybody.

"I'm glad it's not," he said, "for I reckon my ruling motive is always fear."

"Was it fear this evening?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "it was. It was fear of a coward's name, and a sort of abject horror of being one."

"Too big a coward inside," I laughed, "to be a big stout coward outside," and he assented.

"Smith," he said, and paused long, "if I were a hard drinker and should try to quit, it wouldn't be courage that would carry me through, but fear; quaking fear of a drunkard's life and a drunkard's death."

I was about to rejoin that the danger was already at his door, but he read the warning accusation in my eye.

"I'm afraid so," he responded. "I had a strange experience once," he presently added, as if reminded of it by what we had last said. "I took a prisoner."

"By the overwhelming power of fear?" I inquired.

"Partly, yes. I saw him before he saw me and I felt that if I didn't take him he'd either take me or shoot me, so I covered him and he

surrendered. We were in an old pine clearing grown up with oak bushes."

"Would it have been less strange," I inquired, "if you had been in an old oak clearing grown up with pine bushes?"

"No, he'd have got away just the same."

"What! you didn't bring him in?"

"Only part of the way. Then he broke and ran."

"And you had to shoot him?"

"No, I didn't even shoot at him. I couldn't, Smith; *he looked so much like me*. It was like seeing my own ghost. All the time I had him something kept saying to me, 'You're your own prisoner—you're your own prisoner.' And—do you know?—that thing comes back to me now every time I get into the least sort of a tight place!"

"I wish it would come to me," I responded. A slave girl brought his coat and our talk remained unfinished until five years after the war.

III

Gregory had been brought up on the shore of Mississippi Sound, a beautiful region fruitful mainly in apathy of character. He was a skilled lover of sail-boats. When we all got back to New Orleans, paroled, and cast about for a living in the various channels "open to gentlemen," he, largely, I think, owing to his timid notion of his worth, went into the rough business of owning and sailing a small, handsome schooner in the "Lake trade," which, you know, includes Mississippi Sound. I married, and for some time he liked much to come and see us—on rainy evenings, when he knew we should be alone. He was in love yet, as he had been when we were fellow-absentees from camp, and with the same girl. But his passion had never presumed to hope, and the girl was of too true a sort ever to thrust hope upon him. What his love lacked in courage it made up in constancy, however, and morning, noon, and night—sometimes midnight too, I venture to say—his all too patient heart had bowed mutely down toward its holy city across the burning sands of his diffidence. When another fellow stepped in and married her, he simply loved on, in the same innocent, dumb, harmless way as before. He gave himself some droll consolations. One of these was a pretty, sloop-rigged sail-boat, trim and swift, on which he lavished the tendernesses he knew he should never bestow upon any living she. He named her Sweetheart; a general term; but he knew that we all knew it meant the mender of his coat. By and by his visits fell off and I met him oftenest on the street. Sometimes we stopped for a moment's sidewalk chat, New Orleans fashion, and I still envied the clear bronze of his fine skin, which the rest of us had soon lost. But after a while certain changes began to show for the worse, until one day in the summer of the fifth year he tried to hurry by me. I stopped him, and was thinking what a handsome fellow he was even yet, with such a quiet, modest fineness about him, when he began, with a sudden agony of face, "My schooner's sold for debt! You know the reason; I've seen you read it all over me every time we have met, these twelve months—O *don't* look at me!"

His slim, refined hands—he gave me both?—were clammy and tremulous. "Yes," he babbled on, "it's a fixed fact, Smith; the cracked fiddle's a smashed fiddle at last!"

I drew him out of the hot sun and into a secluded archway, he talking straight on with a speed and pitiful grandiloquence totally unlike him. "I've finished all the easy parts—the first ecstasies of pure license—the long down-hill plunge, with all its mad exhilarations—the wild vanity of venturing and defying—that bigness of the soul's experiences which makes even its anguish seem finer than the old bitterness of tame propriety—they are all behind me, now?—the valley of horrors is before! You can't understand it, Smith. O you can't understand —"

O couldn't I! And, anyhow, one does not have to put himself through a whole criminal performance to apprehend its spiritual experiences. I understood all, and especially what he unwittingly betrayed even now; that deep thirst for the dramatic element in one's own life, which, when social conformity fails to supply it, becomes, to an eager soul, sin's cunningest allurements.

I tried to talk to him. "Gregory, that day the dogs jumped on you—you remember?—didn't you say if ever you should reach this condition your fear might save you?"

He stared at me a moment. "Do you"—a ray of humor lighted his eyes—"do you still believe in spasms of virtue?"

"Thank heaven, yes!" laughed I.

"Good-by," he said, and was gone.

I heard of him twice afterward that day. About noon some one coming into the office said: "I just now saw Crackedfiddle buying a great lot of powder and shot and fishing-tackle. Here's a note. He says first read it and then seal it and send it to his aunt." It read:

"Don't look for me. You can't find me. I'm not going to kill or hurt myself, and I'll report again in a month."

I delivered it in person on my way uptown, advising his kinswoman to trust him on his own terms and hope for the best. Privately, of course, I was distressed, and did not become less so when, on reaching home, Mrs. Smith told me that he had been there and

borrowed an arm-load of books, saying he might return some of them in a month, but would probably keep others for two. So he did; and one evening, when he brought the last of them back, he told us fully, spiritual experiences and all, what had occurred to him in the interval.

The sale of the schooner had paid its debt and left him some cash over. Better yet, it had saved Sweetheart. On the day of his disappearance she was lying at the head of the New Basin, distant but a few minutes' walk from the spot where we met and talked. When he left me he went there. At the stores thereabout he bought a new hatchet and axe, an extra water-keg or two, and a month's provisions. He filled all the kegs, stowed everything aboard, and by the time the afternoon had half waned was rippling down the New Canal under mule-tow with a strong lake breeze in his face.

At the lake (Pontchartrain), as the tow-line was cast off, he hoisted sail, and, skimming out by lighthouse and breakwater, tripped away toward Pointe-aux-Herbes and the eastern skyline beyond, he and Sweetheart alone, his hand clasping hers—the tiller, that is—hour by hour, and the small waves tiptoeing to kiss her southern cheek as she leaned the other away from the saucy north wind. In time the low land, and then the lighthouse, sank and vanished behind them; on the left the sun went down in the purple black swamps of Manchac; the intervening waters turned crimson and bronze under the fairer changes of the sky, while in front of them Fort Pike Light began to glimmer through an opal haze, and by and by to draw near. It passed. From a large inbound schooner gliding by in the twilight, came in friendly recognition, the drone of a conch-shell, the last happy salutation Sweetheart was ever to receive. Then the evening star silvered their wake through the deep Rigolets, and the rising moon met them, her and her lover, in Lake Borgne, passing the dark pines of Round Island, and hurrying on toward the white sand-keys of the Gulf.

The night was well advanced as they neared the pine-crested dunes of Cat Island, in whose lee a more cautious sailor would have dropped anchor till the morning. But to this pair every mile of these fickle waters, channel and mud-lump, snug lagoon, open sea and hidden bar, each and all, were known as the woods are known to a

hunter, and, as he drew her hand closer to his side, she turned across the track of the moon and bounded into the wide south. A maze of marsh islands—huddling along that narrow, half-drowned mainland of cypress swamp and trembling prairie which follows the Mississippi out to sea—slept, leagues away, below the western waters. In the east lay but one slender boundary between the voyager and the shoreless deep, and this was so near that from its farther edge came now and again its admonishing murmur, the surf-thunder of the open Gulf rolling forever down the prone but unshaken battle-front of the sandy Chandeleurs.

IV

So all night, lest wind or resolve should fail next day, he sailed. How to tell just where dawn found him I scarcely know.

Somewhere in that blue wilderness, with no other shore in sight, yet not over three miles northeast of a "pass" between two long tide-covered sand-reefs, a ferment of delta silt—if science guesses right—had lifted higher than most of the islands behind it in the sunken west one mere islet in the shape of a broad crescent, with its outward curve to seaward and a deep, slender lagoon on the landward side filling the whole length of its bight. About half the island was flat and was covered with those strong marsh grasses for which you've seen cattle, on the mainland, venture so hungrily into the deep ooze. The rest, the southern half, rose in dazzling white dunes twenty feet or more in height and dappled green with patches of ragged sod and thin groups of dwarfed and wind-flattened shrubs. As the sun rose, Sweetheart and her sailor glided through a gap in the sand reef that closed the lagoon in, luffed, and as a great cloud of nesting pelicans rose from their dirty town on the flats, ran softly upon the inner sands, where a rillet, a mere thread of sweet water, trickled across the white beach. Here he waded ashore with the utensils and provisions, made a fire, washed down a hot breakfast of bacon and pone with a pint of black coffee, returned to his boat and slept until afternoon. Wakened at length by the canting of the sloop with the fall of the tide, he rose, rekindled his fire, cooked and ate again, smoked two pipes, and then, idly shouldering his gun, made a long half-circuit of the beach to south and eastward, mounted the highest dune and gazed far and wide.

Nowhere on sand or sea under the illimitable dome was there sign of human presence on the earth. Nor would there likely be any. Except by misadventure no ship on any course ever showed more than a topmast above this horizon. Of the hunters and fishermen who roamed the islands nearer shore, with the Chandeleurs, the storm-drowned Grand Gosiers and the deep-sea fishing grounds beyond, few knew the way hither, and fewer ever sailed it. At the

sound of his gun the birds of the beach—sea-snipe, curlew, plover—showed the whites of their wings for an instant and fell to feeding again. Save when the swift Wilderness—you remember the revenue cutter?—chanced this way on her devious patrol, only the steamer of the light-house inspection service, once a month, came up out of the southwest through yonder channel and passed within hail on her way from the stations of the Belize to those of Mississippi Sound; and he knew—had known before he left the New Basin—that she had just gone by here the day before.

But to Gregory this solitude brought no quick distress. With a bird or two at his belt he turned again toward his dying fire. Once on the way he paused, as he came in sight of the sloop, and gazed upon it with a faintness of heart he had not known since his voyage began. However, it presently left him, and hurrying down to her side he began to unload her completely, and to make a permanent camp in the lee of a ridge of sand crested with dwarfed casino bushes, well up from the beach. The night did not stop him, and by the time he was tired enough for sleep he had lightened the boat of everything stowed into her the previous day. Before sunrise he was at work again, removing her sandbags, her sails, flags, cordage, even her spars. The mast would have been heavy for two men to handle, but he got it out whole, though not without hurting one hand so painfully that he had to lie off for over two hours. But by midday he was busy again, and when at low water poor Sweetheart comfortably turned upon her side on the odorous, clean sand, it was never more to rise. The keen, new axe of her master ended her days.

"No! O no!" he said to me, "call it anything but courage! I felt—I don't want to be sentimental—I'm sure I was not sentimental at the time, but—I felt as though I were a murderer. All I knew was that it had to be done. I trembled like a thief. I had to stoop twice before I could take up the axe, and I was so cold my teeth chattered. When I lifted the first blow I didn't know where it was going to fall. But it struck as true as a die, and then I flew at it. I never chopped so fast or clean in my life. I wasn't fierce; I was as full of self-delight as an overpraised child. And yet when something delayed me an instant I found I was still shaking. Courage," said he, "O no; I know what it was, and I knew then. But I had no choice; it was my last chance."

I told him that anyone might have thought him a madman chopping up his last chance.

"Maybe so," he replied, "but I wasn't; it was the one sane thing I could do;" and he went on to tell me that when night fell the tallest fire that ever leapt from those sands blazed from Sweetheart's piled ribs and keel.

It was proof to him of his having been shrewd, he said, that for many days he felt no repentance of the act nor was in the least lonely. There was an infinite relief merely in getting clean away from the huge world of men, with all its exactions and temptations and the myriad rebukes and rebuffs of its crass propriety and thrift. He had endured solitude enough in it; the secret loneliness of a spiritual bankruptcy. Here was life begun over, with none to make new debts to except nature and himself, and no besetments but his own circumvented propensities. What humble, happy masterhood! Each dawn he rose from dreamless sleep and leaped into the surf as into the embrace of a new existence. Every hour of day brought some unfretting task or hale pastime. With sheath-knife and sail-needle he made of his mainsail a handsome tent, using the mainboom for his ridge-pole, and finishing it just in time for the first night of rain — when, nevertheless, he lost all his coffee!

He did not waste toil. He hoarded its opportunities as one might husband salt on the mountains or water in the desert, and loitering in well calculated idleness between thoughts many and things of sea and shore innumerable, filled the intervals from labor to labor with gentle entertainment. Skyward ponderings by night, canny discoveries under foot by day, quickened his mind and sight to vast and to minute significancies, until they declared an Author known to him hitherto only by tradition. Every acre of the barren islet grew fertile in beauties and mysteries, and a handful of sand at the door of his tent held him for hours guessing the titanic battles that had ground the invincible quartz to that crystal meal and fed it to the sea.

I may be more rhetorical than he was, but he made all the more of these conditions while experiencing them, because he knew they could not last out the thirty days, nor half the thirty, and took modest comfort in a will strong enough to meet all present demands,

well knowing there was one exigency yet to arise, one old usurer still to be settled with who had not yet brought in his dun.