

Cheek



by Henry C. Rowland

The Island Was Held Sacred as the Resting Place of a Bride Who Had Been Drowned; Then Along Came the Fair Alison and Richard the Disturber.

PART I.
The Invader.

A SLENDER, boyish-looking girl of that age at which the appreciative observer tries vainly to class whether as childhood or womanhood, and is right on either decision, was paddling her canoe off the rocky point of an island on a still, hot day in June.

The girl's kindly but positive injunctions were that in her paddlings about she was not to venture beyond the seaward angle of the island, nor to land upon it; and, as it was her creed to obey this parent whom she loved with that curious passionate devotion that a very young girl is apt to fix upon her ideal of a perfect man, there was no element of temptation even in the thought of disobedience.

But now an unsettling factor had developed. The island, known locally as "Mary's Island," was, oddly enough, a mystery, even to the local folk of that wild and picturesquely beautiful coast, the most beautiful section of the most beautiful coast line in the world, and also the most dangerous by reason of its strong currents, half tide reefs and fickle weather variations, where on the loveliest of days a stealthy fog might come slipping in, smoky and fine, and screening the unexpected bash of a squall from almost any quarter. Nobody appeared to wish to land on the island, nor to disturb its tender, mournful serenity by the cutting of trees, vandal violation of its big white birches, or even the filling of a keg from the cold sweet spring known to bubble under a ledge almost at high water mark.

For the island had its ghostly guardian in a cairn of stones and a rough hewn cross of granite erected at its eastern promontory. This monument was almost in reach of the spray, while yet under the boughs of the big oak that found its nurture from huge roots gripping the rocks like an octopus and drawing its nurture from their crevices.

People, even to careless boys cruising in small boats, were unconsciously respectful of the tenure so positively yet serenely proclaimed by this cross and cairn and the great oak over both, so that, if they landed at all, their inspection was brief and rather awed. The legend of it was not very old, whilst yet so solemn, so sentimental as to assume a certain simple grandeur of idea and execution.

A catastrophe at sea had, in the course of elemental forces, deposited the body of a young wife on the point of Mary's island, and her husband, refusing his place in an overloaded boat and picked up nearly exhausted on a hatch cover, had bought the island, interred his bride upon it, and endowed it as her tomb in perpetuity. A quarter of a century later, though rich by this time and a power in the world of finance, he had not seem fit to disturb this arrangement. And so the little island remained and bade fair to remain always as the tomb of his bride, and through some way of reasoning he had never seen fit to revisit the spot. A host of conjectures and romance had been built from this fact alone.

Mary's island, of which the first occupancy had been as a tomb, was regarded as a tomb, and, for all its alluringness and vivid beauty, no one ever thought of even camping there. The fishermen themselves preferred to run up into the bight if waiting for a tide or shift of weather, rather than to anchor in its sheltered western cove.

It is doubtful if anybody felt this respect more strongly than the boyish girl in the canoe. As she now rested with the paddle athwartships in front of her, she stared at the island under straight brows of a penthouse sort, uncommon in so young a girl, and aggravated by her frown. Her eyes were precisely the shade of wood violets, their lashes very long and black, and the harsh salt air had so far refreshed rather than weathered the exquisite softness of her skin. Her bare forearms were round and so perfectly and uniformly developed that the muscles under them were not in evidence.

She reached beneath her and raised a pair of strong binoculars through which she now examined intently the activity at the top of the low cliffs at their base. She was indifferent to the fact that her scrutiny must be clearly observed by the solitary cause of this activity. In fact, she saw him stop his work and stare at her for a moment or two, his attention having been caught, perhaps, by the heliographic flash of sunlight on the lenses of her glass. He made a little gesture, a sort of salutation, as if to say, "How do you do? Look me over if you like!" a sort of general indication to such effect, that might have been partly amusement with a hint of defiance. At any rate, it served to defuse the girl's hostility, almost as if he had said, "Yes, I'm putting a living presence on this consecrated scrap of rock and woods, and what are you going to do about it?"

The binoculars were good, as might have been expected of their ownership, because Alison's father was a professor of astronomy in government employ and he had sent in some large and honest orders for instruments of high price, ground in the Lemaire works. Through them she observed that this privileged island (as she classified him) was youngish of appearance, rather squarely built, and, to judge from the size of a stone she observed him to be hoisting by means of rough ways and a derrick, sort of a human winch. Alison saw also that as he hoisted these monoliths he appeared

to be landing them in place and in cement.

"Go where you like, sweet," had said the professor, "so long as you are never out of my sight." To most girls of her age and social station such an order would have been impossible to obey without serious sacrifice of personal liberty. But for Alison it was entirely reasonable, permitting her to circulate in an orbit of many miles, and, of course, it did not apply to the immediate environment of their premises. His prohibition as to landing was a little slipshod perhaps, the idea being merely that once swallowed in the depths of the woods she must be removed from his field of observation.

Alison now turned the matter in her mind. She desired intensely to know what this young man was doing on Mary's island, and what he was building there, and why. To her direct and candid nature it seemed that the best way would be to go and ask him. For over a fortnight she had observed his maneuvers and the reticence of the local population, of which the curiosity was no less than her own, though veiled, permitted merely of the brief comment, "Pears like he figgers to build a stone house." Nobody was intrusive enough to demand why he would want to build a stone house there, or why he should do this alone, and when he might expect to complete it. His own imparted information, corroborated by the scanty mail in the name by which his letters were addressed, showed him to be of the same name as the now elderly man who had purchased the island a quarter of a century before. Alison's father declined to interest himself at all in their mysterious neighbor.

Wherefore she laid down her binoculars and paddled in leisurely manner to the jutting rocks from the foot of which the solitary builder was hoisting his material. He could not have helped but observe her near approach, and he was not the only one to do so, as a big dog who, like most canines, reflected the personal traits of its master, rose from some sunny corner and stalked down to the water's edge, less to challenge than to inspect the intruder. Alison in the flat calm heard the young man say in accents and supreme indifference, "It's only a little girl in a canoe, Bill," whereat Bill stretched, yawned, and returned to occupy his former strategic position.

Alison was distinctly annoyed. If the man had said, "It's only a girl, Bill," in that voice of which the indifference bordered on contempt, her feminine antagonism might have been aroused, but the "little" galled her. She had discarded infancy so recently that his classification struck her as less an injury than an insult. Like many highly vital girls, the process of shedding her childhood, both physically and mentally, had been an abrupt transition that, so far, none but she herself had seemed able to appreciate.

She had never thought much about the male of her species until quite recently, and then often with a curious defiance, as one resenting in interest that hitherto she had managed very well without.

The lure was at this moment very strong, infused with an immense curiosity. If two or three young men had been merely camping on the island she would have protested their presence there as unwarranted trespassing and might have avoided the place. But one young man alone engaged in some sort of stone construction was another matter. So she paddled closer to inspect this specimen and his work, so close, in fact, that she discovered him to be a young fellow of 24 perhaps, of pleasing appearance, well knit and going apparently about his work with a sort of cheerful efficiency as he could see from the mounting wall of big heavy stones with a clean, straight fracture that he was hoisting from the water's edge by means of a derrick, windlass, and rough ways put together from straight spruces that he had felled and peeled. This in itself seemed an outrage, to cut trees on Mary's island, with its defenseless tenantry of the cairn and cross on the opposite side of a little bight, where the long, lazy ripples washed on a strip of shingle and fine white sand.

Close up to the rocks she stopped paddling and surveyed him with a level examining glance, when he acknowledged her presence with a friendly wave of the hand and paused for a moment to observe her in return. He wore a white flannel shirt open at the throat, a pair of blue jean overalls and high, heavy hobbled hunting boots. He was bareheaded and the sun shone and glistened on his lustrous chestnut hair, damp from his efforts, and curling about his temples. He looked, indeed, by reason of his depth of shoulder and breadth of chest, a sort of derrick of a man as first appearance had suggested.

"What are you doing?" Alison asked, with a little frown.

"I'm building a stone house," he answered.

"Who gave you permission to do that and to cut down trees?" Alison demanded.

"The owner," he answered briefly. "She let her canoe drift closer until the bow rubbed gently against a sheer kelp covered rock."

"Won't you land and inspect the work?" he asked politely.

Alison shook her head. "I'm forbidden to land," she said, "and I don't much like the idea of anybody building here. We thought it understood that this island was never to be disturbed." "Well," said the young man, "let's call it being improved instead of being disturbed. Doesn't it strike you as not quite fair that a beauty spot like this, with its size and splendid location should be monopolized by a single individual many years deceased?" "I can't say that it does," Alison answered. "It seems to me rather a beautiful idea."



"I will," said Alison, and paddled away.

any one person, even a living one, to monopolize the whole of a charming region to the exclusion of his fellows."

"Does the present owner feel that way about it?" Alison asked.

"If I can finish my work here in a satisfactory manner within a year I may become the owner of this island myself," answered the young man.

Alison felt shocked, but her curiosity was whetted.

"What sort of an arrangement is that?" she asked, "and who are you, anyhow?"

"Well, you might call it a bet," said the builder, "and my name is Richard Douglas, late of the United States army engineer corps. I take it that you are my neighbor, Miss Alison MacNair, daughter of the distinguished astronomer, Angus MacNair."

Alison acknowledged this with a slight nod. "What are you going to do with your house when you get it built?" she asked.

"Live in it," said Richard, and added, pensively, "I hope, with my wife."

For some curious reason this statement struck a sort of resentment through the girl. A young and cheerful hermit on Mary's island would not have seemed so bad, but a young married couple honeymooning there impressed her as being distinctly out of order.

"Where is your wife now?" she asked. "In Boston," said Richard, "but she is not yet my wife. It is even possible that she may never be my wife. That depends on how I succeed with my work."

Alison's interest became immediately whetted again. "Does the owner know that you have come here and cut down trees and interfered with things?" she asked.

"Well," said Richard, cheerfully, "to tell the truth, I slipped one over on him. My father was his brother, and when I was in Yale I visited the island on a solitary cruise in a little boat, and I fell in love with it. At that time I was a perfect stranger to any sort of work, and Uncle Jonathan was grumblingly footing my bills against the time when work and I shook hands and got acquainted. But somehow in subsequent years we never seemed able to foregather, and not long ago he got very tired of my inability to accomplish anything of what he was pleased to consider a useful sort. So he gave me a small grub stake and told me to clear out and rustle for myself. 'If in a year's time,' said he, 'you cannot show me something accomplished through your own unaided effort, don't ever come near me again.'"

"And what if I can, sir?" I asked.

"Well," says he, "if you can manage to convince me that you've got the ability and determination to establish yourself permanently in a home of your own creation and under wholesome and substantial conditions of life, I'll give you the home. But it's got to be such as I approve and, as I've said, the result of your own unaided efforts." So I thought of Mary's island and what I'm doing now. So here I am."

Alison listened to this information with astonishment.

"But what are you going to live on when you get it built?" she demanded.

"Ah," said Richard, "there was nothing said about that. You see, I'm trading on a careful study of my uncle's character. He is himself a builder and has a passion for solid and lasting things. He is convinced that there is nothing solid nor lasting nor persevering in my own cosmos and that I could not stick at any one line of effort, particularly if arduous, for more than a month at the outside. When he sees my house he may have a change of heart."

"But you have really no right here," protested Alison. "The very site of your house is not yours to build on."

"Not yet," Richard admitted, "but you see he promised to present me with my home if only I could manage to get it. He is a man of his word, and he is now in Scotland on a visit to his own old home, and by the time he returns I hope to have something to show him. Then I figure that by the terms of the agreement he will have to come across."

"And then what?" Alison asked. "How about your living expenses?" "Ah," said Richard, "that question has yet to be considered. But the main thing is to get the home, and once that's done a man should be able to manage somehow. Don't you think?"

"Well," said Alison, reflectively, "I must say it all sounds pretty crazy to me. What if your uncle flies up in a rage at your having had the cheek to desecrate the island and tells you to clear out, and dynamites the house? Or your fiancée declines to go into exile? You might as well ask her to spend the winter in a lighthouse."

"I don't think she'd object to that," said Richard, cheerfully. "She paints marines and loves the sea, and hates jazz and social bothers. Her family has never been cursed with riches and she's used to doing her bit, and has inherited a great deal of colonial pioneer attributes."

"Is she pretty?" Alison asked.

"Until a short time ago," said Richard, "I thought she was the prettiest girl I had ever seen."

Alison felt the hot blood creeping up her throat, but the vagueness of this statement offered no room for resentment. Still she answered, coldly:

"You'd better keep on thinking that way if you want to live happily with her here."

"Right," Richard agreed. "That idea has occurred to me. Such a place as this would be a paradise for two people who were enraptured with each other, and possibly small others who were later to come. But lacking such a condition it would be the reverse of Paradise." He looked around reflectively at the rugged rocks and big spreading trees. "It would be hell," he said, as if to himself.

"I'm a natural builder with a good mechanical training."

"Don't you get lonely?" Alison asked. "Well, I hadn't thought about it until just now," Richard answered, "but from the pleasure your visit has given me, I think I may have been so without knowing it. But to avoid possible annoyance, I must ask you not to repeat what I have told you. Some busybody might stir up trouble. The position of a squatter is always insecure until once firmly squatted."

"I shan't tell," said Alison, "and I must say I admire your pluck. I'm curious to see if you'll stick it out." She glanced down at a scow moored in the cove and the motor dory tied up to a rough jetty of poles. "How about going and coming in the winter?"

"I learn that the ice never forms here," said Richard. "There is an open patch on the south side where I am growing potatoes and cabbages and spinach and things. I might have a few chickens and perhaps some sheep and a pig or two, and there is a great abundance of fish and clams and lobsters. Once I get my hoist and saw the construction should move more rapidly. Over in the village they think that I'm a nut, and I want them to go on thinking so for awhile at least. I work from dawn to dark, and it is amazing how much a man can accomplish when he keeps at it."

Alison glanced toward the distant shore and saw from the corner of her pier a small flag fluttering. It was the recall signal. So she dipped her paddle and thrust the canoe out into the clear deep water.

"Thanks for coming," said Richard. "Do call again from time to time and try to get permission to land."

"I will," said Alison and paddled away with strong and even strokes.

The astronomer listened abstractedly to Alison's request for permission to land on Mary's island.

"There's a man building a stone house all by himself," she told him frankly, "and I want to see how he goes about it."

"All right, sweet," said the professor, to whom young men had not yet presented themselves as a possible menace to his daughter, whose emerging from infancy he had entirely overlooked. Like most astronomers, his vision was principally focused on infinity, so that a new star might catch his observation where, a heavenly body beside him appeared to rotate in its habitual orbit. It did not occur to him that there could be any harm in his little girl watching a man lay stones, and in the present instance he was right enough so far as the young man was concerned. Also Alison pointed out that the site was in plain view from the corner of their porch.

Wherefore Alison's visits to the scene of construction became almost a part of her daily rounds, especially as she discovered her presence was a help rather than a hindrance. She was able to save Richard time by holding the turns of the tackle around a tree and slacking them at his direction, throwing sand upon the sifter or mixing his cement with a hoe and sometimes spreading it in the manner of making mud pies. There was a fascination in watching the speed with which the wall rose and climbed over the pointed frames of the Gothic windows to be held by a keystone, and when a few days later his hoisting motor arrived the work proceeded with astonishing rapidity. But still more fascinating, though less consciously so, was the personality of the builder with his cheerful, light hearted and whimsical conversations, set as a sort of screen to mask the rugged purposeful persistency beneath.

"I don't see how anybody could ever think you vacillating, Richard," said she. "They wouldn't if they watched you building your house."

"Ah," said Richard. "That's where I'm artful. I'm in hopes they may change their mind about me when they see the finished edifice. It is a 'by their works ye shall know them' idea."

"But the dreadful part about it is," said Alison, "that when the house is finished you'll have scarcely anything left to go on."

"I'll have a house," said Richard, "and that's more than I had before. But I'm beginning to feel that the house won't be all mine, and he looked at her thoughtfully. "It's getting to be partly yours," he said.

These words crystallized an unformed thought with which Alison's feelings were becoming saturated. She realized with a sudden shock that they were true, that she had begun to regard the house not as Richard's house, but in the dual possessive sense. Her violet eyes fastened on Richard's gray ones with the level gaze of a nature that never shirked an issue, however unpleasant.

"Yes," she said, "I'm beginning to feel as if it were partly mine. I think I'd better stop helping you. I might consider that I had a builder's lien."

Richard looked at her gloomily. "Perhaps you have," he said. "I'm afraid it's too late, isn't it? You've really helped me an awful lot. I'm not sure but that I might have got sick of it and chucked the job if it hadn't been for you. I'm not so constant as you seem to think."

Alison rose and looked at him with a troubled face. "Now, Richard," said she, "don't dare to hint at such a thing. What I most like about you is the daring of ever planning such a thing as this and the determination to go ahead and finish it, no matter what may happen later."

"Well," said Richard somberly, "you may have got me wrong. Anybody can start most anything, but everybody can't finish what they start."

"You can," said Alison, a little breathlessly, "and you must. If you quit it now I don't think that I could ever believe in any man again—except my father."

"I think from now on you'll have to do without me," said she. "I'm getting too fond of this house, and the first we know I may be filing some sort of claim to it."

"No fear but that it would be approved," muttered Richard, "but I see what you mean. After all, why should you waste your time helping to build a house for strangers?"

This was clumsily put, but the words acted as a splendid tonic on Alison. "You're right," said she. "I'll quit the job. Good-bye." And, turning on her heel, she walked down to the beach, got into her canoe and shoved off. Then, as she dipped her paddle, turned back and called over her shoulder:

"Don't give it up, Richard. You've gone too far for that."

He did not answer, but stood looking after her with shoulders that were slightly bowed, as if for the first time he was feeling the reaction of the weeks of hard manual labor often carried to a point that might have done damage to a physique less powerful.

Then, as she started to paddle away, Alison discovered approaching the island a large open launch that she recognized as a boat for hire in the village. It was coming directly toward her, so as to pass her close aboard when she rounded the point over which the long, low swells were foaming. Some instinct told Alison that here was a disturbing factor to Richard's whimsical attempt, and she was glad that it would find her uninvolved.

The launch passed so close that the considerate boatman slowed his motor to avoid giving the canoe too strong a wash. For the moment the attention of his passengers was directed toward Alison, and she, returning their gaze with even greater interest, discovered a very pretty girl, smartly dressed and with features rather high and of no doubtful decision, by the side of a woman of middle age and angular proportions. They both looked well bred, smartly but quietly dressed, but their faces at that close range showed a sort of puzzled disapproval.

Alison guessed immediately that here were the fiancée of Richard and probably her mother, who had heard some rumor of his occupation and come to find out what it was all about. She was possessed of a passionate eagerness to know what the result of the interview would be; what they would think and say of his fantastic undertaking.

But the builder and his visitors had no doubt retreated under the trees while the waiting launch was hidden by the rocky point of the cove. At the end of about an hour Alison had seen the boat with its passengers returning to the village, and a little later she saw Richard's motor dory emerge from the miniature haven and put off in the same direction, an unusual procedure with him in working hours.

Alison had not intended to visit the island again until just before the return of her father and herself to Washington, still about a month away. But there is one feminine emotion almost as strong as love and hate, and often just as insistent for expression, and that is curiosity. The girl found it impossible to go on about her hitherto uncomplicated life until she knew the one focal point resulting from the visit of Richard's callers; whether they approved or disapproved his whimsical yet so tangibly forceful endeavor.

One thing rather relieved her, this being that she saw him through the telescope hoisting stones again and laying them in place, but this did not answer the burning question. His undertaking might have been approved or disapproved or merely held in probation to be determined by its result. In the second case sheer obstinacy might have held him. For the sake of her peace of mind Alison decided to follow her usual candid procedure and paddle over to ask.

She found a different Richard. All of his boyishness appeared to have departed, even more abruptly than had her own in the last few weeks. He seemed suddenly to have matured. His face was hard and grim, but it softened at the sight of her, and he gave a short, bitter laugh.

"I came over to ask you what they thought of it all," said Alison, "but it seems hardly necessary to ask."

"Do I look as sore as that?" he answered.

"Worse," said Alison, "but you seem to be still at work."

"Yes," he answered, striking savagely at a projecting tip of rock with his sledges, then flinging the implement aside. "They seemed a good deal astonished at what I had done and gave me due credit for my obstinacy. But they said that it was absurd for me to count on Uncle Jonathan's making good on his part of the agreement. They said that he would be furious and consider that I had tried to trick him, and they gave me the pleasing information that he had returned to America and learned from some gossiping source that I was up to something down here and called to ask if they knew anything about it. That was the first they had heard, so they ran down from Boston to find out what I was doing."

"Oh, dear!" cried Alison in a curious turmoil of relief and distress. "Of course they'll tell him."

"Of course," growled Richard, "and then it's an even bet whether the old boy waits for me to finish, then disposing"

(Concluded on Page 9.)