**Solitude**

***By Miguel de Unamuno***

Solitude was born of death of her mother. Leopardi sang that birth is a hazard with death: “nasce l’uomo a fatica ed e rischio di morte el nascimento” – hazard with death for the new-born, hazard with death for her who gives birth.

Poor Sanctuary, Solitude’s mother, had led for five years of marriage a life of shadowed and silent tragedy. Her husband was a man impenetrable and apparently without feeling. The poor woman did not know how she had ever come to marry him; she found herself bound in matrimony with this man like somebody awakening from a dream. All her maiden life was lost in a misty distance, and when she thought of it she remembered herself, as she had been before her marriage, as though she were remembering somebody else.

Whether her husband loved her or hated her she could not tell. His home was to him merely a place for eating and sleeping, for all the animal side of life. He worked outside of it, he talked outside of it, he amused himself outside of it. He never raised his voice or said a harsh word to his wife. He never contradicted her. When poor Sanctuary asked him a question or sought his opinion about anything, she invariably got the same reply from him: “All right. Don’t bother me. As you like.”

That persistent “As you like” went to poor Sanctuary’s sick heart like a sharp knife. “As you like it!” the poor woman thought to herself; “that means I’m not even worth contradicting.” And then his “Don’t bother me!” – that terrible “Don’t bother me!” which embitters so many homes. In Sanctuary’s home – in what should have been Sanctuary’s home – that terrible refusal not to be bothered enshadowed everything at the hearth.

The first year that she was married Sanctuary had a son; but in the dreary desolation of her drab home she longed for a daughter. “A son,” she thought, “a man! Men always have something to do outside their homes.” So, when she became pregnant, she dreamed of nothing but a daughter; and her daughter must be called Solitude. The poor woman was taken gravely ill in her pangs. Her heart fluttered feebly. She realized that she would live only long enough to give birth to her daughter – to introduce her into that shadowed home. She called for her husband.

“Oh, Pedro,” she said, “if it is a daughter, as I hope, you’ll call her Solitude, wont’ you?”

“All right, all right,” he replied; “time enough to think about that”; and she reflected that this day, this day of birth, he was going to miss his game of dominoes.

“But I am going to die, Pedro; I haven’t the strength to get over it.”

“Nonsense!” he replied.

“It may be,” Sanctuary insisted; “but if it is a daughter, you will call her Solitude, won’t you?”

“All right. Don’t bother me. As you like,” he closed the conversation.

And she ceased to bother him forever. After she had given birth to her daughter she had only time to realize that it was a daughter; and her last words were: “Solitude – remember, Pedro – Solitude!”

The man was shocked, and would have been humbled if there had been anything of him to humble. A widower at his age, and with two small children! Who was going to look after his house now? Who was going to bring up his children – until his daughter was old enough to be able to take over the management of it?...Marry again? No, that he would not do. He knew now what marriage meant. If he had only known before! That was no solution. Very decidedly he would not marry again.

What he did was to send Solitude to a village to be reared away from home. He did not want the bother of an infant and the insolence of nurses. It was bad enough with the other child, little Peter, now three years old.

Solitude hardly remembered those first years of her infancy at all. Her earliest dim recollection was of that dreary, drab home, and of that hermetically sealed father of hers, that man who ate at the same table with her and whom she saw for a moment when she went to bed; and of his perfunctory, formal kisses.

Her only companionship was that of little Peter, her brother. But Peter played with her in the strictest sense of the word – that is to say, he did not play in company with her; he played with her as one plays with a toy. She, Solitude, Solita, was his plaything; and he, like the man he was going to be, was a brute. Since his fists were stronger than hers, he always had the right of it.

“You women are no good for anything. It is we men who give orders,” he told her one day.

Solitude was by nature acutely receptive; she had a genius for sensitiveness. Women very often have this receptive genius; but, since it produces nothing, it languishes away without anybody noticing it. At first, crying and cut to the quick, Solitude used to go that Sphinx of a father of hers, expecting justice; but that unswerving man received her with his cold: “All right, all right! Don’t bother me! Give me a kiss, and see this doesn’t happen again!”

That, he thought, settled everything, and saved him from further annoyance. The end of it was that Solitude ceased to complain to her father about her brother’s brutality and bore everything in silence, leaving him in peace and sparing herself the humiliation of those perfunctory kisses.

The dreary drabness of her home grew more and more unbearable, and the shadows that it cast grew deeper. Her only relief from it was at school, where her father had made her a day-boarder, among other things in order to get her more off his hands. At school she learned that all her companions had, or once had, mothers. One evening, at supper, she dared to bother her father with a question.

“Tell me, Father, didn’t I have a mother?”

“Well, what a question!” her father replied; “of course, everybody has a mother. Why do you ask?”

“Then where is my mother, Papa?”

“She died when you were born.”

“Oh, how sad!”

And then, just for once, her father abandoned his boorish taciturnity, and told her that her mother had been called Sanctuary, and sketched for her an outline of that dead woman.

“How pretty she must have been!” said the child.

“Yes,” her father agreed; “yes, but not as pretty as you are.” This remark that he let slip went to the bottom of one of his little idiosyncrasies. If his daughter was prettier than her mother, the fact, in his opinion, was due to himself.

“And what about you, Pedrin,” Solitude, excited by this fugitive stirring of the embers of the family hearth, asked her brother; “do you remember her?”

“Now how could I remember her, when she died when I was only three years old?”

“Well, if I were in your place I should remember her,” the girl replied.

“Oh, of course, you women are so clever!” cut in her would-be-grown-up brother.

“No, we’re not; but I think we have longer memories.”

“All right, all right! Stop talking nonsense and don’t bother me!”

And so ended that memorable night when Solitude learned that she once had a mother. It gave her so much to think about that she could almost remember for herself. She peopled her solitude with maternal dreams.

The years went on, all just the same, all drab and ashen beside that hearth where the fire had gone out. Her father seemed to grow no older, to possess no capacity for growing older. He did the same things at the same times every day, with the regularity of a machine. But her brother began to get himself talked about until he became a byword in the town, and until finally he disappeared – whither, Solitude did not know. Father and daughter were left alone: alone, but separated; they merely ate and slept under the same roof.

At last it seemed that day had dawned in the sky of Solitude. A gallant youth, who for some time had been making eyes at her every time he saw her in the street, scraped an acquaintance with her and presented himself to her as a suitor on approval. Poor Solitude saw Life beginning to open its doors to her; and, despite some presentiments, which she tried in vain to scare away, she accepted him on this basis. It was like a spring-tide.

Solitude began to live – or, rather, she was really born for the first time. The meaning of many things which until now had had no meaning for her was revealed to her. She began to understand much that she had heard from her mistresses and companions at school, much that she had read. Everything seemed to sing inside her. But at the same time she realized all the emptiness of her home, and, if it had not been for that picture of her betrothed that was ever present to her, she would have turned into stone there to match that man of granite, her father.

For poor Solitude this betrothal was a regular dazzling of her eyes. But her father seemed to pay no attention to it, or at least to refuse to pay any attention to it. He never made the slightest allusion to it. If he met his daughter’s betrothed hanging about the railings when he left home during those blissful hours when they arranged to meet, he pretended not to see him.

More than once poor Solitude intended to say something about it to her father when they were at the supper-table together; but the words stuck in her throat before she could utter them. So she said nothing, and kept on saying nothing.

Solitude began to read books which her betrothed gave her. Thanks to him, she began to know something of the world. This young man did not seem to be like other men. He was caressing, gay, unreserved, ironical and sometimes he even contradicted her. But about her father he never said a word.

It was her initiation into life – something to dream about at home. Solitude began, indeed, to glimpse what a real home might mean; homes such as those that her school-mates had. And this knowledge, or rather this sensing, increased her horror of the back-water in which she lived.

Then suddenly one day, when she least expected it, there came the crash. Her betrothed, who had been away for a month, wrote her a long letter, full of endearments, adorned with all kinds of trimmings and twistings, in which, amid all his protestations of affection, he made it clear that their relations must be regarded as at an end. He would up with this terrible sentence: “Perhaps, some day, you will meet somebody who can make you happier than I could.”

Solitude felt an awful shudder go through her very soul. She experienced once more all the brutality, all the indescribably brutality, of mankind – of men, of the male species. But she showed no sign, swallowing her humiliation and her pain in silence and with dry eyes. She would show no weakness in the presence of that Sphinx of a father of hers.

Why – why had her betrothed abandoned her? Had he got tired of her? Again, why? Could a man get tired of being in love? Was it possible that he should get tired? No; the truth was that he had never loved her. Solitude, who had been thirsting for affection since the day she was born, realized that this man had never really loved her. She took refuge in herself, in remembrance of her mother, in the worship of the Virgin. She did not weep. Her pain was too deep for tears; it was a pain that burned and dried up.

One night, at supper, the paternal Sphinx opened his mouth long enough to say: “Well, this seems to be the end of that!” Solitude felt as though he had plunged a sword into her heart. She got up from the table, and rushed to her own room. There, crying, “Mother, my mother!” she collapsed into a spasm of agony; and thereafter the world was a waste for her.

So two years passed, and then one morning they found her father, Don Pedro, dead in his bed. He had had a heart attack. But his daughter, now left alone in the world, did not weep for him.

Solitude was left alone – quite alone. So that her solitariness should be complete, she sold the property that her father had left her, and on the proceeds of this modest fortune she went to live far away, very far away, where nobody knew her and she knew nobody.

Solitude is that woman, today almost an old woman, that simple but dignified woman, whom you see every evening going to take the sun on the banks of the river – that mysterious little woman about whom nobody knows whence she came or who she is. She is that solitary benefactor who, doing good by stealth, relieves all those ills of others that she can relieve. She is that kind little woman from whom there sometimes escapes a bitter saying that betrays an affliction which she keeps to herself.

Nobody knows her history, and there has grown up a legend of a terrible tragedy in her life. But, as you can see for yourself, there was nothing that one could call a tragedy in her life – or, at most, merely that common, that very common tragedy, undramatic, undemonstrative, which destroys so many human lives: the tragedy of solitude.

It is recalled only that, some years ago, Solitude was sought out by a man who looked old, old before his years, bowed as though beneath the weight of vice, who a few days afterwards died in the house of that little old woman. “He was my brother!” That was all she said about him.

And now do you understand what solitude means in the soul of a woman – a woman thirsting for tenderness and hungering for a home? A man in our society has ample scope in which to escape from solitude. But a woman – unless she chooses to shut herself up in a convent – how solitary she can be among us!

That poor little woman, whom you see wandering by the river bank, without aim or object, has experienced all the weight of the brutality of animal egoism of men. What does she think? What has she got to live for? What far-off hope keeps her going?

I have gained the acquaintance – I cannot say the friendship – of Solitude, and I have tried to glimpse her view of life and destiny: what one might call her philosophy. So far I have learned little or nothing about it. All that I have got for her is her story, which I have just told you.

Apart from that, I have heard nothing from her but observations which are full of common sense, but of a common sense that seems cold and ordinary. She is a woman of extraordinary range of literary culture, for she has read very widely, and she is very far-seeing. But she remains extraordinarily susceptible to offensiveness or brutality from any quarter. She leads a solitary life, alone and retired, to avoid the rude elbowings of humanity.

About us men she has a curious idea. Whenever I have succeeded in turning the conversation to the subject of men, all her answer is: “Poor little fellows!” It appears that she pities us, as though we were one of the lowest order of crustaceans. But she has promised me that she will talk to me some time about men and about that great, that greatest, that supreme problem – the relationship between men and women.

“Not the sexual relationship,” she said, “be clear about that; not that, but the general relationship between man and woman, whether they be mother and son, brother and sister, or merely friends, on the one hand; or husband and wife, betrothed, or lovers on the other. The important thing, the essential thing, is the general relationship – the question of how a man regards a woman, whether she be his mother, his daughter, his sister, his wife, or his mistress; and how a woman regards a man, whether he be her father, her son, her brother, her husband, or her lover.” I am still awaiting the day when Solitude will talk to me about this.

Once I was talking to her about the flood of erotic books with which we are overwhelmed today; for one can talk to Solitude about anything, as long as one is careful not to hurt her. When I turned the conversation in this direction she looked at me quizzically out of those big, bright eyes of hers, those perpetually virginal eyes, and, with a shadow of a smile on her lips, she asked me: “Tell me, you eat, don’t you?”

“Well, of course, I eat,” I replied, surprised at her question.

“Very well; if I caught you, a man who eats, reading a cookery book and I had my way, I would send you to the kitchen to scour frying pans.”

And that is all she would say.