

The Solitary

Horacio Quiroga from

Stories of Love, of Madness and of Death (1917)

Kassim was a sickly man, a jeweller by trade even if he did not have an established shop. He worked for the great houses, his speciality being the setting of precious stones. There were few hands like his for delicate settings. With more drive and commercial skill, he would have been rich. But at the age of thirty-five, he continued to work under a window in his room, which was set up as a workshop.

Kassim, with a miserly body and an exhausted face shaded by a sparse black beard, had a beautiful and very passionate wife. The young woman, who came from the streets, had aspired with her beauty to higher ranks.

Provoking men and the neighbourhood talking-girls with her body, she held out until she was twenty. Fearful, at last she apprehensively accepted Kassim.

Then no more dreams of luxury. Her husband, even if a skilful artist, lacked the character to amass wealth. So while the jeweller worked bent over his tongs, she, on her elbows, held her husband in a slow, heavy gaze, only to tear herself away abruptly and follow with her eyes behind the glass the well-to-do passer-by who might have been her husband.

What Kassim earned, nevertheless, was for her. On Sundays he also worked in order to bring her some extra money. When Maria wanted one or other piece of jewellery - and how passionately she wanted them - he worked nights. Then there was a cough and sharp pain on the side but Maria got her diamond chips.

Gradually the daily dealings with the gems came to make her love the work of the

craftsman and she followed with devoted attention the intimate delicacies of the setting. But when a jewel was finished, it had to go, it was not for her. And thus she fell into a deeper disappointment with her marriage.

She would try on the jewel pausing before the mirror. At last she would leave it there and go to her room. Kassim would get up at the sound of her sobs and find her in bed, unwilling to listen.

"I do everything I can for you," he would say sadly at last.

The words provoked more sobbing and so the jeweller would slowly settle back on his bench.

These things were repeated so often that Kassim no longer got up to comfort her. Comfort her! From what?

This, however, did not prevent Kassim from prolonging his evenings even more in order to bring her more.

He was an indecisive, irresolute and silent man. With a heavier stare, his wife's eyes were now fixed on his mute tranquillity.

"And you call yourself a man, you!" she grumbled.

Kassim, bent over his stone settings, did not stop moving his fingers.

- "You are not happy with me, Maria." he said after a while.

- "Happy! And you have the nerve to say that! Who could be happy with you? Not the last of women!... Poor devil!" She finished with a nervous laugh and left.

Kassim worked that night until three o'clock in the morning and then his wife had new chips that she beheld just for a moment with tight lips.

"Yes... It's not a wonderful tiara!... When did you make it?"

"I started on Tuesday," he said looking at her with faded tenderness "while you slept... at night..."

"Oh, you should have gone to bed! Huge... the brilliants!"

Because her passion was the voluminous stones that Kassim mounted, she followed the work with a mad hunger for it to be finished and as soon as the jewels were ready she ran with them to the mirror. Then, a fit of sobbing.

"Anybody, any husband, even the last, would make a sacrifice to flatter his wife! And you... and you... I don't even have a miserable dress to wear!"

When a certain boundary of respect is overstepped, a woman can say unfathomable things to her husband. Kassim's wife crossed that limit with a passion at least equal to the passion she felt for diamonds. One afternoon, while putting away his jewellery, Kassim

noticed a missing brooch - five thousand pesos in two solitaires. He searched through his drawers again.

"Have you seen the brooch, Maria? I left it here."

"Yes, I've seen it."

"Where is it?" He turned around in surprise.

"Here!"

His wife, her eyes alight and her mouth sneering, stood with the brooch on.

"It looks good on you," said Kassim after a while. Let's put it away.

Maria laughed.

"Oh, no, it's mine."

"Is that a joke?"

"Yes, it's a joke! It's a joke, yes! How it hurts you to think that it could be mine...! Tomorrow I'll give it back to you. Today I'm going to the theatre with it." Kassim demurred.

"You're doing wrong... they could see you. They would lose all trust in me."

"Oh..." she groaned with angry annoyance, slamming the door violently behind her. Back from the theatre, she placed the jewel on the bedside table. Kassim got up and locked it in his workshop. When he returned, his wife was sitting on the bed. "So that means that you're afraid that I'll steal it from you. That I'm a thief!"

"Don't look at me like that. You were just being reckless."

"Ah! And to you they entrust the stone! To you, to you! And when your wife asks you for a little flattery, and wants... You call me a thief! You low-life!

She fell asleep at last but Kassim did not sleep.

Then they gave Kassim a solitary to mount, the most admirable brilliant that had ever passed through his hands.

"Look, Maria, what a stone. I have never seen another one like it."

His wife said nothing but Kassim felt her breathing deeply on the solitary. "A marvellous aqua..." He went on, "It must cost nine or ten thousand pesos."

"A ring!" Whispered Maria at last.

"No, it's for a man... a pin!"

To the beat of the solitary's montage, Kassim took on his hard-working back his wife's scorching resentment and frustrated solicitation. Ten times a day she interrupted her husband to go to the mirror with the jewel. Then she would try it on with different outfits. "If you want to do it later, ..." Kassim dared to say. It is an urgent job.

He waited in vain for a reply; his wife was opening the balcony.

"Maria, they could see you!"

"There's your stone!" The solitary, violently ripped off, rolled on the floor.

Livid, Kassim picked it up and examined it, then lifted his eyes from the floor towards his wife.

"Well, why are you looking at me like that? Did your stone do something to itself?"

"No." replied Kassim. And he resumed his work at once although his hands were shaking pitifully.

But he had to get up, at last, to see his wife in the bedroom who was in the throes of a nervous breakdown. Her hair had come undone and her eyes were bulging out.

"Give me the jewel!" She cried, "Give it to me! We'll escape together! It's for me! Give it to me!"

"Maria..." stammered Kassim, trying to get away.

- "Ah, you're the thief, you wretch! You stole my life, thief, thief! And you thought I wasn't going to get even... cuckold! Aha! Look at me... you never thought of that, did you? Ah!" And she put both hands to her throat, choking

herself. But as Kassim was leaving, she jumped off the bed and fell reaching down to grab hold of his shoe.

"It doesn't matter! The brilliant! Give it to me! I don't want anything else! It's mine, Kassim wretch!"

Kassim helped her up, livid.

"You're sick, Maria. We'll talk later... lie down."

"My brilliant!"

"Well, we'll see if it's possible... -Lay down."

"Give it to me!"

The ball climbed back to the throat. Kassim went back to work on his solitaire. As his hands had a mathematical certainty, there were only a few hours left.

Maria got up to eat, and Kassim had the usual solicitude with her. At the end of the meal, his wife looked him straight in the face.

"It's a lie, Kassim" she said.

"Oh," smiled Kassim. "It's nothing.

"I swear it's a lie!" she insisted.

Kassim smiled again, caressing her hand with clumsy affection.

"Hey! I tell you, I don't remember anything."

And he got up to continue his work. His wife, her face in her hands, followed him with her eyes.

"And it tells me no more than that," she murmured. And with a deep nausea for the sticky, flabby and inert thing that was her husband, she went to her room.

She did not sleep well. She woke up late at night and saw light in the workshop; her husband was still working. An hour later, he heard a shriek.

"Give it to me!"

"Yes, it's for you; it won't be long now, Maria," he said hastily and got up. But his wife, after that nightmarish cry, slept again. At two o'clock in the morning, Kassim was able to finish his task; the brilliant shone firm and manly in its setting. With silent steps he went to the bedroom and lit the candle. Maria

slept on her back in the icy whiteness of her nightdress and of the sheet.

He went to the workshop and came back. He gazed for a while at the almost bare breast and with a faded smile he pulled the loosened nightdress a little further aside.

His wife did not feel it.

There was not much light. Kassim's face suddenly took on a hard immobility and suspending for an instant the jewel against her bare breast, he plunged firm and perpendicular as a nail the whole pin into his wife's heart.

There was a sudden opening of the eyes followed by a slow drooping of the eyelids. The fingers arched and nothing more.

The jewel, shaken by the convulsion of the wounded gland, trembled for a moment, unbalanced. Kassim waited a moment and when the solitary was at last perfectly still, he was able to leave, closing the door noiselessly behind himself.

