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## [The Plumed Serpent](#)

[D. H. Lawrence](#)

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### Chapter 8 - Night In The House

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Over the gateway of Kate's house was a big tree called a cuenta tree, because it dropped its fruits, that were little, round, hard balls like little dark marbles, perfect in shape, for the natives to gather up and string for beads, cuentas, or, more particularly, for the Pater Noster beads of the rosary. At night, the little road outside was quite dark, and the dropping of the cuentas startled the silence.

The nights, which at first had seemed perfectly friendly, began to be full of terrors. Fear had risen again. A band of robbers had gathered in one of the outlying villages on the lake, a village where the men had bad characters, as being ready to turn bandit at any moment. And this gang, invisible in the daytime, consisting during the day of lake fishermen and labourers on the land, at night would set off on horseback to sack any lonely, or insufficiently-protected house.

Then the fact that a gang of bandits was out always set the isolated thieves and scoundrels in action. Whatever happened, it would be attributed to the bandits. And so, many an unsuspected, seemingly honest man, with the old lust in his soul, would steal out by night with his machete and perhaps a pistol, to put his fingers in the pie of the darkness.

And again Kate felt the terror clot and thicken in the black silence of the Mexican night, till the sound of a cuenta falling was terrible. She would lie and listen to the thickening darkness. A little way off would sound the long, shrill whistle of the police watch. And in a while, the police patrol, on horseback, would go clattering lightly by. But the police in most countries are never present save where there is no trouble.

The rainy season was coming, and the night-wind rose from the lake, making strange noises in the trees, and shaking the many loose doors of the house. The servants were away in their distant recess. And in Mexico, at night, each little distance isolates itself absolutely, like a man in a black cloak turning his back.

In the morning, Juana would appear from the plaza, her eyes blob-like and inky, and the old, weary, monkey look of subjection to fear settled on her bronze face. A race old in subjection to fear, and unable to shake it off. She would immediately begin to pour forth to Kate, in a babbling, half-intelligent stream, some story of a house broken into and a woman stabbed. And she would say, the owner of the hotel had sent word that it was not safe for Kate to sleep alone in the house. She must go to the hotel to sleep.

The whole village was in that state of curious, reptile apprehension which comes over dark people. A panic fear, a sense of devilment and horror thick in the night air. When blue morning came they would cheer up. But at night, like clotting blood the air would begin to thicken again.

The fear, of course, was communicated from one person to another. Kate was sure that if Juana and her family had not been huddled in reptile terror away at the far end of the house, she herself would have been unafraid. As it was, Juana was like a terror-struck lizard.

There was no man about the place. Juana had two sons, Jesús, who was about twenty, and Ezequiel, about seventeen. But Jesús - she pronounced it Hezoosn - ran the little gasoline motor for the electric light, and he and Ezequiel slept together on the floor of the little engine-house. So that Juana huddled with her two girls, Concha and María, in the den at the end of Kate's house, and seemed to sweat a rank odour of fear.

The village was submerged. Usually the plaza kept alive till ten o'clock, with the charcoal fires burning and the ice-cream man going round with his bucket on his head, endlessly crying: Nieve! Nieve! and the people gossiping on the streets or listening to the young men with guitars.

Now, by nine o'clock, the place was deserted, curiously stony and vacuous. And the Jefe sent out the order that anybody in the streets after ten o'clock would be arrested.

Kate hurried to her house and locked herself in. It is not easy to withstand the panic fear of a black-eyed, semi-barbaric people. The thing communicates itself like some drug on the air, wringing the heart and paralysing the soul with a sense of evil; black, horrible evil.

She would lie in her bed in the absolute dark: the electric light was cut off completely, everywhere, at ten o'clock, and primitive darkness reigned. And she could feel the demonish breath of evil moving on the air in waves.

She thought of the grisly stories of the country, which she had heard. And she thought again of the people, outwardly so quiet, so nice, with a gentle smile. But even Humboldt had said of the Mexicans, that few people had such a gentle smile, and at the same time, such fierce eyes. It was not that their eyes were exactly fierce. But their blackness was inchoate, with a dagger of white light in it. And in the inchoate blackness the blood-lust might arise, out of the sediment of the uncreated past.

Uncreated, half-created, such a people was at the mercy of old black influences that lay in a sediment at the bottom of them. While they were quiet, they were gentle and kindly, with a sort of limpid naiveté. But when anything shook them at the depths, the black clouds would arise, and they were gone again in the old grisly passions of death, blood-lust, incarnate hate. A people incomplete, and at the mercy of old, upstarting lusts.

Somewhere at the bottom of their souls, she felt, was a fathomless resentment, like a raw wound. The heavy, bloody-eyed resentment of men who have never been able to win a soul for themselves, never been able to win themselves a nucleus, an individual integrity out of the chaos of passions and potencies and death. They are caught in the coils of old lusts and old activities as in the folds of a black serpent that strangles the heart. The heavy, evil-smelling weight of an unconquered past.

And under this weight they live and die, not really sorry to die. Clogged and tangled in the elements, never able to extricate themselves. Blackened under a too-strong sun, surcharged with the heavy sundering electricity of the Mexican air, and tormented by the bubbling of volcanoes away below the feet. The tremendous potent elements of the American continent, that give men powerful bodies, but which weigh the soul down and prevent its rising into birth. Or, if a man arrives with a soul, the maleficent elements gradually break it, gradually, till he decomposes into ideas and mechanistic activities, in a body full of mechanical energy, but with his blood-soul dead and putrescent.

So, these men, unable to overcome the elements, men held down by the serpent tangle of sun and electricity and volcanic emission, they are subject to an ever-recurring,

fathomless lust of resentment, a demonish hatred of life itself. Then, the in- striking thud of a heavy knife, stabbing into a living body, this is the best. No lust of women can equal that lust. The clutching throb of gratification as the knife strikes in and the blood spurts out!

It is the inevitable supreme gratification of a people entangled in the past, and unable to extricate itself. A people that has never been redeemed, that has not known a Saviour.

For Jesus is no Saviour to the Mexicans. He is a dead god in their tomb. As a miner who is entombed underground by the collapsing of the earth in the gangways, so do whole nations become entombed under the slow subsidence of their past. Unless there comes some Saviour, some Redeemer to drive a new way out, to the sun.

But the white men brought no salvation to Mexico. On the contrary, they find themselves at last shut in the tomb along with their dead god and the conquered race.

Which is the status quo.

Kate lay and thought hard, in the black night. At the same time, she was listening intensely, with a clutch of horror. She could not control her heart. It seemed wrenched out of place, and really hurt her. She was, as she had never been before, absolute physically afraid, blood afraid. Her blood was wrenched in a paralysis of fear.

In England, in Ireland, during the war and the revolution she had known SPIRITUAL fear. The ghastly fear of the rabble; and during the war, nations were nearly all rabble. The terror of the rabble that, mongrel-like, wanted to break the free SPIRIT in individual men and women. It was the cold, collective lust of millions of people, to break the spirit in the outstanding individuals. They wanted to break this spirit, so that they could start the great downhill rush back to old underworld levels, old gold-worship and murder lust. The rabble.

In those days Kate had known the agony of cold social fear, as if a democracy were a huge, huge cold centipede which, if you resisted it, would dig every claw into you. And the flesh would mortify around every claw.

That had been her worst agony of fear. And she had survived.

Now she knew the real heart-wrench of blood fear. Her heart seemed pulled out of place, in a stretched pain.

She dozed, and wakened suddenly, at a small noise. She sat up in bed. Her doors on to the veranda had shutters. The doors themselves were fastened, but the shutters were open for air, leaving the upper space, like the window of the door, open. And against the dark grey of the night she saw what looked like a black cat crouching on the bottom of the panel-space.

'What is that?' she said automatically.

Instantly, the thing moved, slid away, and she knew it was the arm of a man that had been reaching inside to pull the bolt of the door. She lay for a second paralysed, prepared to scream. There was no movement. So she leaned and lit a candle.

The curious panic fear was an agony to her. It paralysed her and wrenched her heart out of place. She lay prostrate in the anguish of night-terror. The candle blazed duskiy. There was a far-off mutter of thunder. And the night was horrible, horrible. Mexico was ghastly to her beyond description.

She could not relax, she could not get her heart into place. 'Now,' she thought to herself, 'I am at the mercy of this thing, and I have lost myself.' And it was a terrible feeling, to be lost, scattered, as it were, from herself in a horror of fear.

'What can I do?' she thought, summoning her spirit. 'How can I help myself?' She knew she was all alone.

For a long time she could do nothing. Then a certain relief came to her as she thought: 'I am believing in evil. I mustn't believe in evil. Panic and murder never start unless the leading people let slip the control. I don't really believe in evil. I don't believe the old Pan can wrench us back into the old, evil forms of consciousness, unless we wish it. I do believe there is a greater power, which will give us the greater strength, while we keep the faith in it, and the spark of contact. Even the man who wanted to break in here, I don't think he really had the power. He was just trying to be mean and wicked, but something in him would have to submit to a greater faith and a greater power.'

So she reassured herself, till she had the courage to get up and fasten her door-shutters at the top. After which she went from room to room, to see that all was made fast. And she was thankful to realize that she was afraid of scorpions on the floor, as well as of the panic horror.

Now she had seen that the five doors and the six windows of her wing of communicating rooms were fast. She was sealed inside the darkness, with her candle. To get to the other part of the house, the dining-room and kitchen, she had to go outside on the veranda.

She grew quieter, shut up with the dusky glow of her candle. And her heart, still wrenched with the pain of fear, was thinking: 'Joachim said that evil was the lapsing back to old life-modes that have been surpassed in us. This brings murder and lust. But the drums of Saturday night are the old rhythm, and that dancing round the drum is the old savage form of expression. Consciously reverting to the savage. So perhaps it is evil.'

But then again her instinct to believe came up.

'No! It's not a helpless, panic reversal. It is conscious, carefully chosen. We must go back to pick up old threads. We must take up the old, broken impulse that will connect us with the mystery of the cosmos again, now we are at the end of our own tether. We must do it. Don Ramón is right. He must be a great man, really. I thought there WERE no really great men any more: only great financiers and great artists and so on, but no great MEN. He must be a great man.'

She was again infinitely reassured by this thought.

But again, just as she had blown out the candle, vivid flares of white light spurted through all the window-cracks, and thunder broke in great round balls, smashing down. The bolts of thunder seemed to fall on her heart. She lay absolutely crushed, in a kind of quiescent hysterics, tortured. And the hysterics held her listening and tense and abject, until dawn. And then she was a wreck.

In the morning came Juana, also looking like a dead insect, with the conventional phrase: 'How have you passed the night, Niña?'

'Badly!' said Kate. Then she told the story of the black cat, or the man's arm.

'Mire!' said Juana, in a hushed voice. 'The poor innocent will be murdered in her bed. No, Niña, you must go and sleep in the hotel. No, no, Niña, you can't leave your

window shutter open. No, no, impossible. See now, will you go to the hotel to sleep? The other señora does it.'

'I don't want to,' said Kate.

'You don't want to, Niña? Ah! Entonces! Entonces, Niña, I will tell Ezequiel to sleep here outside your door, with his pistol. He has a pistol, and he will sleep outside your door, and you can leave your shutter open, for air in the hot night. Ah, Niña, we poor women, we need a man and a pistol. We ought not to be left alone all the night. We are afraid, the children are afraid. And imagine it, that there was a robber trying to open the bolt of your door! Imagine it to yourself! No, Niña, we will tell Ezequiel at mid-day.'

Ezequiel came striding proudly in, at mid-day. He was a wild, shy youth, very erect and proud, and half savage. His voice was breaking, and had a queer resonance.

He stood shyly while the announcement was being made to him. Then he looked at Kate with flashing black eyes, very much the man to the rescue.

'Yes! yes!' he said. 'I will sleep here on the corridor. Don't have any fear. I shall have my pistol.'

He marched off, and returned with the pistol, an old long-barrelled affair.

'It has five shots,' he said, showing the weapon. 'If you open the door in the night, you must say a word to me first. Because if I see anything move, I shall fire five shots. Pst! Pst!'

She saw by the flash of his eyes WHAT satisfaction it would give him to fire five shots at something moving in the night. The thought of shots being fired at HIM gave him not the least concern.

'And Niña,' said Juana, 'if you come home late, after the light is out, you must call Ezequiel! Because if not, Brumm! Brumm! - and who knows who will be killed!'

Ezequiel slept on a straw mat on the brick veranda outside Kate's door, rolled up in his blanket, and with the pistol at his side. So she could leave her shutter open for air. And the first night she was kept awake once more by his fierce snoring. Never had she heard such a tremendous resonant sound! What a chest that boy must have! It was sound from some strange, savage other world. The noise kept her awake, but there was something in it which she liked. Some sort of wild strength.