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Chapter 3 - Fortieth Birthday

Kate woke up one morning, aged forty. She did not hide the fact from herself, but she kept it dark from the others.

It was a blow, really. To be forty! One had to cross a dividing line. On this side there was youth and spontaneity and 'happiness.' On the other side something different: reserve, responsibility, a certain standing back from 'fun.'

She was a widow, and a lonely woman now. Having married young, her two children were grown up. The boy was twenty-one, and her daughter nineteen. They stayed chiefly with their father, from whom she had been divorced ten years before, in order to marry James Joachim Leslie. Now Leslie was dead, and all that half of life was over.

She climbed up to the flat roofs of the hotel. It was a brilliant morning, and for once, under the blue sky of the distance, Popocatepetl stood aloof, a heavy giant presence under heaven, with a cape of snow. And rolling a long dark roll of smoke like a serpent.

Ixtaccihuatl, the White Woman, glittered and seemed near, but the other mountain, Popocatepetl, stood farther back, and in shadow, a pure cone of atmospheric shadow, with glinting flashes of snow. There they were, the two monsters, watching gigantically and terribly over their lofty, bloody cradle of men, the Valley of Mexico. Alien, ponderous, the white-hung mountains seemed to emit a deep purring sound, too deep for the ear to hear, and yet audible on the blood, a sound of dread. There was no soaring or uplift or exaltation, as there is in the snowy mountains of Europe. Rather a ponderous, white-shouldered weight, pressing terribly on the earth, and murmuring like two watchful lions.

Superficially, Mexico might be all right: with its suburbs of villas, its central fine streets, its thousands of motor-cars, its tennis, and its bridge-parties. The sun shone brilliantly every day, and big bright flowers stood out from the trees. It was a holiday.

Until you were alone with it. And then the undertone was like the low, angry, snarling purring of some jaguar spotted with night. There was a ponderous, down-pressing weight upon the spirit: the great folds of the dragon of the Aztecs, the dragon of the Toltecs winding around one and weighing down the soul. And on the bright sunshine was a dark steam of an angry, impotent blood, and the flowers seemed to have their roots in spilt blood. The spirit of place was cruel, down-dragging, destructive.

Kate could so well understand the Mexican who had said to her: El grito mexicano es siempre el grito del odio - The Mexican shout is always a shout of hate. The famous revolutions, as Don Ramón said, began with Viva! but ended always with Muera! Death to this, death to the other; it was all death! death! death! as insistent as the Aztec sacrifices. Something for ever gruesome and macabre.

Why had she come to this high plateau of death? As a woman, she suffered even more than men suffer: and in the end, practically all men go under. Once, Mexico had had an elaborate ritual of death. Now it has death, ragged, squalid, vulgar, without even the passion of its own mystery.

She sat on a parapet of the old roof. The street beyond was like a black abyss, but around her was the rough glare of uneven flat roofs, with loose telephone wires trailing across, and the sudden, deep, dark wells of the patios, showing flowers blooming in shade.

Just behind was a huge old church, its barrel roof humping up like some crouching animal, and its domes, like bubbles inflated, glittering with yellow tiles, and blue and white tiles, against the intense blue heaven. Quiet native women in long skirts were moving on the roofs, hanging out washing or spreading it on the stones. Chickens perched here and there. An occasional bird soared huge overhead, trailing a shadow. And not far away stood the brownish tower-stumps of the Cathedral, the profound old bell trembling huge and deep, so soft as to be almost inaudible, upon the air.

It ought to have been all gay, allegro, allegretto, in that sparkle of bright air and old roof surfaces. But no! There was the dark undertone, the black, serpent-like fatality all the time.

It was no good Kate's wondering why she had come. Over in England, in Ireland, in Europe, she had heard the consummatum est of her own spirit. It was finished, in a kind of death agony. But still this heavy continent of dark-souled death was more than she could bear.

She was forty: the first half of her life was over. The bright page with its flowers and its love and its stations of the Cross ended with a grave. Now she must turn over, and the page was black, black and empty.

The first half of her life had been written on the bright, smooth vellum of hope, with initial letters all gorgeous upon a field of gold. But the glamour had gone from station to station of the Cross, and the last illumination was the tomb.

Now the bright page was turned, and the dark page lay before her. How could one write on a page so profoundly black?

She went down, having promised to go and see the frescoes in the university and schools. Owen and Villiers and a young Mexican were waiting for her. They set off through the busy streets of the town, where automobiles and the little omnibuses called camiones run wild, and where the natives in white cotton clothes and sandals and big hats linger like heavy ghosts in the street, among the bourgeoisie, the young ladies in pale pink crêpe de chine and high heels, the men in little shoes and American straw hats. A continual bustle in the glitter of sunshine.

Crossing the great shadeless plaza in front of the Cathedral, where the tram-cars gather as in a corral, and slide away down their various streets, Kate lingered again to look at the things spread for sale on the pavement: the little toys, the painted gourd-shells, brilliant in a kind of lacquer, the novedades from Germany, the fruits, the flowers. And the natives squatting with their wares, large-limbed, silent, handsome men looking up with their black, centreless eyes, speaking so softly, and lifting with small sensitive brown hands the little toys they had so carefully made and painted. A strange gentle appeal and wistfulness, strange male voices, so deep, yet so quiet and gentle. Or the women, the small quick women in their blue rebozos, looking up quickly with dark eyes, and speaking in their quick, coaxing voices. The man just setting out his oranges, wiping them with a cloth so carefully, almost tenderly, and piling them in bright tiny pyramids, all neat and exquisite. A certain sensitive tenderness of the heavy blood, a

certain chirping charm of the bird-like women, so still and tender with a bud-like femininity. And at the same time, the dirty clothes, and the unwashed skin, the lice, and the peculiar hollow glint of the black eyes, at once so fearsome and so appealing.

Kate knew the Italian fruit vendors, vigorously polishing their oranges on their coat-sleeves. Such a contrast, the big, handsome Indian, sitting so soft and as it were lonely by the kerb, softly, lingeringly polishing his yellow oranges to a clean gleam, and lingeringly, delicately arranging the little piles, the pyramids for two or three cents each.

Queer work, for a big, handsome, male-looking man. But they seem to prefer these childish jobs.

The University was a Spanish building that had been done up spick and span, and given over to the young artists to decorate. Since the revolutions, nowhere had authority and tradition been so finally overthrown as in the Mexican fields of science and art. Science and art are the sport of the young. Go ahead, my boys!

The boys had gone ahead. But even then, the one artist of distinction was no longer a boy, and he had served a long apprenticeship in Europe.

Kate had seen the reproductions of some of Ribera's frescoes. Now she went round the patios of the University, looking at the originals. They were interesting: the man knew his craft.

But the impulse was the impulse of the artist's hate. In the many frescoes of the Indians there was sympathy with the Indian, but always from the ideal, social point of view. Never the spontaneous answer of the blood. These flat Indians were symbols in the great script of modern socialism, they were figures of the paths of the victims of modern industry and capitalism. That was all they were used for: symbols in the weary script of socialism and anarchy.

Kate thought of the man polishing his oranges half-an-hour before: his peculiar beauty, a certain richness of physical being, a ponderous power of blood within him, and a helplessness, a profound unbelief that was fatal and demonish. And all the liberty, all the progress, all the socialism in the world would not help him. Nay, it would only help further to destroy him.

On the corridors of the University, young misses in bobbed hair and boys' jumpers were going around, their chins pushed forward with the characteristic, deliberate youthfulness and eagerness of our day. Very much aware of their own youth and eagerness. And very American. Young professors were passing in soft amiability, young and apparently harmless.

The artists were at work on the frescoes, and Kate and Owen were introduced to them. But they were men - or boys - whose very pigments seemed to exist only to épater le bourgeois. And Kate was weary of épatisme, just as much as of the bourgeoisie. She wasn't interested in épatant le bourgeois. The épateurs were as boring as the bourgeois, two halves of one dreariness.

The little party passed on to the old Jesuit convent, now used as a secondary school. Here were more frescoes.

But they were by another man. And they were caricatures so crude and so ugly that Kate was merely repelled. They were meant to be shocking, but perhaps the very deliberateness prevents them from being so shocking as they might be. But they were ugly and vulgar. Strident caricatures of the Capitalist and the Church, and of the Rich Woman, and of Mammon painted life-size and as violently as possible, round the patios of the grey old building, where the young people are educated. To anyone with the spark of human balance, the things are a misdemeanour.

'Oh, but how wonderful!' cried Owen.

His susceptibilities were shocked, therefore, as at the bull-fight, he was rather pleased. He thought it was novel and stimulating to decorate your public buildings in this way.

The young Mexican who was accompanying the party was a professor in the University too: a rather short, soft young fellow of twenty- seven or eight, who wrote the inevitable poetry of sentiment, had been in the Government, even as a member of the House of Deputies, and was longing to go to New York. There was something fresh and soft, petulant about him. Kate liked him. He could laugh with real hot young amusement, and he was no fool.

Until it came to these maniacal ideas of socialism, politics, and La Patria. Then he was as mechanical as a mousetrap. Very tedious.

'Oh no!' said Kate in front of the caricatures. 'They are too ugly. They defeat their own ends.'

'But they are meant to be ugly,' said young Garcia. 'They must be ugly, no? Because capitalism is ugly, and Mammon is ugly, and the priest holding his hand to get the money from the poor Indians is ugly. No?' He laughed rather unpleasantly.

'But,' said Kate, 'these caricatures are too intentional. They are like vulgar abuse, not art at all.'

'Isn't that true?' said Garcia, pointing to a hideous picture of a fat female in a tight short dress, with hips and breasts as protuberances, walking over the faces of the poor.

'That is how they are, no?'

'Who is like that?' said Kate. 'It bores me. One must keep a certain balance.'

'Not in Mexico!' said the young Mexican brightly, his plump cheeks flushing. 'In Mexico you can't keep a balance, because things are so bad. In other countries, yes, perhaps you can remain balanced, because things are not so bad as they are here. But here they are so very bad, you can't be human. You have to be Mexican. You have to be more Mexican than human, no? You can't do no other. You have to hate the capitalist, you have to, in Mexico, or nobody can live. We can't live. Nobody can live. If you are Mexican you can't be human, it is impossible. You have to be a socialist Mexican, or you have to be a capitalist Mexican, and you hate. What else is there to be done? We hate the capitalist because he ruins the country and the people. We MUST hate him.'

'But after all,' said Kate, 'what about the twelve million poor - mostly Indians - whom Montes talks about? You can't make them all rich, whatever you do. And they don't understand the very words, capital and socialism. They are Mexico, really, and nobody ever looks at them, except to make a casus belli of them. Humanly, they never exist for you.'

'Humanly they can't exist, they are too ignorant!' cried Garcia. 'But when we can kill all the capitalists, then - '

'You'll find somebody killing YOU,' said Kate. 'No, I don't like it. YOU aren't Mexico. You aren't even Mexican, really. You are just half Spaniards full of European ideas, and you care for asserting your own ideas and nothing else. You have no real bowels of compassion. You are no good.'

The young man listened with round eyes, going rather yellow in the face. At the end he lifted his shoulders and spread his hands in a pseudo-Mediterranean gesture.

'Well! It may be!' he said, with a certain jeering flippancy. 'Perhaps you know everything. Maybe! Foreigners, they usually know everything about Mexico.' And he ended on a little cackling laugh.

'I know what I FEEL,' said Kate. 'And now I want a taxi, and I want to go home. I don't want to see any more stupid, ugly pictures.'

Off she drove back to the hotel, once more in a towering rage. She was amazed at herself. Usually she was so good-tempered and easy. But something about this country irritated her and put her into such a violent anger, she felt she would die. Burning, furious rage.

And perhaps, she thought to herself, the white and half-white Mexicans suffered some peculiar reaction in their blood which made them that they too were almost always in a state of suppressed irritation and anger, for which they MUST find a vent. They MUST spend their lives in a complicated game of frustration, frustration of life in its ebbing and flowing.

Perhaps something came out of the earth, the dragon of the earth, some effluence, some vibration which militated against the very composition of the blood and nerves in human beings. Perhaps it came from the volcanoes. Or perhaps even from the silent, serpent-like dark resistance of those masses of ponderous natives whose blood was principally the old, heavy, resistant Indian blood.

Who knows? But something there was, and something very potent. Kate lay on her bed and brooded on her own organic rage. There was nothing to be done!

But young Garcia was really nice. He called in the afternoon and sent up his card. Kate, feeling sore, received him unwillingly.

'I came,' he said, with a little stiff dignity, like an ambassador on a mission, 'to tell you that I, too, don't like those caricatures. I, too, don't like them. I don't like the young people, boys and girls, no? - to be seeing them all the time. I, too, don't like. But I think, also, that here in Mexico we can't help it. People are very bad, very greedy, no? - they only want to get money here, and they don't care. So we must hate them. Yes, we must. But I, too, I don't like it.'

He held his hat in his two hands, and twisted his shoulders in a conflict of feelings.

Kate suddenly laughed, and he laughed too, with a certain pain and confusion in his laughter.

'That's awfully nice of you to come and say so,' she said, warming to him.

'No, not nice,' he said, frowning. 'But I don't know what to DO. Perhaps you think I am - different - I am not the thing that I am. And I don't want it.'

He flushed and was uncomfortable. There was a curious naïve sincerity about him, since he was being sincere. If he had chosen to play a game of sophistication, he could have played it better. But with Kate he wanted to be sincere.

'I know, really,' laughed Kate, 'you feel a good deal like I do about it. I know you only pretend to be fierce and hard.'

'No!' he said, suddenly making solemn, flashing eyes. 'I do also feel fierce. I do hate these men who take, only take everything from Mexico - money, and all - EVERYTHING! He spread his hands with finality. 'I hate them because I MUST, no? But also, I am sorry - I am sorry I have to hate so much. Yes, I think I am sorry. I think so.'

He knitted his brows rather tense. And over his plump, young, fresh face was a frown of resentment and hatred, quite sincere too.

Kate could see he wasn't really sorry. Only the two moods, of natural, soft, sensuous flow, and of heavy resentment and hate, alternated inside him like shadow and shine on a cloudy day, in swift, unavoidable succession. What was nice about him was his simplicity, in spite of the complication of his feelings, and the fact that his resentments were not personal, but beyond persons, even beyond himself.

She went out with him to tea, and while she was out, Don Ramón called and left cards with the corners turned down, and an invitation to dinner for her and Owen. There seemed an almost old-fashioned correctness in those cards.

Looking over the newspaper, she came on an odd little item. She could read Spanish without much difficulty. The trouble lay in talking it, when Italian got in her way and caused a continual stumble. She looked on the English page of the Excelsior or the Universal for the news - if there was any. Then she looked through the Spanish pages for bits of interest.

This little item was among the Spanish information, and was headed: The Gods of Antiquity Return to Mexico.

'There was a ferment in the village of Sayula, Jalisco, on the Lake of Sayula, owing to an incident of more or less comic nature, yesterday morning towards mid-day. The women who inhabit the shores of the lake are to be seen each day soon after sunrise descending to the water's edge with large bundles. They kneel on the rocks and stones, and in little groups, like water-fowl, they wash their dirty linen in the soft water of the lake, pausing at times as an old canoe sails by with large single sail. The scene is little changed since the days of Montezuma, when the natives of the lake worshipped the spirit of the waters, and threw in little images and idols of baked clay, which the lake sometimes returns to the descendants of the dead idolaters, to keep them in mind of practices not yet altogether forgotten.

'As the hot sun rises in the sky, the women spread their washing on the sand and pebbles of the shore, and retire to the shade of the willow trees that grow so gracefully and retain their verdant hue through the driest season of the year. While thus reposing after their labours, these humble and superstitious women were astonished to see a man of great stature rise naked from the lake and wade towards the shore. His face, they said, was dark and bearded, but his body shone like gold.

'As if unaware of any watchful eyes, he advanced calmly and majestically towards the shore. There he stood a moment, and selecting with his eye a pair of the loose cotton pants worn by the peasants in the fields, that was spread whitening in the sun, he stooped and proceeded to cover his nakedness with the said garment.

'The woman who thus saw her husband's apparel robbed beneath her eye, rose, calling to the man and summoning the other women. Whereupon the stranger turned his dark face upon them, and said in a quiet voice: "Why are you crying? Be quiet! It will be given back to you. Your gods are ready to return to you. Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc, the old gods, are minded to come back to you. Be quiet, don't let them find you crying and complaining. I have come from out of the lake to tell you the gods are coming back to Mexico, they are ready to return to their own home."

'Little comforted by this speech, the woman had lost her washing was overcome and said no more. The stranger then appropriated a cotton blouse, which he donned, and disappeared.

'After a while, the simple women gathered courage to return to their humble dwellings. The story thus reached the ears of the police, who at once set out to search for the thief.

'The story, however, is not yet concluded. The husband of the poor woman of the lake-shore, returning from his labours in the field, approached the gates of the village towards sunset, thinking, no doubt, of nothing but repose and the evening meal. A man in a black serape stepped towards him, from the shadows of a broken wall, and asked: Are you afraid to come with me? The labourer, a man of spirit, promptly replied: No, señor! He therefore followed the unknown man through the broken wall and through the bushes of a deserted garden. In a dark room, or cellar, a small light was burning, revealing a great basin of gold, into which four little men, smaller than children, were pouring sweet-scented water. The astounded peasant was now told to wash and put on clean clothes, to be ready for the return of the gods. He was seated in the golden basin and washed with sweet-smelling soap, while the dwarfs poured water over him. This, they said, is the bath of Quetzalcoatl. The bath of fire is yet to come. They gave him clean clothing of pure white cotton, and a new hat with star embroidery, and sandals with straps of white leather. But beside this, a new blanket, white with bars of blue and black, and flowers like stars at the centre, and two pieces of silver money. Go, he was told. And when they ask you, where did you get your blanket? answer that Quetzalcoatl is young again. The poor fellow went home in sore fear, lest the police should arrest him for possessing stolen goods.

'The village is full of excitement, and Don Ramón Carrasco, our eminent historian and archaeologist, whose hacienda lies in the vicinity, has announced his intention of proceeding as soon as possible to the spot to examine the origin of this new legend. Meanwhile, the police are watching attentively the development of affairs, without taking any steps for the moment. Indeed, these little fantasies create a pleasant diversion in the regular order of banditry, murder, and outrage, which it is usually our duty to report.'

Kate wondered what was at the back of this: if anything more than a story. Yet, strangely, a different light than the common light seemed to gleam out of the words of even this newspaper paragraph.

She wanted to go to Sayula. She wanted to see the big lake where the gods had once lived, and whence they were due to emerge. Amid all the bitterness that Mexico produced in her spirit, there was still a strange beam of wonder and mystery, almost like hope. A strange darkly-iridescent beam of wonder, of magic.

The name Quetzalcoatl, too, fascinated her. She had read bits about the god. Quetzal is the name of a bird that lives high up in the mists of tropical mountains, and has very beautiful tail-feathers, precious to the Aztecs. Coatl is a serpent. Quetzalcoatl is the Plumed Serpent, so hideous in the fanged, feathered, writhing stone of the National Museum.

But Quetzalcoatl was, she vaguely remembered, a sort of fair-faced bearded god; the wind, the breath of life, the eyes that see and are unseen, like the stars by day. The eyes that watch behind the wind, as the stars beyond the blue of day. And Quetzalcoatl must depart from Mexico to merge again into the deep bath of life. He was old. He had gone eastwards, perhaps into the sea, perhaps he had sailed into heaven, like a meteor returning, from the top of the Volcano of Orizaba: gone back as a peacock streaming into the night, or as a bird of Paradise, its tail gleaming like the wake of a meteor. Quetzalcoatl! Who knows what he meant to the dead Aztecs, and to the older Indians, who knew him before the Aztecs raised their deity to heights of horror and vindictiveness?

All a confusion of contradictory gleams of meaning, Quetzalcoatl. But why not? Her Irish spirit was weary of death of definite meanings, and a God of one fixed purport. Gods should be iridescent, like the rainbow in the storm. Man creates a God in his own image, and the gods grow old along with the men that made them. But storms sway in heaven, and the god-stuff sways high and angry over our heads. Gods die with men who have conceived them. But the god-stuff roars eternally, like the sea, with too vast a sound to be heard. Like the sea in storm, that beats against the rocks of living, stiffened men, slowly to destroy them. Or like the sea of the glimmering, ethereal plasm of the world, that bathes the feet and the knees of men as earth-sap bathes the roots of trees. Ye must be born again. Even the gods must be born again. We must be born again.

In her vague, woman's way, Kate knew this. She had lived her life. She had had her lovers, her two husbands. She had her children.

Joachim Leslie, her dead husband, she had loved as much as a woman can love a man: that is, to the bounds of human love. Then she had realized that human love has its limits, that there is a beyond. And Joachim dead, willy nilly her spirit had passed the bounds. She was no longer in love with love. She no longer yearned for the love of a man, or the love even of her children. Joachim had gone into eternity in death, and she had crossed with him into a certain eternity in life. There, the yearning for companionship and sympathy and human love had left her. Something infinitely intangible but infinitely blessed took its place: a peace that passes understanding.

At the same time, a wild and angry battle raged between her and the thing that Owen called life: such as the bull-fight, the tea-party, the enjoyments; like the arts in their modern aspect of hate effusion. The powerful, degenerate thing called life, wrapping one or other of its tentacles round her.

And then, when she could escape into her true loneliness, the influx of peace and soft, flower-like potency which was beyond understanding. It disappeared even if you thought about it, so delicate, so fine. And yet, the only reality.

Ye must be born again. Out of the fight with the octopus of life, the dragon of degenerate or of incomplete existence, one must win this soft bloom of being, that is damaged by a touch.

No, she no longer wanted love, excitement, and something to fill her life. She was forty, and in the rare, lingering dawn of maturity, the flower of her soul was opening. Above all things, she must preserve herself from worldly contacts. Only she wanted the silence of other unfolded souls around her, like a perfume. The presence of that which is forever unsaid.

And in the horror and climax of death-rattles, which is Mexico, she thought she could see it in the black eyes of the Indians. She felt that Don Ramón and Don Cipriano both had heard the soundless call, across all the hideous choking.

Perhaps this had brought her to Mexico: away from England and her mother, away from her children, away from everybody. To be alone with the unfolding flower of her own soul, in the delicate, chiming silence that is at the midst of things.

The thing called 'Life' is just a mistake we have made in our own minds. Why persist in the mistake any further?

Owen was the mistake itself: so was Villiers: so was that Mexico City.

She wanted to get out, to disentangle herself again.

They had promised to go out to dinner to the house of Don Ramón. His wife was away in the United States with her two boys, one of whom had been ill, not seriously, at his school in California. But Don Ramón's aunt would be hostess.

The house was out at Tlalpam. It was May, the weather was hot, the rains were not yet started. The shower at the bullfight had been a sort of accident.

'I wonder,' said Owen, 'whether I ought to put on a dinner-coat. Really, I feel humiliated to the earth every time I put on evening dress.'

'Then don't do it!' said Kate, who was impatient of Owen's kicking at these very little social pricks, and swallowing the whole porcupine.

She herself came down in a simple gown with a black velvet top and a loose skirt of delicate brocaded chiffon, of a glimmering green and yellow and black. She also wore a long string of jade and crystal.

It was a gift she had, of looking like an Ossianic goddess, a certain feminine strength and softness glowing in the very material of her dress. But she was never 'smart.'

'Why you're dressed up to the eyes!' cried Owen in chagrin, pulling at his soft collar. 'Bare shoulders notwithstanding!'

They went out to the distant suburb in the tram-car, swift in the night, with big clear stars overhead, dropping and hanging with a certain gleam of menace. In Tlalpam there was a heavy scent of nightflowers, a feeling of ponderous darkness, with a few sparks of intermittent fireflies. And always the heavy calling of nightflower scents. To Kate, there seemed a faint whiff of blood in all tropical-scented flowers: of blood or sweat.

It was a hot night. They banged on the iron doors of the entrance, dogs barked, and a mozo opened to them, warily, closing fast again the moment they had entered the dark garden of trees.

Don Ramón was in white, a white dinner-jacket: Don Cipriano the same. But there were other guests, young Garcia, another pale young man called Mirabal, and an elderly man in a black cravat, named Toussaint. The only other woman was Doña Isabel, aunt to Don Ramón. She wore a black dress with a high collar of black lace, and some strings of pearls, and seemed shy, frightened, absent as a nun before all these men. But to Kate she was very kind, caressive, speaking English in a plaintive faded voice. This dinner was a sort of ordeal and ritual combined, to the cloistered, elderly soul.

But it was soon evident that she was trembling with fearful joy. She adored Ramón with an uncritical, nun-like adoration. It was obvious she hardly heard the things that were said. Words skimmed the surface of her consciousness without ever penetrating. Underneath, she was trembling in nun-like awareness of so many men, and in almost sacred excitement at facing Don Ramón as hostess.

The house was a fairly large villa, quietly and simply furnished, with natural taste.

'Do you always live here?' said Kate to Don Ramón. 'Never at your hacienda?'

'How do you know I have a hacienda?' he asked.

'I saw it in a newspaper - near Sayula.'

'Ah!' he said, laughing at her with his eyes. 'You saw about the returning of the Gods of Antiquity.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Don't you think it is interesting?'

'I think so,' he said.

'I love the WORD Quetzalcoatl.'

'The WORD!' he repeated.

His eyes laughed at her teasingly all the time.

'What do you think, Mrs Leslie,' cried the pale-faced young Mirabal, in curiously resonant English, with a French accent. 'Don't you think it would be wonderful if the gods came back to Mexico? our own gods?' He sat in intense expectation, his blue eyes fixed on Kate's face, his soup-spoon suspended.

Kate's face was baffled with incomprehension.

'Not those Aztec horrors!' she said.

'The Aztec horrors! The Aztec horrors! Well, perhaps they were not so horrible after all. But if they were, it was because the Aztecs were all tied up. They were in a cul de sac, so they saw nothing but death. Don't you think so?'

'I don't know enough!' said Kate.

'Nobody knows any more. But if you like the WORD Quetzalcoatl, don't you think it would be wonderful if he came back again? Ah, the NAMES of the gods! Don't you think the NAMES are like seeds, so full of magic, of the unexplored magic? Huitzilopochtli! - how wonderful! And Tlaloc! Ah! I love them! I say them over and over, like they say Mani padma Om! in Tibet. I believe in the fertility of sound. Itzpapalotl - the Obsidian Butterfly! Itzpapalotl! But say it, and you will see it does good to your soul. Itzpapalotl! Tezcatlipocá! They were old when the Spaniards came, they needed the bath of life again. But now, re-bathed in youth, how wonderful they must be! Think of Jehovah! Jehovah! Think of Jesus Christ! How thin and poor they sound! Or Jesús Cristo! They are dead names, all the life withered out of them. Ah, it is time now for Jesus to go back to the place of the death of the gods, and take the long bath of being made young again. He is an old-old young god, don't you think?' He looked long at Kate, then dived for his soup.

Kate widened her eyes in amazement at this torrent from the young Mirabal. Then she laughed.

'I think it's a bit overwhelming!' she said, non-committal.

'Ah! Yes! Exactly! Exactly! But how good to be overwhelmed! How splendid if something will overwhelm me! Ah, I am so glad!'

The last word came with a clapping French resonance, and the young man dived for his soup again. He was lean and pale, but burning with an intense, crazy energy.

'You see,' said young Garcia, raising his full, bright dark eyes to Kate, half aggressive and half bashful: 'we must do something for Mexico. If we don't, it will go under, no? You say you don't like socialism. I don't think I do either. But if there is nothing else but socialism, we will have socialism. If there is nothing better. But perhaps there is.'

'Why should Mexico go under?' said Kate. 'There are lots of children everywhere.'

'Yes. But the last census of Porfirio Diaz gave seventeen million people in Mexico, and the census of last year gave only thirteen millions. Maybe the count was not quite right. But you count four million people fewer, in twenty years, then in sixty years there will be no Mexicans: only foreigners, who don't die.'

'Oh, but figures always lie!' said Kate. 'Statistics are always misleading.'

'Maybe two and two don't make four,' said Garcia. 'I don't know if they do. But I know, if you take two away from two, it leaves none.'

'Do you think Mexico might die out?' she said to Don Ramón.

'Why!' he replied. 'It might. Die out and become Americanized.'

'I quite see the danger of Americanization,' said Owen. 'That WOULD be ghastly. Almost better die out.'

Owen was so American, he invariably said these things.

'But!' said Kate. 'The Mexicans look so strong!'

'They are strong to carry heavy loads,' said Don Ramón. 'But they die easily. They eat all the wrong things, they drink the wrong things, and they don't mind dying. They have many children, and they like their children very much. But when the child dies, the parents say: Ah, he will be an angelito! So they cheer up and feel as if they had been given a present. Sometimes I think they enjoy it when their children die. Sometimes I think they would like to transfer Mexico en bloc into Paradise, or whatever lies behind the walls of death. It would be better there!'

There was a silence.

'But how sad you are!' said Kate, afraid.

Doña Isabel was giving hurried orders to the manservant.

'Whoever knows Mexico below the surface, is sad!' said Julio Toussaint, rather sententiously, over his black cravat.

'Well,' said Owen, 'it seems to me, on the contrary, a gay country. A country of gay, irresponsible children. Or rather, they WOULD be gay, if they were properly treated. If they had comfortable homes, and a sense of real freedom. If they felt that they could control their lives and their own country. But being in the grip of outsiders, as they have been for hundreds of years, life of course seems hardly worth while to them. Naturally, they don't care if they live or die. They don't feel FREE.'

'Free for what?' asked Toussaint.

'To make Mexico their own. Not to be so poor and at the mercy of outsiders.'

'They are at the mercy of something worse than outsiders,' said Toussaint. 'Let me tell you. They are at the mercy of their own natures. It is this way. Fifty per cent of the people in Mexico are pure Indian: more or less. Of the rest, a small proportion are foreigners or Spaniard. You have then the mass which is on top, of mixed blood, Indian and Spaniard mixed, chiefly. These are the Mexicans, those with the mixed blood. Now, you take us at this table. Don Cipriano is pure Indian. Don Ramón is almost pure Spaniard, but most probably he has the blood of Tlaxcalan Indians in his veins as well. Señor Mirabal is mixed French and Spanish. Señor Garcia most probably has a mixture of Indian blood with Spanish. I myself have French, Spanish, Austrian, and Indian blood. Very well! Now you mix blood of the same race, and it may be all right. Europeans are all Aryan stock, the race is the same. But when you mix European and American Indian, you mix different blood races, and you produce the half-breed. Now, the half-breed is a calamity. For why? He is neither one thing nor another, he is divided against himself. His blood of one race tells him one thing, his blood of another race tells him another. He is an unfortunate, a calamity to himself. And it is hopeless.'

'And this is Mexico. The Mexicans of mixed blood are hopeless. Well then! There are only two things to be done. All the foreigners and the Mexicans clear out and leave the country to the Indians, the pure-blooded Indians. But already you have a difficulty. How can you distinguish the pure-blooded Indian, after so many generations? Or else the half-breed or mixed-blood Mexicans who are all the time on top shall continue to destroy the country till the Americans from the United States flood in. We are as California and New Mexico now are, swamped under the dead white sea.'

'But let me tell you something further. I hope we are not Puritans. I hope I may say that it depends on the moment of coition. At the moment of coition, either the spirit of the father fuses with the spirit of the mother, to create a new being with a soul, or else nothing fuses but the germ of procreation.'

'Now consider. How have these Mexicans of mixed blood been begotten, for centuries? In what spirit? What was the moment of coition like? Answer me that, and you have told me the reason for this Mexico which makes us despair and which will go on making everybody despair, till it destroys itself. In what spirit have the Spanish and other foreign fathers gotten children of the Indian women? What sort of spirit was it? What sort of coition? And then, what sort of race do you expect?'

'But what sort of a spirit is there between white men and white women!' said Kate.

'At least,' replied the didactic Toussaint, 'the blood is homogeneous, so that consciousness automatically unrolls in continuity.'

'I hate its unrolling in automatic continuity,' said Kate.

'Perhaps! But it makes life possible. Without developing continuity in consciousness, you have chaos. And this comes of mixed blood.'

'And then,' said Kate, 'surely the Indian men are fond of their women! The men seem manly, and the women seem very lovable and womanly.'

'It is possible that the Indian children are pure-blooded, and there is the continuity of blood. But the Indian consciousness is swamped under the stagnant water of the white man's Dead Sea consciousness. Take a man like Benito Juarez, a pure Indian. He floods his old consciousness with the new white ideas, and there springs up a whole forest of verbiage, new laws, new constitutions and all the rest. But it is a sudden weed. It grows like a weed on the surface, saps the strength of the Indian soil underneath, and helps the process of ruin. No, madam! There is no hope for Mexico short of a miracle.'

'Ah!' cried Mirabal, flourishing his wine-glass. 'Isn't that wonderful, when only the miracle will save us! When we must produce the miracle? WE! WE! We must make the miracle!' He hit his own breast emphatically. 'Ah, I think that is marvellous!' And he returned to his turkey in black sauce.

'Look at the Mexicans!' Toussaint flared on. 'They don't care about anything. They eat food so hot with chili, it burns holes in their insides. And it has no nourishment. They live in houses that a dog would be ashamed of, and they lie and shiver with cold. But they don't DO anything. They could make, easily, easily, a bed of maize leaves or similar leaves. But they don't do it. They don't do anything. They roll up in a thin serape and lie on a thin mat on the bare ground, whether it is wet or dry. And Mexican nights are cold. But they lie down like dogs, anyhow, as if they lay down to die. I say dogs! But you will see the dogs looking for a dry sheltered place. The Mexicans, no! Anywhere, nothing, nothing! And it is terrible. It is terrible! As if they wanted to punish themselves for being alive!'

'But then, why do they have so many children?' said Kate.

'Why do they? The same, because they don't care. They don't care. They don't care about money, they don't care about making anything, they don't care about nothing, nothing, nothing. Only they get an excitement out of women, as they do out of chili. They like to feel the red pepper burning holes in their insides, and they like to feel the other thing, the sex, burning holes in them too. But after the moment, they don't care. They don't care a bit.

'And that is bad. I tell you, excuse me, but all, everything, depends on the moment of coition. At that moment many things can come to a crisis: all a man's hope, his honour, his faith, his trust, his belief in life and creation and God, all these things can come to a crisis in the moment of coition. And these things will be handed on in continuity to the child. Believe me, I am a crank on this idea, but it is true. It is certainly absolutely true.'

'I believe it is true,' said Kate, rather coldly.

'Ah! you do! Well then! Look at Mexico! The only CONSCIOUS people are half-breeds, people of mixed blood, begotten in greed and selfish brutality.'

'Some people believe in the mixed blood,' said Kate.

'Ah! They do, do they? Who?'

'Some of your serious-minded men. They say the half-breed is better than the Indian.'

'Better! Well! The Indian has his hopelessness. The moment of coition is his moment of supreme hopelessness, when he throws himself down the pit of despair.'

The Austrian, European blood, which fans into fire of conscious understanding, died down again, leaving what was Mexican in Julio Toussaint sunk in irredeemable gloom.

'It is true,' said Mirabal, out of the gloom. 'The Mexicans who have any feeling always prostitute themselves, one way or another, and so they can never DO anything. And the Indians can never do anything either, because they haven't got hope in anything. But it is always darkest before the dawn. We must make the miracle come. The miracle is superior even to the moment of coition.'

It seemed, however, as if he said it by an effort of will.

The dinner was ending in silence. During the whirl of talk, or of passionate declaration, the servants had carried round the food and wine. Doña Isabel, completely oblivious of the things that were being said, watched and directed the servants with nervous anxiety and excitement, her hands with their old jewellery trembling with agitation. Don Ramón had kept his eye on his guests' material comfort, at the same time listening, as it were, from the back of his head. His big brown eyes were inscrutable, his face impassive. But when he had anything to say, it was always with a light laugh and a teasing accent. And yet his eyes brooded and smouldered with an incomprehensible, unyielding fire.

Kate felt she was in the presence of men. Here were men face to face not with death and self-sacrifice, but with the life-issue. She felt, for the first time in her life, a pang almost like fear, of men who were passing beyond what she knew, beyond her depth.

Cipriano, his rather short but intensely black, curved eyelashes lowering over his dark eyes, watched his plate, only sometimes looking up with a black, brilliant glance, either at whomsoever was speaking, or at Don Ramón, or at Kate. His face was changeless and intensely serious, serious almost with a touch of childishness. But the curious blackness of his eyelashes lifted so strangely, with such intense unconscious maleness from his eyes, the movement of his hand was so odd, quick, light as he ate, so easily a movement of shooting, or of flashing a knife into the body of some adversary, and his dark-coloured lips were so helplessly savage, as he ate or briefly spoke, that her heart stood still. There was something undeveloped and intense in him, the intensity and the crudity of the semi-savage. She could well understand the potency of the snake upon the Aztec and Maya imagination. Something smooth, undeveloped, yet vital in this man suggested the heavy-ebbing blood of reptiles in his veins. That was what it was, the heavy-ebbing blood of powerful reptiles, the dragon of Mexico.

So that unconsciously she shrank when his black, big, glittering eyes turned on her for a moment. They were not, like Don Ramón's, DARK eyes. They were black, as black as jewels into which one could not look without a sensation of fear. And her fascination was tinged with fear. She felt somewhat as the bird feels when the snake is watching it.

She wondered almost that Don Ramón was not afraid. Because she had noticed that usually, when an Indian looked to a white man, both men stood back from actual contact, from actual meeting of each other's eyes. They left a wide space of neutral territory between them. But Cipriano looked at Ramón with a curious intimacy, glittering, steady, warrior-like, and at the same time betraying an almost menacing trust in the other man.

Kate realized that Ramón had a good deal to stand up to. But he kept a little, foiling laugh on his face, and lowered his beautiful head with the black hair touched with grey, as if he would put a veil before his countenance.

'Do you think one can make this miracle come?' she asked of him.

'The miracle is always there,' he said, 'for the man who can pass his hand through to it, to take it.'

They finished dinner, and went to sit out on the veranda, looking into the garden where the light from the house fell uncannily on the blossoming trees and the dark tufts of Yucca and the strange great writhing trunks of the Laurel de India.

Cipriano had sat down next to her, smoking a cigarette.

'It is a strange darkness, the Mexican darkness!' she said.

'Do you like it?' he asked.

'I don't know yet,' she said. 'Do you?'

'Yes. Very much. I think I like best the time when the day is falling and the night coming on like something else. Then, one feels more free, don't you think? Like the flowers that send out their scent at night, but in the daytime they look at the sun and don't have any smell.'

'Perhaps the night here scares me,' she laughed.

'Yes. But why not? The smell of the flowers at night may make one feel afraid, but it is a good fear. One likes it, don't you think?'

'I am afraid of fear,' she said.

He laughed shortly.

'You speak such English English,' she said. 'Nearly all the Mexicans who speak English speak American English. Even Don Ramón does, rather.'

'Yes. Don Ramón graduated in Columbia University. But I was sent to England, to school in London, and then to Oxford.'

'Who sent you?'

'My god-father. He was an Englishman: Bishop Severn, Bishop of Oaxaca. You have heard of him?'

'No,' said Kate.

'He was a very well-known man. He died only about ten years ago. He was very rich, too, before the revolution. He had a big hacienda in Oaxaca, with a very fine library. But they took it away from him in the revolution, and they sold the things, or broke them. They didn't know the value of them, of course.'

'And did he adopt you?'

'Yes! In a way. My father was one of the overseers on the hacienda. When I was a little boy I came running to my father, when the Bishop was there, with something in my hands - so! - and he made a cup of his hand. 'I don't remember. This is what they tell me. I was a small child - three or four years of age - somewhere there. What I had in my hands' was a yellow scorpion, one of the small ones, very poisonous, no?'

And he lifted the cup of his small, slender, dark hands, as if to show Kate the creature.

'Well, the Bishop was talking to my father, and he saw what I had got before my father did. So he told me at once, to put the scorpion in his hat - the Bishop's hat, no? Of course I did what he told me, and I put the scorpion in his hat, and it did not bite me. If it had stung me I should have died, of course. But I didn't know, so I suppose the alacran was not interested. The Bishop was a very good man, very kind. He liked my father, so he became my god-father. Then he always took an interest in me, and he sent me to school, and then to England. He hoped I should be a priest. He always said that the one hope for Mexico was if she had really fine native priests.' He ended rather wistfully.

'And didn't you want to become a priest?' said Kate.

'No!' he said sadly. 'No!'

'Not at all?' she asked.

'No! When I was in England it was different from Mexico. Even God was different, and the Blessed Mary. They were changed so much, I felt I didn't know them any more. Then I came to understand better, and when I understood I didn't believe any more. I used to think it was the images of Jesus, and the Virgin, and the Saints, that were doing everything in the world. And the world seemed to me so strange, no? I couldn't see that it was bad, because it was all so very strange and mysterious, when I was a child, in Mexico. Only in England I learned about the laws of life, and some science. And then when I knew why the sun rose and set, and how the world really was, I felt quite different.'

'Was your god-father disappointed?'

'A little, perhaps. But he asked me if I would rather be a soldier, so I said I would. Then when the revolution came, and I was twenty-two years old, I had to come back to Mexico.'

'Did you like your god-father?'

'Yes, very much. But the revolution carried everything away. I felt I must do what my god-father wished. But I could see that Mexico was not the Mexico he believed in. It was different. He was too English, and too good to understand. In the revolutions I tried to help the man I believed was the best man. So you see, I have always been half a priest and half a soldier.'

'You never married?'

'No. I couldn't marry, because I always felt my god-father was there, and I felt I had promised him to be a priest - all those things, you know. When he died he told me to follow my own conscience, and to remember that Mexico and all the Indians were in the hands of God, and he made me promise never to take sides against God. He was an old man when he died, seventy-five.'

Kate could see the spell of the old Bishop's strong, rather grandiose personality upon the impressionable Indian. She could see the curious recoil into chastity, perhaps characteristic of the savage. And at the same time she felt the intense masculine yearning, coupled with a certain male ferocity, in the man's breast.

'Your husband was James Joachim Leslie, the famous Irish leader?' he asked her: and added: 'You had no children?'

'No. I wanted Joachim's children so much, but I didn't have any. But I have a boy and a girl from my first marriage. My first husband was a lawyer, and I was divorced from him

for Joachim.'

'Did you like him - that first one?'

'Yes. I liked him. But I never felt anything very deep for him. I married him when I was young, and he was a good deal older than I. I was fond of him, in a way. But I - had never realized that one could be more than fond of a man, till I knew Joachim. I thought that was all one could ever expect to feel - that you just liked a man, and that he was in love with you. It took me years to understand that a woman CAN'T love a man - at least a woman like I am can't - if he is only the sort of good, decent citizen. With Joachim I came to realize that a woman like me CAN only love a man who is fighting to CHANGE the world, to make it freer, more alive. Men like my first husband, who are good and trustworthy and who work to keep the world going on well in the same state they found it in, they let you down horribly, somewhere. You feel so terribly sold. Everything is just a sell: it becomes so small. A woman who isn't quite ordinary herself can only love a man who is fighting for something beyond the ordinary life.'

'And your husband fought for Ireland.'

'Yes - for Ireland, and for something he never quite realized. He ruined his health. And when he was dying, he said to me: Kate, perhaps I've let you down. Perhaps I haven't really helped Ireland. But I couldn't help myself. I feel as if I'd brought you to the doors of life, and was leaving you there. Kate, don't be disappointed in life because of me. I didn't really get anywhere. I haven't really got anywhere. I feel as if I'd made a mistake. But perhaps when I'm dead I shall be able to do more for you than I have done while I was alive. Say you'll never feel disappointed!'

There was a pause. The memory of the dead man was coming over her again, and all her grief.

'And I don't feel disappointed,' she went on, her voice beginning to shake. 'But I loved him. And it was bitter, that he had to die, feeling he hadn't - hadn't.'

She put her hands before her face, and the bitter tears came through her fingers.

Cipriano sat motionless as a statue. But from his breast came that dark surging passion of tenderness the Indians are capable of. Perhaps it would pass, leaving him indifferent and fatalistic again. But at any rate for the moment he sat in a dark, fiery cloud of passionate male tenderness. He looked at her soft, wet white hands over her face, and at the one big emerald on her finger, in a sort of wonder. The wonder, the mystery, the magic that used to flood over him as a boy and a youth, when he kneeled before the babyish figure of the Santa Maria de la Soledad, flooded him again. He was in the presence of the goddess, white-handed, mysterious, gleaming with a moon-like power and the intense potency of grief.

Then Kate hastily took her hands from her face and with head ducked looked for her handkerchief. Of course she hadn't got one. Cipriano lent her his, nicely folded. She took it without a word, and rubbed her face and blew her nose.

'I want to go and look at the flowers,' she said in a strangled voice.

And she dashed into the garden with his handkerchief in her hand. He stood up and drew aside his chair, to let her pass, then stood a moment looking at the garden, before he sat down again and lighted a cigarette.