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## [The Plumed Serpent](#)

### [D. H. Lawrence](#)

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## Chapter 4 - To Stay Or Not To Stay

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Owen had to return to the United States, and he asked Kate whether she wanted to stay on in Mexico.

This put her into a quandary. It was not an easy country for a woman to be alone in. And she had been beating her wings in an effort to get away. She felt like a bird round whose body a snake has coiled itself. Mexico was the snake.

The curious influence of the country, pulling one down, pulling one down. She had heard an old American, who had been forty years in the Republic, saying to Owen: 'No man who hasn't a strong moral backbone should try to settle in Mexico. If he does, he'll go to pieces, morally and physically, as I've seen hundreds of young Americans do.'

To pull one down. It was what the country wanted to do all the time, with a slow, reptilian insistence, to pull one down. To prevent the spirit from soaring. To take away the free, soaring sense of liberty.

'There is no such thing as liberty,' she heard the quiet, deep, dangerous voice of Don Ramón repeating. 'There is no such thing as liberty. The greatest liberators are usually slaves of an idea. The freest people are slaves to convention and public opinion, and more still, slaves to the industrial machine. There is no such thing as liberty. You only change one sort of domination for another. All we can do is to choose our master.'

'But surely that IS liberty - for the mass of people.'

'They don't choose. They are tricked into a new form of servility, no more. They go from bad to worse.'

'You yourself - aren't you free?' she asked.

'I?' he laughed. 'I spent a long time trying to pretend. I thought I could have my own way. Till I realized that having my own way meant only running about smelling all the things in the street, like a dog that will pick up something. Of myself, I have no way. No man has any way in himself. Every man who goes along a way is led by one of three things: by an appetite - and I class ambition among appetites; or by an idea; or by an inspiration.'

'I used to think my husband was inspired about Ireland,' said Kate doubtfully.

'And now?'

'Yes! Perhaps he put his wine in old, rotten bottles that wouldn't hold it. No! - Liberty is a rotten old wine-skin. It won't hold one's wine of inspiration or passion any more,' she said.

'And Mexico!' he said. 'Mexico is another Ireland. Ah no, no man can be his own master. If I must serve, I will not serve an idea, which cracks and leaks like an old wine-skin. I will serve the God that gives me my manhood. There is no liberty for a man, apart from the God of his manhood. Free Mexico is a bully, and the old, colonial, ecclesiastical Mexico was another sort of bully. When man has nothing but his WILL to assert - even his good-will - it is always bullying. Bolshevism is one sort of bullying, capitalism another: and liberty is a change of chains.'

'Then what's to be done?' said Kate. 'Just nothing?'

And with her own will, she wanted nothing to be done. Let the skies fall!

'One is driven, at last, back to the far distance, to look for God,' said Ramón uneasily.

'I rather hate this search-for-God business, and religiosity,' said Kate.

'I know!' he said, with a laugh. 'I've suffered from would-be- cocksure religion myself.'

'And you can't REALLY "find God"! she said. 'It's a sort of sentimentalism, and creeping back into old, hollow shells.'

'No!' he said slowly. 'I can't FIND GOD, in the old sense. I know it's a sentimentalism if I pretend to. But I am nauseated with humanity and the human will: even with my own will. I have realized that MY WILL, no matter how intelligent I am, is only another nuisance on the face of the earth, once I start exerting it. And other people's WILLS are even worse.'

'Oh! isn't human life horrible!' she cried. 'Every human being exerting his will all the time - over other people, and over himself, and nearly always self-righteous!'

Ramón made a grimace of repulsion.

'To me,' he said, 'that is just the weariness of life! For a time, it can be amusing: exerting your own will, and resisting all the other people's wills, that they try to put over you. But at a certain point a nausea sets in at the very middle of me: my SOUL is nauseated. My soul is nauseated, and there is nothing but death ahead, unless I find something else.'

Kate listened in silence. She knew the road he had gone, but she herself had not yet come to the end of it. As yet she was still strong in the pride of her own - her very own WILL.

'Oh, people are repulsive!' she cried.

'My own will becomes even more repulsive at last,' he said. 'My own will, merely as my own will, is even more distasteful to me than other people's wills. From being the god in my own machine, I must either abdicate, or die of disgust - self-disgust, at that.'

'How amusing!' she cried.

'It is rather funny,' he said sardonically.

'And then?' she asked, looking at him with a certain malevolent challenge.

He looked back at her slowly, with an ironical light in his eyes.

'Then!' he repeated. 'Then! - I ask, what else is there in the world, besides human will, human appetite? because ideas and ideals are only instruments of human will and appetite.'

'Not entirely,' said Kate. 'They may be disinterested.'

'May they? If the appetite ISN'T interested, the will is.'

'Why not?' she mocked. 'We can't be mere detached blocks.'

'It nauseates me - I look for something else.'

'And what do you find?'

'My own manhood!'

'What does that mean?' she cried, jeering.

'If you looked, and found your own womanhood, you would know.'

'But I HAVE my own womanhood!' she cried.

'And then - when you find your own manhood - your womanhood,' he went on, smiling faintly at her - 'then you know it is not your own, to do as you like with. You don't have it of your own will. It comes from - from the middle - from the God. Beyond me, at the middle, is the God. And the God gives me my manhood, then leaves me to it. I have nothing but my manhood. The God gives it me, and leaves me to do further.'

Kate would not hear any more. She broke off into banalities.

The immediate question, for her, was whether she would stay in Mexico or not. She was not really concerned with Don Ramón's soul - or even her own. She was concerned with her immediate future. Should she stay in Mexico? Mexico meant the dark-faced men in cotton clothes, big hats: the peasants, peons, pelados, Indians, call them what you will. The mere natives.

Those pale-faced Mexicans of the Capital, politicians, artists, professionals, and business people, they did not interest her. Neither did the hacendados and the ranch-owners, in their tight trousers and weak, soft sensuality, pale victims of their own emotional undiscipline. Mexico still meant the mass of silent peons, to her. And she thought of them again, these silent, stiff-backed men, driving their strings of asses along the country roads, in the dust of Mexico's infinite dryness, past broken walls, broken houses, broken haciendas, along the endless desolation left by the revolutions; past the vast stretches of maguey, the huge cactus, or aloe, with its gigantic rosette of upstarting, pointed leaves, that in its iron rows covers miles and miles of ground in the Valley of Mexico, cultivated for the making of that bad-smelling drink, pulque. The Mediterranean has the dark grape, old Europe has malted beer, and China has opium from the white poppy. But out of the Mexican soil a bunch of black-tarnished swords bursts up, and a great unfolded bud of the once-flowering monster begins to thrust at the sky. They cut the great phallic bud and crush out the sperm-like juice for the pulque. Agua miel! Pulque!

But better pulque than the fiery white brandy distilled from the maguey: mescal, tequila: or in the low lands, the hateful sugar-cane brandy, aguardiente.

And the Mexican burns out his stomach with those beastly fire-waters and cauterizes the hurt with red-hot chili. Swallowing one hell-fire to put out another.

Tall fields of wheat and maize. Taller, more brilliant fields of bright-green sugar-cane. And threading in white cotton clothes, with dark, half-visible face, the eternal peon of Mexico, his great white calico drawers flopping round his ankles as he walks, or rolled up over his dark, handsome legs.

The wild, sombre, erect men of the north! The too-often degenerate men of Mexico Valley, their heads through the middle of their ponchos! The big men in Tlascala, selling ice-cream or huge half-sweetened buns and fancy bread! The quick little Indians, quick as spiders, down in Oaxaca! The queer-looking half-Chinese natives towards Vera Cruz! The dark faces and the big black eyes on the coast of Sinaloa! The handsome men of Jalisco, with a scarlet blanket folded on one shoulder!

They were of many tribes and many languages, and far more alien to one another than Frenchmen, English, and Germans are. Mexico! It is not really even the beginnings of a nation: hence the rabid assertion of nationalism in the few. And it is not a race.

Yet it is a people. There is some Indian quality which pervades the whole. Whether it is men in blue overalls and a slouch, in Mexico City, or men with handsome legs in skintight trousers, or the floppy, white, cotton-clad labourers in the fields, there is something mysteriously in common. The erect, prancing walk, stepping out from the base of the spine with lifted knees and short steps. The jaunty balancing of the huge hats. The thrown-back shoulders with a folded serape like a royal mantle. And most of them handsome, with dark, warm-bronze skin so smooth and living, their proudly-held heads, whose black hair gleams like wild, rich feathers. Their big, bright black eyes that look at you wonderingly, and have no centre to them. Their sudden, charming smile, when you smile first. But the eyes unchanged.

Yes, and she had to remember, too, a fair proportion of smaller, sometimes insignificant-looking men, some of them scaly with dirt, who looked at you with a cold, mud-like antagonism as they stepped cattishly past. Poisonous, thin, stiff little men, cold and unliving like scorpions, and as dangerous.

And then the truly terrible faces of some creatures in the city, slightly swollen with the poison of tequila, and with black, dimmed, swivel eyes swinging in pure evil. Never had she seen such faces of pure brutish evil, cold and insect-like, as in Mexico City.

The country gave her a strange feeling of hopelessness and of dauntlessness. Unbroken, eternally resistant, it was a people that lived without hope, and without care. Gay even, and laughing with indifferent carelessness.

They were something like her own Irish, but gone to a much greater length. And also, they did what the self-conscious and pretentious Irish rarely do, they touched her bowels with a strange fire of compassion.

At the same time, she feared them. They would pull her down, pull her down, to the dark depths of nothingness.

It was the same with the women. In their full long skirts and bare feet, and with the big dark-blue scarf or shawl called a rebozo over their womanly small heads and tight round their shoulders, they were images of wild submissiveness, the primitive womanliness of the world, that is so touching and so alien. Many women kneeling in a dim church, all hooded in their dark-blue rebozos, the pallor of their skirts on the floor, their heads and shoulders wrapped dark and tight, as they swayed with devotion of fear and ecstasy! A churchful of dark-wrapped women sunk there in wild, humble supplication of dread and of bliss filled Kate with tenderness and revulsion. They crouched like people not quite created.

Their soft, untidy black hair, which they scratched for lice; the round-eyed baby joggling like a pumpkin in the shawl slung over the woman's shoulder, the never-washed feet and ankles, again somewhat reptilian under the long, flounced, soiled cotton skirt; and then, once more, the dark eyes of half-created women, soft, appealing, yet with a queer void insolence! Something lurking, where the womanly centre should have been; lurking snake-like. Fear! The fear of not being able to find full creation. And the inevitable mistrust and lurking insolence, insolent against a higher creation, the same thing that is in the striking of a snake.

Kate, as a woman, feared the women more than the men. The women were little and insidious, the men were bigger and more reckless. But in the eyes of each, the uncreated centre, where the evil and the insolence lurked.

And sometimes she wondered whether America really was the great death-continent, the great No! to the European and Asiatic, and even African Yes! Was it really the great melting-pot, where men from the creative continents were smelted back again, not to a new creation, but down into the homogeneity of death? Was it the great continent of the undoing, and all its peoples the agents of the mystic destruction! Plucking, plucking at the created soul in a man, till at last it plucked out the growing germ, and left him a creature of mechanism and automatic reaction, with only one inspiration, the desire to pluck the quick out of every living spontaneous creature.

Was that the clue to America? she sometimes wondered. Was it the great death-continent, the continent that destroyed again what the other continents had built up? The continent whose spirit of place fought purely to pick the eyes out of the face of God? Was that America?

And all the people who went there, Europeans, Negroes, Japanese, Chinese, all the colours and the races, were they the spent people, in whom the God impulse had collapsed, so they crossed to the great continent of the negation, where the human will declares itself 'free', to pull down the soul of the world? Was it so? And did this account for the great drift to the New World, the drift of spent souls passing over to the side of Godless democracy, energetic negation? The negation which is the life-breath of materialism. And would the great negative pull of the Americans at last break the heart of the world?

This thought would come to her, time and again.

She herself, what had she come to America for?

Because the flow of her life had broken, and she knew she could not re-start it in Europe.

These handsome natives! Was it because they were death-worshippers, Moloch-worshippers, that they were so uncowed and handsome? Their pure acknowledgment of death and their undaunted admission of nothingness kept so erect and careless.

White men had had a soul, and lost it. The pivot of fire had been quenched in them, and their lives had started to spin in the reversed direction, widdershins. That reversed look which is in the eyes of so many white people, the look of nullity, and life wheeling in the reversed direction. Widdershins.

But the dark-faced natives, with their strange soft flame of life wheeling upon a dark void: were they centreless and widdershins too, as so many white men now are?

The strange, soft flame of courage in the black Mexican eyes. But still it was not knit to a centre, that centre which is the soul of a man in a man.

And all the efforts of white men to bring the soul of the dark men of Mexico into final clinched being has resulted in nothing but the collapse of the white man. Against the soft, dark flow of the Indian the white man at last collapses; with his God and his energy he collapses. In attempting to convert the dark man to the white man's way of life, the white man has fallen helplessly down the hole he wanted to fill up. Seeking to save another man's soul, the white man lost his own, and collapsed upon himself.

Mexico! The great, precipitous, dry, savage country, with a handsome church in every landscape, rising as it were out of nothing. A revolution-broken landscape, with lingering, tall, handsome churches whose domes are like inflations that are going to burst, and whose pinnacles and towers are like the trembling pagodas of an unreal race. Gorgeous churches waiting, above the huts and straw hovels of the natives, like ghosts to be dismissed.

And noble ruined haciendas, with ruined avenues approaching their broken splendour.

And the cities of Mexico, great and small, that the Spaniards conjured up out of nothing. Stones live and die with the spirit of the builders. And the spirit of Spaniards in Mexico dies, and the very stones in the building die. The natives drift into the centre of the plazas again, and in unspeakable empty weariness the Spanish buildings stand around, in a sort of dry exhaustion.

The conquered race! Cortés came with his iron heel and his iron will, a conqueror. But a conquered race, unless grafted with a new inspiration, slowly sucks the blood of the conquerors, in the silence of a strange night and the heaviness of a hopeless will. So that now, the race of the conquerors in Mexico is soft and boneless, children crying in helpless hopelessness.

Was it the dark negation of the continent?

Kate could not look at the stones of the National Museum in Mexico without depression and dread. Snakes coiled like excrement, snakes fanged and feathered beyond all dreams of dread. And that was all.

The ponderous pyramids of San Juan Teotihuacan, the House of Quetzalcoatl wreathed with the snake of all snakes, his huge fangs white and pure to-day as in the lost centuries when his makers were alive. He has not died. He is not so dead as the Spanish churches, this all-enwreathing dragon of the horror of Mexico.

Cholula, with its church where the altar was! And the same ponderousness, the same unspeakable sense of weight and downward pressure of the blunt pyramid. Down

sinking pressure and depression. And the great market-place with its lingering dread and fascination.

Mitla under its hills, in the parched valley where a wind blows the dust and the dead souls of the vanished race in terrible gusts. The carved courts of Mitla, with a hard, sharp-angled, intricate fascination, but the fascination of fear and repulsion. Hard, four-square, sharp-edged, cutting, zig-zagging Mitla, like continual blows of a stone axe. Without gentleness or grace or charm. Oh America, with your unspeakable hard lack of charm, what then is your final meaning? Is it forever the knife of sacrifice, as you put out your tongue at the world?

Charmless America! With your hard, vindictive beauty, are you waiting forever to smite death? Is the world your everlasting victim?

So long as it will let itself be victimized.

But yet! But yet! The gentle voices of the natives. The voice of the boys, like birds twittering among the trees of the plaza of Tehuacan! The soft touch, the gentleness. Was it the dark-fingered quietness of death, and the music of the presence of death in their voices?

She thought again of what Don Ramón had said to her.

'They pull you down! Mexico pulls you down, the people pull you down like a great weight! But it may be they pull you down as the earth's pull of gravitation does, that you can balance on your feet. Maybe they draw you down as the earth draws down the roots of a tree, so that it may be clinched deep in soil. Men are still part of the Tree of Life, and the roots go down to the centre of the earth. Loose leaves, and aeroplanes, blow away on the wind, in what they call freedom. But the Tree of Life has fixed, deep, gripping roots.

'It may be you need to be drawn down, down, till you send roots into the deep places again. Then you can send up the sap and the leaves back to the sky, later.

'And to me, the men in Mexico are like trees, forests that the white men felled in their coming. But the roots of the trees are deep and alive and forever sending up new shoots.

'And each new shoot that comes up overthrows a Spanish church or an American factory. And soon the dark forest will rise again, and shake the Spanish buildings from the face of America.

'All that matters to me are the roots that reach down beyond all destruction. The roots and the life are there. What else it needs is the word, for the forest to begin to rise again. And some man among men must speak the word.'

The strange doom-like sound of the man's words! But in spite of the sense of doom on her heart, she would not go away yet. She would stay longer in Mexico.