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Chapter 5 - The Lake

Owen left, Villiers stayed on a few days to escort Kate to the lake. If she liked it there, and could find a house, she could stay by herself. She knew sufficient people in Mexico and in Guadalajara to prevent her from being lonely. But she still shrank from travelling alone in this country.

She wanted to leave the city. The new President had come in quietly enough, but there was an ugly feeling of uppishness in the lower classes, the bottom dog clambering mangily to the top. Kate was no snob. Man or woman, she cared nothing about the social class. But meanness, sordidness she hated. She hated bottom dogs. They all were mangy, they all were full of envy and malice, many had the rabies. Ah no, let us defend ourselves from the bottom dog, with its mean growl and its yellow teeth.

She had tea with Cipriano before leaving.

'How do you get along with the Government?' she asked.

'I stand for the law and the constitution,' he said. 'They know I don't want anything to do with cuartelazos or revolutions. Don Ramón is my chief.'

'In what way?'

'Later, you will see.'

He had a secret, important to himself, on which he was sitting tight. But he looked at her with shining eyes, as much as to say that soon she would share the secret, and then he would be much happier.

He watched her curiously, from under his wary black lashes. She was one of the rather plump Irishwomen, with soft brown hair and hazel eyes, and a beautiful, rather distant repose. Her great charm was her soft repose, and her gentle, unconscious inaccessibility. She was taller and bigger than Cipriano: he was almost boyishly small. But he was all energy, and his eyebrows tilted black and with a barbarian conceit, above his full, almost insolent black eyes.

He watched her continually, with a kind of fascination: the same spell that the absurd little figures of the doll Madonna had cast over him as a boy. She was the mystery, and he the adorer, under the semi-ecstatic spell of the mystery. But once he rose from his knees, he rose in the same strutting conceit of himself as before he knelt: with all his adoration in his pocket again. But he had a good deal of magnetic power. His education had not diminished it. His education lay like a film of white oil on the black lake of his barbarian consciousness. For this reason, the things he said were hardly interesting at all. Only what he WAS. He made the air around him seem darker, but richer and fuller. Sometimes his presence was extraordinarily grateful, like a healing of the blood. And sometimes he was an intolerable weight on her. She gasped to get away from him.

'You think a great deal of Don Ramón?' she said to him.

'Yes,' he said, his black eyes watching her. 'He is a very fine man.'

How trivial the words sounded! That was another boring thing about him: his English seemed so trivial. He wasn't really expressing himself. He was only flipping at the white oil that lay on his surface.

'You like him better than the Bishop, your god-father?'

He lifted his shoulders in a twisted, embarrassed shrug.

'The same!' he said. 'I like him the same.'

Then he looked away into the distance, with a certain hauteur and insolence.

'Very different, no?' he said. 'But in some ways, the same. He knows better what is Mexico. He knows better what I am. Bishop Severn did not know the real Mexico: how could he, he was a sincere Catholic! But Don Ramón knows the real Mexico, no?'

'And what is the real Mexico?' she asked.

'Well - you must ask Don Ramón. I can't explain.'

She asked Cipriano about going to the lake.

'Yes!' he said. 'You can go! You will like it. Go first to Orilla, no? - you take a ticket on the railway to Ixtlahuacan. And in Orilla is an hotel with a German manager. Then from Orilla you can go in a motor-boat, in a few hours, to Sayula. And there you will find a house to live in.'

He wanted her to do this, she could tell.

'How far is Don Ramón's hacienda from Sayula?' she asked.

'Near! About an hour in a boat. He is there now. And at the beginning of the month I am going with my division to Guadalajara: now there is a new Governor. So I shall be quite near too.'

'That will be nice,' she said.

'You think so?' he asked quickly.

'Yes,' she said, on her guard, looking at him slowly. 'I should be sorry to lose touch with Don Ramón and you.'

He had a little tension on his brow, haughty, unwilling, conceited, and at the same time, yearning and desirous.

'You like Don Ramón very much?' he said. 'You want to know him more?'

There was a peculiar anxiety in his voice.

'Yes,' she said. 'One knows so few people in the world nowadays, that one can respect - and fear a little. I am a little afraid of Don Ramón: and I have the GREATEST respect for him - ' She ended on a hot note of sincerity.

'It is good!' he said. 'It is very good. You may respect him more than any other man in the world.'

'Perhaps that is true,' she said, turning her eyes slowly to his.

'Yes! Yes!' he cried impatiently. 'It is true. You will find out later. And Ramón likes you. He told me to ask you to come to the lake. When you come to Sayula, when you are coming, write to him, and no doubt he can tell you about a house, and all those things.'

'Shall I?' she said, hesitant.

'Yes. Yes! of course, we say what we mean.'

Curious little man, with his odd, inflammable hauteur and conceit, something burning inside him, that gave him no peace. He had an almost childish faith in the other man. And yet she was not sure that he did not, in some corner of his soul, resent Ramón somewhat.

Kate set off by the night train for the west, with Villiers. The one Pullman coach was full: people going to Guadalajara and Colima and the coast. There were three military officers, rather shy in their new uniforms, and rather swaggering at the same time, making eyes at the empty air, as if they felt they were conspicuous, and sitting quickly in their seats, as if to obliterate themselves. There were two country farmers or ranchers, in tight trousers and cartwheel hats stitched with silver. One was a tall man with a big moustache, the other was a smaller, grey man. But they both had the handsome, alive legs of the Mexicans, and the rather quenched faces. There was a widow buried in crape, accompanied by a criada, a maid. The rest were townsmen, Mexicans on business, at once shy and fussy, unobtrusive and self-important.

The Pullman was clean and neat, with its hot green-plush seats. But, full of people, it seemed empty compared with a Pullman in the United States. Everybody was very quiet, very soft and guarded. The farmers folded their beautiful serapes and laid them carefully on the seats, sitting as if their section were a lonely little place. The officers folded their cloaks and arranged dozens of little parcels, little cardboard hatboxes and heterogeneous bundles, under the seats and on the seats. The business men had the oddest luggage, canvas hold-alls embroidered in wool, with long, touching mottoes.

And in all the crowd a sense of guardedness and softness and self-effacement: a curious soft sensibilité, touched with fear. It was already a somewhat conspicuous thing to travel in the Pullman; you had to be on your guard.

The evening for once was grey: the rainy season really approaching. A sudden wind whirled dust and a few spots of rain. The train drew out of the formless, dry, dust-smitten areas fringing the city, and wound mildly on for a few minutes, only to stop in the main street of Tacubaya, the suburb-village. In the grey approach of evening the train halted heavily in the street, and Kate looked out at the men who stood in groups, with their hats tilted against the wind and their blankets folded over their shoulders and up to their eyes, against the dust, motionless, standing like sombre ghosts, only a glint of eyes showing between the dark serape and the big hat-brim; while donkey-drivers in a dust-cloud ran frantically, with uplifted arms like demons, uttering short, sharp cries to prevent their donkeys from poking in between the coaches of the train. Silent dogs trotted in-and-out under the train, women, their faces wrapped in their blue rebozos, came to offer tortillas folded in a cloth to keep them warm, or pulque in an earthenware mug, or pieces of chicken smothered in red, thick, oily sauce; or oranges or bananas or pitahayas, anything. And when few people bought, because of the dust, the women put their wares under their arm, under the blue rebozo, and covered their faces and motionless watched the train.

It was about six o'clock. The earth was utterly dry and stale. Somebody was kindling charcoal in front of a house. Men were hurrying down the wind, balancing their great hats curiously. Horsemen on quick, fine little horses, guns slung behind, trotted up to the train, lingered, then trotted quickly away again into nowhere.

Still the train stood in the street. Kate and Villiers got down. They watched the sparks blowing from the charcoal which a little girl was kindling in the street, to cook tortillas.

The train had a second-class coach and a first-class. The second class was jam-full of peasants, Indians, piled in like chickens with their bundles and baskets and bottles, endless things. One woman had a fine peacock under her arm. She put it down and in vain tried to suppress it beneath her voluminous skirts. It refused to be suppressed. She took it up and balanced it on her knee and looked round again over the medley of jars, baskets, pumpkins, melons, guns, bundles, and human beings.

In the front was a steel car with a guard of little scrubby soldiers in their dirty cotton uniforms. Some soldiers were mounted on top of the train with their guns: the look-out.

And the whole train, seething with life, was curiously still, subdued. Perhaps it is the perpetual sense of danger which makes the people so hushed, without clamour or stridency. And with an odd, hushed politeness among them. A sort of demon-world.

At last the train moved on. If it had waited forever, no one would have been deeply surprised. For what might not be ahead? Rebels, bandits, bridges blown up - anything.

However, quietly, stealthily, the train moved out and along the great weary valley. The circling mountains, so relentless, were invisible save near at hand. In a few broken adobe huts a bit of fire sparked red. The adobe was grey-black, of the lava dust, depressing. Into the distance the fields spread dry, with here and there patches of green irrigation. There was a broken hacienda with columns that supported nothing. Darkness was coming, dust still blew in the shadow; the valley seemed encompassed in a dry, stale, weary gloom.

Then there came a heavy shower. The train was passing a pulque hacienda. The rows of the giant maguey stretched bristling their iron-black barbs in the gloom.

All at once, the lights came on, the Pullman attendant came swiftly lowering the blinds, so that the brilliance of the windows should attract no bullets from the dark

outside.

There was a poor little meal at exorbitant prices, and when this was cleared away, the attendant came with a crash to make the beds, pulling down the upper berths. It was only eight o'clock, and the passengers looked up in resentment. But no good. The pug-faced Mexican in charge, and his smallpox-pitted assistant, insolently came in between the seats, inserted the key overhead, and brought down the berth with a crash. And the Mexican passengers humbly crawled away to the smoking-room or the toilet, like whipped dogs.

At half-past eight everybody was silently and with intense discretion going to bed. None of the collar-stud-snapping bustle and 'homely' familiarity of the United States. Like subdued animals they all crept in behind their green serge curtains.

Kate hated a Pullman, the discreet indiscretion, the horrible nearness of other people, like so many larvae in so many sections, behind the green serge curtains. Above all, the horrible intimacy of the noise of going to bed. She hated to undress, struggling in the oven of her berth, with her elbow butting into the stomach of the attendant who was buttoning up the green curtain outside.

And yet, once she was in bed and could put out her light and raise the window-blind, she had to admit it was better than a wagon-lit in Europe: and perhaps the best that can be done for people who must travel through the night in trains.

There was a rather cold wind, after the rain, up there on that high plateau. The moon had risen, the sky was clear. Rocks, and tall organ cactus, and more miles of maguey. Then the train stopped at a dark little station on the rim of the slope, where men swathed in dark serapes held dusky, ruddy lanterns that lit up no faces at all, only dark gaps. Why did the train stay so long? Was something wrong?

At last they were going again. Under the moon she saw beyond her a long downslope of rocks and cactus, and in the distance below, the lights of a town. She lay in her berth watching the train wind slowly down the wild, rugged slope. Then she dozed.

To wake at a station that looked like a quiet inferno, with dark faces coming near the windows, glittering eyes in the half-light, women in their rebozos running along the train balancing dishes of meat, tamales, tortillas on one hand, black-faced men with fruit and sweets, and all calling in a subdued, intense, hushed hubbub. Strange and glaring, she saw eyes at the dark screen of the Pullman, sudden hands thrusting up something to sell. In fear, Kate dropped her window. The wire screen was not enough.

The platform below the Pullman was all dark. But at the back of the train she could see the glare of the first-class windows, on the dark station. And a man selling sweetmeats - Cajetas! Cajetas! La de Celaya!

She was safe inside the Pullman, with nothing to do but to listen to an occasional cough behind the green curtains, and to feel the faint bristling apprehension of all the Mexicans in their dark berths. The dark Pullman was full of a subdued apprehension, fear lest there might be some attack on the train.

She went to sleep and woke at a bright station: probably Queretaro. The green trees looked theatrical in the electric light. Opales! she heard the men calling softly. If Owen had been there he would have got up in his pyjamas to buy opals. The call would have been too strong.

She slept fitfully, in the shaken saloon, vaguely aware of stations and the deep night of the open country. Then she started from a complete sleep. The train was dead still, no sound. Then a tremendous jerking as the Pullman was shunted. It must be Irapuato, where they branched to the west.

She would arrive at Ixtlahuacan soon after six in the morning. The man woke her at daybreak, before the sun had risen. Dry country with mesquite bushes, in the dawn: then green wheat alternating with ripe wheat. And men already in the pale, ripened wheat reaping with sickles, cutting short little handfuls from the short straw. A bright sky, with a bluish shadow on earth. Parched slopes with ragged maize stubble. Then a forlorn hacienda and a man on horseback, in a blanket, driving a silent flock of cows, sheep, bulls, goats, lambs, rippling a bit ghostly in the dawn, from under a tottering archway. A long canal beside the railway, a long canal paved with bright green leaves from which poked the mauve heads of the lirio, the water hyacinth. The sun was lifting up, red. In a moment it was the full, dazzling gold of a Mexican morning.

Kate was dressed and ready, sitting facing Villiers, when they came to Ixtlahuacan. The man carried out her bags. The train drifted in to a desert of a station. They got down. It was a new day.

In the powerful light of morning, under a turquoise-blue sky, she gazed at the helpless-looking station, railway lines, some standing trucks, and a remote lifelessness. A boy seized their bags and ran across the lines to the station yard, which was paved with cobblestones, but overgrown with weeds. At one side stood an old tram-car with two mules, like a relic. One or two men, swathed up to the eyes in scarlet blankets, were crossing on silent white legs.

'Adonde?' said the boy.

But Kate went to see her big luggage taken out. It was all there.

'Orilla Hotel,' said Kate.

The boy said they must go in the tram-car, so in the tram-car they went. The driver whipped his mules, they rolled in the still, heavy morning light away down an uneven cobbled road with holes in it, between walls with falling mortar and low, black adobe houses, in the peculiar VACUOUS depression of a helpless little Mexican town, towards the plaza. The strange emptiness, everything empty of life!

Occasional men on horseback clattered suddenly by, occasional big men in scarlet serapes went noiselessly on their own way, under the big hats. A boy on a high mule was delivering milk from red globe-shaped jars slung on either side his mount. The street was stony, uneven, vacuous, sterile. The stones seemed dead, the town seemed made of dead stone. The human life came with a slow, sterile unwillingness, in spite of the low-hung power of the sun.

At length they were in the plaza, where brilliant trees flowered in a blaze of pure scarlet, and some in pure lavender, around the basins of milk-looking water. Milky-dim the water bubbled up in the basins, and women, bleary with sleep, uncombed, came from under the dilapidated arches of the portales, and across the broken pavement, to fill their water-jars.

The tram stopped and they got down. The boy got down with the bags, and told them they must go to the river to take a boat.

They followed obediently down the smashed pavements, where every moment you might twist your ankle or break your leg. Everywhere the same weary indifference and brokenness, a sense of dirt and of helplessness, squalor of far-gone indifference, under the perfect morning sky, in the pure sunshine and the pure Mexican air. The sense of life ebbing away, leaving dry ruin.

They came to the edge of the town, to a dusty, humped bridge, a broken wall, a pale-brown stream flowing full. Below the bridge a cluster of men.

Each one wanted her to hire his boat. She demanded a motor-boat: the boat from the hotel. They said there wasn't one. She didn't believe it. Then a dark-faced fellow with his black hair down his forehead, and a certain intensity in his eyes, said: Yes, yes; the hotel had a boat, but it was broken. She must take a row-boat. In an hour and a half he would row her there.

'How long?' said Kate.

'An hour and a half.'

'And I am so hungry!' cried Kate. 'How much do you charge?'

'Two pesos.' He held up two fingers.

Kate said yes, and he ran down to his boat. Then she noticed he was a cripple with inturned feet. But how quick and strong!

She climbed with Villiers down the broken bank to the river, and in a moment they were in the boat. Pale green willow-trees fringed from the earthen banks to the fuller-flowing, pale-brown water. The river was not very wide, between deep banks. They slipped under the bridge, and past a funny high barge with rows of seats. The boatman said it went up the river to Jocotlan: and he waved his hand to show the direction. They were slipping down-stream, between lonely banks of willow-trees.

The crippled boatman was pulling hard, with great strength and energy. When she spoke to him in her bad Spanish and he found it hard to understand, he knitted his brow a little, anxiously. And when she laughed he smiled at her with such a beautiful gentleness, sensitive, wistful, quick. She felt he was naturally honest and truthful, and generous. There was a beauty in these men, a wistful beauty and a great physical strength. Why had she felt so bitterly about the country?

Morning was still young on the pale buff river, between the silent earthen banks. There was a blue dimness in the lower air, and black water-fowl ran swiftly, unconcernedly back and forth from the river's edge, on the dry, baked banks that were treeless now, and wider. They had entered a wide river, from the narrow one. The blueness and moistness of the dissolved night seemed to linger under the scattered pepper-trees of the far shore.

The boatman rowed short and hard upon the flimsy, soft, sperm-like water, only pausing at moments swiftly to smear the sweat from his face with an old rag he kept on the bench beside him. The sweat ran from his bronze-brown skin like water, and the black hair on his high-domed, Indian head smoked with wetness.

'There is no hurry,' said Kate, smiling to him.

'What does the Señorita say?'

'There is no hurry,' she repeated.

He paused, smiling, breathing deeply, and explained that now he was rowing against stream. This wider river flowed out of the lake, full and heavy. See! even as he rested a moment, the boat began to turn and drift! He quickly took his oars.

The boat moved slowly, in the hush of departed night, upon the soft, full-flowing buff water, that carried little tufts of floating water-hyacinth. Some willow-trees stood near the edge, and some pepper-trees of most delicate green foliage. Beyond the trees and the level of the shores, big hills rose up to high, blunt points, baked incredibly dry, like biscuit. The blue sky settled against them nakedly; they were leafless and lifeless save for the iron-green shafts of the organ cactus, that glistened blackly, yet atmospherically, in the ochreous aridity. This was Mexico again, stark-dry and luminous with powerful light, cruel and unreal.

On a flat near the river a peon, perched on the rump of his ass, was slowly driving five luxurious cows towards the water to drink. The big black-and-white animals stepped in a dream-pace past the pepper-trees to the bank, like moving pieces of light-and-shade: the dun cows trailed after, in the incredible silence and brilliance of the morning.

Earth, air, water were all silent with new light, the last blue of night dissolving like a breath. No sound, even no life. The great light was stronger than life itself. Only, up in the blue, some turkey-buzzards were wheeling with dirty-edged wings, as everywhere in Mexico.

'Don't hurry!' Kate said again to the boatman, who was again mopping his face, while his black hair ran sweat. 'We can go slowly.'

The man smiled deprecatingly.

'If the Señorita will sit in the back,' he said.

Kate did not understand his request at first. He had rowed in towards a bend in the right bank, to be out of the current. On the left bank Kate had noticed some men bathing: men whose wet skins flashed with the beautiful brown-rose colour and glitter of the naked natives, and one stout man with the curious creamy-biscuit skin of the city Mexicans. Low against the water across-stream she watched the glitter of naked men, half-immersed in the river.

She rose to step back into the stern of the boat, where Villiers was. As she did so, she saw a dark head and the flashing ruddy shoulders of a man swimming towards the boat. She wavered - and as she was sitting down, the man stood up in the water and was wading near, the water washing at the loose little cloth he had round his loins. He was smooth and wet and of a lovely colour, with the rich smooth-muscle physique of the Indians. He was coming towards the boat, pushing back his hair from his forehead.

The boatman watched him, transfixed, without surprise, a little subtle half-smile, perhaps of mockery, round his nose. As if he had expected it!

'Where are you going?' asked the man in the water, the brown river running softly at his strong thighs.

The boatman waited a moment for his patrons to answer, then, seeing they were silent, replied in a low, unwilling tone:

'Orilla.'

The man in the water took hold of the stern of the boat, as the boatman softly touched the water with the oars to keep her straight, and he threw back his longish black hair with a certain effrontery.

'Do you know whom the lake belongs to?' he asked, with the same effrontery.

'What do you say?' asked Kate, haughtily.

'If you know whom the lake belongs to?' the young man in the water repeated.

'To whom?' said Kate, flustered.

'To the old gods of Mexico,' the stranger said. 'You have to make a tribute to Quetzalcoatl if you go on the lake.'

The strange calm effrontery of it! But truly Mexican.

'How?' said Kate.

'You can give me something,' he said.

'But why should I give something to you, if it is a tribute to Quetzalcoatl?' she stammered.

'I am Quetzalcoatl's man, I,' he replied, with calm effrontery.

'And if I don't give you anything?' she said.

He lifted his shoulders and spread his free hand, staggering a little, losing his footing in the water as he did so.

'If you wish to make an enemy of the lake - ' he said, coolly, as he recovered his balance.

And then for the first time he looked straight at her. And as he did so, the demonish effrontery died down again, and the peculiar American tension slackened and left him.

He gave a slight wave of dismissal with his free hand, and pushed the boat gently forward.

'But it doesn't matter,' he said, with a slight insolent jerk of his head sideways, and a faint, insolent smile. 'We will wait till the Morning Star rises.'

The boatman softly but powerfully pulled the oars. The man in the water stood with the sun on his powerful chest, looking after the boat in half-seeing abstraction. His eyes had taken again the peculiar gleaming far-awayness, suspended between the realities, which, Kate suddenly realized, was the central look in the native eyes. The boatman, rowing away, was glancing back at the man who stood in the water, and his face, too, had the abstracted, transfigured look of a man perfectly suspended between the world's two strenuous wings of energy. A look of extraordinary, arresting beauty, the silent, vulnerable centre of all life's quivering, like the nucleus gleaming in tranquil suspense, within a cell.

'What does he mean,' said Kate, 'by "We will wait till the Morning Star rises"?"

The man smiled slowly.

'It is a name,' he said.

And he seemed to know no more. But the symbolism had evidently the power to soothe and sustain him.

'Why did he come and speak to us?' asked Kate.

'He is one of those of the god Quetzalcoatl, Señorita.'

'And you? are you one too?"

'Who knows!' said the man, putting his head on one side. Then he added: 'I think so. We are many.'

He watched Kate's face with that gleaming, intense semi- abstraction, a gleam that hung unwavering in his black eyes, and which suddenly reminded Kate of the morning star, or the evening star, hanging perfect between night and the sun.

'You have the morning star in your eyes,' she said to the man.

He flashed her a smile of extraordinary beauty.

'The Señorita understands,' he said.

His face changed again to a dark-brown mask, like semi-transparent stone, and he rowed with all his might. Ahead, the river was widening, the banks were growing lower, down to the water's level, like shoals planted with willow-trees and with reeds. Above the willow-trees a square white sail was standing, as if erected on the land.

'Is the lake so near?' said Kate.

The man hastily mopped his running wet face.

'Yes, Señorita! The sailing-boats are waiting for the wind, to come into the river. We will pass by the canal.'

He indicated with a backward movement of the head a narrow, twisting passage of water between deep reeds. It made Kate think of the little river Anapo: the same mystery unbroken. The boatman, with creases half of sadness and half of exaltation in his bronze, still face, was pulling with all his might. Water-fowl went swimming into the reeds, or rose on wing and wheeled into the blue air. Some willow-trees hung a dripping, vivid green, in the stark dry country. The stream was narrow and winding. With a nonchalant motion, first of the right then of the left hand, Villiers was guiding the boatman, to keep him from running aground in the winding, narrow water-way.

And this put Villiers at his ease, to have something practical and slightly mechanical to do and to assert. He was striking the American note once more, of mechanical dominance.

All the other business had left him incomprehending, and when he asked Kate, she had pretended not to hear him. She sensed a certain delicate, tender mystery in the

river, in the naked man in the water, in the boatman, and she could not bear to have it subjected to the tough American flippancy. She was weary to death of American automatism and American flippant toughness. It gave her a feeling of nausea.

'Quite a well-built fellow, that one who laid hold of the boat. What did he want, anyway?' Villiers insisted.

'Nothing!' said Kate.

They were slipping out past the clay-coloured, loose stony edges of the land, through a surge of ripples, into the wide white light of the lake. A breeze was coming from the east, out of the upright morning, and the surface of the shallow, flimsy, dun-coloured water was in motion. Shoal-water rustled near at hand. Out to the open, large, square white sails were stepping gingerly forward, and beyond the buff-coloured, pale desert of water rose far-away blue, sharp hills of the other side, many miles away, pure pale blue with distance, yet sharp-edged and clear in form.

'Now,' said the boatman, smiling to Kate, 'it is easier. Now we are out of the current.'

He pulled rhythmically through the frail-rippling, sperm-like water, with a sense of peace. And for the first time Kate felt she had met the mystery of the natives, the strange and mysterious gentleness between a scylla and a charybdis of violence; the small poised, perfect body of the bird that waves wings of thunder and wings of fire and night in its flight. But central between the flash of day and the black of night, between the flash of lightning and the break of thunder, the still, soft body of the bird poised and soaring, forever. The mystery of the evening-star brilliant in silence and distance between the downward-surgingly of the sun and the vast, hollow seething of inpouring night. The magnificence of the watchful morning-star, that watches between the night and the day, the gleaming clue to the two opposites.

This kind of frail, pure sympathy, she felt at the moment between herself and the boatman, between herself and the man who had spoken from the water. And she was not going to have it broken by Villiers' American jokes.

There was a sound of breaking water. The boatman drew away, and pointed across to where a canoa, a native sailing-boat, was lying at an angle. She had run aground in a wind, and now must wait till another wind would carry her off the submerged bank again. Another boat was coming down the breeze, steering cautiously among the shoals, for the river outlet. She was piled high with petates, the native leaf mats, above her hollowed black sides. And bare-legged men with loose white drawers rolled up, and brown chests showing, were running with poles as the shallows heaved up again, pushing her off, and balancing their huge hats with small, bird-like shakes of the head.

Beyond the boats, seawards, were rocks outcropping and strange birds like pelicans standing in silhouette, motionless.

They had been crossing a bay of the lake-shore, and were nearing the hotel. It stood on a parched dry bank above the pale-brown water, a long, low building amid a tender green of bananas and pepper-trees. Everywhere the shores rose up pale and cruelly dry, dry to cruelty, and on the little hills the dark statues of the organ cactus poised in nothingness.

There was a broken-down landing-place, and a boat-house in the distance, and someone in white flannel trousers was standing on the broken masonry. Upon the filmy water ducks and black water-fowl bobbed like corks. The bottom was stony. The boatman suddenly backed the boat, and pulled round. He pushed up his sleeve and hung over the bows, reaching into the water. With a quick motion he grabbed something, and scrambled into the boat again. He was holding in the pale-skinned hollow of his palm a little earthenware pot, crusted by the lake deposit.

'What is it?' she said.

'Ollita of the gods,' he said. 'Of the old dead gods. Take it, Señorita.'

'You must let me pay for it,' she said.

'No, Señorita. It is yours,' said the man, with that sensitive, masculine sincerity which comes sometimes so quickly from a native.

It was a little, rough round pot with protuberances.

'Look!' said the man, reaching again for the little pot. He turned it upside-down, and she saw cut-in eyes and the sticking-out ears of an animal's head.

'A cat!' she exclaimed. 'It is a cat.'

'Or a coyote!'

'A coyote!'

'Let's look!' said Villiers. 'Why, how awfully interesting! Do you think it's old?'

'It is old?' Kate asked.

'The time of the old gods,' said the boatman. Then with a sudden smile: 'The dead gods don't eat much rice, they only want little casseroles while they are bone under the water.' And he looked her in the eyes.

'While they are bone?' she repeated. And she realized he meant the skeletons of gods that cannot die.

They were at the landing-stage; or rather, at the heap of collapsed masonry which had once been a landing-stage. The boatman got out and held the boat steady while Kate and Villiers landed. Then he scrambled up with the bags.

The man in white trousers, and a mozo appeared. It was the hotel manager. Kate paid the boatman.

'Adiós, Señorita!' he said with a smile. 'May you go with Quetzalcoatl.'

'Yes!' she cried. 'Good-bye!'

They went up the slope between the tattered bananas, whose ragged leaves were making a hushed, distant patter in the breeze. The green fruit curved out its bristly-soft bunch, the purple flower- bud depending stiffly.

The German manager came to talk to them: a young man of about forty, with his blue eyes going opaque and stony behind his spectacles, though the centres were keen. Evidently a German who had been many years out in Mexico - out in the lonely places. The rather stiff look, the slight look of fear in the SOUL - not physical fear - and the look of defeat, characteristic of the European who has long been subjected to the unbroken spirit of place! But the defeat was in the soul, not the will.

He showed Kate to her room in the unfinished quarter, and ordered her breakfast. The hotel consisted of an old low ranch-house with a veranda - and this was the dining-room, lounge, kitchen, and office. Then there was a two-storey new wing, with a smart bathroom between each two bedrooms, and almost up-to-date fittings: very incongruous.

But the new wing was unfinished - had been unfinished for a dozen years and more, the work abandoned when Porfirio Diaz fled. Now it would probably never be finished.

And this is Mexico. Whatever pretentiousness and modern improvements it may have, outside the capital, they are either smashed or raw and unfinished, with rusty bones of iron girders sticking out.

Kate washed her hands and went down to breakfast. Before the long veranda of the old ranch-house the green pepper-trees dropped like green light, and small cardinal birds with scarlet bodies and blazing impertinent heads like poppy-buds flashed among the pinkish pepper-heads, closing their brown wings upon the audacity of their glowing redness. A train of geese passed in the glaring sun, automatic, towards the eternal tremble of pale, earth-coloured water beyond the stones.

It was a place with a strange atmosphere: stony, hard, broken, with round cruel hills and the many-fluted bunches of the organ-cactus behind the old house, and an ancient road trailing past, deep in ancient dust. A touch of mystery and cruelty, the stoniness of fear, a lingering, cruel sacredness.

Kate loitered hungrily, and was glad when the Mexican in shirt-sleeves and patched trousers, another lingering remnant of Don Porfirio's day, brought her her eggs and coffee.

He was muted as everything about the place seemed muted, even the very stones and the water. Only those poppies on wing, the cardinal birds, gave a sense of liveliness: and they were uncanny.

So swiftly one's moods changed! In the boat she had glimpsed the superb rich stillness of the morning-star, the poignant intermediate flashing its quiet between the energies of the cosmos. She had seen it in the black eyes of the natives, in the sunrise of the man's rich, still body, Indian-warm.

And now again already the silence was of vacuity, arrest, and cruelty: the uncanny empty unbearableness of many Mexican mornings. Already she was uneasy, suffering from the malaise which tortures one inwardly in that country of cactuses.

She went up to her room, pausing at the corridor window to look out at the savage little hills that stood at the back of the hotel in desiccated heaps, with the dark-green bulks of organ-cactus sticking up mechanically and sinister, sombre in all the glare. Grey ground-squirrels like rats slithered ceaselessly around. Sinister, strangely dark and sinister, in the great glare of the sun!

She went to her room to be alone. Below her window, in the bricks and fallen rubble of unfinished masonry, a huge white turkey-cock, dim-white, strutted with his brown hens. And sometimes he stretched out his pink wattles and gave vent to fierce, powerful turkey-yelps, like some strong dog yelping; or else he ruffled all his feathers like a great, soiled white peony, and chuffed, hissing here and there, raging the metal of his plumage.

Below him, the eternal tremble of pale-earth, unreal waters, far beyond which rose the stiff resistance of mountains losing their pristine blue. Distinct, frail distances far off on the dry air, dim-seeing, yet sharp and edged with menace.

Kate took her bath in the filmy water that was hardly like water at all. Then she went and sat on the collapsed masonry, in the shade of the boat-house below. Small white ducks bobbed about on the shallow water below her, or dived, raising clouds of submarine dust. A canoe came paddling in; a lean fellow with sinewy brown legs. He answered Kate's nod with the aloof promptness of an Indian, made fast his canoe inside the boat-house, and was gone, stepping silent and barefoot over the bright green water-stones, and leaving a shadow, cold as flint, on the air behind him.

No sound on the morning save a faint touching of water, and the occasional powerful yelping of the turkey-cock. Silence, an aboriginal, empty silence, as of life WITHHELD. The vacuity of a Mexican morning. Resounding sometimes to the turkey-cock.

And the great, lymphatic expanse of water, like a sea, trembling, trembling, trembling to a far distance, to the mountains of substantial nothingness.

Near at hand, a ragged shifting of banana-trees, bare hills with immobile cactus, and to the left, an hacienda with peon's square mud boxes of houses. An occasional rancho in skintight trousers and big hat rode trotting through the dust on a small horse, or peons on the rump of their asses, in floppy white cotton, going like ghosts.

Always something ghostly. The morning passing all of a piece, empty, vacuous. All sound withheld, all life withheld, everything HOLDING BACK. The land so dry as to have a quality of invisibility, the water earth-filmy, hardly water at all. The lymphatic milk of fishes, somebody said.