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Chapter 6 - The Move Down The Lake

In Porfirio Diaz' day, the lake-side began to be the Riviera of Mexico, and Orilla was to be the Nice, or at least the Mentone of the country. But revolutions started erupting again, and in 1911 Don Porfirio fled to Paris with, it is said, thirty million gold pesos in his pocket: a peso being half a dollar, nearly half-a- crown. But we need not believe all that is said, especially by a man's enemies.

During the subsequent revolutions, Orilla, which had begun to be a winter paradise for the Americans, lapsed back into barbarism and broken brickwork. In 1921 a feeble new start had been made.

The place belonged to a German-Mexican family, who also owned the adjacent hacienda. They acquired the property from the American Hotel Company, who had undertaken to develop the lake-shore, and who had gone bankrupt during the various revolutions.

The German-Mexican owners were not popular with the natives. An angel from heaven would not have been popular, these years, if he had been known as the owner of property. However, in 1921 the hotel was very modestly opened again, with an American manager.

Towards the end of the year, José, son of the German-Mexican owner, came to stay with his wife and children in the hotel, in the new wing. José was a bit of a fool, as most foreigners are, after the first generation in Mexico. Having business to settle, he went into Guadalajara to the bank and returned with a thousand gold pesos in a bag, keeping the matter, as he thought, a dead secret.

Everyone had just gone to bed, on a brilliant moonlight night in winter, when two men appeared in the yard calling for José: they had to speak to him. José, suspecting nothing, left his wife and two children, and went down. In a moment he called for the American manager. The manager, thinking it was some bargaining to be done, also came down. As he came out of the door, two men seized him by the arms, and said: 'Don't make a noise!'

'What's amiss?' said Bell, who had built up Orilla, and had been twenty years on the lake.

Then he noticed that two other men had hold of José. 'Come,' they said.

There were five Mexicans - Indians, or half-Indians - and the two captives. They went, the captives in slippers and shirtsleeves, to the little office away at the end of the other part of the hotel, which had been the old ranch-house.

'What do you want?' asked Bell.

'Give us the money,' said the bandits.

'Oh, all right,' said the American. There were a few pesos only in the safe. He opened, showed them, and they took the money.

'Now give us the rest,' they said.

'There is no more,' said the manager, in all sincerity; for José had not confessed to the thousand pesos.

The five peons then began to search the poor little office. They found a pile of red blankets - which they appropriated - and a few bottles of red wine - which they drank.

'Now,' they said, 'give us the money.'

'I can't give you what there isn't to give,' said the manager.

'Good!' they said, and pulled out the hideous machetes, the heavy knives of the Mexicans.

José, intimidated, produced the suit-case with the thousand pesos. The money was wrapped up in the corner of a blanket.

'Now, come with us,' said the bandits.

'Where to?' asked the manager, beginning at last to be scared.

'Only out on to the hill, where we will leave you, so that you cannot telephone to Ixtlahuacan before we have time to get away,' said the Indians.

Outside, in the bright moon, the air was chill. The American shivered, in his trousers and shirt and a pair of bedroom slippers.

'Let me take a coat,' he said.

'Take a blanket,' said the tall Indian.

He took a blanket, and with two men holding his arms, he followed José, who was likewise held captive, out of the little gate, across the dust of the road, and up the steep little round hill on which the organ cactus thrust up their sinister clumps, like bunches of cruel fingers, in the moonlight. The hill was stony and steep, the going slow. José, a fat young man of twenty-eight, protested in the feeble manner of the well-to-do Mexicans.

At last they came to the top of the hill. Three men took José apart, leaving Bell alone near a cactus clump. The moon shone in a perfect Mexican heaven. Below, the big lake glimmered faintly, stretching its length towards the west. The air was so clear, the mountains across, thirty miles away, stood sharp and still in the moonlight. And not a sound nor a motion anywhere! At the foot of the hill was the hacienda, with the peons asleep in their huts. But what help was there in them?

José and the three men had gone behind a cactus-tree that stuck up straight like a great black bundle of poles, poised on one central foot, and cast a sharp, iron shadow. The American could hear the voices, talking low and rapidly, but could not distinguish the words. His two guards drew away from him a little, to hear what the others were saying, behind the cactus.

And the American, who knew the ground he stood on and the sky that hung over him, felt again the black vibration of death in the air, the black thrill of the death-lust. Unmistakable he felt it seething in the air, as any man may feel it, in Mexico. And the strange aboriginal fiendishness, awake now in the five bandits, communicated itself to his blood.

Loosening his blanket, he listened tensely in the moonlight. And came the thud! thud! thud! of a machete striking with lust in a human body, then the strange voice of José: 'Perdóneme! - Forgive me!' the murdered man cried as he fell.

The American waited for no more. Dropping his blanket, he jumped for the cactus cover, and stooping, took the down-slope like a rabbit. The pistol-shots rang out after him, but the Mexicans don't as a rule take good aim. His bedroom slippers flew off, and barefoot, the man, thin and light, sped down over the stones and the cactus, down to the hotel.

When he got down, he found everyone in the hotel awake and shouting.

'They are killing José!' he said, and he rushed to the telephone, expecting every moment the five bandits would be on him.

The telephone was in the old ranch-building, in the dining-room. There was no answer - no answer - no answer. In her little bedroom over the kitchen, the cook-woman, the traitress, was yelling. Across in the new wing, a little distance away, José's Mexican wife was screaming. One of the servant boys appeared.

'Try and get the police in Ixtlahuacan,' said the American, and he ran to the new wing, to get his gun and to barricade the doors. His daughter, a motherless girl, was crying with Jose's wife.

There was no answer on the telephone. At dawn, the cook, who said the bandits would not hurt a woman, went across to the hacienda to fetch the peons. And when the sun rose, a man was sent for the police.

They found the body of José, pierced with fourteen holes. The American was carried to Ixtlahuacan, and kept in bed, having cactus spines dug out of his feet by two native women.

The bandits fled across the marshes. Months later, they were identified by the stolen blankets, away in Michoacan; and, pursued, one of them betrayed the others.

After this, the hotel was closed again, and had been reopened only three months when Kate arrived.

But Villiers came with another story. Last year the peons had murdered the manager of one of the estates across the lake. They had stripped him and left him naked on his back, with his sexual organs cut off and put into his mouth, his nose slit and pinned back, the two halves, to his cheeks, with long cactus spines.

'Tell me no more!' said Kate.

She felt there was doom written on the very sky, doom and horror.

She wrote to Don Ramón in Sayula, saying she wanted to go back to Europe. True, she herself had seen no horrors, apart from the bull-fight. And she had had some exquisite moments, as coming to this hotel in the boat. The natives had a certain mystery and beauty, to her. But she could not bear the unease, and the latest sense of horror.

True, the peons were poor. They used to work for twenty cents, American, a day; and now the standard price was fifty cents, or one peso. But then in the old days they received their wage all the year round. Now, only at harvest time or sowing time. No work, no pay. And in the long dry season, it was mostly no work.

'Still,' said the German manager of the hotel, a man who had run a rubber plantation in Tabasco, a sugar plantation in the state of Vera Cruz, and an hacienda growing wheat, maize, oranges, in Jalisco: 'still, it isn't a question of money with the peons. It doesn't start with the peons. It starts in Mexico City, with a lot of malcontents who want to put their spoke in the wheel, and who lay hold of pious catchwords, to catch the poor. There's no more in it than that. Then the agitators go round and infect the peons. It is nothing but a sort of infectious disease, like syphilis, all this revolution and socialism.'

'But why does no one oppose it,' said Kate. 'Why don't the hacendados put up a fight, instead of caving in and running away?'

'The Mexican HACENDADO!' The man's German eyes gave out a spark. 'The Mexican GENTLEMAN is such a brave man, that while the soldier is violating his wife on the bed, he is hiding under the bed and holding his breath so they shan't find him. He's as brave as that.'

Kate looked away uncomfortably.

'They all want the United States to intervene. They hate the Americans; but they want the United States to intervene, to save them their money and their property. That's how brave they are! They hate the Americans personally, but they love them because they can look after money and property. So they want the United States to annex Mexico, the beloved patria; leaving the marvellous green and white and red flag, and the eagle with the snake in its claws, for the sake of appearances and HONOUR! They're simply bottled full of honour; of that sort.'

Always the same violence of bitterness, Kate thought to-herself. And she was so weary of it. How, how weary she was of politics, of the very words 'Labour' and 'SOCIALISM!' and all that sort! It suffocated her.

'Have you heard of the men of Quetzalcoatl?' asked Kate.

'Quetzalcoatl!' exclaimed the manager, giving a little click of the final 'l', in a peculiar native fashion. 'That's another try-on of the Bolshevists. They thought socialism needed a god, so they're going to fish him out of this lake. He'll do for another pious catchword in another revolution.'

The man went away, unable to stand any more.

'Oh dear!' thought Kate. 'It really is hard to bear.'

But she wanted to hear more of Quetzalcoatl.

'Did you know,' she said to the man later, showing him the little pot, 'that they find those things in the lake?'

'They're common enough!' he said. 'They used to throw them in, in the idolatrous days. May still do so, for what I know. Then get them out again to sell to tourists.'

'They call them ollitas of Quetzalcoatl.'

'That's a new invention.'

'Why, do you think?'

'They're trying to start a new thing, that's all. They've got this society on the lake here, of the Men of Quetzalcoatl, and they go round singing songs. It's another dodge for national-socialism, that's all.'

'What do they do, the Men of Quetzalcoatl?'

'I can't see they do anything, except talk and get excited over their own importance.'

'But what's the idea?'

'I couldn't say. Don't suppose they have any. But if they have, they won't let on to you. You're a gringo - or a gringita, at the best. And this is for pure Mexicans. For los señores, the workmen, and los caballeros, the peons. Every peon is a caballero nowadays, and every workman is a señor. So I suppose they're going to get themselves a special god, to put the final feather in their caps.'

'Where did it start, the Quetzalcoatl thing?'

'Down in Sayula. They say Don Ramón Carrasco is at the back of it. Maybe he wants to be the next President - or maybe he's aiming higher, and wants to be the first Mexican Pharaoh.'

Ah, how tired it made Kate feel: the hopelessness, the ugliness, the cynicism, the emptiness. She felt she could cry aloud, for the unknown gods to put the magic back into her life, and to save her from the dry-rot of the world's sterility.

She thought again of going back to Europe. But what was the good? She knew it! It was all politics or jazzing or slushy mysticism or sordid spiritualism. And the magic had gone. The younger generation, so smart and INTERESTING, but so without any mystery, any background. The younger the generation, the flatter and more jazzy, more and more devoid of wonder.

No, she could not go back to Europe.

And no! She refused to take the hotel manager's estimate of Quetzalcoatl. How should a hotel manager judge? - even if he was not really an hotel manager, but a ranch-overseer. She had seen Ramón Carrasco, and Cipriano. And they were men. They wanted something beyond. She would believe in them. Anything, anything rather than this sterility of nothingness which was the world, and into which her life was drifting.

She would send Villiers away, too. He was nice, she liked him. But he, too, was widdershins, unwinding the sensations of disintegration and anti-life. No, she must send him away. She must, she must free herself from these mechanical connections.

Every one of them, like Villiers, was like a cog-wheel in contact with which all one's workings were reversed. Everything he said, everything he did, reversed her real life-flow, made her go against the sun.

And she did not want to go against the sun. After all, in spite of the horrors latent in Mexico, when you got these dark-faced people away from wrong contacts like agitators and socialism, they made one feel that life was vast, if fearsome, and death was fathomless.

Horrors might burst out of them. But something must burst out, sometimes, if men are not machines.

No! no! no! no! no! she cried to her own soul. Let me still believe in some human contact. Let it not be all cut off for me!

But she made up her mind to be alone, and to cut herself off from all the mechanical widdershin contacts. Villiers must go back to his United States. She would be alone in her own milieu. Not to be touched by any, any of the mechanical cogwheel people. To be left alone, not to be touched. To hide, and be hidden, and never really be spoken to.

Yet, at the same time, with her blood flowing softly sunwise, to let the sunwise sympathy of unknown people steal in to her. To shut doors of iron against the mechanical world. But to let the sunwise world steal across to her, and add its motion to her, the motion of the stress of life, with the big sun and the stars like a tree holding out its leaves.

She wanted an old Spanish house, with its inner patio of flowers and water. Turned inwards, to the few flowers walled in by shadow. To turn one's back on the cog-wheel world. Not to look out any more on to that horrible machine of the world. To look at one's own quiet little fountain and one's own little orange-trees, with only heaven above.

So, having soothed her heart, she wrote Don Ramón again, that she was coming to Sayula to look for a house. She sent Villiers away. And the next day she set off with a man-servant, in the old motor-boat of the hotel, down to the village of Sayula.

It was thirty-five miles to travel, down the long lake. But the moment she set off, she felt at peace. A tall, dark-faced fellow sat in the stern of the boat, steering and attending to the motor. She sat on cushions in the middle. And the young manservant perched in the prow.

They started before sunrise, when the lake was bathed in motionless light. Odd tufts of water-hyacinth were floating on the soft spermy water, holding up a green leaf like a little sail of a boat, and nodding a delicate, mauve-blue flower.

Give me the mystery and let the world live again for me! Kate cried to her own soul. And deliver me from man's automatism.

The sun rose, and a whiteness of light played on the tops of the mountains. The boat hugged the north shore, turning the promontory on which the villas had started so jauntily, twenty years ago, but now were lapsing back to wilderness. All was still and motionless in the light. Sometimes on the little bare patches high up on the dry hills were white specks: birds? No, men in their white cotton, peons hoeing. They were so tiny and so distinct, they looked like white birds settled.

Round the bend were the hot springs, the church, the inaccessible village of the pure Indians, who spoke no Spanish. There were some green trees, under the precipitous, dry mountain-side.

So on and on, the motor-boat chugging incessantly, the man in the bows coiled up like a serpent, watching; the fish-milk water gleaming and throwing off a dense light, so that the mountains away across were fused out. And Kate, under the awning, went into a kind of sleep.

They were passing the island, with its ruins of fortress and prison. It was all rock and dryness, with great broken walls and the shell of a church among its hurtful stones and its dry grey herbage. For a long time the Indians had defended it against the Spaniards. Then the Spaniards used the island as a fortress against the Indians. Later, as a penal settlement. And now the place was a ruin, repellent, full of scorpions, and otherwise empty of life. Only one or two fishermen lived in the tiny cove facing the mainland, and a flock of goats, specks of life creeping among the rocks. And an unhappy fellow put there by the Government to register the weather.

No, Kate did not want to land. The place looked too sinister. She took food from the basket, and ate a little lunch, and dozed.

In this country she was afraid. But it was her soul more than her body that knew fear. She had realized, for the first time, with finality and fatality, what was the illusion she laboured under. She had thought that each individual had a complete self, a complete soul, an accomplished I. And now she realized as plainly as if she had turned into a new being, that this was not so. Men and women had incomplete selves, made up of bits assembled together loosely and somewhat haphazard. Man was not created ready-made. Men to-day were half-made, and women were half-made. Creatures that existed and functioned with certain regularity, but which ran off into a hopeless jumble of inconsequence.

Half-made, like insects that can run fast and be so busy and suddenly grow wings, but which are only winged grubs after all. A world full of half-made creatures on two legs, eating food and degrading the one mystery left to them, sex. Spinning a great lot of words, burying themselves inside the cocoons of words and ideas that they spin round themselves, and inside the cocoons, mostly perishing inert and overwhelmed.

Half-made creatures, rarely more than half-responsible and half-accountable, acting in terrible swarms, like locusts.

Awful thought! And with a collective insect-like will, to avoid the responsibility of achieving any more perfected being or identity. The queer, rabid hate of being urged on into purer self. The morbid fanaticism of the non-integrate.

In the great seething light of the lake, with the terrible blue-ribbed mountains of Mexico beyond, she seemed swallowed by some grisly skeleton, in the cage of his death-anatomy. She was afraid, mystically, of the man crouching there in the bows with his smooth thighs and supple loins like a snake, and his black eyes watching. A half-being, with a will to disintegration and death. And the tall man behind her at the tiller, he had the curious smoke-grey phosphorus eyes under black lashes sometimes met among the Indians. Handsome, he was, and quiet and seemingly self-contained. But with that peculiar devilish half-smile lurking under his face, the half-jeering look of a part-thing, which knows its power to destroy the purer thing.

And yet, Kate told herself, both these men were manly fellows. They would not molest her, unless she communicated the thought to them, and by a certain cowardliness, prompted them. Their souls were nascent, there was no fixed evil in them, they could sway both ways.

So in her soul she cried aloud to the greater mystery, the higher power that hovered in the interstices of the hot air, rich and potent. It was as if she could lift her hands and clutch the silent, stormless potency that roved everywhere, waiting. 'Come then!' she said, drawing a long slow breath, and addressing the silent life-breath which hung unrevealed in the atmosphere, waiting.

And as the boat ran on, and her fingers rustled in the warm water of the lake, she felt the fulness descend into her once more, the peace, and the power. The fulfilment filling her soul like the fulness of ripe grapes. And she thought to herself: 'Ah, how wrong I have been, not to turn sooner to the other presence, not to take the life-breath sooner! How wrong to be afraid of these two men.'

She did what she had been half-afraid to do before; she offered them the oranges and sandwiches still in the basket. And each of the men looked at her, the smoke-grey eyes looked her in the eyes, and the black eyes looked her in the eyes. And the man with the smoke-grey eyes, who was cunninger than the other man, but also prouder, said to her with his eyes: We are living! I know your sex, and you know mine. The mystery we are glad not to meddle with. You leave me my natural honour, and I thank you for the grace.

In his look, so quick and proud, and in his quiet *Muchas gracias!* she heard the touch of male recognition, a man glad to retain his honour, and to feel the communion of grace. Perhaps it was the Spanish word *Gracias!* But in her soul she was thinking of the communion of grace.

With the black-eyed man it was the same. He was humbler. But as he peeled his orange and dropped the yellow peel on the water, she could see the stillness, the humility, and the pathos of grace in him; something very beautiful and truly male, and very hard to find in a civilized white man. It was not of the spirit. It was of the dark, strong, unbroken blood, the flowering of the soul.

Then she thought to herself: After all, it is good to be here. It is very good to be in this boat on this lake with these two silent, semi-barbarous men. They can receive the gift of grace, and we can share it like a communion, they and I. I am very glad to be here. It is so much better than love: the love I knew with Joachim. This is the fulness of the vine.

'Sayulal!' said the man in the bows, pointing ahead.

She saw, away off, a place where there were green trees, where the shore was flat, and a bigish building stood out.

'What is the building?' she asked.

'The railway station.'

She was suitably impressed, for it was a new-looking, imposing structure.

A little steamer was smoking, lying off from a wooden jetty in the loneliness, and black, laden boats were poling out to her, and merging back to shore. The vessel gave a hoot, and slowly yet busily set off on the bosom of the water, heading in a slanting line across the lake, to which the tiny high white twin-towers of Tuliapán showed above the water-line, tiny and far-off, on the other side.

They had passed the jetty, and rounding the shoal where the willows grew, she could see Sayula; white fluted twin-towers of the church, obelisk shaped above the pepper-trees; beyond, a mound of a hill standing alone, dotted with dry bushes, distinct and Japanese-looking; beyond this, the corrugated, blue-ribbed, flat-flanked mountains of Mexico.

It looked peaceful, delicate, almost Japanese. As she drew nearer she saw the beach with the washing spread on the sand; the fleecy green willow-trees and pepper-trees, and the villas in foliage and flowers, hanging magenta curtains of bougainvillea, red dots of hibiscus, pink abundance of tall oleander trees; occasional palm-trees sticking out.

The boat was steering round a stone jetty, on which, in black letters, was painted an advertisement for motor-car tyres. There were a few seats, some deep fleecy trees growing out of the sand, a booth for selling drinks, a little promenade, and white boats on a sandy beach. A few women sitting under parasols, a few bathers in the water, and trees in front of the few villas deep in green or blazing scarlet blossoms.

'This is very good,' thought Kate. 'It is not too savage, and not over-civilized. It isn't broken, but it is rather out of repair. It is in contact with the world, but the world has got a very weak grip on it.'

She went to the hotel, as Don Ramón had advised her.

'Do you come from Orilla? You are Mrs Leslie? Don Ramón Carrasco sent us a letter about you.'

There was a house. Kate paid her boatmen and shook hands with them. She was sorry to be cut off from them again. And they looked at her with a touch of regret as they left. She said to herself:

'There is something rich and alive in these people. They want to be able to breathe the Great Breath. They are like children, helpless. And then they're like demons. But somewhere, I believe, they want the breath of life and the communion of the brave, more than anything.'

She was surprised at herself, suddenly using this language. But her weariness and her sense of devastation had been so complete, that the Other Breath in the air, and the bluish dark power in the earth had become, almost suddenly, more real to her than so-called reality. Concrete, jarring, exasperating reality had melted away, and a soft world of potency stood in its place, the velvety dark flux from the earth, the delicate yet supreme life-breath in the inner air. Behind the fierce sun the dark eyes of a deeper sun were watching, and between the bluish ribs of the mountains a powerful heart was secretly beating, the heart of the earth.

Her house was what she wanted; a low, L-shaped, tiled building with rough red floors and deep veranda, and the other two sides of the patio completed by the thick, dark little mango-forest outside the low wall. The square of the patio, within the precincts of the house and the mango-trees, was gay with oleanders and hibiscus, and there was a basin of water in the seedy grass. The flower-pots along the veranda were full of flowering geranium and foreign flowers. At the far end of the patio the chickens were scratching under the silent motionlessness of ragged banana-trees.

There she had it; her stone, cool, dark house, every room opening on to the veranda; her deep, shady veranda, or piazza, or corridor, looking out to the brilliant sun, the sparkling flowers and the seed-grass, the still water and the yellowing banana-trees, the dark splendour of the shadow-dense mango-trees.

With the house went a Mexican Juana with two thick-haired daughters and one son. This family lived in a den at the back of the projecting bay of the dining-room. There, half screened, was the well and the toilet, and a little kitchen and a sleeping-room where the family slept on mats on the floor. There the paltry chickens paddled, and the banana-trees made a chitter as the wind came.

Kate had four bedrooms to choose from. She chose the one whose low, barred window opened on the rough, grass and cobble-stone street, closed her doors and windows, and went to sleep, saying to herself as she lay down: Now I am alone. And now I have only one thing to do: not to get caught up into the world's cog-wheels any more, and not to lose my hold on the hidden greater thing.

She was tired with a strange weariness, feeling she could make no further effort. She woke up at tea-time, but there was no tea. Juana hastened off to the hotel to buy a bit.

Juana was a woman of about forty, rather short, with full dark face, centreless dark eyes, untidy hair, and a limping way of walking. She spoke rapidly, a rather plum-in-the-mouth Spanish, adding 'n' to all her words. Something of a sloven, down to her speech.

'No, Niña, no hay masn' - masn instead of mas. And calling Kate, in the old Mexican style, Niña, which means child. It is the honourable title for a mistress.

Juana was going to be a bit of a trial. She was a widow of doubtful antecedents, a creature with passion, but not much control, strong with a certain indifference and looseness. The hotel owner assured Kate that she was honest, but that if Kate would rather find another criada, all well and good.

There was a bit of a battle to be fought between the two women. Juana was obstinate and reckless; she had not been treated very well by the world. And there was a touch of bottom-dog insolence about her.

But also, sudden touches of passionate warmth and the peculiar selfless generosity of the natives. She would be honest out of rough defiance and indifference, so long as she was not in a state of antagonism.

As yet, however, she was cautiously watching her ground, with that black-eyed touch of malice and wariness to be expected. And Kate felt that the cry: Niña - child! by which she was addressed, held in it a slight note of malevolent mockery.

But there was nothing to do but to go ahead and trust the dark-faced, centreless woman.

The second day, Kate had the energy to cast out one suite of bent-wood and cane furniture from her salon, remove pictures and little stands.

If there is one social instinct more dreary than all the other social instincts in the world, it is the Mexican. In the centre of Kate's red-tiled salon were two crescents: a black bent-wood cane settee flanked on each side by two black bent-wood cane chairs, exactly facing a brown bent-wood cane settee flanked on each side by two brown

bent-wood cane chairs. It was as if the two settees and the eight chairs were occupied by the ghosts of all the Mexican banalities ever uttered, sitting facing one another with their knees towards one another, and their feet on the terrible piece of green-with-red-roses carpet, in the weary centre of the salon. The very sight of it was frightening.

Kate shattered this face-to-face symmetry, and had the two girls, Maria and Concha, assisted by the ironic Juana, carrying off the brown bent-wood chairs and the bamboo stands into one of the spare bedrooms. Juana looked on cynically, and assisted officiously. But when Kate had her trunk, and fished out a couple of light rugs and a couple of fine shawls and a few things to make the place human, the criada began to exclaim: 'Qué bonita! Qué bonita, Niña! Mire que bonita!'