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Chapter 12 - The First Waters

The men had risen and covered themselves, and put on their hats, and covered their eyes for a second, in salute before Ramón, as they departed down the stone stair. And the iron door at the bottom had clanged, the doorkeeper had returned with the key, laid it on the drum, and softly, delicately departed.

Still Ramón sat on his serape, leaning his naked shoulders on the wall, and closing his eyes. He was tired, and in that state of extreme separateness which makes it very hard to come back to the world. On the outside of his ears he could hear the noises of the hacienda, even the tinkle of tea-spoons, and the low voice of women, and later, the low, labouring sound of a motor-car struggling over the uneven road, then swirling triumphantly into the courtyard.

It was hard to come back to these things. The noise of them sounded on the outside of his ears, but inside them was the slow, vast, inaudible roar of the cosmos, like in a sea-shell. It was hard to have to bear the contact of commonplace daily things, when his soul and body were naked to the cosmos.

He wished they would leave him the veils of his isolation awhile. But they would not: especially Carlota. She wanted him to be present to her: in familiar contact.

She was calling: 'Ramón! Ramón! Have you finished? Cipriano is here.' And even so, in her voice was fear, and an overriding temerity.

He pushed back his hair and rose, and very quickly went out, as he was, with naked torso. He didn't want to dress himself into everyday familiarity, since his soul was unfamiliar.

They had a tea-table out on the terrace, and Cipriano, in uniform, was there. He got up quickly, and came down the terrace with outstretched arms, his black eyes gleaming with an intensity almost like pain, upon the face of the other man. And Ramón looked back at him with wide, seeing, yet unchanging eyes.

The two men embraced, breast to breast, and for a moment Cipriano laid his little blackish hands on the naked shoulders of the bigger man, and for a moment was perfectly still on his breast. Then very softly, he stood back and looked at him, saying not a word.

Ramón abstractedly laid his hand on Cipriano's shoulder, looking down at him with a little smile.

'Qué tal?' he said, from the edge of his lips. 'How goes it?'

'Bien! Muy bien!' said Cipriano, still gazing into the other man's face with black, wondering, childlike, searching eyes, as if he, Cipriano, were searching for HIMSELF, in Ramón's face. Ramón looked back into Cipriano's black, Indian eyes with a faint, kind smile of recognition, and Cipriano hung his head as if to hide his face, the black hair, which he wore rather long and brushed sideways, dropping over his forehead.

The women watched in absolute silence. Then, as the two men began slowly to come along the terrace to the tea-table, Carlota began to pour tea. But her hand trembled so much, the teapot wobbled as she held it, and she had to put it down and clasp her hands in the lap of her white muslin dress.

'You rowed on the lake?' said Ramón abstractedly, coming up.

'It was lovely!' said Kate. 'But hot when the sun came.'

Ramón smiled a little, then pushed his hand through his hair. Then, leaning one hand on the parapet of the terrace wall, he turned to look at the lake, and a sigh lifted his shoulders unconsciously.

He stood thus, naked to the waist, his black hair ruffled and splendid, his back to the women, looking out at the lake. Cipriano stood lingering beside him.

Kate saw the sigh lift the soft, quiescent, cream-brown shoulders. The soft, cream-brown skin of his back, of a smooth PURE sensuality, made her shudder. The broad, square, rather high shoulders, with neck and head rising steep, proudly. The full-fleshed, deep-chested, rich body of the man made her feel dizzy. In spite of herself, she could not help imagining a knife stuck between those pure, male shoulders. If only to break the arrogance of their remoteness.

That was it. His nakedness was so aloof, far-off and intangible, in another day. So that to THINK of it was almost a violation, even to look at it with prying eyes. Kate's heart suddenly shrank in her breast. This was how Salome had looked at John. And this was the beauty of John, that he had had; like a pomegranate on a dark tree in the distance, naked, but not undressed! Forever still and clothe-less, and with another light about it, of a richer day than our paltry, prying, sneak-thieving day.

The moment Kate had imagined a knife between his shoulders her heart shrank with grief and shame, and a great stillness came over her. Better to take the hush into one's heart, and the sharp, prying beams out of one's eyes. Better to lapse away from one's own prying, assertive self, into the soft, untrespassing self, to whom nakedness is neither shame nor excitement, but clothed like a flower in its own deep, soft consciousness, beyond cheap awareness.

The evening breeze was blowing very faintly. Sailing-boats were advancing through the pearly atmosphere, far off, the sun above had a golden quality. The opposite shore, twenty miles away, was distinct, and yet there seemed an opalescent, spume-like haze in the air, the same quality as in the filmy water. Kate could see the white specks of the far-off church towers of Tuliapan.

Below, in the garden below the house, was a thick grove of mango-trees. Among the dark and reddish leaves of the mangos, scarlet little birds were bustling, like suddenly-opening poppy-buds, and pairs of yellow birds, yellow underneath as yellow butterflies, so perfectly clear, went skimming past. When they settled for a moment and closed their wings, they disappeared, for they were grey on top. And when the cardinal birds settled, they too disappeared, for the outside of their wings was brown, like a sheath.

'Birds in this country have all their colour below,' said Kate.

Ramón turned to her suddenly.

'They say the word Mexico means below this!' he said, smiling, and sinking into a rocking-chair.

Doña Carlota had made a great effort over herself, and with eyes fixed on the tea-cups, she poured out the tea. She handed him his cup without looking at him. She did not trust herself to look at him. It made her tremble with a strange, hysterical anger: she, who had been married to him for years, and knew him, ah, knew him: and yet, and yet, had not got him at all. None of him.

'Give me a piece of sugar, Carlota,' he said, in his quiet voice.

But at the sound of it, his wife stopped as if some hand had suddenly grasped her.

'Sugar! Sugar!' she repeated abstractedly to herself.

Ramón sat forward in his rocking-chair, holding his cup in his hand, his breasts rising in relief. And on his thighs the thin linen seemed to reveal him almost more than his own dark nakedness revealed him. She understood why the cotton pantaloons were forbidden on the plaza. The living flesh seemed to emanate through them.

He was handsome, almost horribly handsome, with his black head poised as it were without weight, above his darkened, smooth neck. A pure sensuality, with a powerful purity of its own, hostile to her sort of purity. With the blue sash round his waist, pressing a fold in the flesh, and the thin linen seeming to gleam with the life of his hips and his thighs, he emanated a fascination almost like a narcotic, asserting his pure, fine sensuality against her. The strange, soft, still sureness of him, as if he sat secure within his own dark aura. And as if this dark aura of his militated against her presence, and against the presence of his wife. He emitted an effluence so powerful, that it seemed to hamper her consciousness, to bind down her limbs.

And he was utterly still and quiescent, without desire, soft and unroused, within his own ambiente. Cipriano going the same, the pair of them so quiet and dark and heavy, like a great weight bearing the women down.

Kate knew now how Salome felt. She knew now how John the Baptist had been, with his terrible, aloof beauty, inaccessible, yet so potent.

'Ah!' she said to herself. 'Let me close my eyes to him, and open only my soul. Let me close my prying, SEEING eyes, and sit in dark stillness along with these two men. They have got more than I, they have a richness that I haven't got. They have got rid of that itching of the eye, and the desire that works through the eye. The itching, prurient, KNOWING, imagining eye, I am cursed with it, I am hampered with it. It is my curse of curses, the curse of Eve. The curse of Eve is upon me, my eyes are like hooks, my knowledge is like a fish-hook through my gills, pulling me in spasmodic desire. Oh, who will free me from the grappling of my eyes, from the impurity of sharp sight! Daughters of Eve, of greedy vision, why don't these men save me from the sharpness of my own eyes!'

She rose and went to the edge of the terrace. Yellow as daffodils underneath, two birds emerged out of their own invisibility. In the little shingle bay, with a small breakwater, where the boat was pulled up and chained, two men were standing in the water, throwing out a big, fine round net, catching the little silvery fish called charales, which flicked out of the brownish water sometimes like splinters of glass.

'Ramón!' Kate heard Doña Carlota's voice. 'Won't you put something on?'

The wife had been able to bear it no more.

'Yes! Thank you for the tea,' said Ramón, rising.

Kate watched him go down the terrace, in his own peculiar silence, his sandals making a faint swish on the tiles.

'Oh, Señora Caterina!' came the voice of Carlota. 'Come and drink your tea. Come!'

Kate returned to the table, saying:

'It seems so wonderfully peaceful here.'

'Peaceful!' echoed Carlota. 'Ah, I do not find it peaceful. There is a horrible stillness, which makes me afraid.'

'Do you come out very often?' said Kate to Cipriano.

'Yes. Fairly often. Once a week. Or twice,' he replied, looking at her with a secret consciousness which she could not understand lurking in his black eyes.

These men wanted to take her WILL away from her, as if they wanted to deny her the light of day.

'I must be going home now,' she said. 'The sun will be setting.'

'Ya va?' said Cipriano, in his soft, velvety Indian voice, with a note of distant surprise and reproach. 'Will you go already?'

'Oh, no, Señora!' cried Carlota. 'Stay until to-morrow. Oh, yes, stay until to-morrow, with me.'

'They will expect us home,' she said, wavering.

'Ah, no! I can send a boy to say you will come to-morrow. Yes? You will stay? Ah, good, good!'

And she laid her hand caressively on Kate's arm, then rose to hurry away to the servants.

Cipriano had taken out his cigarette-case. He offered it to Kate.

'Shall I take one?' she said. 'It is my vice.'

'Do take one,' he said. 'It isn't good to be perfect.'

'It isn't, is it?' she laughed, puffing her cigarette.

'Now would you call it peace?' he asked with incomprehensible irony.

'Why?' she cried.

'Why do white people always want peace?' he asked.

'Surely peace is natural! Don't all people want it? Don't you?'

'Peace is only the rest after war,' he said. 'So it is not more natural than fighting; perhaps not so natural.'

'No, but there is another peace: the peace that passes all understanding. Don't you know that?'

'I don't think I do,' he said.

'What a pity!' she cried.

'Ah!' he said. 'You want to teach me! But to me it is different. Each man has two spirits in him. The one is like the early morning in the time of rain, very quiet, and sweet, moist, no? - with the mocking-bird singing, and birds flying about, very fresh. And the other is like the dry season, the steady, strong hot light of the day, which seems as if it will never change.'

'But you like the first better,' she cried.

'I don't know!' he replied. 'The other lasts longer.'

'I am sure you like the fresh morning better,' she said.

'I don't know! I don't know!' He smiled a crumpled sort of smile, and she could tell he really did NOT know. 'In the first time, you can feel the flowers on their stem, the stem very strong and full of sap, no? - and the flower opening on top like a face that has the perfume of desire. And a woman might be like that. - But this passes, and the sun begins to shine very strong, very hot, no? Then everything inside a man changes, goes dark, no? And the flowers crumple up, and the breast of a man becomes like a steel mirror. And he is all darkness inside, coiling and uncoiling like a snake. All the flowers withered up on shrunk stems, no? And then women don't exist for a man. They disappear like the flowers.'

'And then what does he want?' said Kate.

'I don't know. Perhaps he wants to be a very big man, and master all the people.'

'Then why doesn't he?' said Kate.

He lifted his shoulders.

'And you,' he said to her. 'You seem to me like that morning I told you about.'

'I am just forty years old,' she laughed shakily.

Again he lifted his shoulders.

'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'It is the same. Your body seems to me like the stem of the flower I told you about, and in your face it will always be morning, of the time of the rains.'

'Why do you say that to me?' she said, as an involuntary strange shudder shook her.

'Why not say it!' he replied. 'You are like the cool morning, very fresh. In Mexico, we are the end of the hot dry day.'

He watched her, with a strange lingering desire in his black eyes, and what seemed to her a curious, lurking sort of insolence. She dropped her head to hide from him, and rocked in her chair.

'I would like to marry you,' he said: 'if ever you will marry. I would like to marry you.'

'I don't think I shall EVER marry again,' she flashed, her bosom heaving like suffocation, and a dark flush suffusing over her face, against her will.

'Who knows!' said he.

Ramón was coming down the terrace, his fine white serape folded over his naked shoulder, with its blue-and-dark pattern at the borders, and its long scarlet fringe dangling and swaying as he walked. He leaned against one of the pillars of the terrace, and looked down at Kate and Cipriano. Cipriano glanced up with that peculiar glance of primitive intimacy.

'I told the Señora Caterina,' he said, 'if ever she wanted to marry a man, she should marry me.'

'It is plain talk,' said Ramón, glancing at Cipriano with the same intimacy, and smiling.

Then he looked at Kate, with a slow smile in his brown eyes, and a shadow of curious knowledge on his face. He folded his arms over his breast, as the natives do when it is cold and they are protecting themselves; and the cream-brown flesh, like opium, lifted the bosses of his breasts, full and smooth.

'Don Cipriano says that white people always want peace,' she said, looking up at Ramón with haunted eyes. 'Don't you consider yourselves white people?' she asked, with a

slight, deliberate impertinence.

'No whiter than we are,' smiled Ramón. 'Not lily-white, at least.'

'And don't you want peace?' she asked.

'I? I shouldn't think of it. The meek have inherited the earth, according to prophecy. But who am I, that I should envy them their peace! No, Señora. Do I look like a gospel of peace? - or a gospel of war either? Life doesn't split down that division, for me.'

'I don't know what you want,' said she, looking up at him with haunted eyes.

'We only half know ourselves,' he replied, smiling with changeful eyes. 'Perhaps not so much as half.'

There was a certain vulnerable kindness about him, which made her wonder, startled, if she had ever realized what real fatherliness meant. The mystery, the nobility, the inaccessibility, and the vulnerable compassion of man in his separate fatherhood.

'You don't like brown-skinned people?' he asked her gently.

'I think it is beautiful to look at,' she said. 'But' - with a faint shudder - 'I am glad I am white.'

'You feel there could be no contact?' he said, simply.

'Yes!' she said. 'I mean that.'

'It is as you feel,' he said.

And as he said it, she knew he was more beautiful to her than any blond white man, and that, in a remote, far-off way, the contact with him was more precious than any contact she had known.

But then, though he cast over her a certain shadow, he would never encroach on her, he would never seek any close contact. It was the incompleteness in Cipriano that sought her out, and seemed to trespass on her.

Hearing Ramón's voice, Carlota appeared uneasily in a doorway. Hearing him speak English, she disappeared again, on a gust of anger. But after a little while, she came once more, with a little vase containing the creamy-coloured, thick flowers that are coloured like freesias, and that smell very sweet.

'Oh, how nice!' said Kate. 'They are temple flowers! In Ceylon the natives tiptoe into the little temples and lay one flower on the table at the foot of the big Buddha statues. And the tables of offering are all covered with these flowers, all put so neatly. The natives have that delicate oriental way of putting things down.'

'Ah!' said Carlota, setting the vase on the table. 'I did not bring them for any gods, especially strange ones. I brought them for you, Señora. They smell so sweet.'

'Don't they!' said Kate.

The two men went away, Ramón laughing.

'Ah, Señora!' said Carlota, sitting down tense at the table. 'Could you follow Ramón? Could YOU give up the Blessed Virgin? - I could sooner die!'

'Ha!' said Kate, with a little weariness. 'Surely we don't want any MORE gods.'

'More gods, Señora!' said Doña Carlota, shocked. 'But how is it possible! - Don Ramón is in mortal sin.'

Kate was silent.

'And he wants to lead more and more people into the same,' continued Carlota. 'It is the sin of pride. Men wise in their own conceit! - The cardinal sin of men. Ah, I have told him. - And I am so glad, Señora, that you feel as I feel. I am so afraid of American women, women like that. They wish to have men's minds, so they accept all the follies and wickedness of men. - You are Catholic, Señora?'

'I was educated in a convent,' said Kate.

'Ah, of course! Of course! - Ah, Señora, as if a woman who had ever known the Blessed Virgin could ever part from her again. Ah, Señora, what woman would have the heart to put Christ back on the Cross, to crucify him twice! But men, men! This Quetzalcoatl business! What buffoonery, Señora; if it were not horrible sin! And two clever, well-educated men! Wise in their own conceit!'

'Men usually are,' said Kate.

It was sunset, with a big level cloud like fur overhead, only the sides of the horizon fairly clear. The sun was not visible. It had gone down in a thick, rose-red fume behind the wavy ridge of the mountains. Now the hills stood up bluish, all the air was a salmon-red flush, the fawn water had pinkish ripples. Boys and men, bathing a little way along the shore, were the colour of deep flame.

Kate and Carlota had climbed up to the azotea, the flat roof, from the stone stairway at the end of the terrace. They could see the world: the hacienda with its courtyard like a fortress, the road between deep trees, the black mud huts near the broken highroad, and little naked fires already twinkling outside the doors. All the air was pinkish, melting to a lavender blue, and the willows on the shore, in the pink light, were apple-green and glowing. The hills behind rose abruptly, like mounds, dry and pinky. Away in the distance, down the lake, the two white obelisk towers of Sayula glistened among the trees, and villas peeped out. Boats were creeping into the shadow, from the outer brightness of the lake.

And in one of these boats was Juana, being rowed, disconsolate, home.