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Chapter 21 - The Opening Of The Church

Kate went back to her house in Sayula, and Cipriano went back to his command in the city.

'Will you not come with me?' he said. 'Shall we not make a civil marriage, and live in the same house together?'

'No,' she said. 'I am married to you by Quetzalcoatl, no other. I will be your wife in the world of Quetzalcoatl, no other. And if the star has risen between us, we will watch it.'

Conflicting feelings played in his dark eyes. He could not bear even to be the least bit thwarted. Then the strong, rather distant look came back.

'It is very good,' he said. 'It is the best.'

And he went away without looking back.

Kate returned to her house, to her servants and her rocking-chair. Inside herself she kept very still and almost thoughtless, taking no count of time. What was going to unfold must unfold of itself.

She no longer feared the nights, when she was shut alone in her darkness. But she feared the days a little. She shrank so mortally from contact.

She opened her bedroom window one morning, and looked down to the lake. The sun had come, and queer blotchy shadows were on the hills beyond the water. Way down at the water's edge a woman was pouring water from a calabash bowl over a statuesque pig, dipping rapidly and assiduously. The little group was seen in silhouette against the pale, dun lake.

But impossible to stand at her open window looking on the little lane. An old man suddenly appeared from nowhere, offering her a leaf full of tiny fish, charales, like splinters of glass, for ten centavos, and a girl was unfolding three eggs from the ragged corner of her rebozo, thrusting them imploringly forward to Kate. An old woman was shambling up with a sad story, Kate knew. She fled from her window and the importunity.

At the same instant the sound that always made her heart stand still woke on the invisible air. It was the sound of drums, of tom-toms rapidly beaten. The same sound she had heard in the distance, in the tropical dusk of Ceylon, from the temple at sunset. The sound she had heard from the edge of the forests in the north, when the Red Indians were dancing by the fire. The sound that wakes dark, ancient echoes in the heart of every man, the thud of the primeval world.

Two drums were violently throbbing against one another. Then gradually they were slowing down, in a peculiar uneven rhythm, till at last there was only left one slow, continual, monotonous note, like a great drop of darkness falling heavily, continually, dripping in the bright morning.

The re-evoked past is frightening, and if it be re-evoked to overwhelm the present, it is fiendish. Kate felt a real terror of the sound of a tom-tom. It seemed to beat straight on her solar plexus, to make her sick.

She went to her window. Across the lane rose a tall garden-wall of adobe brick, and above that, the sun on the tops of the orange-trees, deep gold. Beyond the orange garden rose three tall, handsome, shaggy palm-trees, side by side on slim stems. And from the very top of the two outer palms rose the twin tips of the church towers. She had noticed it so often; the two ironwork Greek crosses seeming to stand on the mops of the palms.

Now in an instant she saw the glitter of the symbol of Quetzalcoatl in the places where the cross had been; two circular suns, with the dark bird at the centre. The gold of the suns - or the serpents - flashed new in the light of the sun, the bird lifted its wings dark in outline within the circle.

Then again the two drums were speeding up, beating against one another with the peculiar uneven savage rhythm, which at first seems no rhythm, and then seems to contain a summons almost sinister in its power, acting on the helpless blood direct. Kate felt her hands flutter on her wrists, in fear. Almost, too, she could hear the heart of Cipriano beating; her husband in Quetzalcoatl.

'Listen, Niña! Listen, Niña!' came Juana's frightened voice from the veranda.

Kate went to the veranda. Ezequiel had rolled up his mattress and was hitching up his pants. It was Sunday morning, when he sometimes lay on after sunrise. His thick black hair stood up, his dark face was blank with sleep, but in his quiet aloofness and his slightly bowed head Kate could see the secret satisfaction he took in the barbarous sound of the drums.

'It comes from the Church!' said Juana.

Kate caught the other woman's black, reptilian eyes unexpectedly. Usually, she forgot that Juana was dark, and different. For days she would not realize it. Till suddenly she met that black, void look with the glint in it, and she started inwardly, involuntarily asking herself: 'Does she hate me?'

Or was it only the unspeakable difference in blood?

Now, in the dark glitter which Juana showed her for one moment, Kate read fear, and triumph, and a slow, savage nonchalant defiance. Something very inhuman.

'What does it mean?' Kate said to her.

'It means, Niña, that they won't ring the bells any more. They have taken the bells away, and they beat the drums in the church. Listen! Listen!'

The drums were shuddering rapidly again.

Kate and Juana went across to the open window.

'Look! Niña! The Eye of the Other One! No more crosses on the church. It is the Eye of the Other One. Look! How it shines! How nice!'

'It means,' said Ezequiel's breaking young voice, which was just turning deep, 'that it is the church of Quetzalcoatl. Now it is the temple of Quetzalcoatl; our own God.'

He was evidently a staunch Man of Quetzalcoatl.

'Think of it!' murmured Juana, in an awed voice. She seemed like a heap of darkness low at Kate's side.

Then again she glanced up, and the eyes of the two women met for a moment.

'See the Niña's eyes of the sun!' cried Juana, laying her hand on Kate's arm. Kate's eyes were a sort of hazel, changing, grey-gold, flickering at the moment with wonder, and a touch of fear and dismay. Juana sounded triumphant.

A man in a white serape, with the blue and black borders, suddenly appeared at the window, lifting his hat, on which was the sign of Quetzalcoatl, and pushing a little card through the window.

The card said: Come to the church when you hear the one big drum; about seven o'clock. - It was signed with the sign of Quetzalcoatl.

'Very well!' said Kate. 'I will come.'

It was a quarter to seven already. Outside the room was the noise of Juana sweeping the veranda. Kate put on a white dress and a yellow hat, and a long string of pale-coloured topaz that glimmered with yellow and mauve.

The earth was all damp with rain, the leaves were all fresh and tropical thick, yet many old leaves were on the ground, beaten down.

'Niña! You are going out already! Wait! Wait! The coffee. Concha! quick!'

There was a running of bare feet, the children bringing cup and plate and sweet buns and sugar, the mother hastily limping with the coffee. Ezequiel came striding along the walk, lifting his hat. He went down to the servants' quarters.

'Ezequiel says - !' Juana came crying. When suddenly a soft, slack thud seemed to make a hole in the air, leaving a gap behind it. Thud! - Thud! - Thud! - rather slowly. It was the big drum, irresistible.

Kate rose at once from her coffee.

'I am going to the church,' she said.

'Yes, Niña - Ezequiel says - I am coming, Niña - '

And Juana scuttled away, to get her black rebozo.

The man in the white serape with the blue and black ends was waiting by the gate. He lifted his hat, and walked behind Kate and Juana.

'He is following us!' whispered Juana.

Kate drew her yellow shawl around her shoulders.

It was Sunday morning, sailing-boats lined the water's edge, with their black hulls. But the beach was empty. As the great drum let fall its slow, bellowing note, the last people were running towards the church.

In front of the church was a great throng of natives, the men with their dark serapes, or their red blankets over their shoulders; the nights of rain were cold; and their hats in their hands. The high, dark Indian heads! - Women in blue rebozos were pressing along. The big drum slowly, slackly exploded its note from the church-tower. Kate had her heart in her mouth.

In the middle of the crowd, a double row of men in the scarlet serapes of Huitzilopochtli with the black diamond on the shoulders, stood with rifles, holding open a lane through the crowd.

'Pass!' said her guard to her. And Kate entered the lane of scarlet and black serapes, going slow and dazed between watchful black eyes of the men. Her guard followed her. But Juana had been turned back.

Kate looked at her feet, and stumbled. Then she looked up.

In the gateway of the yard before the church stood a brilliant figure in a serape whose zig-zag whorls of scarlet, white, and black ran curving, dazzling, to the black shoulders; above which was the face of Cipriano, calm, superb, with the little black beard and the arching brows. He lifted his hand to her in salute.

Behind him, stretching from the gateway to the closed door of the church, was a double row of the guard of Quetzalcoatl, in their blankets with the blue and black borders.

'What shall I do?' said Kate.

'Stand here with me a moment,' said Cipriano, in the gateway.

It was no easy thing to do, to face all those dark faces and black, glittering eyes. After all, she was a gringuita, and she felt it. A sacrifice? Was she a sacrifice? She hung her head, under her yellow hat, and watched the string of topaz twinkling and shaking its delicate, bog-watery colours against her white dress. Joachim had given it her. He had had it made up for her, the string, in Cornwall. So far away! In another world, in another life, in another era! Now she was condemned to go through these strange ordeals, like a victim.

The big drum overhead ceased, and suddenly the little drums broke like a shower of hail on the air, and as suddenly ceased.

In low, deep, inward voices, the guard of Quetzalcoatl began to speak, in heavy unison:

'Oyé! Oyé! Oyé! Oyé!'

The small, inset door within the heavy doors of the church opened and Don Ramón stepped through. In his white clothes, wearing the Quetzalcoatl serape, he stood at the head of his two rows of guards, until there was a silence. Then he raised his naked right arm.

'What is God, we shall never know!' he said, in a strong voice, to all the people.

The Guard of Quetzalcoatl turned to the people, thrusting up their right arm.

'What is God, you shall never know!' they repeated.

Then again, in the crowd, the words were re-echoed by the Guard of Huitzilopochtli.

After which there fell a dead silence, in which Kate was aware of a forest of black eyes glistening with white fire.

'But the Sons of God come and go.
They come from beyond the Morning Star;
And thither they return, from the land of men.'

It was again the solemn, powerful voice of Ramón. Kate looked at his face; it was creamy-brown in its pallor, but changeless in expression, and seemed to be sending a change over the crowd, removing them from their vulgar complacency.

The Guard of Quetzalcoatl turned again to the crowd, and repeated Ramón's words to the crowd.

'Mary and Jesus have left you, and gone to the place of renewal.
And Quetzalcoatl has come. He is here.
He is your lord.'

With his words, Ramón was able to put the power of his heavy, strong will over the people. The crowd began to fuse under his influence. As he gazed back at all the black eyes, his eyes seemed to have no expression, save that they seemed to be seeing the heart of all darkness in front of him, where his unknowable God-mystery lived and moved.

'Those that follow me, must cross the mountains of the sky,
And pass the houses of the stars by night.
They shall find me only in the Morning Star.'

But those that will not follow, must not peep.
Peeping, they will lose their sight, and lingering, they
will fall very lame.'

He stood a moment in silence, gazing with dark brows at the crowd. Then he dropped his arm, and turned. The big doors of the church opened, revealing a dim interior. Ramón entered the church alone. Inside the church, the drum began to beat. The guard of Quetzalcoatl slowly filed into the dim interior, the scarlet guard of Huitzilopochtli filed into the yard of the church, taking the place of the guard of Quetzalcoatl. Cipriano remained in the gateway of the churchyard. His voice rang out clear and military.

'Hear me, people. You may enter the house of Quetzalcoatl. Men must go to the right and left, and remove their shoes, and stand erect. To the new God no man shall kneel.

'Women must go down the centre, and cover their faces. And they may sit upon the floor.

'But men must stand erect.

'Pass now, those who dare.'

Kate went with Cipriano into the church.

It was all different, the floor was black and polished, the walls were in stripes of colour, the place seemed dark. Two files of the white-clad men of Quetzalcoatl stood in a long avenue down the centre of the church.

'This way,' said one of the men of Quetzalcoatl, in a low voice, drawing her into the centre between the motionless files of men.

She went alone and afraid over the polished black floor, covering her face with her yellow shawl. The pillars of the nave were dark green, like trees rising to a deep, blue roof. The walls were vertically striped in bars of black and white, vermilion and yellow and green, with the windows between rich with deep blue and crimson and black glass, having specks of light. A strange maze, the windows.

The daylight came only from small windows, high up under the deep blue roof, where the stripes of the walls had run into a maze of green, like banana leaves. Below, the church was all dark, and rich with hard colour.

Kate went forward to the front, near the altar steps. High at the back of the chancel, above where the altar had been, burned a small but intense bluey-white light, and just below and in front of the light stood a huge dark figure, a strange looming block, apparently carved in wood. It was a naked man, carved archaic and rather flat, holding his right arm over his head, and on the right arm balanced a carved wooden eagle with outspread wings whose upper surface gleamed with gold, near the light,

whose surface was black shadow. Round the heavy left leg of the man-image was carved a serpent, also glimmering gold, and its golden head rested in the hand of the figure, near the thigh. The face of the figure was dark.

This great dark statue loomed stiff like a pillar, rather frightening in the white-lit blue chancel.

At the foot of the statue was a stone altar with a small fire of ocote-wood burning. And on a low throne by the altar sat Ramón.

People were beginning to file into the church. Kate heard the strange sound of the naked feet of the men on the black, polished floor, the white figures stole forward towards the altar steps, the dark faces gazing round in wonder, men crossing themselves involuntarily. Throngs of men slowly flooded in, and woman came half running, to crouch on the floor and cover their faces. Kate crouched down too.

A file of the men of Quetzalcoatl came and stood along the foot of the altar steps, like a fence with a gap in the middle, facing the people. Beyond the gap was the flickering altar, and Ramón.

Ramón rose to his feet. The men of Quetzalcoatl turned to face him, and shot up their naked right arms, in the gesture of the statue, Ramón lifted his arm, so that his blanket fell in towards his shoulder, revealing the naked side and the blue sash.

'All men salute Quetzalcoatl!' said a clear voice in command.

The scarlet men of Huitzilopochtli were threading among the men of the congregation, pulling the kneeling ones to their feet, causing all to thrust up their right arm, palms flat to heaven, face uplifted, body erect and tense. It was the statue receiving the eagle.

So that around the low dark shrubs of the crouching women stood a forest of erect, upthrusting men, powerful and tense with inexplicable passion. It was a forest of dark wrists and hands up-pressing, with the striped wall vibrating above, and higher, the maze of green going to the little, iron-barred windows that stood open, letting in the light and air of the roof.

'I am the living Quetzalcoatl,' came the solemn, impassive voice of Ramón.

'I am the Son of the Morning Star, and child of the deeps. No man knows my Father, and I know Him not. My Father is deep within the deeps, whence He sent me forth. He sends the eagle of silence down on wide wings To lean over my head and my neck and my breast And fill them strong with strength of wings. He sends the serpent of power up my feet and my loins So that strength wells up in me like water in hot springs. But midmost shines as the Morning Star midmost shines Between night and day, my Soul-star in one, Which is my Father whom I know not. I tell you, the day should not turn into glory, And the night should not turn deep. Save for the morning and evening stars, upon which they turn. Night turns upon me, and Day, who am the star between. Between your breast and belly is a star. If it be not there You are empty gourd-shells filled with dust and wind. When you walk, the star walks with you, between your breast and your belly. When you sleep, it softly shines. When you speak true and true, it is bright on your lips and your teeth. When you lift your hands in courage and bravery, its glow is clear in your palms. When you turn to your wives as brave men turn to their women The Morning Star and the Evening Star shine together. For man is the Morning Star. And woman is the Star of Evening. I tell you, you are not men alone. The star of the beyond is within you. But have you seen a dead man, how his star has gone out of him? So the star will go out of you, even as a woman will leave a man if his warmth never warms her. Should you say: I have no star; I am no star. So it will leave you, and you will hang like a gourd on the vine of life With nothing but rind: Waiting for the rats of the dark to come and gnaw your inside. Do you hear the rats of the darkness gnawing at your inside? Till you are as empty as rat-gnawed pomegranates hanging hollow on the Tree of Life? If the star shone, they dare not, they could not. If you were men with the Morning Star. If the star shone within you No rat of the dark dared gnaw you. But I am Quetzalcoatl, of the Morning Star. I am the living Quetzalcoatl. And you are men who should be men of the Morning Star. See you be not rat-gnawed gourds. I am Quetzalcoatl of the eagle and the snake. The earth and air. Of the Morning Star. I am Lord of the Two Ways - '

The drum began to beat, the men of Quetzalcoatl suddenly took off their serapes, and Ramón did the same. They were now men naked to the waist. The eight men from the altar-steps filed up to the altar where the fire burned, and one by one kindled tall green candles, which burned with a clear light. They ranged themselves on either side the chancel, holding the lights high, so that the wooden face of the image glowed as if alive, and the eyes of silver and jet flashed most curiously.

'A man shall take the wine of his spirit and the blood of his heart, the oil of his belly and the seed of his loins, and offer them first to the Morning Star,' said Ramón, in a loud voice, turning to the people.

Four men came to him. One put a blue crown with the bird on his brow, one put a red belt round his breast, another put a yellow belt around his middle, and the last fastened a white belt round his loins. Then the first one pressed a small glass bowl to Ramón's brow, and in the bowl was white liquid like bright water. The next touched a bowl to the breast, and the red shook in the bowl. At the navel the man touched a bowl with yellow fluid, and at the loins a bowl with something dark. They held them all to the light.

Then one by one they poured them into a silver mixing-bowl that Ramón held between his hands.

'For save the Unknown God pours His Spirit over my head and fire into my heart, and sends his power like a fountain of oil into my belly, and His lightning like a hot spring into my loins, I am not. I am nothing. I am a dead gourd.

'And save I take the wine of my spirit and the red of my heart, the strength of my belly and the power of my loins, and mingle them all together, and kindle them to the Morning Star, I betray my body, I betray my soul, I betray my spirit and my God who is Unknown.

'Fourfold is man. But the star is one star. And one man is but one star.'

He took the silver mixing-bowl and slowly circled it between his hands, in the act of mixing.

Then he turned his back to the people, and lifted the bowl high up, between his hands, as if offering it to the image.

Then suddenly he threw the contents of the bowl into the altar fire.

There was a soft puff of explosion, a blue flame leaped high into the air, followed by a yellow flame, and then a rose-red smoke. In three successive instants the faces of the men inside the chancel were lit bluish, then gold, then dusky red. And in the same moment Ramón had turned to the people and shot up his hand.

'Salute Quetzalcoatl!' cried a voice, and men began to thrust up their arms, when another voice came moaning strangely.

'No! Ah no! Ah no!' - the voice rose in a hysterical cry.

It came from among the crouching women, who glanced round in fear, to see a woman in black, kneeling on the floor, her black scarf falling back from her lifted face, thrusting up her white hands to the Madonna, in the old gesture.

'No! No! It is not permitted!' shrieked the voice. 'Lord! Lord! Lord Jesus! Holy Virgin! Prevent him! Prevent him!'

The voice sank again to a moan, the white hands clutched the breast, and the woman in black began to work her way forward on her knees, through the throng of women who pressed aside to make her way, towards the altar steps. She came with her head lowered, working her way on her knees, and moaning low prayers of supplication.

Kate felt her blood run cold. Crouching near the altar steps, she looked round. And she knew, by the shape of the head bent in the black scarf, it was Carlota, creeping along on her knees to the altar steps.

The whole church was frozen in horror. 'Saviour! Saviour! Jesus! Oh Holy Virgin!' Carlota was moaning to herself as she crawled along.

It seemed hours before she reached the altar steps. Ramón still stood below the great Quetzalcoatl image with arm up-flung.

Carlota crouched black at the altar steps and flung up the white hands and her white face in the frenzy of the old way.

'Lord! Lord!' she cried, in a strange ecstatic voice that froze Kate's bowels with horror: 'Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!'

Carlota strangled in her ecstasy. And all the while, Ramón, the living Quetzalcoatl, stood before the flickering altar with naked arm upraised, looking with dark, inalterable eyes down upon the woman.

Throes and convulsions tortured the body of Carlota. She gazed sightlessly upwards. Then came her voice, in the mysterious rhapsody of prayer:

'Lord! Lord! Forgive!

'God of love, forgive! He knows not what he does.

'Lord! Lord Jesus! Make an end. Make an end, Lord of the world, Christ of the cross, make an end. Have mercy on him, Father. Have pity on him!

'Oh, take his life from him now, now, that his soul may not die.'

Her voice had gathered strength till it rang out metallic and terrible.

'Almighty God, take his life from him, and save his soul.'

And in the silence after that cry her hands seemed to flicker in the air like flames of death.

'The Omnipotent,' came the voice of Ramón, speaking quietly, as if to her, 'is with me, and I serve Omnipotence!'

She remained with her white clasped hands upraised, her white arms and her white face showing mystical, like onyx, from her thin black dress. She was absolutely rigid. And Ramón, with his arm too upraised, looked down on her abstractedly, his black brows a little contracted.

A strong convulsion seized her body. She became tense again, making inarticulate noises. Then another convulsion seized her. Once more she recovered herself, and thrust up her clenched hands in frenzy. A third convulsion seized her as if from below, and she fell with a strangling moan in a heap on the altar steps.

Kate had risen suddenly and ran to her, to lift her up. She found her stiff, with a little froth on her discoloured lips, and fixed, glazed eyes.

Kate looked up in consternation at Ramón. He had dropped his arm, and stood with his hands against his thighs, like a statue. But he remained with his wide, absorbed dark eyes watching without any change. He met Kate's glance of dismay, and his eyes quickly glanced, like lightning, for Cipriano. Then he looked back at Carlota, across a changeless distance. Not a muscle of his face moved. And Kate could see that his heart had died in its connection with Carlota, his heart was quite, quite dead in him; out of the deathly vacancy he watched his wife. Only his brows frowned a little, from his smooth, male forehead. His old connections were broken. She could hear him say: There is no star between me and Carlota. - And how terribly true it was!

Cipriano came quickly, switched off his brilliant serape, wrapped it round the poor, stiff figure, and picking up the burden lightly, walked with it through the lane of women to the door, and out into the brilliant sun; Kate following. And as she followed, she heard the slow, deep voice of Ramón:

'I am the Living Quetzalcoatl. Naked I come from out of the deep From the place which I call my Father, Naked have I travelled the long way round From heaven, past the sleeping sons of God.

Out of the depths of the sky, I came like an eagle. Out of the bowels of the earth like a snake.

All things that lift in the lift of living between earth and sky, know me.

But I am the inward star invisible. And the star is the lamp in the hand of the Unknown Mover. Beyond me is a Lord who is terrible, and wonderful, and dark to me forever. Yet I have lain in his loins, ere he begot me in Mother space.

Now I am alone on earth, and this is mine. The roots are mine, down the dark, moist path of the snake. And the branches are mine, in the paths of the sky and the bird, But the spark of me that is me is more than mine own.

And the feet of men, and the hands of the women know me. And knees and thighs and loins, and the bowels of strength and seed are lit with me. The snake of my left-hand out of the darkness is kissing your feet with his mouth of caressive fire, And putting his strength in your heels and ankles, his flame in your knees and your legs and your loins, his circle of rest in your belly. For I am Quetzalcoatl, the feathered snake, And I am not with you till my serpent has coiled his circle of rest in your belly.

And I, Quetzalcoatl, the eagle of the air, am brushing your faces with vision. I am fanning your breasts with my breath. And building my nest of peace in your bones. I am Quetzalcoatl, of the Two Ways.'

Kate lingered to hear the end of this hymn. Cipriano also had lingered in the porch, with the strange figure in the brilliant serape in his arms. His eyes met Kate's. In his

black glance was a sort of homage, to the mystery of the Two Ways; a sort of secret. And Kate was uneasy.

They crossed quickly under the trees to the hotel, which was very near, and Carlota was laid in bed. A soldier had gone already to find a doctor; they sent also for a priest.

Kate sat by the bed. Carlota lay on the bed, making small, horrible moaning noises. The drums outside on the church-roof started to roll, in a savage, complicated rhythm. Kate went to the window and looked out. People were streaming dazzled from the church.

And then, from the church roof, came the powerful singing of men's voices, fanning like a dark eagle in the bright air; a deep, relentless chanting, with an undertone of passionate assurance. She went to the window to look. She could see the men on the church roof, the people swarming down below. And the roll of that relentless chanting, with its undertone of exultance in power and life, rolled through the air like an invisible dark presence.

Cipriano came in again, glancing at Carlota and at Kate.

'They are singing the song of Welcome to Quetzalcoatl,' said he.

'Is that it?' said Kate. 'What are the words?'

'I will find you a song-sheet,' he said.

He stood beside her, putting the spell of his presence over her. And she still struggled a little, as if she were drowning. When she wasn't drowning, she wanted to drown. But when it actually came, she fought for her old footing.

There was a crying noise from Carlota. Kate hurried to the bed.

'Where am I?' said the white-faced, awful, deathly-looking woman.

'You are resting in bed,' said Kate. 'Don't trouble.'

'Where was I?' came Carlota's voice.

'Perhaps the sun gave you a touch of sunstroke,' said Kate.

Carlota closed her eyes.

Then suddenly outside the noise of drums rolled again, a powerful sound. And outside in the sunshine life seemed to be rolling in powerful waves.

Carlota started, and opened her eyes.

'What is that noise?'

'It is a fiesta,' said Kate.

'Ramón, he's murdered me, and lost his own soul,' said Carlota. 'He has murdered me, and lost his own soul. He is a murderer, and one of the damned. The man I married! The man I married! A murderer among the damned!'

It was evident she no longer heard the sounds outside.

Cipriano could not bear the sound of her voice. He came quickly to the side of the bed.

'Doña Carlota!' he said, looking down at her dulled hazel eyes, that were fixed and unseeing: 'Do not die with wrong words on your lips. If you are murdered, you have murdered yourself. You were never married to Ramón. You were married to your own way.'

He spoke fiercely, avengingly.

'Ah!' said the dying woman. 'Ah! I never married Ramón. No! I never married him! How could I? He was not what I would have him be. How could I marry him? Ah! I thought I married him. Ah! I am so glad I didn't - so glad.'

'You are glad! You are glad!' said Cipriano in anger, angry with the very ghost of the woman, talking to the ghost. 'You are glad because you never poured the wine of your body into the mixing-bowl! Yet in your day you have drunk the wine of his body and been soothed with his oil. You are glad you kept yours back? You are glad you kept back the wine of your body and the secret oil of your soul? That you gave only the water of your charity? I tell you the water of charity, the hissing water of the spirit, is bitter at last in the mouth and in the breast and in the belly; it puts out the fire. You would have put out the fire, Doña Carlota. - But you cannot. You shall not. You have been charitable and compassionless to the man you called your own. So you have put out your own fire.'

'Who is talking?' said the ghost of Carlota.

'I, Cipriano Viedma, am talking.'

'The oil and the wine! The oil and the wine and the bread! They are the sacrament! They are the body and the blessing of God! Where is the priest? I want the sacrament. Where is the priest? I want to confess, and take the sacrament, and have the peace of God,' said the ghost of Carlota.

'The priest is coming. - But you can take no sacrament, unless you give it. The oil and the wine and the bread! They are not for the priest to give. They are to be poured into the mixing-bowl, which Ramón calls the cup of the star. If you pour neither oil nor wine into the mixing-bowl, from the mixing-bowl you cannot drink. So you have no sacrament.'

'The sacrament! The bread!' said the ghost of Carlota.

'There is no bread. There is no body without blood and oil, as Shylock found out.'

'A murderer, lost among the damned!' murmured Carlota. 'The father of his children! The husband of my body! Ah no! It is better for me to call to the Holy Virgin, and die.'

'Call then, and die!' said Cipriano.

'My children!' murmured Carlota.

'It is well you must leave them. With your beggar's bowl of charity you have stolen their oil and their wine as well. It is good for you to steal from them no more, you stave virgin, you spinster, you born widow, you weeping mother, you impeccable wife, you just woman. You stole the very sunshine out of the sky and the sap out of the earth. Because back again, what did you pour? Only the water of dead dilution into the mixing-bowl of life, you thief. Oh die! - die! - die! Die and be a thousand times dead! Do nothing but utterly die!'

Doña Carlota had relapsed into unconsciousness; even her ghost refused to hear. Cipriano flung his sinisterly-flaming serape over his shoulders and his face, over his nose, till only his black, glittering eyes were visible as he blew out of the room.

Kate sat by the window, and laughed a little. The primeval woman inside her laughed to herself, for she had known all the time about the two thieves on the Cross with Jesus; the bullying, marauding thief of the male in his own rights, and the much more subtle, cold, sly, charitable thief of the woman in HER own rights, forever chanting her beggar's whine about the love of God and the God of pity.

But Kate, too, was a modern woman and a woman in her own right. So she sat on with Carlota. And when the doctor came, she accepted the obsequiousness of the man as part of her rights. And when the priest came, she accepted the obsequiousness from him, just the same, as part of her woman's rights. These two ministers of love, what were they for, but to be obsequious to her? As for herself, she could hardly be called a thief, and a sneak-thief of the world's virility, when these men came forcing their obsequiousness upon her, whining to her to take it and relieve them of the responsibility of their own manhood. No, if women are thieves, it is only because men want to be thieved from. If women thieve the world's virility it is only because men want to have it thieved, since for men to be responsible for their own manhood seems to be the last thing men want.

So Kate sat on in the room of the dying Carlota, smiling a little cynically. Outside she heard the roll of the tom-toms and the deep chanting of the men of Quetzalcoatl. Beyond, under the trees, in the smoothed, cleared space before the church, she saw the half-naked men dancing in a circle, to the drum; the round dance. Then later, dancing a religious dance of the return of Quetzalcoatl. It was the old, barefooted, absorbed dancing of the Indians, the dance of downward-sinking absorption. It was the dance of these people, too, just the same: the dance of the Aztecs and Zapotecs and the Huicholes, just the same in essence, indigenous to America; the curious, silent, absorbed dance of the softly-beating feet and ankles, the body coming down softly, but with deep weight, upon powerful knees and ankles, to the tread of the earth, as when a male bird treads the hen. And women softly stepping in unison.

And Kate, listening to the drums, and the full-throated singing, and watching the rich, soft bodies in the dance, thought to herself a little sceptically: Yes! For these it is easier. But all the white men, of the dominant race, what are they doing at this moment?

In the afternoon there was a great dance of the Welcome of Quetzalcoatl. Kate could only see a little of it, in front of the church.

The drums beat vigorously all the time, the dance wound strangely to the water's edge. Kate heard afterwards that the procession of women with baskets on their heads, filled with bread and fruits all wrapped in leaves, went down to the shore and loaded the boats. Then dancers and all got into the boats and canoes, and rowed to the island.

They made a feast on the island, and learned the dance of the Welcome of Quetzalcoatl, which they would dance every year on that day. And they learned the Song of the Welcome of Quetzalcoatl; which later on Cipriano brought to Kate, as she sat in that dim room with the unconscious woman, who made small, terrible, mechanical noises.

The doctor came hastening, and the priest came after a while. Neither could do anything. They came in the afternoon again, and Kate walked out and wandered on the half-deserted beach, looking at the flock of boats drawing near the island, and feeling that life was a more terrible issue even than death. One could die and have done. But living was never done, it could never be finished, and the responsibility could never be shifted.

She went back again to the sick-room, and with the aid of a woman she undressed poor Carlota and put a nightdress on her. Another doctor came from the city. But the sick woman was dying. And Kate was alone with her again.

The men, where were they?

The business of living? Were they really gone about the great business of living, abandoning her here to this business of dying?

It was nightfall before she heard the drums returning. And again that deep, full, almost martial singing of men, savage and remote, to the sound of the drum. Perhaps after all, life would conquer again, and men would be men, so that women could be women. Till men are men indeed, women have no hope to be women. She knew that fatally enough.

Cipriano came to her, smelling of sun and sweat, his face darkly glowing, his eyes flashing. He glanced at the bed, at the unconscious woman, at the medicine bottles.

'What do they say?' he asked.

'The doctors think she may come round.'

'She will die,' he said.

Then he went with her to the window.

'See!' he said. 'This is what they are singing.'

It was the Song-sheet of the Welcome to Quetzalcoatl.

WELCOME TO QUETZALCOATL

We are not wasted. We are not left out.
Quetzalcoatl has come!
There is nothing more to ask for.
Quetzalcoatl has come!

He threw the Fish in the boat.
The cock rose, and crew over the waters.
The naked one climbed in.
Quetzalcoatl has come!

Quetzalcoatl loves the shade of trees.
Give him trees! Call back the trees!
We are like trees, tall and rustling.
Quetzalcoatl is among the trees.

Do not tell me my face is shining.
Quetzalcoatl has come!
Over my head his noiseless eagle
Fans a flame.

Tie my spotted shoes for dancing,
The snake has kissed my heel.
Like a volcano my hips are moving
With fire, and my throat is full.

Blue daylight sinks in my hair.
The star comes out between the two
Wonders, shines out of everywhere,
Saying without speech: Look you!

Ah, Quetzalcoatl!
Put sleep as black as beauty in the secret of my belly.
Put star-oil over me.
Call me a man.

Even as she read, she could hear the people outside singing it, as the reed-flutes unthreaded the melody time after time. This strange dumb people of Mexico was opening its voice at last. It was as if a stone had been rolled off them all, and she heard their voice for the first time, deep, wild, with a certain exultance and menace.

'The naked one climbed in.
Quetzalcoatl has come!'

She could hear the curious defiance and exultance in the men's voices. Then a woman's voice, clear almost as a star itself, went up the road at the verse:

'Blue daylight sinks in my hair.
The star comes out between the two
Wonders . . .'

Strange! The people had opened hearts at last. They had rolled the stone of their heaviness away, a new world had begun. Kate was frightened. It was dusk. She laid her hand on Cipriano's knee, lost. And he leaned and put his dark hand against her cheek, breathing silently.

'To-day,' he said softly, 'we have done well.'

She felt for his hand. All was so dark. But oh, so deep, so deep and beyond her, the vast, soft, living heat! So beyond her!

'Put sleep as black as beauty in the secret of my belly.
Put star-oil over me.'

She could almost feel her soul appealing to Cipriano for this sacrament.

They sat side by side in darkness, as the night fell, and he held his hand loosely on hers. Outside, the people were still singing. Some were dancing round the drum. On the church-towers, where the bells had been, there were fires flickering, and white forms of men, the noise of a heavy drum, then again, the chant. In the yard before the church doors a fire was blazing, and men of Huitzilopochtli stood watching two of their men, naked save for a breech-cloth and the scarlet feathers on their head, dancing the old spear-dance, whooping challenge in the firelight.

Ramón came in, in his white clothes. He pulled off his big hat, and stood looking down at Carlota. She no longer made noises, and her eyes were turned up horribly, showing the whites. Ramón closed his eyes a moment, and turned away, saying nothing. He came to the window, where Cipriano still sat in his impenetrable but living silence, that satisfied where all speech had failed, holding Kate's hand loosely. Nor did he let go her hand.

Ramón looked out, at the fires in the church towers, the fire before the church doors, the little fires on the beach by the lake; and the figures of men in white, the figures of women in dark rebozos, with full white skirts, the two naked dancers, the standing crowd, the occasional scarlet serapes of Huitzilopochtli, the white and blue of Quetzalcoatl, the creeping away of a motor-car, the running of boys, the men clustering round the drum, to sing.

'It is life,' he said, 'which is the mystery. Death is hardly mysterious in comparison.'

There was a knocking. The doctor had come again, and a sister to nurse the dying woman. Softly the sister paced round the room and bent over her charge.

Cipriano and Kate went away in a boat over the dark lake, away from all the fires and the noise into the deep darkness of the lake beyond, to Jamiltepec. Kate felt she wanted to be covered with deep and living darkness, the deeps where Cipriano could lay her.

Put sleep as black as beauty in the secret of my belly.
Put star-oil over me.

And Cipriano, as he sat in the boat with her, felt the inward sun rise darkly in him, diffusing through him; and felt the mysterious flower of her woman's femaleness slowly opening to him, as a sea-anemone opens deep under the sea, with infinite soft fleshliness. The hardness of self-will was gone, and the soft anemone of her deeps blossomed for him of itself, far down under the tides.

Ramón remained behind in the hotel, in the impenetrable sanctuary of his own stillness. Carlota remained unconscious. There was a consultation of doctors; to no effect. She died at dawn, before her boys could arrive from Mexico; as a canoa was putting off from the shore with a little breeze, and the passengers were singing the Song of

Welcome to Quetzalcoatl, unexpectedly, upon the pale water.

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