

CHAPTER XVI

THOMAS BECOMES A GOD

Little did I, plain Thomas Wingfield, gentleman, know, when I rose that morning, that before sunset I should be a god, and after Montezuma the Emperor, the most honoured man, or rather god, in the city of Mexico.

It came about thus. When I had breakfasted with the household of the prince Guatemoc, I was led to the hall of justice, which was named the 'tribunal of god.' Here on a golden throne sat Montezuma, administering justice in such pomp as I cannot describe. About him were his counsellors and great lords, and before him was placed a human skull crowned with emeralds so large that a blaze of light went up from them. In his hand also he held an arrow for a sceptre. Certain chiefs or caciques were on their trial for treason, nor were they left long in doubt as to their fate. For when some evidence had been heard they were asked what they had to say in their defence. Each of them told his tale in few words and short. Then Montezuma, who till now had said and done nothing, took the painted scroll of their indictments and pricked it with the arrow in his hand where the picture of each prisoner appeared upon the scroll. Then they were led away to death, but how they died I do not know.

When this trial was finished certain priests entered the hall clothed

in sable robes, their matted hair hanging down their backs. They were fierce, wild-eyed men of great dignity, and I shivered when I saw them. I noticed also that they alone made small reverence to the majesty of Montezuma. The counsellors and nobles having fallen back, these priests entered into talk with the emperor, and presently two of them came forward and taking me from the custody of the guards, led me forward before the throne. Then of a sudden I was commanded to strip myself of my garments, and this I did with no little shame, till I stood naked before them all. Now the priests came forward and examined every part of me closely. On my arms were the scars left by de Garcia's sword, and on my breast the scarcely healed marks of the puma's teeth and claws. These wounds they scanned, asking how I had come by them. I told them, and thereupon they carried on a discussion among themselves, and out of my hearing, which grew so warm that at length they appealed to the emperor to decide the point. He thought a while, and I heard him say:

'The blemishes do not come from within the body, nor were they upon it at birth, but have been inflicted by the violence of man and beast.'

Then the priests consulted together again, and presently their leader spoke some words into the ear of Montezuma. He nodded, and rising from his throne, came towards me who stood naked and shivering before him, for the air of Mexico is keen. As he advanced he loosed a chain of emeralds and gold that hung about his neck, and unclasped the royal cloak from his shoulders. Then with his own hand, he put the chain about my throat, and the cloak upon my shoulders, and having humbly bent the

knee before me as though in adoration, he cast his arms about me and embraced me.

'Hail! most blessed,' he said, 'divine son of Quetzal, holder of the spirit of Tezcat, Soul of the World, Creator of the World. What have we done that you should honour us thus with your presence for a season? What can we do to pay the honour back? You created us and all this country; behold! while you tarry with us, it is yours and we are nothing but your servants. Order and your commands shall be obeyed, think and your thought shall be executed before it can pass your lips. O Tezcat, I, Montezuma your servant, offer you my adoration, and through me the adoration of all my people,' and again he bowed the knee.

'We adore you, O Tezcat!' chimed in the priests.

Now I remained silent and bewildered, for of all this foolery I could understand nothing, and while I stood thus Montezuma clapped his hands and women entered bearing beautiful clothing with them, and a wreath of flowers. The clothing they put upon my body and the wreath of flowers on my head, worshipping me the while and saying, 'Tezcat who died yesterday is come again. Be joyful, Tezcat has come again in the body of the captive Teule.'

Then I understood that I was now a god and the greatest of gods, though at that moment within myself I felt more of a fool than I had ever been before.

And now men appeared, grave and reverend in appearance, bearing lutes in their hands. I was told that these were my tutors, and with them a train of royal pages who were to be my servants. They led me forth from the hall making music as they went, and before me marched a herald, calling out that this was the god Tezcat, Soul of the World, Creator of the World, who had come again to visit his people. They led me through all the courts and endless chambers of the palace, and wherever I went, man woman and child bowed themselves to the earth before me, and worshipped me, Thomas Wingfield of Ditchingham, in the county of Norfolk, till I thought that I must be mad.

Then they placed me in a litter and carried me down the hill Chapoltepec, and along causeways and through streets, till we came to the great square of the temple. Before me went heralds and priests, after me followed pages and nobles, and ever as we passed the multitudes prostrated themselves till I began to understand how wearisome a thing it is to be a god. Next they carried me through the wall of serpents and up the winding paths of the mighty teocalli till we reached the summit, where the temples and idols stood, and here a great drum beat, and the priests sacrificed victim after victim in my honour and I grew sick with the sight of wickedness and blood. Presently they invited me to descend from the litter, laying rich carpets and flowers for my feet to tread on, and I was much afraid, for I thought that they were about to sacrifice me to myself or some other divinity. But this was not so. They led me to the edge of the pyramid, or as near as I would go, for

I shrank back lest they should seize me suddenly and cast me over the edge. And there the high priest called out my dignity to the thousands who were assembled beneath, and every one of them bent the knee in adoration of me, the priests above and the multitudes below. And so it went on till I grew dizzy with the worship, and the shouting, and the sounds of music, and the sights of death, and very thankful was I, when at last they carried me back to Chapoltepec.

Here new honours awaited me, for I was conducted to a splendid range of apartments, next to those of the emperor himself, and I was told that all Montezuma's household were at my command and that he who refused to do my bidding should die.

So at last I spoke and said it was my bidding that I should be suffered to rest a while, till a feast was prepared for me in the apartments of Guatemoc the prince, for there I hoped to meet Otomie.

My tutors and the nobles who attended me answered that Montezuma my servant had trusted that I would feast with him that night. Still my command should be done. Then they left me, saying that they would come again in an hour to lead me to the banquet. Now I threw off the emblems of my godhead and cast myself down on cushions to rest and think, and a certain exultation took possession of me, for was I not a god, and had I not power almost absolute? Still being of a cautious mind I wondered why I was a god, and how long my power would last.

Before the hour had gone by, pages and nobles entered, bearing new robes which were put upon my body and fresh flowers to crown my head, and I was led away to the apartments of Guatemoc, fair women going before me who played upon instruments of music.

Here Guatemoc the prince waited to receive me, which he did as though I, his captive and companion, was the first of kings. And yet I thought that I saw merriment in his eye, mingled with sorrow. Bending forward I spoke to him in a whisper:

'What does all this mean, prince?' I said. 'Am I befooled, or am I indeed a god?'

'Hush!' he answered, bowing low and speaking beneath his breath. 'It means both good and ill for you, my friend Teule. Another time I will tell you.' Then he added aloud, 'Does it please you, O Tezcat, god of gods, that we should sit at meat with you, or will you eat alone?'

'The gods like good company, prince,' I said.

Now during this talk I had discovered that among those gathered in the hall was the princess Otomie. So when we passed to the low table around which we were to sit on cushions, I hung back watching where she would place herself, and then at once seated myself beside her. This caused some little confusion among the company, for the place of honour had been prepared for me at the head of the table, the seat of Guatemoc

being to my right and that of his wife, the royal Tecuichpo, to my left.

'Your seat is yonder, O Tezcat,' she said, blushing beneath her olive skin as she spoke.

'Surely a god may sit where he chooses, royal Otomie,' I answered; 'besides,' I added in a low voice, 'what better place can he find than by the side of the most lovely goddess on the earth.'

Again she blushed and answered, 'Alas! I no goddess, but only a mortal maid. Listen, if you desire that I should be your companion at our feasts, you must issue it as a command; none will dare to disobey you, not even Montezuma my father.'

So I rose and said in very halting Aztec to the nobles who waited on me, 'It is my will that my place shall always be set by the side of the princess Otomie.'

At these words Otomie blushed even more, and a murmur went round among the guests, while Guatemoc first looked angry and then laughed. But the nobles, my attendants, bowed, and their spokesman answered:

'The words of Tezcat shall be obeyed. Let the seat of Otomie, the royal princess, the favoured of Tezcat, be placed by the side of the god.'

Afterwards this was always done, except when I ate with Montezuma

himself. Moreover the princess Otomie became known throughout the city as 'the blessed princess, the favoured of Tezcat.' For so strong a hold had custom and superstition upon this people that they thought it the greatest of honours to her, who was among the first ladies in the land, that he who for a little space was supposed to hold the spirit of the soul of the world, should deign to desire her companionship when he ate. Now the feast went on, and presently I made shift to ask Otomie what all this might mean.

'Alas!' she whispered, 'you do not know, nor dare I tell you now. But I will say this: though you who are a god may sit where you will to-day, an hour shall come when you must lie where you would not. Listen: when we have finished eating, say that it is your wish to walk in the gardens of the palace and that I should accompany you. Then I may find a chance to speak.'

Accordingly, when the feast was over I said that I desired to walk in the gardens with the princess Otomie, and we went out and wandered under the solemn trees, that are draped in a winding-sheet of grey moss which, hanging from every bough as though the forest had been decked with the white beards of an army of aged men, waved and rustled sadly in the keen night air. But alas! we might not be alone, for after us at a distance of twenty paces followed all my crowd of attendant nobles, together with fair dancing girls and minstrels armed with their accursed flutes, on which they blew in season and out of it, dancing as they blew. In vain did I command them to be silent, telling them that it was written of old

that there is a time to play and dance and a time to cease from dancing, for in this alone they would not obey me. Never could I be at peace because of them then or thereafter, and not till now did I learn how great a treasure is solitude.

Still we were allowed to walk together under the trees, and though the clamour of music pursued us wherever we went, we were soon deep in talk. Then it was that I learned how dreadful was the fate which overshadowed me.

'Know, O Teule,' said Otomie, for she would call me by the old name when there were none to hear; 'this is the custom of our land, that every year a young captive should be chosen to be the earthly image of the god Tezcat, who created the world. Only two things are necessary to this captive, namely, that his blood should be noble, and that his person should be beautiful and without flaw or blemish. The day that you came hither, Teule, chanced to be the day of choosing a new captive to personate the god, and you have been chosen because you are both noble and more beautiful than any man in Anahuac, and also because being of the people of the Teules, the children of Quetzal of whom so many rumours have reached us, and whose coming my father Montezuma dreads more than anything in the world, it was thought by the priests that you may avert their anger from us, and the anger of the gods.'

Now Otomie paused as one who has something to say that she can scarcely find words to fit, but I, remembering only what had been said, swelled

inwardly with the sense of my own greatness, and because this lovely princess had declared that I was the most beautiful man in Anahuac, I who though I was well-looking enough, had never before been called 'beautiful' by man, woman, or child. But in this case as in many another, pride went before a fall.

'It must be spoken, Teule,' Otomie continued. 'Alas! that it should be I who am fated to tell you. For a year you will rule as a god in this city of Tenochtitlan, and except for certain ceremonies that you must undergo, and certain arts which you must learn, none will trouble you. Your slightest wish will be a law, and when you smile on any, it shall be an omen of good to them and they will bless you; even my father Montezuma will treat you with reverence as an equal or more. Every delight shall be yours except that of marriage, and this will be withheld till the twelfth month of the year. Then the four most beautiful maidens in the land will be given to you as brides.'

'And who will choose them?' I asked.

'Nay, I know not, Teule, who do not meddle in such mysteries,' she answered hurriedly. 'Sometimes the god is judge and sometimes the priests judge for him. It is as it may chance. Listen now to the end of my tale and you will surely forget the rest. For one month you will live with your wives, and this month you will pass in feasting at all the noblest houses in the city. On the last day of the month, however, you will be placed in a royal barge and together with your wives, paddled

across the lake to a place that is named "Melting of Metals." Thence you will be led to the teocalli named "House of Weapons," where your wives will bid farewell to you for ever, and there, Teule, alas! that I must say it, you are doomed to be offered as a sacrifice to the god whose spirit you hold, the great god Tezcat, for your heart will be torn from your body, and your head will be struck from your shoulders and set upon the stake that is known as "post of heads."

Now when I heard this dreadful doom I groaned aloud and my knees trembled so that I almost fell to the ground. Then a great fury seized me and, forgetting my father's counsel, I blasphemed the gods of that country and the people who worshipped them, first in the Aztec and Maya languages, then when my knowledge of these tongues failed me, in Spanish and good English. But Otomie, who heard some of my words and guessed more, was seized with fear and lifted her hands, saying:

'Curse not the awful gods, I beseech you, lest some terrible thing befall you at once. If you are overheard it will be thought that you have an evil spirit and not a good one, and then you must die now and by torment. At the least the gods, who are everywhere, will hear you.'

'Let them hear,' I answered. 'They are false gods and that country is accursed which worships them. They are doomed I say, and all their worshippers are doomed. Nay, I care not if I am heard--as well die now by torment as live a year in the torment of approaching death. But I shall not die alone, all the sea of blood that your priests have shed

cries out for vengeance to the true God, and He will avenge.'

Thus I raved on, being mad with fear and impotent anger, while the princess Otomie stood terrified and amazed at my blasphemies, and the flutes piped and the dancers danced behind us. And as I raved I saw that the mind of Otomie wandered from my words, for she was staring towards the east like one who sees a vision. Then I looked also towards the east and saw that the sky was alight there. For from the edge of the horizon to the highest parts of heaven spread a fan of pale and fearful light powdered over with sparks of fire, the handle of the fan resting on the earth as it were, while its wings covered the eastern sky. Now I ceased my cursing and stood transfixed, and as I stood, a cry of terror arose from all the precincts of the palace and people poured from every door to gaze upon the portent that flared and blazed in the east. Presently Montezuma himself came out, attended by his great lords, and in that ghastly light I saw that his lips worked and his hands writhed over each other. Nor was the miracle done with, for anon from the clear sky that hung over the city, descended a ball of fire, which seemed to rest upon the points of the lofty temple in the great square, lighting up the teocalli as with the glare of day. It vanished, but where it had been another light now burned, for the temple of Quetzal was afire.

Now cries of fear and lamentation arose from all who beheld these wonders on the hill of Chapoltepec and also from the city below. Even I was frightened, I do not know why, for it may well be that the blaze of light which we saw on that and after nights was nothing but the

brightness of a comet, and that the fire in the temple was caused by a thunderbolt. But to these people, and more especially to Montezuma, whose mind was filled already with rumours of the coming of a strange white race, which, as it was truly prophesied, would bring his empire to nothingness, the omens seemed very evil. Indeed, if they had any doubt as to their meaning, it was soon to be dispelled, in their minds at least. For as we stood wonder-struck, a messenger, panting and soiled with travel, arrived among us and prostrating himself before the majesty of the emperor, he drew a painted scroll from his robe and handed it to an attendant noble. So desirous was Montezuma to know its contents, that contrary to all custom he snatched the roll from the hands of the counsellor, and unrolling it, he began to read the picture writing by the baleful light of the blazing sky and temple. Presently, as we watched and he read, Montezuma groaned aloud, and casting down the writing he covered his face with his hands. As it chanced it fell near to where I stood, and I saw painted over it rude pictures of ships of the Spanish rig, and of men in the Spanish armour. Then I understood why Montezuma groaned. The Spaniards had landed on his shores!

Now some of his counsellors approached him to console him, but he thrust them aside, saying:

'Let me mourn--the doom that was foretold is fallen upon the children of Anahuac. The children of Quetzal muster on our shores and slay my people. Let me mourn, I say.'

At that moment another messenger came from the palace, having grief written on his face.

'Speak,' said Montezuma.

'O king, forgive the tongue that must tell such tidings. Your royal sister Papantzin was seized with terror at yonder dreadful sight,' and he pointed to the heavens; 'she lies dying in the palace!'

Now when the emperor heard that his sister whom he loved was dying, he said nothing, but covering his face with his royal mantle, he passed slowly back to the palace.

And all the while the crimson light gleamed and sparkled in the east like some monstrous and unnatural dawn, while the temple of Quetzal burned fiercely in the city beneath.

Now, I turned to the princess Otomie, who had stood by my side throughout, overcome with wonder and trembling.

'Did I not say that this country was accursed, princess of the Otomie?'

'You said it, Teule,' she answered, 'and it is accursed.'

Then we went into the palace, and even in this hour of fear, after me

came the minstrels as before.