

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NAMING OF THE BRIDES

Now some months passed between the date of my naming as the god Tezcat and the entry of the Spaniards into Mexico, and during all this space the city was in a state of ferment. Again and again Montezuma sent embassies to Cortes, bearing with them vast treasures of gold and gems as presents, and at the same time praying him to withdraw, for this foolish prince did not understand that by displaying so much wealth he flew a lure which must surely bring the falcon on himself. To these ambassadors Cortes returned courteous answers together with presents of small value, and that was all.

Then the advance began and the emperor learned with dismay of the conquest of the warlike tribe of the Tlascalans, who, though they were Montezuma's bitter and hereditary foes, yet made a stand against the white man. Next came the tidings that from enemies the conquered Tlascalans had become the allies and servants of the Spaniard, and that thousands of their fiercest warriors were advancing with him upon the sacred city of Cholula. A while passed and it was known that Cholula also had been given to massacre, and that the holy, or rather the unholy gods, had been torn from their shrines. Marvellous tales were told of the Spaniards, of their courage and their might, of the armour that they wore, the thunder that their weapons made in battle, and the fierce

beasts which they bestrode. Once two heads of white men taken in a skirmish were sent to Montezuma, fierce-looking heads, great and hairy, and with them the head of a horse. When Montezuma saw these ghastly relics he almost fainted with fear, still he caused them to be set up on pinnacles of the great temple and proclamation to be made that this fate awaited every invader of the land.

Meanwhile all was confusion in his policies. Day by day councils were held of the nobles, of high priests, and of neighbouring and friendly kings. Some advised one thing, some another, and the end of it was hesitation and folly. Ah! had Montezuma but listened to the voice of that great man Guatemoc, Anahuac would not have been a Spanish fief to-day. For Guatemoc prayed him again and yet again to put away his fears and declare open war upon the Teules before it was too late; to cease from making gifts and sending embassies, to gather his countless armies and smite the foe in the mountain passes.

But Montezuma would answer, 'To what end, nephew? How can I struggle against these men when the gods themselves have declared for them? Surely the gods can take their own parts if they wish it, and if they will not, for myself and my own fate I do not care, but alas! for my people, alas! for the women and the children, the aged and the weak.'

Then he would cover his face and moan and weep like a child, and Guatemoc would pass from his presence dumb with fury at the folly of so great a king, but helpless to remedy it. For like myself, Guatemoc

believed that Montezuma had been smitten with a madness sent from heaven to bring the land to ruin.

Now it must be understood that though my place as a god gave me opportunities of knowing all that passed, yet I Thomas Wingfield, was but a bubble on that great wave of events which swept over the world of Anahuac two generations since. I was a bubble on the crest of the wave indeed, but at that time I had no more power than the foam has over the wave. Montezuma distrusted me as a spy, the priests looked on me as a god and future victim and no more, only Guatemoc my friend, and Otomie who loved me secretly, had any faith in me, and with these two I often talked, showing them the true meaning of those things that were happening before our eyes. But they also were strengthless, for though his reason was no longer captain, still the unchecked power of Montezuma guided the ship of state first this way and then that, just as a rudder directs a vessel to its ruin when the helmsman has left it, and it swings at the mercy of the wind and tide.

The people were distraught with fear of the future, but not the less on that account, or perhaps because of it, they plunged with fervour into pleasures, alternating them with religious ceremonies. In those days no feast was neglected and no altar lacked its victim. Like a river that quickens its flow as it draws near the precipice over which it must fall, so the people of Mexico, foreseeing ruin, awoke as it were and lived as they had never lived before. All day long the cries of victims came from a hundred temple tops, and all night the sounds of revelry

were heard among the streets. 'Let us eat and drink,' they said, 'for the gods of the sea are upon us and to-morrow we die.' Now women who had been held virtuous proved themselves wantons, and men whose names were honest showed themselves knaves, and none cried fie upon them; ay, even children were seen drunken in the streets, which is an abomination among the Aztecs.

The emperor had moved his household from Chapoltepec to the palace in the great square facing the temple, and this palace was a town in itself, for every night more than a thousand human beings slept beneath its roof, not to speak of the dwarfs and monsters, and the hundreds of wild birds and beasts in cages. Here every day I feasted with whom I would, and when I was weary of feasting it was my custom to sally out into the streets playing on the lute, for by now I had in some degree mastered that hateful instrument, dressed in shining apparel and attended by a crowd of nobles and royal pages. Then the people would rush from their houses shouting and doing me reverence, the children pelted me with flowers, and the maidens danced before me, kissing my hands and feet, till at length I was attended by a mob a thousand strong. And I also danced and shouted like any village fool, for I think that a kind of mad humour, or perhaps it was the drunkenness of worship, entered into me in those days. Also I sought to forget my griefs, I desired to forget that I was doomed to the sacrifice, and that every day brought me nearer to the red knife of the priest.

I desired to forget, but alas! I could not. The fumes of the mescal

and the pulque that I had drunk at feasts would pass from my brain, the perfume of flowers, the sights of beauty and the adoration of the people would cease to move me, and I could only brood heavily upon my doom and think with longing of my distant love and home. In those days, had it not been for the tender kindness of Otomie, I think that my heart would have broken or I should have slain myself. But this great and beautiful lady was ever at hand to cheer me in a thousand ways, and now and again she would let fall some vague words of hope that set my pulses bounding. It will be remembered that when first I came to the court of Montezuma, I had found Otomie fair and my fancy turned towards her. Now I still found her fair, but my heart was so full of terror that there was no room in it for tender thoughts of her or of any other woman. Indeed when I was not drunk with wine or adoration, I turned my mind to the making of my peace with heaven, of which I had some need.

Still I talked much with Otomie, instructing her in the matters of my faith and many other things, as I had done by Marina, who we now heard was the mistress and interpreter of Cortes, the Spanish leader. She for her part listened gravely, watching me the while with her tender eyes, but no more, for of all women Otomie was the most modest, as she was the proudest and most beautiful.

So matters went on until the Spaniards had left Cholula on their road to Mexico. It was then that I chanced one morning to be sitting in the gardens, my lute in hand, and having my attendant nobles and tutors

gathered at a respectful distance behind me. From where I sat I could see the entrance to the court in which the emperor met his council daily, and I noted that when the princes had gone the priests began to come, and after them a number of very lovely girls attended by women of middle age. Presently Guatemoc the prince, who now smiled but rarely, came up to me smiling, and asked me if I knew what was doing yonder. I replied that I knew nothing and cared less, but I supposed that Montezuma was gathering a peculiar treasure to send to his masters the Spaniards.

'Beware how you speak, Teule,' answered the prince haughtily. 'Your words may be true, and yet did I not love you, you should rue them even though you hold the spirit of Tezcat. Alas!' he added, stamping on the ground, 'alas! that my uncle's madness should make it possible that such words can be spoken. Oh! were I emperor of Anahuac, in a single week the head of every Teule in Cholula should deck a pinnacle of yonder temple.'

'Beware how you speak, prince,' I answered mocking him, 'for there are those who did they hear, might cause YOU to rue YOUR words. Still one day you may be emperor, and then we shall see how you will deal with the Teules, at least others will see though I shall not. But what is it now? Does Montezuma choose new wives?'

'He chooses wives, but not for himself. You know, Teule, that your time grows short. Montezuma and the priests name those who must be given to you to wife.'

'Given me to wife!' I said starting to my feet; 'to me whose bride is death! What have I to do with love or marriage? I who in some few short weeks must grace an altar? Ah! Guatemoc, you say you love me, and once I saved you. Did you love me, surely you would save me now as you swore to do.'

'I swore that I would give my life for yours, Teule, if it lay in my power, and that oath I would keep, for all do not set so high a store on life as you, my friend. But I cannot help you; you are dedicated to the gods, and did I die a hundred times, it would not save you from your fate. Nothing can save you except the hand of heaven if it wills. Therefore, Teule, make merry while you may, and die bravely when you must. Your case is no worse than mine and that of many others, for death awaits us all. Farewell.'

When he had gone I rose, and leaving the gardens I passed into the chamber where it was my custom to give audience to those who wished to look upon the god Tezcat as they called me. Here I sat upon my golden couch, inhaling the fumes of tobacco, and as it chanced I was alone, for none dared to enter that room unless I gave them leave. Presently the chief of my pages announced that one would speak with me, and I bent my head, signifying that the person should enter, for I was weary of my thoughts. The page withdrew, and presently a veiled woman stood before me. I looked at her wondering, and bade her draw her veil and speak. She obeyed, and I saw that my visitor was the princess Otomie. Now I rose

amazed, for it was not usual that she should visit me thus alone. I guessed therefore that she had tidings, or was following some custom of which I was ignorant.

'I pray you be seated,' she said confusedly; 'it is not fitting that you should stand before me.'

'Why not, princess?' I answered. 'If I had no respect for rank, surely beauty must claim it.'

'A truce to words,' she replied with a wave of her slim hand. 'I come here, O Tezcat, according to the ancient custom, because I am charged with a message to you. Those whom you shall wed are chosen. I am the bearer of their names.'

'Speak on, princess of the Otomie.'

'They are'--and she named three ladies whom I knew to be among the loveliest in the land.

'I thought that there were four,' I said with a bitter laugh. 'Am I to be defrauded of the fourth?'

'There is a fourth,' she answered, and was silent.

'Give me her name,' I cried. 'What other slut has been found to marry a felon doomed to sacrifice?'

'One has been found, O Tezcat, who has borne other titles than this you give her.'

Now I looked at her questioningly, and she spoke again in a low voice.

'I, Otomie, princess of the Otomie, Montezuma's daughter, am the fourth and the first.'

'You!' I said, sinking back upon my cushions. 'YOU!'

'Yes, I. Listen: I was chosen by the priests as the most lovely in the land, however unworthily. My father, the emperor, was angry and said that whatever befell, I should never be the wife of a captive who must die upon the altar of sacrifice. But the priests answered that this was no time for him to claim exception for his blood, now when the gods were wroth. Was the first lady in the land to be withheld from the god? they asked. Then my father sighed and said that it should be as I willed. And I said with the priests, that now in our sore distress the proud must humble themselves to the dust, even to the marrying of a captive slave who is named a god and doomed to sacrifice. So I, princess of the Otomie, have consented to become your wife, O Tezcat, though perchance had I known all that I read in your eyes this hour, I should not have consented. It may happen that in this shame I hoped to find love if

only for one short hour, and that I purposed to vary the custom of our people, and to complete my marriage by the side of the victim on the altar, as, if I will, I have the right to do. But I see well that I am not welcome, and though it is too late to go back upon my word, have no fear. There are others, and I shall not trouble you. I have given my message, is it your pleasure that I should go? The solemn ceremony of wedlock will be on the twelfth day from now, O Tezcat.'

Now I rose from my seat and took her hand, saying:

'I thank you, Otomie, for your nobleness of mind. Had it not been for the comfort and friendship which you and Guatemoc your cousin have given me, I think that ere now I should be dead. So you desire to comfort me to the last; it seems that you even purposed to die with me. How am I to interpret this, Otomie? In our land a woman would need to love a man after no common fashion before she consented to share such a bed as awaits me on yonder pyramid. And yet I may scarcely think that you whom kings have sued for can place your heart so low. How am I to read the writing of your words, princess of the Otomie?'

'Read it with your heart,' she whispered low, and I felt her hand tremble in my own.

I looked at her beauty, it was great; I thought of her devotion, a devotion that did not shrink from the most horrible of deaths, and a wind of feeling which was akin to love swept through my soul. But even

as I looked and thought, I remembered the English garden and the English maid from whom I had parted beneath the beech at Ditchingham, and the words that we had spoken then. Doubtless she still lived and was true to me; while I lived should I not keep true at heart to her? If I must wed these Indian girls, I must wed them, but if once I told Otomie that I loved her, then I broke my troth, and with nothing less would she be satisfied. As yet, though I was deeply moved and the temptation was great, I had not come to this.

'Be seated, Otomie,' I said, 'and listen to me. You see this golden token,' and I drew Lily's posy ring from my hand, 'and you see the writing within it.'

She bent her head but did not speak, and I saw that there was fear in her eyes.

'I will read you the words, Otomie,' and I translated into the Aztec tongue the quaint couplet:

Heart to heart, Though far apart.

Then at last she spoke. 'What does the writing mean?' she said. 'I can only read in pictures, Teule.'

'It means, Otomie, that in the far land whence I come, there is a woman who loves me, and who is my love.'

'Is she your wife then?'

'She is not my wife, Otomie, but she is vowed to me in marriage.'

'She is vowed to you in marriage,' she answered bitterly: 'why, then we are equal, for so am I, Teule. But there is this difference between us; you love her, and me you do not love. That is what you would make clear to me. Spare me more words, I understand all. Still it seems that if I have lost, she is also in the path of loss. Great seas roll between you and this love of yours, Teule, seas of water, and the altar of sacrifice, and the nothingness of death. Now let me go. Your wife I must be, for there is no escape, but I shall not trouble you over much, and it will soon be done with. Then you may seek your desire in the Houses of the Stars whither you must wander, and it is my prayer that you shall win it. All these months I have been planning to find hope for you, and I thought that I had found it. But it was built upon a false belief, and it is ended. Had you been able to say from your heart that you loved me, it might have been well for both of us; should you be able to say it before the end, it may still be well. But I do not ask you to say it, and beware how you tell me a lie. I leave you, Teule, but before I go I will say that I honour you more in this hour than I have honoured you before, because you have dared to speak the truth to me, Montezuma's daughter, when a lie had been so easy and so safe. That woman beyond

the seas should be grateful to you, but though I bear her no ill will, between me and her there is a struggle to the death. We are strangers to each other, and strangers we shall remain, but she has touched your hand as I touch it now; you link us together and are our bond of enmity. Farewell my husband that is to be. We shall meet no more till that sorry day when a "slut" shall be given to a "felon" in marriage. I use your own words, Teule!

Then rising, Otomie cast her veil about her face and passed slowly from the chamber, leaving me much disturbed. It was a bold deed to have rejected the proffered love of this queen among women, and now that I had done so I was not altogether glad. Would Lily, I wondered, have offered to descend from such state, to cast off the purple of her royal rank that she might lie at my side on the red stone of sacrifice? Perhaps not, for this fierce fidelity is only to be found in women of another breed. These daughters of the Sun love wholly when they love at all, and as they love they hate. They ask no priest to consecrate their vows, nor if these become hateful, will they be bound by them for duty's sake. Their own desire is their law, but while it rules them they follow it unflinchingly, and if need be, they seek its consummation in the gates of death, or failing that, forgetfulness.