

CHAPTER L

Yillah In Ardair

In the verdant glen of Ardair, far in the silent interior of Amma, shut in by hoar old cliffs, Yillah the maiden abode.

So small and so deep was this glen, so surrounded on all sides by steep acclivities, and so vividly green its verdure, and deceptive the shadows that played there; that, from above, it seemed more like a lake of cool, balmy air, than a glen: its woodlands and grasses gleaming shadowy all, like sea groves and mosses beneath the calm sea.

Here, none came but Aleema the priest, who at times was absent for days together. But at certain seasons, an unseen multitude with loud chants stood upon the verge of the neighboring precipices, and traversing those shaded wilds, slowly retreated; their voices lessening and lessening, as they wended their way through the more distant groves.

At other times, Yillah being immured in the temple of Apo, a band of men entering the vale, surrounded her retreat, dancing there till evening came. Meanwhile, heaps of fruit, garlands of flowers, and baskets of fish, were laid upon an altar without, where stood Aleema, arrayed in white tappa, and muttering to himself, as the offerings were laid at his feet.

When Aleema was gone, Yillah went forth into the glen, and wandered among the trees, and reposed by the banks of the stream. And ever as she strolled, looked down upon her the grim old cliffs, bearded with trailing moss.

Toward the lower end of the vale, its lofty walls advancing and overhanging their base, almost met in mid air. And a great rock, hurled from an adjacent height, and falling into the space intercepted, there remained fixed. Aerial trees shot up from its surface; birds nested in its clefts; and strange vines roved abroad, overrunning the tops of the trees, lying thereon in coils and undulations, like anacondas basking in the light. Beneath this rock, was a lofty wall of ponderous stones. Between its crevices, peeps were had of a long and leafy arcade, quivering far away to where the sea rolled in the sun. Lower down, these crevices gave an outlet to the waters of the brook, which, in a long cascade, poured over sloping green ledges near the foot of the wall, into a deep shady pool; whose rocky sides, by the perpetual eddying of the water, had been worn into a grotesque resemblance to a group of giants, with heads submerged, indolently reclining about the basin.

In this pool, Yillah would bathe. And once, emerging, she heard the echoes of a voice, and called aloud. But the only reply, was the rustling of branches, as some one, invisible, fled down the valley beyond. Soon after, a stone rolled inward, and Aleema the priest

stood before her; saying that the voice she had heard was his. But it was not.

At last the weary days grew, longer and longer, and the maiden pined for companionship. When the breeze blew not, but slept in the caves of the mountains, and all the leaves of the trees stood motionless as tears in the eye, Yillah would sadden, and call upon the spirits in her soul to awaken. She sang low airs, she thought she had heard in Oroolia; but started affrighted, as from dingles and dells, came back to her strains more wild than hers. And ever, when sad, Aleema would seek to cheer her soul, by calling to mind the bright scenes of Oroolia the Blest, to which place, he averred, she was shortly to return, never more to depart.

Now, at the head of the vale of Ardair, rose a tall, dark peak, presenting at the top the grim profile of a human face; whose shadow, every afternoon, crept down the verdant side of the mountain: a silent phantom, stealing all over the bosom of the glen.

At times, when the phantom drew near, Aleema would take Yillah forth, and waiting its approach, lay her down by the shadow, disposing her arms in a caress; saying, "Oh, Apo! dost accept thy bride?" And at last, when it crept beyond the place where he stood, and buried the whole valley in gloom; Aleema would say, "Arise Yillah; Apo hath stretched himself to sleep in Ardair. Go, slumber where thou wilt; for thou wilt slumber in his arms."

And so, every night, slept the maiden in the arms of grim Apo.

One day when Yillah had come to love the wild shadow, as something that every day moved before her eyes, where all was so deathfully still; she went forth alone to watch it, as softly it slid down from the peak. Of a sudden, when its face was just edging a chasm, that made it to look as if parting its lips, she heard a loud voice, and thought it was Apo calling "Yillah! Yillah!" But now it seemed like the voice she had heard while bathing in the pool. Glancing upward, she beheld a beautiful open-armed youth, gazing down upon her from an inaccessible crag. But presently, there was a rustling in the groves behind, and swift as thought, something darted through the air. The youth bounded forward. Yillah opened her arms to receive him; but he fell upon the cliff, and was seen no more. As alarmed, and in tears, she fled from the scene, some one out of sight ran before her through the wood.

Upon recounting this adventure to Aleema, he said, that the being she had seen, must have been a bad spirit come to molest her; and that Apo had slain him.

The sight of this youth, filled Yillah with wild yearnings to escape from her lonely retreat; for a glimpse of some one beside the priest and the phantom, suggested vague thoughts of worlds of fair beings, in regions beyond Ardair. But Aleema sought to put away these

conceits; saying, that ere long she would be journeying to Oroolia, there to rejoin the spirits she dimly remembered.

Soon after, he came to her with a shell--one of those ever moaning of ocean--and placing it to her ear, bade her list to the being within, which in that little shell had voyaged from Oroolia to bear her company in Amma.

Now, the maiden oft held it to her ear, and closing her eyes, listened and listened to its soft inner breathings, till visions were born of the sound, and her soul lay for hours in a trance of delight.

And again the priest came, and brought her a milk-white bird, with a bill jet-black, and eyes like stars. "In this, lurks the soul of a maiden; it hath flown from Oroolia to greet you." The soft stranger willingly nestled in her bosom; turning its bright eyes upon hers, and softly warbling.

Many days passed; and Yillah, the bird, and the shell were inseparable. The bird grew familiar; pecked seeds from her mouth; perched upon her shoulder, and sang in her ear; and at night, folded its wings in her bosom, and, like a sea-fowl, went softly to sleep: rising and falling upon the maiden's heart. And every morning it flew from its nest, and fluttered and chirped; and sailed to and fro; and blithely sang; and brushed Yillah's cheek till she woke. Then came to her hand: and Yillah, looking earnestly in its eyes, saw strange

faces there; and said to herself as she gazed--"These are two souls, not one."

But at last, going forth into the groves with the bird, it suddenly flew from her side, and perched in a bough; and throwing back its white downy throat, there gushed from its bill a clear warbling jet, like a little fountain in air. Now the song ceased; when up and away toward the head of the vale, flew the bird. "Lil! Lil! come back, leave me not, blest souls of the maidens." But on flew the bird, far up a defile, winging its way till a speck.

It was shortly after this, and upon the evening of a day which had been tumultuous with sounds of warfare beyond the lower wall of the glen; that Aleema came to Yillah in alarm; saying--"Yillah, the time has come to follow thy bird; come, return to thy home in Oroolia." And he told her the way she would voyage there: by the vortex on the coast of Tedaidee. That night, being veiled and placed in the tent, the maiden was borne to the sea-side, where the canoe was in waiting. And setting sail quickly, by next morning the island of Amma was no longer in sight.

And this was the voyage, whose sequel has already been recounted.