

## CHAPTER LIV

### A Gentleman From The Sun

Never before had I seen the deep foliage of woodlands navigated by canoes. But on they came sailing through the leaves; two abreast; borne on men's shoulders; in each a chief, carried along to the measured march of his bearers; paddle blades reversed under arms. As they emerged, the multitude made gestures of homage. At the distance of some eight or ten paces the procession halted; when the kings alighted to the ground.

They were fine-looking men, arrayed in various garbs. Rare the show of stained feathers, and jewels, and other adornments. Brave the floating of dyed mantles.

The regal bearing of these personages, the deference paid them, and their entire self-possession, not a little surprised me. And it seemed preposterous, to assume a divine dignity in the presence of these undoubted potentates of terra firma. Taji seemed oozing from my fingers' ends. But courage! and erecting my crest, I strove to look every inch the character I had determined to assume.

For a time, it was almost impossible to tell with what emotions precisely the chiefs were regarding me. They said not a word.

But plucking up heart of grace, I crossed my cutlass on my chest, and reposing my hand on the hilt, addressed their High Mightinesses thus. "Men of Mardi, I come from the sun. When this morning it rose and touched the wave, I pushed my shallop from its golden beach, and hither sailed before its level rays. I am Taji."

More would have been added, but I paused for the effect of my exordium.

Stepping back a pace or two, the chiefs eagerly conversed.

Emboldened, I returned to the charge, and labored hard to impress them with just such impressions of me and mine, as I deemed desirable. The gentle Yillah was a seraph from the sun; Samoa I had picked off a reef in my route from that orb; and as for the Skyeman, why, as his name imported, he came from above. In a word, we were all strolling divinities.

Advancing toward the Chamois, one of the kings, a calm old man, now addressed me as follows:--"Is this indeed Taji? he, who according to a tradition, was to return to us after five thousand moons? But that period is yet unexpired. What bring'st thou hither then, Taji, before thy time? Thou wast but a quarrelsome demi-god, say the legends, when thou dwelt among our sires. But wherefore comest thou, Taji? Truly, thou wilt interfere with the worship of thy images, and we have plenty of gods besides thee. But comest thou to fight?--We have

plenty of spears, and desire not thine. Comest thou to dwell?--Small are the houses of Mardi. Or comest thou to fish in the sea? Tell us, Taji."

Now, all this was a series of posers hard to be answered; furnishing a curious example, moreover, of the reception given to strange demi-gods when they travel without their portmanteaus; and also of the familiar manner in which these kings address the immortals. Much I mourned that I had not previously studied better my part, and learned the precise nature of my previous existence in the land.

But nothing like carrying it bravely.

"Attend. Taji comes, old man, because it pleases him to come. And Taji will depart when it suits him. Ask the shades of your sires whether Taji thus scurvily greeted them, when they came stalking into his presence in the land of spirits. No. Taji spread the banquet. He removed their mantles. He kindled a fire to drive away the damp. He said not, 'Come you to fight, you fogs and vapors? come you to dwell? or come you to fish in the sea?' Go to, then, kings of Mardi!"

Upon this, the old king fell back; and his place was supplied by a noble chief, of a free, frank bearing. Advancing quickly toward the boat, he exclaimed--"I am Media, the son of Media. Thrice welcome, Taji. On my island of Odo hast thou an altar. I claim thee for my guest." He then reminded the rest, that the strangers had voyaged

far, and needed repose. And, furthermore, that he proposed escorting them forthwith to his own dominions; where, next day, he would be happy to welcome all visitants.

And good as his word, he commanded his followers to range themselves under the Chamois. Springing out of our prow, the Upoluan was followed by Jarl; leaving Yillah and Taji to be borne therein toward the sea.

Soon, we were once more afloat; by our side, Media sociably seated; six of his paddlers, perched upon the gunwale, swiftly urging us over the lagoon.

The transition from the grove to the sea was instantaneous. All seemed a dream.

The place to which we were hastening, being some distance away, as we rounded isle after isle, the extent of the Archipelago grew upon us greatly.