

CHAPTER LVI

King Media A Host

Striking into a grove, about sunset we emerged upon a fine, clear space, and spied a city in the woods.

In the middle of all, like a generalissimo's marquee among tents, was a structure more imposing than the rest. Here, abode King Media.

Disposed round a space some fifty yards square, were many palm posts staked firmly in the earth. A man's height from the ground, these supported numerous horizontal trunks, upon which lay a flooring of habiscus. High over this dais, but resting upon independent supports beyond, a gable-ended roof sloped away to within a short distance of the ground.

Such was the palace.

We entered it by an arched, arbored entrance, at one of its palmetto-thatched ends. But not through this exclusive portal entered the Islanders. Humbly stooping, they found ingress under the drooping eaves. A custom immemorial, and well calculated to remind all contumacious subjects of the dignity of the habitation thus entered.

Three steps led to the summit of the dais, where piles of soft mats, and light pillows of woven grass, stuffed with the golden down of a wild thistle, invited all loiterers to lounge.

How pleasant the twilight that welled up from under the low eaves, above which we were seated. And how obvious now the design of the roof. No shade more grateful and complete; the garish sun lingering without like some lackey in waiting.

But who is this in the corner, gaping at us like a butler in a quandary? Media's household deity, in the guise of a plethoric monster, his enormous head lolling back, and wide, gaping mouth stuffed full of fresh fruits and green leaves. Truly, had the idol possessed a soul under his knotty ribs, how tantalizing to hold so glorious a mouthful without the power of deglutition. Far worse than the inexorable lock-jaw, which will not admit of the step preliminary to a swallow.

This jolly Josh image was that of an inferior deity, the god of Good Cheer, and often after, we met with his merry round mouth in many other abodes in Mardi. Daily, his jaws are replenished, as a flower vase in summer.

But did the demi-divine Media thus brook the perpetual presence of a subaltern divinity? Still more; did he render it homage? But ere long the Mardian mythology will be discussed, thereby making plain what

may now seem anomalous.

Politely escorting us into his palace, Media did the honors by inviting his guests to recline. He then seemed very anxious to impress us with the fact, that, by bringing us to his home, and thereby charging the royal larder with our maintenance, he had taken no hasty or imprudent step. His merry butlers kept piling round us viands, till we were well nigh walled in. At every fresh deposit, Media directing our attention to the same, as yet additional evidence of his ample resources as a host. The evidence was finally closed by dragging under the eaves a felled plantain tree, the spike of red ripe fruit, sprouting therefrom, blushing all over, at so rude an introduction to the notice of strangers.

During this scene, Jarl was privily nudging Samoa, in wonderment, to know what upon earth it all meant. But Samoa, scarcely deigning to notice interrogatories propounded through the elbow, only let drop a vague hint or two.

It was quite amusing, what airs Samoa now gave himself, at least toward my Viking. Among the Mardians he was at home. And who, when there, stretches not out his legs, and says unto himself, "Who is greater than I?"

To be plain: concerning himself and the Skyeman, the tables were turned. At sea, Jarl had been the oracle: an old sea-sage, learned in

hemp and helm. But our craft high and dry, the Upoluan lifted his crest as the erudite pagan; master of Gog and Magog, expounder of all things heathenish and obscure.

An hour or two was now laughed away in very charming conversation with Media; when I hinted, that a couch and solitude would be acceptable. Whereupon, seizing a taper, our host escorted us without the palace. And ushering us into a handsome unoccupied mansion, gave me to understand that the same was mine. Mounting to the dais, he then instituted a vigorous investigation, to discern whether every thing was in order. Not fancying something about the mats, he rolled them up into bundles, and one by one sent them flying at the heads of his servitors; who, upon that gentle hint made off with them, soon after returning with fresh ones. These, with mathematical precision, Media in person now spread on the dais; looking carefully to the fringes or ruffles with which they were bordered, as if striving to impart to them a sentimental expression.

This done, he withdrew.