

CHAPTER LX

Belshazzar On The Bench

Now, Media was king of Odo. And from the simplicity of his manners hitherto, and his easy, frank demeanor toward ourselves, had we foolishly doubted that fact, no skepticism could have survived an illustration of it, which this very day we witnessed at noon.

For at high noon, Media was wont to don his dignity with his symbols of state; and sit on his judgment divan or throne, to hear and try all causes brought before him, and fulminate his royal decrees.

This divan was elevated at one end of a spacious arbor, formed by an avenue of regal palms, which in brave state, held aloft their majestical canopy.

The crown of the island prince was of the primitive old Eastern style; in shape, similar, perhaps, to that jauntily sported as a foraging cap by his sacred majesty King Nimrod, who so lustily followed the hounds. It was a plaited turban of red tappa, radiated by the pointed and polished white bones of the Ray-fish. These diverged from a bandeau or fillet of the most precious pearls; brought up from the sea by the deepest diving mermen of Mardi. From the middle of the crown rose a tri-foiled spear-head. And a spear-headed scepter graced the right hand of the king.

Now, for all the rant of your democrats, a fine king on a throne is a very fine sight to behold. He looks very much like a god. No wonder that his more dutiful subjects so swore, that their good lord and master King Media was demi-divine.

A king on his throne! Ah, believe me, ye Gracchi, ye Acephali, ye Levelers, it is something worth seeing, be sure; whether beheld at Babylon the Tremendous, when Nebuchadnezzar was crowned; at old Scone in the days of Macbeth; at Rheims, among Oriflammes, at the coronation of Louis le Grand; at Westminster Abbey, when the gentlemanly George doffed his beaver for a diadem; or under the soft shade of palm trees on an isle in the sea.

Man lording it over man, man kneeling to man, is a spectacle that Gabriel might well travel hitherward to behold; for never did he behold it in heaven. But Darius giving laws to the Medes and the Persians, or the conqueror of Bactria with king-cattle yoked to his car, was not a whit more sublime, than Beau Brummel magnificently ringing for his valet.

A king on his throne! It is Jupiter nodding in the councils of Olympus; Satan, seen among the coronets in Hell.

A king on his throne! It is the sun over a mountain; the sun over law-giving Sinai; the sun in our system: planets, duke-like, dancing

attendance, and baronial satellites in waiting.

A king on his throne! After all, but a gentleman seated. And thus sat the good lord, King Media.

Time passed. And after trying and dismissing several minor affairs, Media called for certain witnesses to testify concerning one Jiromo, a foolhardy wight, who had been silly enough to plot against the majesty now sitting judge and jury upon him.

His guilt was clear. And the witnesses being heard, from a bunch of palm plumes Media taking a leaf, placed it in the hand of a runner or pursuivant, saying, "This to Jiromo, where he is prisoned; with his king's compliments; say we here wait for his head."

It was doffed like a turban before a Dey, and brought back on the instant.

Now came certain lean-visaged, poverty-stricken, and hence suspicious-looking varlets, grumbling and growling, and amiable as Bruin. They came muttering some wild jargon about "bulwarks," "bulkheads," "cofferdams," "safeguards," "noble charters," "shields," and "paladiums," "great and glorious birthrights," and other unintelligible gibberish.

Of the pursuivants, these worthies asked audience of Media.

"Go, kneel at the throne," was the answer.

"Our knee-pans are stiff with sciatics," was the rheumatic reply.

"An artifice to keep on your legs," said the pursuivants.

And advancing they salamed, and told Media the excuse of those sour-looking varlets. Whereupon my lord commanded them to down on their marrow-bones instanter, either before him or the headsman, whichsoever they pleased.

They preferred the former. And as they there kneeled, in vain did men with sharp ears (who abound in all courts) prick their auriculars, to list to that strange crackling and firing off of bone balls and sockets, ever incident to the genuflections of rheumatic courtiers.

In a row, then, these selfsame knee-pans did kneel before the king; who eyed them as eagles in air do goslings on dunghills; or hunters, hounds crouching round their calves.

"Your prayer?" said Media.

It was a petition, that thereafter all differences between man and man in Ode, together with all alleged offenses against the state, might be tried by twelve good men and true. These twelve to be

unobnoxious to the party or parties concerned; their peers; and previously unbiased touching the matter at issue. Furthermore, that unanimity in these twelve should be indispensable to a verdict; and no dinner be vouchsafed till unanimity came.

Loud and long laughed King Media in scorn.

"This be your judge," he cried, swaying his scepter. "What! are twelve wise men more wise than one? or will twelve fools, put together, make one sage? Are twelve honest men more honest than one? or twelve knaves less knavish than one? And if, of twelve men, three be fools, and three wise, three knaves, and three upright, how obtain real unanimity from such?"

"But if twelve judges be better than one, then are twelve hundred better than twelve. But take the whole populace for a judge, and you will long wait for a unanimous verdict.

"If upon a thing dubious, there be little unanimity in the conflicting opinions of one man's mind, how expect it in the uproar of twelve puzzled brains? though much unanimity be found in twelve hungry stomachs.

"Judges unobnoxious to the accused! Apply it to a criminal case. Ha! ha! if peradventure a Cacti be rejected, because he had seen the accused commit the crime for which he is arraigned. Then, his mind

would be biased: no impartiality from him! Or your testy accused might object to another, because of his tomahawk nose, or a cruel squint of the eye.

"Of all follies the most foolish! Know ye from me, that true peers render not true verdicts. Jiromo was a rebel. Had I tried him by his peers, I had tried him by rebels; and the rebel had rebelled to some purpose.

"Away! As unerring justice dwells in a unity, and as one judge will at last judge the world beyond all appeal; so--though often here below justice be hard to attain--does man come nearest the mark, when he imitates that model divine. Hence, one judge is better than twelve."

"And as Justice, in ideal, is ever painted high lifted above the crowd; so, from the exaltation of his rank, an honest king is the best of those unical judges, which individually are better than twelve. And therefore am I, King Media, the best judge in this land."

"Subjects! so long as I live, I will rule you and judge you alone. And though you here kneeled before me till you grew into the ground, and there took root, no yea to your petition will you get from this throne. I am king: ye are slaves. Mine to command: yours to obey. And this hour I decree, that henceforth no gibberish of bulwarks and bulkheads be heard in this land. For a dead bulwark and a bulkhead,

to dam off sedition, will I make of that man, who again but breathes those bulky words. Ho! spears! see that these knee-pans here kneel till set of sun."

High noon was now passed; and removing his crown, and placing it on the dais for the kneelers to look at during their devotions, King Media departed from that place, and once more played the agreeable host.