

CHAPTER LXIII

Odo And Its Lord

Time now to enter upon some further description of the island and its lord.

And first for Media: a gallant gentleman and king. From a goodly stock he came. In his endless pedigree, reckoning deities by decimals, innumerable kings, and scores of great heroes, chiefs, and priests. Nor in person, did he belie his origin. No far-descended dwarf was he, the least of a receding race. He stood like a palm tree; about whose acanthus capital droops not more gracefully the silken fringes, than Media's locks upon his noble brow. Strong was his arm to wield the club, or hurl the javelin; and potent, I ween, round a maiden's waist.

Thus much here for Media. Now comes his isle.

Our pleasant ramble found it a little round world by itself; full of beauties as a garden; chequered by charming groves; watered by roving brooks; and fringed all round by a border of palm trees, whose roots drew nourishment from the water. But though abounding in other quarters of the Archipelago, not a solitary bread-fruit grew in Odo. A noteworthy circumstance, observable in these regions, where islands close adjoining, so differ in their soil, that certain fruits growing

genially in one, are foreign to another. But Odo was famed for its guavas, whose flavor was likened to the flavor of new-blown lips; and for its grapes, whose juices prompted many a laugh and many a groan.

Beside the city where Media dwelt, there were few other clusters of habitations in Odo. The higher classes living, here and there, in separate households; but not as eremites. Some buried themselves in the cool, quivering bosoms of the groves. Others, fancying a marine vicinity, dwelt hard by the beach in little cages of bamboo; whence of mornings they sallied out with jocund cries, and went plunging into the refreshing bath, whose frothy margin was the threshold of their dwellings. Others still, like birds, built their nests among the sylvan nooks of the elevated interior; whence all below, and hazy green, lay steeped in languor the island's throbbing heart.

Thus dwelt the chiefs and merry men of mark. The common sort, including serfs, and Helots, war-captives held in bondage, lived in secret places, hard to find. Whence it came, that, to a stranger, the whole isle looked care-free and beautiful. Deep among the ravines and the rocks, these beings lived in noisome caves, lairs for beasts, not human homes; or built them coops of rotten boughs--living trees were banned them--whose mouldy hearts hatched vermin. Fearing infection of some plague, born of this filth, the chiefs of Odo seldom passed that way and looking round within their green retreats, and pouring out their wine, and plucking from orchards of the best, marveled how

these swine could grovel in the mire, and wear such sallow cheeks. But they offered no sweet homes; from that mire they never sought to drag them out; they open threw no orchard; and intermitted not the mandates that condemned their drudges to a life of deaths. Sad sight! to see those round-shouldered Helots, stooping in their trenches: artificial, three in number, and concentric: the isle well nigh surrounding. And herein, fed by oozy loam, and kindly dew from heaven, and bitter sweat from men, grew as in hot-beds the nutritious Taro.

Toil is man's allotment; toil of brain, or toil of hands, or a grief that's more than either, the grief and sin of idleness. But when man toils and slays himself for masters who withhold the life he gives to them--then, then, the soul screams out, and every sinew cracks. So with these poor serfs. And few of them could choose but be the brutes they seemed.

Now needs it to be said, that Odo was no land of pleasure unalloyed, and plenty without a pause?--Odo, in whose lurking-places infants turned from breasts, whence flowed no nourishment.--Odo, in whose inmost haunts, dark groves were brooding, passing which you heard most dismal cries, and voices cursing Media. There, men were scourged; their crime, a heresy; the heresy, that Media was no demigod. For this they shrieked. Their fathers shrieked before; their fathers, who, tormented, said, "Happy we to groan, that our children's children may be glad." But their children's children

howled. Yet these, too, echoed previous generations, and loudly swore, "The pit that's dug for us may prove another's grave."

But let all pass. To look at, and to roam about of holidays, Odo seemed a happy land. The palm-trees waved--though here and there you marked one sear and palsy-smitten; the flowers bloomed--though dead ones moldered in decay; the waves ran up the strand in glee--though, receding, they sometimes left behind bones mixed with shells.

But else than these, no sign of death was seen throughout the isle. Did men in Odo live for aye? Was Ponce de Leon's fountain there? For near and far, you saw no ranks and files of graves, no generations harvested in winrows. In Odo, no hard-hearted nabob slept beneath a gentle epitaph; no requiescat-in-pace mocked a sinner damned; no memento-mori admonished men to live while yet they might. Here Death hid his skull; and hid it in the sea, the common sepulcher of Odo. Not dust to dust, but dust to brine; not hearses but canoes. For all who died upon that isle were carried out beyond the outer reef, and there were buried with their sires' sires. Hence came the thought, that of gusty nights, when round the isles, and high toward heaven, flew the white reef's rack and foam, that then and there, kept chattering watch and ward, the myriads that were ocean-tombed.

But why these watery obsequies?

Odo was but a little isle, and must the living make way for the dead,
and Life's small colony be dislodged by Death's grim hosts; as the
gaunt tribes of Tamerlane o'erspread the tented pastures of the Khan?

And now, what follows, said these Islanders: "Why sow corruption in
the soil which yields us life? We would not pluck our grapes from
over graves. This earth's an urn for flowers, not for ashes."

They said that Oro, the supreme, had made a cemetery of the sea.

And what more glorious grave? Was Mausolus more sublimely urned? Or
do the minster-lamps that burn before the tomb of Charlemagne, show
more of pomp, than all the stars, that blaze above the shipwrecked
mariner?

But no more of the dead; men shrug their shoulders, and love not
their company; though full soon we shall all have them for fellows.