

CHAPTER LXXX

Donjalolo In The Bosom Of His Family

To pretend to relate the manner in which Juam's ruler passed his captive days, without making suitable mention of his harem, would be to paint one's full-length likeness and omit the face. For it was his harem that did much to stamp the character of Donjalolo.

And had he possessed but a single spouse, most discourteous, surely, to have overlooked the princess; much more, then, as it is; and by how-much the more, a plurality exceeds a unit.

Exclusive of the female attendants, by day waiting upon the person of the king, he had wives thirty in number, corresponding in name to the nights of the moon. For, in Juam, time is not reckoned by days, but by nights; each night of the lunar month having its own designation; which, relatively only, is extended to the day.

In uniform succession, the thirty wives ruled queen of the king's heart. An arrangement most wise and judicious; precluding much of that jealousy and confusion prevalent in ill-regulated seraglios. For as thirty spouses must be either more desirable, or less desirable than one; so is a harem thirty times more difficult to manage than an establishment with one solitary mistress. But Donjalolo's wives were so nicely drilled, that for the most part, things went on very

smoothly. Nor were his brows much furrowed with wrinkles referable to domestic cares and tribulations. Although, as in due time will be seen, from these he was not altogether exempt.

Now, according to Braid-Beard, who, among other abstruse political researches, had accurately informed himself concerning the internal administration of Donjalolo's harem, the following was the method pursued therein.

On the Aquella, or First Night of the month, the queen of that name assumes her diadem, and reigns. So too with Azzolino the Second, and Velluvi the Third Night of the Moon; and so on, even unto the utter eclipse thereof; through Calends, Nones, and Ides.

For convenience, the king is furnished with a card, whereon are copied the various ciphers upon the arms of his queens; and parallel thereto, the hieroglyphics significant of the corresponding Nights of the month. Glancing over this, Donjalolo predicts the true time of the rising and setting of all his stars.

This Moon of wives was lodged in two spacious seraglios, which few mortals beheld. For, so deeply were they buried in a grove; so overpowered with verdure; so overrun with vines; and so hazy with the incense of flowers; that they were almost invisible, unless closely approached. Certain it was, that it demanded no small enterprise, diligence, and sagacity, to explore the mysterious wood in search of

them. Though a strange, sweet, humming sound, as of the clustering and swarming of warm bees among roses, at last hinted the royal honey at hand. High in air, toward the summit of the cliff, overlooking this side of the glen, a narrow ledge of rocks might have been seen, from which, rumor whispered, was to be caught an angular peep at the tip of the apex of the roof of the nearest seraglio. But this wild report had never been established. Nor, indeed, was it susceptible of a test. For was not that rock inaccessible as the eyrie of young eagles? But to guard against the possibility of any visual profanation, Donjalolo had authorized an edict, forever tabooing that rock to foot of man or pinion of fowl. Birds and bipeds both trembled and obeyed; taking a wide circuit to avoid the spot.

Access to the seraglios was had by corresponding arbors leading from the palace. The seraglio to the right was denominated "Ravi" (Before), that to the left "Zono" (After). The meaning of which was, that upon the termination of her reign the queen wended her way to the Zono; there tarrying with her predecessors till the Ravi was emptied; when the entire Moon of wives, swallow-like, migrated back whence they came; and the procession was gone over again.

In due order, the queens reposed upon mats inwoven with their respective ciphers. In the Ravi, the mat of the queen-apparent, or next in succession, was spread by the portal. In the Zono, the newly-widowed queen reposed furthest from it.

But alas for all method where thirty wives are concerned.

Notwithstanding these excellent arrangements, the mature result of ages of progressive improvement in the economy of the royal seraglios in Willamilla, it must needs be related, that at times the order of precedence became confused, and was very hard to restore.

At intervals, some one of the wives was weeded out, to the no small delight of the remainder; but to their equal vexation her place would soon after be supplied by some beautiful stranger; who assuming the denomination of the vacated Night of the Moon, thenceforth commenced her monthly revolutions in the king's infallible calendar.

In constant attendance, was a band of old men; woe-begone, thin of leg, and puny of frame; whose grateful task it was, to tarry in the garden of Donjalolo's delights, without ever touching the roses.

Along with innumerable other duties, they were perpetually kept coming and going upon ten thousand errands; for they had it in strict charge to obey the slightest behests of the damsels; and with all imaginable expedition to run, fly, swim, or dissolve into impalpable air, at the shortest possible notice.

So laborious their avocations, that none could discharge them for more than a twelvemonth, at the end of that period giving up the ghost out of pure exhaustion of the locomotive apparatus. It was this constant drain upon the stock of masculine old age in the glen, that so bethinned its small population of gray-beards and hoary-heads. And

any old man hitherto exempted, who happened to receive a summons to repair to the palace, and there wait the pleasure of the king: this unfortunate, at once suspecting his doom, put his arbor in order; oiled and supplied his joints; took a long farewell of his friends; selected his burial-place; and going resigned to his fate, in due time expired like the rest.

Had any one of them cast about for some alleviating circumstance, he might possibly have derived some little consolation from the thought, that though a slave to the whims of thirty princesses, he was nevertheless one of their guardians, and as such, he might ingeniously have concluded, their superior. But small consolation this. For the damsels were as blithe as larks, more playful than kittens; never looking sad and sentimental, projecting clandestine escapes. But supplied with the thirtieth part of all that Aspasia could desire; glorying in being the spouses of a king; nor in the remotest degree anxious about eventual dowers; they were care-free, content, and rejoicing, as the rays of the morning.

Poor old men, then; it would be hard to distill out of your fate, one drop of the balm of consolation. For, commissioned to watch over those who forever kept you on the trot, affording you no time to hunt up peccadilloes; was not this circumstance an aggravation of hard times? a sharpening and edge-giving to the steel in your souls?

But much yet remains unsaid.

To dwell no more upon the eternal wear-and-tear incident to these attenuated old warders, they were intensely hated by the damsels. Inasmuch, as it was archly opined, for what ulterior purposes they were retained.

Nightly couching, on guard, round the seraglio, like fangless old bronze dragons round a fountain enchanted, the old men ever and anon cried out mightily, by reason of sore pinches and scratches received in the dark: And tri-treble-tri-triply girt about as he was, Donjalolo himself started from his slumbers, raced round and round through his ten thousand corridors; at last bursting all dizzy among his twenty-nine queens, to see what under the seventh-heavens was the matter. When, lo and behold! there lay the innocents all sound asleep; the dragons moaning over their mysterious bruises.

Ah me! his harem, like all large families, was the delight and the torment of the days and nights of Donjalolo.

And in one special matter was he either eminently miserable, or otherwise: for all his multiplicity of wives, he had never an heir. Not his, the proud paternal glance of the Grand Turk Solyman, looking round upon a hundred sons, all bone of his bone, and squinting with his squint.