

CHAPTER LXXXIV

Taji Sits Down To Dinner With Five-And-Twenty Kings, And A Royal Time
They Have

It was afternoon when we emerged from the defile. And informed that our host was receiving his guests in the House of the Afternoon, thither we directed our steps.

Soft in our face, blew the blessed breezes of Omi, stirring the leaves overhead; while, here and there, through the trees, showed the idol-bearers of the royal retreat, hand in hand, linked with festoons of flowers. Still beyond, on a level, sparkled the nodding crowns of the kings, like the constellation Corona-Borealis, the horizon just gained.

Close by his noon-tide friend, the cascade at the mouth of the grotto, reposed on his crimson mat, Donjalolo:--arrayed in a vestment of the finest white tappa of Mardi, figured all over with bright yellow lizards, so curiously stained in the gauze, that he seemed overrun, as with golden mice.

Marjora's girdle girdled his loins, tasseled with the congregated teeth of his sires. A jeweled turban-tiara, milk-white, surmounted his brow, over which waved a copse of Pintado plumes.

But what sways in his hand? A scepter, similar to those likenesses of scepters, imbedded among the corals at his feet. A polished thigh-bone; by Braid-Beard declared once Teei's the Murdered. For to emphasize his intention utterly to rule, Marjora himself had selected this emblem of dominion over mankind.

But even this last despite done to dead Teei had once been transcended. In the usurper's time, prevailed the belief, that the saliva of kings must never touch ground; and Mohi's Chronicles made mention, that during the life time of Marjora, Teei's skull had been devoted to the basest of purposes: Marjora's, the hate no turf could bury.

Yet, traditions like these ever seem dubious. There be many who deny the hump, moral and physical, of Gloster Richard.

Still advancing unperceived, in social hilarity we descried their Highnesses, chatting together like the most plebeian of mortals; full as merry as the monks of old. But marking our approach, all changed. A pair of potentates, who had been playfully trifling, hurriedly adjusted their diadems, threw themselves into attitudes, looking stately as statues. Phidias turned not out his Jupiter so soon.

In various-dyed robes the five-and-twenty kings were arrayed; and various their features, as the rows of lips, eyes and ears in John Caspar Lavater's physiognomical charts. Nevertheless, to a king, all

their noses were aquiline.

There were long fox-tail beards of silver gray, and enameled chins, like those of girls; bald pates and Merovingian locks; smooth brows and wrinkles: forms erect and stooping; an eye that squinted; one king was deaf; by his side, another that was halt; and not far off, a dotard. They were old and young, tall and short, handsome and ugly, fat and lean, cunning and simple.

With animated courtesy our host received us; assigning a neighboring bower for Babbalanja and the rest; and among so many right-royal, demi-divine guests, how could the demi-gods Media and Taji be otherwise than at home?

The unwonted sprightliness of Donjalolo surprised us. But he was in one of those relapses of desperate gayety in-variably following his failures in efforts to amend his life. And the bootless issue of his late mission to outer Mardi had thrown him into a mood for revelry. Nor had he lately shunned a wild wine, called Morando.

A slave now appearing with a bowl of this beverage, it circulated freely.

Not to gainsay the truth, we fancied the Morando much. A nutty, pungent flavor it had; like some kinds of arrack distilled in the Philippine isles. And a marvelous effect did it have, in dissolving

the crystalization of the brain; leaving nothing but precious little drops of good humor, beading round the bowl of the cranium.

Meanwhile, garlanded boys, climbing the limbs of the idol-pillars, and stirruping their feet in their most holy mouths, suspended hangings of crimson tappa all round the hall; so that sweeping the pavement they rustled in the breeze from the grot.

Presently, stalwart slaves advanced; bearing a mighty basin of a porphyry hue, deep-hollowed out of a tree. Outside, were innumerable grotesque conceits; conspicuous among which, for a border, was an endless string of the royal lizards circumnavigating the basin in inverted chase of their tails.

Peculiar to the groves of Willamilla, the yellow lizard formed part of the arms of Juam. And when Donjalolo's messenger went abroad, they carried its effigy, as the emblem of their royal master; themselves being known, as the Gentlemen of the Golden Lizard.

The porphyry-hued basin planted full in our midst, the attendants forthwith filled the same with the living waters from the cascade; a proceeding, for which some of the company were at a loss to account, unless his highness, our host, with all the coolness of royalty, purposed cooling himself still further, by taking a bath in presence of his guests. A conjecture, most premature; for directly, the basin being filled to within a few inches of the lizards, the attendants

fell to launching therein divers goodly sized trenchers, all laden with choice viands:--wild boar meat; humps of grampuses; embrowned bread-fruit, roasted in odoriferous fires of sandal wood, but suffered to cool; gold fish, dressed with the fragrant juices of berries; citron sauce; rolls of the baked paste of yams; juicy bananas, steeped in a saccharine oil; marmalade of plantains; jellies of guava; confections of the treacle of palm sap; and many other dainties; besides numerous stained calabashes of Morando, and other beverages, fixed in carved floats to make them buoyant.

The guests assigned seats, by the woven handles attached to his purple mat, the prince, our host, was now gently moved by his servitors to the head of the porphyry-hued basin. Where, flanked by lofty crowned-heads, white-tiaraed, and radiant with royalty, he sat; like snow-turbaned Mont Blanc, at sunrise presiding over the head waters of the Rhone; to right and left, looming the gilded summits of the Simplon, the Gothard, the Jungfrau, the Great St. Bernard, and the Grand Glockner.

Yet turbid from the launching of its freight, Lake Como tossed to and fro its navies of good cheer, the shadows of the king-peaks wildly flitting thereupon.

But no frigid wine and fruit cooler, Lake Como; as at first it did seem; but a tropical dining table, its surface a slab of light blue St. Pons marble in a state of fluidity.

Now, many a crown was doffed; scepters laid aside; girdles slackened; and among those verdant viands the bearded kings like goats did browse; or tusking their wild boar's meat, like mastiffs ate.

And like unto some well-fought fight, beginning calmly, but pressing forward to a fiery rush, this well-fought feast did now wax warm.

A few royal epicures, however, there were: epicures intent upon concoctions, admixtures, and masterly compoundings; who comported themselves with all due deliberation and dignity; hurrying themselves into no reckless deglutition of the dainties. Ah! admirable conceit, Lake Como: superseding attendants. For, from hand to hand the trenchers sailed; no sooner gaining one port, than dispatched over sea to another.

Well suited they were for the occasion; sailing high out of water, to resist the convivial swell at times ruffling the sociable sea; and sharp at both ends, still better adapting them to easy navigation.

But soon, the Morando, in triumphant decanters, went round, reeling like barks before a breeze. But their voyages were brief; and ere long, in certain havens, the accumulation of empty vessels threatened to bridge the lake with pontoons. In those directions, Trade winds were setting. But full soon, cut out were all unladen and

unprofitable gourds; and replaced by jolly-bellied calabashes, for a time sailing deep, yawing heavily to the push.

At last, the whole flotilla of trenchers--wrecks and all--were sent swimming to the further end of Lake Como; and thence removed, gave place to ruddy hillocks of fruit, and floating islands of flowers.

Chief among the former, a quince-like, golden sphere, that filled the air with such fragrance, you thought you were tasting its flavor.

Nor did the wine cease flowing. That day the Juam grape did bleed; that day the tendril ringlets of the vines, did all uncurl and grape by grape, in sheer dismay, the sun ripe clusters dropped. Grape-glad were five-and-twenty kings: five-and-twenty kings were merry.

Morando's vintage had no end; nor other liquids, in the royal cellar stored, somewhere secret in the grot. Oh! where's the endless Niger's source? Search ye here, or search ye there; on, on, through ravine, vega, vale--no head waters will ye find. But why need gain the hidden spring, when its lavish stream flows by? At three-fold mouths that Delta-grot discharged; rivers golden, white, and red.

But who may sing for aye? Down I come, and light upon the old and prosy plain.

Among other decanters set afloat, was a pompous, lordly-looking demijohn, but old and reverend withal, that sailed about,

consequential as an autocrat going to be crowned, or a treasure-freighted argosie bound home before the wind. It looked solemn, however, though it reeled; peradventure, far gone with its own potent contents.

Oh! russet shores of Rhine and Rhone! oh, mellow memories of ripe old vintages! oh, cobwebs in the Pyramids! oh, dust on Pharaoh's tomb!-- all, all recur, as I bethink me of that glorious gourd, its contents cogent as Tokay, itself as old as Mohi's legends; more venerable to look at than his beard. Whence came it? Buried in vases, so saith the label, with the heart of old Marjora, now dead one hundred thousand moons. Exhumed at last, it looked no wine, but was shrunk into a subtile syrup.

This special calabash was distinguished by numerous trappings, caparisoned like the sacred bay steed led before the Great Khan of Tartary. A most curious and betasseled network encased it; and the royal lizard was jealously twisted about its neck, like a hand on a throat containing some invaluable secret.

All Hail, Marzilla! King's Own Royal Particular! A vinous Percy! Dating back to the Conquest! Distilled of yore from purple berries growing in the purple valley of Ardair! Thrice hail.

But the imperial Marzilla was not for all; gods only could partake; the Kings and demigods of the isles; excluding left-handed

descendants of sad rakes of immortals, in old times breaking heads and hearts in Mardi, bequeathing bars-sinister to many mortals, who now in vain might urge a claim to a cup-full of right regal Marzilla.

The Royal Particular was pressed upon me, by the now jovial Donjalolo. With his own sceptered hand charging my flagon to the brim, he declared his despotic pleasure, that I should quaff it off to the last lingering globule. No hard calamity, truly; for the drinking of this wine was as the singing of a mighty ode, or frenzied lyric to the soul.

"Drink, Taji," cried Donjalolo, "drink deep. In this wine a king's heart is dissolved. Drink long; in this wine lurk the seeds of the life everlasting Drink deep; drink long: thou drinkest wisdom and valor at every draught. Drink forever, oh Taji, for thou drinkest that which will enable thee to stand up and speak out before mighty Oro himself."

"Borabolla," he added, turning round upon a domed old king at his left, "Was it not the god Xipho, who begged of my great-great-grand sire a draught of this same wine, saying he was about to beget a hero?"

"Even so. And thy glorious Marzilla produced thrice valiant Ononna, who slew the giants of the reef."

"Ha, ha, hear'st that, oh Taji?" And Donjalolo drained another cup.

Amazing! the flexibility of the royal elbow, and the rigidity of the royal spine! More especially as we had been impressed with a notion of their debility. But, sometimes these seemingly enervated young blades approve themselves steadier of limb, than veteran revelers of very long standing.

"Discharge the basin, and refill it with wine," cried Donjalolo.

"Break all empty gourds! Drink, kings, and dash your cups at every draught."

So saying, he started from his purple mat; and with one foot planted unknowingly upon the skull of Marjora; while all the skeletons grinned at him from the pavement; Donjalolo, holding on high his blood-red goblet, burst forth with the following invocation:--

Ha, ha, gods and kings; fill high, one and all;
Drink, drink! shout and drink! mad respond to the call!
Fill fast, and fill frill; 'gainst the goblet ne'er sin;
Quaff there, at high tide, to the uttermost rim:--
Flood-tide, and soul-tide to the brim!

Who with wine in him fears? who thinks of his cares?

Who sighs to be wise, when wine in him flares?

Water sinks down below, in currents full slow;

But wine mounts on high with its genial glow:--

Welling up, till the brain overflow!

As the spheres, with a roll, some fiery of soul,

Others golden, with music, revolve round the pole;

So let our cups, radiant with many hued wines,

Round and round in groups circle, our Zodiac's Signs:--

Round reeling, and ringing their chimes!

Then drink, gods and kings; wine merriment brings;

It bounds through the veins; there, jubilant sings.

Let it ebb, then, and flow; wine never grows dim;

Drain down that bright tide at the foam beaded rim:--

Fill up, every cup, to the brim!

Caught by all present, the chorus resounded again and again. The beaded wine danced on many a beard; the cataract lifted higher its voice; the grotto sent back a shout; the ghosts of the Coral Monarchs seemed starting from their insulted bones. But ha, ha, ha, roared forth the five-and-twenty kings--alive, not dead--holding both hands to their girdles, and baying out their laughter from abysses; like Nimrod's hounds over some fallen elk.

Mad and crazy revelers, how ye drank and roared! but kings no more:

vestures loosed; and scepters rolling on the ground.

Glorious agrarian, thou wine! bringing all hearts on a level, and at last all legs to the earth; even those of kings, who, to do them justice, have been much maligned for imputed qualities not theirs. For whoso has touched flagons with monarchs, bear they their back bones never so stiffly on the throne, well know the rascals, to be at bottom royal good fellows; capable of a vinous frankness exceeding that of base-born men. Was not Alexander a boon companion? And daft Cambyses? and what of old Rowley, as good a judge of wine and other matters, as ever sipped claret or kisses.

If ever Taji joins a club, be it a Beef-Steak Club of Kings!

Donjalolo emptied yet another cup.

The mirth now blew a gale; like a ship's shrouds in a Typhoon, every tendon vibrated; the breezes of Omi came forth with a rush; the hangings shook; the goblets danced fandangos; and Donjalolo, clapping his hands, called before him his dancing women.

Forth came from the grotto a reed-like burst of song, making all start, and look that way to behold such enchanting strains. Sounds heralding sights! Swimming in the air, emerged the nymphs, lustrous arms interlocked like Indian jugglers' glittering snakes. Round the cascade they thronged; then paused in its spray. Of a sudden, seemed

to spring from its midst, a young form of foam, that danced into the soul like a thought. At last, sideways floating off, it subsided into the grotto, a wave. Evening drawing on apace, the crimson draperies were lifted, and festooned to the arms of the idol-pillars, admitting the rosy light of the even.

Yielding to the re-action of the banquet, the kings now reclined; and two mute damsels entered: one with a gourd of scented waters; the other with napkins. Bending over Donjalolo's steaming head, the first let fall a shower of aromatic drops, slowly absorbed by her companion. Thus, in turn, all were served; nothing heard but deep breathing.

In a marble vase they now kindled some incense: a handful of spices.

Shortly after, came three of the king's beautiful smokers; who, lighting their tubes at this odorous fire, blew over the company the sedative fumes of the Aina.

Steeped in languor, I strove against it long; essayed to struggle out of the enchanted mist. But a syren hand seemed ever upon me, pressing me back.

Half-revealed, as in a dream, and the last sight that I saw, was Donjalolo:--eyes closed, face pale, locks moist, borne slowly to his sedan, to cross the hollow, and wake in the seclusion of his harem.