

## CHAPTER XCIII

### Babbanja Steps In Between Mohi And Yoomy; And Yoomy Relates A Legend

Embarking from Ohonoo, we at length found ourselves gliding by the pleasant shores of Tupia, an islet which according to Braid-Beard had for ages remained uninhabited by man. Much curiosity being expressed to know more of the isle, Mohi was about to turn over his chronicles, when, with modesty, the minstrel Yoomy interposed; saying, that if my Lord Media permitted, he himself would relate the legend. From its nature, deeming the same pertaining to his province as poet; though, as yet, it had not been versified. But he added, that true pearl shells rang musically, though not strung upon a cord.

Upon this presumptuous interference, Mohi looked highly offended; and nervously twitching his beard, uttered something invidious about frippery young poetasters being too full of silly imaginings to tell a plain tale.

Said Yoomy, in reply, adjusting his turban, "Old Mohi, let us not clash. I honor your calling; but, with submission, your chronicles are more wild than my cantos. I deal in pure conceits of my own; which have a shapeliness and a unity, however unsubstantial; but you, Braid-Beard, deal in mangled realities. In all your chapters, you yourself grope in the dark. Much truth is not in thee, historian.

Besides, Mohi: my songs perpetuate many things which you sage scribes entirely overlook. Have you not oftentimes come to me, and my ever dewy ballads for information, in which you and your musty old chronicles were deficient?"

"In much that is precious, Mohi, we poets are the true historians; we embalm; you corrode."

To this Mohi, with some ire, was about to make answer, when, flinging over his shoulder a new fold of his mantle, Babbalanja spoke thus:

"Peace, rivals. As Bardianna has it, like all who dispute upon pretensions of their own, you are each nearest the right, when you speak of the other; and furthest therefrom, when you speak of yourselves."

Said Mohi and Yoomy in a breath, "Who sought your opinion, philosopher? you filcher from old Bardianna, and monger of maxims!"

"You, who have so long marked the vices of Mardi, that you flatter yourself you have none of your own," added Braid-Beard.

"You, who only seem wise, because of the contrasting follies of others, and not of any great wisdom in yourself," continued the minstrel, with unwonted asperity."

"Now here," said Babbalanja, "am I charged upon by a bearded old

ram, and a lamb. One butting with his carious and brittle old frontlet; the other pushing with its silly head before its horns are sprouted. But this comes of being impartial. Had I espoused the cause of Yoomy versus Mohi, or that of Mohi versus Yoomy, I had been sure to have had at least one voice in my favor. The impartialist insulteth all sides, saith old Bardianna; but smite with but one hand, and the other shall be kissed.--Oh incomparable Bardianna!"

"Will no one lay that troubled old ghost," exclaimed Media, devoutly. "Proceed with thy legend, Yoomy; and see to it, that it be brief; for I mistrust me, these legends do but test the patience of the hearers. But draw a long breath, and begin."

"A long bow," muttered Mohi.

And Yoomy began.

"It is now about ten hundred thousand moons--"

"Great Oro! How long since, say you?" cried Mohi, making Gothic arches of his brows.

Looking at him disdainfully, but vouchsafing no reply, Yoomy began over again.

"It is now above ten hundred thousand moons, since there died the last

of a marvelous race, once inhabiting the very shores by which we are sailing. They were a very diminutive people, only a few inches high--"

"Stop, minstrel," cried Mohi; "how many pennyweights did they weigh?"

Continued Yoomy, unheedingly, "They were covered all over with a soft, silky down, like that on the rind of the Avee; and there grew upon their heads a green, lance-leaved vine, of a most delicate texture. For convenience, the manikins reduced their tendrils, sporting, nothing but coronals. Whereas, priding themselves upon the redundancy of their tresses, the little maidens assiduously watered them with the early dew of the morning; so that all wreathed and festooned with verdure, they moved about in arbors, trailing after them trains."

"I can hear no more," exclaimed Mohi, stopping his ears.

Continued Yoomy, "The damsels lured to their bowers, certain red-plumaged insect-birds, and taught them to nestle therein, and warble; which, with the pleasant vibrating of the leaves, when the little maidens moved, produced a strange blending of sweet, singing sounds. The little maidens embraced not with their arms, but with their viny locks; whose tendrils instinctively twined about their lovers, till both were lost in the bower."

"And what then?" asked Mohi, who, notwithstanding the fingers in his

ears, somehow contrived to listen; "What then?"

Vouchsafing no reply, Yoomy went on.

"At a certain age, but while yet the maidens were very young, their vines bore blossoms. Ah! fatal symptoms. For soon as they burst, the maidens died in their arbors; and were buried in the valleys; and their vines spread forth; and the flowers bloomed; but the maidens themselves were no more. And now disdaining the earth, the vines shot upward: climbing to the topmost boughs of the trees; and flowering in the sunshine forever and aye."

Yoomy here paused for a space; but presently continued:

"The little eyes of the people of Tupia were very strange to behold: full of stars, that shone from within, like the Pleiades, deep-bosomed in blue. And like the stars, they were intolerant of sunlight; and slumbering through the day, the people of Tupia only went abroad by night. But it was chiefly when the moon was at full, that they were mostly in spirits.

"Then the little manikins would dive down into the sea, and rove about in the coral groves, making love to the mermaids. Or, racing round, make a mad merry night of it with the sea-urchins:--plucking the reverend mullets by the beard; serenading the turtles in their cells; worrying the sea-nettles; or tormenting with their antics the

touchy torpedos. Sometimes they went prying about with the starfish, that have an eye at the end of each ray; and often with coral files in their hands stole upon slumbering swordfish, slyly blunting their weapons. In short, these stout little manikins were passionately fond of the sea, and swore by wave and billow, that sooner or later they would embark thereon in nautilus shells, and spend the rest of their roving days thousands of inches from Tupia. Too true, they were shameless little rakes. Oft would they return to their sweethearts, sporting musky girdles of sea-kelp, tasseled with green little pouches of grass, brimful of seed-pearls; and jingling their coin in the ears of the damsels, throw out inuendoes about the beautiful and bountiful mermaids: how wealthy and amorous they were, and how they delighted in the company of the brave gallants of Tupia. Ah! at such heartless bravadoes, how mourned the poor little nymphs. Deep into their arbors they went; and their little hearts burst like rose-buds, and filled the whole air with an odorous grief. But when their lovers were gentle and true, no happier maidens haunted the lilies than they. By some mystical process they wrought minute balls of light: touchy, mercurial globules, very hard to handle; and with these, at pitch and toss, they played in the groves. Or mischievously inclined, they toiled all night long at braiding the moon-beams together, and entangling the plaited end to a bough; so that at night, the poor planet had much ado to set."

Here Yoomy once more was mute.

"Pause you to invent as you go on?" said old Mohi, elevating his chin, till his beard was horizontal.

Yoomy resumed.

"Little or nothing more, my masters, is extant of the legend; only it must be mentioned, that these little people were very tasteful in their personal adornings; the manikins wearing girdles of fragrant leaves, and necklaces of aromatic seeds; and the little damsels, not content with their vines, and their verdure, sporting pearls in their ears; bracelets of wee little porpoise teeth; and oftentimes dancing with their mates in the moonlit glades, coquettishly fanned themselves with the transparent wings of the flying fish."

"Now, I appeal to you, royal Media; to you, noble Taji; to you, Babbalanja;" said the chronicler, with an impressive gesture, "whether this seems a credible history: Yoomy has invented."

"But perhaps he has entertained, old Mohi," said Babbalanja.

"He has not spoken the truth," persisted the chronicler.

"Mohi," said Babbalanja, "truth is in things, and not in words: truth is voiceless; so at least saith old Bardianna. And I, Babbalanja, assert, that what are vulgarly called fictions are as much realities as the gross mattock of Dididi, the digger of trenches; for things

visible are but conceits of the eye: things imaginative, conceits of the fancy. If duped by one, we are equally duped by the other."

"Clear as this water," said Yoomy.

"Opaque as this paddle," said Mohi, "But, come now, thou oracle, if all things are deceptive, tell us what is truth?"

"The old interrogatory; did they not ask it when the world began? But ask it no more. As old Bardianna hath it, that question is more final than any answer."