

CHAPTER II

They Land

Coming close to the island, the pennons and trappings of our canoes were removed; and Vee-Vee was commanded to descend from the shark's mouth; and for a time to lay aside his conch. In token of reverence, our paddlers also stripped to the waist; an example which even Media followed; though, as a king, the same homage he rendered, was at times rendered himself.

At every place, hitherto visited, joyous crowds stood ready to hail our arrival; but the shores of Maramma were silent, and forlorn.

Said Babbalanja, "It looks not as if the lost one were here."

At length we landed in a little cove nigh a valley, which Mohi called Uma; and here in silence we beached our canoes.

But presently, there came to us an old man, with a beard white as the mane of the pale horse. He was clad in a midnight robe. He fanned himself with a fan of faded leaves. A child led him by the hand, for he was blind, wearing a green plantain leaf over his plaited brow.

Him, Media accosted, making mention who we were, and on what errand we came: to seek out Yillah, and behold the isle.

Whereupon Pani, for such was his name, gave us a courteous reception; and lavishly promised to discover sweet Yillah; declaring that in Maramma, if any where, the long-lost maiden must be found. He assured us, that throughout the whole land he would lead us; leaving no place, desirable to be searched, unexplored.

And so saying, he conducted us to his dwelling, for refreshment and repose.

It was large and lofty. Near by, however, were many miserable hovels, with squalid inmates. But the old man's retreat was exceedingly comfortable; especially abounding in mats for lounging; his rafters were bowed down by calabashes of good cheer.

During the repast which ensued, blind Pani, freely partaking, enlarged upon the merit of abstinence; declaring that a thatch overhead, and a cocoanut tree, comprised all that was necessary for the temporal welfare of a Mardian. More than this, he assured us was sinful.

He now made known, that he officiated as guide in this quarter of the country; and that as he had renounced all other pursuits to devote himself to showing strangers the island; and more particularly the best way to ascend lofty Ofo; he was necessitated to seek remuneration for his toil.

"My lord," then whispered Mohi to Media "the great prophet Alma always declared, that, without charge, this island was free to all."

"What recompense do you desire, old man?" said Media to Path.

"What I seek is but little:--twenty rolls of fine tappa; two score mats of best upland grass; one canoe-load of bread-fruit and yams; ten gourds of wine; and forty strings of teeth;--you are a large company, but my requisitions are small."

"Very small," said Mohi.

"You are extortionate, good Pani," said Media. "And what wants an aged mortal like you with all these things?"

"I thought superfluities were worthless; nay, sinful," said Babbalanja.

"Is not this your habitation already more than abundantly supplied with all desirable furnishings?" asked Yoomy.

"I am but a lowly laborer," said the old man, meekly crossing his arms, "but does not the lowliest laborer ask and receive his reward? and shall I miss mine?--But I beg charity of none. What I ask, I demand; and in the dread name of great Alma, who appointed me a guide." And to and fro he strode, groping as he went.

Marking his blindness, whispered Babbalanja to Media, "My lord, methinks this Pani must be a poor guide. In his journeys inland, his little child leads him; why not, then, take the guide's guide?"

But Pani would not part with the child.

Then said Mohi in a low voice, "My lord Media, though I am no appointed guide; yet, will I undertake to lead you aright over all this island; for I am an old man, and have been here oft by myself; though I can not undertake to conduct you up the peak of Ofo, and to the more secret temples."

Then Pani said: "and what mortal may this be, who pretends to thread the labyrinthine wilds of Maramma? Beware!"

"He is one with eyes that see," made answer Babbalanja.

"Follow him not," said Pani, "for he will lead thee astray; no Yillah will he find; and having no warrant as a guide, the curses of Alma will accompany him."

Now, this was not altogether without effect; for Pani and his fathers before him had always filled the office of guide.

Nevertheless, Media at last decided, that, this time, Mohi should

conduct us; which being communicated to Pani, he desired us to remove from his roof. So withdrawing to the skirt of a neighboring grove, we lingered awhile, to refresh ourselves for the journey in prospect.

As we here reclined, there came up from the sea-side a party of pilgrims, but newly arrived.

Apprized of their coming, Path and his child went out to meet them; and standing in the path he cried, "I am the appointed guide; in the name of Alma I conduct all pilgrims to the temples."

"This must be the worthy Path," said one of the strangers, turning upon the rest.

"Let us take him, then, for our guide," cried they; and all drew near.

But upon accosting him; they were told, that he guided none without recompense.

And now, being informed, that the foremost of the pilgrims was one Divino, a wealthy chief of a distant island, Pani demanded of him his requital.

But the other demurred; and by many soft speeches at length abated the recompense to three promissory cocoanuts, which he covenanted to send Pani at some future day.

The next pilgrim accosted, was a sad-eyed maiden, in decent but scanty raiment; who without seeking to diminish Pani's demands promptly placed in his hands a small hoard of the money of Mardi.

"Take it, holy guide," she said, "it is all I have."

But the third pilgrim, one Fanna, a hale matron, in handsome apparel, needed no asking to bestow her goods. Calling upon her attendants to advance with their burdens, she quickly unrolled them; and wound round and round Pani, fold after fold of the costliest tappas; and filled both his hands with teeth; and his mouth with some savory marmalade; and poured oil upon his head; and knelt and besought of him a blessing.

"From the bottom of my heart I bless thee," said Pani; and still holding her hands exclaimed, "Take example from this woman, oh Divino; and do ye likewise, ye pilgrims all."

"Not to-day," said Divino.

"We are not rich, like unto Fauna," said the rest.

Now, the next pilgrim was a very old and miserable man; stone-blind, covered with rags; and supporting his steps with a staff.

"My recompense," said Path.

"Alas! I have naught to give. Behold my poverty."

"I can not see," replied Path; but feeling of his garments, he said,
"Thou wouldst deceive me; hast thou not this robe, and this staff?"

"Oh! Merciful Pani, take not my all!" wailed the pilgrim. But his
worthless gaberdine was thrust into the dwelling of the guide.

Meanwhile, the matron was still enveloping Path in her interminable
tappas.

But the sad-eyed maiden, removing her upper mantle, threw it over the
naked form of the beggar.

The fifth pilgrim was a youth of an open, ingenuous aspect; and with
an eye, full of eyes; his step was light.

"Who art thou?" cried Pani, as the stripling touched him in passing.

"I go to ascend the Peak," said the boy.

"Then take me for guide."

"No, I am strong and lithesome. Alone must I go."

"But how knowest thou the way?"

"There are many ways: the right one I must seek for myself."

"Ah, poor deluded one," sighed Path; "but thus is it ever with youth; and rejecting the monitions of wisdom, suffer they must. Go on, and perish!"

Turning, the boy exclaimed--"Though I act counter to thy counsels, oh Pani, I but follow the divine instinct in me."

"Poor youth!" murmured Babbalanja. "How earnestly he struggles in his bonds. But though rejecting a guide, still he clings to that legend of the Peak."

The rest of the pilgrims now tarried with the guide, preparing for their journey inland.