

CHAPTER IV

Hivohitee MDCCCXLVIII

Now, those doleful woodlands passed, straightway converse was renewed, and much discourse took place, concerning Hivohitee, Pontiff of the isle.

For, during our first friendly conversation with Pani, Media had inquired for Hivohitee, and sought to know in what part of the island he abode.

Whereto Pani had replied, that the Pontiff would be invisible for several days to come; being engaged with particular company.

And upon further inquiry, as to who were the personages monopolizing his hospitalities, Media was dumb when informed, that they were no other than certain incorporeal deities from above, passing the Capricorn Solstice at Maramma.

As on we journeyed, much curiosity being expressed to know more of the Pontiff and his guests, old Mohi, familiar with these things, was commanded to enlighten the company. He complied; and his recital was not a little significant, of the occasional credulity of chroniclers.

According to his statement, the deities entertained by Hivohitee

belonged to the third class of immortals. These, however, were far elevated above the corporeal demi-gods of Mardi. Indeed, in Hivohitee's eyes, the greatest demi-gods were as gourds. Little wonder, then, that their superiors were accounted the most genteel characters on his visiting list.

These immortals were wonderfully fastidious and dainty as to the atmosphere they breathed; inhaling no sublunary air, but that of the elevated interior; where the Pontiff had a rural lodge, for the special accommodation of impalpable guests; who were entertained at very small cost; dinners being unnecessary, and dormitories superfluous.

But Hivohitee permitted not the presence of these celestial grandees, to interfere with his own solid comfort. Passing his mornings in highly intensified chat, he thrice reclined at his ease; partaking of a fine plantain-pudding, and pouring out from a calabash of celestial old wine; meanwhile, carrying on the flow of soul with his guests. And truly, the sight of their entertainer thus enjoying himself in the flesh, while they themselves starved on the ether, must have been exceedingly provoking to these aristocratic and aerial strangers.

It was reported, furthermore, that Hivohitee, one of the haughtiest of Pontiffs, purposely treated his angelical guests thus cavalierly; in order to convince them, that though a denizen of earth; a sublunarian; and in respect of heaven, a mere provincial; he (Hivohitee) accounted

himself full as good as seraphim from the capital; and that too at the Capricorn Solstice, or any other time of the year. Strongly bent was Hivohitee upon humbling their supercilious pretensions.

Besides, was he not accounted a great god in the land? supreme? having power of life and death? essaying the deposition of kings? and dwelling in moody state, all by himself, in the goodliest island of Mardi? Though here, be it said, that his assumptions of temporal supremacy were but seldom made good by express interference with the secular concerns of the neighboring monarchs; who, by force of arms, were too apt to argue against his claims to authority; however, in theory, they bowed to it. And now, for the genealogy of Hivohitee; for eighteen hundred and forty-seven Hivohitees were alleged to have gone before him. He came in a right line from the divine Hivohitee I.: the original grantee of the empire of men's souls and the first swayer of a crosier. The present Pontiff's descent was unquestionable; his dignity having been transmitted through none but heirs male; the whole procession of High Priests being the fruit of successive marriages between uterine brother and sister. A conjunction deemed incestuous in some lands; but, here, held the only fit channel for the pure transmission of elevated rank.

Added to the hereditary appellation, Hivohitee, which simply denoted the sacerdotal station of the Pontiffs, and was but seldom employed in current discourse, they were individualized by a distinctive name, bestowed upon them at birth. And the degree of consideration in which

they were held, may be inferred from the fact, that during the lifetime of a Pontiff, the leading sound in his name was banned to ordinary uses. Whence, at every new accession to the archiepiscopal throne, it came to pass, that multitudes of words and phrases were either essentially modified, or wholly dropped. Wherefore, the language of Maramma was incessantly fluctuating; and had become so full of jargonings, that the birds in the groves were greatly puzzled; not knowing where lay the virtue of sounds, so incoherent.

And, in a good measure, this held true of all tongues spoken throughout the Archipelago; the birds marveling at mankind, and mankind at the birds; wondering how they could continually sing; when, for all man knew to the contrary, it was impossible they could be holding intelligent discourse. And thus, though for thousands of years, men and birds had been dwelling together in Mardi, they remained wholly ignorant of each other's secrets; the Islander regarding the fowl as a senseless songster, forever in the clouds; and the fowl him, as a screeching crane, destitute of pinions and lofty aspirations.

Over and above numerous other miraculous powers imputed to the Pontiffs as spiritual potentates, there was ascribed to them one special privilege of a secular nature: that of healing with a touch the bites of the ravenous sharks, swarming throughout the lagoon. With these they were supposed to be upon the most friendly terms; according to popular accounts, sociably bathing with them in the sea; permitting

them to rub their noses against their priestly thighs; playfully mouthing their hands, with all their tiers of teeth.

At the ordination of a Pontiff, the ceremony was not deemed complete, until embarking in his barge, he was saluted High Priest by three sharks drawing near; with teeth turned up, swimming beside his canoe.

These monsters were deified in Maramma; had altars there; it was deemed worse than homicide to kill one. "And what if they destroy human life?" say the Islanders, "are they not sacred?"

Now many more wonderful things were related touching Hivohitee; and though one could not but doubt the validity of many prerogatives ascribed to him, it was nevertheless hard to do otherwise, than entertain for the Pontiff that sort of profound consideration, which all render to those who indisputably possess the power of quenching human life with a wish.