

CHAPTER IX

They Discourse Of Alma

Sailing to and fro in the lake, to view its scenery, much discourse took place concerning the things we had seen; and far removed from the censer-bearers, the sad fate that awaited the boy was now the theme of all.

A good deal was then said of Alma, to whom the guide, the pilgrims, and the censer-bearers had frequently alluded, as to some paramount authority.

Called upon to reveal what his chronicles said on this theme, Braid-Beard complied; at great length narrating, what now follows condensed.

Alma, it seems, was an illustrious prophet, and teacher divine; who, ages ago, at long intervals, and in various islands, had appeared to the Mardians under the different titles of Brami, Manko, and Alma. Many thousands of moons had elapsed since his last and most memorable avatar, as Alma on the isle of Maramma. Each of his advents had taken place in a comparatively dark and benighted age. Hence, it was devoutly believed, that he came to redeem the Mardians from their heathenish thrall; to instruct them in the ways of truth, virtue, and happiness; to allure them to good by promises of beatitude hereafter; and to restrain them from evil by denunciations of woe. Separated from

the impurities and corruptions, which in a long series of centuries had become attached to every thing originally uttered by the prophet, the maxims, which as Brami he had taught, seemed similar to those inculcated by Manko. But as Alma, adapting his lessons to the improved condition of humanity, the divine prophet had more completely unfolded his scheme; as Alma, he had made his last revelation.

This narration concluded, Babbalanja mildly observed, "Mohi: without seeking to accuse you of uttering falsehoods; since what you relate rests not upon testimony of your own; permit me, to question the fidelity of your account of Alma. The prophet came to dissipate errors, you say; but superadded to many that have survived the past, ten thousand others have originated in various constructions of the principles of Alma himself. The prophet came to do away all gods but one; but since the days of Alma, the idols of Maramma have more than quadrupled. The prophet came to make us Mardians more virtuous and happy; but along with all previous good, the same wars, crimes, and miseries, which existed in Alma's day, under various modifications are yet extant. Nay: take from your chronicles, Mohi, the history of those horrors, one way or other, resulting from the doings of Alma's nominal followers, and your chronicles would not so frequently make mention of blood. The prophet came to guarantee our eternal felicity; but according to what is held in Maramma, that felicity rests on so hard a proviso, that to a thinking mind, but very few of our sinful race may secure it. For one, then, I wholly reject your Alma; not so much, because of all that is hard to be understood in his histories; as

because of obvious and undeniable things all round us; which, to me, seem at war with an unreserved faith in his doctrines as promulgated here in Maramma. Besides; every thing in this isle strengthens my incredulity; I never was so thorough a disbeliever as now."

"Let the winds be laid," cried Mohi, "while your rash confession is being made in this sacred lake."

Said Media, "Philosopher; remember the boy, and they that seized him."

"Ah! I do indeed remember him. Poor youth! in his agony, how my heart yearned toward his. But that very prudence which you deny me, my lord, prevented me from saying aught in his behalf. Have you not observed, that until now, when we are completely by ourselves, I have refrained from freely discoursing of what we have seen in this island? Trust me, my lord, there is no man, that bears more in mind the necessity of being either a believer or a hypocrite in Maramma, and the imminent peril of being honest here, than I, Babbalanja. And have I not reason to be wary, when in my boyhood, my own sire was burnt for his temerity; and in this very isle? Just Oro! it was done in the name of Alma,--what wonder then, that, at times, I almost hate that sound. And from those flames, they devoutly swore he went to others,--horrible fable!"

Said Mohi: "Do you deny, then, the everlasting torments?"

"'Tis not worth a denial. Nor by formally denying it, will I run the risk of shaking the faith of, thousands, who in that pious belief find infinite consolation for all they suffer in Mardi."

"How?" said Media; "are there those who soothe themselves with the thought of everlasting flames?"

"One would think so, my lord, since they defend that dogma more resolutely than any other. Sooner will they yield you the isles of Paradise, than it. And in truth, as liege followers of Alma, they would seem but right in clinging to it as they do; for, according to all one hears in Maramma, the great end of the prophet's mission seems to have been the revealing to us Mardians the existence of horrors, most hard to escape. But better we were all annihilated, than that one man should be damned."

Rejoined Media: "But think you not, that possibly, Alma may have been misconceived? Are you certain that doctrine is his?"

"I know nothing more than that such is the belief in this land. And in these matters, I know not where else to go for information. But, my lord, had I been living in those days when certain men are said to have been actually possessed by spirits from hell, I had not let slip the opportunity--as our forefathers did--to cross-question them concerning the place they came from."

"Well, well," said Media, "your Alma's faith concerns not me: I am a king, and a demi-god; and leave vulgar torments to the commonality."

"But it concerns me," muttered Mohi; "yet I know not what to think."

"For me," said Yoomy, "I reject it. Could I, I would not believe it. It is at variance with the dictates of my heart instinctively my heart turns from it, as a thirsty man from gall."

"Hush; say no more," said Mohi; "again we approach the shore."