

CHAPTER XVI

Media And Babbalanja Discourse

Our visiting the Pontiff at a time previously unforeseen, somewhat altered our plans. All search in Maramma for the lost one proving fruitless, and nothing of note remaining to be seen, we returned not to Uma; but proceeded with the tour of the lagoon.

When day came, reclining beneath the canopy, Babbalanja would fain have seriously discussed those things we had lately been seeing, which, for all the occasional levity he had recently evinced, seemed very near his heart.

But my lord Media forbade; saying that they necessarily included a topic which all gay, sensible Mardians, who desired to live and be merry, invariably banished from social discourse.

"Meditate as much as you will," Babbalanja, "but say little aloud, unless in a merry and mythical way. Lay down the great maxims of things, but let inferences take care of themselves. Never be special; never, a partisan. In safety, afar off, you may batter down a fortress; but at your peril you essay to carry a single turret by escalade. And if doubts distract you, in vain will you seek sympathy from your fellow men. For upon this one theme, not a few of you free-minded mortals, even the otherwise honest and intelligent, are the

least frank and friendly. Discourse with them, and it is mostly formulas, or prevarications, or hollow assumption of philosophical indifference, or urbane hypocrisies, or a cool, civil deference to the dominant belief; or still worse, but less common, a brutality of indiscriminate skepticism. Furthermore, Babbalanja, on this head, final, last thoughts you mortals have none; nor can have; and, at bottom, your own fleeting fancies are too often secrets to yourselves; and sooner may you get another's secret, than your own. Thus with the wisest of you all; you are ever unfixed. Do you show a tropical calm without? then, be sure a thousand contrary currents whirl and eddy within. The free, airy robe of your philosophy is but a dream, which seems true while it lasts; but waking again into the orthodox world, straightway you resume the old habit. And though in your dreams you may hie to the uttermost Orient, yet all the while you abide where you are. Babbalanja, you mortals dwell in Mardi, and it is impossible to get elsewhere."

Said Babbalanja, "My lord, you school me. But though I dissent from some of your positions, I am willing to confess, that this is not the first time a philosopher has been instructed by a man."

"A demi-god, sir; and therefore I the more readily discharge my mind of all seriousness, touching the subject, with which you mortals so vex and torment yourselves."

Silence ensued. And seated apart, on both sides of the barge, solemnly

swaying, in fixed meditation, to the roll of the waves, Babbalanja,
Mohi, and Yoomy, drooped lower and lower, like funeral plumes; and our
gloomy canoe seemed a hearse.