

CHAPTER XXVIII

Babbalanja Regales The Company With Some Sandwiches

It was night. But the moon was brilliant, far and near illuminating the lagoon.

Over silvery billows we glided.

"Come Yoomy," said Media, "moonlight and music for aye--a song! a song! my bird of paradise."

And folding his arms, and watching the sparkling waters, thus Yoomy sang:--

A ray of the moon on the dancing waves
Is the step, light step of that beautiful maid:
Mardi, with music, her footfall paves,
And her voice, no voice, but a song in the glade.

"Hold!" cried Media, "yonder is a curious rock. It looks black as a whale's hump in blue water, when the sun shines."

"That must be the Isle of Fossils," said Mohi. "Ay, my lord, it is."

"Let us land, then," said Babbalanja.

And none dissenting, the canoes were put about, and presently we debarked.

It was a dome-like surface, here and there fringed with ferns, sprouting from clefts. But at every tide the thin soil seemed gradually washing into the lagoon.

Like antique tablets, the smoother parts were molded in strange devices:--Luxor marks, Tadmor ciphers, Palenque inscriptions. In long lines, as on Denderah's architraves, were bas-reliefs of beetles, turtles, ant-eaters, armadilloes, guanos, serpents, tongueless crocodiles:--a long procession, frosted and crystalized in stone, and silvered by the moon.

"Strange sight!" cried Media. "Speak, antiquarian Mohi."

But the chronicler was twitching his antiquarian beard, nonplussed by these wondrous records. The cowled old father, Piaggi, bending over his calcined Herculanean manuscripts, looked not more at fault than he.

Said Media, "Expound you, then, sage Babbalanja." Muffling his face in his mantle, and his voice in sepulchral tones, Babbalanja thus:--

"These are the leaves of the book of Oro. Here we read how worlds are

made; here read the rise and fall of Nature's kingdoms. From where this old man's furthest histories start, these unbeginning records end. These are the secret memoirs of times past; whose evidence, at last divulged, gives the grim lie to Mohi's gossipings, and makes a rattling among the dry-bone relics of old Maramma."

Braid-Beard's old eyes flashed fire. With bristling beard, he cried, "Take back the lie you send!"

"Peace! everlasting foes," cried Media, interposing, with both arms outstretched. "Philosopher, probe not too deep. All you say is very fine, but very dark. I would know something more precise. But, prithee, ghost, unmuffle! chatter no more! wait till you're buried for that."

"Ay, death's cold ague will set us all shivering, my lord. We'll swear our teeth are icicles."

"Will you quit driving your sleet upon us? have done expound these rocks."

"My lord, if you desire, I'll turn over these stone tablets till they're dog-eared."

"Heaven and Mardi!--Go on, Babbalanja."

"'Twas thus. These were tombs burst open by volcanic throes; and hither hurled from the lowermost vaults of the lagoon. All Mardi's rocks are one wide resurrection. But look. Here, now, a pretty story's told. Ah, little thought these grand old lords, that lived and roared before the flood, that they would come to this. Here, King Media, look and learn."

He looked; and saw a picture petrified, and plain as any on the pediments of Petra.

It seemed a stately banquet of the dead, where lords in skeletons were ranged around a board heaped up with fossil fruits, and flanked with vitreous vases, grinning like empty skulls. There they sat, exchanging rigid courtesies. One's hand was on his stony heart; his other pledged a lord who held a hollow beaker. Another sat, with earnest face beneath a mitred brow. He seemed to whisper in the ear of one who listened trustingly. But on the chest of him who wore the miter, an adder lay, close-coiled in flint.

At the further end, was raised a throne, its canopy surmounted by a crown, in which now rested the likeness of a raven on an egg.

The throne was void. But half-concealed by drapery, behind the goodliest lord, sideway leaned a figure diademed, a lifted poniard in its hand:--a monarch fossilized in very act of murdering his guest.

"Most high and sacred majesty!" cried Babbalanja, bowing to his feet.

While all stood gazing on this sight, there came two servitors of Media's, who besought of Babbalanja to settle a dispute, concerning certain tracings upon the islet's other side.

Thither we followed them.

Upon a long layer of the slaty stone were marks of riplings of some now waveless sea; mid which were tri-toed footprints of some huge heron, or wading fowl.

Pointing to one of which, the foremost disputant thus spoke:--"I maintain that these are three toes."

"And I, that it is one foot," said the other.

"And now decide between us," joined the twain.

Said Babbalanja, starting, "Is not this the very question concerning which they made such dire contention in Maramma, whose tertiary rocks are chisseled all over with these marks? Yes; this it is, concerning which they once shed blood. This it is, concerning which they still divide."

"Which of us is right?" again demanded the impatient twain.

"Unite, and both are right; divide, and both are wrong. Every unit is made up of parts, as well as every plurality. Nine is three threes; a unit is as many thirds; or, if you please, a thousand thousandths; no special need to stop at thirds."

"Away, ye foolish disputants!" cried Media. "Full before you is the thing disputed."

Strolling on, many marvels did we mark; and Media said:--"Babbalanja, you love all mysteries; here's a fitting theme. You have given us the history of the rock; can your sapience tell the origin of all the isles? how Mardi came to be?"

"Ah, that once mooted point is settled. Though hard at first, it proved a bagatelle. Start not my lord; there are those who have measured Mardi by perch and pole, and with their wonted lead sounded its utmost depths. Listen: it is a pleasant story. The coral wall which circumscribes the isles but continues upward the deep buried crater of the primal chaos. In the first times this crucible was charged with vapors nebulous, boiling over fires volcanic. Age by age, the fluid thickened; dropping, at long intervals, heavy sediment to the bottom; which layer on layer concreted, and at length, in crusts, rose toward the surface. Then, the vast volcano burst; rent the whole mass; upthrew the ancient rocks; which now in divers mountain tops tell tales of what existed ere Mardi was completely fashioned. Hence

many fossils on the hills, whose kith and kin still lurk beneath the vales. Thus Nature works, at random warring, chaos a crater, and this world a shell."

Mohi stroked his beard.

Yoomy yawned.

Media cried, "Preposterous!"

"My lord, then take another theory--which you will--the celebrated sandwich System. Nature's first condition was a soup, wherein the agglomerating solids formed granitic dumplings, which, wearing down, deposited the primal stratum made up of series, sandwiching strange shapes of mollusks, and zoophytes; then snails, and periwinkles:--marmalade to sip, and nuts to crack, ere the substantials came.

"And next, my lord, we have the fine old time of the Old Red Sandstone sandwich, clapped on the underlying layer, and among other dainties, imbedding the first course of fish,--all quite in rule,--sturgeon-forms, cephalaspis, glyptolepis, pterichthys; and other finny things, of flavor rare, but hard to mouth for bones. Served up with these, were sundry greens,--lichens, mosses, ferns, and fungi.

"Now comes the New Red Sandstone sandwich: marly and magnesious, spread over with old patriarchs of crocodiles and alligators,--hard

carving these,--and prodigious lizards, spine-skewered, tails tied in bows, and swimming in saffron saucers."

"What next?" cried Media.

"The Ool, or Oily sandwich:--rare gormandizing then; for oily it was called, because of fat old joints, and hams, and rounds, and barons of sea-beeves and walrusses, which then crowned the stratum-board. All piled together, glorious profusion!--fillets and briskets, rumps, and saddles, and haunches; shoulder to shoulder, loin 'gainst sirloin, ribs rapping knuckles, and quarter to none. And all these sandwiched right over all that went before. Course after course, and course on course, my lord; no time to clear the wreck; no stop nor let; lay on and slash; cut, thrust, and come.

"Next the Chalk, or Coral sandwich; but no dry fare for that; made up of rich side-courses,--eocene, miocene, and pliocene. The first was wild game for the delicate,--bantam larks, curlews, quails, and flying weazels; with a slight sprinkling of pilaus,--capons, pullets, plovers, and garnished with petrels' eggs. Very savory, that, my lord. The second side-course--miocene--was out of course, flesh after fowl: marine mammalia,--seals, grampuses, and whales, served up with seaweed on their flanks, hearts and kidneys deviled, and fins and flippers friccased. All very thee, my lord. The third side-course, the pliocene, was goodliest of all:--whole-roasted elephants, rhinoceroses, and hippopotamuses, stuffed with boiled ostriches,

condors, cassowaries, turkeys. Also barbecued mastodons and megatheriums, gallantly served up with fir-trees in their mouths, and tails cock-billed.

"Thus fared the old diluvians: arrant gormandizers and beef-bolters. We Mardians famish on the superficial strata of deposits; cracking our jaws on walnuts, filberts, cocoa-nuts, and clams. My lord, I've done."

"And bravely done it is. Mohi tells us, that Mardi was made in six days; but you, Babbalanja, have built it up from the bottom in less than six minutes."

"Nothing for us geologists, my lord. At a word we turn you out whole systems, suns, satellites, and asteroids included. Why, my good lord, my friend Annonimo is laying out a new Milky Way, to intersect with the old one, and facilitate cross-cuts among the comets."

And so saying, Babbalanja turned aside.