

CHAPTER XXXI

Babbalanja Discourses In The Dark

Next day came and went; and still we onward sailed. At last, by night, there fell a calm, becalming the water of the wide lagoon, and becalming all the clouds in heaven, wailing the constellations. But though our sails were useless, our paddlers plied their broad stout blades. Thus sweeping by a rent and hoar old rock, Vee-Vee, impatient of the calm, sprang to his crow's nest in the shark's mouth, and seizing his conch, sounded a blast which ran in and out among the hollows, reverberating with the echoes.

Be sure, it was startling. But more so with respect to one of our paddlers, upon whose shoulders, elevated Vee-Vee, his balance lost, all at once came down by the run. But the heedless little bugler himself was most injured by the fall; his arm nearly being broken.

Some remedies applied, and the company grown composed, Babbalanja thus:--"My lord Media, was there any human necessity for that accident?"

"None that I know, or care to tell, Babbalanja."

"Vee-Vee," said Babbalanja, "did you fall on purpose?"

"Not I," sobbed little Vee-Vee, slinging his ailing arm in its mate.

"Woe! woe to us all, then," cried Babbalanja; "for what direful events may be in store for us which we can not avoid."

"How now, mortal?" cried Media; "what now?"

"My lord, think of it. Minus human inducement from without, and minus volition from within, Vee-Vee has met with an accident, which has almost maimed him for life. Is it not terrifying to think of? Are not all mortals exposed to similar, nay, worse calamities, ineffably unavoidable? Woe, woe, I say, to us Mardians! Here, take my last breath; let me give up this beggarly ghost!"

"Nay," said Media; "pause, Babbalanja. Turn it not adrift prematurely. Let it house till midnight; the proper time for you mortals to dissolve. But, philosopher, if you harp upon Vee-Vee's mishap, know that it was owing to nothing but his carelessness."

"And what was that owing to, my lord?"

"To Vee-Vee himself."

"Then, my lord, what brought such a careless being into Mardi?"

"A long course of generations. He's some one's great-great-grandson,

doubtless; who was great-great-grandson to some one else; who also had grandsires."

"Many thanks then to your highness; for you establish the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity."

"No. I establish nothing; I but answer your questions."

"All one, my lord: you are a Necessitarian; in other words, you hold that every thing takes place through absolute necessity."

"Do you take me, then, for a fool, and a Fatalist? Pardie! a bad creed for a monarch, the distributor of rewards and punishments."

"Right there, my lord. But, for all that, your highness is a Necessitarian, yet no Fatalist. Confound not the distinct. Fatalism presumes express and irrevocable edicts of heaven concerning particular events. Whereas, Necessity holds that all events are naturally linked, and inevitably follow each other, without providential interposition, though by the eternal letting of Providence."

"Well, well, Babbalanja, I grant it all. Go on."

"On high authority, we are told that in times past the fall of certain nations in Mardi was prophesied of seers."

"Most true, my lord," said Mohi; "it is all down in the chronicles."

"Ha! ha!" cried Media. "Go on, philosopher."

Continued Babbalanja, "Previous to the time assigned to their fulfillment, those prophecies were bruited through Mardi; hence, previous to the time assigned to their fulfillment, full knowledge of them may have come to the nations concerned. Now, my lord, was it possible for those nations, thus forwarned, so to conduct their affairs, as at, the prophesied time, to prove false the events revealed to be in store for them?"

"However that may be," said Mohi, "certain it is, those events did assuredly come to pass:--Compare the ruins of Babelona with book ninth, chapter tenth, of the chronicles. Yea, yea, the owl inhabits where the seers predicted; the jackals yell in the tombs of the kings."

"Go on, Babbalanja," said Media. "Of course those nations could not have resisted their doom. Go on, then: vault over your premises."

"If it be, then, my lord, that--"

"My very worshipful lord," interposed Mohi, "is not our philosopher getting off soundings; and may it not be impious to meddle with these

things?"

"Were it so, old man, he should have known it. The king of Odo is something more than you mortals."

"But are we the great gods themselves," cried Yoomy, "that we discourse of these things."

"No, minstrel," said Babbalanja; "and no need have the great gods to discourse of things perfectly comprehended by them, and by themselves ordained. But you and I, Yoomy, are men, and not gods; hence is it for us, and not for them, to take these things for our themes. Nor is there any impiety in the right use of our reason, whatever the issue. Smote with superstition, shall we let it wither and die out, a dead, limb to a live trunk, as the mad devotee's arm held up motionless for years? Or shall we employ it but for a paw, to help us to our bodily needs, as the brutes use their instinct? Is not reason subtile as quicksilver--live as lightning--a neighing charger to advance, but a snail to recede? Can we starve that noble instinct in us, and hope that it will survive? Better slay the body than the soul; and if it be the direst of sins to be the murderers of our own bodies, how much more to be a soul-suicide. Yoomy, we are men, we are angels. And in his faculties, high Oro is but what a man would be, infinitely magnified. Let us aspire to all things. Are we babes in the woods, to be scared by the shadows of the trees? What shall appall us? If eagles gaze at the sun, may not men at the gods?"

"For one," said Media, "you may gaze at me freely. Gaze on. But talk not of my kinsmen so fluently, Babbalanja. Return to your argument."

"I go back then, my lord. By implication, you have granted, that in times past the future was foreknown of Oro; hence, in times past, the future must have been foreordained. But in all things Oro is immutable. Wherefore our own future is foreknown and foreordained. Now, if things foreordained concerning nations have in times past been revealed to them previous to their taking place, then something similar may be presumable concerning individual men now living. That is to say, out of all the events destined to befall any one man, it is not impossible that previous knowledge of some one of these events might supernaturally come to him. Say, then, it is revealed to me, that ten days hence I shall, of my own choice, fall upon my javelin; when the time comes round, could I refrain from suicide? Grant the strongest presumable motives to the act; grant that, unforwarned, I would slay myself outright at the time appointed: yet, foretold of it, and resolved to test the decree to the uttermost, under such circumstances, I say, would it be possible for me not to kill myself? If possible, then predestination is not a thing absolute; and Heaven is wise to keep secret from us those decrees, whose virtue consists in secrecy. But if not possible, then that suicide would not be mine, but Oro's. And, by consequence, not only that act, but all my acts, are Oro's. In sum, my lord, he who believes that in times past, prophets have prophesied, and their prophecies have been fulfilled; when put to

it, inevitably must allow that every man now living is an irresponsible being."

"In sooth, a very fine argument very finely argued," said Media. "You have done marvels, Babbalanja. But hark ye, were I so disposed, I could deny you all over, premises and conclusions alike. And furthermore, my cogent philosopher, had you published that anarchical dogma among my subjects in Oro, I had silenced you by my spear-headed scepter, instead of my uplifted finger."

"Then, all thanks and all honor to your generosity, my lord, in granting us the immunities you did at the outset of this voyage. But, my lord, permit me one word more. Is not Oro omnipresent--absolutely every where?"

"So you mortals teach, Babbalanja."

"But so do they mean, my lord. Often do we Mardians stick to terms for ages, yet truly apply not their meanings."

"Well, Oro is every where. What now?"

"Then, if that be absolutely so, Oro is not merely a universal on-looker, but occupies and fills all space; and no vacancy is left for any being, or any thing but Oro. Hence, Oro is in all things, and himself is all things--the time-old creed. But since evil abounds,

and Oro is all things, then he can not be perfectly good; wherefore, Oro's omnipresence and moral perfection seem incompatible. Furthermore, my lord those orthodox systems which ascribe to Oro almighty and universal attributes every way, those systems, I say, destroy all intellectual individualities but Oro, and resolve the universe into him. But this is a heresy; wherefore, orthodoxy and heresy are one. And thus is it, my lord, that upon these matters we Mardians all agree and disagree together, and kill each other with weapons that burst in our hands. Ah, my lord, with what mind must blessed Oro look down upon this scene! Think you he discriminates between the deist and atheist? Nay; for the Searcher of the cores of all hearts well knoweth that atheists there are none. For in things abstract, men but differ in the sounds that come from their mouths, and not in the wordless thoughts lying at the bottom of their beings. The universe is all of one mind. Though my twin-brother sware to me, by the blazing sun in heaven at noon-day, that Oro is not; yet would he belie the thing he intended to express. And who lives that blasphemes? What jargon of human sounds so puissant as to insult the unutterable majesty divine? Is Oro's honor in the keeping of Mardi?-- Oro's conscience in man's hands? Where our warrant, with Oro's sign-manual, to justify the killing, burning, and destroying, or far worse, the social persecutions we institute in his behalf? Ah! how shall these self-assumed attorneys and vicegerents be astounded, when they shall see all heaven peopled with heretics and heathens, and all hell nodding over with miters! Ah! let us Mardians quit this insanity. Let us be content with the theology in the grass and the flower, in seed-

time and harvest. Be it enough for us to know that Oro indubitably is. My lord! my lord! sick with the spectacle of the madness of men, and broken with spontaneous doubts, I sometimes see but two things in all Mardi to believe:--that I myself exist, and that I can most happily, or least miserably exist, by the practice of righteousness. All else is in the clouds; and naught else may I learn, till the firmament be split from horizon to horizon. Yet, alas! too often do I swing from these moorings."

"Alas! his fit is coming upon him again," whispered Yoomy.

"Why, Babbalanja," said Media, "I almost pity you. You are too warm, too warm. Why fever your soul with these things? To no use you mortals wax earnest. No thanks, but curses, will you get for your earnestness. You yourself you harm most. Why not take creeds as they come? It is not so hard to be persuaded; never mind about believing."

"True, my lord; not very hard; no act is required; only passiveness. Stand still and receive. Faith is to the thoughtless, doubts to the thinker."

"Then, why think at all? Is it not better for you mortals to clutch error as in a vice, than have your fingers meet in your hand? And to what end your eternal inquisitions? You have nothing to substitute. You say all is a lie; then out with the truth. Philosopher, your devil is but a foolish one, after all. I, a demi-god, never say nay to these

things."

"Yea, my lord, it would hardly answer for Oro himself, were he to come down to Mardi, to deny men's theories concerning him. Did they not strike at the rash deity in Alma?"

"Then, why deny those theories yourself? Babbalanja, you almost affect my immortal serenity. Must you forever be a sieve for good /grain to run through, while you retain but the chaff? Your tongue is forked. You speak two languages: flat folly for yourself, and wisdom for others. Babbalanja, if you have any belief of your own, keep it; but, in Oro's name, keep it secret."

"Ay, my lord, in these things wise men are spectators, not actors; wise men look on, and say 'ay.'"

"Why not say so yourself, then?"

"My lord, because I have often told you, that I am a fool, and not wise."

"Your Highness," said Mohi, "this whole discourse seems to have grown out of the subject of Necessity and Free Will. Now, when a boy, I recollect hearing a sage say, that these things were reconcilable."

"Ay?" said Media, "what say you to that, now, Babbalanja?"

"It may be even so, my lord. Shall I tell you a story?"

"Azzageddi's stirring now," muttered Mohi.

"Proceed," said Media.

"King Normo had a fool, called Willi, whom he loved to humor. Now, though Willi ever obeyed his lord, by the very instinct of his servitude, he flattered himself that he was free; and this conceit it was, that made the fool so entertaining to the king. One day, said Normo to his fool,--'Go, Willi, to yonder tree, and wait there till I come,' 'Your Majesty, I will,' said Willi, bowing beneath his jingling bells; 'but I presume your Majesty has no objections to my walking on my hands:--I am free, I hope.' 'Perfectly,' said Normo, 'hands or feet, it's all the same to me; only do my bidding.' 'I thought as much,' said Willi; so, swinging his limber legs into the air, Willi, thumb after thumb, essayed progression. But soon, his bottled blood so rushed downward through his neck, that he was fain to turn a somerset and regain his feet. Said he, 'Though I am free to do it, it's not so easy turning digits into toes; I'll walk, by gad! which is my other option.' So he went straight forward, and did King Normo's bidding in the natural way."

"A curious story that," said Media; "whence came it?"

"My lord, where every thing, but one, is to be had:--within."

"You are charged to the muzzle, then," said Braid-Beard. "Yes, Mohi; and my talk is my overflowing, not my fullness."

"And what may you be so full of?"

"Of myself."

"So it seems," said Mohi, whisking away a fly with his beard.

"Babbalanja," said Media, "you did right in selecting this ebon night for discussing the theme you did; and truly, you mortals are but too apt to talk in the dark."

"Ay, my lord, and we mortals may prate still more in the dark, when we are dead; for methinks, that if we then prate at all, 'twill be in our sleep. Ah! my lord, think not that in aught I've said this night, I would assert any wisdom of my own. I but fight against the armed and crested Lies of Mardi, that like a host, assail me. I am stuck full of darts; but, tearing them from out me, gasping, I discharge them whence they come."

So saying, Babbalanja slowly drooped, and fell reclining; then lay motionless as the marble Gladiator, that for centuries has been dying.