

CHAPTER XXXIX

Wherein Babbalanja Discourses Of Himself

An interval of silence was at last broken by Babbalanja.

Pointing to the sun, just gaining the horizon, he exclaimed, "As old Bardianna says--shut your eyes, and believe."

"And what may Bardianna have to do with yonder orb?" said Media.

This much, my lord, the astronomers maintain that Mardi moves round the sun; which I, who never formally investigated the matter for myself, can by no means credit; unless, plainly seeing one thing, I blindly believe another. Yet even thus blindly does all Mardi subscribe to an astronomical system, which not one in fifty thousand can astronomically prove. And not many centuries back, my lord, all Mardi did equally subscribe to an astronomical system, precisely the reverse of that which they now believe. But the mass of Martians have not as much reason to believe the first system, as the exploded one; for all who have eyes must assuredly see, that the sun seems to move, and that Mardi seems a fixture, eternally here. But doubtless there are theories which may be true, though the face of things belie them. Hence, in such cases, to the ignorant, disbelief would seem more natural than faith; though they too often reject the testimony of their own senses, for what to them, is a mere hypothesis. And thus, my

lord, is it, that the masts of Mardians do not believe because they know, but because they know not. And they are as ready to receive one thing as another, if it comes from a canonical source. My lord, Mardi is as an ostrich, which will swallow aught you offer, even a bar of iron, if placed endwise. And though the iron be indigestible, yet it serves to fill: in feeding, the end proposed. For Mardi must have something to exercise its digestion, though that something be forever indigestible. And as fishermen for sport, throw two lumps of bait, united by a cord, to albatrosses floating on the sea; which are greedily attempted to be swallowed, one lump by this fowl, the other by that; but forever are kept reciprocally going up and down in them, by means of the cord; even so, my lord, do I sometimes fancy, that our theorists divert themselves with the greediness of Mardians to believe."

"Ha, ha," cried Media, "methinks this must be Azzageddi who speaks."

"No, my lord; not long since, Azzageddi received a furlough to go home and warm himself for a while. But this leaves me not alone."

"How?"

"My lord,--for the present putting Azzageddi entirely aside,--though I have now been upon terms of close companionship with myself for nigh five hundred moons, I have not yet been able to decide who or what I am. To you, perhaps, I seem Babbalanja; but to myself, I seem not

myself. All I am sure of, is a sort of prickly sensation all over me, which they call life; and, occasionally, a headache or a queer conceit admonishes me, that there is something astir in my attic. But how know I, that these sensations are identical with myself? For aught I know, I may be somebody else. At any rate, I keep an eye on myself, as I would on a stranger. There is something going on in me, that is independent of me. Many a time, have I willed to do one thing, and another has been done. I will not say by myself, for I was not consulted about it; it was done instinctively. My most virtuous thoughts are not born of my musings, but spring up in me, like bright fancies to the poet; unsought, spontaneous. Whence they come I know not. I am a blind man pushed from behind; in vain, I turn about to see what propels me. As vanity, I regard the praises of my friends; for what they commend pertains not to me, Babbalanja; but to this unknown something that forces me to it. But why am I, a middle aged Mardian, less prone to excesses than when a youth? The same inducements and allurements are around me. But no; my more ardent passions are burned out; those which are strongest when we are least able to resist them. Thus, then, my lord, it is not so much outer temptations that prevail over us mortals; but inward instincts."

"A very curious speculation," said Media. But Babbalanja, have you mortals no moral sense, as they call it?"

"We have. But the thing you speak of is but an after-birth; we eat and drink many months before we are conscious of thoughts. And though some

adults would seem to refer all their actions to this moral sense, yet, in reality, it is not so; for, dominant in them, their moral sense bridles their instinctive passions; wherefore, they do not govern themselves, but are governed by their very natures. Thus, some men in youth are constitutionally as staid as I am now. But shall we pronounce them pious and worthy youths for this? Does he abstain, who is not incited? And on the other hand, if the instinctive passions through life naturally have the supremacy over the moral sense, as in extreme cases we see it developed in irreclaimable malefactors,--shall we pronounce such, criminal and detestable wretches? My lord, it is easier for some men to be saints, than for others not to be sinners."

"That will do, Babbalanja; you are on the verge, take not the leap! Go back whence you set out, and tell us of that other, and still more mysterious Azzageddi; him whom you hinted to have palmed himself off on you for you yourself."

"Well, then, my lord,--Azzageddi still set aside,--upon that self-same inscrutable stranger, I charge all those past actions of mine, which in the retrospect appear to me such eminent folly, that I am confident, it was not I, Babbalanja, now speaking, that committed them. Nevertheless, my lord, this very day I may do some act, which at a future period may seem equally senseless; for in one lifetime we live a hundred lives. By the incomprehensible stranger in me, I say, this body of mine has been rented out scores of times, though always one dark chamber in me is retained by the old mystery."

"Will you never come to the mark, Babbalanja? Tell me something direct of the stranger. Who, what is he? Introduce him."

"My lord, I can not. He is locked up in me. In a mask, he dodges me. He prowls about in me, hither and thither; he peers, and I stare. This is he who talks in my sleep, revealing my secrets; and takes me to unheard of realms, beyond the skies of Mardi. So present is he always, that I seem not so much to live of myself, as to be a mere apprehension of the unaccountable being that is in me. Yet all the time, this being is I, myself."

"Babbalanja," said Media, "you have fairly turned yourself inside out."

"Yes, my lord," said Mohi, "and he has so unsettled me, that I begin to think all Mardi a square circle."

"How is that, Babbalanja," said Media, "is a circle square?"

"No, my lord, but ever since Mardi began, we Mardians have been essaying our best to square it."

"Cleverly retorted. Now, Babbalanja, do you not imagine, that you may do harm by disseminating these sophisms of yours; which like your devil theory, would seem to relieve all Mardi from moral accountability?"

"My lord, at bottom, men wear no bonds that other men can strike off; and have no immunities, of which other men can deprive them. Tell a good man that he is free to commit murder,--will he murder? Tell a murderer that at the peril of his soul he indulges in murderous thoughts,--will that make him a saint?"

"Again on the verge, Babbalanja? Take not the leap, I say."

"I can leap no more, my lord. Already I am down, down, down."

"Philosopher," said Media, "what with Azzageddi, and the mysterious indweller you darkly hint of, I marvel not that you are puzzled to decide upon your identity. But when do you seem most yourself?"

"When I sleep, and dream not, my lord."

"Indeed?"

"Why then, a fool's cap might be put on you, and you would not know it."

"The very turban he ought to wear," muttered Mohi.

"Yet, my lord, I live while consciousness is not mine, while to all appearances I am a clod. And may not this same state of being, though but alternate with me, be continually that of many dumb, passive

objects we so carelessly regard? Trust me, there are more things alive than those that crawl, or fly, or swim. Think you, my lord, there is no sensation in being a tree? feeling the sap in one's boughs, the breeze in one's foliage? think you it is nothing to be a world? one of a herd, bison-like, wending its way across boundless meadows of ether? In the sight of a fowl, that sees not our souls, what are our own tokens of animation? That we move, make a noise, have organs, pulses, and are compounded of fluids and solids. And all these are in this Mardi as a unit. Daily the slow, majestic throbbings of its heart are perceptible on the surface in the tides of the la-agoon. Its rivers are its veins; when agonized, earthquakes are its throes; it shouts in the thunder, and weeps in the shower; and as the body of a bison is covered with hair, so Mardi is covered with grasses and vegetation, among which, we parasitical things do but crawl, vexing and tormenting the patient creature to which we cling. Nor yet, hath it recovered from the pain of the first foundation that was laid. Mardi is alive to its axis. When you pour water, does it not gurgle? When you strike a pearl shell, does it not ring? Think you there is no sensation in being a rock?--To exist, is to be; to be, is to be something: to be something, is--"

"Go on," said Media.

"And what is it, to be something?" said Yoomy artlessly. "Bethink yourself of what went before," said Media.

"Lose not the thread," said Mohi.

"It has snapped," said Babbalanja.

"I breathe again," said Mohi.

"But what a stepping-off place you came to then, philosopher," said Media. "By the way, is it not old Bardianna who says, that no Mardian should undertake to walk, without keeping one foot foremost?"

"To return to the vagueness of the notion I have of myself," said Babbalanja.

"An appropriate theme," said Media, "proceed."

"My lord," murmured Mohi, "Is not this philosopher like a centipede? Cut off his head, and still he crawls."

"There are times when I fancy myself a lunatic," resumed Babbalanja.

"Ah, now he's beginning to talk sense," whispered Mohi.

"Surely you forget, Babbalanja," said Media. "How many more theories have you? First, you are possessed by a devil; then rent yourself out to the indweller; and now turn yourself into a mad-house. You are inconsistent."

"And for that very reason, my lord, not inconsistent; for the sum of my inconsistencies makes up my consistency. And to be consistent to one's self, is often to be inconsistent to Mardi. Common consistency implies unchangeableness; but much of the wisdom here below lives in a state of transition."

"Ah!" murmured Mold, "my head goes round again."

"Azzageddi aside, then, my lord, and also, for the nonce, the mysterious indweller, I come now to treat of myself as a lunatic. But this last conceit is not so much based upon the madness of particular actions, as upon the whole drift of my ordinary and hourly ones; those, in which I most resemble all other Mardians. It seems like going through with some nonsensical whim-whams, destitute of fixed purpose. For though many of my actions seem to have objects, and all of them somehow run into each other; yet, where is the grand result? To what final purpose, do I walk about, eat, think, dream? To what great end, does Mohi there, now stroke his beard?"

"But I was doing it unconsciously," said Mohi, dropping his hand, and lifting his head.

"Just what I would be at, old man. 'What we do, we do blindly,' says old Bardianna. Many things we do, we do without knowing,--as with you and your beard, Mohi. And many others we know not, in their true

bearing at least, till they are past. Are not half our lives spent in reproaches for foregone actions, of the true nature and consequences of which, we were wholly ignorant at the time? Says old Bardianna, 'Did I not so often feel an appetite for my yams, I should think every thing a dream;'--so puzzling to him, seemed the things of this Mardi. But Alla-Malolla goes further. Says he, 'Let us club together, fellow-riddles:--Kings, clowns, and intermediates. We are bundles of comical sensations; we bejuggle ourselves into strange phantasies: we are air, wind, breath, bubbles; our being is told in a tick.'

"Now, then, Babbalanja," said Media, "what have you come to in all this rhapsody? You everlastingly travel in a circle."

"And so does the sun in heaven, my lord; like me, it goes round, and gives light as it goes. Old Bardianna, too, revolved. He says so himself. In his roundabout chapter on Cycles and Epicycles, with Notes on the Ecliptic, he thus discourseth:--'All things revolve upon some center, to them, fixed; for the centripetal is ever too much for the centrifugal. Wherefore, it is a perpetual cycling with us, without progression; and we fly round, whether we will or no. To stop, were to sink into space. So, over and over we go, and round and round; double-shuffle, on our axis, and round the sun.' In an another place, he says:--'There is neither apogee nor perigee, north nor south, right nor left; what to-night is our zenith, to-morrow is our nadir; stand as we will, we stand on our heads; essay to spring into the air, and down we come; here we stick; our very bones make glue.'

"Enough, enough, Babbalanja," cried Media. "You are a very wise Mardian; but the wisest Mardians make the most consummate fools."

"So they do, my lord; but I was interrupted. I was about to say, that there is no place but the universe; no limit but the limitless; no bottom but the bottomless."