

CHAPTER XL

Of The Sorcerers In The Isle Of Minda

"Tiffin! tiffin!" cried Media; "time for tiffin! Up, comrades! and while the mat is being spread, walk we to the bow, and inhale the breeze for an appetite. Hark ye, Vee-Vee! forget not that calabash with the sea-blue seal, and a round ring for a brand. Rare old stuff, that, Mohi; older than you: the circumnavigator, I call it. My sire had a canoe launched for the express purpose of carrying it thrice round Mardi for a flavor. It was many moons on the voyage; the mariners never sailed faster than three knots. Ten would spoil the best wine ever floated."

Tiffin over, and the blue-sealed calabash all but hid in the great cloud raised by our pipes, Media proposed to board it in the smoke. So, goblet in hand, we all gallantly charged, and came off victorious from the fray.

Then seated again, and serenely puffing in a circle, the circumnavigator meanwhile pleasantly going the rounds, Media called upon Mohi for something entertaining.

Now, of all the old gossips in Mardi, surely our delightful old Diodorus was furnished with the greatest possible variety of histories, chronicles, anecdotes, memoirs, legends, traditions, and

biographies. There was no end to the library he carried. In himself, he was the whole history of Mardi, amplified, not abridged, in one volume.

In obedience, then, to King Media's command, Mohi regaled the company with a narrative, in substance as follows:--

In a certain quarter of the Archipelago was an island called Minda; and in Minda were many sorcerers, employed in the social differences and animosities of the people of that unfortunate land. If a Mindarian deemed himself aggrieved or insulted by a countryman, he forthwith repaired to one of these sorcerers; who, for an adequate consideration, set to work with his spells, keeping himself in the dark, and directing them against the obnoxious individual. And full soon, by certain peculiar sensations, this individual, discovering what was going on, would straightway hie to his own professor of the sable art, who, being well feed, in due time brought about certain counter-charms, so that in the end it sometimes fell out that neither party was gainer or loser, save by the sum of his fees.

But the worst of it was, that in some cases all knowledge of these spells were at the outset hidden from the victim; who, hearing too late of the mischief brewing, almost always fell a prey to his foe; which calamity was held the height of the art. But as the great body of sorcerers were about matched in point of skill, it followed that the parties employing them were so likewise. Hence arose those

interminable contests, in which many moons were spent, both parties toiling after their common destruction.

Indeed, to say nothing of the obstinacy evinced by their employers, it was marvelous, the pertinacity of the sorcerers themselves. To the very last tooth in their employer's pouches, they would stick to their spells; never giving over till he was financially or physically defunct.

But much as they were vilified, no people in Minda were half so disinterested as they. Certain indispensable conditions secured, some of them were as ready to undertake the perdition of one man as another; good, bad, or indifferent, it made little matter.

What wonder, then, that such abominable mercenaries should cause a mighty deal of mischief in Minda; privately going about, inciting peaceable folks to enmities with their neighbors; and with marvelous alacrity, proposing themselves as the very sorcerers to rid them of the annoyances suggested as existing.

Indeed, it even happened that a sorcerer would be secretly retained to work spells upon a victim, who, from his bodily sensations, suspecting something wrong, but knowing not what, would repair to that self-same sorcerer, engaging him to counteract any mischief that might be brewing. And this worthy would at once undertake the business; when, having both parties in his hands, he kept them forever in suspense;

meanwhile seeing to it well, that they failed not in handsomely remunerating him for his pains.

At one time, there was a prodigious excitement about these sorcerers, growing out of some alarming revelations concerning their practices. In several villages of Minda, they were sought to be put down. But fruitless the attempt; it was soon discovered that already their spells were so spread abroad, and they themselves so mixed up with the everyday affairs of the isle, that it was better to let their vocation alone, than, by endeavoring to suppress it, breed additional troubles. Ah! they were a knowing and a cunning set, those sorcerers; very hard to overcome, cajole, or circumvent.

But in the name of the Magi, what were these spells of theirs, so potent and occult? On all hands it was agreed, that they derived their greatest virtue from the fumes of certain compounds, whose ingredients--horrible to tell--were mostly obtained from the human heart; and that by variously mixing these ingredients, they adapted their multifarious enchantments.

They were a vain and arrogant race. Upon the strength of their dealing in the dark, they affected even more mystery than belonged to them; when interrogated concerning their science, would confound the inquirer by answers couched in an extraordinary jargon, employing words almost as long as anacondas. But all this greatly prevailed with the common people.

Nor was it one of the least remarkable things, that oftentimes two sorcerers, contrarily employed upon a Mindarian,--one to attack, the other to defend,--would nevertheless be upon the most friendly terms with each other; which curious circumstance never begat the slightest suspicions in the mind of the victim.

Another phenomenon: If from any cause, two sorcerers fell out, they seldom exercised their spells upon each other; ascribable to this, perhaps,--that both being versed in the art, neither could hope to get the advantage.

But for all the opprobrium cast upon these sorcerers, part of which they deserved, the evils imputed to them were mainly, though indirectly, ascribable to the very persons who abused them; nay, to the very persons who employed them; the latter being by far the loudest in their vilifyings; for which, indeed, they had excellent reason.

Nor was it to be denied, that in certain respects, the sorcerers were productive of considerable good. The nature of their pursuits leading them deep into the arcana of mind, they often lighted upon important discoveries; along with much that was cumbersome, accumulated valuable examples concerning the inner working of the hearts of the Mindarians; and often waxed eloquent in elucidating the mysteries of iniquity.

Yet was all this their lore graven upon so uncouth, outlandish, and antiquated tablets, that it was all but lost to the mass of their countrymen; and some old sachem of a wise man is quoted as having said, that their treasures were locked up after such a fashion, that for old iron, the key was worth more than the chest and its contents.