

CHAPTER XLI

Chiefly Of Sing Bello

"Now Taji," said Media, "with old Bello of the Hump whose island of Dominora is before us, I am at variance."

"Ah! How so?"

"A dull recital, but you shall have it."

And forthwith his Highness began.

This princely quarrel originated, it seems, in a slight jostling concerning the proprietorship of a barren islet in a very remote quarter of the lagoon. At the outset the matter might have been easily adjusted, had the parties but exchanged a few amicable words. But each disdainful to visit the other, to discuss so trivial an affair, the business of negotiating an understanding was committed to certain plenipotes, men with lengthy tongues, who scorned to utter a word short of a polysyllable.

Now, the more these worthies penetrated into the difficulty, the wider became the breach; till what was at first a mere gap, became a yawning gulf.

But that which had perhaps tended more than any thing else to deepen the variance of the kings, was hump-backed Bello's dispatching to Odo, as his thirtieth plenipo, a diminutive little negotiator, who all by himself, in a solitary canoe, sailed over to have audience of Media; into whose presence he was immediately ushered.

Darting one glance at him, the king turned to his chieftains, and said:--"By much straining of your eyes, my lords, can you perceive this insignificant manikin? What! are there no tall men in Dominora, that King Bello must needs send this dwarf hither?"

And charging his attendants to feed the ambassador extraordinary with the soft pap of the cocoanut, and provide nurses during his stay, the monarch retired from the arbor of audience.

"As I am a man," shouted the despised plenipo, raising himself on his toes, "my royal master will resent this affront!--A dwarf, forsooth!-- Thank Oro, I am no long-drawn giant! There is as much stuff in me, as in others; what is spread out in their clumsy carcasses, in me is condensed. I am much in little! And that much, thou shalt know full soon, disdainful King of Odo!"

"Speak not against our lord the king," cried the attendants.

"And speak not ye to me, ye headless spear poles!"

And so saying, under sufferance of being small, the plenipo was permitted to depart unmolested; for all his bravadoes, fobbing his credentials and affronts.

Apprized of his servant's ignoble reception, the choleric Bello burst forth in a storm of passion; issuing orders for, one thousand conch shells to be blown, and his warriors to assemble by land and by sea.

But bethinking him of the hostilities that might ensue, the sagacious Media hit upon an honorable expedient to ward off an event for which he was then unprepared. With all haste he dispatched to the hump-backed king a little dwarf of his own; who voyaging over to Dominora in a canoe, sorry and solitary as that of Bello's plenipo, in like manner, received the same insults. The effect whereof, was, to strike a balance of affronts; upon the principle, that a blow given, heals one received.

Nevertheless, these proceedings but amounted to a postponement of hostilities; for soon after, nothing prevented the two kings from plunging into war, but the following judicious considerations. First: Media was almost afraid of being beaten. Second: Bello was almost afraid to conquer. Media, because he was inferior in men and arms; Bello, because, his aggrandizement was already a subject of warlike comment among the neighboring kings.

Indeed, did the old chronicler Braid-Beard speak truth, there were

some tribes in Mardi, that accounted this king of Dominora a testy, quarrelsome, rapacious old monarch; the indefatigable breeder of contentions and wars; the elder brother of this household of nations, perpetually essaying to lord it over the juveniles; and though his patrimonial dominions were situated to the north of the lagoon, not the slightest misunderstanding took place between the rulers of the most distant islands, than this doughty old cavalier on a throne, forthwith thrust his insolent spear into the matter, though it in no wise concerned him, and fell to irritating all parties by his gratuitous interference.

Especially was he officious in the concerns of Porpheero, a neighboring island, very large and famous, whose numerous broad valleys were divided among many rival kings:--the king of Franko, a small-framed, poodle-haired, fine, fiery gallant; finical in his tatooing; much given to the dance and glory;--the king of Ibeereea, a tall and stately cavalier, proud, generous, punctilious, temperate in wine; one hand forever on his javelin, the other, in superstitious homage, lifted to his gods; his limbs all over marks of stakes and crosses;--the king of Luzianna; a slender, dark-browed thief; at times wrapped in a moody robe, beneath which he fumbled something, as if it were a dagger; but otherwise a sprightly troubadour, given to serenades and moonlight;---the many chiefs of sunny Latianna; minstrel monarchs, full of song and sentiment; fiercer in love than war; glorious bards of freedom; but rendering tribute while they sang;--the priest-king of Vatikanna; his chest marked over with antique

tattooings; his crown, a cowl; his rusted scepter swaying over falling towers, and crumbling mounds; full of the superstitious past; askance, eyeing the suspicious time to come;--the king of Hapzaboro; portly, pleasant; a lover of wild boar's meat; a frequent quaffer from the can; in his better moods, much fancying solid comfort;--the eight-and-thirty banded kings, chieftains, seigniors, and oligarchies of the broad hill and dale of Tutoni; clubbing together their domains, that none might wrest his neighbor's; an earnest race; deep thinkers, deeper drinkers; long pipes, long heads; their wise ones given to mystic cogitations, and consultations with the devil;--the twin kings of Zandinavia; hardy, frugal mountaineers; upright of spine and heart; clad in skins of bears;--the king of Jutlanda; much like their Highnesses of Zandinavia; a seal-skin cap his crown; a fearless sailor of his frigid seas;--the king of Muzkovi; a shaggy, iced White-bear of a despot in the north; said to reign over millions of acres of glaciers; had vast provinces of snow-drifts, and many flourishing colonies among the floating icebergs. Absolute in his rule as Predestination in metaphysics, did he command all his people to give up the ghost, it would be held treason to die last. Very precise and foppish in his imperial tastes was this monarch. Disgusted with the want of uniformity in the stature of his subjects, he was said to nourish thoughts of killing off all those below his prescribed standard--six feet, long measure. Immortal souls were of no account in his fatal wars; since, in some of his serf-breeding estates, they were daily manufactured to order.

Now, to all the above-mentioned monarchs, old Bello would frequently dispatch heralds; announcing, for example, his unalterable resolution, to espouse the cause of this king, against that; at the very time, perhaps, that their Serene Superfluities, instead of crossing spears, were touching flagons. And upon these occasions, the kings would often send back word to old Bello, that instead of troubling himself with their concerns, he might far better attend to his own; which, they hinted, were in a sad way, and much needed reform.

The royal old warrior's pretext for these and all similar proceedings, was the proper adjustment in Porpheero, of what he facetiously styled the "Equipoise of Calabashes;" which he stoutly swore was essential to the security of the various tribes in that country.

"But who put the balance into thy hands, King Bello?" cried the indignant nations.

"Oro!" shouted the hump-backed king, shaking his javelin.

Superadded to the paternal interest which Bello betrayed in the concerns of the kings of Porpheero, according to our chronicler, he also manifested no less interest in those of the remotest islands. Indeed, where he found a rich country, inhabited by a people, deemed by him barbarous and incapable of wise legislation, he sometimes relieved them from their political anxieties, by assuming the dictatorship over them. And if incensed at his conduct, they flew to

their spears, they were accounted rebels, and treated accordingly. But as old Mohi very truly observed,--herein, Bello was not alone; for throughout Mardi, all strong nations, as well as all strong men, loved to govern the weak. And those who most taunted King Bello for his political rapacity, were open to the very same charge. So with Vivenza, a distant island, at times very loud in denunciations of Bello, as a great national brigand. Not yet wholly extinct in Vivenza, were its aboriginal people, a race of wild Nimrods and hunters, who year by year were driven further and further into remoteness, till as one of their sad warriors said, after continual removes along the log, his race was on the point of being remorselessly pushed off the end.

Now, Bello was a great geographer, and land surveyor, and gauger of the seas. Terraqueous Mardi, he was continually exploring in quest of strange empires. Much he loved to take the altitude of lofty mountains, the depth of deep rivers, the breadth of broad isles. Upon the highest pinnacles of commanding capes and promontories, he loved to hoist his flag. He circled Mardi with his watch-towers: and the distant voyager passing wild rocks in the remotest waters, was startled by hearing the tattoo, or the reveille, beating from hump-backed Bello's omnipresent drum. Among Antarctic glaciers, his shrill bugle calls mingled with the scream of the gulls; and so impressed seemed universal nature with the sense of his dominion, that the very clouds in heaven never sailed over Dominora without rendering the tribute of a shower; whence the air of Dominora was more moist than that of any other clime.

In all his grand undertakings, King Bello was marvelously assisted by his numerous fleets of war-canoes; his navy being the largest in Mardi. Hence his logicians swore that the entire Lagoon was his; and that all prowling whales, prowling keels, and prowling sharks were invaders. And with this fine conceit to inspire them, his poets-laureat composed some glorious old saltwater odes, enough to make your very soul sing to hear them.

But though the rest of Mardi much delighted to list to such noble minstrelsy, they agreed not with Bello's poets in deeming the lagoon their old monarch's hereditary domain.

Once upon a time, the paddlers of the hump-backed king, meeting upon the broad lagoon certain canoes belonging to the before-mentioned island of Vivenza; these paddlers seized upon several of their occupants; and feeling their pulses, declared them born men of Dominora; and therefore, not free to go whithersoever they would; for, unless they could somehow get themselves born over again, they must forever remain subject to Bello. Shed your hair; nay, your skin, if you will, but shed your allegiance you can not; while you have bones, they are Bello's. So, spite of all expostulations and attempts to prove alibis, these luckless paddlers were dragged into the canoes of Dominora, and commanded to paddle home their captors.

Whereof hearing, the men of Vivenza were thrown into a great ferment;

and after a mighty pow-wow over their council fire, fitting out several double-keeled canoes, they sallied out to sea, in quest of those, whom they styled the wholesale corsairs of Dominora.

But lucky perhaps it was, that at this juncture, in all parts of Mardi, the fleets of the hump-backed king, were fighting, gunwale and gunwale, alongside of numerous foes; else there had borne down upon the canoes of the men of Vivenza so tremendous an armada, that the very swell under its thousand prows might have flooded their scattered proas forever out of sight.

As it was, Bello dispatched a few of his smaller craft to seek out, and incidentally run down the enemy; and without returning home, straightway proceed upon more important enterprises.

But it so chanced, that Bello's crafts, one by one meeting the foe, in most cases found the canoes of Vivenza much larger than their own; and manned by more men, with hearts bold as theirs; whence, in the ship-duels that ensued, they were worsted; and the canoes of Vivenza, locking their yard-arms into those of the vanquished, very courteously gallanted them into their coral harbors.

Solely imputing these victories to their superior intrepidity and skill, the people of Vivenza were exceedingly boisterous in their triumph; raising such obstreperous peans, that they gave themselves hoarse throats; insomuch, that according to Mohi, some of the present

generation are fain to speak through their noses.