

CHAPTER XLVII

Babbanja Philosophizes, And My Lord Media Passes Round The Calabashes

An interval of silence passed; when Media cried, "Out upon thee, Yoomy! curtail that long face of thine."

"How can he, my lord," said Mohi, "when he is thinking of furlongs?"

"Fathoms you mean, Mohi; see you not he is musing over the gunwale? And now, minstrel, a banana for thy thoughts. Come, tell me how you poets spend so many hours in meditation."

"My lord, it is because, that when we think, we think so little of ourselves."

"I thought as much," said Mohi, "for no sooner do I undertake to be sociable with myself, than I am straightway forced to beat a retreat."

"Ay, old man," said Babbanja, "many of us Mardians are but sorry hosts to ourselves. Some hearts are hermits."

"If not of yourself, then, Yoomy, of whom else do you think?" asked Media.

"My lord, I seldom think," said Yoomy, "I but give ear to the voices in my calm."

"Did Babbalanja speak?" said Media. "But no more of your reveries;" and so saying Media gradually sunk into a reverie himself.

The rest did likewise; and soon, with eyes enchanted, all reclined: gazing at each other, witless of what we did.

It was Media who broke the spell; calling for Vee-Vee our page, his calabashes and cups, and nectarines for all.

Eyeing his goblet, Media at length threw himself back, and said:

"Babbalanja, not ten minutes since, we were all absent-minded; now, how would you like to step out of your body, in reality; and, as a spirit, haunt some shadowy grove?"

"But our lungs are not wholly superfluous, my lord," said Babbalanja, speaking loud.

"No, nor our lips," said Mohi, smacking his over his wine.

"But could you really be disembodied here in Mardi, Babbalanja, how would you fancy it?" said Media.

"My lord," said Babbalanja, speaking through half of a nectarine,

"defer putting that question, I beseech, till after my appetite is satisfied; for, trust me, no hungry mortal would forfeit his palate, to be resolved into the impalpable."

"Yet pure spirits we must all become at last, Babbalanja," said Yoomy, "even the most ignoble."

"Yes, so they say, Yoomy; but if all boors be the immortal sires of endless dynasties of immortals, how little do our pious patricians bear in mind their magnificent destiny, when hourly they scorn their companionship. And if here in Mardi they can not abide an equality with plebeians, even at the altar; how shall they endure them, side by side, throughout eternity? But since the prophet Alma asserts, that Paradise is almost entirely made up of the poor and despised, no wonder that many aristocrats of our isles pursue a career, which, according to some theologies, must forever preserve the social distinctions so sedulously maintained in Mardi. And though some say, that at death every thing earthy is removed from the spirit, so that clowns and lords both stand on a footing; yet, according to the popular legends, it has ever been observed of the ghosts of boors when revisiting Mardi, that invariably they rise in their smocks. And regarding our intellectual equality here, how unjust, my lord, that after whole years of days end nights consecrated to the hard gaining of wisdom, the wisest Mardian of us all should in the end find the whole sum of his attainments, at one leap outstripped by the veriest dunce, suddenly inspired by light divine. And though some

hold, that all Mardian lore is vain, and that at death all mysteries will be revealed; yet, none the less, do they toil and ponder now. Thus, their tongues have one mind, and their understanding another."

"My lord," said Mohi, "we have come to the lees; your pardon, Babbalanja."

"Then, Vee-Vee, another calabash! Fill up, Mohi; wash down wine with wine. Your cup, Babbalanja; any lees?"

"Plenty, my lord; we philosophers come to the lees very soon."

"Flood them over, then; but cease not discoursing; thanks be to the gods, your mortal palates and tongues can both wag together; fill up, I say, Babbalanja; you are no philosopher, if you stop at the tenth cup; endurance is the test of philosophy all Mardi over; drink, I say, and make us wise by precept and example.--Proceed, Yoomy, you look as if you had something to say."

"Thanks, my lord. Just now, Babbalanja, you flew from the subject;-- you spoke of boors; but has not the lowliest peasant an eye that can take in the vast horizon at a sweep: mountains, vales, plains, and oceans? Is such a being nothing?"

"But can that eye see itself, Yoomy?" said Babbalanja, winking. "Taken out of its socket, will it see at all? Its connection with the body

imparts to it its virtue."

"He questions every thing," cried Mohi. "Philosopher, have you a head?"

"I have," said Babbalanja, feeling for it; "I am finished off at the helm very much as other Mardians, Mohi."

"My lord, the first yea that ever came from him."

"Ah, Mohi," said Media, "the discourse waxes heavy. I fear me we have again come to the lees. Ho, Vee-Vee, a fresh calabash; and with it we will change the subject. Now, Babbalanja, I have this cup to drink, and then a question to propound. Ah, Mohi, rare old wine this; it smacks of the cork. But attention, Philosopher. Supposing you had a wife--which, by the way, you have not--would you deem it sensible in her to imagine you no more, because you happened to stroll out of her sight?"

"However that might be," murmured Yoomy, "young Nina bewailed herself a widow, whenever Arhino, her lord, was absent from her side."

"My lord Media," said Babbalanja, "During my absence, my wife would have more reason to conclude that I was not living, than that I was. To the former supposition, every thing tangible around her would tend; to the latter, nothing but her own fond fancies. It is this imagination of ours, my lord, that is at the bottom of these things."

When I am in one place, there exists no other. Yet am I but too apt to fancy the reverse. Nevertheless, when I am in Odo, talk not to me of Ohonoo. To me it is not, except when I am there. If it be, prove it. To prove it, you carry me thither but you only prove, that to its substantive existence, as cognizant to me, my presence is indispensable. I say that, to me, all Mardi exists by virtue of my sovereign pleasure; and when I die, the universe will perish with me."

"Come you of a long-lived race," said Mohi, "one free from apoplexies? I have many little things to accomplish yet, and would not be left in the lurch."

"Heed him not, Babbalanja," said Media. "Dip your beak again, my eagle, and soar."

"Let us be eagles, then, indeed, my lord: eagle-like, let us look at this red wine without blinking; let us grow solemn, not boisterous, with good cheer."

Then, lifting his cup, "My lord, serenely do I pity all who are stirred one jot from their centers by ever so much drinking of this fluid. Ply him hard as you will, through the live-long polar night, a wise man can not be made drunk. Though, toward sunrise, his body may reel, it will reel round its center; and though he make many tacks in going home, he reaches it at last; while scores of over-plied fools are foundering by the way. My lord, when wild with much thought,

'tis to wine I fly, to sober me; its magic fumes breathe over me like the Indian summer, which steeps all nature in repose. To me, wine is no vulgar fire, no fosterer of base passions; my heart, ever open, is opened still wider; and glorious visions are born in my brain; it is then that I have all Mardi under my feet, and the constellations of the firmament in my soul."

"Superb!" cried Yoomy.

"Pooh, pooh!" said Mohi, "who does not see stars at such times? I see the Great Bear now, and the little one, its cub; and Andromeda, and Perseus' chain-armor, and Cassiopea in her golden chair, and the bright, scaly Dragon, and the glittering Lyre, and all the jewels in Orion's sword-hilt."

"Ay," cried Media, "the study of astronomy is wonderfully facilitated by wine. Fill up, old Ptolemy, and tell us should you discover a new planet. Methinks this fluid needs stirring. Ho, Vee-Vee, my scepter! be we sociable. But come, Babbalanja, my gold-headed aquila, return to your theme;--the imagination, if you please."

"Well, then, my lord, I was about to say, that the imagination is the Voli-Donzini; or, to speak plainer, the unical, rudimental, and all-comprehending abstracted essence of the infinite remoteness of things. Without it, we were grass-hoppers."

"And with it, you mortals are little else; do you not chirp all over, Mohi? By my demi-god soul, were I not what I am, this wine would almost get the better of me."

"Without it--" continued Babbalanja.

"Without what?" demanded Media, starting to his feet. "This wine? Traitor, I'll stand by this to the last gasp, you are inebriated, Babbalanja."

"Perhaps so, my lord; but I was treating of the imagination, may it please you."

"My lord," added Mohi, "of the unical, and rudimental fundament of things, you remember."

"Ah! there's none of them sober; proceed, proceed, Azzageddi!"

"My lord waves his hand like a banner," murmured Yoomy.

"Without imagination, I say, an armless man, born, blind, could not be made to believe, that he had a head of hair, since he could neither see it, nor feel it, nor has hair any feeling of itself."

"Methinks though," said Mohi, "if the cripple had a Tartar for a wife, he would not remain skeptical long."

"You all fly off at tangents," cried Media, "but no wonder: your mortal brains can not endure much quaffing. Return to your subject, Babbalanja. Assume now, Babbalanja,--assume, my dear prince--assume it, assume it, I say!--Why don't you?"

"I am willing to assume any thing you please, my lord: what is it?"

"Ah! yes!--Assume that--that upon returning home, you should find your wife had newly wedded, under the--the--the metaphysical presumption, that being no longer visible, you--you Azzageddi, had departed this life; in other words, out of sight, out of mind; what then, my dear prince?"

"Why then, my lord, I would demolish my rival in a trice."

"Would you?--then--then so much for your metaphysics, Bab--Babbalanja."

Babbalanja rose to his feet, muttering to himself--"Is this assumed, or real?--Can a demi-god be mastered by wine? Yet, the old mythologies make bacchanals of the gods. But he was wondrous keen! He felled me, ere he fell himself."

"Yoomy, my lord Media is in a very merry mood to-day," whispered Mohi, "but his counterfeit was not well done. No, no, a bacchanal is not used to be so logical in his cups."