

CHAPTER XLVIII

They Sail Round An Island Without Landing; And Talk Round A Subject Without Getting At It

Purposing a visit to Kaleedoni, a country integrally united to Dominora, our course now lay northward along the western white cliffs of the isle. But finding the wind ahead, and the current too strong for our paddlers, we were fain to forego our destination; Babbalanja observing, that since in Dominora we had not found Yillah, then in Kaleedoni the maiden could not be lurking.

And now, some conversation ensued concerning the country we were prevented from visiting. Our chronicler narrated many fine things of its people; extolling their bravery in war, their amiability in peace, their devotion in religion, their penetration in philosophy, their simplicity and sweetness in song, their loving-kindness and frugality in all things domestic:--running over a long catalogue of heroes, meta-physicians, bards, and good men.

But as all virtues are convertible into vices, so in some cases did the best traits of these people degenerate. Their frugality too often became parsimony; their devotion grim bigotry; and all this in a greater degree perhaps than could be predicated of the more immediate subjects of King Bello.

In Kaleedoni was much to awaken the fervor of its bards. Upland and lowland were full of the picturesque; and many unsung lyrics yet lurked in her glens. Among her blue, heathy hills, lingered many tribes, who in their wild and tattooed attire, still preserved the garb of the mightiest nation of old times. They bared the knee, in token that it was honorable as the face, since it had never been bent.

While Braid-Beard was recounting these things, the currents were sweeping us over a strait, toward a deep green island, bewitching to behold.

Not greener that midmost terrace of the Andes, which under a torrid meridian steeps fair Quito in the dews of a perpetual spring;--not greener the nine thousand feet of Pirohitee's tall peak, which, rising from out the warm bosom of Tahiti, carries all summer with it into the clouds;--nay, not greener the famed gardens of Cyrus,--than the vernal lawn, the knoll, the dale of beautiful Verdanna.

"Alas, sweet isle! Thy desolation is overrun with vines," sighed Yoomy, gazing.

"Land of caitiff curs!" cried Media.

"Isle, whose future is in its past. Hearth-stone, from which its children run," said Babbalanja.

"I can not read thy chronicles for blood, Verdanna," murmured Mohi.

Gliding near, we would have landed, but the rolling surf forbade. Then thrice we circumnavigated the isle for a smooth, clear beach; but it was not found.

Meanwhile all still conversed.

"My lord," said Yoomy, "while we tarried with King Bello, I heard much of the feud between Dominora and this unhappy shore. Yet is not Verdanna as a child of King Bello's?"

"Yes, minstrel, a step-child," said Mohi.

"By way of enlarging his family circle," said Babbalanja, "an old lion once introduced a deserted young stag to his den; but the stag never became domesticated, and would still charge upon his foster-brothers. --Verdanna is not of the flesh and blood of Dominora, whence, in good part, these dissensions."

"But Babbalanja, is there no way of reconciling these foes?"

"But one way, Yoomy:--By filling up this strait with dry land; for, divided by water, we Mardians must ever remain more or less divided at heart. Though Kaleedoni was united to Dominora long previous to the union of Verdanna, yet Kaleedoni occasions Bello no

disquiet; for, geographically one, the two populations insensibly blend at the point of junction. No hostile strait flows between the arms, that to embrace must touch."

"But, Babbalanja," said Yoomy, "what asks Verdanna of Dominora, that Verdanna so clamors at the denial?"

"They are arrant cannibals, Yoomy," said Media, "and desire the privilege of eating each other up."

"King Bello's idea," said Babbalanja; "but, in these things, my lord, you demi-gods are ever unanimous. But, whatever be Verdanna's demands, Bello persists in rejecting them."

"Why not grant every thing she asks, even to renouncing all claim upon the isle," said Mohi; "for thus, Bello would rid himself of many perplexities."

"And think you, old man," said Media, "that, bane or blessing, Bello will yield his birthright? Will a tri-crowned king resign his triple diadem? And even did Bello what you propose he would only breed still greater perplexities. For if granted, full soon would Verdanna be glad to surrender many things she demands. And all she now asks, she has had in times past; but without turning it to advantage:--and is she wiser now?"

"Does she not demand her harvests, my lord?" said Yoomy, "and has not the reaper a right to his sheaf?"

"Cant! cant! Yoomy. If you reap for me, the sheaf is mine."

"But if the reaper reaps on his own harvest-field, whose then the sheaf, my lord?" said Babbalanja.

"His for whom he reaps--his lord's!"

"Then let the reaper go with sickle and with sword," said Yoomy, "with one hand, cut down the bearded grain; and with the other, smite his bearded lords."

"Thou growest fierce, in thy lyric moods, my warlike dove," said Media, blandly. "But for thee, philosopher, know thou, that Verdanna's men are of blood and brain inferior to Bello's native race; and the better Mardian must ever rule."

"Verdanna inferior to Dominora, my lord!--Has she produced no bards, no orators, no wits, no patriots? Mohi, unroll thy chronicles! Tell me, if Verdanna may not claim full many a star along King Bello's tattooed arm of Fame?"

"Even so," said Mohi. "Many chapters bear you out."

"But my lord," said Babbalanja, "as truth, omnipresent, lurks in all things, even in lies: so, does some germ of it lurk in the calumnies heaped on the people of this land. For though they justly boast of many lustrous names, these jewels gem no splendid robe. And though like a bower of grapes, Verdanna is full of gushing juices, spouting out in bright sallies of wit, yet not all her grapes make wine; and here and there, hang goodly clusters mildewed; or half devoured by worms, bred in their own tendrils."

"Drop, drop your grapes and metaphors!" cried Media. "Bring forth your thoughts like men; let them come naked into Mardi.--What do you mean, Babbalanja?"

"This, my lord, Verdanna's worst evils are her own, not of another's giving. Her own hand is her own undoer. She stabs herself with bigotry, superstition, divided councils, domestic feuds, ignorance, temerity; she wills, but does not; her East is one black storm-cloud, that never bursts; her utmost fight is a defiance; she showers reproaches, where she should rain down blows. She stands a mastiff baying at the moon."

"Tropes on tropes!" said. Media. "Let me tell the tale,--straight-forward like a line. Verdanna is a lunatic--"

"A trope! my lord," cried Babbalanja.

"My tropes are not tropes," said Media, "but yours are.--Verdanna is a lunatic, that after vainly striving to cut another's throat, grimaces before a standing pool and threatens to cut his own. And is such a madman to be intrusted with himself? No; let another govern him, who is ungovernable to himself Ay, and tight hold the rein; and curb, and rasp the bit. Do I exaggerate?--Mohi, tell me, if, save one lucid interval, Verdanna, while independent of Dominora, ever discreetly conducted her affairs? Was she not always full of fights and factions? And what first brought her under the sway of Bello's scepter? Did not her own Chief Dermoddi fly to Bello's ancestor for protection against his own seditious subjects? And thereby did not her own king unking himself? What wonder, then, and where the wrong, if Henro, Bello's conquering sire, seized the diadem?"

"What my lord cites is true," said Mohi, "but cite no more, I pray; lest, you harm your cause."

"Yet for all this, Babbalanja," said Media, "Bello but holds lunatic Verdanna's lands in trust."

"And may the guardian of an estate also hold custody of the ward, my lord?"

"Ay, if he can. What can be done, may be: that's the Greed of demi-gods."

"Alas, alas!" cried Yoomy, "why war with words over this poor, suffering land. See! for all her bloom, her people starve; perish her yams, ere taken from the soil; the blight of heaven seems upon them."

"Not so," said Media. "Heaven sends no blights. Verdanna will not learn. And if from one season's rottenness, rottenness they sow again, rottenness must they reap. But Yoomy, you seem earnest in this matter;--come: on all hands it is granted that evils exist in Verdanna; now sweet Sympathizer, what must the royal Bello do to mend them?"

"I am no sage," said Yoomy, "what would my lord Media do?"

"What would you do, Babbalanja," said Media.

"Mohi, what you?" asked the philosopher.

"And what would the company do?" added Mohi.

"Now, though these evils pose us all," said Babbalanja, "there lately died in Verdanna, one, who set about curing them in a humane and peaceable way, waving war and bloodshed. That man was Konno. Under a huge caldron, he kept a roaring fire."

"Well, Azzageddi, how could that answer his purpose?" asked Media.

"Nothing better, my lord. His fire boiled his bread-fruit; and so convinced were his countrymen, that he was well employed, that they almost stripped their scanty orchards to fill his caldron."

"Konno was a knave," said Mohi.

"Your pardon, old man, but that is only known to his ghost, not to us. At any rate he was a great man; for even assuming he cajoled his country, no common man could have done it."

"Babbalanja," said Mohi, "my lord has been pleased to pronounce Verdanna crazy; now, may not her craziness arise from the irritating, tantalizing practices of Dominora?"

"Doubtless, Braid-Beard, many of the extravagances of Verdanna, are in good part to be ascribed to the cause you mention; but, to be impartial, none the less does Verdanna essay to taunt and provoke Dominora; yet not with the like result. Perceive you, Braid-Beard, that the trade-wind blows dead across this strait from Dominora, and not from Verdanna? Hence, when King Bello's men fling gibes and insults, every missile hits; but those of Verdanna are blown back in its teeth: her enemies jeering her again and again."

"King Bello's men are dastards for that," cried Yoomy. "It shows neither sense, nor spirit, nor humanity," said Babbalanja.

"All wide of the mark," cried Media. "What is to be done for Verdanna?"

"What will she do for herself?" said Babbalanja.

"Philosopher, you are an extraordinary sage; and since sages should be seers, reveal Verdanna's future."

"My lord, you will ever find true prophets, prudent; nor will any prophet risk his reputation upon predicting aught concerning this land. The isles are Oro's. Nevertheless, he who doctors Verdanna aright, will first medicine King Bello; who in some things is, himself a patient, though he would fain be a physician. However, my lord, there is a demon of a doctor in Mardi, who at last deals with these desperate cases. He employs only pills, picked off the Conroupta Quiancensis tree."

"And what sort of a vegetable is that?" asked Mohi. "Consult the botanists," said Babbalanja.