

CHAPTER LXXI

A Book From The "Ponderings Of Old Bardianna"

"Now," said Babbalanja, lighting his trombone as we sailed from the isle, "who are the monsters, we or the cripples?"

"You yourself are a monster, for asking the question," said Mohi.

"And so, to the cripples I am; though not, old man, for the reason you mention. But I am, as I am; whether hideous, or handsome, depends upon who is made judge. There is no supreme standard yet revealed, whereby to judge of ourselves; 'Our very instincts are prejudices,' saith Alla Mallolla; 'Our very axioms, and postulates are far from infallible.' 'In respect of the universe, mankind is but a sect,' saith Diloró: 'and first principles but dogmas.' What ethics prevail in the Pleiades? What things have the synods in Sagittarius decreed?"

"Never mind your old authors," said Media. "Stick to the cripples; enlarge upon them."

"But I have done with them now, my lord; the sermon is not the text. Give ear to old Bardianna. I know him by heart. Thus saith the sage in Book X. of the Ponderings, 'Zermalmende,' the title: 'Je pense,' the motto:--'My supremacy over creation, boasteth man, is declared in my natural attitude:--I stand erect! But so do the palm-trees; and the

giraffes that graze off their tops. And the fowls of the air fly high over our heads; and from the place where we fancy our heaven to be, defile the tops of our temples. Belike, the eagles, from their eyries look down upon us Mardians, in our hives, even as upon the beavers in their dams, marveling at our incomprehensible ways. And cunning though we be, some things, hidden from us, may not be mysteries to them. Having five keys, hold we all that open to knowledge? Deaf, blind, and deprived of the power of scent, the bat will steer its way unerringly:--could we? Yet man is lord of the bat and the brute; lord over the crows; with whom, he must needs share the grain he garners. We sweat for the fowls, as well as ourselves. The curse of labor rests only on us. Like slaves, we toil: at their good leisure they glean.

"Mardi is not wholly ours. We are the least populous part of creation. To say nothing of other tribes, a census of the herring would find us far in the minority. And what life is to us,--sour or sweet,--so is it to them. Like us, they die, fighting death to the last; like us, they spawn and depart. We inhabit but a crust, rough surfaces, odds and ends of the isles; the abounding lagoon being its two-thirds, its grand feature from afar; and forever unfathomable.

"What shaft has yet been sunk to the antipodes? What underlieth the gold mines?

"But even here, above-ground, we grope with the sun at meridian.

Vainly, we seek our Northwest Passages,--old alleys, and thoroughfares of the whales.

"Oh men! fellow men! we are only what we are; not what we would be; nor every thing we hope for. We are but a step in a scale, that reaches further above us than below. We breathe but oxygen. Who in Arcturus hath heard of us? They know us not in the Milky Way. We prate of faculties divine: and know not how sprouteth a spear of grass; we go about shrugging our shoulders: when the firmament-arch is over us; we rant of etherealities: and long tarry over our banquets; we demand Eternity for a lifetime: when our mortal half-hours too often prove tedious. We know not of what we talk. The Bird of Paradise out-flies our flutterings. What it is to be immortal, has not yet entered into our thoughts. At will, we build our futurities; tier above tier, all galleries full of laureates: resounding with everlasting oratorios! Pater-nosters forever, or eternal Misereres! forgetting that in Mardi, our breviaries oft fall from our hands. But divans there are, some say, whereon we shall recline, basking in effulgent suns, knowing neither Orient nor Occident. Is it so? Fellow men! our mortal lives have an end; but that end is no goal: no place of repose. Whatever it may be, it will prove but as the beginning of another race. We will hope, joy, weep, as before; though our tears may be such as the spice-trees shed. Supine we can only be, annihilated.

"The thick film is breaking; the ages have long been circling.
Fellow-men! if we live hereafter, it will not be in lyrics; nor shall

we yawn, and our shadows lengthen, while the eternal cycles are revolving. To live at all, is a high vocation; to live forever, and run parallel with Oro, may truly appall us. Toil we not here? and shall we be forever slothful elsewhere? Other worlds differ not much from this, but in degree. Doubtless, a pebble is a fair specimen of the universe.

"We point at random. Peradventure at this instant, there are beings gazing up to this very world as their future heaven. But the universe is all over a heaven: nothing but stars on stars, throughout infinities of expansion. All we see are but a cluster. Could we get to Bootes, we would be no nearer Oro, than now he hath no place; but is here. Already, in its unimaginable roamings, our system may have dragged us through and through the spaces, where we plant cities of beryl and jasper. Even now, we may be inhaling the ether, which we fancy seraphic wings are fanning. But look round. There is much to be seen here, and now. Do the archangels survey aught more glorious than the constellations we nightly behold? Continually we slight the wonders, we deem in reserve. We await the present. With marvels we are glutted, till we hold them no marvels at all. But had these eyes first opened upon all the prodigies in the Revelation of the Dreamer, long familiarity would have made them appear, even as these things we see. Now, now, the page is out-spread: to the simple, easy as a primer; to the wise, more puzzling than hieroglyphics. The eternity to come, is but a prolongation of time present: and the beginning may be more wonderful than the end.

"Then let us be wise. But much of the knowledge we seek, already we have in our cores. Yet so simple it is, we despise it; so bold, we fear it.

"In solitude, let us exhume our ingots. Let us hear our own thoughts. The soul needs no mentor, but Oro; and Oro, without proxy. Wanting Him, it is both the teacher and the taught. Undeniably, reason was the first revelation; and so far as it tests all others, it has precedence over them. It comes direct to us, without suppression or interpolation; and with Oro's indisputable imprimatur. But inspiration though it be, it is not so arrogant as some think. Nay, far too humble, at times it submits to the grossest indignities. Though in its best estate, not infallible; so far as it goes, for us, it is reliable. When at fault, it stands still. We speak not of visionaries. But if this our first revelation stops short of the uttermost, so with all others. If, often, it only perplexes: much more the rest. They leave much unexpounded; and disclosing new mysteries, add to the enigma. Fellow-men; the ocean we would sound is unfathomable; and however much we add to our line, when it is out, we feel not the bottom. Let us be truly lowly, then; not lifted up with a Pharisaic humility. We crawl not like worms; nor wear we the liveries of angels.

"The firmament-arch has no key-stone; least of all, is man its prop. He stands alone. We are every thing to ourselves, but how little to others. What are others to us? Assure life everlasting to this

generation, and their immediate forefathers--and what tears would flow, were there no resurrection for the countless generations from the first man to five cycles since? And soon we ourselves shall have fallen in with the rank and file of our sires. At a blow, annihilate some distant tribe, now alive and jocund--and what would we reckon? Curiosity apart, do we really care whether the people in Bellatrix are immortal or no?

"Though they smite us, let us not turn away from these things, if they be really thus.

"There was a time, when near Cassiopeia, a star of the first magnitude, most lustrous in the North, grew lurid as a fire, then dim as ashes, and went out. Now, its place is a blank. A vast world, with all its continents, say the astronomers, blazing over the heads of our fathers; while in Mardi were merry-makings, and maidens given in marriage. Who now thinks of that burning sphere? How few are aware that ever it was?

"These things are so.

"Fellow-men! we must go, and obtain a glimpse of what we are from the Belts of Jupiter and the Moons of Saturn, ere we see ourselves aright. The universe can wax old without us; though by Oro's grace we may live to behold a wrinkle in the sky. Eternity is not ours by right; and, alone, unrequited sufferings here, form no title thereto, unless

resurrections are reserved for maltreated brutes. Suffering is suffering; be the sufferer man, brute, or thing.

"How small;--how nothing, our deserts! Let us stifle all vain speculations; we need not to be told what righteousness is; we were born with the whole Law in our hearts. Let us do: let us act: let us down on our knees. And if, after all, we should be no more forever;--far better to perish meriting immortality, than to enjoy it unmeritorious. While we fight over creeds, ten thousand fingers point to where vital good may be done. All round us, Want crawls to her lairs; and, shivering, dies unrelieved. Here, here, fellow-men, we can better minister as angels, than in heaven, where want and misery come not.

"We Mardians talk as though the future was all in all; but act as though the present was every thing. Yet so far as, in our theories, we dwarf our Mardi; we go not beyond an archangel's apprehension of it, who takes in all suns and systems at a glance. Like pebbles, were the isles to sink in space, Sirius, the Dog-star, would still flame in the sky. But as the atom to the animalculae, so Mardi to us. And lived aright, these mortal lives are long; looked into, these souls, fathomless as the nethermost depths.

"Fellow-men; we split upon hairs; but stripped, mere words and phrases cast aside, the great bulk of us are orthodox. None who think, dissent from the grand belief. The first man's thoughts were as ours.

The paramount revelation prevails with us; and all that clashes therewith, we do not so much believe, as believe that we can not disbelieve. Common sense is a sturdy despot; that, for the most part, has its own way. It inspects and ratifies much independent of it. But those who think they do wholly reject it, are but held in a sly sort of bondage; under a semblance of something else, wearing the old yoke."

"Cease, cease, Babbalanja," said Media, "and permit me to insinuate a word in your ear. You have long been in the habit, philosopher, of regaling us with chapters from your old Bardianna; and with infinite gusto, you have just recited the longest of all. But I do not observe, oh, Sage! that for all these things, you yourself are practically the better or wiser. You live not up to Bardianna's main thought. Where he stands, he stands immovable; but you are a Dog-vane. How is this?"

"Gogle-goggle, fogle-fi, fogle-fogle-orum!"

"Mad, mad again," cried Yoomy.