

CHAPTER LXXVII

They Sup

There seemed something sinister, hollow, heartless, about Abrazza, and that green-and-yellow, evil-starred crown that he wore.

But why think of that? Though we like not something in the curve of one's brow, or distrust the tone of his voice; yet, let us away with suspicions if we may, and make a jolly comrade of him, in the name of the gods. Miserable! thrice miserable he, who is forever turning over and over one's character in his mind, and weighing by nice avoirdupois, the pros and the cons of his goodness and badness. For we are all good and bad. Give me the heart that's huge as all Asia; and unless a man, be a villain outright, account him one of the best tempered blades in the world.

That night, in his right regal hall, King Abrazza received us. And in merry good time a fine supper was spread.

Now, in thus nocturnally regaling us, our host was warranted by many ancient and illustrious examples.

For old Jove gave suppers; the god Woden gave suppers; the Hindoo deity Brahma gave suppers; the Red Man's Great Spirit gave suppers:-- chiefly venison and game.

And many distinguished mortals besides.

Ahasuerus gave suppers; Xerxes gave suppers; Montezuma gave suppers; Powhattan gave suppers; the Jews' Passovers were suppers; the Pharaohs gave suppers; Julius Caesar gave suppers:--and rare ones they were; Great Pompey gave suppers; Nabob Crassus gave suppers; and Heliogabalus, surnamed the Gobbler, gave suppers.

It was a common saying of old, that King Pluto gave suppers; some say he is giving them still. If so, he is keeping tip-top company, old Pluto:--Emperors and Czars; Great Moguls and Great Khans; Grand Lamas and Grand Dukes; Prince Regents and Queen Dowagers:--Tamerlane hob-a-nobbing with Bonaparte; Antiochus with Solyman the Magnificent; Pisistratus pledging Pilate; Semiramis eating bon-bons with Bloody Mary, and her namesake of Medicis; the Thirty Tyrants quaffing three to one with the Council of Ten; and Sultans, Satraps, Viziers, Hetmans, Soldans, Landgraves, Bashaws, Doges, Dauphins, Infantas, Incas, and Caciques looking on.

Again: at Arbela, the conqueror of conquerors, conquering son of Olympia by Jupiter himself, sent out cards to his captains,--Hephestion, Antigonus, Antipater, and the rest--to join him at ten, p.m., in the Temple of Belus; there, to sit down to a victorious supper, off the gold plate of the Assyrian High Priests. How majestically he poured out his old Madeira that night!--feeling grand

and lofty as the Himmalehs; yea, all Babylon nodded her towers in his soul!

Spread, heaped up, stacked with good things; and redolent of citrons and grapes, hilling round tall vases of wine; and here and there, waving with fresh orange-boughs, among whose leaves, myriads of small tapers gleamed like fire-flies in groves,--Abrazza's glorious board showed like some banquet in Paradise: Ceres and Pomona presiding; and jolly Bacchus, like a recruit with a mettlesome rifle, staggering back as he fires off the bottles of vivacious champagne.

In ranges, roundabout stood living candelabras:--lackeys, gayly bedecked, with tall torches in their hands; and at one end, stood trumpeters, bugles at their lips.

"This way, my dear Media!--this seat at my left--Noble Taji!--my right. Babbalanja!--Mohi--where you are. But where's pretty Yoomy?--Gone to meditate in the moonlight? ah!--Very good. Let the banquet begin. A blast there!"

And charge all did.

The venison, wild boar's meat, and buffalo-humps, were extraordinary; the wine, of rare vintages, like bottled lightning; and the first course, a brilliant affair, went off like a rocket.

But as yet, Babbalanja joined not in the revels. His mood was on him; and apart he sat; silently eyeing the banquet; and ever and anon muttering,--"Fogle-foggle, fogle-fi.--"

The first fury of the feast over, said King Media, pouring out from a heavy flagon into his goblet, "Abrazza, these suppers are wondrous fine things."

"Ay, my dear lord, much better than dinners."

"So they are, so they are. The dinner-hour is the summer of the day: full of sunshine, I grant; but not like the mellow autumn of supper. A dinner, you know, may go off rather stiffly; but invariably suppers are jovial. At dinners, 'tis not till you take in sail, furl the cloth, bow the lady-passengers out, and make all snug; 'tis not till then, that one begins to ride out the gale with complacency. But at these suppers--Good Oro! your cup is empty, my dear demi-god!--But at these suppers, I say, all is snug and ship-shape before you begin; and when you begin, you waive the beginning, and begin in the middle. And as for the cloth,--but tell us, Braid-Beard, what that old king of Franko, Ludwig the Fat, said of that matter. The cloth for suppers, you know. It's down in your chronicles."

"My lord,"--wiping his beard,--"Old Ludwig was of opinion, that at suppers the cloth was superfluous, unless on the back of some jolly good friar. Said he, 'For one, I prefer sitting right down to the

unrobed table."

"High and royal authority, that of Ludwig the Fat," said Babbalanja, "far higher than the authority of Ludwig the Great:--the one, only great by courtesy; the other, fat beyond a peradventure. But they are equally famous; and in their graves, both on a par. For after devouring many a fair province, and grinding the poor of his realm, Ludwig the Great has long since, himself, been devoured by very small worms, and ground into very fine dust. And after stripping many a venison rib, Ludwig the Fat has had his own polished and bleached in the Valley of Death; yea, and his cranium chased with corrodings, like the carved flagon once held to its jaws."

"My lord! my lord!"--cried Abrazza to Media--"this ghastly devil of yours grins worse than a skull. I feel the worms crawling over me!--By Oro we must eject him!"

"No, no, my lord. Let him sit there, as of old the Death's-head graced the feasts of the Pharaohs--let him sit--let him sit--for Death but imparts a flavor to Life--Go on: wag your tongue without fear, Azzageddi!--But come, Braid-Beard! let's hear more of the Ludwigs."

"Well, then, your Highness, of all the eighteen royal Ludwigs of Franko--"

"Who like so many ten-pins, all in a row," interposed Babbalanja--

"have been bowled off the course by grim Death."

"Heed him not," said Media--"go on."

"The Debonnaire, the Pious, the Stammerer, the Do-Nothing, the Juvenile, the Quarreler:--of all these, I say, Ludwig the Fat was the best table-man of them all. Such a full orb'd paunch was his, that no way could he devise of getting to his suppers, but by getting right into them. Like the Zodiac his table was circular, and full in the middle he sat, like a sun;--all his jolly stews and ragouts revolving around him."

"Yea," said Babbalanja, "a very round sun was Ludwig the Fat. No wonder he's down in the chronicles; several ells about the waist, and King of cups and Tokay. Truly, a famous king: three hundred-weight of lard, with a diadem on top: lean brains and a fat doublet--a demijohn of a demi-god!"

"Is this to be longer borne?" cried Abrazza, starting up. "Quaff that sneer down, devil! on the instant! down with it, to the dregs! This comes, my lord Media, of having a slow drinker at one's board. Like an iceberg, such a fellow frosts the whole atmosphere of a banquet, and is felt a league off We must thrust him out. Guards!"

"Back! touch him not, hounds!"--cried Media. "Your pardon, my lord, but we'll keep him to it; and melt him down in this good wine. Drink!"

I command it, drink, Babbalanja!"

"And am I not drinking, my lord? Surely you would not that I should imbibe more than I can hold. The measure being full, all poured in after that is but wasted. I am for being temperate in these things, my good lord. And my one cup outlasts three of yours. Better to sip a pint, than pour down a quart. All things in moderation are good; whence, wine in moderation is good. But all things in excess are bad: whence wine in excess is bad."

"Away with your logic and conic sections! Drink!--But no, no: I am too severe. For of all meals a supper should be the most social and free. And going thereto we kings, my lord, should lay aside our scepters.-- Do as you please Babbalanja."

"You are right, you are right, after all, my dear demi-god," said Abrazza. "And to say truth, I seldom worry myself with the ways of these mortals; for no thanks do we demi-gods get. We kings should be ever indifferent. Nothing like a cold heart; warm ones are ever chafing, and getting into trouble. I let my mortals here in this isle take heed to themselves; only barring them out when they would thrust in their petitions. This very instant, my lord, my yeoman-guard is on duty without, to drive off intruders.--Hark!--what noise is that?--Ho, who comes?"

At that instant, there burst into the hall, a crowd of

spearmen, driven before a pale, ragged rout, that loudly invoked King Abrazza.

"Pardon, my lord king, for thus forcing an entrance! But long in vain have we knocked at thy gates! Our grievances are more than we can bear! Give ear to our spokesman, we beseech!"

And from their tumultuous midst, they pushed forward a tall, grim, pine-tree of a fellow, who loomed up out of the throng, like the Peak of Teneriffe among the Canaries in a storm.

"Drive the knaves out! Ho, cowards, guards, turn about! charge upon them! Away with your grievances! Drive them out, I say, drive them out!--High times, truly, my lord Media, when demi-gods are thus annoyed at their wine. Oh, who would reign over mortals!"

So at last, with much difficulty, the ragged rout were ejected; the Peak of Teneriffe going last, a pent storm on his brow; and muttering about some black time that was coming.

While the hoarse murmurs without still echoed through the hall, King Abrazza refilling his cup thus spoke:--"You were saying, my dear lord, that of all meals a supper is the most social and free. Very true. And of all suppers those given by us bachelor demi-gods are the best. Are they not?"

"They are. For Benedict mortals must be home betimes: bachelor demi-gods are never away."

"Ay, your Highnesses, bachelors are all the year round at home;" said Mohi: "sitting out life in the chimney corner, cozy and warm as the dog, whilome turning the old-fashioned roasting jack."

"And to us bachelor demi-gods," cried Media "our to-morrows are as long rows of fine punches, ranged on a board, and waiting the hand."

"But my good lords," said Babbalanja, now brightening with wine; "if, of all suppers those given by bachelors be the best:--of all bachelors, are not your priests and monks the jolliest? I mean, behind the scenes? Their prayers all said, and their futurities securely invested,--who so carefree and cozy as they? Yea, a supper for two in a friar's cell in Maramma, is merrier far, than a dinner for five-and-twenty, in the broad right wing of Donjalolo's great Palace of the Morn."

"Bravo, Babbalanja!" cried Media, "your iceberg is thawing. More of that, more of that. Did I not say, we would melt him down at last, my lord?"

"Ay," continued Babbalanja, "bachelors are a noble fraternity: I'm a bachelor myself. One of ye, in that matter, my lord demi-gods. And if unlike the patriarchs of the world, we father not our brigades and battalions; and send not out into the battles of our country whole

regiments of our own individual raising;--yet do we oftentimes leave behind us goodly houses and lands; rare old brandies and mountain Malagas; and more especially, warm doublets and togas, and spatterdashes, wherewithal to keep comfortable those who survive us;-- casing the legs and arms, which others beget. Then compare not invidiously Benedicts with bachelors, since thus we make an equal division of the duties, which both owe to posterity."

"Suppers forever!" cried Media. "See, my lord, what yours has done for Babbalanja. He came to it a skeleton; but will go away, every bone padded!"

"Ay, my lord demi-gods," said Babbalanja, drop by drop refilling his goblet. "These suppers are all very fine, very pleasant, and merry. But we pay for them roundly. Every thing, my good lords, has its price, from a marble to a world. And easier of digestion, and better for both body and soul, are a half-haunch of venison and a gallon of mead, taken under the sun at meridian, than the soft bridal breast of a partridge, with some gentle negus, at the noon of night!"

"No lie that!" said Mohi. "Beshrew me, in no well-appointed mansion doth the pantry lie adjoining the sleeping chamber. A good thought: I'll fill up, and ponder on it."

"Let not Azzageddi get uppermost again, Babbalanja," cried Media. "Your goblet is only half-full."

"Permit it to remain so; my lord. For whoso takes much wine to bed with him, has a bedfellow, more restless than a somnambulist. And though Wine be a jolly blade at the board, a sulky knave is he under a blanket. I know him of old. Yet, your Highness, for all this, to many a Mardian, suppers are still better than dinners, at whatever cost purchased Forasmuch, as many have more leisure to sup, than dine. And though you demi-gods, may dine at your ease; and dine it out into night: and sit and chirp over your Burgundy, till the morning larks join your crickets, and wed matins to vespers;--far otherwise, with us plebeian mortals. From our dinners, we must hie to our anvils: and the last jolly jorum evaporates in a cark and a care."

"Methinks he relapses," said Abrazza.

"It waxes late," said Mohi; "your Highnesses, is it not time to break up?"

"No, no!", cried Abrazza; "let the day break when it will: but no breakings for us. It's only midnight. This way with the wine; pass it along, my dear Media. We are young yet, my sweet lord; light hearts and heavy purses; short prayers and long rent-rolls. Pass round the Tokay! We demi-gods have all our old age for a dormitory. Come!--Round and round with the flagons! Let them disappear like mile-stones on a race-course!"

"Ah!" murmured Babbalanja, holding his full goblet at arm's length on the board, "not thus with the hapless wight, born with a hamper on his back, and blisters in his palms.--Toil and sleep--sleep and toil, are his days and his nights; he goes to bed with a lumbago, and wakes with the rheumatics;--I know what it is;--he snatches lunches, not dinners, and makes of all life a cold snack! Yet praise be to Oro, though to such men dinners are scarce worth the eating; nevertheless, praise Oro again, a good supper is something. Off jack-boots; nay, off shirt, if you will, and go at it. Hurrah! the fagged day is done: the last blow is an echo. Twelve long hours to sunrise! And would it were an Antarctic night, and six months to to-morrow! But, hurrah! the very bees have their hive, and after a day's weary wandering, hie home to their honey. So they stretch out their stiff legs, rub their lame elbows, and putting their tired right arms in a sling, set the others to fetching and carrying from dishes to dentals, from foaming flagon to the demijohn which never pours out at the end you pour in. Ah! after all, the poorest devil in Mardi lives not in vain. There's a soft side to the hardest oak-plank in the world!"

"Methinks I have heard some such sentimental gabble as this before from my slaves, my lord," said Abrazza to Media. "It has the old gibberish flavor."

"Gibberish, your Highness? Gibberish? I'm full of it--I'm a gibbering ghost, my right worshipful lord! Here, pass your hand through me-- here, here, and scorch it where I most burn. By Oro! King! but I

will gibe and gibber at thee, till thy crown feels like another skull clapped on thy own. Gibberish? ay, in hell we'll gibber in concert, king! we'll howl, and roast, and hiss together!"

"Devil that thou art, begone! Ho, guards! seize him!"

"Back, curs!" cried Media. "Harm not a hair of his head. I crave pardon, King Abrazza, but no violence must be done Babbalanja."

"Trumpets there!" said Abrazza; "so: the banquet is done--lights for King Media! Good-night, my lord!"

Now, thus, for the nonce, with good cheer, we close. And after many fine dinners and banquets--through light and through shade; through mirth, sorrow, and all--drawing nigh to the evening end of these wanderings wild--meet is it that all should be regaled with a supper.