

CHAPTER LXXXI

L'ultima Sera

Thus far, through myriad islands, had we searched: of all, no one pen may write: least, mine;--and still no trace of Yillah.

But though my hopes revived not from their ashes; yet, so much of Mardi had we searched, it seemed as if the long pursuit must, ere many moons, be ended; whether for weal or woe, my frenzy sometimes reeked not.

After its first fair morning flushings, all that day was overcast. We sailed upon an angry sea, beneath an angry sky. Deep scowled on deep; and in dun vapors, the blinded sun went down, unseen; though full toward the West our three prows were pointed; steadfast as three printed points upon the compass-card.

"When we set sail from Odo, 'twas a glorious morn in spring," said Yoomy; "toward the rising sun we steered. But now, beneath autumnal night-clouds, we hasten to its setting."

"How now?" cried Media; "why is the minstrel mournful?--He whose place it is to chase away despondency: not be its minister."

"Ah, my lord, so thou thinkest. But better can my verses soothe the sad, than make them light of heart. Nor are we minstrels so gay of

soul as Mardi deems us. The brook that sings the sweetest, murmurs through the loneliest woods:

The isles hold thee not, thou departed!

From thy bower, now issues no lay:--

In vain we recall perished warblings:

Spring birds, to far climes, wing their way!"

As Yoomy thus sang; unmindful of the lay, with paddle plying, in low, pleasant tones, thus hummed to himself our bowsman, a gamesome wight:--

Ho! merrily ho! we paddlers sail!

Ho! over sea-dingle, and dale!--

Our pulses fly,

Our hearts beat high,

Ho! merrily, merrily, ho!

But a sudden splash, and a shrill, gurgling sound, like that of a fountain subsiding, now broke upon the air. Then all was still, save the rush of the waves by our keels.

"Save him! Put back!"

From his elevated seat, the merry bowsman, too gleefully reaching forward, had fallen into the lagoon.

With all haste, our speeding canoes were reversed; but not till we had darted in upon another darkness than that in which the bowsman fell.

As, blindly, we groped back, deep Night dived deeper down in the sea.

"Drop paddles all, and list."

Holding their breath, over the six gunwales all now leaned; but the only moans were the wind's.

Long time we lay thus; then slowly crossed and recrossed our track, almost hopeless; but yet loth to leave him who, with a song in his mouth, died and was buried in a breath.

"Let us away," said Media--"why seek more? He is gone."

"Ay, gone," said Babbalanja, "and whither? But a moment since, he was among us: now, the fixed stars are not more remote than he. So far off, can he live? Oh, Oro! this death thou ordainest, unmans the manliest. Say not nay, my lord. Let us not speak behind Death's back. Hard and horrible is it to die: blindfold to leap from life's verge! But thus, in clouds of dust, and with a trampling as of hoofs, the generations disappear; death driving them all into his treacherous fold, as wild Indians the bison herds. Nay, nay, Death is Life's last despair. Hard and horrible is it to die. Oro himself, in Alma, died not without a groan. Yet why, why live? Life is wearisome

to all: the same dull round. Day and night, summer and winter, round about us revolving for aye. One moment lived, is a life. No new stars appear in the sky; no new lights in the soul. Yet, of changes there are many. For though, with rapt sight, in childhood, we behold many strange things beneath the moon, and all Mardi looks a tented fair--how soon every thing fades. All of us, in our very bodies, outlive our own selves. I think of green youth as of a merry playmate departed; and to shake hands, and be pleasant with my old age, seems in prospect even harder, than to draw a cold stranger to my bosom. But old age is not for me. I am not of the stuff that grows old. This Mardi is not our home. Up and down we wander, like exiles transported to a planet afar:--'tis not the world we were born in; not the world once so lightsome and gay; not the world where we once merrily danced, dined, and supped; and wooed, and wedded our long-buried wives. Then let us depart. But whither? We push ourselves forward then, start back in affright. Essay it again, and flee. Hard to live; hard to die; intolerable suspense! But the grim despot at last interposes; and with a viper in our winding-sheets, we are dropped in the sea."

"To me," said Mohi, his gray locks damp with night-dews, "death's dark defile at times seems at hand, with no voice to cheer. That all have died, makes it not easier for me to depart. And that many have been quenched in infancy seems a mercy to the slow perishing of my old age, limb by limb and sense by sense. I have long been the tomb of my youth. And more has died out of me, already, than remains for the last death to finish. Babbalanja says truth. In childhood, death stirred me

not; in middle age, it pursued me like a prowling bandit on the road; now, grown an old man, it boldly leads the way; and ushers me on; and turns round upon me its skeleton gaze: poisoning the last solaces of life. Maramma but adds to my gloom."

"Death! death!" cried Yoomy, "must I be not, and millions be? Must I go, and the flowers still bloom? Oh, I have marked what it is to be dead;--how shouting boys, of holidays, hide-and-seek among the tombs, which must hide all seekers at last."

"Clouds on clouds!" cried Media, "but away with them all! Why not leap your graves, while ye may? Time to die, when death comes, without dying by inches. 'Tis no death, to die; the only death is the fear of it. I, a demi-god, fear death not."

"But when the jackals howl round you?" said Babbalanja.

"Drive them off! Die the demi-god's death! On his last couch of crossed spears, my brave old sire cried, 'Wine, wine; strike up, conch and cymbal; let the king die to martial melodies!'"

"More valiant dying, than dead," said Babbalanja. "Our end of the winding procession resounds with music and flaunts with banners with brave devices: 'Cheer up!' 'Fear not!' 'Millions have died before!'-- but in the endless van, not a pennon streams; all there, is silent and solemn. The last wisdom is dumb."

Silence ensued; during which, each dip of the paddles in the now calm water, fell full and long upon the ear.

Anon, lifting his head, Babbalanja thus:--"Yillah still eludes us. And in all this tour of Mardi, how little have we found to fill the heart with peace: how much to slaughter all our yearnings."

"Croak no more, raven!" cried Media. "Mardi is full of spring-time sights, and jubilee sounds. I never was sad in my life."

"But for thy one laugh, my lord, how many groans! Were all happy, or all miserable,--more tolerable then, than as it is. But happiness and misery are so broadly marked, that this Mardi may be the retributive future of some forgotten past.--Yet vain our surmises. Still vainer to say, that all Mardi is but a means to an end; that this life is a state of probation: that evil is but permitted for a term; that for specified ages a rebel angel is viceroy.--Nay, nay. Oro delegates his scepter to none; in his everlasting reign there are no interregnums; and Time is Eternity; and we live in Eternity now. Yet, some tell of a hereafter, where all the mysteries of life will be over; and the sufferings of the virtuous recompensed. Oro is just, they say.--Then always,--now, and evermore. But to make restitution implies a wrong; and Oro can do no wrong. Yet what seems evil to us, may be good to him. If he fears not, nor hopes,--he has no other passion; no ends, no purposes. He lives content; all ends are

compassed in Him; He has no past, no future; He is the everlasting now; which is an everlasting calm; and things that are, have been,-- will be. This gloom's enough. But hoot! hoot! the night-owl ranges through the woodlands of Maramma; its dismal notes pervade our lives; and when we would fain depart in peace, that bird flies on before:-- cloud-like, eclipsing our setting suns, and filling the air with dolor."

"Too true!" cried Yoomy. "Our calms must come by storms. Like helmless vessels, tempest-tossed, our only anchorage is when we founder."

"Our beginnings," murmured Mohi, "are lost in clouds; we live in darkness all our days, and perish without an end."

"Croak on, cowards!" cried Media, "and fly before the hideous phantoms that pursue ye."

"No coward he, who hunted, turns and finds no foe to fight," said Babbalanja. "Like the stag, whose brow is beat with wings of hawks, perched in his heavenward antlers; so I, blinded, goaded, headlong, rush! this way and that; nor knowing whither; one forest wide around!"