

CHAPTER LXVII

Little King Peepi

Valapee, or the Isle of Yams, being within plain sight of Media's dominions, we were not very long in drawing nigh to its shores.

Two long parallel elevations, rising some three arrow-flights into the air, double-ridge the island's entire length, lapping between, a widening vale, so level withal, that at either extremity, the green of its groves blends with the green of the lagoon; and the isle seems divided by a strait.

Within several paces of the beach, our canoes keeled the bottom, and camel-like mutely hinted that we voyagers must dismount.

Hereupon, the assembled islanders ran into the water, and with bent shoulders obsequiously desired the honor of transporting us to land. The beach gained, all present wearing robes instantly stripped them to the waist; a naked chest being their salute to kings. Very convenient for the common people, this; their half-clad forms presenting a perpetual and profound salutation.

Presently, Peepi, the ruler of Valapee drew near: a boy, hardly ten years old, striding the neck of a burly mute, bearing a long spear erect before him, to which was attached a canopy of five broad banana

leaves, new plucked. Thus shaded, little Peepi advanced, steadying himself by the forelock of his bearer.

Besides his bright red robe, the young prince wore nothing but the symbol of Valapeean royalty; a string of small, close-fitting, concave shells, coiled and ambushed in his profuse, curly hair; one end falling over his ear, revealing a serpent's head, curiously carved from a nutmeg.

Quite proverbial, the unembarrassed air of young slips of royalty. But there was something so surprisingly precocious in this young Peepi, that at first one hardly knew what to conclude.

The first compliments over, the company were invited inland to a shady retreat.

As we pursued the path, walking between old Mohi the keeper of chronicles and Samoa the Upoluan, Babbalanja besought the former to enlighten a stranger concerning the history of this curious Peepi. Whereupon the chronicler gave us the following account; for all of which he alone is responsible.

Peepi, it seems, had been proclaimed king before he was born; his sire dying some few weeks previous to that event; and vacating his divan, declared that he left a monarch behind.

Marvels were told of Peepi. Along with the royal dignity, and superadded to the soul possessed in his own proper person, the infant monarch was supposed to have inherited the valiant spirits of some twenty heroes, sages, simpletons, and demi-gods, previously lodged in his sire.

Most opulent in spiritual gifts was this lord of Valapee; the legatee, moreover, of numerous anonymous souls, bequeathed to him by their late loyal proprietors. By a slavish act of his convocation of chiefs, he also possessed the reversion of all and singular the immortal spirits, whose first grantees might die intestate in Valapee. Servile, yet audacious senators! thus prospectively to administrate away the inalienable rights of posterity. But while yet unborn, the people of Valapee had been deprived of more than they now sought to wrest from their descendants. And former Peepies, infant and adult, had received homage more profound, than Peepi the Present. Witness the demeanor of the chieftains of old, upon every new investiture of the royal serpent. In a fever of loyalty, they were wont to present themselves before the heir to the isle, to go through with the court ceremony of the Pupera; a curious proceeding, so called: inverted endeavors to assume an erect posture: the nasal organ the base.

It was to the frequent practice of this ceremony, that most intelligent observers imputed the flattened noses of the elderly chiefs of the island; who, nevertheless, much gloried therein.

It was these chiefs, also, who still observed the old-fashioned custom of retiring from the presence of royalty with their heads between their thighs; so that while advancing in the contrary direction, their faces might be still deferentially turned toward their lord and master. A fine view of him did they obtain. All objects look well through an arch.

But to return to Peepi, the inheritor of souls and subjects. It was an article of faith with the people of Valapee, that Peepi not only actually possessed the souls bequeathed to him; but that his own was enriched by their peculiar qualities: The headlong valor of the late Tongatona; the pusillanimous discretion of Blandoo; the cunning of Voyo; the simplicity of Raymonda; the prodigality of Zonoree; the thrift of Titonti.

But had all these, and similar opposite qualities, simultaneously acted as motives upon Peepi, certes, he would have been a most pitiable mortal, in a ceaseless eddy of resolves, incapable of a solitary act.

But blessed be the gods, it was otherwise. Though it fared little better for his subjects as it was. His assorted souls were uppermost and active in him, one by one. Today, valiant Tongatona ruled the isle, meditating wars and invasions; tomorrow, thrice discreet Blandoo, who, disbanding the levies, turned his attention to the

terraces of yams. And so on in rotation to the end.

Whence, though capable of action, Peepi, by reason of these revolving souls in him, was one of the most unreliable of beings.

What the open-handed Zonoree promised freely to-day, the parsimonious Titonti withheld to-morrow; and forever Raymonda was annulling the doings of Voyo; and Voyo the doings of Raymonda.

What marvel then, that in Valapee all was legislative uproar and confusion; advance and retreat; abrogations and revivals; foundations without superstructures; nothing permanent but the island itself.

Nor were there those in the neighboring countries, who failed to reap profit from this everlasting transition state of the affairs of the kingdom. All boons from Peepi were entreated when the prodigal Zonoree was lord of the ascendant. And audacious claims were urged upon the state when the pusillanimous Blandoo shrank from the thought of resisting them.

Thus subject to contrary impulses, over which he had not the faintest control, Peepi was plainly denuded of all moral obligation to virtue. He was no more a free agent, than the heart which beat in his bosom. Wherefore, his complaisant parliament had passed a law, recognizing that curious, but alarming fact; solemnly proclaiming, that King Peepi was minus a conscience. Agreeable to truth. But when they went further, and vowed by statute, that Peepi could do no wrong, they

assuredly did violence to the truth; besides, making a sad blunder in their logic. For far from possessing an absolute aversion to evil, by his very nature it was the hardest thing in the world for Peepi to do right.

Taking all these things into consideration, then, no wonder that this wholly irresponsible young prince should be a lad of considerable assurance, and the easiest manners imaginable.