

CHAPTER LXVIII

How Teeth Were Regarded In Valapee

Coiling through the thickets, like the track of a serpent, wound along the path we pursued. And ere long we came to a spacious grove, embowering an oval arbor. Here, we reclined at our ease, and refreshments were served.

Little worthy of mention occurred, save this. Happening to catch a glimpse of the white even teeth of Hohora one of our attendants, King Peepi coolly begged of Media the favor, to have those same dentals drawn on the spot, and presented to him.

Now human teeth, extracted, are reckoned among the most valuable ornaments in Mardi. So open wide thy strong box, Hohora, and show thy treasures. What a gallant array! standing shoulder to shoulder, without a hiatus between. A complete set of jewelry, indeed, thought Peepi. But, it seems, not destined for him; Media leaving it to the present proprietor, whether his dentals should change owners or not.

And here, to prepare the way for certain things hereafter to be narrated, something farther needs be said concerning the light in which men's molars are regarded in Mardi.

Strung together, they are sported for necklaces, or hung in drops

from the ear; they are wrought into dice; in lieu of silken locks, are exchanged for love tokens.

As in all lands, men smite their breasts, and tear their hair, when transported with grief; so, in some countries, teeth are stricken out under the sway of similar emotions. To a very great extent, this was once practiced in the Hawaiian Islands, ere idol and altar went down. Still living in Oahu, are many old chiefs, who were present at the famous obsequies of their royal old generalissimo, Tammahammaha, when there is no telling how many pounds of ivory were cast upon his grave.

Ah! had the regal white elephants of Siam been there, doubtless they had offered up their long, hooked tusks, whereon they impale the leopards, their foes; and the unicorn had surrendered that fixed bayonet in his forehead; and the imperial Cachalot-whale, the long chain of white towers in his jaw; yea, over that grim warrior's grave, the mooses, and elks, and stags, and fallow-deer had stacked their antlers, as soldiers their arms on the field.

Terrific shade of tattooed Tammahammaha! if, from a vile dragon's molars, rose mailed men, what heroes shall spring from the cannibal canines once pertaining to warriors themselves!--Am I the witch of Endor, that I conjure up this ghost? Or, King Saul, that I so quake at the sight? For, lo! roundabout me Tammahammaha's tattooing expands, till all the sky seems a tiger's skin. But now, the spotted

phantom sweeps by; as a man-of-war's main-sail, cloud-like, blown far to leeward in a gale.

Banquo down, we return.

In Valapee, prevails not the barbarous Hindoo custom of offering up widows to the shades of their lords; for, bereaved, the widows there marry again. Nor yet prevails the savage Hawaiian custom of offering up teeth to the manes of the dead; for, at the decease of a friend, the people rob not their own mouths to testify their woe. On the contrary, they extract the teeth from the departed, distributing them among the mourners for memorial legacies; as elsewhere, silver spoons are bestowed.

From the high value ascribed to dentals throughout the archipelago of Mardi, and also from their convenient size, they are circulated as money; strings of teeth being regarded by these people very much as belts of wampum among the Winnebagoes of the North; or cowries, among the Bengalese. So, that in Valapee the very beggars are born with a snug investment in their mouths; too soon, however, to be appropriated by their lords; leaving them toothless for the rest of their days, and forcing them to diet on poee-pudding and banana blanc-mange.

As a currency, teeth are far less clumsy than cocoanuts; which, among certain remote barbarians, circulate for coin; one nut being equivalent, perhaps, to a penny. The voyager who records the fact,

chuckles over it hugely; as evincing the simplicity of those heathens; not knowing that he himself was the simpleton; since that currency of theirs was purposely devised by the men, to check the extravagance of their women; cocoanuts, for spending money, being such a burden to carry.

It only remains to be added, that the most solemn oath of a native of Valapee is that sworn by his tooth. "By this tooth," said Bondo to Noojoomo, "by this tooth I swear to be avenged upon thee, oh Noojoomo!"