

CHAPTER XCIV

Of That Jolly Old Lord, Borabolla; And That Jolly Island Of His, Mondoldo; And Of The Fish-Ponds, And The Hereafters Of Fish

Drawing near Mondoldo, our next place of destination, we were greeted by six fine canoes, gayly tricked out with streamers, and all alive with the gestures of their occupants. King Borabolla and court were hastening to welcome our approach; Media, unbeknown to all, having notified him at the Banquet of the Five-and-Twenty Kings, of our intention to visit his dominions.

Soon, side by side, these canoes floated with ours; each barge of Odo courteously flanked by those of Mondoldo.

Not long were we in identifying Borabolla: the portly, pleasant old monarch, seated cross-legged upon a dais, projecting over the bow of the largest canoe of the six, close-grappling to the side of the Sea Elephant.

Was he not a goodly round sight to behold? Round all over; round of eye and of head; and like the jolly round Earth, roundest and biggest about the Equator. A girdle of red was his Equinoctial Line, giving a compactness to his plumpness.

This old Borabolla permitted naught to come between his head and the

sun; not even gray hairs. Bald as a gourd, right down on his brazen skull, the rays of the luminary converged.

He was all hilarity; full of allusions to the feast at Willamilla, where he had done royal execution. Rare old Borabolla! thou wert made for dining out; thy ample mouth an inlet for good cheer, and a sally-port for good humor.

Bustling about on his dais, he now gave orders for the occupants of our canoes to be summarily emptied into his own; saying, that in that manner only did he allow guests to touch the beach of Mondoldo.

So, with no little trouble--for the waves were grown somewhat riotous--we proceeded to comply; bethinking ourselves all the while, how annoying is sometimes an over-strained act of hospitality.

We were now but little less than a mile from the shore. But what of that? There was plenty of time, thought Borabolla, for a hasty lunch, and the getting of a subsequent appetite ere we effected a landing. So viands were produced; to which the guests were invited to pay heedful attention; or take the consequences, and famish till the long voyage in prospect was ended.

Soon the water shoaled (approaching land is like nearing truth in metaphysics), and ere we yet touched the beach, Borabolla declared, that we were already landed. Which paradoxical assertion implied,

that the hospitality of Mondoldo was such, that in all directions it radiated far out upon the lagoon, embracing a great circle; so that no canoe could sail by the island, without its occupants being so long its guests.

In most hospitable vicinity to the water, was a fine large structure, inclosed by a stockade; both rather dilapidated; as if the cost of entertaining its guests, prevented outlays for repairing the place. But it was one of Borabolla's maxims, that generally your tumble-down old homesteads yield the most entertainment; their very dilapidation betokening their having seen good service in hospitality; whereas, spruce-looking, finical portals, have a phiz full of meaning; for niggards are oftentimes neat.

Now, after what has been said, who so silly as to fancy, that because Borabolla's mansion was inclosed by a stockade, that the same was intended as a defense against guests? By no means. In the palisade was a mighty breach, not an entrance-way, wide enough to admit six Daniel Lamberts abreast.

"Look," cried Borabolla, as landing we stepped toward the place.

"Look Media! look all. These gates, you here see, lashed back with osiers, have been so lashed during my life-time; and just where they stand, shall they rot; ay, they shall perish wide open."

"But why have them at all?" inquired Media.

"Ah! there you have old Borabolla," cried the other.

"No," said Babbalanja, "a fence whose gate is ever kept open, seems unnecessary, I grant; nevertheless, it gives a notable hint, otherwise not so aptly conveyed; for is not the open gate the sign of the open heart?"

"Right, right," cried Borabolla; "so enter both, cousin Media;" and with one hand smiting his chest, with the other he waved us on.

But if the stockade seemed all open gate, the structure within seemed only a roof; for nothing but a slender pillar here and there, supported it.

"This is my mode of building," said Borabolla; "I will have no outside to my palaces. Walls are superfluous. And to a high-minded guest, the entering a narrow doorway is like passing under a yoke; every time he goes in, or comes out, it reminds him, that he is being entertained at the cost of another. So storm in all round."

Within, was one wide field-bed; where reclining, we looked up to endless rows of brown calabashes, and trenchers suspended along the rafters; promissory of ample cheer as regiments of old hams in a baronial refectory.

They were replenished with both meat and drink; the trenchers readily accessible by means of cords; but the gourds containing arrack, suspended neck downward, were within easy reach where they swung.

Seeing all these indications of hard roustering; like a cautious young bridegroom at his own marriage merry-making, Taji stood on his guard. And when Borabolla urged him to empty a gourd or two, by way of making room in him for the incidental repast about to be served, Taji civilly declined; not wishing to cumber the floor, before the cloth was laid.

Jarl, however, yielding to importunity, and unmindful of the unities of time and place, went freely about, from gourd to gourd, concocting in him a punch. At which, Samoa expressed much surprise, that he should be so unobservant as not to know, that in Mardi, guests might be pressed to demean themselves, without its being expected that so they would do. A true toss-pot himself, he bode his time.

The second lunch over, Borabolla placed both hands to the ground, and giving the sigh of the fat man, after three vigorous efforts, succeeded in gaining his pins; which pins of his, were but small for his body; insomuch that they hugely staggered about, under the fine old load they carried.

The specific object of his thus striving after an erect posture, was to put himself in motion, and conduct us to his fish-ponds, famous

throughout the Archipelago as the hobby of the king of Mondoldo. Furthermore, as the great repast of the day, yet to take place, was to be a grand piscatory one, our host was all anxiety, that we should have a glimpse of our fish, while yet alive and hearty.

We were alarmed at perceiving, that certain servitors were preparing to accompany us with trenchers of edibles. It begat the notion, that our trip to the fish-ponds was to prove a long journey. But they were not three hundred yards distant; though Borabolla being a veteran traveler, never stirred from his abode without his battalion of butlers.

The ponds were four in number, close bordering the water, embracing about an acre each, and situated in a low fen, draining several valleys. The excavated soil was thrown up in dykes, made tight by being beaten all over, while in a soft state, with the heavy, flat ends of Palm stalks. Lying side by side, by three connecting trenches, these ponds could be made to communicate at pleasure; while two additional canals afforded means of letting in upon them the salt waters of the lagoon on one hand, or those of an inland stream on the other. And by a third canal with four branches, together or separately, they could be partially drained. Thus, the waters could be mixed to suit any gills; and the young fish taken from the sea, passed through a stated process of freshening; so that by the time they graduated, the salt was well out of them, like the brains out of some diplomaed collegians.

Fresh-water fish are only to be obtained in Mondoldo by the artificial process above mentioned; as the streams and brooks abound not in trout or other Waltonian prey.

Taken all floundering from the sea, Borabolla's fish, passing through their regular training for the table, and daily tended by their keepers, in course of time became quite tame and communicative. To prove which, calling his Head Ranger, the king bade him administer the customary supply of edibles.

Accordingly, mouthfuls were thrown into the ponds. Whereupon, the fish darted in a shoal toward the margin; some leaping out of the water in their eagerness. Crouching on the bank, the Ranger now called several by name, patted their scales, carrying on some heathenish nursery-talk, like St. Anthony, in ancient Coptic, instilling virtuous principles into his finny flock on the sea shore.

But alas, for the hair-shirted old dominie's backsliding disciples. For, of all nature's animated kingdoms, fish are the most unchristian, inhospitable, heartless, and cold-blooded of creatures. At least, so seem they to strangers; though at bottom, somehow, they must be all right. And truly it is not to be wondered at, that the very reverend Anthony strove after the conversion of fish. For, whoso shall Christianize, and by so doing, humanize the sharks, will do a greater good, by the saving of human life in all time to come, than though he made catechumens of the head-hunting Dyaks of Borneo,

or the blood-bibbing Battas of Sumatra. And are these Dyaks and Battas one whit better than tiger-sharks? Nay, are they so good? Were a Batta your intimate friend, you would often mistake an orang-outang for him; and have orang-outangs immortal souls? True, the Battas believe in a hereafter; but of what sort? Full of Blue-Beards and bloody bones. So, also, the sharks; who hold that Paradise is one vast Pacific, ploughed by navies of mortals, whom an endless gale forever drops into their maws.

Not wholly a surmise. For, does it not appear a little unreasonable to imagine, that there is any creature, fish, flesh, or fowl, so little in love with life, as not to cherish hopes of a future state? Why does man believe in it? One reason, reckoned cogent, is, that he desires it. Who shall say, then, that the leviathan this day harpooned on the coast of Japan, goes not straight to his ancestor, who rolled all Jonah, as a sweet morsel, under his tongue?

Though herein, some sailors are slow believers, or at best hold themselves in a state of philosophical suspense. Say they--"That catastrophe took place in the Mediterranean; and the only whales frequenting the Mediterranean, are of a sort having not a swallow large enough to pass a man entire; for those Mediterranean whales feed upon small things, as horses upon oats." But hence, the sailors draw a rash inference. Are not the Straits of Gibraltar wide enough to admit a sperm-whale, even though none have sailed through, since Nineveh and the gourd in its suburbs dried up?

As for the possible hereafter of the whales; a creature eighty feet long without stockings, and thirty feet round the waist before dinner, is not inconsiderately to be consigned to annihilation.