

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

STRANGE CUSTOM OF THE ISLANDERS--THEIR CHANTING, AND THE PECULIARITY OF THEIR VOICE--RAPTURE OF THE KING AT FIRST HEARING A SONG--A NEW DIGNITY CONFERRED ON THE AUTHOR--MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN THE VALLEY—ADMIRATION OF THE SAVAGES AT BEHOLDING A PUGILISTIC PERFORMANCE—SWIMMING INFANT--BEAUTIFUL TRESSES OF THE GIRLS--OINTMENT FOR THE HAIR

SADLY discursive as I have already been, I must still further entreat the reader's patience, as I am about to string together, without any attempt at order, a few odds and ends of things not hitherto mentioned, but which are either curious in themselves or peculiar to the Typees.

There was one singular custom observed in old Marheyo's domestic establishment, which often excited my surprise. Every night, before retiring, the inmates of the house gathered together on the mats, and so squatting upon their haunches, after the universal practice of these islanders, would commence a low, dismal and monotonous chant, accompanying the voice with the instrumental melody produced by two small half-rotten sticks tapped slowly together, a pair of which were held in the hands of each person present. Thus would they employ themselves for an hour or two, sometimes longer. Lying in the gloom which wrapped the further end of the house, I could not avoid looking at them, although the spectacle suggested nothing but unpleasant reflection. The flickering rays of the 'armor' nut just served to reveal their savage lineaments, without dispelling the darkness that hovered about them.

Sometimes when, after falling into a kind of doze, and awaking suddenly in the midst of these doleful chantings, my eye would fall upon the wild-looking group engaged in their strange occupation, with their naked tattooed limbs, and shaven heads disposed in a circle, I was almost tempted to believe that I gazed upon a set of evil beings in the act of working at a frightful incantation.

What was the meaning or purpose of this custom, whether it was practiced merely as a diversion, or whether it was a religious exercise, a sort of family prayers, I never could discover.

The sounds produced by the natives on these occasions were of a most singular description; and had I not actually been present, I never would have believed that such curious noises could have been produced by human beings.

To savages generally is imputed a guttural articulation. This however, is not always the case, especially among the inhabitants of the Polynesian Archipelago. The labial melody with which the Typee girls carry on an ordinary conversation, giving a musical prolongation to the final syllable of every sentence, and chirping out some of the words with a liquid, bird-like accent, was singularly pleasing.

The men however, are not quite so harmonious in their utterance, and when excited upon any subject, would work themselves up into a sort of

wordy paroxysm, during which all descriptions of rough-sided sounds were projected from their mouths, with a force and rapidity which was absolutely astonishing.

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Although these savages are remarkably fond of chanting, still they appear to have no idea whatever of singing, at least as the art is practised in other nations.

I shall never forget the first time I happened to roar out a stave in the presence of noble Mehevi. It was a stanza from the 'Bavarian broom-seller'. His Typeean majesty, with all his court, gazed upon me in amazement, as if I had displayed some preternatural faculty which Heaven had denied to them. The King was delighted with the verse; but the chorus fairly transported him. At his solicitation I sang it again and again, and nothing could be more ludicrous than his vain attempts to catch the air and the words. The royal savage seemed to think that by screwing all the features of his face into the end of his nose he might possibly succeed in the undertaking, but it failed to answer the purpose; and in the end he gave it up, and consoled himself by listening to my repetition of the sounds fifty times over.

Previous to Mehevi's making the discovery, I had never been aware that there was anything of the nightingale about me; but I was now promoted to the place of court-minstrel, in which capacity I was afterwards

perpetually called upon to officiate.

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Besides the sticks and the drums, there are no other musical instruments among the Typees, except one which might appropriately be denominated a nasal flute. It is somewhat longer than an ordinary fife; is made of a beautiful scarlet-coloured reed; and has four or five stops, with a large hole near one end, which latter is held just beneath the left nostril. The other nostril being closed by a peculiar movement of the muscles about the nose, the breath is forced into the tube, and produces a soft dulcet sound which is varied by the fingers running at random over the stops. This is a favourite recreation with the females and one in which Fayaway greatly excelled. Awkward as such an instrument may appear, it was, in Fayaway's delicate little hands, one of the most graceful I have ever seen. A young lady, in the act of tormenting a guitar strung about her neck by a couple of yards of blue ribbon, is not half so engaging.

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Singing was not the only means I possessed of diverting the royal Mehevi and his easy-going subject. Nothing afforded them more pleasure than to see me go through the attitude of pugilistic encounter. As not one of the natives had soul enough in him to stand up like a man, and allow me to hammer away at him, for my own personal gratification and that of

the king, I was necessitated to fight with an imaginary enemy, whom I invariably made to knock under to my superior prowess. Sometimes when this sorely battered shadow retreated precipitately towards a group of the savages, and, following him up, I rushed among them dealing my blows right and left, they would disperse in all directions much to the enjoyment of Mehevi, the chiefs, and themselves.

The noble art of self-defence appeared to be regarded by them as the peculiar gift of the white man; and I make little doubt that they supposed armies of Europeans were drawn up provided with nothing else but bony fists and stout hearts, with which they set to in column, and pummelled one another at the word of command.

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One day, in company with Kory-Kory, I had repaired to the stream for the purpose of bathing, when I observed a woman sitting upon a rock in the midst of the current, and watching with the liveliest interest the gambols of something, which at first I took to be an uncommonly large species of frog that was sporting in the water near her. Attracted by the novelty of the sight, I waded towards the spot where she sat, and could hardly credit the evidence of my senses when I beheld a little infant, the period of whose birth could not have extended back many days, paddling about as if it had just risen to the surface, after being hatched into existence at the bottom. Occasionally, the delighted parent reached out her hand towards it, when the little thing, uttering a faint

cry, and striking out its tiny limbs, would sidle for the rock, and the next moment be clasped to its mother's bosom. This was repeated again and again, the baby remaining in the stream about a minute at a time. Once or twice it made wry faces at swallowing a mouthful of water, and choked a spluttered as if on the point of strangling. At such times however, the mother snatched it up and by a process scarcely to be mentioned obliged it to eject the fluid. For several weeks afterwards I observed this woman bringing her child down to the stream regularly every day, in the cool of the morning and evening and treating it to a bath. No wonder that the South Sea Islanders are so amphibious a race, when they are thus launched into the water as soon as they see the light. I am convinced that it is as natural for a human being to swim as it is for a duck. And yet in civilized communities how many able-bodied individuals die, like so many drowning kittens, from the occurrence of the most trivial accidents!

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The long luxuriant and glossy tresses of the Typee damsels often attracted my admiration. A fine head of hair is the pride and joy of every woman's heart. Whether against the express will of Providence, it is twisted upon the crown of the head and there coiled away like a rope on a ship's deck; whether it be stuck behind the ears and hangs down like the swag of a small window-curtain; or whether it be permitted to flow over the shoulders in natural ringlets, it is always the pride of the owner, and the glory of the toilette.

The Typee girls devote much of their time to the dressing of their fair and redundant locks. After bathing, as they sometimes do five or six times every day, the hair is carefully dried, and if they have been in the sea, invariably washed in fresh water, and anointed with a highly scented oil extracted from the meat of the cocoanut. This oil is obtained in great abundance by the following very simple process:

A large vessel of wood, with holes perforated in the bottom, is filled with the pounded meat, and exposed to the rays of the sun. As the oleaginous matter exudes, it falls in drops through the apertures into a wide-mouthed calabash placed underneath. After a sufficient quantity has thus been collected, the oil undergoes a purifying process, and is then poured into the small spherical shells of the nuts of the moo-tree, which are hollowed out to receive it. These nuts are then hermetically sealed with a resinous gum, and the vegetable fragrance of their green rind soon imparts to the oil a delightful odour. After the lapse of a few weeks the exterior shell of the nuts becomes quite dry and hard, and assumes a beautiful carnation tint; and when opened they are found to be about two-thirds full of an ointment of a light yellow colour and diffusing the sweetest perfume. This elegant little odorous globe would not be out of place even upon the toilette of a queen. Its merits as a preparation for the hair are undeniable--it imparts to it a superb gloss and a silky fineness.