

CHAPTER XI

A Nursery-Tale Of Babbalanja's

Having taken to our canoes once again, we were silently sailing along, when Media observed, "Babbalanja; though I seldom trouble myself with such thoughts, I have just been thinking, how difficult it must be, for the more ignorant sort of people, to decide upon what particular image to worship as a guardian deity, when in Maramma, it seems, there exists such a multitude of idols, and a thousand more are to be heard of."

"Not at all, your highness. The more ignorant the better. The multitude of images distracts them not. But I am in no mood for serious discourse; let me tell you a story."

"A story! hear him: the solemn philosopher is desirous of regaling us with a tale! But pray, begin."

"Once upon a time, then," said Babbalanja, indifferently adjusting his girdle, "nine blind men, with uncommonly long noses, set out on their travels to see the great island on which they were born."

"A precious beginning," muttered Mohi. "Nine blind men setting out to see sights."

Continued Babbalanja, "Staff in hand, they traveled; one in advance of the other; each man with his palm upon the shoulder next him; and he with the longest nose took the lead of the file. Journeying on in this manner, they came to a valley, in which reigned a king called Tammaro. Now, in a certain inclosure toward the head of the valley, there stood an immense wild banian tree; all over moss, and many centuries old, and forming quite a wood in itself: its thousand boughs striking into the earth, and fixing there as many gigantic trunks. With Tammaro, it had long been a question, which of those many trunks was the original and true one; a matter that had puzzled the wisest heads among his subjects; and in vain had a reward been offered for the solution of the perplexity. But the tree was so vast, and its fabric so complex; and its rooted branches so similar in appearance; and so numerous, from the circumstance that every year had added to them, that it was quite impossible to determine the point. Nevertheless, no sooner did the nine blind men hear that there was a reward offered for discovering the trunk of a tree, standing all by itself, than, one and all, they assured Tammaro, that they would quickly settle that little difficulty of his; and loudly inveighed against the stupidity of his sages, who had been so easily posed. So, being conducted into the inclosure, and assured that the tree was somewhere within, they separated their forces, so as at wide intervals to surround it at a distance; when feeling their way, with their staves and their noses, they advanced to the search, crying out--'Pshaw! make room there; let us wise men feel of the mystery.' Presently, striking with his nose one of the rooted branches, the foremost blind man quickly knelt down;

and feeling that it struck into the earth, gleefully shouted: Here it is! here it is!' But almost in the same breath, his companions, also, each striking a branch with his staff or his nose, cried out in like manner, 'Here it is! here it is!' Whereupon they were all confounded: but directly, the man who first cried out, thus addressed the rest: Good friends, surely you're mistaken. There is but one tree in the place, and here it is.' 'Very true,' said the others, 'all together; there is only one tree; but here it is.' 'Nay,' said the others, 'it is here!' and so saying, each blind man triumphantly felt of the branch, where it penetrated into the earth. Then again said the first speaker: Good friends, if you will not believe what I say, come hither, and feel for yourselves.' 'Nay, nay,' replied they, why seek further? here it is; and nowhere else can it be.' 'You blind fools, you, you contradict yourselves,' continued the first speaker, waxing wroth; 'how can you each have hold of a separate trunk, when there is but one in the place?' Whereupon, they redoubled their cries, calling each other all manner of opprobrious names, and presently they fell to beating each other with their staves, and charging upon each other with their noses. But soon after, being loudly called upon by Tamarro and his people; who all this while had been looking on; being loudly called upon, I say, to clap their hands on the trunk, they again rushed for their respective branches; and it so happened, that, one and all, they changed places; but still cried out, 'Here it is; here it is!' 'Peace! peace! ye silly blind men,' said Tamarro. 'Will ye without eyes presume to see more sharply than those who have them? The tree is too much for us all. Hence! depart from the valley.'"

"An admirable story," cried Media. "I had no idea that a mere mortal, least of all a philosopher, could acquit him-self so well. By my scepter, but it is well done! Ha, ha! blind men round a banian! Why, Babbalanja, no demi-god could surpass it. Taji, could you?"

"But, Babbalanja, what under the sun, mean you by your blind story!" cried Mohi. "Obverse, or reverse, I can make nothing out of it."

"Others may," said Babbalanja. "It is a polysensuum, old man."

"A pollywog!" said Mohi.