

CHAPTER XVIII

They Visit An Extraordinary Old Antiquary

"About prows there, ye paddlers," cried Media. "In this fog we've been raising, we have sailed by Padulla, our destination."

Now Padulla, was but a little island, tributary to a neighboring king; its population embracing some hundreds of thousands of leaves, and flowers, and butterflies, yet only two solitary mortals; one, famous as a venerable antiquarian: a collector of objects of Mardian vertu; a cognoscenti, and dilettante in things old and marvelous; and for that reason, very choice of himself.

He went by the exclamatory cognomen of "Oh-Oh;" a name bestowed upon him, by reason of the delighted interjections, with which he welcomed all accessions to his museum.

Now, it was to obtain a glimpse of this very museum, that Media was anxious to touch at Padulla.

Landing, and passing through a grove, we were accosted by Oh-Oh himself; who, having heard the shouts of our paddlers, had sallied forth, staff in hand.

The old man was a sight to see; especially his nose; a remarkable one.

And all Mardi over, a remarkable nose is a prominent feature: an ever obvious passport to distinction. For, after all, this gaining a name, is but the individualizing of a man; as well achieved by an extraordinary nose, as by an extraordinary epic. Far better, indeed; for you may pass poets without knowing them. Even a hero, is no hero without his sword; nor Beelzebub himself a lion, minus that lasso-tail of his, wherewith he catches his prey. Whereas, he who is famous through his nose, it is impossible to overlook. He is a celebrity without toiling for a name. Snugly ensconced behind his proboscis, he revels in its shadow, receiving tributes of attention wherever he goes.

Not to enter at large upon the topography of Oh-Oh's nasal organ, all must be content with this; that it was of a singular magnitude, and boldly aspiring at the end; an exclamation point in the face of the wearer, forever wondering at the visible universe. The eyes of Oh-Oh were like the creature's that the Jew abhors: placed slanting in his head, and converging their rays toward the mouth; which was no Mouth, but a gash.

I mean not to be harsh, or unpleasant upon thee, Oh-Oh; but I must paint thee as thou wert.

The rest of his person was crooked, and dwarfed, and surmounted by a hump, that sat on his back like a burden. And a weary load is a hump, Heaven knows, only to be cast off in the grave.

Thus old, and antiquated, and gable-ended, was the tabernacle of Oh-Oh's soul. But his person was housed in as curious a structure. Built of old boughs of trees blown down in the groves, and covered over with unruly thatching, it seemed, without, some ostrich nest. But within, so intricate, and grotesque, its brown alleys and cells, that the interior of no walnut was more labyrinthine.

And here, strewn about, all dusty and disordered, were the precious antiques, and curios, and obsoletes, which to Oh-Oh were dear as the apple of his eye, or the memory of departed days.

The old man was exceedingly importunate, in directing attention to his relics; concerning each of which, he had an endless story to tell. Time would fail; nay, patience, to repeat his legends. So, in order, here follow the most prominent of his rarities:--

The identical Canoe, in which, ages back, the god Unja came from the bottom of the sea.

(Very ponderous; of lignum-vitae wood).

A stone Flower-pot, containing in the original soil, Unja's last footprints, when he embarked from Mardi for parts unknown.

(One foot-print unaccountably reversed).

The Jaw-bones of Tooroorooloo, a great orator in the days of Unja.

(Somewhat twisted).

A quaint little Fish-hook.

(Made from the finger-bones of Kravi the Cunning).

The mystic Gourd; carved all over with cabalistic triangles, and hypogrifs; by study of which a reputed prophet, was said to have obtained his inspiration.

(Slightly redolent of vineyards).

The complete Skeleton of an immense Tiger-shark; the bones of a Pearl-shell-diver's leg inside.

(Picked off the reef at low tide).

An inscrutable, shapeless block of a mottled-hued, smoke-dried wood.

(Three unaccountable holes drilled through the middle).

A sort of ecclesiastical Fasces, being the bony blades of nine sword-fish, basket-hilted with shark's jaws, braided round and tasseled with cords of human hair.

(Now obsolete).

The mystic Fan with which Unja fanned himself when in trouble.

(Woven from the leaves of the Water-Lily).

A Tripod of a Stork's Leg, supporting a nautilus shell, containing

the fragments of a bird's egg; into which, was said to have been magically decanted the soul of a deceased chief.

(Unfortunately crushed in by atmospheric pressure).

Two clasped Right Hands, embalmed; being those of twin warriors, who thus died on a battle-field.

(Impossible to sunder).

A curious Pouch, or Purse, formed from the skin of an Albatross' foot, and decorated with three sharp claws, naturally pertaining to it.

(Originally the property of a notorious old Tooth-per-Tooth).

A long tangled lock of Mermaid's Hair, much resembling the curling silky fibres of the finer sea-weed.

(Preserved between fins of the dolphin).

A Mermaid's Comb for the toilet. The stiff serrated crest of a Cook Storm-petrel

(Oh-Oh was particularly curious concerning Mermaids).

Files, Rasps, and Pincers, all bone, the implements of an eminent Chiropedist, who flourished his tools before the flood.

(Owing to the excessive unevenness of the surface in those times, the diluvians were peculiarly liable to pedal afflictions).

The back Tooth, that Zozo the Enthusiast, in token of grief,
recklessly knocked out at the decease of a friend.

(Worn to a stump and quite useless).

These wonders inspected, Oh-Oh conducted us to an arbor, to show us
the famous telescope, by help of which, he said he had discovered an
ant-hill in the moon. It rested in the crotch of a Bread-fruit tree;
and was a prodigiously long and hollow trunk of a Palm; a scale from a
sea-kraken its lens.

Then returning to his cabinet, he pointed to a bamboo microscope,
which had wonderfully assisted him in his entomological pursuits.

"By this instrument, my masters," said he, "I have satisfied myself,
that in the eye of a dragon-fly there are precisely twelve thousand
five hundred and forty-one triangular lenses; and in the leg of a
flea, scores on scores of distinct muscles. Now, my masters, how far
think you a flea may leap at one spring? Why, two hundred times its
own length; I have often measured their leaps, with a small measure I
use for scientific purposes."

"Truly, Oh-Oh," said Babbalanja, "your discoveries must ere long
result in something grand; since you furnish such invaluable data for
theorists. Pray, attend, my lord Media. If, at one spring, a flea
leaps two hundred times its own length, then, with the like proportion

of muscles in his calves, a bandit might pounce upon the unwary traveler from a quarter of a mile off. Is it not so, Oh-Oh?"

"Indeed, but it is, my masters. And one of the greatest consolations I draw from these studies, is the ever-strengthening conviction of the beneficent wisdom that framed our Mardi. For did men possess thighs in proportion to fleas, verily, the wicked would grievously leap about, and curvet in the isles."

"But Oh-Oh," said Babbalanja, "what other discoveries have you made? Hast yet put a usurer under your lens, to find his conscience? or a libertine, to find his heart? Hast yet brought your microscope to bear upon a downy peach, or a rosy cheek?"

"I have," said Oh-Oh, mournfully; "and from the moment I so did, I have had no heart to eat a peach, or salute a cheek."

"Then dash your lens!" cried Media.

"Well said, my lord. For all the eyes we get beyond our own, but minister to infelicity. The microscope disgusts us with our Mardi; and the telescope sets us longing for some other world."