

CHAPTER XIX

They Go Down Into The Catacombs

With a dull flambeau, we now descended some narrow stone steps, to view Oh-Oh's collection of ancient and curious manuscripts, preserved in a vault.

"This way, this way, my masters," cried Oh-Oh, aloft, swinging his dim torch. "Keep your hands before you; it's a dark road to travel."

"So it seems," said Babbalanja, wide-groping, as he descended lower and lower. "My lord this is like going down to posterity."

Upon gaining the vault, forth flew a score or two of bats, extinguishing the flambeau, and leaving us in darkness, like Belzoni deserted by his Arabs in the heart of a pyramid. The torch at last relumed, we entered a tomb-like excavation, at every step raising clouds of dust; and at last stood before long rows of musty, mummyish parcels, so dingy-red, and so rolled upon sticks, that they looked like stiff sausages of Bologna; but smelt like some fine old Stilton or Cheshire.

Most ancient of all, was a hieroglyphical Elegy on the Dumps, consisting of one thousand and one lines; the characters,--herons, weeping-willows, and ravens, supposed to have been traced by a quill

from the sea-noddy.

Then there were plenty of rare old ballads:--

"King Kroko, and the Fisher Girl."

"The Fight at the Ford of Spears."

"The Song of the Skulls."

And brave old chronicles, that made Mohi's mouth water:--

"The Rise and Setting of the Dynasty of Foofoo."

"The Heroic History of the Noble Prince Dragoni; showing
how he killed ten Pinioned Prisoners with his Own Hand."

"The whole Pedigree of the King of Kandidee, with that of his
famous horse, Znorto."

And Tarantula books:--

"Sour Milk for the Young, by a Dairyman."

"The Devil adrift, by a Corsair."

"Grunts and Groans, by a Mad Boar."

"Stings, by a Scorpion."

And poetical productions:--

"Suffusions of a Lily in a Shower."

"Sonnet on the last Breath of an Ephemera."

"The Gad-fly, and Other Poems."

And metaphysical treatises:--

"Necessitarian not Predestinarian."

"Philosophical Necessity and Predestination One Thing and The Same."

"Whatever is not, is."

"Whatever is, is not."

And scarce old memoirs:--

"The One Hundred Books of the Biography of the Great and Good King Grandissimo."

"The Life of old Philo, the Philanthropist, in one Chapter."

And popular literature:--

"A most Sweet, Pleasant, and Unctuous Account of the Manner in which Five-and-Forty Robbers were torn asunder by Swiftly-Going Canoes."

And books by chiefs and nobles:--

"The Art of Making a Noise in Mardi."

"On the Proper Manner of Saluting a Bosom Friend."

"Letters from a Father to a Son, inculcating the Virtue of Vice."

"Pastorals by a Younger Son."

"A Catalogue of Chieftains who have been Authors, by a Chieftain, who disdains to be deemed an Author."

"A Canto on a Cough caught by my Consort."

"The Philosophy of Honesty, by a late Lord, who died in disgrace."

And theological works:--

"Pepper for the Perverse."

"Pudding for the Pious."

"Pleas for Pardon."

"Pickles for the Persecuted."

And long and tedious romances with short and easy titles:--

"The Buck."

"The Belle."

"The King and the Cook, or the Cook and the King."

And books of voyages:--

"A Sojourn among the Anthropophagi, by One whose Hand was eaten off at Tiffin among the Savages."

"Franko: its King, Court, and Tadpoles."

"Three Hours in Vivenza, containing a Full and Impartial Account of that Whole Country: by a Subject of King Bello."

And works of nautical poets:--

"Sky-Sail-Pole Lyrics."

And divers brief books, with panic-striking titles:--

"Are you safe?"

"A Voice from Below."

"Hope for none."

"Fire for all."

And pamphlets by retired warriors:--

"On the Best Gravy for Wild Boar's Meat."

"Three Receipts for Bottling New Arrack."

"To Brown Bread Fruit without Burning."

"Advice to the Dyspeptic."

"On Starch for Tappa."

All these MSS. were highly prized by Oh-Oh. He averred, that they spoke of the mighty past, which he revered more than the paltry present, the dross and sediment of what had been.

Peering into a dark crypt, Babbalanja drew forth a few crumbling, illegible, black-letter sheets of his favorite old essayist, brave Bardianna. They seemed to have formed parts of a work, whose title only remained--"Thoughts, by a Thinker."

Silently Babbalanja pressed them to his heart. Then at arm's length held them, and said, "And is all this wisdom lost? Can not the divine cunning in thee, Bardianna, transmute to brightness these sullied pages? Here, perhaps, thou didst dive into the deeps of things, treating of the normal forms of matter and of mind; how the particles of solids were first molded in the interstices of fluids; how the thoughts of men are each a soul, as the lung-cells are each a lung; how that death is but a mode of life; while mid-most is the Pharzi.-- But all is faded. Yea, here the Thinker's thoughts lie cheek by jowl

with phrasemen's words. Oh Bardianna! these pages were offspring of thee, thought of thy thought, soul of thy soul. Instinct with mind, they once spoke out like living voices; now, they're dust; and would not prick a fool to action. Whence then is this? If the fogs of some few years can make soul linked to matter naught; how can the unhoused spirit hope to live when mildewed with the damp of death."

Piously he folded the shreds of manuscript together, kissed them, and laid them down.

Then approaching Oh-Oh, he besought him for one leaf, one shred of those most precious pages, in memory of Bardianna, and for the love of him.

But learning who he was, one of that old Ponderer's commentators, Oh-Oh tottered toward the manuscripts; with trembling fingers told them over, one by one, and said-"Thank Oro! all are here.--Philosopher, ask me for my limbs, my life, my heart, but ask me not for these. Steeped in wax, these shall be my cerements."

All in vain; Oh-Oh was an antiquary.

Turning in despair, Babbalanja spied a heap of worm-eaten parchment covers, and many clippings and parings. And whereas the rolls of manuscripts did smell like unto old cheese; so these relics did marvelously resemble the rinds of the same.

Turning over this pile, Babbalanja lighted upon something that restored his good humor. Long he looked it over delighted; but bethinking him, that he must have dragged to day some lost work of the collection, and much desirous of possessing it, he made bold again to ply Oh-Oh; offering a tempting price for his discovery.

Glancing at the title--"A Happy Life"-the old man cried--"Oh, rubbish! rubbish! take it for nothing." And Babbalanja placed it in his vestment.

The catacombs surveyed, and day-light gained, we inquired the way to Ji-Ji's, also a collector, but of another sort; one miserly in the matter of teeth, the money of Mardi.

At the mention of his name, Oh-Oh flew out into scornful philippics upon the insanity of that old dotard, who hoarded up teeth, as if teeth were of any use, but to purchase rarities. Nevertheless, he pointed out our path; following which, we crossed a meadow.