

CHAPTER XXI

They Visit A Wealthy Old Pauper

Continuing our route to Jiji's, we presently came to a miserable hovel. Half projecting from the low, open entrance, was a bald overgrown head, intent upon an upright row of dark-colored bags:-- pelican pouches--prepared by dropping a stone within, and suspending them, when moist.

Ever and anon, the great head shook with a tremulous motion, as one by one, to a clicking sound from the old man's mouth, the strings of teeth were slowly drawn forth, and let fall, again and again, with a rattle.

But perceiving our approach, the old miser suddenly swooped his pouches out of sight; and, like a turtle into its shell, retreated into his den. But soon he decrepitably emerged upon his knees, asking what brought us thither?--to steal the teeth, which lying rumor averred he possessed in abundance? And opening his mouth, he averred he had none; not even a sentry in his head.

But Babbalanja declared, that long since he must have drawn his own dentals, and bagged them with the rest.

Now this miserable old miser must have been idiotic; for soon

forgetting what he had but just told us of his utter toothlessness, he was so smitten with the pearly mouth of Hohora, one of our attendants (the same for whose pearls, little King Peepi had taken such a fancy), that he made the following overture to purchase its contents: namely: one tooth of the buyer's, for every three of the seller's. A proposition promptly rejected, as involving a mercantile absurdity.

"Why?" said Babbalanja. "Doubtless, because that proposed to be given, is less than that proposed to be received. Yet, says a philosopher, this is the very principle which regulates all barterings. For where the sense of a simple exchange of quantities, alike in value?"

"Where, indeed?" said Hohora with open eyes, "though I never heard it before, that's a staggering question. I beseech you, who was the sage that asked it?"

"Vivo, the Sophist," said Babbalanja, turning aside.

In the hearing of Jiji, allusion was made to Oh-Oh, as a neighbor of his. Whereupon he vented much slavering opprobrium upon that miserable old hump-back; who accumulated useless monstrosities; throwing away the precious teeth, which otherwise might have sensibly rattled in his own pelican pouches.

When we quitted the hovel, Jiji, marking little Vee-Vee, from whose shoulder hung a calabash of edibles, seized the hem of his garment and

besought him for one mouthful of food; for nothing had he tasted that day.

The boy tossed him a yam.