

CHAPTER XXV

A, I, AND O

The old Begum went by the euphonious appellation of Ohiro-Moldona-Fivona; a name, from its length, deemed highly genteel; though scandal averred, that it was nothing more than her real name transposed; the appellation by which she had been formerly known, signifying a "Getterup-of-Fine-Tappa." But as this would have let out an ancient secret, it was thought wise to disguise it.

Her daughters respectively reveled in the pretty diminutives of A, I, and O; which, from their brevity, comical to tell, were considered equally genteel with the dame's.

The habiliments of the three Vowels must not be omitted. Each damsel garrisoned an ample, circular farthingale of canes, serving as the frame-work, whereon to display a gayly dyed robe. Perhaps their charms intrenched themselves in these impregnable petticoats, as feeble armies fly to fortresses, to hide their weakness, and better resist an onset.

But polite and politic it is, to propitiate your hostess. So seating himself by the Begum, Taji led off with earnest inquiries after her welfare. But the Begum was one of those, who relieve the diffident from the embarrassment of talking; all by themselves carrying on

conversation for two. Hence, no wonder that my Lady was esteemed invaluable at all assemblies in the groves of Pimminee; contributing so largely to that incessant din, which is held the best test of the enjoyment of the company, as making them deaf to the general nonsense, otherwise audible.

Learning that Taji had been making the tour of certain islands in Mardi, the Begum was surprised that he could have thus hazarded his life among the barbarians of the East. She desired to know whether his constitution was not impaired by inhaling the unrefined atmosphere of those remote and barbarous regions. For her part, the mere thought of it made her faint in her innermost citadel; nor went she ever abroad with the wind at East, dreading the contagion which might lurk in the air.

Upon accosting the three damsels, Taji very soon discovered that the tongue which had languished in the presence of the Begum, was now called into active requisition, to entertain the Polysyllables, her daughters. So assiduously were they occupied in silent endeavors to look sentimental and pretty, that it proved no easy task to sustain with them an ordinary chat. In this dilemma, Taji diffused not his remarks among all three; but discreetly centered them upon O. Thinking she might be curious concerning the sun, he made some remote allusion to that luminary as the place of his nativity. Upon which, O inquired where that country was, of which mention was made.

"Some distance from here; in the air above; the sun that gives light to Pimminee, and Mardi at large."

She replied, that if that were the case, she had never beheld it; for such was the construction of her farthingale, that her head could not be thrown back, without impairing its set. Wherefore, she had always abstained from astronomical investigations.

Hereupon, rude Mohi laughed out. And that lucky laugh happily relieved Taji from all further necessity of entertaining the Vowels. For at so vulgar, and in Pimminee, so unwonted a sound, as a genuine laugh, the three startled nymphs fainted away in a row, their round farthingales falling over upon each other, like a file of empty tierces. But they presently revived.

Meanwhile, without stirring from their mats, the polite young bucks in the aigulettes did nothing but hold semi-transparent leaves to their eyes, by the stems; which leaves they directed downward, toward the disordered hems of the farthingales; in wait, perhaps, for the revelation of an ankle, and its accompaniments. What the precise use of these leaves could have been, it would be hard to say, especially as the observers invariably peeped over and under them.

The calamity of the Vowels was soon followed by the breaking up of the party; when, evening coming on, and feeling much wearied with the labor of seeing company in Pimminee, we retired to our mats; there

finding that repose which ever awaits the fatigued.