

CHAPTER XXXVI

They Attend The Games

At last the third day dawned; and facing us upon entering the plain, was a throne of red log-wood, canopied by the foliage of a red-dyed Pandannus. Upon this throne, purple-robed, reclined those very magnificent and illustrious lords seigniors, the lord seigniors Hello and Piko. Before them, were many gourds of wine; and crosswise, staked in the sod, their own royal spears.

In the middle of the down, as if by a furrow, a long, oval space was margined of about which, a crowd of spectators were seated. Opposite the throne, was reserved a clear passage to the arena, defined by air-lines, indefinitely produced from the leveled points of two spears, so poised by a brace of warriors.

Drawing near, our party was courteously received, and assigned a commodious lounge.

The first encounter was a club-fight between two warriors. Nor casque of steel, nor skull of Congo could have resisted their blows, had they fallen upon the mark; for they seemed bent upon driving each other, as stakes, into the earth. Presently, one of them faltered; but his adversary rushing in to cleave him down, slipped against a guavarind; when the falterer, with one lucky blow, high into the air sent the

stumbler's club, which descended upon the crown of a spectator, who was borne from the plain.

"All one," muttered Pike.

"As good dead as another," muttered Hello.

The second encounter was a hugging-match; wherein two warriors, masked in Grisly-bear skins, hugged each other to death.

The third encounter was a bumping-match between a fat warrior and a dwarf. Standing erect, his paunch like a bass-drum before a drummer, the fat man was run at, head-a-tilt by the dwarf, and sent spinning round on his axis.

The fourth encounter was a tussle between two-score warriors, who all in a mass, writhed like the limbs in Sebastioni's painting of Hades. After obscuring themselves in a cloud of dust, these combatants, uninjured, but hugely blowing, drew off; and separately going among the spectators, rehearsed their experience of the fray.

"Braggarts!" mumbled Piko.

"Poltroons!" growled Hello.

While the crowd were applauding, a sober-sided observer, trying to rub

the dust out of his eyes, inquired of an enthusiastic neighbor, "Pray, what was all that about?"

"Fool! saw you not the dust?"

"That I did," said Sober-Sides, again rubbing his eyes, "But I can raise a dust myself."

The fifth encounter was a fight of single sticks between one hundred warriors, fifty on a side.

In a line, the first fifty emerged from the sumachs, their weapons interlocked in a sort of wicker-work. In advance marched a priest, bearing an idol with a cracked cocoanut for a head,--Krako, the god of Trepens. Preceded by damsels flinging flowers, now came on the second fifty, gayly appareled, weapons poised, and their feet nimbly moving in a martial measure.

Midway meeting, both parties touched poles, then retreated. Very courteous, this; but tantamount to bowing each other out of Mardi; for upon Pike's tossing a javelin, they rushed in, and each striking his man, all fell to the ground.

"Well done!" cried Piko.

"Brave fellows!" cried Hello.

"But up and at it again, my heroes!" joined both. "Lo! we kings look on, and there stand the bards!"

These bards were a row of lean, sallow, old men, in thread-bare robes, and chaplets of dead leaves.

"Strike up!" cried Piko.

"A stave!" cried Hello.

Whereupon, the old croakers, each with a quinsy, sang thus in cracked strains:--

Quack! Quack! Quack!
With a toorooloo whack;
Hack away, merry men, hack away.
Who would not die brave,
His ear smote by a stave?
Thwack away, merry men, thwack away!
'Tis glory that calls,
To each hero that falls,
Hack away, merry men, hack away!
Quack! Quack! Quack!
Quack! Quack!
Quack!

Thus it tapered away.

"Ha, ha!" cried Piko, "how they prick their ears at that!"

"Hark ye, my invincibles!" cried Hello. "That pean is for the slain.

So all ye who have lives left, spring to it! Die and be glorified!

Now's the time!--Strike up again, my ducklings!"

Thus incited, the survivors staggered to their feet; and hammering away at each others' sconces, till they rung like a chime of bells going off with a triple-bob-major, they finally succeeded in immortalizing themselves by quenching their mortalities all round; the bards still singing.

"Never mind your music now," cried Piko.

"It's all over," said Hello.

"What valiant fellows we have for subjects," cried Piko.

"Ho! grave-diggers, clear the field," cried Hello.

"Who else is for glory?" cried Piko.

"There stand the bards!" cried Hello.

But now there rushed among the crowd a haggard figure, trickling with blood, and wearing a robe, whose edges were burned and blacked by fire. Wielding a club, it ran to and fro, with loud yells menacing all.

A noted warrior this; who, distracted at the death of five sons slain in recent games, wandered from valley to valley, wrestling and fighting.

With wild cries of "The Despairer! The Despairer!" the appalled multitude fled; leaving the two kings frozen on their throne, quaking and quailing, their teeth rattling like dice.

The Despairer strode toward them; when, recovering their senses, they ran; for a time pursued through the woods by the phantom.