

of the past, she talked about the present, household chores, the burden of family life, which, she had been told were many before she was married, but which were really nothing. She did not tell me, but I knew she had gotten married at the age of twenty-seven.

She did not change places anymore, as she had in the beginning, and she almost did not modify her posture. She no longer stared with her big eyes, but started to look aimlessly at the walls.

"We have to change the living room wallpaper," she said after a while, as if to herself.

I agreed, if only to say something to awake me from that magnetic sleepiness, or whatever it was, that hindered my tongue and my senses. I both wanted and did not want to put an end to the conversation. I made an effort to take my eyes off her, and did so as a sign of respect. However, the idea of seeming to be bored when I was not led my eyes once again to Conceição. The conversation was dying out. The silence in the street was complete.

For a time – I do not know how long – we remained quite silent. The only occasional sound was that of a mouse gnawing away in the office, which woke me from the drowsiness I had fallen into. I wanted to mention it, but could not think how. Conceição seemed to be dreaming. Suddenly, I heard a knock on the window:

"Midnight Mass! Midnight Mass!"

"There's your friend," she said as she stood up. "How odd: you agreed to wake him up and he's here to wake you up. Go, it's time. Goodbye."

"Is it time already?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Midnight Mass!" were the words that came from outside.

"Go, go, don't make him wait, it was my fault. Goodbye. See you tomorrow."

And with the same swing of her body, Conceição made her way down the corridor, stepping lightly. I went outside and found my neighbor waiting for me. We went from there to the church. More than once during the mass, I found the figure of Conceição between the priest and myself. Blame it on my youth: I was only seventeen. The next morning at lunchtime, I talked about the mass and the people who were at the church, without exciting Conceição's curiosity. Throughout the day, I found her as always, natural, benevolent and without a sign that she recalled our conversation of the previous evening. At New Year's I went to Mangaratiba. When I returned to Rio de Janeiro in March, the clerk had died of apoplexy. Conceição had moved to Engenho Novo, but I neither visited nor met her. Later, I heard that she had married her husband's assistant clerk.

The man who knew Javanese

Lima Barreto

One day, at a coffee shop, I was telling my friend Castro about the scams I'd played on the great and the good in order to survive.

There was even a certain occasion, while I was in Manaus, when I myself forced to conceal my Bachelor's degree so as to gain the confidence of clients who flocked to my spells-and-fortune-telling office. I was telling Castro all about it.

My friend listened to me in silence, astonished, enjoying that Gil Blas life of mine, when, during a pause in the conversation, as we emptied our glasses, he said nonchalantly:

"You have been living quite an amusing life, Castelo!"

"It is the only way to live... This business of a regular job, leaving home at a certain hour, returning at another, gets you down, don't you think? I really don't know how I have coped at the consulate!"

"It's wearing, but that is not why I am amazed. What amazes me is that you have had so many adventures here, in this asinine, bureaucratic Brazil."

"No! My dear Castro, we can write the most beautiful pages of our lives right here. Can you believe that I was once a teacher of Javanese!"

"When? Here, after you came back from the consulate?"

"No, before that. In fact, that is precisely why I was named consul."

"Tell me all about it. Will you have some more beer?"

"Why not."

We ordered another bottle, filled our glasses, and I continued:

"I had been in Rio for a short time and was literally living in poverty. I kept running from boarding house to boarding house, not knowing where and how

* De www.bibvirt.futuro.usp.br

to make ends meet, when I read the following advertisement in *Jornal do Comércio*:

'Javanese language teacher needed. Letters to etc'. Now, I told myself, that is a job with very few competitors; if I could just get my head around half a dozen words, I would apply for it. I left the coffee shop and wandered through the streets, imagining I was a teacher of Javanese, making money, taking the streetcar without any unpleasant encounters with 'bloodhounds'. Without quite realizing, I had walked towards the National Library. I didn't know what book to ask for, but I went in, gave the doorman my hat, received my ticket and went upstairs. On the way up, it occurred to me that I could ask for the *Grande Encyclopédie*, volume J, and consult the entry related to Java and Javanese. And that is what I did. I learned, after a few minutes, that Java was a large island of the Sunda archipelago, a Dutch colony, and that Javanese, an agglutinating language of the Malayo-Polynesian group, had a noteworthy literature and was written in characters derived from the old Hindi alphabet.

"The *Encyclopédie* gave me references of works on the Malay language and I did not think twice before consulting one of them. I wrote down the alphabet, the approximate pronunciation, and left. I walked through the streets, rambling and digesting letters. Hieroglyphs danced in my head; every once in a while I would turn to my notes; I strolled through the parks and scribbled the odd letters in the sand to store them in my mind and train my hand to write them.

"At night, after I managed to reach my room without being seen, so as to avoid indiscreet questions from the landlord, I continued to chew over my Malay A-B-C. So seriously that, by the following morning, I knew it perfectly well.

"I was convinced that it was the easiest language in the world and went on my way; but not before bumping into the landlord:

"Mr. Castelo, when are you going to pay what you owe me?"

I answered with the most charming display of confidence:

'Soon... It won't be long... Be patient... I shall be hired as a Javanese teacher and...'

The man interrupted me:

'What the deuce is that, Mr. Castelo?'

I used this digression to take advantage of the man's patriotism:

'It is a language spoken in those parts around Timor. Do you know where that is?'

Oh! Naive soul! The man forgot all about my debt and said in his strong Portuguese accent:

'To tell you the truth, I don't know for sure; but I've heard it is a territory that we have somewhere near Macau. And what do *you* know about all this, Mr. Castelo?'

"I was so excited about the easy escape Javanese had given me that I looked for the advertisement again. There it was. I happily decided to apply for the job of

teaching that oceanic language. I wrote my reply, went down to the newspaper office and left my letter. Then I went back to the library and continued my Javanese studies. I did not make much progress that day, perhaps because I judged the Javanese alphabet to the only information necessary for a Malayan language teacher, perhaps because I worked more on the bibliography and literary history of the language I was going to teach.

"Two days later I received a letter asking me to go speak to Mr. Manuel Feliciano Soares Albernaz, the Baron of Jacuecanga, on Conde de Bonfin Street, I can't recall the number. You must not forget that, in the meantime, I continued studying my Malay, that is, my Javanese. Besides the alphabet, I had learned the names of a few authors, as well as how to ask and answer 'how do you do?', and a couple of grammar rules, all of this knowledge backed up by twenty words from the lexicon.

"You cannot imagine the difficulties I struggled with in trying to obtain the four hundred *réis* for my trip! It is easier – you can be sure – to learn Javanese... I went on foot. I arrived covered in sweat; with maternal affection, the venerable mango trees, which were lined up before the Baron's house, welcomed me, greeted me, and comforted me. In all my life, this was the only moment I actually felt the kindness of nature...

"It was an enormous house that seemed to be empty; it was in poor condition, but for some reason I thought this was probably more related to carelessness and ennui than to actual poverty. It had probably not received a coat of paint in years. The walls were peeling and the edges of the roof, made of those old glazed tiles, were missing ornaments here and there, like a set of deteriorating, mistreated dentures.

"I took a look around the garden and saw the vengeful strength with which the weeds and burrs had expelled the elephant ears and begonias. The crotons, however, survived with their dim-colored foliage. I knocked. It took them a long time to answer. Finally, the door was opened by an old black African man, whose cotton beard and hair gave his appearance an distinct look of age, mildness and suffering.

"In the living room there was a gallery of portraits: arrogant bearded gentlemen were lined up in immense golden frames; profiles of sweet ladies with braided hair, holding large fans, who seemed to want to rise up into the sky, inflated by the ballooning dresses. But, of all those old objects, to which the dust lent more antiquity and respect, the one I liked the most was a quaint porcelain jar, from China or India, as they say. That china purity, its fragility, the innocent design and that dull, moonlit shine, all gave me the impression that the object had been made by the hands of a dreaming child to enchant the tired eyes of disillusioned old men...

"I waited for the owner of the house for a while. He took quite some time. Somewhat shaky, holding a large handkerchief, inhaling the snuff of bygone days

in his ancient manner: I was filled with respect when I saw him enter. I wanted to leave. Even if he were not my pupil, it would always be a crime to hoax that old man, whose age brought to mind something dignified, something sacred. I hesitated, but stayed.

'I am', I said as I stepped forward, 'the Javanese teacher that you said you needed.'

'Have a seat, said the old man. Are you from here, from Rio?'

'No, I come from Canavieiras.'

'Pardon me?' he asked. 'Speak up a little, I am deaf.'

'I come from Canavieiras, in Bahia,' I repeated.

'Where did you study?'

'In São Salvador.'

'And where did you learn Javanese?' he inquired with the stubbornness peculiar to old people.

"I was not expecting that question, but I immediately elaborated a lie. I told him that my father was Javanese. As a crew member of a merchant ship, he had gone to Bahia, settled near Canavieiras as a fisherman, got married, prospered, and with him I had learned Javanese.

"And did he believe you? What about your appearance?" asked my friend, who until this moment had listened in silence.

"I am not that different from the Javanese", I objected. "My straight, hard, thick hair and my bronzed skin could easily give me the appearance of a half-breed Malay... You know very well that among us there is a little of everything: Indians, Malays, Tahitians, Malagasies, Guanches, even Goths – a fraternity of races that is the envy of the whole world."

"Alright", said my friend, "go on."

"The old man, I continued, listened to me carefully, contemplated my looks for a long time, and seemed to actually think I was the son of a Malay. He asked me gently:

'So you are willing to teach me Javanese?'

The answer came out involuntarily: 'Absolutely.'

'You are probably amazed', the Baron of Jacuecanga added, 'that I, at my age, still want to learn anything, but...'

'There is nothing to be amazed at. We have seen examples, very fertile examples...'

'What I want, my dear Mr...'

'Castelo', I said.

'What I want, my dear Mr. Castelo, is to fulfill a family promise. I am not sure you know that I am the grandson of Conselheiro Albernaz, the man who followed Pedro I when he gave up the throne. When my grandfather returned from London, he brought along a book written in a strange language, which he was

very fond of. It was a Hindi or a Siamese man who had given him the book, in London, as thanks for some favor my grandfather had done for him. When Grandfather was dying, he called my father and told him: "Son, here is this book written in Javanese. The man who gave it to me told me that it prevents harm and brings happiness to the owner. I am not so sure about this. In any case, keep it; but if you want the fate the wise oriental man described to come true, your son must understand the book, so that our descendants may always be happy". My father, the old Baron continued, did not believe the story very much, but, he kept the book. On his deathbed, he gave it to me and told me about the promise he had made to his father. In the beginning, I did not care much about the book. I set it aside and went on with my life. I actually forgot all about it; but for some time I have been going through so much sorrow, so many unfortunate events have accompanied my old age, that I remembered the family's talisman. I have to read it, to understand it, if I don't want my last days here to be the portent of disaster for my descendants; and in order to understand it, I obviously must know Javanese. There you have it.'

"The old man fell silent and I noticed his eyes had become misty. He discreetly dried his eyes and asked me if I would like to see the book. I said I would. He called the servant, gave him instructions and explained he had lost all of his sons and nephews, the only descendant left alive was his married daughter, whose only son, however, was a feeble boy of poor and unstable health.

"The book came. It was a big, old tome, an ancient *in-quarto*, leather bound, printed in large letters on thick, yellowish paper. The front page was missing, so there was no way of knowing when it was published. There were some pages with a preface, in English, where I read that the book was about the stories of Prince Kulanga, a very respectable Javanese writer.

"As soon as I said this, the old Baron, not realizing I had learned this through the English text, held my Malayan knowledge in high regard. I continued looking through the volume with the air of someone who understood that kind of gibberish magnificently, until we finally agreed on my payment and schedule, and I committed myself to teaching him to read the old thing within a year.

"Soon, I was teaching my first class, though the old man was not as diligent as I had been. He could not learn to identify and write even four letters. Thus, it took us a month to go through half the alphabet and the Lord Baron of Jacuecanga was not exactly lord of the subject: he learned and he unlearned.

"His daughter and his son-in-law (who had, I think, up to that moment known nothing about the book) learned about the old man's studies; they did not mind. They thought it was amusing and a good way to distract him.

"But what will astonish you, my dear Castro, is how much his son-in-law was impressed with the Javanese teacher. So unique! He never ceased to repeat: "It is astonishing! So young! If only I knew that, ah! Where would I be!"

"Dona Maria da Glória's husband (that was the baron's daughter's name) was a chief judge, a man of connections and power; though he was not embarrassed to show everybody how much he admired my knowledge of Javanese. For his part, the Baron was perfectly satisfied. At the end of two months, he had given up learning and had asked me to translate, every other day, an extract from the enchanted book. He only needed to understand it, he told me; he had nothing against listening to somebody else's translation. Thus, he avoided the fatigue of learning and fulfilled his mission.

"You know full well that I still do not know a word of Javanese, but I made up some foolish stories and imposed them on the old man as if they were from the *Chronicon*. How he would listen to that drivel!... He was enraptured, as if he was listening to the words of an angel. And I grew more important for him!

"He asked me to live in his house, heaped me with gifts, increased my wages. I had, all in all, an easy life.

"Much of it came from the fact that around this time he received an inheritance from a forgotten relative who lived in Portugal. The good old man assigned his good fortune to my Javanese, and I was close to believing it myself.

"I gradually lost any feeling of remorse; still, I was always afraid of finding someone who indeed knew that Malayan patois. My fear grew when the kind Baron sent me with a letter to the Viscount of Caruru so he would get me started in the diplomatic career. I made all kinds of objections: my ugliness, lack of elegance, dark complexion. – 'What!' he would answer. 'Go, lad, you know Javanese!' I went. The Viscount sent me to the Foreigners Department with a number of recommendations. I was a sensation.

"The director called the heads of every division: 'See here, a man who knows Javanese – what a prodigy!'

"The heads of divisions introduced me to the clerks and scribes. There was one fellow who looked at me with anger, rather than envy or amazement. Everyone said: 'So you know Javanese? Is it difficult? Nobody knows it around here!'

"The scribe who had given me the angry look rejoined: 'It is true, but I can speak Kanak. Can you?' I told him I couldn't and went to meet the minister.

"The high authority stood up, placed his hands on his hips, fitted the *pince-nez* to his nose and asked: 'So, you know Javanese?' I said I did, and, to the question about where I had learned it, I told him the story of my Javanese father. 'Well,' said the minister, 'you cannot become a diplomat, your build is not suitable... A consulate in Asia or the Pacific would be good, though. There are no vacancies now, but I will make a few changes and you will get in. From now on, however, you will be an attaché to my cabinet and, next year, I want you to go to Basel, where you will be Brazil's representative at the Linguistics Congress. Study, read Hovelacque, Max Müller, and others!'

"Can you believe it, I still knew no Javanese at all, but I had a job and was to

represent Brazil at a congress of scholars.

"The old Baron eventually died. He passed the book on to his son-in-law, so that he would give it to his grandson when he was old enough, and left me something in his will.

"I devoted myself to studying the Malayo-Polynesian languages; but I simply couldn't!

"Eating well, dressing well, sleeping well; I no longer had the necessary energy to fill my head with all that oddity. I bought books, I subscribed to magazines: *Revue Anthropologique et Linguistique*, *Proceedings of the English-Oceanic Association*, *Archivo Glottologico Italiano*, everything, and still no result! Nevertheless, my reputation only grew. On the streets, those in the know pointed at me, saying to each other: 'There goes the chap who knows Javanese.' In bookshops, grammarians consulted me about the position of the pronouns in that Sunda Islands jargon. I received letters from scholars from other parts of the country, newspapers mentioned my knowledge and I refused to accept a group of students who were thirsty to learn Javanese. After an invitation from the editorial staff, I wrote a four-column article about ancient and modern Javanese literature in the *Jornal do Comércio*...

"How could you, if you knew nothing?" the attentive Castro interrupted me.

"Very simple: first, I described the island of Java, with the help of dictionaries and a few geography books, and then I quoted everything I could."

"Didn't they ever suspect?" my friend asked me.

"Never. That is, there was one time I was almost caught. The police arrested a man, a sailor, a bronzed fellow who only spoke a weird foreign language. A number of interpreters were called, nobody could understand him. I was called, too; naturally, with all the respect due to my wisdom. I took some time to go, but I finally went. The man had already been released, thanks to the intervention of the Dutch consul, to whom he had made himself understood through a few words of Dutch. And the sailor was Javanese – phew!

"The Congress finally came, and off I went, to Europe. What a delight! I attended the opening and the preparatory sessions. They had signed me up for the Tupi-Guarani session and I decamped to Paris. Before that, however, I had my portrait and some biographical and bibliographical notes printed in the *Basel Messenger*. When I returned, the congress president apologized for having put me in that session; he didn't know my work and thought that, because I was Brazilian, I would naturally fit into the Tupi-Guarani session. I accepted his explanations and, to this day, have still not been able to write my papers on Javanese to send him, as promised.

"When the congress was over, I had extracts from the *Basel Messenger* article published in Berlin, Turin and Paris, where the readers of my work offered me a banquet, hosted by Senator Gorot. This whole nonsense cost me a great deal,

including the banquet: about ten thousand francs, almost my entire inheritance from the simple, good Baron of Jacuecanga.

"I wasted neither my time nor my money. I became the pride of the nation and, as I landed on Pharoux dock, I received an ovation from every level of society. A few days later, the president of the republic invited me to have lunch with him.

"In six months, I was sent to the consulate in Havana, where I was stationed for six years and where I will return to perfect my studies of Malayan, Melanesian and Polynesian languages.

"That is fantastic", observed Castro, as he picked up the glass of beer.

"Listen, if I weren't so happy, do you know what would I be?"

"What?"

"An eminent bacteriologist. Shall we go now?"

"Let's."

Gazeta da Tarde, Rio. 28-4-1911.

The other

Rubem Fonseca

Every day I would go to my office at 8:30 a.m. The car would stop in front of the building, I would hop out, take ten or fifteen steps and walk into the building.

Like all businessmen, I spent the mornings making phone calls, reading memos, dictating letters to my secretary and increasingly getting exasperated with problems. By lunchtime, I had already worked very hard. But, I always had the feeling I hadn't done anything useful.

I would take an hour for lunch, sometimes an hour and a half, at one of the restaurants in nearby; then I went back to the office. On some days, I would speak on the phone more than fifty times. There were so many letters that my secretary or one of my assistants would sign them for me. And, at the end of the day, I always had the impression that I hadn't done everything I was supposed to do. I raced against time. I was annoyed when there was a mid-week holiday, since it meant I would have even less time. I took work home daily, where I could produce more; the phone didn't ring so often.

One day I started to feel a strong palpitation. Coincidentally, on the same day, as I was arriving at work in the morning, a fellow appeared right at my side on the street. He walked along with me up to the door saying, "Mister, mister, I wonder if you could help me?" I gave him some change and went into the building. A bit later, when I was on a call to São Paulo, my heart took off. For some minutes, it pounded hard, leaving me exhausted. I had to lie down on the sofa until it slowed down. I was dizzy, sweating heavily, I almost fainted.

On that same afternoon, I went to a cardiologist. He ran detailed tests, including an electrocardiogram, and, finally said that I needed to lose some weight and

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