

THE MAN WHO KNEW JAVANESE

by Lima Barreto

In a confectioner's shop (1) the other day, I was telling my friend Castro how I have to trick convictions and observed respectabilities to be able to make a living.

Once, when I was living in Manaus (2), I even had to hide my professional degree to win the clients trust; in time they flocked to my wizard and sorcerer's office — I was telling him that.

My friend listened to me quietly, admiring my experienced Gil Blas existence, when during a conversational pause, the glasses having been emptied, he commented:

"You've had quite a life, Castelo!"

"It's the only way to live... to have a single occupation, to go to work in the morning, come back in the evening... it's boring, don't you think? I can't imagine how I have been able to stand it at the Consulate!"

"Yes, it must be boring; but that's not what bothers me. I wonder how you've been able to have so many adventures here, in this idiotic, bureaucratic Brazil."

"Don't be so surprized! A lot can happen to you right here. Will you believe it? I was even a teacher of Javanese, once!"

"When was that? Here, after you returned from the Consulate?"

(1) Confectioner's shop — *confeitaria*: basically a bakery; however, in some cases, people gather around a counter and drink beer and *pinga*.

(2) Manaus: Capital of the state of Amazonas.

"No, before. What's more, I got my job at the Consulate because of it."

"No! How did that happen? Have some more beer."

We senta for amother bottle, refilled our glasses and I continued:

"I had just arrived in Rio and I was literally broke. I had fled from one boarding house to another, unable to find a job, when I read the following advertisement in the **Jornal do Comércio**."

"Needed: A JAVANESE TEACHER. Send letters of reference, etc." I said to myself: "There is a position that won't have too many takers. If I could understand a few words of Javanese, I'd apply." I went out of the coffee shop already imagining myself a Javanese teacher, making lots of money, riding in the street car, avoiding unhappy meetings with the **cadáveres** (3). Unsuspectingly, I found myself inside the public library. I didn't really know what book I was going to ask for; nevertheless, I went in, gave my hat to the doorman, received the stub and started to climb the stairs. It occurred to me on the way to ask for the **Grande Encyclopédia**, volume J and look up the article on Java and the Javanese language. It worked! In a few minutes, I knew that Java was a big island of the Sonda archipelago, now a Dutch colony. (4) I learned that Javanese, an agglutinative language of the Malayo-Polynesian family has had a notable literature written in characters derived from the old Hindu alphabet. The **Encyclopédia** gave a list of books for further reading and I consulted one of them immediately. I copied the alphabet and its phonetic transcription and left. I wondered the streets that afternoon walking aimlessly chewing up letters.

Hieroglyphics danced in my brain. From time to time, I'd look at my notes. I'd go to the park and trace those strange looking chrartus in the sand to keep them in my head more easily and to get used to writing them.

To avoid the night watchman's indiscreet questions, I waited for the evening to go into the boarding house. As soon as I could, I went up to my room and commenced swallowing

(3) *Cadáveres*: a slang expression common in Rio de Janeiro meaning bill collectors.

(4) Dutch Colony: This short story was written in 1920.

away my Malayan a-b-c's; I did it with such vehemence that by morning I knew it all by heart.

I sold myself on the idea that this was the easiest language in the world to learn and went out. However, not as early as I had wished, for I couldn't avoid meeting the man in charge of the room rent:

"Senhor Castelo, when are you going to pay your bill?" I answered him with a face filled with gleaming hope:

"Soon... Wait a little while... Be patient... I just got a job as a Javanese teacher and..."

Before I could finish, the man interrupted me:

"What in the world is that, Senhor Castelo?"

I enjoyed the joke and proceeded to invest on the man's patriotism:

"It's a language spoken close to Timor.

Do you have any idea where that is?"

Oh, simple soul! The man forgot all about my overdue bill and told me in a strong Portuguese accent:

"No, I don't, senhor Castelo. I hear it's a colony we have close to Macau. And do you really know that language, senhor Castelo?"

Elated over the good turn Javanese had done me, I turned once more to the advertisement. I decided to propose myself as a teacher of that oceanic idiom. I drafted the letter of acceptance; then, I went to the newspaper office to leave it. Afterwards, I went back to the library to resume my Javanese studies. I didn't make much progress that day. Maybe I felt that the alphabet was the only knowledge required of a Javanese teacher, or perhaps, I was too engrossed reading up on the bibliography and library history of the language I was going to teach.

Two days later I received a letter stating that I was to go to the home of Dr. Manuel Feliciano Soares Albernaz, Baron of Jacuecanga, Rua Conde de Bonfim, I can't recall the house number. You should keep in mind that all this time I kept on studying Malayan, that is Javanese. Besides the alphabet, I knew the names of a few authors; I could say, "How are

you?", knew two or three gramatical rules, all this imbedded with about twenty words of vocabulary.

You can't imagine how hard it was for me to get money for the bus fare! It's easier, you may be sure, to learn Javanese. . . I walked. I arrived in a sweat. The old mango-trees standing in a file in front of the baron's house, received, harbored and rejuvenated me with maternal affection. It was the first time in all my life I felt nature's sympathy. . .

It was an enormous house, deserted looking and illkept. I had the idea, somehow, that it was that way more from a certain carelessness and weariness of living, rather than from its owner's poverty. The house hadn't been painted for years. The walls were peeling away; the eaves made up of those old fashioned glassy tiles, some of which were missing, looked more like decaying or illkept false teeth.

I looked briefly at the garden. I noticed how the flatsedge coreopsis had expelled the caladium and begonias with vindictive strenght. The leaf crotons continued to bloom, however, with their purplish levae. I knocked. It was awhile before anybody came. Finally, an aged African Negro came to the door. His cotton beard and hair gave his appearance a pungent air of antiqueness, sweetness and suffering.

In the parlor there were a number of portraits, arrogant gentlemen with curling beards stood on file, each encircled by gigantic golden frames. Sweet ladies in profile, their hair in bangs, stood with huge fans, seeming to want to ascend in the air puffed up by their round, baloon dresses. Out of the whole furniture, to which the dust gave more antiquity and respect, what impressed me most was a big, beautiful, porcelain Chinese vase. The purity of the material, its fragility, the ingeniousness of its contour and opaque moonlight brightness, appeared to have been created dreamingly by a child's hands for the enchantment of disillusioned old men. . .

I waited a little while for the master. He delayed an instant. Then, he came, a bit haltingly, a large handkerchief in his hand, inhaling the old fashioned snuff venerably. I watched him approach with respect. Although I wasn't sure he was my pupil to be, I felt that it would have been foul to deceive the aged old gentleman, whose ancient aspect made me think of something august and sacred. I hesitated for a moment, but finally decided to remain.

"I am," I offered, "The Javanese teacher you were looking for."

"Sit down," answered the old gentleman. "Are you from Rio?"

"No, Sir. I'm from Canavieiras."

"What?" He said. "Speak louder, I don't hear well."

"I'm from Canavieiras, Bahia," I repeated.

"Where did you go to school?"

"São Salvador."

"And where did you learn Javanese?" he asked with a certain stubbornness common to the old.

The question startled me for a moment, but I made up a story at once. I told him my father was Javanese. He had come to Bahia on a freighter. Liking it, he decided to settle there in Canavieiras as a fisherman. He married, prospered and it was with him I learned Javanese.

"Did he believe you?" asked my friend who up to that moment had remained silent. "How about your physique?"

"I'm not so very different from a Javanese" I contested. "With my thick, straight hair and bronzed skin, I could very well pass for a Malayan half-breed... You know very well that among us there're all kinds of nationalities — Indians, Malaysians, Tahitians, Madagascans, **Guanchos** (5) and even Goths. It's an amalgamation of races and types to make the whole world envy us."

"O.K.." My friend agreed. "Please, go on."

"The old gentleman, "I resumed, "listened intently and looking me over for a long while, seemed to believe that I was really the son of a Malayan. He asked me softly:"

"Well, do you really want to teach me Javanese?" The answer came automatically: "Yes."

(5) Guanchos: Old inhabitants of Tenerife, Canary Islands.

"You must be surprized, "added the Baron of Jacuecanga, that I, at my age, should still want to learn anything, but..."

"I'm not surprized at all. There're exemples, noteworthy examples..."

"What I really want, my dear senhor...?"

"Castelo, "I supplied.

"What I really want, my dear Senhor Castelo, is to fulfill an old family pleidge. I don't know whether you realize that I'm the grandson of Conselheiro Albernaz, the one who accompanied Pedro, the first, into exile, after his abdication. When he came back from London, he brought with him a book written in a strange language and which he valued very much. It had been given to him by an Indian or a Siamese in return for I don't know what favor my grandfather had done him. Before he died, my grandfather called my father to his deathbed and told him: Son, there's this book here, written in Javanese. The person who gave it to me said it would always bring its owner happiness and deliverance from evil. I don't know for certin. In any case, keep it. However, if you want the good omens prophecied by the oriental wiseman to come through, cause your son to understand it, so that our lineage may be happy." "My father," resumed the old baron, "didn't take stock in the story; nevertheless, he kept the book. Dying, he gave it to me repeating what he had promised his father. In the beginning, I hardly paid any attention to the book. I threw it away in a corner and continued to lead my own life. I even forgot it. Lately, I have gone through so much, so many misfortunes have befallen my old age, that I remembered the old family treasure. I must read and understand the book, if I want to preserve my last days from witnessing the total disaster of my posterity. To understand it, I need, of course, to learn Javanese. There you have it."

He became silent. I noticed his eyes were wet. He wiped them discreetly and asked me if I wanted to see the book. I answered affirmatively. He called for a maid, gave her the instructions and then told me he had lost all his children, nephews and nieces. Only one married daughter still lived. Out of her numerous offspring, only one child survived, a frail, weak child of uncertain health.

The maid brought us the book. It was as old, large volume, presented in an old fashioned quarto, bound in leather and printed in huge letters on yellow, thick paper. The title page was missing and as a result, you couldn't see the date of publication. It had a preface written in English. It said that the book contained the stories of Prince Kalunga, a Javanese writher of great renown.

I told all this to the baron. Unsuspecting that I had read all this in the English preface, he was very impressed with my knowledge of Malayan. I looked through its pages with the look of one who is perfectly acquainted with all that gibberish, til finally, we agreed on how much I was going to charge for the lessons and the time the classes were to be given.

I promised the old gentleman that he would be reading the book in a year's time.

Soon afterwards, I gave him the first lesson. The old man wasn't as diligent as I. He couldn't learn to identify or write out even four letters of the alphabet. In short, at the end of a month, he knew only half of the alphabet. And not too well. He'd learn it, but soon after he'd forget it again.

His daughter and son-in-law (up that time, they hadn't heard of the book) learned of the man's studies, but regarded it lightly. They thought thy would amuse the ol man.

You will be surprized, my dear Castro, to hear of the admiration his son-in-law had for the Javanese teacher. "Such talent!" he'd say many times over. "What a wonder! And so young! If I knew all that, where wouldn't I be now."

Dona Maria da Glória's husband (for that was the name of the baron's daughter) was a well known judge, a powerful man of great prestige. Even so, he would tell all his acquaintances of the admiration he had for my Javanese. On the other hand, the old baron was very pleased. He gave up learning Javanese after two months. He begged me to translate a section of the magic book every other day. It would be enough to understand it, he told me. Someone could translate it and he'd listen. This way he avoided the trouble of studying it, but would fulfill his pledge, nevertheless.

You know very well that even now I know nothing whatever about Javanese. I would make up some prety foolish

stories and pass them off on the old man as being really from the old chronicle. How enraptured he listened to all that foolishness! . . .

He'd become ecstatic, as if he were listening to an angel's song. Every day, I'd grow more in his regard! Thus; I lived the good life.

He invited me to come and live in his house, covered me with presents, even increased my salary.

What contributed toward all this affection was the fact that a distant relative, whose existence he had never heard of, left him a large sum of money. The good old man felt that this lucky event could be explained only by the Javanese book. I almost believed it myself.

As time went by, I became less remorseful. Nevertheless, I was always afraid that I'd meet someone who knew that Malayan language. I really became frightened when the baron sent me with a letter of recommendation to the Visconde de Caruru. I was to enter the diplomatic service. I tried to dissuade him I was ugly, uncouth, clumsy and Philipinean in appearance. "That's no problem," he used to say. "Go, my boy. Remember, you know Javanese!" So, I went. The vicount sent me to the Foreign Service Department with several recommendations. I was a huge success.

The director called the department heads: "Look at this, here is a man who knows Javanese — what a find!"

The department heads introduced me to their officers and clerks. One of these looked at me more with hate than wonder or envy. They all said, "Do you really know Javanese? Is it difficult? Nobody knows it here!"

The clerk who had looked at me with disdain came to my rescue, "Yes, nobody knows it here; but, I know **canaque**. (6) Do you know it?" I told him I didn't and went to the secretary's office."

The secretary got up, placed his hands on his hips, adjusted the **pince-nez** on his nose and asked, "So you really know Javanese?" I told him I did and in answer to his asking me where I had learned it, I told him the story of my Javanese

(6) **Canaque**: According to *Larousse*, a language spoken by the inhabitants of New Caledonia and other islands of the Pacific.

father." Well, "the minister told me, "You shouldn't go into the Diplomatic Service. You don't have the right physique. . . . The ideal would be a Consulate somewhere in Asia or Oceania. There's no opening now, but I'm going to switch things around a bit and you'll get a post. Meanwhille, you'l be attached to my office. I want you to go to Bali next year to represent Brazil in a linguistic congress. Study, read up on Hovelacque, Max Muler and others!"

Imagine! I knew nothing about Javanese, but I had a job and I was going to represent Brazil in a scholarly congress.

The old man eventually died; he left the book to his son-in-law with the recommendation that it be given to his grandson when he was old enough to understand. He left me a legacy in his will.

I devoted myself to the study of the maleo-polynesean languages, but to no avail! Eating, sleeping and dressing well, I didn't have the necessary desire to let any of that sink into my head. I bought several books, subscribed to such specialized periodicals as the *Revue Anthropologique et Linguistique*, the *Proceeding of the English Oceanic Association*, *Archivo Glottologico Italiano*, but nothing helped. Yet, all along my reputation increased. People who met me on the street would say, "There goes the man who knows Javanese." Grammarians would come to me in the book stores to inquire the pronoun position in the jargon of the island of Sonda. I'd get letters from scholars living in the interior, newspapers would write special articles about me and once I even refused a group of students who wanted to learn Javanese at any price. I was invited by the editor-chief of the *Jornal do Comércio* to write a four column article on the classical and modern Javanese literature.

"How could you, since you knew nothing about it?" asked the enthralled Castro.

"It was easy. First, I described the island of Java with the help of dictionaries and a few geography textbooks. Then, I quoted extensively."

Didn't they ever doubt you?" asked my friend.

"Never", I said. "That is, once, they almost caught me. The police brought in a fellow, a bronzed type who spoke only a strange language nobody knew. They called several inter-

preters, but no one was able to understand the poor chap. They called me in with all due respect to my high erudition, of course. I stalled for a while, but it couldn't be helped. Fortunately, the fellow had been set free after the Dutch Consul, to whom he had spoken a few Dutch words, intervened; I found out later, he was really Javanese, uf!"

At last, the time of the congress arrived and I went to Europe. It was grand!!! I attended the opening ceremony and the preliminaries. I was enrolled in the Tupi-Guarani language section. Then, I took off for Paris. Not before, however, I had my picture taken and published along with my biography and curriculum vitae in **The Bali Messenger**. When I returned, the congress chairman apologized for having placed me in the Tupi-Guarani section; he hadn't read my publications and since I was an American Brazilian, he thought I was a specialist in that area. I accepted his apology. Its really a pity I still haven't written those works on Javanese I promised to send him.

I published excerpts from the article appearing in **The Bali Messenger** in the most important papers of Turin and Paris. When the congress ended, my Parisian admirers offered me a luncheon presided over by Senator Gorot. Counting luncheon and all, the whole thing must have cost me about ten thousand francs, almost the whole amount inherited from the credulous, kind Baron of Jacuencanga.

It was money adn time well spent! Overnight, I became a national celebrity. When I came ashore in the Pharoux dock, I was welcomed and acclaimed by all the social classes. A few days later, the President of the Republic invited me to have lunch with him.

Within six months I was sent as consul to Havana. There I remained for five years. I plan to go back, for I must complete my studies on the Malayan, Polynesian and Melanesian languages.

"It's fantastic!" Observed Castro taking a hold of his glass of beer.

"You know. If I weren't so happy, do you know what I would do right now?"

"What?"

"I'd be a famous bacteriologist. Shall we go?"

"Let's."