

N.V.M.

THE BAMBOO DANCERS

GONZALEZ

Filipino Literary Classics

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THRIFTBOOKS





THE MASTER of the *Capitan Tiago*, a fat little man in his fifties, preferred the *camisa de chino* to the standard ship captain's uniform, and he liked his dinner served outside his cabin. For this purpose, the steward cleared the dining table and spread at one end a yellow table cloth. On this he set a bottle of beer, a bowl of roasted peanuts, and an empty glass.

"Anyone joining me here?" the captain boomed.

For audience, he had the thirty-odd first-class passengers dozing in their cots and the few who were up and about like me. I had installed Rosa in the third-class section, which was far out astern, where she hugged her knees under a grey flannel blanket and dozed.

"Beer, partner. How about beer?" the master asked me directly.

I observed that he addressed just about everybody "partner", a concession—as Pepe himself had shown at the airport—to his sense of brotherhood with the whole



world. To humor the captain, I joined him at the table, helping myself to some of the peanuts.

Perhaps he had noticed the hotel stickers on my bags; perhaps he saw it in the gray dacron-cord pants I was wearing, for he said:

"So you've just come from America, partner?"

"Oh, well, yes," I admitted.

"I've been on the *ultra mar* myself." He gave the name of a freighter, the *Santa Monica* I think it was, on which he had served as second mate.

"For how long?" I asked.

"Five years, partner."

"And you couldn't stand the long voyages?"

"It was mainly the cold, partner. Oh, that winter—cold in the high seas," he said.

"But it must have been an education, I'm sure."

"Education? Let me tell you something, partner," he began excitedly, as if I had unwittingly touched off a subject he was rather sanguine about. "There are only three things in education—*la cabeza, la corazon, y el otro!*"

The switch to Spanish reminded me of Herb looking at the *tinikling* dancers and throwing Spain into that lilting music. In the fat little shipmaster's case, I suspected Spain was a professional prop. It set him down as a person of character, whatever that was.

"It's the combination of the training of head, heart, and the other that really matters. That's why I left the high seas," he continued. "It gave much too much training in the wrong places. My heart and head and the other—"



yes, the other, especially, was getting too much education, partner." He was loud in a boorish way but it somehow became him.

"Look, Cap," I said, striking up a familiar tone, "you made some money overseas, I'm sure."

"Did I, you think? To get all that education? It's here where the fortune is, partner. Think of it, I've opened up two ports of call in Sipolog—San Jose and Dias."

"We live near Dias," I said.

"You'll remember how Dias was three years back, before this ship began to stop there regularly. It's a changed town now. Honestly, partner, I think I'm responsible for the change—the progress."

"You surely must have brought progress to Dias," I said to humor him even more. "For the extra business," I asked, "does the company pay you extra too?"

"Ten percent, partner," he said.

By this time his dinner was ready. The cabin boy set it elaborately for him—with the ketchup bottle, salt, and pepper shakers and a toothpick-container.

How I managed to leave him to his steak and fried fish and bananas, I don't know. But I succeeded in the enterprise somehow, and before he got around to dessert—the cabin boy brought a can of guava jelly, too—he was expounding on "the heart, the head, and the other" before yet another captive listener.

THERE IS a pleasant and steady vibration that engines make and a rhythmic wash of the water over the ship's side that invites sleep. To me, these make sea voyages extremely delightful. I had seven hours of something like near-bliss, every minute a soothing balm to the nerves. I slept a good half of that time, waking up to another quiet world. Over the ship's side the floodlights revealed a pier. It was past midnight, and we had anchored at Talim harbor.

By eight the next morning we reached San Roque, the main port of Sipolog. The voyage from Talim had been as smooth as that from Manila, but Rosa had got seasick and now looked pale and weak. She would not eat the breakfast served by the ship's mess for third-class passengers, which consisted of dried fish, rice and coffee. I hoped she was not thinking that she should have gone by bus in the first place.

"You would rather take the bus to Dias from here?" I asked.

Two red buses were waiting for passengers at the far rump of the pier. "You'll reach Dias in six hours. From Dias, you can walk two kilometers down the beach to get home."

This suggestion must have redeemed me in her estimation. She hastily gathered her things and followed me down the companion way to the lower deck and down the gangplank, and then we walked past huge piles of copra and lumber laid out on the dock. Outside the pier enclosure were several makeshift restaurants,



and we stopped at the first one on the row. There I bought Rosa a cup of coffee and some bread.

"You'll be hungry if you don't eat," I said, also ordering a cup of coffee for myself.

Then we walked over to the bus. I bought her a ticket and saw her safely installed in one of the forward seats. By six that evening she'd be home. The *Capitan Tiago*, though, would not get to Dias towards ten that evening. She would certainly be home ahead of me.

"You'll be all right," I told Rosa. "Ask Mother to send someone over to meet me with a horse."

The other bus passengers gave me a queer look as I spoke to her, or so I felt. It was a long time since I had treated, or spoken to anyone, with such kindness.

"Just see that you don't lose your ticket," I said with a little gruffness now, which was more like how I wanted to sound.

THE HORSE materialized that evening from out the darkness. It was a wet, sticky darkness. Rain met the ship as she swung out beyond Dumall Point and never quite left us from then on. Three hours later, though it had considerably lessened, you could still see the rain quiet clearly in the floodlights hung over the ship's side to provide illumination for the stevedores and their dinghies.

The rain was stringy like confetti, I thought, sitting on top a heap of cargo that had been piled onto the dinghy. The light from the ship followed us a short distance, and looking back I saw the master at the bridge gazing at the area and the sound of little waves on the shore grew distinct, and indeed louder, as we approached. Lanterns hung ahead; and the dinghy struck gravel, and people were jumping off and wading waist-deep in the water.

"Idrus!" I shouted, recognizing one of the men with the lanterns. "Have you brought a horse?" He had been working as a farm hand with us for as far back as I could remember.

How I got to dry land I don't know. People crowded all around the little boat, which rocked with the breakers pounding down the length of the shore and bounced each time its keel struck bottom. I held on to my fishing-rod case, which, I thought, could very well get lost or get broken under the circumstances. And then somebody offered to carry me off across the water on to dry ground. There was Idrus waiting, holding the lantern high up over his head. In a minute, he had brought my bag and loaded it on to a carabao sled. All this he did while he held up that lantern with one hand and I could see his legs as well as his head and shoulders. He was bowlegged and had spread-out toes. His face was that of a happy boy.

"Are you ready?" he said.

"Where's the horse?"



"A few hundred yards from here."

"Did Rosa get home safely?"

"She's probably done with her supper now," Idrus assured me.

THE SLED runners grated in the sand. With Idrus on its back, the carabao lumbered along, a black hulk in the darkness, like a huge lump of the night moving. To our right, two miles across the water, the *Capitan Tiago* rode at anchor, a castle against the sky with a great feast or a wedding progress.

Either the horse knew me (I was vain enough to think so) or it was just plain spirited, but no sooner had I mounted the saddle than it broke into a gallop.

Idrus shouted: "Be careful!"—and the horse became more wild. "There's the mangrove swamp ahead, remember!" Idrus shouted at the top of his voice.

Pebbles scattered all along the path; they sounded like hailstones on corrugated iron roofing. Before long I was in cold sweat and, in my panic, I let the reins loose. This made the horse run faster, breaking twigs and slushing over pandan leaves.

And I had not become too much of a stranger not to know it when the horse came to the stand of mangrove trees. They were dead trees, I remembered now. Gnarled trunks and branches strewn all over, all along the beach, I remembered. The horse now and



then knocked its knee, stumbled, struggling through the soft mud and thus breaking the rhythm of its gallop. I held on to its mane, which was long and thick. Bending low that way I avoided the branches overhead. The horse, too, sweated profusely and I could feel my calves moist, the sweat having soddened my dacron-cord pants.

We came to the pebbled road that led to the coconut grove and now the horse switched on to an easy trot. A light shimmered through the leaves and I tried to check the horse, but it broke into another gallop instead, certain that the house was just a little way ahead. It was all I could do to avoid falling.

I slipped off the saddle at last in order to lead the horse through the narrow gate. Someone was holding up a lantern so I could see my way.

It was Father. The lantern light fell on his face, and it was an old man's face. All through my days in America, in a hundred old men's faces I had met in parks, restaurants, and other places, I had seen Father's face. That was perhaps the reason why I had dreaded meeting those old men and old women. Now the meaning of that fear was clear.

The lantern light was not too bright; the resin-yellow flame flickered in the thick and fat and sooty chimney that enclosed it. But behind that light, a little to one side, was Father's face. He held the lantern steadily, and he looked happy.