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author Anselm Oelze

title WALLACE

original title WALLACE

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English sample translation

translated by Simon Pare

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contact Schöffling & Co.
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstraße 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
Germany

www.schoeffling.de

Prologue

In which a bearded Englishman waits for the mail steamer on a small island in the Moluccas in the spring of 1858, loads crates with strange contents on board and receives a letter

It was high noon when the *Koningin der Nederlanden* entered the bay. The freshly painted white planks of its hull glistened in the bright sunshine which had stood at its zenith since early morning, bludgeoning everything below the green slopes of the great volcano that loomed above the tiny island into a sluggish and sleepy calm. The only movement over the dusty harbour, a loose collection of palm-roofed huts and wooden shacks on the edge of a stone-buttressed, board-topped pier, was a restless flickering of the air.

Despite the pealing of the ship's bell, which wafted ashore on the wind, there were no discernible signs of disquiet, let alone movement, yet. The gaunt, bearded Englishman was alone as he paced up and down between towers of crates large and small. He had been waiting like this for a good half an hour, ever since he had spied the steamer approaching from the northern horizon.

Now, as the *Koningin* made to come in alongside the breakwater, he removed the wire-rimmed spectacles from his nose, rubbed his small, reddened eyes and watched, squinting, as the narrow-beamed ship's great paddlewheels juddered and ceased to rotate. He held one hand horizontally over his eyes to shade them from the dazzling white sides of the boat. The sun's rays nevertheless filtered easily through the gaps between his skinny fingers, dappling his pale face, which was marked by the bouts of fever he had suffered in recent weeks.

Gruff calls rang out from the bridge of the ship, there was a flurry of orders and the Malay mate in his ochre pantaloons beat the brass clapper so loudly and so energetically against the gleaming bell that it threatened to break free of its mounting.

The first bystanders and day labourers were now gathering on the mole. They yelled and laughed until eventually every last dozing Moluccan appeared at the doors of their palm-fringed huts, spotted the ship and trundled towards the pier.

The bearded man observed these goings-on with a satisfied expression. He was glad that life had, for an hour or so, finally enlivened the village's slumbering limbs. For that one hour at least, he would be able to enjoy the sensation that he was in the most vibrant spot on the entire globe and not at its very end, here on the periphery of this godforsaken archipelago.

Inserting his fingers between his chapped lips, he whistled to a flat-nosed servant, pointed to the crates and offered him three coins to carry them aboard. The flat-nosed man was about to haggle this wage up by another couple of coins when a young lad came running towards the bearded man from the ship.

'For you, mister! For you!' the lad called in a shrill voice, waving a knotted bundle of letters.

'For you, mister! For you!' he repeated and, with a beaming smile, handed the letters to the bearded man.

The man took the parcel, dug a coin out of his pocket, gave it to the messenger and began to untie the string holding the bundle together. The mere sight of the sender's name on the uppermost envelope brought a twinkle to his previously dull eyes. In his excitement he adjusted the spectacles on his nose and studied the post stamps at length.

The flat-nosed man was still waiting patiently at his side. Realizing that the bearded man had forgotten all about him, he initially began to scrape the sand with short, jerky movements of his foot before expelling the contents of his sinus cavities with a powerful snort. When none of this had any effect, he tapped him on the shoulder.

The bearded man glanced up, gave him to understand that he had the choice of taking the job for three coins or departing with no coins at all, and returned to his letters.

The flat-nosed man was already cursing himself for having entered into the thin Englishman's service as he began to haul the first crate along the railing-less gangway. Compared with the hard toil he had agreed to, it would have been almost relaxing to help to load the assembled sacks of cloves onto the ship's stern or, even better, to unload the cargo the *Koningin* was scheduled to leave on the island — namely, a few crates of bootleg distilled juniper spirit, a goat from the neighbouring atoll and the bundle of mail already presented to the bearded man. Instead, he was now carting heavy, bulky crates whose cargo he had thought utterly absurd when he found out about them several days ago.

At first, nothing but rumours had circulated regarding the contents of the bearded man's crates. Rusty tools, some declared; pickled foodstuffs, said others. Certainty had been established only after a fruit merchant known throughout the island, who had a long black hair sprouting from a mole on his chin, had taken advantage of a hasty toilet stop by the bearded man to pick the locks securing the crates with a heavily bent nail and report on their contents in exchange for a small but not insignificant fee. He revelled in the impatience and curiosity of his every listener and hadn't the slightest intention of revealing his knowledge of the wondrous crates' innermost secrets too quickly.

He began with a detailed description of the extremely special lock mechanism (which, though not particularly special per se, could easily have fooled an untrained eye), proceeded from there to an exposition on locks and keys in general (now this *was* new to most of the bystanders, since they were accustomed to either not locking their huts at all or only with a few loops of string woven from palm fibres) and concluded his foreword with a positively philosophical observation on the birth of locks from the spirit of mutual distrust. How on earth he was supposed to make the leap from this to the actual subject — the contents of the crates — was a mystery not just to himself but also to his listeners, yet he found an elegant and gripping solution to this problem by pausing, pulling the hair sprouting from his mole taut, releasing it and waiting until it had sprung back to its original coiled position. Now he came to the point.

‘Beetles,’ was the first word he uttered, and ‘beetles’ was the second too. These first and second words caused a tremor of disillusionment to run through the crowd and as this risked veering into disappointment among some of his audience, he hastily ventured a third word to add to the first two. This third word, awaited with even greater suspense than the previous two, was ‘butterflies’. Beetles and butterflies, he explained; those were what lay at the top of the crates, each one impaled on a fine pin (it was this information that brought a glow of satisfaction back to the faces of at least some of his listeners), packed in boxes and wrapped in thin paper — not all of one size, shape and colour, though, but of every imaginable colour, size and shape (here, his audience swiftly agreed that insects of whichever shape, colour or size were meant to be fried, not wrapped up).

After this, he once more pinched the solitary hair on his chin, pulled it out to its full length again and announced that whosoever wished to hear what lay under the beetles and butterflies should now gather round, albeit only after disbursing an appropriate surcharge.

He considered this supplement to be more than justified, he explained, for not only had his unauthorized exploration of the depths of the crates taken particular skill but almost cost him his freedom (this was, naturally, an exaggeration because while the fruit merchant was rummaging through his crates, the bearded man was far from returning from the makeshift latrine, which consisted only of a pit with a bamboo tube laid across it and a liana serving as a rope to clutch while performing one’s business; for days he had been tormented by nasty diarrhoea). Since his listeners were unaware of this fact, however, every single one of them fished a coin from the innermost fold of his long, baggy trousers, handed it to the fruit merchant, who was still pinching the hair between his thumb and forefinger, and waited spellbound to hear what really lay deep inside those crates.

This time, though, the fruit merchant did not release his chin hair as he prepared to make his statement, sucking in air through his tiny nostrils and opening his mouth. Instead, he clasped it tightly between his fingers and, more

inadvertently than intentionally, tugged on it as the decisive word escaped his lips: ‘Chickens.’ Both the audience and the fruit merchant were startled by this utterance: the fruit merchant because he suddenly realized that he would now have to get by without a single facial hair, and the listeners because they were deeply unsettled by the thought of dead fowl packed into wooden crates. What shocked them was not the lifeless state of the animals; they were actually far more distressed by the fact that someone could in all seriousness come up with the idea of slaughtering chickens and transporting them in crates. That made no sense whatsoever. It had not escaped the majority of the islanders’ attention that the bearded Englishman had spent his first weeks on the island busily procuring chickens from its most remotest corners, but no one had considered that he would one day ship them instead of guzzling their eggs raw or stewing their meat in a clove sauce.

This was, however, the naked truth — *if*, that is, one believed the descriptions of the fruit merchant who, having finished his account and clutching the frizzy hair between his fingers, wandered off along the harbour town’s only street. The flat-nosed servant saw no reason to doubt the merchant’s story, and he was less annoyed about the large sum he had paid to hear it than for the paltry wage the bearded man was paying him to load the pointless cargo on to the ship.

After stowing the first two crates below deck, he wandered down the gangplank, sat down on a stone on the pier and watched the screeching black-headed gulls wheeling over the quayside, desperate to deprive the lurching sailors of a few morsels of chicken breast. A few white-grey puffs of cloud converged around the summit of the volcano, hung there, coalesced into a cluster and enveloped the peak in a hazy veil.

The bearded man was still standing some distance away, clasping the mail in his hands. He paid no attention to the flat-nosed man’s slipshod work ethic. His sole concern was to get to the last envelope as quickly as possible. It had originally been at the top, but anticipating the special character of its contents, the bearded

man treated reading it as he might have a delicious serving of lamb after months of dieting: he kept it until last.

In all his years of travelling, he had grown accustomed to receiving post from home only every few months from one of the rare ships plying the archipelago's seas. This mail generally included several copies of English newspapers that had suffered greatly during the long journey, but nonetheless conveyed a vague impression of events at home and in the rest of the world over the past two or three months. In addition, the bundle usually included the most recent editions — at the time of sending — of scientific journals, but their findings were not infrequently outdated by the time they arrived. And last but not least, the mail brought him the usual news from friends and relatives, along with enquiries about his health and his scheduled return date. He always gave the same answers to these two questions, although he did vary his phrasing: his health was good, despite periodic attacks of fever, and he could not say with any certainty when he would be back, since this ultimately depended on how soon his work was completed. What exactly that meant — that his work was completed — was unclear even to him, but as long as this response satisfied his correspondents, he saw no reason to search for a different one.

He set about opening the last letter with his damp fingers. His eyes were scanning the first lines before the thin, corrugated paper was even fully unfolded. He read the letter from beginning to end, then a second time, before turning his back on the quay and striding as fast as his legs would carry him up the dusty path to his poor hut. Like most other dwellings on the island, it consisted of nothing more than lashed bamboo poles and palm fronds. It measured less than ten feet in height, length and width and, battered by the daily winds, rose out of the dirty sand like a crooked tree. Several bird pelts dangled upside down from the doorway, which had never seen a door and was covered only by a thin piece of material. Long columns of red ants were bidding to reach them, but they were intercepted a long way from their goal by traps containing ginger syrup, set for this very purpose. In front of the hut, beneath a hole-ridden awning, stood a table covered

with piles of papers, sketches and books. Long pointy pins, sharp polished scalpels and strings of varying thickness and length lay in a box.

The bearded man sat down at the table, thrust the papers and books aside, sharpened a quill and began to scrawl on a sheaf of blank sheets of paper without a second's thought as to how the loading of his crates was progressing.

Meanwhile, a dainty pirogue was mooring at the quay. On board were the island's governor and a pale-faced, balding companion. A mate leapt ashore, grabbed a thin towrope and wound it carelessly around one of the bollards. The short, stout governor's belly bulged and spilled like lard from the waistband of his beige knee breeches. He wore a contented grin. Greyish smoke curled into the sky above his head from a Blue Sumatra protruding from his lips.

As soon as the pirogue had been crudely tied up, he instructed two boys to take his hands. He ordered his pale-faced companion to give him a good shove on the backside so that his arms would not be ripped from their sockets, and soon afterwards he was standing on dry land, patting the creases from his breeches and requesting another cigar.

'Come on now, come on!' he cried to the pale man and walked determinedly towards a group of Malays lounging on the jetty. He dealt a small, slight, betel-nut-chewing man such a forceful greeting blow on the back that the man choked and spluttered until tears came to his eyes, while the governor burst into gales of laughter.

The pale-faced man stood awkwardly and anxiously in the middle of the boat, which, relieved of the governor's weight, was now swaying violently from side to side. It banged repeatedly into the slippery stones of the mole, and with each blow the inadequately fastened rope loosened itself a little more from the bollard.

'Come on now, come on!' the governor repeated and reluctant to test the island's administrator's patience unduly, the pale-faced man screwed up all his courage, waited until the boat was carried as close as possible to the breakwater,

made a valiant leap for it, landing his left foot successfully on the quayside while his right foot snagged on one of the planks.

His face twisted in pain, he hobbled over to the governor, who described with his index finger a wide circle from the huts around the quayside, up the slopes of the volcano to the cloud-veiled summit and then back down to the bearded man's shack.

By now, pearls of fresh sweat were standing on the bearded man's brow, but he was so absorbed by his writing that he didn't even notice when several dripped from his forehead onto his nose, from his nose onto his beard and thence onto the paper.

Nor did he notice the small Malay man approaching his hut with nimble steps. It was only when the islander stood before him and called his name, hesitantly at first but then at steadily increasing volume, that he looked up, enquired what was going on and, letting out a quiet sigh, acknowledged the news that the governor wished to speak with him.

Chapter One

In which a book falls on nightwatchman Albrecht Bromberg's foot and history begins to take its course

It is common knowledge that even history's greatest upheavals are sparked by some trivial event. And yet, ultimately, even the most trivial event is rarely trivial enough not to have a major impact. This was indeed the case that particular morning when nightwatchman Albrecht Bromberg entered the library of the Natural and Human History Museum at around five o'clock. As always, he first turned on the light. The lamps on the tables flickered and laboured before assuming their full glow, as if someone had shaken them violently from their blissful slumbers. Bromberg groaned under his breath because, as so often, various desks were strewn with books that lazy readers had left there instead of carrying them to the designated trolley. He walked along the rows, picking up as he went an Elamite dictionary, a commentary on the *Codex Iustinianus*, a study on Denis the Carthusian's interpretation of marriage, a précis of the history of migratory birds in Central Asia, a journal about steam engines in New England, a synopsis of the four Gospels and a book with no visible inscription. Wedging these volumes under his chin, he made his way past the chairs and tables.

Just before he reached the counter — his attention wavered for no more than a split second — his right foot caught under the uneven edge of the carpet that ran the length of the reading room. Bromberg tripped, tumbled, tried to catch himself, lost his footing anyway and then went sprawling headlong on the floor as the heavy books shot off in all directions. Cursing and with aching knees, he groped for his glasses.

If someone had come up to him that precise instant to declare that this apparently insignificant stumble was to change his life, indeed not just *his* life but

others' lives and life in general, he would have dismissed such talk with a sniff before clambering to his feet and walking away.

Since the year dot — since the day Bromberg had started his job as a nightwatchman at the museum, that is — his patrols had invariably followed an identical routine. Very seldom did an unforeseen event disturb his accustomed tour. Some time ago, a weasel had worked its way into one of the cable ducts and caused a major intervention by the fire service because smoke detectors had suddenly begun to raise the alarm everywhere with no fire to be seen. It was not until the weasel greeted the bewildered museum director himself a few days later in his office and, without flinching, continued to gnaw away at a rasher of bacon the obese director had hidden in a desk drawer as relief from the strict diet to which his spouse was subjecting him, that the source of the alarm was revealed, although the director was reluctant to own up to what had tempted the weasel into his office in the first place.

Another time, a ten-year-old boy had slipped away from his class and then sat tight in the half-darkness behind a display case until the museum closed. On the stroke of midnight, when the noise of the daytime visitors had long subsided and the coast seemed completely clear, the boy had crawled out and come across the great brachiosaurus skeleton, like St George confronting the dragon, the result being that Bromberg had found him a short while later sitting on the giant dinosaur's wobbly knee and whimpering loudly like a naive kitten that has managed to climb a high tree but doesn't know how to get back down again. Every night since, when Bromberg entered the gallery with the leviathans and caught sight of the enormous reptile, he could not help thinking of the miserable and comical sight of the little boy perched there.

The gallery with its natural history collections took up the whole of the museum's west wing and was the size of a great cathedral's nave. In shape and in style too, indeed its entire structure, with its sturdy stone pillars, colourful stained-glass windows and ribbed vaulting, it resembled a church more than a museum.

When Bromberg had entered the mighty hall for the first time many years previously, he thought he saw the faces of Church Fathers, prophets, Doctors of the Church and saints on the bases of the pillars. On closer inspection, however, they turned out to be portraits of venerable secular scientists and great inventors — Aristotle, Hippocrates, Euclid, Galileo, Bacon, Newton, Leibniz, Watt, Linnaeus, Darwin and others — who now observed this hoard of odds and ends with stony expressions.

Beneath the span of the glass roof, on several floors, was a panoramic collection of the creatures the Earth had brought forth over millions of years. Poisonous vipers, bluefire jellyfish and scorpions swam in man-sized glass jars. Beside them stood stuffed sparrowhawks, vultures, finches and choughs. Half of an elephant's head had been preserved in formaldehyde, with all its hide and hair. The lifeless bodies of countless flies, dragonflies, wasps and cockroaches were exhibited in cabinets and display cases. Tiny arrow worms, bivalve larvae and crustaceans lay under magnifying glasses. The gigantic bone structures of dinosaurs shared the space with skeletonized whales, sharks and dolphins. Stone slabs containing the fossils of giant ferns had been incorporated into the floor. Life-sized replicas of pelagornis and archaeopteryx were suspended from the roof's steel struts.

During their first visit, the hunchbacked old curator shrugged off Bromberg's comment that the entire cargo of Noah's ark seemed to be gathered in this cathedral, remarking that even after centuries of collecting, comparing and categorizing, overwhelmed taxonomists still did not know even a tenth of the living things populating the Earth, meaning that the waters would have to close over the land several more times before anywhere near every species had been extracted from the darkness of the soil, the tangled thickets of the forests and the depths of the oceans and order such as that which had prevailed on the biblical vessel could be established.

The order of the objects in the museum did indeed leave much to be desired. As usual the nomenclature followed Linnaeus's proven universal scheme, but only a novice could observe any sign of systematic thinking beyond this. In truth, virtually every generation of directors had done exactly as they had seen fit when it came to organizing the exhibits.

To the museum's first director it seemed obvious to arrange living things according to the date of their creation, and he had therefore exhibited grasses, herbs and trees first, then water creatures, fish and birds, with livestock, worms and beasts of the earth next and finally humans. However, the second had bemoaned the fact that if one stuck slavishly to Holy Scripture, one might easily commit the same error as Adam, who had given names only to birds, beasts of the earth and livestock. He had therefore proposed that the smaller structure of the museum mirror the overall structure of the world, which meant that the inhabitants of the water and the soil were presented in the basement, all land creatures at ground level and, in the galleries above, anything that flew among the bushes and trees and in the air, so that no living thing was overlooked or omitted.

The third liked this vertical arrangement but wondered whether it should be the degree of perfection rather than occurrence that should define the classification. He began to display the various forms of life as if they were on the rungs of a ladder. His endeavours would never be completed, though, because a dispute broke out among the assistants about which characteristics and properties should take precedence for classification. Some argued that the honeybee's perfect construction of hexagonal honeycombs proved that it possessed a similar capacity for mathematical reasoning to humans. And others suggested that the lynx had keener eyesight than any human, thus ruling out claims that humankind was the undeniable apotheosis of creation.

The sixth director (numbers four and five had been scarred by their predecessor's quarrels and were too fearful to announce any plans of their own) saw it as his calling to be a fervent advocate of dividing geological time into eons,

eras, periods, epochs and ages. It was therefore immaterial to him whether a creature had been created on the second or third day according to holy writ, whether it lived in water, on land or in the air, and whether it possessed superior or inferior arithmetic or eyesight. What counted was when it had appeared on the Earth.

Finds from the Cambrian and Ordovician must be exhibited at the greatest possible distance from specimens dating from the Jurassic and the Cretaceous, and so he instructed his bemused collection managers to separate young from old, ensuring that his reign went down as a cataclysm in the museum's annals.

His successor caused no less of a stir when he decided to pay proper attention to creatures' geographical origins. It was not just *when* but also *where* it had appeared that was decisive or even essential, he stressed; fossilized armadillos from the pampas of South America should not end up alongside orang-utans from South-East Asia stuffed with wood wool. Not only did his order obey the natural boundaries of the continents, it also took into account whether an animal had been discovered on the northern or southern bank of the Amazon. This, he repeated incessantly, could make a huge difference, if, that is, one lent credence to the words of a clever collector from the Brazilian rainforest whose findings had recently been reported to him.

The tenth director agreed with his pre-pre-predecessor that one could not value the results of bio-geographical studies highly enough. And yet, and yet, he said, this did not release them from the scientific duty to classify living things, as had so long been customary, into kingdoms, classes, orders, families, genera and species — and if necessary, into more precise taxa such as superclasses and subclasses or partial orders. Ultimately, this system alone guaranteed a complete and consistent record of all organisms, not least because it took account of the degree of kinship — information that ought not to be withheld from any beholder of the collection. His successors did not contest this point, and yet they sighed every time an advance in scientific methodologies revealed that countless

specimens had been assigned to the wrong taxon, or if a new species or subspecies was suddenly discovered, necessitating the addition of further complex ramifications to the tree of life. The many years of noble endeavours to fashion an overview and order had therefore bequeathed a splendid chaos, and it was now left to every visitor to see order where they wished to see order, regardless of whether other people saw the same order or perceived nothing but disarray.

The administrators also struggled to cope with a surfeit of objects in the east wing of the museum, which was devoted to the history of humankind. Their storage, maintenance and evaluation was a regular source of trouble. Compared with the western part, however, there was rarely any debate about how the exhibits should be arranged. This was because, unlike natural history, the history of humankind appeared to represent the constant march of progress. Whereas apes had been swinging from trees for millions of years, humans had switched to an upright gait, subsequently invented the wheel and later such things as flying objects and had gradually spread across the globe in order, thousands of years later, to subjugate it at long last in accordance with God's command.

Naturally not every new generation of men rejected the inventions and discoveries of the previous one. The wheel, fire, money: all were still employed, and there was no prospect of an end to their use. Nevertheless, it was customary to consign to oblivion those things that were regarded as having become useless and obsolete. For this reason, not only could visitors to the museum examine increasingly refined iterations of the wheel from a bumpy, lumbering stone to a slick rubber tyre, but it was also the final resting place of rejects. Only an especially profound and lyrical spirit was able to see prehistoric man's much-derided smoke signals as the forerunner of paperless communication, or a brittle hand axe as the prototype of the assault rifle.

Bromberg had not even bothered to establish a particularly intense relationship with this hoard of objects. To him all the exhibits were alike — things that needed to be guarded and protected, but no more than that.

Every night he patrolled each wing of the building at least once to make sure that everything was as it should be. In between times, he essentially focused on three things that were intended to help him escape the routine and tedium of his nights at the museum.

The first was tending his epiphytes, of which he had developed a splendid collection over the years that commanded the respect of even the museum's wildest botanists. His charges had names like *Argentea*, *Balbisiana* and *Dorothea*, and since in the wild they grew on the branches of tall trees in the rainforest, he had lovingly crafted a small wire apparatus for each individual specimen now dangling from the ceiling of the porter's lodge. Sometimes he merely gazed at them from afar, sometime he took them carefully in his hands and occasionally he ran his finger delicately over their leaves.

The second distraction he cultivated was solving crossword puzzles. However, he did not solve the puzzles as normal people do, with a pencil and a newspaper, but in his head. He had come up with this technique not of his own volition but out of necessity. During one of his first nights at the museum, Bromberg had innocently picked up a crossword book from the table in the porter's lodge and filled in every empty box, little suspecting that this would prompt a fierce argument with the colleague to whom it belonged. Since then, he had refrained at all costs from causing further displeasure, and although he did fill out the crosswords, he did so without leaving even the tiniest trace. Often, this exercise produced monstrous word constellations that grew and grew until they threatened to swamp him, but over time he also discovered the decisive advantage of this way of solving crossword puzzles: it dispensed with the trouble of crossing out, overwriting and erasing incorrect guesses. Instead, Bromberg simply dropped any word that wouldn't fit, making room for a new one that was ideally also the correct one. If he had solved the puzzle and inserted the letters from the numbered boxes into the line with the solution, he would call the quiz hotline to announce his solution. He usually had the feeling that his words echoed unheard down the

phone line. Only once did he win a prize — a biro engraved with the words *You Play, We Pay!*

If tending his epiphytes and solving crosswords had not yet eaten up most of the night, then Bromberg would indulge in a third diversionary tactic. As with his crosswords, he tried to leave as few signs as possible of this pursuit, but in this case it wasn't his colleagues' displeasure that he feared he would provoke, but their utter incomprehension. Using a dictionary and a grammar book, he made endless vocabulary lists and detailed notes about various rules regarding the Mordvinic languages, which he had taken for some mad author's invention when he had first come across them in a small booklet of folk tales. However, after undertaking some research, he had been able to identify them as languages spoken by the inhabitants of a small autonomous republic called Mordovia, which was wedged between several oblasts along the Volga a few hundred kilometres south of Moscow. Neither of the two main Mordvinic languages, Bromberg soon discovered, possessed a word for 'to have'. And since it seemed entirely natural to him to have one thing or another, he wanted to find out what it felt like when things could not be 'had' but could only 'be with you'. Despite his best efforts, however, he soon had to confess that to him, no real emotional distinction would emerge between these two states. By the time he went down with the flu one night at the museum, he had realized that it made no difference whether you spoke of 'having' the flu or it merely 'being with you'. He nevertheless continued his reading undeterred, justifying it to himself with the thought that you do most things in life without knowing if they will turn out to be of any use.

Despite these occupations, Bromberg could not deny that his nights sometimes dragged unbearably. Not infrequently he would glance at the hand of the main clock and long for his shift to be over. Still, he did not hate his job, and if someone had asked him if he was happy, he would have replied that he didn't know what was meant by happiness. He had come to terms with his life, and he was glad if no one unduly bothered him.

On the stroke of three o'clock he would step outside the main entrance to smoke his pipe. His absolutely punctual appearance was not a coincidence but simply an additional expression of the self-imposed rigour that allowed him to derive fulfilment from his dreary task. It gave him a certain sense of satisfaction to turn up for duty at the porter's lodge not at two minutes to or three minutes past but at ten o'clock sharp, and to begin to pack his pipe not at five minutes past or ten minutes to but at three o'clock on the dot. In performing his tasks in such constant fashion, the unpleasant sensation occasionally overcame him that he had degenerated into a hopeless pedant, but he consoled himself with the thought that he was at least doing no harm to anyone but himself.

Once outside the museum, he stretched out both arms in front of him and filled his lungs with the clear night air. He liked the hours between the last noise and the first. The street that ran past the museum was generally quiet, with only the occasional taxi racing past or someone slaloming drunkenly home to bed on their bike. Bromberg's shift always finished at half past six in the morning, and the break he allowed himself at three o'clock lasted for precisely half an hour. As well as smoking his pipe, Bromberg used this time to warm his legs over the grating and play a simplified version of roulette with the tramp Henri Clochard.

Bromberg didn't know Henri's real name or even if he had a real name. He called him Henri Clochard because he always carried a bottle of wine and a glass into which he poured the wine whenever he lay or sat down somewhere. In the past, Bromberg had found Henri in one of the museum's ground-floor toilets from time to time. He had wriggled in through a improperly closed window and then lain, warm and content, in one of the cubicles, with his glass of wine resting on the cistern above his head; it was only his loud wheezing that gave him away every time. However, the toilets no longer presented a quiet hiding-place for him. Now whenever he approached, laden with tinkling bags, from a long way off he would invite Bromberg to take a coin out of his pocket. Bromberg would toss the coin into the air, Henri would guess which side it was going to land and if his prediction turned out to be correct, he got to keep the coin; if not, it went back into

Bromberg's pocket. They had been playing this game since their very first meeting, and because each participant had a fifty per cent chance of winning, they both considered the deal more than fair. When Henri won, he would call out each time triumphantly at the top of his voice that he definitely wouldn't be coming back because now he was a made man and was going to retire on his newfound wealth. So far, though, not one night had passed without him reappearing, and Bromberg was the last man to resent Henri's presence, as their quick-fire game never failed to raise his spirits before he had to go back into the museum.

Every night after smoking his pipe he did his tour of inspection of the library. This night too Bromberg would have completed it without any fuss had he not tripped over the reading room's uneven carpet. And so now he stood there under the high cupola, rubbing his sore knees and fuming at himself and his carelessness and even more, much more, at the existence of the carpet.

He bent down to pick up one of the books that had flown off in all directions as he fell, then paused as the two men's eyes met his. The younger of the two stood beside his older, bearded companion, legs slightly apart, his right hand on his hip and his left hand on the back of the chair. His demeanour was calm, his gaze focused. The bearded man's right knee was resting on the velvet cushion, and in a perfect mirror image of the younger man's pose, his right hand was holding the back of the chair and his left was on his hip. Both men were gaunt and wearing dazzling white trousers over freshly polished black shoes. Dark, closely fitting coats, a bit like smocks, hung from their shoulders, and good-quality single-breasted waistcoats with wide lapels over white shirts peeped out from under them.

The younger man's throat was adorned with a black bow, his cheeks and chin were clean shaven, apart from a neat, narrow strip he had left on his upper lip, lending him a somewhat smarmy look. The older man's neck was invisible because his full beard curled out profusely in all directions. On his nose was a pair of metal-rimmed spectacles, and on his head a round bowler hat with an upturned

brim. The younger man's head was covered not by a hat but by a sort of cap, which made him look a bit ridiculous. It did not have a brim and was very crumpled, as if someone had smacked him on the head. This did not appear to bother him, but the eyes of the bearded man at his side twinkled mischievously and a knowing grin tugged at his lips.

He was grinning at Bromberg too, but Bromberg was not in the mood for grinning. His knees were still hurting, and his only desire was to get out of that library as quickly as possible in order to spend the last few hours of his shift as peacefully as possible. So without another glance at the two men, he snapped the book shut, picked up the other volumes and carried them to the counter. He ran his eyes once last time over the large room — and turned out the lights.

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