

Little colloquium in Goa

Look, Ruano, my dear friend...But you're not watching! Your king is locked up, surrounded by his guards. He'll never get away. A knight, very surprised at his sudden good fortune, forces his way through and it's the end of a long reign..

With a light touch of his index finger, Garcia da Orta, my host in this foreign land, a medical and botany colleague, pushes my king once again, who falls down noisily on the wooden chess-board. I tried to look surprised and annoyed at the same time to make my friend happy as the end of our games was invariably a sore loss for me.

Did you know that the Indians know this game? He said to me. I suspected it but now I have proof. One of the men of the village, who often assists me in my explorations, taught me several lethal moves. Strange, no? We Portuguese arrived at Goa in 1498. This is 1559 but it seems they have been playing this game long before we did. It is said that it was the Indians who invented chess, the "shaturanga". I owe them my daily humiliation..."

Garcia giggle almost like a child. It was always a pleasure to see this man of science, with endless knowledge on medicinal plants, be playful just for a few moments. We were seated on his villa's little terrace, a villa in the purest Portuguese style in these oriental lands. It was very hot and the humidity was oppressive during these last days of August.

Even before I finished admiring the landscape, Garcia had already put the chess pieces back on the chess-board. He was insatiable. But I still benefited greatly from this: his concentration was entirely focused on the game and he lowered his guard on his secrets. With his eyes riveted to the game board, he would reveal his secrets with a vague wave of his hand. Faced with an ignorant person or an archaist, or someone pretending to be one...he could not resist :

"I approve the fact that you want to stay here in India. The Inquisition of Catholics in Portugal has engulfed the country in terror. You wouldn't survive it long.

-Neither would your jester, left here without defenses. Here is at least one piece that will no longer bother you! The people here in the Goa colony do not know I am Jewish. I pretend I am a good Catholic and medicine here gives you a demi-God status! I can practice without being bothered".

A comment that made things easier for me. My dead jester was already in the dungeon:

"How can you practice medicine here, so far away from your colleagues, the university, the many libraries?

-I couldn't care less about my colleagues, you know that, he said, lifting his eyes from the board for a moment to look at me with an insolent smile. During my youth in Portugal, I read everything there was on medicine and botany. Believe me, those are considerations I have reviewed under the light of my discoveries here in India!

-You certainly cannot throw away centuries of science!

-Certainly not, but there are so many silly lies in certain texts! They are passed down and taken as truth, when no one, specially the ones who cited them, has been able to check if they were true or not. You see, my dear Ruano, said he while solemnly chasing away another one of my pawns with a flick of his queen, I believe in experimentation. Without experimentation, there is no science. I have been able to verify a whole host of things in India, like nowhere else. The theoretical knowledge of my Western colleagues can be advantageously rectified by the know-how of the Indians".

When the conversation turned to that subject, I tried to memorize every detail of the doctor's words, while keeping a distracted eye on the game; my side of the board was getting dangerously empty.

"I deeply respect what our elders said, but let's not turn it into absolute truth. Take the example of Ptolemy. During the second century AD, this Greek astronomer deducted that India was located on the other side of the Atlantic, across from Portugal. He had just ignored an entire continent! Fortunately, the adventurous spirit of Christopher Columbus got rid of this theory and in 1492, he set foot on a new world. I would have given much just to be on that expedition myself..."

-If you accomplish the same thing for botany, if you explore this new continent, you will also be a Christopher Columbus. You must write down everything, Garcia, record your discoveries!

-So that I can be read, reread, studied at university? Considered as a venerable elder whose word is sacred? I would rather keep to my experiments for the time being. This is what makes me happy. Do you know what it

feels like to collect a plant, make a potion out of it and to see that potion heal someone?

-That is precisely why you must record your discoveries. I'll help you!

-Crazy youth...Look at your tower: you've left it unprotected and I can eliminate it from the game. You are an excellent doctor but a terrible chess player. However, I can take your words to heart: I will start writing down my discoveries if you beat me at this game.

-Why are you so childish?

But Garcia seemed once again plunged into the game. Without waiting for his next move, I quietly got up and went to explore his garden. Located below the terrace, protected from the wind, it looked like a hopelessly tangled mass of green plants. But I did see the living results of Garcia's multiple and sometimes perilous explorations. Since his arrival at Goa twenty five years ago, he explored the entire region, collecting plant samples, asking the natives about their properties and uses, and growing them in his garden. With much patience and tenacity, he was able to collect, sort and describe the numerous medicinal plants used for centuries by the Indian population, as much to feed itself as to heal itself.

Garcia da Orta had already recorded some plants that I knew very little about through faraway explorers. And no one before him had treated this subject with such precision and scientific rigor. Sometimes he would show me his notes, taken after the discovery of a new plant specimen. Without drawing it, he managed a faithful description of it by comparison with other known plants, and recording its effects. I was in the presence of an incredible man of science who put his knowledge at the service of his fellow men. From the tamarind tree, this big tree in front of me, Garcia was able to concoct substances that would fight against feverish diseases. He used the fruit of the nutmeg tree to heal nervous afflictions. These remedies, once known in the West, would make a lot of noise...

"Ruano! If you want to see me write this book, you have to come back and beat me!" he yelled from the terrace. I quickly came back from the garden and sat back down in front of the game board. Again, I started "baiting" him. Most of all, he loved picking out the mistakes of the Elders and finding the truth. It was also easy for me to get what I wanted:

"While examining your garden, I noticed that pepper did not come from a tree but from a climbing plant! Astounding, no? You probably learned in Portugal that pepper grows in trees. I believed it too. The Elders said so. They all agreed to not tell the truth. Dioscuri, imitated by Pliny, Galen, Isidore, Avicenna and all the Arabs. I had to ask the Indians here, in order to finally realize that the pepper tree did not exist, but that the spice did indeed grow on a climbing plant. How can we teach science or heal the sick if our knowledge, because of lack of verification, is false? I intend to dedicate my existence to clarifying this knowledge, for the sake of our descendants.

Garcia no longer looked at the game board and seemed not to pay attention to it anymore, which surprised me. I looked at the board and I could hardly believe what I saw. I carefully seized my queen and put her in the middle of my adversary's camp:

"The queen, protected by her knight, destroys your defense, takes the jester and condemns your king to check mate".

Garcia suddenly emerged from his thoughts and started looking for a solution for his king.

"What do you think, I continued, about a colloquium on simples, drugs and medicinal products from India, the native fruits, anything having to do with practical medicine and other good things we should know about? I see an excellent title to bring together your prodigious knowledge".

Orta seemed to complain but I knew by the spark in his eyes that he would agree to become part of history.

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