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ASSEMBLY LINE

by

B. TRAVEN

with

Labor, Mystery and Rebellion

the story of B. Traven

by Jonah Raskin

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Assembly Line

by B. Traven

Mr. E. L. Winthrop of New York was on vacation in the Republic of Mexico. It wasn't long before he realized that this strange and really wild country had not yet been fully and satisfactorily explored by Rotarians and Lions, who are forever conscious of their glorious mission on earth. Therefore, he considered it his duty as a good American citizen to do his part in correcting this oversight.

In search for opportunities to indulge in his new avocation, he left the beaten track and ventured into regions not especially mentioned, and hence not recommended, by travel agents to foreign tourists. So it happened that one day he found himself in a little, quaint Indian village somewhere in the State of Oaxaca.

Walking along the dusty main street of this pueblecito, which knew nothing of pavements, drainage, plumbing, or of any means of artificial light save candles or pine splinters, he met with an Indian squatting on the earthen-floor front porch of a palm hut, a so-called jacalito.

The Indian was busy making little baskets from bast and from all kinds of fibers gathered by him in the immense

tropical bush which surrounded the village on all sides. The material used had not only been well prepared for its purpose but was also richly colored with dyes that the basket-maker himself extracted from various native plants, barks, roots and from certain insects by a process known only to him and the members of his family.

His principal business, however, was not producing baskets. He was a peasant who lived on what the small property he possessed—less than fifteen acres of not too fertile soil—would yield, after much sweat and labor and after constantly worrying over the most wanted and best suited distribution of rain, sunshine, and wind and the changing balance of birds and insects beneficial or harmful to his crops. Baskets he made when there was nothing else for him to do in the fields, because he was unable to dawdle. After all, the sale of his baskets, though to a rather limited degree only, added to the small income he received from his little farm.

In spite of being by profession just a plain peasant, it was clearly seen from the small baskets he made that at heart he was an artist, a true and accomplished artist. Each basket looked as if covered all over with the most beautiful sometimes fantastic ornaments, flowers, butterflies, birds, squirrels, antelope, tigers, and a score of other animals of the wilds. Yet, the most amazing thing was that these decorations, all of them symphonies of color, were not painted on the baskets but were instead actually part of the baskets themselves. Bast and fibers dyed in dozens of different colors were so cleverly—one must actually say intrinsically—interwoven that those attractive designs appeared on the inner part of the basket as well as on the outside. Not by painting but by weaving were those highly artistic effects achieved. This performance he accomplished without ever looking at any sketch or pattern. While working on a basket these designs came to light as if by magic, and as long as a basket was not entirely finished one could not

perceive what in this case or that the decoration would be like.

People in the market town who bought these baskets would use them for sewing baskets or to decorate tables with or window sills, or to hold little things to keep them from lying around. Women put their jewelry in them or flowers or little dolls. There were in fact a hundred and two ways they might serve certain purposes in a household or in a lady's own room.

Whenever the Indian had finished about twenty of the baskets he took them to town on market day. Sometimes he would already be on his way shortly after midnight because he owned only a burro to ride on, and if the burro had gone astray the day before, as happened frequently, he would have to walk the whole way to town and back again.

At the market he had to pay twenty centavos in taxes to sell his wares. Each basket cost him between twenty and thirty hours of constant work, not counting the time spent gathering bast and fibers, preparing them, making dyes and coloring the bast. All this meant extra time and work. The price he asked for each basket was fifty centavos, the equivalent of about four cents. It seldom happened, however, that a buyer paid outright the full fifty centavos asked—or four reales as the Indian called that money. The prospective buyer started bargaining, telling the Indian that he ought to be ashamed to ask such a sinful price. "Why, the whole dirty thing is nothing but ordinary petate straw which you find in heaps wherever you may look for it; the jungle is packed full of it," the buyer would argue. "Such a little basket, what's it good for anyhow? If I paid you, you thief, ten centavitos for it you should be grateful and kiss my hand. Well, it's your lucky day, I'll be generous this time, I'll pay you twenty, yet not one green centavo more. Take it or run along."

So he sold finally for twenty-five centavos, but then the buyer would say, "Now, what do you think of that? I've got

only twenty centavos change on me. What can we do about that? If you can change me a twenty-peso bill, all right, you shall have your twenty-five fierros." Of course, the Indian could not change a twenty-peso bill and so the basket went for twenty centavos.

He had little if any knowledge of the outside world or he would have known that what happened to him was happening every hour of every day to every artist all over the world. That knowledge would perhaps have made him very proud, because he would have realized that he belonged to the little army which is the salt of the earth and which keeps culture, urbanity and beauty for their own sake from passing away.

Often it was not possible for him to sell all the baskets he had brought to market, for people here as elsewhere in the world preferred things made by the millions and each so much like the other that you were unable, even with the help of a magnifying glass, to tell which was which and where was the difference between two of the same kind.

Yet he, this craftsman, had in his life made several hundreds of those exquisite baskets, but so far no two of them had he ever turned out alike in design. Each was an individual piece of art and as different from the other as was a Murillo from a Velásquez.

Naturally he did not want to take those baskets which he could not sell at the market place home with him again if he could help it. In such a case he went peddling his products from door to door where he was treated partly as a beggar and partly as a vagrant apparently looking for an opportunity to steal, and he frequently had to swallow all sorts of insults and nasty remarks.

Then, after a long run, perhaps a woman would finally stop him, take one of the baskets and offer him ten centavos, which price through talks and talks would perhaps go up to fifteen or even to twenty. Nevertheless, in many instances he would

actually get no more than just ten centavos, and the buyer, usually a woman, would grasp that little marvel and right before his eyes throw it carelessly upon the nearest table as if to say, "Well, I take that piece of nonsense only for charity's sake. I know my money is wasted. But then, after all, I'm a Christian and I can't see a poor Indian die of hunger since he has come such a long way from his village." This would remind her of something better and she would hold him and say, "Where are you at home anyway, Indito? What's your pueblo? So, from Huehuetonoc? Now, listen here, Indito, can't you bring me next Saturday two or three turkeys from Huehuetonoc? But they must be heavy and fat and very, very cheap or I won't even touch them. If I wish to pay the regular price I don't need you to bring them. Understand? Hop along, now, Indito."

The Indian squatted on the earthen floor in the portico of his hut, attended to his work and showed no special interest in the curiosity of Mr. Winthrop watching him. He acted almost as if he ignored the presence of the American altogether.

"How much that little basket, friend?" Mr. Winthrop asked when he felt that he at least had to say something as not to appear idiotic.

"Fifty centavitos, patroncito, my good little lordy, four reales," the Indian answered politely.

"All right, sold," Mr. Winthrop blurted out in a tone and with a wide gesture as if he had bought a whole railroad. And examining his buy he added, "I know already who I'll give that pretty little thing to. She'll kiss me for it, sure. Wonder what she'll use it for?"

He had expected to hear a price of three or even four pesos. The moment he realized that he had judged the value six times too high, he saw right away what great business possibilities this miserable Indian village might offer to a dynamic promoter like himself. Without further delay he started exploring

those possibilities. "Suppose, my good friend, I buy ten of these little baskets of yours which, as I might as well admit right here and now, have practically no real use whatsoever. Well, as I was saying, if I buy ten, how much would you then charge me apiece?"

The Indian hesitated for a few seconds as if making calculations. Finally he said, "If you buy ten I can let you have them for forty-five centavos each, señorito gentleman."

"All right, amigo. And now, let's suppose I buy from you straight away one hundred of these absolutely useless baskets, how much will cost me each?"

The Indian, never fully looking up to the American standing before him and hardly taking his eyes off his work, said politely and without the slightest trace of enthusiasm in his voice, "In such a case I might not be quite unwilling to sell each for forty centavitos."

Mr. Winthrop bought sixteen baskets, which was all the Indian had in stock.

After three weeks' stay in the Republic, Mr. Winthrop was convinced that he knew this country perfectly, that he had seen everything and knew all about the inhabitants, their character and their way of life, and that there was nothing left for him to explore. So he returned to good old Nooyorg and felt happy to be once more in a civilized country, as he expressed it to himself.

One day going out for lunch he passed a confectioner's and, looking at the display in the window, he suddenly remembered the little baskets he had bought in that faraway Indian village.

He hurried home and took all the baskets he still had left to one of the best-known candy-makers in the city.

"I can offer you here," Mr. Winthrop said to the confectioner, "one of the most artistic and at the same time the most original of boxes, if you wish to call them that. These little

baskets would be just right for the most expensive chocolates meant for elegant and high-priced gifts. Just have a good look at them, sir, and let me listen."

The confectioner examined the baskets and found them extraordinarily well suited for a certain line in his business. Never before had there been anything like them for originality, prettiness and good taste. He, however, avoided most carefully showing any sign of enthusiasm, for which there would be time enough once he knew the price and whether he could get a whole load exclusively.

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, I don't know. If you asked me I'd say it isn't quite what I'm after. However, we might give it a try. It depends, of course, on the price. In our business the package mustn't cost more than what's in it."

"Do I hear an offer?" Mr. Winthrop asked.

"Why don't you tell me in round figures how much you want for them? I'm not good in guessing."

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Kemple: since I'm the smart guy who discovered these baskets and since I'm the only Jack who knows where to lay his hands on more, I'm selling to the highest bidder, on an exclusive basis, of course. I'm positive you can see it my way, Mr. Kemple."

"Quite so, and may the best man win," the confectioner said. "I'll talk the matter over with my partners. See me tomorrow same time, please, and I'll let you know how far we might be willing to go."

Next day when both gentlemen met again Mr. Kemple said: "Now, to be frank with you, I know art on seeing it, no getting around that. And these baskets are little works of art, they surely are. However, we are no art dealers, you realize that of course. We've no other use for these pretty little things except as fancy packing for our French pralines made by us. We can't pay for them what we might pay considering them

pieces of art. After all to us they're only wrappings. Fine wrappings, perhaps, but nevertheless wrappings. You'll see it our way I hope, Mr.——oh yes, Mr. Winthrop. So, here is our offer, take it or leave it: a dollar and a quarter apiece and not one cent more."

Mr. Winthrop made a gesture as if he had been struck over the head.

The confectioner, misunderstanding this involuntary gesture of Mr. Winthrop, added quickly, "All right, all right, no reason to get excited, no reason at all. Perhaps we can do a trifle better. Let's say one-fifty."

"Make it one-seventy-five," Mr. Winthrop snapped, swallowing his breath while wiping his forehead.

"Sold. One-seventy-five apiece free at port of New York. We pay the customs and you pay the shipping. Right?"

"Sold," Mr. Winthrop said also and the deal was closed.

"There is, of course, one condition," the confectioner explained just when Mr. Winthrop was to leave. "One or two hundred won't do for us. It wouldn't pay the trouble and the advertising. I won't consider less than ten thousand, or one thousand dozens if that sounds better in your ears. And they must come in no less than twelve different patterns well assorted. How about that?"

"I can make it sixty different patterns or designs."

"So much the better. And you're sure you can deliver ten thousand let's say early October?"

"Absolutely," Mr. Winthrop avowed and signed the contract.

Practically all the way back to Mexico, Mr. Winthrop had a notebook in his left hand and a pencil in his right and he was writing figures, long rows of them, to find out exactly how much richer he would be when this business had been put through.

"Now, let's sum up the whole goddamn thing," he muttered to himself. "Damn it, where is that cursed pencil again? I had it right between my fingers. Ah, there it is. Ten thousand he ordered. Well, well, there we got a clean-cut profit of fifteen thousand four hundred and forty genuine dollars. Sweet smackers. Fifteen grand right into papa's pocket. Come to think of it, that Republic isn't so backward after all."

"Buenas tardes, mi amigo, how are you?" he greeted the Indian whom he found squatting in the porch of his jacalito as if he had never moved from his place since Mr. Winthrop had left for New York.

The Indian rose, took off his hat, bowed politely and said in his soft voice, "Be welcome, patroncito. Thank you, I feel fine, thank you. Muy buenas tardes. This house and all I have is at your kind disposal." He bowed once more, moved his right hand in a gesture of greeting and sat down again. But he excused himself for doing so by saying, "Perdoneme, patroncito, I have to take advantage of the daylight, soon it will be night."

"I've got big business for you, my friend," Mr. Winthrop began.

"Good to hear that, señor."

Mr. Winthrop said to himself, "Now, he'll jump up and go wild when he learns what I've got for him." And aloud he said: "Do you think you can make me one thousand of these little baskets?"

"Why not, patroncito? If I can make sixteen, I can make one thousand also."

"That's right, my good man. Can you also make five thousand?"

"Of course, señor. I can make five thousand if I can make one thousand."

"Good. Now, if I should ask you to make me ten thousand,

what would you say? And what would be the price of each? You can make ten thousand, can't you?"

"Of course, I can, señor. I can make as many as you wish. You see, I am an expert in this sort of work. No one else in the whole state can make them the way I do."

"That's what I thought and that's exactly why I came to you."

"Thank you for the honor, patroncito."

"Suppose I order you to make me ten thousand of these baskets, how much time do you think you would need to deliver them?"

The Indian, without interrupting his work, cocked his head to one side and then to the other as if he were counting the days or weeks it would cost him to make all these baskets.

After a few minutes he said in a slow voice, "It will take a good long time to make so many baskets, patroncito. You see, the bast and the fibers must be very dry before they can be used properly. Then all during the time they are slowly drying, they must be worked and handled in a very special way so that while drying they won't lose their softness and their flexibility and their natural brilliance. Even when dry they must look fresh. They must never lose their natural properties or they will look just as lifeless and dull as straw. Then while they are drying up I got to get the plants and roots and barks and insects from which I brew the dyes. That takes much time also, believe me. The plants must be gathered when the moon is just right or they won't give the right color. The insects I pick from the plants must also be gathered at the right time and under the right conditions or else they produce no rich colors and are just like dust. But, of course, jefecito, I can make as many of these canastitas as you wish, even as many as three dozens if you want them. Only give me time."

"Three dozens? Three dozens?" Mr. Winthrop yelled, and threw up both arms in desperation. "Three dozens!" he re-

peated as if he had to say it many times in his own voice so as to understand the real meaning of it, because for a while he thought that he was dreaming. He had expected the Indian to go crazy on hearing that he was to sell ten thousand of his baskets without having to peddle them from door to door and be treated like a dog with a skin disease.

So the American took up the question of price again, by which he hoped to activate the Indian's ambition. "You told me that if I take one hundred baskets you will let me have them for forty centavos apiece. Is that right, my friend?"

"Quite right, jefecito."

"Now," Mr. Winthrop took a deep breath, "now, then, if I ask you to make me one thousand, that is, ten times one hundred baskets, how much will they cost me, each basket?"

That figure was too high for the Indian to grasp. He became slightly confused and for the first time since Mr. Winthrop had arrived he interrupted his work and tried to think it out. Several times he shook his head and looked vaguely around as if for help. Finally he said, "Excuse me, jefecito, little chief, that is by far too much for me to count. Tomorrow, if you will do me the honor, come and see me again and I think I shall have my answer ready for you, patroncito."

When on the next morning Mr. Winthrop came to the hut he found the Indian as usual squatting on the floor under the overhanging palm roof working at his baskets.

"Have you got the price for ten thousand?" he asked the Indian the very moment he saw him, without taking the trouble to say "Good Morning!"

"Si, patroncito, I have the price ready. You may believe me when I say it has cost me much labor and worry to find out the exact price, because, you see, I do not wish to cheat you out of your honest money."

"Skip that, amigo. Come out with the salad. What's the price?" Mr. Winthrop asked nervously.

"The price is well calculated now without any mistake on my side. If I got to make one thousand canastitas each will be three pesos. If I must make five thousand, each will cost nine pesos. And if I have to make ten thousand, in such a case I can't make them for less than fifteen pesos each." Immediately he returned to his work as if he were afraid of losing too much time with such idle talk.

Mr. Winthrop thought that perhaps it was his faulty knowledge of this foreign language that had played a trick on him.

"Did I hear you say fifteen pesos each if I eventually would buy ten thousand?"

"That's exactly and without any mistake what I've said, patroncito," the Indian answered in his soft courteous voice.

"But now, see here, my good man, you can't do this to me. I'm your friend and I want to help you get on your feet."

"Yes, patroncito, I know this and I don't doubt any of your words."

"Now, let's be patient and talk this over quietly as man to man. Didn't you tell me that if I would buy one hundred you would sell each for forty centavos?"

"Si, jefecito, that's what I said. If you buy one hundred you can have them for forty centavos apiece, provided that I have one hundred, which I don't."

"Yes, yes, I see that." Mr. Winthrop felt as if he would go insane any minute now. "Yes, so you said. Only what I can't comprehend is why you cannot sell at the same price if you make me ten thousand. I certainly don't wish to chisel on the price. I am not that kind. Only, well, let's see now, if you can sell for forty centavos at all, be it for twenty or fifty or a hundred, I can't quite get the idea why the price has to jump that high if I buy more than a hundred."

"Bueno, patroncito, what is there so difficult to understand? It's all very simple. One thousand canastitas cost me a hundred times more work than a dozen. Ten thousand cost me so much

time and labor that I could never finish them, not even in a hundred years. For a thousand canastitas I need more bast than for a hundred, and I need more little red beetles and more plants and roots and bark for the dyes. It isn't that you just can walk into the bush and pick all the things you need at your heart's desire. One root with the true violet blue may cost me four or five days until I can find one in the jungle. And have you thought how much time it costs and how much hard work to prepare the bast and fibers? What is more, if I must make so many baskets, who then will look after my corn and my beans and my goats and chase for me occasionally a rabbit for meat on Sunday? If I have no corn, then I have no tortillas to eat, and if I grow no beans, where do I get my frijoles from?"

"But since you'll get so much money from me for your baskets you can buy all the corn and beans in the world and more than you need."

"That's what you think, señorito, little lordy. But you see, it is only the corn I grow myself that I am sure of. Of the corn which others may or may not grow, I cannot be sure to feast upon."

"Haven't you got some relatives here in this village who might help you to make baskets for me?" Mr. Winthrop asked hopefully.

"Practically the whole village is related to me somehow or other. Fact is, I got lots of close relatives in this here place."

"Why then can't they cultivate your fields and look after your goats while you make baskets for me? Not only this, they might gather for you the fibers and the colors in the bush and lend you a hand here and there in preparing the material you need for the baskets."

"They might, patroncito, yes, they might. Possible. But then you see who would take care of their fields and cattle if they work for me? And if they help me with the baskets it turns out the same. No one would any longer work his fields

properly. In such a case corn and beans would get up so high in price that none of us could buy any and we all would starve to death. Besides, as the price of everything would rise and rise higher still how could I make baskets at forty centavos apiece? A pinch of salt or one green chili would set me back more than I'd collect for one single basket. Now you'll understand, highly estimated caballero and jefecito, why I can't make the baskets any cheaper than fifteen pesos each if I got to make that many."

Mr. Winthrop was hard-boiled, no wonder considering the city he came from. He refused to give up the more than fifteen thousand dollars which at that moment seemed to slip through his fingers like nothing. Being really desperate now, he talked and bargained with the Indian for almost two full hours, trying to make him understand how rich he, the Indian, would become if he would take this greatest opportunity of his life.

The Indian never ceased working on his baskets while he explained his points of view.

"You know, my good man," Mr. Winthrop said, "such a wonderful chance might never again knock on your door, do you realize that? Let me explain to you in ice-cold figures what fortune you might miss if you leave me flat on this deal."

He tore out leaf after leaf from his notebook, covered each with figures and still more figures, and while doing so told the peasant he would be the richest man in the whole district.

The Indian without answering watched with a genuine expression of awe as Mr. Winthrop wrote down these long figures, executing complicated multiplications and divisions and subtractions so rapidly that it seemed to him the greatest miracle he had ever seen.

The American, noting this growing interest in the Indian, misjudged the real significance of it. "There you are, my friend," he said. "That's exactly how rich you're going to be.

You'll have a bankroll of exactly four thousand pesos. And to show you that I'm a real friend of yours, I'll throw in a bonus. I'll make it a round five thousand pesos, and all in silver."

The Indian, however, had not for one moment thought of four thousand pesos. Such an amount of money had no meaning to him. He had been interested solely in Mr. Winthrop's ability to write figures so rapidly.

"So, what do you say now? Is it a deal or is it? Say yes and you'll get your advance this very minute."

"As I have explained before, patroncito, the price is fifteen pesos each."

"But, my good man," Mr. Winthrop shouted at the poor Indian in utter despair, "where have you been all this time? On the moon or where? You are still at the same price as before."

"Yes, I know that, jefecito, my little chief," the Indian answered, entirely unconcerned. "It must be the same price because I cannot make any other one. Besides, señor, there's still another thing which perhaps you don't know. You see, my good lordy and caballero, I've to make these canastitas my own way and with my song in them and with bits of my soul woven into them. If I were to make them in great numbers there would no longer be my soul in each, or my songs. Each would look like the other with no difference whatever and such a thing would slowly eat up my heart. Each has to be another song which I hear in the morning when the sun rises and when the birds begin to chirp and the butterflies come and sit down on my baskets so that I may see a new beauty, because, you see, the butterflies like my baskets and the pretty colors on them, that's why they come and sit down, and I can make my canastitas after them. And now, señor jefecito, if you will kindly excuse me, I have wasted much time already, although it was a pleasure and a great honor to hear the talk of such a distinguished caballero like you. But I'm afraid I've to attend to my work now, for day after tomorrow is market day

in town and I got to take my baskets there. Thank you, señor, for your visit. Adiós."

And in this way it happened that American garbage cans escaped the fate of being turned into receptacles for empty, torn, and crumpled little multicolored canastitas into which an Indian of Mexico had woven dreams of his soul, throbs of his heart: his unsung poems.

Labor, Mystery and Rebellion

by Jonah Raskin

My novels are autobiographical. All that readers want or need to know about me can be found in my books.

—B. Traven

From 1925, when his first novel was published in Berlin, to his death in Mexico City in 1969, Traven refused to divulge information about himself. In the absence of facts, legends proliferated. B. Traven became *the* enigmatic literary figure of the 20th century. Readers, critics, and editors spun myths about the man. Some claimed that he was a European prince, others swore that he was an American pauper. He was said to be Jack London, the president of Mexico, an international spy. Today, most of the myths have been disspelled; but after four decades of investigation we still don't know where or when he was born, his nationality, the identity of his parents, or the name he received at birth.

We do have the clear evidence of his novels and the hard facts of his publishing history. Traven's books were written in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s and were originally published in German by the Gutenberg Book

Guild, a socialist publishing house in Berlin pledged to "fight for the proletariat and shatter the reign of capitalist culture." Traven's relationship with the Book Guild was extraordinary. The editors respected his demand for anonymity; they treated his books, not as commodities, but as works of art that aided the proletariat in its struggle for liberation. The Book Guild didn't advertise or publicize his novels; they listed them in their catalogue and sold millions of copies. For his part Traven worked collectively with the editors to make the Book Guild "a cultural home for European workers." In 1933 the Nazis violently destroyed this relationship. The editors were arrested or driven into exile; Traven's novels were confiscated, burned, censored.

Meanwhile in New York, Traven's troubles were just beginning. The Depression of the 1930s created a demand and a need for proletarian literature. Traven's novels were published in English by Alfred Knopf, but the Manhattan publishing world wasn't ready for him. "I write to propagate ideas, not to make a profit," he insisted. "I deplore the manner in which books are handled in the U.S. I wish to do my part to make publishing a decent and honorable trade." Traven would not allow Knopf to advertise his books; he refused to give interviews or provide a photo for the dust jacket, and he evaded his editor when he arrived in Mexico City for a meeting. These "tactics" irritated Knopf; accordingly Traven's books were "censored," not Gestapo style but Yankee style. They died in the warehouse, and Traven was forced to buy them back from the publisher. For another decade the mystery man was forgotten.

Then in 1946 John Huston made Traven's novel *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* into a Hollywood film. Warner Brothers and *Life* offered a $5,000 reward to anyone who would reveal Traven's identity. Traven declined Huston's offer to help with the film, but under the

pseudonym "Hal Croves" he appeared on the set and claimed that he was Traven's official agent and representative. Huston put him on the payroll. A Mexican detective followed his movements, intercepted his mail, and revealed that he was Traven. *Life* published the story; for a few months Traven/Croves was in the news, then he faded from view and another decade passed before he surfaced again.

In the late 1960s *Ramparts* and the German weekly *Der Spiegel* claimed that B. Traven was the bastard son of Kaiser Wilhelm II. In 1975 I heard this tale from Traven's Mexican widow, Rosa Elena Lujan. For six months I lived in her home—Traven's last home. "My husband participated in the Bavarian Revolution of 1919," Señora Lujan said. "At the height of the insurrection his mother told him 'Your father is the kaiser.' My husband felt a deep sense of guilt; he hated his mother and was haunted by the fact that he was a king's son who helped to topple his father. All his life he hid his identity. Only after he married me did he confess his secret."

Señora Lujan is a myth-maker with a Freudian bent. She would like to believe that she married a king's son, but when pressed for details she admits frankly that she really doesn't know.

My own feeling, based on interviews with Traven's friends and his diaries, letters, and notebooks, is that Traven didn't know the identity of his parents, that he spun a web of mystery about his past to clothe his social nakedness. He created a dozen myths about himself. What's significant about Traven is that he didn't want parents or a nationality; he didn't want the past, the state, or authority to claim him in any way.

The Traven I found was a revolutionary who lost his home in the European Left, and after a long political and cultural journey found it again among the peasants and

workers of Mexico. Traven's novels reflect this passage; they are deeply rooted in his autobiography.

BOHEMIAN AND AESTHETE

In the late 1960s an East German professor named Rolf Recknagel demolished most of the Traven myths and proved conclusively that Traven was "Ret Marut," an obscure actor, pamphleteer, poet, and revolutionary who lived in Germany from 1908 to 1920. Like "B. Traven," "Ret Marut" is a pseudonym. Ret Marut found his name in the *Rigveda*; in the Hindu religion the Maruts are mysterious gods who warn humanity of impending doom. They alone know their origin and birthplace.

As his name suggests, Ret Marut was arrogant and elitist. An admirer of Nietzsche, he detested the "good, mediocre people" and aspired to join the circle of "bad, great people." He abhorred the German bourgeoisie and defined himself as an aesthete and bohemian. Then during World War I, Marut became a pacifist. In 1916, under the pseudonym Richard Maurhut, he published a surrealistic anti-war novel, *Letters to Fraulein Von S.*

In 1917, when the U.S. declared war on Germany, Marut panicked. I obtained U.S. State Department files that show he went to three U.S. consulates to plead for an American passport. On his application forms he said that he was born in San Francisco in 1882 and had been studying philosophy in Germany since 1904. Since Marut spoke English with a heavy accent and gave contradictory reports about himself, U.S. diplomats denied him a passport. Disappointed, he returned to Munich and began to edit and publish *The Brickburner*, a magazine that crusaded against war, the state, the church, private property, and the bourgeois press. "I will come like the storm that covers the Wasteland," Marut promised his

readers. "You who wake in the morning with murder already in your thoughts, I will judge you, so beware. I will come with thunder and lightning."

Germany was in a state of siege. By law Marut was required to submit *The Brickburner* to the State Censor for approval. Like a Dostoevskian hero, he enjoyed his intellectual confrontations with the censor. He cast himself as the archetypical rebel at war with the archetypical tyrant. "My most appreciative reader was the censor," he wrote. "He understood *The Brickburner* better than anyone."

In the autumn of 1917 Marut hailed the Russian Revolution and predicted a world revolution. In 1919 he joined the workers' rebellion in Munich; the aesthete and bohemian was reborn a revolutionary. There wasn't a trace of guilt in his feelings about the fall of the kaiser. "I am not a proletarian," he wrote, "but I have never felt as happy as under the dictatorship of the proletariat; for many years I had to suffer under the dictatorship of monopoly capitalism and militarism. Today I live under the dictatorship of, for, and by the majority of the German people."

A month later the dictatorship of the Munich proletariat was crushed by the *Freikorps*, the troops of the Social Democratic government—an act of barbarism that sealed Marut's hatred of all social democrats. 1200 Munich citizens were massacred; Marut was arrested, found guilty of treason, and sentenced to death by a military tribunal. With the aid of a prison guard he escaped from his cell and fled from Germany. As a fugitive Marut experienced intense persecution as well as severe poverty and hunger. The pressure of underground existence mounted and his mental composure cracked. He turned to the occult and to mysticism; he became increasingly disillusioned, not only with the revolutionary movement,

but with Europe itself and was eager to retreat into a "primitive world."

IN SEARCH OF THE PRIMITIVE

In 1924 Marut arrived in England. As British Home Office documents reveal, he was arrested as an illegal alien, jailed, and deported. He left England as a fireman shovelling coal aboard a steamer. Later that year he arrived in Mexico; after the war and the bloody massacres of Europe, Mexico looked like paradise—"the land in perpetual springtime," he called it. Ret Marut's first impressions of Mexico were distorted. He regarded the Indians as pure, simple creatures, morally superior to the decadent Europeans. He believed that the revolution of 1910 had abolished social and economic inequality and had created a democratic workers' and peasants' government.

Marut's notebooks of 1924 show that he worked as a cotton picker and oil driller. He still had no passport or birth certificate, but something more valuable—his white skin. He earned two to three pesos more a day than the Indians. In Tampico, a center of trade union activity, he was drawn into the workers' movement for better working conditions and higher wages.

In 1925 he took the pen name "B. Traven" and began to record his experiences as a fugitive, a sailor, and a migrant worker. He told friends and officials that he was born in Chicago in 1890 of poor, Scandinavian immigrant parents. Since he was a tall blond, Mexican workers called him *El Sueco*—the Swede. In Tampico, Traven buried Marut and the German past. "The Bavarian of Munich is dead, my black brothers," he wrote in his diary. Traven reached out for proletarian comrades and proletarian roots to match his new proletarian consciousness. "Both Jack London and I are proletarians," he declared. "We grew up in proletarian circumstances in the

turmoil of the proletarian quarters of big industrial cities, worked in all kinds of proletarian occupations, not to study the proletariat but to make a living."

Behind the myth there was a genuine change; Traven rejected Marut's arrogance and embraced humility. "I identify as a worker, nameless and without glory, like every other worker," he said. "I have learned through suffering that the worker is a thousand times more interesting and many-sided a person than Rockefeller, Morgan, Coolidge, Gloria Swanson, or Tom Mix."

In *The Death Ship*, his first novel, Traven fused Marut's experiences with his new proletarian vision; he created the character of Gerard Gales, a New Orleans sailor stranded in Europe without papers. Like Marut, Gales goes from one U.S. consulate to another. He is denied a passport and becomes a man without a country, a nobody. In the eyes of the state he doesn't exist. He is deported, jailed, hunted by the police. Finally, he finds work on the *Yorikke*, a floating hell for proletarians without papers. On the *Yorikke* all the workers are "dead"; they have no nationality, no rights, no identity.

On the *Yorikke* Gales meets Stanislav, his political and cultural twin—a European sailor deprived of his country and nationality by the explosion of World War I. Gales and Stanislav are Traven's Ishmael and Queegueg; his "Moby Dick" or Leviathan is bureaucracy and monopoly capitalism, a beast that manufactures and devours dead workers. In the final section of *The Death Ship* Gales and Stanislav are kidnapped to the *Empress of Madagascar*, a sea-paradise for aristocrats. But the *Empress* is also a death ship. The captain scuttles her and sacrifices Gales and Stanislav to collect the insurance. Before the *Empress* sinks Traven's comrades are catapulted from the hold to first class where they live like kings. Later, floating on a raft in the immense ocean, Gales hallucinates the "Great Skipper" in the sky. Stanislav has no

papers but he is accepted on a long voyage from which there is no return.

In *The Death Ship* Traven bade farewell to Europe, the old world, and Ret Marut. In his next four books he explored the fate of white men in the tropics; he drew upon his own experiences as a migrant worker, archeologist, and anthropologist. In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1927) Traven's gringo prospectors fight bandits and "rob" the mountains of their gold. In the process Traven dramatizes the labor theory of value; he shows us that capitalism means the robbery of the worker and of the resources of the earth for the profit of the capitalist. Dobbs (played by Humphrey Bogart in the movie) robs Curtin and Howard; he, in turn, is robbed by Mexican bandits, not for the gold—they mistake it for ordinary dust—but for his shoes. Then the wind commits the ultimate grand larceny. The thieves are parted from their gold and become proletarians again.

In *The Night Visitor* (1928) Gales lives alone in a "haunted" bungalow. At night he studies ancient Indian history until it comes alive. By day he uncovers the tomb of an Indian warrior. Gales invades the Indian past; in turn the past invades and takes possession of him. He is haunted by the dead warrior until finally his sense of fear and guilt evict him from the bungalow and he runs away.

In *The Bridge in the Jungle* (1929) Gales visits a remote Indian village. On an ominous night an Indian boy disappears. Gales hears a splash in the river, but assumes that it is the sound of a fish. Later he watches the Indians recover the body from the river. He looks at himself through Indian eyes: "He is the guilty one. . . . He is the gringo. He has robbed us of our beloved child."

The North American invasion of Mexico *is* responsible for the death of the boy; he falls from a bridge carelessly constructed by a U.S. oil company; on the night of the fatal accident he wears, for the first time in his life, shoes

imported from Texas. Gales too, by simply doing nothing, is an accessory to the crime. He is grief-stricken and mourns as if his own son is dead. At the funeral a drunken school teacher falls into the grave; the band plays "It ain't gonna rain no more no more." The scene is hysterically funny, but Gales can't laugh. He weeps with the boy's mother and is adopted by the Indians as one of their own.

In *The Bridge in the Jungle* Traven resolved Gales's moral dilemma; faced with the gringo invaders on one hand and the indigenous peoples on the other, he joins the Indians. With *Bridge* Traven ceased to define himself as a white North American; he committed cultural and political suicide. In his succeeding books, especially in *The White Rose* (1929), a documentary novel about U.S. oil companies in Mexico, the only North American characters are corporation executives and their hired thugs. Traven's perspective on white North American workers shifted. He told the Book Guild editors that they "deprived Negro workers of their rights" and that North American union leaders "bartered away the rights of workers to save capitalism."

NOVELIST OF THE THIRD WORLD

At the same time Traven's image of Mexico was shattered. In 1927, while travelling in the jungle, he saw Indian slaves. They picked the coffee beans, cut the lumber, built the roads. Traven recast himself again, this time as a novelist for the Third World. "The Mexican Indians and the Mexican proletarians are my deepest friends and comrades," he wrote in 1927. "I know the courage, devotion, and sacrifices (unheard of in Europe) they make in their fight for liberation. So far I have been unable to make European working people understand a single part of their struggle. But I am striving now to find the words and glowing pictures to embody the struggles

of the Mexican proletariat."

Out of this new understanding and commitment came the Jungle Series, six related novels: *Carreta* (1930), *Government* (1931), *March to the Monteria* (1933), *Rebellion of the Hanged* (1936), *Trozas* (1936) and *General from the Jungle* (1940). Hill & Wang, Traven's U.S. publishers, advertise the Jungle Series as the story of the Diaz dictatorship and the Mexican Revolution of 1910—a designation that Traven never intended. "When I speak of the Indians I mean all American Indians, he wrote. "When I refer to the dictatorship I mean all Latin American dictatorships. The essential part of my story is timeless."

The first four jungle novels stress the oppression and exploitation of the Indians. In *Carreta*, Traven portrays the life of Andres Ugalde, an Indian ox-cart driver who believes that he is free. But each turn of his wagon wheels leads him further and further into bondage. At the end of the journey he realizes that he carries a social burden as heavy as the wooden yoke that oppresses his oxen. His father is in debt to the landlord and Andres has no choice but to accept work in the *monterias*. In the jungle he becomes a slave.

In *March* and *Trozas* Traven unfolds his hell or "heart of darkness." Like Conrad's "heart," Traven's is inhabited by devils of exploitation, genocide, torture, and tyranny. But Traven sees the evil of colonialism, not through the eyes of the whites, but from the point of view of the Indians. And for Traven the jungle is not only hell, it is also the cradle of revolution. In the *monterias* the dictatorship digs its own grave; the slaves become guerrillas.

In the last two jungle books Traven introduces a new character—Martin Trinidad, "The Professor." "The Professor" is Traven himself in a new incarnation: the

intellectual who joins the Indian workers in their fight for liberation. The Professor articulates the lessons that Marut learned from the revolution of 1919 and Traven's new understanding of Third World revolution. Through his mouth Traven expresses his ideas on the state, work, prisons, dictators, and documents. "Many revolutions have. . . failed because papers weren't burned," he says. "We must attack the registry and burn. . . all the papers—deeds, birth and death certificates. . . then nobody will know who he is, what he's called, who his father was, and what his father had. We'll be the heirs because nobody will be able to prove the contrary."

In *General* Traven's guerrilla army defeats the army of the dictator. In the late 1930s Traven studied the art of guerrilla warfare as practiced by Zapata, Villa, and the Chinese. Moreover, he supported Augusto Cesar Sandino, the Nicaraguan liberation leader then battling U.S. marines. Traven's victorious rebels establish the Sun and Peace Commune; they cultivate the land, work co-operatively, and open a school for the peasants. A stranger stumbles into the liberated territory and asks the Professor "Who are you?" The Professor whispers a word in the stranger's ear and then announces "Don't repeat it ever." The book ends and Traven leaves us guessing.

Mystery *is* Traven's theme. His novels of exploitation and resistance are sogged with suspense and the supernatural. They are embedded with irony, satire, slapstick, and farce. In Traven's world the class struggle is an arena for comedy as well as compassion and indignation.

Two novels followed the Jungle Series, *Macario* (1950) and *Aslan Norval* (1960); but Traven's writing career was essentially at an end in 1940. In the 1940s and 1950s, he turned to the movies in an attempt to reach a wide working-class audience. Six of his novels were adapted for the screen. To his dying day Traven was pestered by inter-

viewers and reports. "My work carries all the publicity I need and want," he insisted. By rejecting success North American style, Traven won something more valuable, not fans but loyal readers—the workers of the world. □

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