

# Wilhelm Micholitz

## (1854-1932)

COMPETITIVE SECRECY WAS ESSENTIAL FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE PROFESSIONAL orchid collector. On the brink of discovering a long-sought prize, particularly, he had to be extremely cautious with whom he conversed lest the purpose of his presence in a vicinity be discovered. By the end of the nineteenth century, desirable species could no longer be collected by the thousands, and when a new area was found for collecting, it was of utmost necessity that the location be kept secret. Competition had indeed become keen, and on many occasions the collector found it necessary even to remain hidden from the local populace of the town or village used as his collecting headquarters. Among those bold and adventurous plant seekers the name of Wilhelm Micholitz will long be chronicled for his was a life of botanical intrigue and unceasing excitement.

A native of Germany by birth (born in Saxony in 1854), Micholitz became a plant collector for Messrs. Sanders, St. Albans, England, at an early age. Though only of medium size, he was strongly built yet of a calm disposition and a clear mind. Micholitz understood people well, particularly the Polynesian races among whom he often traveled. In short, he possessed all the qualities that Messrs. Sanders desired in a collector.

His travels were varied and too numerous to list here completely. A sampling would include the Philippines (1884-1885), Aru Islands (1890), Moluccas (1891), New Guinea and Sumatra (1891-1892), Ambon and Natuna Islands (1892-1898), Burma and South America (1900). As might be expected through such an itinerary of travel, Micholitz's plant discoveries and introductions were numerous, and the many orchid species which bear his name testify to his immense energy and geographical wanderings.

"Fearnley," reading through correspondence from Micholitz to his employer, H. F. C. Sander, wrote in 1939:

Micholitz had to wait months in unsavory surroundings in the hope that one of Colombia's many internal strifes would come to an end. On this occasion, however, he waited in vain and no doubt he was happier when on the Aru

Isles in 1890 whence he wrote that money was unknown to the natives, and that a stock of handkerchiefs must be obtained for barter, "the people being rather savage."

Secretive! An Orchid hunter had to be so. Competition was then as great as ever it has been since. Micholitz cabled his employer from Singapore, immediately prior to his first search for *Vanda Sanderiana*—the King of Orchids: "E. not here, R. here. A. arriving next ship." Perhaps this extended his credit from the firm in England, for E., R. and A. were all on the same trail!



Competition! At Bhamo in the North West corner of Burma some two hundred miles from Mandalay, Micholitz wrote an amusing letter: "L.'s man has three men watching the approaches of the town. There are only a few plants (*Dendrobium nobile*) coming in and competition is very keen." Imagine his consternation! But he actually won through on that occasion as on most, and his firm landed many thousand "noble" *Dendrobiums*.

Micholitz's travels mainly involved the East—from Burma to the Philippines and the Eastern Archipelagos. His one trip to South America was the exception, one which was seemingly wrought with difficulty. On one occasion he had collected a large number of plants and had readied them for removal to the coast, when a revolution occurred. In recounting Micholitz's reactions, "Fearnley" (Fearnley Sander) continued:

... his boat was commandeered by first one party and then the other, until his plants had suffered considerably and, when speaking of the trip, Micholitz gave me a very definite opinion in English of revolutionaries and some Governments, and finished it in German—a lapse?—possibly much more expressive, but I did not ask for a translation.

One note by Micholitz to Sander, written on a hotel bill in Bogotá, Colombia, quite succinctly summarized his feelings about staying there:

I do not know what I would not give to be back in the well-ordered British or Dutch Colonies in the East, to be able to do work in peace and comparative comfort.

Also listed on the hotel bill was a charge for fifty-six glasses of beer. Might we speculate that Micholitz was attempting to drown his sorrows?

Micholitz made entomological as well as botanical collections, but his orchid finds are the real credit to his memory. One of his most famous discoveries was *Dendrobium phalaenopsis* var. *schroderianum*. Even in this find, however, he seemed plagued by misfortune, for the sampan on which the consignment was being transported caught fire and all the plants perished. On cabling the news to St. Albans, his return instructions were simply "Return, recollect." And so he did, and through his repeated labors, that beautiful species was finally introduced into the greenhouses of England.

Micholitz's name is perpetuated in many further of his finds—*Aerides micholitzii*, *Phalaenopsis micholitzii*, *Spathoglottis plicata* var. *micholitzii*, *Bulbophyllum micholitzii*, and *Coelogyne micholitzii*. His cymbidium introductions—the result of a journey to Annam—revolutionized the genus, with *Cymbidium insigne* (then called *Cymbidium Sanderi*), *Cymbidium erythrostylum*, *Cymbidium parishii* var. *sanderiae*, *Cymbidium schroederianum*, and *Cymbidium cooperi* becoming popular cultivated members of the genus. Other large consignments included *Den-*

*drobium atroviolaceum*, *Dendrobium dearei*, *Dendrobium johnsoniae*, *Dendrobium spectabilis*, *Dendrobium schutzei*, *Dendrobium speciosissimum*, *Anoectochilus sanderianus*, *Anoectochilus leopoldii* II, *Anoectochilus bohnhoffianum*, and *Arachnanthe annamensis*, to mention merely a few.

After many years of service Micholitz retired to his native Saxony, comfortable with a well-earned retirement. Unfortunately, all his savings were lost as a result of monetary deflation in Germany following World War I, and from then until his death in December 1932, at seventy-eight years of age, he was forced to live in near poverty.

## References

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