

VIEWS & REVIEWS

Elizam—a Reminiscence
Of Childhood in Ceylon

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then. The vibration transmitted itself through the earth. The pavement trembled under my feet before I could see any single thing approaching or identify the muttering advance of sound that seemed to push the very air ahead.

Now the mass neared, rose into a throbbing chorus, and here at last they came: all dark but for the cat's-eye blackout lights of the leading vehicles, two abreast, three abreast, the humps of a vast cavalcade of tanks, looming mud-caked, clanking, with barely visible shapes rising from their hatches under the long guns, grinding, barely missing lampposts and pillars. A division of General Patton's Third Army had arrived for the relief of Bastogne.

They thundered past under the hands of their shadowy leaders at a speed never seen before at night, fifty, a hundred, more hundreds, shaking the substrata as shutters flew open and then stayed open when the people cowering behind them saw that the Americans were here and now moving the right way.

The Direction unlatched its doorway and joined me on the spattered sidewalk. "One had not thought it possible," murmured the frock-coated one. "One had almost resigned oneself. *Mais c'est formidable!*" The shape of a jeep, overtaking the procession, had come cantering down the sidewalk to make for the main intersection near us, where trucks and halftracks were piling up in traffic. A figure bounded out of it, shiny-helmeted, with constellations of stars along his shoulders and more at his collar. It leaped to the center of the snarl through a haze of exhausts, and began flailing its arms after the manner of a traffic cop and shouting oaths all around in a falsetto scream, until the vast assemblage straightened out and roared on.

"And who was that?" asked The Direction. "A general," I said, without telling him that it was this particular army's general. One did not discuss military matters with the local population. "*Formidable,*" he repeated. "And how original. In Europe, such a thing on the part of an officer of high rank would not be possible."

"Tonight," I said—or think I said—"everything is possible."

ELIZAM had no choice in the matter. Her wishes, her own decision to dispose of her future as she wanted, if she had thought about it at all, had not been given a moment's thought by anybody. I was only a child, but people were always asking me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and they seemed to be very much interested when I replied "a doctor" or "an engineer." I had



that freedom of choice, but Elizam had not, and it made me furious.

Although she was ten years older than I was, I felt that I understood her, and I was sure that Elizam did not wish to leave us. But the fate that had seemingly blessed her two elder sisters had now overtaken her, and she looked miserable on the morning she was married. Her big eyes, framed by long lashes, had lost their usual brilliance.

She was dressed as I had never seen her before. A gay wedding sari had replaced the simple bodice and sarong she had worn ever since I could remember. Rubies set in gold hung from her ears. Gold bangles tinkled at her wrists. Around her neck she wore the traditional gold ornaments—a choker with pendant, a triple gold chain, and the *thali* or wedding necklace. The jewelry had been given as a dowry by my mother. Elizam would have been

given more if she had been married off in our village like her sisters. They had received cottages on Grandfather-with-the-Beard's estate for as long as it belonged to our family, as well as the right to farm a bit of the land.

For Elizam Mother provided only clothes and jewelry. It was sufficient that Mother had found her a husband who could support her and her children. Elizam's chocolate complexion was not popular in the marriage market, so that even a poor farmer was a "catch" on which Mother congratulated herself. But Elizam did not seem grateful.

I HATED the bridegroom as soon as I set eyes on him. He was a *chuvvalai*, or fair-complexioned man, not much taller than Elizam, who was big for a Ceylonese girl. He arrived in his bullock cart from his farm at Kantalai, about twenty miles from Trincomalee, to have a look at Elizam before giving his consent. I could tell from the way Elizam hid in the kitchen and refused to come out that she didn't want to get married.

Mother called to the girl several times as if she had some household task for her, but Elizam knew there was a suitor around the place and wouldn't emerge. Then Mother asked me to call her, but Elizam knew that I had been put up to it.

When it was time for tea, it was her cousin Sita who served it. Elizam still hid in the kitchen, and no amount of threats from Mother could make her come out. But Mother was not really angry. She was hugely amused at Elizam's shyness, a natural and proper attribute of a bride-to-be. But Elizam was not just being coy. She didn't want to

... married at all. She had been with us most of her life—in Atchuvevely, in Singapore, and in Malaya—and she wanted to stay on.

The farmer could have peeped into the kitchen, but that would have been undignified. It is not real-



ly necessary to see a bride before marriage. If she is seen at all, it is only by accident—at most an accident that had been staged by one of the parties. The farmer waited patiently, however, chewing his betel leaf and tobacco as if he belonged to the house.

I can't remember what eventually brought Elizam out. It may have been the arrival of the vegetable or oil seller. Anyway the farmer saw her full, strapping figure by the kitchen door—the kitchen was a separate building—and he went away well content, having given his promise. He may not even have noticed the beautiful molding of her oval face.

Good-by, Good-by

When Elizam got married she was saying good-by to her childhood. Like her sisters and cousins, she must have joined us when she was two or three. Her parents and the parents of her cousins lived in cottages on Grandfather-with-the-Beard's estate in Atchuvevely village. Their children were sent into the service of my grandfather or that of his children up in Trincomalee. If

they received any pay at all, it was sent to their parents, but they had a comfortable home and as soon as they reached the age of seventeen or eighteen were married off with a small dowry. That was one duty we had toward them.

ELIZAM called us by our own names, which was forbidden our other servants. Though she did not attend school, as we did, it was she who dressed us for school. She saw to it that we got there safe and was always there by the school gates at four to see us home again. In the mornings, between classes, she or her cousin Sita brought our glasses of milk.

She rubbed our bodies with sesame oil on Saturdays and then bathed us after we had run about under the morning sun for an hour or two. Earlier in the day she had boiled limes, *cheekakai* pods, and bassia meal. She shampooed our hair with the mixture and then rubbed in the limes. The rinses left our hair softer and glossier than any patent shampoo could have done. It was she who arranged our visits to the harbor and the various beaches of Trincomalee. Once a year when we camped in the jungle at Madhu or Paalai Oothu, it was she who slept with us beside the campfire. When the wild boar was brought in, it was Elizam who broiled the first pieces, though she was not the regular cook, and she always gave me the largest piece. She packed parcels of the meat to send to relatives and dried the rest under the sun. When we brought back birds from our shoots she cooked them for us, or when we brought green mangoes that we had stoned down from a nearby grove she secretly dressed them with salt and chili for a relish which we loved dearly but which was forbidden by Mother.

She was always preparing surprises for us. As we dug into our dinner of rice and several curries, with her fond voice coaxing us on, we would come across all kinds of delicacies hidden under the rice—eggs, chicken legs, fried shrimps, cuttlefish or roe, soft-shelled crabs, stuffed bitter gourd, fried wild boar, fish baked in ashes, meat wrapped in leaves, or a quail so tiny that you could eat its wafer-thin bones.

On Kool Day

Elizam was the household expert on the preparation of that king of soups we called *kool*, whose only occidental equivalent I can think of is Provençal bouillabaisse. This main-dish soup is a north Ceylon specialty, and Elizam knew all its village mysteries.

On our family's *kool* day, a day to which we looked forward because there were no tiresome solid chunks of meat and vegetable to eat, Elizam superintended all the stages of its preparation, from the buying of fish to its eating. It was her special day in the kitchen. The matrix of the soup was made of a flour ground from the plumules of palmyra seeds. In it floated grains of rice and bright red stars of chili. Into the pot went tiny dried and fresh fish, medium pink fish and medium blue fish, small crabs, large crabs quartered, fillets of more fish along with their heads, the chestnuts of the jack fruit, the crisp fleshy jacket of jack seeds, tiny immature jack fruit cut into wedges, large "double shrimps," and the leaves of a certain creeper with red fruit that had a special rough texture which was delightful to chew.

In Trincomalee we always ate the



soup out of bowls, but the way Elizam served it back in Atchuvevely village was out of individual cups made of the glaucous jack leaf. Elizam herself took charge of the pot, ladling it out with her long shapely

arm, her blue-black hair done into a very large bun at the back. Even mother, who often superintended our dinners, left the *kool* ceremony to Elizam.

ANOTHER village ritual perpetuated by Elizam in our urban surroundings was eating the pulp off the large palmyra seeds after they had been dipped in a weak solution of tamarind. It is a messy but delightful business. For the poor of the village it was sufficient dinner. When we went on hikes with the Boy Scouts she gave us parcels of *kattu choru*. Cooked eggs, meats, fish, vegetables, and rice were wrapped and pinned with a palm sliver in banana leaf and placed in a palm-leaf basket. The banana leaf, which cooked in the slow heat of the food inside it, flavored everything delicately. We also loved her *palanchoru*, which is cooked rice left overnight in water and made into balls filled with delicacies like shrimp or turtle meat. The proper way to eat it is off a small banana leaf held in the right hand.

Then there were Elizam's *pattchadis*. Between her cousin Sita and herself, all the *pattchadis* of Atchuvely were made available for our table. *Pattchadi* of bananas, *pattchadi* of eggplants, *pattchadi* of dried fish or shrimps, all baked in ashes, *pattchadis* of green ginger, neem flowers, lotus roots, banana inflorescences and their purple spathes, hibiscus blooms, heart of banana stem, portulacas, edible leaves of weeds, and tender stems of *pirandaithandu* creepers.

The Celebration

All this was now about to end. Elizam's younger sister Innesu, who had been brought up in Grandfather-with-the Beard's household, had come up to take her place, but things would never be the same again without Elizam. Her father, who had come up from the village, was hilarious with the many guests. He was tipsy on arrack. But her mother was crying quietly, and I could see that Elizam would cry too before long. She was a wife now, this was her going-away party, but she looked very upset.

As is usual in Ceylonese weddings, the men were in the drawing room

and the women in another part of the house. Being only eight, I was allowed to wander from one part of the house to the other. The men who liked a drink took trips to the small bar almost hidden away in a corner. That is also a tradition—to do the drinking away from the



general company so as not to give offense.

The whole house was reeking with the pungent odor of black Jaffna cheroots. Many of the guests were hardened smokers from the north, including Elizam's mother, who smoked her own home-grown in a clay pipe. The teetotalers dug into the plates of tidbits and slaked their thirst with quantities of lime juice and carbonated water.

The time was drawing near for Elizam's departure. The *koorai*, or special wedding sari (which would become an heirloom), was carried in on a brass tray by my mother and offered to each guest in turn, who touched it with the right hand for good luck.

After I touched Elizam's sari I went to the study room and opened my desk. I wrote in Tamil on a sheet of paper: "Dear Elizam, Come back to see us soon. Thurairajah." I went

to my mother's room and saw the *koorai* sari on the brass tray on the side table. I took a pin out of the sewing box and pinned my note on one of the inside folds. Elizam was bound to find it the first time she wore the sari.

THE BRIDEGROOM had now drawn up his cart and two bullocks in front of the house. Accompanied by the women, Elizam came out and got into the front seat. There were tears in her eyes.

The bridegroom cracked his stick and the bullock cart creaked up the rose-pink gravel road on which the sun lay like golden coins. My brothers and I and our neighbors the Wambeek boys ran behind the rattling cart as far as the first crossroads. Through the thatch roof of the cart we saw Elizam turn around to have a last look at us. She did not wave.

I can't even remember whether we lit Chinese firecrackers at Elizam's wedding. Maybe we did.

I think I may have gone to bed with a book and no lunch that afternoon, as I usually did when I wished to protest against anything. That was a last resort to have my own way, and somehow it usually improved matters. If I did do this on Elizam's wedding day, I feel sure that I did it with no other motive than to mark the occasion with personal regret, as on the day our dog Luxmi died.

The Visit

On the following Sunday, the second day after Elizam's wedding, there was the rumble of cartwheels outside our house at lunch time. When I went to the front door to see who it could be, Elizam rushed up and folded me in her arms and kissed me, a thing I can never remember her doing before. Her husband was standing by the cart smiling sheepishly.

There was tremendous excitement in the house at Elizam's return, with all of us tumbling around her and her sister Innesu full of smiles. Mother looked puzzled and she asked Elizam's husband what the matter was.

Apparently Elizam had found my note when she was dressing in her *koorai* sari to pay her first visit to

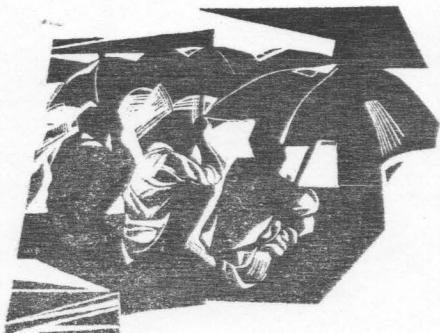
the local church. She had burst into tears, and nothing would console her. She wanted to return to Trincomalee at once. Her husband had no choice but to drive her down at once the twenty miles in his bullock cart. That was how we happened to see Elizam in her *koorai* sari. She looked wonderful.

Elizam spent that day with us and promised to return to see us, which she did often. We were even taken one day to see her at her home in Kantalai near the famous irrigation tank built by King Aggabodhi II in A.D. 601. It was full of crocodiles. All the birds of creation seemed to be at Kantalai—teals, cormorants, Indian darters, and flights of terns, snipe, flycatchers, flamingoes, wild duck, waterfowl, minivets, peacocks, gay-colored jungle fowl, the solitary pelican, sunbirds, tailorbirds, golden orioles, bluejays, jungle crows, coucals, hawks of all sizes, bee-eaters, *buttagoias*, and all the kingfishers—river, giant, pied, and stork-billed. Truly it was a beautiful place to live in.

That day Elizam cooked for us her famous *kool* in her tidy thatched cottage, with jack fruit from her own tree, palmyra shoots from her own beds, and rice from her own fields, but we did not know then it would be our last. She died soon after in childbirth.

ELIZAM'S sister, who looked very much like her, grew more dear to us as the years passed. Today we are as fond of her as we were of Elizam. She too was married off at the age of eighteen. But at that time we were much older and better able to appreciate the festivity of the occasion.

I distinctly remember that we did light Chinese firecrackers at Innesu's wedding.



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The New American Radicals

A poet-historian's view of
mob rule from the Jacobins to McCarthy

PETER VIERECK

DURING the Jacobin Revolution of 1793, in those quaint days when the lower classes still thought of themselves as the lower classes, it was for upper-class sympathies and for *not* reading "subversive leftist literature" that aristocrats got in trouble.

Note the reversal in America. Here the lower classes seem to be the upper classes—they have automobiles, lace curtains, and votes. Here, in consequence, it is for alleged lower-class sympathies—for "leftist" sympathies—that the aristocrats are purged by the lower class.

IN REALITY those lower-class sympathies are microscopic in most of that social register (Lodge, Bohlen, Acheson, Stevenson, and Harvard presidents) which McCarthy is trying to purge; even so, leftist sympathies are the pretext given for the purge. Why is it necessary to allege those lower-class sympathies as pretext? Why the pretext in the first place? Because in America the suddenly enthroned lower classes cannot prove to themselves psychologically that they are now upper-class unless they can indict for pro-proletariat subversion those whom they know in their hearts to be America's real intellectual and social aristocracy.

Ostensibly our aristocrats are being metaphorically guillotined for having signed, twenty years ago, some pinko-front petition by that egghead Voltaire (a typical reversal of the 1793 pretext) and for having said not "Let them eat cake" but "Let them read books" (violation of loyalty oath to TV). Behind these ostensible pretexts, the aristocratic pro-proletarian conspirators are actually being guillotined for having

been too exclusive socially—and, even worse, intellectually—at those fancy parties at Versailles-sur-Hudson. McCarthyism is the revenge of the noses that for twenty years of fancy parties were pressed against the outside window pane.

In Populist-Progressive days and in New Deal days, those same noses were pressed with openly radical, openly lower-class resentment. During 1953 and 1954, the same noses snorted triumphantly with right-wing Republicanism. This demagogue's spree of symbolically decapitating America's intellectual and social upper class, but doing so while shouting a two hundred per cent upper-class ideology, suggests that McCarthyism is actually a leftist instinct behind a self-deceptive rightist veneer. This combination bolsters the self-esteem of sons of Democratic urban day laborers whose status rose into stuffy Republican suburbia. Their status rose thanks to the Communism-preventing social reforms of Roosevelt. Here for once is a radicalism expressing not poverty but sudden prosperity, biting the New Deal hand that fed it.

The New Royalty

Many of our intellectual aristocrats have helped to make the McCarthyite attack on themselves a success by denouncing McCarthyism as a rightist movement, a conservative movement. At first they even denounced it as a Red-baiting, anti-Communist movement, which is exactly what it wanted to be denounced as. By now they have at least caught on to the fact that it is not anti-Communist, has not trapped a single Red spy—whether at Fort Monmouth, the Voice of America, or the State Department—and is a major cause of