

VIEWS & REVIEWS

The Tree Climber

A short story set in Ceylon

TAMBIMUTTU

MEN are the victims of what they love most. At least when I was a boy I thought so, because of what happened to Velu, the Tree Climber.

Almost from childhood, Velu had spent his working days in the coconut groves of Grandfather-with-the-Beard's estate, at Atchuvvely village, in Ceylon. According to old custom, he received ten nuts for every hundred he plucked. We lived with our parents in Colombo, where we went to school, but spent our long school vacations at Atchuvvely. On these holidays my five brothers and I often looked for Velu in the groves, and found him busy with his many tasks, tapping the coconut trees for toddy in the off season—when the palmyra palms, which give the better toddy, can't be tapped—bringing down the brown old leaves for thatch, or supervising the drying of the nuts for copra, which is one of our chief exports. Coconuts provide the easiest crop in the world, as far as I know, as well as the most generous. With occasional help in the crop periods, which came every two months, a man like Velu tended two hundred acres of them. Sometimes we found him planting new trees. The seeds were germinated for several months in the water of a disused well and planted in holes three feet deep, with some lime to sweeten the soil and some sea salt for the trees to feed on.

Velu carefully fenced the plants around with thatch to keep away the squirrels, porcupines, rats, and flying foxes. He weeded and watered them occasionally, watching out for the larvae that feed on the young leaves, for termites, and the destructive coco beetle. Once the plants were firmly rooted, he gave them little more attention. They bore their first

crop at eight years. Velu had an extraordinary feeling of regard and affection for the trees he tended, and this he instilled in me and my brothers. And there was also the wonder and romance of the groves, for they were a world in which many exciting things happened.

WHEN WE ARRIVED at Grandfather's estate in 1922 to spend the long Christmas vacation, we made our first call on Velu. We arrived at his cottage toward sunset, accompanied by Great-Grandfather-with-the-Ear-Bobs, so called because he wore heavy earrings. Great-Grandfather wished to tell Velu that for the next six weeks he would need a daily supply of king coconuts, which are grown specially for drinking.

Velu's cottage of bright-red adobe and fawn-colored palm thatch, although typical of the village, was rather more spacious than his neighbors'. Like most of the other cottages in Atchuvvely, it was fenced around with palmyra or coconut thatch, with a high gate of the same material opening onto a white-sanded path. To its right stood an open shed that housed his cow and pair of goats, and to its left the kitchen, an adobe-and-thatch structure open in front like a cave. All around were his jak and mango trees, and some bananas and pineapples. In front was his kitchen garden, one of the neatest in Atchuvvely. Snake gourds a yard long hung green and silver from their frames, with tiles tied to the ends to aid their stretching among the bitter gourds and peas. Eggplants, tomato vines, and okra plants were fastened with banana cord to upright sticks. The betel and the aerial yam climbed up poles. The fat ash gourds and pumpkins sat on



the red earth between the large, deeply lobed leaves.

About a hundred coconut trees radiated from Velu's well in the furthest corner. Villagers say that a man lacks nothing if he owns half a dozen coconuts, a jak tree (whose monstrous fruit, growing by the shortest of stalks from the main trunk itself, weighs anything up to a hundred pounds), a cow, and a share in a paddy field. By these standards Velu was comfortably off.

VELU'S WIFE was the first to notice our arrival. A small, delicately made woman in a sari without a blouse, she was busy in the kitchen with her pots and curry bowls of smoke-blackened terra cotta. Women of her caste did not wear blouses, as others did, but simply threw the ends of their saris over their left shoulders. The evening fires were blazing cheerfully in the hearth, a series of horseshoe-shaped structures of clay at the far end. The scene inside—with stacked pots hanging from the roof in fiber cradles and all manner of kitchen utensils neatly hung in patterned palm-fiber holders on the wall—was mysterious, ritualistic and self-contained, a world apart, a village woman's world.

"Velu! Velo-o-o!" his wife called. Velu was at a neighbor's. He knew from her shout something special

was on, so he arrived looking breathless. His lively face, rough with gray stubble, broke into a smile as soon as he saw us. As a mark of respect, he took off the shawl hanging on his shoulder and wound it up and tied it around his waist. Though he was fifty-one, he had a young man's cheerful, unlined face and characteristic Indian lips, soft and bow-shaped. It was a typical villager's face, a mixture of strength and that gentleness which travelers, perhaps romantically, have referred to as a flower-like quality. It looked as if he had been celebrating, drinking toddy.

"Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!" Velu chuckled. "So you have returned to Atchuvvely to taste the king coconuts! Welcome, little kings! My eyes feel young again!"

His daughter, a pretty girl of sixteen, brought chairs out into the open. We were entreated to sit even though we had called only for a moment. His tall, brown-limbed farmer son, the elder one, with just the *verti* or white nether garment wound around his middle so that his beautifully molded arms and chest showed to advantage over the narrow waist, was sent to the store-room to get some king yams or palmyra sprouts to present to the visitors. The younger son, Gundu, stood by, grinning shyly. He had a luxuriant, unruly mop of hair on top of a clear-skinned fair face—a marked contrast to his nut-brown brother's. He was nine years old and very mischievous.

"Hullo, Gundu," I said looking at him suspiciously, as he shifted from foot to foot, with his hands clasped behind him.

"Going to climb The Tree this time?" he questioned with a superior air, bobbing his head up and down for emphasis. Gundu was nearly as expert at climbing trees as his father, though we had tried and could not climb at all.

"Who wants to climb trees?" I replied hotly, as if I didn't care, but the cunning devil knew I did.

"You must have a drink now!" Velu said urgently.

"No, not now," my brother Rutnam replied for us. We all knew that it is polite to refuse a drink.

That was only a formality, since nothing could stop Velu from giving us a drink from the special king

coconuts which grew beside his cottage. He tucked up his spotlessly white *verti* between his legs and climbed the tallest of the three special trees, about ninety feet high, which was his favorite. When the stalk cap was removed, the nuts of these trees were a beautiful coral underneath, and all the way through when sliced, which made them unique in all our experience.

Almost with affection, Velu lopped off their green heads with quick strokes of his broad, heavy sickle-shaped knife. Then he cut wedge shapes or round holes in the pink crowns with the blade's pointed beak, and the nectar came fizzing up like a bubbly wine. We had our first taste of country-grown nectar in several months, and were conscious of the bounty of the trees. Not even the best lemonade in Ceylon can equal the drink from a freshly plucked king coconut!

Since we believe in the existence of "good" trees like the bo and "evil" trees like the neem, it was especially at such times that I thought of the coconuts as "good." Velu made us believe that. Owning them, he told us, was like having a cow, a field of flax, a carbonated-water factory, a vineyard, a forest of timber, a haystack for thatch, a compost heap, sacks of feed for cattle and poultry, a field of sugar cane, and a field of ground nuts. It was Ceylon's tree of life, providing everything from butter and milk and Ceylon gin (arrack) to the cottages themselves, which were almost completely vegetable in origin. It gave us sugar, fiber products, palm wine, and oil. "It is the most useful tree in the world," Velu told us, and we believed him.

DURING OUR VISIT, Velu arrived every morning as the sun shone yellow directly on our courtyard and again in the evening. He would bring toddy drawn from the trees for Great-Grandfather, and for us he had young coconuts. He arrived carrying the single large pot of toddy in a fiber cradle and the king coconuts on his shoulder, and if we wanted a drink right away, he would squat in the corner of the courtyard, cutting the coconuts with his great knife. He was so expert with his strokes that the crowns came off in

neat wedges all joined together, leaving the domed drinking surfaces quite smooth. The unpaved courtyard surrounded by buildings and flame-of-the-forest trees was the limit of Velu's approach to Grandfather-with-the-Beard's residence, as to all high-caste houses. Since he was low-caste he could not enter our house, just as we could not enter his or even drink water from his well. This seemed ridiculous, to us, since we drank his toddy. (In less orthodox Colombo, caste barriers were almost nonexistent, except on the important question of marriage.)

Long before Velu's morning visit, we would hunt for him in the palm groves. He was easy to locate. The knock-knock of his toddy tapping sounded through the groves like the beat of a clock as he cut the flower stalks eighty feet and more from the ground and bruised them with salt and spices. Velu was lost in the sea of green above while he tied the terra-cotta pots to the cut buds and the palm wine flowed into them between leaves glinting in the morning sun.

Sometimes the pre-monsoon winds whipped up the leaves and they clashed like swords or serpents. The palm trees swayed as he floated dangerously in the green-sea. Groaning, they swept an awesome arc in the darkening sky. They looked dangerous at such times—just as on that day Velu had told us, "There is a beehive ready to take down on that tree."

After dark that evening we went with him and his farmer son to the palm groves. Velu climbed up and we couldn't see clearly what he was doing. The top of the tree seemed to have caught fire. He had set fire to a hank of coconut fiber and was waving it around to smoke out the bees. Sparks flew among the leaves and rained down. The tree seemed to be angry, spitting smoke and fire. Though Velu descended soon as cheerful as ever with the comb, containing several pounds of honey, the impression persisted with me that in that darkness above Velu had been tampering with the forces of evil.

ONE DAY Velu's wife came to the groves, slightly bent, with her dark eyes looking around as if she expected to see a snake or an igua-

na. "Gundu! Gundu!" she shouted. Gundu was hiding up a palm tree, of course.

She looked at us suspiciously, screwing up her small-boned face, framed with startlingly black hair done up into a smooth bun behind. "Little brothers, do you know where Gundu is?" she asked, looking harassed.

Before we could reply, Velu had come down from his tree. "What do you want with him?" He sounded like a mischievous schoolboy.

"I want him to go to the Junction Shop!" she shouted back. And then Gundu let loose a shower of nuts from his perch.

Her temper flared, and she screamed at Velu. "You and your trees! You spoil Gundu, and soon he will not be fit to lift a flea off a cow's tail! You and your trees! Oh, I wish I were dead!" She went back the way she had come. Gundu merely grinned. "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!" Velu's stomach shook. He smiled at the boy lightheartedly and walked off to get on with his work. It seemed he conspired to keep Gundu in the palm groves with him, although there was very little for him to do.

"Why does she call the coconut trees evil?" I asked brother Rutnam.

"Who knows? They may be," he replied.

WHEN we were in Velu's company it was difficult to think of anything but the trees' bounty and beneficence. It was his husbandry of thirty-six years that had made them grow. His love for them was infectious. For us, he filled the whole coconut world with wonder. "These are the best fighting trees," he said proudly, pointing them out. They were the trees that bore the nuts with extra thick shells for the coconut-splitting contests in which Velu took part.

During these games, the bowler of the opposing team threw a nut as hard as he could, while Velu hit it with the one in his hand. He was "out" if his coconut split or if he didn't split the other. In some villages, Velu told us, the holy water from split coconuts is collected in a pot and then taken in procession through surrounding villages with cries of "Hoya!" The coconut water is wholesome and goodly and charms

away disease. To hear Velu speak like this was to banish any suspicions I may have had that the coconut, like the neem and tamarind trees, was the haunt of devils.

Velu grieved whenever he had to destroy one of his trees. One day he pointed out to us an old tree that he thought was dangerous. "We will have to bring it down," he said unhappily. "I feel it's a mercy it was my grandfather and not I who planted it." Velu and Gundu then brought fiber ropes and tied the tree like a mast. Velu swung his ax above its base, and the sad old tree came crashing down. "It is a bad business," he said, and I thought so too. Then he cut out the enormous butter-colored cabbage in the tree's heart. It tasted delicious, like a cross between almonds and lettuce, and the surplus was pickled away. It had taken nearly a hundred years before we could have it, but it was well worth the waiting. Then Velu trimmed the trunk for a new well sweep.

"Do you know the coconut won't grow away from the sound of human voices or the sea?" Velu asked us. It is something all Ceylon villagers believe, so we raised our voices as we went through the groves, and the trees listened.

We had fine days at Atchuvally on that vacation. The sun was kindly, and we felt exhilarated by it. It was that gentle kind of sunlight which transforms everything it lies on into something young and glowing. Then one evening near the end of the holidays, before the break of the northeast monsoon, the clouds shut off the sun. It got dark and ominous in the mango and palm groves, and the cyclone struck us.

When a cyclone strikes, dust and the parched mango leaves rise from the ground in whirling eddies, and the forest groans. The coconut trunks bend like Rama's bow under the furious onslaught, their leaves chattering and hissing excitedly. Above the storm, we hear the thud of nuts dropping to the ground. Suddenly the heavens open and the torrent falls in solid sheets with frightening violence. The water screeches down the gutters and pipes, drowning conversation. The devils in the tamarind and the other evil trees are on the prowl. The fish are lifted

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out of the sea by the waterspouts to fall from out of the sky onto our courtyards.

WHEN all this fury and clamor ceased, Gundu arrived at the house carrying a hurricane lamp that had gone out. He was crying. "Father is hurt," he sobbed. Grabbing our hats and raincoats, we hurried on through the flood with Great-Grandfather and Grandfather-with-the-Beard. The night was black, and we pointed our flashlights directly on the path before us so as not to stumble on the brambles and coral rocks.

When we got to Velu's cottage, we saw a dreadful sight. By the light of hurricane lamps and flares of bundled-up dry coconut leaves, we saw that his cottage had been crushed flat to the ground like an eggshell. On top lay a fierce, menacing shape, wet and glistening, its long trunk snaking away from the wreck. It was one of Velu's three special trees, the ones that bore nuts with coral pink insides—the tallest and the one he loved best. During the storm's fury it had come down. Now it looked triumphant, its blown leaves hissing with malice. Velu had been trapped by a heavy beam and his neighbors were busy extricating him. They were silent and downcast. As they put Velu onto a stretcher, I dared not go near. His wife and daughter stood sobbing beside his farmer son, and little Gundu talked wildly to his father as they carried him to a car.

Velu recognized us by the light of the flares and smiled. "It was the tree," he said wearily, "but don't worry. I will be back soon to look after the groves."

"Yes, Velu," said Great-Grandfather, who was visibly moved. He had known Velu since he was a child.

MY BROTHERS and I visited him the next day at Manipay Hospital, ten miles away, which was staffed with American and Ceylonese doctors. Great-Grandfather accompanied us. The place was cool and spotless with white beds, and nurses in white saris. Velu was unconscious. Before the next morning's sun rose we heard he was dead, and we returned to Atchuvely with his body.

The drummers drummed that day and the funeral horns blew as the women of Atchuvely mourned ceremoniously for Velu. Some stood in parallel lines and others sat in circles. Each one made up a couplet in verse about the dead man's virtues and the incidents in his life they remembered with affection. They chanted them in turn and wailed together for a refrain. Someone cursed the coconut tree. The chanting went on all day. My brothers and I stole into the hastily erected thatch pavilion under which Velu lay to have our last look at him. He looked peaceful on the white bier surrounded by white jasmines and oleanders. Tall eight-wicked coconut-oil lamps of brass stood at his head and his feet.

We attended his cremation at sunset. His elder son walked three times round the pyre, carrying an earthenware pot of water on his shoulder and sprinkling the water

on the ground. Then he dashed it on the pyre. It burst, spewing water about like a "fighting coconut." He set fire to the four corners of the pyre, the men doused it with coconut oil, and it blazed.

ON THAT DAY I decided the coconut was an evil tree, although it is very difficult for anyone to say with certainty which trees are good and which are evil.

"What do you think?" I asked brother Rutnam.

"I don't know," he said. "But the coconut tree is very useful."

"Yes," I said. "until it kills you."

At Atchuvely today it is Gundu who tends our groves. He is youthful and tall and golden, and he wears his headcloth at a gay angle. When he is up in the trees with the breeze ripping through and the nuts dropping around him, we almost imagine it is Velu. He has the same ready smile and confident air.

A Day in Berenson's Ninety-first Year

JUDITH FRIEDBERG

BERNARD BERENSON, who celebrated his ninetieth birthday in June, still maintains a pace that would weary men half his age. The art historian and connoisseur is supremely conscious that he has a limited time to see and do all he would like. What irks him most is the fact that he must waste so much time these days "just resting." Each moment,

he feels, should be lived to the hilt, and he rations his time with an iron discipline. Wistfully he will sometimes say that he wishes he could stand on a street corner, hand outstretched, and say to passersby: "Won't you give me five minutes, please? They will not be wasted."

B. B. grows angry when congratulated on his advanced years. "It's no fault of mine that I got this far," he says. "I've always had a strong constitution and I was blessed with a good heredity." He recalls his grandfather who lived through his hundredth year, and one has the feeling that he fully intends to do as well. As he sees it, a combination of his own iron discipline and rugged constitution, plus the constant, loving care of his devoted friends and staff, has permitted him to continue living and working at a pace that may have slackened but not halted with the years.

