

BOOK SELLERS, BURIYANI AND BARBERS

A boyhood in Kandy, Long Ago

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Words are keys that open cobwebbed corridors to place distant in time — yet so close to the heart. Book-sellers, buriyani, barber saloons, 'bioscope' carts — are words that call to mind the Kandy of my boyhood in the early nineteen forties.

School bookshops

Booksellers teemed in Kandy, or so it seemed to one young book addict. Most useful, but least interesting, were the bookshops clustered at the top end of Castle street specialising in text books and allied paraphernalia, for now out-dated skills, such as instrument boxes, pasted crayons, pen holders and nibs (G, relief and ladies) — which were rapidly developed into lethal weapons by ingenious

tion for school by gangs and games.

Not far away, Lazarus and Kandy Medical stores tantalisingly displayed, amidst toys and patent medicines, fat and colourful schoolboy Annuals which one longingly leafed through hoping for a birthday gift.

The Corner Book Stall

As one grew older younger siblings entered school and stretched parental budgets. New books were only for the younger ones. We learnt to forage for used texts from promoted seniors and second-hand book-stalls. Thus I found paradise, most appropriately, next to Kandy's sole undertakers at the corner of Castle and King Street. The sign-board "The Yusuf's Corner Book Stall" drew my school teacher father

pressive handlebar moustache, in sarong and khaki tunic. I believe he collected his stock in trade from out-stations at planters' clubs and school libraries. Schoolboys bartered old texts for new comics, or flogged them for the few cents needed to hire a bike for a joyride while "cutting school." I never plumbed the mystery of Yusuf's unfailing supply of wartime comics which found their way to his shelves across submarine infested seas. We were thrilled by their wondrous tales of brave Brits bashing nasty Nazis. Old Yusuf knew his books and had an unerring eye for customer tastes. Father was guided towards dusty volumes of history and travel. And also to abridged versions of the classic historical romances and adventures of his own boyhood. Thus I waded with gusto into Hereward the Wake, The Last Day of Pompeii, and tales of ship wrecks and derring-do

Booksellers, neatly dressed in white verti and shirt, crisscrossed Kandy on cycles, balancing towering piles of books on plank reinforced pillars. A civil breed, they cultivated their clientele and never hesitated to display their wares even on the verandahs of young book-worms of scanty means. Surprisingly well-read, their excellent sales patter recommended authors summarized contents and unobtrusively pushed a sale or two before they repacked their stock in trade. Great purveyors they were of P.G. Wodehouse, and the William books. Once I picked out for a few cents

a battered leather volume of Arctic adventure because it had been published almost a century ago. I was thrilled to personally own such an ancient book. It is yet with me, another half century later!

Wrapping Paper

An unexpected mine of reading matter



in shops competing to build continuous series of adventures, with gaps filled by banter. The newly discovered Ice Age Man of the Alps flashed my memory back to one amazingly prophetic yarn of a blood thirsty prehistoric villain, preserved in a glacier, resurrected by a mad scientist (who else?) to wreak mayhem

literary society (is it yet around, I wonder?) sharpened their wits on these puzzles but none from Ceylon ever hit the jack pot. However, the Weekly did father proud when they published some of his writings. Brightly coloured Tamil magazines jostled dull Indian editions of English "classics" printed on coarse paper with amazing illustrations

Hotels were incredibly posh, the haunt of white planters and memsahibs obsequiously waited on by starched waiters. This left us with The Muslim Hotel. We were ushered upstairs to the family rooms' entered through swing doors, loyally decorated with pictures of Mecca, Mr. Jinnah, and portly king Farouk of Egypt resplendent in wondrous medals and

yellow chaps. Only a full fledged "fowl" qualified to the curried. Watalappan, oily and incredibly sweet, rounded off the repast.

The noisy "feeds" of schoolboys were held downstairs at long tables where we competed to score records in gobbling down string-hoppers. Obvious to this mayhem more sober

to look at while waiting our turn. Garish prints of Gandhi, Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose held pride of place. I learnt of the hero-assassin Bhagat Singh from the naive portrait standing hand-cuffed arrogantly before his gallowes incongruously natty in felt hat and waxed moustache. In between were plump Indian film heroines and moon faced Chinese women in chongsams, all looking like Mme. Chiang Kai Shek.

Summoned at last we sat before a mirrored counter cluttered with the antiquated impedimenta of barbering — bottles fitted with plungers to spray scented water to tame bristly hair; jars of, new forgotten, unguents — Afghan snow, of Roses, Mikado Scent — to perfume young men prom-enading the Lake bund; cut throat razors and the leather straps on which they were rhythmically strapped; opaque chunks of astringent alum to invigorate

advertise the latest offerings at the Empire and Wembley were the 'bioscope' carts. Two large boards with bright posters were mounted tent-fashion on a bullock cart which paraded Kandy's streets. Inside the tent a happy band of urchins drummed, a lively tattoo of baila medleys on empty tins as the cart trotted along. Intermitently they flung a handful of advertising handbills which we ran behind to collect and avidly read. Their contents were the ultimate in suspense and titillation. The story was told in vivid phrases but ended abruptly with the bracketed phrase ("see the rest on the silver screen"), parental dictat, alas, restricted our viewing to "educational" films such as Robin Hood (with Errol Flynn), Young Tom Edition (Micky Rooney), Marco Polo (Douglas Fairbanks) and Walt Disney films. Tarzan (Johnny Weismuller) was grudgingly accepted. To my eternal regret I never did