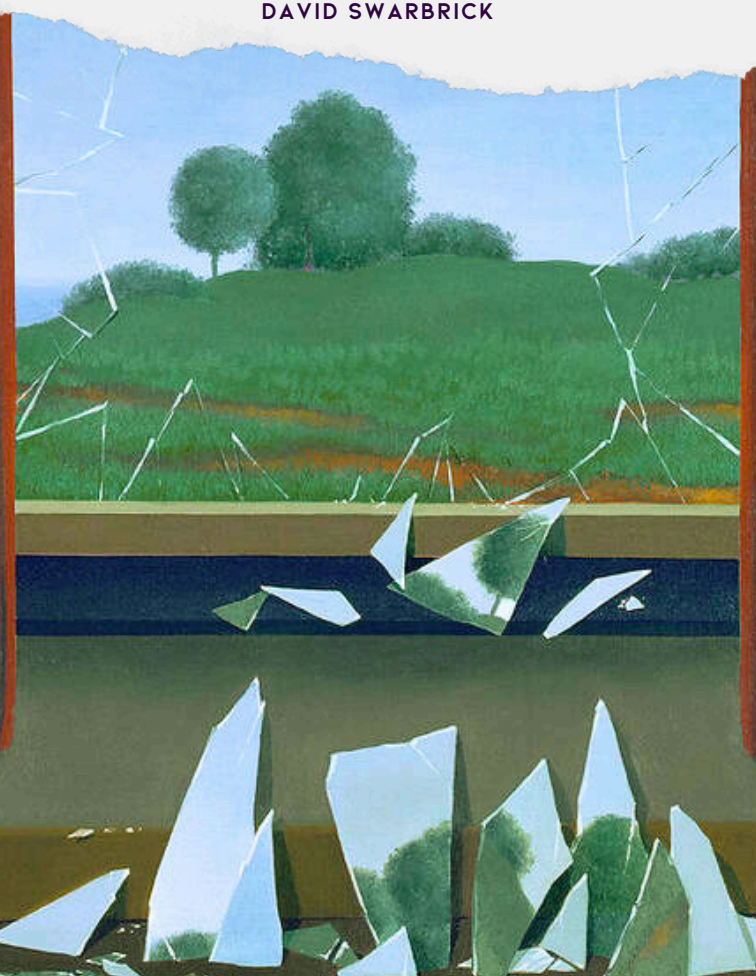
The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 13

LAST CHANCE SALOON

SRI LANKA'S FIRST LAMBAKANNA KINGS IV

DAVID SWARBRICK



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"No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise."

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL 1865

ONE

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

It is unnecessary to employ the mind-reading capabilities of Descartes or The Amazing Kreskin to discern how Sri Lanka might have reacted to Gotabhaya's accession to the throne in 253 CE. For the new king was the archetypal Hard Man – and not someone you would cross and live on in ease and plenty.

After decades of Lambakarna kings, many eagerly pious, ruling with unremitting incompetence, Gotabhaya was nothing less than a shock.

After all, he had been one of the very same three plotters who drove the kingdom into yet another civil war just years earlier, apparently as unaccountable to good governance as any of the many earlier Lambakarna kings who ruled as if they were celestially charged to gambol their reigns like ancient Ves dancers, leaving lakes of regicidal blood in the wake of their inopportune administration.

It was as if some brooding, macho junior army officer had upended his own army, bending generals, kings and sleek courtiers to the austere new realities of a victorious coup, in the style of Jerry Rawlings or Gamal Abdel Nasser. Comparing notes with either of them would have given Gotabhaya all the validation he required. Not that he was the sort to seek approval.

Competent dictators have their moment in the sun, too, and the time was more than ripe for the arrival of Gotabhaya. His very name is still used in the country to suggest authority, command, and control.

Army bases, naval ships, even an ex-president who strove with little success to aspire to his reputation – all bear the name of this stern Lambakarna king. What he lacked in charm, charity, and religious tolerance, Gotabhaya made up for with the sort of firm government that took the fizz out of regicide.

And so, around 253 or 254 CE, Gotabhaya seized the throne and, for fourteen years, ruled Sri Lanka with the proverbial rod of iron.

A deeply conservative religious man, he was unimpressed by the Vajrayana movement, a form of tantric Buddhism that was making a slim but noticeable appearance in his kingdom.

The movement was closely aligned with Mahayana Buddhism and was seen by many as incompatible with the Theravada Buddhism practised on the island since the 3rd century BCE. The

king did all he could to thwart it, even banishing sixty monks for such beliefs.

But what he kept out with one door slammed shut, he inadvertently let in with another, for he entrusted his sons' education to an Indian monk named Sanghamitta, a closet follower of Vaitulya Buddhism.

The Vaitulya doctrinal strand was even more radical than the Vajrayana doctrine that Gotabhaya was so busy trying to eradicate. Like a time bomb, the impact of this private religious education on his successor was timed to go off the moment this alarming and archaic old king died.

His death in 267 CE left the country deeply divided. Several ministers, blithely (and, as it turned out, suicidally) bold, refused to participate in his funeral rites.

His son and heir, Jetta Tissa I, a chip off the monstrous old block, had dozens of them rounded up, staking their impaled heads in a mournful circle around the old king's body, a pitiless and iconic pageant of power that has haunted the island through the centuries, its most recent appearance being during the brutal JVP uprising in 1971 and 1987 when anxious neighbours calling on nearby villages might find such similar circles of horror.

Even so, there is a time when a country needs tough love, or even just tough everything, and Gotabhaya's son sought, with creditable success, to assiduously out-tough his terrifying old father. This display of strong-armed governance under yet another king was probably what was most needed to help keep at bay the lurking regicidal and anarchic tendencies inherent in the dynasty.

Jetta Tissa's decade-long rule is unlikely to have been an easy ride for those around him. Indeed, as the Mahavamsa Chronicle states, "he came by the surname: the Cruel". It then, with dismay, elaborates on the steps he took to shift patronage and resources from the orbit of Theravāda Buddhism to Vaitulya Buddhism.

From the perspective of the majority Theravada Buddhists, life managed to take a further turn for the worse when Mahasen, the king's brother, took the throne in 277 CE, a succession notable for being natural.

Like his brother, Mahasen had been educated by the radical monk Sanghamitta.

TWO

THE ROYAL MASON

A twenty-seven-year reign lay ahead of the new king, who got off to a good start, commissioning what would include sixteen massive reservoirs (the largest covering an area of nearly twenty square kilometres) and two big irrigation canals.

But this did little to assuage the resentment his pro-Mahayana religious policies sparked, prompting a wave of further insurrections opposing his stance against Theravada Buddhism.

Undeterred, Mahasen set about building what would become the country's largest stupa, the Jethavanaramaya, which, until the construction of the Eiffel Tower, was the second-tallest building in the world.

To help, he ordered the plundering of the Mahavihara, the greatest Theravada Buddhist monastery in the land. Monks who resisted his Mahayana policies were pressured by various means, including attempts at starvation. Soon enough, the trickle of angry, anguished and adamant monks fleeing to the safety of Ruhuna in the south became a flood. Ominously, they were also joined by Meghavann Abaya, the king's chief minister, who had broodingly raised an army in their defence.

With surprising wisdom, the king drew back from the confrontation, saving his throne, making peace with the disgruntled Theravada Buddhists, and so enabling himself to enjoy a natural death in 303 CE.

Mahasen's late compromise notwithstanding, it is notable that right across these 50 years of three uncompromisingly hardheaded kings, the vice-like hold with which they gripped their realm was rarely seriously imperilled. Despite the unusually high level of religious dissent they inspired, they commanded with apparent ease, shunting the unruly immoderations of family politics into the darkest of corners.

But even a run of dictators-kings has its own sell-by date, and this one came to an end when Mahasen's son, Siri Meghavanna, inherited the throne and opted to super-change the hints of religious appeasement and kinder governance that had marked the fraying ends of his father's choleric reign.

Under him, vast sums of state revenue were set aside to repair any damage to Theravada Buddhism. The old religion's buildings were restored, its stupas and temples renovated and once more publicly cherished.

It is a truism universally acknowledged that good things rarely come to good people. Still, in the case of King Siri Meghavanna, the aphorism rings as hollow as an elephant's trunk in the jungle - for it was during his therapeutic reign that the greatest of all relics was to fall into his hands. "Just," as the late great Tommy Cooper might have said, "like that."

Few relics ever stand the real test of time. Most end up marooned, outpaced by the culture they once represented or the geography or religion that created them: the Holy Right Hand of King Stephen of Hungary; the wailing wall of occupied Jerusalem; the sandal of Muhammad in Istanbul's Pavilion of the Holy Mantle; John the Baptist's head in Rome's San Sylvestro. None can really compare to the Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka, now housed in Kandy's Temple of the Tooth.

Relics derived from the body of the Lord Buddha are scattered across Asia, most of them in Sri Lanka, which counts amongst its treasures the Lord Buddha's forehead, right collarbone, and vertebrae in places such as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Mahiyanganaya, and Trincomalee.

His hair commands the most significant number of addresses, with single strands of it claimed to be housed in temples in Ambalantota, Mawathagama, Badulla, Anuradhapura, Senanayakarama, Colombo, Kandy, Nelligala, Hambantota, and Kalamatiya; plus at least a dozen other stupas and temples dotted around the coast and now so weathered as to be indistinct from the very landscape they sit within.

But for insurmountably Baroque reasons, his tooth relic is the most revered.

Unlike most other world relics, the Tooth Relic is as relevant to its society today as it was two thousand years ago. It has become, almost unwittingly, the ultimate symbol of the island's statehood, one that nearly supersedes the religion it encompasses, sought after for its aesthetics by ambitious atheists, agnostics, politicians, visiting dignitaries, and, of course, much of the country's current population.

The Tooth Relic arrived like a refugee in need of protection.

Plucked hundreds of years earlier by an enterprising Arhat during the cremation of Lord Buddha, it became synonymous with royal authority and sanctity in faraway Orissa, in the

Indian kingdom of Kalinga, where it eventually ended up.

But only for a while. An interminable war between Indian states threatened its safety; it was sent by the king, Guhaseeva, to Sri Lanka, hidden, it is said, in the elaborate hairstyle of his daughter, Princess Hemamala.

The princess, along with her new husband, Danta, arrived at the port of Lankapatuna, now marked by the Lankapatuna Samudragiri Viharaya. This temple commands the entrance to the vast Ullackalie Lagoon south of Trincomalee.

The following day, this most Agatha Christie of ancient-world couples, the Tommy and Tuppence of their day, made their way – still in disguise as Indian brahmins- to Anuradhapura and presented the relic to King Sri Meghavanna, who enshrined it in the Isurumuniya Temple.

Their moment of bravado and celebrity over, the couple sadly vanish from history, retiring, it is hoped, on the lavish pension of a grateful state, with regular emoluments of crushed pearls in arrack and kiribath garnished with leaves of gold.

Despite a later, very short (1283 CE) return journey to India, the tooth relic remained on the island, passing through time.

From Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa; Dambadeniya to Gampola; Kotte to Kandy, to evade wars and capture, and to better validate the sometimes wafer-thin authority of its rulers.

Nothing could better endorse Siri Meghavanna's rule than this unforeseen bit of good fortune, and its propitious tentacles spreading out beyond his own reign. When he died in 332 CE, the calm times continued under his brother, Jetta Tissa II, who ruled until 341 AD.

THREE

WHEN LAST THINGS WORKED

Jetta Tissa II was followed in good order by his own son, Buddhadasa, in 341 AD, and another twenty-eight-year reign beckoned. The Mahavamsa has nothing but praise for this king, who is characterised as a "Mind of Virtue and an Ocean of Gems."

Unusually, the new king preferred medicine to wars, stupas, temples, monasteries and plotting, and his reign was noted for the exceptional medical care he extended to his subjects.

He wrote a medical handbook, the "Sarartha Sangraha," built hospitals, appointed Medical Officers, and established infirmaries and asylums for the benefit of the blind and the lame. Stories abound of his role as a doctor to various ailing subjects he encountered. He even took care of animals, including, it is said, a snake with a stomachache.

Perhaps his interest in medicine can also help explain the eighty sons that the Mahavamsa credits him with creating, each one, the chronicle approvingly states, named after a disciple of Buddha. Two were to reign after he died in 370 CE.

When, in 2019, Admiral William McRaven, Osama bin Laden's nemesis, informed a group of Texan students that "you have to be at your strongest when you feel at your weakest," it was a dictum he had, from a Sri Lankan perspective, got entirely round the wrong way. For, as often with the island's ancient kings, it was when they were at their strongest that they turned out to be at their weakest.

Buddhadasa's death in 370 CE left his son, Upatissa I, with what seemed to be the most secure of thrones to sit upon. His reign appeared to mirror the long Indian summer of late Lambakarna rule, brought in so improbably by the austere plotter, Gotabhaya.

Everything worked. Water flowed, temples were respected, public infrastructure was cared for, and the fecund land bestowed its many mesmerising gifts for all to enjoy. In short, the kingdom functioned.

Or so it seemed. Little did those last glittering and unbothered Lambakarnas know what we can see from our later and more advantageous viewpoint: that the bar at the kingdom's Last Chance Saloon was closing down. Permanently.

Little is known about Upatissa I's reign except for two things. It lasted a long time – forty-two years. And it was to end in disaster, its terminus foretelling

the dynasty's implosion just a few decades later.

That Upatissa's reign should end in 412 CE with his murder may have surprised the king, who by then was so far into his reign as to imagine it might go for as long as monkeys ate bananas. His shock at discovering the essential untruth of this would have been amplified had he known that his unscheduled dénouement would be delivered by a monk, his own brother, Mahanama, who, according to the chronicles, was busy cuckolding him with the queen.

Wrong on so many counts, it was also a twist of family politics beloved of almost every earlier period of national regicide, and its impact on the state was no less dreadful. Although Mahanama, the new king, was to enjoy dying a most undeserved natural death in 434 CE, the manner of his ascension legitimised regicide once again.

And in a rare moment of historical serendipity, the existence and surprisingly exemplary civic behaviour of this very king is captured most unusually in a random contemporary chronicle of the time.

So few are such contemporaneous observations that they can almost be counted on the teeth of chickens. Still, it was during Mahanama's self-imposed reign that a wandering Chinese Buddhist monk, Faxian, dropped in on the island for several years, his ancient records surviving the boisterous vicissitudes of Chinese history to give us a glimpse of the king attending the burial of a revered Arhat.

"When he drew near his end, the king came to examine into the point; and having assembled the monks according to rule, asked whether the bhikshu had attained to the full degree of Wisdom.

They answered affirmatively, saying that he was an arhat. The king, accordingly, when he died, buried him after the fashion of an arhat, as the regular rules prescribed. Four or five li east from the vihara, a great pile of firewood was reared, which might be more than thirty cubits square, and the same in height.

Near the top were laid sandal, aloe, and other fragrant woods. On the four sides of the pile, they made steps by which to ascend it. With clean white haircloth, almost like silk, they wrapped the body round and round. They made a large carriage-frame, in form like our funeral car, but without the dragons and fishes.

At the time of the cremation, the king and the people, in multitudes from all quarters, collected together and presented offerings of flowers and incense. While they were following the car to the burial ground, the king himself presented flowers and incense. When this was finished, the car was lifted on the pile, all over which oil of sweet basil was poured, and then a light was applied."

But, with hindsight, the cremated arhat was luckier dead than alive. In the words of John Lennon, peace had been given a chance. It was now time for blood-letting.

FOUR

AN ISLAND CONQUERED

Regicidal palace politics, no doubt infected by hearty doses of romantic, monetary, religious, caste, ethnic and personal squabbles, set alight a new ad-lib national anthem that would challenge any modern-day soap opera scriptwriter.

Mahanama's death brought to the throne his (possibly illegitimate) half-Tamil son, Soththisena, for a blink-and-you-miss-it moment of splendour. The luckless king lasted less than a day before succumbing to a draft of poison administered by his half-sister, Sanga.

Sanga, the daughter of King Mahanama's Singhala queen, clearly had strong views about caste and legitimacy, which she enforced with a deft and, as it turned out, a most transient impact.

Although Sanga was to replace her brother with her own husband, Chattagahaka Jantu, the new king lasted barely a year, disappearing at unnatural speed in 434 CE.

In fact, they all disappeared at this time. Chattagahaka Jantu's chief minister, Mittasena, replaced his boss with a more compliant distant relative in 435 CE and, preoccupied with religious devotions, was wholly unprepared for the fourth Tamil invasion of the realm in 436 CE.

That the state was so unable to defend itself was no great surprise.

For the past few decades, family politics has pushed good governance into the back seat. The eye, as Ford Frick, the famous basketball player, might have observed, was firmly off the ball.

The regime fell with minimal resistance. It was a shocking and sudden end. For 369 years, the dynasty had ruled, its two periods of firm and effective guardianship tragically balanced by two other periods of regicidal insanity and power vacuums. They had lasted barely half as long as the previous dynasty, the Vijayans. The state had prospered, matured, and advanced — but was ultimately put at risk by the dynasty's unfavourable ratio of ineffective to effective kings.

It could be argued that the invasion that finally toppled them could have come at almost any time, pushing them to the sidelines of history much sooner than it did. Indeed, by 436 CE, the nation's defences were laid wide open and wholly incapable of resisting the relentless march of South India's Pandyan dynasty.

Across the Palk Straits in Southern India, several dynasties vied for power, their internecine warfare persuading even the great emperor Ashoka to limit his mighty empire from intruding too far into the troublesome boundaries of their states.

On three occasions before the abrupt end of King Mittasena's rule, Indian strongmen had taken an overzealous interest in Sri Lanka, beginning with the opportunistic horse traders, Sena and Guttika, who interrupted Vijayan rule to rule the Anuradhapura Kingdom in 237 BC.

The Vijayan King Asela saw off the horse traders in 215 BC, who had been dispatched by a second Tamil invader, King Elara, in 205. This time, expelling the invaders took longer – but it was achieved by a later Vijayan, King Dutugemunu, in 161 BC.

His grandson, King Walagamba, fared less well, losing his throne to seven invading Dravidians in 104 BCE before regaining it in 89 BC. And there matters rested for five hundred and twenty-two years until the next lot arrived.

As the increasingly weak rule of the Lambakarna dynasty over Sri Lanka's Anuradhapura Kingdom descended into a series of gritty palace coups, the Pandians took matters into their own hands and, with ease, invaded the island and took over the kingdom.

The last Lambakarna king, Mittasena, was slain in battle in 436 CE, and a Tamil king, Pandu, succeeded him. Quite what this meant or how far his rule extended is hard to estimate. It is unlikely that the new king's edict reached much beyond the north and north-central parts of the country.

Pandu was succeeded by his son Parindu in 441 CE and, in less than one suspiciously short year, by another son, Khudda Parinda, the third Pandiyan king. Thereafter, the family lineage is hard to trace, but the revolving door of kingship is not.

By 447 CE, Khudda Parinda was dead, and a fourth Pandiyan took the throne – Tiritara, albeit only for two months, his reign ending with his death in skirmishes with rebels from Ruhuna, led by an emerging Sri Lankan king-in-waiting, Dhatusena, of the Moriyan Dynasty.

The fifth Pandiyan king, Dathiya, was a little luckier. By 450 CE, he too had been killed by Dhatusena in the war that now engulfed the island, and up stepped the last and sixth of the

luckless invaders - Pithiya. His rule also ended at the point of Dhatusena's sword, in 452 CE. Several years of barely documented anarchy followed before the country could turn to the task of recovering from the Pandiyan merry-go-round.

History often presents its students with the prospect of exciting and woeful adjudications. The winner takes all. Looking at King Mittasena's murder in 436 CE, it is easy to suppose that this was the drama to end all dramas: the end of a reign, the end of a dynasty; the end of Singhala independence. What a disaster! Expect, as Lewis Hamilton might have observed, it's all too easy to be a drama queen: "I went blonde," he once said with a breathless lack of perspective, "which killed my hair. It was a disaster."

Indeed, 436 CE was a setback for King Mittasena. But at the time of his death, the country had already enjoyed almost a thousand years of recorded history.

His death and its consequences, dramatic though they were, were all the same, steamrolled out of sight by almost a thousand more years of Singhala kingdoms still to come. As the defeated king breathed his last on a forgotten and nameless battlefield, far to the north-east, the once-great Jin dynasty, which had unified China at about the same time, was also to fragment into scores of mini and quarrelsome kingdoms that would take centuries to sort out.

That was much more sensational. Far to the west, an even more absolute disaster was unfolding as the Roman Empire withdrew from Britain, the first in a series of contractions that left the pax Romana little more than a memory just four hundred years later. A once great empire has come and gone.

And yet to the south, the Singhala kingdom would rise and fall, fall and rise like a magic clock almost – if not quite - destined to beat out the hours until unrecordable time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born Cornish, in Colombo and raised with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. He gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as possible.

He worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board directorfor sales, art, and marketing; at HarperCollins India; Hachette's consumer learning division; and launched Oxford University Press's first online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka to rescue a spice plantation that had gone feral in the jungle. Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams, and overseen by several small schnauzers. It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at sriolankapodcast.com.

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Centered on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques, and its healthy menus fuse street food with fine dining. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

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As a reader of this book, you naturally qualify for special treatment should your holiday ever bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Drop the general manager a note to let him know how you came across us and to make arrangements that best suit you: GeneralManager@flametreeestate.com.