

EMPIRES CHILDREN: CHAPTER 1

May 1957 Watakälé, Sri Lanka

Eight-year-old Shiro Rasiah skipped down the dirt path leading from her house to the tea factory.

‘There once was an ugly duckling, with feathers all stubby and brown. And the other birds said in so many words – get out of town.’ Her sweet, high voice spiralled into the majestic hills of central Sri Lanka, robed in the emerald green of tea bushes. The aroma of fresh picked tea leaves blended with the fragrance of fermenting tea wafting up the hill from the tea factory in the valley.

This was Shiro’s playground and her father’s livelihood.

Shiro loved everything around her. The mountains that made her feel so tiny. Eucalyptus trees with their leaves that smelled like the oil her mother rubbed on her when she had a cold, wildflowers that clung to every nook and cranny, the dragonflies that hovered over her head, even the bumble bees buzzing around the lilies that lined the moss and mud path she was on. She raised her hands above her head and swung round. She was no ugly duckling. She was a ballerina, like in the storybook she was reading with her mother. She was a star and this was her stage. Every tea bush and butterfly her audience. The rush of the water in the nearby stream echoed the applause she heard in her head. She stretched out one foot and bowed. ‘Thank you, thank you.’

The chatter of women’s voices brought Shiro crashing back to reality. She wrinkled her nose and sniffed – sweat and *betel*.

‘Coolies,’ she groaned. ‘Wish they’d go away. This is *my* place.’

The women moved through the tea bushes like a chain of multicoloured beads. Indian tea pluckers, coolie women, dressed in gaudy cotton saris with rough pieces of hessian tied around their waists like aprons. Most wore no blouse under their sari, showing a generous amount of dark brown flesh. Heavy ornamental faux-gold earrings dangled from stretched earlobes and coloured glass bangles jangled on agile wrists. Strong, weathered hands flitted like brown butterflies over the tops of the tea bushes, plucking the fresh bloom, two leaves and a bud. With practiced ease, they flung it over their heads. The leaves collected in the wicker basket on their backs, supported by a rope stretched over the cumbly – a rough blanket on their heads.

The single man in the group stood on the mud path by the tea bushes. ‘*Angé pore. Ingé pore,*’ he shouted in the guttural Tamil dialect of the Indian estate labourers. He was dressed in an old flannel shirt and a faded brown pair of trousers. A towel, wrapped turban-like on his head, announced his status as *Kangani*. He stabbed his finger this way and that to places the women had failed to pick. They darted around on their calloused bare feet. Their fingers flew over the bushes, striving to pick the mandatory twenty pounds of fresh leaves that would assure them a full day’s wage.

Shiro stood, hands on hips, watching the daily ritual of the harvesting of tea leaves, leaves that would soon be in the tea factory, ready to be processed into black tea. The babble of the coolie women and the occasional barked command of the man mingled with the bird calls in the eucalyptus shade trees and the distant hum of the machinery in the tea factory. These were the sounds of a work day in the tea plantation – the background of Shiro’s life.

Leaving the path, she picked her way down the steep slope, careful not to dirty her pretty purple dress or get mud on her neat white socks and buckled black shoes. Thundershowers were common in the hill country and the damp ground was slippery from last night’s rain. She

stepped over the mossy patches, hanging on to the sturdy branches of the tea bushes so she wouldn't slip.

This was, strictly speaking, still school time. But it was different when you're being home-schooled by your mother. You can go to places like where Shiro was heading, to the place where a small waterfall interrupted a clear bubbling stream. It was a private spot; where a cluster of trees and a shield-like rock separated Shiro from her home. Her parents and older brothers knew about it, but they never went there. This was her special place – where she came to think, read and be alone. It was her place of magic, where she made plans and dreamed dreams.

She looked at the coolie women – wanting them to notice her.

'*Chinnamma, kavanam, vallukum,*' one of the coolie women called out, warning her of the slippery mud track. The woman smiled, exposing her chipped teeth, stained red with the betel leaf she was chewing. Another waved her hand at Shiro. Shiro wasn't sure whether it was in greeting or to shoo her away. She edged closer to the group. She should say hello to the second woman, whom she recognised as the mother of her friend, Lakshmi.

'*Chinnamma, veeté poungé!!*' Kangani scowled at her and pointed towards the Tea-maker's house. He wanted her to go back home. She read in his face the threat to tell her father if she spoke with the coolie women. The women around him chortled and continued with their plucking.

'Humph!' Shiro crossed her hands in front of her. She glared back at Kangani. Who did this man think he was? How dare he tell her, the Tea-maker's daughter, what to do?

She wiggled her head, imitating her mother. She knew what her mother would say.

'*Aiyoo mahal,* you mustn't chat to those Indian coolie women. You will begin to talk Tamil like

an Indian. You are a Jaffna Tamil girl; you must speak *chenthamil*, the pure Tamil that belongs to your people. That is your heritage. You have nothing in common with Indian coolies.'

As a Sri Lankan staff child, she accepted that she was not supposed to mix with the Indian coolie labourers. It was a no-no in the tea plantations. Lakshmi, of course, was an exception. She was a coolie girl, but Lakshmi was her special friend. Her mother and father allowed her that, although they never called her a friend. They said Lakshmi was her nanny.

There was no one else for her to play with, except the apothecary's children, Dawn and Elmo. They were burghers, descendants of the Dutch who invaded Sri Lanka a long time ago. But for some reason, her mother didn't like Shiro being with them. Shiro, who wanted reasons for everything, had asked why.

'You might pick up burgher ways,' her mother had replied. She wondered what that was. Probably something that didn't fit into how pure Jaffna Tamil girls behaved. Whatever.

Right now, she had to get the better of this stupid man. Shiro glowered at Kangani. He nodded and raised his right hand to his turban, then pointed again to the house. She got the message: *I respect your father, but you cannot be here or talk to these women.* Maybe she would squeeze into the bushes and say hello to Lakshmi's mother. That would annoy him. But her dress would get dirty and her mother would know what she had done. It wasn't worth the lecture that would follow.

Shiro tossed back her mane of curly black hair. The purple stone pendent on the gold chain around her neck danced and sparkled in the sunshine. Ignoring Kangani, she settled down on the rock ledge overhanging the stream. Her feet hung over the edge, the tip of her shoes just

above the water. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kangani smile, turn and mutter something to the women. The women guffawed and moved away down the hill.

She didn't need them. Here in this place, she could make her own world. Shiro opened the poetry book she had brought with her. Her Uncle George had sent it by post from Colombo. He wanted her to read what he called classics – learn to speak the Queen's English.

'There Was a Little Girl by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,' she read out loud, and then giggled at the words that followed. 'There was a little girl; who had a little curl; right in the middle of her forehead. When she was good, she was very good indeed. But when she was bad she was horrid.'

Drawing out a strand of her hair, she twirled it around her finger. There. Now she had a curl in the middle of her forehead. She had the poet's permission to be horrid.

Shiro heard her mother's voice in the distance. 'Shiro, mahal, where are you? We have to finish study time before Daddy gets home.'

Shiro groaned. Tamil literature and history to learn, so she could grow up to be a good Tamil lady – just like her mother. She raised her sun-browned face to the sky, and reached her arms up. Flapping her hands, she pretended that she had wings and could soar up in the sky like the eagle circling above her. The eagle swooped down and round her. The swept-back crest on its majestic head looked like a back-combed hairstyle. Her father had told her that it was a Crested Hawk Eagle. The bird looked so wise, so old. How long did eagles live? Forever?

'He clasps the crag with crooked hands. Close to the sun in lonely lands. Ringed with the azure world, he stands.' Her father had read from his book of poems to her last night. She could die for poetry. She dropped the book and lay back on the warm rock ledge.

‘Shiro, mahal.’ her mother again.

Getting up from her spot by the rock, she dragged her feet back up the path towards home.

Yesterday, she had overheard her mother and father talking in the bedroom. ‘I can’t get through to Shiro,’ her mother had said. ‘She never listens to me. It’s like she withdraws into a shell when I ask her anything.’

Shiro didn’t listen because most of the time she couldn’t understand what her mother wanted of her. Maybe it was because her mother had grown up in the north of Sri Lanka – in Jaffna, in the middle of what she called Tamil heritage and culture. And she wanted to train her only daughter to be just like her. But Shiro was a child of the mountains, born in the tea plantation. Her father told her there had been a full moon on the night she was born, and that the fireflies had lit up the trees and the cicada sung a special song for her. He said that, against the wishes of her mother and grandmother, he had taken her out into the garden the next morning and the eagle circling in the sky above the house had dipped down in a blessing. He told her she had smiled up at the bird.

She didn’t want to be patient, or forbearing or anything else that her mother pointed out as womanly virtues. She didn’t want to be like her mother. She wanted to be free. To travel to places where people didn’t care whether you were Tamil or Sinhalese, British, Sri Lankan or Indian. She would make it happen – when she grew up.

She ran back to the house, her hair flying behind her in the wind.

The British superintendent’s black car skid to a halt as she dashed across the road. Shiro stopped on the grass edge and waved.

A boy, a lot older than she was sat in the back seat with the superintendent Mr Irvine. He was white, like Mr Irvine. The sun glinted on golden hair that looked a lot like the hair on her walking-talking doll.

Shiro hadn't seen him before. He looked back at her and raised his hand as if to wave back, only to have Mr Irvine pull it back down.

So you won't wave back? Shiro knew how to deal with that. She put her hands on her hips, bent forward, and stuck her tongue out at the receding car.

Shiro turned and skipped past the jasmine hedge and rose bushes that formed the garden fence of their house, then ran up the drive to the veranda.

'Irvine picked up the Ashley-Cooper boy from the station today.' She heard her father's voice in the sitting room. Her father was back already. She must be really late. Now her mother would be truly angry with her. 'He's Anthony, the white bastard who'll inherit Watakälé.'

Her mother's voice was, as always, soft and controlled. 'So he's James Ashley-Cooper's younger son?'

'Yes.' Her father's voice was gruff. He sounded annoyed – even angry. 'The other one, William I think his name is, spent time last year at Udatänná.' He barked a laugh. 'The next generation Ashley-Cooper Empire, probably more degenerate than their father.'

Shiro tiptoed into the house. She crept along the wall of the sitting room. Maybe she could get into her bedroom without them seeing her.

Her father's voice got louder. He waved his hands around over his head. That meant he was furious. 'And Thambiah, the chief clerk at Udatänná, says that older son was a stuck up fool. He was apparently going at the coolie women. Can you imagine? At just seventeen?'

‘*Appa.*’ Her mother put her fingers on her father’s arm. ‘Don’t talk like that.’ Her voice dropped to a whisper. She rolled her eyes towards Shiro. ‘Not in front of Shiro.’

Her father spun around. His face changed. He chuckled and scooped Shiro up in his arms. ‘Ah, princess, late again? And all muddy. Been talking to eagles and playing with butterflies? Never mind, let’s go get you washed up for dinner.’

Shiro wriggled down from his arms. ‘I saw the British bastard.’

‘You what?’ her father tried to look stern, but his lips twitched in a smile.

‘Yes, the car just went by. I waved. He didn’t wave back.’

The smile left his face and was replaced by a glare. ‘Who the hell does he –’

Her mother grabbed Shiro’s hand and dragged her towards the bathroom. ‘Hurry up and wash before dinner, mahal.’

Scrubbing her hands and face in the bowl of warm water, she heard her mother grumble to her father. ‘See what you’ve done? Nice vocabulary you’re teaching your daughter.’

She wondered what a vocabulary was.