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Calypsonian (1952) for Errol Hill

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Abstract
It had a time when things was really brown in Trinidad, and he couldn't make a note nohow, no matter what he do, everywhere he turn, people telling him they ain't have work. It look like if work scarce like gold, and is six months now he ain't working.

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He owe everybody. He have a dollar for Mavis, he have three shillings for Conks (he see good hell to get that three shillings off Conks), and he have twelve cents for Man Centipede.

Besides that, he owe Chin parlour about five dollars, and the last time he went in for a sandwich and a sweetdrink, Chin tell him no more trusting until he pay off all he owe. Chin have his name in a copybook under the counter.

'Wait until the calypso season start,' he tell Chin, 'and I go be reaping a harvest. You remember last year how much money I had?'

But though Chin remember last year, that still ain't make him soften up, and it reach a position where he hungry, clothes dirty, and he see nothing at all to come, and this time so, the calypso season about three four months off.

On top of that, rain falling nearly every day, and the shoes he have on have big hole in them, like if they laughing, and the water getting up in the shoes and have his foot wet.

One day he get so damn disgusted he take off the shoes and walk barefoot all in Frederick Street and Charlotte Street, and people looking at him as if he mad, but he don't give a blast.

Was the rain what cause him to tief a pair of shoes from a shoemaker shop in Park Street. Is the first time he ever tief, and it take him a long time to make up his mind. He stand up there on the pavement by this shoemaker shop, and he thinking things like, oh God when I tell you I hungry, and all the shoes around the table, on the ground, some capsize, some old and some new, some getting halfsole and some getting new heel.

It have a pair just like the one he have on.

The table cut up for so, as if the shoemaker blind and cutting the wood instead of the leather, and it have a broken calabash shell with some boil starch in it. The starch look like pap; he so hungry he feel he could eat it.
Well, the shoemaker in the back of the shop, and it only have few people sheltering rain on the pavement. It look so easy for him to put down the old pair and take up another pair - this time so, he done have his eye fix on a pair that look like Tecnic, and just his size, too besides.

He remember how last year he was sitting pretty - two-tone Tecnic, gabardeen suit, hot tie. Now that he catching his royal, everytime he only making comparison with last year, thinking in his mind how them was the good old days, and wondering if they go ever come back again.

And it look to him as if tiefing could be easy, because plenty time people does leave things alone and go away, like how now the shoemaker in the back of the shop, and all he have to do is take up a pair of shoes and walk off in cool blood.

Well it don't take plenty to make a tief. All you have to do is have a fellar catching his royal, and can't get a work noway, and bam! By the time he make two three rounds he bounce something somewhere, an orange from a tray, or he snatch a bread in a parlour, or something. Like how he bounce the shoes.

So though he frighten like hell and part of him going like a pliers, he playing victor brave boy and whistling as he go down the road. The only thing now is that he hungry. Right there by Queen Street in front a Chinee restaurant, he get an idea. Not an idea in truth all he did think was: in for a shilling in for a pound. But when he think that, is as if he begin to realise that if he going to get stick for the shoes, he might as well start tiefing black is white.

It had a time he used to tell the boys so. He used to say, ' It don't make no sense going to jail for tiefing twenty dollar, you might as well tief couple thousand.'

So he open now to anything; all you need is a start, all you need is a crank up, and it come easy after that.

What you think he planning to do? He planning to walk in the Chinee restaurant and sit down and eat a major meal, and then out off without paying. It look so easy, he wonder why he never think of it before. The waitress come up while he looking at the menu. She stand up there, with a pencil stick up on she ears like a real test, and ...he realize that this restaurant work only part-time as far as she concern, because she look as if she sleepy, she body bend up like a piece of copper wire.

What you go do? She must be only getting a few dollars from the Chinee man, and she can't live on that. He realize suddenly that he bothering about the woman when he himself catching his tail, so he shake his head and watch down at the menu. He made to order a portion of everything. Fry rice, chicken chop-suey, roast pork, chicken chow-min, bird-nest soup, chicken broth, and one of them big salad with big slice of tomato and onion.

He began to think again about the last calypso season, when he was holding big, and used to go up by the high-class Chinee restaurant in St
Vincent Street. He think how is a funny thing how sometimes you does have so much food that you eat till you sick, and another time you can't even see you way to hustle a rock and mauby.

It should have some way that when you have the chance you could eat enough to last you for a week or a month, and he make a plan right there, that the next time he have money (oh God) he go make a big deposit in a restaurant, so that all he have to do is walk in and eat like stupidness.

But the woman getting impatient. She say, 'You taking a long time to make up you mind, like you never eat in a restaurant before.'

And he think about the time when he had money, how no frowsy woman could have talk to him so. He remember how them waitresses used to hustle to serve him, and one night the talk get around that Razor Blade the Calypsonian was in the place, and they insist that he give them a number. Which one it was again? The one about Home and the Bachelor.

Come come, make up you mind, mister, I have work to do.

So he order plain boil rice and chicken stew, because the way how he feeling, all them fancy Chinee dish is only joke, he feel as if he want something like roast breadfruit and saltfish, something solid so when it go down in you belly you could feel it there.

And he tell the woman to bring a drink of Barbados rum first thing, because he know how long they does take to bring food in them restaurant, and he could coast with the rum in the meantime. When he begin to coast with the rum, his head feel giddy, because is a long time since he hit a rum, and his stomach surprise when it feel the liquor. Every two three thoughts he have, he thinking oh God with them, as if oh God is something that must go with everything. Like: oh God them was good days. And, oh God it making hot today.

By the time the food come he feeling so hungry he could hardly wait, he fall down on the plate of rice and chicken as if is the first time he see food, and in three minute everything finish. He drink two glass of ice water, and he pick up a matchstick from the ground and begin to pick his teeth, and he lean back in the chair. And is just as if he seeing the world for the first time, he feel like a million, he feel like a lord; he gave a loud belch and bring up some of the chicken and rice to his throat; when he swallow it back down it taste sour.

He thinking how it had a time an American fellar hear a calypso in Trinidad and he went back to the States and he get it set up to music and thing, and he get the Andrew Sisters to sing it, and the song make money like hell, it was on Hit Parade and all; wherever you turn, you only hearing people singing that calypso. This time so, the poor calypsonian who really write the song catching hell in Trinidad: it was only when some smart lawyer friend tell him about copyright and that sort of business that he wake up. He went to America; and how you don't know he get a lot of money after the case did fix up in New York?
Razor Blade know the story good; whenever he write a calypso, he always praying that some big-shot from America would hear it and like it, and want to set it up good. The Blade used to go in Frederick Street and Marine Square by the one two music shops, and look at all the popular songs, set up in notes and words, with the name of the fellar who wrote it big on the front, and sometimes his photograph too. And Razor Blade used to think: but why I can't write song like that too, and have my name all over the place?

And when things was good with him, he went inside now and then, and tell the clerks and them that he does write calypsos. But they only laugh at him, because they does think calypso is no song at all, that what is song is numbers like 'I've Got You Under My Skin' and 'Sentimental Journey', what real American composers write.

And the Blade used to argue that every dog has his day, and that a time would come when people singing calypso all over the world like stupidness. He thinking about all that as he lean back there in the Chinee man restaurant. Is to peel off now without paying? The best way is to play brassface, do as if you own the damn restaurant, and walk out cool.

So he get up and he notice the waitress not around (she must be serving somebody else), and he take time and walk out, passing by the cashier who writing something in a book. But all this time, no matter how boldface you try to be, you can't stop part of you from going like a pliers, a clip clip, and he feel as if he want to draw his legs together and walk with two foot as one.

When the waitress find out Razor Blade gone without paying, she start to make one set of noise, and a Chinee man from the kitchen dash outside to see if he could see him, but this time so Razor Blade making races down Frederick Street.

The owner of the restaurant tell the woman she have to pay for the food that Razor Blade eat, that was she fault, and she begin to cry big water, because is a lot of food that Razor Blade put away, and she know that that mean two three dollars from the salary.

This time so, Razor Blade laughing like hell; he quite down by the railway station, and he know nobody could catch him now.

One set of rain start to fall suddenly. Razor Blade walking like a king in his new shoes, and no water getting up in his foot this time, so he ain't even bothering to shelter. And he don't know why, but same time he get a sharp idea for a calypso. About how a man does catch his royal when he can't get a work no way. The calypso would say about how he see some real hard days; he start to think up words right away as he walking in the rain.

It had a time in this colony
When everybody have money excepting me
I can't get a work no matter how I try
It look as if good times pass me by.

He start to hum it to the tune of an old calypso (Man Centipede: 'Bad Too Bad'), just to see how it shaping up. And he think about One Foot Harper, the only one man who could help him out with a tune. Every time when he think of a calypso, he used to go round by One Foot, who was one of them old tests surviving from the old days when calypso first start up in Trinidad. And One Foot used to help him with the tune.

It had a big joke with One Foot one time. Somebody tief One Foot crutch one day when he was catching a sleep under a weeping willow tree in Woodford Square, and One Foot had to stay in the square for a whole day and night. You could imagine how he curse stink; everybody only standing up and laughing like hell; nobody won't lend a hand, and if wasn't for Razor Blade, now so One Foot might still be waiting under the weeping willow tree for somebody to get a crutch for him.

But the old Blade help out the situation, and since that time, the both of them good friends.

So Razor Blade start making a tack for the tailor shop which part One Foot does always be hanging out, because One Foot ain't working noway, and every day he there by the tailor shop, sitting down on a soapbox and talking balls whole day.

But don't fret your head. One Foot ain't no fool; it had a time in the old days when they used to call him King of Calypso, and he was really good. If he did have money, or education business, is a sure thing he would have been up the ladder, because he was the first man who ever had the idea that calypsonians should go away and sing in America and England. But people only laugh at One Foot when he say that.

Razor Blade meet One Foot in a big old talk about the time when the town hall burn down. (One Foot was saying he know the fellar who start the fire). When One Foot see him, he stop arguing right away, and he say, 'What happening paleets, long time no see?'

Razor Blade say, 'Look man, I have a sharp idea for a calypso. Let we go in the back of the shop and work it out.'

But One Foot feeling comfortable on the soapbox. He say, 'Take ease, don't rush me. What about the shilling you have for me, that you borrow last week?'

The Blade turn his pockets inside out, and a pair of dice roll out, and a penknife fall on the ground.

'Boy, I ain't have cent. I broken. I bawling. If you stick me with a pin you won't draw blood.'

'Don't worry with that kind of talk, is so with all you fellars, you does borrow a man money and then forget his address.'

'I telling you man,' Razor Blade talk is if he in a hurry, but is only to get away from the topic, 'you don't believe me?'

But the Foot cagey. He say, 'All right, but I telling you in front that if
you want money borrow again, you come to the wrong man. I ain't lending you a nail till you pay me back that shilling that you have for me.' The Foot move off the soapbox, and stand up balancing on the crutch.

'Come man, do quick.' Razor Blade make as if to go behind the shop in the backroom. Same time he see Rahamut, the Indian sailor.

'What happening Indian, things looking good with you?' Rahamut stop stitching a khaki pants and look at the Blade.

'You and One Foot always writing calypso in this shop, all-you will have to give me a commission.'

'Well you know how it is, sometimes you up, sometimes you down. Right now I so down that bottom and I same thing.'

'Well old man is a funny thing, but I never see you when you up.'

'Ah, but wait till the calypso season start.'

'Then you won't come round here at all. Then you is bigshot, you forget small fry like Rahamut.'

Well Razor Blade don't know what again to tell Rahamut, because is really true all what the Indian saying about he and One Foot hanging out behind the shop. And he think about these days when anybody tell him anything, all he could say is, 'Wait till the calypso season start up,' as if when the calypso season start up God go come to earth, and make everybody happy.

So what he do is he laugh kiff-kiff and give Rahamut a pat on the back like they is good friends.

Same time One Foot come up, so they went and sit down by a break-up table.

Razor Blade say, 'Listen to these words old man, you never hear calypso like this in you born days,' and he start to give the Foot the words.

But from the time he start, One Foot chook his fingers in his ears and bawl out, 'Oh God old man, you can't think up something new, is the same old words every year.'

'But how you mean man,' the Blade say, 'this is calypso father. Wait until you hear the whole thing.'

They begin to work on the song, and One Foot so good that in two-twos he fix up a tune. So Razor Blade pick up an empty bottle and a piece of stick, and One Foot start beating the table, and is so they getting on, singing this new calypso that they invent.

Well Rahamut and another Indian fellar who does help him out with the sewing come up and listen.

'What you think of this new number, papa?' the Blade ask Rahamut.

Rahamut scratch his head and say, 'Let me get that tune again.'

So they begin again, beating on the table and the bottle, and Razor Blade imagine that he singing to a big audience in the Calypso Tent, so he putting all he have in it.
When they finished the fellar who does help Rahamut say, 'That is hearts.'

But Rahamut say, 'Why you don't shut your mouth? What all-you Indian know about calypso?'

And that cause a big laugh, everybody begin to laugh kya-kya, because Rahamut himself is an Indian.

One Foot turn to Razor Blade and say, 'Listen to them two Indian how they arguing about we creole calypso. I never see that in my born days!'

Rahamut say, 'Man, I is a creolise Trinidadian, oui'

Razor Blade say, 'All right, joke is joke, but all you think it good? It really good?'

Rahamut want to say yes, it good, but he beating about the bush, he hemming and he hawing, he saying, 'Well it so-so,' and 'it not so bad,' and I hear a lot of worse ones.'

But the fellar who does help Rahamut, he getting on as if he mad, he only hitting Razor Blade and One Foot on the shoulder and saying how he never hear a calypso like that, how it sure to be all the Road March for next Carnival. He swinging his hands about in the air while he talking, and his hand hit Rahamut hand and Rahamut get a chook on his finger with a needle he was holding.

Well Rahamut put the finger in his mouth and start to suck it, and he turn round and start to abuse the other tailor fellar, saying why the arse you don't keep you tail quiet? Look you make me chook my hand with that blasted needle.

'Well what happen for that. You go dead because a needle chook you?' the fellar say.

Big argument start up; they forget talk about Razor Blade calypso and start to talk about how people does get blood poison from pin and needle chook.

Well it don't have anything to write down as far as the calypso concern. Razor Blade memorise the words and tune, and that is the case. Is so calypso born, cool cool, without any fuss. Is so all them big numbers like 'Yes, I Catch Him Last Night', and 'That Is A Thing I Can Do Anytime Anywhere', and 'Old Lady Your Bloomers Falling Down' born, right there behind Rahamut tailor shop.

After the big talk about pin and needle Rahamut and the fellar who does assist him went back to finish off a zootsuite that a fellar was going to call for in the evening.

Now Razor Blade want to ask One Foot to borrow him a shilling, but he don't know how to start, especially as he owe him already. So be begin to talk sweet, praising up the tune that One Foot invent for the calypso, saying he never hear a tune so sweet, that the melody smooth like sweet oil.

But as soon as he start to come like that, the old Foot begin to get cagey, and say, 'Oh God old man, don't mamaguile me.'
The Blade not so very fussy, because a solid meal in his belly. But same
time he trying to guile One Foot into lending him a little thing, he get an
idea. He begin to tell One Foot how he spend the morning how he ups
the shoes from the shoemaker shop in Park Street, and how he eat big for
nothing.

One Foot say, 'I bet you get in trouble, all-you fellars does take some
brave risk, oui.'

Razor say, 'Man, it easy as kissing hand, is only because you have one
foot and can't run fast, that's why you talking so.'

Foot say, 'No jokes about my one foot.'

Razor say, 'But listen man, you too stupid again! You and me could
work up a good scheme to get some money. If you tiefing, you might as
well tief big.'

'Is you is the tief, not me.'

'But listen man Foot,' the Blade gone down low in voice, 'I go do
everything, all I want you to do is to keep watchman for me, to see if
anybody coming.'

'What is the scheme you have?'

To tell the truth, the old Blade ain't have nothing cut and dry in the old
brain; all he thinking is that he go make a big tief somewhere where have
money. He scratch his head and pull his ears like he did see Spencer
Tracy do in a picture, and he say, 'What about the Roxy Theatre down St
James?'

Same time he talking, he feeling excitement in his body, like if waves
going up and coming down, and he hold on to One Foot hand.

The Foot say, 'Well yes, the day reach when you really catching you
royal. I never thought I would see the time when my good friend Razor
Blade turn tief. Man, you sure to get catch. Why you don't try for a work
somewhere until the calypso season start up?'

I tired try to get work. It ain't have work noway.'

'Well you ain't no tief. You sure to get catch, I tell you.'

'But man look how I get away with the shoes and the meal! I tell you
all you have to do is play boldface, and you could commit murder and
get away free.'

The Foot start to hum an old calypso.

If a man have money to-day...
He could commit murder and get away free
And live in the Governor's company...
The Blade begin to get vex. 'So you don't like the idea? You think I can't
get away with it?'

'You ain't have no practice. You is a novice. Crime does not pay.'

'You is a damn coward!'

'Us calypsonians have to keep we dignity.'

'You go to hell! If you won't help me I go do it by myself, you go see!
And I not tiefing small, I tiefing big! If I going down the river, I making
sure is for plenty money, and not for no smalltime job.'

'Well papa don't say I ain't tell you you looking for trouble.'

'Man Foot, the trouble with you is you only have one foot so you can't think like me.'

The Foot get hot. He say, 'Listen, I tell you already no jokes about my one foot, you hear? I ain't taking no jokes about that. Curse my mother, curse my father, but don't tell me nothing about my foot.'

The Blade relent. 'I sorry Foot, I know you don't like nobody to give you jokes.'

Same time Rahamut call out and ask why they keeping so much noise, if they think they in the fishmarket. So they finish the talk. Razor Blade tell One Foot he would see him later, and One Foot say, 'Righto boy, don't forget the words for the song. And I warning you for the last time to keep out of trouble.'

But the minute he leave the tailor shop Razor Blade only thinking how easy it go be to pull off this big deal. He alone would do it without any gun, too besides. He go only tie a handkerchief over his face, wait until he get a chance when the ticket seller counting the money, and he go stick his finger in his pocket as if is a gun (one time he did see Alan Ladd do that in a picture) and say, 'If you don't give me all that money I kill you here to-day!' And afterwards he could take a brisk trip to Barbados, or British Guiana (he might even go to the States) and lay low until things cool off.

Imagine the Foot saying he is a novice! All you need is brassface; play brazen; do as if you is a saint, as if you still have your mother innocent features, and if anybody ask you anything lift up your eyebrows and throw you hands up in the air and say, 'Oh Lord, who me?'

He find himself quite round by Queen's Park Savannah walking and thinking. And he see an old woman selling oranges. The woman as if she sleeping in the heat, she propping up she chin with one hand, and she head bend down. Few people passing. Razor Blade size up the situation in one glance. He mad to bounce an orange from the tray, just to show that he could do it and get away. Just pass up neat - don't even look down at the tray- and just lift one up easy as you walking, and put it in you pocket. He wish One Foot was there to see how easy it was to do.

But he hardly put the orange in his pocket when the old woman jump up and start to make one set of noise, bawling out, 'Tief, tief! Look a man tief a orange from me! Help! Hold 'im! Don't let 'im get away!'

And is as if that bawling start the pliers working on him right away; he forget everything he was thinking, and he start to make races across the savannah.

He look back and he see three fellars chasing him. And is just as if he can't feel nothing at all, as if he not running, as if he standing up on one spot. The only thing is the pliers going clip clip, and he gasping oh God, oh God.