

He held the child in his arms as Mama came out with a saucepan in her hand to stand by him and they watched their son move slowly down the path, go through the gate in the hibiscus hedge, the flowers bright red in the early light, and move towards the hills.

EARL LOVELACE

Shoemaker Arnold

Shoemaker Arnold stood at the doorway of his little shoemaker shop, hands on hips, his body stiffened in that proprietorial and undefeated stubbornness, announcing, not without some satisfaction, that if in his life he had not been triumphant, neither had the world defeated him. It would be hard, though, to imagine how he could be defeated, since he exuded such a hard tough unrelenting cantankerousness, gave off such a sense of readiness for confrontation, that if Trouble had to pick someone to clash with, Shoemaker Arnold would not be the one. To him, the world was his shoemaker shop. There he was master and anyone entering would have to surrender not only to his opinion on shoes and leather and shoemaker apprentices, but to his views on politics, women, religion, flying objects, or any of the myriad subjects he decided to discourse upon, so that over the years he had arrived at a position where none of the villagers bothered to dispute him, and to any who dared maintain a view contrary to the one he was affirming, he was quick to point out, 'This place is mine. Here, I do as I please. I say what I want. Who don't like it, the door is open.'

His wife had herself taken that advice many years earlier, and had moved not only out of his house but out of the village, taking with her their three children, leaving him with his opinions, an increasing taste for alcohol, and the tedium of having to prepare his own meals. It is possible that he would have liked to take one of the village girls to live with him, but he was too proud to accept that he had even that need, and he would look at the girls go by outside his shop, hiding behind his

dissatisfied scowl a fine, appraising, if not lecherous, eye; but if one of them happened to look in, he would snarl at her, 'What you want here?' So that between him and the village girls there existed this teasing challenging relationship of antagonism and desire, the girls themselves walking with greater flourish and style when they went past his shoemaker shop, swinging their backsides and cutting their eyes, and he, scowling, dissatisfied.

With the young men of the village his relationship was no better. As far as he was concerned none of them wanted to work and he had no intention of letting them use his shoemaker shop as a place to loiter. Over the years he had taken on numerous apprentices, keeping them for a month or two and sometimes for just a single day, then getting rid of them; and it was not until Norbert came to work with him that he had had what could be considered regular help.

Norbert, however, was no boy. He was a drifter, a rum drinker, and exactly that sort of person that one did not expect Arnold to tolerate for more than five minutes. Norbert teased the girls, was chummy with the loiterers, gambled, drank too much, and, anytime the spirit moved him, would up and take off and not return for as much as a month. Arnold always accepted him back. Of course he quarrelled, he complained, but the villagers who heard him were firm in their reply: 'Man you like it. You like Norbert going and coming when he please, doing what he want. You like it.'

More than his leavings, Norbert would steal Arnold's money, sell a pair of shoes, lose a side of shoes, charge people and pocket the money, not charge some people at all, and do every other form of wickedness to be imagined in the circumstances. It must have been that because Norbert was so indisputably in the wrong that it moved Arnold to exhibit one of his rare qualities, compassion. It was as if Arnold needed Norbert as the means through which to declare not only to the world, but to declare to himself, that he had such a quality; to prove to himself that he was not the cantankerous person people made him out to be. So, on those occasions when he welcomed back the everlasting prodigal, Arnold, forgiving and compassionate, would be imbued with the idea of his own goodness, and he would feel that in the world, truly, there was not a more generous soul than he.

Today was one such day. Two weeks before Christmas, Norbert had left to go for a piece of ice over by the rumshop a few yards away. He had returned the day before. 'Yes,' thought Arnold, 'look at me, I not vex.' Arnold was glad for the help, for he had work that people had already paid advances on and would be coming in to collect before New Year's

Day. That was one thing he appreciated about Norbert. Norbert was faithful, but Norbert had to get serious about the right things. He was faithful to too many frivolous things. He was faithful to the girl who dropped in and wanted a dress, to a friend who wanted a nip. A friend would pass in a truck and say, 'Norbert, we going San Fernando.' Norbert would put down the shoes he was repairing, jump on the truck without a change of underwear even, and go. It wasn't rum. It was some craziness, something inside him that just took hold of him. Sometimes a week later he would return, grimy, stale, thin, as if he had just hitch-hiked around the world in a coal bin, slip into the shop, sit down and go back to work as if nothing out of the way had happened. And he could work when he was working. Norbert could work. Any shop in Port of Spain would be glad to have him. Faithful worker. Look at that! This week when most tradesmen had already closed up for Christmas there was Norbert working like a machine to get people's shoes ready. Appreciation. It shows appreciation. People don't have appreciation again, but Norbert had appreciation. Is how you treat people, he thought. You have to understand them. Look how cool he here working in my shoemaker shop this big Old Year's Day when all over the island people fêting.

At the door he was watching two girls going down the street, nice, young, with the spirit of rain and breezes about them. Then his eyes picked up a donkey cart approaching slowly from the direction of the Main Road which led to Sangre Grande, and he stood there in front his shoemaker shop, his lips pulled back and looked at the cart come up and go past. Old Man Moses, the charcoal burner, sat dozing in the front, his chin on his chest, and the reins in his lap. To the back sat a small boy with a cap on and a ragged shirt, his eyes alert, his feet hanging over the sides of the cart, one hand resting on a small brown and white dog sitting next to him.

Place dead, he thought, seeing the girls returning; and, looking up at the sky he saw the dark clouds and that it was going to rain and he looked at the cart. 'Moses going up in the bush. Rain going to soak his tail,' he said. And as if suddenly irritated by that thought, he said, 'You mean Moses ain't have no family he could spend New Year's by,' his tone drumming up his outrage. 'Why his family can't take him in and let him eat and drink and be merry for the New Year instead of going up in the bush for rain to soak his tail? That is how we living in this world,' he said, seating himself on the workbench and reaching for the shoe to be repaired. 'That is how we living. Like beast.'

'Maybe he want to go up in the bush,' Norbert said. 'Maybe he going

to attend his coal pit, to watch it that the coals don't burn up and turn powder.'

'Like blasted beast,' Arnold said. 'Beast,' as if he had not heard Norbert.

But afterwards, after he had begun to work, had gotten into the rhythm of sewing and cutting and pounding leather, and had begun the soft firm waxing of the twine, the sense of the approaching New Year hit him and he thought of the girls and the rain, and he thought of his own life and his loneliness and his drinking and of the world and of people, people without families, on pavements and in orphanages and those on park benches below trees. 'The world have to check up on itself,' he said. 'The world have to check up . . . And you, Norbert, you have to check up on yourself,' he said broaching for the first time the matter of Norbert's leaving two weeks before Christmas and returning only yesterday. 'I not against you. You know I not against you. I talk because I know what life is. I talk because I know about time. Time is all we have, boy. Time . . . A time to live and a time to die. You hear what I say, Norbert?'

'What you say?'

'I say, it have a time to live and a time to die . . . You think we living?'

Norbert leaned his head back a little, and for a few moments he seemed to be gazing into space, thinking, concentrating.

'We dying,' he said, 'we dying no arse.'

'You damn right. Rum killing us. Rum. Not bombs or cancer or something sensible. Rum. You feel rum should kill you?'

Norbert drew the twine out of the stitch and smiled.

'But in this place, rum must kill you. What else here could kill a man? What else to do but drink and waste and die? That is why I talk. People don't understand me when I talk; but that is why I talk.'

Norbert threaded the twine through the stitch with his smile and in one hand he held the shoe and with the other he drew out the twine: 'We dying no arse!' as if he had hit on some truth to be treasured now. 'We dying . . . no arse.'

'That is why I talk. I want us . . . you to check up, to put a little oil in your lamp, to put a little water in your wine.'

Norbert laughed. He was thinking with glee, even as he said it, 'We dying no arse, all o' we, everybody. Ha ha ha ha,' and he took up his hammer and started to pound in the leather over the stitch. 'Ha ha ha ha ha!'

Arnold had finished the shoe he was repairing and he saw now the pile of shoes in the shoemaker shop. 'One day I going to sell out all the

shoes that people leave here. They hurry hurry for you to repair them. You use leather, twine, nails, time. You use time, and a year later, the shoes still here watching you. Going to sell out every blasted one of them this New Year.'

'All o' we, every one of us,' Norbert chimed.

'That is why this shoemaker shop always like a junk heap.'

'Let us send for a nip of rum, nuh,' Norbert said, and as Arnold looked at him, 'I will buy. This is Old Year's, man.'

'Rum?' Arnold paused. 'How old you is, boy?'

'Twenty-nine.'

'Twenty-nine! You making a joke. You mean I twenty-one years older than you? We dying in truth. Norbert, we dying. Boy, life really mash you up.' And he threw down the shoe he was going to repair.

'We have three more shoes that people coming for this evening,' Norbert said, cautioning. 'Corbie shoes, Synto shoes and Willie Paul sandals.'

Arnold leaned and picked up the shoe again. 'Life ain't treat you good at all. I is twenty-one years older than you? Norbert, you have to check up,' he said. 'Listen, man, you getting me frighten. When I see young fellars like you in this condition I does get frighten . . . Listen. Norbert, tell me something! I looking mash up like you? Eh? Tell me the truth. I looking mash up like you?'

Norbert said, 'We dying no arse, all o' we everybody.'

'No. Serious. Tell me, I looking mash up like you?'

'Look, somebody by the door,' Norbert said.

'What you want?' Arnold snapped. It was one of the village girls, a plump one with a bit of her hair plastered down over her forehead making her look like a fat pony.

'You don't have to shout at me, you know. I come for Synto shoes.'

'Well, I don't want no loitering by the door. Come inside and siddown and wait. I now finishing it.' He saw her turn to look outside and she said something to somebody. 'Somebody there with you?'

'She don't want to come in.'

'Let her come in too. I don't want no loitering by the door. This is a business place.' He called out, 'Come in. What you hanging back for?'

The girl who came in was the one that reminded him of rain and moss and leaves. He tried to look away from her, but he couldn't. And she too was looking at him.

'You 'fraid me?' And he didn't know how his voice sounded, though at that moment he thought he wanted it to sound tough.

'A little,' she said.

'Siddown,' he said, and Norbert's eyes nearly popped open. What was he seeing? Arnold was getting up and taking the chair from the corner, dusting it too. 'Sit down. The shoes will finish just now.'

She watched him work on the shoe and the whole shoemaker shop was big like all space and filled with breathlessness and rain and moss and green leaves.

'You is Synto daughter?'

'Niece,' she said.

And when he was finished repairing the shoes, he looked around for a paper bag in which to put them, because he saw that she had not come with any bag herself. 'When you coming for shoes you must bring something to wrap it in. You can't go about with shoes in your hand just so.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes.' Quickly as if wanting to please him.

He found some old newspaper he was saving to read when he had time and he folded the shoes in it and wrapped it with twine and he gave it to her and she took it and she said 'thank you' with that funny little face and that voice that made something inside him ache and she left, leaving the breathlessness in the shoemaker shop and the scent of moss and aloes and leaves and it was like if all his work was finished. And when he caught his breath he pushed his hand in his pocket and brought out money and said to Norbert, 'Go and buy a nip.' And they drank the nip, the two of them, and he asked Norbert, 'Where you went when you went for the ice?' And he wasn't really listening for no answer, for he had just then understood how Norbert could, how a man could, leave and go off. He had just understood how he could leave everything and go just so.

'You had a good time?' Though those weren't the right words. A good time! People didn't leave for a good time. It was for something more. It was out of something deeper, a call, something that was awakened in the blood, the mind. 'You know what I mean?'

'Yes,' Norbert said, kinda sadly, soft, and frightened for Arnold but not wanting to show it.

Arnold said, 'I dying too.' And then he stood up and said sort of sudden, 'This place need some pictures. And we must keep paper bags like in a real "establishment",' and with that same smile he said, 'Look at that, eh. That girl say she 'fraid me a little. Yes, I suppose that is correct. A little. Not that she 'fraid me. She 'fraid me a little.'

When they closed the shop that evening they both went up Tapan Trace by Britto. Britto was waiting for them.

'Ah,' he said, 'Man reach. Since before Christmas I drinking and I

can't get drunk. It ain't have man to drink rum with again. But I see man now.'

They went inside and Britto cleared the table and put three bottles of rum on it, one before each one of them, a mug of water and a glass each, and they began to drink.

Half an hour later the *parang* band came in and they sang an *aguanaldo* and a *joropo* and they drank and Norbert started to sing with them the nice festive Spanish music that made Arnold wish he could cry. And then it was night and the *parang* band was still there and Britto wife family came in and a couple of Britto friends and the women started dancing with the little children and then Josephine, Britto neighbour, held on to Arnold and pulled him on to the floor to dance, and he tried to dance a little and then he sat down and they took down the gas lamp and pumped it and Britto's wife brought out the portion of *lappe* that she had been cooking on a wood fire in the yard and they ate and drank and with the music and the children and the women, everything, the whole thing was real sweet. It was real sweet. And Norbert, more drunk than sober, sitting in a corner chatting down Clemencia sister picked up another bottle of rum, broke the seal and about to put it to his lips, caught Arnold's eye and hesitated, then he put it to his lips again. He said, 'Let me dead.' And Arnold sat and thought about this girl, the one that filled the world with breathlessness and the scent of aloes and leaves and moss and he felt if she was sitting there beside him he would be glad to dead too.

IAN McDONALD

◀ ————— ◆ ————— ▶

The Duel in Mercy Ward

Benjie and Beepat arrived in the ward at Mercy about the same time. This ward was for chronic, not exactly terminal, cases. One or two used to make a kind of recovery and totter out into the land of the living. But generally when you went in there you only came out on the long journey. Benjie was wheeled in one morning. Beepat the same afternoon, and ever afterwards Benjie made his seniority a point to emphasise and exaggerate.

'I was here long, long before you come in making trouble,' Benjie would say.

'You old fool,' Beepat would respond. 'We come in the exact same time.'

And that would be good for an hour or two of satisfying, acrimonious debate.

But that was just a very small bone in the huge pot of contention that Benjie and Beepat soon began to cook up. They argued about everything. They drove the nurses to distraction. They were in next-door beds at first but they soon had to be separated. They still found ample ways to meet and quarrel and suck teeth at each other's views.

They made as many as possible in the ward take sides, which added to the confusion. The halt and the lame and the nearly blind, not to mention the dying and the nearly dead, were summoned to make a choice. It was World Cup Final every day, Benjie's team against Beepat's team, and you better have helmets because bouncers bound to fly.

Everything was a case of competition between Benjie and Beepat. They had some big rows about politics — how the other one's party was full of vagabonds and fools. They had some big rows about religion — how Hindus have so many thousands and thousands of Gods they even have a God for water-snake and carrion-crow and how Christians like cannibals, wanting to drink the blood of Jesus Christ. And they had some big rows about race — how Indians mean and sly and can't take their liquor and how black people only like to fête and play with women. But somehow in these rows you had the feeling they were rowing for