

EUGENE WARREN, 1943

I REMEMBER KITCHENER when he land in La Cour Harpe. I was living with my grandmother in an upstairs house right there in the barrackyard, what you call the garret, the attic. We used to stay up there, not because we was well off, but because my grandmother, resourceful as she was, used to wash clothes and cook for the landlord. So because I living up there on the top, I look like a big boy to them fellas down in the barrack yard. But is rat and woodslave up there, red ants, termite like nuts. And the old lady had to wash the landlord big flannel pants and his drawers on a jooking board in the yard, starch and iron his shirts till she catch dry cough and ague sometimes, so it wasn't nice. But even so we was better off than the people living in the yard; down there was pure ketch arse. The fellas used to call me Scholar because I could read and write, my head always in book, so them calypsonian who couldn't write or spell good, like Melody, used to sing and get me to write their words out for them.

La Cour Harpe was a big yard, a courtyard. It had a big house by the entrance, where the landlord living, and we living upstairs. Below had a big gate that used to close at night. On the other side of the entrance it have a little drugstore, a lady selling food, maybe a shop selling groceries. You walk through the gate and in front you, in the centre, was an open space, the yard, gravel, it hard, where people used to lime and skylark, and on both side it have barrack room around. Some room small but divide in two, a back door, a couple slat window, a bench where to cook. It had a long grass space in the back of them rooms, it had two-three standpipe there, some latrines that everybody using. Everybody washing clothes and doing their business right there in the back. Is sewage there, is dirty water; it squalid.

So you want to know how a lady and a man, or a lady who don't have no husband, living in one room with four and five children?

Or how from tanty to uncle and grandmother living in one barrack, or how fifteen, sixteen Chinaman living in one room, paying six cents a night? That was La Cour Harpe. And that is where Kitchener come to ketch his black arse, to live hand-to-mouth, sleeping where he could find a hole, where jamette stooping to piss and stick man bursting each other head, right there in the barrack yard with everybody. Kitchener get to know the life, he get to know town life.

When them calypsonians come down to town they always end up living in the Harpe. But when I say living, I mean they only changing their clothes. Because, remember, soon as calypsonian wake up they have to go and hustle, they bound to go sing by some corner for a lil' change or they never eat that day, they never pay rent. Unless, well, they have some woman minding them. So if something happen the night before, they sing about it the next day. Sometime they go by Lung Ting Lung shop on Henry Street to print lyrics so they could sell the copies on the street; penny a sheet.

When Kitchener come out he hole in the day – because he sleeping till 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning – he come and he take a bath, he change his clothes and he come out in the yard with his hand on his hip. He surveying Observatory Street like he build the road. But he have to hustle to eat that day, so he thinking what he could do, how he could get a few bob in his pocket, because he belly empty, rent must pay, he must maintain he image as a calypsonian. He would go by the corner of Henry and Prince Street. A Syrian fella name Moses had a bar there, and Moses would put out a plate with a few salt biscuits, a piece of roast saltfish and maybe a lil' flask of rum on the table for them calypsonian, and they would sing. Men like Spoiler, Melody, Sir Galba and The Mighty Viking used to go there to find out what mark play in wappie game or how the hustle looking that particular day. As a boy I would stand up in front by the bar and listen to them sing. But they used to run me! They used to say, 'Lil boy, move from here! What you doing here? You eh see is big men here. You mother know where you is?'

Because that's one thing, they very respectable, always dress sharp, they wearing necktie, suspenders, shoes shine up, always

in suit. All the big bards used to wear suit and tie, felt hat, two-tone brogues. They looking good, but they broken to thief. Them days it had no real money in calypso, unless your name is Roaring Lion, Caresser or Attila the Hun.

Sometimes Kitch used to sing at the corner of Prince and Charlotte Street. There was a Chinese restaurant there and he used stand up in front the restaurant and play guitar and sing. People pass and maybe give him a penny or two, maybe he sell two or three music sheet. And if you call him, 'Ai Kitch,' he turn round and he answer you, whoever you is.

'Ai chief, wha' going on?'

Well, eventually the Chineese people run him from outside there. They say he was obstructing. Another time I see him quite down on the wharf, singing for them stevedores. All that time he struggling. Sometime not one black cent in the man pocket; he hungering, but you would never know his business, you would never know that is one good pair of leather shoes he have that he polish; the suit he will wipe it down when it dirty. Sometimes he wear just the jacket with a khaki pants. Sometime he wear the suit pants with a white shirt and a tie. When things brown he borrow a jacket. But Kitch would never ply you with prayers when he see you, he wouldn't moan. He hold his head high and he carry on, he make his kaiso and, joy or pain, he singing same way – white shirt and tie, he going up the road.

Up Frederick Street had a yard where tests used to go and lime, to listen to them bards old-talk and sing. I see Kitch there one, lean up under a tamarind tree, one foot up on the trunk, strumming his box guitar. He was composing 'Tie Tongue Mopsy', right there, in the dust blowing across from the savannah. And if you like it, maybe you give him a lil' change. Kitch wasn't no real hustler, he wouldn't lock your neck, he wouldn't thief, his whole intention was calypso – sun, rain, belly full or empty belly, is kaiso same way.