

Chapter 8

READING

Read the following extract and answer the questions that follow.

DRUNKARD OF THE RIVER

"Where you' father?" the boy did not answer. He paddled his boat carefully between the shallows, and then he ran the boat alongside the bank, putting his paddle in front to stop it. Then he threw the rope round the picket and helped himself on to the bank. His mother stood in front of the door still staring at him.

5 "Where you' father?"

The boy hid his anger. He looked at his mother and said calmly, "You know Pa. You know where he is."

"And ah did tell you not to come back without 'im?"

10 "I could bring Pa back?" the boy cried. His bitterness was getting the better of him. "When Pa went to drink I could bring him back? How?"

It was always the same. The boy's mother stood in front of the door staring up the river. Every Saturday night it was like this. Every Saturday night Mano went up to the village and drank himself helpless and lay on the floor of the shop, cursing and vomiting until the Chinaman was ready to close up. Then they rolled Mano outside and heaven knows, maybe they even spat on him.

15 The boy's mother stared up the river, her face twisted with anger and distress, she couldn't go up the river now. It would be fire and brimstone if she went. But Mano had to be brought home. She turned to see what the boy was doing. He had packed away the things from the shopping bag and he was now reclining on the couch.

"You have to go for you' father, you know," she said.

20 "Who?"

"You!"

"Not me!"

“Who you tellin’ not me,” she shouted. She was furious now. “Dammit, you have to go for you’ father!”

25 Sona had risen from the couch on the alert. His mother hardly ever hit him now but he could never tell.

He rose slowly and reluctantly and as he glanced at her he couldn’t understand what was wrong with her. He couldn’t see why she bothered about his father at all. For his father was stupid and worthless and made their life miserable. If he could have had his way, Mano would have
30 been out of the house a long time now. His bed would have been the dirty meat table in front of Assing’s shop. That was what he deserved. The rascal! The boy spat through the window. The very thought of his father sickened him.

Yet with Sona’s mother it was different. The man she had married and who had turned out badly was still the pillar of her life. Although he had piled up grief after grief, tear after tear, she felt
35 lost and drifting without him. To her he was as mighty as the very river that flowed outside. She remembered that in his young days there was nothing any living man could do that he could not.

In her eyes he was still young. He did not grow old. It was she who had aged. He had only turned out badly. She hated him for the way he drank rum and squandered the little money he worked for. But she did not mind the money so much. It was seeing him drunk. She knew when
40 he staggered back how she would shake with rage and curse him, but even so, how inside she would shake with the joy of having him safe and home.

She wondered what was going on at the shop now. She wondered if he was already drunk and helpless and making a fool of himself.

With Sona, the drunkard’s son, this is what stung more than ever. The way Mano, his father,
45 cursed everybody and made a fool of himself. Sometimes he had listened to his father and he had wanted to kick him because he was so ashamed. Often in silence he had shaken his fist and said, “One day, ah’ll ... ah’ll ...”

He had watched his mother put up with sweat and starvation. She was getting skinnier every day, and she looked more like fifty-six than the thirty-six she was. Already her hair was greying.
50 Sometimes he had looked at her and, thinking of his father, he had ground his teeth and had said, “Beast!” several times to himself. He was in that frame of mind now. Bitter and reluctant, he went to untie the boat.

“If I can’t bring ‘im, I’ll leave ‘im,” he said angrily.

“Get somebody to help you!”

55 He turned to her. “Nobody wouldn’t help me. He insulted everybody. Last week Bolai kick ‘im.”

“Bolai kick ‘im? An’ what you do?”

His mother was stung with rage and shock. Her eyes were large and red and watery.

The boy casually unwound the rope from the picket. “What I do?” he said. “That is he and
60 Bolai business.”

His mother burst out crying.

“What ah must do?” the boy said. “All the time ah say, ‘Pa, come home, come home, Pa!’”

You know what he tell me? He say, ‘Go to hell, yuh little bastard!’”

His mother turned to him. Beads of tears were still streaming down the sides of her face.

65 “Sona, go for you’ father. Go now. You stand up there and watch Bolai kick you’ father and you ain’t do nothing? He mind you, you know,” she sobbed, “he is you’ father, you ungrateful ...”

and choking with anger and grief she burst out crying again.

When she raised her head, Sona was paddling towards midstream, scowling, avoiding the shallows of the river.

70 True enough there was trouble in Assing's shop. Mano's routine was well under way. He staggered about the bar dribbling and cursing.

Again and again, the Chinaman spoke to him about his words. Not that he cared about Mano's behaviour. The rum Mano consumed made quite a difference to Assing's account. It safeguarded Mano's freedom of speech in the shop.

75 But the customers were disgusted. All sorts of things had happened on Saturday nights through Mano's drunkenness. There was no such thing as buying in peace once Mano was there.

So now with trouble looming, the arrival of Sona was sweet relief. As Sona walked in, someone pointed out his father between the sugar bags.

"Pa!"

80 Mano looked up. "What you come for?" he drawled.

"Ma say to come home," Sona said. He told himself that he mustn't lose control in front of strangers.

"Well!"

"Ma send for you."

85 "You! You' mother send you for me! So you is me father now, eh ... eh?" In his drunken rage the old man staggered towards his son.

Sona didn't talk back. He never did anything that would make him feel stupid in front of a crowd. But before he realized what was happening his father lunged forward and struck him a blow across his face.

90 "So you is me father, eh? You is me father now!" he cried, and threw a kick at the boy.

Two or three people bore down on Mano and held him off the boy. Sona put his hands to his belly where his father had just kicked him. Tears came to his eyes. The drunkenness was gripping Mano more and more. He could hardly stand by himself now. He was struggling to set himself free. The men held on to him. Sona kept out of the way.

95 "It's a damn' shame!" somebody shouted.

"Shame?" Mano drawled. "An' he is me father now, 'e modder send him for me. Let me go," he cried, struggling more than ever. "I'll kill 'em. So help me God, I'll kill 'em!"

They hadn't much to do to control Mano in this state. His body was loose and weak now, his bones seemed to be turning to water. The person who had cried, "It's a damn' shame!" spoke
100 again.

"Why you don't carry 'im home, boy? You can't see he only making trouble?"

105 "You'll help me put 'im in the boat?" Sona asked. He looked calm now. He seemed only concerned with getting his father out of the shop, and out of all this confusion. Nobody could tell what went on below the calmness of his face. Nobody could guess that hate was blazing in his mind.

Four men and Sona lifted Mano and carted him into the boat. Sona pushed off. After a while he looked back at the bridge. Everything behind was swallowed by the darkness. "Pa," the boy said. His father groaned. "Pa, yuh going home," Sona said.

110 The wilderness of mangroves and river spread out before the boat. They were alone. Sona was alone with Mano, and the river and the mangroves and the night, and the swarms of alligators

below. He looked at his father again. "Pa, so you kick me up then, eh?" he said.

115 Far into the night Sona's mother waited. She slept a little on one side, then she turned a little on the other side, and at every side she woke up, straining her ears. There was no sound of paddle on water. Surely the shops must have closed by now, she thought. Everything must have closed by this time. She lay anxious and listening until her eyes shut again in an uneasy sleep.

She was awakened by the creaking of the bedroom floor. Sona jumped back when she spoke.

"Who that – Mano?"

120 "Is me, Ma," Sona said.

His bones, too, seemed to be turning liquid. Not from drunkenness, but from fear. The lion in him had turned into a lamb. As he spoke his voice trembled.

His mother didn't notice. "All you now come?" she said. "Where Mano?"

The boy didn't answer. In the darkness he took down his things from the nail-pegs.

"Where Mano?" his mother cried out.

125 "He out there sleeping. He drunk."

"The monster," his mother said, getting up and feeling for the matches.

Sona quickly slipped outside. Fear dazed him now and he felt dizzy. He looked at the river and he looked back at the house and there was only one word that kept hitting against his mind: Police! Police! He knew what would happen. He felt desperate.

130 "Mano!" He heard his mother call to the emptiness of the house, "Mano!"

Panic-stricken, Sona fled into the mangroves and into the night.

Taken from Best West Indian Stories by K. Ramchand

1. (a) What task was Sona given by his mother?
(b) Why was this distasteful to the boy?
2. What is Sona's attitude to his father Mano?
3. There is an ambivalence in the attitude of Sona's mother to his father. Explain this ambivalence.
4. How does the mother react to Sona's comments about his father when he refused to look for him?
5. (a) Describe Mano's Saturday night routine.
(b) How do the other shoppers feel about Mano?
6. (a) What do you feel was the "trouble looming"?
(b) From the passage, say why you feel this is the outcome.