

## CHAPTER XI

**W**HEN the last of Alice's guests had gone she came upstairs and stood in the doorway looking at me with a wide-eyed condemning stare. I shook a cigarette loose and puffed at it and let her stand there and stare. She had a hell of a lot of gall at that, I thought. When she saw that her silent scrutiny wasn't going to beat me down she came into the room and took a seat, crossed her legs, and looked up at me with a Bette Davis pose.

'Bob, are you trying intentionally to make me dislike you?' she asked.

I dropped into a chair facing her, gave her back some of her own scrutiny, said nothing.

'Or is it that you dislike me now?' she kept on.

I wanted her to drop it. Last night had happened and was gone and if I said anything about it at all it'd just make us hate each other. I didn't want it that way. So I said, 'I'm sorry, baby, but I took as much of Leighton as I could. If I'd known you were going to have all the wizards here I'd have stayed away. I just came because I wanted to talk to you.'

'But you insulted Tom deliberately,' she charged. 'He hadn't said anything that should have offended you. He was merely trying to tell you something for your own good.'

'Well, I ain't for it,' I said.

She frowned. 'It isn't just that. That's just one incident. You always have a chip on your shoulder.'

All of a sudden I knew she was trying to put me on the defensive. 'Now what are you getting at?' I asked. 'I suppose

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ying to put me on the at?' I asked. 'I suppose

I'm to blame for everything that happened last night?' I said it before I thought.

She got a hurt look on and said, 'So that's it? So you're trying to get even with me now?'

I started getting mad. 'Goddamnit, if I'd wanted to get even I know plenty ways of doing it besides sitting up listening to your goddamned friends,' I told her.

'I can't stop you from hating me if that's the way your mind works,' she said.

'All right, baby,' I said harshly. 'You said it, now let's skip it.' I knew if the thing started riding me we wouldn't have anything at all for each other any more.

'Is that why you told me, this afternoon when I called, about your affairs with other women?' she went on. 'Is it because you want to hurt me now?' The thing was eating into her; she couldn't let it go.

I spread my hands. 'That isn't what I said,' I denied. 'What I said was I knew plenty chicks I could go to bed with if that was all I wanted——'

'Isn't that all you want of me too?' she cut in.

'What do you want me to say, that I believe it was an accident—a drunken episode—that I still believe you're the finest, most wonderful chick on earth?' I asked her. 'Is that what you want me to say?' I blew a stream of smoke into the air. 'Okay, I say it. Now let's drop it.'

'You have an egocentricity that borders on a disease,' she informed me, getting a high and mighty air. 'You begin by attacking my character, and then when I point out some of your own weaknesses you say, "Let's drop it, I can't be criticized, I'm too——"'

'Baby, please,' I said. 'I didn't mean it that way. I'm not trying to bring you down. I was only——'

She didn't let it touch her. 'I know you will find it hard to realize that anyone could be thinking about anything besides you,' she said. 'But believe it or not, I am thinking about myself. I am wondering why I put up with you, why I continue this farce——'

It was getting brittle now, acid, raw. 'All right, goddamnit, let's quit!' I flared. 'I'm willing to let it go, why in the goddamn hell aren't you?'

But she wasn't satisfied; she went on as if something tight inside of her was driving her. 'You're rude and uncouth and unintelligent.' She paused to light a cigarette, and I let myself go limp. I was tired of fighting with everybody; I decided to let her get it out of her system so we could have some understanding.

'There are three men who sit on my doorstep who are superior to you in every respect. They are cultured, intelligent, sensitive, prominent in the community; and any one of them could support me if I married him. . . .'

I closed my eyes and tried not to listen.

'They understand the niceties a woman enjoys. They do anything in the world I ask them and it's a pleasure to be in their company. . . . You're anti-social, boorish, ill at ease,' she kept hammering. 'You're not especially handsome—you're darker than I like; you dress like a gangster, you're not acceptable socially in any respect, and yet I impose you on my parents and my friends—'

It was beginning to ride me now. I kept telling myself that she just felt beat because she'd let me see her the night before and now she was trying to get over it by digging me. But it wasn't working so well; it was all I could do to keep from blowing.

'Too true, baby,' I said, trying to keep it inside of me.

'You're insanely belligerent,' she continued. 'You think you can solve all of your problems with your brawn. You have a really staggering inferiority complex, amounting to a fixation. You're disrespectful, quite ignorant, simply impossible.'

I had enough of it. 'You know what you can do for me,' I grated, leaning forward in my seat.

She gave me a long clinical stare of appraisal and then smiled contemptuously. 'I've been tremendously worried every minute since you left me last night that you would be so hurt and angry I would never see you again,' she began, then waited for it to sink in. 'I have even considered going to your room to plead with you.' Now she was sneering at me. 'I find that you are not worth it,' she said. 'You are not only willing to take it, believing that I am such—'

I told her right out of the hollow chagrin in my guts: 'That's because you're a nigger. If you were a white woman—'

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She was out of her chair and across the room and had  
slapped me before I could finish. It was a solid pop with fury  
in it and stung like hell. I came up blind mad, grabbed her by  
her shoulders, and shook her until her teeth rattled.  
'Goddamnit, I'll kill you,' I mouthed. 'I'll—I'll—who in the  
goddamned hell do you think you are, you—you—' I  
couldn't think of anything bad enough to call her.

When I stopped shaking her she looked up at me with a  
funny docile expression and said in a low controlled voice:  
'You are a filthy Negro,' and I said: 'What about you? You're  
no goddamned angel.'

She sighed and said: 'But for some strange reason I love you,'  
and went candy. Her eyes got limpid and her mouth got  
suddenly wet and her body just folded into mine.

Whatever she had, it was really and truly for me. I couldn't  
help it. I went soft as drugstore cotton and fell into her arms as  
if I was going home. I kissed her eyes, her nose, her throat;  
I pulled her housecoat away from her neck and kissed the curve  
of her shoulder. I could hear her soft throaty gasping as she  
pressed her body hard against mine.

Right in the middle of it the thing got me again. I couldn't  
help it. I asked her, 'Did you ever really do that?'

She went instantly cold, put her hands against my chest, and  
pushed me away from her so quickly I almost fell.

'Do you just have to do it?' she asked, her eyes condemning  
me. 'Do you just have to keep bringing it up?' She went over  
and sat down and put her face in her hands. 'You destroy every  
emotion I have for you.'

I stood there, clenching my fists, sucking for breath. I got a  
crazy feeling of being penned in by my own emotions; of getting  
out of my own grasp; of not being able to control my actions  
any longer. I didn't know whether to be mad, indifferent, or  
sympathetic; whether to turn and walk out, or sit down beside  
her and try to work it out. Finally I dropped back into my chair.

'Baby, I wish you'd try to understand,' I said. 'I don't want  
to think about it either. Goddamn, it hurts me too. Probably  
more than you. Can't you understand that? I feel like a damn  
simple fool.' I took a breath, let it out, felt my legs tightening  
so they lifted my feet off the floor. 'Every time I kiss you now  
I'm scared you might be laughing.'

She opened her eyes and looked at me for a long time. It was as if she was searching for something. Then suddenly her whole face took on a soft tender look and way back in her eyes there was something like a shadow of hurt. She got up and came over and sat on the arm of my chair. 'You're just a baby,' she murmured. 'Just a big little baby.' And lifted my face and kissed me like she never had before.

I put my arm about her waist and pulled her down into my lap and rubbed my face in her soft silky hair, smelling its faint perfume and feeling its soft caress. I felt all alive inside for the first time in days, on the brink of something wonderful. I felt as if all of a sudden everything was going to be all right; as if I was going to know all the answers and never have anything to worry about again as long as I lived.

She drew back her head and shoulders to look at me. Her gaze was level, pure, but not tender any more. 'Bob darling, won't you believe me when I tell you that I am not a Lesbian?' she said.

I could feel the frown pop between my eyes. 'But you'd been there before,' I said.

She broke away and jumped to her feet, wheeled to look down at me. 'So that's it,' she said. 'So that's why you came here tonight—to cross-examine me.'

I put my hands on the arms of the chair, stood up. I felt resigned, tired, let down, as if I was locked up and would never get out. 'You wanna know why I came here tonight?' I asked her. It didn't make any difference one way or another now. I could tell her. I didn't even give a damn what she might think about me. 'Not because I wanted to, I'll tell you that. I didn't want to see you again until I could get you straightened out in my mind. I sure as hell didn't come here to argue with you about all that mess that happened last night. I didn't come here to argue at all.' I took a breath. 'I came here because I had to. Because I thought you were my girl and I didn't have no other goddamned place to go. Maybe that don't sound so bright, but it's the truth. I had to get somewhere to cool off, to get myself straightened out. I had to get off the goddamned streets out of the goddamned peckerwoods' eyes before I killed some son of a bitch and went to the chair.' I let my breath out, sighed,

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started turning away. 'Now I'm gonna quit bothering you with  
it and go home,' I said.

She stepped around in front of me, clutched me by the arms,  
held me, made me look down into her eyes. 'What is it, dar-  
ling?' she asked. 'Tell me, please.'

'I don't know,' I muttered. I wanted to tell her; I wanted to  
get it out of me. 'Every goddamn thing. My nerves are on edge.  
I keep expecting trouble every minute. Everything's going  
wrong all at once—it's pressing me too hard. Goddamnit! You!

And the job! And just living in the world——'

'Has anything happened on the job?' she asked quickly.  
I looked away from her. 'No, just the same old grind,' I lied.  
'The white folks trying to see how much we'll take.' I paused,  
then said, 'But it don't never lighten up. I tell you, I can't take  
much more of it.'

She let go my arms and turned away from me. 'Bob, if you  
continue brooding about white people you are going insane,'  
she said.

'You're not just saying it.'

She sat down again. 'How do you expect me to help you,  
Bob?' she asked. 'I've talked to you time and time again about  
your attitude toward white people. I've exhausted every argu-  
ment, and still you don't listen——'

'I'll listen to anything you've got to say tonight,' I told her.  
'No, you won't.' She sighed. 'All you've done tonight is fight  
against me. You've tried to hurt me in every way you know.  
You won't even give me a chance to help you, darling. You  
keep throwing what happened last night back into my face.  
Nothing I say about it seems to make any difference to you.'

I dug out another cigarette and lit it, drank the melted ice  
in my highball glass, sank down on the love seat. 'Do you  
really want to know, Alice?' I asked her.

'How to help you?' She was looking at me steadily. 'Yes, I  
really do.'

'Well, I'll tell you,' I said, puffing at my cigarette. 'There are  
three ways——' I spread my hands. 'Maybe you couldn't do  
any of them anyway, but I'll tell you.' I took another puff.  
'You can sit up and drink with me until I go blotto,' I said.  
'That'll keep me put as long as I stay blotto. Or you can let me  
go to bed with you. If I go to sleep afterward that'll hold me

until tomorrow morning—I don't know for how long after that.' I got up and found an ash tray, mashed out my cigarette, walked over to the window, and looked down into the soft warm night. A man and a woman were getting out of a car across the street; she looked like a girl I knew slightly named Monica; I watched them go into the house. 'Or you can talk to me, let me talk to you,' I said without looking around. 'You can tell me why you went to Stella's; how it happened you went there the first time.' I paused and when she didn't say anything I went on, 'I'll tell you everything I know about myself, about my waking up scared every morning, about the way I feel toward white people, why I resent them so goddamned much—resent the things they can do when all they got is colour—tell you all about what happens inside of me every time I go out in the street.' I waited for her a moment, then went on. 'Maybe we can find out what's wrong with both of us, even find out how we really feel toward each other. Maybe you can convince me I'm wrong about a lot of things—I've got an open mind tonight, honestly, baby.' I breathed again. 'Or if you can't convince me maybe you can make it worth while for me to try to be different. If I was really sure about you——' I broke off without finishing, turned to look at her.

She had her head turned around toward me, but when I looked she looked away. I went across and sat down facing her again. 'Listen, baby,' I said. 'If I have to keep on like I'm going—not being sure about you—and getting kicked around by every white tramp who comes along, I'm gonna hurt somebody as sure as hell.'

She sat quite still for a long time after I'd stopped speaking, studying me. 'Bob, your greatest difficulty stems from your not knowing what you want to do in life,' she said. I don't think she put on her social worker's attitude intentionally; she just couldn't help it. 'If you concentrated your energies on a single objective and worked very hard toward that end—for instance if you applied yourself to your studies and thought more about re-entering college this fall—these minor incidents and day-to-day irritations would not affect you so greatly.' She paused to let it sink in.

I gave a long deep sigh and looked away from her, wondering if it was too much to ask of her to face it for a minute.

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Maybe she really couldn't, I thought—maybe none of her class  
could face it. Maybe that was why it was so insane when it  
broke out—because she had to keep it buried as much as  
possible, refuse to look at it, to recognize it, to discuss it; maybe  
that was her way of keeping on living, to keep her frustrations  
hidden, covered over with compromises, just like staying on my  
muscle and trying to fight back and getting kicked in the  
mouth every minute was mine. Maybe we'd never get together,  
I thought. But I listened.

'A certain amount of frustration is latent in most people—  
people of all races,' she went on. 'But in you——'

'It won't help to generalize,' I cut her off. 'I'm willing to talk  
about myself without any prompting or analysis or——'

Now she cut me off. 'Bob, I've been thinking seriously that  
perhaps I'm not the type of woman for you. I'm ambitious  
and demanding. I want to be important in the world. I want a  
husband who is important and respected and wealthy enough  
so that I can avoid a major part of the discriminatory practices  
which I am sensible enough to know I cannot change. I don't  
want to be pulled down by a person who can't adjust himself  
to the limitations of his race—a person who feels he has to  
make a fist fight out of every issue—a person who'd jeopardize  
his entire future because of some slight or, say, because some  
ignorant white person should call him a nigger——'

'That lets me out,' I said, standing up. 'I may as well tell you,  
baby, a white woman called me a nigger at the yard Monday  
morning and I called her a cracker slut and lost my job.'

'Lost your job?' She recoiled as if I had slapped her. 'So that's  
what's wrong with you.' She was suddenly indignant. 'So that's  
why you need my help——'

'Hear my story first,' I said, and told her about my run-in  
with Madge and my getting downgraded.

She jumped up and took a turn about the room. 'If the white  
people hated you as much as you hated them——'

'They'd kill me now and have it done with,' I supplied.  
'And that'd be fine with me.'

She stopped and looked at me. 'Do you want to be white,  
Bob?'

'All I want is to be able——' I began, but she cut me off.

'Let me put it another way. Will the fact that you are a

Negro deter you from attempting to succeed as white men do? I started to interrupt, but she stopped me. 'No, Bob, this is important. Your present attitude has no place for me in your life, it has no place for anyone except yourself. When you lose your temper with the girl you were not thinking about me.'

'I suppose I should have just said, "Yes ma'am, I'm a nigger," and let it go at that.'

She went over and sat down again. 'It's not just you any more, Bob,' she said. 'I have to think about myself. If we're going to be married you will have to begin thinking about the future—our future—'

She got me then. 'Look, baby, I'm going to make the grade,' I told her. 'Next fall I'm going back to college like you want, but right now—'

'But it's more than that Bob,' she cut in. 'I've been trying to tell you. I'll have to have confidence in you. I'll have to believe that you will make good, and I just can't see you doing it unless you learn how to get along with the white people with whom you have to work.'

I felt myself getting tight inside; the bands started clamping on my head again and the rocks started growing in my chest.

'Will you go to the girl tomorrow morning and apologize?' she asked. 'I think father knows the president of Atlas Corporation. Will you—'

'No,' I said.

'But it's not just you now, Bob,' she said. She was pleading now. 'It's you and I now, Bob. Don't you understand? In the things you do and the decisions you make you just can't think of yourself alone. You have to consider *our* future. Is that too much to ask?'

'But you don't understand either,' I began. 'I just can't take it and keep on living with myself. I simply can't—'

'Bob,' she said. 'I'm not going to plead with you any more. If you don't go to that girl and apologize and try in every way you know to get reinstated—'

'Look, baby—' I cut in again; I was trying to stop her; I didn't want her to say it. 'Look, Alice, will you listen to me? Will you let me tell you what'll happen to me if I do that? That's what I've wanted to talk about all night—'

'No, Bob, I won't listen,' she said. 'It's such a little thing. If

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