

CHAPTER XII

I WENT home and went to bed and dreamed Alice and I were in a drugstore and when I got ready to leave I started toward the door with two packages in my hand and then I couldn't find Alice. I went around holding the two packages looking for Alice and finally found her in a hall off from the prescription room talking to the proprietor's wife who had her two hands on Alice's shoulder. I thought something funny was going on and got mad and said, 'I was looking for you.' She looked at me as if she was surprised and said, 'I thought we had a date with these people,' and I said, 'Naw, we ain't got no date,' and yanked her by the arm and pulled her out into the store and then I thought about the packages in my hand and looked down and saw that I had a half a dozen or so grapefruit wrapped in a grey vest and a .45-calibre short-barrelled revolver. I went back into the hall and put the grapefruit on a table and then I stood there and tried to put the gun in a holster I had strapped around my chest, but when I got the gun in the holster the butt end of the holster stuck out so it showed under my overcoat and I had to open my trousers and stick the end of the holster down in my trousers but still it showed when I buttoned my coat so I held my coat with my left elbow pressed against the holster to keep it from showing and went to look for Alice but she had gone outside again. I went outside and saw her up on the other side of the street about half a block ahead. Off to her right was a weedy park that slanted down to a river and when I crossed the street I saw Alice turn into the park and I hurried to catch up with her. But before I got in sight of her she began screaming for help and I fumbled with the holster

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until I got the gun out in my hand and ran down the sidewalk, looking into the park for her, but the park was hilly and rocky and covered with a dense growth of scrub and I couldn't see Alice. I ran ahead to a break in the brush and turned right up a hill and saw millions of swine with bony sharp spines and long yellow tusks running about in the brush and I shot at one right in front of me and I could see the hole pop in his side where the bullet went through. Then I heard Alice screaming again, horribly as if she was being torn apart, and I ran up the hill toward the sound of her voice as fast as I could, my overcoat holding me back, and my heart beating with fear. When I came to the top I saw a dry sandy wash and I started looking about in the wash for her. A woman leaning on a fence at the top of the wash said, 'There,' and I looked in a clump of bushes and saw what at first looked like a little rag doll, but when I turned it over I saw it was Alice. Her head and shoulders were the same but her eyes were closed and her body had shrunk until it was no more than a foot long and she was dead. I felt shocked and scared and all torn up inside and then I looked up for the woman who was leaning on the fence but instead of one woman there were millions of white women leaning there, looking at me, giving me the most sympathetic smiles I ever saw.

I woke up overcome with a feeling of absolute impotence; I laid there remembering the dream in every detail. Memory of my fight with Alice came back, and then I saw Madge's kidney-shaped mouth, brutal at the edges, spitting out the word 'nigger'; and something took a heavy hammer and nailed me to the bed.

I was scared to think about my gang; I started drawing in my emotions, tying them, whittling them off, nailing them down. I was so tight inside, I was like wood. My breath wouldn't go any deeper than my throat and I didn't know whether I could talk at all. I had to get ready to die before I could get out of the house.

When I picked up Homer and Conway they didn't say anything; they just looked at me out of the sides of their eyes. Then I stopped for Pigmeat, Smitty, and Johnson, and they had their usual morning squabble.

Finally Smitty asked, 'Where was you yesditty, Bob?' I had to think about it before I answered. 'I was off,' I said.

Pigmeat turned to Smitty and said, 'Now that's that man's own business. S'pose he tell you he was with you mama.'

'I don't play no dozens, boy,' Smitty growled. 'You young punks don't know how far to go with a man.'

I went out Central trying my brakes, timing my stops so thin and my turns so tight that if any chump in front of me had dug to a sudden stop I'd have climbed up on him.

Conway leaned across Homer and said, 'What's the matter, chief? You look down in the mouth this morning. You old lady quit you?'

I felt fragile as overheated glass; one rough touch and I'd burst into a thousand pieces. 'Could happen,' I said in a thin shallow voice out of the top of my mouth.

'Bob's got his own troubles, nigger, why don't you worry 'bout yours?' Pigmeat said.

Conway turned around and gave him a dirty look. 'You getting too big for yo' britches,' he said.

A big air-brake Diesel gripped the ground in front and I almost went inside of it. I braked so short I scrambled my riders.

Homer rubbed his head where he'd butted into the windshield and said, 'Bob sho ain't got his mind on driving this morning.'

'What Bob got his mind on this morning would get yo' black ass hung where you come from,' Johnson said.

'Where who come from?'

'You, nigger, I s'pose you from Alaska.'

'Now Bob ain't said a word,' Smitty said. 'If he was to cuss you somoleons out and put you out his car you'd say he was a bad fellow.'

Conway got it out in the open. 'Say, chief, what's that grey boy doing in yo' job? He say he taking your place. You ain't gonna quit us, chief?'

That silenced them; they knew the story, but they all waited to hear what I had to say.

'I had to get a cracker chick told yesterday—or rather, day before yesterday—and Mac demoted me,' I said.

'What to, a helper?' Pigmeat wanted to know.

'No, a mechanic,' I said.

'You know they can't 'mote the man to no helper,' Homer said. 'What the union gonna say?'

'What the union gonna say? They white too, ain't they? Did she go to the nigger? I found suddenly I'd said, 'I suppose so.'

'That's what I tell you about Pigmeat. 'Always they good for is trouble. 'Was she that big G asked. 'She in Hank's I didn't say anything. 'She always signifyin' he had noticed; I wonder I'd gone away from I saw some white people stepped on the gas and it; if they didn't I'd run dead absolute quiet in jumped or not.

'That's all you nigger it's damn shame they You're probably laughin' thought to myself. 'T out going and coming 'Bob ain't no grey I 'What make Bob so Pigmeat said. 'What Bob shoulda sanctimoniously. 'Man, where this n where is yo' grey kin way back.'

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'What the union gonna say? What you think they gonna say? They white too, ain't they?' Conway asked.

'Did she go to the man herself?' Conway asked. I found suddenly I'd been holding my breath. I let it out and said, 'I suppose so.'

'That's what I tell this lil old boy,' Conway said, talking about Pigmeat. 'Always messing with those white women. All they good for is trouble.'

'Was she that big Gawga pink work as a tacker?' Pigmeat asked. 'She in Hank's gang, ain't she?'

I didn't say anything; I didn't want to talk about it. 'She always signifying with you,' he went on. I didn't know he had noticed; I wondered who else had noticed.

I'd gone away from them; I was playing a game. Whenever I saw some white people crossing the street in front of me I stepped on the gas and blew. If they jumped they could make it; if they didn't I'd run 'em down. All of 'em jumped. I felt a dead absolute quiet inside; I didn't give a damn whether they jumped or not.

'That's all you niggers think of,' Smitty was saying. 'I think it's damn shame they can Bob for something like that. . . . You're probably laughing like hell, you Uncle Tom bastard, I thought to myself. 'Those grey boys cuss them white women out going and coming,' he went on.

'Bob ain't no grey boy,' Johnson said.

'What make Bob so mad is he ain't got to get none of it yet,' Pigmeat said.

'What Bob shoulda did is to gone to the man,' Smitty said sanctimoniously.

'Man, where this nigger come from?' Pigmeat said. 'Man, where is yo' grey kinks and yo' rusty frock? Uncle Tom from way back.'

'What make me so mad,' Johnson said, 'is the white folks got it on you at the start, so why do they have to give you any crap on top of it? That's what make me so mad.'

I turned on the radio. One of Erskine Hawkins' old platters, 'I'm in a Lowdown Groove,' was playing. Alice and I had discovered it together shortly after we'd met at the Memo on the Avenue. I welled up inside, turned it off. But the words kept on in my mind. I got a hard, grinding nonchalance. To

hell with everybody, I thought. To hell with the world; if there were any more little worlds, to hell with them too.

Conway was saying, 'We oughta get together and go to the man,' when I wheeled into the parking lot at Atlas. 'Reason niggers ain't got nothing now, they don't stick together.'

I found Tebbel already down in the stuffy compartment when I got there. He was Johnny on the spot, but when he started collecting the time cards I said, 'I'll take 'em.'

He jumped. 'Oh, I didn't see you,' he said. 'How you making out?'

'Fine,' I said without looking at him.

He stood there for a moment. Then he said, 'What're the boys doing today?'

I turned and looked at him then. He had a nice friendly smile on his face and was trying to co-operate. But I wasn't for it. 'They're doing what I tell 'em to as long as I'm in charge,' I said in a hard level voice, looking through him.

He reddened slightly but didn't retreat. 'Kelly said he wanted them to——'

'Damn that!'

The other workers took their cue from me. 'Come on, let's get together and back Bob up,' Red said. 'Let's go down and see the man and tell him what's what.'

'Look, fellows, let me handle it,' I said, but they weren't listening to me now.

They were going to have their say about it so they gathered around Red. All of them joined but Ben; he went about his work and had nothing to do with them.

Each one had a different idea. Red said they all ought to quit. Smitty was for talking to Mac. Pigmeat said they ought to mess up the work so it'd have to be done over. Conway thought they ought to form a committee to go see some of the big shots in the front office. George said they ought to organize all the coloured workers in the yard and strike.

Tebbel stood at a distance, red and undecided. I knew he wanted to tell them to go to work; I wondered if he would try it. I didn't say anything to them; I let 'em beef. I didn't care whether they worked or not; I didn't look for 'em to climb any limbs for me; but it made me feel good that they thought about it.

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Two white pipe fitters came into the compartment, but they
went about their work without asking any questions. They had
a tall, angular, coal-black fellow as their helper. He leaned over
Homer's shoulder and asked him what it was all about.
Homer told him. He came closer, was included.

All of a sudden Pigmeat snatched up a hammer and smashed
a cast-iron fire pot. It broke into pieces, rang like a gong in my
brain. Everybody jumped. Pieces flew through the air; one hit
one of the white pipe fitters on the leg. Kerosene ran all over
the deck.

'I wish that was a peckerwood's head,' Pigmeat said. His
face was distorted, uncontrolled.

Then everybody reacted at once. The white pipe fitter
glanced at Pigmeat, reached over, knocked the piece of iron
out of the way, went back to work. Ben stopped work just long
enough to give Pigmeat a cold, sardonic look.

Red said, 'Don't nobody light no match until these fumes
blow outa here.'

Tebbel hurried out. Then suddenly Pigmeat grinned. 'I
scared hell outa that sonabitch, didn't I?'

George said, 'I don't know whether you scared hell outa him.
You sure scared hell outa me.'

Conway was tearing at his vest, trying to get a burning
cigarette out he'd dropped from his mouth. He finally got it,
stamped it out, then turned to Pigmeat and said, 'The man'll
come up here and kick your ass.'

'Kick whose ass?'

'Well now, ef'n it come to that,' Arkansas said, 'I s'pect just
usses in here could whip all these pecks on board this ship.'

Ben had to look up again. One of the white pipe fitters stole
a glance at Arkansas.

George said, 'Man, you are a fool. These peckerwoods'll
come up here and beat all the black off'n us. I bet you be the
first one to holler calf rope.'

'What you bet?' Arkansas said. 'You ast anybody 'bout me.
I'll fight a peck till——'

'Aw, man, hush!' George cut him off. 'The worst whipping
I ever got come from me thinking I could whip every grey boy
I seen. I was in Chicago, man, and I was going down to the
A.C. on Thirty-fifth Street, learning how to duke. Man, I was

bad, I was beating up all the little studs on State Street. Man, I dared them chumps to open their chops. Then I run into this grey boy over on Clark and we got to jawing 'bout a ruff we found on the street. He said it was hisn and I said it was mine and we went back in a vacant lot to settle it. Well, man, I got to dancing around, showing off my footwork I'd learned at the gym and hitting this grey boy anywhere I wanted. All he'd do was just duck his head and bore in. Man, I beat this chump so tired from beating this chump I couldn't get my hands up no higher'n my belt and this chump kept gritting his teeth and ducking his head and coming in. Man, I got my hands up to broom, this chump hauled off and hit me a haymaker and killed me a year. I'm telling you, man——'

'Thass you,' Arkansas said. 'That ain't me.'

They had all just about got over their defiance and were about ready to go to work when Tebbel came in with Kelly. Then they just stood there, milling around, looking sullen. Kelly walked around and looked at the work; he stopped and looked at the broken fire pot. Finally he came up to me and said, 'What's the matter these boys aren't working, Bob?'

I looked at him. 'Ask 'em,' I said. I didn't care whether he fired me or not.

He reddened and looked away. His gaze rested on Smitty. 'What's the matter you aren't working?' he said.

'I was just waiting to ask Bob 'bout this here joint,' Smitty said. 'I'm going to work right now.'

Pigmeat said loud enough for everyone to hear, 'Nigger, you got crap up your back.'

Kelly said hurriedly, 'Well, you better all get to work, I'm telling you,' and beat it.

They were all silent for a moment and then Peaches said, 'Bob done just right. There's more'n one of these dirty white tramps needs cussing out. Course it's too bad he lost his job,' she added lamely.

'What he oughta done 'stead of cussing her out is to trick her some kinda way,' Homer said. 'He shoul'da slipped up to Hank and said she was lorating him, or somp'n like that, and get Hank down on her. Ain't no need of none of us running round here fighting these white folks. All you gotta do is get

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'em fighting 'mongst themselves. Look what they doing in
Europe right this minute, killing each other off like flies.'

'That reminds me of when I used to be a water boy for a
bunch of Irish ganny dancers in Arkinsaw,' Conway said.
'They was laying track for the Yellow Dog and it was hotter'n
a West Virginia coke oven. Them paddies kept holl'ing, "Come
on, coon, with the water! Water Jack, you oughta been here
and halfway back! Where's that black coon?" They made me
mad but I knew I couldn't fit 'em all. So when I'd go atter a
bucket of water I'd pee in it every time.'

'Conway!' Peaches said.
Conway gave a shamefaced grin. 'Well, that's the truth,' he
said. 'Every time.'

The three girls withdrew to the end of the compartment, not
out of hearing distance but far enough so no one would think
they were included.

I took a deep breath and thought, Well, here it goes. I hadn't
expected anything anyway, so I wasn't disappointed. I'd known
from the first that, whatever was done for me, I'd have to do it
for myself. But I still stuck around; I didn't want the guys to
think I didn't appreciate their thinking about me anyway.

Murphy took the ball and started telling dirty jokes. That
morning was the first time I'd seen him; he'd been transferred
into the gang yesterday when I'd been absent. He was a
medium-sized, stoop-shouldered, lean-framed guy, black as
the ace of spades, with a long, narrow, egg-shaped head getting
bald at the extreme back tip, and eyes that slanted upward at
the edges like an Oriental's.

George bobbed his head at Murphy and winked at me.
'Come in talking and ain't let down.'

Johnson said, 'We oughtn't be telling them dirty jokes.
There's ladies present.'

'We ain't listening to you,' Zula Mae said. 'We's talking
'bout you.'

Two or three of them looked around to see if Tebbel was still
there. He was standing off to one side, listening to every-
thing.

Pigmeat said, 'That Willie! When he was a little baby he was
so black his mama used to have to put flour on his mouth to
tell where to feed him.'

'That's all right,' Willie said. 'You was so black you was four days old before anybody knew you was here.'

'Gentlemen! Gentlemen!' George said. 'I beg you desist.' The three girls started out. It was getting too rough for them. When Peaches passed Willie she pinched him on the leg with a pair of pliers. He jumped and yelled.

'That's what you get,' Johnson said.

Then all of a sudden Arkansas asked, 'Kin you run?' 'Who you talking to?' Johnson asked.

'You,' Arkansas said.

'Sure, I can run,' Johnson said. 'Can you run?' 'Kin I run!' Arkansas echoed. 'Takes three to tell it.'

After a moment Johnson asked dutifully, 'What they say?'

'One to say, "Here he come!" The other to say, "Where he at?" The third to say, "I didn't seen him!"' Arkansas didn't crack a smile.

'That reminds me of the coloured fellow what went down to the river——' Smitty began.

'Now how that remind you of a man going to the river?' Arkansas wanted to know.

'Anyway,' Smitty went on, 'this coloured fellow was sitting down by the bank of the river when an alligator came up out of the water. The coloured fellow watched the alligator for a while, then he started laughing. "Look at that old funny alligator," he said. The alligator rolled his eyes at the coloured fellow and ast, "What so funny 'bout me? I'se just an alligator." The coloured fellow jumped up and looked all about, looked in the bushes and up and down the bank, then he look back at the alligator. "Did you say somp'n?" he ast. "I say what's so funny 'bout me?" the alligator said. The coloured fellow's eyes popped near most out his head. "Kin you talk, or is I just hearing things?" he ast the alligator; and the alligator rolled his eyes and said, "Sure, I kin talk. All us alligators kin talk. The difference between us and you coloured folks, you coloured folks talk too much."

'Well, the coloured fellow lit out running and didn't stop till he come to the field where a white man was ploughing, and he said, "Mistah Jones, Mistah Jones, I just hear an alligator talk." Mistah Jones said, "Go on, boy, you know can't no alligator talk." The coloured fellow said, "I swear I heard him

talk. Just lak a natur Mistah Jones, I'll sho no time for no foolin. But the coloured fellow laughed at him and sa he say, 'What's so fu "All right, boy, I'll c alligator don't talk I The coloured fellow s

'Well, they come do was laying out in the alligator, show this n rolled his eyes at the the coloured fellow a on, Mistah Alligator, while ago." But the the coloured fellow white fellow got tire coloured fellow like Well, the coloured head knotty as fat alligator's. "Why did that man you could outa me." The alliga said, "That just what

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talk. Just lak a natural man. Come on down to the river, Mistah Jones, I'll show you." Mistah Jones say, "I ain't got no time for no foolishness; I got to git dis corn ploughed." But the coloured fellow said, "I swear I heard him talk. I laughed at him and say, 'Look at dat old funny alligator,' and he say, 'What's so funny 'bout me?'" So Mistah Jones say, "All right, boy, I'll come 'long and see. But I swear if that alligator don't talk I'se gonna beat the stuffings outa you." The coloured fellow said, "Oh, he gonna talk."

"Well, they come down to the river bank and the old alligator was laying out in the sun; and the coloured fellow said, "Hey, alligator, show this man you kin talk." The old alligator just rolled his eyes at the coloured fellow. The white man looked at the coloured fellow and the coloured fellow said, "Now come on, Mistah Alligator, and talk. You was talking up a breeze a while ago." But the alligator don't say nothing. Ain't nothing the coloured fellow can do to make him say nothing. So the white fellow got tired of standing there and jumped on the coloured fellow like he said and beat the stuffings out of him. Well, the coloured fellow sat down beside the alligator, his head knotty as fat pine; man, his head knottier than the alligator's. "Why didn't you talk?" he ast the alligator. "I told that man you could talk and you made him beat the stuffings outa me." The alligator rolled his eyes at the coloured fellow and said, "That just what I says, you colpured folks talk too much."

Willie and Arkansas rolled on the floor. 'Dat was some alligator,' Arkansas said.

I caught Ben's eye and grinned at him. Ben made twirling motions with his index finger at the side of his head, and I laughed.

Nobody could top that one, and they were silent for a moment. Tebbel took advantage of the pause to tell his. 'Old Aunty was out in the back yard washing.' All of us gave him a startled look. 'And she said——'

'You mean old Aunty Loo?' Pigmeat cut him off.

'It don't make any difference what her name was,' Tebbel tried again; but Pigmeat cut him off again, 'Or do you mean old Aunty Coo?'

Tebbel began getting red. 'Just old Aunty,' he snarled. 'Old Aunty was out in the back yard——'

Conway picked up a duct and banged it on the deck. "We done told enough jokes, now let's get to work," he said. "I had to laugh. I felt better than I'd felt all morning. We all know that one about old Aunty," Johnson said. "You know that one, don't you, Johnson?" I winked. "Everybody knows that one, boy," Pigmeat said to Tebbel. "You go think up another one and then come back."

"What I wanna know now is whether to make a butt joint here or a lap joint," Conway said, turning over the duct. "Tebbel will tell you all about it," I said. "Tebbel's gonna be your boss next week."

Tebbel looked dubious. "What does the print say?" "If I had the print I wouldn't be asking you," Conway said. "Better get the print to be sure," Tebbel said, and walked out. "I done run him," Conway grinned. "It's a lap joint," I said.

"I know," he said. "I was just trying to stop him from telling that dirty joke to keep from having to knock out his teeth." The three girls came in and Peaches asked, "Are you all through telling dirty jokes?"

I laughed. "Tebbel broke it up." "What did he tell?" Bessie wanted to know. "Something dirty about some coloured people, I know."

"They ganged up on him and wouldn't let him tell it, so he left," I told her. "That's good," Peaches said. "Don't let him get started on that stuff."

I winked at Peaches. "Think I'll go out and give my white woman a break," I said.

"You ain't no trouble," she said slyly. "You done found that out."

But it didn't even ruffle me. "Wanna bet?" I teased. "Who gonna be the judge?"

"I'll let you judge. If you holler more than once—"

"What I've got will kill a little boy like you dead," she cut me off, and then if she had been light enough she would have turned fiery red.

"All right, let our helpers alone," George said. "We'll take care of everything that needs taking care of. You go on and give your white woman a break."

Kelly had popped it. He gave a startled look. Pigmeat laughed. I glanced at my wrist up more than an hour almost all of them had it too. Now I could be blowing my top. Then all of a sudden plumb forgot all about it. "No, no, we're not and do your work." "Well, we behind." "Way behind you." I gave them the cut out. Ben stopped me on his head. "Remember what over him and cut off." "My people, my people."

d banged it on the deck. 'We
's get to work,' he said. 'We
an I'd felt all morning.
old Auntie,' Johnson said.
ou, Johnson?' I winked.
boy,' Pigmeat said to Tebbel.
d then come back.'
whether to make a butt joint
, turning over the duct.
it,' I said. 'Tebbel's gonna be

does the print say?'
be asking you,' Conway said.
Tebbel said, and walked out.
ned.

ying to stop him from telling
ng to knock out his teeth.'
peaches asked, 'Are you all

d to know. 'Something dirty
ow.'

ouldn't let him tell it, so he

't let him get started on that

go out and give my white

lyly. 'You done found that

anna bet?' I teased.

more than once——'
oy like you dead,' she cut
ht enough she would have

George said. 'We'll take
g care of. You go on and

Kelly had popped his head in just in time to hear the last of
it. He gave a startled look and beat it without saying a word.
Pigmeat laughed. 'Did you chalk the walker?'
I glanced at my watch. It was nine-fifteen. We had clowned
up more than an hour. But they had got it off their chests;
almost all of them had started back to work. I felt better about
it too. Now I could go up and talk to the union steward without
blowing my top.

Then all of a sudden Conway snapped his fingers. 'We done
plumb forgot all about Bob——' he began, but I cut him off,
'No, no, we're not gonna do that any more. You guys go on
and do your work. I'll take care of everything.'

'Well, we behind you, chief,' Smitty said.
'Way behind you,' Pigmeat said.
I gave them the okay sign, hitched up my pants and started
out. Ben stopped me. 'Some folks, ain't they?' he said, shaking
his head.

'Remember what the monkey said when young Mose ran
over him and cut off his tail?' I asked.
'My people, my people,' we chorused, grinning at each other.