

CHAPTER XIII

I FOUND the union steward, Herbie Frieberger, on the weather deck, enjoying his privileges. He was a tall, lean, stoop-shouldered guy in his early thirties, with frizzly gopher-coloured hair, a flapping loose-lipped mouth, and a big hooked nose. His face was narrow and his brownish eyes were set close together; he had a shiny tin hat tipped to the back of his head and a union button big as a saucer pinned to the front of his shirt. I didn't exactly hate the guy, but I despised him from the word 'go.' It was strictly personal.

There were five guys standing around him, four white and a coloured fellow who was something or other in the union, probably the proof that it wasn't discriminatory. Herbie was beating up his chops about Lend-Lease to Russia when I walked up.

'Comrades,' I greeted.

They all looked around. One of the white guys winked; the other three didn't speak.

'Comrade,' the coloured fellow saluted. A black Russian, I thought.

Herbie looked salty. "Lo, Bob," he growled.

'May I have a word in private with you, Commissar?' I said. Herbie didn't like that either. 'Come on, can the corny jive,' he grated. 'Next thing you'll be asking me to get you out of a jam.'

I kept my face under control. 'Okay, you know the story,' I said. 'I want to talk to you about it.'

He got important again. 'Say look, Bob, can't you see me in about a half-hour? Maybe I can do something for you, old man.'

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CHAPTER III

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'Whatever you can do in a half-hour, you can do right now.'

'Jesus Christ, all you guys do is gripe,' he complained. 'You don't want a union, you want a court of human relations. Write a letter to Mr. Anthony.'

If he knew what I thought about both him and the union he wouldn't be so cute, I thought. I kept my voice level. 'Come on, Jew boy, don't be so loud,' I said, dragging him in front of the white boys.

He jerked a look of solid malevolence at me, then gave the others a you-see-how-it-is look, spread his hands in a despairing gesture, and walked with me to the starboard rail.

'The thing for you to do is to write out a grievance and give it to me tomorrow,' he began blabbing before I'd said a word. 'I'll present it before the executive board when we meet next week.'

'You're jumping the gun, sonny boy,' I told him flatly. 'What I want you to do is straighten out this cracker dame. I'll handle the rest of it. I want you to tell her she has to work with Negroes here or lose her job.'

I knew that'd put him on the spot; he didn't want to butt heads with those crackers any more than I did.

'Jesus Christ, Bob, you know the union can't do that,' he began tracking back. 'The union can't force anybody to quit —'

'You can if they don't pay their dues,' I said.

'But this is different,' he contended. 'This is dynamite. If we tried that, half the workers in the yard would walk out. I hate to even think what might happen.'

'Don't try,' I said. 'Think of what's already happened. If a third-grade tacker can get a leaderman bumped every cracker dame here is going to figure she can make a beef and get any Negro bumped—'

'Well, Christ, I'll talk to her,' he said. 'That's the best I can do. I've been intending to talk to her.' He wiped mock sweat from his brow. 'Damn, old man, take in some of your muscle, you'll get us all shot. Just take it easy and you'll live longer. Listen, if you take it easy for a month or two, I promise you —'

'If you can't talk to her now, and with me there to hear what

you say, then to hell with you and this lousy Jim Crow union too!' I said.

'That's no way to talk about the union,' he began ducking and dodging again. 'You know we have always fought for the coloured people. Christ, learn something about your union, man. Most of the nationals have Negroes on their executive boards—'

'That don't mean anything to me,' I cut him off. 'When I came to this lousy city in '41 all I did was bump my head against Jim Crow shops that were organized by your union. They organize me *in*—that's fine—when I get *in*. . . .'

'Hell, the union isn't an employment agency. If it hadn't been for the union you wouldn't be working here now—'

'That's a goddamned lie!' I said. 'The only reason this company started hiring Negroes is because they couldn't get enough white workers who wanted to work in this dirty yard. This lousy local never fought for Negroes to be hired—probably fought against it—'

'Okay, okay,' he cut in. 'This local is a stinker. Christ, don't you know I know it? But don't judge the whole movement by—'

'The whole movement ain't little Jesus Christ to me,' I said. 'Either you're all the way for me, or you're all the way against me. I don't play the middle.'

'That's the trouble with you coloured people,' he shouted, getting agitated. 'You forget we're in a war. This isn't any time for private gripes. We're fighting fascism—we're not fighting the companies and we're not fighting each other—we're all fighting fascism together and in order to beat fascism we got to have unity. We got to have unity in the union and unity on the job—'

'That's fine, Comrade Marx, that's wonderful,' I cut him off. 'Let's you and me unite and start right here fighting fascism. Let's go down and give this cracker dame some lessons in unity and if she doesn't want to unite let's tell her about the war—'

'Aw, goddamnit, you want to agitate!' he shouted. 'I'm no Communist and you know it. Mrs. Baker had an editorial in her paper about Negro people like you. She said—'

'Whatever she said, I don't want to hear it,' I said. 'Mrs. Baker's not my mama.' Mrs. Baker was a Negro woman who

published a weekly paper in gibberish about unity! Get the damnit. I'll work with 'em, I'm willing. But I ain't gonna let anybody to unite with. Do your finger on his chest. 'What the war either, for that matter, every white person who comes some goddamned unity.'

He gave me a funny look ing you around.'

That made me blind mad that. I blew up. 'Dammit, I don't believe you. Tell it to some other nigger. They'd refuse to work with me.'

Now he got a hurt end and never saw a guy so confused.

'Okay, I'm confused,' I said, taking a breath and pinned him coming with me to talk to

'Bob, you know damn well

'Well, go to hell!' I said

I rubbed my face with my hand into my scalp. That guy could give more phoney arguments than a chump could think up in his head. I made a weak-minded chump out of him to straighten out the matter where she was right and

Now I didn't know what to do with the cards because I didn't want to go on the deck for a time. The cruiser was silhouetted against the sky still going strong, I thought of the sailors aboard waiting on the deck in tradition, I thought; the

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gibberish about unity! Get these crackers to unite with me. I'm
willing. I'll work with 'em, fight with 'em, die with 'em, god-
damnit. But I ain't gonna even try to do any uniting without
anybody to unite with. Do you understand that?' I put my
finger on his chest. 'What the hell do I care about unity, or the
war either, for that matter, as long as I'm kicked around by
every white person who comes along? Let the white people get
some goddamned unity.'

He gave me a funny look, 'I'm white,' he said. 'I'm not kick-
ing you around.'

That made me blind mad for him to put me on a spot like
that. I blew up. 'Dammit to hell, don't look at me!' I said. 'I
believe you. Tell it to some of these crackers around here who
don't. They'd refuse to work with you as quick as they would
me.'

Now he got a hurt enduring look. 'Jesus Christ,' he said. 'I
never saw a guy so confused.'

'Okay, I'm confused,' I said. 'I knew that was coming.' I took
a breath and pinned him down. 'All I want to know are you
coming with me to talk to this dame?'

'Bob, you know damned well I can't do that. I'd start—'
'Well, go to hell!' I said, and walked off.

I rubbed my face with the flat of my hand, dug my finger tips
into my scalp. That guy could really get on my nerves. He could
give more phoney arguments in five minutes than the average
chump could think up in a day. And the hell of it was he could
make a weak-minded chump fall for 'em. All I'd wanted was for
him to straighten out the dame, and he'd damn near shown me
where she was right and I was wrong.

Now I didn't know what to do. I hadn't turned in the time-
cards because I didn't want any stuff out of Kelly. I stood there
on the deck for a time, looking out across the harbour. A
cruiser was silhouetted against the skyline. The white folks are
still going strong, I thought; then I thought about the black
sailors aboard waiting on the white. In the good old American
tradition, I thought; the good old American way.

My face felt drawn in, thin, skin-tight on the bone. I won-
dered what would happen if all the Negroes in America would
refuse to serve in the armed forces, refuse to work in war

production until the Jim Crow pattern was abolished. The white folks would no doubt go right on fighting the war without us, I thought—and no doubt win it. They'd kill us maybe; but they couldn't kill us all. And if they did they'd have one hell of a job of burying us.

The thought pushed a laugh through my nose, loosened me slightly, then I remembered that Mac had said I'd lose my job back, I thought, looking at the long lean cruiser. I gripped the rail until my knuckles showed white through the brown, clamped my teeth until my jaws ached. I wouldn't take it, I told myself; I just wouldn't take it, that was all.

Then I thought of Alice saying, 'But it's not just you now, Bob. It's you and I. . . . Don't you understand?' I began hurting inside, all down in my chest and stomach. I could see the planes of her face moving, the smooth mobile motion of her lips. 'In the things you do and the decisions you make you just can't think of yourself alone. You have to consider our future. . . . The plea in her eyes. . . . 'Is that too much to ask?' The finality of her voice. . . . 'If you don't go to that girl and apologize and try in every way you know to get reinstated—— If you can't do that much, Bob, don't consider me as being with you any more. . . .'

I felt something hammering on my brain, banging away with a ten-pound sledge. I gave a violent shake of my head, trying to get it off. Me and my goddamned two-cent pride, I thought; my cut-rate muscle and my blind dukes. Who in the hell did I think I was?

I took a deep breath and pushed away from the rail. I really liked that chick, I thought—she was strictly tops.

Then I started looking for Madge. But not to apologize. I was going to rack her back, I told myself. I was going to ask her what the hell she meant by saying she wouldn't work with a nigger, where did she get that stuff calling me a nigger, anyway? And if she didn't like it I was going to kick in her teeth. And if it meant losing Alice I was going to lose her. Goddamnit, I was a man like any other man; I wasn't asking any favours, and I wasn't taking no kicks.

I found her on the deck below, working with the same two mechanics, tacking a conduit to the deck plating. She was sit-

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ting on the deck with her feet drawn underneath her, bending forward over the arc. Her skin showed in a white line where her jacket and waist hiked up, and below her hips spread tight in her leather pants like an hour-glass. Don stood to one side, shading his eyes against the flash with his outstretched hand.

'What say, Don,' I greeted, coming up. 'How's things breaking?'

He looked around, didn't exactly give a start at sight of me, but his sharp brown eyes behind their rimless lenses got spark-bright. 'Oh, hello, Bob,' he said. 'I want to see you.'

The arc died for a moment and he took a quick squint at the job, looked away before a flash could catch him, and said to her, 'That's good.'

The two mechanics took off their flash glasses, gave me nervous looks, and began piddling about. It wasn't tense, but it was itchy.

I pulled the edges of my mouth down, dropped a flat-eyed evil glance on her hooded head, then looked at Don. 'A rugged playmate,' I said. 'Must have snake in her. Will she bite you too?' I wanted her to hear me, but she didn't.

She kicked back her hood, flipped the rod butt across the floor, unhooked her stinger, and began chipping the scale off the weld burrs with her iron hand chipper. She didn't see me either.

Don put his hand to his chin, worried at his lip with his index finger, then headed me off. 'I'm sorry about it, Bob. Now don't get down on me,' he said. 'I told Mac I'd let you have her; I told him how it was. I had no idea——'

Her sudden movement stopped him and we both turned startled looks on her. She came to her feet like a jack-in-the-box and went right straight into her act. She cringed back into the bulkhead and her big blue mascaraed eyes peered out at me in sheer terror.

I wouldn't let her have it. 'Get a load of this,' I said to Don, dipping my head at her; then turned and found him studying me with that sharp speculating curiosity of white men watching Negroes' reactions to white women.

She said something under her breath and now her face took on a wild raw excitement that shook me. She looked crazy

enough to call me a nigger again, and I tightened instinctively against it; this time I knew I'd smack her. But instead she pumped a mean, hard contempt into her eyes and said in her flat, unmusical, nigger-baiting drawl, 'Sometimes I sho wish I was back in Texas.'

I took a breath and held it. One of the mechanics said gruffly, 'Come on Madge, we got a divider to put in before noon.'

Now I was ready to shoot her. I wrenched my gaze away, then felt Don's eyes on me again.

But all he said was, 'I want you to believe me, Bob, I had no idea she'd give you any trouble. If you want me to I'll go with you to Mac and——'

'Naw, I'm going to fight it through the union,' I said. 'I want some of Mac too.'

He was curious to know just what had happened, but he didn't want to ask right out, so he said, 'Did you have a fight with her before?'

'Hell naw,' I said. 'I ain't never seen her before.' Then I decided to tell him; I felt I could talk to him all right. 'When I went to get her, she started that phoney act you just saw and said she wouldn't work with a nigger, and I called her a cracker slut.'

Red came up in his face in slow waves, but he didn't pull away from it. 'Some stinker,' he said. 'What she needs is a good going over by someone.' I knew he wanted to say by some coloured fellow but just couldn't bring himself to say it. Instead he got redder and said, 'It'd take some of the stinking prejudice out of her.'

'What she really needs is just some discipline,' I said. 'Some of these officials to tell her what's what, to lay the line down and make her walk it.'

He blinked at me and his eyes got bright again. 'I told you her name, didn't I? Madge Perkins.'

I gave a little laugh. 'I found that out. What I want to know is what's eating her. She knows goddamned well nobody wants to rape her.'

He hesitated a moment, then said, 'She hasn't got a phone, digging out a little black address book. 'But I'll give you her address.' He grinned sheepishly. 'I knew her room-mate, but she joined the WAC's.'

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I gave him a quick startled look; I didn't get it. 'What do I want with her address, man?'

Now he began getting red again, but he gave me a curious little look. 'Maybe you can cure her,' he said.

'Look, man . . .' I began, then didn't know what to say. I couldn't tell whether he figured I was making a play for the dame and was using the beef as an opening, or was trying to tell me how to get even with her, or whether he was trying to prove he didn't have any racial bias himself. It could have been he felt badly about it from a white point of view and wanted to show me that all the men in his race didn't approve of that sort of thing.

Whatever it was, he went on giving me her address with a painful insistence. 'It's the Hotel Mohave on South Figueroa . . .' He gave me a downtown street number. 'Room 202, that's the front room on the second floor.'

'Say, man, look,' I began again. I wanted to tell him I didn't want to go to bed with her, I wanted to black her eyes; but just the idea of her being a white woman stopped me. I felt flustered, caught, guilty. I couldn't realize what was happening to me, myself. It was funny in a way. I couldn't tell him I *didn't* want her because she was a white woman and he was a white man, and something somewhere way back in my mind said that would be an insult. And I couldn't tell him that I *did* want her, because the same thing said that that would be an insult too.

I started shaking my head and laughing. He looked put out, slightly offended, and his eyes blinked like butterfly wings. But he got it all out with the white man's eternal persistence, 'There's a phone in the hotel, but I don't know the number. It's one of those joints, you know.'

I was blowing laughs through my nose; I felt lightheaded and giddy. 'Now anybody in the world would think we were two fairly ordinary, reasonably sane guys,' I said.

I wondered what a white man and a Negro could talk about that wouldn't touch at some time or other on one of those taboo subjects that would embarrass one or the other, or both. Either both the Negro and the white man would have to accept the fact and even justification of white supremacy—then they could talk about what the white folks were doing and thinking and what the Negroes were taking and aping; or both would

have to reject the theory of white supremacy and condemn all of its institutions, including loyalty and patriotism in time of war; or the white man could retain it and the Negro reject it, which didn't make for conversation at all.

I began shaking my head again. 'I'm telling you,' I said. 'It's a killer.'

He didn't get it. He blinked and his eyes went blank, absolutely lost; and I didn't know where to go from there either. We'd taken it too far to back out; now we stood there at a loss for words, each wanting to escape the other but neither wanting to be the first to make the break.

'There're a lot of stinkers like her in the yard,' he was saying, and I said, 'Too many.'

It was a relief to both of us when Zula Mae came up and said, 'Red wants you, Bob, he's up a tree.'

'Again,' I said, and took her by the arm. 'See you, Don.'

'Take it easy, Bob,' he said with a peculiar baffled look in his eyes.

'Baby,' I said to her. 'You sure look good to me.'

She gave me a half-incredulous, half-hopeful look, and her red lips flowered in her dark face. 'Are you kidding?' she said in her husky plaintive voice, and I gave a long loosening sigh.

But the things had gotten me. Now I felt depressed, walled in, black again. Red noticed it right away.

'What the hell happened to you, Bob? Don't the union wanna help you?' he asked.

'I got it all fixed,' I lied, but my voice was flat, dispirited.

'He been reading in the paper where all young men gonna be called to the Army,' Peaches said. 'He got the GI blues.'

'Got something,' Conway said.

Red didn't want anything in particular; just wanted me there so Tebbel couldn't take charge. I stood around for a time.

'I don't know what the hell I'd do if they called me,' Ben said.

'Every time a coloured man gets in the Army he's fighting against himself. Of course there isn't anything else he can do. If he refuses to go they send him to the pen. But if he does go and take what they put on him, and then fight so he can keep on taking it, he's a cowardly son of a bitch.'

Smitty had stopped his work to listen. 'I wouldn't say that,' he argued. 'You can't call coloured soldiers cowards, man.'

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They can't keep the Army from being like what it is, but hell, they ain't no cowards.'

'Any man's a coward who won't die for what he believes,' Ben flared. 'If he's got principles he'll die for them. If he won't he's a cowardly son of a bitch—excuse me, ladies.'

The other fellows stopped to listen now.

'Any time a Negro says he believes in democracy but won't die to enforce it—I say he's a coward,' Ben declared. 'I don't care who he is. If Bob lets them put him in the Army he's a coward. If you let them put you in the Army you're a coward. As long as the Army is Jim Crowed a Negro who fights in it is fighting against himself.'

'If Bob gets called sure 'nough and listens to you and gets sent to the pen, he's a fool,' Zula Mae said.

Ben gave me a swift look. 'Bob's all right. If they call him he'll go on and make the best of it. Nobody expects him to be a martyr. But one thing I'll tell you, and you remember it—'

Tebbel stepped from one of the shower nooks where he'd been standing and Ben gave him a glance and kept on. 'One thing . . . You'll never get anything from these goddamn white people unless you fight them. They don't know anything else. Don't listen to anything else. If you don't believe it, take any white man you know. You can beg that son of a bitch until you're blue in the face. Argue with him until you're out of breath and no matter how eloquent your plea or righteous your cause the only way you'll ever get along with that son of a bitch is to whip his ass—excuse me, ladies.' He looked around defiantly. 'Bob'll tell you that's right. Isn't that right, Bob?'

'That's right.' I said.

'Then he gonna be your friend from then on,' Conway chuckled.

'That reminds me of a story,' Tebbel said. 'There were two coloured soldiers—'

'Was one named Moe?' Pigmeat cut in.

I chuckled and went out.