

back and have his name entered on the shipping department's payroll."

"It's tremendous," I said as we left the building. "It looks like a small city."

"It's big all right," he said. "We're one of the biggest outfits in the business. Make a lot of paint for the government."

We entered one of the buildings now and started down a pure white hall.

"You better leave your things in the locker room," he said, opening a door through which I saw a room with low wooden benches and rows of green lockers. There were keys in several of the locks, and he selected one for me. "Put your stuff in there and take the key," he said. Dressing, I felt nervous. He sprawled with one foot on a bench, watching me closely as he chewed on a match stem. Did he suspect that Emerson hadn't sent me?

"They have a new racket around here," he said, twirling the match between his finger and thumb. There was a note of animation in his voice, and I looked up from tying my shoe, breathing with conscious evenness.

"What kind of racket?" I said.

"Oh, you know. The wise guys firing the regular guys and putting on you colored college boys. Pretty smart," he said. "That way they don't have to pay union wages."

"How did you know I went to college?" I said.

"Oh, there're about six of you guys out here already. Some up in the testing lab. Everybody knows about that."

"But I had no idea that was why I was hired," I said.

"Forget it, Mac," he said. "It's not your fault. You new guys don't know the score. Just like the union says, it's the wise guys in the office. They're the ones who make scabs out of you—Hey! we better hurry."

We entered a long, shed-like room in which I saw a series

## Chapter ten

The plant was in Long Island, and I crossed a bridge in the fog to get there and came down in a stream of workers. Ahead of me a huge electric sign announced its message through the drifting strands of fog

KEEP AMERICA PURE  
WITH  
LIBERTY PAINTS

Flags were fluttering in the breeze from each of a maze of buildings below the sign, and for a moment it was like watching some vast patriotic ceremony from a distance. But no shots were fired and no bugles sounded. I hurried ahead with the others through the fog.

I was worried, since I had used Emerson's name without his permission, but when I found my way to the personnel office it worked like magic. I was interviewed by a little drooping man named Mr. MacDuffy and sent to work for a Mr. Kimbro. An office boy came along to direct me.

"If Kimbro needs him," MacDuffy told the boy, "come

of overhead doors along one side and a row of small offices on the other. I followed the boy down an aisle between endless cans, buckets and drums labeled with the company's trademark, a screaming eagle. The paint was stacked in neatly pyramided lots along the concrete floor. Then, starting into one of the offices, the boy stopped short and grinned.

"Listen to that!"

Someone inside the office was swearing violently over a telephone.

"Who's that?" I asked.

He grinned. "Your boss, the terrible Mr. Kimbro. We call him 'Colonel,' but don't let him catch you."

I didn't like it. The voice was raving about some failure of the laboratory and I felt a swift uneasiness. I didn't like the idea of starting to work for a man who was in such a nasty mood. Perhaps he was angry at one of the men from the school, and that wouldn't make him feel too friendly toward me.

"Let's go in," the boy said. "I've got to get back."

As we entered, the man slammed down the phone and picked up some papers.

"Mr. MacDuffy wants to know if you can use this new man," the boy said.

"You damn right I can use him and . . ." the voice trailed off, the eyes above the stiff military mustache going hard.

"Well, can you use him?" the boy said. "I got to go make out his card."

"Okay," the man said finally. "I can use him. I gotta what's his name?"

The boy read my name off a card.

"All right," he said, "you go right to work. And you," he said to the boy, "get the hell out of here before I give you a chance to earn some of the money wasted on you every payday!"

"Aw, gwan, you slave driver," the boy said, dashing from the room.

Reddening, Kimbro turned to me, "Come along, let's get going."

I followed him into the long room where the lots of paint were stacked along the floor beneath numbered markers that hung from the ceiling. Toward the rear I could see two men unloading heavy buckets from a truck, stacking them neatly on a low loading platform.

"Now get this straight," Kimbro said gruffly. "This is a busy department and I don't have time to repeat things. You have to follow instructions and you're going to be doing things you don't understand, so get your orders the first time and get them right! I won't have time to stop and explain everything. You have to catch on by doing exactly what I tell you. You got that?"

I nodded, noting that his voice became louder when the men across the floor stopped to listen.

"All right," he said, picking up several tools. "Now come over here."

"He's Kimbro," one of the men said.

I watched him kneel and open one of the buckets, stirring a milky brown substance. A nauseating stench arose. I wanted to step away. But he stirred it vigorously until it became glossy white, holding the spatula like a delicate instrument and studying the paint as it laced off the blade, back into the bucket. Kimbro frowned.

"Damn those laboratory blubberheads to hell! There's got to be dope put in every single sonofabitching bucket. And that's what you're going to do, and it's got to be put in so it can be trucked out of here before 11:30." He handed me a white enamel graduate and what looked like a battery hydrometer.

"The idea is to open each bucket and put in ten drops

of this stuff," he said. "Then you stir it 'til it disappears. After it's mixed you take this brush and paint out a sample on one of these." He produced a number of small rectangular boards and a small brush from his jacket pocket. "You understand?"

"Yes, sir." But when I looked into the white graduate I hesitated; the liquid inside was dead black. Was he trying to kid me?

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know, sir . . . I mean. Well, I don't want to start by asking a lot of stupid questions, but do you know what's in this graduate?"

His eyes snapped. "You damn right I know," he said.

"You just do what you're told!"

"I just wanted to make sure, sir," I said.

"Look," he said, drawing in his breath with an exaggerated show of patience. "Take the dropper and fill it full . . . Go on, do it!"

I filled it.

"Now measure ten drops into the paint . . . There, that's it, not too goddam fast. Now. You want no more than ten, and no less."

Slowly, I measured the glistening black drops, seeing them settle upon the surface and become blacker still, spreading suddenly out to the edges.

"That's it. That's all you have to do," he said. "Never mind how it looks. That's my worry. You just do what you're told and don't try to think about it. When you've done five or six buckets, come back and see if the samples are dry . . . And hurry, we've got to get this batch back off to Washington by 11:30 . . ."

I worked fast but carefully. With a man like this Kimbro the least thing done incorrectly would cause trouble. So I wasn't supposed to think! To hell with him. Just a flunkie, a northern

redneck, a Yankee cracker! I mixed the paint thoroughly, then brushed it smoothly on one of the pieces of board, careful that the brush strokes were uniform.

Struggling to remove an especially difficult cover, I wondered if the same Liberty paint was used on the campus, or if this "Optic White" was something made exclusively for the government. Perhaps it was of a better quality, a special mix. And in my mind I could see the brightly trimmed and freshly decorated campus buildings as they appeared on spring mornings—after the fall painting and the light winter snows, with a cloud riding over and a darting bird above—framed by the trees and encircling vines. The buildings had always seemed more impressive because they were the only buildings to receive regular paintings; usually, the nearby houses and cabins were left untouched to become the dull grained gray of weathered wood. And I remembered how the splinters in some of the boards were raised from the grain by the wind, the sun and the rain until the clapboards shone with a satiny, silvery, silver-fish sheen. Like Trueblood's cabin, or the Golden Day . . . The Golden Day had once been painted white; now its paint was flaking away with the years, the scratch of a finger being enough to send it showering down. Damn that Golden Day! But it was strange how life connected up; because I had carried Mr. Norton to the old rundown building with rotting paint, I was here. If, I thought, one could slow down his heartbeats and memory to the tempo of the black drops falling so slowly into the bucket yet reacting so swiftly, it would seem like a sequence in a feverish dream . . . I was so deep in reverie that I failed to hear Kimbro approach.

"How's it coming?" he said, standing with hands on hips.

"All right, sir."

"Let's see," he said, selecting a sample and running his thumb across the board. "That's it, as white as George Wash-



ingron's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig and as sound as the all-mighty dollar! That's paint!" he said proudly. "That's paint that'll cover just about anything!"

He looked as though I had expressed a doubt and I hurried to say, "It's certainly white all right."

"White! It's the purest white that can be found. Nobody makes a paint any whiter. This batch right here is heading for a national monument!"

"I see," I said, quite impressed.

He looked at his watch. "Just keep it up," he said. "If I don't hurry I'll be late for that production conference! Say, you're nearly out of dope; you'd better go in the tank room and refill it. . . . And don't waste any time! I've got to go."

He shot away without telling me where the tank room was. It was easy to find, but I wasn't prepared for so many tanks. There were seven; each with a puzzling code stenciled on it. It's just like Kimbro not to tell me, I thought. You can't trust any of them. Well, it doesn't matter, I'll pick the tank from the contents of the drip cans hanging from the spigots.

But while the first five tanks contained clear liquids that smelled like turpentine, the last two both contained something black like the dope, but with different codes. So I had to make a choice. Selecting the tank with the drip can that smelled most like the dope, I filled the graduate, congratulating myself for not having to waste time until Kimbro returned.

The work went faster now, the mixing easier. The pigment and heavy oils came free of the bottom much quicker, and when Kimbro returned I was going at top speed. "How many have you finished?" he asked.

"About seventy-five, I think, sir. I lost count."

"That's pretty good, but not fast enough. They've been putting pressure on me to get the stuff out. Here, I'll give you a hand."

They must have given him hell, I thought, as he got grunting to his knees and began removing covers from the buckets. But he had hardly started when he was called away.

When he left I took a look at the last bunch of samples and got a shock: Instead of the smooth, hard surface of the first, they were covered with a sticky goo through which I could see the grain of the wood. What on earth had happened? The paint was not as white and glossy as before; it had a gray tinge. I stirred it vigorously, then grabbed a rag, wiping each of the boards clean, then made a new sample of each bucket. I grew panicky lest Kimbro return before I finished. Working feverishly, I made it, but since the paint required a few minutes to dry I picked up two finished buckets and started lugging them over to the loading platform. I dropped them with a thump as the voice rang out behind me. It was Kimbro.

"What the hell!" he yelled, smearing his finger over one of the samples. "This stuff's still wet!"

I didn't know what to say. He snatched up several of the later samples, smearing them, and letting out a groan. "Of all the things to happen to me. First they take away all my good men and then they send me you. What'd you do to it?"

"Nothing, sir. I followed your directions," I said defensively.

I watched him peer into the graduate, lifting the dropper and sniffing it, his face glowing with exasperation.

"Who the hell gave you this?"

"No one . . ."

"Then where'd you get it?"

"From the tank room."

Suddenly he dashed for the tank room, sloshing the liquid as he ran. I thought, Oh, hell, and before I could follow, he burst out of the door in a frenzy.

"You took the wrong tank," he shouted. "What the hell,



you trying to sabotage the company? That stuff wouldn't work in a million years. It's remover, *concentrated* remover! Don't you know the difference?"

"No, sir, I don't. It looked the same to me. I didn't know what I was using and you didn't tell me. I was trying to save time and took what I thought was right."

"But why this one?"

"Because it smelled the same—" I began.

"*Smelled!*" he roared. "Goddamit, don't you know you can't smell shit around all those fumes? Come on to my office!"

I was torn between protesting and pleading for fairness. It was not all my fault and I didn't want the blame, but I did wish to finish out the day. Throbbing with anger I followed, listening as he called personnel.

"Hello? Mac? Mac, this is Kimbro. It's about this fellow you sent me this morning. I'm sending him in to pick up his pay . . . What did he do? He doesn't satisfy me, that's what. I don't like his work . . . So the old man has to have a report, so what? Make him one. Tell him goddamit this fellow ruined a batch of government stuff—Hey! No, don't tell him that . . . Listen, Mac, you got anyone else out there? . . . Okay, forget it."

He crashed down the phone and swung toward me. "I swear I don't know why they hire you fellows. You just don't belong in a paint plant. Come on."

Bewildered, I followed him into the tank room, yearning to quit and tell him to go to hell. But I needed the money and even though this was the North I wasn't ready to fight unless I had to. Here I'd be one against how many?

I watched him empty the graduate back into the tank and noted carefully when he went to another marked SKA-69-T-Y and refilled it. Next time I would know.

"Now, for God's sake," he said, handing me the gradu-

ate, "be careful and try to do the job right. And if you don't know what to do, ask somebody. I'll be in my office."

I returned to the buckets, my emotions whirling. Kimbro had forgotten to say what was to be done with the spoiled paint. Seeing it there I was suddenly seized by an angry impulse, and, filling the dropper with fresh dope, I stirred ten drops into each bucket and pressed home the covers. Let the government worry about that, I thought, and started to work on the unopened buckets. I stirred until my arm ached and painted the samples as smoothly as I could, becoming more skilful as I went along.

When Kimbro came down the floor and watched I glanced up silently and continued stirring.

"How is it?" he said, frowning.

"I don't know," I said, picking up a sample and hesitating.

"Well?"

"It's nothing . . . a speck of dirt," I said, standing and holding out the sample, a tightness growing within me.

Holding it close to his face, he ran his fingers over the surface and squinted at the texture. "That's more like it," he said. "That's the way it oughta be."

I watched with a sense of unbelief as he rubbed his thumb over the sample, handed it back and left without a further word.

I looked at the painted slab. It appeared the same: a gray tinge glowed through the whiteness, and Kimbro had failed to detect it. I stared for about a minute, wondering if I were seeing things, inspected another and another. All were the same, a brilliant white diffused with gray. I closed my eyes for a moment and looked again and still no change. Well, I thought, as long as he's satisfied . . .

But I had a feeling that something had gone wrong.

something far more important than the paint; that either I had played a trick on Kimbro or he, like the trustees and Bledsoe, was playing one on me . . .

When the truck backed up to the platform I was pressing the cover on the last bucket—and there stood Kimbro above me.

"Let's see your samples," he said.

I reached, trying to select the whitest, as the blue-shirted truckmen climbed through the loading door.

"How about it, Kimbro," one of them said, "can we get started?"

"Just a minute, now," he said, studying the sample, "just a minute . . ."

I watched him nervously, waiting for him to throw a fit over the gray tinge and hating myself for feeling nervous and afraid. What would I say? But now he was turning to the truckmen.

"All right, boys, get the hell out of here."

"And you," he said to me, "go see MacDuffy, you're through."

I stood there, staring at the back of his head, at the pink neck beneath the cloth cap and the iron-gray hair. So he'd let me stay only to finish the mixing. I turned away, there was nothing that I could do. I cursed him all the way to the personnel office. Should I write the owners about what had happened? Perhaps they didn't know that Kimbro was having so much to do with the quality of the paint. Perhaps that is how things are done here, I thought, perhaps the real quality of the paint is *always* determined by the man who ships it rather than by those who mix it. To hell with the whole thing . . . I'll find another job.

But I wasn't fired. MacDuffy sent me to the basement of Building No. 2 on a new assignment.

"When you get down there just tell Brockway that Mr.

Sparland insists that he have an assistant. You do whatever he tells you."

"What is that name again, sir?" I said.

"Lucius Brockway," he said. "He's in charge."

It was a deep basement. Three levels underground I pushed upon a heavy metal door marked "Danger" and descended into a noisy, dimly lit room. There was something familiar about the fumes that filled the air and I had just thought *pine*, when a high-pitched Negro voice rang out above the machine sounds.

"Who you looking for down here?"

"I'm looking for the man in charge," I called, straining to locate the voice.

"You talkin' to him. What you want?"

The man who moved out of the shadow and looked at me sullenly was small, wiry and very natty in his dirty overalls. And as I approached him I saw his drawn face and the cottony white hair showing beneath his tight, striped engineer's cap. His manner puzzled me. I couldn't tell whether he felt guilty about something himself, or thought I had committed some crime. I came closer, staring. He was barely five feet tall, his overalls looking now as though he had been dipped in pitch.

"All right," he said. "I'm a busy man. What you want?"

"I'm looking for Lucius," I said.

He frowned. "That's me—and don't come calling me by my first name. To you and all like you I'm *Mister Brockway* . . ."

"You . . . ?" I began.

"Yeah, me! Who sent you down here anyway?"

"The personnel office," I said. "I was told to tell you that Mr. Sparland said for you to be given an assistant!"

"Assistant!" he said. "I don't need no damn assistant!

Old Man Sparland must think I'm getting old as him. Here I been running things by myself all these years and now they keep trying to send me some assistant. You get on back up there and tell 'em that when I want an assistant I'll ask for one!"

I was so disgusted to find such a man in charge that I turned without a word and started back up the stairs. First Kimbro, I thought, and now this old . . .

"Hey! wait a minute!"

I turned, seeing him beckon.

"Come on back here a minute," he called, his voice cutting sharply through the roar of the furnaces.

I went back, seeing him remove a white cloth from his hip pocket and wipe the glass face of a pressure gauge, then bend close to squint at the position of the needle.

"Here," he said, straightening and handing me the cloth, "you can stay 'til I can get in touch with the Old Man. These here have to be kept clean so's I can see how much pressure I'm getting."

I took the cloth without a word and began rubbing the glasses. He watched me critically.

"What's your name?" he said.

I told him, shouting it in the roar of the furnaces.

"Wait a minute," he called, going over and turning a valve in an intricate network of pipes. I heard the noise rise to a higher, almost hysterical pitch, somehow making it possible to hear without yelling, our voices moving blurrily underneath. Returning, he looked at me sharply, his withered face an animated black walnut with shrewd, reddish eyes.

"This here's the first time they ever sent me anybody like you," he said as though puzzled. "That's how come I called you back. Usually they sends down some young white fellow who thinks he's going to watch me a few days and ask me a

heap of questions and then take over. Some folks is too damn simple to even talk about," he said, grimacing and waving his hand in a violent gesture of dismissal. "You an engineer?" he said, looking quickly at me.

"An engineer?"

"Yeah, that's what I asked you," he said challengingly.

"Why, no, sir, I'm no engineer."

"You sho?"

"Of course I'm sure. Why shouldn't I be?"

He seemed to relax. "That's all right then. I have to watch them personnel fellows. One of them thinks he's going to git me out of here, when he ought to know by now he's wasting his time. Lucius Brockway not only intends to protect himself, he *knows how* to do it! Everybody knows I been here ever since there's been a here—even helped dig the first foundation. The Old Man hired me, nobody else; and, by God, I'll take the Old Man to fire me!"

I rubbed away at the gauges, wondering what had brought on this outburst, and was somewhat relieved that he seemed to hold nothing against me personally.

"Where you go to school?" he said.

I told him.

"Is that so? What you learning down there?"

"Just general subjects, a regular college course," I said.

"Mechanics?"

"Oh no, nothing like that, just a liberal arts course. No trades."

"Is that so?" he said doubtfully. Then suddenly, "How much pressure I got on that gauge right there?"

"Which?"

"You see it?" he pointed. "That one right there!"

I looked, calling off, "Forty-three and two-tenths pounds."



"Uh huh, uh huh, that's right." He squinted at the gauge and back at me. "Where you learn to read a gauge so good?"

"In my high-school physics class. It's like reading a clock."

"They teach you that in *big* school?"

"That's right."

"Well, that's going to be one of your jobs. These her gauges have to be checked every fifteen minutes. You ought to be able to do that."

"I think I can," I said.

"Some kin, some caint. By the way, who hired you?"

"Mr. MacDuffy," I said, wondering why all the questions.

"Yeah, then where you been all morning?"

"I was working over in Building No. 1."

"That there's a heap of building. Where'bouts?"

"For Mr. Kimbro."

"I see, I see. I knowed they oughtn't to be hiring anybody this late in the day. What Kimbro have you doing?"

"Putting dope in some paint that went bad," I said wearily, annoyed with all the questions.

His lips shot out belligerently. "What paint went bad?"

"I think it was some for the government . . ."

He cocked his head. "I wonder how come nobody said nothing to me about it," he said thoughtfully. "Was it in buckets or them little biddy cans?"

"Buckets."

"Oh, that ain't so bad, them little ones is a heap of work." He gave me a high dry laugh. "How you hear about this job?" he snapped suddenly, as though trying to catch me off guard.

"Look," I said slowly, "a man I know told me about the job; MacDuffy hired me; I worked this morning for Mr. Kimbro; and I was sent to you by Mr. MacDuffy."

His face tightened. "You friends to one of those colored fellows?"

"Who?"

"Up in the lab?"

"No," I said. "Anything else you want to know?"

He gave me a long, suspicious look and spat upon a hot pipe, causing it to steam furiously. I watched him remove a heavy engineer's watch from his breast pocket and squint at the dial importantly, then turn to check it with an electric clock that glowed from the wall. "You keep on wiping them gauges," he said. "I got to look at my soup. And look here." He pointed to one of the gauges. "I wants you to keep a specially sharp eye on this here sonofabitch. The last couple of days he's 'veloped a habit of building up too fast. Causes me a heap of trouble. You see him giting past 75, you yell, and yell loud!"

He went back into the shadows and I saw a shaft of brightness mark the opening of a door.

Running the rag over a gauge I wondered how an apparently uneducated old man could gain such a responsible job. He certainly didn't sound like an engineer; yet he alone was on duty. And you could never be sure, for at home an old man employed as a janitor at the Water Works was the only one who knew the location of all of the water mains. He had been employed at the beginning, before any records were kept, and actually functioned as an engineer though he drew a janitor's pay. Perhaps this old Brockway was protecting himself from something. After all, there was antagonism to our being employed. Maybe he was dissimulating, like some of the teachers at the college, who, to avoid trouble when driving through the small surrounding towns, wore chauffeur caps and pretended that their cars belonged to white men. But why was he pretending with me? And what was his job?

I looked around me. It was not just an engine room; I knew, for I had been in several, the last at college. It was something more. For one thing, the furnaces were made differently and the flames that flared through the cracks of the fire chambers were too intense and too blue. And there were the odors. No, he was *making* something down here, something that had to do with paint, and probably something too filthy and dangerous for white men to be willing to do even for money. It was not paint because I had been told that the paint was made on the floors above, where, passing through, I had seen men in splattered aprons working over large vats filled with whirling pigment. One thing was certain: I had to be careful with this crazy Brockway; he didn't like my being here.

And there he was, entering the room now from the stairs.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"All right," I said. "Only it seems to have gotten louder."

"Oh, it gets pretty loud down here, all right; this here's the uproar department and I'm in charge . . . Did she go over the mark?"

"No, it's holding steady," I said.

"That's good. I been having plenty trouble with it lately. Haveta bust it down and give it a good going over soon as I can get the tank clear."

Perhaps he *is* the engineer, I thought, watching him inspect the gauges and go to another part of the room to adjust a series of valves. Then he went and said a few words into a wall phone and called me, pointing to the valves.

"I'm fixing to shoot it to 'em upstairs," he said gravely. "When I give you the signal I want you to turn 'em wide open. 'N when I give you the second signal I want you to close 'em up again. Start with this here red one and work right straight across . . ."

I took my position and waited, as he took a stand near the gauge.

"Let her go," he called. I opened the valves, hearing the sound of liquids rushing through the huge pipes. At the sound of a buzzer I looked up . . .

"Start closing," he yelled. "What you looking at? Close them valves!"

"What's wrong with you?" he asked when the last valve was closed.

"I expected you to call."

"I said I'd *signal* you. Caint you tell the difference between a signal and a call? Hell, I buzzed you. You don't want to do that no more. When I buzz you I want you to do something and do it quick!"

"You're the boss," I said sarcastically.

"You mighty right, I'm the boss, and don't forgit it. Now come on back here, we got work to do."

We came to a strange-looking machine consisting of a huge set of gears connecting a series of drum-like rollers. Brockway took a shovel and scooped up a load of brown crystals from a pile on the floor, pitching them skillfully into a receptacle on top of the machine.

"Grab a scoop and let's git going," he ordered briskly.

"You ever done this before?" he asked as I scooped into the pile.

"It's been a long time," I said. "What is this material?"

He stopped shoveling and gave me a long, black stare, then returned to the pile, his scoop ringing on the floor. You'll have to remember not to ask this suspicious old bastard any questions, I thought, scooping into the brown pile.

Soon I was perspiring freely. My hands were sore and I began to tire. Brockway watched me out of the corner of his eye, snickering noiselessly.

"You don't want to overwork yourself, young feller," he said blandly.

"I'll get used to it," I said, scooping up a heavy load.

"Oh, sho, sho," he said. "Sho. But you better take a rest when you git tired."

I didn't stop. I piled on the material until he said, "That there's the scoop we been trying to find. That's what we want. You better stand back a little, 'cause I'm fixing to start her up."

I backed away, watching him go over and push a switch. Shuddering into motion, the machine gave a sudden scream like a circular saw, and sent a tattoo of sharp crystals against my face. I moved clumsily away, seeing Brockway grin like a dried prune. Then with the dying hum of the furiously whirling drums, I heard the grains sifting lazily in the sudden stillness, sliding sand-like down the chute into the pot underneath. I watched him go over and open a valve. A sharp new smell of oil arose.

"Now she's all set to cook down, all we got to do is put the fire to her," he said, pressing a button on something that looked like the burner of an oil furnace. There was an angry hum, followed by a slight explosion that caused something to rattle, and I could hear a low roaring begin.

"Know what that's going to be when it's cooked?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Well that's going to be the gus, what they call the whe-hicle of the paint. Least it will be by time I git through putting other stuff with it."

"But I thought the paint was made upstairs . . ."

"Naw, they just mixes in the color, make it look pretty. Right down here is where the real paint is made. Without what I do they couldn't do nothing, they be making bricks without straw. An' not only do I make up the base, I fixes the varnishes and lots of the oils too . . ."

"So that's it," I said. "I was wondering what you did down here."

"A whole lots of folks wonders about that without gitting anywhere. But as I was saying, caint a single doggone drop of paint move out of the factory less'n it comes through Lucius Brockway's hands."

"How long have you been doing this?"

"Long enough to know what I'm doing," he said. "And I learned it without all that education that them what's been sent down here is suppose to have. I learned it by doing it. Them personnel fellows don't want to face the facts, but Liberty Pants wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel if they didn't have me here to see that it got a good strong base. Old Man Sparland know it though. I caint stop laughing over the time when I was down with a touch of pneumonia and they put one of them so-called engineers to pooting around down here. Why, they started to having so much paint go bad they didn't know what to do. Paint was bleeding and wrinkling, wouldn't cover or nothing—you know, a man could make hisself all kinds of money if he found out what makes paint bleed. Anyway, everything was going bad. Then word got to me that they done put that fellow in my place and when I got well I wouldn't come back. Here I been with 'em so long and loyal and everything. Shucks, I just sent 'em word that Lucius Brockway was retiring!"

"Next thing you know here come the Old Man. He so old hisself his chauffeur has to help him up them steep stairs at my place. Come in a-puffing and a-blowing, says, 'Lucius, what's this I hear 'bout you retiring?'"

"Well, sir, Mr. Sparland, sir, I says, 'I been pretty sick, as you well know, and I'm gitting kinder along in my years, as you well know, and I hear that this here Italian fellow you got in my place is doing so good I thought I'd might as well take it easy round the house.'"

"Why, you'd a-thought I'd done cursed him or some-



thing. 'What kind of talk is that from you, Lucius Brockway,' he said, 'taking it easy round the house when we need you out to the plant? Don't you know the quickest way to die is to retire? Why, that fellow out at the plant don't know a thing about those furnaces. I'm so worried about what he's going to do, that he's liable to blow up the plant or something that I took out some extra insurance. He can't do your job,' he said. 'He don't have the touch. We haven't put out a first-class batch of paint since you been gone.' Now that was the Old Man himself!' Lucius Brockway said.

"So what happened?" I said.

"What you mean, what happened?" he said, looking as though it were the most unreasonable question in the world. "Shucks, a few days later the Old Man had me back down here in full control. That engineer got so mad when he found out he had to take orders from me he quit the next day."

He spat on the floor and laughed. "Heh, heh, heh, he was a fool, that's what. A fool! He wanted to boss *me* and I know more about this basement than anybody, boilers and everything. I helped lay the pipes and everything, and what I mean is I knows the location of each and every pipe and switch and cable and wire and everything else—both in the floors and in the walls *and* out in the yard. Yes, sir! And what's more, I got it in my head so good I can trace it out on paper down to the last nut and bolt; and ain't never been to nobody's engineering school neither, ain't even passed by one, as far as I know. Now what you think about that?"

"I think it's remarkable," I said, thinking, I don't like this old man.

"Oh, I wouldn't call it that," he said. "It's just that I been round here so long. I been studying this machinery for over twenty-five years. Sho, and that fellow thinking 'cause he been to some school and learned how to read a blueprint and

how to fire a boiler he knows more 'bout this plant than Lucius Brockway. That fool couldn't make no engineer 'cause he can't see what's staring him straight in the face . . . Say, you forgotin' to watch them gauges."

I hurried over, finding all the needles steady.

"They're okay," I called.

"All right, but I'm warning you to keep an eye on 'em. You can't forget down here, 'cause if you do, you liable to blow up something. They got all this machinery, but that ain't everything; *we the machines inside the machine*.

"You know the best selling paint we got, the one that *made* this here business?" he asked as I helped him fill a vat with a smelly substance.

"No, I don't."

"Our white, Optic White."

"Why the white rather than the others?"

"'Cause we started stressing it from the first. We make the best white paint in the world. I don't give a damn what nobody says. Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through!"

His eyes glinted with humorless conviction and I had to drop my head to hide my grin.

"You notice that sign on top of the building?"

"Oh, you can't miss that," I said.

"You read the slogan?"

"I don't remember, I was in such a hurry."

"Well, you might not believe it, but I helped the Old Man make up that slogan. 'If It's Optic White, It's the Right White.'" he quoted with an upraised finger, like a preacher quoting holy writ. "I got me a three-hundred-dollar bonus for helping to think that up. These newfangled advertising folks is been tryin' to work up something about the other colors, talk-

ing about rainbows or something, but hell, *they* caint get no where."

"If it's Optic White, it's the Right White," I repeated and suddenly had to repress a laugh as a childhood jingle rang through my mind:

"If you're white, you're right," I said.

"That's it," he said. "And that's another reason why the Old Man ain't goin' to let nobody come down here messing with me. *He* knows what a lot of them new fellers don't: he knows that the reason our paint is so good is because of the way Lucius Brockway puts the pressure on them oils and resins before they even leaves the tanks." He laughed maliciously. "They thinks 'cause everything down here is done by machinery, that's all there is to it. They crazy! Ain't a continental thing that happens down here that ain't as iffen I done put my black hands into it! Them machines just do the cooking, then here hands right here do the sweetening. Yes, sir! Lucius Brockway hit it square on the head! I dips my finger in and sweeten it! Come on, let's eat..."

"But what about the gauges?" I said, seeing him go over and take a thermos bottle from a shelf near one of the furnaces.

"Oh, we'll be here close enough to keep an eye on 'em. Don't you worry 'bout that."

"But I left my lunch in the locker room over at Building No. 1."

"Go on and git it and come back here and eat. Down here we have to always be on the job. A man don't need no more'n fifteen minutes to eat no-how; then I say let him git on back on the job."

Upon opening the door I thought I had made a mistake. Men dressed in splattered painters' caps and overalls sat about on

benches, listening to a thin tubercular-looking man who was addressing them in a nasal voice. Everyone looked at me and I was starting out when the thin man called, "There's plenty of seats for late comers. Come in, brother..."

"*Brother?* Even after my weeks in the North this was surprising. "I was looking for the locker room," I spluttered.

"You're in it, brother. Weren't you told about the meeting?"

"Meeting? Why, no, sir, I wasn't."

The chairman frowned. "You see, the bosses are not co-operating," he said to the others. "Brother, who's your foreman?"

"Mr. Brockway, sir," I said.

Suddenly the men began scraping their feet and cursing. I looked about me. What was wrong? Were they objecting to my referring to Brockway as *Mister*?

"Quiet, brothers," the chairman said, leaning across his table, his hand cupped to his ear. "Now what was that, brother; who is your foreman?"

"Lucius Brockway, sir," I said, dropping the *Mister*.

But this seemed only to make them more hostile. "Get him the hell out of here," they shouted. I turned. A group on the far side of the room kicked over a bench, yelling, "Throw him out! Throw him out!"

I inched backwards, hearing the little man bang on the table for order. "Men, brothers! Give the brother a chance..."

"He looks like a dirty fink to me. A first-class enameled fink!"

The hoarsely voiced word grated my ears like "nigger" in an angry southern mouth...

"Brothers, *please!*" The chairman was waving his hands

as I reached out behind me for the door and touched an arm feeling it snatch violently away. I dropped my hand.

"Who sent this fink into the meeting, brother chairman? Ask him that!" a man demanded.

"No, wait," the chairman said. "Don't ride that word too hard . . ."

"Ask him, brother chairman!" another man said.

"Okay, but don't label a man a fink until you know for sure." The chairman turned to me. "How'd you happen in here, brother?"

The men quieted, listening.

"I left my lunch in my locker," I said, my mouth dry.

"You weren't *sent* into the meeting?"

"No, sir, I didn't know about any meeting."

"The hell he says. None of these finks ever knows!"

"Throw the lousy bastard out!"

"Now, wait," I said.

They became louder, threatening.

"Respect the chair!" the chairman shouted. "We're a democratic union here, following democratic—"

"Never mind, git rid of the fink!"

" . . . procedures. It's our task to make friends with all the workers. And I mean *all*. That's how we build the union strong. Now let's hear what the brother's got to say. No more of that beefing and interrupting!"

I broke into a cold sweat, my eyes seeming to have become extremely sharp, causing each face to stand out vivid in its hostility.

I heard, "When were you hired, friend?"

"This morning," I said.

"See, brothers, he's a new man. We don't want to make the mistake of judging the worker by his foreman. Some of you also work for sonsabitches, remember?"

Suddenly the men began to laugh and curse. "Here's one right here," one of them yelled.

"Mine wants to marry the boss's daughter—a frigging eight-day wonder!"

This sudden change made me puzzled and angry, as though they were making me the butt of a joke.

"Order, brothers! Perhaps the brother would like to join the union. How about it, brother?"

"Sir . . . ?" I didn't know what to say. I knew very little about unions—but most of these men seemed hostile . . . And before I could answer a fat man with shaggy gray hair leaped to his feet, shouting angrily.

"I'm against it! Brothers, this fellow could be a fink, even if he was hired right this minute! Not that I aim to be unfair to anybody, either. Maybe he ain't a fink," he cried passionately, "but brothers, I want to remind you that nobody knows it, and it seems to me that anybody that would work under that sonofabitching, double-crossing Brockway for more than fifteen minutes is just as apt as not to be *naturally* fink-minded! Please, brothers!" he cried, waving his arms for quiet. "As some of you brothers have learned, to the sorrow of your wives and babies, a fink don't have to know about trade unionism to be a fink! Finkism? Hell, I've made a study of finkism! Finkism is *born* into some guys. It's born into some guys, just like a good eye for color is born into other guys. That's right, that's the honest, scientific truth! A fink don't even have to have heard of a union before," he cried in a frenzy of words. "All you have to do is bring him around the neighborhood of a union and next thing you know, why, zip! he's finking his finking ass off!"

He was drowned out by shouts of approval. Men turned violently to look at me. I felt choked. I wanted to drop my head but faced them as though facing them was itself a denial



of his statements. Another voice ripped out of the shouts of approval, spilling with great urgency from the lips of a little fellow with glasses who spoke with the index finger of one hand upraised and the thumb of the other crooked in the sponder of his overalls:

"I want to put this brother's remarks in the form of a motion: I move that we determine through a thorough investigation whether the new worker is a fink or no; and if he is a fink, let us discover who he's finking for! And this, brother members, would give the worker time, if he *ain't* a fink, to become acquainted with the work of the union and its aims. After all, brothers, we don't want to forget that workers like him aren't so highly developed as some of us who've been in the labor movement for a long time. So I says, let's give him time to see what we've done to improve the condition of the workers, and then, if he *ain't* a fink, we can decide in a democratic way whether we want to accept this brother into the union. Brother union members, I thank you!" He sat down with a bump.

The room roared. Biting anger grew inside me. So I was not so highly developed as they! What did he mean? Were they all Ph.D.'s? I couldn't move; too much was happening to me. It was as though by entering the room I had automatically applied for membership—even though I had no idea that a union existed, and had come up simply to get a cold pork chop sandwich. I stood trembling, afraid that they would ask me to join but angry that so many rejected me on sight. And worst of all, I knew they were forcing me to accept things on their own terms, and I was unable to leave.

"All right, brothers. We'll take a vote," the chairman shouted. "All in favor of the motion, signify by saying 'Aye'..."

The ayes drowned him out.

"The ayes carried it," the chairman announced as several

men turned to stare at me. At last I could move. I started out, forgetting why I had come.

"Come in, brother," the chairman called. "You can get your lunch now. Let him through, you brothers around the door!"

My face stung as though it had been slapped. They had made their decision without giving me a chance to speak for myself. I felt that every man present looked upon me with hostility; and though I had lived with hostility all my life, now for the first time it seemed to reach me, as though I had expected more of these men than of others—even though I had not known of their existence. Here in this room my defenses were negated, stripped away, checked at the door as the weapons, the knives and razors and owlhead pistols of the country boys were checked on Saturday night at the Golden Day. I kept my eyes lowered, mumbling "Pardon me, pardon me," all the way to the drab green locker, where I removed the sandwich, for which I no longer had an appetite, and stood fumbling with the bag, dreading to face the men on my way out. Then still hating myself for the apologies made coming over, I brushed past silently as I went back.

When I reached the door the chairman called, "Just a minute, brother, we want you to understand that this is nothing against you personally. What you see here is the results of certain conditions here at the plant. We want you to know that we are only trying to protect ourselves. Some day we hope to have you as a member in good standing."

From here and there came a half-hearted applause that quickly died. I swallowed and stared unseeing, the words spurring to me from a red, misty distance.

"Okay, brothers," the voice said, "let him pass."

I STUMBLED through the bright sunlight of the yard, past the office workers chatting on the grass, back to Building No. 2, to the basement. I stood on the stairs, feeling as though my bowels had been flooded with acid. Why hadn't I simply left, I thought with anguish. And since I had remained, why hadn't I said something, defended myself? Suddenly I snatched the wrapper off a sandwich and tore it violently with my teeth, hardly tasting the dry lumps that squeezed past my constricted throat when I swallowed. Dropping the remainder back into the bag, I held onto the handrail, my legs shaking as though I had just escaped a great danger. Finally, it went away and I pushed open the metal door.

"What kept you so long?" Brockway snapped from where he sat on a wheelbarrow. He had been drinking from a white mug now cupped in his grimy hands.

I looked at him abstractedly, seeing how the light caught on his wrinkled forehead, his snowy hair.

"I said, *what kept you so long!*"

What had he to do with it, I thought, looking at him through a kind of mist, knowing that I disliked him and that I was very tired.

"I say . . ." he began, and I heard my voice come quiet from my tensed throat as I noticed by the clock that I had been gone only twenty minutes.

"I ran into a union meeting—"

"*Union!*" I heard his white cup shatter against the floor as he uncrossed his legs, rising. "I knowed you belonged to that bunch of troublemaking foreigners! I knowed it! Git out!" he screamed. "Git out of my basement!"

He started toward me as in a dream, trembling like the needle of one of the gauges as he pointed toward the stairs, his voice shrieking. I stared; something seemed to have gone wrong, my reflexes were jammed.

"But what's the matter?" I stammered, my voice low and my mind understanding and yet failing exactly to understand.

"What's wrong?"

"You heard me. Git out!"

"But I don't understand . . ."

"Shut up and git!"

"But, Mr. Brockway," I cried, fighting to hold something that was giving way.

"You two-bit, trouble-making union louse!"

"Look, man," I cried, urgently now, "I don't belong to any union."

"If you don't git outta here, you low-down skunk," he said, looking wildly about the floor, "I'm liable to kill you. The Lord being my witness, I'LL KILL YOU!"

It was incredible, things were speeding up. "You'll do what?" I stammered.

"I'LL KILL YOU, THAT'S WHAT!"

He had said it again and something fell away from me, and I seemed to be telling myself in a rush: *You were trained to accept the foolishness of such old men as this, even when you thought them clowns and fools; you were trained to pretend that you respected them and acknowledged in them the same quality of authority and power in your world as the whites before whom they bowed and scraped and feared and loved and imitated, and you were even trained to accept it when, angered or spiteful, or drunk with power, they came at you with a stick or strap or cane and you made no effort to strike back, but only to escape unmarked.* But this was too much . . . he was not grandfather or uncle or father, nor preacher or teacher. Something uncoiled in my stomach and I was moving toward him, shouting, more at a black blur that irritated my eyes than at a clearly defined human face, "YOU'LL KILL WHO?"

"YOU, THAT'S WHO!"

"Listen here, you old fool, don't talk about killing me. Give me a chance to explain. I don't belong to anything—Go on, pick it up! Go on!" I yelled, seeing his eyes fasten upon a twisted iron bar. "You're old enough to be my grandfather, but if you touch that bar, I swear I'll make you eat it!"

"I done told you, GIT OUTTA MY BASEMENT! You *impudent son bitch*," he screamed.

I moved forward, seeing him stoop and reach aside for the bar, and I was throwing myself forward, feeling him go over with a grunt, hard against the floor, rolling beneath the force of my lunge. It was as though I had landed upon a wiry rat. He scrambled beneath me, making angry sounds and striking my face as he tried to use the bar. I twisted it from his grasp, feeling a sharp pain stab through my shoulder. He was using a knife, flashed through my mind and I slashed out with my elbow, sharp against his face, feeling it land solid and seeing his head fly backwards and up and back again as I struck again, hearing something fly free and skitter across the floor, thinking, *It's gone, the knife is gone . . .* and struck again as he tried to choke me, jabbing at his bobbing head, feeling the bar come free and bringing it down at his head, missing, the metal clinking against the floor, and bringing it up for a second try and him yelling, "No, no! You the best, you the best!"

"I'm going to beat your brains out!" I said, my throat dry, "stabbing me . . ."

"No," he panted. "I got enough. Ain't you heard me say I got enough?"

"So when you can't win you want to stop! Damn you, if you've cut me bad, I'll tear your head off!"

Watching him warily, I got to my feet. I dropped the bar, as a flash of heat swept over me. His face was caved in.

"What's wrong with you, old man?" I yelled nervously. "Don't you know better than to attack a man a third your age?"

He blanched at being called old, and I repeated it, adding insults I'd heard my grandfather use. "Why, you old-fashioned, slavery-time, mammy-made, handkerchief-headed bastard, you should know better! What made you think you could threaten my life? You meant nothing to me, I came down here because I was sent. I didn't know anything about you or the union either. Why'd you start riding me the minute I came in? Are you people crazy? Does this paint go to your head? Are you drinking it?"

He glared, panting tiredly. Great rucks showed in his overalls where the folds were stuck together by the goo with which he was covered, and I thought, *Tar Baby*, and wanted to blot him out of my sight. But now my anger was flowing fast from action to words.

"I go to get my lunch and they ask me who I work for and when I tell them, they call me a fink. *A fink!* You people must be out of your minds. No sooner do I get back down here than *you* start yelling that you're going to kill me! What's going on? What have you got against me? What did I do?"

He glowered at me silently, then pointed to the floor.

"Reach and draw back a nub," I warned.

"Caint a man even git his teeth?" he mumbled, his voice strange.

"TEETH?"

With a shamed frown, he opened his mouth. I saw a blue flash of shrunken gums. The thing that had skittered across the floor was not a knife, but a plate of false teeth. For a fraction of a second I was desperate, feeling some of my justification for wanting to kill him slipping away. My fingers leaped to my shoulder, finding wet cloth but no blood. The old fool had bitten me. A wild flash of laughter struggled to rise from beneath my anger. He had bitten me! I looked on the floor, seeing the smashed mug and the teeth glinting dully across the room.



"Get them," I said, growing ashamed. Without his teeth, some of the hatredness seemed to have gone out of him. But I stayed close as he got his teeth and went over to the tap and held them beneath a stream of water. A tooth fell away beneath the pressure of his thumb, and I heard him grumbling as he placed the plate in his mouth. Then, wiggling his chin, he became himself again.

"You was really trying to kill me," he said. He seemed unable to believe it.

"You started the killing. I don't go around fighting," I said. "Why didn't you let me explain? Is it against the law to belong to the union?"

"That damn union," he cried, almost in tears. "That damn union! They after my job! I know they after my job! For one of us to join one of them damn unions is like we was to bite the hand of the man who reached us to bathe in a bathtub! I hates it, and I mean to keep on doing all I can to chase it outta the plant. They after my job, the chickenshit bastards!"

Spiritie formed at the corners of his mouth; he seemed to boil with hatred.

"But what have I to do with that?" I said, feeling suddenly the older.

"Cause them young colored fellers up in the lab is trying to join that outfit, that's what! Here the white man done give 'em jobs," he wheezed as though pleading a case. "He done give 'em good jobs too, and they so ungrateful they goes and joins up with that backbiting union! I never seen such a no-good ungrateful bunch. All they doing is making things bad for the rest of us!"

"Well, I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know about all that. I came here to take a temporary job and I certainly didn't intend to get mixed up in any quarrels. But as for us, I'm really

to forget our disagreement—if you are . . ." I held out my hand, causing my shoulder to pain.

He gave me a gruff look. "You ought to have more self-respect than to fight an old man," he said. "I got grown boys older than you."

"I thought you were trying to kill me," I said, my hand still extended. "I thought you had stabbed me."

"Well, I don't like a lot of bickering and confusion myself," he said, avoiding my eyes. And it was as though the closing of his sticky hand over mine was a signal. I heard a dull hissing from the boilers behind me and turned, hearing Brockway yell, "I tolle you to watch them gauges. Git over to the big valves, quick!"

I dashed for where a series of valve wheels projected from the wall near the crusher, seeing Brockway scrambling away in the other direction, thinking, "Where's he going? as I reached the valves, and hearing him yell, "Turn it! Turn it!"

"Which?" I yelled, reaching.

"The white one, fool, the white one!"

I jumped, catching it and pulling down with all my weight, feeling it give. But this only increased the noise and I seemed to hear Brockway laugh as I looked around to see him scrambling for the stairs, his hands clapping the back of his head, and his neck pulled in close, like a small boy who has thrown a brick into the air.

"Hey you! Hey you!" I yelled. "Hey!" But it was too late. All my movements seemed too slow, ran together. I felt the wheel resisting and tried vainly to reverse it and tried to let go, and it sticking to my palms and my fingers stiff and sticky, and I turned, running now, seeing the needle on one of the gauges swinging madly, like a beacon gone out of control, and trying to think clearly, my eyes darting here and there through the room of tanks and machines and up the stairs so

far away and hearing the clear new note arising while I seemed to run swiftly up an incline and shot forward with sudden acceleration into a wet blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness.

It was a fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension. Then a great weight landed upon me and I seemed to sprawl in an interval of clarity beneath a pile of broken machinery, my head pressed back against a huge wheel, my body splattered with a stinking goo. Somewhere an engine ground in furious futility, grating loudly until a pain shot around the curve of my head and bounced me off into blackness for a distance, only to strike another pain that lobbed me back. And in that clear instant of consciousness I opened my eyes to a blinding flash.

Holding on grimly, I could hear the sound of someone wading, sloshing, nearby, and an old man's garrulous voice saying, "I tol' 'em these here young Nineteen-Hundred boys ain't no good for the job. They ain't got the nerves. Naw, sir, they just ain't got the nerves."

I tried to speak, to answer, but something heavy moved again, and I was understanding something fully and trying again to answer but seemed to sink to the center of a lake of heavy water and pause, transfixed and numb with the sense that I had lost irrevocably an important victory.

## Chapter eleven

I was sitting in a cold, white rigid chair and a man was looking at me out of a bright third eye that glowed from the center of his forehead. He reached out, touching my skull gingerly, and said something encouraging, as though I were a child. His fingers went away.

"Take this," he said. "It's good for you." I swallowed. Suddenly my skin itched, all over. I had on new overalls, strange white ones. The taste ran bitter through my mouth. My fingers trembled.

A thin voice with a mirror on the end of it said, "How is he?"

"I don't think it's anything serious. Merely stunned."

"Should he be sent home now?"

"No, just to be certain we'll keep him here a few days. Want to keep him under observation. Then he may leave."

Now I was lying on a cot, the bright eye still burning into mine, although the man was gone. It was quiet and I was numb. I closed my eyes only to be awakened.