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The Theban Warriors

by

Lonnie Coleman

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The night Montgomery came aboard we were in Norfolk, Virginia, about to sail for North Africa. Starboard watch had liberty. I was port, so I was sitting around third division quarters with some of the other guys chewing the fat. There were four or five of us, and I don't remember what we were talking about. Whatever it was, we forgot it when Montgomery showed up. He clattered down the ladder with his sea bag, shouting, «Where are third division bunks?» We looked around at him. He was a big, good-looking boy with his hat pushed back on his head.

I answered. «This is third division.»

He looked at me and smiled. «Thank you. Now, would you be a dear and help me with my bag? Your mother's all tired out. Such a time I had finding the ship, I thought I'd never—» I helped him get the sea bag to the deck.

«What you got in here, Mac? It's like lead.»

«You're not far wrong. I take a few things around with me to keep in trim. One mustn't let down. Such a temptation in wartime, don't you think? Is there an empty bunk?»

I pointed to the only one reluctantly, for it was above mine.

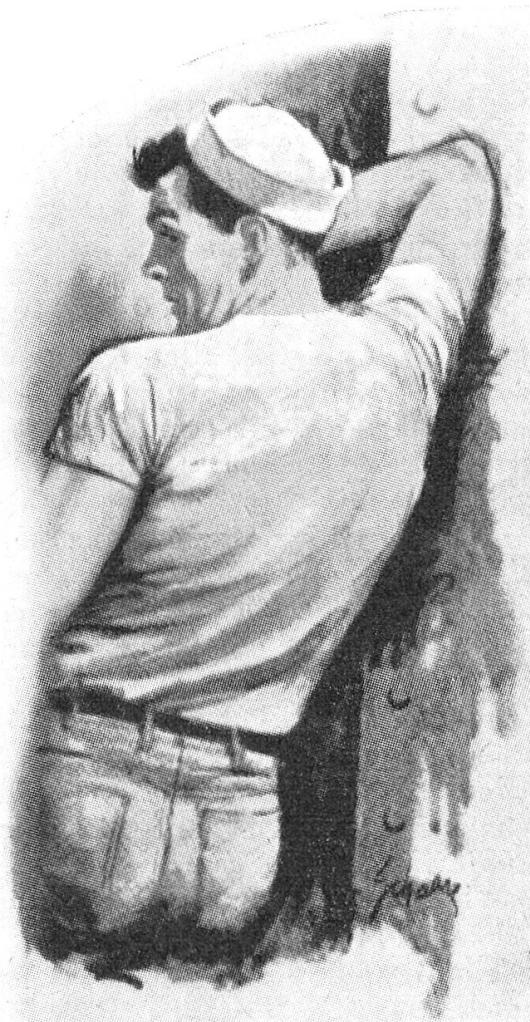
«Thank you. Will we be neighbors?»

I nodded. He looked around at the others. «Cat got your tongues? All of you in third division? We'd better get acquainted. My name is William Montgomery, and I'm a bosun second.»

«I'm Barney Casper,» I said, and we shook hands. He had a strong grip, and he didn't seem to be putting it on.

I told him the names of the others, who were still too surprised to say anything, and they shook hands all around. They looked relieved after shaking hands. Whether his grip relieved their minds or whether just touching him made them believe he was real, I don't know, but everybody relaxed some.

Montgomery smiled. «Good, now we all know one another. It's so



important to start off right. Mother says a first impression is seldom erased. Or maybe she says never. She talks such a lot, I can't always quote her precisely. Like a canary bird, chatter, chatter, chatter. I tell her it's no wonder four husbands left her, but she says never mind, it's easy to get another when you're in the theater. And didn't she ever laugh when I told her I had been assigned to the *Nellie Crocker*. She said, «Monty, my dear, don't you ever in future let me hear you say the Navy doesn't know what it's doing!» Such a wit, mother. Now I don't suppose any of you has a bit of gin in his locker?» He sailed his hat onto his bunk, sat down beside me and unfastened his pea jacket. «That's just coffee in those?» He referred to the mugs we held in our hands. «How cosy you all look sitting there with your thick hands around those thick mugs—what fun we'll have! I can see it now—sitting around in the evenings drinking joe, or do you call it java here? Telling tales of dare-and-do, chanting sea chanties. What a lot I shall have to remember in my old age. Tell me, do any of you dance?» Noting the startled looks on our faces he went on with a laugh. «I don't mean together, of course. Unless you do. If you do, speak right up and say so; I always think it's best to be frank with one another. Surprise can be so disturbing. I meant dancing like in a show. I wondered if there were any entertainment on board, if we might get up a little show now and then to amuse ourselves. I don't do anything much. I sing a bit, though I'll never be professional, mother says. I don't care in the least, for that isn't the life for little old me. I prefer something more rugged. Powder and rouge are all very well in their place, but I mean, they make you feel like such a belle, don't you agree?»

The young freckled sailor named Walters stared at Montgomery with his mouth open.

Montgomery sighed. «Sports are more my field. I love to box. Anybody box aboard? Isn't that funny, alliterative you know, *b-b-b*, to say nothing of the *d's*.»

«When we're at sea or in foreign ports,» I said, «we have boxing matches every Sunday.»

«Thank you. You seem to be the spokesman for the group. Do you yourself box?»

«No.»

«I'll teach you if you like. You ought to be good. You're big. You look like you've got the muscle. What's the matter, are you slow on your feet?»

«I can't think quick enough to know what the other fellow's going to do next.»

«Oh, it isn't a matter of thinking. Look at the professionals. Oafs. Couldn't box a hedge if it took brains, not a one of them. Let me teach you.»

«We'll see.»

Sellers had been quiet all this time, but he seemed finally to have made up his mind how things stood. He said with a fishy smile and in a mincing voice, «You can teach me how to box, Monty-dear!»

Montgomery placed his hands on his thighs and leaned forward, shaking his head. «This moment always comes when I meet new people,»

he said to me, or anyway in my direction. Then looking at Sellers: «We'd better get this straight right off. I don't like ugly little men who snicker. You are ugly and little, and you snicker. God knows, I would be loath to touch you even in punishment, but I warn you, I make the jokes about myself. I hope you understand. Now perhaps you'd like to rephrase your request?»

Sellers flushed and looked at me. I simply looked back at him, neither supporting nor deserting. He looked at the others who, one by one, decided to play it cautious.

«Good», Montgomery said after a pause. «That's all settled. Now tell me about things. What's the captain like?»

«He's a good guy,» Walters, the youngest sailor, said. «He's strict, but only about things that count. He ain't chicken.»

Montgomery looked pleased. «Charming.»

«The exec's the tough one,» Walters went on.

«So often the case,» Montgomery said. «What about the division officer? What's his name?»

«Ensign Mason,» I said.

«First name?»

«Wes. Wesley, I think.»

«Wesley Mason,» he repeated. «He sounds terribly earnest. Is he?»

«He's the best division officer on the ship,» Walters said. «All the fellows like him.»

«Is he terribly butch?» Montgomery asked, and when he was again met with blank looks, expanded: «You know, rough, rugged—oh hell, where have you been all your lives? Don't people talk where you come from? I can see I'll have to teach a language course around here, so I won't have to translate every remark I make. Now let's see what we have. A good captain, a tough executive officer—both in the grand tradition. And a division officer who is popular with his men. What a spot to be in. Now the really important question. How's the chief?»

«He makes you work,» I said.

«Good. I don't approve of slackness in a chief. How does he make you work? Does he curse, is he mean, or does he just tell you what to do and leave you to do it?»

«He tells you what to do,» I said, «and leaves you to do it, but if he comes back and finds you haven't done it, he's likely to curse a little, and he's been known to get mean.»

«You know,» he said, «you're not only nice, but you have wit and intelligence too. Are you married?»

«Look—»

«Are you?»

«No, but—»

«You've got a girl.»

«Sure.»

«The way you say it, I don't believe you. At least not an important one, I'll bet. You sound more and more intelligent.» He slid out of his bunk. «Where's the head? I want to take a shower. Is the water on?»

«Water's almost always on, and the head's aft and starboard.»

He began to undress, and we watched him silently. I'd seen a lot of guys undress in my time and never noticed them, but somehow the way Montgomery did it, he made you curious so that you had to notice. He was showing himself off like one of those women who strip in night clubs. Not that obvious maybe, but as though it were some kind of act. He was conscious of himself, never relaxed. He didn't look uncomfortable, I don't mean that. In fact, he smiled, as though at himself and us too. He was well built, with a flat belly, big muscular thighs, and a good back and good arms. The black hair started at the bottom of his neck and went down to his toenails. While he was undressing, we didn't say much. He had been talking such a streak himself that when he stopped, nobody seemed to find anything on his mind. And the way I said, we couldn't help looking at Montgomery. As he reached into his sea bag for a towel, he said with a laugh, «I don't know when I've had such a good audience. Thank you, lads. You've made me feel right at home.» He slung the towel over his shoulder and went off humming.

Contrary to what all of us expected, Montgomery got along fine. Everybody in the division heard about him right off, and within a day everybody on the ship must have known about him. He seemed to enjoy causing a stir, and didn't change his way of talking much, no matter where he was. If people froze, he just kept talking, but made out like it was a joke and that he was innocent of the impression he caused. We'd come up to muster every morning after we got to sea, with nothing facing us but a long day's work and a night with a watch in it somewhere, and there Montgomery would be with his hands on his hips. «What shall it be today, girls? Let's get out the carriage and horses, put on our red dresses and high-heeled shoes, carry our sauciest parasols, and drive right by the Methodist Church like we're good as anybody!»

The thing was, Montgomery looked too much man for anybody to take offense out loud. Some of the boys talked to one another privately, and some made fun of him behind his back, which he knew and which I don't think bothered him, but nobody came right out and said anything to his face. It got to where he was pretty well liked, or anyway, people were glad he made some kind of joke they could laugh at. I think the fact that he never tried anything made everybody believe his talk was all put on. Even the chief smiled now and then, and only once in a while, when he had something big on his mind, he'd say, «Hell, Montgomery, knock it off, so I can think.»

Montgomery never shirked when there was work to be done, and sometimes his joking made the work seem easier. When a working party was called at night, he'd slide out of his bunk without a whimper, saying one time, «La, dears, I feel like a call girl.»

Every afternoon after work he had a sun bath and some exercise. He did this in the gun tubs aft, out of sight of the midships house. We weren't supposed to be on deck with any of our clothes off when we were at sea, because of the possibility of attack. Montgomery worked out in regular boxer's trunks, and he had a set of dumbbells he varied the weights on. He invited me to work out with him several times, but I never took him up on it, although some of the others were eager enough. He never asked them though. They'd stand around looking at him,

counting off for him. He'd smile at them once in a while or maybe say something funny, but most of the time he acted like he was off by himself.

The first Sunday we were at sea, he boxed. There had been considerable speculation up to this time about whether he just happened to be built well or whether he actually had any strength behind him. Well, we found out. He took on our best boxer for three rounds, and when he got in the ring, he didn't kid. I think it was the first time any of us had seen him without a smile on his face. Kelly, the man he was fighting, was heavier than he was and had the backing of the whole ship. You could tell that from the way the men yelled and carried on. It took Montgomery about one minute to learn everything about Kelly though: where he was weak, where he was strong, how good his breath was going to be, how quick his fists and his feet were. Montgomery fought with a serious look on his face, so most of the boys watching thought he was scared. One or two of them got brave and called out, «Kill the fairy, Kelly!» By that time Kelly probably knew he wasn't going to do anything worth watching, so he tried to make himself look good. He acted like he was mad and tried a few hard punches that looked all right and raised the boys' spirits some but didn't much more than touch Montgomery. Montgomery looked solemn for the whole first round, like he didn't even hear what the boys were yelling. When he came out for the second round, he went after Kelly. He knocked him to the mat for a slow count of seven in the first thirty seconds, and the crowd got quiet. Then he let up until just before the bell ending the second round, when he knocked him to the mat again. Kelly stayed there even after the bell rang. In the third and last round Kelly was too groggy to care what he was doing, knowing that Montgomery could have taken him any time he wanted to. The crowd didn't know anything about boxing, but they could have learned from watching Montgomery. It was as pretty a demonstration match as you'd want to see. He didn't hurt Kelly. He just made him look like a damn fool.

That stupid crowd, when they finally saw what was happening, started yelling for Kelly's hide, like they'd been rooting for Montgomery all along. Montgomery didn't pay any attention to them at all until the bout was over. Then, when the referee held up one of his hands, he cupped his crotch with the other hand and smiled at them like he knew they were crude.

After the match a lot of the guys crowded around him and followed him down to the compartment where he started to undress to take a shower. They yelled the usual things and slapped him on the back, those who could get close enough to touch him. People always want to touch athletes after they've won, as if doing so gives them luck or lets them share in the victory. But Montgomery just went about his business. I'm a boxing fan, and I was excited about how good he was, so I stuck around when the others drifted away. He looked at me as he towed himself down. «What do you say, Barney, was I all right?»

«You were four-o,» I said, meaning perfect.

He wrinkled his face. «I was showing off. I shouldn't have. Now nobody will want to box me, and I won't have any fun.»

«You'll have fun all right, »I said, remembering how he had looked and how cool he had kept in the ring. «All the guys would like to work out with you; you can get a sparring mate any time you want to. That is, if you promise not to hurt them.»

He blinked. «That isn't the question. The little dirty-drawers idiots can always be had for the nudging. I'm more particular.» He smiled again. «I'm saving myself. I always get what I want, too.»

«Good. Swell,» I said uncertainly, thinking for the first time he might be talking about something else.

He looked at me steadily, draping the towel over his shoulders. «You know what I mean. Don't play dumb.»

«I don't get you,» I said honestly.

«I'm dead serious. I may joke, because unless I do it's all too tedious—».

«I don't know what you mean,» I said, beginning to understand.

He saw my understanding. «I mean I've got my eye on you, and I'll get you sooner or later.»

«Sure,» I said trying to make a joke of it. «You'll get me. Right flat on my ass on the mat, like you did Kelly today.» Suddenly we were both blushing.

«Tell me about yourself, Barney. Where did you come from?»

«My old man's a cop in Baltimore. I worked on a Coca-Cola truck a couple of years after I finished high school. Then the call to the colors.»

He shrugged. «It doesn't explain anything, does it? It seldom does. You know the score in all kinds of ways, but nothing in your background points to why. You could have got every bit of education you have from a cereal-box top.»

«Now wait a minute,» I laughed, glad to be on a safe topic. «I studied civics and hygiene and American history. I learned to scan *Lady of the Lake* and memorized speeches from *Julius Caesar* just like everybody else.»

«That isn't how you got your charm.»

«You know,» I said finally, «I've busted guys for saying less than you've said to me.»

«Why don't you try busting me?»

«You're bigger than I am,» I laughed.

«That isn't the reason.» I started to go. He put his hand on my arm, not holding me, but making me pause. «I have to laugh when I hear you straight guys talk about beating up fairies. You'd be surprised how few get beat up. It's usually the plain janes no self-respecting faggot would look at twice who're always talking about what they'd do if anybody tried to lay a hand on them. Let's face it, Barney, the world of straight men is a fraud. They can all be had if anybody wants them enough to work things the right way. And waits his chance. Like I'm waiting my chance with you.»

I shook his hand away. «Don't wait too long, Monty.»

He laughed. «You see, you like me. You're calling me Monty already.»

«I'm calling you Monty because in spite of pretending to be queer as a three-dollar bill, you're a nice guy basically.»

«You don't know how nice I can be.»

«Oh, hell, you're impossible.»

«I'm the most possible thing you ever met up with.»

«Look, Montgomery, don't make me mad. It's all right to kid the others but—».

«I kid them because they bore me, and because it's an easy way to insult them.»

«So kid me too if you like, the way you've just been doing. But if I thought for a minute—».

He wasn't smiling at all. «There's no hurry. I can wait. When I get you, it's going to be for good, and nobody's going to pretend afterwards that nothing happened. When it happens, we'll both want it to happen. Understand?»

«Why me?»

«The ones I've liked come in all shapes and sizes, blond and brunette and redhead, skinny and strong. But there's one thing they have in common that makes them stand out from everybody else around. They're men, not babies.»

«Thanks,» I said as sarcastically as I could manage. «What a crazy bastard you are, Montgomery!»

He scratched his thigh absently and smiled. I was suddenly aware of his nakedness, even though he had taken off his boxing trunks a long time ago and had used the towel for nothing more than to dry himself. «When you want to hear some more of my crazy talk, let me know!»

My embarrassment made me lose my temper again. «Any time you say, Monty old boy, because I want you to know one thing—I'm not afraid of you!»

«Tonight at ten-thirty by the incinerator on the fantail,» he said quickly.

I walked away calling over my shoulder «Go take a cold shower.»

The trouble was, I couldn't forget the things he said. The more I thought about them, the madder I got, and I wondered why I hadn't told him to go to hell. One reason, I guess he was impossible to tell to go to hell. He could talk as well as he could box. When somebody's doing something you don't like, you can beat hell out of them, outtalk them, or walk away. I stood no chance of beating Montgomery. I couldn't outtalk him. And I hadn't walked away. I thought of things I should have said. I realized I should have told him all about my girl back in Baltimore. She's a pretty thing, and smart too. Sometimes I think she's smarter than I am, though no better educated. We both finished high school and went to work right afterwards. She doesn't let anyone outsmart her, whether in talk or deeds. Next time he got going, I'd tell him about Doris. Just thinking about her made me feel better. We were going to get married in a year or two, as soon as we'd saved something and it began to look like I might live through the war. Or maybe the war would be over.

Since it was Sunday, I didn't have much to do until midnight. Then I was to have the bosun watch on the bridge. I kept away from Monty. I was careful not to eat at the same table with him or sit near him later when they showed the movie. The movie was over before ten o'clock,

and I went back to the compartment to write a letter to Doris. I got out her last one, the one I'd had just before we left Norfolk, and read it over. It was all about this girl friend of hers that worked in the blanket department of the same big store, Price and Sons, that Doris worked in. Doris was in kitchenware. This girl was getting married to a marine, and the other girls had given her a big shower. Doris wrote about the shower and all the presents, and what they'd served. She said she'd almost got tipsy. I had to smile reading that again, because Doris never drank more than a couple of beers, or one drink of regular liquor, or a little wine maybe over an entire evening, so I knew she was kidding.

Reading her letter made me feel good, but all of a sudden Montgomery was on my mind. I thought: I'll show the bastard I'm not nervous about him. I looked around the compartment. He wasn't there. «What time is it?» I asked Sellers, who was sitting on an upturned bucket on the deck writing a letter to somebody.

«Nearly ten-thirty. You got the midwatch?»

«Yes.» I dropped my writing board, swung out of my bunk, and went topside.

Sure enough, he was leaning on the rail by the incinerator. I felt damn good about coming out to meet him, because I felt stronger than him, and in my mind I was daring him to say anything wise. He didn't seem surprised at seeing me at all, not surprised nor glad nor sorry.

He said, «Hello, Barney.»

I didn't know what to say. I mumbled something about its being hot below deck.

He said, «Well, we're getting a little farther south every hour.»

«Yeah.»

I leaned on the rail alongside him. I kept expecting him to say something so I'd know what he was thinking, but damned if he didn't just look down at the water and the foam made by the propellers and not say a word for a long time.

I was about to make a crack like, «Well, here I am, you smart bastard, what are you going to do about it? You see I'm not scared of seeing you by yourself,» when he said, «It's such a nice night. I almost wish I had a watch.»

«Oh yeah?» Somehow that made me mad. «Well, I got one at midnight and if you're so keen to stay up and watch the stars and the sea floating by, you can take mine,» I said. «If you want to. Don't let me deprive you of any pleasures.»

His head jerked around. «What's the matter, Barney?»

«Nothing's the matter,» I said. «I just said if you want to stay up the whole god damn night, then you might as well take my watch and do so, that's all I said.»

«You want me to take your watch?» he asked slowly.

«No! I didn't say that. I just said that if—».

«I'll take your watch if you're tired, and you can take one of mine some time. I don't mind.»

I don't know why, but I got more excited. «I'm not asking you to do a god damn thing for me, not a god damn thing. If I had—oh hell,

you're all tired out from your big boxing match. You're lucky not to have a watch.»

«Barney, something's the matter,» he said, innocent as you please. «Have I done anything wrong? Has anybody else done something or said something to hurt you?»

«I never asked you any favors, did I?» I shouted. «Did I?» He shook his head. «If anybody asked you did I ask you any favors, you'd say no, wouldn't you, isn't that right?»

«Barney, what the hell—».

I backed away from him. «Just keep away from me. Keep away from me, understand?»

I went below and crawled into my bunk to try to rest until time to go on watch. I didn't feel like writing a letter to Doris, but I thought about her. Usually when I thought about her I remembered the times we talked or danced, or the plans we had, the way her face looked, and her hair and eyes. Sometimes about kissing her, but we'd never gone much further than that. Now I thought of her naked, and I was shocked at myself and excited. I thought of her breasts, but I didn't know what they looked like, so I just thought about breasts. Doris used to let me feel them, but only in the dark, and I'd never seen them. Now I tried to think what they would look like, and what her body would look like. It was very important to know. I was horny for her for the first time since I'd known her.

It seemed no time at all before somebody touched my shoulder and said, «It's time to go on watch, Barney.» It was Montgomery, and he was looking at me seriously. «You feel all right?»

I swung out of the bunk. «You got the messenger watch, haven't you, Walters?» I said. He nodded. «Come on, let's get up there.»

All during watch I felt horny as a bull, and I made up my mind that first liberty in Algiers I was heading straight for the Sphinx Club. When the watch was over and I crawled in my bunk to go to sleep, Montgomery's arm had slipped over the side of his bunk while he was sleeping.

Next day after I'd had noon chow I was in the gun tub aft taking a sun bath. I kept my dungarees on but had my shirt off and was lying on deck face down when I heard somebody flop down beside me. I didn't turn my head or open my eyes, but I knew it was Montgomery, and I was glad. «That you, Montgomery?» I said, calm and easy.

He seemed to be himself again. «You're getting a nice tan on your upper body,» he said, «but you ought to get it all over. You never know who'll see you all over.»

«Yes, I do,» I answered, still easy and calm.

His «Who?» was surprised and expectant, I thought.

«Rina,» I said.

«Rina? Such a name, like a burlesque queen.»

«Rina's a well-stacked piece in the Sphinx Club in Algiers, and that's where I'm heading the first liberty I get.»

«All right, I'll go with you.»

My eyes snapped open, and I raised up to look at him. He was the one who was calm and easy now, lying on his back with sun glasses on and his

boxing trunks pulled tight to his body. «You don't understand, Monty old fellow,» I said. «This isn't your kind of thing at all. This Sphinx Club is a house where they keep a lot of little pussy cats.»

«I know what it is,» he said, «and I'm coming with you.»

«I don't want you to.»

«Afraid?»

«Come on, I don't give a damn. I just don't see why.»

«I like to keep posted on what the competition has to offer,» he said. «But that isn't the real reason I'm coming. I want to be there when you change your mind. I know those cold little bitches with their ooh-lallas and pretense of passion. They couldn't fool a gorilla. If you think that's going to satisfy you, you've got something to learn. I want to be there when you learn, Barney.»

«I know what it's like, and it's damn good, don't try to tell me! They make me feel like a man, not like a—.»

«What, Barney?» he said, and I could feel him looking at me through the dark glasses. The sun had reddened the tips of dark hair on his chest.

* * *

We were in different watches, but Montgomery fixed things so we left the ship together on the first liberty when we hit Algiers. It was hot as hell, and we didn't talk much as we headed for the Casbah. I saw some leather pocket-books and thought about getting one for Doris, then decided I couldn't take it with me where I was going. There was a bar with tables on the sidewalk facing the park just where the Casbah begins, and we stopped for a couple of vermouths. «You're really going through with it,» I said.

«Varieties of religious experience.» He finished off his wine. «Let's go.»

We knocked at the door at the end of the little alley and were let in by a quiet, hard-faced old woman. Montgomery smiled. «Enchanting. The perfect porter for the house of sin.» He pushed his cap back on his head. The old woman led us through the entrance room with its copy of the Sphinx that gave the place its name. It had the face of a young girl and big, tinted breasts. The next room had a lot of chairs and sofas in it. There were a couple of sailors sitting there with girls on their laps. They looked around at us. The girls smiled, and one of them called something over her shoulder in French. This was the part of coming to the place I hated, the preliminaries. I looked at Montgomery, who was taking in the room with a smile on his face that wasn't exactly a smile, though he seemed relaxed enough.

«It's a lovely place,» he said. «Puts you right in the mood for love, even if you weren't already, don't you agree? That darling sofa, a bit worn and not too clean, but who cares? Those nice muddy-rose walls, how divinely appropriate, the telling feminine touch. And over all the aura, the essence, the very smell of sin. They'd better bring out the girls before I attack you.»

A door opened behind us and two girls entered. One was blonde, and the other was brunette. They wore short dresses with nothing underneath, and they had on a lot of rouge and lipstick and eye make-up.

The blonde was Rina, and she remembered me. She came over with her arms open and a big smile on her face that made her look older. «*Chéri*, you have come back!»

«Hello Rina,» I said. «Yes, I'm back, and I brought a friend along this time.» I hugged her and avoided her lips. She smelled a little like the disinfectant in a men's room.

Rina drew away from me to look at Montgomery. «He is very nice, your friend. Handsome», she said mockingly. «My lucky friend!» She pulled the brunette forward. «Marjane,» she introduced.

Montgomery stepped toward her, smiling. «William. Willy.»

«Willi!» the brunette squealed. She patted his chest. «Nice! Handsome! Rich! The Virgin smiles on me today!»

«There's nothing like being smiled on by a virgin,» Montgomery laughed, putting his arms around Marjane, pulling her to him hard and kissing her full on the lips.

Rina looked at me swiftly and laughed. «He is—hot!» She nodded her head rapidly, raising her black penciled eyebrows. I sat on the sofa and pulled her down on my lap. She squealed as I unbuttoned the top of her dress. Montgomery had raised Marjane's dress until it was gathered about her waist, leaving her naked from there down. He had his hands on her behind, and she was giggling and slapping his hands.

Rina said, «Don't look at them, look at me, *chéri*! I excite you, *chéri*!»

The two girls had adjoining rooms upstairs, and we all rode together on the small slow elevator with the wrinkled old woman who had let us in. When the elevator stopped, the girls went ahead of us while we paid the old woman, who explained what I already knew, that we were to pay the girls the same we paid her, or more if we desired.

«Willi!» Marjane called.

«Barney!» Rina called.

«Isn't it all too thrilling?» Montgomery said to me as we went toward them. «The real thing, no counterfeit here.»

Marjane grabbed Montgomery by the hand, bit his thumb, and pulled him into her room. I followed Rina.

After a while she drew away from me. «First time today for me,» she bragged. «What is wrong, you don't want love?»

«Love?» I said.

«Love, this is love!» she exclaimed. «I am love, *chéri*!» She smiled patiently. «Tell Rina what is wrong.»

«Nothing's wrong.»

«You listen to them all the time you lie with me. They laugh. Come! We have good time like Willi—». She took my head in her hands to kiss me. I was about to kiss her when I heard Montgomery laugh again. I drew away. Rina shrugged and relaxed on the bed. I got up, found a cigarette in my jumper and lit it. In the next room I could hear Marjane grunting like a hog. Rina looked at the wall and began to laugh.

«Shut up,» I said.

«Give me a cigarette.»

I threw the pack on the bed beside her. She fished one out and put

it between her lips. She was staring at me as I held the match for her. «*Chéri*, you love this Willi?»

I went cold all over. I put out my cigarette on the floor, took hers out of her mouth and put it out too. Then I jumped at her.

* * *

I waited for Montgomery on the sidewalk in front of the house. When he came out, he didn't smile, he didn't frown. He just looked at me like he knew everything there was to know about me. He lit a cigarette, cupping his hand around the match out of habit, although there was no wind in the alley. When he blew the match out, he watched it until it stopped smoking before he dropped it. He said, «Where would you like to go, *chéri*?»

I turned away and walked quickly down the alley. He came after me whistling, caught up and walked in step with me, not saying anything. I wouldn't look at him. I walked across the street into the park and down one of the paths. When I sat down on a bench, he sat down beside me. He was still whistling. Finally I looked at him. His face was relaxed. I studied his face and then his neck, and then I let my eyes follow all the way down his body. I knew just what he looked like under the white jumper and white pants, I remember thinking that. I said, «You certainly stayed with her a long time!» He turned and looked at me. He looked at my face the way I had looked at his, and then his eyes followed down my body. «Why don't you say something? What are you thinking?»

«I am thinking,» he said slowly, «what an ugly thing a woman's body is, and what a beautiful thing a man's is.»

«That's funny,» I said. «That certainly is funny, considering the way you were going on with that French whore.»

«I was being kind,» he said. «She knows she's ugly, and I thought it would be nice to make her feel for a little while that she wasn't.»

«Big-hearted Monty.»

He shrugged.

«How many times were you kind to her?»

«Just once,» he said softly.

«I guess you talked to her afterwards.»

«A little.»

I lit a cigarette very carefully because my hands were shaking. When it was going I said, «Did you talk to Rina too?»

«She knocked on the door when she heard us talking, and Marjane let her in. It's a friendly, informal place.»

«What did she say about me?» I demanded.

After a slight hesitation he said evenly, «She and Marjane made fun of you. She told Marjane that you had been listening to us and that you couldn't do anything until you got mad. She said she thought you were queer for me.»

«She's a god damn—».»

«I told them, although I don't know why it should matter to you what they think, I told them you were straight as dye. I told them it was I who wanted you.»

My laugh sounded ugly. «What did they say to that?»

«They didn't believe me.»

«I guess the three of you had a good laugh about it. Did you kiss Rina too?»

«Oh hell, Barney.»

«Well, did you?»

He didn't say anything for a long time, and when he did, it wasn't an answer to my question. «Are you ready, Barney?»

«Ready?»

«I think you are. I have to know, though. I have to be certain. Don't you understand yet what I was doing? I was showing you how empty that is, showing you it isn't what you want. I know what's in you, and I know it isn't going to be satisfied with a whore shrieking ooh-la-la. You want somebody to touch you with love. If things had happened differently, it might have been your Doris. But they didn't happen that way. She's there, I'm here, and I'm going to have you. When the war's over, you can go back to her if you want to. But I don't think you'll want to. Why didn't she let you make love to her when you were with her? Don't you know that most women hate men and use their sex to insult them and dominate them? I'm offering you something better than that, you damned fool. I'm offering you myself, and I'm promising you that I'll take you and hold you and keep you as long as—such promises last. I love you, Barney.»

It was that that made me cry. My mouth was open, and I was biting my knuckles, and I couldn't see for the tears.

«Barney, this is what we're going to do. I found out about a place a few blocks from here. It's a sort of hotel where we can rent a room for a few hours, and they don't ask any questions about why two sailors want to rent it. We can take a bath, get clean again, and then we can be together until it's time to go back to the ship. Wouldn't you like that?»

It was a long time before I could answer. «I guess I'd like a bath.»

He stood up.

«Are you sure this place is safe?» I said.

«Come on.»

(This is a selection from the book «Ship's Company», published originally by Little, Brown and Company, Boston/Mass 1955 and reprinted by Dell Publishing Company, New York.)