

I went into the crowd, walking slowly, smoothly into the dark crowd, the whole surface of my skin alert, my back chilled, looking, listening to those moving with a heaving and sweating and a burr of talk around me and aware that now that I wanted to see them, needed to see them, I could not; feeling them, a dark mass in motion on a dark night, a black river ripping through a black land; and Ras or Tarp could move beside me and I wouldn't know. I was one with the mass, moving down the littered street over the puddles of oil and milk, my personality blasted. Then I was in the next block, dodging in and out, hearing them somewhere in the crowd behind me; moving on through the sound of sirens and burglar alarms to be swept into a swifter crowd and pushed along, half-running, half-walking, trying to see behind me and wondering where the others had gone. There was shooting back there now, and on either side of me they were throwing garbage cans, bricks and pieces of metal into plate-glass windows. I moved, feeling as though a huge force was on the point of bursting. Shouldering my way to the side I stood in a doorway and watched them move, feeling a certain vindication as now I thought of the message that had brought me here. Who had called, one of the district members or someone from Jack's birthday celebration? Who wanted me at the district after it was too late? Very well, I'd go there now. I'd see what the master minds thought now. Where were they anyway, and what profound conclusions were they drawing? What *ex post facto* lessons of history? And that crash over the telephone, had that been the beginning, or had Jack simply dropped his eye? I laughed drunkenly, the eruption painning my head.

Suddenly the shooting ceased and in the silence there was the sound of voices, footfalls, labor.

"Hey, buddy," somebody said beside me, "where you going?" It was Scofield.

"It's either run or get knocked down," I said. "I thought you were still back there."

"I cut out, man. A building two doors away started to burn and they had to git the fire department . . . Damn! wasn't for this noise I'd swear those bullets was mosquitoes."

"Watch out!" I warned, pulling him away from where a man lay propped against a post, tightening a tourniquet around his gashed arm.

Scofield flashed his light and for a second I saw the black man, his face gray with shock, watching the jetting pulsing of his blood spurting into the street. Then, compelled, I reached down and twisted the tourniquet, feeling the blood warm upon my hand, seeing the pulsing cease.

"You done stopped it," a young man said, looking down.

"Here," I said, "you take it, hold it tight. Get him to a doctor."

"Ain't you a doctor?"

"Me?" I said. "Me? Are you crazy? If you want him to live, get him away from here."

"Albert done gone for one," the boy said. "But I thought you was one. You—"

"No," I said, looking at my bloody hands, "no, not me. You hold it tight until the doctor comes. I couldn't cure a headache."

I stood wiping my hands against the brief case, looking down at the big man, his back resting against the post with his eyes closed, the boy holding desperately to the tourniquet made of what had been a bright new tie.

"Come on," I said.

"Say," Scofield said when we were past, "wasn't that you that woman was calling *brother* back yonder?"

"Brother? No, it must have been some other guy."

"You know, man, I think I seen you before somewhere."

You ever was in Memphis . . . ? Say, look what's coming," he said, pointing, and I looked through the dark to see a squad of white-helmeted policemen charge forward and break for shelter as a rain of bricks showered down from the building tops. Some of the white helmets, racing for the doorways, turned to fire, and I heard Scofield grunt and go down and I dropped beside him, seeing the red burst of fire and hearing the shrill scream, like an arching dive, curving from above to end in a crunching thud in the street. It was as though it landed in my stomach, sickening me, and I crouched, looking down past Scofield, who lay just ahead of me, to see the dark crushed form from the roof; and farther away, the body of a cop, his helmet making a small white luminous mound in the dark.

I moved now to see whether Scofield was hit, just as he squirmed around and cursed at the cops who were trying to rescue the one who was down, his voice furious, as he stretched full length firing away with a nickel-plated pistol like that Dupre had waved.

"Git the hell down, man," he yelled over his shoulder. "I been wanting to blast 'em a long time."

"No, not with that thing," I said. "Let's get out of here."

"Hell, man, I can *shoot* this thing," he said.

I rolled behind a pile of baskets filled with rotting chickens now, and to my left, upon the littered curb, a woman and man crouched behind an upturned delivery cart.

"Dehart," she said, "let's get up on the hill, Dehart. Up with the respectable people!"

"Hill, hell! We stay right here," the man said. "This thing's just starting. If it become a sho 'nough race riot I want to be here where there'll be some fighting back."

The words struck like bullets fired close range, blasting my satisfaction to earth. It was as though the uttered word had given meaning to the night, almost as though it had cre-

ated it, brought it into being in the instant his breath vibrated small against the loud, riotous air. And in defining, in giving organization to the fury, it seemed to spin me around, and in my mind I was looking backward over the days since Clifton's death . . . Could this be the answer, could this be what the committee had planned, the answer to why they'd surrendered our influence to Ras? Suddenly I heard the hoarse explosion of a shotgun, and looked past Scofield's glinting pistol to the huddled form from the roof. It was suicide, without guns it was suicide, and not even the pawnshops here had guns for sale; and yet I knew with a shattering dread that the uproar which for the moment marked primarily the crash of men against things—against stores, markets—could swiftly become the crash of men against men and with most of the guns and numbers on the other side. I could see it now, see it clearly and in growing magnitude. It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free. By pretending to agree I *had* indeed agreed, had made myself responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the street, and all the others whom now the night was making ripe for death.

The brief case swung heavy against my leg as I ran, going away, leaving Scofield cursing his lack of bullets behind me, running wildly and swinging the brief case hard against the head of a dog that leaped at me out of the crowd, sending him yelping away. To my right lay a quiet residential street with trees, and I entered it, going toward Seventh Avenue, toward the district, filled now with horror and hatred. They'll pay, they'll pay, I thought. They'll pay!

The street lay dead quiet in the light of the lately risen moon, the gunfire thin and for a moment, distant. The rioting seemed in another world. For a moment I paused beneath a

low, thickly leaved tree, looking down the well-kept doily-shadowed walks past the silent houses. It was as though the tenants had vanished, leaving the houses silent with all windows shaded, refugees from a rising flood. Then I heard the single footfalls coming doggedly toward me in the night, an eerie slapping sound followed by a precise and hallucinated cry—

*“Time’s flying
Souls dying
The coming of the Lord
Draweth niiiigh!”*

—as though he had run for days, for years. He trotted past where I stood beneath the tree, his bare feet slapping the walk in silence, going for a few feet and then the high, hallucinated cry beginning again.

I ran into the avenue where in the light of a flaming liquor store I saw three old women scurrying toward me with raised skirts loaded with canned goods.

“I can’t stop it just yet, but have mercy, Lord,” one of them said. “Do, Jesus, do, sweet Jesus . . .”

I moved ahead, the fumes of alcohol and burning tar in my nostrils. Down the avenue to my left a single street lamp still glowed where the long block was intersected on my right by a street, and I could see a crowd rushing a store that faced the intersection, moving in, and a fusillade of canned goods, salami, liverwurst, hogs heads and chitterlings belching out to those outside and a bag of flour bursting white upon them; as now out of the dark of the intersecting street two mounted policemen came at a gallop, heaving huge and heavy-hooved, charging straight into the swarming mass. And I could see the great forward lunge of the horses and the crowd breaking and

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rolling back like a wave, back, and screaming and cursing, and some laughing—back and around and out into the avenue, stumbling and pushing, as the horses, heads high and bits froth-flecked, went over the curb to land stiff-legged and slide over the cleared walk as upon ice skates and past, carried by the force of the charge, sideways now, legs stiff, sparks flying, to where another crowd looted another store. And my heart tightened as the first crowd swung imperturbably back to their looting with derisive cries, like sandpipers swinging around to glean the shore after a furious wave's recession.

Cursing Jack and the Brotherhood I moved around a steel grill torn from the front of a pawnshop, seeing the troopers galloping back and the riders lifting the horses to charge again, grim and skillful in white steel helmets, and the charge beginning. This time a man went down and I saw a woman swinging a gleaming frying pan hard against the horse's rump and the horse neighing and beginning to plunge. They'll pay, I thought, they'll pay. They came toward me as I ran, a crowd of men and women carrying cases of beer, cheese, chains of linked sausage, watermelons, sacks of sugar, hams, cornmeal, fuel lamps. If only it could stop right here, here; here before the others came with their guns. I ran.

There was no firing now. But *when*, I thought, how long before it starts?

"Git a side of bacon, Joe," a woman called. "Git a side of bacon, Joe, git Wilson's."

"Lord, Lord, Lord," a dark voice called from the dark.

I went on, plunged in a sense of painful isolation as I reached 125th Street and started east. A squad of mounted police galloped past. Men with sub-machine guns were guarding a bank and a large jewelry store. I moved out to the center of the street, running down the trolley rails.

The moon was high now and before me the shattered

glass glittered in the street like the water of a flooded river upon the surface of which I ran as in a dream, avoiding by fate alone the distorted objects washed away by the flood. Then suddenly I seemed to sink, sucked under: Ahead of me the body hung, white, naked, and horribly feminine from a lamp-post. I felt myself spin around with horror and it was as though I had turned some nightmarish somersault. I whirled, still moving by reflex, back-tracking and stopped and now there was another and another, seven—all hanging before a gutted storefront. I stumbled, hearing the cracking of bones underfoot and saw a physician's skeleton shattered on the street, the skull rolling away from the backbone, as I steadied long enough to notice the unnatural stiffness of those hanging above me. They were mannequins—"Dummies!" I said aloud. Hairless, bald and sterilely feminine. And I recalled the boys in the blonde wigs, expecting the relief of laughter, but suddenly was more devastated by the humor than by the horror. But are they unreal, I thought; *are* they? What if one, even *one* is real—is . . . Sybil? I hugged my brief case, backing away, and ran . . .

THEY moved in a tight-knit order, carrying sticks and clubs, shotguns and rifles, led by Ras the Exhorter become Ras the Destroyer upon a great black horse. A new Ras of a haughty, vulgar dignity, dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders. A figure more out of a dream than out of Harlem, than out of even this Harlem night, yet real, alive, alarming.

"Come away from that stupid looting," he called to a group before a store. "Come jine with us to burst in the armory and get guns and ammunition!"

And hearing his voice I opened my brief case and searched

for my dark glasses, my Rineharts, drawing them out only to see the crushed lenses fall to the street. Rinehart, I thought, Rinehart! I turned. The police were back there behind me; if shooting started I'd be caught in the crossfire. I felt in my brief case, feeling papers, shattered iron, coins, my fingers closing over Tarp's leg chain, and I slipped it over my knuckles, trying to think, I closed the flap, locking it. A new mood was settling over me as they came on, a larger crowd than Ras had ever drawn. I went calmly forward, holding the heavy case but moving with a certain new sense of self, and with it a feeling almost of relief, almost of a sigh. I knew suddenly what I had to do, knew it even before it shaped itself completely in my mind.

Someone called, "Look!" and Ras bent down from the horse, saw me and flung, of all things, a spear, and I fell forward at the movement of his arm, catching myself upon my hands as a tumbler would, and heard the shock of it piercing one of the hanging dummies. I stood, my brief case coming with me.

"Betrayer!" Ras shouted.

"It's the brother," someone said. They moved up around the horse excited and not quite decided, and I faced him, knowing I was no worse than he, nor any better, and that all the months of illusion and the night of chaos required but a few simple words, a mild, even a meek, muted action to clear the air. To awaken them and me.

"I am no longer their brother," I shouted. "They want a race riot and I am against it. The more of us who are killed, the better they like—"

"Ignore his lying tongue," Ras shouted. "Hang him up to teach the black people a lesson, and theer be no more traitors. No more Uncle Toms. Hang him up theer with them blahsted dummies!"

"But anyone can see it," I shouted. "It's true, I was

betrayed by those who I thought were our friends—but they counted on this man, too. They needed this *destroyer* to do their work. They deserted you so that in your despair you'd follow this man to your destruction. Can't you see it? They want you guilty of your own murder, your own sacrifice!"

"Grab him!" Ras shouted.

Three men stepped forward and I reached up without thinking, actually a desperate oratorical gesture of disagreement and defiance, as I shouted, "No!" But my hand struck the spear and I wrenched it free, gripping it midshaft, point forward. "They want this to happen," I said. "They planned it. They want the mobs to come uptown with machine guns and rifles. They want the streets to flow with blood; your blood, black blood and white blood, so that they can turn your death and sorrow and defeat into propaganda. It's simple, you've known it a long time. It goes, 'Use a nigger to catch a nigger.' Well, they used me to catch you and now they're using Ras to do away with me and to prepare your sacrifice. Don't you see it? Isn't it clear . . . ?"

"Hang the lying traitor," Ras shouted. "What are you waiting for?"

I saw a group of men start forward.

"Wait," I said. "Then kill me for myself, for my own mistake, then leave it there. Don't kill me for those who are downtown laughing at the trick they played—"

But even as I spoke I knew it was no good. I had no words and no eloquence, and when Ras thundered, "Hang him!" I stood there facing them, and it seemed unreal. I faced them knowing that the madman in a foreign costume was real and yet unreal, knowing that he wanted my life, that he held me responsible for all the nights and days and all the suffering and for all that which I was incapable of controlling, and I no hero, but short and dark with only a certain eloquence and a

bottomless capacity for being a fool to mark me from the rest; saw them, recognized them at last as those whom I had failed and of whom I was now, just now, a leader, though leading them, running ahead of them, only in the stripping away of my illusionment.

I looked at Ras on his horse and at their handful of guns and recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine. I stood there, knowing that by dying, that by being hanged by Ras on this street in this destructive night, I would perhaps move them one fraction of a bloody step closer to a definition of who they were and of what I was and had been. But the definition would have been too narrow; I was invisible, and hanging would not bring me to visibility, even to their eyes, since they wanted my death not for myself alone but for the chase I'd been on all my life; because of the way I'd run, been run, chased, operated, purged—although to a great extent I could have done nothing else, given their blindness (didn't they tolerate both Rinehart and Bledsoe?) and my invisibility. And that I, a little black man with an assumed name should die because a big black man in his hatred and confusion over the nature of a reality that seemed controlled solely by white men whom I knew to be as blind as he, was just too much, too outrageously absurd. And I knew that it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's.

So when Ras yelled, "Hang him!" I let fly the spear and it was as though for a moment I had surrendered my life and

begun to live again, watching it catch him as he turned his head to shout, ripping through both cheeks, and saw the surprised pause of the crowd as Ras wrestled with the spear that locked his jaws. Some of the men raised their guns, but they were too close to shoot and I hit the first with Tarp's leg chain and the other in the middle with my brief case, then ran through a looted store, hearing the blanging of the burglar alarm as I scrambled over scattered shoes, upturned showcases, chairs—back to where I saw the moonlight through the rear door ahead. They came behind me like a draft of flames and I led them through and around to the avenue, and if they'd fired they could have had me, but it was important to them that they hang me, lynch me even, since that was the way they ran, had been taught to run. I should die by hanging alone, as though only hanging would settle things, even the score. So I ran expecting death between the shoulder blades or through the back of my head, and as I ran I was trying to get to Mary's. It was not a decision of thought but something I realized suddenly while running over puddles of milk in the black street, stopping to swing the heavy brief case and the leg chain, slipping and sliding out of their hands.

If only I could turn around and drop my arms and say, "Look, men, give me a break, we're all black folks together . . . Nobody cares." Though now I knew *we* cared, they at last cared enough to act—so I thought. If only I could say, "Look, they've played a trick on us, the same old trick with new variations—let's stop running and respect and love one another . . ." If only—I thought, running into another crowd now and thinking I'd gotten away, only to catch a punch on my jaw as one closed in shouting, and feeling the leg chain bounce as I caught his head and spurted forward, turning out of the avenue only to be struck by a spray of water that seemed to descend from above. It was a main that had burst, throwing a fierce curtain of spray into the night. I was going for Mary's

but I was moving downtown through the dripping street rather than up, and, as I started through, a mounted policeman charged through the spray, the horse black and dripping, charging through and looming huge and unreal, neighing and clapping across the pavement upon me now as I slipped to my knees and saw the huge pulsing bulk floating down upon and over me, the sound of hooves and screams and a rush of water coming through distantly as though I sat remote in a padded room, then over, almost past, the hair of the tail a fiery lash across my eyes. I stumbled about in circles, blindly swinging the brief case, the image of a fiery comet's tail burning my smarting lids; turning and swinging blindly with brief case and leg chain and hearing the gallop begin as I floundered helplessly; and now moving straight into the full, naked force of the water, feeling its power like a blow, wet and thudding and cold, then through it and able partly to see just as another horse dashed up and through, a hunter taking a barrier, the rider slanting backward, the horse rising, then hit and swallowed by the rising spray. I stumbled down the street, the comet tail in my eyes, seeing a little better now and looking back to see the water spraying like a mad geyser in the moonlight. To Mary, I thought, to Mary.

THERE were rows of iron fences backed by low hedges before the houses and I stumbled behind one and lay panting to rest from the crushing force of the water. But hardly had I settled down, the dry, dog-day smell of the hedge in my nose, when they stopped before the house, leaning upon the fence. They were passing a bottle around and their voices sounded spent of strong emotion.

"This is some night," one of them said. "Ain't this some night?"

"It's 'bout like the rest."