

Intrusion and Reaction

By Frank Slupesky

George bent his broad back and leaned against the rail. He surveyed the ocean passing a few yards beneath. Funny how the ship passing through the blue water, churned it into a white foam. Then, how the foam reverted to its original shade—but not abruptly; first it was emerald, then green, then turquoise, then blue again. It occurred to George that he was witnessing a cycle which, though brief, was perhaps beautiful.

George's thoughts were interrupted by the approach of two of his shipmates—Slim, the bo'sun, and Whitie, the cook. They were muttering the usual inanities with the usual blatancy. As they passed behind him, their tone abruptly decreased to a confidential whisper. George kept his eyes on the water, but he tried to discern the whispers. He could not make out what Whitie said, but Slim agreed and added audibly: "That Damn nigger's always loafin'. I don't care what the union says, I ain't gonna sign on another ship with one of 'em."

George glanced down at his dark brown arms and saw his muscles tighten. His arteries expanded, until he could feel the throbbing flow of blood. He wanted to run after Slim and Whitie, grab them, and beat their heads together. God knows he was big and strong enough, but checking himself he remembered how, in the past, his strength had never helped on these occasions. Indeed, it had often made matters worse. Prudently, he turned and headed for his cabin.

Lying in his bunk, George thought of his childhood and tried to relax. His father had been the first colored doctor in his town. He had bought a home in a white district and one Sunday attended the nearby church. The flock were so scandalized by this intrusion upon the unanimity of their cuticles that many got up and left, while the others remained, condescendingly, and at their proper distance. Thus, there was an approximate circle. The colored family was the center, and the condescending ones were the periphery. The remainder of the circle served as a buffer, or no man's land.

George was only five then, but the look of wrathful resentment on those white faces as they marched out of church was indelibly impressed on his memory. Later that day George's mother had tried to explain to him how the pigmentation in a person's skin determines much of what he must be.

There were many other instances—so many that he could not

remember, and the ones he remembered he wanted to forget. His two years at college were probably the happiest of his life. Oh, yes, one time he was refused admission to a dance, but on the whole, the students and faculty had granted him more tolerance than other people had.

Then he joined the Merchant Marine. Before finishing school he wanted to do something different, something adventurous. How better could he balance his experiences than by supplementing the academic with a bit of the practical?

That evening George and another seaman were talking out on deck when a voice was directed toward them from behind a port hole: "Why don't you two salts come in and try to win back that dough you dropped last night."

"Sounds like a good idea, Mac: deal 'em out and we'll be right in," replied George, wanting to solidify the friendship he was making with some of the crew.

When George and his friend entered the cabin two other seamen had appeared to participate in the nightly poker game. Mac counted the cards, and, when he was satisfied none was missing, spread them face down on the table. Each man drew a card. George's queen was highest so he picked up the deck, shuffled it, and began dealing.

"Five card stud," he announced.

"What! No seven card low hole?" demanded Mac in a tone of affable sarcasm.

They sat there for more than an hour. George played a sociable game. He bet diffidently. Mac played a garrulous game. He tried to anticipate others' bets, and once they were made, would raise them again. He always made the last raise. In spite of his seemingly undisciplined and jovial playing, he seldom lost. The other three players always picked up their cards and looked at them gravely, almost surreptitiously, as if an invisible conspirator were standing to the rear who would see the cards and relay the information to the other players. George thought of them as little paranoiacs.

Mac was in a raising duel with one of the paranoics when Slim and Whitie walked in. George saw them enter, but acted as if he did not. The others were unaware of them until they found two chairs and wedged themselves into the circle of gamblers. George, looking to his side, saw Slim's faded denim trousers. A shiny marlin spike was stuck behind the three inch belt. His long, slender arms were emphasized by the snug T-shirt. A narrow scar which descended obliquely down Slim's cheek was quite pale against the windburned skin. Slim preemptorily announced that he and Whitie should be included in the next hand.

Mac gathered the cards, and, after shuffling them with ostentatious dexterity, dealt to the seven men.

"Seven card stud with seven players," he added loquaciously; "there's just enough cards."

"Queen bets," Slim said to George.

Until hearing that deliberate voice, George was unaware that it was up to him to open the betting. Nervously, he took a quarter from in front of him and flipped it to the center of the table.

"Two bits," he said, like an actor who had forgotten his lines and then suddenly remembered them.

After seven quarters had been placed in the center of the table, Mac dealt each man another card. Slim got an ace. Without speaking, he placed a half dollar among the seven quarters on the table. The other players did the same. Mac dealt another round of cards. Slim's ace was still the highest card, and again he invested a half dollar. Other halves were tossed toward the center and Mac began distributing the next round of cards.

"Hold it, Mac, the pot's short a half," Slim droned.

Mac stopped dealing, but nobody submitted the missing half.

Slim scratched the end of his nose, then shifted his eyes from the table to George.

"Why don't you put in your half?" he asked.

"I did put it in," George answered.

"Don't lie, I was watching you You guys think you can get away with anything, but, dammit, when I'm playing you ain't gonna drag light on the pots."

"You know well enough that I put in my half If you're trying to cause trouble why in hell don't you leave."

Slim narrowed the opening between his eye lids and stared more deliberately at George. "You black bastard."

George raised his arm and flung it around so fast that Slim could not duck. The forearm hit his face, and he pivoted backwards on his chair. In a rage, George jumped on top of him and started to hit at random, as if he depended on the force of the blows instead of their accuracy. Almost overcome by the savage arms beating him from above, Slim managed to free the marlin spike from his belt, and with the power left in him, blindly sunk it into the dark hulk on top.

Suddenly the door opened and the First Mate walked in.

"What the hell's going on here?" he demanded.

Hearing his authoritative voice, the five noncombatants bent down and pulled the two men apart. Blood began to pour out of

the wound in George's leg, and some trickled out of Slim's nose and mouth.

"Take those two men down to the Sick Bay," the officer said.

"Yes, sir," replied Mac, and, lifting George's arm around his shoulders, helped him away.

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George knocked on the door of the Captain's cabin.

"Come in."

He slowly pushed back the door. The first thing he saw was Slim sitting in the corner, his face badly discolored. George went in, closed the door, and walked a few steps toward the Captain who was looking at some papers which lay on his desk.

"You want to see me, sir?"

Still looking at the papers, the Captain replied: "Eh, the First Mate told me you started a fight last night. Is that right?"

"I was the first to hit, sir."

"I haven't had any trouble on my ship for a long time, and I don't want any more this trip. Just to make sure you don't start any more fights, I'm going to fine you a hundred dollars. You realize, of course, that I have the authority to give you a much greater punishment, but I'll save that in case you try anything again."

George stood looking at the Captain. Finally, the Captain moved his eyes from the papers and glanced up at George.

"Have you got anything to say?"

George still looked at him, silently.

"That will be all then," he said, returning his eyes to the papers. George turned slowly and walked out.

