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Lieutenant La Cava

The leading character of *Loren Wahl* «The Invisible Glass».
Two outcuts of chapter 7 and 9.

I.

Lieutenant La Cava casually saluted the guard at the gate and passed on to the Company office. Leaving a call for fivethirty, he picked up the bed check roster from the Charge of Quarters and took a flashlight from the Captain's desk.

As he started down the double row of pyramidals, checking to see that each cot was occupied, two dogs hurtled toward him from beside a tent. Their threatening growls broke into plaintive yips as the officer warned them, «Sta zitto!» With tails thumping madly upon the hard ground they received his friendly pats and trotted closely at his heels as the Lieutenant continued his check.

At the end of the first row, La Cava crossed the rutted road and started up the opposite side. He could feel his nerves tighten strangely as he neared the fourth tent. This was where Chick slept. First cot on the right of the entrance. It was the first name he had noticed on the chart when the CQ had handed it to him. His flashlight picked out the flaps that closed over the entrance to the pyramidal. Would Chick be there? Perhaps not. Perhaps he hadn't returned yet. Perhaps he was with Anna.

The Lieutenant glanced down at the dogs standing patiently beside him, waiting to follow him into the tent. Their pinkish tongues lolled lopsided from open jaws as they stared him full in the face. Possibly he shouldn't go in, La Cava thought. He could skip this tent and go on to the next. He could pretend he had inspected. Then... just in case... Chick wasn't there...

«Vieni,» the Lieutenant muttered to the dogs. He held the flap open and let the dogs trot in ahead of him. He was acting like a child. If Chick wasn't there, that's all there was to it. What was Chick to him, that he should worry whether the soldier made bed check? If he were missing, he simply wouldn't report him to the Captain.

Lieutenant La Cava followed the dogs into the pyramidal and flashed his light rapidly over the cots. For a brief second he held the beam squarely on the first bed to the right. A slender form huddled under the blankets squirmed slightly. Chick was there. He hadn't missed bed check. He wasn't with Anna.

Lieutenant La Cava snapped off the light as he stood at the foot of Chick's cot. In the blackness of the tent he caught the musty odor of washed underwear and socks dangling from ropes along the sides of the tent. He listened to the heavy breathing and muffled snores of the Negroes.

Chick had his head buried under a blanket. One arm hung over the edge of his cot. The Lieutenant's eyes pierced the shadows in the tent until he could trace the outline of Chick's arm, the knotted biceps, the muscular forearm, and the long, slender fingers of his strong hand. The officer stretched out his hand until his fingertips grazed those of the

soldier. Then abruptly he pulled back his hand and turned out of the tent.

With the dogs beside him, Lieutenant La Cava hurriedly finished checking the pyramidals. The animals squatted on their haunches as he walked down the path to the officers' quarters. Then they shook their ears, glanced at each other, and snapping and yipping ran off to their beds. The game was over.

Captain Randall mumbled sleepily as he heard La Cava enter the tent. He turned onto his side and watched the Lieutenant undress. «Everything go all right at the dance, Steve?»

«Fine. No trouble at all.» La Cava pulled back the blankets and climbed into his cot.

«How about bed check?»

«Everyone in, Johnny.»

The Captain grunted. «That's unusual. I figured someone of those black bastards would try to take off with a Dago gal. No beds empty, eh?»

Lieutenant La Cava yawned. «Well, there was one bed empty, if you want details. Your mess sergeant wasn't sleeping in his.»

Johnny shoved himself onto an elbow. «Don't tell me Sergeant Washington missed bed check?»

«He was in the tent all right. But in bed with one of other cooks. Carney, I think it was. A corporal.»

The Captain chuckled. «Oh, that! Those two have been having a wild affair for months. Let them have their fun. But I'd like to know who does what to whom!» He rolled onto his back and snickered. «Yep, Steve, we've even got them in this nigger outfit!»

La Cava shut his eyes tightly to squeeze away the familiar darting flashes of light. «We've even got them... we've even got them...» Johnny's smirking words repeated in his ears. What kind of crazy talk was that? With the palms of his hand La Cava pressed his temples fiercely. He had to get to sleep. At five-thirty he'd have to get up and shave and dress and throw together his rations and get the sugar and coffee and other things from the mess tent and see that Chick had «Lena» gassed and ready for the trip. They'd be leaving in a few hours. He and Chick. They'd climb into the jeep and race for Milan, away from Bassano and the Company and Johnny and his crazy talk. That was it. He and Chick would get away. In a few hours. In a few short hours.

II.

The officer grasped Chick's wrist and buckled on the watch.

«But means too much to you. You just said yourself —».

«It was given to me, and now I'm giving it to you,» the Lieutenant said sharply. «Now shut up about it.» He was peeved with the soldier and peeved with himself for giving away the watch. And yet he wanted Chick to have it.

«I don't know why you do it, though,» Chick insisted.

«I don't know either.»

«It must be something like your uncle giving you that pistol, so he can forget about his son. Is it something like that, Steve?»

«I suppose so'» the Lieutenant said wearily. Forget about Phil, who had given him the watch? Never! He hadn't given Chick the watch in order to forget Phil!

«Funny thing. Everyone getting presents today. You bring your folks presents, and Zio gives you his Beretta, and now you give me your watch.»

«For the last time, forget about it!» La Cava said angrily. «I don't want to hear about that damn watch again!» He leaned back and lay still. What a stupid thing to do! Give away Phil's watch. After all it had meant. And to give it to Chick, a Negro he had known, scarcely four days. What did Chick mean to him that he should present him with Phil's watch?

The soldier lying beside the Lieutenant sighed comfortably. «Yes, sir, Steve. You really are fine people. I like you. A lot.»

And now La Cava knew. It wasn't out of drunken munificence that he had given Chick the watch. It was because he cared for him. Wanted, deeply wanted him to have it. In the same way Phil had given it away, pretending that the watch meant nothing. There had been a tight, secret bond between Phil and Steve, one that had left his life empty with Phil's death. And now it had come again, the same tight, secret bond. This time between Chick and Steve. The void in his life was once more filled. Chick liked him. He'd said he liked him a lot. Chick understood.

Suddenly there was an intense silence. To the Lieutenant the room seemed steeped in an utter quiet, a black, desperate quiet. He strained to catch the sound of Chick's breathing. It was slow, steady. He could almost feel rather than hear the soldier's breath.

Without moving his head La Cava whispered, «Asleep, not sleepy.»

Under the white sheets the Lieutenant's right leg, bent at the knee, gradually unflexed. His foot inched slightly to the side, then stopped. Again it slid. His hand moved from his side and the fingers worked stealthily across the whiteness. Now the foot reached out carefully. Once again the hand. Again the foot.

Lieutenant La Cava froze as his toes touched those of the soldier beside him. He could feel a maddening pounding in his chest. His ears pierced the stillness. He heard Chick's steady breathing and the distant ticking of the watch. His watch. Phil's watch. La Cava mentally counted the tick-ticking for a full two minutes. Still their toes touched. Chick did not move.

The officer stared wide-awake into black space. He scarcely dared breathe. Then gently his toes grazed those of the soldier, rubbed slowly up, down, up. The Lieutenant's hand brushed Chick's side. His fingers glided across the smooth, hard waist a fraction of an inch. He stopped.

With a slight moan Chick rolled onto his left side, toward the Lieutenant. His fingers sought those of the officer as he entwined their legs. Their faces met. Their breaths, smelling sweet from wine, came in heavy, drawn sighs. La Cava grasped the soldier about the waist and drew him tightly to his body. His mouth pressed down as he felt Chick's lips part. For a long moment they lay quietly, holding one another with strained arms. The Lieutenant could feel Chick's fingers squeezing firmly upon his back.

With an effort La Cava broke from the soldier's embrace. His mouth searched for the soldier's ear. His fingers grasped the tight, kinky hair. He kissed the neck. The shoulders. Now his mouth worked downward, past the muscular breasts, over the panting abdomen, and came to rest on the warm, bony thighs. He could feel the soldier quiver in response.

«Chick, Chick!» he murmured. «I love you.» Lieutenant La Cava trembled as the soldier's strong, lean fingers caressed his face and hair.

The soldier awoke with a start. He looked at the watch. One-thirty. His head was still groggy from wine. He felt a weight upon his chest. It was the Lieutenant's arm. Chick stared at it strangely. He eased himself from under the officer's arm and arose. He stood silently at the head of the bed, a strained, numbed expression distorting his face, and watched Lieutenant La Cava sleep. Only when he began shivering in the coldness of the room did Chick move. He pulled a blanket and pillow from the bed and lay down on the wooden floor.

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True Friendship

*'Tis hard to find in life
A friend, a bow, a wife,
Strong, supple to endure,
In stock and sinew pure,
In time of danger sure.*

*False friends are common. Yes, but where
True nature links a friendly pair,
The blessing is as rich as rare.*

*To bitter ends
You trust true friends,
Not wife nor mother,
Not son nor brother.*

*No long experience alloys
True friendship's sweet and supple joys;
No evil men can steal the treasure;
'Tis death, death only, sets a measure.*

from the Panchatantra (Sanskrit, B. C.)