

These things shouldn't be important. But sometimes they are. And this was one of the times.

Some of the repairmen didn't care one way or another. Some were strong enough for Jimmy that they could forgive him for getting himself in a spot like that. But a lot of them were shocked that he didn't take a sock at Van Waggoner, and you couldn't convince them that Jimmy wasn't just plain scared. And how could he be a leader if he was scared?

Jimmy thought about it at work all day while some of the guys were looking at him out of the corner of their eyes. And he thought about it on the way home and while he was eating supper. He kept awake half the night thinking about it, too.

Then he made his decision. He would take his beating, but he would get everything out of it that he possibly could and show everybody he was game.

So the next morning he went up to Van Waggoner when everybody was still hanging around the tool house waiting for work assignments and he said:

"You know what you called me yesterday, Van?"

"So what are you going to do about it?" Van growled back at him.

"Just this. I'll be waiting for you out in front of the Buffalo Gate at three o'clock."

Van looked surprised and said, "Yeah, you and all your Black friends, I suppose."

Jimmy was very excited and nervous, and he held his voice low so it wouldn't squeak. "That won't be necessary," he said in what came off as the best cowboy picture style, somehow.

That was all, except that the rest of the work day was pretty tense. Jimmy knew he couldn't beat Van either at slugging or at boxing. But one thing he did know was that he could show everybody he was not afraid.

He did this by making a break away from work a few minutes early and dressed up fast, running out to Buffalo Gate so as to be there ahead of Van Waggoner. When people came out of the plant, at least a few of them would see him waiting there alone and figure that he was ready and waiting—and maybe even anxious—to fight.

Sure enough, Jimmy made it out there first. And even while he was nervous and scared, he waved at workers driving home in the direction of Buffalo.

After a few minutes, he waved more and more cheerfully with smiles and everything, making the most of the situation that he possibly could.

But then all the cars had passed and the whole plant seemed to have let out the whole day shift, and still no Van Waggoner—and for that matter, nobody else, either.

Where were all the people who usually came to see a fight? Where were the backers, the betters, the doubters, or even the plain bloodthirsty, that like to see somebody get hit? The word might not have gotten around to the whole department but seventy men in the repair gang certainly knew about the fight.

Finally, about three-thirty, old Mike Gorman, who lived in a part of Lackawanna near the plant and liked Jimmy, at least part of the time, and had never said a word against Willie, came up and asked:

"Are you still waiting for Van Waggoner?"

And when Jimmy said yes, he continued: "I saw him sneaking out Three Gate almost half an hour ago. You might as well go home. He ain't going to fight anybody today."

Jimmy could hardly believe it. He asked Mike if he were sure.

Mike was sure.

Well, it was kind of comical in a way. And the next day there were a few hidden smiles all around, although nobody said anything out loud, except an old Croatian pipefitter who told Jimmy (who at that time was helping in the pipe gang) to do some little job and then said:

"Now don't give me any argument. You're not talking to Van Waggoner now."

And Jimmy knew he wasn't supposed to say anything, but just grin and do what he was supposed to do.

Why didn't Van Waggoner show up? It was cowardice all right, but cowardice of a special sort. Van Waggoner was such a racist that he really thought that the furnace men were going to get him if he fought with Jimmy!

But why didn't any *Black furnace men* show up to give Jimmy some backing?

Not many of them probably knew about the fight, although Willie Brainard might have told somebody on the furnace floor and it would have got all around. If they did know about it (and Jimmy never asked a single one if they did), they must have