IF HE HOLLERS LET HIM GO

a novel

CHESTER HIMES

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Foreword by Graham Hodges

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Foreword

The forty years since publication of Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* have not been kind to this brilliant novel. It was dismissed by some critics as a "protest" novel and exploited by cheap paperback publishers who emphasized the sensational aspects of interracial sex in the book. By the early 1970's, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* had gone out of print. With this reprint, it is now time to assess Chester Himes's achievement as a literary diamond, reflecting the harsh truths of black life in America during the 1940's.

The predominant theme of the novel is racial antagonism. The story is related in the hard-boiled, tough-guy style familiar to students of the detective novel of the 1930's and 1940's. It is narrated in the first person by Bob Jones, a young black man working in the defense industry in Los Angeles during World War II. Written at a time when lynching was not uncommon, race intrudes upon Jones's every thought and action. During the highly compressed four-day period of this story, Jones loses his job, his girl, and his army deferment; he is falsely accused of raping a white woman and that forces him to enlist to avoid jail.

The novel's white characters are equally obsessed by race, and these feelings are dramatized most memorably by Jones at the close of the second chapter. The scene involves Jones in a harrowing race through the streets of Los Angeles with his white co-workers on their way to work. At last, Jones arrives at the factory, only a few minutes late. Whereupon, the white timekeeper insults him with a racial slur. Jones comments to

himself: "white folks had sure brought their white to work with them that morning."

Although hostility between the races is pivotal to understanding *If He Hollers*, the novel is also a linguistic tour de force for Himes. His tense, bleak language is reminiscent of the muscular prose of such detective novelists as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Cornell Woolrich, and David Goodis. An additional influence on Himes was surely the authors of the Black Mask school of detective novels whom he studied during an earlier seven-year stretch he spent in prison.

Later in his career, Himes would earn money writing numerous potboilers about two Harlem detectives for French publishers. Two of these books (*Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *The Crazy Kill*) are once again in print, in the U.S., and others may be found in second-hand bookstores. Read with Himes's other, more serious novels which appeared after *If He Hollers*, they demonstrate the constant attraction the *roman noir* held for him.

As in detective novels of the period, *If He Hollers* expresses an existential despair. Events overwhelm Bob Jones; the blatant unfairness of the rape charge against him mimics the arbitrary fates of the heroes in many a tough-guy novel. The important difference, however, is that Himes unravels Jones's fate not in terms of an implacable, unknowable fate, but rather places it directly within the historic fabric of racial antagonisms in America.

A significant parallel between *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and similar genre novels is also its treatment of violence. Murderous rage lurks beneath every surface. After a dice game, Jones is knocked out by a young white bully. Regaining consciousness and finding most of his winnings gone, Jones determines to seek revenge. When he realizes the homicidal strength of his passion, Jones is filled with sweet feelings of satisfaction and a sense of proprietorship over "his white boy." Though this fury may reflect a nod towards Richard Wright's *Native Son*, published six years before, Bob Jones's character has more in common with the cool, remorseless killers of the detective novel. Its analysis of every nuance and permutation of the racial question, however, elevates *If He Hollers* to a higher artistry.

Himes's scorching prose is softened by his juxtaposition of descriptions of the people and the terrain of Los Angeles in those times. Through Jones's eyes, we are given a street tour of L.A.'s bars, restaurants, fast-food joints, and party scenes in nearly photographic detail. The novel is a Baedecker of high and low, white and black Angelino life during the 1940's.

If He Hollers Let Him Go is, finally, a concise history of black workers in this important transitional period. The surging demand for labor in a war economy opened new doors to employment for Afro-Americans. Southern blacks migrated to Los Angeles and San Diego in search of work in the munitions and ship-building factories. The saga of these black workers is too little known, and *If He Hollers* stands as an important document to that neglected story.

This first novel by Chester Himes is an accurate portrait of an important era just before the early stages of integration. If his message seems too bitter, we should remember that America's dreams of racial equality have yet to be realized. Himes has written a story that must be confronted honestly.

GRAHAM HODGES
New York City, 1985

IF HE HOLLERS LET HIM GO

CHAPTER I

I DREAMED a fellow asked me if I wanted a dog and I said yeah, I'd like to have a dog and he went off and came back with a little black dog with stiff black gold-tipped hair and sad eyes that looked something like a wire-haired terrier. I was standing in front of a streetcar that was just about to start and the fellow led the dog by a piece of heavy stiff wire twisted about its neck and handed me the end of the wire and asked me if I liked the dog. I took the wire and said sure I liked the dog. Then the dog broke loose and ran over to the side of the street trailing the wire behind him and the fellow ran and caught it and brought it back and gave it to me again.

'About the——' I began. I wanted to ask him how much it cost because I didn't have any money.

But he cut me off. 'Now about the pay. It'll cost you a dollar and thirty-five cents.'

I said, 'I haven't got any money now but I'll give it to you on Monday.'

'Sure, that's all right,' he said.

I took the dog and got on the streetcar. I liked the little dog; but when I got home nobody else seemed to like it.

Then I turned over and dreamed on the other side.

I was working in a war plant where a white fellow named Frankie Childs had been killed and the police were there trying to find out who did it.

The police lieutenant said, 'We got to find a big tall man with strong arms, big hands, and a crippled leg.'

So they started calling in the coloured fellows. The first one to be called was a medium-sized, well-built, fast-walking,

dark brown man of about thirty-five. He was dressed in a faded blue work shirt and blue denim overall pants tied about the waist with a cord. He came up from the basement and walked straight to the lieutenant and looked him in the eye, standing erect and unflinching.

The lieutenant asked, 'Can you stand the test?'

'What test?' the coloured fellow wanted to know.

'Can you go up to the third floor and look the dead body of Frankie Childs in the face?'

The coloured fellow said, 'Frankie Childs! Sure, I can go up and look at that bastard dead or alive.' He had a fine, scholarly voice, carrying but unmusical. He turned and started up the stairs three at a time. Suddenly I began to laugh.

'Oh!' I said to the lieutenant. 'You gonna keep 'em running upstairs until you find out what one's crippled.' I fell out and rolled all over the floor laughing.

Then I turned over and dreamed on my back.

I was asking two white men for a job. They looked as if they didn't want to give me the job but didn't want to say so outright. Instead they asked me if I had my tools. I said I didn't have any tools but I could do the job. They began laughing at me, scornfully and derisively. One said, 'He ain't got no tools,' and they laughed like hell.

I didn't mind their not giving me the job, but their laughing at me hurt. I felt small and humiliated and desperate, looking at the two big white men laughing at me.

Suddenly I came awake. For a time I laid there without thought, suspended in a vacancy. There was no meaning to anything; I didn't even remember having dreamed.

The alarm went off again; I knew then that it had been the alarm that had awakened me. I groped for it blindly, shut it off; I kept my eyes shut tight. But I began feeling scared in spite of hiding from the day. It came along with consciousness. It came into my head first, somewhere back of my closed eyes, moved slowly underneath my skull to the base of my brain, cold and hollow. It seeped down my spine, into my arms, spread through my groin with an almost sexual torture, settled in my stomach like butterfly wings. For a moment I felt torn all loose inside, shrivelled, paralysed, as if after a while I'd have to get up and die.

Every day now I'd been waking up that way, ever since the war began. And since I'd been made a leaderman out at the Atlas Shipyard it was really getting me. Maybe I'd been scared all my life, but I didn't know about it until after Pearl Harbour. When I came out to Los Angeles in the fall of '41, I felt fine about everything. Taller than the average man, six feet two, broad-shouldered, and conceited, I hadn't a worry. I knew I'd get along. If it had come down to a point where I had to hit a paddy I'd have hit him without any thought. I'd have busted him wide open because he was a paddy and needed busting.

Race was a handicap, sure, I'd reasoned. But hell, I didn't have to marry it. I went where I wanted and felt good about it. I'd gotten refused back in Cleveland, Ohio, plenty of times. Cleveland wasn't the land of the free or the home of the brave either. That was one reason why I left there to come to Los Angeles; I knew if I kept on getting refused while white boys were hired from the line behind me I'd hang somebody as sure as hell. But it'd never really gotten me down. Once I threatened to sue a restaurant and got a hundred dollars. I'd even thought about making a business of it. Most times when I got refused I just went somewhere else, put it out of my mind, forgot about it.

They shook that in Los Angeles. It wasn't being refused employment in the plants so much. When I got here practically the only job a Negro could get was service in the white folks' kitchens. But it wasn't that so much. It was the look on the people's faces when you asked them about a job. Most of 'em didn't say right out they wouldn't hire me. They just looked so goddamned startled that I'd even asked. As if some friendly dog had come in through the door and said, 'I can talk.' It shook me.

Maybe it had started then, I'm not sure, or maybe it wasn't until I'd seen them send the Japanese away that I'd noticed it. Little Riki Oyana singing 'God Bless America' and going to Santa Anita with his parents next day. It was taking a man up by the roots and locking him up without a chance. Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving him a chance to say one word. It was thinking about if they ever did that to me, Robert Jones, Mrs. Jones's dark son, that started me to getting scared.

After that it was everything. It was the look in the white people's faces when I walked down the streets. It was that crazy, wild-eyed, unleashed hatred that the first Jap bomb on Pearl Harbour let loose in a flood. All that tight, crazy feeling of race as thick in the street as gas fumes. Every time I stepped outside I saw a challenge I had to accept or ignore. Every day I had to make one decision a thousand times: *Is it now? Is now the time?*

I was the same colour as the Japanese and I couldn't tell the difference. 'A yeller-bellied Jap' coulda meant me too. I could always feel race trouble, serious trouble, never more than two feet off. Nobody bothered me. Nobody said a word. But I was tensed every moment to spring.

I carried it as long as I could. I carried my muscle as high as my ears. But I couldn't keep on carrying it. I lost twenty pounds in two weeks and my hands got to trembling. I was working at the yard then as a mechanic and every time my white leaderman started over toward me I drew up tight inside. I got so the only place I felt safe was in bed asleep.

I was even scared to tell anybody. If I'd gone to a psychiatrist he'd have had me put away. Living every day scared, walled in, locked up. I didn't feel like fighting any more; I'd take a second thought before I hit a paddy now. I was tired of keeping ready to die every minute; it was too much strain. I had to fight hard enough each day just to keep on living. All I wanted was for the white folks to let me alone; not say anything to me; not even look at me. They could take the goddamned world and go to hell with it.

Suddenly the baby started bawling in the next room and I heard the bed squeak as Ella Mae got up to feed him. I wondered if they knew how well I could hear them through the thin partition. If they did they didn't let it bother them. I heard Henry mutter sleepily, 'Goddamnit! Goddamnit!' Then all I could hear was the sound of the baby sucking greedily, and I thought if they really wanted to give him a break they'd cut his throat and bury him in the back yard before he got old enough to know he was a nigger. Then I was ashamed. Ella Mae loved that baby. If anything happened to him she'd die.

Parts of my dream started coming back and I remembered vaguely about a little black dog with gold-tipped hair, and the police lieutenant looking for a big crippled man who must be

coloured. I remembered saying in my dream, 'Oh, you gonna keep 'em running upstairs until you find out what one's crippled.' Suddenly it struck me as funny, and I began laughing. But right in the middle of the laugh I felt a crazy impulse to cry. I wanted to just lie there and cry.

Hell, I oughta stay home today, I thought. I oughta go over and see Susie and take a quart of rum. She was fine if you were drunk enough. Once she told me, 'I'm not pretty but I'm wonderful.' I could picture her ducky black body with the tiny waist and round, bucket-shaped hips. I knew if I kept thinking about her I'd get up and go over and play it out and to hell with my job.

I tried to force my mind to a blank. I had to get myself together; I had to get up.

I could hear the baby still sucking. Lucky little rascal, I thought, didn't know how lucky he was. I wished I had Ella Mae in bed with me; I could lose myself with her too. I remembered how she used to let me in the evenings when Henry was at work. That was during the time I was having so much trouble trying to get my journeyman's rating at the yard and used to come home so burnt up all the time. When I found out she'd done it just because she felt sorry for me I quit speaking to her for a week. But she hadn't let it bother her one way or the other.

I'd gone to the Lincoln Theatre last night and I began thinking of how the audience had applauded so loudly for the two white acrobats. The other acts had been all-coloured—singing and dancing and black-face comedy. I thought at the time how the white folks were still showing everybody how strong they were and how we spooks were still trying to prove how happy we were. But what got me was the way the coloured audience clapped their hands off for the white acrobats—not so much just because they were white, although that was reason enough in itself, I thought—but because one of the boys was blind.

'He's blind,' I heard some woman in back of me whisper. 'He is? Which one?'

'The little one.'

'Is dat so? Well, ain't he spry?'

It went all through the audience: The little one's blind.

We're a wonderful, goddamned race, I thought. Simple-minded, generous, sympathetic sons of bitches. We're sorry for

everybody but ourselves; the worse the white folks treat us the more we love 'em. Ella Mae laying me because I wasn't married and she figured she had enough for me and Henry too; and a black audience clapping its hands off for a blind white acrobat.

I thought of Ben telling Conway out at the yard, 'I was just asking the man a question, fellow, I ain't going to steal your white man. I know that's the one thing a Negro won't forgive you for—that's stealing his prize white man.'

What I was trying to do now was to keep from thinking about Alice, just to drift on my thoughts as long as they didn't touch her. I was scared if I thought about her now I'd begin to wonder, maybe to doubt her. She'd broken a date with me last night; that's why I'd gone to the Lincoln.

The next thing I knew I had opened my eyes and was looking at her picture on my dressing table. It was as if I was trying to catch some telltale expression in her eyes. But it wasn't there; she had the same warm, intelligent, confident look. I just looked at her and didn't think about her at all—I just laid there and enjoyed looking at a really fine chick. She had one of those heart-shaped faces with a cupid's-bow mouth, and coal-black hair parted in the middle and pulled tight down over her ears.

Now I didn't mind thinking about her—who she was; her position as supervisor of case work in the city welfare department. Her father was a doctor—Dr. Wellington L.-P. Harrison. He was the kind of pompous little guy you'd expect to have a hyphenated name, one of the richest Negroes in the city if not on the whole West Coast.

I jumped out of bed and went over and picked up the picture. It set me up to have a chick like her. It gave me a personal pride to have her for my girl. And then I was proud of her too. Proud of the way she looked, the appearance she made among white people; proud of what she demanded from white people, and the credit they gave her; and her position and prestige among her own people. I could knock myself out just walking along the street with her; and whenever we ran into any of the white shipyard workers downtown somewhere I really felt like something.

I didn't want to think about her breaking our date. She'd called and said she ought to attend a sorority meeting she'd forgotten all about—she was president of the local chapter.

And would I really mind? Of course I couldn't mind; that was where the social conventions had me. If she'd been Susie I could have said, 'Hell yes, I mind,' but I had to be a gentleman with Alice. And I really wanted to be. Only thinking about it now gave me a tight, jealous feeling. Started me to wondering why she'd want to marry a guy like me—two years of college and a shipyard job—when she could pick any number of studs with both money and position. But she was trying so hard to make me study nights so I could go back to college after the war and study law, she had to be serious, I reassured myself.

Before I lost it again I put the picture down on the dresser and went into the kitchen to make some coffee. I didn't know Ella Mae was there; I was barefooted and my pyjamas were open. She was standing before the small gas range and when I came in she turned to face me. Her robe was hanging open but at sight of me she pulled it together and fastened it, not hurried, but with finality.

'I was just getting ready to wake you,' she said.

She was a full-bodied, slow-motioned home girl with a big broad flat face, flat-nosed and thick-lipped; yellow but not bright. She had the big, brown, glassy eyes that went along with the rest of her; and her hair was short and straightened and she had it in curlers.

'Good morning, *Mrs.* Brown,' I said facetiously, then, lowering my voice, I added, 'I was just thinking about you, baby.'

She smiled self-consciously, but her look made me button my pyjamas. 'Your clock woke the baby up,' she said.

'He's cute,' I said. 'I heard him.'

She turned back to the stove so I couldn't see her face. 'She's a *she*,' she corrected.

'I forgot.' I ran my finger down her spine.

She pulled away and began making coffee in her silex.

'Go on and get dressed,' she said. 'You'll be late again.' When I didn't move she added, 'I'm making your coffee. You want anything else?'

'Yeah,' I said. She didn't answer. 'I'd get married if I could find somebody like you,' I went on. 'Then I wouldn't mind waking up in the mornings.'

'Go on and get dressed,' she said again. I made another pass

at her and she said, 'Oh, go on, Bob! You'll be over it in a minute. Everybody wakes up like that.'

'So!' I said, putting my arm about her waist and trying to pull her to me. 'You oughtn' to told me that, baby.' I put my right hand on her shoulder and tried to face her to me. 'Come on, baby, be sweet.'

She gave me a hard push, sent me off balance. 'Go on now! Don't be so crazy. Hurry up or you'll be late.'

I stood back and looked at her with a sudden hard soberness. 'Do you ever wake up scared?' I asked.

She turned and looked at me then. There was a queer expression on her flat yellow face. She stepped over to me, reached up, and put her hands about my head, drew me down to kiss her. Then she pushed me away again, saying, 'Now hurry up, you'll make all your riders late too.'

'Okay, little sister,' I said. 'When Henry's gone to the Army, and you get all hot and bothered and come running to me, just remember.'

She gave a slow laugh and stuck out her tongue. I felt differently now. All the tightness and scare, even the lingering traces of jealousy, had gone out of me. I just felt pressed for time.

I hurried back to my room and put on my shirt and shorts, crossed the kitchen to the bathroom, still barefooted. It was a small, four-room cottage sitting back in a court off of Wall Street in the middle fifties, and the rooms opened into one another so there wasn't any way of getting out of a certain casual intimacy, even if I'd never had Ella Mae. My room was in the back, off from the kitchen, and the bathroom was on the other side. Their bedroom was on one side of the front, and the parlour on the other.

When I'd finished brushing my teeth and washing up I started back through the kitchen in my underwear and almost bumped into Ella Mae as she was returning to bed. I patted her on the hips and said, 'Stingy.' She switched on through the parlour into her bedroom.

I got a clean pair of coveralls out of the dresser drawer, slipped them on over my underwear, pulled on my high-heeled, iron-toed boots, slanted my 'tin' hat on the back of my head, and slipped into my leather jacket. Something about my working clothes made me feel rugged, bigger than the average

citizen, stronger than a white-collar worker—stronger even than an executive. Important too. It put me on my muscle. I felt a swagger in my stance when I stepped over to the dresser to get my keys and wallet, identifications, badge, handkerchief, cigarettes. I looked to see if I had enough money, saw a ten and some ones. Then I went into the kitchen and drank two cups of black coffee. All of a sudden I began rushing to get to work on time.

CHAPTER II

I WENT out to the garage, threw up the door, backed halfway out to the street on the starter, telling myself at the time I oughtn' to do it. I had a '42 Buick Roadmaster I'd bought four months ago, right after I'd gotten to be a leaderman, and every time I got behind the wheel and looked down over the broad, flat, mile-long hood I thought about how the rich white folks out in Beverly couldn't even buy a new car now and got a certain satisfaction. I straightened out and dug off with a jerk, turned the corner at forty, pushed it on up in the stretch on Fifty-fourth between San Pedro and Avalon, with my nerves tightening, telling me to take it slow before I got into a battle royal with some cracker motor-cycle cop, and my mind telling me to hell with them, I was a key man in a shipyard, as important as anybody now.

Homer and Conway were waiting in front of the drug-store at the corner of Fifty-fourth and Central.

'You're kinda tardy, playboy,' Homer said, climbing in beside Conway.

I turned the corner into Central and started digging. 'She wouldn't let me go,' I said.

'You mean you had that last dollar left,' Conway said.

I squeezed between a truck and an oncoming streetcar, almost brushing, and Homer said, 'See that. Now he's tryna kill us. He don't mind dying hisself, but why he got to kill you and me too?'

'Just like that safety man said, gambling thirty seconds against thirty years,' Conway said.

I pulled up in front of the hotel at Fifty-seventh and my other