

Waterfront Fists

or, Stand Up And Slug!

Steve Costigan

by Robert Ervin Howard, 1906-1936

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THE SEA GIRL hadn't been docked in Honolulu more'n three hours before Bill O'Brien come legging it down to the pool hall where I was showing Mushy Hansen the fine points of the game, to tell me that he'd got me matched to fight some has-been at the American Arena that night.

„The RUFFIAN is in,“ said Bill, „and they got a fellow which they swear can take any man aboard the SEA GIRL to a royal cleanin'. I ain't seen him, but they say he growed up in the back country of Australia and run wild with the kangaroos till he was shanghaied aboard a ship at an early age. They say he's licked everybody aboard the RUFFIAN from the cap'n down to the mess boy—“

„Stow the gab and lead me to some RUFFIAN idjits which is cravin' to risk their jack on this tramp,“ I interrupted. „I got a hundred and fifty bucks that's burnin' my pockets up.“

Well, it was easy to find some lunatics from the RUFFIAN, and after putting up our money at even odds, with a bartender for stakeholder, and knowing I had a tough battle ahead of me and needed some training, I got me a haircut and then went down to the Hibernian Bar for a few shots of hard licker. While me and Bill and Mushy was lapping up our drinks, in come Sven Larsen. This huge and useless Swede has long been laboring under the hallucination that he oughta be champion of the SEA GIRL, and no amount of battering has been able to quite wipe the idee outa what he supposes to be his brain.

Well, this big mistake come up to me, and scowling down at me, he said: „You Irisher, put oop your hands!“

I set my licker down with a short sigh of annoyance. „With a thousand sailors in port itchin' for a scrap,“ I said, „you got to pick on me. G'wan—I don't want to fight no shipmate now. Anyway, I got to fight the RUFFIAN's man in a few hours.“

„Aye shood be fightin' him,“ persisted the deluded maniac. „Aye ought to be champ of dey SEA GIRL. Come on, you big stiffer!“ And so saying he squared off in what he fondly believed was a fighting pose. At this moment my white bulldog, Mike, sensing trouble, bristled and looked up from the bowl of beer he was lapping up on the floor, but seeing it was nobody but Sven, he curled up and went to sleep.

„Don't risk your hands on the big chump, Steve,“ said Bill disgustedly. „I'll fix him—“

„You stay oot of dis, Bill O'Brien,“ said the Swede waving his huge fists around menacingly. „Aye will see to you after Aye lick Steve.“

„Aw, you're drunk,“ I said. „A fine shipmate you are.“

„Aye am not droonk!“ he roared. „My girl told me—“

„I didn't know you had a girl here,“ said Bill.

„Well, Aye have. And she said a big man like me shood be champion of his ship and she wouldn't have nothings to do with me till Aye was. So put oop your hands—“

„Aw, you're crazy,“ I snapped, turning back to the bar, but watching him close from the corner of my eye. Which was a good thing because he started a wild right swing that had destruction wrote all over it. I side-stepped and he crashed into the bar. Rebounding with a bloodthirsty beller he lunged at me, and seeing they was no arguing with the misguided heathen, I stepped inside his swing and brought up a right uppercut to the jaw that lifted his whole two hundred and forty-five pounds clean off the floor and stood him on the back of his neck, out cold. Mike, awakened by the crash, opened one eye, raised one ear, and then went back to sleep with a sort of gentle canine smile.

„Y'oughta be careful,“ growled Bill, while Mushy sloshed a pitcher of dirty water over the Swede. „You mighta busted yore hand. Whyn't you hit him in the stummick?“

„I didn't wanta upset his stummick,“ I said. „I've skinned my knuckles a little, but they ain't even bruised much. I've had 'em in too many buckets uh brine.“

At last Sven was able to sit up and cuss me, and he mumbled something I didn't catch.

„He says he’s got a date with his girl tonight,“ Mushy said, „but he’s ashamed to go back to her with that welt on his jaw and tell her he got licked.“

„Ya,“ said Sven, rubbing his jaw, „you got to go tell her I can’t come, Steve.“

„Aw, well,“ I said, „all right. I’ll tell her you fell off the docks and sprained your ankle. Where’s she live?“

„She dances at the Striped Cat Cabaret,“ said Sven.

After downing a finger of Old Jersey Cream, I tightened my belt and me and Mike sauntered forth.

Bill followed me out into the street and said: „Dawg-gone it, Steve, you ought not to go cruisin’ off this way, with the fight just a few hours in the offin’. That RUFFIAN crew is crooked as a buncha snakes—and you know what a soft head you are where women is concerned.“

„Your remarks is highly insultin’, Bill,“ I returned with my well-known quiet dignity. „I don’t reckon no woman ever made a fool outa me. I know ‘em like a book. Anyhow, you don’t think I’d fall for a dame as encouraged a sap like Sven, do you? Heck, she’s probably some big fat wench with a face like a bull terrier. What’d he say her name was—oh, yes, Gloria Flynn. Don’t you worry about me. I’ll be at the American in plenty uh time.“

It was after dark when me and Mike got to the Striped Cat Cabaret which is located in a tough waterfront section of the city. I asked the manager for Gloria Flynn, and he said she’d just finished a dance and was in her dressing room, changing to street clothes. He told me to wait for her at the back exit, which I done. I was standing there when the door opened and some girls come out. I said, taking off my cap, politely, „Which one of you frails is Gloria Flynn, if any?“

You could of knocked me over with a pile-driver when the snappiest, prettiest one of the bunch up and said, „I’m her—and what of it?“

„Well,“ I said, eyeing her with great admiration, „all I can say is, what does a girl like you want to waste her time with such tripe as Sven Larsen when they is men like me in port?“

„Don’t get fresh!“ she snapped.

„Oh, I ain’t fresh,“ I assured her. „I just come to tell you that Sven fell off a dock and broke his neck—I mean sprained his ankle, and he can’t make the date tonight.“

„Oh,“ she murmured. Then looking close at me, she said, „Who are you?“

„I’m Steve Costigan, the fellow that licked him,“ I replied thoughtlessly.

„Oh!“ she said, kind of breathlessly. „So you’re Steve Costigan!“

„Yeah, I am,“ I said, having spilled the beans anyway. „Steve Costigan, A. B. mariner, and heavyweight champion aboard the trader SEA GIRL. I knowed you didn’t know me, or you wouldn’t of persuaded your boy friend to risk his life by takin’ a swing at me.“

She looked kind of bewildered. „I don’t know what you’re talking about.“

„Oh, it’s all right,“ I hastened to assure her. „Sven told me about you urgin’ him to climb me, but it’s natural for a frail to want her fellow to be a champ of somethin’. What I can’t understand is, what you see in a galoot like Sven.“

She gave a kind of hysterical laugh. „Oh, I see. Why, Mr. Costigan—“

„Call me Steve,“ I beamed.

„Well—Steve,“ she said with a little embarrassed laugh, „I didn’t urge him anything of the sort. I just said he was such a big fellow I bet he could whip anybody aboard his ship—and he said one of the other sailors, Steve Costigan,

was champion, and I said I was surprised that anybody could lick him—Sven, I mean. Why, I had no idea he'd get it into his head I wanted him to fight anybody. I do hope you didn't hurt the poor boy."

"Oh, not much," I said, unconsciously swelling out my huge chest, "I always handle my shipmates easy as possible. Though uh course, I'm so powerful some times I hit harder'n I intend to. But say, sister, I know a swell little girl like you wasn't takin' that big squarehead serious. You was just sorry for him because he's so kind of big and awkward and dumb, wasn't you?"

"Well," she admitted, "that was the way of it; he looked lonesome—"

"Well, that's mighty fine of you," I said. "But forget about him now; after the beltin' I give him, he won't want to come back to you, and anyway, he'll find a native girl or a Chinese or somethin'. He ain't like me; a woman's a woman to him and he'll fall for anything in skirts that comes along. Me, I'm a one-woman man. Anyway, kid, it ain't right for you to trail around with a galoot like him. You owe it to yourself to keep company with only the best—me, for instance."

"Maybe you're right," she said, with downcast eyes.

"Sure, I'm always right," I answered modestly. "Now what say we go in and lap up something. All this talkin' I been doin's got my throat dry."

"Oh, I never drink intoxicants," she said with a bright smile. "If you don't mind let's go over here to this ice-cream parlor."

"O.K. with me," I said, "but first lemme introduce you to Mike who can lick his weight both in wildcats and dog biscuits."

Well, Mike, he shook hands with her but he wasn't particular enthusiastic. He ain't no ladies' dog; he treats 'em politely but coldly. Then we went over to the joint where they sold ice cream, and while we was dawdling over the stuff, I let my eyes wander over my charming companion. She was a beauty, no doubt about it; curly yellow hair and big trusting violet eyes.

"What's a nice girl like you doin' workin' in a dump like the Striped Cat?" I asked her, and she kind of sighed and hung her head.

"A girl has to do lots of things she don't like to," she said. "I was in a high class stock company which went broke here on account of the manager getting delirium tremens and having to be sent back to his home in England. I had to eat, and this was the only job open for me. Some day I'm going home; my folks live on a dairy farm in New Jersey, and I was a fool ever to leave there. Right now I can see the old white farm house, and the green meadows with the babbling brooks running through them, and the cows grazing."

I thought she was going to cry for a minute, then she kind of sighed and smiled: "It's all in a lifetime, isn't it?"

"You're a brave kid," I said, touched to my shoe soles, "and I wanta see more of you. I'm fightin' some guy at the American Arena in a little while. How about holdin' down a nice ringside seat there, and then havin' supper and a little dancin' afterwards? I can't dance much, but I'm a bear at the supper table."

"Oh," said she, "you're the man that's going to fight Red Roach?"

"Is that his name?" I asked. "Yeah, if he's the man from the RUFFIAN."

"I'd like to go," she said, "but I have to go on in another dance number in half an hour."

"Well," I said, "the fight can't last more'n three or four rounds, not with me in there. How 'bout me droppin' around the Striped Cat afterwards? If you ain't through then, I'll wait for you."

„That’s fine,“ she said, and noting my slightly unsatisfied expression, she said: „If I’d known you were going to fight so soon, I wouldn’t have let you eat that ice cream.“

„Oh, that won’t interfere with my punchin’ ability any,“ I said. „But I would like a shot of hard licker to kind of settle it on my stummick.“

That’s the truth; sailors is supposed to be hawgs about ice cream and I have seen navy boys eat it in disgusting quantities, but it’s poor stuff for my belly. Mike had ate the bowl full I give him, but he’d a sight rather had a pan of slush.

„Let’s don’t go in any of these saloons,“ said Gloria. „These waterfront bars sell you the same stuff rattlesnakes have in their teeth. I tell you, I’ve got a bottle of rare old wine not very far from here. I never touch it myself, but I keep it for my special friends and they say it’s great. You’ve time for a nip, haven’t you?“

„Lead on, sister,“ I said, „I’ve always got time to take a drink, or oblige a beautiful girl!“

„Ah, you flatterer,“ she said, giving me a little push. „I bet you tell that to every girl you meet.“

Well, to my surprise we halted before a kind of ramshackle gymnasium, and Gloria took out a key and unlocked the door.

„I didn’t tell you I had a kid brother with me,“ she said in answer to my surprised glance. „He’s a weakly sort of kid, and I have to support him as well as myself. Poor kid, he would come with me when I left home. Well, Mr. Salana, who owns the gym, lets him use the equipment to build himself up; it’s healthy for him. This is the boy’s key. I keep the wine hidden in one of the lockers.“

„Ain’t this where Tony Andrada trains?“ I asked suspiciously. „Cause if it is, it ain’t no place for a nice girl. They is fighters and fighters, my child, and Tony is no credit to no business.“

„He’s always been a perfect gentleman towards me,“ she answered. „Of course I come here only occasionally when my brother is working out—“ She opened the door and we went in and then she shut it. To my slight surprise I heard the click as she locked it. She switched on a light and I seen her bending over something. Then she swung around and—*wow!*—I got the most unexpected, dumfounding surprise of my life to date! When she turned she had a heavy Indian club in both hands, and she heaved it up and crashed it down on my head with everything she had behind it!

Well, I was so utterly dumfounded I just stood and gaped at her, and Mike, he nearly had a fit. I’d always taught him never to bite a woman, and he just didn’t know what to do. Gloria was staring at me with eyes that looked like they was going to jump right out of her head. She glanced down at the broken fragments of the Indian club in a kind of stunned way, and then the color all ebbed out of her face, leaving her white as a ghost.

„That’s a nice way to do a friend!“ I said reproachfully. „I don’t mind a joke, but you’ve made me bite my tongue.“

She cringed back against the wall and held out both hands pitifully: „Don’t hit me!“ she cried, „please don’t hit me! I had to do it!“

Well, if I ever seen a scared girl, it was then. She was shaking in every limb.

„You don’t need to insult me on top of busting a club on my skull,“ I said with my quiet dignity. „I never hit no woman in my life and I ain’t figurin’ on it.“

All to once she began to cry. „Oh,“ said she, „I’m ashamed of myself. But please listen—I’ve lied to you. My brother is a fighter too, and he just about had

this fight with Red Roach, when the promoter at the American changed his mind and signed you up instead. This fight would have given us enough to get back to New Jersey where those cows are grazing by the babbling meadows. I—I—thought, when you told me you were the one that's going to fight Roach, I'd fix it so you wouldn't show up, and they'd have to use Billy—that's my brother—after all. I was going to knock you unconscious and tie you up till after the fight. Oh, I know you'll hate me, but I'm desperate. I'll die if I have to live this life much longer," she said passionately. And then she starts to bawl.

Well, I can't see as it was my fault, but I felt like a horse thief anyhow.

„Don't cry," I said. „I'd help you all I can, but I got all my jack sunk on the imbrolio to win by a k.o.“

She lifted her tear stained face. „Oh, Steve, you can help me! Just stay here with me! Don't show up at the Arena! Then Billy will get the fight and we can go home! Please, Steve, please, please, please!“

She had her arms around my neck and was fairly shaking me in her eagerness. Well, I admit I got a soft spot in my heart for the weaker sex, but gee whiz!

„Great cats, Gloria," I said, „I'd dive off the Statue uh Liberty for you, but I can't do this. My shipmates has got every cent they got bet on me. I can't throw 'em down that way.“

„You don't love me!" she mourned.

„Aw, I do too," I protested. „But dawg-gone it, Gloria, I just can't do it, and please don't coax me, 'cause it's like jerkin' a heart-string loose to say *No* to you. Wait a minute! I got a idee! You and your brother got some money saved up, ain't cha?“

„Yes, some," she sniffed, dabbing at her eyes with a foolish little lace handkerchief.

„Well, listen," I said, „you can double it—sink every cent you got on me to win by a kayo! It'll be a cinch placin' the dough. Everybody on the waterfront's bettin' one way or the other.“

„But what if you lose?" said she.

„Me lose?" I snorted. „Don't make me laugh! You do that—and I can't stay another minute, kid—I'm due at the Arena right now. And say, I'll have some dough myself after the battle, and I'm goin' to help you and your brother get back to them green cows and babblin' farm houses. Now I got to go!“

And before she had time to say another word, I kicked the lock off the door, being in too big a hurry to have her unlock it, and the next second me and Mike was sprinting for the Arena.

I found Bill tearing his hair and walking the dressing room floor.

„Here you are at last, are you, you blankety-blank mick diphthong!" he yelled blood-thirstily. „Where you been? You want to make a nervous wreck outa me? You realize you been committin' the one unpardonable sin, by keepin' the crowd waitin' for fifteen minutes? They're yellin' bloody murder and the crew which is all out front in ringside seats, has been throwin' chairs at the RUFFIAN's men which has been howlin' you'd run out on us. The promoter says if you ain't in that ring in five minutes, he'll run in a substitute.“

„And I'll run him into the bay," said I, sitting down and shucking my shoes. „I gotta get my wind back a little. Boy, we had Sven's girl down all wrong! She's a peach, as well as bein' a square-shootin'—“

„Shut up, and get into them trunks!“ howled Bill, doing a war-dance on the cap I'd just took off. „You'll never learn nothin'. Listen to that crowd! We'll be lucky if they don't lynch all of us!“

Well, the maddened fans was making a noise like a flock of hungry lions, but that didn't worry me none. I'd just got into my fighting togs when the door opened and the manager of the Arena stuck a pale face in.

„I got a man in place of Costigan—“ he began, when he saw me and stopped.

„Gangway!“ I snarled, and as I pushed by him, I saw a fellow in trunks coming out of another dressing room. To my amazement it was Tony Andrada, which even had his hands taped. His jaw fell when he seen me, and his manager, Abe Gold, give a howl. They was two other thugs with them— Salana and Joe Cromwell—I'd been in Honolulu enough to know them yeggs.

„What do you think you're doin' here?“ I snarled, facing Tony.

„They want me to fight Roach, when you run out—“ he begun.

Bill grabbed my arm as I was making ready to slug him. „For cats' sake!“ he snarled, „you can lick him after you flatten Roach if you want to! Come on!“

„It's mighty funny he should turn up, right at this time,“ I growled. „I thought Billy Flynn was to fight Roach if I didn't show up.“

„Who's Billy Flynn?“ asked Bill as he rushed me up the aisle between howling rows of infuriated fans.

„My new girl's kid brother,“ I answered as I clumb through the ropes. „If they've did anything to him, I'll—“

My meditations was drowned by the thunders of the mob, who give me cheers because I'd got there, and razzes because I hadn't got there sooner.

On one side of the ring the SEA GIRL's crew lifted the roof with their wild whoops and on the other side the RUFFIAN's roughnecks greeted me with coarse, rude squawks and impolite remarks.

Well, I glanced over to the opposite corner and saw Red Roach for the first, and I hope the last, time. He was tall and raw-boned, and the ugliest human I ever seen. He had freckles as big as mess pans all over him; his nose was flat, and his low slanting forehead was topped by a shock of the most scandalously red hair I ever looked at. When he rose from his stool I seen he was knock-kneed and when we came to the center of the ring to pretend to listen to instructions, I was disgusted to note that he was also cross-eyed. At first I thought he was counting the crowd, and it was slightly disconcerting to finally decide he was glaring at me!

We went back to our corners, the gong sounded, the scrap started and I got another jolt.

Roach come out, right foot and right hand forward. He was left-handed! I was so disgusted I come near lighting in and giving him a good cussing. Red-headed, cross-eyed—and left-handed! And he was the first good port-sider I'd ever met in a ring.

I forgot to say our weights was 190 for me, and 193 for him. In addition, he was six feet three, or just three inches taller'n me, and he musta had a reach of anyways fifteen fathoms. We was still so far apart I didn't think he could reach me with a pole when—*bam!* his right licked out to my chin. I give a roar and plunged in, meaning to make it a quick fight. I wanted to crush this inhuman freak before the sight of him got on my nerves and rattled me.

But I was all at sea. A left-hander does everything backwards. He leads with his right and crosses his left. He side-steps to the left instead of the right

ordinarily. This guy done everything a port-sider's supposed to do, and a lot more stuff he thought up for himself. He had a fast hard straight right and a wicked left swing—oh boy, how he could hit with that left! Seemed like every time I did anything, I got that right in the eye or the mouth or on the nose, and whilst I was thinking about that, *bam!* come the left and nearly ripped my head clean off.

The long, lanky mutt—it looked like if I ever landed solid I'd bust him in two. But I couldn't get past that long straight right. My swings were all short and his straight right beat my left hook every time. When I tried trading jabs with him, his extra reach ruint that—anyway, I'm a natural hooker. My straight left is got force, but it ain't as accurate as it should be.

At the end of the first round my right ear was nearly mangled. In the second frame he half closed my eye with a sizzling right hook, and opened a deep gash on my forehead. At the beginning of the third he dropped me for no-count with a left hook to the body that nearly caved me in. The RUFFIAN's crew was getting crazier every second and the SEA GIRL's gang was yelling bloody murder. But I wasn't worried. I'm used to more punishment than I was getting and I wasn't weakening any.

But dawg-gone it, it did make me mad not to be able to hit Roach. To date I hadn't landed a single solid punch. He was a clever boxer in his way, and his style woulda made Dempsey look like a one-armed paperhanger carryin' a bucket.

He managed to keep me at long range, and he belted me plenty, but it wasn't his speed nor his punch that kept me all at sea; it was his cruel and unusual appearance! Dawg-gone—them eyes of his nearly had me batty. I couldn't keep from looking at 'em. I tried to watch his waist-line or his feet, but every time my gaze wouldst wander back to his distorted optics. They had a kinda fatal attraction for me. Whilst I wouldst be trying to figure out where they was looking—*wham!* would come that left winging in from a entirely unexpected direction—and this continued.

Well, after arising from that knock-down in the third frame, I was infuriated. And after chasing him all around the ring, and getting only another black eye for my pains, I got desperate. With the round half a minute to go, I wowed the audience by closing both my eyes and tearing in, swinging wild and regardless.

He was pelting me plenty, but I didn't care; that visage of his wasn't upsetting all my calculations as long as I couldn't see it, and in a second I felt my left crash against what I knew to be a human jaw. Instantly the crowd went into hystericals and I opened my eyes and looked for the corpse.

My eyes rested on a recumbent figure, but it was not Red Roach. To my annoyance I realized that one of my blind swings had connected with the referee. At the same instant Roach's swinging left crashed against my jaw and I hit the canvas. But even as I went down I swung a wild dying effort right which sunk in just above Red's waistline. The round ended with all three of us on the canvas.

Our respective handlers dragged us to our corners, and somebody threwed a bucket of water on the referee, who was able to answer the gong with us battlers by holding on to the ropes.

Well, as I sat in my corner sniffing the smelling salts and watching Red's handlers massaging his suffering belly, I thought deeply, a very rare habit of mine while fighting. I do not believe in too much thinking; it gives a fighter the

headache. Still and all, with my jaw aching from Red's left and my eyes getting strained from watching his unholy face, I rubbed the nose Mike stuck into my glove, and meditated. A left-hander is a right-hander backwards. Nine times out of ten his straight right will beat your left jab. If you lead your right to a right-hander, he'll beat you to the punch with his left; but you can lead your right to a left-hander, because his left has as far to travel as your right.

So when we come out for the fourth round, instead of tearing in, I went in cautious-like for me, ignoring the yells of the RUFFIAN's crew that I was getting scared of their man. Red fainted with his right so clumsy even I knowed it was a feint and instantly shot my right with everything I had behind it. It beat his left swing and landed solid, but high. He staggered and I dropped him to his all fours with a whistling left hook under the heart. He was up at „Nine“ and caught me with a wild left swing as I rushed in. It dizzied me but I kept coming, and every time he made a motion with his left I shot my right. Sometimes I landed first and sometimes he did, and sometimes we landed simultaneous, but my smashes had the most kick behind them. Like most port-siders when they're groggy, he'd clean forgot he had a right hand and was staking everything on his left swing.

I battered him back across the ring, and he rallied and smashed over a sledge-hammer left hook that rocked me to my heels and made the blood spatter, but I bored right in with a sizzling left hook under the heart. He gasped, his knees buckled, then he steadied himself and shot over his left just as I crashed in with a right. *Bam!* Something exploded in my head, and then I heard the referee counting. To my chagrin I found I was on the canvas, but Roach was there too.

The still weaving and glassy-eyed referee was holding onto the ropes with one hand and counting over us both, but I managed to reel up at „Six!“ Me and Red had landed square to the button at just the same second, but my jaw was just naturally tougher than his. He hadn't twitched at „Ten“ and they had to carry him to his dressing room to bring him to.

Well, a few minutes' work on me with smelling salts, ammonia, sponges and the like made me as good as new. I couldn't hardly wait for Bill to dress my cuts with collodion, but the minute I got my clothes on and collected my winnings and bets from the bartender, who'd come to the ring under escort from both ships, I ducked out the back way. I even left Mike with Bill because he's always scrapping with some other dog on the streets and I was in a big hurry.

I was on my way to see if Gloria had followed my advice, also something else. One hundred and fifty bucks I won; with what I had that made three hundred. I got a hundred and fifty for the fracas. Altogether I had four hundred and fifty dollars all in greenbacks of large denomination in my jacket pocket. And I was going to give Gloria every cent of it, if she'd take it, so she could go back to New Jersey and the cows. This sure wasn't no place for a nice girl to be in, and I'll admit I indulged in some dreams as I hurried along—about the time I'd retire from the sea and maybe go into the dairy farming business in New Jersey.

I was headed for the Striped Cat, but on my way I passed Salana's gym, and I noticed that they was a light in one of the small rooms which served as a kind of office. As I passed the door I distinctly heard a voice I knowed was Gloria's. I stopped short and started to knock on the door, then something made me steal up close and listen—though I ain't a eavesdropper by nature. From the voices five people was in the room—Gloria, Salana, Abe Gold, Joe Cromwell, and Tony.

„Don't hand us no line, sister,“ Gold was saying in his nasty rasping voice. „You said leave it to you. Yeah, we did! And look what it got us! You was goin' to keep Costigan outa the way, so's we could run Tony in at the last minute. You know the promoter at the American was all set to match Tony with Roach when Costigan's ship docked and the big cheese changed his mind and matched the Mick instead, because the fool sailors wanted the scrap.

„Roach woulda been a spread for Tony, because the wop eats these port-siders up. The town sports know that, and they woulda sunk heavy on Tony. We was goin' to bet our shirts on Roach, and Tony would flop along about the third. Then we coulda all left this dump and gone to Australia.

„Well, we left it up to you to get rid of Costigan. And what does he do, I ask you? He walks in as big as you please, just when Tony was fixing to go in for him. I ask you!“

„Well, don't rag me,“ said Gloria in a voice which startled me, it was that hard, „I did my best. I got hold of a Swede aboard the Sea Girl and primed the big stiff proper. I stirred him up and sent him down to climb Costigan, thinking he'd bung the mick up so he couldn't come on tonight, or that Costigan would at least break his hands on him.

„But the harp flattened him without even spraining a thumb, and the first thing I knew, he was waiting for me outside the cabaret. I thought he'd come to smack me down for sicking the Swede on him, but the big slob had just come to tell me the square-head couldn't keep his date. Can you feature that? Well, he fell for me right off, naturally, and I got him into the gym here, intending to lay him cold and lock him up till after the fight. But say! That big mick must have a skull made of reinforced battleship steel! I shattered a five-pound Indian club over his dome without even making him bat his eyes!

„Well, I hope I never have a half-minute like that again! When I failed to even stagger him with that clout, I thought I was a gone goose! I had visions of him twisting my head off and feeding it to that ugly cannibal he calls his bulldog.

„But you can't tell about those tough looking sluggers like him. He didn't even offer to lay a hand on me, and when I got my second wind, I spun him a yarn about having a kid brother that needed this fight to get back home. He fell for it so easy that I thought I could coax him to run out on his own accord, but he balked there. All he'd do was to advise me to bet on him, and then all at once he said it was time for him to be at the stadium, and he busted right out through the door and took it on the lam, making some crack about coming back after the fight.“

„A fine mess you've made!“ sneered Salana. „You've gummed things up proper! We had everything set for a killing—“

„A high class brand of sports you are!“ she snapped. „I'm ashamed to be seen with you, you cheap grafters! A big killing! You don't know what one is. Anyway, what do you want me to do, cry?“

„We want you to give back that hundred we paid you in advance,“ snarled Salana, „and if you don't, you'll cry plenty.“

„And I guess you think I risk my life for such cheap welchers as you for nothing?“ she sneered. „Not one cent—“

There was the sound of a blow and Gloria give a short, sharp cry which was cut short in a sort of gasp.

„Give her the works, Joe,“ Salana snarled. „You can't cross me, you little—!“

Never mind what he called her. I'd have half killed him for that alone. I tore the door clean off the hinges as I went through it, and I seen a sight that made a red mist wave in front of me so everything in that room looked bloody and grim.

Salana had Gloria down on a chair and was twisting both her arms up behind her back till it looked like they'd break. Joe Cromwell had the fingers of his left hand sunk deep in her white throat and his right drew back to smash in her face. Tony and Abe Gold was looking on with callous, contemptuous sneers.

They all turned to look as the door crashed in, and I saw Salana go white as I give one roar and went into action. He turned loose of the girl, but before he could get his hands up, I crashed him with a left-hander that crushed his nose and knocked out four teeth, and my next smash tore Joe Cromwell's ear loose and left it hanging by a shred. Another of the same sort stood him on his head in a corner with a cracked jaw-bone, and almost simultaneous Abe Gold barely missed me with a pair of brass knuckles, and Tony landed hard on my ear. But I straightened with a right-hander that dropped Gold across Salana with three broken ribs, and missed a left swing that wouldst of decapitated Tony hadst it landed.

I ain't one of these fellows which has to be crazy mad to put up a good fight, but when I am crazy mad, they's no limit to the destruction I can hand out. Maybe in the ring, under ordinary circumstances, Tony could of cut me to ribbons, but here he never had a chance. I didn't even feel the punches he was raining on me, and after missing a flock of swings in a row, I landed under his jaw with a hay-making right-hander that I brought up from the floor. Tony turned a complete somersault in the air, and when he come down his head hit the wall with a force that laid his scalp open and wouldst of knocked him cold, if he hadn't already been unconscious before he landed.

Maybe a minute and a half after I busted through the door, I stood alone in the middle of the carnage, panting and glaring down at the four silent figures which littered the room. All I craved was for all the other yeggs in Honolulu to come busting in. Pretty soon I looked around for Gloria and saw her cringing in a corner like she was trying to flatten herself out against the wall. She was white-faced and her eyes was blazing with terror.

She give a kind of hunted cry when I looked at her. „Don't! Please, don't!“

„Please don't what?“ I snapped in some irritation. „Ain't you learned by this time that I don't clout frails? I come in here to rescue you from these gypes, and you insult me!“

„Forgive me,“ she begged. „I can't help but be a little afraid of you—you look so much like a gorilla—“

„What!“

„I mean you're such a terrible fighter,“ she hastily amended. „Come on—let's get out of here before these welchers come to.“

„Would that they wouldst,“ I brooded. „What I done to 'em was just a sample of what I'm goin' to do to 'em. Dawg-gone it, some of these days somebody's goin' to upset my temper, then I'll lose control of myself and hurt somebody.“

Well, we went out on the street, which was mostly deserted and rather dimly lighted, and Gloria said pretty soon: „Thank you for rescuing me. If my brother had been there—“

„Gloria,“ I said wearily, „ain't you ever goin' to stop lyin'? I was outside the door and heard it all.“

„Oh,“ said she.

„Well,“ I said, „I reckon I'm a fool when it comes to women. I thought I was stuck on you, and didn't have sense enough to know you was stringin' me. Why, I even brung the four hundred and fifty bucks I won, intendin' to give it to you.“

And so saying I threw out the wad of bills, waved it reproachfully in front of her eyes and replaced it in my jacket pocket. All at once she started crying.

„Oh, Steve, you make me ashamed of myself! You're so fine and noble—“

„Well,“ I said with my quiet dignity, „I know it, but I can't help it. It's just my nature.“

„I'm so ashamed,“ she sobbed. „There's no use lying; Salana paid me a hundred dollars to get you out of the way. But, Steve, I'm changing my ways right here! I'm not asking you to forgive me, because I guess it's too much to ask, and you've done enough for me. But I'm going home tomorrow. That stuff I told you about the dairy farm in New Jersey was the only thing I told you that wasn't a lie. I'm going home and live straight, and I want to kiss you, just once, because you've showed me the error of my ways.“

And so saying, she threw her arms around me and kissed me vigorously—and me not objectin' in no manner.

„I'm going back to the old, pure simple life,“ she said. „Back to the green meadows and babbling cows!“

And she made off down the street at a surprising rate of speed. I watched her go and a warm glow spread over me. After all, I thought, I do know women, and the hardest of them is softened by the influence of a strong, honest, manly heart like mine.

She vanished around a corner and I turned back toward the Hibernian Bar, at the same time reaching for my bank roll. Then I give a yell that woke up everybody in that section of Honolulu with cold sweat standing out on them. Now I knowed why she wanted to put her arms around me. My money was gone! She loved me—she loved me not!

