
The Slugger's Game

by

Robert E. Howard

I WAS BROODING over my rotten luck in the Sweet Dreams bar on the Hong Kong waterfront, when in come that banana peel on the steps of progress, Smoky Jones. I ain't got no use for Smoky, and he likes me just about as much. But he is broad-minded, as he quickly showed.

"Quick!" quoth he. "Lemme have fifty bucks, Steve."

"Why shouldst I loan you fifty smackers?" I demanded.

"I got a sure-fire tip," he yipped, jumping up and down with impatience. "A hundred-to-one shot which can't lose! You'll get back your dough tomorrer. C'mon, kick in."

"If I had fifty bucks," I returned bitterly, "do you think I'd be wasting my time in a port which don't appreciate no fistic talent?"

"What?" hollered Smoky. "No fifty bucks? After all I've did for you?"

"Well, I can't help it if these dopey promoters won't gimme a fight, can I?" I said fiercely. "Fifty bucks! Fifty bucks would get me to Singapore, where I can always talk myself into a scrap. I'm stuck here with my white bulldog, Mike, and can't even get a ship to sign on. If I don't scam away from here soon, I'll be on the beach, and you demands fifty bucks!"

A number of men at the bar was listening to our altercation with great interest, and one of 'em, a big, tough-looking guy, bust into a loud guffaw, and said: "Blimey! If the regular promoters turn you down, mate, why don't you try Li Yun?"

"What d'you mean?" I demanded suspiciously.

All the others was grinning like jassacks eating prickly pears.

"Well," he said, with a broad smirk, "Li Yun runs a small menagerie to cover his real business which is staging animal fights, like mongooses and cobras, and pit-terriers, and game-cocks. He's got a big gorilla he ought to sign you up with. I'd like to see the bloody brawl myself; with that pan of yours, it'd be like twin brothers fighting."

"Lissen here, you," I said, rising in righteous wrath--I never did like a limey much anyhow--"I may have a mug like a gorilla, but I figger your'n could be improved some--like this!"

And so saying, I rammed my right fist as far as it would go into his mouth. He reeled and come back bellowing like a typhoon. We traded some lusty swats and then clinched and went head-long into the bar, which splintered at our impact, and the swinging lamp fell down from the ceiling. It busted on the floor, and you should of heard them fellers holler when the burning ile splashed down their necks. Everything was dark in there, and some was scrambling out of winders and doors, and some was stomping out the fire, and somehow me and my opponent got tore loose from each other in the rush.

My eyes was full of smoke, but as I groped around I felt a table-leg glance off my head, so I made a grab and got hold of a human torso. So I throwed him and fell on him and begun to maul him. I musta softened him considerable already, I thought, because he felt a lot flabbier than he done before, and he was hollering a lot louder. Then somebody struck a light, and I found I was hammering the fat Dutch bartender. The limey was gone, and somebody hollered the cops was coming. So I riz and fled out the back way in disgust. That limey had had the last lick, and it's a p'int of honor with me to have the last lick myself. I hunted him for half a hour, aiming to learn him to hit a man with a table-leg and then run, but I didn't find him.

Well, my clothes was singed and tore, so I headed for my boarding-house, the Seamen's Delight, which was down on the waterfront and run by a fat half-caste. He was lying in the hall dead-drunk as usual, and I was glad because when he was sober he was all the time bellyaching about my board bill. Didn't seem to be nobody else in the house.

I went upstairs to my room and opened the door, calling Mike. But Mike didn't come, and I smelt a peculiar smell in the air. I smelt that same smell once when some crimps tried to shanghai me. And the room was empty. My bed was still warm where Mike had been curled up on it, sleeping, but he was gone. I started to go outside and call him, when I seen a note stuck to the wall. I read it and turned cold all over.

It said:

If you want to ever see yure dog agane leeve fifty dolers in the tin can outside the alley dore of the Bristol Bar at the stroak of leven-thirty tonight. Put the money in the can and go back in the sloon and cloase the dore. Count a hunderd and then you will find yure dog in the ally.

--A Man What Meens Bizziness.

I run downstairs and shook the landlord and hollered: "Who's been here since I been gone?"

But all he done was grunt and mutter: "Fill 'er up again, Joe!"

I give him a hearty kick in the pants and run out on the street, plumb distracted. Me and Mike has kicked around together for years; he's saved my worthless life a dozen times. Mike is about the only difference between me and a bum. I don't give a cuss what people think about me, but I always try to conduct myself so my dog won't be ashamed of me. And now some dirty mug had stole him and I hadn't no dough to buy him back.

I sot down on the curb and held my throbbing head and tried to think, but the more I thought, the more mixed up things got. When I'm up against something I can't maul with my fists, I'm plumb off my course and no chart to steer by. Finally I riz up and sot out at a run for the Quiet Hour Arena. They was a fight card on that night, and though I'd already tried to get signed up and been turned down by the promoter, in my desperation I thought I'd try again. I intended appealing to his better nature, if he had one.

From the noise which issued from the building as I approached, I knowed the fights had already started, and my heart sunk, but I didn't know nothing else to try. The back door was locked, but I give it a kind of tug and it come off the hinges and I went in.

They was nobody in sight in the narrer hallway running between the dressing-rooms, but as I run up the hall, a door opened and a big man come out in a bathrobe, follered by a feller with towels and buckets. The big man ripped out a oath and throwed out his arm to stop me. It was the limey I'd fit in the Sweet Dreams bar.

"So that table-leg didn't do the business, eh?" he inquired nastily. "Looking for another dose of the same, are you?"

"I got no time to fight you now," I muttered, trying to crowd past him. "I'm lookin' for Bisly, the promoter."

"What you shaking about?" he sneered, and I seen he had his hands taped. "Why are you so pale and sweating? Scared of me, eh? Well, I'm due up in that ring right now, but first I'm going to polish you off, you Yankee swine!" And with that he give me a open-handed swipe across the face.

I dunno when anybody ever dared _slap_ me. For a second everything floated in a crimson haze. I dunno what kind of a lick I handed that Limey ape. I don't even remember hitting him. But I must of, because when I could see again, there he was on the floor, with his jaw split open from the corner of his mouth to the rim of his chin, and his head gashed where it hit the door jamb.

The handler was trying to hide under a bench, and somebody else was hollering like he had a knife stuck in him. It was the promoter of the joint, and he was jumping up and down like a cat on a red-hot hatch.

"What 'ave you done?" he squalled. "Oh, blimey, what _'ave_ you done? A packed 'ouse

'owlin' for h'action, and one of the principals wyting in the bleedin' ring--and 'ere you've lyed out the other! Oh, my 'at! What a bloody go!"

"You mean this here scut was goin' to fight in the main event?" I asked stupidly, because my head was still going around.

"What else?" he howled. "Ow, murder! What am I to do?"

"Well, you limeys certainly stick together," I said. And then a vast light dazzled me. I gasped with the force of the idea which had just hit me, so to speak. I laid hold on Bisly so forcibly he squealed, thinking I was attacking him.

"How much you payin' this rat?" I demanded, shaking him in my urgency.

"Fifty dollars, winner tyke all!" he moaned.

"Then I'm your man!" I roared, releasing him so vi'lently he sprawled his full length on the floor. "You been refusin' to let me fight in your lousy club account of your prejudice against Americans, but this time you ain't got no choice! That mob out there craves gore, and if they don't see some, they'll tear down your joint! Lissen at 'em!"

He done so, and shuddered at the ferocious yells with which the house was vibrating. The crowd was tired of waiting and was demanding action in the same tone them old Roman crowds used when they yelped for another batch of gladiators to be tossed to the lions.

"You want to go out there and tell 'em the main event's called off?" I demanded.

"No! No!" he said hastily, mopping his brow with a shaky hand. "Have you got togs and a handler?"

"I'll get 'em," I answered. "Hop out there and tell them mugs that the main event will go on in a minute!"

So he went out like a man going to keep a date with the hangman, and I turned to the feller which was still trying to wedge hisself under the bench--a dumb cluck hired by the club to scrub floors and second fighters which didn't have none theirselves. I handed him a hearty kick in the rear, and sternly requested, "Come out here and help me with this stiff!"

He done so in fear and trembling, and we packed the limey battler into his dressing-room, and laid him on a table. He was beginning to show some faint signs of life. I took off his bathrobe and togs and clamb into 'em myself, whilst the handler watched me in a kind of pallid silence.

"Pick up them buckets and towels," I commanded. "I don't like your looks, but you'll

have to do. Any handler is better'n none--and the best is none too good. Come on!"

Follered close by him, I hurried into the arener to be greeted by a ferocious uproar as I come swinging down the aisle. Bisly was addressing 'em, and I caught the tag-end of his remarks which went as follows: "--and so, if you gents will be pytient, Battler Pembroke will be ready for the gog in a moment--in fact, 'ere 'e comes now!"

And so saying, Bisly skipped down out of the ring and disappeared. He hadn't had nerve enough to tell 'em that a substitution had been made. They glanced at me, and then they glared, with their mouths open, and then, just as I reached the ring, a big stoker jumped and roared: _"You_ ain't Battler Pembroke! At him, mates--!"

I clouted him on the button and he done a nose-dive over the first row ringside. I then faced the snarling crowd, expanding my huge chest and glaring at 'em from under my battered brows, and I roared: "Anybody else thinks I ain't Battler Pembroke?"

They started surging towards me, growling low in their throats, but they glanced at my victim and halted suddenly, and crowded back from me. With a snort of contempt, I turned and clamb into the ring. My handler clumb after me and commenced to massage my legs kind of dumb-like. He was one of these here sap-heads, and things was happening too fast for him to keep up with 'em.

"What time is it?" I demanded, and he pulled out his watch, looked at it carefully, and said, "Five minutes after ten."

"I got well over a hour," I muttered, and glanced at my opponent in the oppersite corner. I knowed he must be popular, from the size of the purse; most performers at the Quiet Hour got only ten bucks apiece, win, lose or draw, and generally had to lick the promoter to get that. He was well built, but pallid all over, with about as much expression as a fish. They was something familiar about him, but I couldn't place him.

The crowd was muttering and growling, but the announcer was a stolid mutt which didn't have sense enough to be afraid of anybody, even the customers which frequents the Quiet Hour. To save time, he announced whilst the referee was giving the usual instructions, and said he: "In that corner, Sailor Costigan, weight--"

"Where's Pembroke?" bellered the crowd. "That ain't Pembroke! That's a bloody Yankee, the low-lifed son of a canine!"

"Nevertheless," said the announcer, without blinking, "he weighs one-ninety; and the other blighter is Slash Jackson, of Cardiff; weight, one-eighty-nine."

The maddened mob frothed and commenced throwing things, but then the gong clanged and they calmed down reluctantly to watch the show, like a fight crowd will. After all, what they want is a fight.

At the whang of the gong I tore out of my corner with the earnest ambition of finishing that fight with the first punch, if possible. It was my intention to lay my right on his jaw, and I made no secret of it. I scorn deception. If he'd ducked a split second slower, the scrap would of ended right there.

But I didn't pause to meditate. I sent my left after my right, and he grunted poignantly as it sunk under his heart. Then his right flicked up at my jaw, and from the way it cut the air as it whistled past, I knowed it was loaded with dynamite. Giving him no time to get set, I slugged him back across the ring and into the ropes on the other side. The crowd screamed blue murder, but I wasn't hurting him as much as they thought, or as much as I wanted to. He was clever at rolling with a punch, and he was all elbows. Nor he wasn't too careful where he put 'em, neither. He put one in my stummick and t'other'n in my eye, which occasioned some bitter profanity on my part. He also stomped heartily on my insteps.

Little things like them is ignored in the Quiet Hour; the audience merely considers 'em the spice of the sport, and the referee is above noticing 'em.

But I was irritated, and in my eagerness to break Jackson's neck with a swinging overhand punch, I exposed myself to his right, which licked out again like the flipper of a seal. I just barely managed to duck it, and it ripped the skin off my chin as it grazed me. And as I stabbed him off balance with a straight left to the mouth, that peculiar lick of his set me to wondering again, because it reminded me of something, I couldn't remember what.

He now brung his left into play with flashy jabs and snappy hooks, but it didn't pack the power his right did, and all he done was to cut my lips a little. He kept his right cocked, but I was watching it, and when he shot it again I went inside it and battered away at his midriff with both hands. He was steel springs and whale-bone under his white skin, but he didn't like 'em down below. He was backing and breaking ground when the gong ended the round.

I sunk onto my stool in time to receive a swipe across the eyes with the towel my handler was trying to fan me with, and whilst I was shaking the stars out of my vision, he emptied a whole bucket of ice water over my head. This was wholly unnecessary, as I p'inted out to him with free and fervent language, but he had a one-track mind. He'd probably seen a fighter doused thusly, and thought it had to be did, whether the fighter needed it or not.

I was still remonstrating with him concerning his dumbness when the bell rung, and as a result, Jackson, who shot out of his corner like a catapult, caught me before I could get into the center of the ring, shooting his left and throwing his right after it. Zip! It come through the air like a hammer on a steel spring!

I side-stepped and ripped my left to his midriff. He gasped and staggered, and I set myself like a flash and throwed my right at his head with all my beef behind it. But I'd forgot I was standing where the canvas was soaked with the water my dumb handler had

poured over me. My foot slipped on a sliver of ice just as I let go my swing, and before I could recover myself, that T.N.T. right licked out, and this time it didn't miss.

Jerusha! It wasn't like being hit by a human being. I felt like a fire-works factory hadst exploded in my skull. I seen comets and meteors and sky-rockets, and somebody was trying to count the stars as they flew past. Then things cleared a little bit, and I realized it was the referee which was counting, and he was counting over me.

I was on my belly in the resin, and bells seemed to be ringing all over the house. I could'st hardly hear the referee for 'em, but he said "Nine!" so I riz. That's a habit of mine. I make a speciality of getting up. I have got up off the floor of rings from Galveston to Shanghai.

My legs wasn't exactly right--one had a tendency to steer south by west, while the other'n wanted to go due east--and I had a dizzy idee that a typhoon was raging outside. I could'st hear the waters rising and the winds roaring, but realized that it was my own ears ringing after that awful clout.

Jackson was on me like a hunting panther, just about as light and easy. He was too anxious to use his right again. He thought I was out on my feet and all he had to do was to hit me. Any old-timer could of told him that leading to me with his right, whether I was groggy or not, was violating a rule of safety which is already becoming a ring tradition.

He simply cocked his right and let it go, and I beat it with a left hook to the body. He turned kinda green in the face, like anybody is liable to which has just had a iron fist sunk several inches into their belly. And before he could strike again, I fell into him and hugged him like a grizzly.

I knowed him now! They wasn't but one man in the world with a right-hand clout like that--Torpedo Willoughby, the Cardiff Murderer. Whiskey and women kept him from being a champ, and kept him broke so much he often performed in dumps like the Quiet Hour under a assumed name, but he was a mankiller, the worst England ever produced.

I shook the blood and sweat outa my eyes, and took my time about coming out of that clinch, and when the referee finally broke us, I was ready. Willoughby come slugging in, and I crouched and covered up, weaving always to his left, and hooking my left to his ribs and belly. My left carried more dynamite than his left did, and I didn't leave no openings for that blasting right. I didn't tin-can; I dunno how and wouldn't if I could. But I retired into my shell whilst pounding his mid-section, and he got madder and madder, and flailed away with that right fiercer than ever. But it was glancing off my arms and the top of my head, and my left was digging into his guts deeper and deeper. It ain't a spectacular way of battling, but it gets results in the long run.

I was purty well satisfied at the end of that round. Fighting like I was didn't give Willoughby no chance to blast me, and eventually he was going to weaken under my

body-battering. It might take five or six rounds, but the bout was scheduled for fifteen frames, and I had plenty of time.

But that don't mean I was happy as I sot in my corner whilst my handler squirted lemon juice in my eye, trying to moisten my lips, and give me a long, refreshing drink of iodine in his brainless efforts to daub a cut on my chin. I was thinking of Mike, and a chill trickled down my spine as I wondered what them devils which stole him wouldst do to him if the money wasn't in the tin can at exactly eleven-thirty.

"What time is it?" I demanded, and my handler hauled out his watch and said, "Five minutes after ten."

"That's what you said before!" I howled in exasperation. "Gimme that can!"

I grabbed it and glared, and then I shook it. It wasn't running. It didn't even sound like they was any works inside of it. Stricken by a premonishun, I yelled to the referee, "What time is it?"

He glanced at his watch. "Seconds out!" he said, and then: "Fifteen minutes after eleven!"

Fifteen minutes to go! Cold sweat bust out all over me, and I jumped up offa my stool so suddenly my handler fell backwards through the ropes. _Fifteen minutes!_ I couldn't take no five or six rounds to lick Willoughby! I had to do it in this round if winning was going to do me any good.

I throwed all my plans to the winds. I was trembling in every limb and glaring across at Willoughby, and when he met the glare in my eyes he stiffened and his muscles tensed. He sensed the change in me, though he couldn't know why; he knowed the battle was to be to the death.

The gong whanged and I tore out of my corner like a typhoon, to kill or be killed. I'm always a fighter of the iron-man type. When I'm nerved up like I was then, the man ain't born which can stop me. There wasn't no plan or plot or science about that round--it was just raw, naked, primitive manhood, sweat and blood and fists flailing like mallets without a second's let-up.

I tore in, swinging like a madman, and in a second Willoughby was fighting for his life. The blood spattered and the crowd roared and things got dim and red, and all I seen was the white figger in front of me, and all I knowed was to hit and hit and keep hitting till the world ended.

I dunno how many times I was on the canvas.

Every time he landed solid with that awful right I went down like a butchered ox. But every time I come up again and tore into him more furious than ever. I was crazy with

fear, like a man in a nightmare, thinking of Mike and the minutes that was slipping past.

His right was the concentrated essence of hell. Every time it found my jaw I felt like my skull was caved in and every vertebrae of my spine was dislocated. But I'm used to them sensations. They're part of the slugger's game. Let these here classy dancing-masters quit when their bones begins to melt like wax, and their brains feels like they was being jolted loose from their skull. A slugger lowers his head and wades in again. That's his game. His ribs may be splintered in on his vitals, and his guts may be mashed outa place, and his ears may be streaming blood from veins busted inside his skull, but them things don't matter; the important thing is winning.

No white man ever hit me harder'n Torpedo Willoughby hit me, but I was landing too, and every time I sunk a mauler under his heart or smashed one against his temple, I seen him wilt. If he could of took it like he handed it out, he'd been champeen. But at last I seen his pale face before me with his lips open wide as he gulped for air, and I knowed I had him, though I was hanging to the ropes and the crowd was yelling for the kill. They couldn't see the muscles in his calves quivering, nor his belly heaving, nor the glaze in his eyes. They couldn't understand that he'd hammered me till his shoulder muscles was dead and his gloves was like they was weighted with lead, and the heart was gone out of him. All they couldst see was me, battered and bloody, clinging to the ropes, and him cocking his right for the finisher.

It come over, slow and ponderous, and glanced from my shoulder as I lurched off the ropes. And my own right smashed like a caulking mallet against his jaw, and down he went, face-first in the resin.

When they fall like that, they don't get up. I didn't even wait to hear the referee count him out. I run across the ring, getting stronger at every step, tore off my gloves and held out my hand for my bathrobe. My gaping handler put the sponge in it.

I throwed it in his face with a roar of irritation, and he fell outa the ring headfirst into a water bucket, which put the crowd in such a rare good humor that they even cheered as I run down the aisle, and not over a dozen empty beer bottles was throwed at me.

Bisly was waiting in the corridor, and I grabbed the fifty bucks outa his hand as I went by on the run. He follered me into the dressing-room and offered to help me put on my clothes, but knowing he hoped to steal my wad whilst helping me, I throwed him out bodily, jerked on my street clothes, and sallied forth at top speed.

The Bristol Bar was a low-class dive down on the edge of the native quarters. It took me maybe five minutes to get there, and a clock behind the bar showed me that it lacked about a minute and a fraction of eleven-thirty.

"Tony," I panted to the bartender, who gaped at my bruised and bloody face, "I want the back room to myself. See that nobody disturbs me."

I run to the back door and throwed it open. It was dark in the alley, but I seen a empty tobacco tin setting close to the door. I quickly wadded the money into it, stepped into the room and shut the door. I reckon somebody was hiding in the alley watching, because as soon as I shut the door, I heard a stirring around out there. I didn't look. I wasn't taking no chances on them doing anything to Mike.

I heard the tin scrape against the stones, and they was silence whilst I hurriedly counted up to a hundred. Then I jerked open the door, and joyfully yelled: "_Mike!"_ They was no reply. The tin can was gone, but Mike wasn't there.

Cold, clammy sweat bust out all over me, and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I rushed down the alley like a wild man, and just before I reached the street, where a dim street-lamp shone, I fell over something warm and yielding which groaned and said: "Oh, my head!"

I grabbed it and dragged it into the light, and it was Smoky Jones. He had a lump on his head and the tin can in his hand, but it was empty.

I must of went kinda crazy then. Next thing I knowed I had Smoky by the throat, shaking him till his eyes crossed, and I was mouthing, "What you done with Mike, you dirty gutter rat? _Where is he?"_

His hands were waving around, and I seen he couldn't talk. His face was purple and his eyes and tongue stuck out remarkable. So I eased up a bit, and he gurgled, "I dunno!"

"You do know!" I roared, digging my thumbs into his unwashed neck. "You was the one which stole him. You wanted that fifty bucks to bet on a horse. I see it all, now. It's so plain even a dumb mutt like me can figure it out. You got the money--where's Mike?"

"I'll tell you everything," he gasped. "Lemme up, Steve. You're chockin' me to death. Lissen--it was me which stole Mike. I snuck in and doped him and packed him off in a sack. But I didn't aim to hurt him. All I wanted was the fifty. I figgered you could raise it if you had to ... I'd taken Mike to Li Yun's house, to hide him. We put him in a cage before he come to--that there dog is worse'n a tiger ... I was to hide in the alley till you put out the dough, and meanwhile one of Li Yun's Chinees was to bring Mike in a auto, and wait at the mouth of the alley till I got the money. Then, if everything was OK, we was going to let the dog out into the alley and beat it in the car.... Well, whilst I hid in the alley I seen the Chinees drive up and park in the shadows like we'd agreed, so I signalled him and went on after the dough. But as I come up the alley with the money, _wham!_ that double-crossin' heathen riz up out of the dark and whacked me with a blackjack. And now he's gone and the auto's gone and the fifty bucks is gone!"

"And where's Mike?" I demanded.

"I dunno," he said. "I doubt if that Chinees ever brung him here at all. Oh, my head!" he said, holding onto his skull.

"That ain't a scratch to what I'm goin' to do to you when you get recovered," I promised him. "Where at does Li Yun live at?"

"In that old warehouse down near the wharf the natives call the Dragon Pier," said Smoky. "He's fixed up some rooms for livin' quarters, and--"

That was all I wanted to know. The next second I was headed for the Dragon Pier. I run down alleys, crossed dark courts, turned off the narrer side street that runs to the wharf, ducked through a winding alley, and come to the back of the warehouse I was looking for. As I approached, I seen a back door hanging open; and a light shining through.

I didn't hesitate, but bust through with both fists cocked. Then I stopped short. They was nobody there. It was a great big room, electrically lighted, with a switch on the wall, and purty well fixed up generally. Leastways it had been. But now it was littered with busted tables and splintered chairs, and there was blood and pieces of silk on the floor. They had been some kind of a awful fight in there, and my heart was in my mouth when I seen a couple of empty cages. There was white dog hair scattered on the floor, and some thick darkish hair in big tufts that couldn't of come from nothing but a gorilla.

I looked at the cages. One was a bamboo cage, and some of the bars had been gnawed in two. The lock on the steel cage was busted from the inside. It didn't take no detective to figger out what had happened. Mike had gnawed his way out of the bamboo cage and the gorilla had busted out of his cage to get at him. But where was they now? Was the Chinees and their gorilla chasing poor old Mike down them dark alleys, or had they took his body off to dispose of it after the gorilla had finished him?

I felt weak and sick and helpless; Mike is about the only friend I got. Then things begun to swim red around me again. They was one table in that room yet unbusted. I attended to that. They was no human for me to lay hands on, and I had to wreck something.

Then a inner door opened and a fat white man with a cigar in his mouth stuck his head in and stared at me.

"What was that racket?" he said. "Hey, who are you? Where's Li Yun?"

"That's what I want to know," I snarled. "Who are you?"

"Name's Wells, if it's any of your business," he said, coming on into the room. His belly bulged out his checked vest, and his swagger put my teeth on edge.

"What a mess!" he said, flicking the ashes offa his cigar in a way which made me want to kill him. It's the little things in life which causes murder. "Where the devil is Li Yun? The crowd's gettin' impatient."

"Crowd?" I interrogated. As I spoke, it seemed like I did hear a hum up towards the front

of the building.

"Why," he said, "the crowd which has come to watch the battle between Li Yun's gorilla and the fightin' bull-dog."

"Huh?" I gawped.

"Sure," he said. "Don't you know about it? It's time to start now. I'm Li Yun's partner. I finances these shows. I've been up at the front of the buildin', sellin' tickets. Thought I heard a awful racket back here awhile ago, but was too busy haulin' in the dough to come back and see. What's happened, anyhow? Where's the Chinees and the animals? Huh?"

I give a harsh, rasping laugh that made him jump. "I see now," I said betwixt my teeth. "Li Yun wanted Mike for his dirty fights. He seen a chance to make fifty bucks and stage a show too. So he double-crossed Smoky, and--"

"Go find Li Yun!" snapped Wells, biting off the end of another cigar. "That crowd out there is gettin' mad, and they're the scrapin's off the docks. Hurry up, and I'll give you half a buck--"

I then went berserk. All the grief and fury which had been seething in me exploded and surged over like hot lava out of a volcano. I give one yell, and went into action.

"Halp!" hollered Wells. "He's gone crazy!" He grabbed for a gun, but before he could draw I caught him on the whiskers with a looping haymaker and he done a classy cart-wheel head-on into the wall. The back of his skull hit the light-switch so hard it jolted it clean outa the brackets, and the whole building was instantly plunged in darkness. I felt around till my groping hands located a door, and I ripped it open and plunged recklessly down a narrer corridor till I hit another door with my head so hard I split the panels. I jerked it open and lunged through.

I couldn't see nothing, but I felt the presence of a lot of people. They was a confused noise going up, a babble of Chinese and Malay and Hindu, and some loud cussing in English and German. Somebody bawled, "Who turned out them lights? Turn on the lights! How can we see the scrap without no lights?"

Somebody else hollered, "They've turned the animals into the cage! I hear 'em!"

Everybody begun to cuss and yell for lights, and I groped forward until I was stopped by iron bars. Then I knowed where I was. That corridor I'd come through served as a kind of chute or runway into the big cage where the fights was fit. I reached through the bars, groped around and found a key sticking in the lock of the cage door. I give a yell of exultation which riz above the clamor, turned the key, throwed open the door and come plunging out. Them rats enjoyed a fight, hey? Well, I aimed they shouldn't be disappointed. Two men fighting for money, of their own free will, is one thing. Making a couple of inoffensive animals butcher each other just for the amusement of a gang of

wharf rats is another'n.

I came out of that cage crazy-mad and flailing with both fists. Somebody grunted and dropped, and somebody else yelled, "Hey, who hit me?" and then the whole crowd began to mill and holler and strike out wild at random, not knowing what it was all about. It was a regular bedlam, with me swinging in the dark and dropping a man at each slam, and then a window got busted, and as I moved across a dim beam of light which come through, one guy give a frantic yell, "Run! Run! _The griller's loose!" _

At that, hell bust loose. Everybody stampeded, screaming and hollering and cussing and running over each other, and me in the middle of 'em, slugging right and left.

"You all wants a fight, does you?" I howled. "Well, here's some to tote home with you!"

They hit the door like a herd of steers and splintered it and went storming through, them which was able to storm. Some had been stomped in the rush, and plenty had stopped my iron fists in the dark. I come ravin' after 'em. Just because them rats wanted to see gore spilt--by somebody else--Mike, my only friend in the Orient, had to be sacrificed. I could of kilt 'em all.

Well, they streamed off down the street in full cry, and as I emerged, I fell over a innocent passerby which had been knocked down by the stampede. By the time I riz, they was out of my reach, though the sounds of their flight come back to me.

The fire of my rage died down to ashes. I felt old and sick and worn out. I wasn't young no more, and Mike was gone. I stooped to pick up the man I had fell over, idly noticing that he was a English captain whose ship was tied up at a nearby wharf, discharging cargo.

"Say," he said, gasping to get his breath back, "aren't you Steve Costigan?"

"Yeah," I admitted, without enthusiasm.

"Good!" he said. "I was looking for you. They told me it was your dog."

I sighed. "Yeah," I said. "A white bulldog that answered to the name of Mike. Where'd you find his body?"

"Body?" he said. "My word! The bally brute has been pursuing four Chinamen and a bloody gorilla up and down the docks for half an hour, and now he has them treed in the rigging of my ship, and I want you to come and call him off. Can't have that, you know!"

"Good old Mike!" I whooped, jumping straight into the air with joy and exultation. "Still the fightin'est dog in the Asiatics! Lead on, matey! I craves words with his victims. I got nothin' against the griller, but them Chinees has got fifty bucks belongin' to me and Mike!"

THE END

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks®Standard 2.0, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information about ReaderWorks, please visit us on the Web
at www.overdrive.com/readerworks