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Circus Fists

by

Robert E. Howard

ME AND THE Old Man had a most violent row whilst the Sea Girl was tied up at the docks of a small seaport on the West Coast. Somebody put a pole-cat in the Old Man's bunk, and he accused me of doing it. I denied it indignantly, and asked him where he reckoned I would get a pole-cat, and he said well, it was a cinch somebody had got a pole-cat, because there it was, and it was his opinion that I was the only man of the crew which was low-down enough to do a trick like that.

This irritated me, and I told him he oughta know it wasn't me, because I had the reputation of being kind to animals, and I wouldn't put a decent skunk where it would have to associate with a critter like the Old Man.

This made him so mad that he busted a bottle of good rye whiskey over my head. Annoyed at such wanton waste of good licker, I grabbed the old walrus and soused him in a horse-trough--us being on the docks at the time.

The Old Man ariz like Neptune from the deep, and, with whiskers dripping, he shook his fists at me and yelled, "Don't never darken my decks again, Steve Costigan. If you ever try to come aboard the Sea Girl, I'll fill you fulla buckshot, you mutineerin' pirate!"

"Go set on a marlin-spike," I sneered. "I wouldn't sail with you again for ten bucks a watch and plum duff every mess. I'm through with the sea, anyhow. You gimme a bad taste for the whole business. A landman's life is the life for me, by golly. Me and Mike is goin' to fare forth and win fame and fortune ashore."

And so saying, I swaggered away with my white bulldog, follered clean outa sight by the Old Man's sincere maledictions.

Casting about for amusement, I soon come onto a circus which was going full blast at the edge of town. I seen a side-show poster which said, "_Battling Bingo, Champion of the West Coast._" So I went in and they was considerable of a crowd there and a big dumb-looking mutt in tights standing up in a ring, flexing his arms and showing off his muscles.

"Gents," yelled the barker, a flashy-dressed young feller with a diamond horse-shoe stick-pin, "the management offers fifty dollars to any man which can stay four rounds with this tiger of the ring! Five minutes ago I made the same offer on the platform outside, and some gent took me up. But now he seems to have got cold feet, and is nowhere to be found. So here and now I again make the original proposition--fifty round, bright iron men to any guy which can stay four rounds with this man-killin' terror, this fire-breathin' murderer, this iron-fisted man-mountain, Battling Bingo, the Terror of the Rockies!"

The crowd whooped, and three or four fellers made a move like they was going to take up the challenge, but I brushed 'em scornfully aside and bellered, "I'll take that dough, mate!"

I bounced into the ring, and the barker said, "You realize that the management ain't responsible for life or limb?"

"Aw, stow that guff and gimme them gloves," I roared, ripping off my shirt. "Get ready, champeen. I'm goin' to knock your crown off!"

The gong sounded, and we went for each other. They wasn't no canvas stretched across the back of the ring where Bingo couldst shove me up against to be blackjacked by somebody behind it, so I knowed very well he had a iron knuckle-duster on one of his hands, and, from the way he dangled his right, I knowed that was the hand. So I watched his right, and, when he throwed it, I stepped inside of his swing and banged him on the whiskers with a left and a right hook which tucked him away for the evening.

The crowd roared in huge approval, and I jerked the wad of greenbacks outa the barker's hand and started away when he stopped me.

"Say," he said, "I reckernize you now. You're Sailor Costigan. How'd you like to take this tramp's place? We'll pay you good wages."

"All I got to do is flatten jobbies?" I said, and he said it was. So that's how I come to start working in Flash Larney's Gigantic Circus and Animal Show.

Each night I'd appear in fighting tights before the multitude, and the barker, Joe Beemer, wouldst go through the usual ballyhoo, and then all I had to do was to knock the blocks offa the saps which tried to collect the fifty. I wouldn't use the knuckle-duster. I wouldn't of used it even if I'd of needed it, which I didn't. If I can't sock a palooka to sleep, fair and above-board, with my own personal knuckles, then they ain't no use in trying to dint him with a load of iron.

WE WORKED UP and down the West Coast and inland, and it was mostly easy. The men which tried to lick me was practically all alley-fighters--big strong fellers, but they didn't know nothing. Mostly farmers, blacksmiths, sailors, longshoremen, miners, cowpunchers, bar-room bouncers. All I had to do was to hit 'em. More'n once I knocked out three or four men in one night.

I always got action because the crowd was always against me, just like they was against Battling Bingo when I flattened him. A crowd is always against the carnival fighter, whether they know his opponent or not. And when the opponent is some well-known local boy, they nearly have hydrophobia in their excitement.

You oughta heered the cheers they'd give their home-town pride, and the dirty remarks they'd yell at me. No matter how hard I was fighting, I generally found time to reply to their jeers with choice insults I had picked up all over the seven seas, with the result that the maddened mob wouldst spew forth more raging sluggers to be slaughtered. Some men can't fight their best when the crowd's against 'em, but I always do better, if anything. It makes me mad, and I take it out on my opponent.

When I wasn't performing in the ring, I was driving stakes, setting up or taking down tents, and fighting with my circus-mates. Larney's outfit had the name of being the toughest on the Coast, and it was. The fights I had in the ring wasn't generally a stitch to them I had on the lot.

Well, I always makes it a point to be the champeen of whatever outfit I'm with, and I done so in this case. The first day I was with the show I licked three razor-backs, the lion-tamer and a side-show barker, and from then on it was a battle practically every day till them mutts realized I was the best man on the lot.

Fighting all the time like I was, I got so hard and mean I surprised myself. They wasn't a ounce of flesh on me that wasn't like iron, and I believe I could of run ten miles at top speed without giving out. The Dutch weight-lifter figgered to give me a close scrimmage, but he was way too slow. The toughest scrap I had was with a big Japanese acrobat. We fought all over the lot one morning, and everybody postponed the parade for a hour to watch. I was about all in when I finally put the heathen away, but, with my usual recuperative powers, I was able to go on that night as usual, and flatten a farm-hand, a piano-mover and a professional football player.

Some trouble was had with Mike, which always set in my corner and bit anybody which tried to hit me through the ropes, as often happened when the local boy started reeling. Larney wanted to shave him and tattoo him and put him in a sideshow.

"The tattooed dog!" said Larney. "That would draw 'em! A novelty! Can't you see the crowds flockin' through the gates for a look at him?"

"I can see me bustin' you in the snoot," I growled. "You let Mike alone."

"Well," said Larney, "we got to make him more presentable. He looks kinda crude and uncultured alongside our trained poodles."

So the lion-trainer bathed Mike and combed him and perfumed him, and put on a little fool dog-blanket with straps and gilt buckles, and tied a big bow ribbon on his stump tail. But Mike seen himself in a mirror and tore off all that rigging and bit the lion-tamer.

Well, they had a old decrepit lion by the name of Oswald which didn't have no teeth, and Mike got to sleeping in his cage. So they fixed a place where Mike couldst get in and out without Oswald getting out, and made a kind of act out of it.

Larney advertised Mike as the dog which laid down with the lion, and wouldst have Mike and Oswald in the cage together, and spiel about how ferocious Oswald was, and how unusual it was for a friendship to spring up between such natural enemies. But the reason Mike slept in the cage was that they put more

straw in it than they did in the other cages on account of Oswald being old and thin-blooded, and Mike liked a soft bed.

Larney was afraid Mike would hurt Oswald, but the only critters Mike couldn't get along with was Amir, a big African leopard which had already kilt three men, and Sultan, the man-eating tiger. They was the meanest critters in the show, and was always trying to get out and claw Mike up. But he wasn't afeard of 'em.

WELL, I WAS having a lot of fun. I thrives in a rough environment like that, though I'll admit I sometimes got kinda homesick for the Sea Girl and the sea, and wondered what Bill O'Brien and Mushy Hanson and Red O'Donnell was doing. But I got my pride, and I wouldn't go back after the Old Man had pratically kicked me out to shift for myself.

Anyway, it was a lot of fun. I'd stand out on the platform in front of the tent with my massive arms folded and a scowl on my battered face, whilst Joe Beemer wouldst cock his derby back on his head and start the ballyhoo.

He'd whoop and yell and interjuice me to the crowd as "Sailor Costigan, the Massive Man-mauler of the Seven Seas!" And I'd do strong-man stunts--twisting horse-shoes in two and bending coins between my fingers and etc. Then he'd rare back and holler, "Is they any man in this fair city courageous enough to try and stay four rounds with this slashin' slugger? Take a chance, boys--he's been drivin' stakes all day and maybe he's tired and feeble--heh! heh! heh!"

Then generally some big ham wouldst jump outa the crowd and roar, "I'll fight the so-and-so." And Joe wouldst rub his hands together and say under his breath, "Money, roll in! I need groceries!" And he'd holler, "Right this way, gents! Right through the door to the left. Ten cents admission--one dime! See the battle of the century! Don't crowd, folks. Don't crowd."

The tent was nearly always packed with raging fans which honed at the top of their voices for their local hope to knock my iron skull off. However small a tank-town might be, it generally had at least one huge roughneck with a reputation of some kind.

One time we hit a town in the throes of a rassling carnival. Nobody couldst be found to box with me, but a big Polack came forward claiming to be the rassling champeen of the West--I ain't never seen a rassler which wasn't champeen of something--and wanted me to rassle him. Beemer refused, and the crowd hissed, and the rassler said I was yeller.

I seen red and told him I wasn't no rassler but I'd give him more'n he could tote home. He figgered I was easy, but he got fooled. I don't know a lot about scientific rassling, but I know plenty rough-and-tumble, and I was so incredibly hard and tough, and played so rough that I broke his arm and dislocated his shoulder. And after that nobody ast me to rassle.

IT WASN'T LONG after that when we blowed into a mining town by the name of Ironville, up in the Nevada hills, and from the looks of the populace I figgered I'd have plenty of competition that night. I wasn't fooled none, neither, believe me.

Long before we was ready to start the show, a huge crowd of tough-looking mugs in boots and whiskers was congregated around the athaletic tent, which wasn't showing no interest whatever in the main-top nor the freaks nor the animals.

Joe hadn't hardly got started on his ballyhoo when through the crowd come a critter which looked more

like a grizzly than a man--a big black-headed feller with shoulders as broad as a door, and arms like a bear's paw. From the way the crowd all swarmed around him, I figured he was a man of some importance in Ironville.

I was right.

"You don't need to say no more, pard," he rumbled in a voice like a bull. "I'll take a whirl at yore tramp!"

Joe looked at the black-browed giant, and he kinda got cold feet for the first time in his career.

"Who are you?" he demanded, uneasily.

The big feller grinned wolfishly and said, "Who, me? Oh, I'm just a blacksmith around here." And the crowd all whooped and yelled and laughed like he'd said something very funny.

"Somethin's fishy about this, Steve," whispered Joe to me. "I don't like the looks of it."

About that time the crowd begun to hiss and boo, and the big feller said nastily, "Well, what's the matter--you hombres gettin' yeller?"

I seen red. "Get into this tent, you black-muzzled palooka!" I roared. "I'll show you who's yeller! Shut up, Joe. Ain't I always said I barred nobody? What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

"I tell you, Steve," he said, wiping his forehead with his bandanner, "I seen this big punk somewheres, and if he's a simple blacksmith I'm a Bohemian!"

"Gahhh!" I snorted disgustfully. "When I get through with him, he'll look like a carpet. Have I lost you a penny since I joined the show? Naw! Come on!"

And so saying, I swaggered into the tent and bounded into the ring while the crowd gathered around, packing the place solid, applauding their man and howling insults at me, which I returned with interest, that being a game at which I ain't no amateur myself.

JOE STARTED TO lead the big feller to the dressing-room which was partitioned off with a curtain in one corner of the tent, but he snorted and began ripping off his clothes then and there, revealing ring togs under 'em. Ah, thought I, he come here with the intention of going on with me. Some local battler, no doubtless.

When he clumb into the ring, they was several men with him--one a tall cold-faced man which looked like a high-class gambler, and who they called Brelen, and three or four tough mugs which was to act as seconds. They had the game writ all over their flat noses and tin ears. In fact, it looked to me like the big feller had a right elaborate follering, even if he was a local white hope.

"Who referee's?" asked Brelen, the poker-faced gent.

"Oh, I referee," said Joe.

"Not this time you don't," said Brelen. "The crowd chooses a referee who'll give my boy a square deal, see?"

"It's against the rules of the management--" began Joe, and the crowd rumbled and begun to surge

forward. "All right, all right," said Joe, hurriedly. "It's okay with me."

Brelen grinned kinda thin-like, and turned to the crowd and said, "Well, boys, who do you want to referee?"

"Honest Jim Donovan!" they roared, and pushed forward a bald-headed old sea-lion which had the crookedest face I ever seen on a human. Joe give him a look and clasped his head and groaned. The crowd was nasty--itching for trouble. Joe was kinda white around the gills, and my handlers was uneasy. I was glad I'd locked Mike up in Oswald's cage before the show started, being suspicious of the customers. Mike ain't got much discretion; when the crowd starts throwing things at me, he's likely to go for 'em.

"Gents," yelled Joe, who, being a natural-born barker, couldn't keep his mouth shut if he swung for it, "you are now about to witness the battle of the centu-ree, wherein the Fighting Blacksmith of your fair city endeavors to stay four actual rounds with Sailor Costigan, the Terror of the Seven Seas--"

"Aw, shut up and get out of this ring," snarled Brelen. "Let the massacre commence!"

THE GONG SOUNDED and the Blacksmith come swinging outa his corner. Jerusha, he was a man! He stood six feet one and a quarter and weighed not less than two hundred and ten pounds to my six feet and one ninety. With a broad chest matted with black hair, arms knotted with muscles like full-sized cables, legs like trees, a heavy jutting jaw, a broad fighting face with wicked gray eyes glittering from under thick black brows, and a shock of coarse black hair piled up on top of his low, broad forehead--I wanta tell you I ain't never seen a more formidable-looking fighter in my life!

We rushed together like a pair of mad bulls. Bang! In a shower of stars I felt myself flying through the air, and I landed on my shoulders with a jolt that shook the ring. Zowie! I sprawled about, almost petrified with dumfoundment. The crowd was whooping and cheering and laughing like all get-out.

I glared in wild amazement at the black-headed giant which was standing almost over me, with a nasty grin on his lips. A light dawned.

"Blacksmith my eye!" I roared, leaping up at him. "They ain't but one man in the world can hit a lick like that--Bill Cairn!"

I heard Joe's despairing howl as I slashed into my foe. Wham! Wham! I was on the resin again before I even got a chance to connect. The yells sounded kinda jumbled this time, and I shook my head violently, cussing fervently as I got my feet under me. Ironville. I oughta knowed--Bill Cairn, which they called the Ironville Blacksmith, the hardest hitter in the game! This was his home town, and this was him!

Fighting mad, I bounded up, but Cairn was so close to me that he reached me with one of his pile-driving left hooks before I was balanced, and down I went again. Now the yelling was kinda dim and the lights was quaking and rocking. I crouched, taking a count which Honest Jim was reeling off a lot faster than necessary. Bill Cairn! The kayo king of the heavyweights, with thirty or forty knockouts in a row, and never been socked off his feet, himself. He was in line for a crack at the champ--and I was supposed to flatten this grizzly in four rounds!

I was up at nine, and, ducking a savage drive for the face, I clinched. By golly, it was like tying up a grizzly. But I ain't no chicken myself. I gripped him in a desperate bear-hug whilst him and the referee cussed and strained, and the crowd begged him to shake me loose and kill me.

"You side-show rat!" he gritted between his teeth. "Leggo whilst I rip yore head off! How can I show my best stuff with you hangin' on like a leech?"

"This is cheap stuff for a headliner like you!" I snarled, red-eyed.

"Givin' my home town folks a free show," he grinned, nastily. "It was just my luck to have a mug like you blow in whilst I was visitin' back home."

Oh, I see the idee all right. It was a big joke with him to knock me off and give his friends a treat--show off before the home-folks! He was laughing at me and so was all them Ironville lubbers. Well, I thought, grinding my teeth with red rage, they's many a good man punched hisself into fistic oblivion on my iron jaw.

I let go of Cairn and threwed my right at his jaw like it was a hammer. He pulled away from it and--_bang!_ It mighta been a left hook to the head. It felt like a handspike. And the next instant, whilst my eyes was still full of stars, I felt another jolt like a concentrated earthquake.

Purty soon I heered somebody say, "Seven!" and I instinctively clumb up and looked about for my foe. I didn't locate him, as he was evidently standing behind me, but I did locate a large gloved mauler which crashed under my ear and nearly unjointed my neck. I done a beautiful dive, ploughing my nose vigorously into the resin, whilst the crowd wept with delight, and then I heered a noise like a sleigh-bell and was aware of being dragged to my corner.

A SNIFTER OF ammonia brung me to myself, and I discovered I was propped on my stool and being worked over by my handlers and Joe, who was bleeding from a cut over the temple.

"How'd you get that?" I asked groggily.

"One of these eggs hit me with a bottle," he said. "They claim I jerked the gong too soon. Listen at 'em! Toughest crowd I ever seen."

They sure was. They was rumbling and growling, just seething for a scrap, but stopping now and then to cheer Cairn, which was bowing and smirking in his corner.

"I knew I'd seen him," said Joe, "and Ace Brelen, his manager. The lousy chiselers! You ain't got a chance, Steve--"

At this moment a rough-whiskered mug stuck his head through the ropes and waved a coil of rope at Joe.

"We're on to you, you rat!" he bellered. "None of your side-show tricks, understand? If you try anything dirty, we'll stretch your neck. And that goes for you, too, you tin-eared gorilla!"

"So's your old man!" I roared, kicking out with all my might. My heel crunched solid on his jaw, and he shot back into the first row amongst a tangle of busted seats and cussing customers, from which he emerged bleeding at the mouth and screaming with rage. He was fumbling for a gun in his shirt, but just then the gong sounded and me and Cairn went for each other.

I come in fast, and figgered on beating him to the punch, but he was too quick for me. He wasn't so clever, but he moved like a big cat, and the very power of his punches was a swell defense. No man couldst keep his balance under them thundering smashes, even if they didn't land on no vital spot. Just

trying to block 'em numbed my arms.

Zip! His left whizzed past my jaw like a red-hot brick. _Zinggg!_ His right burned my ear as it went by. I seen a opening and shot my right with everything I had. But I was too eager; my arm looped over his shoulder and he banged his left into my ribs, which I distinctly felt bend almost to the breaking point as my breath went outa me in a explosive grunt.

I threwed my arms about him in a vain effort to clinch, but he pushed me away and slammed a full-armed right to my jaw. _Crash!_ I felt myself turning a complete somersault in the air, and I landed on my belly with my head sticking out under the ropes and ogling glassily down at the ecstatic customers. One of these riz up and slashed his thigh with his hat and, sticking his face almost into mine, yelled, "Well, you carnival punk, how do you like _those?" _

"Like this!" I roared, catching him on the whiskers with a unexpected bash that sunk his nose in the sawdust. I then rolled over on my back and, observing that the referee had rapidly counted up to nine, I ariz and, abandoning my scanty boxing skill, started slugging wild and ferocious in the hope of landing a haymaker.

But that was Cairn's game; he blocked my punches for a second or so, then _bang!_ he caught me square on the chin with one of them thunderbolt rights which shot me back into the ropes, and I rebounded from 'em square into a whistling left hook that dropped me face-down in the resin.

I couldst dimly hear the crowd yelling like wolves. When the average man falls face-first he's through, but nobody never accused me of being a average man. At nine I was up as usual, reeling, and Cairn approached me with a look of disgust on his brutal face.

"Will you stay down?" he gritted, and, measuring me with a left, he crashed his right square into my mouth, and I went down like a pole-axed ox.

"That finishes him!" I heered somebody yelp, and evidently Cairn thought so too, because he give a scornful laugh and started toward his corner where his manager was getting his bathrobe ready. But I got my legs under me and at nine I staggered up, as is my habit.

"Come back here, you big sissy!" I roared groggily, spitting out fragments of a tooth. "This fight ain't over by a devil of a ways!"

The mob screamed with amazement, and Cairn, swearing ferociously, turned and rushed at me like a tiger. But though I reeled on buckling knees, I didn't go down under his smashing left hooks.

"Why don't you get a ax, you big false-alarm?" I sneered, trying to shake the blood outa my eyes. "What you got in them gloves--powder puffs?"

At that he give a roar which made the ring lights shimmy, and brought one up from the canvas which hung me over the top rope just as the gong sounded. Joe and his merry men untangled my limp carcass and held me on the stool while they worked despairingly over me.

"Drop it, Steve," urged Joe. "Cairn will kill you."

"How many times was I on the canvas that round?" I asked.

"How should I know?" he returned, peevishly, wringing the gore out of my towel. "I ain't no adding

machine."

"Well, try to keep count, willya?" I requested. "It's important; I can tell how much he's weakenin' if you check up on the knockdowns from round to round."

Joe dropped the sponge he was fixing to throw into the ring.

"Ye gods! Are you figgerin' on continuin' the massakree?"

"He can't keep this pace all night," I growled. "Lookit Brelen talkin' to his baby lamb!"

Ace was gesticulating purty emphatic, and Cairn was growling back at him and glaring at me and kneading his gloves like he wisht it was my goozle. I knowed that Brelen was telling him this scrap was getting beyond the point of a joke, and that it wasn't helping his reputation none for me to keep getting up on him, and for him to make it another quick kayo. Ha, ha, thought I grimly, shaking the blood outa my mangled ear, let's see how quick a kayo Bill Cairn can make where so many other iron-fisted sluggers has failed.

At the gong I was still dizzy and bleeding copiously, but that's a old story to me.

CAIRN, INFURIATED AT not having finished me, rushed outa his corner and throwed over a terrible right, which I seen coming like a cannonball, and ducked. His arm looped over my shoulder and his shoulder rammed into my neck with such force that we both crashed to the canvas.

Cairn untangled hisself with a snarl of irritation, and, assisted by the fair-minded referee, arose, casually kicking me in the face as he done so. I ariz likewise, and, enraged by my constant position on the canvas, looped a whistling left at his head that would of undoubtedly decapitated him hadst it landed--but luck was against me as usual. My foot slipped in a smear of my own blood, my swing was wild, and I run smack into his ripping right.

I fell into Cairn, ignoring an uppercut which loosened all my lower teeth, and tied him up.

"Leggo, you tin-eared baboon!" he snarled, heaving and straining. "Try to show me up, wouldja? Try to make a monkey outa me, wouldja?"

"Nature's already attended to that, you lily-fingered tap-dancer," I croaked. "A flapper with a powder-puff couldst do more damage than you can with them chalk-knuckled bread-hooks."

"So!" he yelled, jerking away and crashing his right to my jaw with every ounce of his huge frame behind it. I revolved in the air like a spin-wheel, felt the ropes scrape my back, and realized that I was falling through space. Crash! My fall was cushioned by a mass of squirming, cussing fans, else I would of undoubtedly broke my back.

I looked up, and high above me, it seemed, I seen the referee leaning over the ropes and counting down at me. I began to kick and struggle, trying to get up, and a number of willing hands--and a few hob-nailed boots--hoisted me offa the squawking fans, and I grabbed the ropes and swung up.

Somebody had a grip on my belt, and I heard a guy growl. "You're licked, you fool! Take the count. Do you want to get slaughtered?"

"Leggo!" I roared, kicking out furiously. "I ain't never licked!"

I tore loose and crawled through the ropes--it looked like I'd never make it--and hauled myself up just as the referee was lifting his arm to bring it down on "Ten!" Cairn didn't rush this time; he was scowling, and I noticed that sweat was streaming down his face, and his huge chest was heaving.

Some of the crowd yelled, "Stop it!" but most of 'em whooped, "Now you got him, Bill. Polish him off!"

Cairn measured me, and smashed his right into my face. The top-rope snapped as I crashed back against it, but I didn't fall. Cairn swore in amazement, and drew back his right again, when the gong sounded. He hesitated, then lemme have it anyway--a pile-driving smash that nearly lifted me offa my feet. And the crowd cheered the big egg. My handlers jostled him aside and, as they pulled me offa the ropes, Cairn sneered and walked slowly to his corner.

SUPPORTED ON MY stool, I seen Joe pick up a sponge stealthily.

"Drop that sponge!" I roared, and Joe, seeing the baleful light in my one good eye, done so like it was red-hot.

"Lemme catch you throwin' a sponge in for me!" I growled. "Gimme ammonia! Dump that bucket of water over me! Slap the back of my neck with a wet towel! One more round to go, and I gotta save that fifty bucks!"

Swearing dumfoundedly, my handlers did as they was bid, and I felt better and stronger every second. Even they couldn't understand how I couldst take such a beating and come back for more. But any slugger which depends on his ruggedness to win his fights understands it. We got to be solid iron--and we are.

Besides, my recent rough-and-ready life hadst got me into condition such as few men ever gets in, even athletes. This, coupled with my amazing recuperative powers, made me just about unbeatable. Cairn could, and had, battered me from pillar to post, knocked me down repeatedly, and had me groggy and glassy-eyed, but he hadn't sapped the real reservoir of my vitality. Being groggy and being weak is two different things. Cairn hadn't weakened me. The minute my head cleared under the cold water and ammonia, I was as good as ever. Well, just about, anyhow.

So I come out for the fourth round raring to go. Cairn didn't rush as usual. In fact, he looked a little bit sick of his job. He walked out and lashed at my head with his left. He connected solid, but I didn't go down. And for the first time I landed squarely. Bang. My right smashed under his ear, and his head rocked on his bull's neck.

With a roar of fury, he come back with a thundering right to the head, but it only knocked me to my knees, and I was up in a instant. I was out-lasting him! His blows was losing their dynamite! This realization electrified me, and I bored in, slashing with both hands.

A left to the face staggered but didn't stop me, and I ripped a terrific left hook under his heart. He grunted and backed away. He wasn't near as good at taking punishment as he was at handing it out. I slashed both hands to his head, and the blood flew. With a deafening roar, he sunk his right mauler clean outa sight in my belly.

I thought for a second that my spine was broke, as I curled up on the canvas, gasping. The referee sprang forward and began counting, and I looked for Cairn, expecting to see him standing almost astraddle of me, as usual, waiting to slug me down as I got up. He wasn't; but was over against the

ropes, holding onto 'em with one mitt whilst he wiped the blood and sweat outa his eyes with the other'n. And I seen his great chest heaving, his belly billowing out and in, and his leg muscles quivering.

Grinning wolfishly, I drew in great gulps of air and beat the count by a second. Cairn lurched offa the ropes at me, swinging a wide left, but I went under it and crashed my right to his heart. He rolled like a ship in a heavy gale, and I knowed I had him. That last punch which had floored me had been his dying effort. He'd fought hisself clean out on me, as so many a man had didst. Strategy, boy, strategy!

I went after him like a tiger after a bull, amid a storm of yells and curses and threats. The crowd, at first dumfounded, was now leaping up and down and shaking their fists and busting chairs and threatening me with torture and sudden death if I licked their hero. But I was seeing red. Wait'll you've took the beating I'd took and then get a chance to even it up! I ripped both hands to Cairn's quivering belly and swaying head, driving him to the ropes, off of which he rolled drunkenly.

I HEERED A gong sounding frantically; Brelen hadst knocked the time-keeper stiff with a blackjack and was trying to save his man. Also the referee was grabbing at me, trying to push me away. But I give no heed. A left and right under the heart buckled Cairn's knees, and a blazing right to the temple glazed his eyes. He reeled, and a trip-hammer left hook to the jaw that packed all my beef sent him crashing to the canvas, just as the crowd come surging into the ring, tearing down the ropes. I seen Joe take it on the run, ducking out under the wall of the tent, and yelling, "Hey, Rube!"

Then me and the handlers was engulfed. Half a hundred hands grabbed at me, and fists, boots and chairs swung for me. But I ducked, ripping off my gloves, and come up fighting like a wild man.

I swung my fists like they was topping-mauls, and ribs snapped and noses and jaw-bones cracked, whilst through the melee I caught glimpses of Brelen and his men carrying out their battered gladiator. He was still limp.

Just as the sheer number of maddened citizens was dragging me down, a gang of frothing razor-backs come through the tent like a whirlwind, swinging pick handles and tent-stakes.

Well, I ain't seen many free-for-alls to equal that 'un! The circus war-whoop of "Hey, Rube!" mingled with the blood-thirsty yells of the customers. The Iron-villians outnumbered us, but we give 'em a bellyful. In about three seconds the ring was tore to pieces and the storm of battle surged into the tent-wall, which collapsed under the impact.

Knives was flashing and a few guns barking, and all I wonder is that somebody wasn't kilt. The athaletic tent was literally ripped plumb to ribbons, and the battle surged out onto the grounds and raged around the other tents and booths.

Then a wild scream went up: "Fire!" And over everything was cast a lurid glow. Somehow or other the main top hadst caught in the melee--or maybe some fool set it on fire. A strong wind was fanning the flames, which mounted higher each second. In a instant the fight was abandoned. Everything was in a tumult, men running and yelling, children squalling, women screaming. The circus-people was running and hauling the cages and wagons outa the animal tent, which was just catching. The critters was belling and howling in a most hair-raising way, and I remembered Mike in Oswald's cage. I started for there on the run, when there riz a most fearful scream above all the noise: "The animals are loose!"

EVERYBODY HOLLERED AND tore their hair and ran, and here come the elephants like a avalanche! They crashed over wagons and cages and booths, trumpeting like Judgment Day, and thundered on into the night. How they got loose nobody never exactly knowed. Anything can happen in a

fire. But, in stampeding, they'd bumped into and busted open some more cages, letting loose the critters inside.

And here they come roaring--Sultan, the tiger, and Amir, the leopard, killers both of 'em. A crowd of screaming children rushed by me, and right after them come that striped devil, Sultan, his eyes blazing. I grabbed up a heavy tent-stake and leaped betweenst him and the kids. He roared and leaped with his talons spread wide, and I braced my feet and met him in mid-air with a desperate smash that had every ounce of my beef behind it. The impact nearly knocked me offa my feet, and the stake splintered in my hand, but Sultan rolled to the ground with a shattered skull.

And almost simultaneously a terrible cry from the people made me wheel just in time to see Amir racing toward me like a black shadder with balls of fire for eyes. And, just as I turned, he soared from the ground straight at my throat. I didn't have time to do nothing. He crashed full on my broad breast, and his claws ripped my hide as the impact dashed me to the earth. And at the same instant I felt another shock which knocked him clear of me.

I scrambled up to see a squat white form tearing and worrying at the limp body of the big cat. Again Mike had saved my worthless life. When Amir hit me, he hit Amir and broke his neck with one crunch of his iron jaws. He'd squoze out between the bars of Oswald's cage and come looking for me.

He lolled out his tongue, grinning, and vibrated his stump tail, and all to once I heered my name called in a familiar voice. Looking around, I seen a battered figger crawl out from under the ruins of a band-wagon, and, in the lurid light of the burning tents, I reckernized him.

"Jerusha!" I said. "The Old Man! What you doin' under that wagon?"

"I crawled under there to keep from bein' trampled by the mob," he said, working his legs to see if they was broke. "And it was a good idee, too, till a elephant run over the wagon. By gad, if I ever get safe to sea once more I'll never brave the perils of the land again, I wanta tell ya!"

"Did you see me lick Bill Cairn?" I asked.

"I ain't see nothin' but a passel of luneyticks," he snapped. "I arrived just as the free-for-all was ragin'. I don't mind a rough-house, but when they drags in a fire and a stampede of jungle-critters, I'm ready to weigh anchor! And you!" he added, accusingly. "A merry chase you've led me, you big sea-lion! I've come clean from Frisco, and it looked for a while like I wouldn't never find this blame circus."

"What you wanta find it for?" I growled, the thought of my wrongs renewing itself.

"Steve," said the Old Man, "I done you a injustice! It was the cabin-boy which put that pole-cat in my bunk--I found it out after he jumped ship. Steve, as champeen of the old Sea Girl, I asks you--let bygones be gone-byes! Steve, me and the crew has need of your mallet-like fists. At Seattle, a few weeks ago, I shipped on a fiend in human form by the name of Monagan, which immediately set hissself up as the bully of the fo'c'le. I had to put in Frisco because of shortage of hands. Even now, Mate O'Donnell, Mushy Hanson and Jack Lynch lies groanin' in their bunks from his man-handlin', and he has likewise licked Bill O'Brien, Maxie Heimer and Sven Larsen. He has threatened to hang me on my own bow-sprit by my whiskers. I dast not fire him, for fear of my life. Steve!" the Old Man's voice trembled with emotion, "I asks you--forgive and forget! Come back to the Sea Girl and demonstrate the eternal brotherhood of man by knockin' the devil outa this demon Monagan before he destroys us all! Show the monster who's the real champeen of the craft!"

"Well," I said, "I got some money comin' to me from Larney--but let it go. He'll need it repairin' his show. Monagan, of Seattle--bah! I hammered him into a pulp in Tony Vitello's poolroom three years ago, and I can do it again. Calls hisself champeen of the _Sea Girl,_ huh? Well, when I kick his battered carcass onto the wharf, he'll know who's champeen of the craft. They never was, and they ain't now, and they never will be but one champeen of her, and that's Steve Costigan, A.B. Let's go! I wasn't never cut out for no peaceful landlubber's existence, nohow."

THE END

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