
Alleys of Peril

by

Robert E. Howard

THE MINUTE I seen the man they'd picked to referee the fight between me and Red McCoy, I didn't like his looks. His name was Jack Ridley and he was first mate aboard the _Castleton,_ one of them lines which acts very high tone, making their officers wear uniforms. Bah! The first cap'n I ever sailed with never wore nothing at sea but a pair of old breeches, a ragged undershirt and a month's growth of whiskers. He used to say uniforms was all right for navy admirals and bell-hops but they was a superflooty anywheres else.

Well, this Ridley was a young fellow, slim and straight as a spar, with cold eyes and a abrupt manner. I seen right off that he was a bucko which wouldn't even let his crew shoot craps on deck if he could help it. But I decided not to let his appearance get on my nerves, but to ignore him and knock McCoy stiff as quick as possible so I couldst have the rest of the night to myself.

They is a old feud between the _Sea Girl_ and McCoy's ship, the _Whale._ The minute the promoter of the Waterfront Fight Arena heard both our ships had docked, he rushed down and signed us up for a fifteen-round go--billed it as a grudge fight, which it wasn't nothing but, and packed the house.

The crews of both ships was holding down ringside seats and the special police was having a merry time keeping 'em from wrecking the place. The Old Man was rared back on the front row and ever few seconds he'd take a long swig out of a bottle, and yell: "Knock the flat-footed ape's lousy head off, Steve!" And then he'd shake his fist across at Cap'n Branner of the _Whale,_ and the compliments them two old sea horses wouldst exchange wouldst have curled a Hottentot's hair.

You can judge by this that the Waterfront Fight Arena is kinda free and easy in its management. It is. It caters to a rough and ready class, which yearns for fast action, in the ring or out. Its performers is mostly fighting sailors and longshoremen, but, if you can stand the crowd that fills the place, you'll see more real mayhem committed there in one evening than you'll see in a year in the politer clubs of the world.

Well, it looked like every sailor in Hong Kong was there that night. Finally the announcer managed to make hisself heard above the howls of the mob, and he bellered: "The main attractshun of the evenin'! Sailor Costigan, one hunnerd an' ninety pounds, of

the _Sea Girl--_"

"The trimmest craft afloat!" roared the Old Man, heaving his empty bottle at Cap'n Branner.

"And Red McCoy, one hunnerd an' eighty-five pounds, of the _Whale_, " went on the announcer, being used to such interruption. "Referee, First Mate Ridley of the steamship _Castleton,_ the management havin' requested him to officiate this evenin'. Now, gents, this is a grudge fight, as you all know. You has seen both these boys perform, an'--"

"And if you don't shut up and give us some action we'll wreck the dump and toss your mangled carcass amongst the ruins!" screamed the maddened fans. "Start somethin' before we do!"

The announcer smiled gently, the gong sounded, and me and Red went together like a couple of wildcats. He was a tough baby, one of them squat, wide-built fellows. I'm six feet; he was four inches shorter, but they wasn't much difference in our weight. He was tough and fast, with one of these here bulldog faces, and how that sawed-off brick-top could hit!

Well, nothing much of interest happened in the first three rounds. Of course, we was fighting hard, neither of us being clever, but both strong on mixing it. But we was both too tough to show much damage that early in the fight. He'd cut my lip and skinned my ear and loosened some teeth, and I'd dropped him for no-count a couple of times, but outside of that nothing much had happened.

We'd stood toe-to-toe for three rounds, flailing away right and left and neither giving back a step, but, just before the end of the third, my incessant body punching began to show even on that chunk of granite they called Red McCoy. For the first time he backed out of a mix-up, and just before the gong I caught him with a swinging right to the belly that made him grunt and bat his eyes.

SO I COME out for the fourth round full of snap and ginger and promptly run into a right hook that knocked me flat on my back. The crowd went crazy, and the _Whale's_ men begun to kiss each other in their ecstasy, but I arose without a count and, ducking the cruel and unusual right swing McCoy tossed at me, I sunk my left to the wrist in his belly and crashed my right under his heart.

This shook Red from stem to stern and, realizing that my body blows was going to beat him if he didn't do something radical, he heaved over a hay-making right with everything he had behind it. It had murder writ all over it, and when it banged solid on my ear so you could hear it all over the house, the crowd jumped up and yelled: "There he goes!" But I'm a glutton for punishment if I do say so, and I merely tittered amusedly, shook my head to clear it, and caressed Red with a left hook that broke his nose.

The baffled look on his face caused me to bust into hearty laughter, in the midst of which

Red closed my left eye with a right-hander he started in Mesopotamia. Enraged for the first time that night, I rammed a blasting left hook to his midriff, snapped his head back between his shoulders with another left, and sank my terrible right mauler to the wrist in his belly just above the waist-line.

He immediately went to the canvas like he figured on staying there indefinitely, and his gang jumped up and yelled "Foul!" till I bet they was plainly heard in Bombay. They knowed it wasn't no foul, but when Red heard 'em, he immediately put both hands over his groin and writhed around like a snake with a busted back.

The referee came over, and as I stood smiling amusedly to hear them howl about fouls, I suddenly noticed he wasn't counting.

"Say, you, ain't you goin' to count this ham out?" I asked.

"Shut up, you cad!" he snapped to my utter amazement. "Get out of this ring. You're disqualified!"

And while I gaped at him, he helped Red to his feet and raised his hand.

"McCoy wins on a foul!" he shouted. The crowd sat speechless for a second and then went into hysterics. The Old Man went for the _Whale's_ skipper, the two crews pitched in free and hearty, the rest of the crowd took sides and began to bash noses, and Red's handlers started working over him. The smug look he give me and the wink he wunk, drove me clean cuckoo. I grabbed Ridley's shoulder as he started through the ropes.

"You double-crossin' louse," I ground. "You can't get away with that! You know that wasn't no foul!"

"Take your hands off me," he snapped. "You deliberately hit low, Costigan."

"You're a liar!" I roared, maddened, and _crack_ come his fist in my mouth quick as lightning, and I hit the canvas on the seat of my trunks. Before I could hop up, a bunch of men pounced on me and held me whilst I writhed and yelled and cussed till the air was blue.

"I'll get you for this!" I bellered. "I'll take you apart and scatter the pieces to the sharks, you gyppin', lyin', thievin' son of a skunk!"

He looked down at me very scornful. "A fine specimen of sportsmanship you are," he sneered, and his tongue cut me like a keen knife. "Keep out of my way, or I'll give you a belly-full of what you want. Let him loose--I'll handle him!"

"Handle him my eye!" said one of the fellows holding me. "Get outa here while gettin' good. They ain't but ten of us settin' on him and we're givin' out. Either beat it or get seven or eight other birds to help hold him!"

He laughed kind of short, and, climbing from the ring, strode out of the building between rassing, slugging and cursing groups of belling fans, many of which was yellin' for his blood. Funny how some men can get by with anything. Here was hundreds of tough birds which was raving mad at Ridley, yet he just looked 'em in the eye and they give back and let him past. Good thing for him, though, that my white bulldog Mike was too busy licking Cap'n Branner's police dog to go for him.

WELL, EVENTUALLY THE cops had things quieted, separated the dogs and even pried the Old Man and Cap'n Branner apart, with their hands full of whiskers they had tore off each other.

I didn't take no part in the rough-house. As quick as I could get dressed and put some collodion on my cuts, I slipped out the back way by myself. I even left Mike with Bill O'Brien because I didn't want him interfering and chewing up my man; I wanted nobody but me to get hold of Mister Jack Ridley and beat him into a red hash. He wasn't going to cow me with the cold stare of his eyes, because I was going to close both of 'em.

Honest to cats, I dunno when I ever been so mad in my life. I was sure he'd deliberately jobbed me and thrown the fight to McCoy, and what was worse, he'd slugged me in the face and got away with it. A red haze swum in front of me and I growled deep black curses which made people stop and stare at me as I swaggered along the waterfront streets.

After a while I seen a barkeep I knowed and I asked him if he'd seen Ridley.

"No," said he, "but if you're after him, I'll give you a tip. Lay off him. He's a hard man to fool with."

That only made me madder. "I'll lay off him," I snarled, "after I've made hash for the fishes outa him, the dirty, double-crossin', thievin' rat! I'll--"

At this minute the barkeep commenced to shine glasses like he was trying for a record, and I turned around to see a girl standing just behind me. She was a white girl and she was a beauty. Her face very white, all except her red lips and her hair was blacker than mine. Her eyes was deep and a light gray, shaded by heavy lashes. And them eyes was the tip-off. At first glance she mighta been a ordinary American flapper, but no flapper ever had eyes like them. They was deep but they was hard. They was yellow sparks of light dancing in them, and I had a funny feeling that they'd shine in the dark like a cat's.

"You were speaking of Mr. Jack Ridley, of the _Castleton_?" she asked.

"Yeah, I was, Miss," I said, dragging off my ragged old cap.

"Who are you?"

"Steve Costigan, A. B. mariner aboard the trader _Sea Girl,_ outa San Francisco."

"You hate Ridley?"

"Well, to be frank, I ain't got no love for him," I said. "He just robbed me of a fight I won fair and square."

She eyed me for a minute. I ain't no beauty. In fact, I been told by my closest enemies that I look more like a gorilla than a human being. But she seemed plenty satisfied.

"Come into the back room," she said, and, to the bartender: "Send us a couple of whisky-and-sodas."

In the back room, as we sipped our drinks, she said, "You hate Ridley, eh? What would you do to him if you could?"

"Anything," I said bitterly. "Hangin's too good for a rat like him."

She rested her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, and, looking into my eyes, she said, "Do you know who I am?"

"Yeah," I answered. "I ain't never seen you before, but you couldn't be nobody else but the girl the Chinese call the 'White Tigress.'"

Her narrow eyes glittered a little and she nodded.

"Yes. And would you like to know what drove a decent white girl into the shadows of the Orient--made an innocent, trusting child into one of a band of international criminals, and the leader of desperate tongmen? Well, I'll tell you in a few words. It was the heartlessness of a man--the man who took me from my home in England, lied to me, deceived me, and finally left me to the tender mercies of a yellow mandarin in interior China."

I shuffled my feet kind of restless; I felt sorry for her and didn't know what to say. She leaned toward me, her voice dropped almost to whisper, while her eyes burned into mine: "The man who betrayed and deserted me was the man who robbed you tonight--Jack Ridley!"

"Why, the low-down swine!" I ejaculated.

"I, too, want revenge," she breathed. "We can be useful to each other. I will send a note to Ridley asking him to come to a certain place in the Alley of Rats. He will come. There you will meet him. There will be no one to hold you this time."

I grinned--kinda wolfishly, I reckon. "Leave the rest to me."

"No one will ever know," she murmured, which kind of puzzled me. "Hong Kong's waterfront has many secrets and many mysteries. I will send a man with you to guide you to the place. Then, come to me here tomorrow night; I can use you. A man like you need not work away his life on a trading schooner."

She clapped her hands. A Chinaboy come in. She spoke to him in the language for a minute, and he bowed and beat it. She arose: "I am going now. In a few minutes your guide will come. Do as he says. Good luck to you; may you avenge us both."

SHE GLIDED OUT and left me sitting there sipping my licker and wondering what it was all about. I'd heard of the White Tigress; who in China ain't? A white girl who had more power amongst the yellow boys than the Chinese government did. Who was she? How come her to get so much pull? Them as knowed didn't say. That she was a international crook she'd just admitted. Some said she was a pirate on the sly; some said she was the secret wife of a big mandarin; some said she was a spy for a big European power. Anyway, nobody knowed for sure, but everybody agreed that anybody which crossed her was outa luck.

Well, I set there and guzzled my licker, and pretty soon in come the meanest, scrawniest looking piece uh humanity I ever seen. A ragged, dirty shrimp he was, with a evil, furtive face.

"Bli'me, mate," said he, "le's be up and doin'. It's a nice night's work we got ahead of us."

"Suits me," said I, and I follered him out of the saloon by a side door into the nasty, dimly lighted streets, and through twisty alleys which wasn't lighted at all. They stunk like sin and I couldst hear the stealthy rustling noises which always goes on in such places. Rats, maybe, but if a yellow-faced ghost hadda jumped around my neck, I wouldn'ta been surprised a bit.

Well, the cockney seemed to know his way, though my sense of direction got clean bumfuzzled. At last he opened a door and I follered him into a squalid, ramshackle room which was as dark as the alleys. He struck a light and lit a candle on a rough table. They was chairs there, and he brought out a bottle. A door opened out of the room into some other part of the place, I guess; the windows was heavily barred and I saw a trap door in the middle of the floor. I could hear the slow, slimy waves sucking and lapping under us, and I knowed the house was built out over the water.

"Mate," said the Cockney, after we'd finished about half the bottle, "it comes to me that we're a couple o' blightin' idjits to be workin' for a skirt."

"What d'ya mean?" I asked, taking a pull at the bottle.

"Well, 'ere's us, two red-blooded 'e-men, takin' orders from a lousy little frail, 'andin' the swag h'over to 'er, and takin' wot she warnts to 'and us, w'en we could 'ave the 'ole lot. Take this job 'ere now--"

I stared at him. "I don't get you."

He glanced around furtive-like, and lowered his voice: "Mate, let's cop the sparkler for ourselves and shove out! We can get back to Hengland or the States and live like blurry lords for a while. Hi'm sick o' this bloody dump."

"Say, you," I snarled, "what'r you drivin' at? What sparkler?"

"W'y, lorlumme," said he, "the sparkler we takes off Mate Ridley afore we dumps his carcass through that trapdoor."

"Hold everything!" I was up on my feet, all in a muddle. "I didn't contract to do no murder."

"Wot!" said the Cockney. "Bli'me! The Tigress says as you was yearnin' for Ridley's gore!"

"Well, I am," I growled, "but she didn't get my meanin'. I didn't mean I wanted to kill him, though, come to think about it, it mighta sounded like it. But I ain't no murderer, though killin' is what he needs after the way he treated that poor kid. When he comes through that door, I'm goin' to hammer him within a inch of his life, understand, but they ain't goin' to be no murder done--not tonight. You can bump him later, if you want to. But you got to let me pound him first, and I ain't goin' to be in on no assassination."

"But we got to finish him," argued the Cockney, "or him and To Yan will have all the bobbies in the world after us."

"Say," I said, "the Tigress didn't say nothin' about no jewel nor no To Yan. What's they got to do with it? She said Ridley brung her into China and left her flat--"

"Banan orl!" sneered the Cockney. "She was spoofin' you proper, mate. Ridley never even seen 'er. Hi dunno 'ow she got into so much power in China myself, but she's got somethin' on a mandarin and a clique o' government officials. She's been a crook ever since she was big enough to steal the blinkin' paint orf 'er bloomin' cradle."

"Listen to me, mate, and we 'ands 'er the double-cross proper. I wasn't to spill this to you, y'understand. I was to cop the sparkler after you'd bumped Ridley, and say nuthin' to you about it, see? But Hi'm sick o' takin' orders orf the 'ussy."

"Old To Yan, the chief of the Yan Tong, 'as a great fancy to Ridley. Fact is, Ridley's old man and the old Chineese 'as been close friends for years. Right now, To Yan's oldest darter is in Hengland gettin' a Western eddication. Old To Yan's that progressive and hup to the times. Well, it's the yellow girl's birthday soon, and To Yan's sendin' 'er a birthday present as would make your heyes bug out. Bli'me! It's the famous Ting ruby, worth ten thousand pounds--maybe more. Old To Yan give it to Jack Ridley to take to the girl, bein'

as Ridley's ship weighs anchor for Hengland tomorrer. I dunno 'ow the Tigress found hout habout it, but that's wot she's hafter."

"I see," said I, grinding my teeth. "I was the catspaw, hey? She handed me a line to rub me up to do her dirty work. She thought I wanted to bump Ridley, anyway. Why'n't she have some of her own thugs do it?"

"That's the blightin' smoothness o' 'er," said the Cockney. "Why risk one o' her own men on a job like that, w'en 'ere was a tough sailor sizzlin' for the blinkin' hopportunity? She really thought you was wantin' to bump Ridley; she didn't know you just wanted to beat 'im hup. If you'd bumped 'im and got caught, she wouldn't a been connected with it, so's it could be proved, because you ain't one o' 'er regular men. She thought you was the right man for the job, anyway, because, mate, if Hi may say so, you looks like a natural-born murderer. But look 'ere--let's cross 'er, and do the trick hon our hown."

"Not a chance," I snapped. "Unlock that door and let me out!"

"Let you hout to squeal hon me," he whined, a red light beginning to gleam in his little rat eyes. "Not me, says you! Watch hout, you Yankee swine--!"

I saw the flash of his knife as he came at me, and I kicked a chair into his legs; and while he was spitting curses like a cat and trying to untangle hissself, I bent my right on his jaw and he took the count.

WITH SCARCELY A glance at his recumbent form, I twisted the lock off the door and stalked forth into the darkness. I groped around in a lot of twisty back alleys for a while, expecting any minute to get a knife in my back or fall into the bay, but finally I blundered into a narrow street which was dimly lit and soon found myself back in a more civilized portion of the waterfront. And a few minutes later who do I see emerging from a saloon but a man I recognized as a stoker aboard the Castleton.

"Hey, you," I accosted him politely, "where is that lousy first mate of yours?"

"Try and find out, you boneheaded mick," he answered rudely. "What d'ya think uh that?"

"Chew on this awhile," I growled, clouting him heartily in the mush, and for a few seconds a merry time was had by all. But pretty quick I smashed a right hook under his heart that took all the fight out of him, along with his wind.

Having brung him to by a liberal deluge of water from a nearby horse trough, I said: "All right, if you got to be so stubborn you won't answer a civil question, I won't insist. But lemme tell you somethin', and you can pass it on to that four-flushin' mate--when I get my hands on him, I'm goin' make him eat that foul decision. And say, you better find him and tell him that if he keeps packin' around what To Yan give him, he's goin' to lose it, along with his life. He'll understand what I mean. And tell him to stay away from the

Alley of Rats, if he ain't already gone there."

Well, it was mighty late by this time. The streets was nearly deserted, even them which usually has a crowd of revelers on 'em all night. I was sleepy, but knowing that the _Castleton_ was sailing the next morning, I took one more stroll around, hoping to run onto the mate. I was sure he hadn't gone aboard yet, because he always spent his nights ashore when he could.

After hunting for maybe an hour or more, I was about to give it up. I was passing a dark alleyway when something come slipping out, looking like a slim white ghost. It was the White Tigress.

"Wait a minute, Costigan," she said, as friendly as you please. "May I speak to you just a moment?"

"You got a nerve, Miss," I said reproachfully, "after the bunk you handed me--"

"Ah, don't be angry at me," she cooed, patting my arm. "Forget it. I'll make it up to you, if you'll just come with me. You're the kind of a man I admire."

I'm the prize boob of the Asiatics. I follered her along the little, dark, smelly alley, through an arched doorway and into a kind of small court, lighted by smoky lamps. Then she turned on me and I got a chill.

Boy, all the cat-spirit in her eyes was up and blazing. Her face was whiter than ever, her red lips writhed into a snarl, and of all the concentrated venom I ever seen flaming out of a woman's eyes, it was there! Murder, destruction, torture, sudden death and damnation she looked at me.

"I reckon maybe I better be going Miss," I said, kind of nervous. "It's gettin' late and the Old Man'll be expectin' me back--"

"Stand where you are!" she said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper.

"But the cook may be drunk and I'll have to make breakfast for the crew!" I said wildly, beginning to get desperate.

"Shut up, you fool!" she exclaimed in a voice which plumb shook with passion. "I'll fix you, you dumb, imbecilic, boneheaded, double-crossing beast! It was you who warned Ridley, wasn't it? And he ditched the ruby and never showed up at the Alley of Rats. It was just by pure luck that we got him at all. But he'll tell what he did with the gem before we get through with him. And as for you--"

She stopped a minute and her eyes ran up and down my huge frame gloatingly; she actually licked her lips like a cat over a mouse.

"When I finish with you, you'll have learned not to interfere with my affairs," she added, taking a long, thin raw-hide whip from somewhere and flicking it through the air. "I'm going to lash you within an inch of your life," she announced. "You won't be the first, either. I'm going to flay you and cut you to pieces. I'm going to whip you until you're a blind, whimpering, writhing mass of raw flesh."

"Now listen, Miss," I said, with quiet dignity, "I like to oblige a lady but they is such a thing as carryin' curtesy too far. I ain't goin' to let you even touch me with that cat."

"I didn't suppose you would," she sneered, "so I provided for that." She clapped her hands and into the courtyard from nowhere come five big Chinese. They was big, too; the smallest was larger than me and the biggest looked more like a elephant than a man. They come for me from all sides like shadows.

"Grab him, boys," she snapped in English, and I give a wolfish grin. I was plumb at ease now I had men to deal with. They was reaching for me when I went into action. A trained fighter can clean up a roomful of white civilians--and a Chinee can't take a punch. Quick as a flash I threw my whole shoulder-weight behind the left I smashed into the yellow map of the one in front of me; blood spattered and he sagged down, out cold. The next instant the rest was on me like a pack of wolves, but I whirled, ducking under a pair of arms and dropping the owner with a right hook to the heart. For the next few seconds it was a kind of whirlwind of flailing arms and legs, with me as the center.

At first they tried to capture me alive, but, being convinced of the futility of this endeavor, they tried to kill me. A knife licked along my arm, and the sting of the wound maddened me. With a roar, I crashed my right down on the neck of the Chinee which had me around the legs, driving him against the ground so hard his face splattered like a tomato. Then, reaching back and getting a good hold on the yellow boy which was both strangling me from behind and trying to knife me, I tossed him over my head. He hit on his neck and didn't get up. I then ducked a hatchet swiped at me by the biggest of the gang, and, rising on my toes, I reached his jaw and crashed him with a torrid left hook. I didn't need to hit him again.

THE FIGHT HAD took maybe a minute and a half. I glanced scornfully at the prostrate figures of my victims, and then looked around for the Tigress. She was crouched back in a angle of the wall, with a kind of stunned look in her eyes, the whip dangling from her limp fingers. She give me one horrified look and shuddered and murmured something about a gorilla.

"Well," I said, kind of sarcastic, "it don't look like they is goin' to be no whippin' tonight--or have you got some more hatchet-men hid away somewheres? If you have, trot 'em out. Action is what I crave."

"Great heavens," she murmured, "are you human? Do you realize that you've just laid out five professional murderers? And--and--_what are you going to do with me_?"

Seeing that she was scared gave me a idea. Maybe I could make her tell something about Ridley.

"You come with me," I growled, and taking her arm, I marched her out of the courtyard by another way, until we come to another courtyard similar to the one we'd left, but open enough so I couldst see if anybody tried to slip up on me. Spite of what she'd did, I felt kind of ashamed of myself, because if I ever seen a scared girl, it was the White Tigress. Her knees knocked together and she looked like she thought I'd eat her. When she thought I wasn't looking, she dropped the whip like it was hot, giving me a most guilty glance. I reckon she thought maybe I'd use it on her, and I felt clean insulted.

"Where's Jack Ridley?" I asked her, and she named a place I'd never heard of.

"Don't hit me," she begged, though I never hit a woman and hadst made not the slightest threatening motion at her. "I'll tell you about it. I sent the note to Ridley and waited for the Cockney to come and report to me. He had orders to hide you in a safe place after you'd turned the trick, and then come back and tell me about it. But after a while the Cockney turned up with a welt on his jaw, and said you'd balked on the job. He said you knew about the ruby somehow and that you proposed that you and he kill Ridley, take the stone and skip--"

"Aha," thought I to myself, "I bet he lied hisself into a jamb!"

--but I realized that you couldn't have known about it unless he told you, so I laid into him with the raw-hide and pretty soon he admitted that he let it slip about the ruby. But he said you wanted him to double-cross me, and he wouldn't do it, and you knocked him out and left. He said that after he came to he waited a while, intending to kill Ridley himself, but the mate never showed up. I knew the Cockney was lying about part of it, at least, but I believed him when he said that likely you had killed Ridley yourself and skipped. I started my gang out looking for you, but they caught Ridley instead. It was just by chance.

"They brought him to the hang-out and we searched him, but he didn't have the ruby on him and he wouldn't tell what he'd done with it. We did worm it out of him that he was on his way to the Alley of Rats in answer to the note he got, when a stoker on his ship met him and warned him to keep away. While we were getting ready to _make_ him talk, one of my boys brought me word that he'd just seen you on the streets, and I thought I'd settle the score between us. I'm sorry; I'll never try it again. What are you going to do with me?"

"How do I know you're tellin' the truth?" I asked.

She shuddered. "I'd be afraid to lie to you. You're the only man I ever saw that I was afraid of. Don't be angry--but I saw a gorilla kill six or seven niggers on the West African Coast once, and, when you were fighting those China-boys, you looked just like him."

I was too offended to say anything for a second, and she kind of whimpered: "Please, what _are_ you going to do with me? Please let me go!"

"I'm goin' to let you take me to where you got Jack Ridley," I growled, mopping the blood off my cut arm, and working it so it wouldn't get stiff. "I got a account to settle with the big cheese--and you ain't goin' to torture no Americans while I can stand on my two feet. Lead the way!"

WELL, I'D OF been in a jamb if she'd refused, because I don't know what I coulda done to make her--it just ain't in me to be rough with no women--but my bluff worked. She didn't argue at all. She led me out of the courtyard, down three or four narrow, deserted streets, across a bunch of back alleys, and finally through a narrow doorway.

Here she stopped. The room was very dimly lighted by a street lamp that burned just outside and through the cracks in the wall I could see they was a light in the room beyond.

I had my hand on her arm, just so she wouldn't try to give me the slip, but I guess she thought I'd wring her neck if she crossed me, because she whispered: "Ridley's in there, but there's a gang of men with him."

"How many and who all are they?" I whispered.

"Smoky and Squint-Eye and Snake and the Dutchman; and then there's Wladek and--"

Just then I heard a nasty voice rise that I recognized as belonging to the said Smoky--a shady character but one which I hadn't known was mixed up in the Tigress game: "Orl right, you bloody Yank, we'll see wot you says after we've touched yer up a bit wiv a 'ot h'iron, eh, mates?"

I let go the girl's arm and slid to the door, soft and easy. And then I found out the Tigress wasn't near as scared as she'd pretended, because she jumped back and yelled: "Look out, boys!"

Secrecy being now out of the question, the best thing was to get in the first punch. I hit that door like a typhoon and crashed right through it. I had a fleeting glimpse of a smoky lamp in a bracket on the wall, of a rope-wrapped figure on a bunk and a ring of startled, evil faces.

"Ow, murder!" howled somebody I seen was the Cockney. "It's that bloody sailor again!" And he dived through the nearest window.

In that room they was a Chinee, a Malay, a big Russian and six thugs which was a mixed mess of English, Dutch and American. As I come through the door, I slugged the big Russian on the jaw and finished him for the evening, and grabbing the Chinee and the Malay by their necks, I disposed of them by slammin' their heads together. Then the rest

of the merry men rose up and come down on me like a wolf on the fold, and the real hilarity commenced.

It was just a whirlwind. Fists, boots, bottles and chairs! And a few knives and brass knuckles thrown in for good measure. We romped all over the room and busted the chairs and shattered the table, and it was while I was on the floor, on top of three of them while the other three was dancing a horn-pipe on me, that I got hold of a heavy chair-leg. Shaking off my assailants for a instant, I arose and smote Dutchy over the head with a joyous abandon that instantly reduced the number of my foes to five. Another swat broke Snake's arm, and at that moment a squint-eyed yegg ran in and knifed me in the ribs. I give a roar of irritation and handed him one that finished him and the chair-leg simultaneous.

At this moment a red-headed thug laid my scalp open with a pair of brass knuckles, and Smoky planted his hob-nailed boots in my ribs so hard it put me on my back again, where the survivors leaped on me with howls of delirious joy. But I was far from through, though rather breathless.

Biting a large hunk out of the thumb a scar-faced beachcomber tried to shove in my eyes, I staggered up again. Doing this meant lifting Smoky too, as he was on my back, industriously gnawing my ear. With a murmur of resentment, I shook him off and flattened him with a right-handed smash that broke three ribs; and, ducking the chair Scar-Face swung at me, I crashed him with a left that smashed his nose and knocked out all his front teeth.

Red-Head was still swinging at me with the brass knuckles, and he contrived to gash my jaw pretty deep before I broke his jaw with a hay-making right swing. As the poem says, the tumult and the clouting died, and, standing panting in the body-littered room, I shook the blood and sweat outa my eyes and glared around for more thugs to conquer.

But I was the only man on his feet. I musta been a sight. All my clothes was tore off except my pants, and they wasn't enough of them left to amount to anything. I was bleeding from a dozen cuts. I was bruised all over and I had another black eye to go with the one McCoy had give me earlier in the evening. I looked around for Ridley and seen him lying on the bunk where he was tied up, staring at me like he'd never seen a critter like me before. I looked for the Tigress but she was gone.

SO I WENT over and untied Ridley, and he never said a word; acted like he was kinda stunned. He worked his fingers and glanced at the victims on the floor, some of which was groaning and cussing, and some of which was slumbering peaceful.

"Gettin' the circulation back in your hands?" I asked, and he nodded.

"All right," said I, "Put up your mitts; I'm goin' to knock you into the middle of Kingdom Come."

"Good Lord, man," he cried, "you've saved my life--and you mean you want to fight me?"

"What the hell did you think?" I roared. "Think I come around to thank you for jobbin' me out of a rightful decision? I never fouled nobody in my life!"

"But you're in no shape to fight now!" he exclaimed. "You've just whipped a roomful of men and taken more punishment than I thought any human being could take, and live! You're bleeding like a stuck hog. Both your eyes are half-closed, your lips are pulped, your scalp's laid open, one of your ears is mangled, and you've got half a dozen knife cuts on you. I saw one of those fellows stab you in the ribs--"

"Aw, it just slid along 'em," I said. "If you think I'm marked up, you oughta seen me after I went fifteen rounds to a draw with Iron Mike Brennon. But listen, that ain't neither here nor there. You ain't as big as I am, but you got the reputation of a fighter. Now you put up your mitts like a man."

Instead, he dropped his hands to his sides. "I won't fight you. Not after what you've just done for me. Do you realize that you've burst into the secret den of the most dangerous crook in China--and cleaned up nine of her most desperate gangmen, practically bare-handed?"

"But what about that foul?" I asked petulantly.

"I was wrong," he said. "I was standing behind McCoy and didn't really get a good look at the blow you dropped him with. Honestly, it looked low to me, and when McCoy began to writhe around on the canvas, I thought you had fouled him. But if you did, it wasn't intentional. A man like you wouldn't deliberately hit another fighter low. You didn't even hit these thugs below the belt, though God knows you had every right. Now then, I apologize for that foul decision, and for hitting you, and for what I said to you. If you want to take a swing at me anyway, I won't blame you, but I'm not going to fight you."

He looked at me with steady eyes and I seen he wasn't afraid of me, or handing me no bluff. And, somehow, I was satisfied.

"Well," I said, mopping the blood off my scalp, "that's all right. I just wanted you to know I don't fight foul. Now let's get outa here. Say--the White Tigress was here with me--where'd she go, do you reckon?"

"I don't know. And I don't want to know. If I don't see her again, it will be soon enough. It must have been she who sent me that note earlier in the night."

"It was. And I don't understand, if you was goin' to do what it said, why it took you so long. You shoulda been at the Alley of Rats before the stoker had time to find you and give you my warnin'."

"Well," he said, "I hesitated for nearly an hour after getting the note, as to whether I'd go or not, but finally decided I would. But I left the To Yan ruby with the captain. On the way, the stoker met me and gave me your tip, which he didn't understand but thought I ought to know nevertheless. So I didn't go to the Alley of Rats, but later on a gang jumped me, tied me up and brought me here. And say, how is it that you're mixed up in all this?"

"It's a long story," I said, as we come out into one of the politer streets, "and--"

"And just now you need those cuts and bruises dressed. Come with me and I'll attend to that. You can tell me all about it while I bandage you."

"All right," I said, "but let's make it snappy 'cause I got business."

"Got a girl in this port, have you?"

"Naw," I said. "I think I can find the promoter of the Waterfront Fight Arena at his saloon about now, and I want to ask him to get Red McCoy to fight me at the Arena again tomorrow night."

THE END

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