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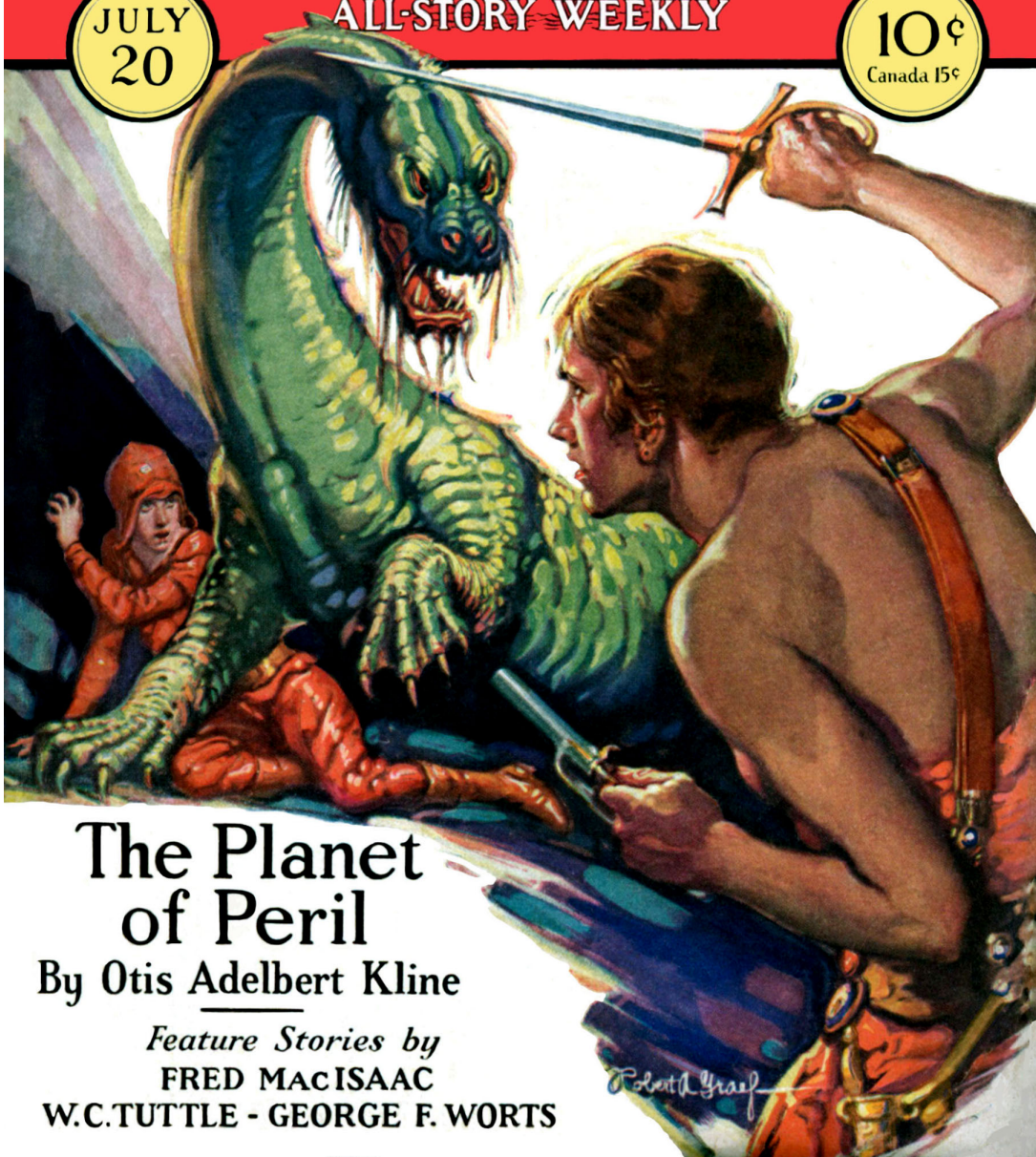
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The Planet of Peril

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Crowd-Horror

By **ROBERT E. HOWARD**

Slade Costigan, boxer with a slugger's punch, had everything—if he could only fight off his one great weakness.

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I first spoke to Slade Costigan in his dressing room, where I had hurried immediately after his two round knock-out of Battling Monaghan. The boy was an impressive specimen of manhood, about six feet in height, slim-waisted and tapering of legs, with remarkably broad shoulders and heavy arms. Dark-skinned, with narrow, cold gray eyes, and a shock of black hair falling over a broad forehead, he had the true fighting face—broad across the cheekbones with thin lips and a firm jaw. His face was in a battered condition just now, one eye being partly closed, while his lips were bruised and his cheeks decorated with several small cuts, owing to the last desperate efforts of Battling Monaghan.

I sat down and looked him over.

"My name is Steve Palmer; you've probably heard of me. Now to come to the point; you look fairly intelligent."

He seemed slightly surprised, but grinned.

"With your brains and your body." I said slowly, "you should be fighting in the best rings in the country—not second-rate joints like this. I've followed your career. I've seen you fighting second-raters in small clubs for the last few months, tearing into them, wide-open and reckless. Now, listen, I'm saying this for your own good. As a boxer you're a false alarm. Wait now, don't get sore. I've watched you fight, and you're the toughest, hardest punching slugger I ever saw, but you don't use your brains. You start your swings from the floor, leave yourself wide open at all times, forget all about footwork and fall for every trick your opponent tries. You fight almost like a man in a trance. The only reason you've

ever whipped anybody is because you're a freak—a regular granite-jawed iron man. But you'll crumble after a while under the steady fire of punches and go around cutting paper dolls. Punch-drunk! Just another Joe Grim."

"I know it," he answered roughly. "But how is it any of your business?"

"Listen, Slade," I said as kindly as I could, "I wouldn't be wasting my time on you if you were of the general run of iron men—a small-brained slugger without intelligence enough to learn. But you have plenty of brains, and probably more education than I have. I don't know how you got into the game, or why you haven't learned some science, but you have the makings of a champion. You've been going along without a manager. I don't say I can make you a ring wizard. But I say this: if you'll throw in with me, try your best to learn and apply what I teach you, I'll make you a champion."

Costigan shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he answered rather indifferently. "As you say. I've never been knocked out yet, but this incessant battering is beginning to tell on me already."

That was how I came to manage "Iron" Slade Costigan. I liked the boy from the first; and I earnestly set to work to make a scientific slugger out of him. Alone in my training camps I had him study the tactics of Dempsey, McGovern, Ketchel and Tom Sharkey—men who, lacking real cleverness, adapted themselves to their own particular style of fighting. Costigan learned with an ease which astonished me.

At last I got him Johnny Hilan, a good, clever light-heavyweight, for a sparring partner, absolutely forbidding Costigan to slug him.

I was astounded. To my amazement I watched my iron slugger glide about Johnny for four fast rounds, outstepping and outjabbing him, tying him up in the clinches, and flashing a defense that showed real genius.

"Slade," I said heartily, "I've been all wrong! I've been trying to make a scientific slugger out of you. Now I'm going to make you the classiest boxer the ring has ever seen! You're a queer fellow, Slade. I never heard of a slugger before who concealed such latent cleverness. It's absolutely beyond me how you've been such a tramp in the ring."

He shook his head in a helpless sort of manner and I was vaguely worried to note that he did not seem at all enthusiastic.

"I could always box cleverly in the training quarters," he said, "but the instant I climb into the ring I seem to be transformed into—a tramp," he laughed sardonically.

I imported the cleverest sparring partners I could find and set to work. Slade took naturally to his work and I was wildly enthusiastic. I had stumbled on to the rarest of all finds—a clever heavyweight with a killing punch. Could I make a cool crafty boxer out of Slade, I knew no man in the world could stand against him. Fast, aggressive, too tough to be worried by the few punches that would slip past his guard, with the power of a projectile in each hand and the speed of light in his feet, he would tower above the general ruck of fighters like a giant above dwarfs. The manager's and fight fans'

dream! The super-fighter! A Corbett with the ruggedness of a Jeffries and the punch of a Dempsey!

All these things I imparted to Costigan, but he listened silently and his only comment was a despairing, empty and self-mocking laugh that worried me deeply. But I went on.

At last I deemed my man ready to take the first step in the course I had mapped out for him. Accordingly I matched him with one Joe Handler, a tough fighter, fairly clever, with a wicked hitting ability. His manager was looking for a set-up at the time, and did not object to putting his man in with an unknown.

I impressed upon Costigan that this was his first step on the trail that should lead from second-rater to champion. I instructed him to box Handler, to keep away from him until he saw an opening, then to crash in with the short heavy smashes I had taught him. Slade listened, but said nothing.

The gong sounded. The crowd fell partly silent for a breathless instant, as Handler came to the center of the ring, hands up and wary. Costigan slid out of his corner in a half-crouch, moving with the smooth cat-like tread that was his. I wondered if this could be the same man who had fought Battling Monaghan.

Handler led with his left, but Costigan was out of reach. Again he led and this time Slade stepped inside it and hooked a short left to the body. Handler grunted and went back on his heels and instantly Costigan was on him, raining right and left hooks to body and head. Somehow Handler slipped blindly

through the hail of gloves and clinched. The referee broke them. Handler striking out blindly, connected with a hard left. Costigan stepped back from a wild right. The crowd shouted jeeringly, as crowds will, mindlessly, meaninglessly—and then to my horror Costigan went out of his mind and charged in blindly, flailing right and let!

My yells were in vain. He drove Handler about the ring with the force of his onslaught, missing or landing glancingly with most of his wild swings. The crowd was up, bellowing—they liked this, of course. What do they care about a fighter or whether he spends his last days maundering about with a punch-drunk brain?

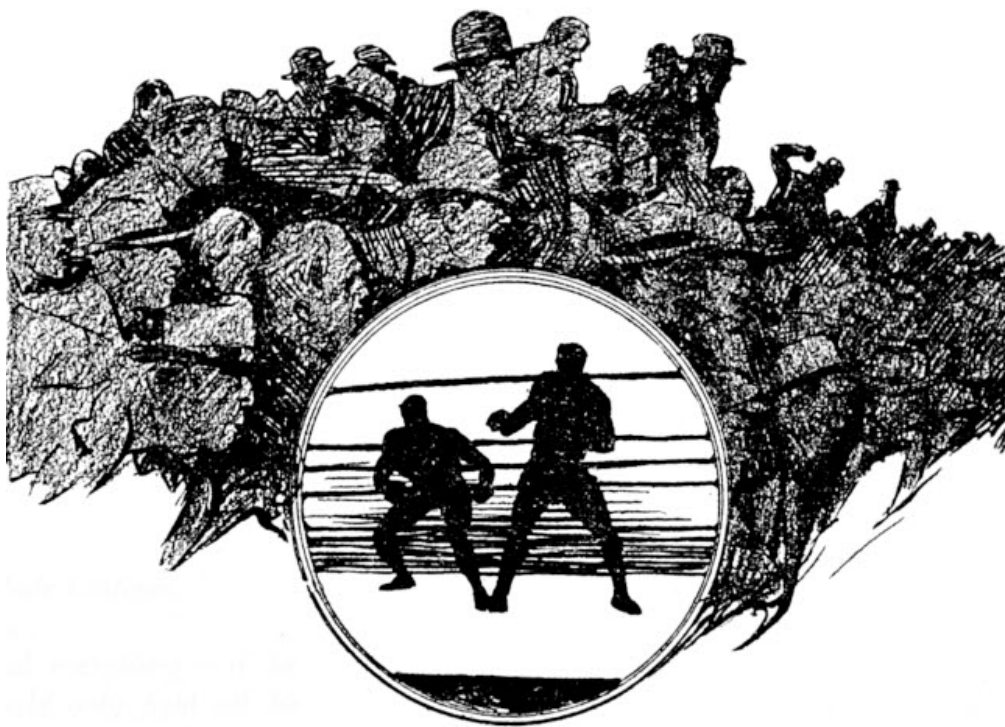
Handler was so astounded by this metamorphosis that he was unable to work out a plan of defense and just before the gong Costigan floored him with a wild right swing to the side of the head.

Back in his corner, Slade sat with his head in his hands, paying no attention to my curses and entreaties. For the second round he came out slowly, in a boxing pose, but before the gloves touched, he went to pieces again and reverted to his old style. Handler was so weakened by the punishment he had received in the first round that he was in no shape to withstand Costigan's ferocity, and after missing seven or eight terrific swings, Slade landed a haymaking left to the jaw, and Handler went down and out.

Slade sat in his dressing room in silence, his eyes on the floor. I did not berate him, for I knew he was suffering. I slapped him on the back and said: "Cheer up, kid, better luck next time. After all, this is only the first bout."

"No, Steve," he said with a despairing gesture. "It'll be the same next time and always. I've been this way ever since I can remember. I'll never be anything but a tramp. It was only by chance I won—Handler was so surprised at my change of style that he left himself open. Otherwise he'd have beaten me to a pulp. Oh, I've had this experience before. When I first started fighting it was the same way. To come out sparring and dancing, and then the crowd—" He shuddered suddenly and clenched his fists until the nails sank into his palms.

"The crowd! They yell and I go insane! I can hear every shout —'Fight, you yellow tramp!' 'Get off your bicycle!' 'Stand up and fight, curse you!' The force of those thousands of wills beats on me like a material flood. I've seen psychologists. Mass hypnotism, they say it is. I'm like a man in a trance, as you once said. A part of my brain goes to sleep and all that remains is the wild beast urge to destroy my enemy. The crowd beats down my will power and hypnotizes me."



"Fight, you yellow tramp!"

"I've heard of such things," I said dubiously. "Still, I maintain that it can be overcome. You slug naturally. I believe we can train you until you box naturally; instinctively."

"I doubt it," said Costigan. "When the thunder of the crowd beats on my brain, I'm stunned—dazed; only partly aware of what I'm doing."

I went back to the training camp with one object in mind—to drill Costigan until he boxed as instinctively as he fought. To implant the science of the game so thoroughly in his reflexes

that his trained motions would carry him through even if his brain "went to sleep."

The reporters pounced on the sensational knock-out of Handler, and boosted Costigan's stock sky high. They proclaimed him a second Dempsey, a smashing man-killer of the West, and laughed over his trick of fooling Handler into thinking that he was a defensive boxer—as they said.

I was cautious in getting him his next bout.

I finally selected Tommy Olsen. A clever light-heavyweight. A good boy but not a man-killer. The sports writers were somewhat surprised at my preference, but the crowd that packed the arena was infinitely more so. As before, Costigan began boxing in a lively manner, but almost instantly blew up and began his wild and futile slugging.

The bout went the full ten rounds. Olsen, boxing cleverly, punished Costigan terrifically, but because of the iron man's incredible stamina, was unable to stop him or even knock him off his feet. At the end of the slaughter, the referee decided that Costigan had gained a draw, owing to his aggressiveness and the fact that his aimless but terrible swings had twice floored Olsen for counts of nine. The crowd booed the decision and even I felt it was unjust to Olsen.

The sports writers, after recovering from their astonishment, trained their heavy artillery on us, inquiring sarcastically as to what kind of iron man this was, unable to defeat a man fifteen pounds lighter than himself.

As for me, I saw the handwriting on the wall.

"Slade," I said, "our championship hopes have gone glimmering. I hate to quit so quickly, but the crowd has us whipped."

Slade silently grasped my hand. "You're a real friend, Steve, and you're right. It's bitter quitting the game like this, but my face is already more battered than many an old-timer's and my brain will be next. I've seen these punch-drunk wrecks that were once iron men like myself. But I want just one more fight, and then I'll have money enough to go into the kind of business I want, Steve."

I argued against it, but finally gave in. Handler and his manager were clamoring for a return match and as I could get more money for my man there than anywhere else, I agreed with misgivings. Handler was a hard man.

One night, a few days before the fight, Slade came in and after hesitating a while, and making several false starts, he said, blushing like a schoolboy, "Steve, I have a girl."

Following my manager's instinct, I was about to protest; then remembering he was practically through with the game, I congratulated him heartily.

"Her name's Gloria. She dances in some of the higher-class cabarets. Maybe—maybe when I get started good in my business she'll marry me."

He wandered away day-dreaming, and I sighed. It was pathetic to me, for I felt in my heart Slade would fail in his "business" as in everything else.

The night of the fight arrived and I stood in Slade's corner, as I thought for the last time, muttering some words of

encouragement to him. Across the ring Joe Handler sat glowering, grimly intent on wiping out the stain on his record.

"I'm glad Gloria isn't here," muttered Slade just as the gong sounded and I silently echoed his words. If the girl cared for him at all, it would be a terrible sight for her to see the beating I knew he was in for.

At the tap of the gong Costigan leaped from his corner in a vain effort to crush Handler before he could get set. But Handler, while bent on revenge, was taking no chances with the sledges which had knocked him out before. He back-pedalled around the ring with Slade in hot chase, swinging fiercely and futilely. Handler evaded his efforts, frequently beat him to the punch with a stinging left jab, and clinched often. Little damage was done by either that round.

During the minute intermission I thrust my head through the ropes and spoke a few cheering words to Slade, who smiled dazedly at me. The crowd had him. As I was about to climb into the ring to aid his seconds in caring for him, I felt some one tug at my coat. I turned to look into the face of a girl who sat in a front row seat. She was small and slender, not much more than a child, with a winsome face set off by silky blond hair. This hair was cut in a very boyish bob and a round little hat perched jauntily on top, adding to her appearance of piquant youthfulness.

"You're Mr. Palmer, aren't you?" she asked childishly, her large, violet eyes gazing trustfully up at me. "Slade is going to win, isn't he?"

"How do I know?" I responded irritably, for my nerves were rasped with worry. "What is it to you?"

"I'm Gloria," she answered nervously. "Hasn't Slade told you about me?"

"My God!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

She shrank back into her seat. "Don't tell him," she cried. "He told me not to come, but I wanted to see him whip Handler."

"You're more likely to see him battered to a bloody pulp," I snarled brutally. "Why can't women stay where they belong? Don't let him see you, whatever you do. He's in for enough suffering as it is."

I instantly regretted my unnecessary roughness. Tears sprang to her soft eyes and she twined her white hands nervously.

"You'd better leave," I said, more gently, but she shook her head.

"I'm right behind Slade's corner," she said in a subdued manner. "He can't see me unless he turns right around, and he isn't likely to do that. Mr. Palmer, please let me stay; I won't scream or anything."

"All right." I turned back to my fighter, who was just getting off his stool to answer the gong. Evidently, in the racket the crowd was making, he had heard nothing of our conversation and was unaware of the girl's presence.

I haven't the heart to tell of that fight in detail. Round after round it was the same, Costigan charging and missing, and Handler putting more and more steam behind his jabs and counters as he solved Slade's single style, until he was

battering away fiercely at the iron man's crimsoned face and body. The fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh were alike. The crowd was stunned at two things: Slade's powers of taking punishment, and his senseless manner of fighting. I sighed, thinking of what he might have been.

At the end of the eighth round Costigan went down for the second time beneath a volley of right hooks to the head and had to be helped to his corner. I was on the point of throwing in the sponge, but Costigan, both eyes partly closed, his nose smashed and blood gushing from innumerable cuts on his face, stopped me. Oh, he had courage.

"Take it standing up," he muttered like a man in a dream. "Feeling better now—last out the bout."

It was true that his recuperation was remarkable—more so than in any man I have ever known. He actually charged out for the ninth round with a show of freshness which would have broken some men's hearts—and the slaughter commenced again. Handler, wearying of his efforts, began to take chances in his eagerness.

I heard a sound of sobbing and turned to see the girl, Gloria. She had left her seat and was leaning against the ring at my side. Her pretty little face was streaked with tears, her foolish little hat all awry.

"Oh, why don't they stop it?" she whimpered. "Isn't there some way that Slade can whip that brute?"

"Yes." I said bitterly. "Handler's leaving scores of openings now, but Slade's got only a long roundhouse swing that a blind man could duck. The boy would win if he could box him."

To my amazement her eyes flashed suddenly, she leaped feet first into a seat, and her high shrill voice cut through the din like a knife:

"Box him, Slade, *box him!*"

And before my eyes a miracle happened. At the first sound of that voice. Slade stopped short. His head turned as he sought the author of it, and instantly Handler crashed a sledge-hammer right to his jaw. Costigan dropped like a log, but as the referee counted over him he reeled to his knees and his blood-misted eyes swept the ring-side until they rested on the girl; they remained riveted there.

"Slade, oh, Slade!" Her arms were outstretched and all the pleading and love and sacrifice of a thousand centuries of womanhood trembled in her voice: "Box him, kid, *box him!*"

"Nine!" shouted the referee—and Costigan was on his feet. The crowd screamed. I yelled. Handler's manager went white. Handler, rushing in to deliver the finishing blow, had been met with a snaky left jab that set him back on his heels and broke a flow of blood from his lips.

Like a great smooth leopard Costigan was after him, and again and again the left shot to Handler's face, while Costigan easily avoided the boxer's wild and bewildered returns. It was an incredible reversal of form! Now it was Handler who floundered and swung wild and Costigan who poured a swift fire of jabs and hooks to head and body.

Never before in any ring has such a thing happened. Had Handler had his mind about him, he might have won yet, but just as Costigan had beaten him before by a shift from boxer to slugger, so he beat him now by a shift from slugger to

boxer. Handler missed repeatedly, went down, and arose, weakening fast. Back across the ring Slade jabbed his foe and on the ropes sank his right four times to the midriff. Handler sank to his knees and was counted out, crouching and holding dazedly to Costigan's legs.

"For the love of Mike!" exclaimed a dazed reporter to me, as the crowd watched in stunned silence and then broke into bedlam, "What sort of bird are you managing anyhow? You mean to tell me Costigan intentionally took a beating like that to trick Handler, or what?"

"They say that the influence of the mob can be counterbalanced by one person, if you think enough of that one person," I answered, only about half aware of what I was saying. "There's a living proof of that statement!"

And I pointed to the corner of the ring where Costigan had collapsed in the arms of Gloria, who was showering him with tears and kisses absolutely unaware of any one.

"And about this retirement business you hinted at the other day," the reporter plucked at my sleeve. "What about it?"

"I've changed my mind. You can announce for Costigan and me that I'm managing the next world's heavyweight champion!"

That fight marked the beginning of a new era for Slade Costigan. How it came to be I do not know, being no psychologist, but his horror of the crowd was a thing of the past as long as Gloria was at hand to call to him when the old

mists began to steal back over his brain. As he himself expressed it, it was as if her voice woke him from a deep sleep and started his drugged brain cells working again. The crowd roared and thundered as of old, but all my boxer heard now was the beloved voice of Gloria, which out-weighed all else.

I always had a seat reserved for the girl just behind his corner and when the going was roughest, her voice kept him steady and keen. Perhaps it was simply his great love for her which made him instinctively follow her directions under all circumstances. Or perhaps her nature was the stronger, or that like all restless souls, his needed an anchor of some sort and she was his anchor. I do not know; I only know that—with Gloria's war-cry of love quavering through the roar of fans, "Box him, kid, box him!"—Slade Costigan was invincible.

The Unbeatable Triangle the scribes called us, and our onrush for the title will be remembered a hundred years. With an anchor for Costigan's peculiar mind he developed into what I had visioned him. An irresistible super-fighter.

At last only one man stood between him and the champion—Buffalo Gonzalez, the South American—and then as suddenly as the Unbeatable Triangle had been formed, it was broken.

It was two nights after Costigan had outboxed the Brown Ghost of Atlanta and knocked him out in the seventh. As I came into our training quarters, I met Gloria coming out and saw at a glance that bad weather was brewing. Oh, she had a will of her own, for all her childish gentleness, and was something of a little tigress when roused.

"I hate him!" she exclaimed, stamping her little foot.

"Who, Gloria?" I asked.

"Slade!"

"Slade! Why—" I was struck speechless.

"He was a bully and a brute!" she cried, tears starting to her eyes. "Just because I went to a dance with a fellow he doesn't like, he got rough! Look at this bruise on my arm!"

"But, honey," I soothed, "I know Slade didn't intend to hurt you. He's so strong."

"He had no business grabbing me!" she sobbed, stamping her foot. "I'm through with him forever and a day! I wouldn't come back if he got down on his knees! I'm through-h-h-h!"

And suddenly she threw her arms around my neck like a child, wept briefly on my bosom, jerked away, stamped her foot again—and was gone. And I could see my hopes of a title fading with her. I went on into the training quarters.

Slade sat at a table, head sunk in his arms.

"Slade," said I, "you're a fool. What's come between you and Gloria?"

"Oh, I'm a fool all right," he answered, lifting his head with a sigh. "She went to a dance with this rotter I warned her against, just to show me I wasn't running her affairs, and when they came here afterward I went out of my mind and threw him out. Then we had our first row and she threw my engagement ring at me and swore she was through. And she means it. She won't come back."

I tried to find the girl, but she had left the city. I put a couple of detective agencies on the job, but Slade said, "No use, Steve, she wouldn't come back, even if you found her."

My soul was filled with bitterness. I knew the futility of sending Slade into the ring without her aid. I stopped all other business in my useless efforts to find the girl.

Then one day I came into the training quarters and found my boxer punching the light bag.

"Have you forgotten my match with Gonzalez?" he asked in response to my questions. "Have you forgotten you signed me up four months ago for a fifteen-round bout in Chicago with him?"

"You're not going to fight Gonzalez unless I find that girl."

"Yes, I am. The contract's drawn and you've put up a ten thousand dollar forfeit."

"Do you think I care about the money?" I asked bitterly. "It's yourself I'm thinking about."

"And it's Gloria I'm thinking about," he muttered, hitting the bag mechanically.

"Forget her. She's not worth it. You can't mean you'll fight Gonzalez? Why, man, he's never been whipped! He's a giant, a killer. Boxing him, you have a chance; slugging he'll kill you. And you know as good as I do, that you'll go to pieces without Gloria to steady you."

"That's true," he muttered. "But I'll fight Gonzalez. I'll close my ring career in a blaze of glory, at least. If you'll have nothing to do with it, I'll fight him anyway. But I'd like to have you in my corner that night, Steve."

Long ago I learned that when a boxer is so determined it is useless to argue. With horrible misgivings I went about my preparations for the bout. There was no need for me to look into the credentials of Buffalo Gonzalez. Once in a hundred years such a man flashes cometlike across the stage. Landing in New York less than fourteen months before, carrying his scanty belongings in a bandanna handkerchief and armed with the high-sounding but empty title of South American Champion, the Buffalo had soon proved his worth by smashing through all opposition, and the record showed a list of twenty straight knock-outs to his credit.

I could see but one outcome to the bout. Gonzalez was almost as tough as Slade, and could hit just as hard. He was the greatest natural slugger I have ever seen; he fought with a certain natural science, weaved, circled, feinted, ducked, and fought from a crouch. He knew little of the finer points of the game, but thus far his stamina and punching powers had made him invincible. At his top form, boxing and fighting, I believed Slade would prove even the Buffalo's master. But if he went back to his old way of upright, wide open, useless swinging, it would simply be a slaughter.

Once again the thunder of the crowd tore at us, the ring lights blazed above, and the smell of canvas rosin and sweaty leather filled our nostrils. I helped Costigan through the ropes and watched him as he stood erect and flung off his bath robe.

A fine figure of a man he was; six feet, and one hundred and ninety pounds of lithely muscled young manhood, with the long, smooth sinews rippling along his powerful arms and mighty shoulders. Handsome, too, in a fierce, tigerish way, despite the disfigurations of his many battles, which were, after all, not so bad as one might think. A true iron man, few

blows had left their marks on him permanently, and though his nose had been broken many times, it was not altogether shapeless.

I thought as I looked at him how self-confident and efficient he must have seemed to the crowd—but to me he seemed pathetic, a bewildered giant laboring under a handicap he could never overcome, groping blindly through life, and now deserted by his only stay.

He shivered as though from a cold wind when the full blast of the crowd smote him, and into his cold gray eyes stole the blank, unseeing stare as of old. Again and again the crowd thundered his name, a raging ocean of sound on which I knew Slade Costigan's anchorless soul was drifting, against which his numbed brain was vainly struggling. Again and again I asked myself the question—would his trained reflexes carry him through, or would he crack as he had cracked before?

Then the clamor changed, for another form was entering the ring. Gonzalez! A huge hairy giant he was, with the mightiest chest ever seen in an American ring. His shoulders were like iron mountains, his arms like knotted oak limbs. Six feet two he stood, and every ounce of his two-hundred-and-fifteen-pound body was vibrant with savage energy. He was bulky, yet not ponderous. He moved with the case of a tiger, and from under thick black brows his small eyes gleamed and sparkled with magnetic fierceness.

The men were called to the center of the ring for instructions, and Slade listened with his head bowed on his mighty chest, like a great panther gathering himself for the charge. Then they stepped to their corners, the seconds left the ring, the lights went out everywhere except for the cluster which

blazed above the ring, and as I climbed through the ropes, I stopped for a last word.

"Slade, in God's name let me throw in the sponge if it gets too rough!"

His hand grasped mine, and I felt the grip of his iron fingers through the glove.

"No, Steve, let me go out as I lived. The game's not worth the candle. My world has crashed about me, and I guess I've been out of place all my life. Tell Gloria I still loved her to the last. The gong! Now let's see how long the greatest iron man can last against the greatest slugger!"

And like a huge leaping tiger he was out of his corner, leaving me speechless with horror, for I read in his last words a determination to die there in the ring! Oh, don't laugh at the idea of a man dying under a hail of leather gloves. It has happened before, and if there was ever a man built for the destruction of his opponents in the ring, and intent upon their slaughter, it was Buffalo Gonzalez. It was said of him that he had knocked bulls off their feet with his fist, and certainly a squarely landed smash of his right would have caved in the skull of many a man. Consider, then, the prospects of standing up under a blast of such blows—of running full into them, time and again.

No, I knew that unless Costigan should by some miracle be knocked out quickly by one blow, he would be carried senseless from the ring and might never come to.

Over the stadium a hush fell—a breathless silence, as the tiger and the buffalo met in the center of the ring.

Costigan came very close to winning by a knock-out in the very first exchange. Charging in like the rush of a whirlwind, he landed first a trip-hammer left to the jaw and a blasting right that dashed Gonzalez to his knees for his first trip to the canvas. The right was high, else I believe not even the Buffalo could have risen. As it was, he bounced up without a count. Hurt but furious, and roaring like a wounded bull, he staggered Costigan with a crashing left to the jaw. He ducked Slade's return and landed again—hard under the heart with the right.

"My God!" a reporter screamed at me. "Has Costigan gone crazy? What does he mean, trading punches with Gonzalez?"

How could I tell him that my boy was not only following his stunned instinct, but was also bent on his own destruction? How could I tell him of the feelings which prompted Slade's despair—his girl gone, and with her, all his hopes and ambitions? But understood how the boy felt, crazed with the shattering of his hopes, and haunted by the ghosts of all his failures. Life meant nothing to him, and he was willing to lay it down gloriously here in the ring.

Gonzalez was weaving and ducking, and Slade's savage smashes were glancing off his massive shoulders. The South American was confident in the power of his own punches, and he was wild with rage and humiliation. For the first time in his life he had felt the canvas under his knees!

I sighed. That incident showed me that Slade had power enough in his fists to knock out even Gonzalez, could he land

often enough. But the man never lived who could flatten the Buffalo with one or two blows, and the infrequent smashes which Slade was likely to land would not turn the trick.

Smash! Smash! Gonzalez's straight rights battered at Costigan's body, and his long, looping left hooks found Slade's temple repeatedly, while the lighter man's swings glanced from the weaving Latin's arms or the top of his skull, or missed him entirely.

A right hook caught Slade off balance and hurled him to the floor. He was up without a count, and as he rose they traded crashing rights to the body. Slade was staggered, but Gonzalez grunted and halted an instant in his rush. Instantly Slade swung blindly and terribly, and by pure luck landed under the heart with his sledge hammer right. Gonzalez gasped and bent double, and another mine-sweeping right straightened him and flung him into the ropes, where he clung, dazed.

Then and there Costigan should have won the fight, but with the South American reeling helplessly before him, Slade missed swing after swing, until, recovering with his usual alacrity, Gonzalez lurched off the ropes and smashed Costigan to the canvas with a long overhand right. The gong sounded, and we lifted Slade to his feet and helped him to his corner.

"Boy," Slade's handler habbled wildly, "he's fightin' wide open! You nearly got 'im that first rush! Duck them slams, an' he's your'n. Whyn't you box 'im a little?"

"Shut up!" I snarled. "The boy doesn't know what you're saying."

Slade sat, lolling back on the ropes as his seconds worked over him. He was able to answer the gong, his body and nerves responding as freshly as ever, but in his eyes still flamed that blank glare that the roaring of the throng induced.

Gonzalez came out more cautiously — feinted — met Slade's rush with a straight left to the face. As the lighter man went back on his heels, the South American, bunching himself into a compact unit of destruction, crashed through and sank his right to the wrist in Costigan's body. Not even an iron man could stand up under such a blow. Costigan dropped as if he had been shot.

"One! Two! Three! Four!"

Costigan was struggling to rise; the blood that trickled from his battered features reddened the canvas. The crowd was chanting in unison to the count of the referee. I reached for the sponge. Then suddenly, at my very elbow, sounded a cry which halted me short.

"Box him, kid; oh, *box him!*"

Gloria! I whirled. She stood at my side, the foolish little hat perched high on her blond head. One hand clutched at a rope, the other reached out in mute appeal toward the battered and gory fighter who was slowly rising in the center of the ring.

"Seven!"

At the first sound of her voice, Costigan's head had whipped about toward his corner. His eyes flared, and he shook his head violently as if to clear his brain. He raked a glove across his eyes to wipe away the blood, and into those eyes, as their gaze fell on the tear-stained face of the girl, came a sudden blaze of light. The blank stare vanished; in its place gleamed

a sane and self-confident expression. A sob of grateful relief burst from me.

"Nine!"

Costigan rose with a rather uncertain motion. His trembling legs showed that the punishment he had received had taken its toll. Gonzalez came in warily, expecting the usual savage and aimless charge. But Costigan, with a cat-like movement, ducked between the Buffalo's great arms and clinched, tying up the South American so that he was helpless in spite of his superior strength.

The crowd bellowed; Gonzalez swore. The referee broke them, but before Gonzalez could strike, Slade clinched again. The crowd roared its bloodthirsty disapproval, but Costigan gave no heed. Each moment now was precious to him, for with each passing second the strength was flowing back into his veins.

He stalled, clinched and held until the referee was weary from tearing them apart, the crowd was frenzied, and Gonzalez was wild. The South American was all at sea. The shift from slugger to boxer bewildered him, just as it had Joe Handler, and the Buffalo knew nothing of the finer arts of the game. Coming out of clinches, Slade kept him off balance with quick jabs, then clinched again. The gong! And I knew, barring accident, Gonzalez's best chance of victory was gone.

Slade did not need to be helped to his corner this time.

"Slade, Slade," the girl sobbed. "I'm a selfish, damn fool! I had to come back to you, Slade; do you still love me?"

A smile curled his battered lips. "Gloria, you know I do."

"I couldn't stay away." She was crying and laughing at the same time, while the crowd looked on speechless. "I had to come back!"

"Seconds out!"

I gently disengaged the girl's clinging arms and helped her through the ropes, turning to Costigan for a single quick word: "Is it all right, kid?"

"All right, Steve," he grinned. "Watch this for a boxing lesson! I could whip a ring full of buffaloes now!"

The gong! Costigan went out to meet Gonzalez, not with the senseless, wide open plunge of the slugger, but with the smooth, studied charge of the aggressive boxer.

But Gonzalez was a grim and desperate fighter. Seeing victory fading before the jabs of the rejuvenated boxer facing him, he came out to kill or be killed. His first charge was like the blast of a wind from hell, and Slade, with all his renewed skill, could not wholly evade it. Back across the ring he was hurled in a whirlwind of cannon-ball smashes, which would have destroyed any but himself.

With his ribs pounded black and blue, and a deep gash opened on his cheek bone, Costigan felt the ropes at his back, and gave up boxing for the moment. As I saw him burst into a ferocious rally of slugging, I thought for an instant he had gone wild again, and so did Gloria.

But Slade knew what he was doing. A human tiger had him pinned on the ropes, where his skill was useless, and he must

fight him off as best he could or go down to swift defeat. He went into terrific action, staking all on his toughness and punch. But he was not slugging wildly as of old. Chin low on his chest, body bunched into a defensive crouch, he slashed away with short, terrific hooks and straight jolts. He was taking plenty of punishment, but he was handing it out, too! Already Gonzalez's face was a red mask, and his breath was coming shorter.

Crash! Crash! At close range the mighty blows thundered on each other, and then Gonzalez reeled back from the impetus of a sledge hammer right to the jaw, and Slade bounded away from the ropes. Yet even as he did, Gonzalez reeled back and crashed a terrible overhand right through the air. That return was as sudden and unexpected as the stroke of a cobra.

Costigan ducked, but he was not swift enough. He took it square on the temple, and went down on his face as though the force of the blow would drive him through the boards. The referee sprang forward and began to count, while Gonzalez lurched into a neutral corner, almost in as bad a way as the man he had just floored.

Gloria began to cry, but I had no doubt at all in my mind. I knew Slade would somehow be on his feet before the last count. And he was.

Gonzalez came toward him with dragging steps, and stiffly moving legs. Only his wild beast courage kept him on his feet, but he was still dangerous. He rushed like a great, unwieldy monster, his great fist moving in erratic arcs, his partly closed eyes gleaming furiously. He could not understand this man who stood before him, and who continued to rise after blows that would have killed an

ordinary man. After all, this was more a contest of endurance. Both had taken hideous punishment.

They were both on the verge of collapse, but somewhere in him Costigan found the power to carry him through. The Buffalo missed a straight right and attempted to clinch for the first time. Costigan shoved him away and hooked both hands to the head. For the first time Gonzalez was being hit without a return. With a last dying effort he reeled back, and in a sembalance of his old ferocity, rushed Slade back across the ring and sank a right to the body that hurt the iron man.

Slade hooked a left to the chin and a terrific right under the heart, and the swart giant's knees buckled. The Buffalo swung—little more than a gesture it was—and a blasting right that carried all of Slade's waning strength, found his chin and dropped him to his knees, whence he slid on his back to the canvas.

Costigan staggered to the farthest corner, and as the referee counted, the Buffalo turned blindly, reeled to his feet, where he stood with his trembling legs braced wide apart, his great, shaggy head bowed upon his mighty chest, unable to lift his hands; out on his feet, but still impelled by that wild beast instinct of battle.

Costigan came slowly out of his corner and approached the South American, uncertainly. A single shove would topple the beaten man, but Slade wished to be spared delivering the final blow. The referee hesitated, then waved Gonzalez to his corner. But the South American did not see the gesture, for as the referee raised Slade's right hand, Gonzalez pitched forward on his face and lay still, completely out.

Costigan collapsed in his corner, unable to climb out of the ring, and Gloria squirmed into his arms and wept and laughed and kissed him,

"Oh, Slade, I never realized how much you need me! Slade, I'll never leave you again!"

END.

[The end of *Crowd-Horror* by Robert E. Howard]