



Champ of the Forecastle

Howard, Robert Ervin

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About Howard:

Robert Ervin Howard (January 22, 1906 – June 11, 1936) was a classic American pulp writer of fantasy, horror, historical adventure, boxing, western, and detective fiction. Howard wrote "over three-hundred stories and seven-hundred poems of raw power and unbridled emotion" and is especially noted for his memorable depictions of "a sombre universe of swashbuckling adventure and darkling horror." He is well known for having created — in the pages of the legendary Depression-era pulp magazine *Weird Tales* — the character Conan the Cimmerian, a.k.a. Conan the Barbarian, a literary icon whose pop-culture imprint can be compared to such icons as Tarzan of the Apes, Sherlock Holmes, and James Bond. Between Conan and his other heroes Howard created the genre now known as sword-and-sorcery in the late 1920s and early 1930s, spawning a wide swath of imitators and giving him an influence in the fantasy field rivaled only by J.R.R. Tolkien and Tolkien's similarly inspired creation of the modern genre of High Fantasy. There is no evidence that Tolkien was influenced by the earlier author, however. A full century after his birth, Howard remains a seminal figure, with his best work endlessly reprinted. He has been compared to other American masters of the weird, gloomy, and spectral, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Jack London. Source: Wikipedia

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I DON'T HAVE to have a man tell me he craves war. I can tell it by the set of his jaw, the glare in his eyes. So, when Sven Larson raised his huge frame on his bunk and accused me of swiping his tobaccer, I knowed very well what his idee was. But I didn't want to fight Sven. Havin' licked the big cheese three or four times already, I seen no need in mauling him any more. So somewhat to the surprise of the rest of the crew, I said:

"Sven, that's purty crude. You didn't need to think up no lie to pick a fight with me. I know you crave to be champion of the *Sea Girl*, but they ain't a chance, and I don't want to hurt you—"

I got no further, because with a bull's beller he heaved hisself offa his bunk and come for me like a wild man. Gosh, what a familiar scene that was—the fierce, hard faces ringing us, the rough bunks along the wall, the dim light of the lantern swinging overhead, and me standing in the middle, barefooted and stripped to the waist, holding my only title against all comers! They ain't a inch of that fore-castle floor that I ain't reddened with my blood. They ain't a edge of a upper bunk that I ain't had my head smashed against. And since I been a man grown they ain't a sailor on the Seven Seas that can say he stood up to me in that fore-castle and beat me down.

The lurching of the ship and the unsteady footing don't bother me none, nor the close space and foul, smoke-laden air. That's my element, and if I couldst fight in the ring like I can in the fore-castle, with nothing barred, I'd be champion of something besides a tramp wind-jammer.

Well, Sven come at me with his old style—straight up, wide open, with a wild swinging right. I ducked inside it and smashed my left under his heart, following instantly with a blasting right hook to the jaw as he sagged. He started falling and a lurch of the ship throwed him half under a opposite bunk. They's no mercy ast, give or expected in a fore-castle fight; it's always to the finish. I was right after him, and no sooner hadst he got to his feet than I smashed him down again before he could get his hands up.

"Let's call it a day, Sven," I growled. "I don't want to punch you no more."

But he come weaving up, spitting blood and roaring in his own tongue. He tried to clinch and gouge, but another right hook to the jaw sent him down and out. I shook the sweat outa my eyes and glared down at him in some irritation, which was mixed with the satisfaction of knowing that again I hadst proved my right to the title of champion of

the toughest ship afloat. Maybe you think that's a mighty small thing, but it's the only title I got and I'm proud of it.

But I couldn't get onto Sven. Me and him was good friends ordinarily, but ever so often he'd get the idee he couldst lick me. So the next day I looked him up between watches and found him sulking and brooding. I looked over his enormous frame and shook my head in wonder to think that I hadst gotten no further in the legitimate ring than I have, when I can lay out such incredible monsters as Sven so easy.

Six feet four he was in his socks, and his two hundred and forty-five pounds was all muscle. I can bend coins between my fingers, tear up decks of cards and twist horseshoes in two, but Sven's so much stronger'n me they's no comparison. But size and strength ain't everything.

"Sven," said I, "how come you forever got to be fightin' me?"

Well, at first he wouldn't say, but at last it come out.

"AYE BANE GOT girl at Stockholm. She bane like me purty good, but they bane another faller. His name bane Olaf Ericson and he own fishing smack. Always when Aye go out with my girl, he bane yump on me and he always lick me. Aye tank if Aye ever lick you, Aye can lick Olaf."

"So you practice on me, hey?" I said. "Well, Sven, you never will lick me nor Olaf nor any man which can use his hands unless you change your style. Oh, uh course, you're a bear-cat when it comes to fightin' ignorant dock-wallopers and deck-hands which never seen a glove and can't do nothin' but bite and gouge. But you see what happens when you get up against a real fightin' man. Sven," said I on a sudden impulse, like I usually do, "far be it from me to see a deep water seaman get beat up regular by a Baltic fish-grabber. It's a reflection on the profession and on the ship. Sven," said I, "I'm goin' to train you to lick this big cheese."

Well, I hadn't never give much thought to Sven before, only in a general way—you can't pay close attention to every square-head which comes and goes aboard a trading ship—but in the weeks which followed I done my best to make a fighting man of him. I rigged up a punching bag for him and sparred with him between watches. When him or me wasn't doing our trick at the wheel or holystoning the deck, or scraping the cable or hauling on a rope, or trimming sail or exchanging insults with the mates, I tried to teach him all I knowed.

Understand, I didn't try to make no boxing wizard outa him. The big slob couldn't of learned even if I could of taught him. And I didn't know how myself. I ain't a clever boxer. I'm a rough and willing mixer in the ring, but compared to such rough-house scrappers as Sven, I'm a

wonder. The simple ducking, slipping and blocking, which even the crudest slugger does in the ring, is beyond the ken of the average untrained man, and as for scientific hitting, they never heard of it. They just draw back the right and let it go without any aim, timing nor nothing. Well, I just taught Sven the fundamentals—to stand with his left foot forward and not get his legs crossed, to lead with his left and to time and aim a little. I got him outa the habit of swinging wild and wide open with his right all the time, and by constant drilling I taught him the knack of hooking and hitting straight. I also give him a lot of training to harden his body muscles, which was his weak spot.

Well, the big Swede took to it like a duck takes to water, and after I'd explained each simple move upwards of a thousand times, he'd understand it and apply it and he wouldn't forget. Like lots of square-heads, he was slow to learn, but once he had learned, he remembered what he'd learned. And his great size and strength was a big asset.

Bill O'Brien says, "Steve, you're trainin' the big sap to take your title away from you." But I merely laughed with great merriment at the idee.

Sven had a wallop like a mule's kick in either hand, and when he learned to use it, he was dangerous to any man. He was pretty tough, too, or got so before I got through with him. He wasn't very fast, and I taught him a kind of deep defensive crouch like Jeffries used. He took to it natural and developed a surprising left for the body.

After six months of hard work on him, I felt sure that he could lick the average alley-fighter easy. And about this time we was cruising Baltic waters and headed for Stockholm.

As we approached his native heath, Sven grew impatient and restless. He had a lot more self-confidence now and he craved another chance at Olaf, the demon rival. Sven wasn't just a big unwieldy slob no more. Constant sparring with me and Bill O'Brien had taught him how to handle hisself and how to use his bulk and strength. A few days outa Stockholm he had a row with Mushy Hansen, which was two hundred pounds of fighting man, and he knocked the Dane so cold it took us a hour and a half to bring him to.

Well, that cheered Sven up considerable and when we docked, he said to me: "Aye go see Segrida, my girl, and find out if Olaf bane in port. He bane hang out at dey Fisherman's Tavern. Aye go past with Segrida and he come out and yump on me, like usual. Only diss time Aye bane lick him."

Well, at the appointed time me and Bill and Mushy was loafing around the Fisherman's Tavern, a kind of bar where a lot of tough Swedish fishermen hung out, and pretty soon, along come Sven.

He had his girl with him, all right, a fine, big blonde girl—one of these tall, slender yet well-built girls which is overflowing with health and vitality. She was so pretty I was plumb astounded as to what she seen in a big boob like Sven. But women is that way. They fall for the dubs and pass up the real prizes—like me, for instance.

Segrida looked kind of worried just now and as they neared the Tavern, she cast a apprehensive eye that way. Well, they was abreast of the door when a kind of irritated roar sounded from within and out bulged what could of been nobody but Olaf the Menace, hisself, in person.

THERE WAS A man for you! He was fully as tall as Sven, though not as heavy. Tall, lithe and powerful he was, like a big, blond tiger. He was so handsome I couldst easily see why Segrida hesitated between him and Sven—or rather I couldn't see why she hesitated at all! Olaf looked like one of these here Vikings you read about which rampaged around in old times, licking everybody. But he had a hard, cruel eye, which I reckon goes with that kind of nature.

He had some fellers with him, but they stayed back in the doorway while he swaggered out and stopped square in front of Sven. He had a most contemptuous sneer and he said something which of course I couldn't understand, but as Mushy later translated the conversation to me, I'll give it like Mushy told to me and Bill.

"Well, well," said Olaf, "looking for another licking, eh? Your deep sea boy friend is back in port looking for his usual trouncing, eh, Segrida?"

"Olaf, please," said Segrida, frightened. "Don't fight, please!"

"I warned you what would happen to him," said Olaf, "if you went out with him—"

At this moment Sven, who had said nothing, shocked his bold rival by growling: "Too much talk; put up your hands!"

Olaf, though surprised, immediately done so, and cut Sven's lip with a flashing straight left before the big boy couldst get in position. Segrida screamed but no cops was in sight and the battle was on.

Olaf had learned boxing some place, and was one of the fastest men for his size I ever seen. For the first few seconds he plastered Sven plenty, but from the way the big fellow hunched his shoulders and surged in, I hadst no doubt about the outcome.

Sven dropped into the deep, defensive crouch I'd taught him, and I seen Olaf was puzzled. He hisself fought in the straight-up English

sparring position and this was the first time he'd ever met a man who fought American style, I could see. With Sven's crouch protecting his body and his big right arm curved around his jaw, all Olaf couldst see to hit was his eyes glaring over the arm.

He battered away futilely at Sven's hard head, doing no damage whatever, and then Sven waded in and drove his ponderous left to the wrist in Olaf's midriff. Olaf gasped, went white, swayed and shook like a leaf. He sure couldn't take it there and I yelled for Sven to hit him again in the same place, but the big dumb-bell tried a heavy swing for the jaw, half straightening out of his crouch as he swung and Olaf ducked and staggered him with a sizzling right to the ear. Sven immediately went back into his shell and planted another battering-ram left under Olaf's heart.

Olaf broke ground gasping and his knees trembling, but Sven kept right on top of him in his plodding sort of way. Olaf jarred him with a dying-effort swing to the jaw, but them months of punching hadst toughened Sven and the big fellow shook his head and leaned on a right to the ribs.

That finished Olaf; his knees give way and he started falling, grabbing feebly at Sven as he done so. But Sven, with one of the few laughs I ever heard him give, pushed him away and crashed a tremendous right-hander to his jaw. Olaf straightened out on the board-walk and he didn't even quiver.

A LOW RUMBLE of fury warned us and we turned to see Olaf's amazed but wrathful cronies surging towards the victor. But me and Bill and Mushy and Mike kind of drifted in between and at the sight of three hard-eyed American seamen and a harder-eyed Irish bulldog, they stopped short and signified their intention of merely taking Olaf into the Tavern and bringing him to.

At this Sven, grinning placidly and turning to Segrida with open arms, got the shock of his life. Instead of falling on to his manly bosom, Segrida, who hadst stood there like she was froze, woke up all at once and bust into a perfect torrent of speech. I would of give a lot to understand it. Sven stood gaping with his mouth wide open and even the rescue party which had picked up Olaf, stood listening. Then with one grand burst of oratory, she handed Sven a full-armed, open-handed slap that cracked like a bull-whip, and busting into tears, she run forward to help with Olaf. They vanished inside the Tavern.

"What'd she say? What's the idee?" I asked, burnt up with curiosity.

"She say she bane through with me," Sven answered dazedly. "She say Aye bane a brute. She say she ain't bane want to see me no more."

"Well, keel-haul me," said I profanely. "Can ya beat that? First she wouldn't choose Sven because he got licked by Olaf all the time; now she won't have him because he licked Olaf. Women are all crazy."

"Never mind, old timer," said Bill, slapping the dejected Sven on the back. "Anyway, you licked Olaf to a fare-you-well. Come along, and we'll buy you a drink."

But Sven just shook his head sullen-like and moped off by hisself; so after arguing with him unsuccessfully, me and Bill and Mushy betook ourselves to a place where we couldst get some real whiskey and not the stuff they make in them Scandinavian countries. The barkeep kicked at first because I give my white bulldog, Mike, a pan-full of beer on the floor, but we overcome that objection and fell to talking about Sven.

"I don't savvy dames," I said. "If she gives Sven the bounce for beatin' up Olaf, whyn't she give Olaf the bounce long ago for beatin' up Sven so much?"

"It's Olaf she really loves," said Mushy.

"Maybe," said Bill. "And maybe he's just persistent. But women is kind-hearted. They pities a poor boob which has just got punched in the nose, and as long as Sven was gettin' licked all the time, he got all her pity. But now her pity and affections is transferred to Olaf, naturally."

Well, we didn't see no more of Sven till kind of late that night, when in come one of our square-head ship-mates named Fritz to the bar where me and Bill and Mushy was, and said he: "Steve, Sven he say maybeso you bane come down to a place on Hjolmer Street; he bane got something to show you."

"Now what could that Swede want now?" said Bill testily, but I said, "Oh well, we got nothin' else to do." So we went to Hjolmer Street, a kind of narrow street just out of the waterfront section. It wasn't no particularly genteel place—kind of dirty and dingy for a Swedish street, with little crumby shops along the way, all closed up and deserted that time of night. The square-head, Fritz, led us to a place which was lighted up, though the shutters was closed. He knocked on the door and a short fat Swede opened it and closed it behind us.

To my surprise I seen the place was a kind of third-rate gymnasium. They was a decrepit punching bag, a horizontal bar and a lot of bar-bells, dumb-bells, kettle bells—in fact, all the lifting weights you couldst imagine. They was also a rastling mat and, in the middle of the floor, a

canvas covered space about the size of a small ring. And in the middle of this stood Sven, in fighting togs and with his hands taped.

"Who you goin' to fight, Sven?" I asked curiously.

He scowled slightly, flexed his mighty arms kind of embarrassed-like, swelled out his barrel chest and said: "You!"

You could of bowled me over with a jib boom.

"Me?" I said in amazement. "What kind of joke is this?"

"It bane no yoke," he answered stolidly. "Mine friend Knut bane own diss gym and teach rastlin' and weight liftin'. He bane let us fight here."

Knut, a stocky Swede with the massive arms and pot belly of a retired weight lifter, give me a kind of apologetic look, but I glared at him.

"But what you want to fight me for?" I snarled in perplexity. "Ain't I taught you all you know? Didn't I teach you to lick Olaf? You ungrateful—"

"Aye ain't got no grudge for you, Steve," the big cheese answered placidly. "But Aye tank Aye like be champion of dass *Sea Girl*. Aye got to lick you to be it, ain't it? Sure!"

Bill and Mushy was looking at me expectantly, but I was all at sea. After you've worked six months teaching a man your trade and built him up and made something outa him, you don't want to undo it all by rocking him to sleep.

"Why're you so set on bein' champ of the *Sea Girl*?" I asked irritably.

"Well," said the overgrown heathen, "Aye tank Aye lick you and then Aye can lick Olaf, and Segrida she like me. But Aye lick Olaf, and Segrida she give me dass gate. Dass bane your fault, for teach me to lick Olaf. But Aye ain't blame you. Aye like you fine, Steve, but now Aye tank Aye be champ of dass *Sea Girl*. Aye ain't got no girl no more, so Aye got to be something. Aye lick Olaf so Aye can lick you. Aye lick you and be champ and we be good friends, ya?"

"But I don't want to fight you, you big mutton-head!" I snarled in wrathful perplexity.

"Then Aye fight you on the street or the fo'c's'le or wherever Aye meet you," he said cheerfully.

At that my small stock of temper was plumb exhausted. With a blood thirsty howl I ripped off my shirt. "Bring on the gloves, you square-headed ape!" I roared. "If I got to batter some sense into your solid ivory skull I might as well start now!"

A FEW MINUTES later I was clad in a dingy pair of trunks which Knut dragged out of somewhere for me, and we was donning the gloves

a set lighter than the standard weight, which Knut hadst probably got as a present from John L. Sullivan or somebody.

We agreed on Bill as referee, but Sven being afraid of Mike, made me agree to have Mushy hold him, though I assured him Mike wouldn't interfere in a glove fight. They was no ropes around the canvas space, no stools nor gong. However, as it happened, they wasn't needed.

As we advanced toward each other I realized more'n ever how much of a man Sven was. Six feet four—245 pounds—all bone and muscle. He towered over me like a giant, and I musta looked kinda small beside him, though I'm six feet tall and weigh 190 pounds. Under his white skin the great muscles rolled and billowed like flexible iron, and his chest looked more like a gorilla's than a human's.

But size ain't everything. Old Fitz used to flatten men which outweighed him over a hundred pounds, and lookit what Dempsey and Sharkey used to do to such like giants—and I'm as tough as Sharkey and can hit as hard as either of them other palookas, even if I ain't quite as accurate or scientific.

No, I hadst no worries about Sven, but I'd got over being mad at him and I seen his point of view. Sven wasn't sore at me, nor nothing. He just wanted to be champ of his ship, which was a natural wish. Since his girl give him the air, he wanted to more'n ever to kind of soothe his wounded vanity, as they say.

No, I cooled down and kind of sympathized with Sven's point of view which is a bad state of mind to enter into any kind of a scrap. They ain't nothing more helpful than a good righteous anger and a feeling like the other bird is a complete rascal and absolutely in the wrong.

As we come together, Sven said: "No rounds, Steve; we fight to dass finish, yes?"

"All right," I said with very little enthusiasm. "But, Sven, for the last time—have you just got to fight me?"

His reply was a left which he shot for my jaw so sudden like I just barely managed to slip it. I come back with a slashing right which he blocked, clumsy but effective. He then dropped into the deep crouch I'd taught him and rammed his left for my wind. But I knowed the counter to that, having seen pictures of the second Fitzsimmons-Jeffries riot. I stepped around and inside his ramming left, slapping a left uppercut inside the crook of his right arm, to his jaw, cracking his teeth together and rocking his head up and back for a right hook which I opened a gash on his temple with.

He give a deafening roar and immediately abandoned his defensive posture and come for me like a mad bull. I figured, here's where I end this scrap quick, like always. But in half a second I seen my error.

Sven didn't rush wide open, flailing wild, like he used to. He come plunging in, bunched in a compact bulk of iron muscles and fighting fury; he hooked and hit straight, and he kept his chin clamped down on his hairy chest and his shoulders hunched to guard it, half crouching to protect his body. Even the rudiments of boxing science he'd learned, coupled with his enormous size and strength made him plenty formidable to any man.

I don't know how to tin-can and back pedal. If Jeffries hisself was to rush me, all I'd know to do wouldst be to stand up to him and trade punches until I went out cold. I met Sven with a right smash that was high, but stopped him in his tracks. Blood spattered and he swayed like a big tree about to crash, but before I could follow up, he plunged in again, hitting with both hands. He hit and he hit—and—he—hit!

He throwed both hands as fast as he could drive one after the other and every blow had all his weight behind it. Outa the depths of his fighting fit he'd conjured up amazing speed. It happens some time. I never seen a man his size hit that fast before or since. It was just like being in a rain of sledge-hammers that never quit coming. All I couldst see was his glaring eyes, his big shoulders hunched and rocking as he hit—and a perfect whirlwind of big glove-covered clubs.

He wasn't timing or aiming much—hitting too fast for that. But even when he landed glancing-like, he shook me, with that advantage of fifty-five pounds. And he landed solid too often to suit me.

Try as I would, I couldn't get in a solid smash under the heart, or on the jaw. He kept his head down, and my vicious uppercuts merely glanced off his face, too high to do much good. Black and blue bruises showed on his ribs and shoulders, but his awkward half crouch kept his vitals protected.

It's mighty hard to hammer a giant like him out of position—especially when you're trying to keep him from tearing off your head at the same time. I bored in close, letting Sven's blows go around my neck while I blasted away with both hands. No—they was little science used on either side. It was mostly a wild exchange of sledge-hammer wallops.

In one of our rare clinches, Sven lifted me off my feet and throwed me the full width of the room where I hit the wall—*wham!*—like I was going on through. This made Bill, as referee, very mad at Sven and he cussed

him and kicked him heartily in the pants, but the big cheese never paid no attention.

I WAS LANDING the most blows and they rocked Sven from stem to stern, but they wasn't vital ones. Already his face was beef. One eye was closed, his lips were pulped and his nose was bleeding; his left side was raw, but, if anything, he seemed to be getting stronger. My training hadst toughened him a lot more than I'd realized!

Blim! A glancing slam on my jaw made me see plenty of stars. *Wham!* His right met the side of my head and I shot back half-way across the room to crash into the wall. Long ago we'd got off the canvas; we was fighting all over the joint.

Sven was after me like a mad bull, and I braced myself and stopped him in his tracks with a left hook that ripped his ear loose and made his knees sag for a second. But the Swede had worked hisself into one of them berserk rages where you got to mighty near kill a man to stop him. His right, curving up from his hip, banged solid on my temple and I thought for a second my skull was caved in like an egg-shell.

Blood gushed down my neck when he drewed his glove back, and, desperate, I hooked my right to his body with everything I had behind it. I reckon that was when I cracked his rib, because I heard something snap and he kind of grunted.

Both of us was terrible looking by this time and kind of in a dream like, I saw Knut wringing his hands and begging Bill and Mushy and Fritz to stop it—I reckon he'd never saw a real glove battle before and it was so different from lifting weights! Naturally, they, who was clean goggle-eyed and yelling theirselves deaf and dumb, paid no attention to him at all, and so in a second Knut turned and run out into the street like he was going for the cops.

But I paid no heed. For the first time in many a day I was fighting with my back to the wall against one of my own crew. Sven was inhuman—it was like fighting a bull or an elephant. He was landing solid now, and even if them blows was clumsy, with 245 pounds of crazy Swede behind them, they was like the blows of a pile-driver.

He knowed only one kind of footwork—going forward. And he kept plunging and hitting, plunging and hitting till the world was blind and red. I shook my head and the blood flew like spray. The sheer weight of his plunges hurtled me back in spite of myself.

Once more I tried to rock his head up for a solid shot to the jaw. My left uppercut split his lips and rattled his teeth, but his bowed neck was

like iron. In desperation I banged him square on the side of the head where his skull was hardest.

Blood spurted like I'd hit him with a hand spike, and he swayed drunkenly—then he dropped into a deep crouch and shot his left to my midriff with all his weight behind it. Judas! It was so unexpected I couldn't get away from it. I was standing nearly upright and that huge fist sank into my solar-plexus till I felt it banged against my spine. I dropped like a sack and writhed on the floor like a snake with a busted back, fighting for air. Bill said later I was purple in the face.

Like I was looking through a thick fog, I seen Bill, dazed and white-faced, counting over me. I dunno how I got up again. I was sick—I thought I was dying. But Sven was standing right over me, and looking up at him, a lot of thoughts surged through my numbed and battered brain in a kind of flash.

The new champion of the *Sea Girl*, I thought, after all these years I've held my title against all comers. After all the men I've fought and licked to hold the only title I got. All the cruel punishment I've took, all the blood I've spilt, now I lose my only title to this square-head that I've licked half a dozen times. Like a dream it all come back—the dim-lighted, smelly, dingy forecastle, the yelling, cursing seamen—and me in the middle of it all—the bully of the forecastle. And now—never no more to defend my title—never to hear folks along the docks say: "That's Steve Costigan, champ of the toughest ship afloat!"

WITH A KIND of gasping sob, I grabbed Sven's legs and climbed up, up, till I was on my feet, leaning against him chest to chest, till he shook me off and smashed me down like he was driving a nail into the floor. I reeled up just as Bill began to count, and this time I ducked Sven's swing and clinched him with a grip even he couldn't break.

And as I held on and drew in air in great racking gasps, I looked over his straining shoulder and seen Knut come rushing in through the door with a white-faced girl behind him—Segrida. But I was too near out to even realize that Sven's ex-girl was there.

Sven pushed me away finally and dropped me once more with a punch that was more a push than anything else. This time I took the count of nine, resting, as my incredible vitality, the wonder of manys the sporting scribe, began to assert itself.

I rose suddenly and beat Sven to the punch with a wild right that smashed his nose. Like most sluggers, I never lose my punch, no matter how badly beaten I am. I'm dangerous right to the last second, as better men than Sven Larson has found out.

Sven wasn't going so strong himself as he had been. He moved stiff and mechanical and swung his arms awkwardly, like they was dead. He walked in stolidly and smashed a club-like right to my face. Blood spattered and I went back on my heels, but surged in and ripped my right under the heart, landing square there for the first time.

Another right smashed full on Sven's already battered mouth, and, spitting out the fragments of a tooth, he crashed a flailing left to my body, which I distinctly felt bend my ribs to the breaking point.

I ripped a left to his temple, and he flattened my ear with a swinging right, rocking drunkenly like a tall ship in the Trades with all sails set. Another right glanced offa the top of my head as I ducked and for the first time I seen his unguarded jaw as he loomed above me where I crouched.

I straightened, crashing my right from the hip, with every ounce of my weight behind it, and all the drive they was in leg, waist, shoulder and arm. I landed solid on the button with a jolt that burst my glove and numbed my whole arm—I heard a scream—I seen Sven's eyes go blank—I seen him sway like a falling mast—I seen him pitching forward—*bang!* The lights went out.

I WAS PROPPED up in a chair and Bill was sloshing me with water. I looked around at the dingy gym; then I remember. A queer, sad, cold feeling come over me. I felt old and worn out. After all, I wasn't a boy no more. All the hard, bitter years of fighting the sea and fighting men come over me and settled like a cold cloud on my shoulders. All the life kind of went out of me.

"Believe me, Steve," said Bill, slapping at me with his towel, "that fight sure set Sven solid with Segrida. Right now she's weepin' over his busted nose and black eye and the like, and huggin' him and kissin' him and vowin' everlastin' love. I knowed I was right all the time. Knut run after her to get her to stop the bout. Gosh, the Marines couldn't a stopped it! Mushy clean chawed Mike's collar in two, he was that excited! Say, would you uh thought a slob like Sven coulda made the fightin' man he has in six months?"

"Yeah," I said listlessly, scratching Mike's ear as he licked my hand. "Well, he had it comin'. He worked hard enough. And he was lucky havin' somebody to teach him. All I know, I learned for myself in cruel hard battles. But, Bill, I can't stay on the *Sea Girl* now; I just can't get used to bein' just a contender on a ship where I was champion."

Bill dropped his towel and glared at me: "What you talkin' about?"

"Why, Sven's the new champ of the *Sea Girl*, lickin' me this way. Strange, what a come-back he made just as I thought he was goin' down."

"You're clean crazy!" snorted Bill. "By golly, a rap on the dome has a funny effect on some skates. Sven's just now comin' to. Mushy and Fritz and Knut has been sloshin' him with water for ten minutes. You knocked him stiff as a wedge with that last right hook."

I come erect with a bound! "What? Then I licked Sven? I'm still champion? But if he didn't knock me out, who did?"

Bill grinned. "Don't you know no man can hit you hard enough with his fist to knock you out? Swedish girls is impulsive. Segrida done that—with a iron dumb-bell!"

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