

Winner Take All

or, Sucker Fight

Steve Costigan

by Robert Ervin Howard, 1906-1936

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ME and Bill O'Brien was flat broke when we come out of Jerry Rourke's American Bar. Yes, sir—half a hour ashore, and cleaned along by of a land shark with a pair of educated dice. Not having the coin to pay his fine in case my white bulldog Mike followed his usual custom of tearing off some cop's pants leg, I left him with Jerry till I could raise some dough.

Well, me and Bill sallied forth into the night looking for anything that might mean money, experience having told us that you can find mighty near anything in the wharf-side streets of Singapore. Well, what we did find was the last thing we'd of expected.

We was passing a dark alley in the native quarters when we heard a woman screaming: „Help! Help! Help!“

We dashed into the alley immediately, and in the faint light we seen a girl struggling with a big Chinee. I seen the flash of a knife and I yelled and dived for him, but he dropped the frail and scooted down the alley like a scared rabbit, ducking the cobble-stone Bill heaved after him.

„Are you hurt, Miss?“ I asked with my usual courtesy, lifting her to her feet.

„No, but I'm scared stiff,“ she answered. „That was a close call—let's get out of here before the big Chinee comes back with a mob.“

So we legged it out into the street. Under the light of the street lamps we saw she was a white girl—American by her accent, and not hard to look at either, with her big grey eyes and wavy black hair.

„Where at shall we take you to, Miss?“ asked Bill.

„I dance at the Bristol Cabaret,“ said she. „But let's go into the saloon—the bar-keep's a friend of mine and I want to buy you men a drink. It's the least I can do, for saving my life.“

„Don't mention it, Miss,“ said I with a courtly bow. „We was glad to be of service. Howthesomever, if it will give you any pleasure to buy us a drink, we would not think of refusin'.“

„More especially as we have just lost all our jack in a crap game, and are slowly but surely perishin' of thirst,“ said Bill, who ain't got my natural tact.

So we went in and got a back room to ourselves, and while we was downing our liquor—me and Bill, that is, because the girl said she never even tasted the stuff—she cupped her chin in her hands and rested her elbows on the table and gazing deep in my eyes, she sighed deeply.

„If I had a big strong man like you to protect me,“ she said in open admiration, „I wouldn't have to work in joints like the Bristol, and be abused by such swipes as tried to slit my gullet tonight.“

I involuntarily expanded my enormous chest and said: „Well, lady, as long as Steve Costigan, A.B. mariner, can stand on his feet and hit with either maulie, you got no call to be afraid of anybody. The best thing, next to fightin', that me and Bill O'Brien here do is aid ladies in distress.“

She shook her head wistfully. „You've been very kind to me, but you sailors are all alike—a girl in every port. But—I haven't even introduced myself—my name is Joan Wells, and I'm from Philadelphia.“

„We're mighty glad to meet somebody from the States,“ said Bill. „But why was that slant-eye tryin' to knife you?“

„I—I really shouldn't tell,“ said she, looking kind of frightened.

„We ain't tryin' to intrude in your private affairs none,“ I hastened to add.

„I couldn't keep a secret from a man like you,“ said she with a languishing glance that made my heart skip a beat, „so I'll tell you. Take a look out the door to see that nobody's listening at the key-hole.“

Nobody wasn't, so she went on.

„Did you ever hear of the No Sen Tong?“ We shook our heads. We knowed in a general way about the big tongs, or merchant houses, which just about controls the Orient, but we hadn't had no experience with them.

„Well,“ said she, „it's the richest, most secret tong in the world. When I first came here I worked as private secretary for old To Ying, who's one of its highest secret officials. He fired me because I wouldn't let him get fresh with me—the old slant-eyed snake—and I went to work at the Bristol. But once you've been

on the inside of an organization like that, you have ways of knowing things that other people don't."

Her eyes sparkled and her fists clenched as she got all excited. „I'm in on the biggest coup of the century!" she exclaimed. „If I live, I'll be a rich woman! Did you ever hear of the Korean Copper Company? No? Well, it's about to go bankrupt. They've never paid a single dividend. Stock's selling at a dollar a share, with no buyers. But, listen! They've hit the biggest copper mine that the world has ever seen! The No Sens are quietly buying up all the stock they can get—at a dollar a share! As soon as I found this out I ran down to the broker's and bought a hundred shares. It took every cent I had. But one of the No Sen spies saw me, and that's why old To Ying tried to have me bumped off. He's afraid I'll squeal.

„Think what a riot there'll be on the stock market tomorrow when the word gets in! Tonight Korean Copper's selling for a dollar! Tomorrow it'll be worth a thousand dollars a share!"

„Hold everything!" I said, kind of dizzy. „You mean you shoot a buck and get a thousand on the spin of the wheel?"

„I sure do—say, why don't you men buy some stock? It's the chance of a lifetime! Most of it has been bought up by the No Sens, but I know where I can get you a few hundred shares."

Bill laughed bitterly. „Sister, it might as well be sellin' for a thousand per right now as far as we're concerned. We ain't got a dime! And my watch is in a pawn-shop in Hong Kong."

„I'd gladly lend you some money," said she, „but I spent all mine on stock—"

„Wait a minute," said I, getting on my feet, „I got a idee. Miss Wells—Joan, is it safe for you to be left alone for a few hours?"

„Sure; the bar-keep goes off duty in a few minutes, and he can see me home."

„All right. I think we can raise some dough. Where can we see you, in say about three hours?"

„Come to the Alley of the Seven Mandarins," said she, „and knock on the door with the green dragon carved on it. I'm going to hide there till the No Sens quit looking for me. I'll be waiting for you," said she, giving my rugged hand a timid, shy little squeeze that made my big, honest heart flutter like a boy's.

Then me and Bill was out in the foggy dim lighted streets and making tracks. I led the way through narrow streets and garbage-strewn back alleys till we was in the toughest section of Singapore's waterfront. It's dangerous in the daytime; it's pure Hades at night.

Right on the wharfs we come to a big ramshackle building, which a struggling sign announced as *Heinie Steinman's Grand International Fight Arena*. This dump was all lighted up, and was shaking with the ferocious roars which went up inside.

„Hello, Steve; hello, Bill," said the fellow at the door, a dip who knowed us well. „How 'bout a couple good ringside seats?"

„Gangway," said I. „We ain't got no money—but I'm fightin' here tonight."

„G'wan," said he, „you ain't even matched with nobody—"

„One side!" I roared, drawing back my famous right. „I'm fightin' somebody here tonight, get me?"

„Well, go in and fight somebody that's paid to git mutilated!" he squawked, turning slightly pale and climbing up on the ticket counter, so me and Bill stalked haughtily within.

If you want to study humanity in its crudest and most uncivilized form, take in one of Heinie Steinman's fight shows. The usual crowd was there—sailors, longshoremen, beach-combers, thugs and crooks; men of every breed and color and description, from the toughest ships and the worst ports in the world. Undoubtedly, the men which fights at the International performs to the toughest crowds in the world. The fighters is mostly sailors trying to pick up a few dollars by massacring each other.

Well, as me and Bill entered, the fans was voicing their disapproval in a tone that would of curled the hair of a head-hunter. The main event had just driven the patrons into a frenzy by going to the limit, and they was howling like a pack of wolves because ther'd been no knockout. The crowd that comes to Heinie's Arena don't make no talk about being wishful to see a exhibition of boxing. What they want is gore and busted noses, and if somebody don't get just about killed they think they have been gypped, and wreck the joint.

Just as me and Bill come in, the principals scurried out of the ring followed by a offering of chair bottoms, bricks and dead cats, and Heinie, who'd been acting as referee, tried to calm the mob—which only irritated them more and somebody hit Heinie square between the eyes with a rotten tomato. The maddened crowd was fast reaching a point where they was liable to do anything, when me and Bill climbed into the ring. They knowed us, and they kind of quieted down a minute and then started yelling fiercer than ever.

„For my sake, Steve,“ said Heinie, kind of pale, wiping the vegetable out of his eyes, „say somethin' to 'em before they start a riot. Them two hams that just faded away only cake-walked through the bout and these wolves is ready to lynch everybody concerned, particularly includin' me.“

„Have you got somebody I can fight?“ I asked.

„No, I ain't,“ he said, „But I'll announce—“

„I don't see no announcer,“ I growled, and turning to the crowd I silenced them by the simple process of roaring: „Shut up!“ in a voice which drowned them all out.

„Listen here, you tin-horn sports!“ I bellered. „You've already paid your dough, but do you think you've got your money's worth?“

„No!“ they thundered in a voice that started Heinie's knees to knocking. „We been robbed! We been rooked! We been gypped! Give us our money back! Wreck the dump! Hang that Dutchman!“

„Shut up, you Port Mahon baboons!“ I roared. „If you're sports enough to jar loose and make up a purse of twenty-five dollars, I'll fight any man in the house to a finish, winner take all!“

At that they lifted the roof. „At's the stuff!“ they whooped. „Shower down gents. We know Steve! He always gives us a run for our money!“

Coins and a few bills began to shower on the canvas, and two men jumped up from among the crowd and started for the ring. One was a red-headed Englishman and the other was a lithe black-haired fellow. They met just outside the ropes.

„One side, bloke,“ growled the red-head. „H'I'm fightin' this bloody Yank!“

Black-head's right shot out like a battering ram and red-head kissed the floor, and laid still. The mob went into hysterics of joy and the winner hopped over the ropes, followed by three or four of the most villainous looking mugs I ever hope to see.

„I weel fight Costigan!“ said he, and Heinie give a deep sigh of relief. But Bill swore under his breath.

„That’s Panther Cortez,“ said he. „And you know you ain’t been trainin’ close lately.“

„Never mind,“ I growled. „Count the money. Heinie, you keep your hands off that dough till Bill counts it.“

„Thirty-six dollars and fifty cents,“ announced Bill, and I turned to the slit-eyed devil which called hisself Panther Cortez, and growled: „You willin’ to fight for that much—winner take all, loser gets nothin’ but a headache?“

He grinned with a flash of white fangs. „Sure!—I fight you just for the fun of knocking you cold!“

I turned my back on him with a snarl and, giving Heinie the money to hold, though it was a terrible risk to take, I strode to one of the make-shift dressing rooms, where I was given a pair of dingy trunks, which Heinie pulled off a preliminary boy which had gone on earlier in the evening and was still out.

I gave little thought to my opponent, though Bill kept grouching about the fact that I was going to get so little for knocking out such a man as Cortez.

„You oughta be gettin’ at least a hundred and fifty,“ Bill grumbled. „This Cortez is a mean puncher, and shifty and dirty. He ain’t never been knocked out.“

„Well,“ said I, „it ain’t never too late to begin. All I want you to do is watch and see that none of his handlers don’t sneak around and hit me with a water bottle. Thirty-six shares means thirty-six thousand dollars for us. Tomorrer we’ll kick the Old Man in the slats for a token of farewell, and start livin’! No more standin’ watch and gettin’ sunburnt and froze for somebody else—“

„Hey!“ yelled Heinie, looking in at the door, „hurry up, will ya? This crowd’s goin’ clean nuts waitin’. The Panther’s already in the ring.“

As I climbed through the ropes I was greeted by a roar such as must of resembled them given by the Roman mobs when a favorite gladiator was throwed to the lions. Cortez was seated in his corner, smiling like a big lazy jungle cat, the lids drooping down over his glittering eyes in a way that always irritated me.

He was a mixed breed—Spanish, French, Malay and heck knows what else, but all devil. He was the choice fighting man aboard the WATER SNAKE, a British vessel with a shady reputation, and though I’d never fought him, I knowed he was a dangerous man. But, gosh, all he represented to me just then was thirty-six dollars and fifty cents, which in turn represented thirty-six thousand dollars.

Heinie waved his arms and said: „Gents, you all know these boys! Both of them has fought here plenty of times before, and—“

The crowd rose up and drowned him out: „Yeah, we know ‘em. Cut the introductions and le’s see gore spilt!“

„Weights,“ yelled Heinie to make hisself heard. „Sailor Costigan of the SEA GIRL, one hundred ninety pounds! Panther Cortez of the WATER SNAKE, one hundred eighty-five pounds!“

„That’s a lie!“ roared Bill. „He weighs one-ninety if he weighs a ounce!“

„Aw, stow yer gab, ye bleedin’ mick!“ snarled one of the Panther seconds, shoving out his lantern jaw. Bill bent his right on that jaw and the limey went over the ropes on his head. The mob applauded madly; things was going just to

their taste! All they needed to make it a perfect evening was for me or Cortez to get our neck broke—preferably both of us.

Well, Heinie chased Cortez' handlers out of the ring, and Bill climbed out, and the slaughter was on. Heinie was referee, but he didn't give us no instructions. We'd fought enough there to know what we was supposed to do, and that was to sock and keep on socking till somebody kissed the canvas and stayed there. The gloves we wore was at least a ounce and a half lighter than the regular style, and nothing was a foul at the International as long as both fellows could stand on their feet.

The Panther was lithe, rangy, quick; taller than me, but not so heavy. We come together in the middle of the ring, and he hit with cat-like speed. Left to the face, right to the body and left to the jaw. Simultaneous I shot my right to his chin, and he hit the canvas on the seat of his trunks. The crowd howled, but he wasn't hurt much, mainly surprised and mad. His eyes blazed. He took the count of nine, though he could of got up sooner, and bounced up, stopping me in my tracks with a hard left to the mouth. I missed with a looping left, took a right to the ribs and landed hard under the heart. He spat in my face and began working his arms like pistons—left, right, left, right, to the face and body while the crowd went nuts. But that was my game; I grinned savagely and braced my feet, boring in and slugging hard with both hands.

A minute of this, and he backed away in a hurry, blood trickling from a cut on his cheek. I was after him and sank a left deep in his midriff that made him clinch and hold on. On the break he nailed me with a straight right to the head, and followed it up with a hard left to the eye, but failed to land his right, and got a wicked right hook to the ribs. I battered away at his body, but he was all elbows, and, irritated, I switched to his head and nearly tore it off with a blazing right hook just at the gong.

„That round was yours by a mile,“ said Bill, between exchanging insults with Cortez' handlers. „But watch out; he's dangerous and dirty—“

„I'm goin' to ask Joan to marry me,“ I said. „I can tell she's fell for me, right off. I dunno why it is, but it seems like they's a fatal fascination about me for women. They can't keep from floppin' for me at first sight—“

The gong sounded and I dashed out to collect that \$36.50.

Well, the Panther had found out that he couldn't trade wallops with me, so he come out boxing. I don't mean he tin-canned and rode his bicycle, like some prominent fighters I could mention. He was one baby that could fight and box at the same time, if you get me. When I say he boxed, I mean he feinted me out of position, kept me off balance, speared me with cutting left jabs, ducked my ferocious returns, tied me up in the clinches, nearly ripped my head off with right uppercuts in close, stayed inside my wings, and generally made a sap outa me.

Inside of a minute he had me bleeding at the mouth and nose, and I hadn't landed solid once. The crowd was howling like wolves and Bill was cussing something terrible, but I wasn't worried. I had all night to lick him in, and I knowed I'd connect sooner or later, and I did quicker than I'd thought. It was a smashing right hook under the heart, and it bent Senyor Cortez double. While in this position I clouted him heartily behind the ear and drove him to his knees. He was up without a count, slipped the terrible swing I threw at him, and having clinched and tied me up, scraped his glove laces across my eyes and ground his heel into my instep. He hung on like a regular octopus

regardless of my cruel and unusual oaths. Heinie wouldn't pull him loose, and finally we both went to the canvas still clinched in a vise-like embrace.

This mishap threw the crowd into a perfect delirium of delight, which was increased by Cortez earnestly chewing my ear while we writhed on the mat. Driven to frenzy I tore loose, arose and closed the Panther's left eye with a terrible right swing the minute he was on his feet. He came back with a slashing left hook to the body, ripped the same hand to my already battered face, and stopped a straight left with his own map. At that moment the gong rang.

„I'm goin' to kick Heinie Steinman loose from his britches after the fight!“ snarled Bill, shaking with rage as he mopped the blood off my mangled ear. „If that wasn't the dirtiest foul I ever seen—“

„I wonder if we couldn't buy a half share with that fifty cents,“ I meditated. „That'd be five hundred dollars—“

I rushed out for the third frame inclined to settle matters quick, but Cortez had other plans. He opened a cut over my eye with a left hook, ripped a right hook to my sore ear and went under my return. He come up with a venomous right under the heart, ducked my left swing and jabbed me three times on the nose without a return. Maddened, I hurtled into him headlong, grabbed him with my left and clubbed him with my right till he tied me up.

At close quarters we traded short arm rights and lefts to the body and he was the first to back away, not forgetting to flick me in the eye with his long left as he did so. I was right on top of him and suddenly he lowered his head and butted me square in the mouth, bringing a flow of claret that dyed my chin. He instantly ripped in a right uppercut that loosened a bunch of my teeth and backed me into the ropes with a perfect whirlwind of left and right hooks to the head.

With the ropes cutting into my back I rallied, steadied myself and smashed a right under his heart that stopped him in his tracks. A left to the jaw set him back on his heels and rattled his teeth like a castinet, and before I could hit again the gong sounded.

„This is lastin' considerably longer than I thought,“ I said to Bill, who was mopping blood and talking to Heinie with some heat.

„My gosh, Bill,“ said Heinie. „Be reasonable! If I stopped this fight and awarded it to Steve or anybody else on a foul, these thugs wouldst tear this buildin' down and hang me to the rafters. They craves a knockout—“

„They're goin' to get one!“ I snarled. „Never mind the fouls. Say, Bill, did you ever see such clear, honest eyes as Joan's got? I know women, I wanta tell you, and I never seen a straighter, squarer jane in my life—“

At the gong we went into a clinch and pounded each other's midsections till Heinie broke us. Cortez wasn't taking much chances, fighting wary and cautious. He slashed away with his left, but he kept his right high and never let it go unless he was sure of landing. He was using his elbows plenty in the clinches, and butting every chance he got, but Heinie pretended not to see. The crowd didn't care; as long as a man fought, they didn't care how he fought. Bill was making remarks that would of curled the toes of a Hottentot, but nobody seemed to mind.

About the middle of the lap, Cortez began making remarks about my ancestors that made me good and mad. My Irish got up, and I went for him like a wild bull, head down and arms hammering. He shot his left and side-stepped,

but the left ain't made that can stop me when my temper's up, and I was right on top of him too fast for him to get away. I battered him across the ring, but just as I thought I had him pinned on the ropes he side-stepped and I fell into them myself.

This highly amused the crowd, and Cortez hooked three lefts to my head while I was untangling myself, and when I slewed around and swung, he ducked and crashed my jaw with a right hook he brought up from the floor and which had me groggy for the first time that night. Sensing victory, he shot the same hand three times to my head, knocking me back into the ropes where he sank his left to the wrist in my midriff.

I was dizzy and slightly sick, but I saw Cortez' snarling face in a sort of red haze and I smashed my right square into the middle of that face. He was off his guard—not expecting a return like that and his head went back like it was hinged. The blood splattered, and the crowd howled with relish. I plunged after him, but he crouched and as I came in he went under my swing and hooked his right hard to my groin. Oh Jerusha! I dropped like my legs had been cut from under me, and writhed and twisted on the canvas like a snake with a broken back.

I had to clench my teeth to keep from vomiting and I was sick—nauseated if you get what I mean. I looked up and Heinie, with his face white, was fixing to count over me.

„One!“ he said. „Two! Three!“

„You hog-fat nit-wit!“ screamed Bill. „If you count him out I'll blow your brains through the back of your skull!“

Heinie shivered like he had a chill; he took a quick look at Bill, then he shot a scared glance at the ravening crowd, and he ducked his head like a tortoise, shut his eyes and kept on counting.

„Four! Five! Six!“

„Thirty-six thousand dollars!“ I groaned, reaching for the ropes. The cold sweat was standing out on my brow as I pulled myself up.

„Seven! Eight! Nine!“

I was up, feet braced wide, holding the top rope to keep from falling. Cortez came lunging in to finish me, and I knowed if I let go I'd fall again. I hunched my shoulder and blocked his right, but he ripped his left to my chin and crashed his right high on my temple—and then the gong sounded. He socked me again after the gong, before he went to his corner—but a little thing like that don't cause no comment in the International Fight Arena.

Bill helped me to my corner, cursing between clenched teeth, but, with my usual recuperative powers, I was already recovering from the effects of that foul blow. Bill emptied a bucket-full of cold water over me, and much to Cortez' disgust I come out for the fifth frame as good as new. He didn't think so at first, but a wicked right-hander under the heart shook him to the toes and made him back pedal in a hurry.

I went for him like a whirlwind and, seeming somewhat discouraged, he began his old tactics of hit and run. A sudden thought hit me that maybe all the shares was bought up. This fight looked like it was going on forever; here I was chasing Panther Cortez around the ring and doing no damage, while the No Sens was buying up all the Korean Copper in sight. Every minute a fortune was slipping that much farther away from me, and this rat refused to stand up and be knocked out like a man. I nearly went crazy with fury.

„Come on and fight, you yellow skunk!“ I raged, while the crowd yelled blood-thirstily, beginning to be irritated at Cortez' tactics, which was beginning to be more run than hit. „Stand up to it, you white-livered, yellow-bellied, Porchugeeze half-caste!“

They's always something that'll get under a fellow's hide. This got under Cortez'. Maybe he did have some breed blood in him. Anyway, he went clean crazy. He give a howl like a blood-mad jungle-cat, and in spite of the wild yells from his corner, he tore in with his eyes glaring and froth on his lips. Biff! Bim! Bam! I was caught in a perfect whirlwind of punches; it was like being clawed by a real panther. But, with a savage grin, I slugged it out with him. That's my game! He hit three blows to my one, but mine were the ones that counted.

There was the salty tang of blood in my mouth, and blood in my eyes; it reddened Heinie's shirt, and stained the canvas under our feet. It splattered in the faces of the yelling ring-siders at every blow. But my gloves were sinking deep at every sock, and I was satisfied. Toe to toe we slashed and smashed, till the ring swum red and the thunder of our blows could be heard all over the house. But it couldn't last; flesh and blood couldn't stand it. Somebody had to go—and it was Cortez.

Flat on his back he hit, and bounced back up without a count. But I was on him like a blood-mad tiger. I took his left and right in the face without hardly feeling them, and smashed my right under his heart and my left to his jaw. He staggered, glassy eyed; a crashing right to the jaw dropped him under the ropes on his face. Maybe he's there yet. Anyhow, up to the count of ten he didn't bat an eyelash.

„Gimme that dough!“ I snarled, jerking it out of Heinie's reluctant hand.

„Hey!“ he protested. „What about my cut? Didn't I promote this show? Didn't I stand all the expense? You think you can fight in my ring for nothin'—“

„If I had your nerve I'd be King of Siam,“ I growled, shaking the blood outa my eyes, and at that moment Bill's right met Heinie's jaw like a caulking mallet meeting a ship's hull, and Heinie went to sleep. The crowd filed out, gabbling incoherently. That last touch was all that was needed to make the night a perfect success for them.

„Here, give this to Cortez when he wakes up!“ I snarled, shoving a five-dollar bill—American money—into the hand of one of the Panther's seconds. „He's dirty, but he's game. And he don't know it, but it's the same as me givin' him five thousand dollars. Come on, Bill.“

I changed my clothes in the dressing-room, noting in a cracked mirror that my face looked like I'd fallen afoul a wildcat, and likewise that I had a beautiful black eye or two. We skinned out a side door, but I reckon some thugs in the crowd had seen us get the money—and they's plenty of men in the Singapore waterfront who'd cut your throat for a dime. The second I stepped out into the dark alley-way something crashed against my head, and I went to my knees seeing about a million stars. I come up again and felt a knife-edge lick along my arm. I hit out blind and landed by sheer luck. My right lifted my unseen attacker clean off his feet and dropped him like a sack on the ground. Meanwhile Bill had grappled with two more and I heard the crack as he knocked their heads together.

„You hurt, Steve?“ he asked, feeling for me, because it was that dark you couldn't see your hand before you.

„Scratched a little,“ I said, my head still ringing from the blackjack sock. „Let’s get outa here. Looks like we got to lick everybody in Singapore before we get that stock.“

We got out of the alley and beat it down the street, people looking kind of funny at us. Well, I guess I was a sight, what with my black eye and cut and battered face, the bump on my head, and my arm bleeding from the knife wound. But nobody said nothing. People in places like that have got a way of minding their own business that politer folks could well copy.

„We better stop by the Waterfront Mission before we go for that stock, Steve,“ said Bill. „The gospel-shark will bandage your arm and not charge a cent—and keep his mouth shut afterward.“

„No, no, no!“ said I, becoming irascible because of my hurts and the delay. „We’re goin’ to get that stock before we do anything else.“

We was passing a gambling hall and Bill’s eyes lighted as he heard the click and whir of the roulette wheel.

„I feel lucky tonight,“ he muttered. „I betcha I could run that thirty bucks up to a hundred in no time.“

„And I’d give my arm for a shot of licker,“ I snapped. „But I tell you, we ain’t takin’ no chances. We can guzzle and play fan-tan and roulette all we want to after we get rich.“

After what seemed a century we arrived at the dismal, dark and vile smelling alley that the Chinese call the Alley of the Seven Mandarins—why, I never could figure. We found the door with the green dragon and knocked, and my heart stood still for fear Joan wouldn’t be there. But she was. The door opened and she give a gasp as she saw me.

„Quick, don’t keep us in suspense,“ Bill gasped. „Is the stock all took up?“

„Why, no,“ she said. „I can get you—“

„Then do it, quick,“ I said, pressing the money into her hand. „There’s thirty-one dollars and fifty-cents—“

„Is that all?“ she said, like she was considerably disappointed.

„If you’d a seen how I won it, you’d think it was a lot,“ I said.

„Well,“ she said. „Wait a minute. The man who owns that stock lives down the alley.“

She vanished down the dark alley-way, and we waited with our hearts knocking holes in our ribs for what seemed like hours. Then she came out of the darkness, looking kind of white and ghostly in the shadows, and slipped a long envelope into my hot and sweaty hand. I hove a vast sigh of relief and started to say something, but she put her finger to her lips.

„Shhh! I musn’t be seen with you. I must go, now.“ And before I could say a word, she’d vanished in the dark.

„Open the envelope, Steve,“ urged Bill. „Let’s see what a fortune looks like!“

I opened it and pulled out a slip of paper. I moved over to the lamp- light in the street to read what was wrote on it. Then I give a roar that brought faces to every window on the street. Bill jerked the paper from me and glared at it and then he give a maddened howl and joined me in a frenzied burst of horrible talk that brought a dozen cops on the run. We wasn’t in no condition to make any coherent reply, and the ensuing riot didn’t end till the reserves was called out.

On the paper which was in the envelope Joan Wells gave me in return for my hard-earned money was wrote:

This is to certify that you are entitled to thirty-one and a half shares of stock in the Korean Copper Company which was dissolved in the year 1875. Don't worry about the No Sen Tong; it was extinct before the Boxer Rebellion. Of all the suckers that have fallen for this graft, you saps were the easiest. But cheer up; you're out only \$31.50, and I took one bonehead for \$300. A girl has got to live.

