

Hunger Hunger Everywhere

I CAN whip him, Venus. I know I can.” “Better not try, Herb. We were lucky to get jobs with this carnival.” The woman who spoke shook her head slowly as she talked.

Herb sucked quickly on the last half of a cigarette without exhaling and flipped it at a dog sniffing at a tent stake. The ash brightened, making a glowing arc in the dark before it hit and dropped in the mud. The dog yelped, stumbling before gaining balance to run. Herb snickered, letting smoke leak out gaps between yellow teeth. He was a tall gaunt man with a stooping posture that shortened his height a good three inches. Long blond hair was combed back above his ears into a duck tail with several carefully placed finger-made waves pushed into the massive growth. His neck was skinny, almost emaciated, with a large bluish vein that seemed to be outside the skin. The woman was still shaking her head. “Stick to cooking.”

He quit grinning and pushed his face close to hers. “You saw me at the dance Saturday. Damn betcha you did.”

“I’ve heard that a thousand times.”

“Yep,” he went on like she hadn’t answered, “ya saw me walk right up to the door on the men’s toilet and say to the duty cop standing there that I was gonna punch my fist through the door. And he smiled and told me to go sit down and have a nice time.”

“And you punched your fist through the door.”

“Right through the wood.”

“Thin wood.”

“Okay, they was thin. Let’s see you punch through a door.”

He looked at her without answering and then turned and read the sign again. There was a faded painting of a chubby boxer in tarnished gold trunks. The boxer’s left hand was extended in a jab that pointed to the sign — \$50 to stay four rounds with the Dangerous Dane.

“Damn,” Herb muttered, “I could use an easy fifty bucks.”

Venus shifted her feet impatiently. "You're so damned hard-headed. Go ahead. Get your brains beat out."

He looked at her again and placed his hand on her arm. "Now, don't get sore. I don't do nothin' to make ya mad." The string of bare light bulbs lining the midway gave her skin a yellow oriental hue. She wore a tight red sheath dress that came just below her knees. Her legs were bare to the top of the spike-heeled white leather pumps. A young couple walked by, and the man stared at Venus until Herb noticed and glared back. She was watching a group of young girls giggling in front of the girlee show next to the boxing tent. The barker stopped his spiel and leaned down clear of the mike, "Run along, kids. Don't bother me." The girls giggled faster and looked at each other without moving. The barker watched them out of the corner of his eye and made another spiel about the next show starting in ten minutes, then he leaned down again growling, "Beat it! Scram!" The giggling started again.

Herb looked at the platform in front of the boxing tent and moved from one foot to the other. "Hell, fifty bucks in half an hour and ya act huffy." The flap under the painted boxes opened, and a large freckle-faced man with thin, red hair came out wearing a plaid bathrobe, black and white tennis shoes, dirty sweat sox and scuffed wine-colored boxing gloves. A shorter man, wearing a derby, followed the boxer to the stage and busied himself with switches and hissing into the microphone. The hiss came louder and louder over the speaker till the man in the derby nodded with satisfaction and wiped spit off the microphone with a deft swipe under his arm. The boxing Dane was on the platform pulling limp sweat sox up out of his tennis shoes. His bathrobe drooped, revealing a mat of kinky red hair extending from under his chin to the top of the faded trunks. He began jumping up and down, first on one foot, then the other, and pawing the air with lazy pushing punches. The man in the derby held the microphone to his lips. "Hey! Who's gonna try his luck with the Dangerous Dane? Fifty bucks for four rounds with him!"

A small crowd gathered, and the Dane scowled and

snorted through his nose in contempt at the men nearest the platform. Herb sneared back. The speaker was blaring again, "Who's man 'nuff to challenge the Dangerous Dane?" The boxer spit on the platform in front of the crowd. The men in front leaned back and Herb waved his fist in the air yelling, "Watch that!"

The man in the derby leaned clear of the mike shouting, "Watch what?"

Herb shifted his glare from the boxer, "Ya know damned well watch what. That blubbery bastard better not be for spitting this way again."

The loud speaker blared, "Who are you — the village idiot?" Several people down the midway turned with interest and started walking toward the boxing tent. Herb's nostrils flared as he waved his fist in the air screaming, "I'll show ya who's an idiot!" Venus tugged his arm, hissing in his ear, "Don't be an ass. They don't know you're with the carnny. Com'on, I got to get ready for my act."

The boxer spit on the front of the platform again. Herb yanked loose and stomped to the stairway leading to the platform. Venus watched till he started up the stairs and then pushed aside a red-headed boy and a smaller boy that stood at the rear of the, by now, large crowd and walked hurriedly to the girlee show tent, entering under a newly-painted sign in large red letters — Lady Venus. The red-headed boy she had bumped turned to the smaller boy, "I bet that is one of the show ladies. We better get over there before we miss out." He took the other's arm and pulled him toward the next tent. The smaller boy looked back open-mouthed as Herb reached the top of the platform and grabbed at the Dane.

The man in the derby jumped between them. "Wait! You can fight him in the ring and earn a few bucks."

Herb calmed down at the mention of the money and said, "That's right, you bet I'll get in the ring with him!" The Dane began his warm up again, back and forth, up and down, and punches pushed into the air accompanied by quick snorts.

The man in the derby began selling tickets, occasionally picking up the microphone causing the loudspeaker to blare the announcement of the big grudge fight that was starting in ten minutes. Herb stood beside the bouncing boxer, alternately digging in his ear with his little finger and wiping his nose on his sleeve as he glared out of the corner of his eye at his mammoth opponent. For an instant he wondered if he shouldn't have confined his punching to toilet doors.

Then there were no more people waiting to buy tickets and the boxer jumped from the platform and went into the tent. The man in the derby told Herb to follow him and they also went into the tent.

The ring was raised several feet above the ground. The Dane was going around the ropes rewrapping corner joints where the worn adhesive tape hung loose. The crowd gaped curiously as Herb walked to the ring. There were a few women and children, but the majority of the audience were men. The man in the derby climbed into the ring, motioning Herb to follow. Herb climbed through the ropes, stood up and removed his shirt, hanging it on the ring post. The large vein in his neck quivered and pulsated like an excited snake. Herb was pigeon-chested and though completely void of hair on his trunk, had compensated this barrenness by collecting tattoos — Mother — Death Before Dishonor — True Love, Cold — a nude woman. The Dane completed the inspection of the ring ropes and hung his robe across the corner post opposite from Herb. The man in the derby held up his hands for silence, yelling, "Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening and a hearty welcome! !"

"To hell with blarney! Get on with the fight." A man in the front of the crowd yelled.

"Ya!" echoed several others. Someone whistled shrilly and another started clapping. The clapping caught on and the man in the derby raised his hands for silence yelling, "Okay! Okay." The crowd quieted. "You paid to see a fight and you're gonna see one just as soon as the Dangerous Dane runs out back and gets the other pair of boxing gloves." The Dane, jumped from the ring, stepped through a flap at the

rear of the tent. The man in the derby climbed from the ring and reaching under the ring apron pulled a large cardboard box out and opened it. He held up a thin cardboard box. "We have a minute to wait. Just 'nuff time to get a twenty-five cent box of rich caramel kisses. A prize in every box that is easily worth the money. And, tonight only, we've inserted a ten dollar bill in one of the boxes."

A woman who had been staring at Herb snapped her head around hearing the ten-dollar-prize announcement and, digging frantically in her purse, she shoved through the crowd toward the candy. She was dressed in a flowered cotton house dress and wore pink anklets. A young boy clung to her dress whining, "Buy me candy, ma."

She shouldered through the front row and eagerly thrust a dollar forward, snatched four boxes and without looking at the boy began ripping them open, saying, "Ya, shut up. I bought ya four boxes, didn't I?"

More of the crowd surged forward forcing quarters, fifty-cent pieces, and dollars into the outstretched hand in return for the cheap boxes. The woman with the small boy finished ripping the last box open and stood looking at a tin chicken inspector's badge, a balloon, a picture of Babe Ruth, a cut-out doll, and a hand full of brittle candy kisses. The boy's eyes watered as he tried biting through a piece of the candy. "Gyped." She muttered amazedly. "A lousy damn gyp!" She screamed. Others who had opened their candy began shouting, and an ominous air settled over the mob as they moved forward.

"Here comes the Dangerous Dane with the gloves!" hollered the man in the derby, and so saying, he rammed the large box under the ring apron and scurried up into the ring. The Dane came through the tent flap, carrying another pair of gloves, and climbed into the ring. The audience continued grumbling till the man in the derby raised his hands for attention, announcing, "The fight will begin as soon as we tie gloves on the challenger." The Dane bounced up and down and punched at the air while the man in the derby pushed weather-beaten gloves on Herb's skinny fists. He pulled the laces taut and, with a flip, passed them around the wrists and knotted the ends.

The Dane stood in the center of the ring, waiting. Herb walked out to within a few feet of the boxer. The referee, his derby pushed back on his head, stood with a hand on each man's shoulder, saying, "I want a clean fight. No rabbit punches. No kidney punches. May the best man win." The fighters returned to their corners and the referee walked to the neutral corner, and taking a small wooden mallet hanging by a cord to the post, he hit a pie tin hanging from another cord. As the fighters approached across the ring, the crowd sighed expectantly. The Dane stood flat-footed in the center of the ring, holding his left arm out stiff. Herb shuffled back and forth trying to paw the arm out of his way. The Dane pivoted slowly as Herb circled him, slapping at the glove holding him off. They made several circles without striking any blows. The crowd stirred impatiently. "Hit 'im now, Skinny. The wind's with ya." There were several guffaws at this. Herb struck angrily at the arm. The Dane brought it back to his chest — Herb leaped forward, cocking his right for a looping round house — the Dane snapped the left back out, catching Herb full on the nostrils. Hornets fought in his nose as rupturing membranes vented blood. The crowd roared in satisfaction as Herb stumbled against the ropes. The Dane stepped closer, bracing his feet and pushing Herb straight against the ropes with his left he started the right, letting his right toe turn in as his weight went into the punch. Herb, blinking frantically at the water flooding his eyes, saw the blow coming and turned his head to avoid taking the impact on his chin. His head jerked weirdly as the leather-braced fist crunched home on the large vein in his neck.

Meanwhile, at the girlee show where Venus had entered, the red-headed boy glanced at the Lady Venus sign, "Boy, that was something."

The smaller boy was looking at the boxing tent.

Red turned to him. "She sure was naked!"

The smaller boy pointed. "Look, there goes the show lady into the fight tent."

Venus, having changed back into the red sheath dress, was entering the tent when the Dane landed the punch on

Herb's neck. The crowd screamed with delight as Herb spun half around, making a dreadful gurgling noise. He flopped over the top rope as if he might fall outside — then shivered — straightened to a standing position and fell on his back. His head banged the canvas with a loud gourd-like thud. He lay silently — eyes open and rolled back — a large purplish swelling was raised on his neck. His nose had stopped bleeding.

The Dane danced around the ring, waving his clasped hands above his head and grinning happily at the cheering crowd. Venus was standing beside the ring staring in horror at the large swelling on Herb's neck. "Gawd! It's like a huge blood blister!" The man in the derby came over and dumped a bucket of water on the body. "He's out colder'n hell," he muttered. Then, noticing Venus, he said, "Hey, aren't you the new hootchy-cootchy girl?"

Still staring at the swelling, she answered, "Ya. And he's the new cook. Look at his eyes."

"I didn't know he was with the show," the man said, taking off his derby and fanning the lifeless face, "Ya, he looks bad. Ya. Gawd! I think he's dead. Gawd!"

The Dane was standing there now. "I only hit 'im good oncet."

Venus kept staring, "He's dead!"

"I only hit 'im oncet."

"I didn't know he was with the show. Gawd!"

"He was..." she started.

"Just oncet..."

"Hunh?"

"He was a good cook," she stated flatly.

A dog came into the tent and sniffed at a tent post. The man with the derby sucked several times on a cigarette but without exhaling and flipped it at the dog.

"...Oncet."

"He was a good cook."

The dog yelped and ran into the night.

Andrew Tidemann, '59