

Back O' The Yards

By Will Levington Comfort and H. A. Sturtzel

The brickyards, I mean. It's a jungle-patch between the stockyards and the Larcher Street limit—this “back o' the yards.” Healy's Gardens is the Capitol and Square of the district.

Things happen in Healy's Gardens. Hundreds of unnaturalised Irish from the bogs work in the brick-yards; hundreds of not-to-be-naturalised “Hunkeys” work in the stockyards. Added to this, all the bastard and mongrel float of the world's crucible swarm the choked dwelling districts between.

Every Saturday night when the men are paid, Healy's Gardens becomes the corral of a thousand Huns, hell-bent from the killing pens, and a horde of Irish vandals from the brick-kilns. Then things pop. But Buck Healy, who used to be a “tub gambler on the Isthmus,” is a wise man. He sees to it that the “Hunkeys” and the “Tyros” have their special fireworks on separate nights.

There was a big official “Hunkey” dance in progress on this particular night, and the “Dreamer” was there. This was Pronto Kid Ladue. They called him the “Dreamer”—the Polish girls and the big mottled butterflies that hung around Healy's—because of his languorous disinterest in everything, their fairness in particular. The Kid was a card. He had recently come in from 'Frisco and was a past welter-king of the squared-circle, for the present laid up with a slow-mending wrist. He had money, but something about Annulka Street and the Gardens had called him from the first. The Kid was inclined to be on the rim of things—in touch with the outposts of law and civilisation. In 'Frisco you'd have found him around Russian Hill or Meigg's Wharf; in Seattle, out to the “Jungles”; in New York around Leverette, if not in Chinatown. Here, the Kid found his own “back o' the yards.”

Ladue had ideas about women. One would have marked him for a “hater” to see his papal armature against feminine shafts from all quarters. He was attentive and at the same time impartial—fascinating in his aloofness—one who had lived to the last ditch. So the little Polish girls from the packing plant stamped their feet at the Kid and called him “Dreamer.” One day Tim Whalen, Healy's chief bouncer, asked the Kid why he hung off.

“When I crossbows with a plume,” Ladue told him, “it's a glowworm—an eighteen-carat butterfly with yellow eyes or nothin'. None of your corn-fed, timothy-janes for mine.

Nor did the floating particles of the social swim interest the fighter. These were the “grey moths” in the Kid's argot.

On this particular night there was special reason for Ladue's presence. It was to see the wind-up of a certain Slovak affair, which brings us to Jan Karlukson.

Jan Karlukson was a night hammerman in the stockyards, and also the king of Annulka Street—a street of a thousand cheap and exactly identical frame shacks wherein live the bulk of the stockyards employees—street of a thousand phonographs—the hub of Packingtown, the very buckle of the jungle-belt, “back o' the yards.” Karlukson ruled Annulka Street with a hand of iron and the law of fear—a great blond, taciturn giant, part Norse and part Pole, with a hard hand and a harder face. A seething volcano lived in Karlukson. He was dangerous when sober, treacherous when drunk; a slow-moving fighter of the cold Scandinavian type, with a pale blue eye, like light glinting on ice. Karlukson chewed and smoked at the same time. When he opened his mouth it was no place for our kind of women and children. It was the Norse blood in him that overtrod the more docile Huns and made him the big noise of the Street.

Between Jan Karlukson and Tim Whalen, there was a deep grudge. Whalen, a “strong-arm” from the water-fronts of the East, was Healy’s pride, the only bouncer he had secured with class enough to hold his job over two pay-days. It was said that Whalen had done his term in “stir” for killing a man with his bare hands. Buck Healy put out a certain yard-man’s cocktail called a “tin roof.” It was raw and it was red-hot—a Louisiana rot-gut blent with vodka, five fingers high. “White men” never drank the stuff, but through Healy’s coaching, the Huns from the slaughter-house had learned to cry for it. Now and again the lid blew off, in spite of the precautions of Tim Whalen.

On the night of the last official “Hunkey” dance, the Hammerman and the Bouncer had come to grips. Karlukson, who had taken on a supercargo of “tin roofs,” had gripped a “lady” too hard in the open, and had been ejected by one quick, cat-like rush of Whalen’s. Furthermore, in the back entry-way Whalen had dealt the big Norse a straight-arm in a place that counted, then locked the door. Karlukson had recovered in the alley, and gone home—without saying a word. That was absolutely inhuman, when one knew Jan Karlukson.

Later, however, talk began to drift along the Street and about Gile’s Bar, at the corner of Larcher and Annulka, that Karlukson had been brooding silent for a fortnight, and that he had sworn to cut out the heart of Tim Whalen and put it back in a different place. Thus things had been brewing, and for two weeks past all Packingtown had been waiting and watching for the night when Big Jan liquored up for the surgery.

On this night all the packing girls and the wrapping girls, and every driver and “killer” along the Street was out in his brightest barbaric. Among the latecomers, as the Kid had expected, were Jan Karlukson and his clique. At the door they met Whalen’s *lookee*, who told them Whalen’s orders, which were that Karlukson was not to step inside the limits of Healy’s for a month. But Karlukson and his crowd butted right past, dropping their half-dollars in the box, then losing themselves in the crowd. It wasn’t a minute before the *lookee* tipped Whalen off.

Now the Bouncer had the shoulders of a pianomover, . the thighs of a troglodyte, but it was only “development.” Karlukson was ingrained; slim beside Whalen, but of the fibre of a man who works with his back ten hours a day and is hard to the ligaments. No one knew this better than the natural fighter, Kid Ladue, who was there to watch.

Whalen was not looking hard for Karlukson this night, but the Hammerman, after a dozen of Healy’s raw, began looking for the Bouncer—sighted him across the hail. Whalen saw him coming and also saw a job that needed tending to at the other end of the floor.

Karlukson and his crowd stayed on, and began a night’s session. When the Hammerman took to deep drinking it was not for an evening’s performance. The enormous overstrung vitality did not appear to be deadened by stimulants. Some devil in his brain awakened and looked out. At five in the morning the dance broke up, but still the group in the back-room sat on. The Fighting Kid had no intention of leaving before action. He had been devoting himself to Whalen in order to keep in touch—interested as only a fighter can be. The Bouncer’s talk jumped a bit, and his hands wouldn’t exactly behave. The Kid knew the signs, but rather despised him. It was the intolerable patience of the Hammerman that was shattering his enemy’s nerve.

At eight next morning, Healy himself appeared and was tipped off to the Slovak crowd. He called Whalen out of a two hours’ sleep. The Kid, who was in the offing, heard him ball blue fire out of his bouncer.

Of the rest, Ladue was an eye witness.

Karlukson was sitting at a table with his back to the wall. Four of his lot were in commission. Every man still on his legs drank when Karlukson drank, or fought. Karlukson was still flush. He

had been waiting for Whalen for ten hours. When the door opened, he slumped back in his seat as if inert, the pale fishy-blue eyes took on a glazed look, fastened on the opposite wall. Whalen had entered and approached softly. Then he roared out . . .

Karlukson stared stonily at the other until a hand shot out to jerk him upright. Ladue couldn't quite follow the two tawny arms of the Hammerman that now gripped Whalen's shoulders. There was a stifled curse from Whalen, who could neither grip Karlukson nor draw away. He was held rigid. The ring-master, Ladue, was puzzled for a moment.

Slowly, inexorably the back of the big bouncer was bent at the waist, backward and down, his two arms held slightly crooked and behind. Down to the level of the table he was forced, the cold heavy blue eyes of the Hammerman changeless upon his writhing features, without feeling, without hate—the dead, passionless stare of an avenger. It was as if by sheer brooding Karlukson had brought this moment about. It had the look of being ordained—and so fully anticipated that it brought not even a flush of victory to the Hammerman's eyes.

Kid Ladue heard plainly the snap, then the hoarse moan from Whalen, as he crumpled up on the floor. It was the only sound of the struggle. Karlukson put out his boot. Like a broken reed the other lay across it and was spurned away. Then the Hammerman cob lapsed in his chair. The great tawny head sank forward on the chest. The break had come. A sneer touched Ladue's lips. His admiration had gone out to Karlukson at first, but now it was spoiled. Both men had been in rotten condition. . . . They carried the Hammerman home to his shack in Annulka Street and Whalen to the stockyards hospital. That was the last Healy's Gardens ever saw of this Bouncer.

The woman was Karlukson's woman. The first glimpse Ladue got of her was on the night after the fight in the back-room. It was in the cool of the evening and he was sitting out with a friend on the front steps of his little boarding hutch, as he called it, down on Annulka. Ladue was fogging one of his favorite "phoebes" and telling his friend some of the "mills" he'd been through, back at the Gate before his wrist went. On the porch alongside, a couple of yardsmen were sitting on the steps, their hands hanging over their knees, their eyes blank and staring—saying nothing, thinking nothing, feeling nothing, but "all in." The other porch to the left was draped with a giant Pole, lying half in a chair, half across the low railing, his head thrown back and snoring like a grade-tractor.

It struck the Kid at the time that a sculptor chap couldn't have pulled off anything better in clay under the title, "The Spirit of the Yards." He mentioned the same to his friend. If you see this picture, you've got Annulka.

It was darker now and the women were beginning to trail along the Street, when a commotion in one of the houses near by broke out. A high-pitched voice in English, a woman's voice—pleading, on the verge of a scream. Then she was running out of her house—the gigantic Karlukson behind. Ladue heard her whimper as the Hammerman clapped her to his chest. His hand cut off her breath. She was thrust bodily within. A laugh ran through the dusk.

The Kid had arisen. Men and women on the porches made light of the affair; though there was nervous laughter all round. Something had boiled up in the Kid. The woman had been of astonishing quality, even in that trying glimpse.

The big Pole with the snore, stretched, and ambled off down the Street towards Gile's Bar. Soon Karlukson emerged and disappeared in the same direction. He was "going on," for his was a night-job in the killing pens.

Somehow Ladue didn't find any words the rest of that evening. Later he took a turn with his friend to the corner. He caught a glimpse of Karlukson's woman in the doorway, standing in the

dusk in a light kimono of some sort, low-necked and clinging. There was something pale and shimmery about the picture, her face distinct, the full lips and eyes gleaming, even in that half-light. She seemed to beckon.

Something of the women of Rome and Pompeii, a bit of the fulness of the Island beauty about her. Without designating, the Kid got the feel of this. She watched him intently, even came out to look after him as he passed. There was a queer draw to the whole thing, and it got to Ladue. He was not himself, as he said good-night to his friend. Somehow he seemed to belong to a woman like that, waiting for him in the dusk.

It took this much to challenge the Kid—his kind of a woman—a flame. He went out after her. She was on the porch when he went back.

They sat together on her porch. . . . Now and then each would steal a covert glance at the other, half appraising, but always their eyes dropped simultaneously. It was like a fear. It was not because of any shame; it was no abashment of youth; it was because of the too-deep understanding that had sprung up like a presence between them. Even Ladue was afraid to meet the long look.

They had little to say. The Kid smoked many cigarettes in the new tension that had come over him. He was feeling something of it all now—the big strange streak in her.

Suddenly he turned squarely on the woman, determination in his eyes. She did not turn, but he saw the quiver under her chin and he smiled to himself. A little breath of the night breeze had brought a faint and delicate scent to his nostrils. . . .

Soon after, he left, but the next evening he came again to the porch, and the next. She had begun to dress for his coming. He had not been slow to catch that. This third night her hair was done in two soft little pads that came down across her forehead, a crown in the dusk for her beauty. It might have been done for a lover's eyes. He noted the taste of the cameo she wore at the V of her waist. She was more daring. She swiftly turned her face, meeting his eyes full. He grinned, almost tauntingly. A full moment he held those wonderful Egyptian eyes, great yellow eyes, full of strange and conflicting lights—like far countries that stir and call to a man.

Somewhere a baby cried. A woman was singing, a foreign song, that gave a strange sad sense of the peasant spirit, ignorant, trampled, unawakened. Down the Street a red glare was lighting up the sky from the yard furnaces—the burning of the entrails. The wind favoured, and the man thanked his stars.

From the boarding-house adjoining came the scraping of chairs, the clatter of dishes being snatched from table—and a half-dozen men thumped out and shambled past in the direction of the Gardens.

“Cattle!” said Ladue. “Off for the rum-shops.”

She nodded indifferently. “I suppose.”

“But there's nothing else to do around here,” he added, watching her face.

She did not turn to him, but he knew her thoughts.

An outbreak of screaming from a child next door—a woman trying to still it with the abominable chatter of the Galician. Ladue felt her wrestling with her pride.

“How long have you weathered this?” he asked suddenly.

“Two years,” she answered.

“Two years,” he repeated slowly. “Two years in this. Karlukson earns big money. Why don't you get out?”

“He doesn't want to. It suits him, so he stays.”

“And you’re bound to stick to him, I suppose.” He lifted his brows insolently. “Bonds of home and all that. . . . How often does Karlukson practice those cave-tactics?”

She flashed a glance of quick hatred at him. The Kid loved even that, the small fury of it, but he only laughed into her face in the arrogance of deep insight. He liked to see her blaze. The tides of youth were strong within her. Her eyes dropped again.

“What tactics?”

“That strong-arm stuff three nights ago?”

“Oh, not so often,” she returned coldly. “Some one is liable to drop him like a mad dog on one of his expeditions.”

“Karlukson is a big man. He does what he pleases on this street. No one would dare come after Karlukson.”

There was pride in her voice.

“Wouldn’t they?” he asked.

“No.” She shot a quick glance at him, then added dully, “Besides, it was nothing. Karlukson wouldn’t hurt me.”

He was beginning to get a line on her now. Hers was a savage animal passion, the gay, gilaour love of Spain and the Orient. Her kind of womanhood yearned to be captured by force. He imagined the pride that would be hers to instil a man with enough ardour to drag her away by the hair, fling her in some cellar, to have and to hold against the world. His own passion quickened on the moment. It was a challenge.

He said bluntly: “Karlukson’s a brute and a bull,” and again leaned back smiling into her face. He knew his power. But it was her presence that liberated him.

“You don’t know Karlukson,” she whispered suddenly. “Karlukson is my man. That wasn’t Karlukson that came home to me three nights ago. The Yards did that—work did that. Karlukson works and works until the beast gets into him—the animals in the Yards get into him and he goes to the Gardens to forget. But the Karlukson I met three years ago wasn’t like that. He was a master steel-worker then, and the best man on the job. He was always that. He offered me everything in life I hadn’t had. I was all froze-in on myself. He made me a queen. But he grew tired—”

“Uses you for a chopping-block, eh?”

She blazed at him again, and there was tense silence before she put in:

“It was work again. Karlukson has worked like a beast—a cog!”

“And in the meantime you’ve been getting along, buried here in this jungle. Mighty near the dead-line now, aren’t you?” he suggested.

Her face burned as from a lash.

“A couple more years of it, in this—!” he added. “Think of it. And you a regular!”

Even in that there was appraisal.

She was looking off toward the red in the sky again. Suddenly he drew her to him and kissed her mouth. She showed fight, but her eyes smouldered with passion as well as fury. . . . They sat back an instant gazing into each other’s eyes, arms tense between, each holding the other back.

“Look here, you’re a flame! Do you know it? I want you—I want you bad! You make a giant out of just your touch. Can’t you see it? I could do anything with you. I’m going to have you!”

“How’ll you get me?” she answered. Her eyes contracted and she elevated her chin scornfully. He had felt the pull of her beauty, but never as now. She was smooth as a vase in the dusk. She returned the menace in his eyes with a dare. Ladue thought he read her like a scroll, and the dusk lent magic to it all. He felt now that she feared him. A smile which he misinterpreted, flashed

across her face, her eyes turned up over his shoulder. Was Karlukson in her thoughts? Yet her breast heaved with real emotion. He knew that her woman's art had long been disengaged; that she was drawn to him; that her heart was sick of the frowsy monotony of Annulka Street. He drew her close again. Her small hands pushed and beat against his breast, her fingers wound in his hair, but her smoky eyes beckoned him on. Again and again he pressed her to him.

"Let me go!" she cried in a low furious voice, half a laugh.

A moment longer he held her, making her feel his wondrous bounding vitality, in which lay coiled up fights, scores of fights, hundreds of those glorious moments. And he told her with his eyes that he would never tire, never dull. He had lived; he had learned her life better than she had learned it.

"Shall I let you go?" he whispered through a laugh. For answer she covered herself in his coat, her arms around his neck. Her eyes looked into his, a yellow glare in the dusk, and his looked back, unwinking. . . . Then, as suddenly as she had flung herself at him she had broken away, turned, and sped through the doorway and up the dark stairs.

He followed, making no sound on the stair, taking four steps at a time. She was quicker. Almost in his face, a lock snapped—her room door.

Softly he tried the knob, then pushed his weight against the panel. It was firmly locked. A moment he waited.

"Anna!" he called softly. "Anna!"

No answer.

He listened. There was no sound within, yet he knew she was there. He had a picture of her there in the dark, looking at the red out of her window with a cruel little smile on her face. She was larger than he thought.

He went down the stairs, sat on the porch, lit a cigarette and waited. . . . He smiled to himself. He knew that every moment was breaking her now. Soon she would come back to him, humble and dejected.

In the interval a man stepped from a house down the row, passed along the walk, and repassed, scrutinising Ladue intently through the dark. He was a little man of ape-like proportions and the unfinished face and offensive moustache of the Galician. A moment he called Ladue out of his thoughts. Somewhere he had seen the fellow. Then it came to him—one of the Karlukson crowd in Healy's back-room.

A moment later the woman was sitting beside him again. She said nothing, but looked away.

He fell back to the commonplace now, feeling her confusion. He began telling her of the old days in the ring, back in 'Frisco—days of big games and big money, in the eye of the world. He was different as he talked—the impetuous boy came out, full of enthusiasm and impulse. The feel of it thrilled her anew.

"And it's all coming back again," he finished, holding up the wrist with the leather splint. "This'll be all set in another two weeks, good as new."

He turned to her, impetuously, laying a hand on hers.

"Say, why don't you come out with me? God, how we'd live—travelling together, out in the world! We could keep going or stay awhile, just as we liked—"

"And when you got tired?" she put in, mockingly.

"I wouldn't. . . . Say, what do you see in that bull, anyhow? There's nothing to hold you. He's got nothing for you now. Why don't you break away and live?"

She did, not answer.

“Do you know what I’m going to do?” he turned on her. “I’m coming to get you—hear me? I’m coming to take you I’ll take you the way he took you. He did that—now, didn’t he?”

She nodded faintly.

“Well, I’m coming. You think I can’t? . . . I’m not a bull, but I’m going to show you.”

He sat back and felt the pride that flushed her.

A week passed. Always away from her came the doubt,—the memory of her laugh in the dusk, the feel of the little demons that lived within her. And always the Kid was aware of some secret supervision from the houses surrounding. But never for an instant did he drop the conquest. There were times when he felt his own power. Sometimes he felt that all that had lain dormant in her had awakened and was singing.

He talked of cities, of magnolias and soft smoky nights in the south Islands, of winter seasons in Europe and the coast of South America, of the ring-life he had known. He told her what life held for her kind of creature if she would break free. He explained how he had almost used himself up in the trades before he had developed the fighter in himself. How he hated the trades! They were the treadmills that made cogs out of big and potent men. The trades silenced the call of the world and the quest in a man, and when that was silenced, a fellow was down and done. He asked her only to look about her at the dwellers of Annulka Street for the cogs. Would she remain in the grime and fog of it all, without even a struggle to break away?

The woman listened, and the night breeze became the breath of all that gay, bizarre life she had known before Karlukson came.

“But suppose I got tired of you?” she would say after long intervals of silence. “What then?”

Fine egotism pulsed through him like wine.

“Hell, you wouldn’t be hurt any, would you? And you’d be out of this, wouldn’t you? Isn’t it worth the risk? Let’s be square. We might either of us get tired, but isn’t it worth the game anyhow? There’s nothing big coming to any one without a risk. Think of it—we two—doing Europe together, and the big coast cities of South America—until you did get tired. I wouldn’t kick if you did. I wouldn’t hold you. But maybe you never would. Maybe I never would. And there’s nothing to lose. You know that. Life with me couldn’t come to this, whatever happened. I’ll take my chance. Won’t you?”

The boy, serious, unpretentious, came to the surface now as he took her face between his two hands and kissed her tenderly. . . . This was different from ever before, and she surrendered her face to him.

As he left that night he looked back to see if she were watching. There was a white filmy figure just withdrawing from the doorway. He laughed softly and whistled to himself. But later again, he couldn’t get the lines running all straight.

One night, at last, he came early, before dusk, and the leather splint was no longer on his wrist. Joyously like a boy, he showed the woman the new sound hand, beating the wrist with the back of the other to show that it was solid. She laughed at his ardour.

“To-morrow—” he said, as they sat down in the little parlour. “To-morrow’s Saturday. To-morrow I’m coming to take you, do you hear? Take you from him and pay for you in his own kind of money.”

She nodded and said nothing, looking away over the city.

An hour passed in glory. Everything that she did pleased him.

A short silence was broken by a step on the outer porch and a light knock. The peering animal face of the little Galician with the moustache was thrust in the doorway. The woman stepped out. A few sentences were exchanged in Slovak, then the woman came back in the house to search

for something. It was some thing Karlukson wanted. The woman was nervous and Ladue knew that there would be trouble if he stayed.

He stayed.

They did not fall into talk after that. The hot August night, starless, breathless, portended storm. The air was dead and sultry and bore down upon them as if the city were being smothered under the hollowed palm of an angry god. Out of the window the yard furnaces glared up into the sky, fitfully. Down at the corner of Larcher, the echo of downtown millions yelped in their ears.

Come on," said the man presently. "I can't breathe here. Come outside. There's a little joint down the Street where we can talk and be cool."

With proud obeisance she went to her room for her wraps. The man waited in the shadows of the sitting-room. Downtown still came to him in low rumblings. Somehow there was a breath of expectancy in the oppressive air. He arose and stood waiting at the

Ten minutes elapsed before her white dress gleamed at the head of the stairs. There she stopped short, and the man heard her catch her breath, then remain as if frozen. Something crawled along his spine; he whirled and confronted Jan Karlukson standing huge, silent and shadowy in the doorway.

Ladue did not know whether the Hammerman had been standing there for minutes, or had just stepped into the doorway. It was like the Killer to come in silently. Another creeper went up the Kid's back. Here was bull and cat combined.

A full minute the two confronted, the woman watching from above. In all the times the Kid had seen him, the Hammerman had said no word. It was so now; it was ruin to weak nerves, the same that Whalen had known. A quick movement and the key clicked in the lock of the front door. Karlukson advanced. Queerly the Kid heard the hiss of the woman's breath above.

Only the lurid lights of the yard furnaces lit the room, as the two manoeuvred, brushing against furniture, speaking no word. Twice Karlukson rushed to be played aside by the Kid. Plainly it was the aim of the Killer to break his man with bare hands—Whalen-fashion. Not a blow did he strike, only came on patiently, the huge arms reaching out to pluck Ladue to him.

With a quick turn the Kid flung open the back door and stepped out. Every foot of the cramped room was an advantage to the bigger man and Karlukson followed into the open. Then began the fight in the Jumping red light of the furnaces, that flung their shadows, grotesque and misshapen upon the ground.

"There's nothing but a finish in this," was what kept running through the Kid's head. "No throwing up the sponge. This is a stake fight to a finish. Somebody's going to be spoiled."

There, between the walls of the high board fence that shut in the hack yard—a fence that might have been the stockade walls of one of the killing-pens in the yards, they rushed each other—two men in a certain glory of youth and strength, with naked fists, with the mania to maim, to destroy. All the tortured æons of human gains in the upward climb through evolution were erased in that first half-minute. Evolution itself was lost. This was involution, rather, hideous reversion. Not even a man-made light guided their movements. The fitful red of the furnaces might have been the belching from some distant crater throwing its light on their midnight struggle—two cave-men of the stone age. Lower they sank into the primal dregs of the Beginnings, striving, blindly, elementally, as antipodal atoms strive in a chemist's crucible. And the woman had come and was standing big-eyed and silent in the low doorway, finishing the savage picture—its Cause.

The Kid would not be caught. Intermittently he was participant and spectator. It was like a bit of a moving-picture film, as he suffered and toiled and sweated, colliding, recoiling, whirling, the picture broken only by exultation when he felt his knuckles smash home.

Voices arose from the houses and yards surrounding, and heads began popping over the board fence. Presently the Kid was aware that the yard was filling with men, foreigners, babbling excitably in the detestable high-pitched Slovak of the Street. It was like a gathering of foul birds to watch the end of a fight.

The Hammerman was hurt and puzzled. He could not use his fists, depended upon the sheer power of his crushing arms. But his enemy was as quick as a leopard and punished him again and again from the Unseen. . . . Karlukson began striking out, great lumbrous blows. It was what Ladue had wanted, the rage that blinds and tires itself out.

“Muscle-bound!” the Kid voiced between his teeth after the first minute. “They all are, that handle the hammer.”

Karlukson’s movements were ponderous. It was as if he were deformed by his own strength.

The crowd was quiet—awed.

It may have been the utter unreliability of a man who knows nothing of the game, but the fact was Karlukson put one ripping wallop across. Ladue’s cheek was laid open to the bone. There were mutters of amazement. Karlukson with his bare knuckles had done this. Ladue was drenched with his own blood. A sound from the woman in the doorway was like the cry of a devil. The watchers muttered crazily. The Kid gave no sign.

Some one was edging nearer the Hammerman, admonishing. Ladue made out the squat figure of the little Galician. Suddenly the Kid was like a thing of terror that bore down on the bystanders, and upon the sneak in their midst who had been trying to hand Karlukson something from the rear.

“Get back!” he called hoarsely. “Keep out of this, all of you! This is my scrap, hear me? You, you little sneakin’ ape—out of the yard, or I’ll beat you to death!”

The crowd shrank back. The two fought on, through dragging exhaustion and back to second-wind again.

And now the crowd of animals, its lust sated, jabbered with fear at what it saw. Karlukson towered backward and forward, a monster out of whose features all likeness to a man had been beaten.

An endless purgatory of red mist—a loud snap of bone and the right hand of the Kid dropped to his side. The newly-knit wrist gone again. Giving his face and head to a dozen blows, Karlukson had done it, had caught the Kid’s arm and twisted it back. Everybody heard it and knew. The Hammerman was waiting for another grip that would end it. The crowd surged forward, but Ladue parried on, the Fighter uprisen in his heart—beyond fear and feeling now.

With one hand, he punched on, unfolding the last coils of his vitality through immeasurable lapses of time, only once in an age jerking back for an instant, knowing his blow had gone home. The hideous bloody gargoyle before him still came on, with mouthings and gibbers now—death on the face—death that the Kid saw—that his own hands had wrought—but why didn’t he fall.

The Kid’s fist sank into Karlukson’s neck. There was the loose snapping of jaws that meant paralysis. Ladue braced his eyes open, steeled himself and followed up the blow with another. Then he was dimly aware that the great bulk was sinking slowly to its knees. Again and again he followed his lead, battering the head and neck of the other. And next moment the Hammerman was stretched out on the ground, and Ladue was swaying over him on shaky legs, clutching the air for support and saying over and over again:

“I got him. I got him with my bare hands!”

The pale blue eye of the Hammerman jerked him back. It seemed filled with ancient wisdom. It seemed as if the brain of Karlukson worked now as it never had done when he lived and moved.

Something behind Ladue, a rustle and the sharp burn like a scald, in the centre of his back—a knife.

The “Dreamer” slipped to the ground, without a sound, his head on his arms. He was down and done now, and it was not the Pole, but the woman—who had done it. One wonders if he got that last picture—the woman in white, kneeling, her arms about the neck of the Hammerman, her hair falling about the face of that ruin.