

A Light Supper before the Main Event

With the last bit of rice, Tomas Romero wiped his plate clean of the last droplet of sauce and swallowed the mouthful. As he rose from the table, he was just a little bothered by the feeling that he was still hungry. Yet he alone had eaten. The three children in the other room had been sent early to bed in order that, in sleep, they might forget they had gone supperless. His wife had touched nothing, and had sat silently, watching him with wide eyes. She was a solid but shapely woman -- a slightly worn out woman of the working-class, though signs of an earlier prettiness were in her face. The sauce for the meal she had borrowed from Senora Garcia across the hall. The last two dollars had gone to buy the flour. But there was to be no meat tonight -- too expensive.

Tomas sat down by the window. He was a steel-bodied man, and his rough clothes were old. Now, the physique of this buffed man showed that he was a man to be reckoned with. But it was the *face* of Tomas Romero that advertised him for what he was. It was a face of battered stone, the face of one who had put in long years of service in the ring. The lips were shapeless, the jaw was aggressively cut and heavy. The eyes, slow of movement and heavy-lidded, were almost expressionless under the brows. The eyes were dark and forbidding. The forehead rose bumpily back to the hair, and the nose, twice broken, was permanently off-center and noticeably swollen.

All together, it was the face of a man to be feared. And yet Tomas Romero was not a criminal. Outside of the ring, he had harmed no one

since his teenage years. All the fight in him was reserved for his profession. Outside the ring, he knew little anger, bore no grudges, and made few enemies.

It was a different matter in the ring. In the ring he struck to hurt and to crush; he did this work well – *too well*, his unlucky opponents said. But even here – in the bloody ring -- it was just a business proposition. Audiences paid for the spectacle of men knocking each other out. The winner took the big purse. The loser was paid a small sum. It was the game, and Tomas had played it well for twenty-five years.

Tomas had never been a talker, and he sat by the window, silent, staring at his hands. The veins stood out on the backs of the hands, large and swollen; and the knuckles, smashed and battered and malformed, testified to the use to which they had been put. Was it the veins? They carried the blood that was the power within a man, but they no longer did the work well. Maybe he had stretched the elasticity out of them and they had lost his endurance. Who knows? But he tired easily now. No longer could he do a tough fifteen rounds. A fast ten rounds – maybe. But after that, he dragged. What the hell...

The impression of his hunger came back on him. "A piece of meat! I shoulda had some meat," he muttered, half-aloud, but too quietly for his wife to hear. The slight hunger would hurt his performance tonight.

"What time is it, Esperanza?" he asked.

"Almost eight."

"They'll be startin' the first bout in a few minutes," he said. There's a ten-rounder tonight. Thousand bucks to the winner. Hundred bucks to the loser."

"We need it," she said. "You can do it -- I feel it."

She always said, "*I feel it.*" But it never did any good.

He rose to his feet. "Truth is, girl, I ain't had proper trainin'."

She remained quiet. What could she say?

He reached for his hat and started for the door. He did not offer to kiss her -- he never did on going out -- but on this night she dared to kiss him, throwing her arms around him and compelling him to bend down to her face.

"Good luck, Tomas Romero," she said. "You're gonna do 'im. Thousand bucks...hundred bucks...whatever."

"Ya, Gonna do 'im," he repeated. " That's all there is to it. I jus' gotta do 'im."

He laughed while she pressed more closely against him. Across her shoulders he looked around the bare room. It was all he had in the world,

this room and her and the kiddies.

“I'll come straight home if it's a win. If I lose...maybe a beer.”

"An' I'll be waitin' up," she called to him along the hall.

It was full two miles to the El Paso Palazzo Municipal -- the fight arena. As he walked, he remembered how in his younger days he had become the 1911 welterweight champion of El Paso. Those were the days! He was “Youth Rising” then. No wonder it had been easy.

Well, a man had only so many fights in him, to begin with. It was the law of the game. One man might have a hundred hard fights in him; another man would have only twenty. Each, according to the stuff in him, had a definite number. When a man had fought them fights, he was done. Yes, he had had more fights in him than most of them. He had seen them guys all worn out and finished, and he had had a hand in finishing some of them. He had lasted...but now he was old, and he didn't have too many fights left in him.

As Tomas Romero reflected, there came to his solid vision the form of Youth, glorious Youth, rising exultant and invincible, supple of muscle and silken of skin, with heart and lungs that had never been tired and torn and that laughed at all limitations of effort. Yes, Youth was the Enemy. Youth destroyed the old ones. Youth was ever youthful. It was only Age that grew old.

At Castillo Street, he turned to the left, and three blocks along came to the Ring. A crowd of young dudes hanging outside the door made respectful way for him, and he heard one say to another: "That's 'im! That's Tommy Romero! He was the champ back in the day."

"When?"

"Don't know... long time ago."

Inside, on the way to his dressing-room, he came upon Ricardo Garza, the promoter -- a keen-eyed, shrewd-faced man, who shook his hand.

"How are you feelin', Tommy?" he asked.

"Feelin' good!" Romero answered.

When he emerged from the dressing-room, his ring helpers behind him, and came down the aisle to the squared ring in the center of the hall, a burst of greeting and applause went up from the waiting crowd. Audiences love old athletes. Old athletes tell them the lie that Death is not necessarily coming for us. Tomas knew better. Ignoring the encouragement of the crowd, he leaped to the raised platform and ducked through the ropes to his corner, where he sat down on a stool. Jack Ball, the referee, came over and shook his hand.

The audience applauded, and applauded again as a young and steely man, young Ricardo Solano, sprang through the ropes and sat down in *his*

corner. Tomas looked across the ring at him curiously, for in a few minutes they would be locked together in merciless combat, each trying with all the force of him to knock the other into unconsciousness. Solano's face was strongly handsome, crowned with a curly mop of shiny hair, while his thick, muscular neck rippled in magnificence. Tomas was only slightly concerned; he had crashed against many such men in his life.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer hollered, “Tonight, we present a ten round contest between two welterweights. In this corner -- weighing 141 pounds -- Ricardo Solano.” Applause. “In this corner, weighing 146 pounds, the former welterweight champion of El Paso, here's TOMMYYY ROMMERRRROHHH!” There was loud yelling, especially from the old timers. And then the fight was on.

The two men advanced to meet each other, and, as the gong sounded and the helpers clattered out of the ring with the folding stools, they shook hands and instantly took their fighting attitudes. And instantly, like a mechanism of steel and springs balanced on a hair trigger, Solano was in and out and in again, landing a left to the eyes, a right to the ribs, ducking a counter, dancing lightly away and dancing menacingly back again. He was swift and clever. It was a dazzling exhibition. The crowd yelled its approval. But Romero was not dazzled. He had fought too many fights and too many youngsters. He knew the blows for what they were - too quick to be dangerous. Tomas leaned away from each punch with perfect the timing of experience. Solano was going to rush things from the start. It was to be expected. It was the way of Youth, expending its splendor and excellence in wild and furious attack

Solano was in and out, here, there, and everywhere, light-footed and eager-hearted, a living wonder of shining flesh and stinging muscle that wove itself into a dazzling fabric of attack, slipping and leaping from action to action through a thousand actions, all of them centered upon the destruction of Tommy Romero, who stood between him and fortune.

Tomas Romero patiently endured.

The third round began as usual, one-sided, with Solano doing all the leading and delivering all the punishment. A half-minute had passed when Solano, overconfident, left an opening. Romero's eyes and right arm flashed in the same instant. It was his first real blow - a hook, with the twisted arch of the arm to make it rigid, and with all the weight of the half-pivoted body behind it. It was like a sleepy old lion suddenly thrusting out a lightning paw. Solano, caught on the side of the jaw, was knocked down. The audience gasped.

Solano was shaken. He rolled over and attempted to rise, but he knelt on one knee, too shaky to rise; he waited, while the referee stood over him, counting the seconds loudly in his ear. At the ninth count he rose in fighting attitude, and Tomas, facing him, knew the regret that the blow had not been an inch nearer the point of the jaw. That would have been a knockout, and he could have carried those ten hundred dollar bills home to the missus and the kids.

The round continued to the end of its three minutes, Solano for the first

time respectful of his opponent. Romero was as slow of movement and sleepy-eyed and deadly as ever.

By the seventh round, Solano's freshness was gone, and he settled down to what he knew was to be the hardest fight in his experience. Tommy Romero was an old man, but a tougher old man than he had ever encountered - an old one who never lost his head, who was remarkably able at defense, and who had a knockout in either hand. Romero took every advantage he knew. It was the strategy of Old Age.

The house by this time had gone mad, and it was his house, nearly every voice yelling: "Go to it, Tommy!" "Get 'im! Get 'im!" "You've got 'im, Tomas! You've got 'im!" The mob thought it was to be a whirlwind finish, with Old age and Experience defeating Youth and Death in one stroke; that was what the ringside audience had paid to see. Or the opposite -- it didn't matter that much.

But it mattered to Tomas. Old Romero, who for half an hour had conserved his strength, now expended it in the one great effort he knew he had in him. It was his one chance - now or not at all. His strength was dying fast, and his hope was that, before the last of it slipped out of him, he would beat his opponent down for the count. And as he continued to strike and force, coolly estimating the weight of his blows and the quality of the damage wrought, he realized how hard a man young Solano was to knock out.

Solano was reeling and staggering, but he would not fall -- and Tomas

Romero's legs were cramping and his knuckles going back on him. He steeled himself to strike the fierce blows, every one of which brought anguish to his tortured hands. Although he was now receiving practically no punishment from the young opponent, he was weakening as rapidly as Solano. His blows went home, but there was no longer the weight behind them, and each blow was a severe effort of will. His legs were like lead, and they dragged visibly under him.

Knowing that the time had come, Romero gave a burst of effort. He delivered two blows in succession - a left, a tiny bit too high, to the solar plexus, and a right cross to the jaw. Solano went down – went down hard. It was impossible that a man so punished could rise.

Only Youth *could* rise, and Solano *did* rise. At the fourth second, he rolled over on his face and groped blindly for the ropes. By the seventh second he had dragged himself to his knee, where he rested, his head rolling groggily on his shoulders. As the referee cried "Nine!" Solano stood upright, in proper stalling position, his left arm wrapped about his face, his right wrapped about his stomach. Solano swayed, but did not fall; he staggering back to the ropes and held on. Romero staggered after him, but his body had deserted him. All that was left of him was a fighting intelligence that was dimmed and clouded from exhaustion. He struck what he thought was a blow, but the punch that was aimed for the jaw struck no higher than the shoulder. He had willed the blow higher, but the tired muscles had not obeyed.

Youth *would* be served. Even in the clinch he could feel Solano

growing stronger against him. When the referee thrust them apart, there, before his eyes, he saw Youth recuperate. From instant to instant Solano grew stronger. His punches, weak and futile at first, became stiff and accurate. Tomas Romero's bleary eyes saw the gloved fist driving at his jaw, and he willed to guard against it by raising his arm. He saw the danger, willed the act; but the arm was too heavy. It seemed burdened with a weight of lead. It would not lift itself, and he strove to lift it with his soul. Everything was in slow motion now.

And then the gloved fist of the young man landed home on old Tomas Romero's head. He experienced a sharp snap like an electric spark, and, simultaneously, the veil of blackness enveloped him.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in his corner, hearing the yells of the audience like the roar of the surf. A wet sponge was being pressed against the base of his brain, and his ring helper, old Herman Garcia, was blowing cold water in a refreshing spray over his face and chest. His gloves had already been removed, and this young man -- Youth Himself -- was bending over him, shaking his hand. He bore no ill will toward the young man who had put him out. It was Youth he hated -- not the young. And so he returned the grip with all the little strength he had.

His helpers were half-supporting him as they eased him through the ropes. He tore free from them, ducked through the ropes unaided, and leaped heavily to the floor, following as they forced a passage for him down the crowded center aisle toward the locker room.

The loser could claim a hundred bucks for a night in the ring. Not bad for an old guy like Tomas Romero. Just another night.

Leaving the dressing-room for the street, in the entrance to the hall, some young fellow spoke to him.

"Why didn't yuh go in an' get 'im when yuh 'ad 'im?" the young guy asked.

"Aw, go to hell!" said Tomas Romero, as he passed down the steps to the sidewalk.

Maybe a beer before going home tonight, Tomas thought. Maybe two.

The End