

The Big Punch

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There are those who find their biggest adventure in a gun battle on the plains or in the mountains; others, in storms conquered on the high seas; still others in tight situations they never imagined possible. But as far as this adventure we're going to narrate goes, although it's well known that it occurred far from the big cities, in a small town theater full of wildly excited spectators, the true business, theme, and intrigue of the adventure didn't take place spectacularly and with violent and outrageous scenes, but rather in a smooth and very simple way.

The unusual incident to which we refer happened to Juan Romaguera, known in Regla, the neighborhood where he was born, by the nickname Kid Rayo, his moniker as invincible boxer.

A great number of people who know about Romaguera's adventure don't consider it as having any importance at all, and they usually even call it idiotic. But Romaguera knows very well what happened, and he always claims that he played his role as he had to do it, and if a thousand times he were to find himself again in the same situation, a thousand times he would react in the same manner.

To get on with it and clear up the matter definitively, we'll tell the simple story in all its details, and the reader can judge Romaguera's strange behavior from all angles after he has in-depth knowledge of the true aspects of the incident.

It happened that Romaguera's manager, Ernesto Pantoja, talked to him about a fight to be held in a village of Las Villas, against an idol of that place, one of those mediocre fighters who are popular among their friends, who usually fill up to capacity the place a fight is held on the night of the action. This was undoubtedly a good deal for Romaguera and his director.

They packed their things and caught a bus to the village where the fight would take place. Upon arriving, as usually happened, the promoter of the business and numerous fans awaited them and accompanied them to the only hotel in the town, a two-story affair of pine boards and tile roof, and there they settled in to wait for the match, which was programmed for two days later.

Romaguera slept two hours, took an unsatisfactory shower, put on his elegant linen pants, his colorful Hawaiian-patterned shirt, his long key chain hanging from a belt whose buckle was formed by his two initials, **J** and **R**, in silver, and went out to show off his musculature for the town.

In the street he was surrounded by boys and young men. They stared at him, enraptured. One of the more daring touched his right bicep, where the blue tattoo of a badly engraved heart stood out ostentatiously.

Romaguera was walking along very contentedly when, in one corner of the only park, he noticed the announcement of his fight, in a poster attached to a light pole by means of two cords. And he read contentedly:

NEXT SUNDAY: BOXING
THE ANTICIPATED MATCH
KID RAYO VS. INOCENTE MARTÍNEZ
ADMISSION, ONE PESO

He smiled and said to himself, "I'm going to lay out this country boy with a couple of jabs to the jaw." And he entered the park as the afternoon waned. There were children, pleasant young people strolling, an old person resting on a bench under the cottonwood trees. The light was golden, the air fresh.

And Romaguera walked round and round, knowing he was the object of the glances directed toward his young and robust body.

Before he arrived at the stand where the municipal band played, he saw her. She was golden skinned and dressed in pink. White shoes, a mouth made for soft laughter, deep eyes. He turned, he watched her pass by, he smiled at her, but she only observed him quickly and continued her walk.

Romaguera stayed in the park until nightfall, all eyes for the marvelous golden girl. He returned to his hotel, dined rapidly and returned to the site where he had been enchanted, this time in a suit of English cut with a red tie over a white shirt. He lighted up an expensive cigar. He looked for her, he saw her.

Finally, he was able to speak to her, but only briefly. When he asked her, "Can I see you tomorrow afternoon, here?"

She replied, "Perhaps."

Romaguera looked at her forlornly. He whispered to her, "Come ... Come..."

"I'll try hard to come...Yes."

And she went away. And Romaguera stayed in the park another hour, thinking, daydreaming.

When he returned to the hotel to sleep, his manager was waiting for him with important news.

"This thing has gotten complicated," he said quickly, "The money is on you. Nobody's going to bet on this country boy, because everybody knows you're undefeated and that you have a big punch that can't be handled, a real gut buster."

Romaguera interrupted him. "Right, and so what? That's no concern of mine."

His manager continued: "Yes it does concern you, because we have us a deal where you're going to be able to pick up an easy five hundred pesos. The people here say they don't put local sentiments behind their money and they're betting it on you, and even giving odds. You know what's happening?"

Romaguera, a little curious now, asked: "What's going on?"

"The mayor's secretary came to see me, and he told me that there's a group that's going to bet eight or ten thousand pesos against you. There's the captain of the rural guards, a police lieutenant, and the mayor. If you take a dive, they're going to rake in a lot of money and you get five hundred pesos."

Romaguera thought: "This comes at a good time. With those five hundred pesos I'll buy Irene a wristwatch, and a bracelet for my other girl in Casablanca, and even my stray kid can have a piece of it."

He said to his manager: "I'm a professional. Business is business."

The manager replied: "I'll go see the secretary right now and tell him that the deal is on."

And he went quickly, leaving Romaguera alone with his thoughts. He thought about Regla and its ambience, about Irene...and afterwards, for a long time, about the golden girl in the park, whom he would see the next afternoon.

Spellbound, he fell asleep.

Next afternoon, the day before the fight, he saw her. And they talked for a long time. And in the evening he saw her again, and they talked again, seated on a park bench, and now alone. And Romaguera was captivated by this woman as never before in his life.

He felt unsettled; he slept badly. And on Sunday morning, the day of the match, he went to the house of the golden girl, Juana García, and he took her the tickets he had bought out of his own pocket for a box in the theater where he was going to fight, for her and her family.

She came to the fight. This time in a black dress and a necklace of two strands of white beads. Her brilliant hair fell in waves over her back. The boisterous spectators who filled the theater, already aware of the romance, stared at her and made roguish comments.

In the improvised dressing room, Romaguera listened to his manager: "The prelims are finishing up. Don't forget that when I tell you, 'drop,' you hit the canvas. There's a lot of money bet."

Romaguera nodded his agreement and smiled.

But when he climbed into the ring, erected on the pine board stage of the theater, his smile disappeared.

He looked at his opponent, the so-called "Guayos Torpedo," and calculated that in a couple of rounds he could bring him along to the point of putting him away in the third or fourth.

He looked for Juana García and found her in the box, splendid and in love.

Preoccupied, he heard the bell (a cowbell) that started the bout. Once the first punches had been thrown, he concentrated on his work and realized that his opponent was going to be easy, having nothing but brute force. He dominated him in the infighting, and at long distance easily dodged his wild punches.

"If I wanted, this wouldn't last past the second round," he thought.

During the rest before the second round, he looked at Juana and exchanged a smile with her. He continued the fight in the same manner for two more rounds.

At the beginning of the fourth, his manager whispered to him: "Now's the time for the dive."

Romaguera said to him, slowly: "In front of this woman, I'm not taking any dive. I've thought it over and I'm not going down."

"You're crazy! You'll ruin us if you don't hit the canvas. The lieutenant will club us to death! There's thousands of pesos riding on it! They'll kill us with blackjacks! Because they're going to believe that we tricked them. Lie down! Lie down!"

And Romaguera, very calm, answered him: "In front of this babe, I'm not playing that game. I can't."

The whistle blew, warning the boxers' assistants to leave the ring.

Romaguera said to his manager in an authoritative voice: "Go collect right now and get out of here quick and wait for me in the first culvert you come to along the highway that leads to Havana."

The cowbell sounded and Romaguera entered the ring knowing what he was going to do. Two minutes into the round he laid out the Guayos Torpedo with a left to the liver. The Torpedo tried to get up but his legs couldn't support him, and although the referee counted ten interminable seconds, Romaguera won by the fastest route.

All hell broke out in the theater.

"What a tremendous punch," yelled the town barber, "a punch like that could break a bull's neck."

Romaguera couldn't hear the barber's comment. He had jumped over the ropes and headed for the dressing room.

He put his pants on over his boxing trunks, grabbed his shoes with one hand and with his unbuttoned shirt flapping, ran to the back door and left the theater. He flew to the Havana highway.

Behind him the police were already running. He hid in a clump of mango trees.

After midnight he made out a wagon pulled by mules coming along the road. He spoke to the driver, alleging the necessity for a trip to the country to buy vegetables. The wagon driver let him get in. He crouched down. At the first culvert, he jumped out. There was his confused, bewildered, feverish manager, upbraiding him: "What the hell did you think you were doing? Now they're going to trap us wherever we try to go! Why did you do it, you numbskull?"

Romaguera replied tranquilly: "Because I was in love."

The manager, in his confused anger, was intrigued.

"And the girl, who is it?"

"A girl in that town."

"And what are you going to do with her? Is she rich?"

Romaguera responded even more tranquilly: "She's pretty and I fell in love. In front of her I couldn't lie down. I know she really enjoyed seeing me put that guy out with my big punch. That victory was for her. She is good and honorable."

The manager insisted: "And what are you going to do with her now?"

Romaguera replied very quietly: "Nothing. Leave her. You know I'm no saint."

The manager remained silent. The boxer said, "I have to leave her. I truly fell in love."

And they began to walk, crossing barbed wire fences, under the high stars, within the light fog that began to form, in the direction of Havana.