Irish

Blue Ribbon Fiction

By Donn Byrne

Concerning an epic prize-fight in which real fighting is done, and also concerning the superior Mr. McCann.

EASTWARD the line of Twenty-fourth street flowed evenly like a sluggish river, hazy, dim, antique, mottled by the lights of the little shops, of blotches and shafts of yellow illumination from the glass panels of the old houses, iron railings and small scrofulous gardens. Past the old houses, at the junction of Seventh avenue and the street, came an irregular blaze, a sort of ochre ray, from a cellar where an Italian had a coal, ice and wood business; the glare of the cigar store; the thin spray of the newstand kept by the fat, rather dirty old German woman; the pale, sinister windows of the Chinese restaurant, and the arrogant blaze from Slavin's saloon.

The old man sitting in the doorway of one of the little houses with the yellowish patch of grass surrounded by warped iron railing hated the street with the dull, cold hatred of old men. Yet he couldn't get away from it. Often his son had suggested, and his wife, when she had been alive, had suggested, that they move to the country. "Yerra, do ye call that country?" he had snarled at the mention of Westchester and Long and Staten islands, and that had killed the suggestion; and they had tried to have him move uptown, to Harlem, but "Yerra, what would I be doing up there?" he had rasped. The son had spoken of the pleasant places in Brooklyn, out Flatbush way. "Yerra, is it Brooklyn?" What impression he had of that worthy borough is hard to imagine, but he spoke with a devastating contempt.

To the eye the old man was a forbidding, a cold figure. It was more this forbidding and cold quality that made him old, rather than years. He could not have been much over 50. But this fixity of habit, this impression of being a monument, had endowed him with antiquity. He was not a big man, but he gave the impression of size, of importance. His hair was gray, and that gave him dignity. His eyes were of a colorless, aloof blue, the blue of ice. His gaunt, clean shaven face had something ecclesiastical about it. His clothes were always a decent and expensive black, and a heavy gold watch chain spanned his vest. He had always a stick by his side. His shoes were good and roomy and somewhat old-fashioned. His hat was of black hard felt, not a derby, nor yet a high hat, but one of those things that suggest property and respectability and, somehow, land. His name was Mr. McCann.

The social standing of Mr. McCann on Twenty-fourth street was something of a phenomenon. Every one accorded him a sort of terrified respect. The street recognized he was of them, but immensely superior. He was not a gentleman, so the respect was not from caste to caste, but something much more real.

None in the street ever examined their hearts or minds as to why he was paid their tribute of respect. If they had, they would have found no reason for it, but they would have paid it to him all the same. He was Mr. McCann.

And this was all the more strange because he was father of Irish Mike McCann, between whom and the middleweight boxing championship of the world there stood only two men. Irish they loved; were proud of. But it wasn't to the father of Irish that the respect was paid. It was to Mr. McCann.

A very strange thing about Mr. McCann was this: that he could only know time and space and circumstance in relation to himself. As thus: Seventh avenue to him, a muscular, grimy street that plodded for a space on the west side of Manhattan, crashed northward through the Twenties, galloped toward Forty-second, crossed Broadway recklessly, and at Fifty-ninth met the armed front of the Park, died. To Mr. McCann it was only an artery that crossed his street. And great national events marked only points in his life. He would not say, for instance, that he was married about the time of the war with Spain, but that the Maine was sunk about the time he was married.

And by his mother it was impressed on the whole family that their son and brother, Dennis, was superior. For him better clothes, easier work, and when he decided that farm life was not for him no objection was made to the sending of him to college in Cork. But after a couple of years there he had made no progress with studies, and it seemed to him that the studies were not worth while. And he returned home.

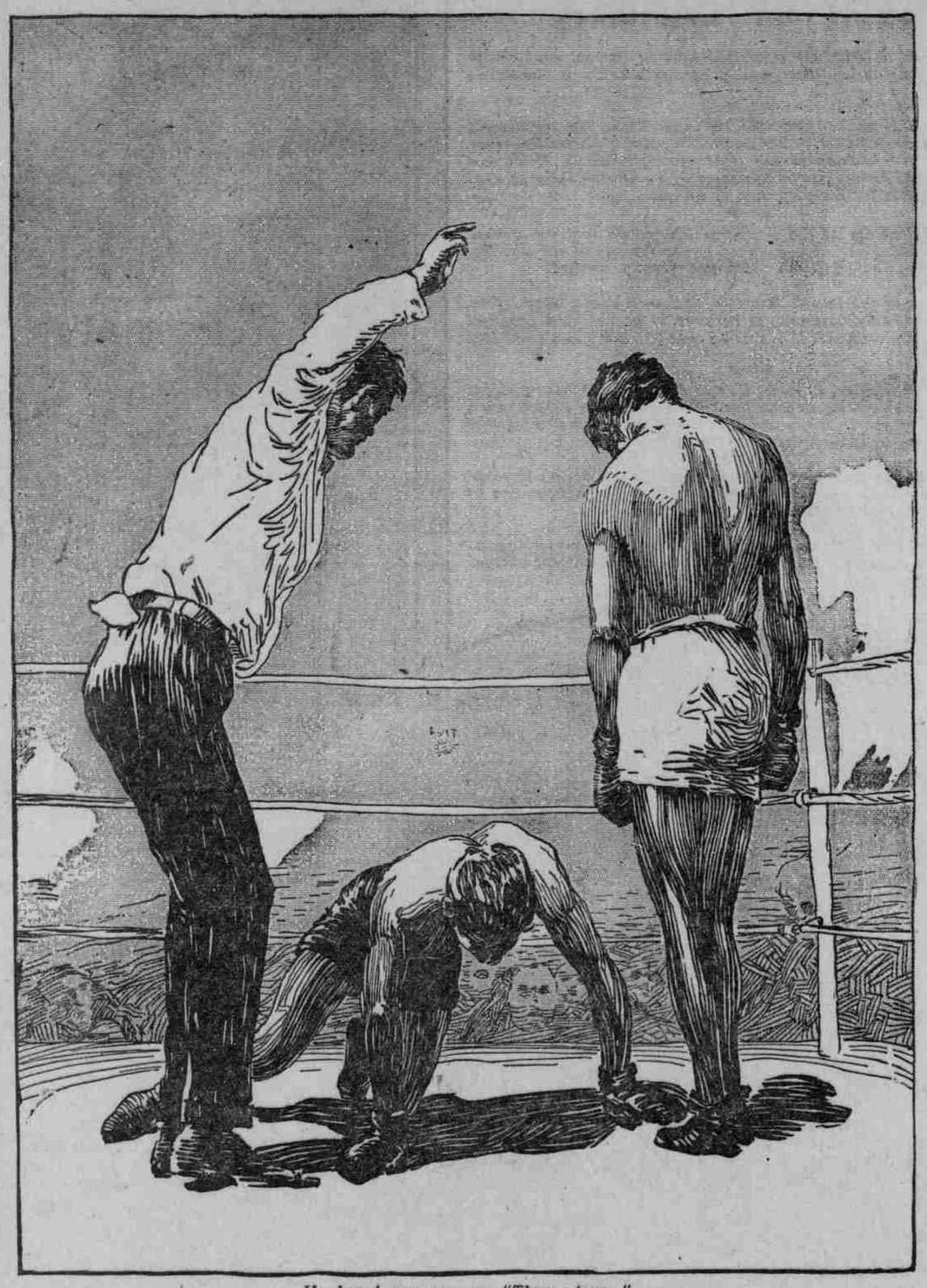
They had tried to get a government office for him then; a very small one. But that also required examinations, which he could not seem to pass. So that a great contempt for books grew up within him. And then he grew convinced that Ireland had not enough opportunity for him. And the family got the money to send him to America.

The years at the college in Cork had intensified his sense of superiority, so that when he came to America he felt that the Irish he met there were a very inferior people. And nothing about the city pleased him—everything was much better in Ireland, he decided, and said Ireland was a wonderful country—the only thing wrong with it was the people. And the queer thing about it was that the Irish in New York agreed with him. His few years at Cork gave them the impression he had accumulated learning, and the race has a medieval respect for books and writing. "True for you, Mr. McCann, true for you," they would answer his remarks on the inferiority of the Irish Irish.

This aloofness, this superiority helped him, or rather made him, in the business he had chosen—life insurance.

His superiority also brought him a wife, a timid, warm hearted girl, who brought a tidy sum of money as a fortune, which he spent upon himself.

She was terrified of him and very much in love with him for years. And then the love went and the terror remained. She bore him three children, two sons and a daughter. And in due time she died. But not until life had run pleasantly and respectfully for her husband, for all that he despised it, not as vanity and affliction of spirit but as inferiority and irritation.



He heard someone say "Three—four—"

And one son died, and a while after her mother's death Moyra, the daughter, ran away, contracting a very inferior marriage with a brakeman on the Pennsylvania railroad. And the time came when the old man had to retire from the field of insurance, new methods, new companies coming in. The native Irish died of consumption and pneumonia, and the Irish-Americans cared not a tinker's curse for superiority. So his kingdom vanished. And Poles, and French, and Italians, and the folk who came from Palestine by way of Russia, and even Chinese jostled him. And he was left, with a great sense of superiority and a growing sense of futility and one son, "the brilliant Irish-American middleweight, contender for the world's championship, 'Irish' Mike McCann!"

All there was needed now, the old man felt, to crown a useful and superior life was a material reward. Money he didn't care for—he had all he wanted, decent clothes, a house, tobacco, his three drinks a day, and The Advocate, an Irish weekly, he read for news of people in Cork, puzzling out this genealogy and that. As, for instance, he would read of a Patrick Murphy fined for drunkenness at Youghal, and he would say: "I wonder now would that be a son of ould James Murphy of Ballinure. Sure, I wouldn't put it past him. A damned drunken family they always were." Or a name in litigation would strike him. "Them Hamiltons were always the ones for going to law. A dirty connection!" If a pier or a piece of public property was being builded his comment was: "I wonder who's getting the money out of that." If a political speech was reported he would sneer: "Yerra, John Redmond and them fellows ought to be ashamed of themselves and them plundering the people with their tongue in their cheek." The Advocate was a great comfort to him.

He often thought, and be reading it, of how much he would like to return to Ireland and show the ignorant the fruits of a superior life led in hard work and wisdom. But for that he would have to show something tangible—even money would not be enough, so queer those people were. To impress them at all he would have to have a title of some kind: alderman, or judge, or sheriff, "the Honorable Dennis McCann," and to have that he would need to have gone into politics, and that was not a career for him. To succeed there he would have to be able to mix with the common people, drink with them, be half-fellow-well-met with a crowd of the dirtiest kind of Irish.

No, he could never have done that.

No, but his son might have. Sure, why couldn't he? Wasn't he reared right among them? And though he came from a superior house, sure, that would only be an advantage. They would look up to him as well as be friends with him. And with the brains he ought to have, considering his father, there was no office in the land for which he couldn't be fitted. Surrogate, or mayor, or governor even! What was to prevent him if he'd been the sort of child he ought to have been?

There would have been an evidence for him, an evidence he was entitled to.

And look you the dirty trick had been played on him. Instead of the son who would crown his gray hairs with honor, who would justify him, he was father to a common prize fighter, a man who was not looked on with respect by any. The idol, perhaps of the New York Irish, but of the ignorant Irish. True, he was a good boy; he didn't drink. But neither did his father, except in reason. He was generous with his money, but after all what was money? Always smiling, always laughing—"Sonny" they called him, and "Irish"; that was no way to attain dignity. Even the Italian coal-ice-and-wood man called him "Irish." The old man would like to see any one call himself "Irish."

And he couldn't listen to any reason. The old man had an opening for him in business uptown. A friend of his, an undertaker, a very superior man, who only did the best kind of trade, had offered young Michael a chance. But the prize fighter had laughed.

"In a way I'm in that line of business myself. Why change?"

The old man had shaken with rage.

"Get out of my sight, you impertinent pup!"

What were they thinking of him in Ireland at all, at all? Some one, of course, would write home and tell all about it. And if his name, that should be treated with respect, came up, some one would laugh: "Ould Dennis McCann! Ah, sure what's he anyway? Sure his son's only a common fighter."

He could never get away from it; was never let get away from it. Why, even tonight now, not a half mile away at Madison Square Garden, Michael was fighting. And a great fuss they were making about it, too. Some Italian he was fighting, and if he won he was to get a fight with the champion. He'd probably win—he always did—and beat the champion, too. And the end of it would be the honorable name would be dragged more through the dirt of the newspapers.

"I wonder will he forget to bring home The Advocate?" the old man thought.

"He'd better not."

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Before the bell had gone for the first round, before the referee had called them together for instructions, before even the gloves were laced on him, Irish knew he was a beaten man.

Across the ring, in his corner, the Italian middleweight lolled, chatting with his seconds. Irish could occasionally glimpse the olive body; the dark hair and eyes; the even, grim face, unmarked save for the marred left ear and the minute flattening of the nose.

". . . between the leading contenders of the world's middleweight championship, Nick Chip" (so they had Americanized Niccolo Chiapetta) "of Buffalo and Irish Mike McCann . . ." and the sentence was lost in the roar of the garden.

They shook hands and returned to their corners. The whistle blew, ordering the seconds out.

"Don't box him, Irish. Stay with him. Get in close, and when you get him open, bam! See, just bam!" old Maher, his trainer, whispered as he ducked out. "See, no fancy stuff. Just sock him. How are you feeling, Irish?"

"Fine."

"At 'e baby!"

Bong-g-h! He turned and walked to the center of the ring.

The Italian had dropped into his usual unorthodox pose. His open right glove fiddling gently at the air, his left arm crocked, the glove resting against his left thigh. He moved around the ring gently, like a good woman dancer. About him was an immense economy of movement. He seemed wide open—a mark for any boxer's left hand. But Irish knew better. The Latin would sway back from the punch and counter like lightning. The old champion was wise to lie low and not to fight this man until he was compelled to.

If he could only spar him into a corner and rush him there, taking the punches on the chance of smashing him on the ropes. But the Italian glided around like a ghost. He might have been some sort of wraith for shadow boxing, except for the confident, concentrated eyes.

A minute's fiddling, shifting of position, light sparring. The creaking of the boards, the shuff, shuff, shuff of feet.

"Ah, why don't you walk in and kill him, Irish. He's only a Guinea!" came a voice from the gallery.

"He's a yellow. He's a yellow, da Irish," an Italian supporter jeered.

Irish could wait no longer. He feinted with his left, feinted again. The left shot out, missed the jaw, came home high on the head. The right missed the ribs and crashed on the Latin's back. A punch jarred Irish on the jaw. An uppercut ripped home under his heart. At close quarters the Italian was slippery as an eel. The garden roared delight at the Irish punches, but Irish knew they were not effective. And the Italian had hurt him; slightly, but hurt him.

A spar, another pawing rush; light, smart blows on the ropes. "Break! Break!" The cry of the referee. Creaking of ropes and whining of boards. A patter of applause as the round came to an end. A chatter of voices as the light went up. The clicking of telegraph instruments.

"'At 'e boy! Keep after him," Maher greeted.

As he sat down in his corner Irish was grim. Yes, the Italian was too good for him; he had been afraid of this: that the Italian would outgeneral him into attacking all the time. A little more experience, the fights that mean a hundred times the theory, and he would have lain back and forced Chip to stand up and face him instead of sniping him on the run. The confidence of six or seven more fights, and it wouldn't have mattered to him what the gallery was shouting, what the ringside thought. He could have made Chip stand up and fight, and in a round or so the garden would have been with him.

If he had only had a little more experience—if only he had been able to wait.

Ah, well, what was the use of grousing. He was here to fight.

"Can't you rough him up a little in the clinch, Irish?" Maher whispered.

"No, I'll fight him fair."

"Just a little, to get his goat."

"No."

The lights went out, leaving only the great glare of the ring. The whistle blew; clatter of buckets and bottles. The seconds clambered down. The gong clashed, shuddering. The second round.

He walked slowly forward over the white canvas under the bluish white arc light to meet his man, and then suddenly from his walk he jumped, as some jungle thing might jump. He jumped without setting, without any boxer's poise. Right for the poised, alive body he jumped. And his hands hooked for drive and uppercut. He could feel the sense of shock as they both went home, but to unvital points. The left hand thudded on the neck. The right crashed on the Italian's left arm. He was in close now, driving short lefts and rights to the body, but he was handling something that bent and sprang back like whalebone, that moved, swayed with suppleness like some Spanish or Argentine dancer, and soon elbows locked his arms subtly, and he could do nothing.

"Come on, break!" The referee was trotting about the ring like a working terrier. Peering, moving from right to left. "Break! Break!" His voice had the peculiar whine of a dog on a scent.

He stood back, sparred a moment. Again Irish rushed. He felt on either side of his face sharp pains as of slaps with the open hand on the cheeks. Irritating things. He could feel the Latin shake as the left hand caught him flush on the ear. A tattoo like taps of little hammers played at his body. Irish's right glove came full into the Italian's ribs. He could feel the rush of air through the Italian's teeth. He brought the hand up with a short chop on the Italian's neck. A scuffle; a semi-wrestle. And again his arms were locked.

"Come on, boys. Come on. Break quick."

They stood apart, sparred. Irish feinted with the left hand. Feinted with the right. Changed feet quickly, right foot foremost now. Pivoted home with the left hand—Joe Walcott's punch. The Italian side-stepped, and caught him on the ear as he swung to the ropes. Irish turned quickly. A flurry of gloves. Light lead and counter. Clinch.

"You're good, Nick!"

"Y' ain't so bad yourself, Irish."

As the bell finished the round and he walked toward his corner he was surprised, looking down at himself, to find angry, red weals on his body where what he thought was a light tattoo had been beaten. . . .

Yes, he thought between rounds, another little while, another pound of experience, and for all his cunning, his generalship, he could have beaten Nick. And then between him and the championship there would have been only the champion, and the old champion's day was past. He was getting fat, and satisfied and drinking—and that was bad! And going around the country to Boston and New Orleans and Seattle, beating third-raters and then mainly on points, and lying low, very low indeed, whenever Nick Chip's name was mentioned, or even his, Irish Mike McCann.

He wanted to be champion—knew he could be, with time and experience. And what there was for him in the championship was not personal glory and not money, but a strange pride of ease that was hard to explain. All he could do well was this athletic feat of fighting with gloves. There was intuition, a sort of gift. His body balanced right. His left had moved easily.

It seemed to him only right that an Irishman—or an Irish-American, which was better still—should hold the middleweight and heavyweight championships. Fighting—clean, hard struggle—was the destiny apportioned to them.

Vaguely in his mind there were thoughts which he could not translate into words, it not being his craft, that there was some connection between the men who fought in a padded ring with gloves and the men who went gallantly into battle with two flags above their heads, the flag they served faithfully and the little wisp of green they loved. The men in the ring stood for the green in the field, perhaps. And we should see in the Irish boxer what the cheering ranks of Irish going into battle were. Fight squarely in the ring, fight gallantly, fight to the last drop, and win gallantly, and lose gallantly. And let no man say—there is a dirty or mean fighter; and let no man say—there is a coward.

There were Irish names in the ring that made old men's hearts flutter and young men wish they had been born years before. Old John L. Sullivan (God rest the gallant battered bones!) and Tom Sharkey of Dundalk, who never knew when he was beaten, and old Peter Maher, who was somewhere in the house. And there was another name in the mist of past days, the name of a middleweight champion who had been greatest and most gallant of them all, the elder Jack Dempsey, the Nonpariel. None like him, none! Irish of the Irish, most gallant of them all, he sleeps in a green grave in the west somewhere, and in all men's hearts.

And Irish had thought humbly to fill the Nonpariel's shoes, to fight as hard as he fought, to win as chivalrously, to lose as well, and in his corner as he fought the ghost of the great Nonpareil would be. And the roar of the house as he would walk out at the referee's call, the champion, Irish-American, in his tights of green, and around his waist the starry western flag.

Ah, well!

The shrill cut of the whistle and the chief second leaned forward and wiped his face.

"Fift' round, Irish. Keep at him, boy!"

The gong and the hushed house.

He noticed now that the Italian fighter was no longer resting his left hand semi-casually on his hip, kept up no longer his poise of an Argentine dancer. The Buffalo man's left hand was extended like an iron bar, his shoulder hunched to his jaw for a shield, his head sunk low, as a turtle's head is half drawn under its carapace; his feet well apart! The man's oil black hair was a tangled mop, and on his ribs were red blotches. His lips were set in a wide line. His black, ophidian eyes snapped and glowed. His poised right hand flickered like a snake's tongue.

And he was punching, punching as hard as he could, hitting squarely with knuckles and every ounce of weight—careless of the economy of the ring that tells a man to save his hands, for a boxer's hands are a boxer's life, and every hurt sinew, every broken knuckle, every jarred delicate bone counts in the long run. The Italian was hitting, hitting like a triphammer, hitting for his life.

Patter of feet, and creak of the boards, and little whine of the ropes. The great blue light overhead, the click of the telegraph instruments below. The running feet of the referee and the nervous patting of his hands, clop! clop! The seconds with their eyes glued on the fighting men, and their hands sparring in sympathy. The mooing roar of the crowd and their louder tense silence.

Once they were so carried away they paid no attention to it, but fought on. Only the referee parted them. Irish held out his glove in apology and they shook hands. The garden seemed to shake at the cheering.

Whip of lead in the tenth round, crash of counter, deep sock of infighting. Clinch; break. A half second's inattention on the Italian's part, and the left hand of Irish crashed home to the jaw.

Himself did not understand what had happened until he noticed the crumpled figure on the boards and heard the referee:

"Get back, McCann. Get back! . . . One! . . . two . . ." An immense hysteria of sound filled the house. Men jumped on seats. The telegraph instruments clattered madly. Somewhere near the ring was a fist fight.

"Three!"

The crumpled figure twitched. At four it was dragging itself to its hands. The glazed eyes blinked. Life returned. The Italian shook his head. At seven he was on his hands and knees, his head clearing. At eight he was kneeling on one knee, one glove resting on boards. God! how long the seconds were, Irish thought.

"Nine!" Slowly the Italian rose.

The garden was no longer filled with human beings but with instruments of baritone sound. It hit the roof, rebounded, whirled, surged. All about Irish was sound, sound. In front of him the Italian weak at the knees. The referee hunched like a bowler. Irish jumped in, fists swinging. His fists met crossed arms, elbows, shoulders, but not jaw or head. And suddenly the Italian was clinging to him, as a terrified cat will cling—he couldn't tear himself loose. It took the referee and him to tear the Italian away.

Insane with the din, blind with excitement, he rushed again to meet the beautiful diagonal coverup, left arm across heart and plexus, right crooked about throat and jaw. Again the clinging of the cat. And he felt the Italian growing stronger. It was like a dead man coming to life again. Life was flowing slowly back to shoulders, from shoulders to arms and hands, to hips and knees.

He stood back to consider this miracle, to think what to do next. Two shaking lefts caught him in the face.

And the gong rang and his chance was gone.

Yes, another six months and he could have won. He would have known how to keep his head, how to finish the Italian crisply. He had him out, out clean. Another punch would have finished it. And he hadn't experience enough—another six months.

Well, what was the use of grousing. It couldn't be helped. He couldn't pass the fight up when it was offered to him. Right at home and so much money.

The money had been needed for the home and the old man. It was funny how much a home cost even on Twenty-fourth street, and the old man was used to a certain way of living. He couldn't very well put the old man in lodgings. He wasn't accustomed to that.

But a house took an awful lot of money. In what the house cost he and the old man could have stayed at a swell hotel.

It seemed a pity, even for the money end, not to have waited. If he'd waited he'd have had the championship, and then he'd have been fixed for life.

If his old man had been a different kind of old man he'd have gone to him and said:

"Hey, old-timer, how about going easy on the jack for a while, hey? Just lay off a bit until I get things right. Gi' me another half dozen fights under my belt, see, and I'll drop this Guinea cold. And then the champion'll have to give me a fight—the papers'll make him, and you know what he is. He's a bum. So what do you say we get us a couple o' rooms, hey, and go easy for a while. What do you say?"

A different kind of old man would have said: "Sure. We'll take our time, and we'll knock this Guinea for a row of jam jams. And as for the champion, it's a cinch."

But he wasn't that kind of old man. He didn't hold with this fighting nohow.

(Concluded on Page 8.)