

STORIES

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ALEXANDER SAMALMAN, Editor

CHEESE CHAMP



Broken and bleeding, Cande rolled over on the canvas and lay still

The fans called Jimmy Welter yellow — so he took on a man-killer!

CHAPTER I

Listless Bout

HALF-FILLED Madison Square Garden reverberated to the shouts of the blood-lusting fight thousands. One voice boomed persistently in Jimmy Welter's ears as he danced around the baffled South American, Enrico Cande.

"Come on, fight, you bums. Somebody do something up there!"

Jimmy splatted the left to Enrico's nose, and then banged it home again as Enrico left himself wide open. Jimmy felt sorry for the South American. Enrico had been the pride of his division in the Latin countries, but he was as poor as the rest of the current crop of challengers, with the exception of hard-fisted George Grady.

The bell rang, and Jimmy danced easily back to his corner.

"You slow down more each fight," chubby Max Cord, his manager, growled disgustedly. "Before you were champ you could have killed this clown in three."

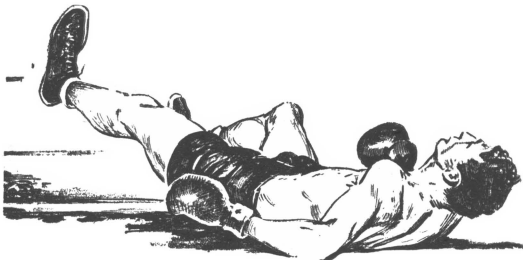
"I still could."

"Then what are you foolin' around for?" Max demanded. "All of a sudden he'll connect with one of those wild swings and they'll scrape you off the canvas like the black off burnt toast."

Jimmy shrugged. So far as Jimmy was concerned, Max was a nice guy, but had a dollars and cents complex. Kill the guy and send him home on a stretcher, that was Max's idea.

Jimmy moved out for round eight and continued to pile up his big edge in points. He slapped Enrico around for the first half of the round, and then carried the Latin through the rest.

It happened in round nine. Jimmy was coasting, not letting the jeers of the crowd get under his skin, and Enrico was sweating and trying. The right came out of nowhere like a whistling shell, and Jimmy was only able to partially duck it. It was dynamite-packed, and it knocked Jimmy off his feet. He sprawled into his own corner, half-



a prize-ring novelet by BILL ERIN

conscious, and heard Max screaming in his ear.

Jimmy rolled to his stomach and heard the referee count "three". He shook his head and the cobwebs were all gone. He grinned at Max's excitement.

"Get up," Max shouted with the thousands. "Get up!"

"Relax!" Jimmy said. "I might as well take my nine."

HE WAS up easily at nine, let the referee do the duties on the gloves, and moved around as Enrico charged furiously. Jimmy lowered the boom on Enrico. He stopped Enrico with a straight left, crossed a right to the ribs, hooked a left to the head, busted another right to the middle, then a left to the belly, and came up with a righthand hook which staggered Enrico back across the ring.

"That's the gratitude I get for carrying you so you look good to the señoritas, you bum," Jimmy grated. He followed Enrico with cocked gloves, and coldly hammered the Latin back into the ropes. Enrico was groggy and Jimmy was measuring him when the bell rang.

"That's better," Max said as he doused Jimmy with water. "That's much better. You had me worried, on the floor that way. You had me worried."

"This bum couldn't knock out his grandmother," Jimmy said disgustedly.

"But how do the people out there know it?" Max asked. "How do the guys who laid their two-twenty on the line know it? To them you look like a bum, too."

"I win," Jimmy said. "As long as I win, I'm the champ."

He felt kindly toward the South American again in the tenth round. He made sure he won the round, but he carried Enrico. He figured as long as the handsome senior had gone this far, he might as well finish. It would mean much to Enrico's prestige and pocketbook. Jimmy carried him through.

They raised Jimmy's hand, and there were some boos and not much applause. "Cheese champion!" the brass-voiced spectator bellowed. "Why don't you fight George Grady?"

"That's a good question," Jimmy said when he was in the dressing room.

"What?" Max asked.

"Why don't we fight George Grady?"

"Don't start that again," Max said. "After the way you looked tonight, I wouldn't dare put you in the same ring with Grady."

"Why should I murder Enrico? He's a good guy."

"Wait'll you see what Grady does to him."

"You think Grady'll fight him?"

"Grady's looking for another chance to show you up. This is it. He's made the commission look bad ever since they gave the championship to you."

"It was Grady's fault. When Buster Amoroso got tired of running away from us and resigned, the commission said Grady and I would fight for the title. Grady hollered no, he wanted it for himself."

"So you got it by default, and there's no sense in fighting Grady now."

Jimmy frowned at Max. "You don't figure I can take Grady?"

Max fidgeted. "After tonight's showing—no."

"Never mind tonight. You figure Grady's got it over me?"

"He's murder with either hand and he never stops swinging."

"He'll stop when I'm through with him."

"He's met fancy-dans before."

"Who's a fancy-dan?" Jimmy bristled. "I fight a scientific fight, I'll give you that, but did I ever quit? Did I ever turn down a good mix? You got the public figuring I'm a cheese champ because that's the way you figure."

"Now, now, calm down and get your shower before you latch onto a cold," Max said soothingly. "I've been with you from a pup; I saw from the first you could be a champ. If I don't believe in you, nobody does. Now take your shower and stop worrying about it."

He read the papers the next morning. The write-ups weren't good. It had been a dull fight according to the sports writers, and they weren't trying to kid the public. Jimmy knew they wanted a Weiler-Grady fight for the championship. Jimmy also knew the commission couldn't very well force him to

fight Grady since Grady had originally refused the fight and the commission had given Jimmy the title by default. Enrico had been a logical contender off his record. But good fighters were scarce.

CURT MASTERS, a good writer who knew his boxing, came the closest to the truth. Jimmy was nettled by most of the writing, but he grinned at Curt's account.

Welter was either out of condition or bored with the whole affair. He's a better fighter than he showed against Enrico and could give Grady a battle. Whether he could withstand the powerful, two-fisted attack of Grady is a moot question at this writing, but it's certain he wasn't giving the fans his best last night. The only time he looked like the Welter we've seen previously was when Enrico bowled him over with a lucky hay-maker in the ninth. Jimmy bounced back and had Enrico on the ropes when the bell ended the round. Whether he ran out of steam, or whether he just decided it wasn't worth the effort in the tenth, only Welter and his manager know.

Jimmy had no fight in immediate prospect, no training to do, and lots of time on his hands. He went to the hotel lobby with an itch in his soul, and when he saw the beautiful girl sitting in the deep chair he decided to investigate. He looked over the situation carefully before advancing to the attack.

Jimmy walked past her with his nose apparently immersed in a paper. He caught his toe inside her slim leg and did a beautiful swan dive to the floor. His powerful forearms caught him and let him down easily, but it looked as though he hit hard.

"I'm sorry," the girl gasped, and she was on her feet immediately.

Jimmy rolled over. "What happened?"

"You tripped over my foot. Are you hurt?"

Jimmy sat up and felt over himself. "I guess nothing's broken."

"I'm sorry," she said again.

"I'm the one who should apologize," Jimmy said. "I was so busy reading the stock market, I didn't see you." He looked her over carefully. "Say I *should* apologize. How could I over-look something like you?"

She grinned. "Well, if you're not hurt, no harm done."

"Give me a hand," he said, and he held up his hand. She reached down to help him up, but he was too heavy and she lost her

balance. She sat down in his lap.

"Holy mackerel," Jimmy said, but he grinned.

She frowned at him. "If you're trying to be gay, your humor is unappreciated."

Jimmy looked at the rapidly gathering crowd, many of them grinning with him. "Oh, I don't know."

She stood up hastily. Jimmy hopped to his feet. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It's all right, your apology is accepted. Now let's forget it." She started to walk away.

Jimmy stuck with her. "You have to admit it wasn't my fault in the first place. If you hadn't had your leg out in the aisle—"

"If you had looked up from your paper just once from the elevator to where you tripped—"

Jimmy took her arm. "I'll buy you a drink." He steered her into the bar.

"I'm not sure I want a drink."

"Make believe you do. Here's a table." He pulled a chair out for her, and she sat down reluctantly.

"I was supposed to meet my uncle out there," she said. "He won't know where to find me."

"Good."

She frowned at him again. "If you will answer one question frankly, I'll stay for one drink."

"All right."

"Was your tripping over me an accident, or was it intentional?"

Jimmy grinned. "I cannot tell a lie—it was intentional."

"One drink," she said firmly.

"You're not angry?"

"Technically I am."

Jimmy ordered the drinks. "I'm Jimmy Welter," he said.

"Mary Simmons," she said. "What do you do for a living, Jimmy?"

"I'm a pug."

"A fighter?"

"That's right."

"Are you a good fighter?"

"I'm the best in my division."

"Champion?"

"Right."

Jimmy found he liked her. His liking was

heightened by the fact that she seemed to like him. She was firm about leaving after the one drink, however, although she told him where he could call her some evening.

CHAPTER II

Cheese Champ

GEORGE GRADY'S manager announced that his boy was going to fight Enrico Cande. Cande's manager said it was true, that Cande hadn't been hurt by the Welter fight, and that the two men would meet sometime during the next month.

Jimmy read the news with great interest. "Poor Cande," he said to Max. "He shouldn't be in the same ring with Grady. Grady doesn't know how to pull a punch if he wanted to, which he undoubtedly has no intention of doing anyway. He'll kill Cande."

"It would be better for all concerned if you couldn't pull a punch," Max said sarcastically. "Or even better, if you had no intention of doing same. I got eight offers to fight you. Every two-bit punk with a fast right hand figures he'll knock your head off and waltz away with the championship."

"Is one of those eight Mr. Grady?"

"He's temporarily out of the picture. But after he polishes off Cande he'll be number one."

"Good. We'll sit tight, let interest build up, and then we'll take Mr. Grady."

"You nuts?" Max shouted. "Now's our chance to get out from under. While Grady's training for Cande, we sign someone else. I got a good offer from Detroit to put the crown on the line against Billy Aldrich. We'll sign for six months from now, and let Grady sit around and suck his thumb."

"You're a little mixed up, Max," Jimmy said quietly. "I'm the champ, remember? I'm the best in my class. I don't have to duck anyone. Grady's the best challenger, and Grady's the next boy we meet."

Max stood angrily and, as much as his stubby frame allowed, towered over Jimmy. "It's about time someone gave it to you

straight from the shoulder. The title's gone to your head, the way it does to a lot of guys. You got inflated ego. There was a time, before the commission handed us the title, when I figured maybe you stood an outside chance with Grady if you could hold him off long enough until he tired. But I haven't seen it in you since. You ain't hungry any more, that's your trouble. You stand about as much chance in the ring with Grady as Cande does, and as long as I'm your manager, we ain't signing Grady until the commission tells us it's Grady or no title!"

Jimmy finally kidded Mary into a date. They drove out of the big city for dinner and dancing at a spot where Jimmy was sure he wouldn't be recognized. Being recognized these days might not be so good. Even the kids on the street, who usually idolized a champ, were calling him a cheese champ.

To Jimmy it looked as though he were alone in his opinion that he was as good a fighter as Grady, although perhaps a different kind of fighter, and he was beginning to wonder if Max was right. Maybe the title had gone to his head and Grady would murder him. Jimmy figured when a man's own manager was against him, it was time for a man to stop and take stock.

They ate and danced, and were getting along well until she brought up the fight business. Jimmy had steered away from this subject because it was obvious from their first meeting that she didn't know much about it.

"I've asked a few of my friends about you," Mary said.

"Checking up?"

"Out of curiosity. Since most of the girls I know are not exactly fight fans, I had to turn to the men I know, and it may be that their opinions were founded on jealousy of a sort."

Jimmy stiffened. "So?"

"So they were very much interested when I said I had met a fight champion."

"Until you mentioned it was Jimmy Welter?"

"They were still interested, but their attitude changed."

"Was this a communal gathering, or did you approach them one at a time?"

She laughed. "One at a time. I didn't believe the first one."

"Thank you."

"I still don't believe any of them. That's why I mentioned it. I'm curious to know the real story, and I thought you'd explain."

"There's nothing to explain," Jimmy said, the warmth gone out of his voice. "I'm the champ, that means I'm the best in my class until someone proves differently—that's all."

SHE LOOKED at him curiously. "Oh."
"Let's dance."

"Certainly."

On the drive back, Jimmy realized that he was acting like a spoiled kid, and again he remembered Max's warning that the title had gone to his head. He liked this girl, and yet he was deliberately confirming what she had heard about him. He was hurting himself—and he knew it didn't make sense.

"Night-cap?" he asked when they reached the hotel.

She hesitated. "All right."

Next to each other, in a small booth in the bar-room, some of the mood returned to Jimmy. "I'm sorry I acted the way I did."

"I suppose I should apologize," she said. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

Jimmy shrugged. "You were bound to hear about it. I am generally accused of being a poor champ and yellow."

"That seemed to be the idea," she agreed. She grinned at him. "One of my friends figured he could beat you himself."

Jimmy grinned. "I have trouble with one of those kind of guys every now and then. I've had a couple take a swing at me."

"Are you really—what did they call it?"

"Ducking Grady?"

"That's it. 'Ducking' a fight?"

"Let me explain. In the boxing business you don't duck a fight necessarily because you are physically afraid, but because it's good business—it's shrewd politics."

Again she gave him that curious look. "Then you're not afraid, just a good businessman and shrewd politician?"

"Not me, my manager. He's the one who arranges my fights and my business. I can't convince him I should fight Grady next."

"You mean you want to fight Grady?"

"That's right. I think I can beat him. But whether I can beat him or not, I want to fight him. I don't care any more for the way your friends talk about me than you do." He stopped and looked at her. "Or do you care?"

A small grin twitched at the corner of her mouth. "Of course I care," she said. "I still don't believe them."

Jimmy grinned happily. "Listen, have you ever seen a fight?"

"No."

"All right, in about a month Grady is going to fight the last man I fought—Enrico Cande, South American champ. I'll get a couple of ringside seats, and I'd like to have you go with me. After you see the fight, I'll explain why people think I'm a cheese champ."

Max paced up and down the hotel room chewing his big cigar while Jimmy lay stretched on the bed. "Can you imagine those yokels?" Max asked irritably. "They want us to come all the way to Detroit and fight in Briggs Stadium this summer against this Aldrich for a measly twenty-five per cent. I wired back and told them I wanted fifty."

"Fifty?"

"Well, I'll settle for forty, but if they're going to start at twenty-five, I've got to have something to come down from."

"Maybe they figure twenty-five is all I'm worth."

"What?" Max took his cigar out of his mouth and punctuated with it. "You're the champ."

"Aren't you the guy was telling me I didn't belong in the same ring with Grady?"

Max stopped his pacing. "Look, kid, I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to blow my stack. You're my boy, and I just want to get the best shake for you, that's all."

Jimmy rose to one elbow. "But do you figure Grady's a better fighter?"

"Aw cut it out. Can't a guy lose his temper?"

"Sure, but I want a straight answer. You figure Grady's better than I am?"

"You gotta admit the guy kicks like a wild horse with either hand, kid. He's got fifteen rounds for you to make one mistake, and it's

all over."

"Max, Grady might beat me if we meet, but I figure it might be the other way, too. Nobody's ever knocked me out, and now and then I've made more than one mistake and been hit pretty hard. I want to get in the ring with Grady just once."

MAX GROANED and threw his cigar into a corner. "Once will be enough. You'll get him eventually. Can't you be patient, kid, and make a little hay while the sun's shining?"

"Sure, after I meet Grady!"

Max went to the door and wrenched it open. "You're not going to fight Grady, and that's the last word." He slammed the door behind him.

Curt Masters, the sportswriter, was one of those who saw Jimmy at ringside with Mary and came over to shake hands. "How's the champ?"

"Fine. Just four pounds over."

"When are you fighting next?"

"Ask Max."

Masters turned to Mary. "That's what I like, a fighter who makes up his own mind and isn't close-mouthed. Well, if you ever decide to fight Grady, I'll write your obituary."

Jimmy was called to the center of the ring and introduced to the crowd. His name was greeted with a long, loud boo. He mitted the crowd without losing the smile on his face and went to Cande's corner to shake hands. The South American grinned and bobbed his head.

Then Jimmy crossed the ring to Grady's corner.

"Well, well, if it ain't the cheese champ," Grady sneered.

Jimmy shook hands and grinned. "Maybe, but it's better cheese than you'll ever slice."

"Get in the ring with me, you punk, I'll knock you kicking so fast you'll meet yourself on the way down."

"For you they should put out tornado warnings, you big wind!" Jimmy waved affably at the enraged fighter and trotted back to the neutral corner. He made his way to his seat, and a man sitting in back of him leaned forward.

"When you gonna quit stalling and take on a good fighter?" the man asked.

"As soon as jerks like you are willing to pay ten bucks a seat," Jimmy snapped back.

"I wouldn't pay two-bits and three old buttons to see you."

"Can I count on that? Now take your fat face out of mine so I can see this fight before I spread your nose like jam on a kid's slice of bread."

Jimmy grinned at Mary to indicate that it was one of those things, but she was staring steadfastly in front of her. Jimmy began to get the idea that maybe it had not been such a good idea to bring her to the fight.

CHAPTER III

Ring Butcher

AGGRESSIVE and confident, Grady came out of his corner in a half-crouch, stalking across the ring, his head drawn down between his shoulders and his powerful mitts cocked. Cande danced lightly and moved around.

Grady cut directly across Cande's path so that the South American had to back up. Grady stepped fast and boxed Cande in a corner. Cande slapped three light lefts to Grady's face, but Grady didn't even bother to ward them off. His fists moved swiftly, like pistons, and he slashed the Latin with a two-fisted attack which rocked Cande.

Cande blocked most of the blows and clinched. The referee broke them, and Cande quickly danced out of range. Grady moved after him, stalking, and Cande back-pedaled, slapping with the left. Grady kept coming until he cornered Cande again. Once more he attacked with a vicious flurry of fists, and one right rocked Cande.

The two circled, Cande trying to stay away, and Grady stalking like a jungle killer after fresh meat. Cande couldn't hold him off. He didn't have the footwork or the power. Twice more Grady trapped the South American and hammered him. The last time he shifted to a body attack and belted a pun-

ishing one-two to the middle before Cande could tie him up.

"Howdja like that?" the man behind Jimmy chortled at the bell. "What'd happen to you in there, Welter? Think you can run any faster than that guy up there?"

What Jimmy would do was occupying Jimmy's mind at that moment. He worked furiously on the picture Grady presented, and imagined himself in the ring against those powerful and fast fists and that determined fighter. He ignored the man behind him and pretended not to notice the glance Mary threw him.

Cande foolishly carried the attack to open the second round. He bounded across the ring and drove into Grady. Grady planted his feet and met Cande with a whipping one-two to the middle, a smashing left hook to the head, and a crushing right uppercut to the jaw. Cande reeled and staggered back.

Grady methodically moved in and hammered Cande's body until the gasping fighter tied him up. The referee broke them, and Grady was back in, his iron fists hammering a tattoo on Cande's ribs. Cande bent in the middle and again hung on. The referee broke them, and Grady was back at it, his face cold and cruel, his fists unmerciful.

On the next charge, Grady switched to the head. He rocked Cande back, cut his eye with a whipping left, brought blood streaming out of his nose with a blasting right, and knocked him into the ropes with a perfect left hook.

Cande went to one knee, but pulled himself back up. Grady closed the gates of mercy as he moved in. There was the trace of a tight smile on his cold face as he hit Cande with left and right. Cande planted his feet and tried to fight back, his dazed mind no longer allowing retreat, and he was made to order for Grady.

Thirty seconds later Cande, broken and bleeding, rolled over on the canvas and lay still. His body was red and swollen and his face still bled as he lay there. The referee formally counted him out.

The fan behind Jimmy had been screaming until he was hoarse. His face red and sweaty, he leaned over and shook Jimmy's shoulder. "Did you get your belly full?" he

asked deliriously. "I'll bet you run for another year after seeing that. How would you like to be in there with him, cheese champ?"

Jimmy tried to detach himself, but the man hung on. "Lookit this guy," the fan yelled at all the fans around him. "This is Jimmy Welter, the champ, and it took him ten rounds to out-point that bum Grady just killed. Why don't you fight the real champ, you bum?"

JIMMY saw red for the first time since the man started riding him. He drew back his fist, but someone grabbed his arm. It was Curt Masters.

"Take it easy," Curt said, and he shouldered between the two of them and eased Jimmy away in the crowd. It was the usual jostling, excited mob after a knockout, and Jimmy and Mary were swept away. Her face was white and she looked a little sick.

"I shouldn't have brought you," Jimmy said.

"I asked for it."

"How'd you like it?"

"The fight or the rest of it?"

"Take your choice, it's one or the other. Either you kill a poor guy like Cande, or you're a cheese champ."

"I think I begin to understand."

"That's why I brought you."

"You mean you could have beaten that fighter that way?"

"My style's different, but it would have amounted to the same thing. At least, I think I could have done it. I seem to be the only one. Even my manager has lost faith in me."

"It seems strange."

"It's not strange at all. My only question is whether I'm right and the world is wrong, or whether I've just got an inflated ego."

"I have never seen you fight, and I don't know anything about fighting, but I don't think you have an inflated ego." She met Jimmy's gaze with her frank, blue eyes, and it gave Jimmy a thrill.

Later, when Jimmy took her home, she again brought up the subject of the fight. "It was brutal," she said with a shudder.

"I knew it would be," Jimmy said. "Grady was putting the pressure on me."

"Jim, if you really have faith in yourself,

why don't you fight Grady?"

Jimmy grinned. "It's not that easy. There's Max."

"But you certainly have something to say about who you fight. You're being maligned unfairly. Why don't you insist on fighting Grady?"

"I have. I have insisted strongly. But the only thing keeping Max from signing for a fight in Detroit against a bum by the name of Aldrich is a squabble over the percentage."

"Then it's about time you had a showdown with Max. It isn't sensible to go on this way. I don't like what it's doing to you."

"Do you care what it does to me?"

"Of course I care what it does to you."

Jimmy moved in, and he forgot about the fight business.

Max came into Jimmy's room the next morning with a big frown on his face. "I'm going to settle the Detroit fight for thirty per cent," he growled.

Jimmy was interested. "How come?"

"Because I want to have a fight signed and sealed. We'll shoot this one in August, and we won't have to worry about Grady for several months."

"Here we go again," Jimmy said. "You know how I feel about it."

"You're letting the writers panic you. Don't let them get the better of your good sense, kid. This is a business and you're out to make as much as you legitimately can, just like any business."

"What did you think of the fight last night?"

Max shrugged. "Just about what I expected. He had a set-up and he was out to show how much better he was than you are. Even so, I think the guy looked pretty good."

Jimmy nodded. "Cande may not be a champ, but he's a pretty fair country fighter. Against most of the ham-and-beaners in this division, he'd do pretty well."

"Now you're beginning to see things the right way," Max said happily. "Don't you figure I'm right in ducking Grady and taking on Aldrich for a fat purse in Detroit?"

"No. In the first place, I don't think you'll get a fat purse out of Detroit. The bad publicity we'll get out of ducking Grady again

will keep the people away by the millions. In the second place, after watching Grady, I still think I can beat him."

MAX GROANED and sat on the edge of the bed. "You have never been hit as hard as Grady can hit. It may look to you like you can out-point him, but you've never been hit that hard. When your legs won't hold you up, when you see three Gradys instead of one, when your arms are so tired you can't hit with them, then you'll wish you'd listened to old Max."

"It may be that you're right, but I've got to find out."

"Not this year," Max said stubbornly. "Not this year."

Jimmy read the papers, and they all had rave notices about Grady. According to the papers, Grady was at his peak. They wanted to see him meet Jimmy Welter, and they weren't backward about saying so. They called on the commission to force the fight, to forget that Grady himself had refused the bout as an elimination battle on the basis that Grady had been right and the commission had been wrong.

Then Jimmy read Curt Masters' column. Curt had a different approach.

"This writer came across a sure sign that Jimmy Welter may be cracking under the pressure of his own conscience," Masters wrote. "Last night a heated Grady fan sat behind Welter at ringside and bombarded the champ as unmercifully with cutting words as Grady was bombarding Cande with his blasting fists. Welter staggered under the barrage about the same time Cande did, and, when the referee counted Cande out to the rhythm of the fan's taunts, Welter couldn't take it any longer. He turned and would have hit the fan had not the jostling, excited crowd unknowingly separated them at that moment. Come on, Jimmy, give us the fight we want!"

Jimmy called the paper, and was told that Masters didn't come in until later in the day. He got Masters' home number and called him there.

"I want to see you," he told Masters.

"What's the matter, sore about the column?"

"I never get sore when someone prints the truth."

"That was the truth."

"I'm not arguing."

"Then what do you want to see me about?"

"I'll tell you when I see you. How about me buying you lunch?"

"I can't see much sense in turning down a free meal."

Masters was puzzled when they met.

"What's the story?" he asked.

"I want you to do me a little favor."

"Depends on how little it is. If you want me to lay off the story about Grady—nuts!"

"No, just the opposite."

"What?"

"Just the opposite. I want you to pour it on!"

CHAPTER IV

Toughest Challenger

IF MASTERS had been puzzled when they met, he was now completely baffled. He leaned across the table. "Let me get this straight. You want me to pour it on about you ducking Grady?"

"That's right. I'll even give you a story to go with it. I want to fight Grady. I think I can beat him, and I'm anxious to get in the same ring with him."

"Can I quote you on that?"

"You certainly can. You can say that I'm a misunderstood boy. Grady ducked me when the commission wanted us to fight for the championship, and now he's running around building up a myth about how much better he is. All right, let's settle it."

"Have you gone off your rocker?"

"Maybe so. I'm tired of the kind of thing you saw last night. I can take a punch at all the fat, leering fans in the business by bouncing a glove off Grady's head—and that's what I'm going to do."

"You've given me a terrific story," Masters said cautiously. "But before I print it, I want to know what's behind it. There's

more to this than I can see. I'm not doing you a favor by printing this."

"Max."

"What about Max?"

"He's the one ducking Grady, not me. I want to force his hand."

"Max is a smart manager."

"Sure he is. If he wasn't, I'd get rid of him. But he doesn't think I've got a chance against Grady."

"Who does?"

Jimmy's lips tightened. "I do."

"Okay, okay, don't get sore, I was just asking. So you want to force Max's hand, is that the idea?"

"That is exactly the idea. Max is about to sign me to fight a push-over in Detroit by the name of Aldrich. They'll stick it in Briggs Stadium in August."

Masters whistled. "Can I use that?"

"Say it's a strong rumor. Then let's see Max crawl out of it."

Masters shook his head. "As far as I'm concerned, you're obligated to the fight public to tackle Grady next, but I'll never know why you're so anxious to do it. It's been a long time since I've seen a fighter who can hit like Grady."

"Grady's the kind of fighter who shows up good against second-raters because he's all offense. He pushes the fight, and he can show what he's got against a humpty-dumpty. I'm a boxer and a counter-puncher. I can't look much better than the guy I'm fighting, and I don't have much desire to look better than someone like Cande."

Masters nodded. "You may have something there. On your record, you must be a better fighter than most of the boys are giving you credit for—but as far as being better than Grady, I wish you all the luck in the world, but—" Masters shook his head again.

Masters broke the story the next morning in his column, and bedlam broke loose in Jimmy's room. The phone rang constantly as rival reporters and columnists called.

"Is what Masters said in his column the truth?"

"I haven't read his column yet."

"He says you're hankering for a shot at Grady."

"That's right."

"What the hell? How come you give him something like that exclusive?"

"He was the only one interested enough to come around and talk to me. The rest of you just figured I didn't want to fight Grady, and that was the end of it."

"How come you want to fight Grady?"

"First because I don't like his ugly face, and second to make liars out of you gents."

Max burst into the room like Paul Revere carrying the word. He was out of breath and his face was red. "Who gave that story to Masters?"

"I cannot tell a lie," Jimmy said. "I did it with my little hatchet."

MAX CHOKED. He backed slowly and sat down in a chair. "You did?"

"I told Masters how I felt about going to Detroit to meet an oaf like this Aldrich you're trying to sell me."

"But everything's set for the Aldrich go. Everything."

"Have you signed any papers, yet?"

"Not yet, but—"

"Then don't. Because I'm not fighting Aldrich. Grady's my next fighter or I don't fight again—ever."

"Then you won't fight again," Max yelled as he climbed back to his feet. "Don't forget, I hold your contract and you don't fight unless you fight who I say. And I'm not saying Grady—ever!"

Jimmy grinned quietly at the slammed door.

Three days later they sat in the commissioner's office and signed papers for the Grady fight. Now that they had finally come to terms, both managers wanted the fight as soon as possible, so it was set for late June in Yankee Stadium.

Grady allowed the thin-lipped, cruel smile to come to his face. "I'm going to enjoy this fight more than any I ever fought," he said.

"Don't count on it," Jimmy said.

Grady snorted. "Commissioner, if I don't win this fight, I want you to give us both a saliva test, because there'll be something phony."

"Save it for the ring, gentlemen," the commissioner said. "There won't be any need for any policing by this office, I'm sure.

I think I can count on all concerned to handle themselves in the best interests of the sport."

The reporters were waiting outside the room, and they surrounded the fighters. "How about it, Grady?" one of them asked.

"We signed for fifteen, but we're wasting ten rounds," Grady said confidently. "I'll kill this cheese champ in five."

"Got anything to say about that?" they yelled at Jimmy.

"Not a thing," Jimmy said. "I'll do my talking in the ring."

"How do you expect to fight Grady?"

"Like I would a mad dog," Jimmy answered, and it drew a laugh.

"Think you've got a chance?"

"Not only a chance, but I'm going to win." This also drew a laugh, including a hearty one by Grady.

Jimmy called Mary the next morning. "I suppose you have read the papers?"

"I have. People seem quite excited by the fight."

"People like to see someone like Grady go into the ring because they like to see blood. They all figure Grady's going to knock out a champion."

"Good luck, Jim."

"Thanks. I'll see you after the fight."

"After the fight?"

"We're fighting the last of June, and I'm going into training right away. The way to beat Grady, I figure, is to be in top condition and out-last him."

"So you won't have any time for me?"

"That's right."

"Fighting is more important?"

"This fight is more important, because if I win this fight, I'm going to ask you to marry me."

"Why just if you win?"

"You mean you will?"

"Since you're not going to have time for me for nearly two months, I don't think I should give you an answer just now."

"What does that mean?"

"Just what it says. When you have time to see me, ask me."

"I'll see you if I win."

"See me if you win or lose, Jim."

Jimmy set up his training camp at Pompton Lakes, and he trained hard. This was

one fight he knew he had to win. This was the fight which would vindicate his championship, the fight which would put him on top of the heap, which would mean the difference between a guy who made dough at the fight racket, and a real fighter to be remembered with the great champions. He had to beat the hard-hitting, cold-blooded killer, George Grady.

CURT MASTERS came to the camp. "Since I more or less started this thing for you, how about giving me an idea of how you're fighting Grady?"

"There's no secret about it," Jimmy said. "Grady moves in all the time. He's tough, hits hard with either hand, and he's a better boxer than most guys give him credit for. All right, to beat him you've got to keep from getting hit, and you've got to do more than run, you've got to be able to hit hard enough to wear him down. I figure I'm a better boxer and hitter than he's met, and I figure to beat him."

"Sounds easy to hear you tell it."

"It won't be easy," Jimmy said, and his face set, "but I'm going to win!"

"You're not whistling in the dark?"

"I don't know how to whistle."

"Everybody quotes you saying you're going to win like it's a big joke. If he cuts you down in the first five the way he says he's going to, you're out of business."

Jimmy shrugged. "I'll give it everything I've got, and I don't think he can beat it."

Max was getting ulcers over the fight. He hovered like a mother hen and he worried constantly. "Jimmy, don't let him box you in those corners so you can't move. He's good with his feet, Jimmy."

"I know," Jimmy'd say.

The next time Max would have something new to say. "He likes to work on the body until you drop your guard, Jimmy. You gotta watch yourself all the time, because then he comes up to the head like five drinks too many."

"I'll watch it."

The papers were solidly in favor of Grady as the eventual winner by a kayo. They laughed at Curt Masters when he said that if the fight went past the seventh, Jimmy

Welter stood a chance of taking a decision. By the time the night of the fight rolled around, Jimmy was a two-to-one underdog. It was another indignity for him to face, since the champion usually rates at least an even break with the odds-makers.

The experts had watched Jimmy train, had watched how he kept moving all the time, kept snapping with a left, and came to the conclusion that it was going to be a bicycle race. "Unless Grady tires himself out chasing Welter around the ring, he should win handily," one paper summed it up.

CHAPTER V

Blow for Blow

CLAD IN A gaudy bathrobe, Grady was first in the ring, and Jimmy heard the ovation as he started from his dressing room. They were still yelling for Grady when Jimmy came down the aisle. Then they saw him, and the cheering changed to a heavy boo from most of the fans. Here and there a fan stood to applaud and cheer, but they were not many and could not make themselves heard in the tumult.

Jimmy reached ringside and had just started up the steps when he saw someone waving at him. He stooped to look, and saw that it was Mary! Mary, flanked on either side by a handsome, well-dressed young man. Jimmy stepped back down and slipped behind the rows of reporters to where Mary sat.

"You came to the fight," he said in surprise.

"I couldn't stay away," she said. "I'm well-protected." She indicated the two men with her.

"These the boys who put me in the cheese column?"

They grinned. "We're all for you tonight, Champ," one of them said.

"We have to be," the other one said, "or we'll have a fight of our own on our hands." He nodded at Mary.

"I'll see you after the fight?" she asked.

Jimmy's jaw set. "If I win," he said.

The photographers had gathered to snap pictures of Jimmy talking to Mary, but Jimmy shouldered through them and up into the ring.

"A fine time to be worrying about girls," Max growled.

"Don't open up another ulcer," Jimmy said. "For the next hour I'm concentrating on Herman the Vermin over there."

"Don't lay down to do it," Max said. "If you had a brain in that punchy cranium of yours, we'd be in Detroit now with a soft fight coming up instead of putting the title out here for Grady to kick around."

"That's what I like, encouragement and confidence in my corner," Jimmy said, and he went to the middle of the ring to meet with Grady and the referee. He put out his hand to shake with Grady, but the challenger ignored it.

"Let's not kid each other," Grady said tightly. "I'm no pal of yours. I'm gonna knock you kicking just as soon as I can."

"Quiet, I'm turning on the P.A." the referee said. He clutched the mike and flicked the button. "You boys know the rules," he said for the benefit of the crowd and the radio. "I want you to break when I tell you, and I don't want any hitting coming out. Keep your blows above the belt, no rabbit-punching or back-handing. Make it a good fight."

Max slipped the robe off, and gave Jimmy a hug. "Look, kid, I'm all for you, remember that. Give him everything you've got."

The bell rang, and Jimmy turned to face the man who had labeled him a cheese-champ and who had built up such a terrific following with his driving, two-fisted attack that very few in the vast throng gave Jimmy a chance to win.

Grady moved straight across the ring, in his familiar crouch, with his fists cocked. Jimmy danced lightly, slapped with a left, and then suddenly walked right into Grady. He came in belting, and his sudden attack caught Grady off-balance.

Jimmy slugged a wicked left to the side of Grady's head, banged a right into Grady's side, hooked a left to the cheek, came up with a right which rocked Grady back, and then

slammed left and right to the body before Grady could tie him up.

There was a tremendous roar of surprise from the fans. "How do you like that from a cheese-champ?" Jimmy grated in Grady's ear.

Grady came after him furiously, and Jimmy hit him hard four times with the left as he backed across the ring. He stepped quickly, moved inside Grady's fists, and tied him up. He moved out and away. He stepped around, snapped the left twice to Grady's face, putting steam behind it, and then Grady worked him into a corner. Jimmy stepped once as though driving in again, then weaved outside Grady's vicious one-two, making the challenger miss badly, and moved out into the open.

JIMMY moved smoothly, swiftly and effortlessly. Grady was out of rhythm due to Jimmy's surprise attack, and he couldn't nail Jimmy through the rest of the first. Jimmy kept hammering his left to the right side of Grady's face.

Max was excited between rounds. "You caught him flat-footed, kid. He didn't touch you. That was your round all the way."

Jimmy nodded, rinsed his mouth, breathed deeply and relaxed. He was going to need all his strength before this was over. Grady was still strong; Jimmy hadn't really hurt the challenger, just annoyed him.

In the second round, Grady kept coming, and Jimmy kept moving. Once midway through the round Grady boxed him on the ropes, but Jimmy stopped and fought his way off in a blistering exchange. He stopped Grady with a stiff left, and hit with three battering rights as he clinched. For the first time he felt Grady's power as the man got in a solid one-two to the body. They were trip-hammer blows.

Grady was moving in rhythm now, and Jimmy had to maneuver more swiftly to keep out of trouble. Grady's footwork was fast, and he knew what he wanted. Jimmy danced and sniped with the left, and now and then he stopped to put sting into the left. Grady countered with a vicious left hook twice, but Jimmy slipped them both.

Then, just before the second round ended,

Grady caught up with him. Jimmy hit with a straight left, but Grady stepped in and Jimmy had to move fast—right into a corner. Grady charged like an enraged bull. A left hook bounced off Jimmy's head, a right dug into his middle, the left almost broke a rib, and the right caught him on the jaw and rocked him. He tried to clinch, but Grady broke away nicely and belted him with a long left and right.

Jimmy hooked a left into Grady, but Grady took it and powdered Jimmy with a smashing left and right to the head which buckled Jimmy's legs as the bell rang. The crowd was screaming hysterically as Jimmy went back to his corner.

Jimmy glanced down at ringside as he went to the corner, and he saw Mary with her hands clenched, her face white and eyes wide. She looked frightened. It was the last time during the fight he was conscious of noticing her. From then on he was busy trying to survive, something which he realized had been rated impossible from the beginning.

Grady was moving faster in the third. Jimmy had to step up his own tempo, but he was still in good shape and kept moving just ahead of the killing fists. But when two men are put into a small square facing each other, Jimmy knew that sooner or later one of them was going to be hurt, and in the case of George Grady it was usually sooner.

Halfway through the third Grady again caught Jimmy. Jimmy saw it coming this time and pole-axed the left twice into Grady's face as Grady moved in for the kill. Grady blasted at the body, and Jimmy didn't try to protect himself. He went flat on his feet and hit with everything he had. He barreled left and right directly to Grady's head, and he leaned into them, feeling the crushing snap of Grady's blows to his middle as he did so.

Grady brought up a left hook which snapped Jimmy's head back, and slugged a wicked right to Jimmy's jaw. Jimmy, with his head spinning and his legs rubbery, smashed a left straight to Grady's nose, and brought blood. They clinched, and the referee separated them.

Jimmy felt a little tired as he saw Grady doggedly coming back in. He could tell he was too sluggish to move away from Grady,

and he drove in, meeting the challenger toe-toe. For the remaining twenty seconds of the round they stood braced, and hammered each other. Jimmy gave one for every one he took, but Grady hit like a cement track going downgrade.

They didn't hear the bell in the bedlam which had broken loose in Yankee Stadium, and the referee had to get between them and start them back to their corners.

THE REFEREE came over to Jimmy's corner. "How's that cut?" he asked.

"What cut?" Jimmy asked.

"Not very deep," Max said, and then Jimmy felt it sting as Max treated it. He couldn't remember when Grady had cut him, but it must have been in the last furious exchange.

Jimmy's conditioning paid off, and he recuperated rapidly. His legs felt strong again to open the fourth, and he moved swiftly around Grady. He kept hammering with the left. Either Grady was pacing himself, or he had slowed down some, because he wasn't moving as fast. Jimmy had time to belt the left solidly. He was content to box, and the round was dull compared to the previous ones. Jimmy piled up a handy margin of points to take the round.

Grady had promised to get Jimmy by the fifth, and he was a man whose vanity impelled him to keep his promise. He moved swiftly across the ring to open the fifth, and tried to nail Jimmy before he was ready. He almost succeeded. Jimmy hit with a hard left, and moved. Grady leaped after him in a change of pace from the fourth round which Jimmy couldn't measure. He caught Jimmy along the ropes and slugged him to the point of the jaw with a right which turned out the lights for a second.

It was only a short second that Jimmy was numbed, but it was enough for Grady. He hit with a left which reopened the cut over Jimmy's right eye, and then another right smashed to Jimmy's jaw. Jimmy staggered and tried to clinch.

Grady broke out of the attempted clinch and splattered a hard right off the top of Jimmy's head. He came in with a left hook to the midsection which bent Jimmy, and

then the whacking right again slugged to Jimmy's jaw. Jimmy sagged against the ropes and started down. Grady hooked with a left which slammed him to the canvas, and Jimmy rolled over twice.

Jimmy was sprawled on his back when he was conscious of the lights hurting his eyes. "Five—Six—"

Jimmy rolled over to his stomach, drew his knees under him slowly, and came up at the count of nine. The referee wiped off his gloves, and Jimmy set himself. He threw a hard left to the right eye of Grady as Grady came in with his cast-iron fists and his blacksmith strength.

Bang-bang to the body, but Jimmy hooked another left to the head with everything he had. Crack-splat to the head with left and right, but Jimmy swung a haymaker right which rocked Grady. Grady was infuriated, and his arms pumped like the drive-rods of the Twentieth Century Limited. He blasted Jimmy back to the ropes, nailed him there, and knocked him down in a fine spray of blood.

Jimmy laboriously came back up, hand over hand up the ropes, and he leaned against them as Grady pumped back in. Jimmy bounced off the ropes with another vicious left, but Grady hit him four times with rocking, slugging blows. Jimmy planted his feet and leaned on the ropes so he couldn't fall down. He flattened Grady's nose with a hammering right.

Grady hit him with everything he had. Jimmy was bloody, weary and half out on his feet, but his mind held tenaciously to the thought that he couldn't go down again because he knew he wouldn't be able to get back up. Slowly he drew back his fists one at a time and smashed at the wild apparition in front of him. He felt his blows hitting, but the rain of fire and brimstone which pelted him never stopped.

Jimmy felt himself slipping sideways. He tried to catch himself, but Grady's murderous fists knocked him off his feet, and he felt himself hit the canvas. Then there was nothing until he felt Max and the seconds dragging him to his stool.

Max was sobbing. Jimmy shook his head, and the ring came back into focus. "Is it

over?" he asked.

"It should be," Max said. "It should be."

"Is your man going to answer the bell for the sixth?" the referee asked.

"Yes," Jimmy said in a strong voice.

The referee bent over and peered into his eyes. He put a finger upright from Jimmy's nose to his forehead and drew it back, and he watched the focus of Jimmy's eyes. "All right, but if you didn't hold the championship, I'd stop the fight."

JIMMY'S legs felt pretty good and his head was clear as he came out for the sixth. He braced himself for Grady's charge, but Grady was moving much slower than in the fifth. The right side of Grady's face was badly swollen, and when Jimmy hit him with a hard left, Grady slowed even more.

Jimmy realized that Grady was also tired and looking for a breather. Although Grady hadn't been knocked down, he had been hit hard, and he had been the one who had been punching furiously and burning up energy. He was arm-weary from his attack!

Grady was still dangerous and could still hit, but for now he was content to throw one at a time instead of the fast barrage. Jimmy felt himself growing stronger as the round went on, but he stayed away, and banged home the left when he could. Grady protected his left side well, however, and it was a dull round. But the crowd, too, seemed to want a breather, and a heavy murmur of expectancy hung over Yankee Stadium.

Grady renewed the attack in the seventh. Jimmy's condition was good, and he felt able to move with Grady. He stayed away as much as possible, whipping the left to Grady's swollen face when he could, and clinching when Grady got close. Halfway through the round Grady drove him into a corner and plunged to the attack.

Jimmy speared him with a vicious left, and it stopped Grady. Jimmy cracked a right to Grady's heart, and then hooked a left to the right side of Grady's face. Grady stepped back and swung a wild right. Jimmy went under it and came up with another left to the side of the head. Grady clinched.

Jimmy felt elation run through him. He stayed away through the rest of the seventh,

softening Grady with the wicked left, and Grady looked tired and hurt as he went back to his corner.

Max pounded Jimmy on the back excitedly and doused him with water. Jimmy leaned back on the stool and felt the strength flow through him again.

"You've got him," Max yiped in his ear. "You've got him!" And Jimmy couldn't help agreeing.

But they both should have remembered the viciousness of a wounded tiger.

Jimmy moved out, and Grady came plodding on in the only way he knew how to fight. Jimmy, cocky now, slammed the left to Grady's head, and easily blocked the right counter. Grady swung another right, but Jimmy beat him to the punch. Jimmy attacked, abandoning his boxing skill, and he rocked Grady.

Grady came to life. From somewhere Grady drew the last strength from a fighting heart, and Grady clawed back. Left and right hammered to Jimmy's body, and Jimmy banged a right to Grady's jaw. Grady ignored it and drove with a fast, furious as-



sault. He slammed Jimmy back, hitting with a left and right which staggered Jimmy, and Jimmy knew he was once again fighting for his life.

Jimmy knew he had made a mistake, and he knew there was only one way for a champion to rectify such a mistake. He could run and perhaps coast to a decision over Grady as Masters had predicted he would if the fight went past the seventh, but Jimmy was a champion and he wouldn't retreat from something he had started against a man he figured was beaten.

They fought it out toe-to-toe, and the man who backed up first and crumbled was going to be the loser. They both realized that fact as they shot the works. Left and right, with blood spraying at every contact of soggy

glove against beaten flesh. With their heads almost touching they hammered at each other, and Jimmy kept putting his body behind the left hook to the pulpy right side of Grady's face.

Jimmy was weary, and he could think of nothing except to hook the left. He hooked it savagely. Then again, and again. His right hung almost uselessly as he blasted home the left. He hit again, and he felt Grady give.

He followed, hooking a mean left as Grady hit back with a right cross which bounced off Jimmy's head.

SAVAGELY Jimmy hooked the left again, and over the screaming thousands he heard the heavy sob which came out of Grady. Again he slugged the left, and Grady crumpled.

Jimmy brought his right back into play, and smashed Grady half-around. Then he hooked the left, and Grady disintegrated.

Grady collapsed to the floor and rolled over on his face. Jimmy staggered to a neutral corner and hung wearily on the ropes, gulping air into his heaving lungs, as the referee counted ten over Grady.

Max hugged him and pounded him and his seconds laughed and leaped around him. Masters got into the ring and pumped Jimmy's sodden right glove. Jimmy grinned back at them all as best he could, and kept inching for the corner. They helped him down the steps from the ring, and there at the bottom was Mary.

She suddenly threw her arms around his bloody, sweaty body and kissed his battered lips.

"Hey," he said. "Hey, you're running a new dress and a set of make-up."

"Who cares," she said. "This is no time for a fighter's wife to be delicate."

"You mean that?"

"If you have time for me now."

Then it was Jimmy who threw his arms around her and pulled her to him, completing the ruin of the dress and the make-up as he kissed her.

The photographers popped away merrily with their flash-bulbs, and this time no one tried to stop them.