

The Apparition in the Prize Ring

or, The Spirit of Tom Molyneaux

Ace Jessel

by John Taverel, 1906-1936

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READERS of this magazine will probably remember Ace Jessel, the big negro boxer whom I managed a few years ago. He was an ebony giant, four inches over six feet tall, with a fighting weight of 230 pounds. He moved with the smooth ease of a gigantic leopard and his pliant steel muscles rippled under his shiny skin. A clever boxer for so large a man, he carried the smashing jolt of a trip-hammer in each huge fist.

It was my belief that he was the equal of any man in the ring at that time—except for one fatal defect. He lacked the killer instinct. He had courage in plenty, as he proved on more than one occasion—but he was content to box

mostly, outpointing his opponents and piling up just enough lead to keep from losing.

Every so often the crowds booed him, but their taunts only broadened his good-natured grin. However, his fights continued to draw a big gate, because, on the rare occasions when he was stung out of a defensive role or when he was matched with a clever man whom he had to knock out in order to win, the fans saw a real fight that thrilled their blood. Even so, time and again he stepped away from a sagging foe, giving the beaten man time to recover and return to the attack—while the crowd raved and I tore my hair.

The one abiding loyalty in Ace's happy-go-lucky life was a fanatical worship of Tom Molyneaux, first champion of America and a sturdy fighting man of color; according to some authorities, the greatest black ringman that ever lived.

Tom Molyneaux died in Ireland a hundred years ago but the memory of his valiant deeds in America and Europe was Ace Jessel's direct incentive to action. As a boy, toiling on the wharves, he had heard an account of Tom's life and battles and the story had started him on the fistic trail.

Ace's most highly prized possession was a painted portrait of the old battler. He had discovered this—a rare find indeed, since even woodcuts of Molyneaux are rare—among the collection of a London sportsman, and had prevailed on the owner to sell it. Paying for it had taken every cent that Ace made in four fights but he counted it cheap at the price. He removed the original frame and replaced it with a frame of solid silver, which, considering the portrait was full length and life size, was more than extravagant.

But no honor was too great for „Mistah Tom“ and Ace merely increased the number of his bouts to meet the cost.

Finally my brains and Ace's mallet fists had cleared us a road to the top of the game. Ace loomed up as a heavyweight menace and the champion's manager was ready to sign with us—when an unexpected obstacle blocked our path.

A form hove into view on the fistic horizon that dwarfed and overshadowed all other contenders, including my man. This was „Mankiller Gomez,“ and he was all that his name implies. Gomez was his ring name, given him by the Spaniard who discovered him and brought him to America. He was a full-blooded Senegalese from the West Coast of Africa.

Once in a century, rings fans see a man like Gomez in action—a born killer who crashes through the general ruck of fighters as a buffalo crashes through a thicket of dead wood. He was a savage, a tiger. What he lacked in actual skill, he made up by ferocity of attack, by ruggedness of body and smashing power of arm. From the time he landed in New York, with a long list of European victories behind him, it was inevitable that he should batter down all opposition—and at last the white champion looked to see the black savage looming above the broken forms of his victims. The champion saw the writing on the wall, but the public was clamoring for a match and whatever his faults, the title-holder was a fighting champion.

Ace Jessel, who alone of all the foremost challengers had not met Gomez, was shoved into discard, and as early summer dawned on New York, a title was lost and won, and Mankiller Gomez, son of the black jungle, rose up as king of all fighting men.

The sporting world and the public at large hated and feared the new champion. Boxing fans like savagery in the ring, but Gomez did not confine his

ferocity to the ring. His soul was abysmal. He was ape-like, primordial —the very spirit of that morass of barbarism from which mankind has so tortuously climbed, and toward which men look with so much suspicion.

There went forth a search for a White Hope, but the result was always the same. Challenger after challenger went down before the terrible onslaught of the Mankiller and at last only one man remained who had not crossed gloves with Gomez—Ace Jessel.

I hesitated to throw my man in with a battler like Gomez, for my fondness for the great good-natured negro was more than the friendship of manager for fighter. Ace was something more than a meal-ticket to me, for I knew the real nobility underlying Ace's black skin, and I hated to see him battered into a senseless ruin by a man I know in my heart to be more than Jessel's match. I wanted to wait a while, to let Gomez wear himself out with his terrific battles and the dissipations that were sure to follow the savage's success. These super-sluggers never last long, any more than a jungle native can withstand the temptations of civilization.

But the slump that follows a really great title-holder's gaining the belt was on, and matches were scarce. The public was clamoring for a title fight, sports writers were raising Cain and accusing Ace of cowardice, promoters were offering alluring purses, and at last I signed for a fifteen-round go between Mankiller Gomez and Ace Jessel.

At the training quarters I turned to Ace.

„Ace, do you think you can whip him?“

„Mistah John,“ Ace answered, meeting my eye with a straight gaze, „I'll do mah best, but I's mighty afeard I caint do it. Dat man ain't human.“

This was bad; a man is more than half whipped when he goes into the fight in that frame of mind.

Later I went to Ace's room for something and halted in the doorway in amazement. I had heard the battler talking in a low voice as I came up, but had supposed one of the handlers or sparring partners was in the room with him. Now I saw that he was alone. He was standing before his idol—the portrait of Tom Molyneaux.

„Mistah Tom,“ he was saying humbly, „I ain't neveh met no man yet what could even knock me off mah feet, but I recon dat niggah can. I's gwine to need help mighty bad, Mistah Tom.“

I felt almost as if I had interrupted a religious rite. It was uncanny; had it not been for Ace's evident deep sincerity, I would have felt it to be unholy. But to Ace, Tom Molyneaux was something more than a saint.

I stood in the doorway in silence, watching the strange tableaux. The unknown artist had painted the picture of Molyneaux with remarkable skill. The short black figure stood out boldly from the faded canvas. The breath of by-gone days, he seemed, clad in the long tights of that other day, the powerful legs braced far apart, the knotted arms held stiff and high— just as Molyneaux had appeared when he fought Tom Cribb of England over a hundred years ago.

Ace Jessel stood before the painted figure, his head sunk upon his mighty chest as if listening to some dim whisper inside his soul. And as I watched, a curious and fantastic idea came to me—the memory of a age-old superstition.

You know it had been said by students of the occult that statues and portraits have power to draw departed souls back from the void of eternity. I wondered if Ace had heard of this superstition and hoped to conjure his idol's

spirit out of the realms of the dead, for advice and aid. I shrugged my shoulders at this ridiculous idea and turned away. As I did, I glanced again at the picture before which Ace still stood like a great image of black basalt, and was aware of a peculiar illusion; the canvas seemed to ripple slightly, like the surface of a lake across which a faint breeze is blowing...

When the day of the fight arrived, I watched Ace nervously. I was more afraid than ever that I had made a mistake in permitting circumstances to force my man into the ring with Gomez. However, I was backing Ace to the limit—and I was ready to do anything under heaven to help him win that fight.

The great crowd cheered Ace to the echo as he climbed into the ring; cheered again, but not so heartily, as Gomez appeared. They afforded a strange contrast, those two negroes, alike in color but so different in all other respects!

Ace was tall, clean-limbed and rangy, long and smooth of muscle, clear of eye and broad of forehead.

Gomez seemed stocky by comparison, though he stood a good six feet two. Where Jessel's sinews were long and smooth like great cables, his were knotty and bulging. His calves, thighs, arms and shoulders stood out in great bunches of muscles. His small bullet head was set squarely between gigantic shoulders, and his forehead was so low that his kinky wool seemed to grow just above his small, bloodshot eyes. On his chest was a thick grizzle of matted black hair.

He grinned insolently, thumped his breast and flexed his mighty arms with the assurance of the savage. Ace, in his corner, grinned at the crowd, but an ashy tint was on his dusky face and his knees were trembling.

The usual formalities were carried out: instructions given by the referee, weights announced—230 for Ace, 248 for Gomez. Then over the great stadium the lights went off except those over the ring where two black giants faced each other like men alone on the ridge of the world.

At the gong Gomez whirled in his corner and came out with a breath-taking roar of pure ferocity. Ace, frightened though he must have been, rushed to meet him with the courage of a cave man charging a gorilla. They met headlong in the center of the ring.

The first blow was the Mankiller's, a left swing that glanced from Ace's ribs. Ace came back with a long left to the face and a stinging right to the body. Gomez „bulled in,“ swinging both hands; and Ace, after one futile attempt to mix it with him, gave back. The champion drove him across the ring, sending a savage left to the body as Ace clinched. As they broke, Gomez shot a terrible right to the chin and Ace reeled into the ropes.

A great „Ahhh!“ went up from the crowd as the champion plunged after him like a famished wolf, but Ace managed to get between the lashing arms and clinch, shaking his head to clear it. Gomez sent in a left, which Ace's clutching arms partly smothered, and the referee warned the Senegalese.

At the break Ace stepped back, jabbing swiftly and cleverly with his left. The round ended with the champion bellowing like a buffalo, trying to get past the rapier-like arm.

Between rounds I cautioned Ace to keep away from in-fighting as much as possible, where Gomez' superior strength would count heavily, and to use his footwork to avoid punishment.

The second round started much like the first, Gomez rushing and Ace using all his skill to stave him off and avoid those terrible smashes. It's hard to get a shifty boxer like Ace in a corner, when he is fresh and unweakened, and at long

range he had the advantage over Gomez, whose one idea was to get in close and batter down his foes by sheer strength and ferocity. Still, in spite of Ace's speed and skill, just before the gong sounded Gomez got the range and sank a vicious left in Ace's midriff and the tall negro weaved slightly as he returned to his corner.

I felt that it was the beginning of the end. The vitality and power of Gomez seemed endless; there was no wearing him down and it would not take many such blows to rob Ace of his speed of foot and accuracy of eye. If forced to stand and trade punches, he was finished.

Gomez came plunging out for the third round with murder in his eye. He ducked a straight left, took a hard right uppercut square in the face and hooked both hands to Ace's body, then straightened with a terrific right to the chin, which Ace robbed of most of its force by swaying with the blow.

While the champion was still off balance, Ace measured him coolly and shot in a fierce right hook, flush on the chin. Gomez' head flew back as if hinged to his shoulders and he was stopped in his tracks! But even as the crowd rose, hands clenched, lips parted, hoping he would go down, the champion shook his bullet head and came in, roaring. The round ended with both men locked in a clinch in the center of the ring.

At the beginning of the fourth round Gomez drove Ace about the ring almost at will. Stung and desperate, Ace made a stand in a neutral corner and sent Gomez back on his heels with a left and right to the body, but he received a savage left in the face in return. Then suddenly the champion crashed through with a deadly left to the solar plexus, and as Ace staggered, shot a killing right to the chin. Ace fell back into the ropes, instinctively raising his hands. Gomez' short, fierce smashes were partly blocked by his shielding gloves—and suddenly, pinned on the ropes as he was, and still dazed from the Mankiller's attack, Ace went into terrific action and, slugging toe to toe with the champion, beat him off and drove him back across the ring!

The crowd went mad. Ace was fighting as he had never fought before, but I waited miserably for the end. I knew no man could stand the pace the champion was setting.

Battling along the ropes, Ace sent a savage left to the body and a right and left to the face, but was repaid by a right-hand smash to the ribs that made him wince in spite of himself. Just at the gong, Gomez landed another of those deadly left-handers to the body.

Ace's handlers worked over him swiftly, but I saw that the tall black was weakening.

„Ace, can't you keep away from those body smashes?“ I asked.

„Mistah John, suh, I'll try,“ he answered.

The gong!

Ace came in with a rush, his magnificent body vibrating with dynamic energy. Gomez met him, his iron muscles bunching into a compact fighting unit. Crash—crash—and again, crash! A clinch. As they broke, Gomez drew back his great right arm and launched a terrible blow to Ace's mouth. The tall negro reeled—went down. Then without stopping for the count which I was screaming at him to take, he gathered his long, steely legs under him and was up with a bound, blood gushing down his black chest. Gomez leaped in and Ace, with the fury of desperation, met him with a terrific right, square to the jaw. And Gomez crashed to the canvas on his shoulder blades!

The crowd rose screaming! In the space of ten seconds both men had been floored for the first time in the life of each!

„One! Two! Three! Four!“ The referee’s arm rose and fell.

Gomez was up, unhurt, wild with fury. Roaring like a wild beast, he plunged in, brushed aside Ace’s hammering arms and crashed his right hand with the full weight of his mighty shoulder behind it, full into Ace’s midriff. Ace went an ashy color—he swayed like a tall tree, and Gomez beat him to his knees with rights and lefts which sounded like the blows of caulking mallets.

„One! Two! Three! Four—“

Ace was writhing on the canvas, trying to get up. The roar of the fans was an ocean of noise which drowned all thought.

„—Five! Six! Seven—“

Ace was up! Gomez came charging across the stained canvas, gibbering his pagan fury. His blows beat upon the staggering challenger like a hail of sledges. A left—a right—another left which Ace had not the strength to duck.

He went down again.

„One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six! Seven! Eight—“

Again Ace was up, weaving, staring blankly, helpless. A swinging left hurled him back into the ropes and, rebounding from them, he went to his knees—then the gong sounded!

As his handlers and I sprang into the ring Ace groped blindly for his corner and dropped limply upon the stool.

„Ace, he’s too much for you,“ I said.

A weak grin spread over Ace’s face and his indomitable spirit shone in his blood-shot eyes.

„Mistah John, please, suh, don’t throw in de sponge. If I mus’ take it, I takes it standin’. Dat boy caint last at dis pace all night, suh.“

No—but neither could Ace Jessel, in spite of his remarkable vitality and his marvelous recuperative powers, which sent him into the next round with a show of renewed strength and freshness.

The sixth and seventh were comparatively tame. Perhaps Gomez really was fatigued from the terrific pace he had been setting. At any rate, Ace managed to make it more or less of a sparring match at long range and the crowd was treated to an exhibition illustrating how long a brainy boxer can stand off and keep away from a slugger bent solely on his destruction. Even I marveled at the brand of boxing which Ace was showing, though I knew that Gomez was fighting cautiously for him. The champion had sampled the power of Ace’s right hand in that frenzied fifth round and perhaps he was wary of a trick. For the first time in his life he had sprawled on the canvas. He was content to rest a couple of rounds, take his time and gather his energies for a final onslaught.

This began as the gong sounded for the eighth round. Gomez launched his usual sledge-hammer attack, drove Ace about the ring and floored him in a neutral corner. His style of fighting was such that when he was determined to annihilate a foe, skill, speed and science could do no more than postpone the eventual outcome. Ace took the count of nine and rose, back-pedaling.

But Gomez was after him; the champion missed twice with his left and then sank a right under the heart that turned Ace ashy. A left to the jaw made his knees buckle and he clinched desperately.

On the break-away Ace sent a straight left to the face and right hook to the chin, but the blows lacked force. Gomez shook them off and sank his left wrist

deep in Ace's midsection. Ace again clinched but the champion shoved him away and drove him across the ring with savage hooks to the body. At the gong they were slugging along the ropes.

Ace reeled to the wrong corner, and when his handlers led him to his own, he sank down on the stool, his legs trembling and his great dusky chest heaving from his exertions. I glanced across at the champion, who was glowering at his foe. He too was showing signs of the fray, but he was much fresher than Ace. The referee walked over, looked hesitantly at Ace, and then spoke to me.

Through the mists that veiled his muddled brain, Ace realized the significance of these words and struggled to rise, a kind of fear showing in his eyes.

„Mistah John, don' let him stop it, suh! Don' let him do it; I ain't hu't nuthin' like dat would hu't me!“

The referee shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the center of the ring.

There was little use giving advice to Ace. He was too battered to understand—in his numbed brain there was room only for one thought—to fight and fight, and keep on fighting—the old primal instinct that is stronger than all things except death.

At the sound of the gong he reeled out to meet his doom with an indomitable courage that brought the crowd to its feet yelling. He struck, a wild aimless left, and the champion plunged in, hitting with both hands until Ace went down. At „nine“ he was up, back-pedaling instinctively until Gomez reached him with a long straight right and sent him down again. Again he took „nine“ before he reeled up and now the crowd was silent. Not one voice was raised in an urge for the kill. This was butchery—primitive slaughter—but the courage of Ace Jessel took their breath as it gripped my heart.

Ace fell blindly into a clinch, and another and another, till the Mankiller, furious, shook him off and sank his right to the body. Ace's ribs gave way like rotten wood, with a dry crack heard distinctly all over the stadium. A strangled cry went up from the crowd and Ace gasped thickly and fell to his knees.

„—Seven! Eight—“ The great black form was still writhing on the canvas.

„Nine!“ And then a miracle happened; Ace was on his feet, swaying, jaw sagging, arms hanging limply.

Gomez glared at him, as if unable to understand how his foe could have risen again, then came plunging in to finish him. Ace was in dire straits. Blood blinded him. Both eyes were nearly closed, and when he breathed through his smashed nose, a red haze surrounded him. Deep cuts gashed cheek and cheek bones and his left side was a mass of torn flesh. He was going on fighting instinct alone now, and never again would any man doubt that Ace Jessel had a fighting heart.

Yet a fighting heart alone is not enough when the body is broken and battered, and mists of unconsciousness veil the brain. Before Gomez' terrific onslaught, Ace went down—broken—and the crowd knew that this time it was final.

When a man has taken the beating that Ace had taken, something more than body and heart must come into the game to carry him through. Something to inspire and stimulate him—to fire him to heights of superhuman effort!

Before leaving the training quarters, I had, unknown to Ace, removed the picture of Tom Molyneaux from its frame, rolled it up carefully and brought it to the stadium with me. I now took this, and as Ace's dazed eyes instinctively

sought his corner, I held the portrait up, just outside the flare of the ring lights, so while illumined by them it appeared illusive and dim. It may be thought that I acted wrongly and selfishly, to thus seek to bring a broken man to his feet for more punishment—but the outsider cannot fathom the souls of the children of the fight game, to whom winning is greater than life, and losing, worse than death.

All eyes were glued on the prostrate form in the center of the ring, on the exhausted champion sagging against the ropes, on the referee's arm which rose and fell with the regularity of doom. I doubt if four men in the audience saw my action—but Ace Jessel did!

I caught the gleam that came into his blood-shot eyes. I saw him shake his head violently. I saw him begin sluggishly to gather his long legs under him, while the drone of the referee rose as it neared its climax.

And as I live today, the picture in my hands shook suddenly and violently!

A cold wind passed like death across me and I heard the man next to me shiver involuntarily as he drew his coat close about him. But it was no cold wind that gripped my soul as I looked, wide-eyed and staring, into the ring where the greatest drama of the boxing world was being enacted.

Ace, struggling, got his elbows under him. Bloody mists masked his vision; then, far away but coming nearer, he saw a form looming through the fog. A man—a short, massive black man, barrel-chested and might-limbed, clad in the long tights of another day—stood beside him in the ring! It was Tom Molyneaux, stepping down through the deal years to aid his worshiper —Tom Molyneaux, attired and ready as when he fought Tom Cribb so long ago!

And Jessel was up! The crowd went insane and screaming. A supernatural might fired his weary limbs and lit his dazed brain. Let Gomez do his worst now—how could he beat a man for whom the ghost of the greatest of all black warriors was fighting?

For to Ace Jessel, falling on the astounded Mankiller like a blast from the Arctic, Tom Molyneaux's mighty arm was about his waist, Tom's eye guided his blows, Tom's bare fists fell with Ace's on the head and body of the champion.

The Mankiller was dazed by his opponent's sudden come-back—he was bewildered by the uncanny strength of the man who should have been fainting on the canvas. And before he could rally, he was beaten down by the long, straight smashes sent in with the speed and power of a pile-driver. The last blow, a straight right, would have felled an ox—and it felled Gomez for the long count.

As the astonished referee lifted Ace's hand, proclaiming him champion, the tall negro smiled and collapsed, mumbling the words, „Thanks, Mistah Tom.“

Yes, to all concerned, Ace's come-back seemed inhuman and unnatural—though no one saw the phantom figure except Tom—and one other. I am not going to claim that I saw the ghost myself—because I didn't, though I did feel the uncanny movement of that picture. If it hadn't been for the strange thing that happened just after the fight, I would say that the whole affair might be naturally explained—that Ace's strength was miraculously renewed by a delusion resulting from his glimpse of the picture. For after all, who knows the strange depths of the human soul and to what apparently superhuman heights the body may be lifted by the mind?

But after the bout the referee, a steely-nerved, cold-eyed sportsman of the old school, said to me:

„Listen here! Am I crazy—or was there a fourth man in that ring when Ace Jessel dropped Gomez? For a minute I thought I saw a broad, squat, funny-looking negro standing there beside Ace! Don't grin, you bum! It wasn't that picture you were holding up—I saw that, too. It was a real man—and he looked like the one in the picture. He was standing there a moment—and then he was gone! God! That fight must have got on my nerves.“

And these are the cold facts, told without any attempt to distort the truth or mislead the reader. I leave the problem up to you:

Was it Ace's numbed brain that created the hallucination of ghostly aid—or did the phantom of Tom Molyneaux actually stand beside him, as he believes to this day?

As far as I am concerned, the old superstition is justified. I believe firmly today that a portrait is a door through which astral beings may pass back and forth between this world and the next—whatever the next world may be—and that a great, unselfish love is strong enough to summon the spirits of the dead to the aid of the living.

