

The Ghost Fighter

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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The bell clanged. The narrow-faced man tipped his chair away from the gym wall and sat suddenly forward. Had he not known it to be impossible, he would have sworn the husky young heavyweight in the black trunks was none other than „Bat“ McGowan, the champion of the world!

Tall, bronzed, the fighter glided swiftly across the ring, stabbing a sharp left to his opponent's head; then, slipping over a left hook, he whipped a steaming right to the heart.

„Salty“ Burke staggered, and his hands dropped slightly. Quickly Barney Malone jabbed another left at his face, and then a terrific right cross to the jaw. The blow seemed to travel no more than six inches, yet it exploded upon the angle of Burke's chin like a six-inch shell, and the big heavyweight crashed to the canvas, out cold!

Ruby Ryan, trainer of Bat McGowan, turned as „Rack“ Hendryx relaxed and leaned back in his seat. His keen blue eyes were bright with excitement.

„See? What did I tell you? The kid’s got it. He can box an’ he can hit. He’s just what you want, Rack!“

„Yeah, that’s right. But he can’t take it...“ Hendryx mused. „Well, he’s a ringer for the champ, that’s for sure. Hell, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear that was him in there! Why, they could as well be twins!“

„Sure,“ Ryan nodded wisely. „Stick the kid in an’ let him box these exhibitions as the champion, an’ nobody the wiser. You’ve heard of these *ghost writers*, haven’t you? Well, Malone can be your *ghost fighter*! No reason why you should miss collecting just because that big lug wants to booze and raise hell. It’s a cinch.“

„Yeah,“ Hendryx agreed. „As long as nobody taps that glass jaw of his... Okay, we’ll try it. This kid is good, an’ if he’s just a gym fighter, so much the better. We don’t want him gettin’ any ideas.“

The next night three men loafed in the expensive suite at the Astor where Hendryx maintained an unofficial headquarters. Rack Hendryx did not confine himself merely to managing the heavyweight champion of the world. From behind a score of „fronts“ he pulled the wires that directed a huge ring of vice and racketeering. Even Bat McGowan knew little of this, although he surmised a good deal. The three had become widely known figures: Bat McGowan, the champion; Rack Hendryx, his manager; and Tony Mada, Hendryx’s quiet, thin-lipped bodyguard.

„Say, when’s this punk going to show up?“ McGowan growled irritably. „He hasn’t taken a powder on you, has he?“

„Not a chance. Ruby’s bringin’ him up the back way. We can’t have nobody gettin’ wise to this. Why, the damned papers would howl bloody murder about the fans payin’ to see the champ an’ only seein’ some punk gym fighter who can’t take it on the chin!“ Hendryx laughed harshly.

„What about the guys that already seen him?“ McGowan demanded.

„He’s from South Africa. An Irishman from Johannesburg. He only fought here once, and that was some little club in the sticks. Ruby Ryan also saw him in the gym.“

There was a sharp rap at the door, and when Mada swung it open, Ryan stepped in with Barney Malone at his heels. For a moment, there was silence while Malone and Bat McGowan stared at each other.

„Well, I’ll be—“ McGowan exclaimed. „The punk sure does look like me, don’t he?“ Then he walked over and looked Barney Malone up and down. „Don’t you wish you could fight like me, too?“

„Maybe I can,“ Malone snapped, his eyes narrowing coldly.

McGowan sneered. „Yeah?“ Quick as a flash he snapped a left hook to Malone’s head, a punch that caught the newcomer flush on the point of the chin. Without a sound the young fighter crumpled to the floor!

„Are you crazy?“ Rack Hendryx grabbed McGowan by the arm and jerked him back, face livid. „What the hell d’you think you’re tryin’ to do, anyway? Crab the act?“

„Aw, what the hell—the punk was gettin’ wise with me. I might as well put him in his place now as later.“

Helped by Ruby Ryan, Malone was slowly getting to his feet, shaking his head to clear it. The old trainer’s Irish face was hard, and the light in his eyes when he looked at McGowan was not good to see.

„Now lay off, you big chump!“ Hendryx snapped angrily. „What d’you think this is, an alley?“

Malone looked at McGowan, his eyes strange and bleak. „So you’re a champion?“ he said coldly. McGowan stepped forward, his fist raised, but Hendryx and Mada intervened.

„You should know, lollypop.“ Bat turned and picked up his hat, then looked back at Malone and laughed.

„Just another cream puff! Well, you can double for me, but don’t get any ideas, see, or I’ll beat you to jelly.“ He turned and walked out.

„Forget that guy, Malone,“ Hendryx broke in, noticing the gleam in the youngster’s eye. „Just let it slide. We got to talk business!“

„Nothing doing.“ Barney Malone looked at Hendryx and shook his head. „Not for a guy like that!“

„Come on... Bat won’t be around much. He’ll be busy with the girls. An’ where can you lay your mitts on five hundred a week? Forget that guy; this is business.“

„All right,“ Malone said. „But not for five hundred. I want five hundred, and ten percent of the take from all exhibitions I work as champion!“

„Not a chance!“ Hendryx snapped angrily. „What you tryin’ to do, pull a Jesse James on me?“

„Then let me out of this joint,“ Malone said grimly. „I’m through.“

For a half hour they argued, and finally Hendryx shrugged his shoulders. „Okay, Malone, you win. I’ll give it to you. But remember—one move that looks like a double cross and I give Tony the nod, see?“

Malone glanced at Tony Mada, and the little torpedo parted his lips in a nasty grin. Whatever else there was about the combination, there wasn’t any foolishness about Tony Mada. He was something cold and deadly.

A month and nine exhibitions later, in the dressing room of the Adelphian Athletic Club, Barney Malone sat on the table, taping his hands. The champion’s silk robe over his broad shoulders set them off nicely. He looked fit and ready.

„This Porky Dobro is tough, see?“ Ryan advised. „He’s tougher than we wanted right now, but we couldn’t dodge him. He knows McGowan, an’ has a grudge against him. You gotta be nasty with this guy, Barney. Get tough, heel your gloves, use your elbows and shoulders, butt him, hold and hit—everything! That’s the way the champ works; he was always dirty. This guy will expect it, so give him the works. But, no matter what, don’t let him near that jaw of yours... you can outbox him, so don’t try anything else.“

„That’s right, kid,“ Hendryx agreed. „You been doin’ fine. But this Dobro isn’t like the others, he’s bad medicine—an’ he ain’t going to be scared!“

Hendryx walked out, with Mada at his heels. Malone watched them go, and then looked back at Ruby Ryan. The old Irishman was tightening a shoelace.

„How'd you happen to get mixed up with an outfit like that, Ruby?“

Ryan shrugged. „Same way you did, kid. A guy's got to live. Rack knew I was a good trainer, an' he hired me. I made McGowan champ. Now they both treat me like the dirt under their feet.“

They hurried down the aisle to the ring, where Porky Dobro was already waiting for them. He was a heavy-shouldered fighter with a square jaw and heavy brows. A typical slugger, and a tough one.

„All right, champ, box him now! Ryan murmured as the bell sounded.

Dobro broke from his corner with a rush. He was a huge favorite locally, and it was the real thing for the hometown fans to see a local heavyweight in a grudge battle with the world's champion.

Dobro rushed to close quarters but was stopped abruptly by a stiff left jab that set him back on his heels. Before he could regain his balance, Malone crossed a solid right to the head, and hooked two lefts to the body, in close. Dobro bored in, taking more blows. Bobbing and weaving, he tried to go under Malone's left, but it followed him, cutting, stabbing, holding him off.

Then Barney's left swung out a little, and Dobro managed to drive in close, where he clinched desperately, cursing. Malone tied him up calmly and pounded his body with a free hand. Ryan was signaling from his corner and, remembering, Malone jerked his shoulder up hard under Dobro's chin. As the crowd booed, he calmly pushed Dobro away and peeled the hide from a cheekbone with the vicious heel of his glove.

The crowd booed again, and Dobro rushed, but brought up sharply on the end of a left that split his lips and started a stream of blood. Before he could set himself, Malone fired a volley of blows to his body. The bell sounded, and the crowd mingled cheers with the booing.

„Nice goin', kid,“ Ryan assured him. „You should be in the movies. You look so much like McGowan, I hate you myself! But keep up the rough stuff, that's what we want.“

The clang of the bell had scarcely died when Dobro was across the ring, but again he met that snapping left. He plunged in again, and again the left swung a little wide, letting him in. Then Malone promptly tied him up.

As they broke, Dobro took a terrific swing at Malone's jaw, slipped on some spilled water, and plunged forward, arms flailing. Stumbling, he tried to regain his balance, then plunged headfirst into a steel corner-post! He slumped, a dead weight upon the canvas, suddenly still.

Quickly, Malone bent over him, helping him to his feet, face white and worried. The referee and the man's seconds crowded around, working madly over the fighter, who had struck with force enough to kill. Malone was suddenly conscious of a tugging at his arm, and looked up to find Ruby Ryan motioning him to the corner.

„He's all right, kid,“ Ryan assured him. „But if he came to and found you bent over him, worried like that, the shock would probably kill him! Remember, you're supposed to hate him and everything about him.“

Finally, Dobro came around, but insisted on going on with the fight after a brief rest.

When the bell sounded again, Dobro came out fast, seemingly none the worse for his bump, but Malone stepped away, sparring carefully. Dobro plunged in close and slammed a couple of stiff punches to the body, then hooked a hard left to the head without a return. Malone stepped away, boxing carefully. He could still see Dobro's white face and queer eyes as he lay on the canvas, and was afraid that a stiff punch might—

A jolting right suddenly caught him on the ear, knocking him across the ring into the ropes. He caught himself just in time to see Dobro plunging in, his eyes wild with killer's fire. Malone ducked and clinched. As Dobro's ear came close, he whispered:

„Take it easy, you clown, an' I'll let you ride awhile!“

Then the referee broke them, and Malone saw Dobro's brow wrinkle with puzzlement. He realized instantly that he had overplayed his hand. Hesitant to batter Dobro after his fall, he had acted as Bat McGowan would never have acted. Dobro bored in, and Malone put a light left to his mouth, but passed up a good shot for his right. Suddenly, in close, his eye caught Dobro's; Dobro went under a left and clinched.

„Say, what is this?“ he growled. „You're—“

Panic-stricken, Malone shoved him off with a left and hooked a terrific right to the chin that slammed Dobro to the canvas. But he was up at nine, boring in, still puzzled, conscious that something was wrong. Malone put two rapid lefts to the face, and then stepped back, feinting a left and then letting it swing wide again. But this time, as Dobro lunged to get in close, Malone caught him coming in with a short, vicious right cross to the chin that stopped him dead in his tracks. Dobro weaved and started to drop, already out cold, but before he could fall, Malone whipped in a steaming left hook that stretched him on the canvas, dead to the world.

The next morning, Ruby Ryan walked into the room where Barney Malone was playing solitaire and handed him a paper.

„Take a gander at that, son. Looks like they're eating it up; but just the same, I'm worried. Porky is dumb enough, but even a dumb guy can stumble into a smart play.“

On one side of the sport sheet, black headlines broadcast the fight of the previous evening:

MCGOWAN STOPS DOBRO IN SECOND

Champ Looks Great in Grudge Battle with Slugging Foe

But across the page, and in a column of comment, Malone read further:

How does he do it? In the past thirty days, Bat McGowan has flattened ten opponents in as clean-cut fashion as ever a champion did. But in the same space of time, he has been seen drunk and carousing no less than seven times. Even Harry Greb in his palmy days never displayed such form as the champion has of late, while at the same time burning the candle at both ends.

We have never cared for McGowan; the champion has been as consistently dirty, and as unnecessarily foul as any fighter we have ever seen. But last night with Porky Dobro, he intentionally coasted after the man had been injured by a fall. It was the act of a champion—but somehow, it wasn't like McGowan as we have known him.

„Well, what do you think, kid?“ Ryan looked at him curiously. You're making the champion a reputation as a good guy.“

„It's all the same to me, Ruby. Champion or no champion, I've been giving the fans a run for their money. I'm going to keep it up, even if McGowan does get the credit.“

„You know, son, you've changed some lately, do you realize that?“

„How d'you mean?“

„You stopped Porky Dobro in the second round last night. The last time they fought, McGowan needed seven rounds to get him, and had quite a brawl. And Dobro stayed the distance with him twice before, once in Reno, and again in Pittsburgh. You've improved a lot.“

There was a sharp rap at the door, and Ryan looked up, surprised. When he opened the door it was to admit Bat McGowan, Tony Mada, and a very excited Rack Hendryx.

„All right, Ryan, you were smart enough to tip me off to this ghost fighter business. Now give me an out!“

„What's up?“

„Almost everything. Major Kenworthy called me this morning and told me to come to the Commission offices, and right away. I went, and they want to know why McGowan is gallivanting around the country, knocking off setups and not defending his title. They say the six months are up, and they want him to defend his title at once. They had Dickerson, the promoter, up there, and had papers all ready to sign, and wanted to know if I had any objections to letting the champ defend his title against Hamp Morgan—and in just six weeks! McGowan here can't get in shape to fight in that time!“

„Hamp Morgan, eh?“ Ryan frowned. „He's a tough egg, and been comin' up fast the past few months. Can't you stall a little?“

„Stall? What d'you think I've been tryin' to do? They say the champ's in great shape, they saw him beat Dobro and a couple of other guys. There's a lot of talk now, and they say it will draw like a million bucks. And when we got the fight for the title, we posted ten thousand bucks in agreeing to defend the title in six months!“

„Why not let Barney fight?“ Ryan asked softly.

„Malone? Say, what are we talkin' about? Hamp Morgan is no setup!“ McGowan snarled angrily. „Think I want that punk to lose my title for me? You're nuts!“

„Yeah? What about Porky Dobro? How long did it take you to stop him last time? And did he or did he not bust you around plenty?“ Ryan demanded. „Maybe Barney can't take it—but how many of these bums been touchin' him? Well, I'll tell you—none of them have! He was hurt on the ship workin' his way over from South

Africa and hasn't been able to take 'em around the head since. But he can box, an' he can hit."

"Maybe we don't have a choice, Ruby," Hendryx said thoughtfully. "Bat is hog-fat. He'd be twenty pounds over Malone's weight easy."

"Hey!" the champ scowled at Hendryx.

"You are! You'd be in a hell of a spot if the Commission put you on a scale. I ain't made much money with this title, an' I can't afford to gamble. It looks to me like Barney has to fight Morgan."

Bat turned suddenly, facing Malone. "Well, what d'you say about it? Are you game? Or are you yella?"

Barney Malone got up slowly. For a minute he stared coldly at Bat McGowan. Then he turned to face Hendryx. "You're the one that has it to lose. Sure, I'll fight Morgan. I've been playin' champ a month now, an' I like it!"

"Kind of cocky, ain't you?" McGowan said suddenly, his eyes hard. "It seems to me you're gettin' pretty smart for a guy with a glass chin! Why, I just brushed you with a left and flattened you the first time I ever laid eyes on you!"

"Fight him yourself!" Barney snapped back.

"Forget it," Hendryx barked. "Sit down, Bat, an' shut up. What're you always gettin' hard around Barney for? He's been doin' your dirty work, and makin' money for all of us."

"Why? Because he's yella, because he's too pretty to suit me! Because he thinks he's a nice boy! Why, I'd—"

"You'd nothing!" hissed Hendryx. "If you were just another pug I'd have your knees broken—I'd have you whacked! You're the pretty face around here, and you're lettin' someone else do all the work. Now everybody listen close; Malone, you win this fight or I'll make you sorry... and Bat, you stop drinkin' and get yourself in shape! If you don't make me some money I'm gonna let you swing, understand?"

For a long time after they'd left, Malone stared out the window into the gathering darkness. Ryan walked up finally and stood by his chair.

After a moment—"Well, kid," he began, "we've come a long way together. When I first spotted you in that gym, I knew you had it. If you don't get careless, none of these punks are goin' to hit you. But just remember, Barney—the champ knows, see? An' if you ever let McGowan start a fight with you, he'll try to kill you!"

"I know. Hell, Ruby, everything looked good when I left Capetown. I'd had seventeen fights, and won them all by knockouts. Then I had that fall, and the doc told me I could never fight again. But I have to fight. It's all I know. I was stopped twice in the gym, and then practically knocked out that day by McGowan."

"Ain't there anything a doctor can do?" Ryan asked.

"Doesn't seem so. But this doc told me I might get over it, in time. An' Ruby, do you remember the Dobro battle? He hit me twice on the head, an' though one of them hurt, I didn't go down."

Sixty thousand people crowded the vast open-air arena to see Bat McGowan defend his heavyweight title against Hamp Morgan, the Butte, Montana, miner. For only six weeks the publicity barrage had been turned on the title fight, but it

had been enough. Morgan's steady string of victories and the champion's ten quick knockouts in as many exhibitions had furnished the heat for the sportswriters. They all agreed that it should be a great battle. Morgan had lost but two decisions, and these almost three years before. The champion looked great in training, and everyone marveled at his recent record even during a long period of dissipation. The betting was three-to-one on the champ.

In Hamp Morgan's dressing room „Dandy Jim“ Kirby was giving his fighter a few last-minute tips. Salty Burke, Morgan's sparring partner and second, whom Barney Malone had knocked out on the day Ryan spotted him, stood nearby. Porky Dobro had dropped in to wish Morgan the best of luck and a better „break“ than he himself had got. Though they had all been competitors at one time or another, there was one thing they could all agree on: No one liked the champ.

„You know, Hamp,“ Dobro mused, „it's funny, but Bat eased up on me in the last scrap we had. He was boxing like a million, had me right on the spot after I got hurt, and then offered to let me ride. If I hadn't known him so well, I'd have sworn there was something crooked about the deal. McGowan has a trick of cussing a guy in the clinches, an' a funny way of biting his lip, an' that night he didn't do either!“

Burke looked up and grinned. „Maybe Hendryx stumbled on that punk I fought a few months ago.“

Kirby looked queerly at Burke, his eyes narrowing slightly. „What d'you mean, the guy you fought?“

„Why, several months ago I boxed a guy who looked enough like McGowan to be his twin. A fella named Barney Malone, from Johannesburg, South Africa. He stopped me quick. Hit like a mule, he did, but I'd seen him get stopped in the gym a couple of times by small boys, and figured I could take him.“

„And you say he looked like the champ?“ Kirby said thoughtfully.

„Yeah,“ Burke agreed. „An' say, I hadn't remembered it before, but I seen him talkin' to Ryan one time...“

„Did he sound like he was from South Africa, you know, did he have an accent?“ Kirby asked Dobro.

„Had the mouthpiece in—he sounded like a guy talkin' past the world's biggest chaw.“

„You say he was stopped by somebody?“

„Yeah, hit on the head, both times. Back around the ear. I thought I could cop him myself, but he was in better shape, an' he never give me no chance.“

Nearly ring time. „Dandy Jim“ Kirby walked slowly down the aisle toward his ringside seat, a very thoughtful man. Kirby was nobody's fool. He had been around the fight racket as a kid, and he'd heard the smart fight managers talk, guys who'd been in the business since the days of Gans and Wolgast. He knew Rack Hendryx well enough to know he was no more honest than he had to be. Somehow—He paused momentarily, running his long fingers through his slightly graying hair.

Now, let's see: McGowan, nasty as they make 'em, wins the title by a kayo. He is a slugger with a chunk of dynamite in each mitt, and plenty tough. He starts drinking and chasing women. Then, about two months later, he suddenly starts a campaign of exhibition fights.

McGowan carouses, and yet is always in perfect shape. Tonight his face is puffy and eyes hollow—tomorrow he is lean, hard, and clear-eyed. There is another heavyweight who looks like McGowan, and Ruby Ryan knows them both...

Kirby dropped his cigarette and rubbed it out with his toe. Then he turned and walked back toward the dressing room. His eyes were bright. He met Hamp Morgan coming toward the ring.

„Listen, Hamp,“ he said quickly. „When you go out there tonight, I want you to hit this guy on the ear, see? Hit him, an‘ hit him hard, get me?“

For years, fans were to remember that fight. It was one for the books. For four rounds, it was one of the most terrific slugging matches ever seen, with both boys moving fast and slamming away with a will. It was a bitter, desperate fight, and when the bell rang for the fifth, the crowd was on the edge of their seats, every man hoarse from yelling.

The „champion“ stopped Morgan’s first rush with a lancing left jab. A hard right to the body followed, and Morgan backed up, taking two lefts as he was going away. Then he lunged in, whipped both hands for the body, and then missed a long overhand right to the head. The „champion“ backed away and Morgan followed. Suddenly Barney Malone stopped, feinted a left, and shook Morgan to his heels with a driving right to the jaw. Hamp Morgan dropped swiftly to a crouch, and suddenly, so quickly that the eye could not follow, he whipped over a terrific right to the head that crashed against Malone’s ear! With a sound, the „champion“ pitched forward on his face and lay still.

Amid the roar of the crowd, the referee’s hand began to rise and fall, slowing tolling off the seconds. In the ringside seat, Rack Hendryx sat tensely, swearing under his breath in a low, vicious monotone. Ryan leaned over the edge of the ring, fists clenched, almost breathless.

Kirby, the championship almost in his hands, was watching Hendryx, and then his eyes slid over to Tony Mada.

The crowd was in a frenzy, but Mada was cold and silent. He was not looking at the ring; his gaze was fastened upon „Dandy Jim“ Kirby. Kirby felt his mouth go dry with fear. Then, amid the roaring of the crowd, the bell sounded. Probably not more than a dozen people heard it, but it sounded at the count of nine.

The first thing Barney Malone understood was the dull roar in his ears and the bright lights over the ring. He felt someone anxiously shaking his head, and a whiff of smelling salts nearly tore his skull off.

Then—„Come on, son, you got to snap out of it!“ Ryan was pleading. „Come on!“ As Malone’s eyes opened, Ryan leaned forward, whispering, „Now’s your chance! Go out there like you were gone, see? Stagger out, act like you don’t know where you are. Then let him have it, just as hard as you can throw it, get me?“

The sound of the bell was lost in the howl of the crowd, and Hamp Morgan was crossing the ring, tearing in, punching like a madman, throwing a volley of hooks, swings, and uppercuts that had Barney Malone reeling like a drunken man; reeling, but just enough to keep most of Morgan’s blows pounding the air. And then, like a shot from the blue, his right streaked out and crashed against

Morgan's chin with the force of a thunderbolt. Hamp Morgan spun halfway around and dropped at full length on the canvas!

Malone crawled stiffly out of bed and sat staring across the room. One eye was swollen, and he felt gingerly of his ear. Thoughtfully, but cautiously, he worked his jaw around to find the sore spots. There were plenty.

He was shaving when suddenly the sound of the key in the lock made him look up. It was Ruby Ryan.

„Look, kid,“ he said excitedly, „we got to scram. Somebody is stirrin' up a lot of heat! Look at this!“

He pointed at the same daily column of sports comment that had been giving so much space to the activities of the champion, both in and out of the ring.

Where is Barney Malone? That question may or may not mean anything, but this A.M., as we recovered from last night's fistic brawl in which Bat McGowan (or somebody) hung a kayo on Hamp Morgan's chin, we received an anonymous note asking this very question: Where is Barney Malone?

Now, it is true that we are not too well aware of who this Malone party is, but an enclosed clipping from a Capetown, South Africa, paper shows us a picture entitled BARNEY MALONE, a picture of a fighter whose resemblance to Bat McGowan is striking, to say the least. The accompanying story assures the interested reader that Mr. Malone is headed for pugilistic fame in the more or less Land of the Free.

Can it be possible that this accounts for the startling alterations in the appearance and actions of Bat McGowan? And if so, who knocked out Hamp Morgan? Was it indeed our beloved champion, or was it some guy named Jones, from Peoria, or perhaps Malone, from Capetown?

I wonder, Major Kenworthy, if Bat McGowan has a large ear this morning?

There was a light step behind them as Malone finished reading, and they whirled about to confront Tony Mada. He smiled.

„Hello, kid, the boss wants to see you.“

„Hendryx? Why don't he come over here like he always does?“ Ryan demanded. „He knows it's dangerous to have Barney on the streets.“

„We got a car, Barney, a closed car. Come on, he's waiting for you.“

Ryan was standing by the window, and he turned his head slightly, glancing at the car across the street. Suddenly his face went deathly white. Behind the wheel was „Shiv“ McCloskey, another of Hendryx's muscle men. He had the feeling that Barney Malone was about to disappear, forever.

Malone picked up his hat, straightened his tie. In the mirror he caught a glimpse of Ryan's face, white and strained. A jerk of the head indicated the car, with McCloskey at the wheel. Mada was lighting a cigarette.

Without a word, Barney Malone spun on his heel, and as Mada looked up, his fist caught the torpedo on the angle of the jaw. Something crunched, and the gunman toppled to the floor. Quickly, Ryan grabbed the automatic from Mada's shoulder holster.

„Come on, kid, we got to scram—“

Suddenly in the door of the room stood Major Kenworthy, Rack Hendryx, Bat McGowan, and two reporters. Kenworthy stepped over to Mada, and then glanced out the window. He turned slowly to Hendryx.

„I don't know quite what this is all about yet, Hendryx,“ he said dryly, „but I'd advise you to call off your dog out there. He might become conspicuous. It seems“—he smiled at Ryan and Malone—„that your other shadow has met with an accident.“

„Are you Malone?“ asked one of the reporters.

„Of course he's Malone,“ Kenworthy interrupted. „Just what else he is, we'll soon find out. But before asking any questions or listening to any alibis, I'm going to speak my piece. Apparently, Malone“—he eyed Barney's bruised ear—„fighting as the champion, defeated Hamp Morgan. This means“—he looked at Hendryx—„that your ten thousand dollars is forfeit. Apparently, Malone, you scored ten knockouts while posing as champion. This is all going to be public knowledge, but you and McGowan are going to get a chance to make it right with the fans. A chance I'd not be giving either of you but for the good of the game. You can fight each other for the world's title, the proceeds, above training expenses, to go to charity... that, or you can both be barred for life. And if you can also be prosecuted, I'll see that it's done. What do you men say?“

„I'll fight,“ Barney Malone said. „I'll fight him, and only too willing to do it.“

Hendryx agreed, sullenly, for the scowling McGowan.

„Don't miss any guesses, Barney,“ Ruby Ryan whispered. „Watch him all the time. Remember, he won the title, and he can hit. He's dangerous, experienced, and a killer. He's out for blood and to keep his title. Both of you got everything to fight for. Now, go get him!“

The bell clanged, and Malone stepped from his corner, stabbing a lightninglike jab to McGowan's face. McGowan slid under another left and slammed both hands into Malone's ribs with jolting force, then whipped up a torrid right uppercut that missed by a hairsbreadth. Malone spun away, jabbing another left to the chin, and hooking a hard right to the temple that shook McGowan to his heels.

But Bat McGowan looked fit. For two months, he had trained like a demon. Ryan had not been joking when he said that McGowan was out for blood. He crowded in close, Malone clinched, and McGowan tried to butt him, but took a solid punch to the midsection before the break.

McGowan crowded in again, slugging viciously, but Malone was too fast, slipping over a left hook and slamming him on the chin with a short right cross. Bat McGowan slipped under another left, crowded in close to bury his right in Malone's solar plexus.

Malone staggered, tried to cover up, but McGowan was on him, pulling his arms down, driving a terrific right to the side of his head that slammed him back into the ropes. Before he could recover, McGowan was throwing a volley of hooks, swings, and uppercuts, and Malone was battered into a corner, where he caught a stiff left and crashed to the canvas!

He was up at nine, but McGowan came in fast, measured Malone with a left, and dropped him again. Slowly, his head buzzing, the onetime ghost fighter

struggled to his knees, and caught a strand of rope to pull himself erect. McGowan rushed in, but was a little too anxious, and Malone fell into a clinch and hung on for dear life.

At the break, McGowan missed a hard right, and the crowd booed. Malone circled warily, boxing. Bat McGowan crowded in close, but Malone met him with a fast left that cut his eyebrow. Then just before the bell, another hard right to the head put Malone on the canvas again. The gong rang at seven.

„Say, you sap,“ Ruby Ryan growled in his ear, „who said you couldn't take it? Whatever has been wrong with you is all right. You've taken all he can dish out now. Keep that left busy, and keep this guy at long range and off balance, got me?“

The second round opened fast. Malone was boxing now, using all the cleverness he had. McGowan bored in, then hooked both hands to the head. But Malone took them going away. A short right dropped Bat McGowan to his knees for no count, and then the champion was in close battering away at Malone's ribs with both hands. Just before the bell, Malone staggered the champion with a hard left hook, and then took a jarring right to the body that drove him into the ropes.

Through the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth rounds the two fought like madmen. Toe-to-toe, they battered away, first one having a narrow lead, then the other. It was nobody's fight. Bloody, battered, and weary, the two came up for the seventh berserk and fighting for blood. McGowan's left eye was a bloody mess, his lips were in shreds; Malone's body was red from the terrific pounding he had taken, his lip was split, and one eye was almost closed. It had been a fierce, grueling struggle with no likelihood of quarter.

McGowan came out slowly and missed a hard right hook, which gave Malone a chance to step in with a sizzling uppercut that nearly tore the champion's head off! Quickly Malone feinted a left, tried another uppercut, but it fell short as McGowan rolled away, then stepped in, slamming both hands to the body, and then landed a jarring left hook to the head. Slipping away, Malone jabbed a left four times to the face without a return, danced away. McGowan put a fist to Barney's sore mouth, but took a fearful right and left to the stomach in return that made him back up hurriedly, plainly in distress. McGowan swung wildly with a left and right, Malone ducked with ease, and fired a torrid right uppercut that stretched the champion flat on his shoulder blades!

McGowan came up at seven and, desperate, swung a wicked left that sank into Malone's body, inches below the belt!

There was an angry bellow from the crowd and a rush for the ring amidst a shrilling of police whistles! But Malone caught himself on the top rope, and as McGowan rushed to finish him, the younger fighter smashed over a driving right to the chin that knocked the champion clear across the ring. Staying on his feet with sheer nerve, Barney Malone lunged across the canvas and met McGowan with a stiff left as he bounded off the ropes, then a terrific right to the jaw and McGowan went down and out, stretched on the canvas like a study in still life!

Ruby Ryan threw Malone's robe across his shoulders, grinning happily. „Well, son, you made it! What are you going to do now?“

Barney Malone carefully raised his head. „A couple more fights. Then I’m goin’ back home... buy a farm up north near Windhoek... find a wife. I need to be in a place where a man can just be himself without having to be someone else first!“

In the press benches, a radio columnist was speaking into the mike: „Well, folks, it’s all over! Barney Malone is heavyweight champion of the world, after the first major ring battle in recent years in which neither fighter was paid a dime! And“—he glanced over at McGowan’s corner, where Hendryx was slowly reviving his fighter—„if Major Kenworthy is asked tomorrow morning whether Bat McGowan has a large ear, he will have to say *Yes*, and very emphatically!“

