

The Greatest Fighter in the World

or, Sideshow Champion

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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When Mark Lanning looked at me and asked if I would take the Ludlow fight, I knew what he was thinking, and just what he had in mind. He also knew that there was only one answer I could give.

“Sure, I’ll take it,” I said. “I’ll fight Van Ludlow any place, for money, marbles, or chalk.”

But it was going to be for money. Lanning knew that, for that’s what the game is about. Also, it had to be money because I was right behind the eight ball for lack of it.

Telling the truth: if I hadn't needed the cash as bad as I did, I would never have taken the fight. Not me, Danny McClure.

I'd been ducking Ludlow for two years. Not because I didn't want a shot at the title, but because of Lanning and some of the crowd behind him.

Mark Lanning had moved in on the fight game in Zenith by way of the slot machine racket. He was a short, fat man who wore a gold-plated coin on his watch chain. That coin fascinated me. It was so much like the guy himself, all front and polish, and underneath about as cheap as they come.

However, Mark Lanning was *the* promoter in Zenith. And Duck Miller, who was manager for Van Ludlow, was merely an errand boy for Mark. About the only thing Lanning didn't control in the fight game by that time was me. I was the uncrowned middleweight champ and everybody said I was the best boy in the division. Without taking any bows, I can say yes to that one.

The champ, Gordie Carrasco, was strictly from cheese. He won the title on a foul, skipped a couple of tough ones, and beat three boys on decisions. Not that he couldn't go. Nobody ever gets within shouting distance of any kind of title unless he's good. But Gordie wasn't as good as Ludlow by a long ways. He wasn't as good as Tommy Spalla, either. And he wasn't as good as me.

Ludlow was a different kinda deal. I give the guy that. He had everything and maybe a little more. Now no real boxer ever believes anybody is really better than he is. Naturally, I considered myself to be the better fighter. But he was good, just plenty good, and anybody who beat him would have to go the distance and give it all he had. Van Ludlow was fast. He was smart, and he could punch. Added to it, he was one of the dirtiest fighters in the business.

That wasn't so bad. A lot of good fighters have been rough. It isn't always malicious. It's just they want to win. It's just the high degree of competitive instinct, and because among top grade fighting men the fight's the thing, and a rule here or there doesn't matter so much. Jack Dempsey never failed to use every advantage in the book, so did Harry Greb, and for my money they were two of the best who ever lived.

If it had just been Ludlow, I'd have fought him long ago. It was Lanning I was ducking. Odd as it may seem, I'm an honest guy. Now I've carried a losing fighter or two when it really didn't matter much, but I never gypped a bettor, and my fights weren't for sale. Nor did I ever buy any myself. I won them in the ring and liked it that way.

The crowd around Lanning was getting a stranglehold on the fight game. I didn't like to see that bunch of crooks, gunmen, and chiselers edging in everywhere. I had ducked the fights with Ludlow because I knew that when I went in there with him, I was the last chance honest fighting had in Zenith or anywhere nearby. I was going to be fighting every dirty trick Lanning and his crowd could figure out. The referee and the judges would be against me. The timekeeper would be for Ludlow. If there was any way Lanning could get me into the ring without a chance, he'd try it.

Yet, I was taking the fight.

The reason was simple enough. My ranch, the only thing in the world I cared about, was mortgaged to the hilt. I'd blown my savings on that ranch, then put a mortgage on it to stock it and build a house and some barns. If it hadn't been for

Korea, it would have been paid off. But I was in the army, and Mark Lanning located that note and bought it.

The mortgage was due, and I didn't have even part of a payment. Without that ranch, I was through. My days in the ring weren't numbered, but from where I stood I could see the numbers. I'd been fighting fourteen years, and Lanning had the game sewed up around there, so nobody fought unless they would do business. I cared more about that ranch than I did the title, so I could take a pass on Gordie Carrasco. But Van Ludlow couldn't. Lanning had him aimed at Gordie but he wouldn't look so good wearing the belt if the man all the sportswriters called "the uncrowned champ" wasn't taken down, too. Lanning now had it all lined up. I had to fight or give up on my future.

And then, there was Marge Hamlin.

Marge was my girl. We met right after I mustered out, when I first returned to Zenith. She was singing at the Rococo, and a honey if there ever was one. We started going together, became engaged, and were going to marry in the summer.

I *had* to take the fight. That was more the truth of it.

I went over to Lanning's. Duck Miller was there. We talked.

"Then," Lanning said, smiling his greasy smile, "there's the matter of an appearance forfeit."

"What d'you mean?" I asked. "Ever know of me running out on a fight?"

He moved one pudgy hand over to the ashtray and knocked off the gray ashes from his expensive cigar. "It ain't that, Danny," he said smoothly, "it's just business. Van's already got his up to five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand?" I couldn't believe what I heard. "Where would I get five thousand dollars? If I had five thousand you would never get me within a city block of any of your fights."

"That's what it has to be," he replied, and his eyes got small and ugly. He liked putting the squeeze on. "You can put up your car an' your stock from the ranch."

For a minute I stared at him. He knew what that meant as well as I did. It would mean that come snakes or high water, I would have to be in that ring to fight Ludlow. If I wasn't, I'd be flat broke, not a thing in the world but the clothes on my back.

Not that I'd duck a fight. But there are such things as cut eyes and sickness.

"Okay," I said, "I'll put 'em up. But I'm warnin' you. Better rig this one good. Because I'm going to get you!"

I wasn't the bragging kind, and I saw Duck Miller looked a little worried. Duck was smart enough, just weak. He liked the easy dough, and the easy money in Zenith all came through Mark Lanning. Lanning was shrewd and confident. He had been winning a long time. Duck Miller had never won, so Miller could worry.

The thing was, Miller knew me. There had been a time when Duck and I had been broke together. We ran into some trouble out West when a tough mob tried to arrange one of my fights to make a cleanup. I refused to go along, and they said it was take the money or else.

Me, I'm a funny guy. I don't like getting pushed around, and I don't like threats. In that one, everybody had figured the fight would go the distance. This guy was plenty tough. Everybody figured me for the nod, but nobody figured he would stop

me or I'd stop him. The wise boys had it figured for me to go in the tank in the sixth round.

I came to that fight all rodded up. They figure a fighter does it with his hands or no way. But these hombres forgot I'm a western man myself, and didn't figure on me packing some iron.

Coming out of the Arizona Strip, the way I do, I grew up with a gun. So I came down to that fight, and when this Rock Spenter walked out of his corner I feinted a left and Rock threw a right. My right fist caught him coming in, and my left hook caught him falling. And at the ten count, he hadn't even wiggled a toe.

I went down the aisle to the dressing room on the run, and when the door busted open, I was sitting on the rubbing table with a six-shooter in my mitt. Those three would-be hard guys turned greener than a new field of alfalfa, and then I tied two of them up, put the gun down, and went to work on the boss.

When I got through with him, I turned the others loose one at a time. Two of them were hospital cases. By that time the sheriff was busting down the door.

That old man had been betting on me, and when I explained, he saw the light very quickly. The sure-thing boys got stuck for packing concealed weapons, and one of them turned out to be wanted for armed robbery and wound up with ten years.

I'm not really bragging. I'm not proud of some of the circles I've traveled in or some of the things I've done. But I just wanted you to know what Duck Miller knew. And Duck may have been a loser, but he never lost anything but money. So far, he was still a stand-up guy.

When I had closed the door I heard Duck speak. "You shouldn't have done it, Mark," he said. "He won't take a pushing around."

"Him?" Contempt was thick in Lanning's voice. "He'll take it, and he'll like it!"

Would I? I walked out of there and I was sore. But that day, for the first time in months, I was in the gym.

The trouble was, I'd been in the service, spent my time staring through a barbed-wire fence in a part of Korea that was like Nevada with the heat turned off, and during that time I'd done no boxing. Actually, it was over three years since I'd had a legitimate scrap.

Van Ludlow had a busted eardrum or something and he had been fighting all the time. It takes fights to sharpen a man up, and they knew that. Don't think they didn't. They wanted me in the tank or out of the picture, but bad. Not that Van cared. Ludlow, like I said, was a fighter. He didn't care where his opponent came from or what he looked like.

Marge was waiting for me, sitting in her car in front of the Primrose Cafe. We locked the car and went inside and when we were sitting in the booth, she smiled at me.

Marge was a blonde, and a pretty one. She was shaped to please and had a pair of eyes you could lose yourself in. Except for one small thing, she was perfect. There was just a tiny bit of hardness around her mouth. It vanished when she smiled, and that was often.

"How was it?" she asked me.

“Rough,” I said. “I’m fighting Van in ninety days. Also,” I added, “he made me post an appearance forfeit. I had to put it up, and it meant mortgaging my car and my stock on the ranch.”

“He’s got you, hasn’t he?” Marge asked.

I smiled then. It’s always easy to fight when you’re backed in a corner and there’s only one way out.

“No,” I said, “he hasn’t got me. The trouble with these smart guys, they get too sure of themselves. Duck Miller is a smarter guy than Lanning.”

“Duck?” Marge was amazed. “Why, he’s just a stooge!”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ll lay you five to one he’s got a little dough in the bank, and well, he’ll never wind up in stir. Lanning will.”

“Why do you say that?” Marge asked quickly. “Have you got something on him?”

“Uh-uh. But I’ve seen his kind before.”

Like I say, I went to the gym that day. The next, too. I did about eight rounds of light work each of those two days. When I wanted to box, on the third day, there wasn’t anybody to work with. There were a dozen guys of the right size around, but they were through working, didn’t want to box that day, or weren’t feeling good. It was a runaround.

If I’d had money, I could have imported some sparring partners and worked at the ranch, but I didn’t. However, there were a couple of big boys out there who had fooled with the mitts some, and I began to work with them. Several times Duck Miller dropped by, and I knew he was keeping an eye on me for Lanning. This work wasn’t doing me any good. I knew it, and he knew it.

Marge drove out on the tenth day in a new canary-colored coupe. One of those sleek convertible jobs. She had never looked more lovely. She watched me work, and when I went over to lean on the door, she looked at me.

“This won’t get it, Danny,” she said. “These hicks aren’t good enough for you.”

“I know,” I said honestly, “but I got a plan.”

“What is it?” she asked curiously.

“Maybe a secret,” I told her.

“From me?” she pouted. “I like to know everything about you, Danny.”

She did all right. Maybe it was that hardness around her mouth. Or put it down that I’m a cautious guy. I brushed it off, and although she came back to the subject twice, I slipped every question like they were left-hand leads. And that night, I had Joe, my hand from the ranch, drive me down to Cartersville, and there I caught a freight.

The Greater American Shows were playing county fairs through the Rocky Mountain and prairie states. I caught up with them three days after leaving the ranch. Old Man Farley was standing in front of the cook tent when I walked up. He took one look and let out a yelp.

“No names, Pop,” I warned. “I’m Bill Banner, a ham an’ egg pug, looking for work. I want a job in your athletic show, taking on all comers.”

“Are you crazy?” he demanded, low voiced. “Danny McClure, you’re the greatest middleweight since Ketchell, an’ you want to work with a carnival sideshow?”

Briefly, I explained the pitch. "Well," he said, "you won't find much competition, but like you say, you'll be fightin' every night, tryin' all the time. Buck's on the show, too. He'd like to work with you."

Almost fifteen years before, a husky kid, just off a cow ranch in the Strip, I'd joined the Greater American in Las Vegas. Buck Farley, the old man's kid, soon became my best pal.

An ex-prizefighter on the show taught us to box, and in a few weeks they started me taking on all corners. I stayed with the show two years and nine months, and in that time must have been in the ring with eight or nine hundred men.

Two, three, sometimes four a night wanted to try to pick up twenty-five bucks by staying four rounds. When I got better, the show raised it to a hundred. Once in a while we let them stay, but that was rare, and only when the crowd was hot and we could pack them in for the rest of the week by doing it.

When I moved on, I went pro and had gone to the top. After three years, I was ranking with the first ten. A couple of years later I was called the uncrowned champ.

"Hi, Bill!" Buck Farley had been tipped off before he saw me. "How's it going?"

Buck was big. I could get down to one sixty, but Buck would be lucky to make one ninety, and he was rawboned and tough. Buck Farley had always been a hand with the gloves, so I knew I had one good, tough sparring partner.

That night was my first sideshow fight in a long time. Old Man Farley was out front for the ballyhoo and he made it good. Then, I don't have any tin ears. My nose has been broken, but was fixed up and it doesn't show too much. A fighter would always pick me for a scrapper, but the average guy rarely does, so there wasn't any trouble getting someone to come up.

The first guy was a copper miner. A regular hard-rock boy who was about my age and weighed about two hundred and twenty. The guy's name was Mantry.

When we got in the ring, the place was full.

"Maybe you better let me take it," Buck suggested, "you might bust a hand on this guy."

"This is what I came for," I said. "I've got to take them as they come."

They sounded the bell and this gorilla came out with a rush. He was rawboned and rugged as the shoulder of a mountain. He swung a wicked left, and I slid inside and clipped him with two good ones in the wind. I might as well have slugged the side of a battleship.

He bulled on in, letting them go with both hands. I caught one on the ear that shook me to my heels and the crowd roared. Mantry piled on in, dug a left into my body and slammed another right to the head. I couldn't seem to get working and circled away from him. Then I stabbed a left to his mouth three times and he stopped in his tracks and looked surprised.

He dropped into a half crouch, this guy had boxed some, and he bored in, bulling me into the ropes. He clipped me there and my knees sagged and then I came up, mad as a hornet with a busted nest. I stabbed a left to his mouth that made those others seem like brushing him with a feather duster and hooked a right to his ear that jarred him for three generations. I walked in, slamming them with both hands, and the crowd began to whoop it up.

His knees wilted and he started to sag. This was too good to end, so I grabbed him and shoved him into the ropes, holding him up and fighting with an appearance of hard punching until the bell rang.

Mantry looked surprised, but walked to his corner, only a little shaky. He knew I'd held him up, and he was wondering why. He figured me for a good guy who was taking him along for the ride.

When we came out he took it easy, whether from caution or because I'd gone easy on him, I couldn't tell. I stabbed a left to his mouth that left him undecided about that, then stepped in close. I wanted a workout, and had to get this guy back in line.

"What's a matter, chump?" I whispered. "You yella?"

He went hog wild and threw one from his heels that missed my chin by the flicker of an eyelash. Then he clipped me with a roundhouse right and I went back into the ropes and rebounded with both hands going. He was big and half smart and he bored in, slugging like crazy.

Mister, you should have heard the tent! You could hear their yells for a half mile, and people began crowding around the outside to see what was going on. Naturally, that didn't hurt the old man's feelings.

Me, I like a fight, and so did this Mantry. We walked out there and slugged it toe-to-toe. What I had on him in experience and savvy, he had in weight, strength, and height. Of course, I'd never let old Mary Ann down the groove yet.

The crowd was screaming like a bunch of madmen. I whipped a right uppercut to Mantry's chin and he slumped, and then I drove a couple of stiff ones into his wind. The bell rang again and I trotted back to my corner.

The third was a regular brannigan. I dropped about half my science into the discard because this was the most fun I'd had in months. We walked out there and went into it and it would have taken a smarter guy than any in that crowd to have seen that I was slipping and riding most of Mantry's hardest punches. He teed off my chin with a good one that sent up a shower of sparks, and when the round ended, I caught him with two in the wind.

Coming up for the fourth, I figured here is where I let him have it. After all, Farley was paying one hundred bucks if this guy went the distance. I sharpened up in this one. I didn't want to cut the guy. He was a right sort, and I liked him. So I walked out and busted him a couple in the wind that brought a worried expression to his face. Then I went under his left and whammed a right to the heart that made him back up a couple of steps. He shot two fast lefts to the head and one to the chin, then tried a right.

I stepped around, feinted with a left, and he stepped in and I let Mary Ann down the groove. Now you can box or you can slug but there's none out there that can do both at once. A fighter's style is usually one or the other. Boxing will win you points and it'll keep you from getting hit too much, but slugging puts them on the canvas. The only problem is you have to stop boxing for an instant and plant your feet to do it. It's in that instant that you can get hit badly, if your opponent is on the ball. Mantry took the feint, however, and that was the end of him.

It clipped him right on the button and he stood there for a split second and then dropped like he'd been shot through the heart.

I walked back to my corner and Buck looked at me. "Man," his eyes were wide, "what did you hit him with?"

When the count was over, I went over and picked the guy up.

"Lucky punch!" one of the townies was saying. "The big guy had it made until he clipped him!"

When Mantry came around, I slapped him on the shoulder. "Nice fight, guy! Let's go back an' dress.

"Pop," I said when we were dressing, "slip the guy ten bucks a round. He made a fight."

Pop Farley knew a good thing when he saw it. "Sure enough." He paid the big guy forty dollars, who looked from me to Pop like we were Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. "Why don't you come back an' try it again?" Pop suggested.

"I might," Mantry said, "I might at that!"

That was the beginning. In the following sixty days, I boxed from four to twelve rounds a night, fighting miners, lumberjacks, cowpunchers, former Golden Glove boys, Army fighters, anything that came along. Mantry came back twice, and I cooled him twice more, each one a brawl.

Those sixty days had put me in wonderful condition. I was taking care of myself, not catching many, and tackling the varied styles was sharpening me up. Above all, every contest was a real fight, not practice. Even an easy fight keeps a man on his toes, and a fighter of strength can often be awkwardly dangerous if he knows a little. And every one of these men was trying.

Buck knew all about my troubles. He was working with me every day, and we had uncovered a good fast welter on the show who had quit fighting because of a bad hand. The light, fast work was good for me.

"It won't go this easy," Buck told me. "I heard about Mark Lanning. He's dangerous. If he intends to clear the way to the title, he'll not rest until he knows where you are, and just what you're doin'."

Later, I heard about it. I didn't know then. Buck Farley had voiced my own thoughts, and in a different way, they were the thoughts of Mark Lanning and Duck Miller.

"Well," Lanning had said, "if he's taken a powder he's through. Might be the best way at that, but I hate to think of him gettin' away without a beatin', and I hate to think of blowin' the money we'd win on the fight."

"He ain't run out," Duck said positively. "I know that guy. He's smart. He's got something up his sleeve. What happened to him?"

"We traced him to Cartersville," Gasparo said. Gasparo was Lanning's pet muscle man. "He bought a ticket there for Butte. Then he vanished into thin air."

It was Marge Hamlin who tipped them off. I found that out later, too. I hadn't written her, but she was no dumb Dora, not that babe. She was in a dentist's office, waiting to get a tooth filled, when she saw the paper. It was a daily from a jerkwater town in Wyoming.

CARNIVAL FIGHTER TO MEET PAT DALY

Bill Banner, middleweight sharpie who has been a sensation in the Greater American Shows these past two months, has signed to meet Pat Daly, a local light-heavyweight, in the ten-round main event on Friday's card.

Banner, a welcome relief from the typical carnie stumblebum, has been creating a lot of talk throughout the Far West with his series of thrilling knockouts over local fighters. Pop Farley, manager and owner of Greater American, admits the opposition has been inexperienced, but points to seventy-six knockouts as some evidence. One of these was over Tom Bronson, former AAU champ, another over Ace Donaldson, heavyweight champion of Montana.

She grabbed up that paper and legged it down to Mark Lanning. "Get a load of this," she tells him. He studies it and shrugs. "You don't get it?" she inquired, lifting an eyebrow. "Ask Duck. He knows that Danny used to fight with a carnival."

"Yeah," Duck looked up, "got his start that way. Greater American Shows, it was."

Lanning's eyes lit up triumphantly. "You get a bonus for that, Chick," he tells Marge. Then he turned his head. "Gasparo, take three men. Get Tony Innes. I'll contact him by phone. Then get a plane west. I want Tony Innes to fight in this Daly's place."

"Innes?" Miller sat bolt upright. "Man! He's the second best light-heavy in the business!"

Lanning leered. "Sure! An' he belongs to me. He'll go out there, substitute for Daly. He'll give McClure a pasting. One thing, I want him to cut Danny McClure's eye! Win or lose, I want McClure's eye cut! Then when he goes in there with Ludlow, we'll see what happens!"

Outside in the street, Duck Miller lit a cigarette and looked at Marge Hamlin.

"So he's got you on the payroll, too," he said. "What a sweet four-flusher you turned out to be!"

Marge's face flushed and her lips thinned. "What about you?" she sneered.

Duck shrugged. "I'm not takin' any bows, kid," he said grimly, "but at least he knows which side I'm on. He's a square guy. You like blood? Be there at the ringside when he gets that eye opened. You'll see it. I hope it gets on you so bad it'll never wash off!"

"He chose this game," Marge said angrily. "If he doesn't know how it's played, that's his problem."

"And you chose him." Duck snapped his match into the street. "I guess the blood's there and won't wash off already."

All that I heard later. The Greater American was playing over in Laramie, but Pop and Buck Farley were with me, ready to go in there with Pat Daly. All three of us were in the dressing room, waiting for the call, when the door busted open.

Pat Daly was standing there in his street clothes. He had blood all over and he could hardly stand.

"Who in blazes are you?" he snarled. "Y' yella bum! Scared of me an' have your sluggers beat me up so's you can put in a setup!"

Buck took him by the arm and jerked him inside. "Give," he said, "what happened?"

"What happened?" Daly was swaying and punch-drunk, but anger blazed in his eyes. "Your sluggers jumped me. Ran my car off the road, then before I was on my feet, they started slugging me with blackjacks. When I was out cold they rolled me into the ditch and poured whiskey on me!"

"What about this substitute business?" Pop demanded.

Suddenly, I knew what happened. Mark Lanning had got me located. From here on in, it would be every man for himself.

"You knew all about it!" Daly swore. "When I got in, Sam tells me he heard I was drunk and hurt in an accident, and that they have a substitute. You tell me how you knew that!"

The door opens then, and Sam Slake is standing there. He looks at Daly, then he looks at me. His face is hard.

"Daly can't fight," he says, "which is your fault. Your handpicked substitute is out there, so you can go in with him. But I'm tellin' you, don't bring your crooked game around here again. I'm callin' the D.A., so if you want to play games you can play them with him."

I got to my feet then, and I was sore. "Listen!" I snapped. "I'll tell you what this is all about! Get the newspaper boys in!"

It was time for the main go, and the crowd was buzzing. They had had a look at Pat Daly, some of them, and the arena was filled with crazy stories. The newspaper boys, three of them, came down into my dressing room.

"All right," I said, "this is the story. My name isn't Bill Banner. It's Danny McClure."

"What?" one of these reporters yelped. "The uncrowned middleweight champ? But you're signed to meet Van Ludlow!"

"Right!"

Briefly, quickly as I could, I told them about how I was pushed into the fight with Ludlow, all about the methods Lanning used. How I couldn't get sparring partners, and how I came west and joined the show I'd been with as a kid. And how Lanning had sent his sluggers to the show. That I didn't know who the substitute was, but before the fight was over, they'd know it was no frame. Some of it was guesswork, but they were good guesses.

"Maybe I'll know him. I'll bet money," I told them, "he's good. I'll bet plenty of dough he was sent out here to see that I go into the ring with Ludlow hurt. I got to go, or the commission in Zenith belongs to Lanning and I lose my ranch."

"Wow! What a story! The best middleweight in the game fights his way into shape with a carnival!" The reporters scrambled to beat me to the ring.

By that time the arena was wild. So I grabbed my robe and got out of the dressing room with Buck Farley and Pop alongside of me. I could see both of them were packing heaters.

When I crawled through the ropes, I looked across the ring and saw Tony Innes.

"Who is he?" Buck asked.

I told him and his face went white. Tony Innes was tough. A wicked puncher who had fought his way to the top of the game with a string of knockouts.

The announcer walked into the center of the ring and took the microphone, but I pushed him aside. Gasparo, in Innes's corner, started up. Before he could get over the edge of the ring, Buck Farley tugged him back. The crowd was wild with excitement, but when I spoke, they quieted down.

"Listen, folks! I can't explain now! It will all be in the papers tomorrow, but some guys that want me out of the fight racket had Pat Daly slugged and brought out a tough boy to stick in here with me. So you're goin' to get your money's worth tonight!

"In that corner, weight one hundred and seventy-five pounds, is Tony Innes, second-ranking light-heavyweight in the world! And my name isn't Bill Banner! It's Danny McClure, and tonight you're going to see the top-ranking light-heavyweight contender take a beating he'll never forget."

The crowd just blew the roof off the auditorium, and Tony Innes came on his feet and waved a wildly angry glove at the mike. "Get it out of here!" he snarled. "Let's fight!"

Somebody rang the bell, and Buck Farley just barely got out of the way as Innes crossed the ring. He stabbed a left that jerked my head back like it was on a hinge, and he could have ended the fight there, but he was crazy mad and threw his right too soon. It missed and I went in close. Never in all my life was I so sore as then.

I ripped a right to his muscle-corded middle and then smashed a left hook to the head that would have loosened the rivets on the biggest battleship ever built, but it never even staggered this guy. He clipped me on the chin with an elbow that made my head ring like an alarm clock. If *that* was the kind of fight it was going to be, I was ready! We slugged it across the ring and then he stepped out of the corner and caught me with a right that made my knees buckle.

I moved into Tony, lancing his cut mouth with a straight left. He sneered at me and bored in, rattling my teeth with a wicked uppercut and clipping me with a short left chop that made my knees bend. I slammed both hands to the body and jerked my shoulder up under his chin. When the bell for the first sounded, we were swapping it out in the middle of the ring.

The minute skipped by and I was off my stool and halfway across the ring before he moved. The guy had weight and height on me and a beautiful left. It caught me in the mouth and I tasted blood and then a right smashed me on the chin and my brain went smoky and I was on the canvas and this guy was standing over me, never intending to let me get up. But I got up, and brought one from the floor with me that caught him on the temple and rolled him into the ropes.

I was on top of him but still a little foggy, and he went inside of my right and clinched, stamping at my arches. I shoved him away with my left, clipped him with a right, and then we started to slug again.

You had to give it to Innes. He was a fighter. There wasn't a man there that night who wouldn't agree. He was dirty. He had sold out. He was a crook by seventeen counts, but the guy could dish it out, and, brother, he could take it.

And those people in that tank town? They were seeing the battle of the century, and don't think they didn't know it! The leading world contenders for two titles with no holds barred. Yeah, they let it go on that way. The sheriff was there, a red-hot sport and fight fan.

“Let the voters get me!” I heard him say between rounds. “I’m a fightin’ man, an’ by the Lord Harry I wouldn’t miss this no matter what happens. Nobody interrupts this fight but the fighters. Understand!”

If a guy was to judge by that crowd, the sheriff could hold that office for the rest of his life. Me, I was too busy to think about that then. Van Ludlow, Marge Hamlin, Duck Miller, and Lanning were a thousand miles away. In there with me was a great fighting man, and a killer.

Maybe I’d never fight Ludlow, but I was going to get Innes.

Don’t ask me what happened to the rounds. Don’t ask me how we fought. Don’t ask me how many times I was down, or how many he was down. We were two jungle beasts fighting on the edge of a cliff, only besides brawn, we had all the deadly skill, trained punching power, and toughness of seasoned fighters. A thousand generations had collected the skill in fighting we used that night.

He cut my eye... he cut both my eyes. But his were, too, and his mouth was dribbling with blood and he was wheezing through a broken nose. The crowd had gone crazy, then hoarse, and now it sat staring in a kind of shocked horror at what two men could do in a ring.

Referee? He got out of the way and stood beside the sheriff. We broke, but rarely clean. We hit on the breaks, we used thumbs, elbows, and heads, we swapped blows until neither of us could throw another punch. The fight had been scheduled for ten rounds. I think it was the fourteenth when I began to get him.

I caught him coming in and sank my right into his solar plexus. He was tired, I could feel it. He staggered and his mouth fell open and I walked in throwing punches to head and body. He staggered, went down, rolled over.

Stand over him? Not on your life! I stepped back and let the guy take his own time getting up! It wasn’t because I was fighting fair. I wanted him to see I didn’t need that kind of stuff. I could do it without that.

He got up and came in and got me with a right to the wind, and I took it going away and then I slipped on some blood and I hit the canvas and rolled over. Innes backed off like I had done, and waved at me with a bloody glove to get up and come on!

The crowd broke into a cheer then, the first he’d had, and I could see he liked it.

I got up and we walked in and I touched his gloves. That got them. Until then it had been a dirty, ugly fight. But when I got up, I held out both gloves and with only a split second of hesitation, he touched my gloves with his, a boxer’s handshake!

The crowd broke into another cheer. From then on there wasn’t a low blow or a heeled glove. We fought it clean. Two big, confident fighting men who understood each other.

But it couldn’t last. No human could do what we were doing and last. He came for me and I rolled my head and let the glove go by and then smashed a right for his body. He took it, and then I set myself. He was weaving and I took aim at his body and let go.

The ropes caught him and he rolled along them. He knew he was going to get it then, but he was asking no favors, and he wasn’t going to make it easy for me.

Again I fainted, and when he tried to laugh, a thin trickle of blood started from a split lip. He wouldn't bite on that.

"Quit it!" I heard him growl. "Come an' get me!"

I went. Then I uncorked the payoff. I let Mary Ann go down the groove!

The sound was like the butt end of an axe hitting a frozen log, and Tony Innes stood like a dummy in a doze, and then he went over on his feet, so cold an iceberg would have felt like a heat wave. And then I started backing up and fell into the ropes and stood there, weaving a little, my hands working, so full of battle I couldn't realize it was over.

The news report of the fight hit the sport pages like an atomic bomb. Overnight everybody in the country was talking about it and promoters from all over the country were offering prices on a return battle. Above all, it had started a fire I didn't think Mark Lanning could put out. But he could still pull plenty behind the smoke.

Most people will stand for a lot, but once a sore spot gets in front of their eyes, they want to get rid of it. The rotten setup at Zenith, which permeated the fight game, was an example. The trouble was, it was a long time to election and Lanning still had the situation sewed up in Zenith, and most of the officials.

More than ever, he'd be out to get me. The season was near closing for Greater American so Pop turned the show over to his assistant and came east with me. Buck came, too, and he brought that .45 Colt along with him.

Maybe I had spoiled Lanning's game. Time would tell about that, but on the eve of the Ludlow fight, I had two poorly healed eyes, and the ring setup back home was no better than it had been. Despite all the smoke, I was still behind the eight ball.

The publicity would crab the chance of Lanning pulling any really fast stuff. But with my eyes the way they were, there was a good chance he wouldn't have to. I was going into a fight with a cold, utterly merciless competitor with two strikes against me. And with every possible outside phase of the fight in question.

You think the timekeeper can do nothing? Suppose I got a guy on the ropes, ready to cool him, or suppose I get Ludlow on the deck and the referee says nine and there are ten seconds or twenty seconds to go, and then the bell rings early and Ludlow is saved?

Or suppose I'm taking a sweet socking and they let the round go a few seconds. Many a fight has been lost or won in a matter of seconds, and many a fighter has been saved by the bell to come on to win in later rounds.

Duck Miller was lounging on the station platform when I got off of the train. He glanced at my eyes and there was no grin on his lips.

"Well, Duck," I said, "looks like your boss got me fixed up."

"Uh-huh. He's the kind of guy usually gets what he wants."

"Someday he's going to get more than he asks for," I said quietly.

Duck nodded. "Uh-huh. You got some bad eyes there."

"It was a rough fight."

Duck's eyes sparkled. "I'd of give a mint," he said sincerely, "to have seen it! You and Tony Innes, and no holds barred! Yeah, that would be one for the book." He looked at me again. "You're a great fighter, kid."

“So’s Ludlow.” I looked at Duck. “Miller, at heart you’re a right guy. Why do you stick with a louse like Lanning?”

Duck rubbed his cigarette out against his heel. “I like money. I been hungry too much. I eat now, I got my own car, I got a warm apartment, I have a drink when I want. I even got a little dough in the bank.”

I looked at him. Duck was down in the mouth. His wide face and hard eyes didn’t look right.

“Is it worth it, Duck?”

He looked at me. “No,” he said flatly. “But I’m in.”

“Seen Marge?” I asked.

That time he didn’t look at me. “Uh-huh. I have. Often.”

Often? That made me wonder. I looked at him again. “How’s she been getting along?”

Duck looked up, shaking out a smoke. “Marge gets along, don’t ever forget that. Marge gets along. Like me,” he hesitated, “she’s been hungry too much.”

He turned on his heel and walked away. He was there to look at me, to report to Lanning how I looked so they could figure on Ludlow’s fight. Well, I knew how I looked. I’d been through the mill. And what he’d said about Marge I didn’t like.

She was waiting for me at the ranch, sitting in the canary-yellow convertible. She looked like a million, and her smile was wide and beautiful. Yet somehow, the change made her look different. I mean, my own change. I’d been away. I’d been through a rough deal, I was back, and seeing her now I saw her with new eyes. Yes, she was hard around the eyes and mouth.

When I kissed her something inside me said, “Kid, this is it. This babe is wrong for you.”

“How’s it, honey?” I said. “Everything all right?”

“Yes, Danny, but your eyes!” she exclaimed. “Your poor eyes are cut!”

“Yeah. Me an’ Tony Innes had a little brawl out West. Maybe,” I said, “you read about it?”

“Everybody did,” she said frankly. “Do you think it was wise, Dan? Telling that stuff about Mark Lanning?”

“Sure, baby. I fight in the open, cards on the table. Guys like Lanning don’t like that.” I looked down at her. “Honey, he’s through.”

“Through? Mark Lanning?” She shook her head. “You’re whistling in the dark, Dan. He’s big, he’s too strong. He’s got this town sewed up.”

“It’s only one town,” I said.

Right then I didn’t know she was working with Lanning. I didn’t know she was selling me out. Maybe, down inside, I had a hunch, but I didn’t know. That was why I didn’t see that I’d slipped the first seed of doubt into her thoughts.

That evening two black sedans pulled up the drive and stopped in front of the porch where I was sitting, feet up, reading the newspaper. Something about the men that got out, maybe it was their identical haircuts or the drab suits that they wore, said “government” in square, block lettering.

“Evening,” the first one said. “I’m special agent Crowley, FBI.” He flipped open his wallet to show me his ID. “This,” he indicated a taller man from the second car, “is Bill Karp, with the State Attorney General’s office. We’d like to talk to you about a story we read in the newspaper...”

Before they were done we'd talked for four hours, and a court reporter took it all down.

Three days I rested, just working about six rounds a day with the skipping rope and shadowboxing. Then I started in training again, and in earnest. We had a ring under the trees, and I liked it there. Joe Moran was with me, and Buck Farley.

It went along like that until two days before the fight. Then Pop came in, he had a long look at me, and he pushed his wide hat back on his head and took the cigar from his lips.

"Kid," he said, "I got a tip today. Your dame's bettin' on Ludlow."

If anybody had sprung that on me, even Pop Farley, before I went west, I'd have said he was a liar. Now I just looked at him. Pop was my friend. Maybe the best one I had. I was like a son to him, and Pop wouldn't lie to me.

"Give it to me, Pop," I said. "What do you know?"

"Saw her coming from Mark Lanning's office. I got curious and I had her followed. I found out she's hocked her jewelry to bet on Ludlow. I traced the sale of that yellow car. Lanning paid for it."

Well, I got out of the ring and walked back to the house. I pulled on my pants and a sweater, I changed into some heavy shoes. Then I went for a walk.

There was work to be done. Fences needed mending, one barn would soon need a new roof, over the winter I would have to repair my tractor, which hadn't worked right in years...I always dreamed I was doing it for someone, someone besides me, that is. Suddenly I realized that person wasn't Marge and never would be.

Marge Hamlin meant a lot to me, but hurt as it did, it wasn't as bad as it would have been before I went west. That trip had made me see things a lot clearer.

I walked in the hills, breathing a lot of fresh, cool air, and before long I began to feel better. Well, maybe Duck was right. She had been hungry too much. Somehow, I didn't find any resentment in me.

We were sitting on the porch the day of the fight when Marge drove up. She'd been out twice before, but I was gone. She looked at my eyes when I walked down to the car. I heard Pop and Buck get up and go inside.

Marge looked beautiful as a picture, and just as warm.

"Marge," I said, "you shouldn't have bet that money." Her eyes went sharp, and she started to speak." It's okay," I said, "we all have to live. You play it your way, it's just that you'll lose, and that'll be too bad. You're going to need the money."

"What do you mean? Who told you how I bet?"

"It doesn't matter. Copper those bets if you can, because I'm going to win."

"With those eyes?" She was hard as ice now.

"Sure, even with these eyes. Tony Innes was a good boy. I beat him. Outweighed fifteen pounds, I beat him. I'll beat Ludlow, too."

"Like fun you can!" Her voice was bitter. "You haven't a chance!"

"Take my tip, Marge. And then," I added, "cut loose from Mark. He won't do right by you. He won't be able to, even if he wanted to."

"What do you mean? What can you do to Mark?" Contempt was an inch thick in her voice.

"It isn't me. That story from out West started it. Mark's through. He's shooting everything on this fight. He still thinks he's riding high. He isn't. Neither are you."

She looked at me. "You don't seem much cut up about this," she said then.

"I'm not. You're no bargain, honey. In fact you've been a waste of my time."

That got her. She had sold me out for Mark Lanning and his money, but she didn't like to think I was taking it so easy. She had set herself up to be the prize, but now she wasn't the prize I wanted. She started the car, spun the wheel and left the ranch with the car throwing gravel as I walked back inside.

That night you couldn't have forced your way into the fight club with a crowbar. The Zenith Arena was jammed to the doors, and when Ludlow started for the ring, a friend told me and I slid off the table and looked at Pop.

"Well, Skipper," I said, "here goes everything."

"You'll take him," Buck said, but he wasn't sure. It's hard to fight with blood running into your eyes.

When we were in the center of the ring, Buck Farley was with me. I turned to him. "You got that heater, Buck?"

"Sure thing." He showed me the butt of his .45 under his shirt.

The referee's eyes widened. Ludlow's narrowed and he touched his thin lips with his tongue.

"Just a tip." I was talking to the referee. "Nobody stops this fight. No matter how bloody I get, or no matter how bloody Ludlow gets, this fight goes on to the end. When you count one of us out, that will be soon enough.

"Buck," I said, "if this referee tries to give this to Ludlow any way but on a knockout or decision at the end of fifteen rounds, kill him."

Of course, I didn't really mean it. Maybe I didn't. Buck was another guess. Anyway, the referee was sure to the bottom of his filthy little soul that I did mean it. He was scared, scared silly.

Then I went back to my corner and rubbed my feet in the resin. This was going to be murder. It was going to be plain, unadulterated murder.

The gong sounded.

Van Ludlow was a tough, hard-faced blond who looked like he was made from granite. He came out, snapped a fast left for my eyes, and I went under it, came in short with a right to the ribs as he faded away. He jabbed twice and missed. I walked around him, fainted, and he stepped away, watching me. The guy had a left like a cobra. He stabbed the left and I was slow to slip it. He caught me, but too high.

Ludlow stepped it up a little, missed a left and caught me with a sweet right hand coming in. He threw that right again and I let it curl around my neck and smashed both hands to the body, in close. We broke clean and then he moved in fast, clipped me with a right uppercut and then slashed a left to my mouth that hurt my bad lip. I slipped two lefts to the head and went in close, ripping both hands to the body before he tied me up. He landed a stiff right to the head as the bell rang.

Three rounds went by just like that. Sharp, fast boxing, and Ludlow winning each of them by a steadily increasing margin. My punches were mostly to the body in close. In the fourth the change came.

He caught me coming in with a stiff left to the right eye and a trickle of blood started. You could hear a low moan from the crowd. They had known it was coming.

Blood started trickling into my eye. Ludlow stabbed a left and got in close. "How d'you like it, boy?"

"Fine!" I said, and whipped a left hook into his ribs that jolted him to his socks.

He took two steps back and I hit him with one hand, then the other. Then the fight turned into a first-rate blood-and-thunder scrap.

Van Ludlow could go. I give him that. He came in fast, stabbed a left to my mouth, and I went under another one and smashed a right into his ribs that sounded like somebody had dropped a plank. Then I ripped up a right uppercut that missed but brought a whoop from the crowd.

Five and six were a brawl with blood all over everything. Both my eyes were cut and there was blood in my mouth. I'd known this would happen and so was prepared for it. Ludlow threw a wicked right for my head in the seventh round and I rolled inside and slammed my right to his ribs again. He backed away from that one.

"Come on, dish face!" I told him politely. "You like it, don't you?"

He swung viciously, and I went under it and let him have both of them, right in the lunch basket. He backed up, looking unhappy, and I walked into him blazing away with both fists. He took two, slipped a left, and rocked me to my number nines with a rattling right hook.

He was bloody now, partly mine and partly his own. I shot a stiff left for his eye and just as it reached his face, turned my left glove outside and ripped a gash under his eye with the laces that started a stream of blood.

"Not bleeding, are you?" I taunted. "That wasn't in the lesson for today. I'm the one supposed to bleed!"

The bell cut him off short, and he glared at me. I took a deep breath and walked back to my corner. I couldn't see myself. But I could guess. My face felt like it had been run through a meat grinder, but I felt better than I had in months. Then I got the shock of my life.

Tony Innes was standing in my corner.

"Hey, champ!" He looked at me, got red around the gills, and grinned. "Shucks, man! You're a fighter. Don't tell me the guy who licked me can't take Van Ludlow."

"You ever fight Ludlow?" I was still standing up. I didn't care. I felt good.

"No," he said.

"Well," I told him, "it ain't easy!"

When the bell sounded, I went out fast, feeling good. I started a left hook for his head and the next thing I knew the referee was saying "Seven!"

I rolled over, startled, wondering where the devil I'd been, and got my feet under me. I came up fast as Van moved in, but not fast enough. A wicked right hand knocked me into the ropes and he followed it up, but fast. He jabbed me twice, and blind with blood, I never saw the right.

That time it was the count of three I heard, but I stayed where I was to eight, then came up. I went down again, then again. I was down the sixth time in the

round when the bell rang. Every time I'd get up, he'd floor me. I never got so tired of a man in my life.

Between rounds they had my eyes fixed up. Tony Innes was working on them now, and he should have been a second. He was as good a man on cut eyes as any you ever saw.

The ninth round opened with Ludlow streaking a left for my face, and I went under it and hit him with a barrage of blows that drove him back into the ropes. I nailed him there with a hard right and stabbed two lefts to his mouth.

He dished up a couple of wicked hooks into my middle that made me feel like I'd lost something, and then I clipped him with a right. He jerked his elbow into my face, so I gave him the treatment with my left and he rolled away along the ropes and got free.

I stepped back and lanced his lip with a left, hooked that same left to his ear, and took a wicked left to the body that jerked my mouth open, and then he lunged close and tried to butt.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Can't you win it fair?"

He jerked away from me and made me keep my mouth shut with a jolting left. I was counterpunching now. He started a hook and I beat him with an inside right that set him back on his heels. He tried to get his feet set, and rolled under a punch. I caught him with both hands and split one of his eyes.

Ludlow came in fast. It was a bitter, brutal, bloody fight and it was getting worse. His eyes were cut as badly as mine now, and both of us were doing plenty of bleeding. I was jolting him with body punches, and it was taking some of the snap out of him. Not that he didn't have plenty left. That guy would always have plenty left.

Sweat streamed into my eyes and the salt made me blink. I tried to wipe the blood away and caught a right hook for my pains. I went into a crouch and he put a hand on my head, trying to spin me. I was expecting that and hooked a left high and wide that caught him on the temple. It took him three steps to get his feet under him, and I was all over him like a cold shower.

He went back into the ropes, ripping punches with both hands, but I went on into him. He tried to use the laces and hit me low once, but that wasn't stopping me. Not any. I was out to get this guy, and get him but good. I hung him on the ropes and then the bell sounded and I turned and trotted to my corner.

Tony Innes was there, and he leaned over. "Watch yourself, kid. Mark's got some muscle men here."

"Don't let it throw you," Buck said grimly, "so've we!"

I looked at him, and then glanced back at the crowd. Lanning was there, all right, and Gasparo was with him, but they both looked unhappy. Then I recognized some faces. Bulge Mahaney, the carnival strong man from Greater American, had a big hand resting on Lanning's shoulder. Beside him, with a heavy cane I knew to be loaded with lead, was Charley Dismo, who ran the Ferris wheel.

Behind them, around them, were a half-dozen tough carnival roughnecks. I grinned suddenly, and then, right behind my corner, I saw somebody else. It was Mantry, the big guy I fought several times. He lifted a hand and waved to me, grinning from ear to ear. Friends? Gosh, I had lots of friends.

Yet, in that minute, I looked for Marge. No, there was no love in me for her, but I felt sorry for the girl. I caught her eye, and she was looking at me. She started to look away, but I waved to her, and smiled. She looked startled, and when the bell rang I got a glimpse of her again, and there were tears in her eyes.

Van Ludlow wasn't looking at tears in anybody's eyes. He came out fast and clipped me with a right that rang all the bells in my head. I didn't have to look to see who these bells were tolling for. So I got off the canvas, accepted a steamy left hand to get close and began putting some oomph into some short arm punches into his middle.

He ripped into me but I rolled away, and he busted me again, and then I shoved him away and clipped him. His legs turned to rubber and I turned his head with a left and set Mary Ann for the payoff. He knew it was coming, but the guy was still trying; he jerked away and let one come down the main line.

That one got sidetracked about a flicker away from my chin, but the right that I let go, with all the payoff riding on it, didn't. It took him coming in and he let go everything and went down on his face so hard you'd have thought they'd dropped him from the roof!

A cloud of resin dust floated up and I walked back to my corner. I leaned on the ropes feeling happy and good, and then the referee came over and lifted my right and the crowd went even crazier than they had already. The referee let go my hand, and when I started to take a bow, I bowed all the way to the canvas, hit it, and passed out cold.

Only for a minute, though. They doused me with water and picked me up. They were still working over Van Ludlow. I walked across toward his corner, writing shallow figure S's with my feet, and put my hand on his shoulder.

Duck Miller was standing there with his cigar in his face and he looked at me through the smoke.

"Hi, champ," he said.

I stopped and looked at him. "I won some dough on this fight," I said. "I'm going to open a poolroom, gym, and bowling alley in Zenith. I need a manager. Want the job?"

He looked at me, and something came into his eyes that told me Duck Miller had all I'd ever believed he had.

"Sure," he said, "I'd never work for a better guy!"

I walked back to my corner then, and Buck Farley slipped my robe around my shoulders and I crawled through the ropes. I walked back to the dressing room. Pop was leaning on the table with a roll of bills you could carry in a wheelbarrow. "I bet some money," he said happily, "a lot of money!" He looked up. "And you," he said, "even if you never get a middleweight title fight, you are still going to be a wealthy young man!"

When I came out, Marge was sitting in the canary convertible.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"Yes." She looked at me.

"If it isn't," I said, "let me know."

She sat there looking at me, and then she said, "I guess I made a mistake."

"No," I said, "you weren't brave enough to take a chance."

All the way back to the ranch I could hear Pop and Buck talking about how the G-men came in and picked Lanning up for some gyp deal on his income tax, an investigation stirred up by my stories from the West. But I wasn't thinking of that.

I was thinking that in the morning I'd slip on some old brogans and a sweater to take a walk over the hills. I'd watch the grass shifting in the wind, see the brown specks of my cattle in the meadows, the blunt angles of my corrals and barns. I was thinking that after the frozen winters in Korea, the blood and sweat of the ring—choking down that smoky air... how I loved and hated it—I had a chance with something that was really mine. I had no one to fight anymore.

