

The Phantom Fighter

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

Published: 1942



He never even cracked a smile. Just walked in and said, "Mr. Sullivan, I want a fight with Dick Abro."

Now Dick Abro was one of the four or five best heavyweights in the racket and who this kid was I didn't know. What I did know was that if he rated a fight with anybody even half so good as Dick Abro, his name would have been in every news sheet in the country.

At first I thought the guy was a nut. Then I took another look, and whatever else you can say, the kid had all his buttons. He was a tall, broad-shouldered youngster with a shock of wavy brown hair and a nice smile. He looked fit, too, his weight was around one eighty. And Abro tipped the beam at a plenty tough two hundred.

"Listen, kid," I said, shoving my hat back on my head and pointing all four fingers at him. "I never saw you before. But if you were twice as good as you think you are, you still wouldn't want any part of Dick Abro."

“Mr. Sullivan,” he said seriously, “I can beat him. I can beat him any day, and if you get me the fight, you can lay your money he will go out in the third round, flatter than ten pancakes.”

What would you have said? I looked at this youngster, and then I got up. When I thought of that wide, brown face and flat nose of Abro’s, and those two big fists ahead of his powerful shoulders, it made me sick to think what would happen to this kid.

“Don’t be a sap!” I said, hard-boiled. “Abro would slap you dizzy in half a round! Whatever gave you the idea you could take that guy?”

“You’d laugh if I told you,” he said quite matter-of-factly.

“I’m laughing now,” I said. “You come in here asking for a fight with Abro. You’re nuts!”

His face turned red, and I felt sorry for the kid. He was a nice-looking boy, and he did look like a fighter, at that.

“Okay,” I said. “You tell me. What made you think you could lick Abro?”

“I dreamed it.”

You could have knocked me down with an axe. He dreamed it! I backed up and sat down again. Then, I looked up to see if he was still there, and he was.

“It’s like this, Mr. Sullivan,” he said seriously. “I know it sounds goofy, but I dream about all my fights before I have them. Whenever I get a fight, I just train and never think about it. Then, a couple of nights before the fight, I dream it. Then I get in the ring and fight like I did in the dream, and I always win.”

Well, I thought if Dick Abro ever smacked this lad for a row of channel buoys, he’d do a lot of dreaming before he came to. Still, there’s a lot of nuts around the fight game. At best, and it’s the grandest game in the world, it’s a screwy one. Funny things happen. So I tipped back in my chair and looked up at him, rolling a quid of chewing gum in my jaws.

“Yeah? Who’d you ever lick?”

“Con Patrick, in two rounds. Beetle Kelly in four, Tommy Keegan in three. Then I beat a half dozen fellows before I started to dream my fights.”

I knew these boys he mentioned. At least, I knew one of them personally and two by their records. None of them were boys you could beat by shadowboxing.

“When’d you have this pipe about Abro?” I asked.

“About a week ago. I went to see the pictures of his fight with the champ. Then, two weeks ago I saw him knock out Soapy Moore. Then I dreamed about fighting him. In the dream, I knocked him out with a right hook in the middle of the third.”

I got up. “You got some gym stuff?” I asked.

He nodded. “I thought maybe you’d want to see me box. Doc Harrigan down in Copper City told me to see you soon as I arrived.”

“Harrigan, eh?” I rolled that around with my gum a few times. Whatever else Harrigan might be, and he was crooked enough so he couldn’t even play a game of solitaire without trying to cheat without catching himself at it, he did know fighters.

We walked down to the gym, and I looked around. There were a couple of Filipinos in the ring, and I watched them. They were sure slinging leather. That man Sambo they tell about in the Bible who killed ten thousand Filipinos with the jawbone of an ass must have framed the deal. Those boys can battle. Then, I saw

Pete McCloskey punching the heavy bag. I caught his eye and motioned him over. The kid was in the dressing room changing clothes.

"Listen, Pete," I said. "You want that six-round special with Gomez?"

"I sure do, Finny," he said. "I need it bad."

"Okay, I'll fix it up. But you got to do me a favor. I got a kid coming out on the floor in a couple of minutes, and I want to see if he any good. Watch your step with him, but feel him out, see?"

"I get it. You don't want him killed, just bruised a little, eh?" he said.

The kid came out and shadowboxed a couple of rounds to warm up. Pete was looking him over, and he wasn't seeing anything to feel happy about. The kid was fast, and he used both hands. Of course, many a bum looks pretty hot shadowboxing.

When they got in the ring, the kid, who told me his name was Kip Morgan, walked over and shook hands with Pete. Then he went back to his corner, and I rang the bell.

McCloskey came out in a shell, tried a left that the kid went away from, and then bored in suddenly and slammed a wicked right to the heart. I looked to see Morgan go down, but he didn't even draw a breath. He just stepped around, and then, all of a sudden, his left flashed out in four of the snappiest, shortest jabs I ever saw. Pete tried to slide under it, but that left followed him like the head of a snake. Then, suddenly, Pete and I saw that opening over the heart again. And when I saw what happened I was glad I was outside the ring.

McCloskey hadn't liked those lefts a bit, so when he saw those open ribs again, he uncorked his right with the works on it. The next thing I knew, Pete was flat on his shoulders with his feet still in the air. They fell with a thump, and I walked over to the edge of the ring. Pete McCloskey was out for the afternoon, his face resting against the canvas in a state of calm repose. I couldn't bear to disturb him.

That night I dropped in on Bid Kerney. Race Malone, the sportswriter, was sitting with him. We talked around a while, and then I put it up to him.

"What you doing with Abro?" I asked. "Got anybody for him?"

"Abro?" Bid shrugged. "Heck, no. McCall wants the champ, an' Blucher wants McCall. There ain't a kid in sight I could stick in there that could go long enough to make it look good. Even if I knew one, he wouldn't fight him."

"What's in it?" I asked. "You make it ten grand, and I got a guy for you."

Race looked up, grinning. "For ten grand I have, too. Me! I'd go in there with him for ten grand. But how long would I last?"

"This kid'll beat Abro," I said coolly, peeling the paper off a couple of sticks of gum casually as I could make it. "He'll stop him."

"You nuts?" Kerney sneered. "Who is he?"

"Name of Morgan, Kip Morgan. From over at Copper City. Stopped Patrick the other night. Got ten straight kayos. Be fighting the champ in a year."

When I talked it up so offhand, they began wondering. I could see Malone smelling a story, and Bid was interested.

"But nobody knows him!" Bid protested. "Copper City's just a mill town. A good enough place, but too far away."

“Okay,” I said, getting up. “Stick him in there with Charlie Gomez. But after he beats Gomez, it’ll cost you more.”

“If he beats him, it’ll be worth it!” Bid snapped. “Okay, make it the last Friday this month. That gives you two weeks.”

When I walked out of there, I was feeling good. There would be three grand in this, anyway, and forty percent of that was a nice cut these days. Secretly, I was wondering how I could work it to make the kid win. He had some stuff. I’d seen that when he was in there with Pete, and while Gomez was tough, there was a chance. Pete was fighting Tommy Gomez, Charlie’s brother, so he would be training. That took care of the sparring partner angle.

Suddenly, I thought of Doc Van Schendel. He was an old Dutchman, from Amsterdam, and a few years before I’d done him a favor. We’d met here and there around town several times, and had a few bottles of beer together. He called himself a psychiatrist, and in his office one time, I noticed some books on dreams, on psychology, and stuff like that. Me, I don’t know a thing about that dope, but it struck me as a good idea to see the Doc.

He was in, with several books on the table, and he was writing something down on a sheet of paper. He leaned back and took off his glasses.

“Hallo, hallo, mein Freund! Sit yourself down and talk mit an oldt man!” he said.

“Listen, Doc, I want to ask you a question. Here’s the lay.” Then I went ahead and told him the whole story. He didn’t say much, just leaned back with his fingertips together, nodding his head from time to time. Finally, when I’d finished, he leaned toward me.

“Interesting, very, very interesting! You see, it iss the subconscious at work! He boxes a lot, this young man. He sees these men fight. All the time, he iss asking, ‘How would I fight him?’ Then the subconscious takes what it knows of the fighter, and what it knows of boxing, undt solves the problem!”

He shrugged.

“Some man t’ink of gomplicated mathematical problem. They go to sleep, undt wake up mit the answer! It iss the subconscious! The subconscious mindt, always at vork vile ve sleep!”

Race Malone was short of copy, and he took a liking to Kip Morgan so we drove over together. When we got down to the arena, the night of the fight, it was jammed to the doors. Charlie Gomez was a rugged, hard-hitting heavy with a lot of stuff. If the kid could get over him, we were in the money. Race grabbed a seat behind our corner and the kid and I headed for the changing rooms.

“How is it, Kip?” I asked him. I was bandaging his hands, and he sat there watching me, absently.

“It’s okay. I dreamed about the fight last night!”

“Yeah?” I said cautiously. I wasn’t very sold on this dream stuff. “How’d you do?”

“Stopped him in the second.”

We got our call then, and it wasn't until I was crawling through the ropes after him that it struck me what a sweet setup this was. It was too late to get to a bookie, but looking down I saw Race Malone looking up at us.

"Want a bet?" I asked him, grinning. "I'll name the round."

Race grinned.

"You must think the kid's a phenom," he said. "All right. You name the round, and I'll lay you three to one you're wrong!"

"Make it the second," I said. "I don't want it over too soon."

"Okay," Race grinned. "For two hundred? It's a cinch at any odds."

I gulped. I'd been figuring on a five spot, a fin, like I always bet. That's why they called me Finny Sullivan. But if I backed down, he'd kid me for crawfishing. "Sure," I said, trying to look cheerful, "two yards against your six."

The bell sounded, and Gomez came out fast. He snapped a short left hook to the kid's head, and it jerked back a good two inches. Then, before the kid could see, Charlie was inside, slamming away at Morgan's ribs with both hands. The kid pushed the Portugee off and ripped his eye with a left, hooked a short right to the head, and then Gomez caught him with a long overhand right, and the kid sailed halfway across the ring and hit the canvas on his tail!

I grabbed the edge of the ring and ground my teeth. I wasn't thinking of my two yards either, although I could afford to lose two yards as much as I could afford to lose an eye, but I was thinking of that shot at Abro and what a sap I was to get taken in on a dream fighter. Second round, eh? Phooey!

But the kid made it to one knee at seven and glanced at me. He needed rest, but there wasn't time, so I waved him up. He straightened up, and Gomez charged across the ring throwing a wild left that missed by a hairsbreadth, and then the kid was inside, hanging on for dear life!

Gomez shook him loose, ripped both hands into the kid's heaving belly, then jerked a wicked right chop to the chin. The kid toppled over on the canvas. I was sick enough to stop it, but the referee had to do that, so I just sat there, watching that game youngster crawl to his feet. Gomez rushed again, took a glancing left to the face that split his eye some more, and then whipped a nasty right to the body. They were in a clinch with the kid hanging on when the bell rang.

Race Malone looked over at me shaking his head.

"I never thought I'd be smart enough to take you for two hundred, Finny," he said. "At that, I hate to see the kid lose."

So did I.

"Listen, Kip," I said. "You ain't got a chance. I'm going to call the referee over and stop it!"

He jerked up on the stool.

"No you won't!" he snapped. "I'm winning in the next round! I've been ready for this. I knew it was going to happen! Now watch!"

The bell rang, and the kid walked out fast. Charlie Gomez was serious. He was all set to win by a kayo this round, and he knew what it meant. It meant he'd be back in the big money again.

He snapped a vicious left hook, but it missed, and then that flashy left jab of the kid's spotted him in the mouth. I'm telling you, there never was one like it. Bang-

bang-bang-bang! Just like a trip-hammer, and then a jolting right to the body that wrenched a gasp from Charlie, and had the fans yelling like crazy men.

Leaping in, Gomez swung a volley of punches with both hands so fast you could hardly see them travel, but the kid slid away, and then stepped back and nearly tore Charlie's head loose with a wicked left hook. Then came a crashing right that knocked Gomez into the ropes, and then a left that laid Charlie's cheek open like it had been cut with a knife!

With Gomez streaming blood, and the fans howling like madmen, the kid stepped in coolly, measured the Portugee with a nice straight left, and fired his right—right down the groove! The referee could have counted to five thousand.

I was trembling so I could hardly control myself, but I calmly turned around to Race.

"I'll take that six yards, son," I told him, in a bored voice. "And I'll treat you to a feed and beer."

Race paid me carefully. Then he looked up.

"Honest to Roosevelt, Finny," he said, "what kind of dope did you slip that kid? It sure snapped him out of it. He acted there for a while like he was in a dream!"

Maybe you don't think I grinned then.

"Maybe he was, Palsy, maybe he was!"

The next two months slipped by like another kind of dream. Morgan trained hard, and I spent a lot of time with him. If Doc Van Schendel was right, and I was betting he was, there wasn't any hocus-pocus about the kid's fighting. It was just that he had some stuff, a good fighting brain, and he thought fighting so much that his subconscious mind had got to planning his battles.

It isn't so wild as it sounds. You know how a guy scraps, and what to use against him. Dempsey was a rusher who liked to get in close and work there, so Tunney made him fight at long range and then tied him up in the clinches. Every fighter is a sucker for something, and a guy who learns the angles can usually work out a way to beat the other fellow.

The kid had a lot on the ball, and I wanted him to have more. In those two months while we were building up for Abro, I gave him plenty of schooling. I knew he had the old moxie. He was fast, and he could hit. This dream business was just so much gravy. I'll admit there was an angle that bothered me, but I didn't mention it to the kid. I was afraid he'd get to thinking about it, and it would ruin him. What if he dreamed of losing?

Now wasn't that something? The day I first thought of that wasn't a happy one. But I kept my mouth shut. Race Malone was around a good deal. He liked the kid, and then there was a chance the promoter was slipping him a little geetus on the side for playing Morgan up for the Abro fight. With the sensational win over Gomez and the ten kayos behind him, not much was needed. If it had been, his fight with Cob Bennett would have been enough.

Cob had rated among the first ten for six or seven years. He was a battle-scarred veteran, whose face was seamed with scar tissue and who knew his way around inside the ropes. A lot of fans liked him, and they all knew he could fight.

About a month after the Gomez scrap, I took the kid over to Pittsburgh and stuck him in there with Bennett. It lasted a little over two minutes.

If I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget that Abro fight. The preliminaries had been a series of bitter, hard-fought scraps, and the way things shaped up, anything but a regular brannigan was going to be sort of an anticlimax.

Dick Abro crawled through the ropes, looking tough as always. When he came over to our corner, I confess I got a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. Sometimes I think maybe I ain't cut out for this racket. There was going to be four grand in this fight for me, yet when I thought of this kid going out there with that gorilla, I got a qualm or two. I'll admit I didn't let them queer my chances for that four grand, because four grand will buy a lot of onions, but nevertheless, I was feeling plenty sorry for Kip.

Abro grinned.

"Howya, keed?"

He had a face like a stone wall, all heavy bones and skin like leather. "You lika da tough going, huh?"

He gripped Morgan's hand and then spun on his toe and walked back across the ring, easy on his feet as a ballet dancer, and him weighing in at two-oh-eight for this brawl.

When the bell sounded, the kid took his time. Abro wasn't in any hurry either. His big brown shoulders worked easily, his head lowered just enough. Most people figured Abro as a tough slugger, but a guy doesn't get as far as he did without knowing a thing or two. Abro feinted and landed a light left. Then he tried another left but the kid stepped away. Dick walked in, feinted again and jerked a short right hook to the ribs. He dug a hard left into the kid's belly, and then jerked it up to slam against his chin.

Abro was cool. He knew the kid was no bum and was watching his step. The kid's left shot out, twisting as it landed, and I saw Abro's head jerk. He stepped back then, and I could see that it jarred more than he'd expected. Abro shot a steaming left to the head, jerked a right to the chin, then pushed his head against Morgan's shoulder and started ripping punches into his body.

Morgan twisted away, flashed that left to Abro's face twice, making the big fellow blink. I could see his eyes sharpen, saw him move in. Then the kid dropped a short right on his chin, and Dick Abro sat down hard. The crowd came off their seats yelling, and Abro sprang up at the count of one, and slammed a vicious right to the kid's head.

Morgan staggered, and backed away, with Abro piling after him, both hands punching. Then Kip ripped up a short right uppercut, and Abro stopped dead in his tracks. Before he could recover, a sweeping left hook dropped him to the canvas. He was up at five, and working toward the kid cautiously.

But Morgan was ready and stepped in, his left ripping Abro's face like a spur, that short right beating a drumfire of punches into the bigger man's body. Abro staggered and seemed about to go down, but, as the kid stepped in, Dick fired a left at close quarters that set Morgan back on his heels.

Boring in, Abro knocked Morgan back into the ropes with a hard right. The kid was hurt. I could see him trying to cover up, trying to roll away from Abro, who

was set for the kill. Always dangerous when hurt, the big fellow had caught Kip just right.

Morgan backed away, desperately trying to hold Abro off with a wavering left. Just as Dick got to the kid with two hard wallops to the body, the bell rang.

"Take it easy, kid," I told him. "Don't slug with this guy. Box him and keep moving this round."

Abro came out fast for the next round, but the kid jabbed and stepped around, jabbed again and stepped around further. He missed with his right and took a stiff left to the ribs. Then Abro leaped in, splitting the kid's lip with a snappy left hook, and as the kid tried to jab, rammed a right into his belly with such force it brought a gasp from his lips. The kid tried to clinch, but Abro shook him off and floored him with a short right.

The kid was hurt bad. He got to his knees at five, and when the referee said nine, swayed to his feet. Dick walked in, hitching up his trunks, looking the kid over. He was a little too sure, and Kip was desperate.

He let go with a wild right swing that fairly sizzled. Abro tried to duck, jumped back desperately, but the kid lunged, and the punch slammed against Abro's ear! The big fellow went down with a crash. Thoroughly angered, he leaped to his feet, groggy with pain and rage, and sprang at the kid, swinging with both hands.

Toe-to-toe they stood and swapped it out. Tough as they come, and a wicked puncher, Dick Abro was fighting the fight of his life. He had to.

Ducking and weaving, swaying his big shoulders with every punch, his face set in grim lines, Kip Morgan was fighting like a champion. They were standing in the center of the ring, fighting like madmen, when the bell sounded. It took the referee, the timekeeper, and all the seconds to pry them apart.

Race Malone was battering away at his typewriter between rounds, and the kid sat there on his stool, grim as death. When the bell sounded, Abro looked bad. One eye was completely closed, the other cut. His lips were puffed and broken. I think everyone in the crowd that night sensed what was going to happen.

Abro rushed in and swung a left, but the kid slid inside, hooked short and hard with his left, and whipped a jolting, rib-loosening punch into the big man's body. Abro staggered, and his legs went loose. He tried to clinch, but the kid shook him off, took a left without flinching, then chopped a right hook to the chin that didn't travel a bit over six inches. Abro turned half around and dropped on his face, dead to the world.

Maybe you think I was happy. Well, I wasn't. The kid was suddenly one of the ranking heavies in the game, but me, I had worries. The more I thought of what might happen if the kid dreamt of losing, the more I worried. We were matched with Hans Blucher, a guy who had beaten Abro, had fought a draw with Deady McCall and been decisioned by the champ. Blucher, in a lot of ways, was one of the toughest boys in the game.

So I went to see Doc Van Schendel.

"Listen, Doc," I said. "Supposing that kid dreams of losing?"

Doc shrugged.

“Vell? Maybe hiss psychology is spoiled by it, yes? Maybe he t’ink these dreams iss always true. Probably he vill lose.”

“You’re a big help!” I said, and walked out. Leaving, I saw Race Malone.

“Hello,” he said. “What’s the matter? You going to a psychiatrist now? Nuts, are you? I always suspected it.”

“Aw, go lay an egg!” I said wittily, and walked away. If I’d looked back I’d have seen Race Malone going into the Doc’s office. But I had enough worries.

When I walked into the gym the kid was walloping the bag. He was listless, and his heels were dragging. So I walked over.

“What’s the matter?” I said. “Didn’t you get any rest last night?”

“Yeah, sure I did,” he growled. It wasn’t like the kid to be anything but cheerful.

“Listen,” I said. “Tell me the trouble. What’s on your mind?”

He hesitated, glancing around. Then he stepped closer.

“Last night I dreamed a fight,” he said slowly, “and I lost! I got knocked out...I think I’d been winning until then.”

I knew it! Nothing lasts. Everything goes haywire. A guy can’t get a good meal ticket but what he goes to dreaming bad fights.

“Yeah,” I said. “Who were you fighting?”

“That’s just the trouble,” he said. “I couldn’t see who it was! His face was all vague and bleary!”

I grinned, trying to pass it off, hoping he won’t worry. “That sounds like Pete McCloskey,” I said. “He’s got the only face I know of that’s vague and bleary.”

But the kid doesn’t even crack a smile; as if it wasn’t bad enough for him to dream of losing a fight, he has to go and dream of losing to somebody he can’t see!

If I knew who it was he was going to lose to, we’d never go near the guy. But as it was, there I stood with a losing fighter who didn’t know who he was going to lose to!

Blucher is the next guy we fight, and if we beat him, we get Deady McCall and then the champ. There’s too much at stake to take any chances. And I can see that dreaming about that knockout has got the kid worried. Every time he fights he’ll be in there under the handicap of knowing it’s coming and not being able to get out of it.

At best, this dreaming business is logical enough. But there’s a certain angle to it that runs into fatalism. The kid might just have found some weakness in his own defense, and thought about it until he got himself knocked out in his dreams.

Me, I don’t know a lot about such things, but I got to thinking. What if he got knocked out when he wasn’t fighting?

Pete McCloskey was punching the heavy bag, and when I looked at him, I got a flash of brains. Heck, what’s a manager good for if he can’t think?

“Listen, Pete...” I gave him the lowdown, and he nodded, grinning. After all, Morgan had knocked him so cold he’d have kept for years, and this was the only chance Pete would ever have to get even.

When they crawled into the ring for their afternoon workout, I chased the usual gang out. I gave Kip some tips on some new angles I wanted him to try. That

was the gag for having a secret workout, but I just didn't want them to see what's going to happen.

They were mixing it up in the third round of the workout, and like I told him, Pete was ready. I looked up at Kip and yelled. "Hey, Morgan!"

And when he turned to look at me, Pete let him have it. He took a full swing at the kid and caught him right on the button! Kip Morgan went out like a light.

But it was only for a half minute or so. He came out of it and sat up, shaking his head.

"What—what hit me?" he gasped.

"It was my fault, kid," I told him, and me feeling like a heel. "I yelled, an' Pete here had started a swing. He clouted you."

"Sure, I'm sorry, Kip," Pete broke in, and he looked it, too.

"That's okay." He got up, shaking his head to clear it of the effects of the punch. "No hard feelings."

"That's enough for today, anyway," I told him. "Let it go, and have a good workout tomorrow."

Morgan was crawling from the ring when suddenly he stopped, and his face brightened up.

"Hey, Finny!" He dropped to the floor and grabbed my arm. "I'm okay! You hear? I'm okay! That was the knockout. Now I'm in the clear."

"Yeah, sure. That's great," I told him.

But now, tell me a ghost story, I was still worried. One way or another the kid had convinced me. There might still be that knockout to think about—if there was really anything to it—but he could go in the ring without it hanging over him, anyway. He was in the clear now.

He was in the clear, but I wasn't. You can't be around a big, clean-looking kid like this Kip Morgan without liking him. He was easygoing and good-natured, but in the ring, he packed a wallop and never lacked for killer instinct. And me, Finny Sullivan, I was worried. Sooner or later the kid was going to get it, and I didn't want to be there. Some guys are all the better for a kayo, and maybe he would be. But they are always hard to take.

Kip was climbing into the ring the night of the Blucher fight when Race Malone reached over and caught me by the coat. He pulled me back and spoke confidentially.

"What's this dope about Morgan dreaming his fights? Before he fights 'em, I mean?"

"Where'd you get that stuff?" I asked. "Whoever heard of such a thing?"

Race grinned.

"Don't give me that. Doc Van Schendel let the kitten out of the bag. Come on, pal, give. This is a story."

"Can't you see I got a fight on?" I jerked a thumb toward the ring. "See you later."

Morgan went out fast in the first round. He was confident, and looked it. Blucher fainted and started to throw a right, but the kid faded away like a shadow. It was just like he was reading Blucher's mind. The German tried again, boring in

close, but for everything he tried, the kid had an answer. And Morgan kept that jarring, cutting left, making a mess of Blucher's features.

Honest to Roosevelt, it was just like he'd rehearsed it, and, of course, that's what he'd done. What the kid had, I was hoping, was a photographic memory. He'd see a guy fight a couple of times, and he'd remember how he got away from every punch, how he countered, and what he did under every condition. It was instinctive with him, like Young Griffo slipping punches. Tunney got the job done as thoroughly, only he did it by hard work and carefully studying an opponent.

There's only a certain number of ways of doing anything in the ring, and a fellow fighting all the time falls in habits of doing certain things at certain times. Morgan thought about that, remembered every move a man made, and knew what to do under any circumstance. It was a cinch. Or would be until he met some guy who crossed him up. Some of them you could never figure—like Harry Greb. He made up his own style each time and threw them from anywhere and everywhere.

Blucher stepped in, taking it cautiously, and hooked a light one to the ribs. The kid stabbed a left to the mouth, then another one. Blucher threw a right, and the kid beat him to the punch with a hard right to the heart. Then Morgan put his left twice to the face, and sank a wicked one into the solar plexus. Blucher backed away, covering up. Kip followed him, taking his time. Just before the bell rang, Morgan tried a right to the body and took another left hook.

Glancing down between rounds, I saw Race Malone looking at the kid with a funny gleam in his eye... which I didn't like. Put that dream stuff in the papers, and it would ruin the kid. They'd laugh him out of the ring.

The second round started fast. Morgan went out, then dropped into a crouch and knocked Blucher into the ropes with a terrific left hook that nearly tore his head off. Blucher bounded back and tried to get in close, but the kid danced away. Then he came back with that flashy left jab to Blucher's mouth, feinted a right to the heart, and left his head wide open.

Blucher bit, hook, line, and sinker. Desperate, he saw that opening and threw everything he had in the world on a wide left hook aimed for the kid's chin!

It was murder. Morgan had set the German right up by taking those other left hooks, and when that one came he was set. He stepped inside with a short right to the chin, and I'm a sun-kissed scenery-bum if Blucher's feet didn't leave the floor by six inches! Then he hit the canvas like somebody had dropped him off a building, and the kid never even looked down. He just turned and walked to his corner and picked up his towel. He knew Blucher was out.

The payoff came in the morning. I crawled out of the hay rubbing my eyes and walked to the door. When I picked up my paper, it opened my eyes quick enough.

DREAM FIGHTER KAYOS BLUCHER
Morgan Fights According to Dream Plan.
Blucher Completely Out-Classed.

I walked back inside and read the rest of it. Race had been getting around. He'd picked up a statement from Van Schendel, whom I'd not asked to keep still, and then had found two or three other guys who knew something about it. Here and there the kid had mentioned it before I took him over. Then Race went down the

line of his fights and showed how the kid had won—and how I'd called the round on Charlie Gomez.

It made a swell yarn. There was no question about that. I could see papers all over the country eating it up. Good stuff, if you just wanted to make a couple of bucks, but the wrong kind of publicity for a champ.

Champ? Yes, that's what I figured. I'd been figuring on it ever since the kid took Gomez. This dream stuff didn't mean a thing to me. I was banking on the kid's boxing and his punch. And down in the corner of the sports sheet I saw something else...

DEADY MCCALL TO RETIRE Contender to Marry

That left Kip Morgan the leading contender for the world's heavyweight title. That put Kip in line for a fight for the world's championship, and it had to be within ninety days. I knew the champ, Steve Kendall, had signed with Bid Kerney to defend his title. And Bid had a contract that made the kid his for one more fight in that same period. We had the champ, and we had Bid, and there was no getting away from that.

That dream stuff built the fight up beautifully, and everything went fine until about four days before the battle. I dropped around to the dressing room after the kid's workout. He was sharp, ready to go. I'd never seen him look better. His body was hard as iron, and he'd browned to a beautiful golden tint that had all the girls in camp oohing and aahing around. But he looked worried.

"What's the matter, Kip?" I asked him. "Working too hard?"

He shook his head.

"No. I'm worried though. I slept like a log last night—and never dreamed a bit! I was just dead from the time I hit the bed until I woke up this morning."

"So what?" I said, shrugging. "You got four nights yet."

He nodded, gloomily. We talked awhile, and then I went outside. Stig Martin was a hanger-on around the fight game I'd picked up to rub the kid. Maybe he knew his way around too well. But he was an A-1 rubber. He grinned at me.

"How's the kid? Dreaming any?"

"Listen, Duck-Bill," I told him. "You lay off that stuff, see? That dream business is a lot of hooey, get me? Now forget it."

I turned away, but when I got to the door, I glanced back. Stig was standing there with a sarcastic grin on his face that I didn't like. I was about to go back and fire him when Race Malone came up. So I postponed it. Which only goes to show what a sap I was.

Race took me back to town to get some publicity shots of me signing articles to guarantee that the kid would defend his title against Kendall if he beat him, and it was the next morning before I saw Morgan or Stig again. The minute I saw the kid, I knew something was haywire.

"What's eatin' you?" I asked him, gripping his arm. "You feel all right, don't you?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "Only I haven't dreamed about this fight. I dreamed last night, but it was all a confused mess where nothing got through. Only sometimes I'd think about punches, and I'd hear them saying how I was getting beat. That I was blood all over, that I couldn't take it. Over and over again."

I frowned, pushing my hat back on my head. Stig Martin was standing on the edge of the porch, smoking a cigarette. He was grinning. It made me sore.

"Listen, you," I said. "Take a walk. I'm sick of seeing your face around. Walk around someplace and keep out of the way."

He pouted, and walked off. Something didn't smell right about this deal.

"Listen, kid," I said. "You never mentioned hearing voices before. Before it was all like a motion picture, you said."

He nodded.

"I know. But now I don't see anything. I just hear a lot of confused stuff about me getting whipped."

I could see he was worried. His eyes looked hollow, and his face was a little yellow. I decided to get hold of Doc Van Schendel.

When I drove back to the camp with Van Schendel the next day, I saw the kid sitting on the steps, twisting his hands and cracking his knuckles nervously. His face was drawn, and he looked bad. Just as we got out of the car, I heard Stig Martin speak to him.

"What of it, kid? Everybody has to lose sometime. You're young. You couldn't expect to take the belt the first time out."

"What's that?" I snapped at him. "Where'd you get that stuff, talking to my fighter like that? Listen, you tramp! Morgan's going to knock the champ loose from his buttons, an' don't forget it!"

Stig got up, sneering.

"Yeah? Maybe. But not if he doesn't have the right dream. He's got to be ready for that...got to be ready to lose. If he goes in without his dream, he's going to get beat to a pulp! Right, Kip? For your own good, I suggest you duck this one."

Well, I haven't hit a guy since I used to hustle pool around the waterfront, but I uncorked that one with the works on it. Stig Martin hit the ground all in one bunch. He wasn't out, but he had a lot of teeth that were. He got up and stumbled away, mumbling through mashed lips, and I walked over to the kid, rubbing my knuckles, and hustled him inside. I came out to get Doc and found him looking at Stig's retreating back.

"Who iss dese man?" he asked, curiously. "I see him talking mit Steve Kendall undt Mister Johnson."

"What?" I yelled. "You saw Stig—!" I backed up and sat down cussing myself for a sap. I should have known Martin was a plant. And here I was feeling so good about getting the champ, worrying about dreams and everything, that I let something like that happen. Why, if Doc hadn't seen—

"Hey, wait a minute!" I shouted, scrambling up again. "Where did you see Kendall and his pilot?"

Doc turned, looking at me over his glasses. "Vhy, they was oop to my office. They were asking me questions about zose articles in de newspaper. Vhy, iss it nodt all right?"

Then I just let go everything and sat down. I sat there with the Doc staring at me, kind of puzzled. Finally, I get up courage enough to take it.

"All right," I said. "Tell me. Tell me all about it. What did they ask you, and what did you tell them?"

"They asking me about dreams, undt what would happen if he don't dream at all."

The Doc rambled on into a lot of words I didn't understand, and a lot of talk that was all a whistle in the wind to me, and if Race Malone hadn't come up I never would have got it figured out.

"It's simple enough," Race said. "They went to the Doc to find some way of getting your boy's goat. They decided to keep him from dreaming, and they found out dope might do it. If you look into it, I'll bet you find Stig Martin has been slipping the kid something to make him sleep, and sleep heavily."

Then the Doc had told them some people were subject to suggestion when asleep or doped, so (I found this out later) Stig evidently gave the kid a riding all night a couple of times, telling him over and over that he'd lose, that he didn't have a chance. He kept it up even when the kid was awake, and they were together.

After listening to all of this Race shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a lousy stunt, and the nuttiest thing I ever heard of, but it'll make a swell story."

I got up.

"Listen," I said, trying to be calm. "If one word of this ever makes the paper I'll start packing a heater for you, and the first time I see you I'll cut you down to the curb, get me? Those stories of yours spilled the beans in the first place!"

Race promised to say nothing until after the fight, and I walked inside with Doc Van Schendel to look the kid over. We didn't let on about Stig, Kendall, or Johnson. I had a better idea in mind. I asked the Doc to stick around the camp with us, and, feeling guilty for his part in all this, he agreed to help.

When we went into town for the fight, I was feeling much happier. The kid was looking pretty good and rarin' to go, with a nervousness that's just right and natural.

I was still pretty nervous myself. This fight wasn't going to be a cinch, by no means. But when the kid crawled into the ring, I was in a much better frame of mind than I had been some days before. Stig Martin contributed his little share to my happiness, too. When I saw him in the hall near the dressing room, I licked my lips.

He didn't see me until I was within arm's length of him, and then it was too late to duck. I slammed him into the wall, then hit him again. He slid down the wall and sat there, blood streaming from his nose.

A big cop looked around the corner, came over, frowning.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"I am," I returned cheerfully, and went.

It will be a long time before they have a crowd like that again, and a long time before they see two heavyweights put on such a fight. When we walked down

to the ring, the ballpark was ablaze with lights, and there was a huge crowd stretching back into the darkness, a sea of faces that made you feel lost. Then the lights went out, and there was only the intensely white light over the ring, and the low murmur of voices.

Kip Morgan was wearing a blue silk dressing gown, and he crawled into the ring, walking quickly over to the resin box. The champ took his time. I saw him take in the kid's nervousness with a sleepy smile. Then he rubbed his feet slowly in the resin and walked back to his corner.

Then I was talking to the kid, trying to quiet him down, trying to get him settled when I was so jittery that a tap on the shoulder would have set me screaming. I'd been handling scrappers a long time, but this was my first championship battle, and there, across the ring, was the Big Fellow, the world's heavyweight champion himself, the guy we'd been reading about, and seeing in the newsreels. And here was this kid that I'd brought up from the bottom, the kid who was going out there to fight that guy.

I'm telling you, it was something. I saw the champ slip off his robe and noticed that hard brown body, the thick, sloping shoulders, the slabs of muscle around his arms, watched him dancing lightly on his toes, moving his arms high. He was a fighter, every inch of him.

We got our instructions, and both men stared down at the canvas. I whispered a few last-minute instructions to the kid, tossed his robe and towel to a second, then dropped down beside the ring. Morgan was standing up there, all alone now. He had it all ahead of him in the loneliest place in the world. Across the ring the champ was sucking at his mouthpiece, and dancing lightly on his toes. When the bell sounded you could hear it ring out over the whole crowd, and then those guys were moving in on each other.

Did you ever notice how small those gloves look at a time like that? How that dull red leather seems barely to cover their big hands? I did, and I saw the kid moving out, his fists ready. They tried lefts, and both landed lightly. The kid tried another. He was still nervous. I could see that. The champ stepped away from it, looking him over. Then he feinted, but the kid stepped back. He wasn't fooled. The champ moved in, and the crowd watched like they were in a trance. They all knew something was going to happen. They had a hunch, but they weren't hurrying it.

Suddenly, the champ stepped in fast, and his left raked the kid's eye, and a short, wicked right drummed against the kid's ribs. The champ bored in, slamming both hands to the head, then drilled a right to the body. The kid jabbed and walked around him, taking a hard right. The champ landed another right. He was confident, but taking his time.

The kid jabbed twice, fast. One left flickered against the champ's eye, the other went into his mouth—hard. The champ slipped under another left and slammed a wicked right to the ribs and I saw the kid's mouth come open.

Then the champ was really working. He drilled both hands to the body, straightened up and let the kid have a left hook on the chin. The kid's head rolled with the punch and Morgan jarred the champ with a short right. They were sparring in mid-ring at the bell.

The second opened with the champ slipping a left and I could see the gleam of grease on his cheekbones as he came in close. A sharp left jab stabbed Morgan

twice in the mouth, and he stepped away with a trickle of blood showing. The champ came in again, jabbed, and the kid crossed a right over the jab that knocked the champ back on his heels.

Like a tiger the kid tore in, hooking both hands to the body. A hard right drove the champ into a neutral corner, and the two of them swapped it out there, punching like demons, their faces set and bloody. When they broke, I saw both were bleeding, the champ from an eye, and the kid from the mouth.

They met in mid-ring for the third and started to swap it out, neither of them taking a back step. Then the champ straightened up, and his right came whistling down the groove. Instinctively, I ducked—but the kid didn't.

Then I was hanging on to the edge of the ring and praying or swearing or something and the kid was lying out there on the canvas, as still as the dead. I was wishing he never saw a ring when the referee said four, and the kid gathered his knees under him. Then the referee said five and the kid got one foot on the floor. At six he was trying to get up and couldn't make it. At eight, he did, and then the champ came out to wind it all up.

Behind me someone said, "There he goes!" and then Kip wavered somehow and managed to slip the left, and before the right cross landed he was in a clinch. The champ pounded the kid's ribs in close, but when they broke the kid came back fast with a hard left hook, then another, and another and another!

The champ was staggering! Kip walked in, slammed a hard right to the head and took a wicked one in return. I saw a bloody streak where the champ's mouth should be, and the kid jerked a short left hook to the chin, and whipped up a steaming right uppercut that snapped the champ's head back.

Morgan kept boring in, his lips drawn in a thin line. All the sleepiness was gone from the champ. Morgan stabbed a left and then crossed a right that caught the champ flush on the nose as he came in. Out behind me the crowd was a thundering roar, and the kid was weaving and hooking, slamming punch after punch to the champion's head and body, but taking a wicked battering in return.

Somewhere a bell rang, and they were still fighting when the seconds rushed in to drag them back to their corners.

The kid was hot. He wouldn't sit down. He stood there, shaking his seconds off, swaying on his feet from side to side, his hands working and his feet shuffling. I was seeing something I never saw before, for if ever fighting instinct had a man, it had Kip Morgan.

When the bell rang I saw the champ come off his stool and trot to the center of the ring, and then the kid cut loose with a sweeping right that sent him crashing into the ropes. Before he could get off them, the kid was in there pounding away with both hands in a blur of punches that no man could evade or hope to stem.

Kendall whipped a right to the kid's body, but he might as well have slugged the side of a boiler, for the kid never slowed up. The champion was whipped, and he knew it. You could see in his face there was only one thing he wanted, and that was out of there. But he clinched and hung on, his eyes glazed, his face a bloody mask, his mouth hanging open as he gasped for breath.

When the bell rang for the fifth, not a man in the house could speak above a whisper. Worn and battered by the fury of watching the fight, they sat numb and staring as the kid walked out there, his face set, his hands ready. There was

nothing of the killing fury about him now, and he moved in like a machine, that left stabbing, stabbing, stabbing.

The champ gamely tried to fight back, throwing a hard right that lost itself on air. Then a left set him back on his heels, and as he reversed desperately to regain his balance, the kid stepped back, coolly letting him recover. Then his right shot out and the champion came facedown to the blood-smeared canvas—out cold!

Mister, that was a fight.

Race cornered me first thing.

“Give, Finny,” he said, all excited. “What did you do to the kid?”

I smiled.

“Nothing much, Race. I only used the same method Stig Martin used. With Doc’s help, we doped him that night, kept repeating over and over that he’d win the fight, that it was surefire for him! The next day he was all pepped up! The Doc and I worked on him after that, putting him into the right kind of physical shape. So how could you stop him in the ring tonight?”

“What a story!” breathed Race. “What a—”

“What a nothing!” I snapped. “No more stories from you, Race Malone. The dream fighter business is going to be all over, anyhow, Race. I’m going to tell Morgan just what happened to him! How long do you think he’s going to believe in this dream business after that?”

“I’ll bet you ten to one it’ll knock his dreams out of the ring!”
