

THAT'S WHERE THE MONEY IS

The old man and the kid entered Capone's castle. It crawled with cops, lawyers and divekeepers; doubtful politicians gathered around, as did the women about whom there was no doubt at all. The Metropole Hotel at 2300 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, was gangdom central and into its opulent lobby limped Pop Foster with the wide-eyed Jimmy McLarnin at his heels. Pop and Jimmy had asked for a quiet, family hotel. Tall, grizzled and nearly bald, Foster was decked out in a newly-acquired suit of hand-me-downs while Jimmy's clothes were new, cheap and gaudy. Pop's clothes often looked as though they hadn't been pressed for six months – and often they hadn't been. They stayed at the Metropole for a week before discovering that the Capones had as many as fifty rooms on the top two heavily-guarded floors. They had asked for a family hotel after all. Gamblers and hookers took private elevators at all hours of the day and night. Pop couldn't figure out how everybody was so well dressed as if they were really rich. Capone occupied rooms 409 and 410, overlooking the boulevard. 'Not too serious a coincidence for a visiting schoolteacher or clergyman, but the kind of

thing that can ruin a boxer who hasn't much left but a reputation for honesty,' thought Jimmy. 'We didn't know Capone owned the Metropole Hotel, but when we found out we got out of there pretty fast.'

Jimmy didn't want to go to Chicago. Before leaving LA, he asked Pop whether it was true that he was through and the old man shook his head. If he'd been getting hurt or losing fight after fight, Pop would have made him quit. That had always been the clear understanding between them. Pop said he was through in Los Angeles and through in San Francisco, but that was only a local disease. 'You gave them so many good fights they can't make allowances for the bad ones. You boxed like a man when you were sixteen. They can't understand why you should be boxing like a boy when you're nineteen.' So Pop bought a second-hand Buick and after breakfast one morning he got Jimmy into the car and they started out to see the country. Pop set off with the intention of driving to Chicago, but the Buick broke down in Juliet, Illinois, so they sold it and went on by train. Foster had wired Jim Mullen, Chicago's leading promoter, to ask if he could use Jimmy. The kid's record still looked all right on paper and Mullen offered them a match against a well-known fighter that Pop was sure his boy could lick. The other fighter's manager told Foster that no matter who won or lost it had to be clearly understood that nobody was going to get hurt. Pop promised that Jimmy would kill the other pug and the fight fell through. A replacement was drafted in. Jimmy was working out in a gymnasium in the Loop and knocked out a sparring partner. The replacement developed a severe cold overnight and that fight fell through too. Another

prospective opponent, Spug Myers, broke his left hand training so Mullen called for the Meriden junk man, Louis 'Kid' Kaplan, who used to be the featherweight champion of the world. Kaplan was stepping out of his class because of weight and was now a leading contender for Sammy Mandell's lightweight title. 'Offering me Kid Kaplan at that stage of my career was like throwing a drowning man a crowbar,' Jimmy recalled. 'From the time I started fighting until the time I finished I never ducked fighting anybody at or near my weight, but I was tempted to duck Kaplan. My instinct told me I could beat him but my reason told me I couldn't. Pop decided. He said I could win, and we took the fight.'

Kaplan looked like a fighter. A battered nose and brow divided a pair of beautifully cauliflowered ears. He was a short, stumpy lightweight with bulging forearms. Pop sent Jimmy out of the corner with his usual mantra of 'If he can't hit you he can't hurt you.' Jimmy walked across the ring and with the first punch of the fight Kid Kaplan broke his jaw. He was sent crashing to the canvas for the first time in his life. Jimmy had often wondered how it felt and here he was in a strange town looking along his legs and seeing his feet sticking out in front like tent pegs. An old-hand would have stayed down for nine but the nineteen-year-old was too startled to stay down. He got up right away and Kaplan battered him from ringpost to rope. The crowd bayed for a knockout but all Jimmy could hear was a buzzing in his ear and finally, the bell to finish the first.

Kaplan threw another big left in the second. A little longer this time and Jimmy saw it coming and moved to block it. Too late. There was a creak of soles in the resin and a dull, sodden

sound and Jimmy was falling and sinking. He came to after bouncing off the canvas. He felt all right, he blinked, realised that he had somehow managed to scramble to his knees and he could see Kaplan's black fighting shoes in the dust. Jimmy watched the referee toll one and regained his feet. Kaplan went for the finish but Jimmy went into close quarters and weathered another round. He didn't knock Jimmy down in the third but Kaplan hit him just as often as he had in the first two.

Jimmy was tired but far from gone as he sat in the corner. Between the first and second and the second and third rounds, Pop had told him to come up a little with his left, to shorten up with the right, to circle to Kaplan's left. Jimmy waited to hear what he'd say now. He sluiced a spongeful of water down his boy's face.

'Jimmy?' Pop said.

The water ran down Jimmy's chest.

'Yes, Pop?'

'Why don't *you* try hitting *him*?'

'Pop was and is a serious man,' Jimmy recalled. 'He knew there was nothing funny in this situation, either for me or for him. But I think that he sensed that we'd both been living with and eating with and sleeping with our troubles so long that it was time we quit taking them so much to heart. I was nowhere near doubling up with mirth at Pop's unprecedented wisecrack. But I went out for the next round feeling looser and more relaxed, less as though the world was going to stop going round if a guy named Kid Kaplan happened to beat a guy named Jimmy McLarnin.'

It was Kaplan's turn to crash to the canvas in the fourth. The

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customers were screaming. A right cross and Jimmy thought Kaplan would stay down but he was up at three with a puffed and bruised left eye and a face flushed with rage. Kaplan was in a bad way going to his corner at the end of the round. Now Kaplan was fighting angry. Jimmy hit him with a right in the fifth and he stayed down for nine. All through the sixth and the seventh Jimmy hit Kaplan the way he'd been hit in the first and second, but Kaplan wouldn't go down again. Jimmy got so tired hitting him that he could hardly lift his arms. 'After the seventh I was hoping he'd knock me down again, just so I could feel that beautiful, restful floor.' It was the prizefighter's deepest humiliation, falling out half conscious on the floor and not wanting to get up. 'There is an extortion of will beyond any of our measure in the exhaustion which comes upon a fighter in early rounds when he is already too tired to lift his arms or take advantage of openings there before him,' wrote Norman Mailer, 'there are all those rounds to go, contractions of torture, the lungs screaming into the dungeons of the soul, washing the throat with a hot bile that once belonged to the liver, the legs are going dead, the arms move but their motion is limp, one is straining into another will, breathing into the breath of another will as agonised as one's own.'

In the eighth Jimmy smashed a short right to the chin and Kaplan hit the floor. 'I backed into a neutral corner. I don't really believe that God cares who wins a boxing match, but I leaned against the ropes praying that Kid Kaplan wouldn't get up. He got up at three, with his hands hanging down around his knees and his eyes far away.' Jimmy hit him with another right and Kaplan crumpled in a heap and then turned over on his

back. He managed to regain his feet at nine. Kaplan's face and body were now taking their toll on Jimmy's hands. He felt the small bones going like snapping bits of chalk. Jimmy feinted Kaplan into position, braced himself and drove his broken right hand to Kaplan's jaw. The pain shot up Jimmy's arm and if that blow didn't do the trick he was beaten. But Kaplan just lay there, staring up at the arc lights as the referee tolled ten. Jimmy came upright again after his customary hand-spring and back flip gasping from the excruciating pain in his hands.

The knockout of Kaplan was a major upset and it changed Jimmy's life. 'Pop and I don't talk about fights much any more,' Jimmy said long after he'd retired. 'But when we do he tells me this was the best fight I ever fought. Maybe he's biased because he alone knows how low I was when it started and he alone knew how much winning it meant to me.' It made Jimmy, that fight. Many years later he admitted to his friend Ed Frayne at the *New York American*, that up to the time Kid Kaplan hit him on the chin he had never taken the fight game seriously. He didn't believe that he ever really had his heart in his work. 'They say an honest confession is good for the soul. I've done everything else I thought would be good for me, so I may as well finish the job,' said Jimmy. 'Those who have seen me in my California fights will understand what I mean. I remember one writer who gave me an unmerciful panning for one of my Los Angeles fights. He called me a poser, a looking-glass fighter and a pretty boy. I think he was a little harsh, but there was something in what he said. I wasn't really fighting. I was playing. I was having fun. I loved to make the other fellows miss, and then laugh at them. I wasn't doing myself justice, and, I realise now, I wasn't giving the fans

everything they deserved. I was amusing myself instead of entertaining them.’ Kaplan had woken Jimmy up. He had to fight that night.

When they got back to the hotel there was a message to call Jess McMahon in New York. McMahon worked for Tex Rickard, the promotional wizard who had invested \$100,000 in the old Madison Square Garden and the day he signed that lease, prizefighting was born as a respectable business. He had made history’s first million-dollar gates aboard the glamorous shoulders of Jack Dempsey and now he saw Jimmy as a miniature version of the Manassa Mauler, the man to bring the big gates back into boxing. It was the McLarnins of the ring, and the Dempseys, who made boxing the big drawing card it was in the roaring twenties, and if a promoter could pick up a McLarnin or a Dempsey, he was assured of netting himself a fortune. Rickard knew he had a mint in Jimmy and Tex wasn’t one to spurn an opportunity. New York was calling, but Pop wasn’t listening, at least not yet. One more like the Kaplan bout and Tex Rickard would be making the offers – instead of Pop going in, hat in hand, asking for a chance for his boy. The process of recreating Jimmy was pretty nearly completed and the difficult period when he was growing into a lightweight was over. He no longer had to keep down to an unnatural weight and he was punching better than ever, too. Pop was ready to take his creation to New York but only on his terms. Jess McMahon wanted them in New York right away.

‘Why?’ Pop asked.

‘McMahon wasn’t quite ready for a question as silly as that one,’ Jimmy recalled. ‘I suppose he knew as well as anybody else

that every boxer wanted to come to New York and that if there were any questions to be asked there was time to ask them when he got there. Pop cupped his hand over the telephone and relayed the answer to me. "They're not sure who they want us to fight. They'll give us a \$5,000 advance to come and talk terms." Jimmy sat on the edge of the bed. Less than six weeks previously he'd been fighting in San Diego for not much more than room and board. He had been told that if he wanted to fight in Los Angeles or San Francisco he'd virtually have to start from scratch. Just two hours past he'd earned \$3,000 for the hardest fight of his life. And now Pop was quibbling about taking \$5,000 just to go and say hello to a man.

'Thanks, Mr McMahan,' Pop said and hung up.

The McLarnins had always been very far from rich and seldom very far from poor. The first-born son had died in infancy and, as the oldest boy in the family, Jimmy did his bit. He sold papers from the time he was old enough to stake out a stand on the Vancouver docks and stubborn enough to hold on to it. 'I grew up believing that life was good, but that you had to work for what you got,' he recalled. Jimmy set himself the task of earning a dollar a day selling papers, but by the time he was out of school and got down to the docks there were some days when he wasn't taking more than twenty or thirty cents. So when he was just thirteen, Jimmy quit school. Strathcona School was well aware that its poorest pupils had to go out and hustle when they were young and when Jimmy explained to Mr Brown, the principal, that he wanted to quit to start earning money the man didn't give Jimmy a 'lot of high-minded arguments'. To the contrary, he got the boy a job running an elevator at the

Colombia Paper Company for \$8 a week.

Jimmy supplemented his income by fighting for pennies pitched in the ring at lodge hall smokers. It doesn't appear in his record and even Pop only got to hear about it a long time later, but Jimmy fought his first fight in public at a smoker at the Second Division Artillery Club on Vancouver's East Granville Street soon after his twelfth birthday. His opponent was a 'fat kid' named Clarence Robinson and they fought four rounds to a draw in what was billed as an amateur bout. But they weren't really amateur bouts and Jimmy got a dollar as his end of the purse. He walked to the club alone on a dark winter night. It was a long trek and near the end of it Jimmy had to cross the Georgia Street viaduct. It was long and dark and full of shadows. 'In every shadow I was sure there was a Chinaman hiding with a long curved knife,' Jimmy recalled. 'I don't remember much about the fight, but I do remember that I couldn't face that lonely walk back across the viaduct. The streetcar fare was six cents. I thought that it would be undignified to ask for six cents so I asked the promoter Rough-house Charley Burns, for a dime. He gave me a dollar and I was a pro before I held my first amateur card.'

The phone rang off and on all through the night after the Kaplan fight and when Jimmy got up the following day Pop announced that they were heading to Detroit to fight Billy Wallace. There was talk that the winner of the Wallace-McLarnin bout was in line for a shot at Sammy Mandell and the world lightweight title. Wallace had the best right hand in the lightweight division and he was a particularly fine drawing card in Detroit. He had written to Promoter Mullen in Chicago

offering to fight Mandell for nothing, because he knew he could beat the champion and all he wanted was the shot. Kid Kaplan had taught Jimmy what it felt like to be knocked down and he certainly didn't want any more of that business. Now they told him that Billy Wallace could hit harder than Kaplan ever thought of. That didn't sound so good, considering that Kaplan had almost turned the lights out. Jimmy didn't want any more lessons, so he went in there with his hands up, and didn't make any fool leads, just as Pop had told him back in the basement of Sam McLarnin's store in Vancouver.

'War ain't so much different than boxing in the way it's run,' Pop would say. 'What happens if they send the shock troops over before the gunners have laid down a barrage an' smashed the wire and the machine-gun nests? I'll tell you. The infantry jolly well gets the daylight shot out of them. If a good barrage is walkin' ahead and wiping out the opposition, the boys with the bayonets get a chance to do their stuff. It's like that in the ring, Jim. Go in there throwing that right and you'll have your block torn off you. Fix the way first with your left and then throw the right, like you did at Fields, and it's a different story. The fellow who can box and punch is going a long way, but the fellow who does nothing but punch usually has a short life in the ring, and it ain't always such a happy one, either.'

Jimmy took the referee's decision over Wallace after a furious ten-round bout. It was a tough fight, slam-bang; Wallace was a great little fighter and he made it tough for Jimmy all the way. They punched each other around the ring, but Jimmy was the more accurate and got the nod. The phone rang quite a bit more that night and the next morning Jimmy asked Pop what he was

doing. He told him that if he wanted to they could go to New York and fight Sid Terris for 25 per cent of the gate at Madison Square Garden.

It had been a profitable season and before taking on New York the adventurers went home to Vancouver once more with their bank accounts fattened. Jimmy bought himself a heavy insurance policy, subscribed discreetly to several charities and became a Rotarian. Now he was ready. Now he could go. There wasn't any use waiting any longer. New York, here I am! Bring on all your lightweights from Sammy Mandell down the line. It doesn't matter. James McLarnin was going to show his stuff! Boxing had struggled to gain legitimacy in the United States, but in 1920, state senator Jimmy Walker, the soon-to-be-mayor of New York City, established a state commission to govern the sport. Very quickly boxing ranked alongside baseball, horse racing and college football in the sports pantheon, and New York City emerged as the capital of pugilism. It was in New York that the money was to be found, that's where champions were made. Tex Rickard had drawn a dollar mark across the Eastern skyline and the old man and the kid made up their minds to head there. The sport entered its golden age thanks largely to the popularity of the heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey. After Dempsey lost the title to Gene Tunney, boxing, and New York in particular, waited for a new star to come along. And in January 1928 Jimmy McLarnin arrived.

Jimmy was perfect for New York. Not only was he an exciting fighter, a showman who knocked people out, he had the one ingredient that guaranteed a fighter popularity in New York – he was Irish. The tradition of prizefighting in America was that of

the Irish fighter, from John L. Sullivan onwards, and the vast majority of the crowds who flocked to the fights were Irish. But by the time Pop and Jimmy arrived in New York the pre-eminence of the Irish fighter was already over. A decade or so previously nearly every champion was either a pure-blooded Irishman or had a strain of Irish blood coursing through his veins. But as the Jews and then the Italians began to establish themselves in New York the Irish were slowly fading into the background in the sport in which they had reigned supreme. 'What is it then that has caused the Irish gladiators to bow to the Jews, the Italians and the Germans?' asked *The Ring*. 'Where in the past every great warrior of the squared circle was an Irishman, today the leading figures carry Irish names indicative of ring prowess, but the *nom-de-guerre* belongs either to an Italian or an Israelite.' A profitable myth grew up that 'Baby Face' McLarnin was a wild Irishman who loved to get in there and slug until somebody fell on his face – by preference the other fellow, but if not him, then Jimmy.

The greatest Irish fighter of his generation, arguably the last of the great fighting Irishmen, was about to take his bow in New York at a time when the sport was at the height of his popularity. Everybody now knew what Pop had known for years, Jimmy McLarnin was one of the most valuable commodities in all of sports. He was the new star in a giant industry that had an annual take of \$60,000,000. There were between five hundred and six hundred fight clubs in the United States, all operating under boxing commissions modelled after that which Jimmy Walker had created in New York. But wherever there was money to be made rackets grew to feed off the industry and boxing was

ripe for the taking. It had emerged out of the underworld, a sport for the depraved and the criminal, and there had always been corruption. But in the roaring twenties the scale of the corruption was taken to a whole new level. Boxing was no longer a sport, it was a business that involved millions of dollars. And where there were millions of dollars there were crooks. It was a time when the mobs owned the fighters and decisions were bought or exacted at the point of a gun. Managers and fighters were intimidated. Referees and judges were hounded. Gamblers and fixers had always been a part of prizefighting but in the years following Prohibition huge bootlegging profits had given the racketeers the cash to invest in their favourite game. As Charles J. McGuirk wrote in the *Washington Post* in 1929:

‘The fight game is like a great, rich, ring of gold embedded in a morass of filth and slime; or like a brave gallant ship whose bottom is so cluttered with barnacles that she fails to obey her helm and finds herself on the reef of oblivion.’

It was a time when boxing matches were selling out ballparks and attracting million-dollar gates. A well-engineered betting scam on a fixed fight could net millions – and the racketeers wanted in. One of Jimmy’s future opponents, Ruby Goldstein, wrote of how one East Side hood, Waxie Gordon, muscled in on him. According to Goldstein, very few boxers lacked a mob sponsor. ‘When you’re going big in New York, myths grow up around you and your name,’ Jimmy recalled. ‘The central myth, from which all the others sprang, is that the entire underworld and half-world of the world’s second largest city spent the best part of those nine years trying to separate me and my manager, Pop Foster, from our money or our honour, or both. If you

could believe half the stories they used to tell on Forty-Second Street and in the lobby of Madison Square Garden, hardly a day passed but I was urged to sell a fight, buy a gold brick or meet a blonde. As for Pop, he could scarcely turn round without somebody shoving a gun in his ribs and demanding that he go back to the sticks and leave somebody's mob to look after his fighter – or waving a sackful of thousand-dollar bills under his nose and suggesting that he arrange for me to take a quiet dive in the fifth.

'I don't say things like this couldn't have happened. There are burglars in any business and I'm afraid the boxing business has always had its full quota. There are – or were in my day – too many gangsters mixed up in boxing and too many gamblers betting too much money on boxing for anyone in his right mind to believe that boxing could be entirely honest.

'But I was never asked to throw a fight or offered a bribe, a threat or any other kind of inducement to throw a fight. Neither was Pop.

'We were told twice by managers of other fighters that their fighters couldn't fight me unless I'd agree not to try to knock them out. Once, in our early days in Oakland, before Pop and I had a written contract and all we had to eat was the crabs we could net in San Francisco Bay, one of those strangely prosperous little men who hang around gyms told me that if I'd get rid of Pop he'd see that I got all the steaks and all the fights I could handle.

'Another time, after things were going better for us, a "New York manager" wrote and urged me to quit wasting my time in the tall timber and come and get it where the going was good. Of course, he added, I would have to place myself in the hands of

somebody who knew the right people and had the necessary ins – meaning him.

‘None of these propositions got as far as the discussion stage. To the best of my knowledge they were the only propositions of a dishonest or doubtful nature that were ever put to either Pop or me. This wasn’t entirely an accident. It was Pop’s theory that nobody ever made a proposition without first finding somebody to listen to it – and Pop was a terrible listener.’

Pop suspected every Broadwayite on sight and he insisted that his mail came to him care of Tex Rickard at the Garden. ‘The boys tried to put the lug on Foster,’ wrote Andy Lytle, of the *Toronto Star*. ‘If he was “regular”, they told him, nothing was impossible. Jimmy could have lucrative matches. Money would roll in. Foster sniffed, grabbed his mail and walked swingingly away. “They’ll come to me,” he would say to his cronies: “they can’t do without the boy. ‘E packs them in. They’ll get no piece of us!”’

On arriving in New York Foster sought out an old friend from the Coast for advice. Ed Frayne had been a sports writer on the *Los Angeles Record* when Jimmy fought in California, but had moved East to work on the *New York American*. Frayne certainly helped ease Pop and his boy’s path into Gotham but the old man had some history that went much further back and that was considerably more important for a fighter and his manager trying to make it in New York. Pop knew that there was one man in New York who could ensure that he and Jimmy would be left alone whenever they were in town. It was time to hark back to the old days; to the bare-knuckle fights and the boxing booths, to Jack ‘Kid’ Berg and to Liverpool. It was time to call on Owney ‘The Killer’ Madden.