



Unprepared or Getting a Biff on the Jaw

By
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Sweet

What Happened One
Thursday Afternoon at
the Naval Training
Station.

"Not for Holland?"
"Say, what's Holland got to do wid me? I'm United States. I don't care nuttin' about Holland. But you can call me 'Dutch' if you want to. Everybody always has."
"You all shuah do pronounce wo'ds funny," finished Mississippi, shaking his head dubiously. "I caint fo'get the way that boy selling stuff on the train said 'Kain-tucky.'"

"Better be grabbing a blanket out of the corner over there before they're all gone," advised Grand Rapids. "Here, do you want to borrow my pipe awhile? Don't forget to give it back. That guy over there where we was examined wanted to know if I wanted to give my clothes to Cherry. Well, if Cherry can get any good out of those old overalls of mine he's welcome to 'em. On the farm where I worked last summer—"

But Grand Rapids was interrupted. Two sailors, a month old in the place, came bursting into the room. It's a peculiar thing about the naval station. A bunch may arrive long haired and uncertain of manner and pale of face, and a week later you wouldn't recognize the crowd at all. Daily baths and open air and exercise and regular hours, and maybe the removal of tonsils, does the trick. The two boys who burst into the room had become accustomed to their jersey caps and pea jackets. They fairly radiated physical fitness.

"Say," one of them called out as he shook off the snow, "where's that lightweight fighter you got over here in detention?"

At first it never occurred to me who they meant. I started looking about the room with the rest. Then I saw that every eye was upon me and I remembered with a start. The two visitors began sizing me up.

"Know who you're going to fight?" asked one of the veterans. "Guy over in '3-2' company."

"Is—he he much good?" I ventured, trying to display but languid interest.

"Pretty good man," came the answer. "Scrapped a little on the outside, I guess, and anxious to make a reputation. Just keep him from sailing into you first, that's all."

"You two boys been heah quite awhile," put in Mississippi, "how do you like it?"

"All depends on yourself whether you like it or not," retorted one of the old timers. "Do what you're told and you'll get along fine. Ain't any of you fellows from Moberly, Missouri, are ya? That's my town. No? Thought maybe there was. Well, so long."

And once more Minneapolis boys of Scandinavian descent took up their banter in 1917 slang with a couple of small town wise 18 year olds from Lake City, Iowa, who harmonized perfectly on the latest Hawaiian song. The lad from Omaha admitted his name was Taliferro and declared that if the rest of the bunch found difficulty in pronouncing it they could waive it for all he cared. A 17 year old French Canadian who had enlisted at Buffalo became reminiscent about history from having caught sight of the cannon near the gates as he had entered the grounds, and he figured the gun had probably been captured from the Spaniards at the battle of Bunker Hill. The world, from the "under 21" viewpoint, was a rosy place full of beckoning adventure. Regardless of names and complexions, all belonged to the same secret order—the Lodge of Youth.

All night long the sentinels brought in new batches of recruits, fresh from the trains, but tired from travel and bewildered and blinking. And at 5 o'clock in the morning—hours it seemed before dawn—the sentinel routed us out with a command of his own making—the command of "Here you come!"

Throughout the day we saw more and more of the other boys at a distance. I never saw such a husky looking bunch in my life. I kept wondering which one I was going to be pitted against. At 2 o'clock Turret Capt. Sharpe came and called me away from the group that was busy tying knots.

"It's about time now," he explained. "You say you've never boxed before? Well, I trust you ain't getting cold feet. Every fellow ought to know how to box. Come into the 'gym' here and I'll have a couple of the boys get your muscles in shape."



It was while I was being rubbed down that Kennedy, the athletic director, brought in my adversary. My adversary looked at me and I looked at him. I took particular note of how much of a bulge there was between his elbows and his shoulders. Maybe a certain viciousness crept unconsciously into my expression. Anyhow, the youth shook his head.

"I thought I wasn't going up against an old timer," he hedged.

"Look here," poohed Kennedy, sticking a finger in my stomach. "Nothing but useless fat. He may outweigh you, but you've got him skinned on height."

"Well, all right," the youth agreed. "I guess I can't any more than get killed." His name was Broderick, he told me. I don't know where he had enlisted from.

By the time we got to the ringside the flag decorated athletic hall was crowded. Seven hundred young seamen sat expectantly about the elevated roped off space and peered down from the balconies. I had always wondered how fighters felt during those minutes just before entering the ring. Always, I recalled, they gave out statements expressing confidence in the outcome. I didn't feel any such confidence. Mostly I felt uncertainty. With a towel over my shoulders, I took a seat alongside other bare shouldered youths and waited.

Suddenly the skyrocket yell of the navy broke forth and echoed back from the rafters. Things were about to start!

I found myself taking a peculiar interest in what—to me, at least—were preliminary bouts. All the contestants were clean limbed; their muscles rippled beneath glowing skin. Without exception they rushed toward each other, unafraid. When they received a bloody nose or a cut lip they wiped the crimson away with their gloved hands and kept right on in an effort to return the favor. Each one gave all that was in him. It was along about the third bout that Broderick, sitting some distance away, caught my eye and smiled. To me, it seemed not so much a smile of encouragement as a smile of prophecy. Well, it was too late to back out now.

No suspense can last forever. I had risen from my seat. I was crawling through the ropes. Broderick received a great cheer from his mates in "3-2" company as he took his corner of the ring, and from up in one corner of the balcony there came a faint response from my associates at detention. In their strangeness one couldn't expect them to find much voice; they may have been for me strong at that.

I sank into the chair in my corner and, at Kennedy's request, two youths leaped to the platform to act as my seconds. They seemed to know just what to do, for one of them began tying the not overly thick gloves on my hands and the other tightened the ropes back of me a bit so that I could let my arms

hang over them, just as I had seen real fighters do. I don't know who it was who told me it was time for me to go over and shake hands.

I saw Broderick advance to meet me, but he didn't strike—only held out his gloved hand and took mine and then walked back to his corner.

Then the gong rang!

It came before I had a chance to dope out my plan of campaign, before I was given any opportunity to spar—a stinging sensation on my nose where a glove flattened against fat. Then I got one in the mouth, the contact of my lower lip against my teeth being of such violence that the blood began to flow. It was the drawing of that blood that caused me to lose coolness and deliberation. I began a blind rush to get even as quickly as possible and it was then that I caught a jolt just under my jaw below the left ear. Half balanced as I was at the time, the jolt completely unbalanced me and I sprawled on all fours to the mat. To my annoyance I found upon regaining my feet that whenever I struck at Broderick he had a habit of dodging and permitting my glove to come in contact with nothing but thin air.

Broderick's company was cheering for him as we took our corners at the ringing of the gong, and the only consolation my seconds offered me was an impatient urging to make more use of my left hand. I didn't answer back, I was too much out of wind.

It was not until the next day and for the next three days that I was to discover a certain amount of pain in trying to work my jaw. It was not until then that I would find that one of the bones in my nose felt achy when I touched it, and that contact of anything hot against the cut open place inside my mouth would make me want to howl.

When the gong finally rang on the second and last round, Director Kennedy rushed to the center of the ring and, taking Broderick's right arm, held it aloft. It was the signal that he had somehow been chosen victor, and the members of "3-2" company went wild.

Low in spirits and completely exhausted physically, I started to leave the ring. My interest in everything was at a low ebb, but just as I was about to crawl out through the ropes I noticed that three blue jackets had pushed their way up to the platform and were surrounding Kennedy with much eagerness.

"What kind of a showing did I make, anyhow?" I asked of Kennedy, turning back just before getting off the platform.

"Here's your answer right here," laughed Kennedy. "I've already had three applicants more than willing to go against you at our bouts next Thursday."

THE lake wind was howling, the snow was whirling, and we recruits had our jacket collars turned up so high that it was necessary for our officer to shout in making himself heard.

"Is there any one among you fellows who just came in today who can box?" shouted the officer. "We hold our regular weekly boxing contests tomorrow afternoon and you new fellows have the privilege of sending over a man."

For a minute or two there was no response—just the howling of the wind and the swirling of the snow. Down at our end of the line we were all so new and strange. Finally, I held up my hand.

"How much do you weigh?" bellowed the instructor.

"A hundred and thirty pounds," I chattered.

"All right. Report to me tomorrow afternoon at 2 o'clock. Dismissed!"

And thus it happened that over in our quarters in "detention" the twenty others who during the day had been shipped to the Great Lakes Naval Training station took notice of me for the first time. Had I ever boxed professionally? Did I have any idea what I would be up against?

Already the transformation of the bunch had begun to take place. We had had our clothes turned over to charity or sent home, had been forced to scrub ourselves and be examined, and had been given haircuts and fitted out in uniforms. One of the youths who had shipped from Detroit came over to where I was sitting on a stack of ropes.

"I suppose you know what you're doing," he mused, "but before I went into it I'd want to know who I was going against. You're apt to get your teeth knocked out and your nose broke, and maybe an eye gouged, though it's none of my business. I'd give my first month's pay just for one cigaret."

"You've smoked your last cigaret for three years," commented the master of arms who was in charge of us. He had a year's service to his credit and was therefore a subject of awe. We hung on to his words, followed his every sophisticated movement. I think he was fully aware of the hero worship bestowed upon him.

"It's shuah cold up heah," ventured a gaunt Poplarville, Mississippi, youth, his expression wistful from still thinking about home and from puzzling about the unexplored future. "I come almost doin' some boxin' myself this mo'nin' when I went back on the train aftah crossing the Mason and Dixon line and saw those two buck niggahs sittin' right in the same train with white folks. It shuah got me fo' a minute."

"O, that's nothing," nippantly blurted a young husky from Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"The hell you preach!" flared Mississippi, a chip on his shoulder at once. He was bewildered, Mississippi was, angered, yet bewildered, for he could see Grand Rapids meant no harm. What a strange, cold country it was up north—traditions blurred, a joke for everything!

"You jes said a minit ago you was Dutch," flung Mississippi at Grand Rapids. His eyes were narrowed. He was hardly satisfied with the manner in which the argument had ended. "You took an oath, I reckon, that you would fight fo' yeah country."

"I'll tell the whole wide world I did," munched Grand Rapids.

