

BY THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *SHELBY 1923*

THE ST. PAUL PHANTOM

The Gibbons Brothers' Fight for Glory, Volume I



GERARD GIBBONS

Descendant & Historian

"A breathtaking, cinematic true story of underdogs that leaps off the page like *Seabiscuit* and *The Boys in the Boat*."—Biography.com

For *THE ST. PAUL PHANTOM* & the **FIGHT FOR GLORY** Trilogy

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— **Dr. John E. Lapham**, Former Deputy Commander,
U.S. Army Medical Materiel Agency

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— **Perry Bosmajian, PhD**, Former U.S. Dept. of Defense
Psychological Health Center of Excellence

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— **Enzo Villani**, CEO, AlphaTON Capital

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“We were deeply invested in the human, familial, and community dimensions of American culture you so powerfully explored. Our readers were magically transported to another time and place.”

— **David Hartley**, Organizer, The Glasgow Book Club (UK)

“This amazing story... could only be told by a descendant with a treasure trove of family archives and an exceptional talent as a master storyteller.”

— **Bob Mutter**, Former boxing writer, *Chicago Sun-Times*

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— **Bob Gibbons Jr.**, Grandson of the St. Paul Phantom

“I love this book! I didn’t expect to be drawn to boxing, but this is a compelling American tale! Great characters, unlikely friendships, an unforgettable love story!”

— **Dr. Susan Partovi**, Author of *Renegade MD*

ALSO BY GERARD GIBBONS

SHELBY 1923

*The Dempsey-Gibbons Fight for Glory
and a Little Montana Town's Impossible Dream*

THE ST. PAUL PHANTOM

The Gibbons Brothers' Fight for Glory, Volume I

A **FIGHT FOR GLORY** Story
An Authentic American Epic

*The true story of the legendary Gibbons Brothers,
Boxing's Shining Knights of the Ring*



THE ST. PAUL PHANTOM

The Gibbons Brothers' Fight for Glory, Volume I



GERARD GIBBONS



*Fight For Glory Press
Thousand Oaks, California*

THE ST. PAUL PHANTOM

The Gibbons Brothers' Fight for Glory, Volume I

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Disclaimer:

The St. Paul Phantom is a true story based on real events, populated by individuals who once lived and dreamed. With the ambition of telling the tale both completely and accurately, no effort was spared in researching and reviewing thousands of primary and secondary sources, many of them incredibly rare, including hundreds of documents and images never before seen. In every instance possible, dialogue and scenarios have been carried into the book with the utmost fidelity. In some minor cases, however, dates, locations, and/or quotes have been respectfully modified for narrative continuity. It is not the author's intention to disrespect the people or their history, but rather to convey the story—and the truth at its core—in a fashion most accessible to contemporary readers.

*For the champions, crowned and uncrowned...
And to the indomitable human spirit.*

*To my daughter
Clio Helena Gibbons
May your angels guide you*

EPIGRAPH

The Man in the Arena

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

—President Theodore Roosevelt,

Excerpt from *Citizenship in a Republic*

Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910

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THE ST. PAUL PHANTOM

The Gibbons Brothers' Fight for Glory, Volume I



GERARD GIBBONS

INTRODUCTION

*The heritage of the past is the seed
that brings forth the harvest of the future.*

—Wendell Phillips, *The Future of Western Culture* (1852)

My earliest memory is sitting on my grandfather Tommy's lap in the summer of 1960 at our Mojave Desert home in California. I'm four years old and, in his embrace, I'm feeling deeply safe, valued, and loved. His smile is a beacon; his eyes, tranquil pools of blue. A few months later, the extraordinary man, celebrated as a heavyweight boxer and crimefighter from Minnesota—immortalized by his 1923 world championship battle against Jack Dempsey—was gone.

Tommy Gibbons had been my father's hero and best friend, just as my dad was mine. A born storyteller, my father, Tommy Jr., recounted vivid tales of Tommy's exploits and those of his older brother, Mike, the legendary St. Paul Phantom. Together, they were the greatest boxing brothers of their time, acclaimed Hall of Famers, known as the "shining knights of the ring." They embodied the grit and grandeur of the early twentieth century, when boxing was not only the world's most popular entertainment, but a powerful looking glass into the soul of the American Dream.

Mike and Tommy rose to prominence during America's most transformational period, which was also the heart of boxing's Golden Age. Their journey is a kaleidoscope of history: from the howling desperation of old Ireland to St. Paul's mean streets, smoky gymnasiums, vaudeville theaters, and the grand boxing arenas of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Winnipeg, Chicago, Detroit, Portland, San Francisco, New Orleans, Havana, and London. They navigated race riots, presidential assassinations, suffragette marches, a global pandemic, and a world war, brushing shoulders with Plains Indians, the Golden Pens of sportswriting, jazz legends, movie stars, and gangsters. Crisscrossing the nation on locomotives to battle in the greatest sporting venues, they witnessed the vanishing Wild West, the rise of major cities, the advent of automobiles and aviation, the birth of radio and cinema, and the immigrant waves arriving on America's shores.

Yet I did not—or could not—grasp the depths of these truths until much later in life.

When my father passed in the 1990s, he left me a trove of sealed cardboard boxes and a large locked trunk that he said were family treasures—newspaper clippings, photographs, memoirs, diaries, and love letters. For decades, I carted these boxed relics from place to place, unsure of how to approach them. Then in 2016, driven by a longing to reconnect with my roots, I finally unsealed the vault, diving into one of the boxes.

The first item I took out was a photograph of my parents on their wedding day, just months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. It hit me like a blow from savage heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey himself, reopening the wound of my mother's sudden death when I was barely a teenager. Yet, through the pain, I felt a connection—a shared grief that spanned generations. My mother's loss mirrored my father's heartbreak when his mother—my grandfather Tommy's wife—died tragically in 1940.

This chain of love, loss, and resilience awakened something in me. I found myself reflecting on my dad's lifelong lessons about the primacy of God, the importance of family, and the value of service to community and country. In that moment of stillness, the stacked treasure summoned me with quiet force. Were there additional clues here as to who my family had really been? Was there wisdom to be gleaned? Maybe even hints as to how I might move forward in life? Or what family legacy I might pass on?

Empowered, I returned to the boxes and ventured forth to mine the great unknown, uncovering in the process the remarkable lives of my grandfather Tommy and great-uncle Mike.

I approached their forgotten past like a puzzle, using my craft as a storyteller, filmmaker, and researcher to reconstruct the narrative they left behind. It took years. Much longer than I ever imagined. Through investigation and interrogation of family legends in galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and memorabilia collections worldwide, I discovered not just pieces of history, but genuine wisdom: a roadmap for living with purpose today.

Mike and Tommy's story is a powerful testament to the indomitable human spirit. It's a story of perseverance and faith, of love tested and sacrifices made. It speaks to the quiet strength of humility, the grace of gratitude, and the redemptive power of forgiveness. At its heart, it's about chasing impossible dreams, forging bonds of brotherhood, and discovering

unlikely friendships. It's about heroism and patriotism, about uncommon valor in ordinary men, and the infinite, mysterious ways in which all our lives are bound together.

The Gibbons Brothers' journey reminds us that the fight to achieve dreams, large or small, is timeless. Their story is about walking through fire to become something greater.

As Ken Burns once said, the historian's work is to "wake the dead." He also reminded us that "God is in the details." I've found both to be true. The search for meaning isn't only about arriving at answers; it's the seeking itself that transforms us. As I delved into the lives and landscapes of a bygone era, something unexpected happened: the past began to feel deeply personal. I wasn't merely learning history; I was feeling it in my bones. The joy and labor of researching this book became an odyssey—several trips around the world, and somehow, a return home. Along the way, I connected more deeply to my family, gained new insight into myself, and deepened my understanding and appreciation of the larger American experience we all share.

Although I met my grandfather Tommy only once, my pursuit of history's deepest truths brought me so much closer to him, to his brother Mike, to all of my ancestors, and to their world—the heroes, villains, and everyday people who bravely fought the good fight for those they loved. I've come to respect, admire, and love them all.

The *Fight for Glory* franchise, beginning with this book, *The St. Paul Phantom*, is about the common struggles that unite us. A century ago, everyone had a dream, so everyone had a fight. Realizing these dreams, even the simplest ones, required overcoming astonishing adversity. If you were smart enough, tough enough, you might fulfill them. This was the rugged free spirit that built the Promised Land of America.

What all the people in this story endured transformed me. I hope it will inspire you as well. Humbly, I invite you to join me on this extraordinary American adventure.

Dr. Gerard Gibbons
Author • Historian

HISTORICAL CAST 1

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MIKE GIBBONS
The St. Paul Phantom



TOMMY GIBBONS
Mike's Kid Brother



THOMAS JOHN GIBBONS
Mike & Tommy's Father



GEORGE A. BARTON
Sportswriter/Referee
Mike's First Teacher



MAE WALSH GIBBONS
Mike's Wife



HELEN MOGA GIBBONS
Tommy's Wife



MARY BURKE GIBBONS
Mike & Tommy's Mother



FATHER JOHN DUNPHY
Pugilistic Priest/Mentor



DANIEL P. WALSH
Mae's Father/Fire Chief



MOCKY DOLAN
Mike's Uncle/Irish Rebel



MICHAEL "Q" CUSICK
Mike's Uncle/Irish Rebel



HUGH J. MCFAYDEN
Fire Captain/
Boxing Advocate



JOE GANS
The Old Master
Lightweight Champion



EDDIE REDDY
Mike's Childhood Pal/
First Manager



JACK JOHNSON
The Big Smoke
Heavyweight Champion



LUCILLE JOHNSON
Jack Johnson's Wife

HISTORICAL CAST 2



JOE BORRELL
Philadelphia Middleweight



SID BURNS
*British Middleweight
Title Claimant*



GEORGES CARPENTIER
*The Orchid Man
Aviator, French Air Force
Light Heavyweight*



HERB CATHERWOOD
*Mike's Childhood Bully/
Twin Cities Middleweight*



JIMMY CLABBY
*The Indiana Wasp
Welterweight*



JAMES J. CORBETT
*Gentleman Jim
Second Heavyweight
Champion*



LEACH CROSS
The Fighting Dentist



LES DARCY
*The Maitland Wonder
Australia's Middleweight &
Heavyweight Champion*



JACK DEMPSEY
The Manassa Mauler



BOB FITZSIMMONS
*Ruby Red
Three-Division Boxing
Champion*



HARRY GREB
The Pittsburgh Windmill



JIM JEFFRIES
*The Great White Hope
Former Heavyweight
Champion*



STANLEY KETCHEL
*The Michigan Assassin
Middleweight Champion*



SAM LANGFORD
*The Boston Bone Crusher
Uncrowned Champion*



BENNY LEONARD
*The Ghetto Wizard
Lightweight Champion*



BATTLING LEVINSKY
*Light Heavyweight
Champion*

HISTORICAL CAST 3

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WILLIE LEWIS
*New York Welterweight
& Middleweight*



AL MCCOY
Middleweight Champion



PACKEY MCFARLAND
*Pride of the Stockyards
Lightweight/Welterweight*



EDDIE MCGOORTY
*The Oshkosh Terror
Middleweight*



TERRY MCGOVERN
*Terrible Terry
Bantamweight &
Featherweight Champion*



SAM MCVEA
*The Oxnard Cyclone
California Heavyweight*



BILLY MISKE
*The St. Paul Thunderbolt/
Tommy's Childhood Bully*



BATTLING NELSON
*The Durable Dane
Lightweight Champion*



MIKE O'DOWD
*The Fighting Harp
St. Paul Middleweight*



JOHN L. SULLIVAN
*The Boston Strong Boy
First Heavyweight
Champion*



GENE TUNNEY
*The Fighting
Marine American
Expeditionary Force
Boxing Team*



JESS WILLARD
*The Cowboy Killer
Heavyweight*



NEWTON D. BAKER
U.S. Secretary of War



EUBIE BLAKE
*Jazz Pianist
Ragtime Pioneer &
Broadway Trailblazer*



NELLIE BLY
*Groundbreaking
Journalist/ Sportswriter,
New York World*



CHARLIE CHAPLIN
*Comic Genius of the
Silent Screen, Boxing Fan*

HISTORICAL CAST 4



TY COBB
Center Fielder,
Detroit Tigers "The Mike
Gibbons of Baseball"



MIKE COLLINS
Playboy/Fight Promoter



**SGT. RUDOLPH
"DOC" COOK**
Photographer, 313th Regiment
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



THE GODDESS DIANA
Boxing's Lucky Charm
Madison Square Garden



**PROFESSOR MIKE
DONOVAN**
Boxing Legend, Instructor,
Theodore Roosevelt's
Personal Trainer



**SIR ARTHUR
CONAN DOYLE**
Sherlock Holmes Creator,
Boxing Enthusiast



WYATT EARP
Old West Lawman of
O.K. Corral Shootout
Fame & Boxing Referee



ROBERT EDGREN
Sports Editor/Cartoonist
New York World



ALBERT EINSTEIN
Scientist/Physicist



JULIAN ELTINGE
America's Greatest
Female Impersonator



F. SCOTT FITZGERALD
Author, St. Paul Native



NAT FLEISCHER
Founding Editor,
The Ring Magazine



**WILLIAM
RANDOLPH HEARST**
Owner/Publisher,
New York Journal &
San Francisco Examiner



JAMES J. HILL
The Empire Builder
Great Northern Railroad



HARRY HOUDINI
World's Greatest
Escape Artist



**MOTHER
CELESTINE HOWARD**
St. Agatha's Conservatory of
Music & Art, Boxing Critic

HISTORICAL CAST 5

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EDDIE KANE
The Cardinal
Mike & Tommy's Manager



JACK KEARNS
The Beelzebub of Boxing
Boxing Manager



BAT MASTERSON
Old West Lawman/
Sportswriter New York
Morning Telegraph



DR. JOHN MOGA
Physician
Helen Gibbons' Brother



LEROY NEIMAN
Renowned Fine Artist
St. Paul Native



JOHN O'CONNOR
St. Paul Police Chief



JOHN J. PERSHING
"Black Jack"
U.S. General of the
Armies, American
Expeditionary Force



JOSEPH PULITZER
Publisher,
New York World



JEANNETTE RANKIN
Suffragette/
First Female Congressperson



GRANTLAND RICE
Sportswriter,
New York Tribune



TEX RICKARD
King of Boxing Promoters
Madison Square Garden



ROBERT L. RIPLEY
Sportswriter/Cartoonist,
San Francisco Bulletin



THEODORE ROOSEVELT
26th U.S. President,
Boxing Enthusiast



DAMON RUNYON
Sportswriter,
New York American



WOODROW WILSON
28th U.S. President



LEONARD WOOD
U.S. Army General
Chief of Staff

Old Saint Paul, Minnesota



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF SAINT PAUL
LOOKING WEST FROM DAYTON'S BLUFF



PART I

Bring Back the Good Old Days

(1850–1911)



THE COMET VOW

*Once again, the great pendulum is swinging into sight.
The comet has returned...*

—*New York Sun*, September 19, 1909



Dreaming at the end of the world

May 1910

Minnesota

Through the hush of midnight, Halley's Comet listens, as she always has. To the rumbling nightmare of a fledgling century. The glorious howl of the new age. The small prayers and giant wishes. The covenants and surrenderings. The anguish and the jubilation. The trembling hopes of humankind. The dreaming.

She's been gone for seventy-five years, but in the twentieth century's early hours—from a distance of 230 million miles, barnstorming the cosmos at 1,600 miles per minute, her luminescent tail extending over 60

million miles—Halley's Comet roars across the sky again and is greeted as apocalypse.

"Whenever Halley's Comet appeared, nations were at war, plagues decimated mankind, princes died, and floods raged," warns *The Hartford Courant* in 1910. "Is it any wonder we fear the end is nigh?"

Across the ages, the comet's arrival has heralded upheaval, chaos, and transformation—foretelling Caesar's assassination, Napoleon's downfall, the rampages of Genghis Khan's conquests, and the wrath of Attila the Hun. Even Mark Twain, the American oracle, seemed bound to the comet's fiery arc: born in the year of its 1835 appearance and departing with its return seventy-five years later.

This time, a U.S. president is shot dead, the earth quakes, reducing San Francisco to ruins, and the Wild West vanishes into legend; 30 million immigrants follow the glow of Lady Liberty's torch to the Promised Land; the color line is drawn, and the Ku Klux Klan rises. Suffragists demand liberation. Innovation explodes: airplanes, automobiles, Broadway, radio, motion pictures, jazz. White hopes. White plagues. Unsinkable ships making icy graves. A global pandemic. A world war. *Extra! Extra! Read all about it!*

Madame de Thèbes, the famed French psychic, proclaims, "The strain of the stars will be most severely felt in America. Its people will pay dearly for their prosperity."

The comet listens. She hears the wailing, the weeping, the sparks of hope. She watches the world teeter on the edge of something vast and unknowable. The dreaming, it can be heard.

*

Surging through darkness, Halley's Comet hurtles toward Earth. Faster than life... Faster than can be imagined. That's how the world changes.

Below the light divine, a hidden world. A pristine lake in Minnesota, shimmering in moonlight, oaks, elms, and silver maples lining the shore; a pair of western grebes breaking the silence with haunting calls. Somewhere in shadows, Dakota Sioux silently observe the world unfolding.

And in a clearing, two figures emerge: Mike and Tommy Gibbons. Mike's twenty-three, compact but statuesque, lithe, fast as wildfire. He's yet to dream a fistic trick he can't make real. Tommy, nineteen, is all muscle and

heart—strong, eager, and still learning. Not as fast as his big brother yet, but coming along. Always game—even when Mike’s glove clips his chin.

Their twilight movements are spectral at first: weightless, like ghosts gliding through mist. Then a flash of fists, footwork so fleet it’s almost impossible to see.

But this is not dancing; they are sparring.

Jab, jab, feint, sidestep, glide back, circle right, sidestep, advance, feint—pop!

“You good, Tommy Boy?” Mike asks. “Better keep those gloves up, or I’ll knock you to the moon!”

Tommy, shaking off the blow with a moonbeam grin, rolls his shoulders, pipes up, “Let’s go again, Mikey!”

Mike, always the teacher, always the showman, grins roguishly, all mischief and confidence.

And then another rapid combination—*pop, pop, pop!*—slipping straight through Tommy’s defenses, landing clean.

Cherub-faced, Tommy theatrically widens his eyes, throws his arms out, staggers, and collapses onto Mike as if slain by sudden gunfire. They tumble together to the ground, rolling onto their backs, laughing beneath the burning sky, captivated by the celestial wonder sweeping the stars above them.

*

“So, Mikey... you think this is really it?” Tommy asks, almost childlike. “The end of the world?”

“It’s a miracle you’ve survived this long, you gob!” Mike cracks. “They say a lot of things. They say the comet’s magic. Or science. A blessing or a curse. Wanna know how I see it?”

It doesn’t matter if Tommy wants to know; Mike’s going to tell him anyway.

“I think she’s our lucky star, Tommy Boy!” Mike cheers, leaping to his feet, his natural agility astonishing even in such simple movement. “It’s a sign! Our call to action!”

“Our *what?*”

Mike pulls Tommy to his feet, wraps an affectionate arm around his kid brother, drawing him close. “You and me, Tommy,” he says, gesturing grandly toward the comet and painting dreams in the starlight. “The first

brothers in history to be crowned champions of the world.”

“*Champions?*” asks Tommy, hushed, almost reverent.

With that, Mike’s already gone, a cannonball unleashed, disappearing into the woods in a trail of laughter. With an uncertain smile, Tommy looks up at the comet again, shrugs, then bursts into motion, giving chase to his brother. It’s something he does all the time.

*

By autumn of 1910, the light above the world has vanished again into deeper darkness. “The comet came, the comet went,” writes the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. “And this old Earth is no worse, no better, and no wiser.”

This is not, strictly speaking, true.

The world, always ending, but never done, *is* changed. In 1910, the comet’s light has shifted what could happen, clarified what will be, moved to commence a timeless tale. No longer in the sky, the blazing light has attached itself to the terrestrial plane. To the shadowy byways of St. Paul, Minnesota. To the boxing ring. To these two brothers and their impossible dream.

FROGTOWN HUSTLE

*The easy road is over, for in this swarming hive,
Those who can take a beating are those who will survive.*

—Grantland Rice, *The Final Answer* (1955)



Running from the Devil in the Saintry City

1904

St. Paul, Minnesota

Mike Gibbons, always moving. Fast. Thinking too much, even when he shouldn't. Only sixteen years old, he's always been like this, and already knows: time is short.

Often, Mike is fast enough. Tonight, though, his jaw's already swelling. His upper lip is split open, gore trickling down his chin.

Mike's pale, scrawny, small for his age, and Irish to boot. He has no power, so he's gotta be fast. He's spent his entire childhood trying to dodge neighborhood punks—especially the English ones, intent on carrying the

centuries-old war with Ireland to a new continent.

On the streets of St. Paul, there remains fierce prejudice against the Irish, often expressed in fisticuffs. When the Protestant boys from Minneapolis stalk into town, after chasing locomotives across Stone Arch Bridge that spans the Mississippi River, things get bloody even faster.

All year long, Mike has been a punching bag for one of these hoods: Herb Catherwood, the eighteen-year-old, bare-knuckled bully, the English welder's son with a particular affinity for tormenting Irish boys. If their surname rhymes with "ribbons," all the better.

Tonight, Catherwood's already bloodied his knuckles on Mike's ashen face. Folding over to catch his breath, Mike glances up at his kid brother, Tommy, twelve, who trails him everywhere, like a well-stitched shadow. *I'll always keep him safe*, Mike vowed the night Tommy was born. Sometimes he wishes he hadn't.

Mike and Tommy are always on the lookout for Catherwood. When their late-afternoon shifts at the railyard wrap, they soldier swiftly every night to their special meeting place—the hilltop Indian burial grounds that overlook St. Paul. From there, safety in numbers, they walk home together, keenly scanning the path for danger. The brothers have already lapped the city twice tonight, trying to slip the hellhound nipping at their heels.

Goddammit, Mike snarls to himself, spitting out a mouthful of blood. *I've had enough!*

*

If a St. Paul kid really wants to wrestle the Devil, Frogtown's the place.

From University Avenue on the south, Lake Como to the north, Stone Arch Bridge to the west, Rice Street on the east, the railyard along the river, and all the way over to Minnehaha, Frogtown is where St. Paul's underclass makes its home—the Irish Catholic immigrants, thugs, pugs, dubs, newsies, orphans, and desperados. The have-nots.

Most of the Frogtown boys take swings at each other from time to time. Some lose teeth. Others, only pride.

"If you were a kid on the streets (back then), you'd box, you'd fight, and some kids were naturals," writes famed American fine artist LeRoy Neiman, who grew up in the neighborhood. "They all had fighters' faces, and they were all mean, desperate bastards... trying to claw their ways

out of the mean streets. It was either beat your opponent, or (duck and cover all the time).”

It’s called Frogtown because, when the swampy marshland was first settled by European immigrants in the seventeenth century, the evenings were never silent, but full with the crescendoing serenade of a thousand croaking creatures.

Sure, they’re building up Rice Street with a sleek row of grocers, meat markets, lunch counters, candy shops, haberdashers, and hardware stores, but Frogtown will always be at the bottom of every hill in St. Paul. The basin, the valley, the lowest of the low.

It’s where Mike Gibbons lives. Where he’s from, like his father’s from County Mayo. But it’s not who he is. At least that’s what he tries to believe.

*

Together, the brothers race through the city, dodging Catherwood, doing their best to avoid run-ins with the menagerie of other local ruffians. They pass dozens of lakes, rise up and over St. Paul’s seven hills. Mike and Tommy linger a moment at the foot of Summit Avenue, a posh, exclusive boulevard of palaces and mansions that line the city’s northern bluff, overlooking the silvery Mississippi River.

On this street reside the Sainly City’s most privileged residents: fledgling author Sinclair Lewis, restless, red-haired, and rippling with an observational curiosity and creative power that soon propel him to literary fame and a Nobel Prize; F. Scott Fitzgerald, only eight years old, trying his hand at short stories, weighed down by his father’s booze-fueled cycle of getting rich and going bust; and James J. Hill, the Great Northern railroad magnate, whose access to unpublished Lewis and Clark maps of the western territories allowed him to avoid the Rocky Mountains and other geographical challenges as he connects the northern Midwest with the East and West Coasts by rail. In 1904, Hill—the Empire Builder, they call him—is one of the world’s wealthiest men, worth \$63 million (or roughly \$2 billion, adjusted for inflation).

Summit Avenue is its own world. Or it feels that way to Mike. Like a place he would never leave, if he could only ever be there at all.

“Growing up, we Irish boys looked at that world from the bottom

up,” Mike writes years later. “Our lives were aimless and dream-laden. We had very little, and every last one of us wanted more. It seemed as if those who lived on Summit had it all.”

*

“Hey, Mikey, I think we lost him!” Tommy says, looking around. “By the way, where we going anyway?”

In the distance, the clanging bell of the Selby Avenue electric streetcar fast approaches. Scanning the rails, Mike’s hatching an idea. As the wood-sided streetcar careens toward the brothers, steel wheels screeching over metal tracks, headlights blazing, Mike, shifting his weight from foot to foot, gauges the oncoming trolley’s velocity.

“This one’s all about timing, Tommy Boy!” Mike says, focused on the streetcar. He grabs his kid brother tightly by one hand, counting softly under his breath. “Three... two... *jump!*”

As the vehicle barrels by, Mike hooks an elbow around a metal support beam at the streetcar’s rear. Tugged from his feet by the vehicle’s speed and power, Mike holds on to Tommy with all his might, pulling his kid brother to safety. Avoiding the conductor’s sightlines, the breathless brothers drop out of sight, riding the streetcar’s bumper, holding their feet just above the concrete as it rushes by.

For another mile, Mike and Tommy ride like this. One of the last free rides St. Paul ever surrenders.

*

Dropping off the back of the streetcar undetected, small in the towering city, they arrive at their destination.

Here, the waterfront section of Downtown St. Paul: a maze of steamboat docks and freight warehouses, the sprawling Union Depot, nerve center for a dozen rail lines. Streetcars clatter in every direction. Half the town looks worn-out and hungover, like it’s been there forever and mostly regretted it. The other half—fresh-faced businesses with Romanesque towers, dark red brick with sandstone detailing: a three-story drugstore, a law office, a bank, a midsize opera house—is barely born. In another month, it will look different again. Lowertown, they call it.

It’s booming tonight. Hustle and flow. Mike and Tommy advance toward the pandemonium surrounding a flat-roofed, brick and steel build-

ing, three stories tall with wall-sized windows. St. Paul's Amateur Athletic Club.

This, the reason. The mission. The grand adventure and main event.

In the evening's river mist, the brick edifice is surrounded by a growing crowd. The migration is clear: every man's making his way to the Athletic Club's secret rooftop nook.

Around the building's perimeter, a dozen St. Paul coppers keep one hand firmly on their billy clubs, and pass a cigarette back and forth with the other.

"What *is* this, Mikey?" Tommy asks.

"Look up," Mike says, pointing toward the darkened club's roof where a few jittery men peer anxiously down from fire escapes.

"What's going on?"

"The rest of my life," Mike says. "*Maybe...*"

FALL FROM GRACE

*If thine is the glory,
then mine must be the shame.*

—Leonard Cohen, “*You Want It Darker*” (2016)



Crashing the most dangerous game

1904

Seven days and six nights a week, Amateur Athletic Club is a cherished, “respectable” establishment in the St. Paul cityscape. For three full floors, the club is bona fide, traditional—swimming pool and lounge, weights, mats, much of the gear handed-down from ritzier professional clubs uptown. Every Thursday evening, the club hosts free, family-friendly showcases of its star pupils—acrobats, fencers, wrestlers. Priests and politicians brag far and wide of the club’s great civic value, for its wholesome spread of Physical Culture and Muscular Christianity.

On the seventh night, however—Tuesdays—the Club’s activities move

to the rooftop. No one publicly discusses Tuesday nights, but attendance doubles, even with wives and children forbidden. This is where the real action occurs—the secret society of fighters and their fans.

The first rule of fight club has always, apparently, been: *We do not talk about fight club.*

*

Winded, the brothers are bumped and shoved by fight fans, spun around and dizzy, as they move toward the Athletic Club. Here come the coppers, half of them to uphold the law, the other half paid off by promoters to respond—slowly enough for the highest-profile guests to escape—should trouble arise.

Mike swivels his head, seeking an out, looking for options, bolting around a corner with Tommy at his side. Behind the Athletic Club, Mike grabs a drainpipe, shimmies up the side of the building. Tommy follows suit. Pulling themselves onto the rooftop, they stay low, hiding behind a row of tall wooden barrels.

“If you’re small in this world, Tommy Boy, you’re always wrong,” Mike whispers to his kid brother. “That doesn’t mean you always have to lose.”

*

It’s a moonless October night, and George Arthur Barton is stepping into the Athletic Club’s rooftop boxing ring. Only nineteen years old, he is the evening’s widely respected referee, or third man in the ring. A year ago, straight out of high school, he was crowned sportswriter at the *Minneapolis Daily News*, taking charge of two full pages of sporting columns, interviews, play-by-play reports, and editorial cartoons.

Though barely of age, Barton’s already a veteran—a lightweight, five feet six inches tall and 133 pounds, sharp, fluid in movement, a shark with livewire eyes. As a boxer, he’s a soft-shoe specialist with a dandy pop, fast, hot, grim to his purpose. His YMCA class in the fistic arts is always packed with the poor boys of St. Paul, eager to elevate their skills of demolishing anything for a chance at something better.

He’s dubbed Kid Barton. Some call him “the glorious little fella” because he’s so tiny and universally loved. Fighters and fans alike rely on him for unbiased officiating in the ring and crackerjack reportage on the sports page. In the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Barton’s word is gospel.

"I do not envy a professional boxing referee's job," writes boxing historian Mike Silver. "Split second decisions must sometimes be made. The life of the athlete is in his hands. A wrong call during a boxing match can lead to severe injury, or worse. Mere seconds can mean the difference between life and death. If a boxing referee wants to sleep well at night, his mantra should be 'better to stop a fight too soon than too late.'"

It's all about timing.

*

In St. Paul fistic circles, Barton is law and order. But he is also an outlaw.

In Minnesota and thirty-seven other states, boxing's been illegal for decades, so the Twin Cities' fight game has gone underground with "sneak fights" held on river barges, in basements, barns, clearings in the woods, construction sites, railroad tracks at midnight, illuminated by engine headlights, and downtown rooftops.

Purses are modest, with a \$100 victory considered a banner day. Battles are hush-hush, promoted only by word of mouth. Women are not allowed. Sometimes several hundred men are at ringside. Penalties for organizing, attending, or participating in such "sneak fights" are stiff: a \$1,000 fine, one to five years in jail.

"When the fight was done, it was done, and the respectable world took over once again," Barton remembers. "Afterward, all evidence of two men at war was wiped clean from the world—scrubbed and vanished."

To George Barton, breaking the law is worth the risk. Working hard labor jobs since the age of nine, Barton has already tried everything else: busboy, newsie, butcher's apprentice, factory twine-weaver. Summers, Barton worked eleven-hour shifts, six days a week packing tea leaves in a windowless warehouse on Third and Jackson, wearing a mask packed with a wet sponge to keep from inhaling tea dust and other gateways to tuberculosis.

The brutality of the straight and narrow path. The crush of still being broke.

Barton yearns for more. In the shadowland of boxing, he finds it. For "sneak fights," he's earning five bucks for every battle he referees. For "exhibition bouts," showcases for St. Paul's well-to-do in local theaters, with the full blessing of Police Chief John O'Connor and his force, Barton

makes triple that.

“Whether you were a boxer or a brawler back then, if you took a fight for money, you’d already broken the law,” Barton writes years later in his autobiography, *My Lifetime in Sports*. “It was in this atmosphere of the hunted lawbreaker that we cut our pugilistic eyeteeth, and it almost ruined our lives.”

*

A light rain falls over the frenzied crowd. They cheer at the sight of local hero Barton, his damp shirt clinging to him like a straitjacket, mop of raven hair heavy with precipitation, and mist-kissed face, handsome and unscarred, glowing in the amber light of a dozen oil lamps.

The mob of men—the banker and railman, grocer and barber, grifter, pharmacist, pastor, farmer, and clerk, the husbands, fathers, and sons—wade through the hushed slick of cash and wagering, swaddled in the curt, tart fragrance of kerosene, haloed by sweet and pungent plumes of cigar smoke rising against the threatening sky.

Tonight, packed tight and deep on the rooftop of the Amateur Athletic Club, 450 men are getting away with a “sneak fight” through a legal loophole. For months, the club has courted the favor of Police Chief O’Connor, contributing lavishly to his “personal charity.” In return, the crooked copper agrees to look the other way under two simple conditions: no victor may be declared in the ring, and the boxing must appear “civilized.” O’Connor has amassed staggering wealth through similar arrangements with other criminal enterprises in the Saintly City, from gangsters and bootleggers to brothels and gambling dens. In time, St. Paul earns a notorious reputation as “the vacation spot of the criminal underworld.”

*

Mike and Tommy Gibbons, wide-eyed, catch their first glimpse of Barton—focused, brow furrowed, rolling up the sleeves amid the dim, veiled current of imminent danger. The fluttery crush of men at ringside cheer riotously.

The evening’s main event: five three-minute rounds, Minneapolis banger Jimmy Potts versus Chicago smasher Kid Braun. It won’t go that long.

Round one is a fistic tango from first bell, ninety-five seconds of footwork and head games. Come hither, then back the hell up. The fighters,

feeling each other out. Measuring, it's called. Suddenly, Potts unleashes a triplet of blows.

"The spectators," reports the *St. Paul Globe*, "howled for joy at the sound of the thudding mitts against unprotected bodies."

The combatants, tumbling into the clinch. Barton, gliding into the tangle of limbs and heavy breathing, carving the brawlers apart. Manners in check and ring rules obeyed, the fight goes on for one-minute more, then the bell.

Between rounds, Barton catches his breath, lifts his eyes for a moment to the soft rain, looks out at the city, lamplit streets and riverboats on the Mississippi. He imagines he sees Katherine's house there in the distance, the beautiful girl he hopes to marry.

Turning back to the ring, Barton spies movement in the corner, behind the stack of large shipping crates.

Mike and Tommy, caught in Barton's gaze, freeze helplessly in place.

Barton understands the world—its rules and workarounds, what it is to be a kid—and breaks softly into a smile. He nods slowly at the Gibbons Brothers, gestures for them to take cover again.

*

Round two.

Potts, a lightning bolt in dancing shoes. Braun, bulky and dazed, timing off, unable to dish anything out, but catching everything—"wild swings and tearing, straight right-hand smashes to the body," the *Globe* observes.

Barton, at the fringe of battle, framing the warriors, checking every jab, hook and uppercut, the cresting angles of leather through air, the force of blunt impact. The spray of sweat and blood, the crimson reverie of mangled flesh. Barton, looking for signs of a damaged fighter unable to protect himself. Searching for punches clean, low, and dirty. He's careful not to break the fighters too soon—or not soon enough.

Potts, dealing a stinging combination. Braun, walloped to kneeling, tipping over for a count of nine. Barton, holding back the steaming Potts. Braun, wobbling, but up on his feet again, eyes at half-mast, lifting his gloves in spite of himself. Barton, observing the unsteady fighter eye-to-eye, giving Braun an eight-count to assess his ability to continue, then

waves him forward.

As the hammered bell ends round two, “the wild appeals of the feverish crowd” serenade Braun, staggering to his corner, slumping over onto his stool. Potts, choosing to stand as he’s tended by his cornerman, glares at Braun, slapping his gloved fists together menacingly, still just warming up.

At ringside, half the house howls for Braun’s revival, the other half for Potts to finish him.

Mike and Tommy, huddled together in hiding, watch George Barton wipe rain from his eyes. Barton’s thinking about time. Moving through it. With it, if he can.

As a referee, he needs to see the moment, but ahead of the moment too. He’s concerned about Braun, but clears him for the next round.

*

Only seconds into the third round, Potts is “rushing wildly about the ring,” swinging with two fists, catching Braun’s jaw from both sides. Crashing like a crushed accordion, “entirely incapable of defending himself,” Braun runs his gloves over the canvas to keep from collapsing.

The best referees can see the punch before it’s thrown. But tonight, the drizzle at last committing to downpour, Barton cannot see much anymore, let alone the world within the world and what comes next.

Time slows and stalls, heavy and foreboding. Like on battlefields and at airfield crashes.

Still fresh and eager to end it, Potts hijacks the clock, storming in again. Arms waving wildly, Barton throws himself at Potts, calling for a time-out. Undaunted, Potts jolts straight through Barton, hammering Braun with a tempest of devastating blows. More urgently, Barton tries again to insert himself between the pugilists. Potts, unstoppable, dynamites through, bending and breaking the stunned Braun until he slams to the canvas in a quagmire of blood and rain. The electric throng of fight fans is on its feet with a deafening tumult.

Barton is too late. His world stands still and silent for a long moment.

Behind the crates, Mike wraps an arm around his kid brother, pulls him close. “Don’t look, Tommy Boy,” Mike whispers firmly, calmly. “Keep your eyes closed. I’ll get us out of here.”

*

Kid Braun lies akimbo on the canvas in the shape of a question mark, motionless from the neck down, blinking rapidly, gaze drifting, revealing the whites of his eyes. Head trauma. He'd been hit too hard, and too often. Inside his skull, his brain is bleeding.

Barton drops to his knees beside Braun, cradling the kid's crushed head in his lap, assessing his condition. Braun's cornerman, jumping in to help administer aid.

The crowd falls hushed as Braun's eyes slowly close. Barton lays two trembling fingers upon the fallen fighter's carotid artery, hoping for a pulse.

Mike and Tommy, watching, holding their breath, nearly praying. Barton exhales deeply, releasing a torrent of emotion toward the heavens.

*

Then the screech of the medic's wagon braking hard on the street below and the clamor of heavy boots racing up steel stairs.

The rooftop jolts into manic motion with the shrill howl of police whistles. Braying onlookers scramble and scatter to vanishment, tumbling down back stairwells, gliding down slicked fire escapes, leaping over the building's edge and swinging to freedom, gripping thick ropes installed for such emergency retreats.

A blitz of lawmen rushes the ring. Bringing up the rear, twin medics in white, an empty stretcher carried between them.

Barton, jaw clenched, hangs his head over Braun, his weeping veiled by heavy weather on a dark night. Mike and Tommy, silent and stunned, watch as two coppers pull Barton to his feet and cuff his hands behind his back.

As Barton is dragged across the rooftop, his eyes meet briefly with Mike's. This time, Barton doesn't grin. He looks away.

*

The city streets around the Athletic Club: bedlam.

Three more wagons of coppers squeal to a halt and storm the building, colliding with the fierce squall of fleeing fight fans. In the pandemonium, shell-shocked and surrounded, Mike and Tommy dash toward the roof's edge, tumble onto a fire escape, slither down a loose drainpipe to the ground, turn sharply down a back alley. For a fleeting moment, they are free.

And then, the voice. "Well, what in the holy hell do you know? It's

little Mike Gibbons and his dumber kid brother. *Again!* Two times in one night,” the voice, salted lightly with an English accent, grunts. “Jesus must *really* love me!”

Mike, weary and rattled, slowly turns to face the voice, already knowing it belongs to Herb Catherwood. All night long, outrunning this broad-shouldered, spike-haired nemesis, and Mike and Tommy are right back in the mouth of the lion. Trapped, nowhere to run. No strategy. Probably no hope.

Mike shoots Tommy a quick glance, then turns to gaze darkly into Catherwood’s eyes. Everything else happens very quickly.

Mike, making a fist, pushing off on his back foot like he’s just seen Jimmy Potts do in the ring.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Herbert,” Mike simmers, glowering at Catherwood, “there is *no* chance in heaven or hell that Jesus loves *you*.”

Mike launches a white-knuckled blitz, charging Catherwood with the full weight of his body.

Like child’s play, Catherwood sidesteps the rush. Mike, swinging, missing, stumbling. Catherwood, pulling Mike up by the shirt collar before he can hit the ground. As Tommy watches helplessly, Catherwood lands one more bombshell on Mike’s battered mug.

Mike staggers, swoons, and collapses. No surprise.

What he could not have predicted is that in less than five seconds, Herb Catherwood—eyes agog, nose snapped in a geyser of gore—would crash to the ground beside him.

*

When Mike regains consciousness, he’s looking up into the face of a bald cherub, a man he barely knows. At the man’s side, brother Tommy, his smile miraculously restored.

“Ah, there you be, boy,” the man says as Mike flutters to waking. “Now don’t be mistaking this pretty face for St. Peter’s. Hopefully you’ll take it as good news that you’re not in Heaven yet!”

Mike, attempting to pull himself to a seated position, but the exertion unleashing a riot in his head. “Dunphy?” Mike says, disoriented, slumping back to the concrete.

“That’d be *Father* Dunphy to you, lad,” the priest says, removing his

round, wire-rimmed spectacles, cleaning them on the loose fabric of his cassock. He's young, new in St. Paul, already beloved for his fiery spirit by his congregation at Saint Vincent's.

"What happened?" Mike asks, rubbing his swollen jaw and lip, pulled to his feet with Tommy's assistance.

"It was a miracle, Mikey!" Tommy erupts. "Like a cowboy gunfight! There was you. And Catherwood. And then—bang, bang, bang! And then—"

Dunphy rests a gentle hand on Tommy's shoulder, grinning, snaps his spectacles back onto his wide oval face.

"What about Catherwood?" Mike manages. "What happened to him?"

"Never you mind, lad," Dunphy says, twirling his gold-handled cane mischievously.

Father Dunphy cuts a figure. Eyes a touch too close together, ridged beak, thin lips, bald pate. A brow creased with wisdom, but also ancient fury. A compact frame, but nearly immovable. Dynamite fists, concealed in the blooming sleeves of his vestments. If he weren't so charming, Father Dunphy would be terrifying.

"If I were you," Dunphy adds, "I'd be worrying less about that limey mumblecrust, and start praying that God will wrap your good old da in a holy calm before we get home. You know how he feels about fighting!"



1890s

St. Paul, Minnesota

If moxie and bravado are what's required to attend a "sneak fight" in 1904, it's been that way for a very long time—since 1891, really, when Minnesota's governor sent an army to a fistfight.

When the lawless, Wild West of the 1880s was steamrolled into the moralistic progressive movement of the 1890s, America threw its old bare-knuckled, blood-soaked history overboard. Driven by religious reformers and powerful political groups, boxing was made illegal in thirty-seven states.

In the early hours of 1891, Minnesota was not one of them yet—which makes it the perfect location for a big-money showdown between middleweight champion of the world Robert "Ruby Red" Fitzsimmons and Minnesota Governor William R. Merriam.

One man's fists are legendarily lethal. The other has the state militia at his disposal.

*

Everybody was supposed to get rich. John S. Barnes and Pat Connolly said so. A pair of whip-smart St. Paul entrepreneurs, born showmen, sartorially fresh and quick with the tongue, Barnes and Connolly are selling a dream: "Ruby Red" defending his middleweight crown in the Sainly City.

The richest, most powerful men in town, the ones on Summit Avenue, cozy to the get-rich scheme, dance in the fancy of ringside seats at the proposed battle. They go all in, investing more than \$100,000 to lure Fitzsimmons and opponent, Jim Hall, to town with plump paydays and a high-end arena, built brand-new on the infield of West

Seventh's baseball park.

The fight was scheduled for mid-July. Newly minted Queensberry Rules—with three-minute rounds, one-minute rests, and five-ounce gloves—were agreed to. Fight to the finish. Last man standing wins the title.

Not everyone in St. Paul is delighted by the proposed fight. “So much nationwide publicity was raised,” George Barton writes in a 1932 newspaper column, “that the ire of the reform elements in Minnesota was aroused.”

Had 1891 not been an election year with three candidates—the incumbent Republican Governor Merriam, St. Paul's Mayor Robert A. Smith and Sheriff Edward S. Bean—all in desperate need of the religious vote, the fight would likely have gone on. But when a grass-roots protest group called St. Paul Citizens Law & Order League emerges—its membership numbers vague, but its message loud and unavoidable—they minced no words damning the fight and the kinds of people who might enjoy it.

“We believe that serious evils have resulted from such contests,” the group seethed. “Evils such as the excitement of bad passions, feuds, fights, bodily injuries, brutality, betting, and desecration of the Lord's Day.”

The League demanded that Governor Merriam cancel the fight and arrest all involved.

“When he demurred,” Barton reported, “the objectors threatened to have him impeached.”

*

Given twenty-four hours to respond to the protest group's ultimatum, and with the championship battle itself only a week away, Governor Merriam announced his verdict: the fight would be canceled. How else would he be re-elected to enjoy another Christmas in the Governor's Mansion?

Promoters Barnes and Connolly knew their way around the political battlefield, however, and promptly pointed out that Minnesota had no laws on the books prohibiting prizefighting. “Governor Merriam

countered,” Barton wrote, “with a statement that there was no law permitting it, either.”

When protestors reminded the governor of their impeachment threats, Merriam surrendered and fell in line. “The fight is off!” he declared. “Or there will be hell to pay!”

The morning of the championship battle—July 22, 1891, “a date which will long be remembered in the history of the city,” according to the *St. Paul Globe*—Merriam unleashed a secret knockout punch, ordering the Minnesota militia to ringside.

Minutes before first bell, First Regiment Companies C, D, E, and H, many of whom served in the Civil War, flanked the arena on horseback, faces hardened, firearms hoisted, to enforce the governor’s ruling. Without incident, Fitzsimmons, Hall, and their trainers were arrested and held overnight to prevent the fight’s relocation. Ten thousand ticket-holders, including two of the governor’s adult sons, “were driven out (of the arena) without ceremony,” *The Globe* reported. “By 7:30, the scene was contained, peaceful.”

That November, Governor Merriam won re-election. As first order of business, he wrote a bill, passed into law, outlawing boxing in the state of Minnesota.

The *St. Paul Globe* declared, “Law—and the people—had won.”

EXODUS

*May those who love us, love us;
And for those who don't love us,
May God turn their hearts;
And if He doesn't turn their hearts,
May He turn their ankles,
So we will know them by their limping.*

—Old Irish Curse



The times so savage, they almost demanded violence—and redemption

1850

County Mayo, Ireland

The day Mike and Tommy Gibbons' father was born atop the lopsided dinner table in the clan's ramshackle, stone-and-twig homestead, Ireland buried 152 sons and daughters. One-third of the dead, fallen to famine and disease, were under the age of five.

As a fiendish, fungal blight ravaged Ireland's potato crop, transforming the once-verdant island to a boneyard of snuffed sepia and tarry mush, many starved to death. Nearly a million Irish were buried, quick and shallow. *An Drochshaol*, "the bad times," the Irish called these hours.

The bleak, rocky highlands of Glennagashleen that surround Thomas John Gibbons' birthplace quickly became a mass grave. Many believe those swallowed by the Great Hunger were the lucky ones. The rest of the Irish could only endure the cruel escalation of England's merciless, centuries-long rule.

For nearly a thousand years, life for the Irish was a relentless battle. With Queen Victoria's coronation in 1837, life became war. Under Victoria's reign, the Irish were forbidden from owning land or weapons, speaking their native Gaelic tongue, educating their children, attending Catholic Mass, voting in elections, assembling in public, and even fishing from streams. Brutal arrests, casual executions, and the torching of Irish homesteads were everyday affairs.

The times so savage, they almost demanded violence.

*

For years, all Thomas John could do was pray. When the English stripped him of that, he began to fight.

A ghost through the fog, Thomas John hunted by moonlight, crossing country miles with nothing but primrose and yew trees for cover. He'd snatch brown trout from veiled streams, skewer field animals with a sharp strike of his father's shillelagh.

Good with his hands, Thomas John would spark fire to blaze with nothing, it seemed, but his fingertips and a hard look. He could hear damnation on the wind. The banshee of Ireland, always wailing a doomed man's name.

In 1872, when he was twenty-two, Thomas John married a woman he did not really know or love, secretly exchanging vows in a church where the bells had been silenced for years.

By night, Thomas John was the demolition man for a band of determined Irish rebels—The Invincibles—they were called. Guided by two of his sisters' husbands, Thomas John was trained to pack powder into casings and install stable fuses. The rebels began blasting their way toward

liberty or oblivion—one homemade stick of dynamite at a time.

Thomas John never intended to claim an Englishman's life, but did not grieve long when it happened. His hands, now always encrusted with gunpowder and grime, were full of feud and fury. His hope, barely an ember against England's gale force. He'd often wonder if Ireland would ever win, and fought like there was nothing left to lose.

He does not remember his last night in Ireland—how, blood-soaked, he'd come to be surrounded by his children in the cramped inferno of a steamship's belly, cradled in his wife's arms, logged in the ship's manifest as the head of "Family No. 29." He would remember, but in time. For now, he was simply grateful to be alive.

*



An Irish goodbye

May 1, 1884

Port of Galway, Ireland

Galway to Boston, crossing the ocean took six days. The boiler room of the SS *Prussian* steamship held no luxury for its migrant cargo. Still, there was more to eat on the Gibbons family's first night on board than in the entire week before.

Quarters were hot and cramped, a tween-deck crudely constructed

between the main deck and the ship's bowels by those who had crossed the Atlantic before. No comfort nor privacy, just a labyrinth of wooden planks spread over steel beams for walkway or slumber, an obstacle course of steep, narrow ladders, fraying ropes tied off with expert knots. A cat's cradle of boiler pipes, the steam sizzling and rising with the steamship's acceleration. The ceilings, so low that any man topping six feet had to slouch.

It was here the fleeing families of Ireland bunked, sometimes on straw, sometimes on splinters, often tossed from crest to tide by the ocean's angry pull. The stench of industrial fumes, vomit, and ancient sweat, stifling and unrelenting.

It was always dark, save for the furnace's fiery glow. No windows by which to watch the sun's rise or fall. No ventilation, just two hundred refugees at a time, stowed away like so much baggage—Irish, Chinese, Scots, Germans. The tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

On the second day at sea, Thomas John figured out that gathering his wife and children in the center of the makeshift deck eased the impact of the ocean's constant churning on their equilibrium. Tightly, he held his wife, Mary. She, in turn, pulled the children closer to her breast. Like so, they crossed deepest waters.

*



In the belly of the beast

When Thomas John landed in the booming metropolis of St. Paul in 1884, immigration counselors at the local church gave him a choice of two jobs: railroad or lumber.

He chose the rails, paid a dollar a day in the textiles shop at Great Northern Railway, where soot-stained workers molded their own height each day in steel rails. The railroad was bustling with work connecting the upper tier of the nation from St. Paul to Seattle.

Great Northern was a good choice for Thomas John. After the cyclone of 1886 chewed up the state, Minnesota lumberjacks had nothing to swing an axe at for several years. By comparison, the railroad based in St. Paul still aimed to lay thousands of miles of rails, over rivers and through the Rockies and Cascades, to Puget Sound and the Northwest region.

In 1884, the railyard was sixteen tracks wide, with the middle eight crisscrossing like the mad score to an unhinged symphony. In 1904, there were thirty tracks. Things hadn't changed much, merely doubled in size.

For Thomas John, older than many of the new immigrants at thirty-five, it was color-work at Great Northern, bleaching leather for Pullman car benches and seats, dyeing curtains a crimson that looked like blood. It was more than a world away from the life he'd known in Ireland.

Raising his four Ireland-born children—and, soon, the American-born ones too—Thomas John lived lean, frugal, but also in peace. He walked four miles each day to the railyards, then every night back home, saving the five cents in trolley fare. There was this new freedom in America. The freedom to roam, to explore, to fish from a stream. To bring home supper to the family without fear of rope or gallows. He vowed his children would grow up in a world without senseless brutality, without the endless cycle of bruised knuckles and broken bones. That they would always have enough.

In America, Thomas John was born again. Perhaps not redeemed, but set free. It was around this time that he began to often say: *What matters most is what you do next.*

May 6, 1884
Boston Harbor

Though it was more than a year before he could remember the night he fled Ireland, Thomas John would never forget the family's first moments in the New World, stepping into blinding light after six days in the darkness of the steamship's lower decks, at Boston Harbor, Pier 5.

For all Thomas John had forgotten, he remembered how to pray. Gathering his bride and four children in the snare of his embrace, he hurried them to Boston's West End and through the Roman columns and heavy double doors of St. Joseph's Catholic Church.

Once inside, Thomas John threaded Mary's hand into his own, looked tenderly at her for a long moment—this woman whom only a dozen years before he'd married without knowing or loving. They had only stood together in a church once before, on their wedding day, and as outlaws.

New in the Promised Land of America, Thomas John closed his eyes in gratitude and relief, took a deep breath, squeezed Mary's hand. His other hand gripped a crucifix of silver joined to rosary beads of Connemara marble. He began to pray. This new world, a fresh start, a second chance.

When a small smile threatened the gravestone of Thomas John's battle-wearied face for the first time in decades, he made a silent promise to God: *I swear, dear Lord, I will fight no more.*

*

Two years later, black ink flooded the cratered Minnesota sky, birthing a mile-wide cyclone, the "wicked demon of the clouds." It ripped through cemeteries, spitting out tombstones like rotten teeth. Churches and synagogues vanished. Stone houses crumbled. The Mississippi surged skyward, before being forcefully dropped back onto the land. Schools, post offices, bridges, and railcars were raised, tossed, shredded, and devoured. A small Catholic chapel was reduced to nothingness. "Universal destruction," declared the press. Four-fifths of the state was in ruins; hundreds lay wounded in the rubble. Seventy-two souls never drew breath again—including newlyweds and their wedding party, who had been playing stickball in the churchyard. Some bodies were carried for miles; others vanished into the void.

In the wake of the cyclone's wrath and ruin, a child was born to Thomas John and Mary Burke. He would not only live. He would make his mark. Named after the archangel, heaven's supreme warrior, commander of angelic forces, and invincible defender of faith, the child was called Michael.

In time, he would tear through the world with as much insatiable fury, supernatural speed, and fearsome grace as the damnable cyclone, but his dominion would be a squared circle, and he would come to be known by another name altogether.

TROUBLE

*Bid a strong ghost stand at the head
That my Michael may sleep sound,
Nor cry, nor turn in the bed
Till his morning meal come round;
And may departing twilight keep
All dread afar till morning's back,
That his mother may not lack
Her fill of sleep.*

—William Butler Yeats,
“A Prayer for My Son” (1928)



Wanting more than he believes he can ever have

1904

St. Paul

When the pounding fist rattles the Gibbons' front door, Thomas John is on one knee, jabbing an iron poker at stubborn flames in the fireplace.

The living room hums with the warm chaos of dinner preparations. Jack and Paddy, aged twenty-six and twenty-three, toss plates like frisbees to cloth mats on the table. The girls—Mary, Bridget, and six-year-old Alice—are a blur of spinning spoons, bubbling pots, and lilting Irish songs.

But when the thumping comes again, harder this time, everything stops.

Big brother Jack rips open the door, revealing Father Dunphy standing in the doorway, grinning like a man who just pulled a largemouth bass from the Mississippi. Flanking him, bruised and bloodied, are Mike and Tommy.

“Da!” Jack shouts. “They’re not dead!”

Thomas John moves to the door, sharp eyes locking onto the purple welts and crusted blood on Mike’s face. Without a word, he wraps his boys in a fierce embrace, kissing their heads before turning to Dunphy.

The priest beams as if he’s delivered the Gospel itself. “I’ve got a proposition for you,” he announces. “Feed a priest who caught no fish today, and hear a whale of a tale!”

At the dinner table, Father Dunphy is served first.

*

Burly, brown-eyed, and shaped like a coffee can, even as a toddler, John Dunphy was born for the priesthood. He began ministering in County Kilkenny, Ireland, at the age of eight, when his father fell seriously ill.

When his father died, the fourteen-year-old Dunphy was alone in this world, save his dear mother. He did not question the Good Lord’s plan in claiming his father so young. *God’s will*, the boy figured. *God’s will*.

After the funeral, Dunphy jumped straight into a Kilmacow boxing ring, bludgeoning a bigger boy for four ruthless rounds.

Even as a younger man, Dunphy trusted God’s plan. He desired religious immersion, explored and meditated upon the liturgy with passion, purpose, and intensity. He distinguished himself in school and church not only as a rousing orator, but a tireless, fearless student. In religious study, his performance was unrivaled. So too in the boxing ring.

At twenty-one, Dunphy was hand-picked for American study and service by St. Paul’s Catholic Archbishop John Ireland. Dunphy steamed to the States in 1894, was processed at newly opened Ellis Island in New

York Harbor, and arrived in the Saintly City already bald, face strapped with his trademark spectacles, walking with a limp and a gold-handled cane that he would never explain. His scriptural pitch was perfect, the young priest capable of reciting chapter and verse on command, then expounding on a single sentence for a full hour.

Father Dunphy was ordained June 1, 1900, only twenty-six years old. He led Sunday services at St. Vincent's, served as Dean of Students and prefect of discipline at St. Thomas Academy in St. Paul. He never spoke from the pulpit. Instead, he would pace the center aisle of the church. More than once, he awakened sleeping parishioners with a pinch to the ear.

*

At the Gibbons' dinner table, Father Dunphy holds court.

"Your kindness, Father, is a blessing," Thomas John says from his seat at the table, though his voice carries judgment as his eyes linger on Mike's battered face. Tommy presses a cold towel to his brother's cheek, but Mike is clearly wound tight, muscles coiled with barely contained fury. "Still," Thomas John continues, "I must ask: have we not had our fill of violence in this world?"

Mike's jaw tightens. Everyone knows his father's views on fighting. Tommy lays a calming hand on his brother's shoulder. The air at the table grows heavy.

"As you know, my good brother," Dunphy begins, his tone measured, "God made man a delicate mix—equal parts animal and angel. And in these teenage years, if memory serves, we find the animal more freely in our hearts than the angel."

"But it's in scripture," Thomas John counters, his voice rising. "Jesus himself says we must turn the other cheek!"

Mike stiffens, fists curling under the table. He's heard this sermon before. His father's morality, rigid and unyielding, feels like a chain around his neck.

Mary, resting a gentle hand on her husband's clenched fist, but he doesn't soften.

"The world does not always work that way," Dunphy replies, his cheerful tone taking on a harder edge. "There is danger everywhere. Sometimes war is waged upon us. By our own brothers. The key is to face all of it

with courage, nobility, grace, and wisdom. But also, if absolutely required, a fierce defensive skill.”

Thomas John shakes his head, the fire in his eyes undimmed. “Forgive me, Father,” he says, “but what wisdom is there in battering another man?”

Dunphy’s voice drops, his words as sharp as steel. “Pray tell, brother, what wisdom is there in softly speaking your truth, only to realize the opposition has come seeking war, not peace? Did not St. Paul himself—the namesake of this city—speak of fighting the good fight to keep the faith? Did not God’s own Son carry a rod and staff? And correct me if I’m wrong, but was it not you, three Septembers ago, on a very hot afternoon at the State Fair, who brought me—the new priest in town and a total stranger—a cool cup of water, then stood at my side as we heard Theodore Roosevelt implore us, as men and country, to speak softly and carry a big stick.”

The room falls silent. Thomas John, against the ropes.

Dunphy continues, “For goodness’ sake, you and Mary were wed in County Mayo, by Father Corbett himself, the very uncle of America’s heavyweight champion, James J. Corbett. Your own father’s shillelagh leans there against the hearth, does it not? Were he alive today, would he not tell you that sometimes a man’s worth is measured by his ability to defend what is his?”

Tommy stares wide-eyed at the priest, spoon frozen mid-bite. Mike is afraid to blink.

Dunphy leans forward, voice soft, but unyielding. “I am not saying a man should seek a fight. But it must please the Lord that a man knows how to end one.”

*

The next morning, Thomas John makes his decision.

Mike and Tommy will be separated. Tommy, the younger and calmer of the two, will transfer to St. Thomas Academy, continuing his schooling in residence, far from trouble’s reach. Mike, two years shy of graduation, will be pulled from school to work full-time under his father’s watchful eye as a tinsmith at Great Northern. For his efforts, Mike will earn a dollar a day, but only ten cents of it will be his to keep.

One son already lost to the fire and determined to save the other,

Thomas John hopes this will keep the boys from spiraling into trouble together.

At the railyard, Thomas John stands often at the window of his second-floor office, gazing down on the workshops below. Often, he watches his son at work, agile and elegant. Mike, in glorious rhythm with hammer, steel, sparks, and flame. What the father feels, it is something like pride.

Thomas John turns to his workstation—the drafting table, the color wheels, the fabric samples and spattered palettes. His fingertips, tattooed with a life of luxury he will never enjoy. But the labor, it is honorable, satisfying. It does not bend his body nor break his will. It is almost enough.

Some attribute his happier fate to the luck of the Irish, but Thomas John has been Irish far too long to believe in such things.

*

Mike Gibbons is running the numbers. If he wants to make a life of his own, the railroad is never going to be enough.

In the early twentieth century, eggs are two pennies each. A thick sirloin steak is a buck fifty. A good-sized house breaks the bank at \$2,500. The yardstick of genuine affluence—the American Dream—is a savings account of \$100,000.

Even if his father allowed him to keep his full wage, Mike would have to dance with fire in the tin shop for two full weeks before he could afford to buy a decent suit. If he ever hoped to enjoy the free, easy breathing of a six-figure bank account, it would take him more than three centuries at the railroad.

In 1904, the average life expectancy of the American man is 47.1 years.

In the railroad's tin shop, Mike works with mallet, fire, tongs, heavy gloves, and safety glass, hammering molten steel into new shapes. It's a gig with its own dangers and a high injury rate. To remain untouched by flames, a worker must outpace natural law. The average tinsmith spends part of every day on fire. But not Mike Gibbons.

He takes swiftly, almost naturally, to the labor. He studies the veterans, the older men with rough hands and scarred flesh, their vision impaired by protective masking and thick glass. Carefully, they toss metal spikes between two tongs over a cauldron gurgling with flames.

Mike learns the rhythm of their motion, the tempo, the count—one,

two, three, one, two, three—until he can feel it in his bones. The cadence, the rhythm, more a cha-cha than a waltz. Feet in constant shuffle. Wrists snapping hard to tease the flat heated metal into something new.

He never feels the fire. He is never burned. Mike Gibbons is fast, always moving. He was, he liked to say, born that way.

But he's run the numbers, and they do not lie. The railroad will never be enough.

Like hell he's going to waste his life in the fire and ash of the tin shop. He's heard stories around the railroad about tougher, wilder boys crossing the river to make fifty bucks in a single night in an illegal boxing ring—four times that in the big cities back East.

It's not that Mike wants to fight. He just wants more than he believes he can ever have.

GLORIOUS LITTLE FELLA

*Somewhere in the world,
There is defeat for everyone.
Some are destroyed by defeat,
And some made small and mean by victory.
Greatness lives in one who triumphs equally
Over defeat and victory.*

—John Steinbeck,
The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights (1976)



Teaching stillness

1904-1907

St. Paul

George Barton's done with it all—the double life, the knuckles and gloves, the skulduggery and brushes with death. After Kid Braun is forever wrecked by Jimmy Potts, Barton's had enough.

After his rooftop arrest, the long night in jail, and surrendering all the money in both his pockets to post bail, Barton is clear on what comes

next. There he goes, storming through a sea of carriages, streetcars, and howling newsboys at the corner of Exchange Street and St. Peter, charging into the five-story, pale-brick YMCA where he's served as a beloved boxing instructor for two years.

The darkness this time has come too near. Sure, boxing's one of the only methods for a hard-working man not born to wealth or social status to rise in this world, but—in Barton's heart—financial security could never be worth the damage done.

So it's time. Time to quit. Hang up the gloves. Clear out the locker. Turn in the keys and badge.

His outlaw days are over, Barton swears. He'll shed his shadow, this second skin, violent and nocturnal, and rise to the sun-kissed surface of the world where everyone else lives: the horse-drawn carriages and trolleys, Victorian houses with ornate gables and gingerbread trim, paddleboats on the lake, groceries in brown bags, ballgames by the river, the daily news and courtyard gossip, fire stations running drills, church twice a week, the coppers stacking cash two ways—once to let criminals walk free, twice to protect the innocents they'll prey upon.

The "respectable world," they call it.

*

Mike Gibbons has other ideas.

He'd gone to the rooftop to meet George Barton that bedeviled night, and returned home with a split lip, a shiner, and more resolve than ever. Undaunted by Kid Braun's grim fate or the legal consequences for those involved, Mike remains determined to connect with Barton and wring the most lethal fistic techniques he can from "the glorious little fella."

It's as simple as this: Mike's tired of running and losing. What he wants is wisdom and the ability to deliver bullies like Herb Catherwood a decisive series of shattering, vengeful blows.

Though there is little about George Barton, even on his darkest night, that suggests a trained killer, Mike is confident the local hero is the teacher he needs. Knowing Barton's scheduled to lead class at the YMCA tonight, Mike's been prowling around the locker room for two hours already, and will wait forever, if that's what it takes.

When Barton finally appears, he's surprised to see Mike's familiar face,

bruised and scabbing, and brushes straight past him to his locker. Mike watches silently as Barton packs his things, lobbing them brusquely into a gym bag—gloves, jump rope, notebook, whistle, towel, smelling salts, a change of clothes.

“Class is canceled,” Barton says flatly, glancing over his shoulder at Mike, wondering if the kid’s still there. “They should have my replacement next week.”

Unsure of where to begin, Mike finally speaks: “Mr. Barton, you’re too young to be so sad.”

Barton stops what he’s doing, shakes his head with a bitter laugh. “It’s a new age, kid,” he says. “We’re never too young anymore.”

“That boy from last night, he’s gonna be okay, you know,” Mike offers. “I read it in the paper.”

Slamming shut the locker door, Barton turns hard toward Mike. “He’s gonna *live*,” Barton snaps. “Not the same thing.”

Mike’s momentarily humbled, but refuses to back down. “My father, he’s always said,” Mike begins, “‘What matters most is what you do next.’”

More than anything, George Barton wants to disappear, to be the furthest place from here, but he is unexpectedly moved by Mike’s words. Shaking it off, he grabs his gym bag, shoulders past Mike on his way to the exit.

Digging deep without thinking, Mike slips Barton and defiantly blocks the door. “I think what my father meant is,” he says, eyes full of fire, “sometimes we need a second chance.”

*

A few nights later, behind the Northfield house where he was raised, George Barton heaves open the large hinged doors of the weathered wood barn.

Not long ago, this was Dakota Indian territory. Now Northfield champions itself as a haven of “cows, colleges, and contentment.” It’s a long walk from the heart of St. Paul. Framed by the hard-charging Cannon River, the budding hamlet is bordered by wildflowers, cornfields, and swaying wheat to the north. To the south—through a veil of oak and birch—lie warehouses, markets, boat landings, a flour mill, a lumberyard, and a small religious college.

Less than a decade before Barton was born, six Northfield residents raided their own gun cabinets and shot dead two outlaws, putting a bloody

halt to a bank robbery in progress. The criminal gang's leader, a quick-triggered dervish named Jesse James, escaped unharmed, but empty-handed.

Inside the weatherworn sanctuary of the barn—its roof half-collapsed, furred with moss—rests a constellation of fistic gear, salvaged over time from the YMCA's surplus stock. The equipment is well-worn but still usable: levers and pulleys, speed bags and jump ropes, rowing machines and heavy bags like giants without limbs. There are gloves. Padded mitts. A full-length wall mirror, cracked three times and jagged at the edges.

Mike stares, wide-eyed.

This moldering cowshed, Barton's secret hollow, is one of the only places on Earth where Mike has ever felt truly at home.

For the first time in a long time, he loses track of time.

*

There will be action, of course. But first things first: stillness.

If you haven't got that, George Barton knows, you've already lost.

When you're weary and winded, bleeding into your own eyes, your right thumb popped out of joint, feeling like every bone in your body has been ground to dust, that's the moment when you need it most. Stillness—where time and chaos can be more than endured, but *mastered*.

Mike and Barton, side by side, studying each other's reflections in the fractured, full-length mirror before them, like a vaudeville duo yet to conceive their signature act. They do not sing or dance. They tell no jokes and pluck no banjos. Mike bristles with excitement and a blazing anticipation, though they simply stand there, eyes awkwardly connecting in their reflection.

Barton knows what he's doing. He's seen plenty of boys want to box before—some for exercise, some for self-defense, others for revenge—and knows the thing they all need the most. Beyond dancing shoes, clenched fists, and a vendetta is the ability to be still. Not just in body, but in mind. Stillness is, Barton knows, the distance between being good and being great, the space where spirit enters, between keeping your head and losing the war.

So silence then. Until the stillness comes. Compared to that, punching is easy.

Shifting impatiently from foot to foot, Mike—all gloved up, wearing

boxing trunks—checks Barton's eyes in the mirror with increasing frequency. He opens his mouth to speak, but Barton shakes his head: *Shh*.

After another minute, Barton finally breaks the silence. "The body is the boiler. It's where all the power that moves your machine—arms, legs, feet, fists—comes from," he says. "The body gets its orders from the head. If you can't find, or make, some quiet in that thick skull of yours, you'll be sending your body all kinds of screwy messages. But mostly the one that says, 'I'm okay with losing.'"

Feet apart. Knees bent. Legs loose. Barton adds a little bounce, heels lifting from the ground.

"Loose, limber, free and easy," he instructs.

Mike echoes Barton's moves, hesitantly at first, like he's signed up for football and been dropped into sewing class. He can't stop thinking about his hands, fitfully waving them at his sides like a pair of dirty dishrags.

"You looking to hit something, Gibbons?"

Mike, turning sharply to face Barton head-on: "Do you know a kid in St. Paul who *isn't*?"

*

Hours roll into days, weeks into months. The calendar burns pages until a year has passed.

An earthquake lays San Francisco to rubble. A race riot in Atlanta, where a thousand homes are burned to the ground and two-dozen Black men are shot dead in the street. President Theodore Roosevelt wins re-election. Albert Einstein lays the rails for modern physics with his quantum theory of light. In the pages of *The Strand*, by popular demand, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle resurrects Sherlock Holmes, the super-sleuth he'd murdered on the page a decade earlier to escape the shackles of fame. After two failed attempts, Ohio's Wright Brothers finally succeed in defying gravity, sending a metal airship into the sky for a jaw-dropping thirty-nine minutes.

Mike lives two lives: one at the railroad, dancing with fire, missing his kid brother, Tommy, and dodging his father's suspicious gaze; the other, in secret training with Barton.

"Mike Gibbons was only sixteen years old when we first met," Barton recalls years later, "but in all my life, I never saw such a natural."

*

Fall of 1906, Barton rolls Mike into his YMCA classroom, feeds him to his veteran students. They never last very long.

Barton remembers: "When Mike Gibbons first came to me, the only part of him too large to stuff into my coat pocket was his desire and an almost pathological need to settle old scores with that dumb giant, Catherwood. Mike was small, lanky, and thin with the almost innocent face of a boy awaiting Christmas morning. But things changed when he stepped into the ring. His schoolboy looks would melt away. His eyes would go dark and cold. His lips would snarl. He put the fear of hell in boys twice his size, and could somehow land devastating blows on them without the benefit of climbing a stepstool."

Vengeance fuels the restless scrapper, but a brutal victory over Herb Catherwood would only bring enduring peace if Mike could also return home without any telltale marks of battle. The wisdom? *If they can't catch you, they can't hit you. If they can't hit you, they can't hurt you.* To that end, Mike trains tirelessly on defense—dodging, feinting, and executing footwork that dazzles and lies.

"Mike's defense was superb," Barton recalls. "It wasn't long before I couldn't lay a glove on him. No one could! He moved so smooth and swift, it appeared as if he was zipping about the ring on roller-skates. Faster than I could believe, he was becoming a genuine contender."

Whether facing flyweights or big boys, lions or lambs, Mike's astonished at how little punching he has to do to win a battle waged with a scientific method. Dance a little. Play on the other boy's desire. Tease him into swinging away. Wear him out for most of a three-minute round, then end the war with a single, well-placed blow.

"Mike was never where you thought he was going to be," Barton writes years later. "No matter how fast you were, he was always faster. You'd reach for him, but he'd always be ahead—there, then gone. He shifted about gracefully, with the sureness and precision of a Swiss watch, feinting with his left, drawing a punch from his foe that would always miss, then flashing in for the kill. I'd never seen anything like it before, and I haven't since."

The sweet science, they call it.

It becomes a point of contest between the boys at the YMCA: Which one of Barton's students would finally defeat the teacher's pet. From his classroom door dangles a sign-up sheet for "The Mike Gibbons Challenge," filled to overflowing twice a week by boys from St. Paul and, eventually, Minneapolis, across the river, too.

After an assembly line of Barton's best students flop and flounder against the Irish newbie from Frogtown, the contest is opened to local punks, street fighters, and young toughs too broke to hold YMCA membership cards.

Who can beat Mike Gibbons? George Barton hollers from curbside, as if he were an eight-year-old newsboy again. *Nobody. That's who.*

Night after night, Barton watches Mike defeat every boy he faces. One by one, they fall, as Barton grins and nods. Over time, he is surprised to feel something he thought he'd lost for good. Something like satisfaction.

Mike Gibbons: a reason to believe.

*

Towels, sponge, a bucket of ice. Wooden stool, scissors, and tape. Rubbing alcohol and collodion. Add one more thing to the cargo Mike Gibbons is hauling toward the Grand Theater, and the kid, barely a featherweight, tips over to the concrete.

Tonight, he's on a mission: working George Barton's corner in a six-round suicide mission against Terrible Terry McGovern, a two-time boxing champion. Barton hasn't fought in almost two years, but training Mike has the budding sportswriter believing there's more to learn, and maybe something left to prove. It'll be Mike's first time in a twenty-four-foot, regulation boxing ring. For that matter, he's never been inside the Grand either.

Corner of Fourth and Wabasha, the Grand is one of St. Paul's crown jewels—2,200 seats, three balconies, ventilated air, and crushed velvet seating. The palatial theater, six stories high, pressed brick, with a massive, well-lit marquee, is "equal to many of the finest opera houses of Eastern cities," the local newspapers crow. The Grand caters to "all the best people" of the Saintly City—the top-hatted, monocled, powdered, manicured, and freshly-scrubbed, many of them migrating from the hilltop paradise of Summit Avenue—and raises its curtain for all-star dramas, large-scale

comedies, operas, symphonies and, occasionally, legal boxing exhibitions.

Carefully balancing his haul of corner supplies, Mike clips down the thawing alleyway to the Grand's side-stage entrance. He hammers away at the steel door, gratified when the door is pulled open, revealing the face of his old grade school pal, Eddie Reddy, learning the show biz ropes with a part-time gig backstage.

"Mike Gibbons, whattaya say?" pipes Reddy, six feet tall, armored in a crisp-collared shirt and slicked-back hair, but still resembling a quivering green bean. "We're in the middle of a goddamned show! You delivering telegrams this afternoon, or just trying to get me fired?"

"Let's say it's the first, and see how things go from there," Mike quips. "I'm with the guy who's gonna knock out McGovern tonight."

Reddy rolls his eyes, opens the door wider with a dramatic flair. "Well, by all means then," Reddy says, "He's wrapping it up onstage right now. You're just in time for the—"

BOOM!

A stagehand vigorously thrashes a stack of metal sheets, unleashing a deafening explosion that rattles the theater. Even after jamming his fingers into his ears—and enduring this spectacle thirty-two times already—Reddy still flinches at the blast. Beside him, Mike barely reacts, slipping deeper into the theater's wings for a better view.

Out on the boards, Terrible Terry McGovern emerges from the smoke, having once again survived the melodrama's so-called "dynamite trap"—a flimsy plot twist in an autobiographical show, *For Fame and Fortune*, as authentic as fool's gold. Having vanquished the play's murderous villain in three acts, and now, with the swagger of a prizefighter and the flair of a circus strongman, McGovern plants his fists on his hips, thrusts his chin high. Striking a heroic pose and feeling larger than life for one more precious moment, the five-foot-three, 115-pound McGovern pitches a smile to the back of the sold-out house.

The audience responds rapturously as Reddy lowers the curtain and six ample-bosomed girls in short skirts parade onstage, without context or cause, to sing a popular song no one will remember three months hence.

"I don't suppose you brought me a sandwich?" Reddy asks, rubbing his hands together. "We had an early rehearsal before today's show. I'm starved."

"Plenty of ham onstage," Mike quips.

"You any good?"

"At *acting*?"

"At *boxing*, you numbskull!" Reddy says. "Story goes, there's a scrawny little shamrock beating up all the boys in Barton's classroom. Two and two, Mike."

"Eddie Reddy, you're a silly boy," Mike says, clapping his old pal on the back. "Boxing's against the law!"

*

Beloved as George Barton is in St. Paul, no one figures he stands a chance—not against Terry McGovern, twice-crowned lightweight champion of the world. Terrible Terry, whose nickname is, by all accounts, well-earned (and possibly understated) has circled the world three times, bashed the brains of bounteous brawling bastards on several continents, and bedded their wives, sisters, and mothers. He's been fighting professionally since 1897, earned his first championship with a merciless first-round salvo against Pedlar Palmer in 1899, the same year Barton began grunting out whiskers. Only two years later, McGovern lost the crown to a kid named William Rothwell, but believes he will win it back someday. He has to.

In his globe-trotting, McGovern's become an avid collector, every trip home requiring an extra piece of luggage to transport his new treasures: skeletons of wild boars and marsupials, the skulls of assassins, pamphlets for curing hysteria, phone numbers on cocktail napkins, the lacy slips of unavailable women, death threats nailed to his hotel door, the occasional stack of cash.

All he really wants is another shot at the championship crown.

*

McGovern's reckless lifestyle and the financial ruin from his extravagant collection gradually erode his mental health. The live melodrama runs eight shows a week on a never-ending national tour, and is meant as an economic—and, perhaps, psychological—remedy for the fragile fighter. Ostensibly autobiographical, the box office hit is less about historical accuracy than apocryphal ego-soothing and cash-grabbing. It's a five-act loop of McGovern's greatest hits.

St. Paul is one of the show's final stops. In 150 performances over five months, McGovern never loses his championship crown onstage. Popular

playwright Hal Reid ends the story with McGovern's 1901 title victory, ensuring that, in the theater at least, the hero remains undefeated. Night after night, McGovern swims through past triumphs, the final curtain never failing to fall before the good times end.

In the Grand, Terry McGovern's life is only victory. Offstage, it's a pail of slop. He drinks too much, brawls too often, punches actors mid-show, breaks his hands, pukes in churches, and catches syphilis—the only thing he's beaten, besides his wife, since the turn of the century. He's spending faster than he's earning. Whatever it takes to hush the voices reminding him that in the fever dream of *For Fame and Fortune*, he's only reliving, but never recapturing, his glory days.

By the time McGovern arrives in St. Paul, he's done multiple stints in mental health asylums across the country. According to New York State, the twenty-four-year-old McGovern is “certifiable, a bona fide lunatic”—which makes his post-performance fights against every tour-stop's ballsiest local brawlers an increasingly dangerous proposition. Terrible Terry's knocked out twenty-three of the last chumps who dared to raise a fist against him.

*

The six-round battle between George Barton and Terry McGovern is billed as a legal exhibition match to be enjoyed by audiences after the evening's performance of *For Fame and Fortune*.

As the boxing ring is quickly raised onstage behind drawn curtains, Mike Gibbons wraps Barton's hands, slides padded gloves onto his teacher's fists, ties the laces. Barton, boxing trunks purple with gold stripes and a white waistband, catches sight of Mike's feet and smiles, the excited Irish kid, towel draped over his shoulder, prancing spryly, pivoting with grace, always moving.

Suddenly reflective, Barton rests his gloves on Mike's shoulder. “The night we met, Gibbons, it was the darkest of my life. And then you appeared,” he says, “Just wanted to say thank you.”

“Mr. Barton!” Reddy yelps, poking his head around the backstage corner. “You're on!”

It's been a long time. That's about all George Barton can think, thumping his gloves together, gearing up, winding down, finding his stillness, then stepping into the ring.

*

It costs him one front tooth and a split lip, but in the fifth round, against natural law and all predictions, Kid Barton knocks out Terrible Terry McGovern. The audience sings the name of their local hero. Backstage, Mike grabs Reddy, pulls him close, breaking into a jubilant Irish jig.

Two minutes later, McGovern finally wakes up, the crowd still cheering Barton's name. McGovern crawls offstage on hands and knees, takes off his left boot, and spits in it.

After that night at the Grand, the burden of replaying glories once held and now gone became too much for McGovern. A Minneapolis asylum diagnoses McGovern the next day as "raving" and "insane, violently so." He bows out of *For Fame and Fortune's* remaining dates. His brother, Hugh, replacing him in the leading role. Terrible Terry quits fighting, and promptly loses the rest of his mind.

For a time, McGovern makes ends meet as a ticket-taker at a rundown opera house in his native Brooklyn, but he's never whole again. Despite his frequent, incoherent ramblings about reclaiming the championship crown, he never does. In fact, he never wins again.

*



Halfway home beneath a bed of stars

Passing a bottle of soda pop back and forth, the glorious little fella and the always moving Irish scrapper are halfway home beneath a bed of stars. They're crossing the Mississippi over the half-mile-long Stone Arch

Bridge, which connects St. Paul and Minneapolis. The structure narrowly fits twin tracks that carry dozens of trains each day. As they walk, Mike and George remain vigilant for locomotives coming from either direction. Nobody outruns a fully stoked Great Northern. Get caught mid-bridge, there's no way out. It's more than sixty feet down to the cold river.

There is laughter and celebration as they replay Barton's five lightning rounds against Terrible Terry. From a certain distance, they might appear drunk, but it's only victory in their veins.

"Word's spread, Mikey," Barton says. "About how you've been coming along."

"The scrawny little shamrock ruining all the tough guys in your class," Mike laughs. "I've heard!"

"People are curious. They wanna see if the stories are true," Barton says. "A promoter pal of mine in Minneapolis wants to put you in the ring."

"Against Catherwood?"

"Catherwood was a long time ago, Mike. Besides, he's gotten big, I hear, dropping boys left and right across the river."

"George, you know the story," Mike says firmly, "I need Catherwood."

"What you need is to let it go," Barton says. "Revenge doesn't feed a fighter; it breaks him. Good as you are, Mike, Catherwood's got you too emotional. That fight's already half lost. Want my advice?"

Mike wants to argue, but he slowly nods instead.

"Walk away," Barton says. "From all of it."

"Never gonna happen," Mike snaps.

"Like I didn't already know that," Barton grins, shaking his head. On the middle of the bridge, halfway between bedlam and home, he takes the last swig of pop, looks up at the stars. "Well then, how do you feel about breaking the law—and selling your soul—for a dollar?"

"I'm an Irishman, Georgie," Mike says, his fighting eyes flashing. "We've sold our souls for less."

SILVER DOLLAR BABY

*Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation:
the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*

—Matthew 26:41



Tinsmith to Prizefighter

Winter 1885

St. Paul

When Thomas John Gibbons was in Ireland, there had been no chance of winning. In St. Paul, he would take no chance of losing.

It had been centuries since England first invaded the Emerald Isle, and the war still raged—red against green. Even in Minnesota, an ocean and a continent away, the Irish remained punching bags for the world. “No Irish Need Apply” signs still hung in storefront windows across the Twin Cities. The boys of Frogtown, slugging away at everything in sight,

still hoped to make a mark. The world's never been shy about picking fights with poor immigrants.

Life in this new world had never been easy for Thomas John, but it had made sense. If you wanted something, you labored for it—then worked your hands until they were calloused. Until they were clean again.

Here, in America, Thomas John was becoming someone new. Even as violence, fury, and temptation burned within every Irishman in the Twin Cities, Thomas John, for the first time in his life, embraced his faith. With freedom came a quieting of fear. His anger began to fade. And in that first taste of peace, he found room for laughter. For pleasure. For dreams. For love.

Forgiveness—he was still praying for that one.

*

Every morning and every night, Thomas John renews the vow he'd made with God the night he died in Ireland.

In the old world, he had fought. He had known trouble—was born to it, raised in it, devoted to it. He knew how to make trouble good and strong. Sometimes lethal. He tried to believe it was courage, or justice, or self-defense. Maybe even patriotism.

He had darkened his soul for an unwinnable prize. Free now in America, even saved, he could not help but sometimes think he had failed, fleeing the violence and blight of his homeland, belly hollow, blood on his hands.

Cursed, he feared, like every last Irishman.

So forgiveness.

Thomas John was thirty-five years old now. New to America. A stranger in a strange land. Husband to a woman he was only beginning to know. Father to four children he was still learning to love. He could not read. He could not write. He had no wealth, no friends in high places. All he owned of Ireland: his father's shillelagh, a rosary, the family's battered Bible—and the hands of a man who had killed.

All he brought to here and now: a hope, a prayer, and the vow to never fight again.

He hoped it would be enough.

*



The bounty for selling one's soul

Returning home one evening from the Great Northern railyards, Thomas John turned onto Seventh and St. Peter, downtown—and saw them: a brigade of silhouettes, backlit by the scarlet surrender of day. Muscles and tendons, flesh and bone, a dozen bodies moving in perfect unison. Boxing drills—lead, step, feint, step, hook, retreat—a martial ballet unlike any fighting he'd given or gotten in Ireland.

The men belonged to Firehouse Engine Company No. 1, St. Paul's oldest station, steel and brick, raised in 1873 for \$6,500. Their leader was a charismatic, soft-spoken rookie named Hugh J. McFayden, who led the dance.

Around town, McFayden was considered a “fancy,” an exuberant Irish immigrant chasing a better life through the pugilistic arts. He knew the craft, the rules, the laws. Rarely got hit. Never got caught. The church, the cops, even the reformists left him alone to train his firefighters as he saw fit.

Thomas John couldn't begin to understand how boxing drills improved firefighting. But maybe, he thought, a man actually *could* punch a structure fire into submission.

The streets of St. Paul, folding into dusk. Shop signs flipped to “Closed.” Cobblestone clattering with horses and buggies, the occasional Model T wheeling too fast. Workers clocking out. Families heading home. Neighborhood kids, immune to their mothers' calls of *supper*time, shadow-

ing the firemen from a respectful distance, mimicking every move with a kind of meditative reverence. The station's Dalmatian, a nimble thing called Scorch, circling the action like a mascot with a mission.

McFayden, gloved up, leading his men through slow-motion jabs and lunges. Bedlam tamed. Violence civilized. Conflict transformed. Assault reimagined as art. They're moving as one.

Thomas John helpless to look away.

Then, stepping away from his flock, McFayden roped off a ring from four makeshift posts, dropping into one corner, peeling off a boot, peeling off a sock, and began filling it with coins from both pockets. The sock was passed around the station, each man adding what he could. When it returned to McFayden, bulging with copper and silver, a few in gold, he tied it off and hung it from the post like an offering.

Hugh McFayden was barely twenty. Willowy, but coiled with strength. Trousers sagging, suspenders taut, hair slicked tight to his scalp. Limbs fluid. Expression fixed in quiet menace.

To Thomas John, he looked like a gangly child dressed up as a full-grown god.

*

Thomas John turned to leave, but not quickly enough.

"Hold up there now, good sir!" McFayden barked, chasing after Thomas John. "In the name of Mary, Joseph, and the sweet baby Jesus, if I can beat fire, I can sure as hell catch an old Irish rebel!"

Thomas John stopped where he stood, his jaw clenching. McFayden approached with a crooked smile. "See here, friend, I was hoping you could assist me with something," said McFayden, a gifted raconteur, however skilled he was with fire. "I'm told I'd fare better with the ladies or the rich and powerful of our fair city if I developed a special skill or two. Been working on the gift of second sight. May I?"

Thomas John, confused, stares blankly. McFayden studied Thomas John, looking him up and down dramatically for a long beat, then went off to the races: "An Irishman, once mad, now sad, less than a year in the new world," McFayden rambled. "Still trying to figure out a way to do better for your family. You feed your wife and kids first, always taking a little bit less than you need. Pray more than you wash—not that you smell

so bad. You're Irish, so you fight, and Catholic, so you hate yourself for it. You're skilled, but can't read, so honest options are limited. Am I close?"

Thomas John took too long to nod.

"In that sock over there, boyo, is more than the smell of my left foot," McFayden said. "There's also at least eight or nine dollars. In my book, that's called an honest option."

It's more money than Thomas John has ever seen in one place. His face betrayed nothing.

"Right now, your brain's a stampede of buffaloes," McFayden said. "A riot of all the old regrets, the promises you made to your girl, the kids, great God and Virgin Mary above. You'll never be a fighting man again—the oaths we make, but are moved to break. I know the song, brother. I know *all* the songs."

Thomas John, charged inside, but projected disinterest.

"See here, friend, all of this is no sin," McFayden continued, gesturing to the station house and the ring. "It's a game. A way to keep our spirits high before we risk our lives walking into the next burning building. We're short a boy today, and need a ringer. Three rounds, three minutes each. Basic Queensberry Rules. Points only. Connect with my body, one point. Connect with my face, two points. Put me to the mat, three points. Nothing below the belt. Whoever earns the most points wins the sock."

"Sir, I don't even know your name," Thomas John said.

"Hugh J. McFayden," he answered, extending his hand with a huckster's grin. "And you are?"

"A man who already has two socks," Thomas John said, stepping backward without meaning to.

McFayden bowed deeply to Thomas John. "Principled then. My kind of Mick," he said, magically pulling a nickel from behind Thomas John's ear and pressing it into his hand. "When your principles wear out, come on back. You've already got a coin for the sock!"

McFayden saluted Thomas John, then bounded through the ropes of the ring, windmilling his arms, working up his game face. To no one in particular, McFayden erupted in a theatrical howl, "Who wants the sock?"

The rest of the way home, Thomas John struggled to calculate how many times, worst case, a man could be hit inside of nine minutes, and

how much each blow would earn him, based on a sock stuffed with nine dollars in nickels. He could not name the number, but knew that it was a lot.

When he entered his home on Burgess Street that night, he smiled, opened his arms to the family, and joyfully cried, "God bless us all!"

*

1907

St. Paul

Like Mike Gibbons and the rest of the country, St. Paul is growing up fast.

Construction booms across the Sainly City's seven hills. Tall buildings fall to make room for taller ones, then bigger still. Progress leaves its mark and moves on. The city is always under revision—reaching, yearning, becoming.

But that spring, the nation stumbles. Banks panic. Production skids. Bankruptcies soar. The stock market plunges. Unemployment hits eight percent. The recession casts dark, desperate hours across St. Paul's working-class.

Outside of the city's many churches, bread lines stretch. In the red-light district on Wabasha Street, nightclubs and bordellos serve after-hours buffets for the hungry. Soup kitchens take over parks and baseball fields.

Between gloved victories and long shifts at the railroad's tin shop, Mike aches for his kid brother, still away at boarding school. Tommy, once his shadow. Now separated by order of their father, after the rooftop fight that nearly shattered George Barton.

Downtown, St. Paul's strutting, straw-hatted elite pin buttons to their lapels that read: "The year just has to get better, 'cause it can't get any worse!"

The buttons cost a dollar. What Mike Gibbons makes in a day.

*

On December 1, a Twin Cities newspaper declares: "The weatherman put on his war toga, enveloping the city in a 14-degree frost and a welcome blast of light snow."

By sundown, the city's heat is hoarded in a barn near Minnehaha Falls. Inside, men pack in elbow to elbow, the air thick with cigar smoke and sweat. Oil lanterns burn against frost-rimmed walls.

The ring gleams in the center, its posts wrapped in tattered rope. It's a

four-round sneak fight arranged with a quiet bribe to Police Chief O'Connor.

George Barton tightens the laces on Mike's gloves. Across the ring stands his opponent: San Francisco's Newsboy Brown, a rough puncher, relentless and proud, who never quits.

Inside of a dozen minutes, Brown is old news. Slammed post to post, he's knocked cold and never fights again.

Mike's reward for giving the Newsboy a deep sleep? A silver dollar, flipped from the fight promoter to Barton, then into his own hand.

"You're a silver dollar baby, Mike," Barton laughs. "You sent that boy straight to Dreamland!"

*

A glacial gust rushes through the front door as Mike, hat in hand, steps into his family's home. His father, stoking the fire, looks up. Their eyes meet.

Mike tilts his hat lower to hide the bruise—the one lucky shot Newsboy Brown had landed. But Thomas John knows blarney when he sees it. He knows his boy's been fighting.

Tonight, he says nothing.

Father and son nod in silence. Mike slips down the hall and into the bedroom he once shared with his kid brother.

Mike lifts Tommy's pillow, sliding the silver dollar beneath it.

"For luck," he softly says. "One day..."

*

Thomas John worries for his American-born sons. Mike, most of all. The one who dares this new world to bend to his will without carrying the burden or scars of the old one.

Some nights, the ache of Mike's absence hits Thomas John hard, racing his heart, sharpening his fear. He knows how deeply violent victory can scar a soul and haunt a man's sleep.

He wants to rise, throw his arms around Mike, beg him to stop tempting fate. To lay down his fists. To seek forgiveness before his blood and bones turn tangled, clotted, cursed.

Tonight, instead, he holds his tongue.

FIRE WITH FIRE

*O Lord, the sin
Done for things there's money in.*

—John Masefield, *The Everlasting Mercy* (1911)



Living and dying in Old Ireland

Winter 1907

St. Paul

Twenty years takes its toll on every man. Those who play with fire, even more.

Hugh J. McFayden was once a wiry young fighter, his power a surprise in both prizefights and infernos. Now, at forty, he more closely resembles a cracked bell—bulging at the waist, breath shallow from years of smoke inhalation, face a hardscrabble etching of squint and soot, his eyebrows mostly singed away. He's a captain now. He forgets a lot these days, but

never how to fight.

"I don't rightly recall the day," McFayden says, his walrus mustache twitching as he pumps Mike Gibbons' hand, "but it's been dog years since I saw a boy fight so righteous as you did against Newsboy Brown last week. A tinsmith, no?"

Mike is surprised to be so clearly seen.

McFayden carries on: "Short, snappy shots—one for the cauldron, one for the rod. The other boy's still trying to talk his fingers into making a fist, and you—moving like you're being chased by flames, yet not a drop of sweat, rattling off five short-range bangers. Only a tinsmith could fight like that. Your da must be proud."

Mike and Barton trade a glance.

"Sir, if you knew my father—"

"But I do, lad," McFayden grins. "Or rather, I *did*. He used to pass by the station house some nights. A loitering Irishman, I figured he must be looking for a fight. But when we spoke, it was clear: this man had been to the other side of darkness and come out a wee-bit better than the rest of us angry Micks."

"Mike," Barton says, "most of what I know, Cap's taught me. The best mitts you've ever read about—Fitzsimmons, Corbett, Langford—they've all passed muster with Cap."

"Easy, Georgie, you're a newsman now. Stick to the facts," McFayden cracks, then turns to Mike. "Your da turned me down once, boyo. But I won't hold that against you."

"Cap's got a fight for you, Mike," Barton adds.

"Forty dollars," McFayden grins. "Unless, that is, you're a better man than your daddy."

*

Spring 1884

Glennagashleen, County Mayo, Ireland

For Thomas John, remembering takes time. Not days. Not months. Real time. The kind that bends, folds, and loops back on itself.

By 1884, the Queen's noose had tightened to strangling. British com-

manders Burke and Cavendish were speared to death in a rebel ambush outside of Dublin. A dynamite charge leveled a British fishery, incinerating three English soldiers alive. In reprisal, six Irishmen were hanged for treason.

The rebellion spread like fire. And Thomas John was pulled straight into its flames. His name, whispered in the wrong circles, became an accusation. The constabulary closed in on him quickly, stalking his home, his wife, his children.

He'd always sworn he would never leave Ireland. The only home he'd ever known. A place worth fighting for. Killing for.

And, given the time, dying for.

*

Had it not been for Mocky Dolan, Thomas John Gibbons would have lived and died in Ireland.

Had it not been for Mocky's drunken rage at supper, his fist cracking across the face of Bridget, Thomas John's sister.

Had it not been for Mocky's reckless mouth, his thirst for blood and betrayal, his loud and liquor-loosened bragging: naming names, claiming credit for the ambush, the fires, the explosives hidden in hallowed halls. It wasn't the first time.

One late spring night, he tipped off the constabulary, selling out Thomas John's bed, his home, his family.

*

As darkness fell, the banshee wind howling through Tourmakeady, wailing over hills, carving shadows from the night, fomenting whitecaps on Lough Mask, rustling through the potato highlands and peat bogs of Glennagashleen, the Westport police stormed toward the Gibbons clan's stone house.

Inside, Thomas John counted his blessings—and drew the line.

He had been running since birth. But not tonight. No more hiding. No more waiting. Tonight, he would fight one last battle before surrendering.

Tonight, it would end.

*

Twilight, by river's edge, two men facing off—Thomas John and Mocky Dolan, brothers-in-law, now sworn enemies.

Fists clenched. Pulses hammering. They stood in the valley of the Partry

Mountains, where legend holds that old giants observe in silence from hill-tops, passing judgment on the mortals below. *Fomorians*, they're called—fallen angels, not good enough for heaven, not wicked enough for hell.

For an hour, the men fought in the cold, damp wind. Bare-knuckled. Brutal. The River Aille raged at their feet, an untamable phantom that coils, curves, vanishes, then reappears again.

Mocky was bigger than his opponent, drunker and wilder. Thomas John was sharper, colder, his rage fueled by clarity. For most of the battle, he held the upper hand. All that remained: ending it with one fateful blow.

God curse these hands, Thomas John swore, *I will end this*.

*

Teeth bared and fists raised, Thomas John lunged with all his strength.

Why didn't we leave for America?

The thought, striking harder than any blow.

Before the best of Ireland was jailed, ruined, or buried?

Before my wife's pleading turned desperate?

Before time ran out?

The hesitation costs him.

Grinning through bloodstained teeth, Mocky scooped up river sludge with a fistful of stones, and hurled it directly into his brother-in-law's eyes.

Blinded.

A large jagged rock, hammering Thomas John's temple. Then another.

The river roaring. The blood pouring. The hilltop giants watch in mute conference. And Thomas John, slamming to the ground.

Mocky Dolan rifled through the fallen man's pockets, finding nothing. With a foul cackle, he spat in Thomas John's face and kicked him into the water, where darkness and current swallowed him whole.

*

He could not cry for mercy. Could not breathe.

All that there was for Thomas John: surrender and prayer.

Only last snowfall, his wife had read to him of a place across the ocean: a land with sunset gates, fields of amber, purple mountains, a torch-bearing crowned goddess welcoming the tempest-tossed.

America.

Absurd.

Blasphemy.

Not Ireland.

But could he outrun all of it—the Queen, the constables, the famine, the poverty, the shame?

I thought I'd live and die in Ireland.

The sinking. The slipping away.

Goddammit, I thought I'd live and die in Ireland.

Before the river devoured him in its dark depths, Thomas John had one final thought:

You did.

*

And then—

The razor poke of hay, the stink of pig shit. The grind of wheels on a ragged road.

Thomas John, hurting everywhere, inside and out, brow clotted and battered, head humming. His eyes, adjusting to torchlight. Dancing in and out of darkness, his friend, Phillip Derrig, grimly grinned and gestured for Thomas John to stay low.

Thomas John saw her then, the girl. A woman now. Mary. A dozen years before, he could not love her. Did not even know her. Still, she was there now, as she had always been. Mary Burke Gibbons, cradling Thomas John's head in her lap, hand wrapped in damp cloth, tenderly wiping away the traces of violence from his face. Their children, clinging to one another: daughters Mary and Bridget, sons Jack and Paddy.

Above them, musket strapped to chest, dagger in belt, brandishing a torch, Michael Cusick stood watch as the wagon sped to sea. Q, they called him, from the Irish brotherhood. Q of the rebellion, Q the local ringleader. Q, the demolition man.

The way Q figured, he wouldn't be done sacrificing for Ireland until he was finally buried in her blighted embrace, atop the corpses of a thousand British soldiers.

Michael Cusick—once Thomas John's partner in rebellion, tonight his savior.

They were running. For their lives.

The SS *Prussian* looming ahead, docked in deep fog at the Port

of Galway.

The Gibbons family would board in silence. No farewells, just rip and run. The page not turned, but torn. An Irish goodbye.

Before he could ascend the gangway, Thomas John was stopped by a mangled hand gripping his shoulder.

“You know how this night should’ve gone, brother,” Q said. “Wherever you land, I’ll be asking you to make this square one day. Count on it.”

*

Winter 1907

St. Paul

Mike Gibbons is nineteen years old, one professional win and a dollar closer to his dream and fortune. He signs Captain McFayden’s fight contract.

There is a fleeting moment where Mike considers the risks of battling again—of breaking his parents’ hearts, of crossing swords with the law, of being damaged in the ring. He thinks about walking away.

“I knew that my sneak fights wouldn’t stay a secret forever, and I did not wish to shame or hurt my mother or my father,” he writes. “They were always worried over my place with God and, probably also, our Irish neighbors. They believed a prizefighter is twenty-five degrees lower than a bank robber, and no better than an animal. So of course, I thought twice before fighting again.”

To keep his criminal pursuits undetected, Mike works tirelessly to master his fistic defense: feinting, blocking, sidestepping. Dodging, ducking, bluffing. Faster than fire. If you can’t be hit, you can’t be hurt, marked, or given away.

At any moment before January 11, 1908, Mike could have backed out of the ten-rounder with Roy Moore. But he wants things. He wants more. Most of all, he can’t stop thinking about the girl. Mary Agnes Walsh. Mae, she’s called. The one who’s made him swoon since grade school.

Forty bucks. A month’s salary at the railroad for a single fight. A little scratch with which to woo the girl. Wars have been waged over less.

*

For longer than he’s been raising his fists, Mike Gibbons has seen the

world split in two: where she is, and where she is not.

He always wants to be where she is.

Her name is Mary, like his mother. But she goes by Mae, even sweeter. She's the eldest daughter of Daniel P. Walsh, a Boston-born tinsmith turned St. Paul fire chief. In his youth, Daniel Walsh, like Mike, knew the speed of fire, working metal over a cauldron in a tin shop. As a respected civil servant, he had helped build the Sainly City's fire department from the ground up. Today, he's Captain Hugh McFayden's superior.

Mike and Mae met as kids on the schoolyard, becoming fast friends—though for him, it was love at first sight.

"She was the sweetheart of my boyhood days," he writes. "The skip and the dance in my heartbeat. The one who made me feel I could—or at least should—do better."

Mae Walsh is hardy, devoted, and true—"a good egg," many comment. But as she studies the world around her, she wonders where she fits in. Other girls are taller, prettier. Better dressed, from wealthier families. Some are saints. Some are sinners. Some are rock candy. Others, tough cookies. Some turn bathing suits into art. Some sing like angels or dance like demons. Some rule the kitchen. Others, their garden.

All of these girls, Mae thinks, have been blessed with some God-given gift. Something that makes them desirable. As a fireman's daughter, she's never aspired to dangle helplessly from a husband's arm, but still, she often wonders what makes her special. Valuable. *Lovable*.

As a little girl, she'd stack three Bibles on a bench just to reach the church pianist's sheet music, turning pages as the hymns galloped by. Growing up, she helped her father keep records of St. Paul's rapidly expanding fire department. She ladled soup, distributed bread at city shelters, volunteered at fundraisers for newsboys without families or homes, helped publicize other events for the poor. At fourteen, she followed her mother into a clandestine gathering of sharp, well-dressed women, plotting a future where their voices and power stretch beyond hearth and home. Petitions. Speeches. Letters. Pamphlets. The path to equal rights.

Now, at eighteen, Mae joins the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), helping plan Minnesota's first state Capitol march.

She also devotes hours each week to the "mercy trains"—boxcars

rolling into St. Paul each month from New York, three or four at a time, teeming with hundreds of abandoned, abused, and neglected children. Their tear-streaked faces and vacant eyes peer out, tiny hands clutching donated Bibles, sometimes the only possession they can call their own.

Mae's gift then is service. She is an agent of change. A figure of kindness. A balm for a wounded world. Her gift is love itself. Even if it means being alone. An activist. A spinster. A spitfire. Too rough to have. Too tough to hold.

And she despises boxing. Will never stand for it.

But to Mike Gibbons, forty dollars for one ring battle is a month's pay on the railroad. Enough to take Mae out, buy her something fine. Maybe one day build a home together. No dream worth having, he figures, comes without risking everything.

*

The morning of the fight with Roy Moore, Mike Gibbons throws up. Twice.

The ring sits in a clearing behind the sprawl of St. Paul Park, on the east bank of the Mississippi. Ropes stretched between trees. Canvas laid over dirt. Hidden from view.

The crowd presses in, a guttural throng clutching betting stubs and rolled-up newspapers. Young boys scurry up trees and along gnarled branches for a bird's-eye view of the battlefield.

Across from Mike in the ring, Roy Moore waits. A dangerous bruiser, two dozen fights deep into a young, barbaric career. Moore's latest victory: a gong-splashing knockout of Minneapolis thug Herb Catherwood.

Mike's mission: defeat Moore and earn his long-awaited shot at Catherwood.

With McFayden in his corner and George Barton at ringside, Mike anxiously tapes his hands. His breath is shallow, nerves tangling with conscience. When he fumbles the tape, McFayden steps in to help.

"Any words of wisdom, Cap?" Mike asks.

McFayden scratches his head. "One of these days, good lad, I'll remember the one thing I know for sure about boxing," he says. "When I do, I'll be sure to tell you."

With a gusty laugh, McFayden gives Mike a shove toward the center of the ring, then turns and walks away. He trains fighters, but never

watches them fight.

When the first bell is struck, Mike makes the sign of the cross, then roars into savage motion.

"I tore in like a wild animal," Mike later recalls, "and did not stop for an instant."

*

It is a good night for Mike Gibbons.

For two and a half rounds, Roy Moore proves a one-punch pony wielding a hot, clumsy right that never finds its mark. Wherever Moore lunges, Mike vanishes, reappearing just out of reach. Where Moore swings, Mike glides away like a ghost. Where Moore rocks, Mike rolls. Here, then gone, melting into thin air, baiting the gap, slipping through the seam—and then, *pop!* From the ether: a hard, venom-tipped right to the jaw, then another.

Middle of the third round, Mike lands another crushing right to Moore's kisser. Moore's arms go slack. His body sags, wobbles, and crumbles. Moore flops face-down in the dirt.

The referee lifts Mike's gloved fist into the sky, newly studded with evening stars.

But Mike cannot celebrate.

Instead, he shoves out of the ring, through the mob, past Barton's congratulations and McFayden's knowing grin.

Into the woods, where the earth is cool and dark.

There, alone, he sinks to his knees and weeps.

THE HANDCUFF KING

*The world is full of magic things,
Patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.*

—William Butler Yeats,
“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1888)



The lure of danger and death

Erich Weiss was a little-known vaudeville illusionist and burgeoning escapologist trying to carve his name in the firmament when he arrived in St. Paul in March 1899 for a month-long residency at the Orpheum.

To ignite ticket sales, Weiss boasted to the local press that not even the cleverest of the city’s law enforcement officers could keep him locked up. St. Paul’s Chief of Detectives Philip Schweitzer, trained by the world-famous Pinkerton Detective Agency, called the magician’s bluff, shackling Weiss in what the *Globe* called “a pair of (hand)cuffs that would defy Mephistopheles himself.”

In less than two minutes, Weiss had slipped the bracelets and chains. Within two days, the Orpheum engagement was completely sold out.

What had his life been up to that moment but a great escape?

In 1878, when he was four years old, Weiss, the third son of a Hungarian rabbi, crossed the Atlantic with his family, fleeing the brutal antisemitism devouring their homeland. In America, the Weisses sought freedom; what they found was hatred. The temple they built in Wisconsin was burned to the ground. Erich's father was refused employment at every turn, the rejections often accompanied by a sound beating. The New World welcomed Jews even less than the Irish.

By six, Erich had learned there was no real magic in the world, only illusions.

At first, he ran. Sometimes for sport, sometimes for survival. In school, he became a cross-country champion. At nine, he stowed away with his father on a steam train heading to New York City, hopeful they might discover better opportunities. They bunked on the boardwalk, where the city's unloved and forgotten gathered. Even among the misfits, rebels, and carnival atmosphere, Erich's father was, owing to his faith, unemployable.

Young Erich, though, revealed himself to be a natural in the Coney Island sideshow's trapeze act, soaring through the sky with grace and ease. Carnival barkers noted the child's preternatural skills, commenting "it's almost like gravity holds no power over him." By summer's end, Erich was known as "the Prince of the Air," and though it was no fortune, the Weiss family had money enough for food and shelter.

Magic followed. Then escape work.

By the age of thirty-four, Erich Weiss had become rich and famous, slipping chains, straitjackets, cages, and coffins. He's been buried alive once a week for years. Left for dead hundreds of times. In 1908, when he returned to St. Paul as a headliner in the city's largest theater, the Grand, the month-long run is sold out before he steps off the train. By then, Weiss had slipped the chains of his ignoble origins and established himself as a global sensation. He had shown the world that with hard work, fearlessness, and a touch of magic, freedom is possible for anyone. The Handcuff King, the world calls him.

But for years now, he's only answered to his stage name, the one

announcing his presence in bold, block letters on the Grand's gaslit marquee: Harry Houdini.

*

Winter 1908

St. Paul

The theater darkens, falls hushed, as the man once known as Erich Weiss prepares to unveil his latest death-defying stunt: "the greatest escape ever invented": the Milk Can Escape.

With a favor from old pal Eddie Reddy, now the Grand's ranking promoter, Mike Gibbons is seated in the center section, two-dozen rows back. On one side of Mike is George Barton—newly promoted to *Daily News* sports editor—and his fiancée, Katherine. On Mike's other side, the girl he's always dreamed of: Mae Walsh, holding a single red rose.

In a searing spotlight on center stage, a sixty-gallon metal can is filled by audience volunteers with twenty-two pails of water. The conductor brings his orchestra to crescendo as the magician, in a blue one-piece bathing suit, strides toward the milk can. His assistant, also his real-life bride, cuffs his hands, binding him in heavy chains. Six padlocks click into place, each tested by volunteers.

Houdini takes a final breath and vanishes into the can. The lid slams shut.

Satisfied, his assistant smiles at the audience, taps the top of the milk can three times. A long silence. The audience, too enthralled to applaud. And then, three slow thumps calling back from inside the metal can.

One minute passes. The audience, leaning forward, breathlessly contemplates the distance between magic and miracle.

Another thirty seconds.

Mike and Mae exchange anxious glances in the dark. The orchestra falls silent. The great hall becomes a mausoleum.

A third minute slips away. Nothing.

Then, gasping for air, Houdini explodes from the can, chains falling from his body. The audience erupts in cheers. Mike exhales, smiling as Mae clutches his arm. The world's greatest escape artist has done it again.

Some men, not even death can catch.

*

Between speed and charm, Mike Gibbons has come across very few things he wants that he cannot pry from the world's grasp. He finds a way, or makes one. But Mary Agnes Walsh is of tougher material than the rest.

He takes her to the Minnesota premiere of Richard Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration*, where Maud Powell, the world's foremost female violinist, holds the spotlight. They sip hot cocoa by George Barton's new fireplace, swapping tall tales and wedding plans.

At Lane's Dancing Academy on Hennepin, Mike and Mae clench roses in their teeth, bodies entangled in precision, passion, and melancholy, footwork swift and sharp, picking up the tango from the studio's owners who were personally instructed by Broadway greats, Vernon and Irene Castle. In other dance halls, Mike takes Mae into his arms like a rag doll, cutting a hundred rugs to the two step, the grizzly bear, the shimmy, a little bit of the rooster. They spin, tilt, pivot, glide, plant, and dip. Twirl, clinch, part and pull. The dancing is joyous, combustible—fluid like a fight, the space between love and war but a trigger-pull apart.

By starlight, arm in arm, they circle Lake Como, its surface hardening under winter's first breath. Sometimes, he sings to her, voice low and sweet:

*Your silvery beams
will bring love dreams
By the light of the moon*

Mae laughs, leans into him, but never lets herself fall completely.

She knows the truth. That she could love him.

In spite of the fighting. She could.

So she tries not to.

*

"After we'd been steady for some time, Mae made it clear to me that we would never be married until I quit fighting forever," Mike remembers.

Pounding the pavement on the straight and narrow, he works even

harder at the tin shop, where he is promoted to twelve dollars a week. He looks into college, thinks about law school.

"This pleased Mae very much," Mike says. "But I also had one more fight in front of me—the one I'd been waiting years for."

*

Day of the Fight

An unmarked locomotive carries Mike and the others to a secret location outside of town—an old barn dusted with fresh snow and heaving with ancient tales, the wood structure a whisper in the wilderness now, but a powderkeg when dusk falls.

Mike Gibbons sits alone, arms crossed. Determined. Focused. Maybe a little scared. All around him, the tough talk and war cries of sparring partners, the hushed strategizing of cornermen Barton and McFayden, the boozy laughter of fight fans on an illegal pilgrimage to the middle of nowhere.

He thinks of his father. His mother. Tommy, away at school for far too long.

He thinks of Mae.

And of course, he thinks of Catherwood.

The childhood bully who never let him forget what it meant to be smaller, weaker, and Irish. All these years: Catherwood.

*

On the train, a strong hand grips Mike's shoulder: big brother Jack, twelve years older, thirty-two now and a father. His thick hair combed back slick and smart, Jack is wearing a suit and tie to a sneak fight.

"I've been hearing rumors of a scrappy Irish kid making waves in George Barton's classroom," Jack says. "Figured it had to be you."

Mike gazes out the window.

"I've missed you, brother," Jack says.

*

Since Jack's wedding day, the brothers hadn't seen each other much: holidays sure, and sometimes at church.

For years before Tommy was born, Mike Gibbons had only one friend

and hero in the world: Jack. Despite their twelve-year age gap, they were inseparable. Where Jack went, Mike followed, a rambling shadow, mimicking his big brother's every step, gesture, and phrase.

By the time Mike was five, Jack was home less often. A gifted wrestler who competed statewide, Jack became one of Minnesota's early greats. Though he still tucked Mike into bed some nights and wrestled with him in the yard, his absence left a hollow Mike could never fill.

At eleven, Mike watched Jack pack up his room, trading boyhood things for the props of adulthood: he was marrying and moving across town. Mike stood in the yard as Jack and his bride, Nora Theresa Naughton, waved goodbye, pulling away from the family home in a horse-drawn carriage. The moment they disappeared from view, Mike bolted inside, snatched a set of tools cribbed from the Great Northern Railway's workshop, and pried open the door to Jack's abandoned bedroom, confident that treasure awaited.

There on the bed: a cardboard box. Pinned to the flap, a note:

"Nice job breaking into my room, you gobshite. Did you at least wait till I was down the driveway? Prolly not. Just a couple of things for you. I won't need them in my brand-new married life. These are things for a boy. A good boy. And I hate to say it, but I think you might be that.

—Jack."

Inside the box: a few battered neckties, a broken pocketknife that might fetch something in trade, ribbons from past victories, the medal Jack won with the Northwest title, an old jockstrap. A couple of photographs: Jack in wrestling gear, thick-legged, broad-shouldered; Jack with Nora; Jack and George Barton, grinning outside the YMCA.

Tucked into the pink, tabloid-sized pages of an old *National Police Gazette* newspaper from 1901, from a page that featured Jack wearing black tights in a championship pose, a slip of paper fluttered loose. Jack's YMCA membership card. A passport, in Jack's words, to being "better than good."

Mike gripped it tight.

This was more than a keepsake. It was his passport and skeleton key into the world of St. Paul athletics—and the tutelage of George Barton. His ticket to everything after.

*

On the train to the Catherwood showdown, Jack's fidgeting with the fedora in his hands.

"If I'm being straight and true, Mike," he says, "I'm a little concerned."

"Save your breath, Jack," Mike says. "I'm fighting Catherwood."

"All I'm saying is: you don't have to."

"You think I can't beat him?"

"I just wonder if it matters."

"You were there that night Catherwood jumped Tommy and me. When Father Dunphy damn near carried me home," Mike snaps. "Trust me, Jack: it matters!"

"I held the ice to your ugly mug that night," Jack says firmly. "So don't get tart with me, boyo!"

Mike, humbled, pulls back. Jack, taking a moment to cool down.

"I was nine years old when we left Ireland. Turned ten the week we got here. First night of my life I didn't go to bed hungry. Growing up, I got strong. So I fought. I was good. You know I was. But things changed," Jack says. "I've got a wife who stands by me, a daughter of my own. I'm not rich. I'm nobody's hero. But my daughter, she's never—not one time—gone hungry. That's what matters to me, Mike, and it's what's always mattered to Da."

Mike taking in his big brother's words. Jack rises from his seat on the train, steps into the aisle.

"Fight Catherwood, or don't," Jack says, turning to leave. "I'm rooting for you either way, little brother."

*

The morning before Harry Houdini climbs into the milk can at St. Paul's Grand Opera House, he tells local journalists, "The easiest way to attract a crowd is to let it be known that, at a given time and a given place, someone is going to attempt something that, in the event of failure, will mean sudden death."

In a far-off Minnesota outpost a few nights later, it's three hundred

people crushed into a riverfront barn, but it looks like half of St. Paul to Mike Gibbons. Sliding fists into gloves with the help of Captain McFayden, Mike trains his eyes on Herb Catherwood, warming up across the ring. He studies the brawler for weaknesses or eccentricity, signals and clues to defusing and dismantling him. The spring in his step and turn of his wrists. The roll of his neck. How slowly he blinks.

McFayden laces Mike's gloves, slapping each one as he finishes. "Listen up, boyo: you're good," McFayden says, "but not great."

"*This* is your pep talk?"

"Lucky thing is: the same thing's true for that limey twat across the ring. He's good. Not great," McFayden rambles. "But Herb Catherwood's no Roy Moore. He won't be flashing his kisser at you like he wants to make babies."

"So," Mike says sarcastically, "maybe I should hit him?"

"Good idea, boyo. Do *that*," McFayden says, slapping his hands together. "Hit him. Hard, if you can."

McFayden claps Mike's back firmly, as if to transfer confidence, then slips out of the ring.

"Not gonna watch?" Mike asks.

"Oh, goodness, no! You're dating my boss' daughter, lad!" McFayden says. "It's better for everyone, including God above and the coppers below, if I was never here at all!"

As McFayden heads toward the barn doors, Mike calls out, "Hey, Cap! Ever remember that one thing about boxing you were gonna teach me one day?"

McFayden stops, scratches his head quizzically.

"Still trying to remember, boyo," he shouts back. "One of these days!"

*

Mike, alone in his corner of the ring.

He hears his name ricocheting around the barn like a feather in a hurricane, tossed and tumbling from corner stools to bench bleachers, cigarette girls to bookies and goons. Two hard-driving victories, and the locals are figuring out who Mike Gibbons is, a flash in the pan or the real deal.

He sees big brother Jack in the crowd, perched high on the wood risers, hat in his lap. Jack startles when a rowdy newsboy with a bucket

of Irish green paint jets down his row, slapping a loaded brush across the crowd's foreheads. A slash of emerald: the wearin' o' the green. Even at a devil's dance in a rundown barn 3,600 miles away from County Mayo, the battle between the Irish and the English rages on.

Mike thinks of Mae and the agreement they'd come to the night Houdini was locked inside a milk can and left to drown at the Grand. If the lovebirds are to continue their courtship, Mae has two conditions: after settling scores with Catherwood, Mike will not fight again, and he must also emerge from the ring battle unharmed. "Coming home handsome," Mae calls it. She's promised to see the fight, but has yet to arrive.

Across the barn, George Barton, the evening's referee, rolls up his sleeves, reviewing the rulebook with Catherwood's pilot, Jimmy Potts, always sneering, sideburns salted now with silver. Since nearly killing Kid Braun on the Athletic Club's rooftop years earlier, Potts fights less, manages more. In boxing, the pivot is everything.

Surrounded, but alone, Mike shifts his weight from foot to foot, adrenaline surging, ears alert for the first bell when he spots Father Dunphy, wearing collar and vestments, elbowing his way toward two ringside seats. Trailing the priest is his favorite pupil at St. Thomas Academy: Tommy Gibbons, who has skipped afternoon classes to support Mike at the sneak fight. Tommy had made it only halfway out of his dormitory window when Dunphy interrupted the great escape, sentencing his star student to three rounds of hard, punitive sparring the next morning, before promptly dragging Tommy to a waiting motorcar and off to the barn. The Lord and His mysterious ways.

Once inseparable, Mike and his shadow, Tommy, torn apart after the last Catherwood shootout, then sent to different corners by their father. Mike is suddenly illuminated by his kid brother's presence. Tommy, grinning wide, sends a dramatic salute toward his big brother. Thumbing his nose with his right glove, a trademark move soon enough, Mike bows deeply to his kid brother and the priest.

Beating Catherwood doesn't matter? Mike thinks to himself, shaking his head. *That can't be right.*

He's run the numbers, played the scenes, tried praying himself away from fighting, but he always returns to this: not merely for the pride of

one tiny Irish boxer, but for every Irishman in the world, what's done is done and must be made right. Catherwood must fall.

*

The barn's double-wide doors swing open one final time, allowing a bitter chill to roll in low. There, bathed in the last bloodshot rays of a winter sun, Mae Walsh regards the bedlam of so many lost boys and prodigal sons at illicit play.

In a wide-rimmed, black velvet hat trimmed with pressed roses and ornamented with a straight-pinned monarch butterfly, Mae enters the barn on the arm of her father, Fire Chief Daniel Walsh. The slope of her shoulders and curve of her hips, hugged by simple lines of fine fabric, well-cut and tailored. Holding a red corsage in her hands, she is exquisite.

Like most men who fight fires, Mae's fully uniformed father enjoys watching a man battle impossible odds. He hopes Mike Gibbons will win tonight, of course, being a hometown boy for one thing—but also never wanting his daughter to love a loser.

Mike sees Mae and catches his breath, his brow relaxing. He's been searching for stillness, and now feels at ease. Shyly, he raises a gloved hand and waves. Mae smiles back, lifts her own gloved hand to her lips, and blows him a kiss.

Mike Gibbons is ready now. Come what may.

*

Referee George Barton, summoning Mike and Catherwood to center ring, rattles off rules. "Break clean when I say. Nothing below the belt." Barton says, turning to look Catherwood straight in the eye. "I'm talking mostly to you."

"This Mick's got nothing down there to hit anyway," Catherwood sneers, his grin revealing that he had lost most of his front teeth in recent battles.

Mike rolls his eyes, extends his glove for the traditional pre-fight handshake. Catherwood refuses. Half a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier, Mike's childhood nemesis leans in close. "You know what I've been thinking, Gibbons, slapping your silly Catholic ass all these years from one edge of town to the other?" Catherwood snarls. "If Jesus doesn't love me, he couldn't possibly love you, either."

Mike exhales, tilting his head. "Oh, Herbert, teabags to shamrocks,

we're *boxing* tonight: we're both going straight to hell," Mike jabs. "You'll just be getting there first."

*

The paint-slinging newsboy, armed now with a mallet, joyously smashes the brass gong, and the fight is on!

Mike and Catherwood charge hard, a thundering stampede toward center ring. There will be no science tonight. The slugging is relentless. Kill or be killed: the only strategy.

Mike dances, dodges, feints, but Catherwood's blows sneak through. Chalky clouds of rosin dust swirl in the lantern-light as another savage wallop splits fresh flesh. Decades later, George Barton would recall the battle as "a very brutal affair."

First round: the fast feet and tinsmith's fists of Mike Gibbons keep him clear of doom. Even into the second round, Mike is able to slip half of Catherwood's blistering blows. But the other half? They land. *Hard.*

By the third, both men are woozy, rouged with welts, spoiled with purpling bruises. Their faces, open ditches of gore. The entire round: a breakneck volley of rage.

From the corner of one eye, Mike catches a glimpse of Mae, turning to her father, burying her face against his chest. When he looks again, Fire Chief Walsh and his daughter are already down the aisle, turning for the exit, and vanishing into the night.

There's no coming home handsome tonight. Not a chance. So the girl is gone.

*

Bleary-eyed, Mike shoves off Catherwood's chest, creating enough space and time to clear his head. Through the bloodthirsty bellowing of the audience, a single voice rises above all others, near his corner, beaming directly toward Mike's mangled ears.

"He's dropping his left, Mikey!" Tommy wails, rushing the ropes. "After his right, he drops his left! That's your opening!"

But Mike—already fading, his left eardrum ruptured by Catherwood's constant pummeling—hears almost nothing, save the siren's song of falling down, the sweet, swelling aria of sleep.

"He's dropping his left, Mikey!" Tommy roars. "Take him now!"

Mike smiles wistfully at Tommy, pushes off the canvas, charges Catherwood. Looking to end it all. To settle the score. Balance the ledger. He's looking to win.

What he does is survive.

*

Years later, Mike Gibbons remembers:

"Captain McFayden was right: Herb Catherwood was no Roy Moore. We fought fifteen bloody rounds, whaling away like butchers. Both my eyes were puffy, blackened, and quickly closing. My nose, busted. My left ear was mutilated, cauliflowered, swelling to the size of a door-knob. My face had never been a work of art, but that night, Catherwood pumped me full of kerosene and blew up the whole damned gallery. Every scar I carry today is from that one cataclysmic fight."

*

The battle of Gibbons versus Catherwood may have been a sneak fight, but it would never remain a secret.

Locked alone in his room that night, Mike studies his reflection for a desperate hour, searching the mirror for his face, finding only demolition and catastrophe, an atlas of anguish. He's been marked. More like hammered. Surely, his parents will find out, and Mae, she already knows.

By morning, he's hatched a plan. Confess. Repent. Beg forgiveness.

"If I'd fallen off a bridge and landed on my face, I couldn't have looked more gravely battered," Mike writes. "My father's temper always frightened me more than the gates of hell, but there was no way out of this. I had to tell the truth, and hope I'd be left alive to try again."

But it's Mary who first sees Mike in the morning, and "immediately assumed I'd been the innocent victim of a violent street gang," Mike remembers. "She guessed there had been a dozen or more thugs having their way with me all at once. It made my heart so sad to betray my mother that I began to weep—which only made her believe me more."

Cleaning her child's wounds, Mary pulls her son close, whispering into his mangled ear the words all men would kill to hear: *Everything's going to be all right.*

*

Slowly sipping coffee by the fireplace, Thomas John is decidedly less gullible. His own biography deeply marked by blood and rebellion, he knows what a face looks like the morning after it's been punched. He's not buying his boy's blarney, but plays along, ratcheting up the charade.

"Surely, we should alert the police about the roving muggers who roughed you up, Michael," he says flatly. "Justice must be served."

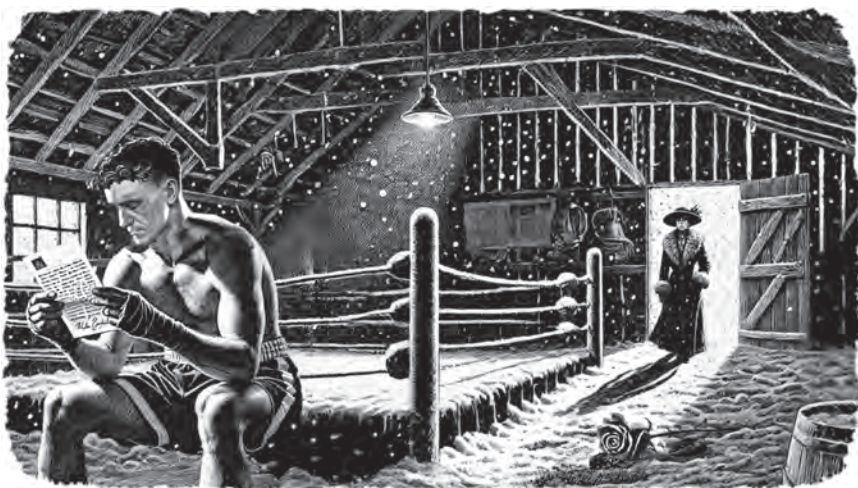
Mike bolts upright, jerking his head painfully from his mother's breast. "That won't help, Pop! It all happened so fast. I wouldn't even recognize the boys who attacked me, I swear!"

"One thing I don't understand," Thomas John says, adding a shot of milk to his coffee. "I've seen you in the tin shop at Great Northern. You're faster than fire. Everyone says so. These hoodlums, they must've caught you on an off night."

Mike, nodding slowly, ashamed, resting back against his mother again. He's certain his father knows the truth, grateful when Mary gives Thomas John a tender, firm look that remolds his quiet rage into better stuff.

Thomas John rises more calmly than Mike expects, rests a gentle hand on his son's forehead. "If you'll add a Saturday shift at the railroad, I'm sure Mr. Hill will grant you a raise. Maybe even an extra dollar a day," Thomas John says. "I'll arrange it with him this afternoon."

*



The girl is gone

Three days after the Catherwood fight, Mike Gibbons receives three messages. All of them are bad news.

First, a freckled kid on a bicycle blows a tin whistle in front of the Gibbons' house until Mike stumbles to the front door. "My father was pulling for you all the way," the boy says, handing Mike a telegram. "But I knew Catherwood would thump you like an old rug!"

It is a message from Mae:

Michael, it's not because you didn't win, but that I can't bear to love a man who chooses such danger. Goodbye.

*

The second message is from George Barton, standing on the Gibbons' porch, clutching his fedora like it's a life vest.

"Bad news, Mike," Barton says grimly. "There's a rookie copper marching around town, hot to cuff some lawbreaking fighters. Catherwood's already skipped off to Montana. You should lay low too. For a while anyway. This copper's talking to everybody. People we know. People who were there. He talked to *me*."

"What'd you tell him, Georgie?"

"That he should zip up his trousers and go home satisfied," Barton says. "If I'd ever met a kid named Mike Gibbons and if he'd ever been a prizefighter, then his parents had certainly murdered him already."

Searching for a comeback, something glib to cool the heat, Mike can only feel the hard, heavy weight of his predicament.

"Got me thinking, Mike," Barton slowly continues. "Katherine and me, we're getting married in June. We want to start a family. And the newspaper's asking more of me..."

Barton, trailing off, lowering his head, a sad smile crossing his lips.

Mike, suddenly anxious. "I can do better, Georgie, I swear I can," he pleads. "Teach me!"

"Even if I had another trick to teach you—which I don't—I wouldn't do it. I've gotta step back," Barton says. "I promised Katherine I would and, if you don't mind me saying so, I believe you made your own promise to a pretty girl."

Mike's head racing with promises and vendettas, love and war. He's already lost the girl. What else is there, but another battle?

*

The third message arrives on the Gibbons family's doorstep two hours later.

It is Deputy Sheriff Dane Anderson, apple-cheeked with a dutch boy haircut, a cherub in a cheap suit with chewed fingernails and a poorly-drawn necktie. If he wasn't a copper, he'd have to be a clown.

Before Thomas John can open the front door completely, Deputy Sheriff Anderson slams the warrant for Mike's arrest straight onto his heart.

"I'll never forget the look of horror on my mother's face when that cruel lawman wiped his muddy feet on our best carpet and flashed the frightfully large star on his badge," writes Mike Gibbons years later. "Matter of factly, and a little gleefully, he informed my family that I was an outlaw prizefighter, under arrest, and headed for jail."

Stunned, Mary fights back tears, then a long, hard look between father and son. Thomas John, closing his eyes tightly for a long moment, resigned to what he must do. He shoves Mike, feet dragging, directly into the lawman's arms.

"The scene was a sad one," Mike recalls. "My father had given me up. My mother was weeping. Whether or not there is a hell after this lifetime, I surely felt damnation in that moment."

Turning without a word, Thomas John leaves the room. Deputy Sheriff Anderson cuffs Mike's hands behind his back, tugs him from the house and toward the police wagon out front—a slow, shameful parade before a gathering of curious neighbors.

Handcuffed in the back of the police wagon, Mike tries to remember better days. Dancing with Mae, hunting and fishing with his father and brothers, adventuring with Tommy. When he was, however imperfectly, loved.

As the police wagon pulls away, Mike cranes his neck to keep his home in sight. He watches to see if his father will begin waving his arms frantically and race after the wagon with a more forgiving mind. He does not. Instead, the front door slowly closes and the house Mike grew up in becomes smaller and smaller until he can no longer see it at all.

*

Money may not buy happiness, but it's always had the potential to build a bridge between good and bad decisions. If Mike Gibbons had been born to anything at all, he might never have started fighting.

But yanked up the stairs of the St. Paul Courthouse, brought before the judge, he's got less than he ever has. There are no decisions to make, only consequences to endure.

"The words caught in my throat as I pleaded 'guilty,'" Mike remembers.

Dropping his gavel, the judge quickly calculates the costs of arrest, hearing, and bail: \$27.50. Turning his pockets inside out, the bounty from his Catherwood battle spilling everywhere, Mike does not have enough. Looking plaintively at the judge, Mike is five dollars short of freedom.

All mercy exhausted, Mike is hauled down several flights of stairs and through a steel door, bolted and padlocked behind him. Here, a long row of holding cells. Deputy Sheriff Anderson swings one open, inviting Mike inside with a sarcastic bow. When Mike refuses to budge, Anderson slaps him on the back of the head.

"You dumb Micks," Anderson says. "Always believing your dreams are better than the rest of ours."

Anderson slams every door on his way out.

*

Next morning, Mike Gibbons has a visitor. Dressed in a well-cut wool suit, wired spectacles snapped over graveyard eyes that twinkle with mischief, face framed by a wild silver mane pulled back to reveal deep scarring over his left eye, the visitor is a stranger to Mike.

For a long moment, Mike and the man size each other up.

"Do you know who I am, boy?" the visitor finally rasps.

"A lawyer?" Mike guesses.

The visitor, middle-aged with a dense Irish brogue, erupts in wheezing laughter, tearing the eyeglasses from his face.

"Guess again, son," the visitor says, leaning closer to the bars.

Mike, searching the man's face, but without a clue.

"For a moment there in the fifth round, I thought you had that Protestant boy licked," the visitor darkly grins. "Truly believed you were going to beat the snakes right out of him."

Mike lowers his eyes, disappointing even this stranger.

"Then I remembered, whatever else you might be," the visitor growls, "you're still your da's son."

Mike, looking up quickly. "You know my father?"

The visitor presses his face against the prison bars, closer to Mike's. "Look into this handsome mug, boy, and tell me you don't know it," he says. "The same blood dried up all over your face, as I sit here, it's roaring through my veins."

"Uncle Michael?" Mike puzzles. "From Ireland?"

"In the flesh and bone," the visitor beams. "Though for years now, they've called me Q."

"You're here to save me?"

Q's hard laugh becomes convulsive coughing. "I'm afraid that's between you and the Good Lord above," he says. "I've saved enough Gibbons for a lifetime."

"You can't just leave me here, Uncle! *Please!*"

"Funny," Q reflects for a bittersweet moment, "that's almost precisely what your da said to me back in County Mayo all those years ago."

*

Two hours after Uncle Cusick's unexpected visit and abrupt departure, Mike Gibbons is hauled back to the courtroom upstairs.

He is surprised and elated to find, standing before the judge, two familiar faces: Father Dunphy, thumping his gold-handled cane into the palm of his open hand, and, noisily dumping coins from a sock onto the judge's bench, his kid brother, Tommy.

"Howdy, Mikey!" Tommy cheerfully waves. "We'll be done here lickety-split."

Tommy slides the coins closer to the judge. "I don't expect you to take my word, sir," he says, "but I believe you'll find four dollars there."

"It's five, young man," the judge says, unamused. "The accused is not four dollars short, but *five*."

Mike panics briefly, but Tommy calmly digs into his pocket, and retrieves one more coin. With dramatic flair, he slaps the silver dollar onto the judge's bench.

"Found this under my pillow one night," Tommy cheers, winking at his big brother. "Saved it for a rainy day."

*

With the sunset at his back and the long, dark road before him, Mike has been set free. He's going home.

"After Catherwood, the trouble with my parents was worse than the fight," Mike remembers. "For months, my mother seemed to be afraid of me somehow. My broken-hearted father would not speak to me. It was hell, or as close to it as I cared to tread."

Drifting off to sleep that night, he dreams of Harry Houdini. The Handcuff King. Bound in chains, locked inside the milk can. Only a week ago. When things were different. Simpler. The magician's fists, pounding for life against the metal tomb. Water sloshing from the can, flooding the theater's stage. The audience rapt as the desperate thumping slows, slows again, then stops altogether. The theater in total silence. The seconds, melting away. The minutes, burning into regret.

All that's left, the theater program hyped, is the escape—or certain death.

Mike Gibbons never learns how The Handcuff King cheated death that night, though he never stops wondering. In Houdini's storied life and career, no one ever does.

THE OLD MASTER

*That man is a mystery, an old soul if ever there was one.
There is in him, by some mysterious decree, a quintessence of things,
an accumulation of the silver and dross of centuries...
Joe Gans was born with all the hopes and dreams and the blinding pain of mankind.
The tragedies of millions of years thrummed on the strings of his heart.*

—Jim Tully, *Blood on the Moon* (1931)



The master class and the lucky charm

*April 18, 1906, 5:12 a.m.
San Francisco, California*

It was still dark when Enrico Caruso, the world's most famous operatic tenor, awoke to the end of the world.

The opera star—two hundred pounds of panic wrapped in a burgundy night robe—shoved his sleep mask to his forehead and stumbled bare-

foot out of the Palace Hotel, just as it began to crumble. Unsure whether to run for the hills or the sea, he bolted into the middle of Montgomery Street, where he collided, face-first, with the lightweight champion of the world: Joe Gans, who had burst, completely naked, from his collapsing hotel across the street.

It was one of the only times in his entire life that Gans had been legitimately knocked down by anyone.

“What an awakening!” Caruso exclaimed, breathless, then cleared his throat to send a soaring F5 into the chaos-choked dawn, just to be sure God’s wrath—and the seismic rumbling—had not stolen his voice.

Satisfied, Caruso suddenly recognized the face of the man he had knocked over. Though gentle by nature, Caruso was also a fierce amateur pugilist who had settled more than one dispute in saloons and brothels with his fists. Extending a plump hand to the fallen hero, Caruso belted, “*Devo aver sognato?*”

“Aren’t we all?” Gans grinned, already on his feet. Dusting himself off, slapping the chunky songbird on the back, Joe Gans turned and vanished buck naked over the hills and into the ruins of San Francisco, the nation’s ninth-largest city.

As dawn broke, dogs took over the streets as they burned—couriers of cataclysm, their doleful baying an ode to the new century’s grave power.

Joe Gans, lightweight champion of the world, had neither a penny nor a stitch of clothing to his name. He solved both problems by stowing away on one of the last trains to leave the fallen city, the place dandies once called “the Paris of the West.” Gans was heading 450 miles east toward an austere Nevada desert mining outpost called Goldfield. He’d heard the hotels there were as nice as those in the City by the Bay—and they usually didn’t fall down.

*

September 17, 1906
Minneapolis, Minnesota

When Joe Gans rolls into Minneapolis for a five-night vaudeville exhibition run at the Dewey Theater and a reunion with his old friend George

Barton, the ground beneath his feet has been unsteady far longer than San Francisco's tragic quake.

In 1902, Gans knocked out lightweight boxing champion of the world Frank Erne in under two minutes, becoming the first American-born Black man to hold a world title in any sport. Over a storied career, he's faced 179 opponents, battled 1,487 rounds, and knocked out nearly seventy percent of the men who stood against him. He won more than most, but had learned all the ways a man could lose: thrown fights, crooked managers, gold-digging blondes, making weight, injuries that linger. Not to mention the omnipresent ultimatum every Black fighter faced: *Win, and you'll be lynched. Lose, you'll be shot.*

Pulling up in front of the Dewey, Gans shakes his head and smiles. Wedged between a musty saloon and a dime museum of human and animal oddities, the Dewey, located at 203 North Washington Avenue, is a four-hundred-seat house of sticky floors and lowbrow entertainment—prat-falls, peekaboo acts, ventriloquists, acrobats, one-man bands, underdressed chorus girls. Sometimes, performers are paid in baskets of vegetables.

The Dewey is the pinnacle of no one's career. It's where a man plays when he's just starting out, or his career is almost over. Black men need not apply for headlining slots—unless they happen to be the champion of the world.

By the night he faces Mike Gibbons, Gans has made \$100,000 and lost it all on bad bets, broken marriages, and flamboyant generosity. Tuberculosis is taking the rest. But even if it has to be at the goddamned Dewey, where white trash and a Black king share the stage, he's determined to make the most of what's left.

It isn't much.

In three months, he will lose his crown. In less than two years, at thirty-five, he will be dead.

*

1874

Baltimore, Maryland

The year Cochise, the great Apache leader, died on the Chiricahua reservation in Arizona, and the U.S. Army raided the last sanctuary of the

Kiowa, Comanche, and Cheyenne tribes in Texas, Joe Gans was born and abandoned near the oyster boats of Baltimore. Like Mike Gibbons, he was a nobody from nowhere—not just destined for oblivion, but born to it.

Shuffled between orphanages and foster homes a dozen times before he turned four, Gans was apprenticed at nine to a local fisherman, where he spent fourteen-hour days shucking oysters, carving food and fortune from stubborn shells. Sometimes he earned two nickels for his trouble.

No one needed to tell Gans the score. He knew what life owed him: absolutely nothing. That would never do, not after a Maryland widow with a big heart took him in and gave him a home. He called her “Mammy,” the only person who had ever treated him kindly.

At sixteen, eager to earn his keep—and his Mammy’s love—Gans laid down the oyster knives and stepped into his first fight. His opponent: an older, bigger sailor who was all smiles at the invitation to nab two dollars for thumping a Black kid like an old rug.

That’s not how the fight went.

Instead, through fast dancing and a couple of hard hooks, Gans knocked out the sailor in the first round.

Gans took home five dollars—two from the purse, three from his own side bet—and handed every cent to Mammy. She kissed both his cheeks, and thanked him for “bringing home the bacon.” The next morning, Gans booked another fight.

*

At seventeen, Gans was lured into the brutal world of Battles Royale—“the de facto boot camp for Black boxers,” though in truth, a throwback to plantation days.

These weren’t fights. They were gang beatings for the amusement of wealthy white men—monocled bankers, affluent fathers and sons, gun-toting hoodlums on abandoned docks. Six to ten blindfolded Black fighters were thrown into a ring, fists swinging blindly, the last man standing earning a handful of tossed coins.

Sometimes the brawlers were armed with cream pies or sacks of flour. Other times, wooden bats. Ringside gamblers made things more amusing by scattering marbles beneath their feet, or slicking the canvas with slip-

pery soap. The blindfolds were always white, ensuring the blood would show vividly.

Gans' first time in a regulation ring was a Battle Royale at Baltimore's Monument Theater. Unlike most men in these racist free-for-alls, Gans didn't just survive. He won. Mammy counted the velvet bag of winnings herself: "Five dollars of bacon."

But Gans kept one thing for himself: the blood-speckled white handkerchief used to blindfold him before that battle. From that moment on, before every fight, he tucked the handkerchief into the waistband of his boxing trunks. A reminder of where he'd come from, he said. Other times, he called it his lucky charm.

Rarely hit hard enough to bleed, when he was, Gans would wipe his eyes, then stuff the cloth back into his trunks, and keep on fighting.

*

Seven years later, Joe Gans left the Battles Royale behind. He was no longer brawling neighborhood grunts for coins; he was facing top-ranked fighters for five-figure purses.

In the summer of 1900, he knocked out San Francisco's Dal Hawkins twice—once in seventy-five seconds, then again in just over two minutes. After his second victory, famed ring announcer Billy Jordan lifted Gans' gloved fist into the air and gave him the ring nickname that would follow him forever: the Old Master. For six years after that triumph, Gans would reign as world lightweight champion. In time, *Ring Magazine* would rate Gans as the greatest lightweight boxer of all time.

*

For over a century, boxing experts have said the same thing: Joe Gans knew every trick in the book, the high art and the dark magic.

There was a stillness about him, a mystery, a secret. His mind in the ring, impossible to read. His body, a lean fortress, a machine of blood and bone. His methods, almost supernatural.

Asked to explain his protean talents, Gans would modestly shrug and grin. "I just see the other man's ideas, all the things he intends to do, the thoughts slipping from his head to his fists," he said. "And then I don't let him do those things."

This was the "sweet science"—not brute force, but strategy and speed,

feinting and footwork. Chess with knuckles. Fencing with fists. Punch hard, sure, but leave an opening. Taunt and tease. Lure a man in, then vanish the moment he flashes his teeth. Exhaust him with his own hunger, then take him down.

"It was a thing of beauty to watch Joe Gans in the ring," wrote *The Ring's* founding editor, Nat Fleischer. "Veteran boxers tell how he stood in the middle of the ring, hands open, plucking punches out of the air like peaches from a tree."

Esquire compared Gans' fistic wizardry to "a painting by Rembrandt or a violin solo by Kreisler... He had the footwork of a ballet dancer and two hands that hit hard, but never more than they had to. Best of all, he'd never duck two inches when one inch would suffice, and was still only rarely hit in the ring."

Writer and ex-sparring partner Jim Tully put it simply: "If the art of pugilism can reach genius, Gans was so gifted. He had stamina, caution, cunning, swift and terrible execution. It required a great pugilist to whip even his shadow."

*

September 3, 1906

Joe Gans vs. Battling Nelson

Lightweight Championship

Casino Amphitheatre, Goldfield, Nevada

It was in the years after winning the world lightweight championship that life got really hard for Joe Gans. After fleeing the San Francisco quake, he stepped off Southern Pacific's *Desert Flyer* in Goldfield, a parched mining town in Western Nevada, wearing another man's suit, borrowed boots, and clutching a pair of frayed boxing gloves he hoped would be lucky. He had no money.

Tex Rickard, the enigmatic gold prospector, lawman, saloonkeeper, and fast-rising boxing promoter, offered Gans a record-setting, lifesaving \$11,000 payday to defend his title in a forty-five-round bout against Oscar Matthew "Battling" Nelson. Known as the Durable Dane, Nelson was a thick-skulled, twenty-four-year-old spitfire from Denmark, celebrated as

much for his racism as for his foul fighting tactics. With no other prospects, Gans said yes.

Common wisdom says that fights are half-won before the first round begins, and Nelson—working with his unscrupulous manager Billy Nolan—left nothing to chance. Together, they launched a racially charged media campaign, promising that Gans—whom they called “the black scourge”—would be demolished by “the Danish conqueror.” Most devastatingly, the contract they presented to Gans required the Black fighter step into the ring nearly ten pounds beneath his normal fighting weight, ensuring the champion would be a shadow of himself by the time the first bell rang.

“Many ring critics believed making weight for the Nelson fight was what killed Gans,” the *Butte Daily Post* later wrote. “But he needed the money so badly, he would have cut off a leg to make weight.”

Instead of amputation, Gans starved himself for three weeks, surviving on calves’ foot jelly and beef tea. To shed the last few ounces, he rolled marbles in his mouth to trigger salivation. Whether it was the glass orbs puffing his cheeks or the bitterness of the road he’d traveled, on Labor Day, September 3, 1906, Joe Gans did an awful lot of spitting.

*

The New York Times called the Gans-Nelson contest “the fastest and most desperate prizefight in history.”

For more than two savage hours, Gans and Nelson tore into each other beneath the punishing desert sun. In the seventeenth round, an emaciated Gans fractured a bone in his right hand. Undaunted, he fought valiantly through the pain for twenty-five more grueling rounds. On the verge of collapse in the forty-second round, Nelson lashed out with a flurry of illegal low blows, desperate to end the battle on his terms. Referee George Siler had seen enough, and finally called the foul. Surrounded by eight thousand roaring fans, Theodore Roosevelt III, son of the U.S. president, rose to his feet in agreement. As quoted in the *New York World*, Roosevelt said, “Gans plainly was the better fighter and he was far ahead of the Danish boy when the fight was stopped. Nelson’s foul tactics in the forty-second were clearly unprofessional. All credit goes to the Old Master.”

Joe Gans kept his title, earned his full payday, and walked out of

Goldfield a legend.

His mother wired a telegram to him in Nevada: "I am proud of you son for 'bringing home the bacon.'" The phrase spread through newspapers. Soon, sportswriters across America were using it to mean "winning" and "making money."

But what Gans lost in Goldfield was almost everything else.

*

Exhausted from dropping ten pounds too fast and battle-worn after two and a half hours in the ring, Gans saw a doctor. The diagnosis was worse than any beating he'd ever taken: tuberculosis—the White Plague, a gambler's surest bet. Once the bacteria settled in, it would eat a man alive, drowning him in his own blood and sputum. Renowned for his timing in battle, Gans was thirty years too early for the antibiotics that might have saved him.

Dying would take time, but not long. He told no one. There was nothing to say.

After years of fighting and mostly winning, a champion from 1902 to 1908, who defended his title fifteen times against more than a dozen boxers, Gans thought he might, this close to the end, have something to show for himself. That the journey—the struggle—might have added up to something lasting. Something to leave behind.

He had to laugh.

"None of it was ever mine anyhow," he often said.

*

September 17, 1906

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Joe Gans is exactly what Mike Gibbons needs. George Barton is sure of it.

After losing his freedom, his pride, and—for weeks—most of his handsome, Mike is determined: he won't rest until he gets a rematch with Herb Catherwood and beats the Protestant bully into ash.

"First of all, Mike, you're an idiot," Barton says, poking a finger into a tender spot on his friend's battered face. "Second, if you're gonna keep fighting without dying or going back to jail, you need to stop getting hit!"

Barton knows a guy.

"I'd given Mike all the boxing lessons and wisdom I could," Barton writes years later. "But he needed more. There never was, nor will be, a greater boxer than Joe Gans—unless, that is, you count the fighter Mike Gibbons grew up to be."

Barton arranges for Gans to visit his office at the *Minneapolis Daily News* during the champ's post-Goldfield victory tour. The plan is straightforward: Barton will interview Gans before his week-long exhibition engagement at the Dewey Theater. Then, in exchange for stepping into the ring for three onstage rounds with the Old Master, Barton secures thirty minutes of private instruction for Mike Gibbons. Sacrificing himself as a human punching bag is a small price to pay for his pupil and pal to learn from the greatest.

*

Eddie Reddy swings open the side-stage door, leading Mike to the wings just as Barton wraps up his three-round vaudeville dance with the Old Master before a sold-out Dewey crowd. The give, take, glide, lunge, and pop are mesmerizing. The crowd, enthralled.

"Joe hit me just enough to make it look good," Barton says. "But he never hurt me. I wasn't sure he'd do the same with Mike and, frankly, I wasn't sure he *should*."

As the exhibition match concludes, the house rises to its feet. Joe Gans, center stage, bows humbly and waves to the crowd, his eyes carrying a quiet sadness. Then, suddenly, he's in front of Mike and Reddy backstage.

"One of you gentlemen called Gibbons?" he purrs, taking a towel from Reddy's hand and wiping sweat from his brow.

Still staggered by Gans' movements in the ring, Mike is speechless.

"Ordinarily, he never shuts up," Reddy cracks. "But this tongue-tied willow next to me is the man you're looking for."

Gans grins slowly, giving Gibbons a long, measured look. The bruises from Catherwood's fists are still fresh.

"I didn't think it was possible, son," Gans says, low and smooth. "But I think I've just met a boy blacker and bluer than me."

*

The moment the sparring starts, Mike Gibbons forgets everything he

knows. He moves too much, too fast, too reckless. He's burning energy carelessly, overshooting, charging wildly from his corner. Gans is always there first, waiting at center ring with a Mona Lisa smile.

The Old Master teases, sticking out his chin, inviting Mike to swing, then vanishing like smoke before the punch can land. Mike whirls and spins, lost and confused, only to feel Gans' playful tap on his shoulder from behind. Again and again, Mike rushes in. Again and again, Gans disappears, then reappears with fists flying out of nowhere.

Mike can't get close enough to land a shot, nor far enough away to escape the onslaught. Then Gans, done with babysitting, starts to really unload, dealing out quick, snapping lefts, sliding rights, and seamless combos.

"Can you quit hitting me for a goddamn second?" Mike snaps, his frustration swelling, "and teach me the lesson first?"

Gans doesn't break stride. "Getting hit *is* the lesson, son," he serenely grins, clipping Mike with another clean shot. "You don't like it, make me stop. Change your game."

Mike sees the next combo coming, slips the first punch and dodges the second. But the third digs deep into his gut, doubling him over.

"Cool your heels, son," Gans advises. "In love and war, sometimes you gotta slow it down to get it done."

*

Stillness, of course. Among Barton's first lessons: find the other man's rhythm and rhyme, learn his pattern, disrupt his cycle. Cause and effect.

Mike, at last, settles, now easing from his corner. Watching. Studying. Gans is right there, but when reached for, he's a thousand miles away. Already gone.

Blinking quickly, Mike searches the ring for Gans, who suddenly materializes over his left shoulder. Mike pivots. Too late. The Old Master leans in, nearly nose to nose, feints right, then glides away into darkness.

Mike marvels at the footwork. *His goddamn feet are putting on a show of their own!*

Then—*pop!* A hard right slams into Mike's nose, sending him reeling in a shower of gore.

"You're not bad, kid," Gans says, reaching into his waistband for the

blood-speckled handkerchief from his Battle Royale days. He waves it toward Mike—an offering. “Not great, but not bad.”

Mike, nose cupped in his hands, cracks a weak smile. “I’ve heard that before.”

Gans gestures again. Hesitant, Mike takes the rag, folds it, wipes his face clean, tries to hand it back.

Gans shakes his head, grinning. “That’s for you, son,” he says. “What the Old Master gives away, it’s for keeps.”

*

An hour later, they’re still in the ring. Only now, Mike is blindfolded, his eyes covered by the old handkerchief, sticky with fresh blood.

“You’re thinking too much,” Gans says, dancing around him. “Studying me like a hawk, but you’re forgetting to *feel* me. Show me what you do without any eyes at all.”

Mike raises a cautious hand, steps forward in darkness, then wobbles back, lunges, and swings hard at nothing but air.

“You a man of faith, Gibbons?” Gans asks, tapping him lightly on the head.

“I... I try,” Mike manages, swinging and missing again.

“Keep trying,” Gans grins, effortlessly landing a straight left.

*

In time, Mike stops listening and starts feeling.

His body attunes to the slightest shift in the air, the subtle vibrations of the ring beneath his feet. He falls into Gans’ rhythm, moving in sync, alive to every detail.

Gans sends in another shot. Blindfolded, Mike senses the danger—intuiting the angle, imagining the velocity. He slips his head left, barely at all, and the punch whizzes past his chin.

“I did it!” Mike crows, stepping back, shaking off the closeness of the shave. “I made you miss!”

Then, the downbeat. Gans chases the miss with a direct hit, sending Mike’s head spinning all over again.

“You keep coming at the world with all that juice, son,” Gans says, pulling him into an embrace, “you’re gonna live every day with your head in the lion’s mouth.”

They dance like this until just before daybreak.

On their final exchange, Joe Gans swings five times at a blindfolded Mike Gibbons—and misses every single time.

*

The sun rises, pulled up like a red velvet curtain over Minneapolis. On the Dewey's marquee, Joe Gans is already yesterday's news. The Holy Roller Dance Squad is set for a three-night run, with a Black ventriloquist named John Cooper as the opener.

Gans and Mike Gibbons step from the theater into the morning light. Mike, still in workout gear. Gans, sharp in a three-piece suit, tweed overcoat, and a feathered fedora held close to his heart. They shake hands as the trolley screeches to a stop before them.

"Want my advice, Gibbons?" Gans says, pulling himself aboard. "If you can do anything in this world besides fight, then for the love of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph Gans, do it."

Mike nods, even if he can't imagine a world where he won't want—or need—to fight.

"One more thing, son," Gans says, as the trolley's steel wheels lurch into motion. "Since you're always thinking, I figured you'd wanna know the Old Master's secret of life."

The trolley is already half a block away when Joe Gans sails his words into the wind.

Mike Gibbons listens hard. What he thinks he hears:

Don't want too much.

*

In 1907, Gans opens the Goldfield, a hotel and saloon down the street from his mother's home in Baltimore.

"A precursor to the Cotton Club," it is the first "black-and-tan club" in Baltimore, replete with batwing doors, velvet poker tables, and a player piano, the Goldfield surrounded Gans with three things that rarely hurt him: good people, fair odds, and great music.

He recruits an ivory-tickling rookie called Eubie Blake to be the Goldfield's resident one-man band. In the house that Joe Gans built, Blake gives birth to ragtime and jazz. Gans and Blake would take turns "blaming" each other for the popular musical style, with the musician

claiming his ragged rhythms and syncopation were a tribute to Gans' staccato ring style, and the fighter swearing no pugilist would ever know a thing about boxing without feeling ragtime in his bones.

*

A few months later, after defending his title fifteen times against a baker's dozen of challengers, Joe Gans steps into the ring with Battling Nelson once more.

In the seventeenth round, the Old Master falls.

Publicly, Gans takes the loss in stride, repeating a familiar refrain: "None of it was ever mine anyhow."

When sportswriters ask what's next, Gans falls silent. He thinks of where he's been, what he's learned, what he's lost, and what he never understood at all.

Finally, he says, "Can't rightly say. Like everybody, I've loved my time in the light. But maybe the real purpose of it all is figuring out how to make our way in the dark."

*

In the spring of 1910, tuberculosis takes over. Gans is wracked by a persistent cough and labored breathing. He's spitting blood, burning up with high fever and paralyzed by total exhaustion. He's feeling so poorly that he turns down Jack Johnson's request to work his corner for the heavyweight championship against Great White Hope Jim Jeffries at Reno on July 4.

Gans' condition quickly deteriorates—from bad to dire. Judgment Day, he knows, draws near. In an odyssey that draws national headlines, Joe Gans rides the rails that summer from the Southwest to Baltimore. He wants to die at home, in his mother's arms.

Departing from Prescott, Arizona, the train—soon dubbed The Gans Special—follows a route reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession. Across 2,340 miles, crowds gather at every stop to pay tribute to the lightweight great. From his railcar window, Gans waves weakly, already more ghost than man.

The journey takes a week, but he makes it.

"Gans survived long enough to have his last wish granted," remembers *The Ring's* Nat Fleischer. "He died in his mother's arms—simply closed

his eyes, holding onto her hand. She sang to him. He coughed, gasped for a last breath, and whispered, 'I have positively fought my last battle.'

And then, he is gone.

*

Months before Joe Gans vanishes forever, Mike Gibbons steps into battle with Herb Catherwood once again.

Natural law does not demand the rematch. But Mike, trained now at the feet of the Old Master, does.

In the fleeting moments before the first bell, he tucks Joe Gans' blood-stained handkerchief into his waistband, taps it twice for luck.

Over six rounds, he is immaculate—"surgical," a ringside reporter says.

Catherwood does not land a single punch. Mike, by contrast, lands more than sixty. Fifty-four blows strike the Englishman's left ear, smashing cartilage into pulp.

An eye for an eye. Or close enough.

"After everything, I'd finally beaten my childhood foe," Mike reflects. "I pasted him like a skilled butcher so that he'd be scarred in all the places he'd marked me before."

Vengeance claimed. Score settled. Order restored.

Everyone knows this should be Mike Gibbons' last fight.

But it won't be.

An hour later, he stirs with unexpected feelings. He's won the war, yet feels no peace. Taken revenge, but found no relief. Fought boldly, but still does not feel free.

If he'd talked to a younger version of his father, Mike might have heard Thomas John say: *Such things as freedom and victory, they are impossible. For an Irishman anyway.*

THE ART OF WAR

He who wishes to fight must first count the cost.

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*



Birth of the Dope Book under watchful eyes

Rumors of Mike Gibbons' furious deconstruction of his nemesis Herb Catherwood spread fast and far.

Deputy Sheriff Dane Anderson and the St. Paul police make no arrests, but the *St. Paul Globe* spills ink over the ringside presence of "an officer at one of the city's otherwise immaculate firehouses." Captain Hugh J. McFayden isn't named, but everyone in the Saintly City knows which firefighter to call if they need to sharpen their uppercut.

Pressured by higher powers to "strike fast to keep the fire department clean of pugilism and other immoral behaviors," the office of St. Paul Fire Chief Daniel P. Walsh, father of Mike's beloved Mae, issues an ultimatum: *quit managing fighters or quit fighting fires.*

For McFayden, it's a painful decision, but not a difficult one. With regret, he informs Mike that the boxing game at Engine House No. 1 is folding. No more training. No more fighting. At least for now.

As they part, the fire captain presses a kiss to Mike's cheek. "Finally remembered that thing I wanted to tell you," he says wistfully. "Know when it's time to quit, Michael. And then, goddammit, *quit*."

*

Mike Gibbons cannot see the light.

With Herb Catherwood behind him, he's keeping his fists to himself. The railroad has raised his pay to fifty dollars a month, enough to keep the house in order but nowhere near enough to change his life. His parents still look at him like he's a dangerous stranger.

Joe Gans' departing words echo in his mind: *Don't want too much*.

Having shattered his parents' hearts and humiliated them with his arrest, Mike devotes himself to being the American-born son they always wanted. He works twice as hard at the tin shop, joins the family every evening at supper, prays with his father until he knows all of the words by heart, plays the fiddle so the family can dance. He clears the dishes and says the rosary with his mother, and never misses Sunday Mass, even sitting still through the entire liturgy.

In the quiet of early dawn and evening dusk, often accompanied by Thomas John, he fly-fishes and bait-fishes the hundred lakes that surround St. Paul. There is barely a word spoken between them. In the stillness, Mike hopes the discord will one day heal.

Mae remains beyond reach. Every day, Mike pens letters begging her forgiveness, vowing to renounce prizefighting if she would only give him a second chance. But Mae is no soft-hearted fool. She remains unyielding, even as Mike tries to do better.

Every morning, he touches his ear—the grotesque, knotted cartilage Catherwood left behind, a permanent signature of who Mike really is and what he's done. Some days, he hates it. Other days, it's the only part of him that feels honest.

In the barn at night, he shadowboxes at full tilt. Lantern light flickers as he moves, throwing skittering carousels of shadow and illumination upon the wood walls. He slips unseen punches, unleashes quicksilver combinations at the worn leather bag, his speed and rhythm accelerating. The old bruises have faded, and his fists now swing like he's battling a specter finally seen.

He's got forty bucks stuffed in a shoebox and no idea why. He's a fighter without fights. A train between stations. For one of the first times in his life, he doesn't know what comes next.

Then Tommy returns from St. Thomas Academy, not quite graduated, but finished nonetheless. With his shadow back home again, Mike can see the light and the reason, even if the way remains unclear.

He's no longer training just to stay physically fit anymore, nor merely biding time until the world descends once more to violence. He's studying: arcs, angles, openings, and mistakes. Watching for half-seconds of weakness and tearing them open into opportunities. His whole life, he's been running the numbers. With his kid brother home, he begins clarifying the mission.

*

One night, veiled by darkness, Thomas John stands in the barn doorway, watching his two sons. The night is cold, but the lanterns inside burn hot. Amber light spills over the ring Mike and Tommy have fashioned from bales of straw. Shadows leap and lunge on the wooden walls.

Mike moves swiftly and with confidence, not like a reckless street brawler or rank amateur, but like a man who has discovered and begun to control his fearsome gifts. He shifts his weight with purpose, turns his head with the precision of someone who already knows where the next punch will land.

Rapt, Tommy carefully observes his big brother's every movement.

Unseen by his sons, Thomas John watches, his chest tightening with something he cannot quite name. Pride? No.

Fear. Not for Mike's safety, but for what he might become.

He's seen boys fight before. He's fought himself, in alleys and potato fields, in pubs where the walls sweat and the floor is tacky with old beer, whiskey, and fresh blood. In Ireland, fighting was everyday survival. But this, this is different.

Mike's learned something. Something his father does not know. Something a man could build a legend upon. Something a man could die for. Something that Tommy is now determined to master, too.

For a single heartbeat, Thomas John considers stepping into Mike's sanctuary. Almost reaches out. Almost begs him to stop before it's too late.

But then Mike turns, breath even, eyes steady, body and soul on another plane. And Thomas John knows: there is no stopping this. So he walks back into the house without a word.

*

No longer a child and not quite a man, Tommy Gibbons picks up right where he left off. At eighteen, Tommy's now three inches taller and fifteen pounds bulkier than Mike, with an increasingly solid form and power that's multiplying.

While Mike has fumed at the railroad, making fists at the world and dancing with fire, Tommy's studied philosophy, theology, and classical literature at St. Thomas Academy, its Latin motto *Ex Umbris In Veritatem* translating to "Out of Darkness, into Truth." Thanks to the two-fisted tutelage of Father Dunphy, Tommy's evolved into a model of the Muscular Christianity doctrine.

"I know of no better discipline than to ask a young man to stand behind his errant convictions with his fists," Dunphy frequently roars, soft-shoeing around the regulation ring he installed in the school gym. "I've never met a boy whose mind I cannot correct in the ring."

Loved and loathed in equal measure, often by the same person, Dunphy wields his gold-handled cane against tardy students, slaps the backs of snoozing pupils, and prescribes pitiless push-ups for those who complain about homework. Bullies and wisecracs earn three punitive rounds after class. They call Dunphy the King.

"Dunphy believed in the gospel of salvation by sports," writes Minnesota historian Nick Hayes. "One sport above all was sacramental to him: boxing. He saw to it that the boys in his charge had a backup plan when turning the other cheek failed, and believed God spoke plainly through a well-placed right hook."

Being Mike Gibbons' kid brother, Tommy takes extensive notes.

*

As if time had folded in half rather than faded into oblivion, Tommy steps back into his old life: a dollar a day in the Great Northern machine shop, his face always gleaming with a broad, moonbeam smile, his every footfall an echo of Mike's.

At the railyard, gone too long to be remembered, Tommy is "the new

kid” again. The younger laborers tease him as a bookworm for his time in academia, mock him as the baby brother of a pugilist who’s done jail time, and haze him as only a bona fide hooligan can.

From the day he was born, Mike’s devoted himself to keeping Tommy from harm’s way. “When Tommy was a child, he didn’t know his fists from a fiddle,” Mike often chuckled. But at eighteen, the kid brother has become the bigger man—taller, stronger, broad-shouldered, and sturdy.

Mike watches as Tommy reintegrates into the slam-bang, duck-and-cover rumblings of Frogtown and the railyard, surprised at how infrequently the boy he’d long ago sworn to protect needs a bodyguard anymore.

One afternoon, it’s the railyard ruffian, desperate to prove himself, surging at Tommy with brass knuckles. Then, the freckled carpentry twins, both missing fingers, looking to wipe the smile off the new kid’s face. A few times, a gang of loggers storm across the river, angling for a battle royale with the pink-cheeked scrub.

Since his return, Tommy’s been a weekly target for the lost boys and wild children of the Twin Cities. Once upon a time, he would’ve been easy meat.

But things are different now. Tommy Gibbons can stand his ground.

*

At daybreak, the brothers rise together to work out in the old barn. Afterward, they walk together to the railyard, sharing the breakfast they’d hastily stuffed into coat pockets: a slice of ham, chunk of bread, half a potato.

By nightfall, they’re almost home again. Supper, song, and prayer with the family. Then a return to the barn for rope skipping, storytelling, and bag punching. They spar together as a bedtime ritual.

In the barn, Mike illustrates the fundamentals of boxing for Tommy—a fiery stew of lessons learned and wisdom gleaned: feet, legs, hips, eyes, fists, stillness, and feel.

Into a weather-beaten notebook already half-full, Tommy eagerly scribbles his brother’s teachings, adding it to notes he’d taken at St. Thomas, watching Father Dunphy coach a dozen Minnesota boys. The notebook is full of careful observations: ring strategies, sketches of every punch’s unique arc and angle, diagrams of footwork, lists of individual fighters

and their eccentricities.

By this method, Mike begins learning again, too.

Over time, Tommy's getting hit less often, but is never able to land a punch on Mike. He doesn't really mind. He knows he'll get there. Eventually. Between every round, he scrawls fresh data into the notebook.

Mike is sometimes moved by the simple, quiet joy he sees in his kid brother. Unflappable. Radiant.

Sometimes at night they fish side by side on the shores of Lake Minnetonka without saying a word. Waist-deep in water, silhouettes with lines cast, and perfectly still. The moon above them, mirrored in the lake before them. They rarely get even a nibble, but nobody minds. It's what Mike's needed most of all. Stillness and brotherhood.

*

Later that summer, Tommy Gibbons finally lands one on Mike: a hard left to his big brother's chin.

So used to missing, Tommy stopped pulling punches weeks ago, so the blow is very hard. Doesn't knock Mike all the way down, but dazes him—drops him to one wobbly knee. Mostly, it enrages him.

"In legends about the Gibbons Brothers of St. Paul, Minnesota," famed sportswriter Damon Runyon writes, "it is said that this was the night when it all really began—the kid brother, suddenly revealing that the gods of fistiana had, however improbably, blessed him too. The older brother, well studied now with masters old and new, embracing and refining a science we for some reason call 'sweet,' almost believing he's good enough to one day be champion of the world."

Rubbing his jaw, Mike looks up to see Tommy dancing a ridiculous, loose-limbed jig, pumping his fists exaggeratedly into the air, quietly chanting an impromptu song: "I can't believe it... But I did it! I missed a thousand times, but I finally did it!"

"It was more like a thousand and one," Mike says, shaking off the ringing in his ears. "If we're keeping score."

Smiling even bigger, Tommy dramatically dances his way to where Mike's still on one knee, picks his brother up off the ground, and waltzes him around the barn. He never stops quietly singing his one-verse cele-

bratory jingle. “Oh yeah, baby, I did it!”

Suddenly, Mike finds himself smiling and singing along in full voice, playfully twirling his brother until they fall down laughing.

“How the hell did you do that?” Mike asks. “Besides the one fight with Catherwood, that’s about the only time I’ve been hit!”

“To know your enemy,” Tommy says in a booming theatrical voice, “you must *become* your enemy.”

“What?”

“It’s an old Chinese secret, Mikey!” Tommy cheers. “Buy me some ice cream, and I’ll tell you all about it!”

*



Once upon a time, in the Kingdom of Wu—one of the seven warring nations of Zhou Dynasty China—a man named Sun Tzu wrote a book.

It is said that this book held the key to victory in any battle. That a man who read it would be unstoppable. That armies who followed its wisdom would never know defeat.

For years, emperors and warlords searched for the book. When they found it, they burned it. They feared what it might do, that it could conjure a soldier capable of winning a war without ever stepping onto the battlefield.

But Sun Tzu had already memorized every word.

When he was captured, the enemy tortured him, trying to extract his secrets. For a year, he refused to speak. They cut off his feet and starved him. Still, he refused.

Finally, his own men came for him. Under cover of darkness, they stormed the fortress where he was held. In combat, they did not lose a single man. When the warriors returned home, they were asked how they had secured victory so easily. They responded with a simple declaration: "We read the book."

*For two decades, Sun Tzu's army remained undefeated. The book, known a thousand years later as "the battlefield bible," is called *The Art of War*.*

*

Summer of 1910, in downtown St. Paul, there's a general store run by Dorie Beaumont, the one-eyed Civil War veteran. Between jumbled shelves of chewing gum, tonics, laudanum, smokes, handguns, boxed oats, and fishing gear, Beaumont has stocked several copies of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Beaumont believes the book saved his life at Bull Run.

Father Dunphy claims to be the first in the Twin Cities to own a copy. He reads it several times the night he takes it home. Dunphy, like many sons of Ireland, never speaks of the battles he waged back home. But he knows the war is not over yet, if it ever would be, so he commits Sun Tzu's wisdom to memory before passing the book along to Tommy Gibbons.

When the book lands in the hands of Mike Gibbons, it's already dog-eared and ragged. After Mike has devoured it three times, the book barely has a spine. He reads the words until they are carved into his bones.

The brothers' sparring sessions grow more intense. Faster. Sharper. More angles. Fewer moves, executed more swiftly. Higher strategy to sweeten the science. Leading, dancing, teasing out front, wearing the opponent out with his own desire. A flash of hands, then thunder crashing in from both sides.

It's a long time before Tommy lands another punch on Mike. Well before that, he starts asking Mike what everyone's wanted to know for months: "So are you gonna keep on fighting, or not?"

THE GHOST WHO CROSSED AN OCEAN

*We rise in glory, as we sink in pride:
Where boasting ends, there dignity begins.*

—Edward Young, *Night Thoughts* (1742-1745)



The rebel's past returns at Stone Arch Bridge

To remember Ireland, it's often said, is to raise her dead, sparring with faeries, dueling with demons. The memories, sweet sometimes to drink, but bitter in the belly.

After all these years, Thomas John's heart remains a landlord to ghosts. The smell of paraffin and smokestacks, burning peat, the banshee howl of a winter wind, they are shadows of the past that still clip at his heels. And then, one midnight, a rapping at his door.

A man stands on the porch. Behind him, a briar of mangled, leafless trees, and a slivered December moon. Thomas John would know him anywhere—atop a mountain, at river's edge, by torchlight or fog, and

certainly in his own doorway. Fear charges up his spine.

It's Michael Cusick. Good old Q.

Without a word, the men hold the silence between them.

Q smiles first, then grips Thomas John's shoulders. "You look good for a dead man."

A kiss on one cheek. Then the other. Q feels the fear in Thomas John's body. "Aye then," he says. "You know why I'm here."

*

They walk into the dark, through the sleeping city, into the heart of St. Paul, past the luxurious Ryan Hotel at Sixth and Robert. The elegant seven-story Victorian Gothic structure, red brick, bracketed balconies, stained-glass windows, is framed for renovation with a cat's cradle of scaffolding. The streets are slick with frost, gaslight flickering on icy cobblestone, empty now but for the drunks, gamblers, and vagrants stumbling in dizzy circles, trying to find their way home.

The two men tread along the waterfront, plunging deeper into the night, until the Mississippi rolls black beneath the Stone Arch Bridge. Q moves like a man who owns the darkness, one arm slung over Thomas John's shoulders, the other resting lightly on a dagger tucked in his belt.

"You know Mocky Dolan swore he killed you that night," Q says cavalierly. "Bragged about it for weeks."

"The bastard beat me with a stone," Thomas John snarls. "Kicked me into the river."

"Aye, and sang about it too," Q recalls. "So I let the feckin' eejit run his mouth. Let him call down the Crown, the landlords, every hungry wolf on the Emerald Isle. In allowing him to brag on, it kept alive the story that you, my good brother, were dead. To all that were hunting you, you became a phantom."

"So I didn't die for nothing then," Thomas John almost whispers.

"They carted old Mocky off to prison for a brief time. For your murder, ya know," Q continues. "He was so full of piss and protest, his beard soppin' wet with snot and tears. Wasn't long 'til he was crying how he'd barely scratched you, let alone killed ya. But he'd wagged his tongue to just deserts, and they kept him locked up."

Q smiles, slow and sharp. "As the constables dragged him away, I

whispered in his ear, ‘I know you’re innocent, Mocky. But I won’t set you free. Nobody, but *nobody*, fucks with Thomas John Gibbons—except me.’”

*

Halfway across the bridge, the bitter wind rising off the river five dozen feet below, moonlight reflecting on the glistening steel of the majestic structure. Trains done for the night, the twin railroad tracks are cold and silent. Thomas John finally finds his voice.

“I know I owe you, brother,” he says. “Maybe I owe Ireland, too.”

“Surely you do.”

“But I have fought my last fight,” Thomas John says firmly. “My days of spilling blood for Ireland are done.”

“*Almost* done,” Q says, eyes aflame. “You’ll be hearing from me, brother.”

Thomas John grabs his arm, almost in spite of himself. “I don’t mean *almost*, brother,” he says, tightening his grip. “I mean *completely*.”

Q slips from Thomas John’s grasp, slippery as a shadow. “God will judge you,” he says. “As will your neighbors. I’m not sure which you’ll enjoy less.”

*

The first stone shatters through the Gibbons’ front window two nights later.

A week after that, a dozen snakes are dumped on the porch, writhing in the morning sun.

Then comes the British crown, painted crudely and red on the barn wall. And finally, the fire.

Mike and Tommy wake to flames licking the side of the family barn, smoke thick in the winter air. They are first on the scene, smothering the blaze with wet rags, coats, and buckets of well water. Tommy works with a desperate energy, but Mike, he is still. Silent. His fists clench and unclench.

“Tell me this isn’t what I think it is,” Tommy says, breathless.

Mike’s jaw tightens. “It’s exactly what you think it is.”

That evening, after the last spark is extinguished, the embers stamped out, Thomas John returns home from the railyard to witness the devastation. Solemnly, he stands staring at the blackened wood, the fight rising in his heart, his belly, and hips.

Watching silently from his bedroom window, Mike sees the war in

his father's face and wonders how long a man can outrun his past.

*

One morning, taking the long way to work—up and over Summit, through the gravel ridges and lower marshes, past prairie grasses and oak groves—Mike sees it.

An empty lot. A space to fill. A place to build his future home.

Lake Como shimmers before him: paddleboats and rowing lovers in summertime, ice skaters carving its frozen surface in winter. In spring, the waterfront blooms lush and green, a canopy of leaning trees shading picnic blankets. A pond brims with rare tropical lilies. A winding path, lined with potted banana trees, leads to a white, arched pavilion where bands play. A boathouse, a golf course, horse-drawn buggies, lamplights, and cobblestone.

The lot is for sale.

The mission becomes instantly clear: *Buy the land. Build the house. Win back the girl. Start a family.*

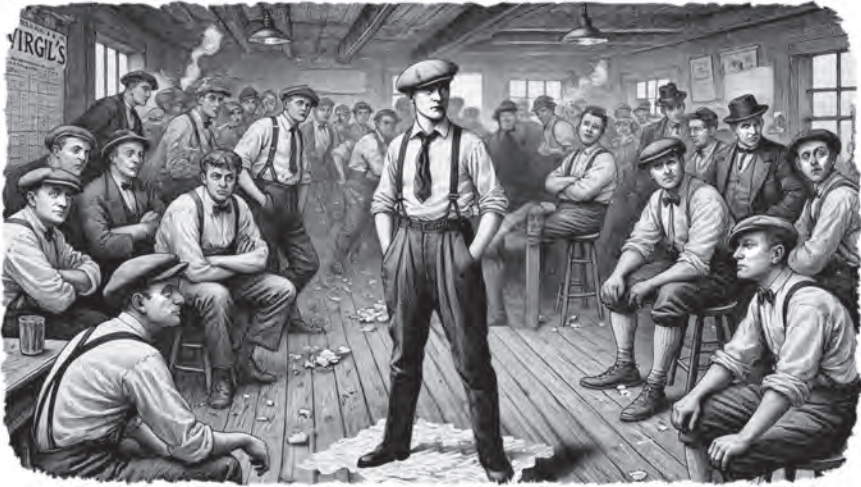
A place to call home. Mike is twenty-two.

“Life was a serious proposition to me in those days,” he writes. “I had every reason to quit boxing. It wasn’t like I loved the fight game. Who could enjoy harming another man, unless his name was Catherwood? I knew I should quit. If I did, there’d be peace with my parents. If I did, Mae Walsh would marry me. If I did, life would be simpler.

“I’d socked away nearly fifty dollars from boxing, almost a month’s wage. I puzzled over whether it was enough,” he continues. “I did not wish for endless riches. I’d heard what Joe Gans said about wanting too much. But I wanted a piece of land for my girl and our babies. A place where we might always be free. I don’t think I wanted too much. I think I wanted *enough*.”

After seeing the empty lakefront lot, he can think of nothing else.

*



The “rough and ruthless” ruse

Mike Gibbons is looking for trouble. Not a war, just a quick skirmish. Some foolish pug willing to bloody his knuckles against the wrong man.

It's a ruse he's refined over months—not a fight exactly, so he won't actually be breaking the law. So long as he remains faster than flames, he'll go home handsome and a few bucks richer. The rough-and-tumblers of Frogtown aren't hard to find, and Mike knows exactly how to get under their skin.

LeRoy Neiman, famed American fine artist, fight fan, and St. Paul native, tells the tale:

“Starting out, Mike Gibbons could be rough and ruthless. He'd walk into a bar and talk tough guys into making bloody-knuckled dopes of themselves. His gimmick was to stand on an open handkerchief—an old white rag he said he got from Joe Gans—and he'd stand there against a brick wall and bet big bruisers they couldn't knock off his derby hat.

“Aw, c'mon, give it a shot, ya big jerk,” he'd taunt. ‘I can't even move my feet now, can I? Fifty cents says you're not man enough!’

“And then he'd just stand there without budging off the handkerchief, almost miraculously slipping, ducking, and dodging everything

launched at him until his challenger's fists were broken and blooded from hitting the bricks."

*

Some nights, Mike Gibbons struts out of a bar, not a mark on his face, with five dollars in his pocket. His old pal, Eddie Reddy—guileless, blond hair slicked down the middle, too tall for slow dancing and two left feet anyhow—starts tagging along, quickly learning Mike's game.

Soon, Reddy starts playing a role: warming up the room, insulting the drunkest men, bounding to bar tops to call out for challengers, recording and settling all bets and wagers. When they work a room together, Mike and Reddy sometimes clear fifteen dollars a night.

Often though, these nights conclude with the boyhood pals running for their lives, breathlessly laughing, chased down St. Paul's alleyways and into the trolley tunnels by a disgruntled pack of bloody-knuckled heavyweights demanding a full refund. But the boyhood pals always make it out alive and split the pot straight down the middle.

They've been friends forever—Mike, small, but always game, and Reddy, even then, not sure what he was good at except rooting for Mike Gibbons. When they were ten or eleven, Reddy told Mike his big dream: one day, he'd like to open a soda shop downtown and get rich selling vanilla creams. Mike doesn't laugh, which meant a lot to Eddie.

*

Tonight, Mike and Eddie are working Virgil's, a secret saloon and gambling hall tucked away on an unnamed road on the other side of town. Hidden in plain sight, it's sandwiched between two other clandestine joints—one masquerading as a telegraph-and-phrenology store, the other as a barber shop. Virgil's has its own storied past. Not long ago, it was an ammunition storehouse for Union soldiers. Now, its "respectable" front is an ice cream parlor, a sweet disguise for the hard-drinking, two-fisted world inside.

Mike takes a slow sip from his Coke bottle, shoots a puckish look at Reddy, napkin tucked neatly into his collar and eyeing a bowl of soup like there might be gold nuggets at the bottom of it.

Then something shifts. A shadow crosses Reddy's face. He sets his spoon down, looking at Mike warily.

"You gonna let me actually eat this before you start stirring the pot tonight?"

Mike answers with a dark grin. The kind of look that means trouble.

And then it begins: Mike, slowly pushing off the counter, casually slipping from his stool. Hands in pockets, whistling like some carefree wanderer. Then, suddenly, full tilt: "Which one of you big ugly Betties wants a crack at 133 pounds of hot Irish love?"

Reddy exhales, untucking the napkin from his collar. *Here we go again.*

If you want to eat in peace, you leave Mike Gibbons at home.

Rarely does Mike have to repeat himself. The thick-knuckled boys of the Twin Cities have sharp ears for insults. Calling a Minnesotan lad a Betty, a Nancy, a Maryanne, that's like spitting in his daddy's whiskey and patting his mama on the ass.

"You call me a big ugly Betty?" a voice rumbles from the back of the room, thick with gravel and menace.

Reddy doesn't bother looking up. He's been here before and already knows: Mike's caught a Big Boy. A whopper. Probably the biggest in the whole damned room.

Mike pivots toward the voice, eyes flickering with mischief. Looming before him is a slab of a man—whiskers like barbed wire, soot-dark nostrils, cauliflower ears, a brow heavy enough to shade a porch.

"I was actually hoping your mama would answer my call," Mike taunts, "but I suppose you'll do. *Betty.*"

The room stills. Big Boy steps forward, broad-chested, whiskey-breathed, fists flexing, ready for murder.

But Mike Gibbons is fast and always moving. Tonight's trick will go no differently than every other night.

*

Tugging Joe Gans' handkerchief from his back pocket, Mike waves it in front of Big Boy's face. "Where it lands, I stand. Sixty seconds. Give me your best."

Big Boy scoffs. "You're just gonna stand there?"

Mike grins. "More like stand here while you *miss.*"

"And then?"

Mike smirks. "Then I get one swing—and a cut of the wagering."

The crowd comes alive. The bets fly. Coins hit the counter.

Eddie Reddy is suddenly a whirlwind of motion, dashing away from his soup to bring home some bacon. He's the money man, weaving through the thickening crowd, calling out bets and accepting wads of cash. He expertly stacks the bills, fingers dancing across the greenbacks like a seasoned pianist tickling the ivories.

Mike flicks his wrist, releasing the handkerchief. It hangs in the air for an eternity before surrendering to gravity, twisting, turning, and pirouetting to the saloon floor.

When it finally lands, Mike steps on it, gives the old man behind the counter—Virgil himself—a confident nod.

"Go!" Virgil howls, clanging a bell, beginning his steady count to sixty. As proprietor, he's also the official timekeeper.

And then the entire room shifts, tilts, turns inside out. Mike Gibbons alters time.

Big Boy swings. Misses. Swings again. Misses again. Almost falls over.

Thirty seconds left now. Faster. Harder. Big Boy's fists shriek through the air. Mike doesn't move his feet. Barely adjusts his body. Just a flick of the neck, a twist of the shoulder. Big Boy's fists, pumping and smoking like a steam train, glazing right past Mike, smashing into the brick wall.

Ten seconds. The crowd roars. Big Boy grunts, swings wildly. The pug should land something, but never does. Mike's too fast. Big Boy misses every time, knuckles splitting to blood and bone. Mike does not flinch. He is stillness and storm at once, five steps ahead of the moment he's in.

"Time!" Virgil shouts.

Big Boy staggers, breath ragged, hands ruined, uncertain he'll ever be able to describe the night he couldn't smash a nail with the hammers of his fists.

Mike's grinning, exhales, waves to the crowd. Then with a sharkish smile, he turns to Big Boy. "My turn," he glowers.

Pop!

One punch.

Big Boy drops to the ground, like a bucket of gravel and dried shit.

Already, Reddy's hands are a blur, scooping up the winnings like a squirrel gathering nuts for the winter, until Mike hooks him by the arm:

“Let’s split before Betty wakes up!”

Something’s always coming, Reddy thinks to himself, scurrying out another door with his childhood pal. Third one this week.

With Mike Gibbons, something’s always coming.

*

“I’ve been thinking, Mike,” Reddy heaves, catching his breath after narrowly outrunning yet another crew of embittered gamblers. “One of these days, someone’s gonna come after us with a gun. You might be faster than bullets, Mike, but I’m not so sure about me.”

“Where’s your spirit, Reddy?” Mike grins, exhilarated, hands on his hips. “We just made a week’s wage in two hours. *And* we got some excellent exercise, too!”

“I don’t wanna get shot in the back over a couple of dollars,” Reddy says. “Especially when we could pick up a whole month’s earnings in ten rounds.”

“You got us a fight, Reddy?”

“Otto Herwig. Next Thursday,” Reddy says with a nod and a smile. “Fifty bucks, win or lose.”

*

Reddy sets them up. Mike knocks them down—thrashing Herwig in ten rounds, drubbing Mike Brown over five and a half, knocking Jimmy Bartos into the splits in six.

Between fights, Mike and Tommy devour every page of Sun Tzu together by lamplight, marking up the text, embracing key passages, incorporating the philosophy into sparring and combat. They copy notes and diagrams into what they call the Dope Book: their bulging red notebook of fight strategies, footwork combos, and “tells” gleaned from previous opponents.

“Yield and overcome; bend and become straight; empty and become full; outthink, rather than outfight, your enemy,” reads one passage.

One line strikes Mike Gibbons most deeply: *“Let your plans be as dark and impenetrable as night, so that when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.”*

In the ring, *The Art of War* reigns supreme with Mike Gibbons. He dances. He dodges. He wears a man out, then sends him to sleep. George “KO” Brown, face-first, in the first round. Art Godfrey, twisted and

smashed in under two minutes. Kid Grantly, barely surviving to the ninth.

Mike soon sees the ring as a battlefield. He yields and overcomes, feints and counters, outthinks his enemies rather than slugging it out. Most importantly, to maintain the secrecy of his double life, the advanced methods keep Mike unmarked by the violence of the ring. Combining Barton's stillness and Joe Gans' swift, lethal fantasia, no one can lay a hand on him. Without bruise or blood, no evidence exists that the first surviving American-born son of Thomas John Gibbons is, in truth, an everyday outlaw.

All of the fights, off the grid, are well-kept secrets—modest paydays, but stunning evidence of a rising ring maestro. When the seasons change again, Mike's old cardboard box, the one where he stashes his ill-gotten gains, is full.

*

It pleases Mike that his old pal Eddie Reddy is booking the fights, working them at ringside, there in his corner. Reddy is a wide-eyed loon, too tall, too plain, too enthusiastic for the amount of skin and bones he'd been given. His speech is molasses-slow, his temperament even-to-flat-lining, but his energy surges into a hot riot the nearer he gets to a boxing ring.

Eddie Reddy, always true. Since he's the only man with pockets that Mike Gibbons trusts at ringside, Reddy carries the purses all the way home.

After nearly a dozen matches, Reddy can smell bigger opportunities. "We're running outta scrappers in St. Paul," he tells Mike. "Rhymes with 'fork,' you hear me? New York, that's where you belong."

Mike just laughs.

Something Reddy knows: *to rule the world, a man has to leave his home.*

According to Reddy's plan, Mike Gibbons won't be in the Saintly City much longer.

There's a mission at hand, Reddy takes to saying.

"Reddy wanted me to leave my post at the railroad and devote all of my time to boxing," Mike writes. "He wanted me to abandon Tommy, whom he never really liked, and pack it all up as a total professional, trying to make my name outside of Minnesota. 'Rhymes with fork,' he was

always whispering in my ear.”

*

Not that he'd credit *The Art of War*, but Mike's frequent invitations to walk with Mae Walsh are, eventually, successful.

“With Mae at my side,” Mike writes, “the whole world seemed full of wonder, and yet I knew I could not have her. We'd walk along the lake together, but she remained firm in her position: unless I gave up boxing, I would never have her heart.”

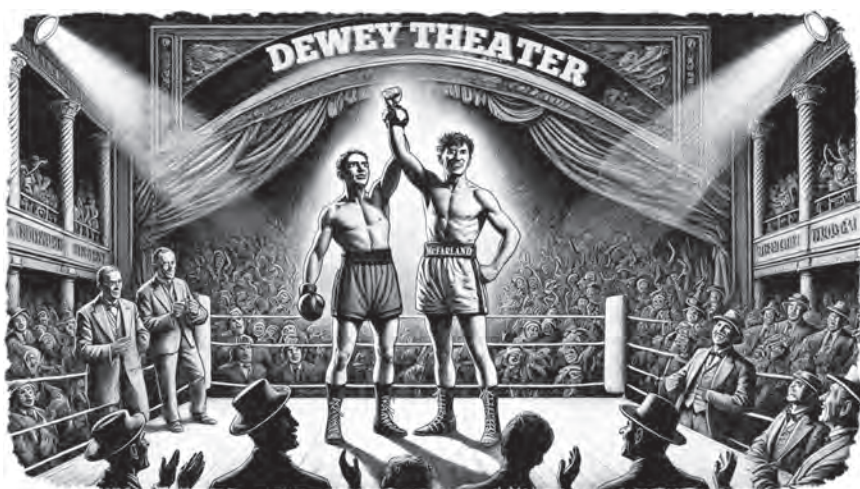
Mike Gibbons passes the empty lot on Lake Como every day now. Sometimes he thinks he can see the walkway and garden that will one day be there. The porch light and hallways. The windows into rooms where love will bloom. The place where he'll live. Where he'll belong. Home, with Mae.

And he begins to understand that Eddie Reddy's right: *before he can stay, he'll have to go.*

EVERYWHERE BUT THE RING

*You cannot dream yourself into a character;
You must hammer and forge yourself one.*

—James Anthony Froude,
The Nemesis of Faith (1849)



For the cleverest boys, all the world is a stage

1910

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Luck smiles on Mike Gibbons only a few times in life, but this unexpected invitation is one of them: a twenty-dollar payday for three exhibition rounds against Packey McFarland at the Dewey. If the first night goes well, four more nights will follow at thirty dollars each.

“McFarland’s no schlub, Mike,” Eddie Reddy says, gasping for breath, having run straight to the railyards after confirming the gig. “He’s the real deal. You’ll need to bring better than the best you’ve ever dreamed you could be.”

Mike's smiling. He knows damn well who Packey McFarland is.

"This is a real job, Mike. A privilege, some might say. Or a learning opportunity. Whatever else it is, it's a lot of money," Reddy says. "I hope you'll see it's fair to split the pot, seeing as how I arranged—"

"Right down the middle, Reddy," Mike says. "Like you need to ask."

"Thanks, Mike," Reddy smiles. "Gotta run!"

Reddy's working the opera all week, and curtain's up in ten minutes, so he turns swiftly and breaks into an awkward gallop. He does a lot of running these days for his childhood pal.

Suddenly, Reddy twists back toward Mike. "Punch in at 9:30!" he howls over his shoulder. "And wear red tights!"

Then he's gone.

Mike shakes his head. *Red tights? That can't be right.*

*

Diminutive in the Dewey's high-ceilinged lobby, stricken with frantic butterflies, Mike paces the theater lobby's authentic Oriental carpeting. He doesn't know why, but as instructed, he's wearing red tights. Tommy trails along, face bright with a moonbeam smile.

"Looking good, Mikey," Tommy cracks, eyeing his brother's get-up: a too-tight tank top tucked into mercilessly snug red tights, which vanish into loosely knotted boxing boots. More than anything, he resembles a weary and anxious vaudeville ballerina stripped of her dignity and tutu, clomping across the fancy rug in boots meant for brawling, not plié.

It's 8:30, an hour after the brothers' arrival and a full hour before curtain, when Packey McFarland's manager, Emil Thiry—monocled, top-hatted, in a tuxedo with tails—descends the lobby's marble stairwell like a cartoon of royalty. He homes in on Mike.

The tights, Thiry thinks, and rolls his eyes. *The red, goddamned tights.*

When he reaches the bottom of the stairs, Thiry pulls on his long cigarette, releases several elegant smoke rings from pursed lips, then removes his top hat with a flourish, and emphatically thumps it over Mike's groin.

"Cover it up, boyo," Thiry snaps, handing the hat to Mike, "before the coppers bust in and accuse us of staging a burlesque!"

"Sir, I—I—," Mike says, blushing, covering his crotch with the top hat. "I was told you wanted me to wear tights. My mistake, sir!"

"That I did, boyo. I surely did," Thiry laughs, resting a friendly hand on Mike's shoulder. "But *beneath* the trunks, lad!"

Face red, like the tights, Mike trades a quick look with Tommy, who struggles to contain a belly laugh.

"It's just as well you're blushing now, Gibbons," Thiry says with a malevolent grin. "My boy's going to make a fool of you out there tonight anyway."

*

It's often said that the only time an opponent lays a glove on Packey McFarland is *before* a fight—when they shake hands at the referee's instruction.

McFarland—Pride of the Stockyards, they called him—was simply that good. Unhittable, they said. Born and bred in Chicago's rough-and-tumble South Side, McFarland had grown up in a world where mere survival demanded true grit. By day, he slaved over a furnace in a boiler room. By night, he fended off thick-knuckled bullies who thought a skinny Irish boy made for easy target practice. They learned fast. *The Ring* described McFarland as taking to street fighting "like a duck to water."

Rumor had it that Packey—a wiry young man with a narrow, quizzical face, intelligent eyes, and a billowy tuft of auburn hair—would often wander the farmlands surrounding the stockyards, punching out roaming cattle to develop tougher fists and more powerful blows.

"In the beginning, McFarland felt there was only one way to prove himself—by knocking out his opponents," writes boxing historian Bert Randolph Sugar. "His 'kayo' punch earned him a reputation throughout the South Side as a 'banger,' and he rolled up knockout win after knockout win."

By early 1907, at just nineteen, McFarland had steamrolled forty-two of forty-three opponents, sending fourteen of them to deep sleep. A year later, he left home, riding the rails to build his name and, like every other immigrant boy, change his stars.

If Chicago boxing had primarily been about brute force, Boston fighting was all finesse. It required dramatic adjustments, but McFarland was always a quick study.

He never stopped evolving his game. He began to think with increasing

strategy in the ring, embracing—and then personifying—the principles of scientific boxing. The power punch was always there when he needed it, but as he matured, McFarland came to see the wisdom and power of brains over brawn. Outwit your opponent. Dominate his mind first, and his body will follow.

Mastery, McFarland understood, did not require bloodshed and broken bones, but control.

“McFarland became a sweet scientist, a Joe Gans kind of boxer,” writes Sugar. “His speed and ring intelligence kept him one step ahead of his opponents at all times, and usually unmarked by battle.”

The Ring describes his precision: “(McFarland) performed wizardry when moving at top speed or when on the defensive, never missing an opening, and timing his punches to perfection. When necessary, he excelled at cutting and slashing an opponent to ribbons.”

By the time Packey McFarland arrives in the Twin Cities, he’s one of the most popular fighters in the country. “A coming champion,” the big-city newspapers roar. He’s also a man on a mission: the lightweight boxing crown. He has a quarter of a million dollars in savings and the heart of a tall, pretty brunette from a wealthy family in Joliet.

It’s hard to say which of the three matters most to the kid from the stockyards—fame, love, or money. Like most boys of the day, Packey McFarland wants to believe he can have it all.

*

In the backstage dressing room of the Dewey, Packey McFarland, handsome and shirtless, his mop of orange curls tousled from warm-ups, slides boxing shorts over his blue tights, moving with the casual ease of a man who has done this a thousand times. Plainly, he’s a fighter at home in his own skin.

Mike walks into the room, pauses just long enough to observe his opponent and take note: *beneath the trunks!*

McFarland turns slowly to Mike, his Chicago brogue rich with honey, ice, and steel. “You a real Irishman Gibbons?” he asks, eyes twinkling as they land on the St. Paul kid, still meekly holding a top hat over the crotch of his bright red tights. “For the love of Christ, boyo! You’re gonna put someone’s eye out. Get dressed proper, would you?”

McFarland snatches a pair of trunks from an overflowing laundry bin and tosses them to Mike, still chuckling and shaking his head. “And never mind my question,” he snorts. “‘Balls first’ tells me everything I need to know. You’re an Irishman all right!”

Still red-faced, Mike fumbles with the trunks. “Sir, I apologize,” he stammers. “I was told to wear—”

“I know, I know,” Packey says, grinning as he slaps Mike on the back. “Tights first, Gibbons. *Then* trunks. Welcome to the bigs, boyo!”

*

Mike waits in the wings, the red velvet curtain almost matching his tights. There onstage, the ring—a twenty-four-foot square with triple-padded canvas, high-fiber rosin, and leather ropes pulled taut—awaits. Overhead, a dozen keg-sized kerosene lanterns sway from a railroad cable, casting flickering light over the battlefield.

The ring announcer steps forward, voice booming.

“When they called my name that night,” Mike later recalls, “at least six people applauded my appearance.”

Five minutes later, the number drops to zero for one irrefutable reason: from the bout’s first bell, McFarland hasn’t stopped smacking the holy hell out of him.

*

Wearing a stars and stripes belt, Packey McFarland steps into the ring to what John L. Sullivan once called “the roar of the crowd.” Clearly, this is his show.

Across the ring, Mike is eager, hungry. Maybe too hungry. At the bell, he slingshots and streaks from his corner like his hair, fists, and boots are on fire, racing directly into McFarland’s slick, cool offense.

Serving as Mike’s second, Tommy gestures for his brother to slow things down.

Mike recalibrates, exhales deeply, and begins again, gliding back to center ring—only to find himself standing there all alone.

When McFarland finally appears behind him, Mike is greeted with a wake-up call: two snappy lefts and a right. After that, the Irish battlers mix fast, though Mike’s three steps behind McFarland’s electric footwork and clever, precise battery.

"I felt like I was doing everything wrong," Mike later writes. "I was nervous and overthinking. Packey slapped me on the face and body anytime he wanted, and all over my head and body."

McFarland seizes Mike by the shoulders, squeezing tight. The referee bookmarks himself between the fighters, struggling to pry them apart, when McFarland leans in, growling in Mike's ear: "I'm beginning to doubt you're a real Irishman after all, boyo!" he taunts. "Where's your goddamned fight?"

The words bruise more deeply than all of McFarland's blows combined, snapping Mike awake.

Erupting instantaneously, Mike becomes a cyclone of dynamic motion, skating across the ring with fists pumping, a flash flood of controlled mayhem storming straight at the Pride of the Stockyards. McFarland's getaway is flashy, all angles and lightning, feinting left, striking right, soaking Mike with a torrential downpour of blows that land high, low, and everywhere in between.

In Mike's corner, Tommy scribbles furiously into the Dope Book, tracking every move. Between rounds, he shouts to Mike his educated guesses as to what McFarland will do next.

Mike hangs on, hearing his brother's barked directions. He holds his ground, but takes a beating—spanked sideways and turned inside out. Three rounds—nine minutes—but it feels like a century.

At night's end, Mike leaves the Dewey with his red tights, twenty bucks, and an unexpected invitation to return for another three rounds the following night. Of course, he'll come back. But not without a plan.

"Before I faced Packey McFarland, I was a good boxer. *Pretty good*, anyway," he later writes. "But what I learned in three rounds that night could have filled a hundred books."

Fortunately, Mike and Tommy have already started one: the Dope Book. For months, Tommy's notes have been meticulously, if informally, kept. But after night one with McFarland, the writing is on the wall: good fighters require a customized game plan. With that, the brothers' Dope Book becomes high priority. On their way home from the Dewey, Mike drops a dime on a drugstore countertop for a brand-new red notebook.

They stay up all night, reviewing every second of the three-round

battle, frame by frame, like the fight is a motion picture in their minds. They record their findings in the notebook: diagrams, sketches, battlefield observations. Onto lined pages, they inscribed every opponent's weaknesses and habits, prepped battle plans, mapped airtight defenses.

Over the years, the Dope Book—which came to include nearly a dozen volumes—serves as a war manual, the very foundation of Mike and Tommy's indomitable scientific ringcraft.

"When we finally put down the pen that night," Mike writes, "we'd recorded on paper every single thing Packey McFarland could possibly do in the ring, then imagined every *other* thing he could do. After our second date, Packey would have no reason to ask me again if I was really an Irishman."

Inside the Dope Book's cover, Mike scrawls a favorite Sun Tzu quote:

"Know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat."

The second night against McFarland goes better than the first. The third, better still. In every round, Mike learns more about Packey's techniques and tells: the feints and footwork, the quick flutter of his eyes before he'd launch an attack. Every night, Mike gets better, fights smarter.

By the final night, Mike knows McFarland's wizardry, not like a second language, but his native tongue.

"In our last fight, Packey barely laid a glove on me," Mike later recalls. "Even when he did, I always clapped back, landing some real skull-rattlers. I tell you: I boxed that final night like never before. The audience went wild, shouting not only Packey's name—but mine too! It was glorious!"

When the battle ends, McFarland invites Mike onstage for the curtain call. Mike feels it. For the first time. The thunder. The roar. The overwhelm of the crowd in ecstasy, the unruly congregation's gutter hymn, the sacred song held in special reserve for the witnessing of truly impressive athletic feats and genuine heroism.

Slowly, Mike takes a bow. Then another.

As he rises, a figure in the theater's second balcony catches his eye.

Surrounded by the frenzied throng, the man stands motionless. Stone-

faced. Watching.

"Whatcha lookin' at, Mikey?" Tommy asks.

Mike squints, trying to focus. Crisp suit. Grizzled face. A shock of red hair, ribboned with silver. *Michael Cusick? Uncle Q?*

When he looks again, the man is gone.

*

A sportswriter from the *Winnipeg Tribune*, up close at three of the Gibbons-McFarland showdowns, pens a powerful commentary, eventually reprinted in more than one hundred newspapers nationwide. The journalist writes:

"In these days of rough infighting and powerful slugging, swiftness of foot in both attack and defense is lost sight of. Yet it is one of the biggest factors in making real champions. A boxer who is so light on his feet that he can be constantly on the move is not easy to hit.

"Darting in with dazzling speed, it is possible to land clean-cut blows with such unexpected skill that an opponent has no time to block or counter. His assailant, after landing, skips away. The employment of these tactics means the scoring of points upon which a referee's decision must be based—unless there's a knockout.

"Of the present-day boxers, two experts of footwork stand out in bold relief. They are Packey McFarland, the Chicago lightweight, and Mike Gibbons, the St. Paul boy, who is regarded by many as the best welterweight in America. Both are phantoms when they begin fighting, for they can fade away from a rival's wallop so quickly that boxing fans are amazed. Yet, when McFarland and Gibbons decide to land punches, they shoot the mark with lightning-like rapidity. Their footwork is not cultivated, they say, but a gift. They are so agile and quick that they cannot help moving about the padded floor like dancing masters at the head of a ballet corps.

"As a result, McFarland and Gibbons are believed to be the cleverest boxers in the world."

*

Long after the last audience member has departed the Dewey, Mike Gibbons and the Pride of the Stockyards remain in their shared dressing room. Gloves unlaced, freshly showered, dressed like civilians—maybe even gentlemen. After five nights in the ring together, they're old pals.

"I'm leaving the Twin Cities this afternoon, Gibbons," McFarland says, buttoning his cuffs. "But I'll be back one day, and I'm hoping for two things when I am. First, I hope they don't book me in this godforsaken theater again. Minneapolis has gotta have something classier."

"And second," McFarland continues, "I hope to Christ you've made your way to New York. Because if I come back and find you still hammering steel over buckets of hell, I swear to the Father, Son, and Holy Fucking Ghost, I'll beat you over that cauldron myself and dump your body into the flames. In a friendly way, of course."

Mike, flattered but silent, looks down.

"I mean it, Gibbons," McFarland presses. "You're too good for tin shops and sneak fights. Get to New York. Show them who you are. There's real money in the big city. Some of it's yours."

He pauses, grinning.

"And most of it's mine."

McFarland smacks Mike lightly on both cheeks, ruffles his hair.

Mike extends a hand. "Friends?"

"Absolutely, Gibbons," Packey says, gripping his hand firmly. "Everywhere but the ring."

Without another word, McFarland turns, sprints up the street, and vanishes into the first light of dawn.

When Mike Gibbons and Packey McFarland meet again, the world will be at war—and Mike will dance too close to death.



The lovers' pact at Lake Como

By the third time Mike Gibbons waltzes her past the empty lot on Lake Como, Mae Walsh knows exactly what he's doing.

She knows he's never stopped fighting. She also knows he's never been hurt—not since Catherwood, anyway. He's changed, improved. He barely gets hit anymore. Why else would she agree to so many strolls, arm in arm, if not to see for herself whether the man she loves is mastering his trade?

The stories of his skill precede him. His unmarked face confirms it. He's not quitting, not with his eye so fixed on the pricey lakefront property they keep "casually" passing. This time, he's even brought flowers.

Mae knows that in time Mike will be hurt in the ring. Even the best fighters, given the time, eventually are. She knows this. But her heart speaks louder than reason.

She rests a hand on his. "Let me save you a nervous stomach and a few deep breaths, Michael," she says, turning from the empty lot to the lake. "The ladies are planning our first march next month. There are thousands of us here in St. Paul, and it's time we're taken seriously. The world couldn't be worse for allowing a woman's touch. We'll march from the river to the Capitol, and we *will* be heard."

Mike squeezes her hand, nodding.

"I want a husband and children. I want a family. I want to make a

home," she says. "The things they say a girl *should* want? I want them. But I also want more. I believe we're on the brink of real change. Good for women, good for the world. Can you live with that, Michael?"

They stand together, gazing at a future coming clearly into view. He nods.

"Then here's my proposal," Mae says, matter-of-factly. "You fight your fights. And in return, you let me fight mine."

Months later, on May 11, 1910, Mike Gibbons, twenty-three, and Mary Agnes Walsh, twenty-two, marry at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church in Frogtown. Tommy Gibbons stands as his brother's best man. The newlyweds celebrate their vows with four nights in a cabin on Swift Current Lake, deep in Blackfoot Nation, Glacier National Park, Montana.

*

Upon returning to St. Paul, Mike meets with a banker at the Lake Como lot, where he's curtly informed that he's \$4,000 short of being taken seriously as a buyer. Then, recognized as the recently incarcerated sneak fighter, Mike is scolded for wasting the banker's time.

Four thousand dollars shy, Mike cannot see the light.

He takes the long way home, back to his parents' house, where he and Mae are crammed into his brother Jack's old room.

"You must be Irish, boyo," a gravelly voice calls out. "Looking so glum when you're riding on top of the world!"

Mike stops, turns toward the voice. He knows where this is going, and who it is that summons. The man from the Dewey balcony, who visited him in jail after the Catherwood fight.

Uncle Q.

"Lovely night for dreaming, isn't it?" Q tips his hat, offering a handshake. Mike hesitates, unsure of what to say. Slowly, he takes the offered hand, feeling the firm, cold grip of a man who's always been a shadow.

"When I heard one of Thomas John's American runts was coming up gold in the prize ring, I figured it must be blarney," Q says, still gripping Mike's hand. "But I must be congratulatin' ya, lad. You're a thousand times the fighter your da ever was."

Q's eyes glint in the moonlight, as he continues: "I have a proposition for you, lad. One that could make you a *very* wealthy man."

Mike's gut tightens with familiar unease. He glances toward the house, picturing Mae waiting for him, but the lure of Q's words, the promise of a fortune, is a powerful draw.

"What kind of proposition?" Mike asks, his voice barely a whisper.

Q leans in, voice low, conspiratorial.

"A fight, lad. A fight that could change everything."

OH-SA-KIS

*The world is little, people are little, human life is little.
There is only one big thing—desire.*

—Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (1915)



“Oh, save us!”

1910

St. Paul, Minnesota

Ten years into the new century, everything’s sizzle and stride. The American Dream’s sparking into “lunatic existence,” according to iconoclastic journalist and satirist H. L. Mencken. “(The United States) is the land of mirth. The buffoonery never stops. (It) is incomparably the greatest show on earth.”

Halley’s Comet doesn’t help. Carving a broadsword of light into the inkwell of evening, the comet—after seventy-five years away—arrives to change

everything all over again. Scientists warn that its tail may “emit cyanogen gas into the atmosphere and possibly snuff out all life on the planet.”

“The sky is falling!” newspapers scream on their front pages. “In a flash of light, it will all be gone.”

Left to its own devices, the world responds with a familiar lack of moderation. Gas masks, “anti-comet pills,” “anti-comet umbrellas,” snake oil, carnival barking, and absurdist malarkey. Some Americans, steeped in overwhelming anxiety, take their own lives. In Iowa, a farmer digs a cave, fitting it with an airtight door to keep out the comet’s presumed poisonous gases. Coal miners in the East refuse to work, preferring to perish above ground with their families. Some watch the comet from hot air balloons. Others pray in packed churches. A million people in Constantinople take to their rooftops, huddling together for comfort, singing hymns, pleading for salvation.

Whatever Halley’s Comet brings to the world this time, it’s coming—and it’s coming fast.

For Mike Gibbons, the comet’s light means only one thing: *it’s time to leave home.*

*

Waking up in his childhood bedroom, his new bride wrapped in his arms, Mike stares at the ceiling. In the other room, his family wrestles with routines—the cacophony of domestic harmony, dishes clinking, the voices of his siblings and mother, the rise and fall of conversation and Irish song.

He needs more than this. *Wants* more. For Mae. For the family they hope to build.

He thinks of the empty lot on Lake Como. He’s run the numbers. He *has* to leave. Has to take his shot in the place that “rhymes with fork.”

Before Mae is fully awake, he begins pouring out his plan.

“You’re such a child, Michael,” she says, her voice still thick with sleep. “A stubborn child.”

“I think you mean ‘clever,’” he grins, a mischievous spark in his eye. “If I keep fighting here, I’ll never be able to afford a home for us—and I’d be—”

“A criminal,” she says. “I know.”

"I prefer 'outlaw,'" he counters, tenderly kissing her forehead. "Or 'the man who loves you.' Forever."

She rolls her eyes, but he sees the hint of a smile.

"Forever is a very long time, Michael," she says.

"Only without you," he sings, bounding to his feet, arms outspread like a vaudeville superstar bringing down the house. "Whatever I am, two things are right certain: I will love you forever, Mary Agnes Walsh, and I'm going to build a magnificent world for us and our children. With my fists."

Mae knows Mike will never stop trying to become more than he is, not ever. She loves him for it—his determination, his devotion. Even if it sometimes frightens her.

"Nobody's laid a hand on me in six fights, baby," he says, his voice softening. "Sometimes I think the world's forgotten how to hit me."

Still, no word nor light from Mae.

"I can do this, baby. For you. For *us*," Mike says. "For our babies."

Mae, smiling in spite of herself, waits a long moment before she speaks. "And you'll come home handsome?"

He nods emphatically.

"*And* I'll bring home the bacon," he says, stealing a kiss. "We'll have everything we can dream. Roses and kisses. Maybe even a beautiful parade."

*

The day he breaks the news to Tommy, his younger brother's sitting on a crate behind the family home. Glancing warily at Mike, Tommy's fiddling with tape, trying to wrap his own fists. He already knows he'll be alone soon.

"So, you're going," Tommy says flatly.

"Like I said I would," Mike says. "But I'll be back, Tommy Boy. New York's not that far. A day and a half by train. Maybe less. I won't forget about you."

Tommy's not convinced.

"We're on a mission," Mike says. "We made a vow, right?"

"Yeah," he mumbles, unconvincingly.

"We're men of our word, Tommy Boy," Mike says. "That's what counts. I will come back. And you *will* have your shot in New York. Call this 'a scouting mission.'"

Tommy carefully considers his brother's words, nodding slowly in acceptance. Suddenly and cheerfully, he blurts, "You think they'll give you a nickname, Mikey?"

"If I'm good, they will," he says. "And if I'm *great*, they'll never forget it."

Tommy's eyes suddenly brighten. "And if the comet doesn't kill us first," Tommy cheers, "you swear you'll take me with you next time?"

"Like I said I would," Mike nods.

Tommy proudly holds up his perfectly-taped hands with a radiant smile. "I'll be ready!" he cheers.

Mike grins, feeling a deep pull in his belly—a fire rising to his chest, then his throat. He realizes he's fighting back tears and, for a moment, wonders if this is just another part of growing up.

If love weren't so goddamned hard, he sometimes thinks, *it might be the only way out of the madness.*

*

When the last glaciers of Minnesota melted away, they carved ten thousand shimmering wounds into the earth—lakes that mirrored the vast, indifferent sky. In 1893, one of those lakes became a battlefield.

After losing their homes, their freedom, and most of their people in the bloody, century-long Indian Wars, the decimated tribes, still true to their ancient rituals, searched the land for a place to begin again. Lake Osakis, then unnamed, was that place.

Having lost to everyone else, they began battling each other for dominion over the land and the lake. Weakened by warring, the Chippewa and Ojibwe were easy prey for the vicious swarm of Dakota Sioux who also coveted the territory. The Chippewa fought boldly, but quickly surrendered. The Ojibwe refused to yield, and were annihilated, butchered, and drowned.

All but one lone Ojibwe brave who, the story goes, dropped to his knees on the battlefield, throwing his arms open to the sky, and cried:

"Oh-sa-kis, Oh-sa-kis!"

Roughly translated: "*Oh, save us! Oh, save us!*"

The Sioux moved in. The name stuck; the body of water known ever after by the Ojibwe's desperate lament.

Battle Point, on the eastern side of the lake, is where the Ojibwe fell. The waters may be haunted by a thousand ghosts, but everyone knows it's the best place for fishing.

*



The wisdom of age, the folly of youth, and the guidance of the spirit

Mike casts his line into the early morning fog again. His father's bucket is nearly full. They can see their breath and do not speak. Thomas John offers a tin thermos of hot coffee to Mike, who shakes his head. Crickets softly pepper the quiet as the eerie wail of a distant loon marks its territory.

After long silence, Thomas John speaks: "Before my father went to Heaven, he told me in a whisper that he was afraid God might judge him for knowing less as an old man than he did as a boy. I thought he was speaking in jest, but through the years, I've come to see the truth of it: he was *warning* me."

Mike stares into the lake, all morning and not a nibble. He pretends not to listen.

"I thank the good Lord every day for allowing me to hold onto a few strong convictions," Thomas John says, "even as I come closer to judgment myself."

"Let me guess, Pop," Mike grunts in frustration. "What matters most is what you do next."

Thomas John pauses. He understands. Maybe he's said it too often.

Mike isn't done. "What I want to know is: what did you do after that son of a bitch Michael Cusick tried to burn down our barn?" Mike growls. "What did you do next *then*?"

In all these years, not a word between them about Ireland. About the hunger and the suffering. Not about Q, now deep in their lives.

"I've run into him," Mike says. "He stopped by the night you let me spend in jail. Said he'd be catching up with you."

"You never said anything."

"Neither did you, Pop," Mike snaps. "Not even when he was throwing rocks through our windows."

Thomas John lowers his head, his face washed in a briar of dark emotions.

"Son, there are things—"

"—we'll never understand about each other," Mike interrupts. "I know, Pop. I've always known."

"Don't talk down to me, boyo," Thomas John snaps, his eyes welling. "I may not have always done good, but I have always tried to do right. I may not read well. I have no fancy clothes. No fortune. But I crossed a goddamned *ocean* to try—just to *try*—to be a better man. And I've not stopped trying, not for one breath, since we got here. So don't you dare talk down to me!"

Mike retreats. Thomas John steps back, calming himself. A long silence.

"I know you've made up your mind, Michael. About what comes next," Thomas John softly says. "The boys at Great Northern say you're something special. Like you haven't always been."

Mike looks down, a tangle of emotion, unable to slip the cuffs. He watches the battering wings of a low-flying grebe shatter the calm waters.

"Look, Pop," Mike says resolutely, "I'm going to New York. That's what happens next. It's what matters most. For me. For Mae."

Mike swallows hard, meets his father's gaze, and quietly adds, "For the baby she's carrying."

Thomas John's face suddenly shifts, birthing something brighter in his eyes. Mike nods.

Another long silence.

Then, for the first time in years, his father smiles.

Flash! July 4, 1910. Jack Johnson—the Big Smoke, they call him—defends his heavyweight boxing title in Reno, Nevada, demolishing a race-baiting “Great White Hope,” Jim Jeffries, in the fifteenth of forty-five scheduled rounds. Newspapers nationwide christen the blockbuster battle. “The Fight of the Century.” With Johnson’s victory, elation and fury over the racially charged fight send seismic shocks from coast to coast. “*Kill that giant!*” the racists cry. Then the riots begin—violence erupting in New York and Los Angeles, meeting convulsively and explosively in the middle of the country. Fear and fury are contagious. Lives are lost. Weeks before the fight, in the Twin Cities, fledgling sportswriter George Barton stakes his career on (accurately) predicting Johnson’s triumph. He’s the only newsman to do so.

Barton, seated ringside in sportswriters’ row, telegraphs news of the victory to the Gibbons brothers at Cooke’s Gymnasium on Kasota Avenue next to the tracks in Minneapolis. Mike has just knocked out Jack Parres, known as the Iron River Kid, in the third round. As they celebrate in center ring, Tommy is handed a sealed wire, tears it open. “It’s from Georgie. Brother, he called it right!” Tommy says. “Jack Johnson crushed Jeffries! Hurrah!”

Flash! Late summer, 1910. Joe Gans, ravaged by tuberculosis, going home, racing the rails to die in his mother’s arms. On August 10, the newspapers mourn: “Joe Gans, the Old Master, is no more. He has heard the count from which there is no awakening. May he rest in peace.” From different corners of St. Paul, Mike Gibbons and George Barton—their paths still intertwined, but more distantly—grieve the departed legend.

Flash! October 25, 1910. Twenty-four-year-old middleweight champion of the world Stanley Ketchel—the Michigan Assassin, they call him—is murdered at breakfast by a jealous boyfriend. Before Ketchel’s six feet under, the middleweight crown becomes open season. Every serious fighter in the division—including, soon enough, Mike Gibbons—eyes the glittering prize.

Flash! March 1911. Mike and Mae welcome their first child: Robert. Mae cradles the newborn while Mike pulls his wife and child close. Everything else dissolves in the light of this tiny, blinking infant. *He's mine*, Mike thinks to himself, almost incredulously. *Ours*. "With a son of your own now," Thomas John says, embracing Mike, "you might come to understand: wisdom comes from loving something you never want to lose."

Flash! October 1911. With a hundred dollars in his pocket and Eddie Reddy at his side, Mike Gibbons is leaving St. Paul. Heading to New York. Rhymes with fork. After another half-dozen victories in the Twin Cities and before he departs, he makes a modest, but acceptable down payment on the empty lot at Lake Como. He stands before the plot of land till the sun vanishes, dreaming of the house he'll build, the home, the front porch, where his bride will rock their baby to sleep far from Frogtown and its boundless hunger and withering shadows. Fading to sleep that night, he dreams of abundance, many more children, even grandchildren. Upon awakening, the vision scatters like birds to gunshots.

*



The biggest mistake of his life

On Halloween morning, with the air biting and the leaves swirling in orange drifts, Mike leads a somber parade through St. Paul Union Depot. The station clatters with the morning march of porters hauling trunks,

newsies hawking papers, gum and cigarette girls, ticket clerks, and travelers hailing one another. The Gibbons clan—Mae, baby Robert, and Tommy—are silent.

The thundering Great Northern locomotive, preparing for departure, releases a thick cloud of steam. Mike turns to admire the massive engine, grins to himself. A year has passed since he helped build this very powerhouse as a tinsmith and steamfitter in the railyard shops. He taps the side of the iron horse boiler for good luck.

“Put on some speed, Gibbons!” Reddy shouts, head dangling out a window of their train. “Aren’t you supposed to be faster than flames!”

The train whistle shrieks. Steam floods the platform. Mike pulls Tommy close, presses his forehead against his brother’s tenderly. “I’ll be home soon, Tommy Boy,” he whispers. “And you know what’ll happen next.”

Mike turns to Mae and the baby, softly kisses them both. “Write,” she says, pressing a gentle hand against her husband’s cheek. “Don’t let me wonder how you’re doing. Promise.”

Mike nods as the conductor makes his last boarding call. Still hanging out the window, Reddy urgently taps the face of his pocket watch. It’s time.

*

The train rumbles forward on the rails, gathering speed, the station fading away like a dream upon waking.

Inside the carriage, Mike settles into the Pullman car bench across from Reddy. He sees the seat fabric and curtains are dyed a bloodlike crimson color, immediately recognizing his father’s railyard craftsmanship. He smiles, then stares out the window, mind racing, pulse hammering. He watches the Mississippi River glisten blindingly at his side until it’s no longer there at all.

Mike glances down at his callused fists, presses them gently together as if in prayer.

Less than 200 miles down the tracks, halfway to Chicago, a cold certainty grips him and will not let go: *This is the biggest mistake of my life.*



BOXING'S SHINING KNIGHTS OF THE RING: From the railyards of St. Paul to the bright lights of Madison Square Garden, Irish American six-time Hall-of-Fame brothers Tommy and Mike Gibbons were hailed not only as ring virtuosos but as paragons of chivalry, character, class, and clean living in a demanding, brutal, and dangerous trade. This is the true story of their origin and rise to fame.



ONCE UPON A TIME: The Gibbons family homestead, established in 1825 at Glennagashleen, County Mayo, Ireland, lay in the hardscrabble highlands between the haunted tides of Lough Mask, the River Aille, and the sleeping giants of the Partry Mountains. Too poor to own sheep, the clan tirelessly worked the potato fields and peat bogs, “praying to no end until their knees would hurt.”



TIES THAT BIND: A ninety-year-old, unpublished Gibbons family memoir hinted at a link to boxing royalty, claiming the author’s great-grandparents were married by the uncle of America’s second heavyweight champion, James J. “Gentleman Jim” Corbett. The story was confirmed during a 2022 visit to St. Mary’s Church in Partry, Ireland. There, the author found Father Corbett’s grave and stained-glass windows donated by the Corbett and Gibbons families: definitive proof of a connection to the rise of American boxing in the 1880s.



ATLANTIC CROSSING: In 1884, the Gibbons family fled famine-shadowed Ireland, joining the wave of “tired, poor, and tempest-tossed souls” bound for the promised land of America. They crossed the ocean in steerage on a perilous “coffin ship,” carrying little more than hope for freedom, redemption, and a new beginning. Within days of arriving in Boston, they took the train to St. Paul, Minnesota.



HILL'S FOLLY: Pursuing his quixotic dream of linking America's east and west coasts by rail, St. Paul magnate James J. Hill constructed the half-mile-long Stone Arch Bridge across the Mississippi River. Heralded as “one of the greatest specimens of engineering in the country,” the Minneapolis bridge carried the Great Northern's *Empire Builder* (seen here) and a hundred other trains daily. In its yards, the railroad employed a newly immigrated Thomas John Gibbons. In time his sons would follow: first those born in Ireland, then his American-born sons, Mike and Tommy.



LIBERTY RISING: On October 28, 1886, amid a ticker-tape salute and steamers crowding New York Harbor, dignitaries, commoners, and immigrants witnessed President Grover Cleveland unveil Lady Liberty—her torch a promise of light, hope, and belonging.



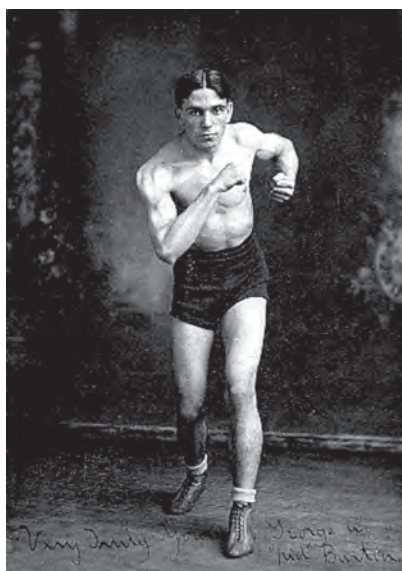
DEDICATION: President Cleveland vowed the statue's "stream of light shall pierce the darkness of ignorance and man's oppression, until liberty enlightens the world."



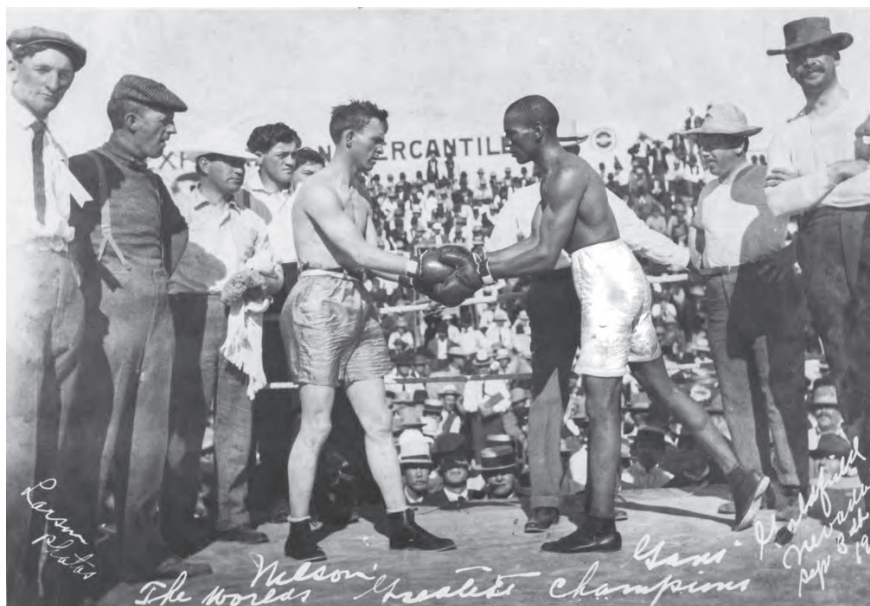
IMMIGRANT SONG: Fleeing the hunger and violence of British-ruled Ireland, Thomas John and Mary Burke Gibbons stood among the "huddled masses," inspired by the colossal goddess that rose as a beacon before them.



BOXING IS KING: Gymnasiums and athletic clubs boomed in the early twentieth century, their popularity buoyed by American youth of every class, creed, and color. For scrawny, bullied boys like Mike Gibbons, the ring offered more than exercise—it promised escape, self-defense, dignity, and a rare chance at fame and fortune. Even when outlawed across much of the nation, boxing provided the single most powerful tool for upward mobility and was fast becoming America's most popular form of entertainment.



DOUBLE LIVES: Mike's first mentor was St. Paul's "glorious little fella," George A. Barton, a man of many hats: former bantamweight "Kid" Barton, respected referee, and influential sports editor for the *Minneapolis Daily News*.



A FATEFUL WAR: Promoted by Tex Rickard and scheduled for an astonishing forty-five rounds, the 1906 World Lightweight Championship between Battling Nelson and Joe Gans in Goldfield, Nevada, captivated the nation and fueled the ambitions of a young Mike Gibbons.



CHAMPIONS IN MINNEAPOLIS: Hosting rivals Battling Nelson and Joe Gans at the *Minneapolis Daily News* on September 17, 1906, George Barton (standing, right) used his access to champions to open doors for his protégé, Mike Gibbons.



THE OLD MASTER: Joe Gans, the world lightweight champion (1902–1908) and America's first Black world champion, gave Mike a pivotal master class in the sweet science in 1906, as well as a sacred and unusual lucky charm.



THE COMET VOW: On a snowy night in 1910, as Halley's Comet blazed overhead, Mike and Tommy Gibbons sparred with a shared vow: to become the first brothers to win world championships.



IMPOSSIBLE DREAMERS: By 1910, young Mike (left) emerged as a dominant force in St. Paul's boxing scene, honing skills that would carry him to national prominence. Younger brother Tommy (right), a cadet at St. Thomas Academy, trained under Mike's guidance and the stern spiritual mentorship and fistic discipline of Father John Dunphy who fought in the ring as a young lad in Ireland.



INTO THE WILD: Mike and his childhood pal and manager, Eddie Reddy, railed to the Big Apple to make a name for themselves. But upon arriving at Grand Central Terminal, they were overwhelmed by a world larger and noisier than they could comprehend. That was only the beginning.



BIG CITY BLUES: The city's promise was seductive: "If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere." Mike and Eddie took the subway to Manhattan, ready to conquer New York, the undisputed boxing capital of the world. Stepping into the dazzling hub of Times Square, however, they knew they were in way over their heads.



KNIGHTED: With manager, Eddie Reddy (right), steering him to the pinnacle of New York's boxing scene, Mike Gibbons caught the eye of Joseph Pulitzer's sports editor, Robert Edgren. Impressed by the Minnesotan's elusive, ghostlike style, Edgren dubbed him "the St. Paul Phantom."



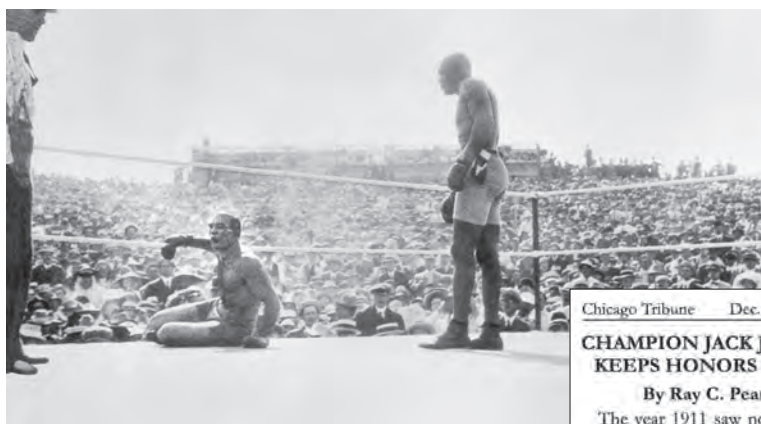
TINSMITH TO GOLDSMITH: Mike (left), a former Great Northern Railway metalworker known for moving “faster than flames,” became a boxing supernova overnight and won the hand of his childhood sweetheart, Mae Agnes Walsh (right). But their union came with a condition. A dedicated suffragist who deplored the sport, Mae demanded his support in her own fight: the battle for equal rights.



FAITH AND FISTS: Religious devotion was a cornerstone for the Gibbons family. The Cathedral of Saint Paul (left), dedicated March 28, 1915, was overseen by Archbishop John Ireland (right), a fellow Irish immigrant and a powerful public critic of the brutal sport reshaping the Gibbons brothers’ lives.



POWER PLAYERS: Two titans of the age who shaped Mike's career: Tex Rickard (left), the enigmatic boxing impresario on a quest to rule the world (including Madison Square Garden), and mentor-friend Jack (the Big Smoke) Johnson (right), the unforgivably Black heavyweight champion (1908–1915).



FIGHT OF THE CENTURY: Covered at ringside by George Barton, Jack Johnson's July 4, 1910, victory over Jim (the Great White Hope) Jeffries sparked race riots across the nation. The fight's referee and promoter, Tex Rickard (far left), looked on. As a cultural lightning rod, Johnson's defiant stardom—and his later friendship with Mike Gibbons—generated electric buzz.

Chicago Tribune Dec. 31, 1911, Sun.

CHAMPION JACK JOHNSON KEEPS HONORS IN RING

By Ray C. Pearson

The year 1911 saw no changes in pugilistic champions. Jack Johnson, the first negro fighter to hold the world's heavyweight title, maintained his exalted position.

Mike Gibbons a Rising Star

There has come to front a youngster who gives promise of being the greatest welterweight of modern times. This is Mike Gibbons of St. Paul. In New York he has disposed of fighters like Willie Lewis in such a capable manner as to stamp him a star of the first water.

It is being suggested that Gibbons join Jack Johnson in Paris, where boxing is receiving large audiences.



THE COLOR LINE: Mike was mentored and befriended by (left to right) Joe Gans, Jack Johnson, and Sam Langford. These legendary fighters, pioneers who broke the sport's color barrier, gave him a priceless education in skill, resilience, and honor. Though many Black boxers of the period were denied title shots, this trio forged an immortal legacy.



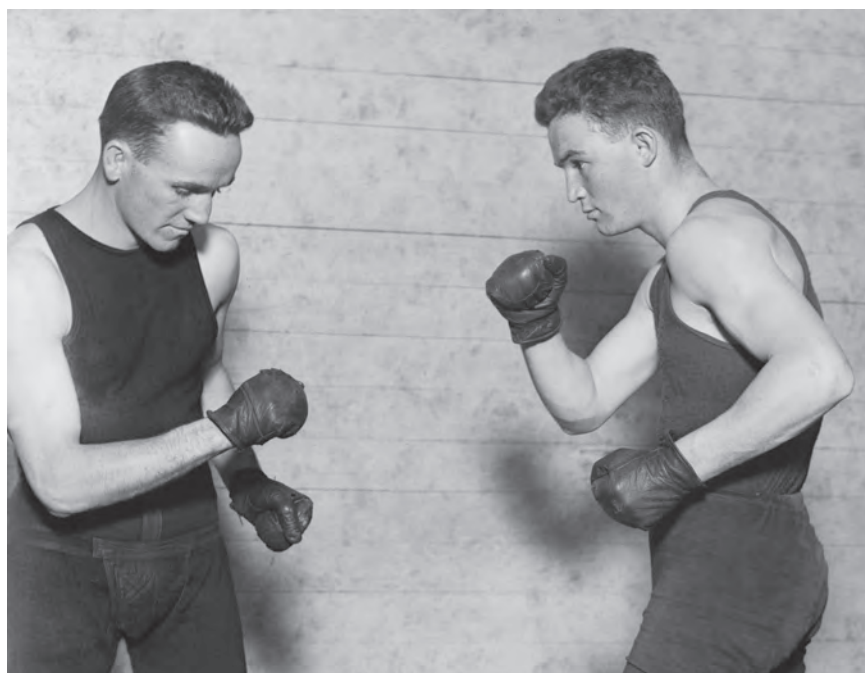
THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME: In the segregated fight game, many young Black fighters (including Gans, Johnson, and Langford) were forced into battles royale—brutal, racist spectacles where blindfolded boys slugged it out until only one remained. The prize was little more than coins tossed on the floor. It was humiliation and survival—boxing's ugliest spectacle, and for many Black boxers, the only path into mainstream prizefighting.



LEAP OF FAITH: Steve Brodie, who became a folk hero after his famed jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, symbolized the impossible made real to a young Jack Johnson. Brodie's legend was later cemented in the 1933 feature film *The Bowery*, starring George Raft.



MAKING HISTORY: Mike and Tommy (below) made history at Madison Square Garden (above) on May 16, 1913. By defeating Jack McCarron and Young Mike Donovan, respectively, they became the first sibling pugilists to score victories on the same night in the same venue—a feat they would repeat three more times.



GIBBONS BOYS WIN GARDEN BATTLES

New York, May 17.—The Gibbons brothers, Mike and Tom, St. Paul middleweights, outpointed Jack McCarron of Philadelphia and Young Mike Donovan, of this city, respectively, in ten round bouts at the Madison Square Athletic Club last night. Mike at no time gave McCarron a chance, as he kept up a continuous jabbing with his left and crossing his right occasionally, and with clever side stepping and blocking made McCarron look like a novice. McCarron displayed gameness, but the best he could send back was an occasional body blow at close quarters. Toward the end of the bout he reached Mike's face half a dozen times with rights and lefts which did little or no damage.

In the other bout Tom Gibbons had the better of Donovan in every round save one and that was even. Donovan, like McCarron, was game, but he was outclassed and outfought.



THE GODDESS & THE DREAM: Perched atop Madison Square Garden, the goddess Diana (above) towered thirty stories over New York—even higher than Lady Liberty—where fighters like Mike and Tommy (above right) would pay her respect for luck or, in fear, pray to her to ward off doom.



**QUICK KNOCKOUTS**

By ROBERT L. RIPLEY

The blow that Mike Gibbons landed on Young Ahearn's chin just 88 seconds after the gong sounded for the first round was spectacular.

The St. Paul Phantom is the superlative of all prize-ring sensations.

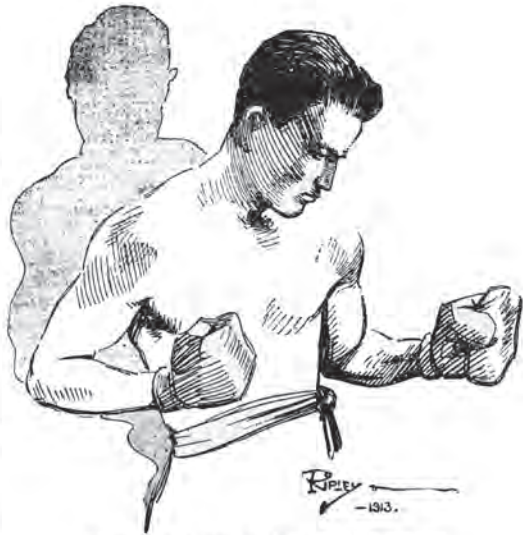


PHANTOM KAYOS YOUNG AHEARN
TIME -- 88 SECONDS!

BELIEVE IT OR NOT! The *San Francisco Chronicle's* Robert Ripley sketched Mike and Tommy Gibbons into boxing folklore, his cartoons making the St. Paul Phantom and his brother, the Happy Warrior, household names. Alongside artistic giants like Tad Dorgan, Rube Goldberg, Burris Jenkins, Hype Igoe, Thornton Fisher, and Robert Edgren, Ripley helped turn newspapers into arenas where champions were crowned and exalted in ink.

King of the Middleweights!

Mike Gibbons
The St. Paul Phantom

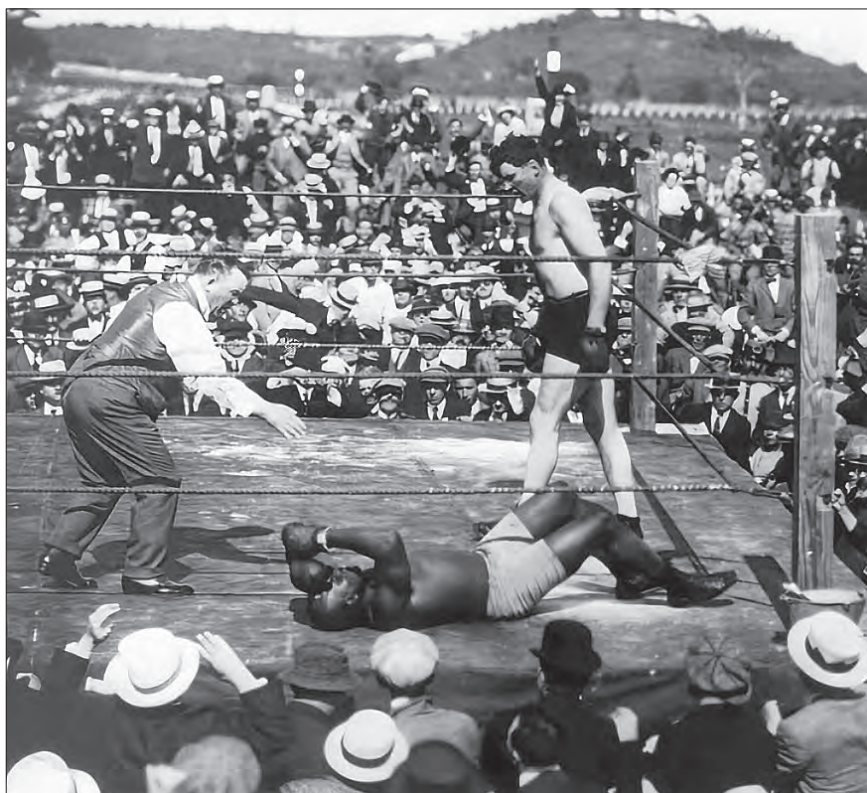


Tommy Gibbons, the Phantom's Shadow?

"Younger brudder wins at the Garden.
He's a comer! As good as Mike?"



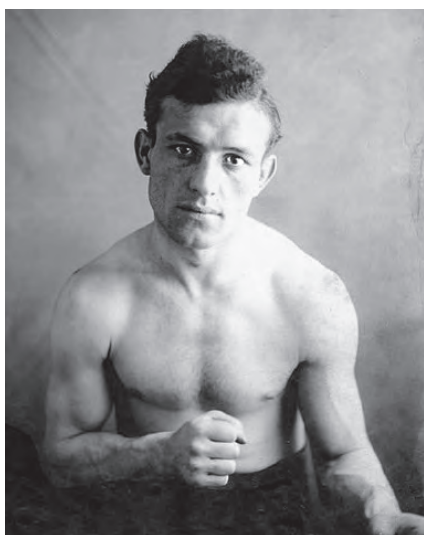
SUGAR & SMOKE: From left, Mike Gibbons, Jack Johnson, and Sam McVea at Johnson's training camp in Vedado, Cuba, on April 3, 1915, before Johnson's fateful heavyweight title defense against Jess Willard.



FALL OF A KING: At Havana's Oriental Racetrack on April 5, 1915, Jack Johnson lost his crown to Jess Willard in the twenty-sixth round. The loss remains controversial: some claimed Johnson threw the fight to escape legal persecution, while others swore Willard's victory was clean. Whatever the truth, this portrait of Johnson in the Cuban sun became one of boxing's most debated images.



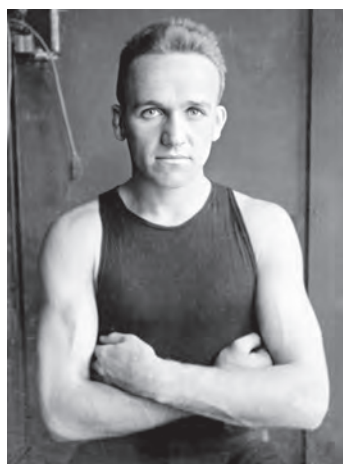
TOP OF THE WORLD: On the rooftop of the Woolworth Building, New York's tallest skyscraper in 1916, the Gibbons brothers sparred before the cameras of pioneering filmmaker William N. Selig, "the man who created Hollywood." The six-minute short, part of Selig's Athletic Series, drew sellout crowds and made movie stars of Mike and Tommy.



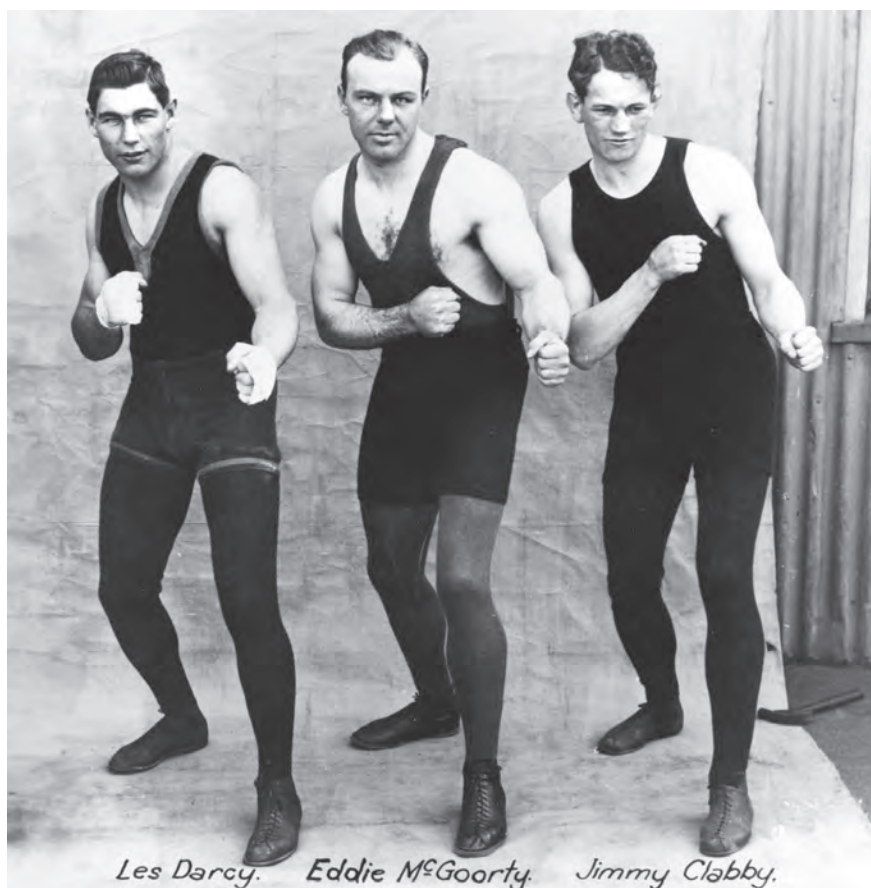
UNCROWNED CHAMPION: Known as the Pride of the Chicago Stockyards, Packey McFarland was a brilliant, elusive, virtually unbeatable lightweight and welterweight maestro—a key mentor, rival, friend, and target in Mike's quest for the crown.



THE DEVIL'S OPERA: After years of bare-knuckled negotiations, Mike Gibbons fell for the cunning art-of-war tactics of Packey McFarland, signing contracts (opposite page, with promoter W. C. Marshall) on August 5, 1915. The Brighton Beach Motordrome (above) became ground zero for Gibbons vs. McFarland, widely regarded as the era's greatest outdoor sporting event, on September 11, 1915.



In the ring before 50,000 fans (left), Gibbons (right) and McFarland (left) touched gloves under the watchful eye of referee Billy Joh (center), as announcer Joe Humphreys (in straw hat) worked the crowd and Tommy Gibbons (far right) stood ready. To make the weight mandated by the contracts, however, Mike (above right) had pushed his body to the brink. Stepping into battle, he found his strength and power deeply diminished.



Les Darcy. Eddie McGoorty. Jimmy Clabby.

THE HIT LIST: This was the murderer's row of middleweight contenders standing between Mike Gibbons and the championship: Les (the Maitland Wonder) Darcy, Eddie (the Oshkosh Terror) McGoorty, and Jimmy (the Indiana Wasp) Clabby, photographed together in Sydney, Australia, in 1915.



THE GHOST KING: By 1916, many declared Mike Gibbons the uncrowned middleweight champion of the world. As Robert Edgren of the *New York World* wrote, "As a master of ring generalship, [he] has everything: a perfect defense, a sliding, slippery, in-and-out-and-in-again attack, a snappy, jarring, dazing punch, and the ability to take instant advantage of every opening." But for all the praise, the Phantom remained uncrowned.

PART II

Twice Removed from Yesterday

(1911–1917)



THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

*New York can destroy an individual,
or it can fulfill him,
depending a good deal on luck.*

—E.B. White, *Here Is New York* (1948)



First, they take Manhattan...

November 1911

New York City

Mike Gibbons is not the first man to raid New York City looking for a fight.

That man was, in fact, British General William Howe, who took the Port of New York by sea during the Revolutionary War, then flooded the city with 32,000 troops in the King's name. America's Continental Army,

led by George Washington, was hit strategically—and *hard*—by Howe. Losing too much, too fast, Washington and his men were forced to retreat under cover of darkness. They survived.

Mike doesn't want to retreat. Doesn't want to merely survive.

"When I think now of our quiet departure from St. Paul—my family watching and waving, almost in slow-motion as we pulled further and further away from home—it chills me," he writes years later.

He wants to go home.

"Between us, Reddy and I had one decent suit, a few collared shirts, and enough cash to get to New York," Mike writes. "But not enough money to return home—unless we won. *A lot.*"

He *has* to win.

The battlefield: 262 blocks of cobblestone and pavement, thirteen miles long, two miles wide. The mission: become an overnight sensation and financially flush.

Failing that: get a fight. Win it. Keep winning fights until he makes his name—and enough scratch to get home to his wife and child.

Anything more than that, Mike figures, is probably wanting too much.

*

The November evening Mike and Eddie roll into New York's Penn Station, no one is waiting for them, and the city, literally, smells like shit.

Street cleaners and trash collectors—the city's two thousand "ash-cart men"—have been on strike for several weeks. It's been raining almost as long. With garbage "heaped along street corners everywhere," according to one newspaper, a steady, curdling wind carries the balmy effluvium northeast through the city.

Subways, trolleys, horse-drawn carriages, and Model Ts. Rambling throngs of pedestrians. Parasols and straw hats. Baby carriages and sidewalk chalk. Clock towers, church bells, the Great White Way. Circus tents and electric marquees. The harbor, a constant flurry of ocean liners, freighters, tugs, ferries, and barges.

Crawling toward midtown in a light drizzle: a mile-long funeral procession. The newspaper publisher, Joseph Pulitzer, is being laid to rest at St. Thomas Church at Fifth and Fifty-Third. This, the final march of a man millions regarded as an advocate for the working-class and a hero

of the city. His wood casket is bedecked with his favorite bloom, lilies of the valley. Pulitzer's right hand rests upon his heart, holding a copy of the juggernaut newspaper he famously brought to life: the *New York World*.

Twenty blocks uptown, an ambitious journeyman songwriter named George M. Cohan is opening his sixth musical of the year, *The Little Millionaire*. At the Polo Grounds in upper Manhattan, baseball fans are praying for a World Series miracle. In game one, hometown ace Christy Mathewson stifled the underdog Philadelphia Athletics, hurling an almost meditative shutout. For his remarkable performance from the mound, Mathewson is heralded "the peerless wonder of modern baseball."

But then the heavy rains began, postponing game two for a record-setting six days. When play resumed, everything was different for the Giants. In the bouquet of New York's swampy stench, the long-shot Athletics improbably surged, winning three in a row. Tonight, in the place that rhymes with fork, reeking of swamp and sadness, and it's zero hour for the Giants.

In recent days, sportswriters have begun speculating that Mathewson, "the peerless wonder," might be slipping. Or maybe, they muse, he was never that amazing to begin with. New York can turn on a man like that.

*

Mike and Eddie start with New York's top-tier athletic clubs, the luxury sweatboxes overrun by champs, contenders, and pugs: Brown's in midtown, O'Rourke's on Forty-fourth, the Crescent, the Knickerbocker. They're roundly rejected, often with a snide comment about their Irish origins and a sassy invitation to fight six guys for free in the back alley.

They move on to the working-class establishments. Highly segregated by ethnicity and race, they teem with sour, scarred scrappers—some of them too young, others too old, most of them still dreaming they could get rich, famous, or both. The rest have already given up, but still need something to punch. These venues are no more hospitable to the St. Paul boys.

"At one of these gyms, a bunch of men violently rushed us, calling us 'cornhuskers,'" Mike recalls. "For all our practice outrunning coppers and thugs in St. Paul, a couple of these punks caught up to us and knocked Reddy down. They even tore off his shirt!"

Inside their rundown, closet-sized boarding room—Thirty-seventh

and Seventh—the blistering thrum of the city bleeds through windows and walls. Mike sits up all night watching Reddy sleep, changing the cool towel on his old pal's brow, where a blooming shiner is darkening around his left eye.

Mike Gibbons knows the numbers. He's trying to forget them.

Nineteen, for example. They've been thrown out of nineteen athletic clubs and boxing gymnasiums. "We never dreamed every door would be slammed in our faces!" Mike remembers years later. "We came to the city on an extremely pinched budget. If we shared every meal, we could afford four nights of lodging. We were sure we'd be rolling in dough before our money ran out."

Instead, the other numbers: three and one.

Tonight, their third night in the Big Apple. Tomorrow, their last with food or shelter. After that, without a fight to win, there's no way home.

"That night in our room was a sad one," Mike remembers. "But I picked up Reddy's ripped shirt, and I learned to sew."

*

1886

New York City

Like Mike Gibbons' parents and millions of others, she had come to America from an ocean away and, upon reaching the harbor, was welcomed by no one and left without a home.

She was expected to endure a thousand years, this colossal copper goddess and corrosion-resistant beauty. She stood 151 feet tall, a towering statue that weighed more than 225 tons. Created by world-renowned sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi and commissioned for \$250,000 by the French government, she was meant as a skyscraping symbol of enduring friendship between France and the United States.

Libertas, they called her, brandishing a torch large enough to house a dozen human beings. Her head, four times larger than that. Her inscrutable mouth, stretching three feet wide. Her face, modeled on the artist's mother, her body on his mistress.

Bartholdi knew precisely where his masterpiece should stand: Bedloe's

Island in New York Harbor, fourteen abandoned acres that once served as a quarantine station for those stricken with smallpox, cholera, and tuberculosis and as a prison camp for Tory refugees during the Revolutionary War.

To Bartholdi, what mattered about the island was its location. To approach New York by sea, every single vessel—from warship to cargo boat to steamships ferrying the world’s tired, poor, and huddled masses to new lives in America—would have to cruise past his magnum opus, the “mighty woman with a torch,” the Mother of Exiles.

On Bedloe’s Island, the statue needed only a place to stand: a pedestal. Though America had been expecting Lady Liberty’s arrival for nearly a decade, it had never been with much enthusiasm, let alone gratitude. Congress turned its nose up at the \$150,000 price tag to construct a sturdy concrete and granite platform. Both the City and State of New York refused funding as well.

For months, she languished on a New York dock. Bolts and rivets removed, the goddess was dismantled into 350 pieces, packed into 214 large wooden crates. A wrist in one box. A fist in another.

In time, the Statue of Liberty would be put together again. It would not be by the king’s horses or all of his men, but by a Jewish immigrant.

*

1864

Europe to America

The seventeen-year-old Hungarian Jew, chronically ill, frail, and half-blind, fled the pogroms of Europe for a new world that wanted him even less.

Born to affluence, he had been schooled privately and well, but his father’s sudden death, the collapse of the family’s milling business, and his mother’s hasty remarriage unraveled his fortune overnight. One day, a child of privilege. The next, a pauper.

Already six feet two and slender like a quill, “with long arms and the frail, narrow chest of a tubercular patient,” the teenage boy was recruited from Hungarian docks by American soldiers seeking foreigners as cannon fodder for the decimated Union Army. After a week on choppy waters, with Boston Harbor in sight and certain death awaiting in Lincoln’s cav-

alry, the boy reportedly threw himself overboard and swam to shore before his military conscription could be completed.

His first years in the so-called Promised Land were a harsh tumble of unemployment, anti-Semitism, and homelessness. He worked grim, thankless shifts as a deckhand, coal shoveler, mule tender, and gravedigger during the cholera epidemic. "Joey the Jew," they called him. Sometimes just Jew-seph.

Undaunted, the boy studied English and law by day, resting discreetly in stables and sheds by night. By the age of twenty-five, he had saved enough to buy a failing newspaper in St. Louis, Missouri. Though new to the English language, he reinvigorated the paper's editorial purpose, focusing on "the intelligent working man and the underprivileged," and achieved his first success.

A few years later, he moved to New York and acquired another failing newspaper. Embracing a populist, inclusive, sometimes rabble-rousing tone, he transformed the Gotham paper into a visually sumptuous stew of human interest, crime, scandal, and disaster. Circulation exploded from 15,000 copies daily to 600,000, making it the most-read newspaper in the nation. By 1885, the boy held the whole world in his hands: the *New York World*.

Joseph Pulitzer—the raven-maned, robustly bearded, indigo-eyed, pince-nez-spectacled Mephistopheles lookalike—became one of the booming country's most celebrated and influential newspaper publishers. A few days before Mike and Reddy arrived in New York, the long-suffering Pulitzer was gone for good. His final words: "Softly. Quite softly."

*

It was Pulitzer, in the end, who rallied the populace—via the *World*—to raise the statue and light her flame.

To close the six-figure gap required to build the statue's 154-foot, ten-story pedestal, Pulitzer sponsored boxing matches, theatrical productions, and art shows, then followed with impassioned editorials imploring readers to give.

"We must raise the money!" he wrote. "Let us not wait for the millionaires to give us this money. It is not a gift from the millionaires of France to the millionaires of America, but a gift of the whole people of

France to the whole people of America.”

To initiate the fundraising, Pulitzer put \$250 on the table. The sum was quickly matched, then far surpassed, by contributions from tens of thousands of faithful readers. One kindergarten classroom pooled its resources, raising a little over one dollar in total. The rest of New York—businessmen, street cleaners, politicians, hustlers, shop owners, and pugilists—leaned into the cause at Pulitzer’s constant urging. *The World* published a weekly list of benefactors, no matter how humble their pledge.

Within a few months, the crowdfunded rescue of Lady Liberty raised over \$100,000 from more than 120,000 mostly working-class donors. The *objet d’art* was set free—unboxed, reassembled, and raised to glory on Bedloe’s Island.

*

October 1886

St. Paul

The autumn night in 1886 when the statue was unveiled, twenty-five thousand men, women, and children gathered to bear witness at New York Harbor. Among them were Thomas John and Mary Burke Gibbons, new to America, poor and unfriended, strangers in a strange land. On this night, in their darkest hour, the statue’s grand torch was sparked to illumination.

A year earlier, Mary had given birth to their first American-born child, a son. Thomas John Gibbons II, he was called. But only briefly. Just after the infant’s first birthday, whooping cough stole his life, and the future his parents had imagined.

For weeks after the baby’s death, Thomas John helplessly watched Mary pace from kitchen to garden, often mumbling to herself. Her words were unknowable. Her presence quickly fading, as if she were vanishing a little more with each passing day.

Thomas John could feel it to his core, would pull her into his arms, press his lips tenderly to her forehead, only to feel himself pass right through her.

She was here. She was gone. She was lost.

And so was he. The child. And the man he might have been.

Finally, one night, Mary spoke. "I did not even know to fear that God would curse not only the fields of Ireland but my womb too, and all that comes from it," she wept. "I am sorry, my dearest Thomas John. For failing you. For failing our child. Sorry is all that I can ever be again."

He could feel her anguish in his spine, in his hands, deep in his chest. He wraps her in his arms, and then, not knowing what words to speak, began with a whisper. "Mary Burke Gibbons, you must know this," he softly said. "On the day we were married, I did not love you. How could I? I did not know you. I did not understand why we had been bound together by God and our families. I asked God how I'd ever be able to provide for you, when my life alone had only been hunger and fight. I prayed on it for months and wondered if He'd heard my prayer at all."

He took her face in his hands, meeting her eyes.

"But He *had*," Thomas John said. "And He answered clearly, over and over, until even a blind, dumb, deaf idiot like me could not deny it. What He showed me, Mary, is this: however we came together, we have chosen to *remain* together. Every day. And in that choice, I have come to know you. And in that, I have come to love you. Maybe not well enough, but every day more than the one that's gone forever."

Mary pressed her face to his chest. For the first time in weeks, it felt like home.

"If God is in all things, then we must have faith that this too is part of His plan," Thomas John says. "Perhaps we should thank Him that we have each other. Until we figure out the rest, our love—and His—must be enough. My faith tells me that it will be."

In the garden, surrounded by damp earth and seeds that would not grow, with a soft kiss, they silently wed once more.

*

Days after laying their baby to rest among much older graves at Calvary Cemetery in St. Paul, Thomas John, his wife, and their Ireland-born children wrapped themselves in heavy coats and knit caps—hand-me-downs from St. Vincent's Church—and rode the Great Northern without a word.

Guests of the railroad's founding owner, James J. Hill, the family was rapt by the chameleonic landscape of the nation rushing by: radiant and gilded, a kaleidoscope of promise and pigment almost near enough to touch. Golden fields fading and azure skies going dark, deep forests giving way to rivers that have bent forever toward distant constellations.

Mary nestled closer to her husband, broken by the lost child and the small grave, but trying to believe in something better. For the first time in weeks, she felt a quivering of hope. In his bride's relief, the bottomless anguish of Thomas John's soul began to fill with better stuff. So much loss. In Ireland. In America. Gone now, his son. His namesake.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. No need to speak. Not when life was such a song.

*

1886

New York City

In a billow of steam, the locomotive screeched on its approach to the depot at Penn Station. It was the morning of October 28, 1886, and the city of New York was awake and alive in anticipation of Lady Liberty's imminent dedication.

Nearly one million people lined the streets of Manhattan—from Madison Square to Washington Square, Broadway to Park Row—as the Gibbons clan joined the passing parade. In New York's first ticker-tape parade, workers, stock traders, and residents in high-rises, leaned out windows, showering confetti upon the horse-drawn carriage ferrying President Grover Cleveland and the statue's creator toward the harbor.

The Hudson and East Rivers were gridlocked with hundreds of steamers, sailing ships, cargo hauls, military gunships and rowboats—old money and new immigrants alike, side by side, waiting in wonder.

On Bedloe's Island, the statue's body was wrapped in canvas, her face veiled by an enormous French flag. After a rousing speech from the president, there were fireworks, drum rolls, marching bands. The peal of guns, flash of cannons, and a cheer that seemed never to end. In this, Lady Liberty was finally revealed.

On the docks, surrounded by his family and illuminated by the revelry and pyrotechnics, Thomas John began to quietly weep. Not in grief this time, but in gratitude. In his arms, Mary too was weeping. For the home they had left. The child they had lost. For the ways that America had asked them, and would again—and then again—to carry hope against unbearable weight, and faith in the darkest hours.

Not for the first time, Thomas John thought to himself: *What matters most is what you do next.*

*

November 1911
New York City

Whatever the odds, Mike Gibbons knows: it's pivot or perish. Especially in New York.

On the foggy, frozen morning of their last day in the city, Mike and Reddy shift their strategy. They've been hunting fighters; now, they're hunting sportswriters—the Gods of Gotham, whose words can make or break a man overnight.

“(In 1911), the American sports page was more than just another section of the newspaper,” writes John Schulian in *The Great American Sports Page*. “Factory workers wanted scores in the morning and race results in the afternoon... The writing was good enough to spare the sports page from the bottom of the birdcage. Some dared call it art.”

Before radio, television, and motion pictures, the sports page was where athletic contest was reshaped into triumph, and legend. It was the most-read section of every newspaper.

Sportswriters—nearly three thousand of them nationwide—became the storytellers of the age. They had a habit, many confessed, of “turning a checkers game into the Battle of Gettysburg.” By their soaring hyperbole, immortals were made of pitchers, jockeys, and brawlers alike. Often, especially in boxing's days of illegality, it fell to the sportswriters to declare winners and losers in fistic showdowns.

They were a Greek Chorus, traveling in packs, bickering like brothers, sharing cigarettes and bar tabs, their thirty-five-pound typewriters

hauled from stadium to stadium, ringside to racetrack. They dressed the part: sharp suits, polished shoes, felt fedoras with all-access badges tucked into the band.

New York had ten daily newspapers in 1911 including *Pulitzer's World* (the first paper in America to dedicate an entire section to sports), William Randolph Hearst's *Journal American*, *The Times*, *Mail*, *Sun*, and *Telegram*. The city boasted the best writers—Robert Edgren, Tad Dorgan, Robert Ripley, Hype Igoe—many drawn from San Francisco after the great quake sent them east.

When Mike and Reddy arrive, two-thirds of New Yorkers read the sports page every day. Just a couple of column inches in a big-city paper has the power to transform a man overnight into a hero or a flop.

*

Mike and Reddy descend into the chaos of the Bowery, near City Hall, into the heart of Newspaper Row, where skyscrapers birth the daily news.

They pass the craggy, Romanesque *Times* building, its newsroom buzzing, cigarette smoke swirling above hammering typewriters. Beneath them, the grinding roar of printing presses shakes the basement floors. Across the street looms *Pulitzer's World*, a towering masterpiece of stained glass and terra-cotta, crowned by an enormous six-story dome, illuminated by thousands of electric lights.

Next, *The Sun*, reaching humbly for the light in the *World's* shadow. Then *The Tribune*, its clock tower overlooking the *Journal American*, where Hearst—so desperate for dominance—once encouraged false reports to incite the Spanish-American War. “You furnish the pictures,” he allegedly wired his illustrator in Cuba, “and I’ll furnish the war.”

Here, the titans of print compete, conspire, and crown champions.

Mike and Reddy knock on every sportswriter's door, handing out business cards that bear an unknown name: *Mike Gibbons*. They wait. They are dismissed. No one bites.

They try the *New York Herald*. No interest. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Nothing.

“The name ‘Mike Gibbons’ on that plain white business card impressed no one,” Mike later recalls.

By nightfall, down to his last dollar, Mike is furious. If it weren't so

cold, he'd tear his hat off, throw it in the snow, and stomp it into the ground.

"What were we thinking, Reddy?" he fumes. "Leaving home. Coming to New York. What the hell were we thinking?"

Eddie folds his arms, unimpressed by the tantrum.

"We can't afford to stay here! And we can't afford to go home! We're stuck, Reddy!"

Without warning, Reddy slaps Mike across the face. A pulled blow, but a point made. Mike's not hurt. Just stunned.

"You made me read *The Art of War*, Gibbons," Reddy says, stepping close. "So you already know: the emotional fighter has already lost."

Mike rubs his cheek, eyes burning with surprise.

"Cool yourself, boyo. Take a goddamned breath," Reddy continues, throwing an arm over Mike's shoulder. "Sure, we've had a rough couple of days, but there is a goddamned war to win. So we keep on fighting. Right?"

"Don't ever hit me again," Mike squints, pulling away. "I mean it."

"Then quit your sobbing and trust your pilot," Reddy grins, straightening his coat, dusting off his gloves, and heading toward the *New York World*. "We've got one more stop, and I've saved the best for last."

KNIGHTED

*Now, whoever has courage and a strong and collected spirit in his breast,
let him come forward, lace on the gloves and put up his hands.*

—Virgil, *The Aeneid*



High noon above The World

It has to be noon; how else to explain the sudden explosion three hundred feet above the city? A thousand carrier pigeons exploding into flight, lustrous and confounding, the afternoon sun momentarily obscured as if in a total eclipse.

Tied to each bird's leg is a tiny printed business card advertising Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. Lady Liberty's savior has long promoted his newspaper this way; each well-trained pigeon capable of carrying messages more than two hundred miles away, then returning safely home to spread the word again another day.

Every day at noon sharp, a thundering passel of pigeons is set free from the rooftop of *The World* with a rhythmic, fluttering whistle, an almost industrial buzz, their thickly feathered wings rising in a rolling, rumbling ascent. Dung, like grim melting snowflakes, tumbles to the streets below. An enterprising pushcart vendor sells parasols to passersby, capitalizing on the daily storm.

The pigeons above them, blooming in formation, quickly vanish into the blue. Mike gazes up at the newspaper building—309 feet and 26 stories tall. Giant marble statues—female figures of Justice and Truth, one bearing scales and a sword, the other a torch—frame the *World's* entryway.

They call it “the greatest newspaper building in the world.”

*

Inside *The World*, high above the bustling newsroom, one last sports-writer remains. They call him Edgren. Not yet forty, Robert Wadsworth Edgren is already a living legend. His name is even stenciled on the fogged glass of his office door.

Six feet five inches tall and 225 pounds by the age of seventeen, he was built for competition. At UC Berkeley, he earned high marks both in the classroom and on the field, excelling in shot put and discus. He played football for Stanford, studied art at the prestigious Mark Hopkins Institute, then took a handyman job at William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner*, learning the newspaper business from the ground up.

He played as hard as he worked. He set a world record for throwing a sixteen-pound hammer more than 148 feet. Later, in 1906, he gained international acclaim with his discus performance at the Olympic Games in Athens.

Edgren's first big break in journalism came in 1897, covering the heavyweight title fight between Bob Fitzsimmons and James J. Corbett at Carson City, Nevada. He wrote daily dispatches, filling nearly half the sports page with facts, speculation, myth-making, and crisp, photorealistic cartoons.

The following year, Hearst sent Edgren to Cuba, assigning him to document the island's bloody war of independence against Spain. His cartoon series, *Sketches from Death*, exposed Spanish war crimes, igniting

outrage in America and pleasing Hearst, a champion of war reporting.

It also put a bounty on the young wordsmith's head.

Arrested by the Spanish military in Havana, Edgren was convicted of treason, slander, and libel. Hearst refused to intervene, even when his writer was sentenced to death. Rather than wait for the executioner, Edgren disguised himself as a tugboat engineer and escaped on a cargo ship bound for the States.

Abandoned by his publisher, Edgren headed for New York and joined Pulitzer's *World*, Hearst's fiercest rival. Sports, especially boxing, was his specialty.

At *The World*, Edgren—the triple threat: editor, columnist, and cartoonist—became the most widely syndicated sportswriter and illustrator in America, his words and images appearing in hundreds of newspapers.

“Even-tempered always, well-informed in all sports (particularly boxing), Edgren was known the world over as an authority who always told the truth as he saw it,” declared one newspaper.

“When the law did not permit the giving of decisions in fights, the world was always willing to accept the judgment of (Robert) Edgren in deciding wagers,” wrote the *New York Times* upon his passing in 1939. “When Edgren said ‘so-and-so’ was the winner, nobody complained.”

*



Tools of Joseph Pulitzer's Golden Pen

Hats in hand, humbled and almost hopeless, Mike and Eddie rap on Edgren's open office door. The sports editor, hammering sentences to pulp on his Underwood typewriter, doesn't look up.

"Lunchtime already?" Edgren says, still typing. "Roast beef sandwich—if your hands aren't too full with bottles of gin for the secretaries!"

This is farther than they've gotten with any other scribe. Stepping into the office, Reddy offers a business card with one hand, reaches for a shake with the other. Edgren keeps typing.

"Lettuce and tomato, sir?" Reddy blurts, surprising even himself.

"Greens are for rabbits," Edgren cracks, finally glancing up. "Say, since when does it take two morons to fetch me a bite?"

"Sir, we're not errand boys," Reddy says, voice rising like a ring announcer. "I'm Eddie Reddy. And this is Mike Gibbons of St. Paul, the best pugilist you've never heard of—"

"—yet," Mike quickly adds.

Edgren leans back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head. "Ain't that cute," he says, eyeing them. "All these years, and I've never seen a couple of rubes show up from nowhere dreaming of the big time!"

"You... you *haven't*?" Mike marvels.

"Not today," Edgren smirks. "But seven yesterday. Three the day before. Nineteen last week. Some of you boys even dare to show up on Sundays."

Reddy fires the last rally. "Nineteen fighters a week. That's a thousand a year." He pats Mike's shoulder. "This boy here? One in a million."

"That a fact?" Edgren plays along. "What do they call you, boyo?"

"Gibbons," Mike says. "Of St. Paul."

"I mean in the ring," Edgren presses. "What's your handle when you're fighting?"

Mike and Reddy exchange a blank look.

"A coming champion!" Reddy improvises.

Mike grins and approximates a "tough guy" pose, aiming for something between charming and fearsome, like the brawlers he's seen in the pages of *National Police Gazette*.

"This mean I'm on my own for lunch?" Edgren asks, turning back to his typewriter, trying not to laugh.

"No, sir," Mike says, jumping in. "Roast beef. Hold the greens."

Suddenly aware that he's sweating, Mike pulls Joe Gans' old handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his brow. Edgren watches closely.

"You must be pretty fast," Edgren notes. "Most first-timers walk in here with a shoulder full of pigeon shit."

"This boy here's faster than fire," Reddy boasts.

"That a fact?" Edgren tilts his head. "Joe Gans ever tell you that, Gibbons?"

Startled, Mike nods.

"I just put my pal Joey Pulitzer in the ground the other day. But the saddest thing I ever saw was what became of Gans," Edgren says, nodding at the cloth in Mike's hand. "I watched him rise, fall, come back, and fall again. Sat with him on the train last summer, halfway across the country, holding his hand as he lay dying. I'd know that handkerchief anywhere."

Edgren plucks an envelope from his desk. "This came yesterday from St. Paul," he says. "George Barton says I should send you up to Harlem for a tryout. Take this letter to the Polo Athletic Club. It'll get you into the ring once. Be brilliant—or plan your funeral."

Mike and Reddy can barely contain their joy.

"By the way, watch the pigeons on your way out," Edgren adds. "If they miss you coming in, they hit you extra hard on the way out."

*

If New York City in 1911 was "a riddle in steel and stone," its boxing scene was just as tangled—against the law, yet wildly popular.

"Anyone engaging in a prizefight stood in danger of being arrested, fined five hundred dollars, and sentenced to a year's imprisonment," writes sports historian Graeme Kent.

That summer, the Frawley Law was intended to clean up the sport, but only made it messier. Designed to reduce injuries and curb corruption, the law established a three-man boxing commission, mandated extensive licensing and paperwork, shuttered countless small gyms, and funneled profits to the city's largest athletic venues. Fights were limited to ten rounds. Knockouts were frowned upon, yet remained the only way a fighter could earn a clean, undisputed victory. Under Frawley Law, referees were no longer allowed to determine fight outcomes. The goal was to make boxing safer and more respectable. In practice, the new law proved

a disaster for fighters chasing the championship crown. Most bouts now ended without a decisive finish; results were uncertain, subject to debate that would extend more than a century. What crowns a king of the ring if no one declares the battle won?

In this no-decision era, sportswriters took control, and in New York, no voice was louder than Robert Edgren's.

*

In New York, Walt Whitman once wrote, the world was always rising up or falling down. In the fight game—riddled with con artists, grifters, shifting laws, cops, newsmen, and mobsters from every borough—the cycle moved faster still.

The Polo Athletic Club had seen more highs and lows than any glass-jawed brawler. Since opening in 1896 in an abandoned Harlem casino at 155th and Eighth Avenue, it had been raided by cops, vandalized by sore losers, even burned to the ground by competitors.

It never stayed down for long.

By November 1911, the Polo had lived and died at half a dozen addresses before settling into an old three-story factory at 129th and Park Avenue, once used to build wooden buggies and horse-drawn carriages.

Led by wealthy fight promoter Billy Newman, the club was transformed into one of New York's premier training grounds. Inside, luxury met sweat: large marble bathtubs, gleaming hardwood floors, handball courts, punching bags, free weights, a swimming pool, saunas, and a third-floor, red velvet-walled lounge for reading, smoking, and billiards. The heart of it all was the first-floor gymnasium, where a roped, regulation-sized ring stood on an elevated stage, illuminated by a fifty-foot wall of windows, with a gallery that could seat hundreds of fight-hungry spectators.

Outside the club, the thud of fists, the grunt of exertion, and the rhythmic pound of speed bags spilled onto the street. Many autumn days, the humid winds carried the scent of sweat, brine, stale coffee, and blood over several city blocks.

Mike and Reddy stand before the building, taking it all in.

Six steps from street to door, Reddy inhales deeply, sweeps his arm in a dramatic bow, and asks, "Are you ready for your date with destiny, Mr. Gibbons?"

Mike says nothing. Years later, he writes what he could not say: "In that moment, I felt somewhat like a lamb being led to slaughter. Here was my big chance—and all I could think of was home."

*

The first man Mike Gibbons meets at the Polo Athletic Club is a dentist. By day, at least. The rest of the time, Leach Cross is a fast-rising brawler. The double lives of boxers.

A Lower East Side kid born to Viennese parents, Cross—known in the ring as the Fighting Dentist—is a five-foot-five, 127-pound menace who learned to fight as a matter of survival. Unlike most pugilists, who barely finished grade school, Cross holds two university diplomas, a medical license, and a thriving dental practice on East Third. Fixing teeth by day, he earns fifteen dollars a week. Knocking them out by night, he clears thirty. He enjoys both.

Born Louis Wallach, he changed his name to spare his well-to-do parents the embarrassment of his illegal side hustle. Cross needn't have worried; he packs a big punch for a small man, fighting from a low, coiled stance—the "Cross Crouch"—launching his trademark uppercut, which usually lands like a stick of dynamite. He's more brawn than science, but a consummate showman, convinced that boxing should combine sport and circus. Some writers call him "the rabbi of the ring." Others, "he's a thrilling fighter; too damned bad he isn't Irish."

"When Leach Cross fought, there were as many fights in the audience as in the ring," writes *The Ring's* Murray Goodman. "Half the fans came to see him killed, the other half to bury him. Cross knew that to hate him was to pay to see him fight, and that suited him just fine."

*

In combat, Cross is a lunatic—a tiny outlaw with a wrecking-ball right, notorious for littering the ring with canines, incisors, and false teeth from the mouths of his opponents. After every match, he becomes a doctor again, frequently performing complimentary repair work on men whose fangs he'd rearranged in battle.

Mike Gibbons knows all about Leach Cross: six knockouts in 1911 alone, but two tough losses to Packey McFarland. He extends a handshake. Cross offers a scowl in return. Taking his time, drolly sizing him

up like fresh meat, Cross sneers, "Open your mouth, son. I wanna see your choppers."

Mike hesitates, confused, looking to Reddy for explanation. Reluctantly, he relaxes his jaw and opens his mouth.

"Bigger," Cross insists. "I wanna see all of 'em."

Mike bares his full set of teeth, eyes fixed on the Fighting Dentist: the way he cranes his neck, shifts his weight, the rhythm of his blinking, and the subtle flex of his muscles. Mike knows: watch a man outside the ring, and you learn how he fights.

Peering into Mike's mouth, Cross tilts his head from side to side, as if taking mental photographs for later use. Mike's eyes narrow, his mouth drying out.

"Just wanna see where everything's at," Cross says with a deadpan smile, "so I can put it back together after we fight."

*

Three hours later, the Polo Club is a hot jungle, slathered in sweat, windows fogged, electric with the hungry sounds of wagering. Fight fans from all over New York have been lured by the promise of another small-town boy's imminent big-city slaughter.

The smell of blood is irresistible. Word spreads fast, thanks to newsboys hollering from Harlem street corners. The room fills quickly.

Robert Edgren slips into the club, takes a folding chair at ringside, opens his notebook, uncaps his pen, and waits quietly, trying to blend in. Noticing the esteemed six-foot-five sports editor attempting to go unnoticed, Eddie Reddy makes a beeline toward him, retrieving a roast beef sandwich from his coat pocket. He offers it to Edgren, who accepts it with a subtle nod, barely concealing his amusement.

The pitch of the room surges. Mike Gibbons and Leach Cross stand in the Polo Club's ring, hands taped, gloves on, prayed up, ready to thunder or perish. Outside the ropes, Reddy stands atop a folding chair, nervously rubbing a penny between his thumb and forefinger.

Faith and superstition: essential ingredients in any athletic contest.

*

With first bell, the fight's on!

Jolting from his corner like a spooked stallion, Leach Cross gallops

forward and tilts, almost jousting, his left arm held high, his right fist extended like a lance.

Mike Gibbons holds back, remembering the stillness taught to him years ago by George Barton and Joe Gans. Wait. Watch. Then strike.

Cross deepens his crouch, then pounces toward Mike like a tiger on laughing gas.

"Cross came at me with a fury, issuing a terrifying swing that would have dropped me flat," Mike recalls. "*If* it had landed."

It doesn't.

A minute into the first round, the dentist is gassed, having swung and missed so many times.

Mike glances at Robert Edgren at ringside. A slow nod between them. Edgren gestures as if to say: *Keep showing me, boyo.*

Second round, Mike presses in closer, taking the fight to Cross, drawing the dentist into a clinch. Leaning close, Mike whispers: "You might have perfect teeth, Mr. Dentist, but the way you keep missing makes me think you need an eye doctor."

Enraged, Cross slams both gloves against Mike's chest, shoving off hard to create a narrow runway between them, then barrels forward with a steaming salvo of fists. He misses all over again.

At the final bell, Mike's hair is tidy. His brow, unsoaked with sweat. His face and body, unmarked by Cross' gloves. All his teeth remain in perfect position.

Wobbly and amazed, Cross takes the loss with class. That night, he buys Mike and Reddy a steak at Delmonico's—Abraham Lincoln's favorite place to dine in what the world already calls "the good old days."

*

November 11, 1911

Mike Gibbons vs. Billy Sherman

Polo Athletic Club, Harlem

One break leads to another for Mike Gibbons.

After failing to beat the boy from St. Paul, Leach Cross joins him, splitting duties with Eddie Reddy in Mike's corner. Though his dental

skills go untapped, he provides sharp counsel and good cheer.

Next up, Mike is matched with Billy Sherman, a fighter the sports-writers call “a stone-cold killer.”

“Sherman’s one of the best welterweights in the game,” Cross says, sticking out his tongue at the brawler across the ring. “Fast, tricky, and hard. Like the girls on Forty-second Street.”

Lifted by the sudden roar of the Polo Club crowd, Reddy grins. “Hear that, Mike? They love you!”

“*That?*” Cross snaps. “That’s for the other guy, numbskull! Billy Sherman’s a hero around here.”

Cross grips Mike by the shoulders. “Look me in the eye, boy. If you had any sense, you’d have never come to New York chasing this foolish dream,” he spits. “But here you are, so goddammit anyway. Right now, you probably can’t decide if you wanna shit your shorts or fall down a well. That’s just nerves. Let ‘em go.”

Mike listens, locked in.

“Everything worth having, we have to fight for, Gibbons,” Cross says. “Only the best of us win.”

Mike nods.

“If you try to kill Sherman, you’re as good as dead,” Cross says. “But if you go at him with some of that scientific sorcery you trotted out on me the other night, you might just survive.”

“You mean *win*,” Reddy corrects.

Cross shoots Reddy a hard look. “I did not stutter.”

*

For beating Cross, Mike earned bragging rights and five bucks—still a dollar short of train fare home.

Against Sherman, bigger money’s on the line. Going-home money.

Or, Mike wonders, maybe enough to stay.

The ringside crowd is different tonight—wealthier, sharper. Cigars, top hats, steel-tipped canes, large rolls of cash. Along one side of the ring, a long table holds five typewriters, each with a brass ashtray beside it, and paperweights pinning down blank pages soon to be marked with ringside dispatches. Seat by seat, the table fills. Robert Edgren of *The World* takes one of them.

In Mike's corner, Leach Cross leans in. "Showing me up the other day was the smartest thing you've ever done. So far," Cross says. "But all you won by beating me was another chance to lose. My advice? *Don't.*"

Mike listens, nodding, as he tucks Joe Gans' white handkerchief into his waistband.

Cross points across the ring to the press row. "See those five typewriters over there?" Cross says. "By the end of the night, they'll tell the tale. The ref can't name a winner, so those drunk billy goats decide if you're the second coming or just another fart in the wind. They write the final word on who you get to be, so make up their goddamned minds for them."

The crowd is in a fury now, thumping the floor, shaking the rafters, chanting for the fight to begin.

Mike steps forward from his corner, a small move into the light. He can't help it. He begins to smile. Almost naively, he raises a gloved fist to the crowd in greeting.

Someone throws a bottle at the ring.

*

Billy Sherman is a Navy man, a lightweight champ in the military ranks, undefeated against other sailors. Five fights into his professional career, Sherman's bouts are noisy, bruising affairs, all timpanis and cymbal crashes. He's already put three opponents to sleep before they could grab a pillow. Many of the Golden Pens believe he's "a certain contender for the crown."

Round one: footwork and feinting. Mike and Sherman, feeling each other out. Thirty seconds in, Mike's got Sherman figured, the next chapter of his Dope Book already pressed into memory.

"Sherman's all about the rush, the ambush, the blitz," Mike later recalls. "But by swinging like he's trying to knock the sun out of the sky, he leaves himself wide open. Not for long. But long enough for me to slip in and do whatever the hell I want."

The *New York Times* reports: "In a whirlwind, (Gibbons) rushed his man all over the ring, scoring a terrific knockdown. Sherman took the count of nine. The fight was scheduled for ten rounds, but right off the bat, Gibbons informed the world: it's going to be an early night."

In the fourth, Mike sends Billy Sherman to dreamland.

He locks eyes again with Robert Edgren at ringside. The sports editor nods in approval, holds up two fingers—one for each of the St. Paul boy's New York victories.

"Show me a third," Edgren mouths, not saying a word.

*

For twelve minutes of dancing with Billy Sherman, Mike Gibbons earns sixty-four dollars. He and Reddy split the purse down the middle. From his cut, Mike sends Mae and baby Robert twenty-four dollars and keeps a ten-spot for himself. It's not the big-city payday he's chasing, but it's enough to stay, to keep fighting, or to return home without shame.

Knocking out Sherman electrifies the Polo Club crowd. For five minutes, they roar with ecstatic ovations, hailing the St. Paul boy as their new favorite warlord.

"Just like that," Mike writes, "I was standing in the limelight. I had scored my hit, and knocked out the local hero. The dreams I'd dreamed were coming true!"

Before the next day breaks, Mike is already booked against Willie Lewis, whom many believe to be the true welterweight champion of the world. The purse: one hundred dollars, or nearly two months' salary at the railroad. But for Mike, the stakes run deeper. In May 1906, Lewis had beaten Joe Gans over six bitter rounds at Madison Square Garden. Tonight, Mike fights not just for money, but—armed with the Old Master's tattered handkerchief—to redeem an old mentor's loss.

After a few tense minutes of tinkering with the rusty ringside scale, officials finally declare both fighters are under the division limit of 147 pounds.

Then Eddie Reddy dangerously raises the ante, laying a thousand-dollar side bet with Lewis' manager. If Mike wins, the St. Paul boys are flush. If he loses, their brief brush with big-city glory will quickly fade, and Reddy's reckless gamble will yoke them to gangsters for the rest of their lives.

For Mike Gibbons, the Willie Lewis fight is all or nothing.

*

November 28, 1911

*Mike Gibbons vs. Willie Lewis, world welterweight champion (claimant)
Fairmont Athletic Club, the Bronx*

Before catching three bullets to the chest in a Manhattan cabaret phone booth in 1920, before his hunting rifle backfires and takes a chunk of his left leg in 1913, before he squares off in 1911 with the unknown Midwesterner named Mike Gibbons, Willie Lewis fights frequently in France, so impressing Parisian sportsmen that he's now widely considered king of the welterweights (136–147 pounds).

In the Fairmont Athletic Club's locker room, Mike receives a visitor.

"In case you're thinking you can beat Lewis and take the crown tonight, no can do. *Unless* you knock him out," Robert Edgren says. "My advice? Forget the old kayo and focus on staying alive."

"But what if I can?" Mike snarls, lacing his gloves, staring hot at Edgren.

"Can what?"

"Knock him out."

"You've won two, Gibbons," Edgren grins. "Show me three, and I'll give you a goddamn nickname."

*

"To size up the bout in a few words," writes the *Evening World's* John Pollock, "after the first two minutes of fighting, Willie Lewis never had a chance."

With the lucky charm of Joe Gans' blood-stained handkerchief tucked into his waistband, Mike is "light on his feet, feinting Lewis into knots with his hands, head, and footwork," according to *The World's* Vincent Treanor. "Gibbons seemed to know just what Willie was going to do before Willie himself did."

Mike explains: "With Lewis, I seemed to read his mind and his motions. A lot of fighters study their opponent's eyes. I've found that eyes lie and the rest of the body does not, so I watch a man's feet and knees. The way an opponent balances and braces himself reveals to me just what he is going to try next. I just look until I see, and then I go to work!"

"At nearly every turn, Mike Gibbons held the ace," writes the *Buffalo Morning Express*. "On many occasions, he brought to mind the Old Master Joe Gans, but with an even saltier, more powerful right fist!"

*

By the next morning, it's a new age. Yesterday, Mike Gibbons was a nobody from the middle of nowhere, the best fighter you'd never heard

of. Today, every sportswriter in New York declares him a “marvel of the ring,” and “the newest wonder of the boxing world.” The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* adds, “Gibbons is the Second Coming.”

Eddie Reddy counts the winnings: a hundred-dollar purse and the thousand-dollar side bet, now collected and neatly stacked in his leather medicine bag. Almost two years’ salary at the railroad in one fell swoop, even after splitting the pot in half.

James J. Corbett, former heavyweight champion (1892-1897), joins the chorus in singing Mike’s praise: “Gibbons is the best fighting machine currently on exhibition. He has speed in abundance, two great hands, science to burn, and a good headpiece. What more does a real fighter need?”

“Gibbons is a supernova,” declares Corbett’s old nemesis, America’s first heavyweight champion John L. Sullivan (1885–1892). “He is in the mold of the great, old-time gladiators.”

Boxing’s first three-division world champion “Ruby Robert” Fitzsimmons declares, “Gibbons is a wonderfully skillful chap, brainy and thrilling. I believe he can beat anybody of his weight.”

“Mike Gibbons should join heavyweight champion Jack Johnson in Paris for the big money,” writes the *Chicago Tribune*.

*



Through his father's eyes

On the long walk back to their lodging, Mike's smiling so big there's hardly room for a thought in his head. Reddy's beaming too, even as he scrubs pigeon shit from his shoulder with a coat sleeve.

On the footpath to the Brooklyn Bridge, halfway across the East River, Mike shuffles his shoes on the icy concrete until his feet take over and begin to dance. Arms loose, fists clenched, a soft-shoe of sorts, he's throwing punches at the night, as the old pals soldier on toward what feels like the rest of their lives.

Reddy suddenly stops, eyes widening. He sweeps his fedora from his head, lowering it to his heart.

"Mike..." Reddy barely musters. "Look up..."

"What?" Mike snaps, sending a hard left into the darkness.

"There!" Reddy insists, spellbound, emphatically pointing west. "Look!"

What Mike Gibbons sees, looking out from the bridge toward the middle of the harbor, is the same vision witnessed decades earlier by his parents, new to America: Lady Liberty.

Many times through the years, Mike's mother had shared the story of that long-ago night. The family's hearts shattered, their hopes pinned to nothing at all, strangers in a strange land, promised nothing in this new world but a second chance. Sailing into the harbor: the jubilation, the roar of the crowd, the vast splendor of the statue unveiled.

Only weeks later, Thomas John and Mary Burke Gibbons conceived a child they would call Michael John.

Mike and Reddy stand like this for a minute, maybe an hour, transfixed, before a gentle snow, lighter than rain and louder than silence, begins to fall.



The promise kept

It is, of course, Robert Edgren's review that Mike most eagerly anticipates, and the last of the sports pages he's able to read. Clutching *The World* in his hands, Mike holds his breath, shuffling to the four-page sports section.

"Gibbons was a revelation," Edgren writes. "He has everything: a perfect defense, a sliding, slippery attack, a snappy, jarring punch, and the ability to take instant advantage of every single opening."

But what Mike really wants to know is whether Edgren has kept his word—the promise to bestow a fighting nickname upon him after three victories.

Robert Edgren always keeps his word.

Once the nickname hits *The World*, it reverberates around the world—from New York to San Francisco, England to Ireland, France to Australia, and all the way home to St. Paul.

Mike Gibbons has been knighted by the king of the Golden Pens. From here to evermore, he is called the St. Paul Phantom.

A SORT OF HOMECOMING

*Amid pleasures and palaces
Though I may roam
Be it ever so humble
There's no place like home...*

—“Home! Sweet Home!”

Lyric: John Howard Payne; Music: Sir Henry Bishop (1823)



Greeted by the King of the Ring

Before the newly anointed St. Paul Phantom is even halfway home with his fistic windfall and, according to many Gotham scribes, Willie Lewis' welterweight crown, he's already dodging bullets.

It's the matter of weights and scales.

Sure, the majority of boxing critics who witnessed the Lewis–Gibbons battle hailed Mike the undisputed victor. The *Winnipeg Tribune* marveled

at his “unprecedented battle from obscurity to the title in only eighty rounds.” The *San Francisco Chronicle* exulted, “The printed history of Mike Gibbons reads like a novel!”

Then comes the twist.

One of the sportswriters present at the Lewis–Gibbons weigh-in anonymously reports on the decaying, unreliable condition of the athletic club’s ringside scale. After multiple measurements of each fighter, Lewis’ poundage, the writer claims, hovered consistently around 145. Mike, on the other hand, allegedly exceeded the 147-pound welterweight limit two out of five times and therefore, the writer tantrums, should have his victory disqualified.

Though the provocative account is unattributed, its origin is no mystery to New York’s Golden Pens. Every scribe runs debuting battlers through an acid test, but one authority above all is known for his disdain of new blood: Bat Masterson, the cantankerous but highly regarded sports columnist at the *New York Morning Telegraph*. In his younger years, Masterson was a gunslinging Old West lawman, made famous in Dodge City, Kansas, for pumping two dozen outlaws full of lead. Now in his sixties, the quick-draw artist does more sleuthing than shooting. Until, that is, it comes to Mike Gibbons.

In an article published anonymously, but recognized by Robert Edgren and other prominent New York sportswriters as “classic Bat,” Masterson flatly “refuses to take Gibbons seriously”—a case of the old guard blasting away the new world.

Soon, a Greek chorus of sporting experts forms, casting grave doubts over the Gibbons–Lewis fight’s outcome and, more than that, over the excellence of the Saintly City wunderkind. Whispers begin to spread. Did Gibbons truly beat Lewis clean? Had he ruffled Masterson’s feathers by upsetting a wager the old gunslinger had placed on Lewis, the favorite?

“The fact is, we may never have seen Mike Gibbons fight below 147 pounds,” writes syndicated boxing guru Tom S. Andrews. “Some claim he is the best welterweight in the game. But is Gibbons really a welterweight at all?”

In the countdown to Christmas 1911, only one fighter in the world marches over hotter coals than Mike Gibbons: heavyweight champion of the world, Jack Johnson. The Big Smoke, they call him, a sneering nickname owed to the “dusky color of his skin.”

On Boxing Day 1908, at Rushcutters Bay, Australia, the thirty-year-old son of slaves pummeled Canadian slugger Tommy Burns so brutally that the title fight was stopped by a swarm of coppers. In defeating Burns, Johnson became the world’s first Black heavyweight champion.

America lost its mind.

Boxing Magazine fumed: “It is repulsive that a Black man should hold a world’s fighting title over a white man.” Across the United States, a feverish hunt was launched—not for justice, but for vengeance. For the white pugilist who could “quench the nation’s barbarous racial fury” and “retrieve, for the honor of his race,” the heavyweight crown. Big-city newspapers dubbed these lily-skinned aspirants “Great White Hopes.”

Leading the charge was Jim Jeffries, a thirty-five-year-old former gladiator and exalted hero to the nations’ most devoted bigots who had retired to Burbank, California as heavyweight champion five years earlier to drink beer, grow alfalfa, and raise cattle. Known as the Boilermaker, Jeffries carried a personal grudge against Jack Johnson. In 1906, the Big Smoke had made his name in San Francisco by dismantling Jeffries’ younger brother, Jack, a rising heavyweight contender Jeffries had been grooming for the crown.

Charles E. Van Loan of the *Los Angeles Examiner* was there.

“In the fifth round, Johnson stepped quickly in and his right hand came up from his waist—a short punch, but with a tremendous lifting power behind it,” Van Loan remembers. “Jeffries went clear off the floor and the soles of his feet were still in the air when the back of his head struck the canvas.”

Destroying Jack Johnson was personal, for sure. But it was also profitable.

Jeffries didn’t mind the “full-flavored” payday of being the “world-famous white savior” on powerhouse promoter Tex Rickard’s blockbuster ticket: Independence Day, 1910, Reno, Nevada. Jeffries’ upfront haul? \$40,000 (approximately \$1.4 million, adjusted). He was also promised a

post-fight bonus, a cut of the film rights, and a “personal signing gratuity” from Rickard totaling another \$75,000 (more than \$2.5 million, adjusted).

Rickard billed Jack Johnson versus Jim Jeffries as The Battle of the Century. Instead, it was a public execution. Jeffries, bathed in blood and jacked up on amphetamines, was put brutally to sleep in the fifteenth round.

By exposing the Great White Hope as a great white nope, the already-loathed Jack Johnson became the most hated man in the world.

The backlash was instant and savage. White power mobs and Ku Klux Klan affiliates flooded America’s streets seeking penance for Johnson’s victory from every person of color they could find. From Atlanta to St. Louis, Los Angeles to Roanoke, the nation exploded in racial violence. Black homes and businesses were torched amid gunfire, brawling, and lynchings. The riots were largely contained within a week, but left more than twenty-four Black citizens dead. By the end of 1910, sixty-seven Black men would be lynched in America, none of them by a court ruling.

*

On the other side of annihilating Jim Jeffries, Jack Johnson became an even bigger target. In the pages of *Collier’s Weekly*, one of America’s most-read periodicals, Johnson was warned of the coming storm by globe-trotting sports and theater scribe Arthur Brown Ruhl.

“Today, Johnson faces a harder road ahead of him than any he has ever yet traveled,” Ruhl writes. “It is the gilded, beguiling pathway of him who is not climbing, but has arrived.”

The champion of the world was “fast-living,” according to boxing historian Harry Carpenter. A larger-than-life man with appetites both varied and insatiable, Johnson lived flamboyantly, unrepentantly. “He liked white girls, flashy cars, expensive cigars, imported champagne, and thumped hard jazz rhythms on his prized, seven-foot bass fiddle,” Carpenter writes.

Upon winning the heavyweight crown in 1908, Johnson paid a fortune to have his front teeth capped in gold, in the style of Rome’s greatest warriors.

“Johnson insisted on his rights as a man of the world when most Americans believed Negroes should live as discreetly as possible,” writes John Lardner. “Johnson defied convention and made no concessions at all.”

For refusing to bow, Jack Johnson was deemed “unforgivably Black.”

*

Before 1911 takes its curtain call, Johnson has been arrested dozens of times, mostly for driving his fleet of speedy automobiles too fast around the streets of Chicago, which he now calls home.

"I want to believe every time," Johnson grins, flashing his gilded frontispiece, "that I'll be fast enough to outrun them."

He rarely is.

The *Chicago Tribune* calls Johnson "a red flag to a matador." In triumph, he is stalked and taunted, harassed and hounded by the whole wide world with lawsuits, traffic stops, hate speech, threats of violence, and trumped-up local, state, and federal charges. He is smeared relentlessly by the mainstream media.

By the fall of 1912, Johnson is arrested for "white-slave trafficking," having crossed state lines with Lucille Cameron, his nineteen-year-old fiancée, the white daughter of prominent Chicago socialites. In solitary confinement awaiting trial, Johnson is forced to whitewash prison walls.

Released from prison and awaiting trial, Johnson enters a waking nightmare.

His first wife, white divorcée Etta Duryea, puts a bullet in her brain to escape the pain of public shaming and aggression. After that, keenly dedicated bigots bomb with dynamite the home the champion recently purchased for his mother, then his Chicago nightclub, Café de Champion, is shuttered. The money begins to run out.

Undaunted, Johnson makes a fist and heads to New Mexico to face yet another Great White Hope: a squat, thick-necked firefighter named Jim Flynn from Pueblo, Colorado. Johnson punishes the fireman for nine brutal rounds, further inflaming the public.

After that, the heavyweight champion of the world, has nowhere left to run.

*

But in December 1911, in the hours after Mike Gibbons is anointed the St. Paul Phantom, Jack Johnson, Chicago's most notorious celebrity, is still a free man, training daily at the city's finest gymnasium: O'Connell's.

When Mike swings through the Windy City on his way home from New York, he stops by O'Connell's to meet a few local sportswriters. The gym pulses with life—the staccato thumping of leather on flesh, the

rhythmic scrape of jump ropes, the rapid tattooing of fists striking speed bags, the shuffle of dancing feet, the heavy breath and deep grunts of men at war with themselves. The air is thick with sweat, fraught with its own barometric pressure.

Mike finds a rowing machine in a far-off corner and begins to discreetly pull unnoticed until a booming voice silences the gym: "Ladies and gentlemen, the St. Paul Phantom is in the house!"

Heads turn. Eyes find Mike, who offers a shy wave. When he looks up, Johnson is towering above him.

"Welcome to Chicago, son," Johnson grins, hands on hips. "I'm Jack Johnson."

"I've heard of you," Mike quips.

"That's a good one, Gibbons!" Johnson bellows. "If I didn't hit so damn hard, I'd slap my knee!"

*



The Phantom, the Big Smoke, and the Silver Ghost

An hour later, Mike is praying for his life as Jack Johnson rockets north of the city in his gleaming Silver Ghost, hugging the curves of Lake Michigan.

Adjusting his goggles, Johnson makes conversation. "Before I forget: give my best to your pal George Barton," he says. "I owe him one for backing me over Jeffries in Reno."

"He says you made it easy, Jack. But I'll tell him."

"They say you're gonna be the next champion of the world," Johnson grins. "Maybe already are."

"They say a lot of things," Mike says, gripping his seat.

"Don't I know it! Too skinny, too fat, too Irish, too old, or *too damn Black*." Johnson laughs. "See these gold teeth? I got 'em just to give the world something to bitch about besides the color of my skin."

They drive in silence for miles.

"You got anybody to love back home, Gibbons?" Johnson finally asks, his bravado fading.

Mike nods.

"They love you right?"

Another nod.

"Then the whole damned world can shit in their shoes and stomp off to the woods!" Johnson roars. "It'd be nice if everybody loved everybody, but that ain't the world the Good Lord built. You gotta be undeniable, Gibbons. Keep showing 'em who you are."

Mike, still nodding.

"And do Jack Johnson a favor," the champ says. "We're out here beating our chests, having our silly adventures, but the ones who love us are doing the hardest part—working and waiting. When you see 'em next, be real sweet. *Extra sweet*."

Mike wishes he could take notes, then Johnson takes a turn *too fast*.

"Pop open that glove box," Johnson grins. "You've gotta see the little keepsake I took from Stanley Ketchel, when that tiny, crazy bastard thought he could take me out!"

Mike rummages around the glove box, retrieves a small glass vial. Inside, three pearl-colored objects dance in the light. Mike frowns, puzzled, and turns to Johnson for explanation.

"Every time you fight a man," Johnson says, "you trade pieces of your soul for his."

Mike studies the jagged pearl cubes in the vial.

"I got a piece of Ketchel, for sure," Johnson smiles. "I got the son of a bitch's front teeth!"



The hero returns

When the Great Northern pulls into Union Depot, Mike is met by his wife and an eight-month-old son who doesn't recognize him. Tommy is there, and their father too, along with more than 2,000 residents of the Saintly City.

Mike is astonished by the turnout.

The whole of St. Paul is eager to embrace the local boy who has made good. Autographs are signed. Flashbulbs burst. A marching band of musically proficient mail carriers in full uniform stands on the station platform, trumpeting multiple renditions of "Hail, the Conquering Hero."

The Minneapolis Tribune reports: "It is the greatest reception ever given to a St. Paul athlete."

*

Home.

The breathtaking shores of Lake Como, "where the whimsical and the unexpected collide," as one paper describes it. Only the mansions of Summit Avenue, perched high on the city's tallest hill, offer a grander view of the world below.

Horses and buggies. Trolleys and cars. Strolling lovers wrapped in fur, trading stolen kisses. Parasols, picnickers, paddleboats on the water. The pearl-domed waterfront pavilion, alive with ragtime music and joy-

ful dancers. Here, on the spot where the three-story home he is building will soon stand, the celebration continues.

Mike stands apart, taking it all in. He's happy to be home, even as he wonders if it's the place he belongs.

"I was away for only seven weeks," he tells the *St. Paul Globe*, "but I swear it was seven years. I don't know how other boys stay away without dying of heartbreak."

Around a bonfire, wrapped in a blanket, Mae—already pregnant again—rests a hand on her belly. From a distance, she watches a gleeful Thomas John along the shore, holding baby Robert in his arms. After giving birth to their second child this spring, Mae will take to the streets again, marching for women's rights. Nothing—not ridicule, opposition, nor repeated defeat—can shake her conviction.

Catching Mike's eye, Mae smiles. He's loved her since grade school. She still blushes at his gaze. He smiles in return.

By the gazebo, Mary Gibbons churns butter, ribbons of silver in her hair. She hums an Irish jig. "If you couldn't hear Mother singing," Mike recalls years later, "you needed only to watch her foot keeping time, and you would begin to hear the music."

His brothers, Jack and Paddy, their bodies worn from years of hard labor at the railyard, play a lively tune on the fiddle, while singing an Irish trad duet, hearts light for the first time in years.

Nearby, Father Dunphy spars with Tommy, who continues to grow, while improving his fistic methods. The priest fires off a tight-fisted trio of quick punches but none of them land. Tommy dodges each one with a gliding sidestep and smooth boogie, light on his toes and grinning.

"Take it easy, Father!" he hollers.

"I wish not to preach the doctrine of noble ease," Dunphy crows, winding up again, "but of a strenuous life!"

Tommy rolls his eyes, ducking the man of the cloth's next salvo just as swiftly.

Here comes George Barton, carrying his toddler, George Jr., and throwing an arm around Mike's shoulder.

"Ever wonder what the hell we did to deserve all this?" Barton asks.

Mike searches for words.

"You might be smiling, Mike. You've done well."

Still silent, Mike nods. His eyes are on his father, off in the distance, gently placing a fishing pole into baby Robert's tiny hands, teaching the boy what it really takes to survive in this world: a lot of watching, a lot of waiting.

The sky shifts to purple, stars blooming in jeweled clusters across a twilight canvas without border or frame. As darkness settles and the temperature drops, the family and townspeople begin to gather their things, exchanging hugs, kisses, blessings, departing one by one, two by two, and finally Barton too, until, suddenly, Mike finds himself alone.

*

Soon, the lake will freeze. The city will paint the ice green, a tribute to its Irish roots.

Soon, the *Titanic* will vanish beneath the sea. Among the 1,513 who perish: two Welsh boxers, Leslie Williams and David Bowen, crossing the Atlantic in search of a new beginning.

Soon, Jack Johnson will have nowhere left to turn, and he'll contact Mike Gibbons for help.

Soon, Tommy will make his fighting debut—a couple of bruising sneak fights, where his opponents will be made to quickly slumber. Inspired by Mike, Tommy will beg to come to New York. Mike will hesitate, haunted by an old promise to protect his kid brother from the dangers of the world.

Soon, everything will change. The children will grow. The lovers will age. The parents will be gone.

Soon, probably too soon.

*

A few weeks ago, Mike Gibbons was a nobody from the middle of nowhere.

After a handful of fights in the Big Apple, he became *everyone's* hero.

Then overnight, everything turned inside out.

Nobody—not even Mike himself—knows who, or what, he is anymore.

So he boards the train again, returning to the circus of the big-city fight game, where he'll put his head once more inside the lion's mouth.

He shouldn't. He knows that.

But he will. He knows that, too.

He's fasted off and on for a week, slimming down to 144 pounds for the last time in his life. Now, he's at the counter of a butcher's shop on New York's Lower East Side, plunking down fifty bucks for a brand-new industrial scale.

He stalks into Brooklyn's Empire Athletic Club, stepping onto the scale five times in a row, coming in consistently at 145—two pounds to spare as a welterweight.

Hungry, thirsty, but fiercely determined, he gives a shark-eyed nod to the sportswriters at ringside and a dismissive wave to the five thousand boxing fans gasping in unison at the leaner—and decidedly meaner—Mike Gibbons before them.

He stares darkly across the ring at Willie Lewis, and hears the bell strike. Before its sound fully decays, he's electrified, "beating [Lewis] into a state of frazzled helplessness," the *Minneapolis Tribune* reports.

Eighty-five seconds into battle, Mike sends Lewis "a rapping left to the jaw." A ten-count later, and the fight is over.

Mike Gibbons has made his case.

The crowd is convinced.

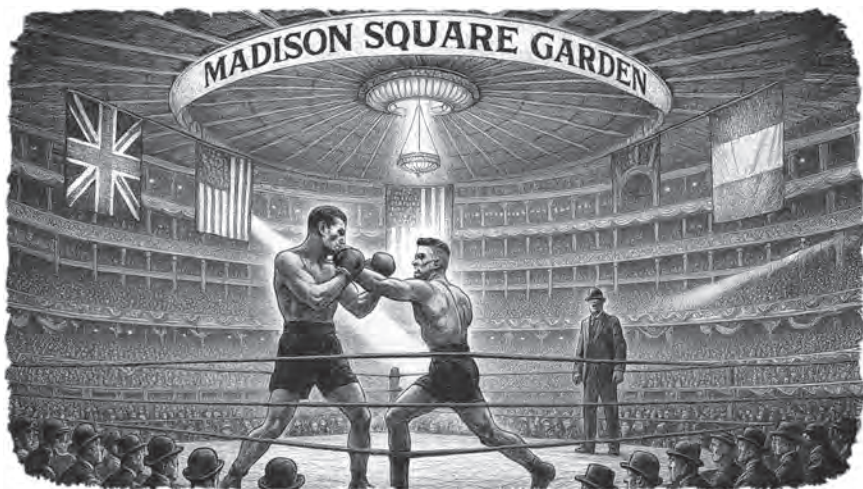
To an anvil chorus, rising to their feet and chanting the Gibbons name, Mike gives a deep bow. He steps out of the ring near the sportswriters' station, gives Robert Edgren a wink.

Then, just to be sure, he knocks over a steaming cup of coffee—right into Bat Masterson's lap.

POOL OF RED, SEA OF GREEN

*Where the cruel cross of England
shall never more be seen
And in that land we'll live and die
still wearing Ireland's green
They're hangin' men and women
For the wearin' of the green...*

—traditional Irish folk song, “Wearin’ o’ the Green,”
lyrics by Dion Boucicault (1820-1890)



The prize ring as allegory: “Let’s say this one’s for my father, boyo!”

Speeding home from the Willie Lewis knockout, welterweight-svelte and brimming with rejuvenated confidence, Mike Gibbons is nevertheless caught between divisions and worlds, struggling to stay under the 147-pound welterweight limit while nearly a full dozen pounds shy of the 158-pound middleweight ceiling.

“(Gibbons) is betwixt the welter and middle divisions in matters of poundage,” declares “Gentleman Jim” Corbett.

It’s purgatory: the rock and the hard place.

“As I aged into my middle twenties, my body continued to change,” Mike reflects years later. “I was naturally growing, and finding it increasingly difficult to be strong, healthy, and comfortable below 150. At the same time, it was almost impossible for me to consume enough calories to add much weight above that.”

After running the numbers and chewing over all options, he determines there are only two paths forward. “Either I had to quit the fight game and walk away from all the dreams that were coming true,” he remembers. “Or I had to somehow bulk up and become a bona fide middleweight.”

In other words, there’s only one way for Mike Gibbons to go: *up*.

*

“You’re too light,” Eddie Reddy grouses every day, sparring in the gym with his fighter, the mood-swinging manager’s torso shielded with a cushion of pillows and pads. “The big boys aren’t gonna fall at your feet, Mike!”

“But I’m faster than the middles,” Mike growls, throwing two lefts and a surprise uppercut. “If I can add power and weight, while staying lightning-fast, nothing can stop me!”

“They hit harder and fall down slower,” Reddy coughs, the wind knocked out of him. “You don’t have that kind of punch.”

“Try me,” Mike seethes.

*

It’s an open call to Twin Cities middleweights: ten bucks for three rounds against Mike Gibbons.

As in the old days, Reddy turns a key in the side-stage door of the Dewey Theater and ushers his pal inside. Tonight, the whole house is theirs.

Onstage: a regulation-size boxing ring. In the pit: a six-piece band—tuba, banjo, trumpet, piano, bass, and percussion. A tuxedoed conductor stands poised, baton in hand. Across the stage, a pack of burly, well-muscled men pace anxiously. Some shadowbox in slow-motion. Others gnaw their nails.

Reddy rubs his hands together, anticipating a great night. Beside him,

Tommy, ready to work his brother's corner, beams as Mike steps forward to greet the cheering newsboys filling the theater.

It was Tommy's idea to invite them—many of them without families, homes, or anywhere else to be. Mike bows to their cheers, soft-shoeing with a grin, throwing playful punches as he dances.

Once he slips through the ropes to face his first sparring partner, though, everything about Mike Gibbons changes.

Off comes the green sweater, which Tommy leaps to catch midair, just before it hits the boards. Then it's fists into gloves, laces tied and tightened; Gans' handkerchief, tucked into Mike's waistband; and gloves together: *thump, thump, thump*. A turn of the neck, a roll of the shoulders, a glove flick of the nose, a bounce in the knees. Deep breath. Ready to rumble.

Mike, shark-eyed, nods to Reddy, who relays the signal to the conductor.

The baton drops. Music swells. The fighters meet at center ring.

A rapid arpeggio skitters up the starboard side of the piano before the rest of the orchestra storms in. Tonight, they're fighting to Wagner.

Within thirty seconds, Mike hammers the young pug to the canvas. As the kid's counted out, the orchestra puckishly slips into Chopin's "Funeral March."

"Number two!" Reddy yells, summoning the next challenger, a beady-eyed, broad-shouldered mutt who lumbers toward the ropes.

Mike stares him down. The kid, twice Mike's size, tries to steady himself.

Tommy massages his brother's shoulders. "Pace yourself, Mikey," he says calmly. "There are twenty boys backstage. This could be a long night."

The music surges as the bell clangs again.

Since Chopin played so well the first time, the orchestra repeats the gag with every subsequent knockout.

"The Funeral March" gets quite a workout that night.

July 1, 1912

Mike Gibbons vs. Sid Burns

Madison Square Garden

New York, NY

Madison Square Garden: the High Temple of Boxing, they call it. The hall of halls. The place a man fights once he's made it big. Spanning an entire Midtown block, the arena is, as reporters like to say, "a central palace of pleasure" in New York City.

A lavish, Moorish-flavored castle, the Garden is "an imposing structure of yellow brick and white Pompeian terracotta." Its broad, flat roof is broken by colonnades and domes, crowned by a tall Italianate tower. When the \$3 million marvel opened in 1890, the national magazine *Century* confessed, "We do not understand how we lived so long even half content without it."

Sixteen years after the Garden's debut, the man who dreamed it on paper and raised it in steel and stone, architect Stanford White, is gunned down by a jealous lover atop his creation. In boxing, there is always a little blood mixed into the concrete.

*

Sid Burns, an Englishman in America, is a loudmouthed Jewish brawler from east London with five wins and a finely tuned contempt for Irishmen. He is Mike Gibbons' first test in middleweight waters, the proving ground the sweet scientist from the Saintry City needs. A decisive win advances his game. Anything less is a belly-flop and a long walk home.

Burns versus Gibbons is a grudge match: England versus Ireland, red versus green—the prize ring as national allegory, a crystalline echo of the bloody, centuries-old feud still raging across the Atlantic. The chaos and conflict of a world gone wild, distilled into a battle between two men.

Mike knows a win won't save Ireland. But maybe, just maybe, it will inspire her. Lend her strength. Stir the blood and feed the fire.

Ireland: the place his father fled so long ago. The homeland that Mike himself has never seen. But tonight, against Sid Burns, he can show his father that some ancient battles are still worth waging.

*

A few hours before the bout, Mike meets Robert Edgren outside the Garden.

"Welcome back to the Devil's Opera," Edgren grins. "Let's see how New York loves you as a middleweight."

"Just a little more of me to love," Mike jokes, patting his belly.

"I don't know about that, lad," Edgren laughs, throwing an arm around him. "You're still bonier than my darling grandmother."

The sportswriter gestures upward. Mike follows his gaze, tilting his head to take in the stately tower of Madison Square Garden.

"All the way up," Edgren advises.

Perched atop the marble portico, high above the city, stands a gleaming bronze figure, lit by ten searchlights—an exquisitely nude female archer, bow drawn taut, arrow aimed skyward, frozen in mid-release. Thirteen feet tall, thirty stories high, even higher than the Statue of Liberty, she rotates on ball bearings, poised and unshakable. "Poised airily on the heaven-kissing tower, her radiant brow and straight-aimed arrow always meet the shifting wind," writes Edward Cary in *The Century*.

"The great mythic huntress, they say. Goddess of the Moon. Ever watching. Always ready to strike," Edgren muses. "Say hello to Diana."

"Gorgeous," Mike says. "But not really my type."

"It's a big night for you, Gibbons," Edgren says. "First fight at the Garden. Just thought you should know: every man who's ever fought here says a prayer to that girl before they walk through the door."

Mike looks up again, stirred by Diana's beauty but unmoved by superstition. Besides, he's not the praying kind.

*

Inside Madison Square Garden, the largest crowd ever to attend an indoor boxing match has assembled—12,000 permanent seats sold out, with another thousand crammed into temporary bleachers and a thousand more packed shoulder to shoulder in the aisles.

As a precaution, Irish and English fans are seated on opposite sides of the arena: one half a pool of red, the other a sea of green. In the lobbies, stairwells, and balconies, coppers labor mightily to keep fists from flying between fight fans determined to express their nationalism with violence.

The house swells into a riot of howls, horns, and stomping feet as Mike Gibbons steps into the ring. He weighs in at 149 pounds, light for

the middleweight division, but “(wears) a businesslike look in his eyes that bodes no good for his rival,” notes the *New York Tribune*.

Across the ring stands Sid Burns, 156 pounds of gristle and rage. Called to center ring by referee Billy Joh, the Irish Gibbons and English Burns come face-to-face. Burns wastes no time.

“I heard your daddy can’t read,” he sneers, “and your mother don’t know how to cross her legs.”

“Oh, Sidney. So kind of you to keep up with my parents,” Mike grins. “Since yours vanished the day you were born.”

“That’s enough scary eyes, boys,” Joh barks, wedging himself between them. Bald, grizzled, and a former featherweight himself, he lays down the law. “Fair, clean, and nothing below the belt, or I’ll follow you both home and beat you with a bag of rocks.”

A bottle crashes against the ring apron near Eddie Reddy. The ground beneath Diana’s marble feet seems to quake as the English side of the arena waves red and blue flags, while the Irish belt out another chorus of “The Wearin’ o’ the Green.”

When the bell finally rings, it’s barely audible above the tumult and the shouting.

*

Mike Gibbons crosses himself, glides to center ring, focused and smooth, rubbing his nose with a gloved fist and a sneer, eyes flaring with a hungry, predatory look.

Sid Burns lingers in his corner a moment, as if reconsidering, then charges into the fray. For several seconds, time slows down, each man sizing up the other.

Then everything ignites.

“The first round was not two minutes old before (Gibbons’) piston-like left jabs had the Brit jarred and reeling,” reports the *New York Tribune*. “Burns would swing, but never land. Gibbons, on the other hand, seemed incapable of missing.”

So it goes for four rounds.

*

“Then came the fifth,” writes *The Tribune*.

Burns: a deer in the headlights.

Mike: rushing in, a fierce right tearing open a deep gash on the Englishman’s left brow, following up with a barrage of heavy artillery. A left hook snaps Burns’ jaw, sending him reeling.

“Gibbons, jarring his man with a flurry of blows,” notes *Mirror of Life*, a leading U.K. sports weekly.

As the seconds slip away, Mike remains dogged and unsparing, unleashing a cannonade of blinding blows that climaxes with another left hook to the jaw, this one landing so clean and thunderous the crack is audible even in the nosebleeds.

Burns weaves, wobbles, crumbles.

In the Garden, everyone holds their breath as the referee counts down from ten. By the time he reaches six, it’s clear: Sid Burns isn’t getting up.

“The American sent the Englishman into the Land of Nod,” declares *Mirror of Life*.

“For five rounds, Gibbons wrote his signature all over Burns’ face,” according to *Boxing*, a British weekly, “then rubbed blows so hard onto Burns’ body that he dug a grave big enough to bury Sid’s reputation in.”

Down. Out. Cold. Done.

With an assist from referee Billy Joh, Mike hauls Burns to his corner, flops him onto his stool, kisses his battered forehead, and bitterly whispers into the fallen man’s ear: “Let’s say this one’s for my father, boyo.”

*

Rising to the raucous crowd—some jubilant, some crestfallen, pockets of fistfights erupting in the cheaper seats—Mike Gibbons thrusts his fist into the air and waves at the crowd.

He nods with a smile to Reddy, who vaults through the ropes to embrace him. Spinning his manager in his arms, Mike gives a wink to Robert Edgren at ringside, then spots Bat Masterson, arms grumpily crossed at his typewriter. When Masterson realizes he’s been spotted, he fumbles for his coffee cup and raises it in disgruntled salute.

Then the pain. An electric surge from shoulder to fist, chased by waves of nausea. Adrenaline, slithering from every corner of his body, blitzing toward the riot in his right hand, now broken.

He knows the moment it happened. Fourth round. Timing off on an uppercut. Coming up too fast. Trying to pull back. But too late. Limbs tangling. Right hand snagging on Burns' iron arm. A *twig-snap pop*—two fingers fractured, thumb torn clean out of joint.

The victory is glorious.

But it hurts like hell.

In the Garden, the remaining crowd, mostly Irish, chants ecstatically, singing the name of their man: the St. Paul Phantom. For one shining moment, Mike bathes in the adulation.

It's almost enough to stop the inferno in his hand.

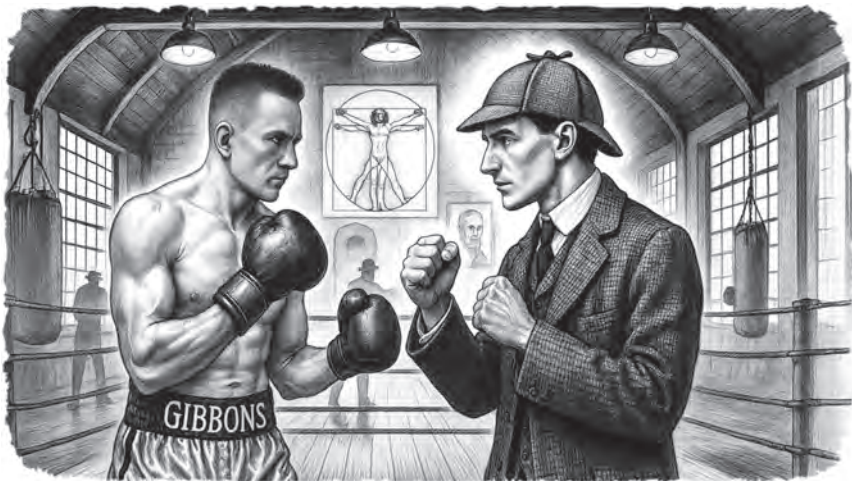
*

On the Great Northern home, Mike cradles his broken hand beneath his overcoat. The bandage is tight, but the injury throbs like a war drum, firing off lightning bolts of pain even when he's not trying to make a fist.

Still, he smiles, watching the world blur past the window. He'd gone to New York to test himself as a middleweight, to bring home a win for Ireland. The press made it clear: he'd delivered.

"Mike Gibbons is an ambitious genius," writes Jim Corbett. "He aspires to the middleweight championship of the world, and I am not alone in believing he has what it takes!"

To the hymn of these words, Mike drifts into sleep.



The Phantom's sweet science inspires Sherlock Holmes' fighting style

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Sherlock Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—an avid boxing fan who admired Gibbons—begins to model his world-famous detective’s fighting style after Mike’s “scientific boxing.” Doyle believes Mike Gibbons’ fighting style is a good match for Holmes’ proficiency with observation, deduction, science and reasoning that borders on the fantastic. *Sports Illustrated* years later writes, “Holmes’ fighting is reconstructed to incorporate the Phantom’s extraordinary speed of foot to avoid infighting, rapid short lefts, and finishing off opponents with a powerful right cross. It’s fleet-footed dancing with surprising showers of gore.”

*

On the train, an hour from home, a firm grip on his shoulder jolts Mike awake.

“That was some strong medicine you dished out to that English son of a bitch,” a gravelly voice says. “I see now why they call you the Phantom—faster than flames and damn near invisible. We used to talk of your da the same way.”

Brushing away the hand, Mike turns to face Uncle Michael Cusick, seated across the aisle from him, clutching a bulging suitcase.

“I should thank you, lad,” Q grins, flashing a spirited grin that’s newly missing two bottom teeth. “By dunking that foul teabag tonight, you made me a winner twice—filled my heart with Irish pride *and* my suitcase with so much cash I had to toss out all my stockings and knickers just to make it fit!”

“You’re drunk, Uncle. Drunk, old, and telling tales,” Mike says, the steeliness in his smile betraying his rising fire. “How about I thank you for helping my parents to America, and then we agree to never see each other again?”

Mike rises, extends his uninjured left hand. Reluctantly, Q accepts it. Then Mike suddenly tightens his grip, yanking the old man to his feet, forcing their faces inches apart.

“You know what I can do to a man from this distance, Uncle. You just watched me do it to Sid Burns,” Mike growls. “So hear me now, ‘cause I’ll only be saying it once: bet on me all you want, but stay the *hell* away

from my family!”

Then, a brutal shift. The cold immutable steel of a pistol, grinding into Mike’s ribs. Q drives the weapon deeper into Mike’s side, slipping from his grasp with a slow, deliberate smirk.

Mike Gibbons, always fast, always moving. But in this moment, motionless.

“God bless you, child, but you’ll never be enough for me,” Cusick says, pleased with himself for having outdrawn the St. Paul Phantom. “The war I’m fighting isn’t sport. It may be fun some days, but it’s never games. Still, I’d like to thank you.”

Q spits onto the floor of the train car. “When your da, the haggard old twat, turned his back on Ireland, I had no choice but to turn to his wildest child. The one who never gets hit. The one who never loses,” Q proudly glowers, wagging the pistol like a schoolmaster’s finger. “The good Lord showed me the way, Michael John. He led me straight to this underworld, this savage kingdom of yours, full of dim gobs foolish enough to bet *against* you! What your da would not do for Ireland, your victories are paying for!”

And then Q is gone, slipping into the next car, and disappearing like smoke.

*

When the train pulls into St. Paul fifteen minutes later, Michael Cusick lugs his battered suitcase through the station. Though the bag is heavy and pulls at his arm, he’ll be walking home tonight, refusing to waste a single penny on cab or carriage. The \$8,000 inside—cash won by betting his nephew would crucify Sid Burns—isn’t for St. Paul. It’s for Ireland. Every cent to Ireland.

A wave of weariness washes over him. He sets down his suitcase and rests awkwardly on it, drawing ragged breaths. Patting his coat pockets, he digs out a chewed-up cigar, clamps it between his teeth, and strikes a match. The flame sputters and dies. After several failed attempts, he rises with a shrug, hoists the suitcase, and heads out on foot.

The walk home is slow. Winded, he stops again and again to rest on his bag before shuffling on. *Goddamn this aging body*, he often thinks

these days.

At last, he reaches the narrow sidewalk in front of his tiny house. He draws a deep breath, tries to smile as he unlatches the wooden gate, and trudges up the pathway to his porch. House key in hand, pain suddenly seizes him, a white-hot conflagration zigzagging the latitude and longitude of his weathered form. He clutches his left arm. Staggered. Drops the suitcase full of money. Falls to the ground.

Flat on his back, eyes to the sky. Breathing labored, heart failing. He fumbles for a prayer, but cannot remember a single one.

Michael Cusick dies in the end. They always do.

COULDA

*When life seems full of clouds and rain
and I am full of nothin' and pain...
Who soothes my thumping, bumping brain?
Nobody...*

—Bert Williams, “Nobody,” (1905)

Music by Bert Williams, Lyrics by Alex Rogers



All of the dreams, coming true

Months later, Mike Gibbons rarely thinks of Uncle Michael Cusick. The shadow that haunted his father across oceans and decades is gone, his cold body now six feet beneath the dirt in Calvary Cemetery, his fire and nationalism living on in younger rebels who will never stop fighting.

For Mike, it's another hero's homecoming, the people of St. Paul gathering in gyms and on city streets, eager to glimpse their local champion: old-timers easing through their own workouts, wide-eyed young fight-

ers, tumbling toward ecstasy or dreamland, all of them inspired by the Phantom, the Irishman who battered England's best at the Garden and is now eyeing the middleweight crown.

As summer deepens, Mike's training shifts to Lake Como, where his new home quickly blooms from the earth at 1193 West Como Boulevard, a skeleton of scaffolding and timber yawning three stories into the sky, frames without windows and walls without faces, no doors yet hung to close on the future or past.

A cool summer breeze stirs beneath a sliver of moonlight reflecting on the water. On the unfinished third floor, Mike and Tommy spar, their footwork echoing through the hollow of the house still dreaming itself into being.

Boxing that's like fencing, fists like foils. Parry, feint, lunge. Slip, bluff, counter, strike.

Mike continues to evolve and reinvent. His right hand healing. His left picking up critical power. His weight, piling on.

Tommy holds his own against his big brother, proving just how far he's come with speed, power, and shine. It's been only a matter of time before the Phantom's shadow would raise his voice to collect on a promise made.

"Take me to New York, Mikey," Tommy pleads one night. "Like you said you would."

*

Eddie Reddy doesn't like it one bit. But three weeks later, he's on a train to New York with Mike Gibbons *and* the kid brother.

"You've got two fighting Gibbons now, Reddy!" Mike says, trying to win him over. "Double the money!"

"Tommy's not special like you, Mike," Reddy grumbles. "So what if he beat up a couple of boys down by the river? They'll kill him in New York."

Two days later, Tommy Gibbons fights "ripping, hard-striking" middleweight Tommy Nelson at the Fairmont Athletic Club in the Bronx. The battle's over before the echoes of the opening bell die down.

"From the very start, the brother of Mike Gibbons did not give his sturdy opponent a chance," marvels the *Minneapolis Tribune*. "Tommy Gibbons showered his adversary with blows as soon as the gong sounded and never relented!"

A first-round knockout.

Suddenly, sportswriters wonder: is the Phantom's kid brother also a force to be reckoned with?

*

When Mike Gibbons fights Eddie McGoorty—the Oshkosh Terror, they call him—two nights later, the crowd sings a very different song.

Ballyhooed as “the best middleweight contest” in decades, Gibbons-McGoorty—almost exactly one year after Mike's meteoric, stop-the-presses Gotham debut—ends up being both more and less than what sportswriters and the sold-out Madison Square Garden crowd were promised.

Fight fans are split. Baseline brawlers howl for savagery, agog at McGoorty's blunt force barrage, his constant stampede of sledgehammer fists, swinging in from every direction with bone-crushing intent. The purists, meanwhile, marvel at Mike's almost supernatural skills as an escape artist. Wherever McGoorty stomps, slams, and storms, Mike is already gone, dancing out of reach as the bombs go off. He's a shadow, a blur, a whisper between blows. Unhittable and untouchable. But he holds back, his offense largely holstered, his own artillery barely unleashed.

At the final bell, both fighters remain on their feet. No knockout. No decision. No clear victor. The rules of the game.

The crowd is restless and unsatisfied. In a world this fast, no one buys a ticket for ambiguity. They want spectacle: a pool of blood and an unconscious man on the floor. Either Houdini clearly defeats death, or he drowns in the goddamned milk can.

With McGoorty versus Gibbons, the people came for war and got a waltz. They howled for slaughter, and were given slapstick and heavy breathing.

By night's end, they're not sure they'll ever want an encore.

*

A knock on Mike's dressing room door. No pause. Just entry. Robert Edgren, hat in hand.

Mike, fresh from the showers, pulls on a clean undershirt.

“*Coulda*,” Edgren says.

Mike slumps into a folding chair, staring at his reflection in the bulb-studded mirror. “Excuse me?”

"A fighter's least favorite word," Edgren says. "*Coulda.*"

Mike pulls an old gray sweater. "How about this one, Bob? *Shoulda.* As in, I *shoulda* known you weren't really my friend."

"Why didn't you let loose out there tonight, Gibbons?" Edgren asks. "You might've knocked out McGoorty."

Mike looks down at his hands. In the fifth round, he'd thrown a hard right to McGoorty's chin but landed high on the forehead, breaking several fingers. He wants to tell Edgren, but swallows his alibi.

"You're the real deal, Gibbons," Edgren says, fingering his fedora brim. "But for the record, it's not my job to be your friend. It's my job to be accurate."

*

In St. Paul, a front-page headline reads: "Mike Gibbons No Longer a Hero at Home"

The story:

A year ago, when Mike Gibbons came home from his New York debut, the people of St. Paul gathered at Union Depot to do him honor. It was great while it lasted. Verily, Fame is a fickle wench.

*

There remains plenty to love about home: the endless green, the halcyon sky still unspoiled by skyscrapers, the wind harmonizing with the rush of ten thousand lakes. Breakfast with his son. Making love with his wife.

After a year of bread and circus in the Big Apple, being back in St. Paul moves Mike. But it gives him no peace.

Every day, he sprints up and over St. Paul's seven hills. Like he knows what he's chasing and how to get there. He passes the lakefront lot where his family's home nears completion: paint, windows, and hinges. Soon, they'll hang doors.

*

There's no furniture yet, so Mike, Mae, and their boys—Robert, almost two, and eight-month-old Mike Jr.—sleep in a nest of blankets on the floor.

One night, as the children slumber, Mike winds the turntable, drops the needle, and waltzes Mae across their empty living room.

She wants for little these days, though sometimes still wishes Mike would lay down his gloves for good. But a journey, she understands, is a journey. A mission and a cause. A war made up of a hundred battles.

Hers and his.

He fights alone in the ring. She fights at home, the first to wake and last to rest, carrying the weight of worry in silence.

Tonight, she surrenders into his arms. His body, changing quickly now, the ounces adding up to pounds, a genuine middleweight under construction. His shoulders are broadening, his arms more muscled. Still lean and sculpted, but thicker in the middle, better insulated for heavy fire.

Mae has always loved the man he is. But she's truly enjoying the man he is becoming.

*

After giving birth to their second child, Mae is eager to reclaim her own strength. She enlists her husband's help, asking him to teach her how to box. Just the basics.

The children asleep, windows thrown open to the spring night, Mike fires up the phonograph. Some nights it's *Clair de Lune*, others a Sousa march. In the third-floor dancehall of their lakefront home, Mae falls into Mike's arms, into his strength and sway.

Sometimes they spar. Sometimes they swing. Sometimes they laugh. Sometimes they sweat. Sometimes they kiss, slow and deep.

Boxing becomes a joy for Mae—the movement, the power, the rhythm. It fills her as it fills Mike.

"Mrs. Gibbons has become more than proficient with the gloves," Mike proudly tells a sportswriter. "She is fast on her feet and lashes nearly as hard with her fists as she can with her tongue!"

*

A few months later, tuned-up, dialed-in, and ready for war, Mike and Tommy return to New York with Eddie Reddy, aiming to stomp decisively back into the big-city limelight.

April 29, 1913, the Fairmont Athletic Club glows with electric anticipation. Inside its hallowed ring, the Phantom's kid brother will face "rugged, dangerous" Joe Borrell of Philadelphia. The stakes are high. The atmosphere is charged. Tommy Gibbons had fared well in his New York debut, but

this is the night he intends to carve his name into boxing history.

Borrell is no pushover. Tommy later recalls the Philly boy as “a big, tough fellow,” fearsome and intimidating with “heavy hands, bone-breaking fists, and a reputation to match.” But to Mike and Reddy, the men in Tommy’s corner, Borrell looks like a paper tiger. “If I were the man boxing Borrell, he’d be dizzy, and wouldn’t be able to hit me with a handful of birdshot,” Mike assures his brother, filling Tommy with confidence. Perhaps too much.

When the opening bell sounds, Tommy bolts from his corner like a thoroughbred out of the gate, fists flashing. Borrell looks lost, leaving enough openings to make a Swiss cheesemaker blush. “I debated with myself which fist to use in knocking him out,” Tommy cheekily admits later.

But fate is fast, and a boxer’s fortunes can flip faster than a silver dollar. Out of nowhere, Borrell’s thunderous right hand crashes through the air and finds its mark: the jaw of Tommy Gibbons.

Crack! Vision spinning, ears roaring, the crowd a blur of noise and light, Tommy wobbles and weaves.

In the corner, Reddy moves like a battlefield medic. Ice water. Smelling salts. A sharp slap to the cheek. Then, like he’s delivering scripture, Reddy commands: “Be glorious, boyo. Show Mike what you’re made of.”

For the rest of the fight, Tommy is glorious. With precision and fury, he surges back, dismantling Borrell piece by bloody piece. In under twenty minutes, the tide is so completely turned that Borrell, battered and disoriented by Tommy’s relentless assault, inadvertently clicks his heels together and crumples unconscious to the canvas.

That night, the press is ecstatic. The rise of the Phantom’s kid brother electrifies the scribes. “From sparring partner of his famous brother to contender for the middleweight championship, all within the space of one year!” crows the *Winnipeg Tribune*. The *New York Herald* goes further: “Many Believe Tommy Gibbons Will Prove To Be Better Boxer Than His Brother.”

Just like that, Tommy Gibbons has arrived.

Years later, *Star Tribune* sportswriter George Barton sits with Tommy to look back on that night.

"A boxer always ought to be in top shape, or he can't do himself justice," Tommy says. "Otherwise, he's bound to come to grief sooner or later. Always regard the other fellow as a tough scrapper who has an excellent chance of beating you, for if you think he is a set-up and become careless, you are liable to run into trouble."

Tommy adds: "I learned that lesson early and, luckily, it didn't cost me the fight. After my experience with Borrell, I never let anybody kid me again about my opponents being easy. I looked upon all of them as dangerous, and fought them accordingly."

The big city's got nothing Tommy Gibbons can't handle with his science, power, and ever-present smile; in rapid succession, he overpowers William "KO" Brennan in ten, twice flattens George "KO" Brown, hammers Al Worgin to sleep, and stomps Buck Crouse in four.

*

After his frustrating draw with McGoorty, Mike returns to the ring with renewed fire. He gives Gus Christie "a lesson in the art of boxing," the *Boston Herald* reports. In Pittsburgh's Exhibition Hall, he drops Jimmy Perry with a right cross "so neat, sweet, and clean" that Perry lands "half-way across the ring."

After that, it's a blurring carousel of triumph: Joe White in Boston, Spike Kelly in Kenosha, Kid Wagner in Wilkes-Barre, Marty Rowan sent to dreamland in Brooklyn.

In New Orleans, Mike drops Wildcat Ferns in the first round. Some ticket-holders demand refunds, claiming they missed the entire fight while stowing their hats beneath their seats.

"Gibbons seems to hover, wraithlike, just out of harm's way," rhapsodizes the *New York Tribune*. "But given the opening, he strikes with jarring jabs and a right always poised for the finishing stroke."

*

In May, the brothers return to Madison Square Garden, with Mike headlining the main event and Tommy cued up on the undercard. In short order, Mike "completely outclasses" the stellar middleweight Jack McCarron, while Tommy schools Young Donovan—the son of legendary Victorian-era boxing professor Mike Donovan, who for years trained President Theodore Roosevelt in the White House.

After the bout, the former president, a great admirer and devotee of boxing, praises the brothers. Roosevelt has long believed boxing in the “scientific style” of Mike and Tommy Gibbons builds courage, grit and defensive proficiency in the “right” way. He regards their boxing style—with its emphasis on skill, speed, and strategy—as a noble pursuit for a vigorous life. “Boxing is an art... as much so as music,” he once said approvingly. Roosevelt views a scientific boxer—one with timing, balance, and cleverness—as the superior kind of fighter.

In private letters, the President encouraged his own children to take up boxing for character-building. “I am glad that you should box...as well as you do,” he wrote to his son, Kermit (a fan, then pal, of Mike and Tommy’s) stressing that he wanted all his boys to learn to protect themselves and others.

The sporting world also makes note of the triumph at boxing’s high church.

Mike and Tommy’s double victory marks a first in Garden history: two brothers victorious on the same night. A month later, they do it again, with Mike knocking out Dancing Master, Young Ahearn, in the fourth, and Tommy sinking his fangs into Jack Denning, a man said to “carry venom in his mitts.”

After Mike’s superlative showing, flashbulbs pop and the crowd roars. The brothers don’t hear it at first: the distant rumble, the rising tide of voices. Suddenly, dozens of fans rush the Phantom in the ring.

“They picked me up and carried me on their shoulders all around the splendid arena,” Mike writes. “I had won my way back into their hearts after the McGoorty flop, and I felt almost satisfied.”

*

After showering, Tommy walks into their dressing room and freezes. Mike is already dressed to the nines in a full tuxedo, hair slicked, bow tie crisp and perfectly knotted. Tommy’s eyes widen. Then a slow, knowing smile spreads across his face.

In the middle of the room, stashed between an industrial rack of clean towels and a cage full of medicine balls, a string quartet plays softly. Mike, standing tall and regal, gestures for his kid brother to join him.

A bistro table awaits, draped in a checkered cloth with a single red

rose in a crystal vase. Mike pulls out a chair for his brother, as a tuxedoed waiter appears, towel folded neatly over his arm, dramatically revealing the contents of the silver platter he carries: two freshly boiled lobsters.

"Did you know, Mikey?" Tommy enthuses. "We used to feed lobster to jailbirds?"

Mike pops the cork on a bottle of champagne and pours two flutes. "As a matter of fact, I did," he says with a smile. "But these days, lobster's for winners. And that's you and—"

"—*Us*," Tommy cuts in.

"That's us, then," Mike laughs, raising his glass. "We showed them again tonight, didn't we?"

"Like we said we would," Tommy nods. "That night with the comet."

They clink glasses: *Cheers!* After that, neither boy ever drinking alcohol, they chuckle and hurl the champagne over their shoulders.

Fresh-baked bread arrives, salad tossed at the table, full service, right there in the makeshift café. The brothers sit alone together, savoring the moment.

"What is all this, Mikey?" Tommy finally asks.

"This is because I love you, little brother. And I'm damn proud of you," Mike says, his voice snagging on emotion. "The night you were born, I made a promise to God. Just a dumb little four-year-old swearing to always keep you safe. But somewhere along the way, I think maybe it's been *you* looking after *me*."

"Silver dollar baby!" Tommy beams.

"Thank you, brother," Mike says. "For seeing me through."

Tommy grabs a crouton from his salad, flicks it across the table, hitting Mike square between the eyes. Then he cheerfully lifts the champagne bottle, feigning a posh accent, and asks Mike, "Care for a refresher, Monsieur?"

Mike nods dramatically. Tommy tops off both glasses. They make another silent toast—clink and cheers—then laugh like loons as they throw the champagne over their shoulders again.

*

Since his run-in with Uncle Q, Mike Gibbons no longer sleeps on trains. But beside him in the narrow cabin berth, Tommy's curled up

and lightly snoring.

A knock at the cabin door. Eddie Reddy stands there, brow furrowed, hat in hand, the look on his face inscrutable.

Simultaneously, Mike and Reddy say, "We've gotta talk."

Mike slips from the cabin, following Reddy through the crowded dining car, all the way to the last car at the back of the train. They step onto the rear platform, leaning against the railing, watching the rails vanish beneath them.

"You could've joined us for dinner," Mike says.

"What can I say, Mike?" Reddy smirks, though there's no real humor behind it. "I'm a one-fighter kind of girl."

"What's brewing with you, Reddy?"

"You fight. I drive. Wasn't that the deal?" Reddy says. "Not really like that with baby brother in the mix."

"If you're feeling left out, that's on you, Reddy. You're choosing it," Mike says, shaking his head. "And don't forget, you're making more money than ever."

Reddy holds his stare, jaw tight, until he can speak without taking a swing. "I've got brothers too, Mike," he says. "I get it. Family comes first. I just thought—"

"We *are* family, Reddy," Mike cuts in. "Pals. Family. Always."

Reddy nods, unconvinced, then abruptly shifts gears. "I've got news," he says. "Packey McFarland's agreed to fight you. Big money at the Garden."

Mike's body stiffens with a thousand thoughts at once, none of them friendly, then spits out the hottest one. "What the hell are you thinking, Reddy?" he snaps. "I'm 154 pounds now! Packey's last weigh-in was 133. Do the goddamned math!"

"He's agreed to 145," Reddy says. "You can do that, Mike. If you want it bad enough."

"Goddammit, Reddy," Mike seethes. "Running up and down the scales like this is gonna kill me. Putting on the middleweight pounds was rough. Dropping a dozen pounds now could ruin me. I'll have nothing to fight with!"

"Kind of figured you'd say that, so I handled it," Reddy says, watching everything rush away from them on the back of the train. "It's an

exhibition. Looks like a fight, smells like a fight. But nobody gets hurt. The rich, famous crowd goes home dazzled after watching two of the cleverest boxers alive.”

“That’s not a fight, Reddy. It’s a show!”

“It’s a *job*!”

“I don’t want a job,” Mike fires back. “I want the goddamned crown.”

“Mikey, we need a job,” Reddy says, voice lowering. “A payday.”

Something in his tone makes Mike pause. “What do you mean?”

A long silence. Reddy grips his hat, knuckles whitening.

“*Reddy?*”

Without a word, Eddie tosses his hat off the back of the train. For a moment, it hovers over the rails, drifting above the flatlands in defiance of gravity, then vanishes into darkness as the train speeds on.

“There are a lot of ways to win and lose in the ring, Mike,” Reddy says, his words chasing after his fedora. “When you lost to McGoorty, it cost us a lot more than your pride.”

THE MIDDLEWEIGHT MUDDLE

*Before beginning a hunt, it is wise to ask someone
what you are looking for before you begin looking for it.*

—A. A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh* (1926)



Murder makes an orphan of the crown

*October 15, 1910
Conway, Missouri*

BANG!

A .22-caliber bullet, meant for the heart of reigning middleweight champion of the world Stanley Ketchel, tears instead through his left shoulder and lung, grazing the left lobe of his liver and spleen before piercing and lacerating the wall of his stomach and lodging deep in its upper quadrant.

Halfway through breakfast, when the single gunshot shatters the pre-dawn hush in the tiny farm kitchen, Ketchel finishes chewing a mouthful of scrambled eggs against the sudden, searing agony in his chest. Swallowing what would be the final bite of his last meal, he watches a crimson pool bloom on the table by his left hand.

He springs to his feet, a fighter's instinct, but is already reeling. From a quivering, useless fist, he surrenders the three strips of crispy bacon still in his grip.

Bewildered, he turns to face his assailant: Walter Diple, a jealous ranch hand whose comely girlfriend Ketchel has been bedding on the sly for weeks.

Ketchel's never gone down easy, but Diple doesn't need a second shot.

The champion takes a single leaden step forward before collapsing to the hardwood floor. He gasps and gurgles, air hissing through his perforated lung, choking on his own blood. His eyes, once sharp, predatory, and often unexpectedly kind, begin to lose their light.

It takes all day, but Stanley Ketchel's dead by dark.

"By the time he took his last breath," sportswriter John Lardner eulogizes, "the crude, brawling, low-living, sentimental vagabond Ketchel had become a folk hero and a legend—the stuff of myth."

*

In every fighter's life, there is blood. In Stanley Ketchel's, more than most.

"The first thing you must understand about Stanley Ketchel," writes boxing historian Bert Randolph Sugar, "is that he wasn't human."

Born to Polish immigrants in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Ketchel's life was brutal from the start. It was the hard scraps of his youth that earned him a fearsome reputation. As his career evolved, it was imbued with the mythmaking and tall tales intrinsic to media coverage of the fight game in that era.

Alone, Ketchel fled west, riding the rails, dreaming of being a cowboy or a gunfighter. He landed in Butte, Montana, worked as a saloon bouncer, where his hot temper, big mouth, and quick fists finally found purpose and release. Ketchel had been born to violence; in the Treasure State, he finally discovered a way to get paid for it.

Ketchel ran roughshod over Montana's fight scene, then romped and stomped through San Francisco's middleweights like a plague—often by knockout, always with a tidal wave of gore. Ketchel was “game as a bulldog, tough as a bronco,” recalled *The Ring's* Nat Fleischer, “a man-made tornado” with “a tangle of cowlicks, who (charged in the ring) head-down like a bull.”

On Thanksgiving Day 1908, the killer became king. Over eleven savage rounds, Ketchel pounded middleweight champ Billy Papke to a pulp, earning him the division crown, as well as his fearsome boxing sobriquet: the Michigan Assassin.

“Ketchel fought like a gladiator of old Rome,” raved sportswriter William A. Phelon. “There never was, or will be, another quite like him.”

*

Then came Jack Johnson.

October 16, 1909, Ketchel stepped into a Northern California ring to punch up—*way* up—against the Big Smoke, six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier. The fight was scheduled for twenty rounds, but the heavyweight champ ended it in the twelfth with a thunderous blow that hammered several of Ketchel's teeth straight into his glove.

After that, Stanley Ketchel was never the same.

Throughout 1910, offers poured in—a title bout against Eddie McGoorty, a \$30,000 purse to face Sam McVea in Paris—but Ketchel turned his back on the ring, choosing instead to “go back to the simple life.” He bought 3,200 acres of timberland near Springfield, built a profitable sawmill, and, barely twenty-four years old, considered settling down for good.

It was never going to last. By the time the girl, the breakfast, the farmhand, and the rifle entered the scene, the ending had already begun.

*

By Halloween 1910, with Ketchel's body barely cold, the *New York Times* asked the question echoing through the fight world: *With the champion now dead, who holds the middleweight crown?*

Every manager, promoter, and pug in the game had an answer, but there was no consensus. To the heartbreak of Mike Gibbons and the rest of the middleweight fraternity, there wouldn't be one for a very long time.

“Ever since Stanley Ketchel took the long and final count, the poor middleweight division has been orphaned,” lamented the *Winnipeg Tribune*. “It ain’t got no mother. It ain’t got no father. To be on the level, it ain’t got nobody to give it a care.”

For nearly three chaotic years, the middleweight title was fought over by every 158-pound palooka in the sport, a wild free-for-all William Phelon dubbed “the Middleweight Muddle.”

“Which one of these outstanding fighters is now the middleweight king,” Phelon mused, “is a riddle not even the sagest fistic scholar can satisfactorily resolve.”

Finally, in 1914, after exhaustive study, polling, and debate, Phelon declared a data-driven end to the madness. The crown, which had rested too long on the brow of a dead man, now belonged to George Chip.

*

Mike Gibbons sees the path to the middleweight crown at last, but the road is anything but clear.

George Chip, the so-called champion, refuses to step into the ring with the St. Paul Phantom. Sheltered in the Pennsylvania coal towns, Chip cherry-picks easy fights, sidestepping the division’s real threats. Mike watches in mounting frustration, his fists aching for worthy opposition.

With Eddie McGoorty off chasing money in Australia and Eddie Reddy’s reputation crumbling in the gambling world, Mike needs a fight. A real one. But at this point, he’ll take anything.

On February 23, 1914, he steps into the ring at Brooklyn’s Irving Athletic Club against a nineteen-year-old chicken farmer’s son named Al McCoy. A southpaw with more than a hundred bouts behind him, McCoy is dismissed by the press as “slow, awkward, clumsy, and unconvincing,” a warm-up act, at best. No one gives the kid a second glance or half a chance against Mike Gibbons—not even his own father, who reportedly bets “every one of his chickens” against his son’s success.

Then, just before the first bell, McCoy knocks on Gibbons’ dressing room door, trembling, his eyes wet with fear.

“Have a heart, Gibbons,” he pleads. “I’ve got a wife and kids. If you knock me out, I’ll never get another fight. I’ll go broke. My family will be ruined.”

The words hit Mike harder than any punch. Against his better judgment, he agrees: no knockout.

For ten rounds, he dominates McCoy, outclassing him at every turn, tallying a brutal 95 points to McCoy's meager 4.8. It's a master class in skill and restraint. A lesson in mercy.

What Mike doesn't know is that his kindness will soon come back to haunt him.

*

While Gibbons fumes over the stalled middleweight division, George Chip's younger brother, Joe, prepares for a rematch against McCoy. Their first ended with Chip knocking McCoy out. The second should be no different.

But in a gruesome twist of fate, two days before the bout, Joe Chip mangles his right hand in a coal-mining accident. For months to come, he won't be fighting for anything besides saving his fingers.

Rather than forfeit the \$300 payday, George Chip steps in. Instantly, and however inconceivably, the bout is declared a fight for the middleweight championship. Experts predict a slaughter. McCoy's father, who kept all his chickens and pocketed twenty bucks when his son lost to Mike Gibbons, lays a \$100 wager that George Chip will "swiftly pulverize" his boy.

*

Room 854
Commodore Hotel
New York City

Mike Gibbons dines with Tommy and Eddie Reddy. He hasn't bothered to attend the fight. He doesn't need to. Chip will have the chicken farmer's son plucked, gutted, and stewing in a soup pot before the steaks hit the table.

"I didn't see the fight," Mike Gibbons later writes. "But I'll never, ever forget it."

For two hours on fight night, telegrams arrive from George Barton with routine updates from ringside. Mike barely pays attention: the outcome feels inevitable. The sun will rise, the sun will set, and George Chip

will dismantle Al McCoy lickety-split.

Then the telephone rings, and Mike's heart begins to race.

Reddy answers, beer in hand. A moment later, the glass crashes on the floor.

"Chip's down," Reddy whispers, voice hollow. "Knocked out. First round."

Gibbons feels the room tilt beneath him. He stares, unblinking. Silence stretches into infinity.

"Forty-five seconds," Reddy finally says. "A lucky punch. Caught Chip flush on the chin."

The middleweight division—once a muddle—is now an absurdity.

*

Al McCoy, the same fighter Mike had humiliated just weeks earlier, is suddenly now the middleweight champion of the world. And he has no intention of ever giving the Phantom a shot at his crown.

"Not now, not ever," McCoy crows.

Word spreads fast: McCoy has been laughing about Mike's "tender-heartedness." He brags to anyone who'll listen about how he tricked the Phantom, begged for mercy, and got it. How he walked out of the ring unscathed, while Chip never saw what hit him.

"Gibbons is a sucker," McCoy crows.

Mike grits his teeth at the sting of betrayal.

The boxing world is outraged. Champions are meant to inspire hope, not jeers. McCoy inspires only ridicule. Sportswriters spit venom. Fans boo. Fighters shake their heads in disgust.

"Mike Gibbons could have taken the title from Al McCoy any night of any week," journalist Alexander Johnston writes. "But they don't call boxing 'the grim art of breaking hearts' for no good reason."

*

During McCoy's three-year reign, he "defends" the title forty-two times. He wins only four of the fights. The other thirty-eight, he loses—an astounding 90.5% loss rate. But under the era's "no decision" rules, a champion must be knocked out to lose his title. McCoy never is. Instead, he survives—running, dodging, stalling—fight after fight. And against all odds, he remains king.

Sportswriters dub McCoy the “Cheese Champ,” a moniker ladled in dung, not glory.

Just like that, the barely-resolved middleweight muddle is suddenly jumpstarted all over again. For Mike, it’s purgatory: the crown, just out of reach, held hostage by a kid who refuses to fight him.

“I kept Al McCoy handsome that night,” he later writes. “I could’ve knocked him out, but he asked for mercy, and mercy’s what he got. My reward? He never risked his title against me.”

On the heels of the McCoy fiasco, the Phantom earns a new title of his own. Ring announcers and sportswriters of the world begin referring to him as “the uncrowned king of the middleweights.”

“More than I could ever say,” Mike writes, “I *hated* it.”

*

If Mike Gibbons were the praying kind, the appearance of strapping, pie-in-the-sky entrepreneur Mike Collins might’ve been proof that God was finally listening.

In the fall of 1913, Wisconsin lifts its statewide ban on boxing, legalizing the sport after forty-five years in the shadows. Though the newly sanctioned bouts still operate under the “no-decision” rule, the shift drags boxing out of the murky underworld of sneak fights.

Mike Collins, built like a circus strongman, but dressed like a Wall Street banker, recognizes an opportunity when he sees it. Sportswriters call him “five books smarter than your average Joe,” and he intends to prove them right.

The day Wisconsin boxing becomes legal, Collins files for a promoter’s license. The next day, he spends \$5,000 on a sprawling, dilapidated barn in Hudson, just twenty miles south of St. Paul, perched on the edge of the St. Croix River.

For Collins, it isn’t about the barn; it’s about location. St. Paul is a seething hotbed of fistic talent, second only to New York City, and even though boxing remains outlawed there, champions-in-the-making like Billy Miske and Johnny Ertle are emerging at a blistering pace.

Collins strikes deals with a local ferry company to shuttle Twin Cities fans across the St. Croix for a nickel fare on fight nights. He even negotiates with Great Northern Railway baron James J. Hill to lay new rail lines

that funnel spectators straight to his doors. Collins' vision is audacious: make Wisconsin the prizefighting capital of the Northwest.

The barn remains a barn—until Collins transforms it. He renovates aggressively, adding tiered seating, a balcony, a bar and lounge, a world-class ring. “A 15,000-seat fight factory,” writes Frank E. Force in the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*. The journalist revels in the liberty of attending fights in Hudson “without fear of offending police powers.”

Hudson Arena is a shrewd gamble for Collins—an overnight success that happens, quite literally, overnight. (After its March 24, 1914 opening with Mike Gibbons headlining and Tommy Gibbons on the undercard, the arena is already turning a profit.) Collins pours everything into his “Friday Night Fights,” a weekly series that only fails to sell out when one of the Gibbons Brothers isn't on the marquee.

For his efforts, local journalists dub him “the St. Paul Playboy.”

*

Mike Collins' right-hand man is Eddie Kane, a wiry bolt of nervous energy. A former jockey, vaudeville singer, and manager to both world wrestling champion Charley Cutler and billiards great Willie Hoppe, Kane's a livewire: tireless, theatrical, and, as one scribe put it, “a meerkat in a bowler hat.” At five-foot-four and barely 118 pounds, he's nicknamed “the Cardinal” for his unshakable Catholic devotion and daily presence at Mass.

As a kid, Kane fancied himself a flyweight boxer. As the story goes, in his first professional fight, Kane was quickly knocked out cold, then woke up as a manager. Everybody loves him, except for the couple of people who really don't.

He handles promotions, publicity, and logistics for Collins' barn, hawking \$1-\$5 tickets in Twin Cities ice cream parlors, tobacco shops, and billiard halls to ensure every Friday Night Fight at Hudson Arena is standing-room only.

Tommy Gibbons thrives in Hudson. Once dismissed as just the Phantom's little brother, he's finally carving out his own path and becoming impossible to ignore. At the barn, Tommy earns \$400 to \$500 per fight, never has to dodge law enforcement, and sleeps in his own bed at night.

Mike, meanwhile, commands a staggering \$4,000 per bout, money

that helps him claw out of the financial crater left by Eddie Reddy. He hopes for a break in the big-city circuit—maybe a rematch with McGoorty, or Al McCoy suddenly agreeing to defend his crown. Maybe Packey McFarland will finally say yes to a proper battle, like hell.

In the meantime, the work is steady, and he's close to Mae and the family.

Mike Gibbons likes Mike Collins. Respects him. Finds him easy to work with. He's taken a liking to little Eddie Kane too.

When the Phantom fights, Hudson Arena is always packed to the rafters. So Mike Collins likes Mike Gibbons a lot too.

*

After kicking open so many locked doors for his old pal, Eddie Reddy finds himself suddenly sidelined. There's not much left for him to do these days but count coins and hurl half-hearted challenges at McCoy, McGoorty, and McFarland. His heart just isn't in it anymore.

Backstage at Hudson Arena, as another sellout crowd chants the Gibbons name, Reddy fumbles with the tape, wrapping Mike's hands loose with too much slack. Growing impatient, Mike exhales sharply, shoots a hard look across the silence at him.

"He wins his battles by making no mistakes," Mike gruffly quotes. *"That is what establishes the certainty of victory."*

"What now, Mikey?" Reddy sighs, rolling his eyes, starting again with the tape. "John 3:16? *Wizard of Oz*? *Song of Songs*?"

"What's with the sass, Reddy?" Mike snaps, yanking his hands away to rewrap them himself.

"Nothing at all, Mike," Reddy scoffs. "I adore hanging out in this goddamned barn, babysitting your little brother while Mike Collins manages the superstar *I* made."

"Collins is the only reason Tommy and me are making any money at all these days," Mike says. "And you're still taking half my cut—despite everything."

"I made you a star, Mikey," Reddy growls. "Now Collins gets the credit."

"And I'm still no closer to the crown than the day I started," Mike fires back. "Twenty wins since McGoorty, and they're calling me 'the uncrowned king.' I'm running out of road, Eddie. I'm twenty-seven years

old. Nobody ever fights worth a damn after thirty.”

“When we started out, you were nobody, Mike. A nobody from nowhere. And I made them believe you were the greatest thing they’d ever seen.” Reddy says, shaking his head. “But this whole game—the numb-skull laws, the crooked promoters, the lawless cops, the bookies and the gangsters—it’s rigged. I’m beginning to think it can’t ever be won. We’ll just always be running for our lives. Chasing after some dumb childish dream without ever counting the things we lost along the way.”

“Reddy, I know what you’ve given—”

“No, Mike, you don’t. You just *don’t*,” Reddy barks. “To be with you, I walked away from my entire goddamned life—my pitiful little backstage job, my mother, my father, all my asshole brothers. A girl I hoped I’d marry. I’ll bet you didn’t even know that part, did you, Mike?”

Mike, shaking his head, ashamed he didn’t.

“Mary,” Reddy says. “Like *your* wife.”

A long silence between old friends, the fire subsiding, but the damage done.

“No one’s ever gonna win again, Mike,” Reddy says. “We’ll just keep making other people rich, believing, like suckers, that one day we might rule the world. Sure, we’ve got some money now. But only one of us has a life.”

Mike meets his eyes, full of regret. “I’m sorry, brother. Truly.”

“I’m not your brother,” Reddy snaps. “He’s the one that carries the bucket you spit into between rounds.”

From the arena, the chant rises, rhythmic and relentless: *Gib-bons, Gib-bons, Gib-bons...*

“You coming?” Mike asks.

“Nah, but thanks,” Reddy says. “I’m heading home.”

After that night, Mike and Reddy do not see each other again for many years.

*

Over six rounds at Hudson Arena that night, Mike Gibbons delivers “a severe beating” to Vic Hansen—the Salt Lake City Bearcat, they call him.

“Gibbons, fast and furious, systematically declawed Hansen,” zings one newspaper. “It was a one-man battle all the way.”

The Phantom's right fist, broken bones finally healed, hammers Hansen to his knees, again and again. In battle, Mike is "invincible."

But the victory feels hollow. The middleweight crown always tantalizingly out of reach. So here he is: the Uncrowned King. However great, however many victories, no matter what he does, he's still only spinning in circles. Marking time that will one day run out.

*

After bulldozing Vic Hansen, Mike walks along the St. Croix with George Barton. Twenty miles across the water, the lights of St. Paul flickering like stars that have fallen to earth.

"Who the hell do I have to beat, Georgie?" Mike asks. "For any of this to matter."

"You're looking for a hit list?" Barton asks.

Mike nods.

"A one-two-three to the middleweight crown?"

Another nod.

"No one takes McCoy seriously, so why not?"

"Why not indeed?" Barton says, suddenly inspired and already formulating a plan. "I'll check with Edgren. Maybe Runyon and Rice. A few other sportswriters from Boston, Philly, Chicago, LA. Due diligence. We'll build a list everyone can agree on."

*

Seven days later, Mike rides the ferry across the river, takes a cab from the dock to the arena, and marches into Mike Collins' office. He slaps the morning sports page down on the desk, jabs a finger at the headline: "Gibbons Wants Clear Title."

Collins lifts his gold-rimmed spectacles to cloudy blue eyes. By the time he's done reading, he's already smiling.

"Who are we talking?" Collins asks.

"Eddie McGoorty, of course," Mike says. "Jimmy Clabby from Indiana, definitely. And my dear old friend, Packey McFarland. One, two, three—king me."

"I don't think I'm breaking news here, Gibbons, but McFarland's not a middleweight."

"Not soaking wet, sure. But ever since I set foot in the ring, the press

boys have sung it loud and clear: Packey and me are the only fighters under 160 pounds that really matter. So he's on the list."

"Battle of the uncrowned champions," Collins muses to himself. "Son, you sure know how to pick a fight."

"I'd like to fight them here. At the Hudson. With you," Mike says. "But I'm not looking for a manager. Just a matchmaker."

"To do the impossible," Collins says, a feral grin lighting up his eyes. "Nothing I love more."

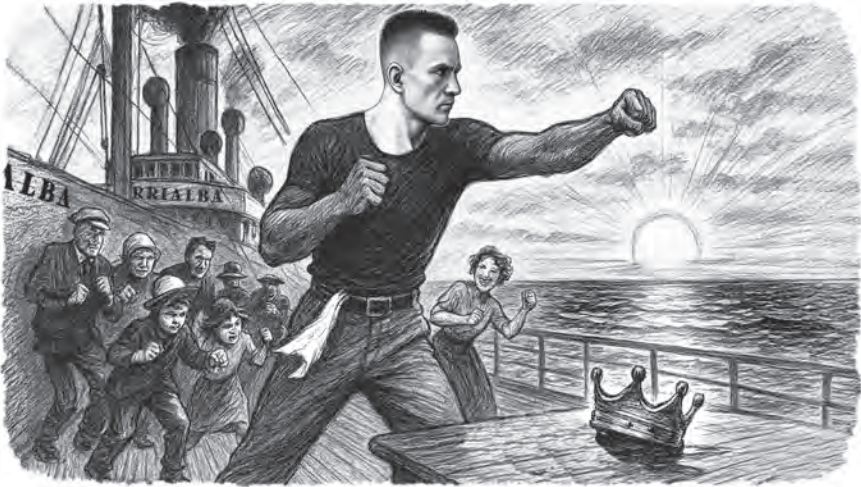
Mike nods, a dark grin stretching across his face. Collins laughs, pours himself a triple-deep whiskey, raises his glass to the Phantom.

Within weeks, Collins delivers. Two of the three battles are signed, sealed, and scheduled, and the Phantom's road to the crown begins all over again.

THE LONG ROAD

No flowery road leads to glory...

—Jean de La Fontaine, *Fables*, x.14 (1694)



The sweet science on the high seas

Topping the Phantom's three-man hit list: Jimmy Clabby. They call him the Indiana Wasp.

"Slender, handsome, curly-headed, with sparkling brown eyes and a boyish grin that won you instantly," says longtime friend George Barton. Clabby began fighting at sixteen, under the watchful eye of his father, Pop, a devoted fight fan and reckless gambler. He was fast and powerful, a born showman. His kid brother, Eddie, tried to follow in his footsteps, but a few swift knockouts later, he gave up the ghost.

In 1910, Clabby took his fists overseas, tearing through New York,

London, and Australia, challenging the best welters and middles in the world, and almost always winning. In Sydney, he claimed the Australian middleweight crown. Sportswriters called him “one of the greatest pieces of fighting machinery the prize ring has ever known.”

Even those he battered couldn’t begrudge him. “Clabby was a man everyone enjoyed,” Barton writes. “He made you feel good—even after he’d beaten you. Everything was always all right with Clabby, so long as the money lasted.”

*

By January 1915, the Phantom and the Wasp have faced off three times. It’s never gone great for Mike Gibbons.

September 11, 1909

Mike Gibbons vs. Jimmy Clabby #1

Hibernian Hall

St. Paul, Minnesota

At twenty-two, Mike Gibbons walked into one of his first big fights to square off against Jimmy Clabby. His payday? Seventy-five dollars.

National Police Gazette called Clabby, “the best 145-pound boxer in the country.”

“Clabby stood head and shoulders above other fighters. He was a superstar hailed the world over as a pugilistic wonder,” Mike later writes.

When the first bell rang, Mike was swallowed whole. Clabby moved like a storm, wriggling in close, dropping his head onto Mike’s chest, then shoving off to unleash a fusillade of blows too fast to counter. Every time Mike thought he had him figured out, Clabby shifted, unpacking a whole new bag of fistic tricks.

Mike stayed on his feet, but left the ring humiliated as fans jeered his performance.

“I thought I could box before that night,” he writes, “but in thirty minutes, I had revelation after revelation.”

*

September 1, 1911

Mike Gibbons vs. Jimmy Clabby #2

Terminal Building

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Fresh from his victorious tour of Australia, having “defeated all the capable boxers in the land of the kangaroo,” Clabby agreed to a rematch.

No one expected Mike to win, and he didn’t. But this time, he didn’t lose either.

“I was too cautious, stuck in my head,” Mike reflects. “Thinking instead of knowing. Looking instead of seeing. Trying to remember what Clabby had done before instead of being there for what he was doing in the moment.”

Most sportswriters gave Clabby the nod, but some called it a draw, praising Mike’s “almost impregnable, shell-like defense.”

*

September 29, 1911

Mike Gibbons vs. Jimmy Clabby #3

Auditorium Rink

Winnipeg, Canada

A month later, Mike Gibbons earned a full-flavored \$750 payday for his third shot at Jimmy Clabby before 2,000 fans in a frigid, gargantuan venue that typically hosts ice hockey. Per Canadian sportswriters, Mike’s odds of winning were “next to zero.”

Determined not to repeat his past mistakes, Mike—with Tommy at his side and in his corner—studied Clabby’s every move from the Dope Book.

For seven rounds, the third Gibbons-Clabby battle closely resembled the first two. “He was punishing me so severely, splitting my eyebrow open with a right hook,” Mike recalls. “For several minutes, I couldn’t see anything for all the blood in my eyes.”

Then, something shifted. In the final rounds, an adrenalized Mike rewired his rhythm. He stopped reacting and started controlling, flashing in and out of range—striking, vanishing, then striking again.

"Suddenly, I had Clabby on the run," Mike remembers. The crowd erupted as he swarmed the Indiana Wasp with stinging jabs and crosses, attacking and escaping all at once.

There was no knockout, but nearly every reporter awarded the win to him. One month later, he boarded a train with Reddy for his maiden voyage to New York City.

*

The Final Showdown

January 21, 1915

Mike Gibbons vs. Jimmy Clabby #4

Hudson Arena, Wisconsin

It has to end here.

"Clabby was always a hard road to hoe," Mike writes. "But I *knew* where I belonged, and Clabby wasn't going to keep me from getting there."

The *Minneapolis Journal* warns: "This is the fight of Mike's life. If Gibbons loses, he will be out of the running for the middleweight championship. Maybe for good."

Ten p.m. A sold-out house. Warmed up, rubbed down, Joe Gans' white kerchief tucked into his waistband, Mike, now known worldwide as the St. Paul Phantom, stalks to the ring. Noticeably absent in his corner: Eddie Reddy.

"We came to a parting of the ways," Mike tells reporters. "We had our differences, as many boxers and their managers do. We agreed to sever relations."

Across the ring, Clabby grins, loose and lively. Never one for conventional wisdom, the Indiana Wasp's only pre-fight ritual has always been: a close shave and a glass of whiskey.

Forty minutes into the fight, Clabby is wrecked, bleeding from his mouth and nose, his two front teeth suddenly missing. In the fourth round, Mike punches the Wasp's dental bridge clean out of his mouth, where it skips and skitters across the canvas and into the seats.

"Just saving you the trouble of taking those fake chompers out, Jimmy Boy!" Mike shouts, as the crowd howls with laughter.

Then, Mike unleashes hell, “jabbing, swinging, hooking rights and lefts repeatedly,” reports the *Minneapolis Tribune*. “In every way, Gibbons was Clabby’s master.”

“In his defeat of Clabby,” writes Robert Edgren of the *New York World*, “Mike Gibbons was everything a champion is expected to be. He is the nearest thing to a middleweight champ that we have today!”

At the final bell, the badly beaten Clabby embraces Mike, grinning a toothless smile.

“Took you long enough,” Clabby cracks, leaning in close, then, turning to the crowd, he hoists Mike’s fist into the air.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Clabby bellows, “my pal and your new champion of the world—*almost!*—the St. Paul Phantom, Mike Gibbons!”

*

The whole world loves Jimmy Clabby. Maybe they always have.

Having earned nearly \$500,000 in the ring before retiring in 1923, the Wasp’s pockets are inside out and empty by the early 1930s. He’s burned through every penny of his fortune on high times with friends, whiskey, and slow horses. In 1932, Jimmy’s father, Pop Clabby, is killed in a car crash. After that, the Wasp disappears.

By Christmas 1933, the once-golden champion is found living in “a tumbledown shack, forgotten, penniless, skin-and-bones, and starving,” reports the *Star Tribune*.

“That is the pitiful, almost inevitable finale to the careers of too many fighters,” comments *The Indianapolis Star*’s John Wray. “Most of them appear to be headed for the same exit of poverty and despondency.”

In one of his final interviews, Clabby is asked how it feels to have nothing.

He grins.

“You can’t turn back the universe and bring back yesterday,” he tells *Sporting News*. “That’s gone. The thing to do is face the present.”

A few weeks later—the morning of January 20, 1934—a man walking his dogs finds Clabby’s body curled up in the snow. The forty-three-year-old warrior is emaciated, wearing a patched wool coat, a serene expression, and not much else.

Alone in life, at least at the end, the body of Jimmy Clabby—another

uncrowned king—lies unclaimed in the city morgue for over a week.

He dies in the end.

They always do.

*

Mike Gibbons is shattered.

"I was a pallbearer at his funeral," he writes. "There were three hundred of us there. We trudged through the rain to a cemetery on the outskirts of town and buried this hero of the prize ring. My friend—dead with less than he had when he was born. I wish I had done more. I wish I could have found him. Barton says Clabby was too proud to ask for help, but I cannot believe anything other than that someone could have saved him."

The fights we cannot win.

Mike knows exactly what Clabby meant about facing the present. Every great boxer does. The trick is to seize time. To own it. To move with it. Until you can't any longer.

Years later, Mike writes:

"When I think of Clabby now, this is how I remember him.

"It's 1909. Clabby is on top of the world. Champion. Wealthy. Beloved. Me? I'm skinny, stupid, and starstruck. We touch gloves. First time together. First time our eyes lock. He already knows he's got me. I already know it too. It's all about to happen.

"Clabby smiles at me, this downright devilish glimmer in his eyes, like he's seen every secret there is in the ring, every angel too, and is in love with it all.

"Just before the first bell, he leans in and whispers: 'Gibbons, I am gonna rock your world.'"

*

March 2, 1915

Mike Gibbons vs. Eddie McGoorty

Hudson Arena, Wisconsin

The second man on the Phantom's hit list: Eddie McGoorty, the Oshkosh Terror, a bruising, 158-pound workhorse from Wisconsin who's been fighting since he was ten. Dublin. Belfast. Liverpool. London. Sydney. Brisbane.

Wherever there's blood and money, you'll find the Terror.

These days, it's all about the payday. There's five grand on the table to face Mike Gibbons, and McGoorty can't stop bragging to the press about his wealth, his imported leather shoes—and how he sometimes burns them just so he has to buy another pair.

"You can tell Gibbons," McGoorty sneers, "I never waste a blow. Every punch I throw is planned and placed. Some men go deer hunting, shooting blindly, kicking up dust but never hitting the target. Other men take a single-shot rifle, aim deliberately, and kill the beast with one bullet. That's how I fight. Every punch is the last bullet I have left."

Demand for tickets explodes. Fifty carpenters raise a third balcony at Hudson Arena, adding 2,500 seats. On fight night, a flotilla of lantern-lit ferries crosses the St. Croix. Six trains thunder in from St. Paul, marching bands playing from every car. The crowd pulses, electric. The stakes, colossal.

Mike Gibbons is ready.

He's no longer a rising talent, but a true middleweight now. His once-shattered hand is healed. His punches, precise. His purpose, absolute.

*

At the first bell, Mike bolts to center ring, as McGoorty barrels forward. They collide, arms crossing and clashing, like bayonets. Pressing, jamming, grinding, neither giving an inch.

Then Mike slips free, drifting away like smoke. McGoorty staggers, blinks, and recovers. Mike feints, teases with his left, then launches an earth-shaking right uppercut.

Crack!

When the shockwave lands on his jaw, McGoorty reels, his head jerking and twisting, eyes fluttering like the wings of a spooked dove.

The Phantom only gets better from there.

With merciless efficiency, Mike puts on a clinic of timing, precision, and punishment. He takes McGoorty apart, head to toe and piece by piece, driving him into the ropes, hammering him from both sides. The Terror swings wild and desperate, but Mike has already vanished.

The arena is in ecstasy at the full-throttle war.

"McGoorty was like a moving picture film of exceptional excellence," writes the *Star Tribune*. "Gibbons was the same reel, but played at triple speed."

The fight goes the full ten rounds, but the outcome is never in doubt. Mike dominates every round with elegant footwork, surgical punches, and cool ring generalship. Even McGoorty's own manager, Tommy Walsh, concedes, "Mike Gibbons is the world's best middleweight."

Final scorecard tallies: Gibbons, 103.7 points to McGoorty's 31.

Humiliated, McGoorty sails for Australia chasing softer targets. He finds none.

Two months later, a teenager named Les Darcy—a poor boy no one outside of New South Wales has heard of—knocks the Terror out cold in Sydney. Soon, the world will know Darcy by his fighting name: the Maitland Wonder.

*

At the final bell, Eddie Kane scuttles through the ropes, skidding past a dazed McGoorty, and leaping into Mike's arms.

"Speed of light's got nothing on you, Gibbons!" Kane shouts as flash-bulbs explode all around them. "You're just one good smash from the crown, I swear it!"

Kane is everywhere these days. A single father to a six-year-old son and barely larger than the boy, he shadows the Gibbons Brothers everywhere they go. No title. No pay. Just faith.

He carries their bags. Helps with training. Works their corners. Always suggests a quick prayer before the bell.

And he has a dream.

Kane wants to manage them. Both of them. Mike, to the middle-weight throne. Tommy, now four inches taller and fifteen pounds heavier than his big brother, to the light-heavyweight crown.

"I've already done it with a wrestler and a pool shark!" Kane grins.

“Leading two beautiful brothers to the top? Piece of cake!”

Tommy is charmed. He likes Eddie Kane.

But Mike, still burning from the fallout with Eddie Reddy, isn’t really looking to befriend another Eddie, nor is he ready to surrender his fortunes to another manager. Not now. Not this close to winning it all.

*

Until Eddie Reddy became heartbreak to the St. Paul Phantom, they were nearly brothers. But then, the everything after.

After splitting with Mike, Reddy clings to the fight game. He signs a promising young boxer, Billy Whalen. Talented, but fragile, Whalen is, ultimately, a nonstarter. A year later, Reddy becomes matchmaker at the St. Paul Athletic Club on Fourth and Robert Street, booking bouts, running the box office. He always holds one ticket in reserve. Just in case. But Mike Gibbons never shows.

Then, tragedy returns to the ring. Reddy makes a match that ends with one fighter beaten to death in the ring. The religious reform movement, already circling the sport like vultures, seizes the moment. Boxing in Minnesota comes under fire. Reddy is the scapegoat. He’s fired. And just like that, the fight game is done with him.

For a while, Reddy tries to start over. He does bookkeeping for a local grocer, W. A. Frost & Co. on Selby, opens a short-lived Hupmobile auto dealership. This and that, hit and miss. Nothing sticks.

In 1921, with investment from local gangsters, Reddy finally realizes his childhood dream: he opens his own pool hall and soda shop. For a time, it works. Kids love the new Baby Ruth candy bar and the orange pop and vanilla creams at the counter. It’s fun and laughter for a few good years.

Then comes the police raid. Several arrests. Doors shuttered. Operation closed.

After that, Eddie Reddy vanishes from public life.

In 1972, his body is found in a St. Paul apartment. He is eighty-five and alone. No headlines. No mourning crowd. Just the silence of a man the world forgot.

Eddie Reddy dies in the end.

They always do.

*

Redeemed against McGoorty, and one step closer to the crown. Two of three contenders, already defeated. A single battle remains, then it's "king me."

In late March 1915, the pink pages of the *National Police Gazette* blaze with Jim Corbett's endorsement of the Phantom's title run. "If Gibbons sticks to his plan, only one obstacle remains: Packey McFarland," Corbett writes. "My money is on Gibbons to finally solve the middleweight muddle that began when Ketchel so brutally lost his life and crown five years ago."

Kind words, but history notes that in his post-championship years, Gentleman Jim has endorsed more than forty contenders ahead of title bouts—and gotten it wrong every single time.

*

When the \$3.7 million Cathedral of Saint Paul is completed after nine years—the majestic Beaux Arts granite structure, a "Classical Renaissance" style inspired by St. Peter's in Rome, set dramatically on Summit Hill, its copper and steel dome rising 308 feet above the crossing of Selby, Dayton and Summit Avenues, overlooking James J. Hill's mansion and the city's seven hills—Mike and Tommy are there for opening services.

Inside, Archbishop John Ireland presides, the renowned shepherd of the archdiocese, the same man who once helped Thomas John Gibbons and countless other Irishmen rise from the famine's shadow to America's bounty.

"The whole of the Twin Cities is jubilant at the completion of the National Shrine," reports the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*. "As a luminous sign of God, it is one of the most beautiful Catholic churches in the country. Today, March 28, the old cathedral bell, which now hangs in one of the turrets of the new cathedral, will sound the Angelus. Thus will be the first official services of divine worship to the people of the Saintly City."

With Tommy at his side, Mike ascends the stone steps. He bows, dips into the holy water, crosses himself, and enters the vast sanctuary.

In a back pew, the Gibbons Brothers kneel beneath the tabernacle that seems to rise for miles above them.

Mike is moved by the grandeur. Tommy is awestruck.

"It's... It's just..." Tommy mumbles.

"The word you're looking for is 'magnificent,'" Mike offers.

"*Magnificent!*" Tommy exclaims, wide-eyed.

"I have to believe, Tommy Boy, that when God looks down on you," Mike chuckles, "He's thinking the same thing."

They bow their heads in prayer.

When Tommy opens his eyes, his brother is gone.

*

While Eddie Kane adds his blessed hustle to luring Packey McFarland into the ring, Mike boards a luxury steamship to Havana, Cuba, *all expenses paid* by the *St. Louis Star & Times*, Missouri's most-read newspaper.

It's a special assignment, arranged by Kane, to cover the heavyweight title bout between "unforgivably Black" king of the ring Jack Johnson and towering, doughy Kansan Jess Willard, the boxing world's new Great White Hope. Ever since Willard sent young Wyoming farmer and fistie upstart John Bull Young to an early grave two summers ago in a Los Angeles ring, they've called him the Cowboy Killer.

Mike likes to think of Havana as a second honeymoon. Down the road, a half-mile from where Johnson's training, Mike and Mae dance, kiss, stroll the strand, and conceive their third child.

Mike also sees Cuba as a victory lap: Clabby, done; McGoorty, done; McFarland, somewhere around the bend.

The crown, never closer.

Only five years earlier, Mike was "pinching pennies in a cracker bowl on the pantry shelf," the *Star Tribune* writes—sixty bucks a month at the railroad, dancing with fire six days a week, lifetimes away from a hundred grand.

Everything is different now, and already changing again.

Before leaving St. Paul, Mike fills two plain envelopes with cash, as he does every month, one for the collection plate at St. Vincent's, the other for his mother's breadbox. He never says a word about either.

*

Onboard the SS *Turrialba* from New Orleans to Cuba, the almost-king and his queen are treated like royalty. Travelers warmly greet them with "Howdy, Champ!" and "There goes the King!"

Mid-voyage, a group of starstruck children beg the Phantom to teach

them some boxing fundamentals. The captain, consulted for permission, insists the lessons are offered ship-wide.

That night, with the sun dissolving behind him, Mike steps onto the bow of the ship as hundreds gather. Here, the Phantom teaches the sweet science to strangers and dreamers alike. As darkness falls, his fleet form fades into silhouette, so no one can see him smiling.

When the aged of the world speak wistfully about “golden days,” these are the hours they have in mind. A man born to nothing becoming a champion. A people united, moving as one. A sun that rises and sets like clockwork. Stars that bloom according to schedule to tell stories that illuminate the paths of human beings great and small.

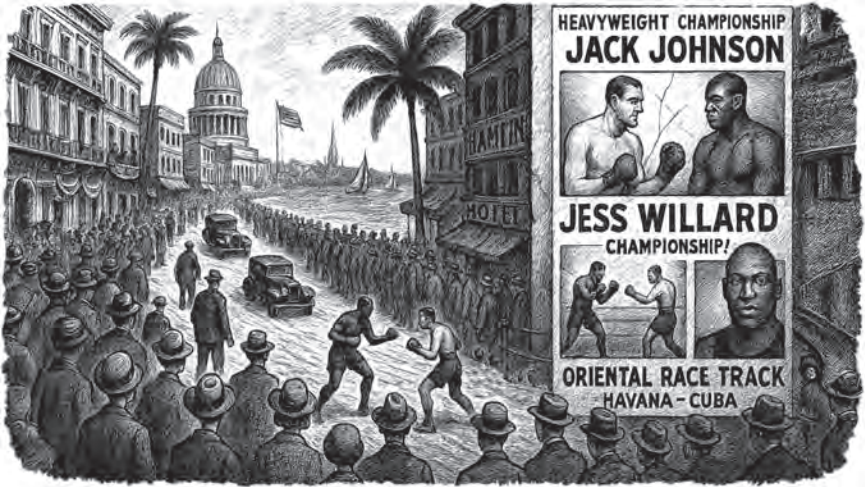
A luxury ship that does not sink.

Golden days. Maybe the very last of them.

THE BIG SMOKE

*That a boxing championship has symbolic value is obvious enough;
the defeat of a title-holder represents the killing of a king
and the passing of his crown.*

—Finis Farr, *Black Champion: The Life and Times of
Jack Johnson* (1964)



Heavyweight showdown in Havana

*Late March 1915
Havana, Cuba*

“This is the most beautiful land ever beheld by human eyes,” wrote a seafaring Italian in his journal on October 28, 1492. Scouting new worlds for Spain’s Queen Isabella, the adventurer, Cristóbal Colón—Columbus, they’d later call him—believed he’d found the edge of China.

The place he described: a lush, pristine island paradise in the Caribbean. Eden perhaps, or heaven on earth, he mused. It's populated by a hundred thousand Indigenous people. The world would one day know this nirvana by another name: Cuba.

Centuries later, the island's story is still being "written in bloodshed and oppression." Yet, unlike much of the Western world, Cuba is strikingly colorblind, its mixed population forged through shared defense against foreign oppressors and genocidal colonizers. In Cuba, skin color doesn't dictate destiny. The racial tempests that have burned in New York, New Orleans, and Chicago rarely touch the island's sun-kissed shores. The streets, though impoverished, carry the harmony and pulse of a people's resilience, not their struggles or resentments.

Jack Johnson doesn't know these things, but he feels them as he joins three barefoot children kicking an empty sardine tin through a puddled street muddied by an afternoon cloudburst. He senses their welcome in his bones. Cuba isn't home, but for the first time in years, the Big Smoke almost feels free.

For years, the world champion has been on the run, living in exile, weary from losing all the things he's ever loved.

In Cuba, Johnson thinks, maybe things will finally be different.

*

For years, the Big Smoke and the St. Paul Phantom were the twin stars of boxing—one, the heavyweight king; the other, the middleweight heir apparent. Their names and exploits, breathlessly retold from coast to coast, their photographs in every newspaper. It only made sense that somewhere along the way, they'd become friends.

But while Mike Gibbons rises swiftly, Jack Johnson is falling fast and almost out of time.

Since obliterating the Great White Hope, Jim Jeffries, in 1910, Johnson has paid a heavy price for victory, enduring personal tragedy, wrongful arrest, public humiliation, racial hatred, and the constant threat of violence. In 1912, the U.S. government finally cornered the Big Smoke, charging him under the Mann Act for transporting a white woman across state lines. Never mind that the woman was Johnson's wife, Lucille Cameron.

Johnson was tried and convicted, sentenced to a year in Illinois State

Penitentiary at Joliet. Solitary confinement, because he's Black.

The night Johnson was to surrender to federal authorities—June 24, 1913—he pulled a Houdini. With the help of close allies (including, as family memoirs suggest, a quiet hand from the Gibbons Brothers), Johnson evaded capture, slipping out of Chicago and crossing into Montreal, where he was joined by his wife, then sailing for Le Havre, France.

Once again, Jack Johnson slipped the handcuffs of the world. But his timing could not have been worse. Within months, his safe harbor in Europe would tremble and explode with violence. Soon, there would be world war.

*

From 1912 to 1914, Jack Johnson tried to love the world, but no matter how many oceans or borders he crossed, it was only hatred that he found.

He was unwelcome in England, France, and Italy. Riots raged after him in Sweden. In Spain, he fought bulls for loose change in half-empty arenas. Twice, Johnson defended his heavyweight crown overseas, but in slapdash affairs dismissed by the fight world. He won both, and no one cared.

By the summer of 1914, as Europe descended into war, Johnson was running out of countries, and the price of returning to America was federal incarceration. “(The champion) was facing a very bleak world with very few prospects,” writes Johnson biographer Finis Farr. “Money had come in. Money had gone out. Troubles piled up.”

That fall, Johnson caught a lucky break—one of the few in his life, he'd often laugh. Big-spending American fight promoter Jack Curley tracked him down in London with a miraculous, lucrative offer: \$30,000, win or lose, to defend his heavyweight title against a pulpy Caucasian behemoth with enormous strength, Jess Willard.

Without hesitation, Johnson said yes, sailing the next day to the tranquil Caribbean Island of Barbados to begin training as Curley finalized details. Curley planned to hold the fight in Juárez, Mexico, just across the border from El Paso, Texas, as a double-bill with Mike Gibbons battling for the middleweight crown before the Johnson-Willard finale. But the Mexican Revolution south of the border was raging too fiercely for safety, despite assurances from guerrilla leader Pancho Villa that he'd provide safe passage for the champion from Tampico to Juárez. Even the U.S. military was on full alert, with army General John J. Pershing under presidential

order to capture Villa.

When it was suggested that the Big Smoke enter Juárez through the United States disguised as a Pullman porter, Johnson laughed. "I couldn't get ten feet into the U.S. without being recognized by immigration officers or the police," he said. "In Mexico, they'd ransom my severed fingers."

Johnson wisely insisted on a safer venue.

That Christmas, Curley visited Havana to share a cash-plumped handshake with Cuban President Mario García Menocal. This sealed the deal: the heavyweight championship battle is set for April 5, 1915, at the island's Oriental Racetrack.

*

The Big Smoke's challenger had also endured a year of heartbreak and legal peril, owing to his third battle at the Pacific Athletic Club in Los Angeles against twenty-two-year-old Wyoming farm boy John Bull Young.

If August 22, 1913 had ended for Bull Young anywhere before the eleventh round against Jess Willard, it would have played like a Shakespearean comedy—the tale of a dumb, pretty kid who fought a giant, lost, but won the girl anyway.

In their two previous, underwhelming bouts, Bull Young, bolstered by the blissful ignorance of his own mortality and almost completely bereft of pugilistic skills, spent ten rounds running repeatedly into Willard's ever-extended left hand, until he finally fell to the canvas and stayed down.

What happened in the third Bull Young-Willard battle featured similar choreography. However, the outcome was no laughing matter.

For Willard, the fight was just a tune-up, a way to keep sharp while waiting for a tougher, more lucrative opponent. For Young, the stakes were much higher: beating the fast-rising heavyweight Willard would mean better fights and bigger paydays for the farm boy.

It was, in other words, make-or-break for John Bull Young. He had made promises accordingly: if he lost that summer afternoon, he would delight his father and the girl he loved by quitting boxing and returning to ranching in Wyoming. In fact, he was set to marry this fiancée the very night of the afternoon battle with Willard.

Fate had other plans.

The first ten rounds were unexceptional for both fighters—smack,

swing, pop, slide, take a break, repeat. DeWitt Van Court, chief boxing instructor at the Los Angeles Athletic Club captured what happened in the *Los Angeles Times*:

"At the beginning of the eleventh round, as Bull rushed in, Jess met him with a solid left hook to the jaw followed by a terrific uppercut to the chin. It was the hardest punch I have ever seen delivered in a boxing ring. Bull doubled up like a rag, fell back on his haunches, and then onto his back, completely out."

The young fighter was rushed into surgery at a nearby hospital to relieve the pressure of a cerebral hemorrhage. His fiancée, weeping bitterly, followed the grim developments by telegraph. By the time she arrived at her man's side, he was already dead, his skull fractured, the *Times* reported, "his unusually heavy jaw bone being driven straight through the skull cavity into the brain."

The *Santa Ana Register* assigned a reporter to shadow Willard that day. "The giant Willard is crushed," the sportswriter reported. "He declares that he struck Bull Young many harder blows during the fight before the final one. Throughout the night, Willard, accompanied by friends, wanders the streets around the hospital. The big fighter sobs constantly, and his friends fear a nervous collapse."

By morning, Willard and all the fight principals are arrested and charged with "prizefighting," still illegal in California. Willard alone faced an additional charge of "manslaughter." Six months later, he was acquitted under the doctrine of *volenti non fit injuria* (to a willing person, no injury is done). Young, the court ruled, had entered the ring knowing the risks. His death was not a crime.

That year alone, more than four thousand boxing matches took place across the United States, most illegal. At least five ended in funerals.

At his father's request, Young's body was carried by train from coast to coast. The grieving parent wanted the world to feel the loss so deeply that boxing itself would be banned forever.

Anti-boxing activists joined in condemnation. In St. Paul, one spokesman thundered, "Prizefighting, even at its best, is an outrage upon civi-

lization. It is time that the community at large should take the matter in their own hands and put a stop to it.”

“Boxing Game Now on Trial for Its Life,” blared a *Los Angeles Times* headline. California Senator William E. Brown declared, “Boxing threatens degeneracy in man. It develops the old blood lust of barbarism—the Roman Colosseum, the Stone Age, the killing fields of Genghis Khan. A man cannot help letting his brute instincts take command. His better nature falls far below par. He becomes a raving piece of bloodthirsty humanity. As long as we have fighting, we will have jails full of thieves, degenerates, liars, and murderers.”

When the funeral train crossed Stone Arch Bridge at Saint Anthony Falls, Mike and Tommy Gibbons stood quietly watching as it rolled over the Mississippi’s roiling current. Eight miles away, as the train approached St. Paul Union Depot, their father, Thomas John Gibbons, stood hat in hand, covering his heart—not only out of reverence, but as the only defense he could summon against a grief and fear too large to measure.

*

March 31, 1915

Jack Johnson turns thirty-seven today.

Everybody knows: no one fights past thirty.

To celebrate, Johnson pummels his sparring partners and wrestles a bull in the town square, mostly for show. By noon, he retreats to his room at the Plaza, Havana’s finest hotel, where the view is nothing but ocean and sky. His wife, Lucille, is down the street at a beauty parlor, where American women, lured to Havana by their husbands’ promises of romance, then promptly abandoned as the men vanish into the fight parade, assault her. Newspapers report a “fierce hair-pulling incident” over Lucille’s marriage to a Black man.

Johnson doesn’t even flinch anymore. This is his life. It never stops hurting; he’s just quit keeping score.

With two fingers of scotch, he stares contemplatively at the sea. He can’t stop thinking about the coming war.

*

In the week leading up to his birthday, Johnson begins receiving typewritten notes on hotel stationery, slipped under his hotel room door at night.

In his 1927 autobiography, *In and Out of the Ring*, the champion tells the tale:

“These letters hinted to me in terms which I could not mistake, that if I permitted Willard to win, which would give him the (heavyweight) title, much of the prejudice against me in America would be wiped out, that the charges against me might be dropped. With these letters, temptation came to me... It was the promise of everything I ever wanted, if only I would surrender everything I had ever fought for.”

For nearly four decades, he’s pursued victory fearlessly. All of a sudden, he’s starting to consider: Maybe I wanna lose.

He reflects on the years of exile, the constant injustice, the exhausting pursuit of respect. He remembers the faces of those who hated him simply for existing.

The goddamn crown, it’s worn him out.

*

Two nights after Johnson’s birthday, Mike and Mae Gibbons arrive in Cuba. When Mike sees his old friend, he knows there is trouble, and it’s not because he missed the Big Smoke’s birthday.

It isn’t the weight—Johnson has always been big—but how he’s carrying it. Less like armor than a rusted anchor that’s dragging him down. His feints are perfect, his blocks precise, his head slipping fast as ever. But there’s something else underneath. The sweat, the labored breath, the forced laughter. Something sinking.

In his first dispatch for the *St. Louis Star & Times*, Mike pulls the punch: “The champ puffs badly and seems to tire easily, but he is still boxing as great as ever. I think this fight is even money, or ought to be, right now.”

But privately, Mike is worried about his friend. From a certain distance, the Big Smoke looks like the king of the world. But up close, Mike fears Jack Johnson might already be half-beaten.

Over dinner that night, Johnson is all jokes, all grins. But when he asks Mike to spar the next morning after training with Oxnard Cyclone Sam McVea, Johnson’s tone shifts. Sportswriter Damon Runyon writes,

“Johnson doesn’t ask Mike Gibbons like a man looking for a workout. He asks like a man looking for a friend.”

*



Champion and near-champion at work and play

The sun’s not up yet, but Jack Johnson is.

In the kitchen of his training cottage on the palm-shrouded coast at Vedado, he watches his kettle boil, stirring porridge made with oats, ground wheat, pistachios, bananas, and honey. He eats alone. His wife and trainers sleep upstairs. He has no children.

Outside the window, the boxing ring waits, its corner posts hammered into the muddy turf. The early morning light glints off the ropes, and the tropical earth smells rich and sugary after yesterday’s rain. Johnson smiles when he sees Mike stepping into the ring holding his gloves, wearing a tank top, trunks, and training shoes borrowed from a boxing club downtown.

Before Mike can say hello, Johnson’s arms are around him, lifting him off the ground in a bear

hug. “*¡El Fantasma está en la casa!*” Jack roars with a grin.

Mike Gibbons—half a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter—almost disappears in the champion’s arms.

*

Ten minutes later, at high tide, with the ocean's roar and sea salt heavy in the air, the champion and near-champion spar.

"Lemme ask you something, Gibbons," Johnson says, throwing a fast triplet. "Do you think I can win this thing?"

Mike, tilting his head at the question, glides left in silence, catching one of Johnson's punches on his left ear. He shakes off the glancing blow, but really, he just doesn't want to answer.

Johnson understands the silence, watching Mike quickly dance all the way across the ring without returning fire. The champion digs in his heels, stands still with hands firmly on his hips, slowly nodding and grinning at the Phantom.

Mike lowers his fists, wondering what comes next. For a long moment, there are no words.

The sunrise at Johnson's back casts his shadow across the ring like an attacking lion. Mike gazes tongue-tied and wistfully at his friend.

"Yeah," Johnson finally says. "Me either."

*

April 5, 1915

Jack Johnson vs. Jess Willard

Heavyweight Championship of the World

Oriental Racetrack

Havana, Cuba

Under a merciless sun, the open-air arena hums with heat and tension. Down a dirt road from the opulent Tropicana, where celebrities, old money, and gangsters hold court, the racetrack usually runs world-class horses. Today, it's Johnson versus Willard over 45 rounds.

It's 100 degrees with no wind, the crowd swelling to 30,000, for a box office haul of \$110,000. A ragtag band plays ragtime in the streets, entertaining the crush of fans approaching on foot. Some have walked a dozen miles to witness the historic battle. From a neighboring hilltop, the shadows of uniformed cavalry loom.

At 12:30 p.m., Willard enters the ring, a towering, pear-shaped figure in a ten-gallon sombrero, his belt embroidered with stars and stripes.

He's five inches taller, thirty pounds heavier, and five years younger than Johnson, so he's also a 7-5 favorite.

Champion and challenger met before, four years earlier at O'Connell's Gymnasium in Chicago. Johnson, in need of a sparring partner, invited the untested Willard into the ring, but the Kansan refused.

"I'm going to fight you one day for the championship," Willard told Johnson matter-of-factly. "It wouldn't be fair to box you now."

That was the first time Jess Willard took a swing at Jack Johnson.

*

At 12:35 p.m., Mike Gibbons, handsomely dressed in a dark suit and tie, is escorted into center ring before a cheering crowd, and introduced as middleweight title claimant. (Echoing popular opinion of the day, the official souvenir fight program lists Mike as middleweight champion of the world, special correspondent, and an official timekeeper). Mike sticks close to the Big Smoke's corner, while Mae sits next to Lucille Cameron Johnson, the champion's third wife, swooning in the heat and gripped by mounting anxiety.

When champion of the world Jack Johnson, finally slides into the ring a few minutes later, he's smiling, his gold grill glinting in the Cuban sunshine. Intending to convey confidence, he gives a cool nod to his cornermen and Mike, gives a reassuring wink to his bride, Lucille.

Then he shrugs the robe from his shoulders and squints menacingly as he locks eyes with Willard. So begins a story that could only be penned in violence.

*

1 p.m., the bell rings.

The champion owns the first ten rounds, moving with conviction, pep, and power, battering Willard at will. Johnson's fast and precise, his left jabs snapping like coiled springs, right hooks finding their marks with sickening thuds.

"Willard was slow to start," reports boxing historian and Johnson biographer Randy Roberts. "He stood ramrod straight and stuck out his long, left arm in an attempt to keep his opponent at a distance."

But time shifts. The relentless Cuban sun bears down on Johnson, siphoning the sturdiness from his legs and dulling the slam-bam sting

from his punches. Thirteen rounds deep, Johnson still dominates, but something's changing. He's fading. The crowd senses it. So does Willard, eyes narrowing, a predatory glint emerging as he notices Johnson's subtle hesitations.

Twenty rounds in, Johnson's still pecking away at Willard, as yet unable to knock out the giant. Feeling the blanket of melancholy in the humid Cuban air, the decision Johnson's been considering continues to weigh heavily on his heart and mind. Too heavily.

The champion of the world is about to make up his mind.

He is about to choose his destiny.

He wonders if what comes next is a decision he's making, or merely the way things were always going to go.

"When Jack dragged himself upright for the twenty-sixth round, the crowd sensed the kill," recounts biographer Farr. "Willard could see that the champion's tired arms had failed him. There was no longer even the semblance of a defense."

In a sudden burst of aggression, Willard unleashes a salvo of "hard, left cracks," knocking out two of Johnson's gold-capped teeth.

"I felt them drop down on my tongue," Johnson writes in his autobiography, "but my pride would not let me spit them out. I knew what a howl would go up if the people saw them in the sunlight, so I did the next best thing: I swallowed them."

*

So begins Jack Johnson's swan song.

"Johnson walked a few steps toward Willard, then looked pitifully toward his wife," the *Miami Herald* writes. "His expression was so hopeless that those who saw it will never forget. It was as though Johnson had called out to his wife, 'The end has come. After all these years, they've finally got me.'"

Willard remembers: "I went to (Johnson) fast... He tried to clinch, and I broke free and bobbed his head with a right. As we worked into the center ring, I pushed in another right. He drooped, and I lined up another shot. All I could think of was how good it would be to get out of that hot ring and into the shade again."

"All the fight was draining out of Johnson, this faded King of the

Ring,” Farr reports, “he trembled and glanced toward the exit gate at Lucille, as Willard, with an open target before him, laid in with everything he had, a blockbuster right to the jaw.”

A split-second after Willard drops the axe, Johnson is unmoored from space and time, desperately flailing to grasp his opponent. Anything to stop the fall.

“Down tumbled Johnson, rolling in defeat,” writes Farr. “As a reflexive action, his arm went up to shade his eyes from the fierce sun beating down on him. It seemed cool and quiet there on the canvas, in dreamland, Johnson thought. Deep in his unconscious, Johnson heard the soft laughing voices of the ladies at ringside. Flat on his back he smiled that golden smile one last time in the ring. It was the smile of profound relief, a final, unburdened exhalation.”

Johnson remains unconscious for five minutes. He is at rest, perhaps for the first time in years. Chasing no crown, protecting no laurels, running from nothing and no one. Not home yet, but finally free of the hunger, the hunt, and the reign.

Sic transit gloria mundi, captions the *Chicago Daily Tribune* beneath a photo of the knocked-out champion. “Thus passes the glory of the world.”

*

The crowd erupts in raucous song, stomping and howling. Some dance jubilantly on their seats. Wagers are settled amid tears and cheers. To maintain peace, the cavalry storms the ring. Fireworks fill the skies.

The *New York Times* applauds Jess Willard for “restoring pugilistic supremacy to the white race.”

Jack Johnson, the fallen king. The crown, no longer his. Has he lost it in sincere combat, or surrendered it hoping for free passage to America and his mother’s arms? No one knows for certain. Johnson himself revised his story countless times until his death in 1946.

*

Whatever deal Jack Johnson made, didn’t make, or thought he might have made, one thing becomes quickly clear: even after surrendering his crown, the world is not done punishing him.

“Rumors abound that the Negro is about to be arrested at the request of the United States government and returned to Chicago on white slavery

charges,” Pennsylvania’s *Times Tribune* reports.

Should’ve known better, Johnson thinks to himself. His wife is already on the next ship out. He rushes back to his hotel, stuffs a small bag with essentials, and tosses the gloves from the Willard fight—his last as champion—to the bellboys as tips.

He moves fast, like he always has. But now, the race is no longer for a crown or kingdom. No longer the champion of the world, Jack Johnson is just another Black man running for his life.

*

Near midnight, lanterns softly sway in the humid sea breeze, illuminating the Phantom’s path to the new-fallen king and his getaway boat.

On the dock, Johnson pulls up anchor, wrapping the line with a focused gaze and furrowed brow. Mike quickens his pace to reach his friend. When they are face-to-face, Johnson smiles softly as Mike searches for words.

“Hold your tongue, Gibbons. I lost,” Johnson says. “Like we both knew I would.”

Mike shakes his head, words caught behind clenched teeth.

“Before I was king, it was the color of my skin,” Johnson continues. “Once I was champion, it was the crown. Without that, we’re just going back to how things used to be.”

Above them, a dustbin of stars spills across the sky, their ancient light already dead.

“I had a hero once,” Johnson says, gazing skyward in reflection.

Mike waits.

“Steve Brodie—the man who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge,” Johnson says. “I was just a Black kid in Texas when I heard about that man and thought, ‘Now there’s a hero, doing the impossible, surviving things no man should.’”

They walk along the Havana shore, the low, heavy Cuban moon dead-lifted through the darkness. The sounds of the city, now distant, seem to sigh and dissolve into ocean and breeze.

“One morning, I’m eleven or twelve years old, I woke up and I just knew it was time to go,” Johnson says. “Packed a bag, left Texas, ran away to New York. No money, no map, no nothing. Just a damn fool child, I wanted to find Steve Brodie and make him my best friend!”

Mike watches his friend light a cigar, the gold of his teeth flashing with the glow of the match.

"Took me nearly a year to get there," Johnson says, shaking his head in a wreath of tobacco smoke. "First thing I did, I asked a well-dressed gentleman if he knew where I could find Steve Brodie. He pointed across the street at another gentleman, so I went running over, my heart bursting with excitement."

"And?" Mike grins.

"Wasn't him! Damn fool didn't even know who Brodie was!" Johnson barks with laughter. "I looked back, and the first guy's doubled over laughing at me. Played me like a fiddle."

Mike chuckles. Sometimes the world works that way.

"After that, I spent months asking all kinds of folks if they knew the man who jumped off bridges. Probably met everyone in the city that way," Johnson says. "Some of them were even nice."

"But did you ever—"

"Here's the thing, Gibbons: I could've kept asking strangers if they knew Steve Brodie. Probably till kingdom come," Johnson says. "But after a while, I met some nice boys. Some of them were fighters. They invited me to put on gloves. Turns out, I wasn't bad with my fists. The rest is history."

"So you never found Brodie?"

Johnson exhales, haloed by a slow ring of smoke, looks up at the moon with a broad, gleaming smile, and shakes his head. "But going after him got me where I was meant to be," he says. "Besides, you know the thing with heroes: there's always a new one coming along."

*

A horn bellows from the harbor. Johnson slaps an arm around Mike's shoulders, pulling him close.

"It's been good, Gibbons," the former champion says. "A damn good run."

He steps onto the boat, then turns, calling out as the vessel drifts from shore: "Hey, Gibbons! You know what John L. Sullivan said when he met Steve Brodie?"

Mike shakes his head.

"Any asshole can jump off a bridge," Johnson hollers. "'Why didn't

you jump *over* it?’”

Mike laughs, then feels the sting of hot tears.

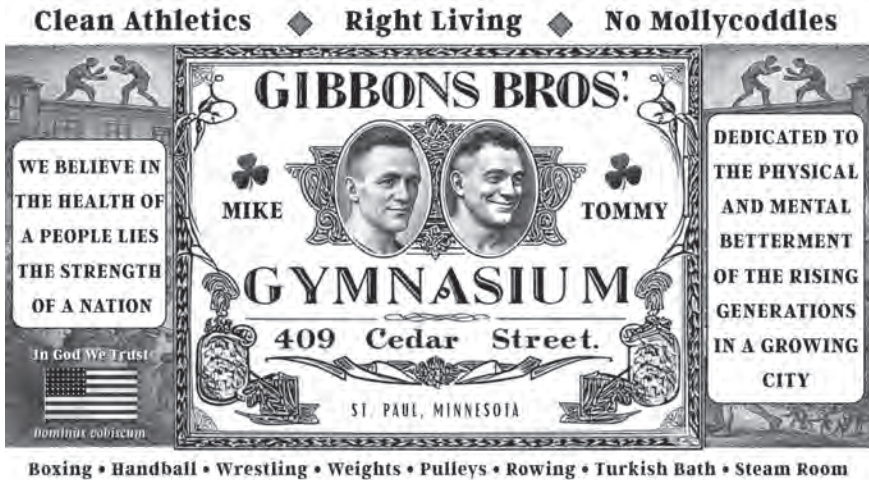
Johnson shouts something else, but the wind swallows his words. In moments, his boat will be too small to see, vanishing over the edge of the earth.

It will be five years before Mike Gibbons sees Jack Johnson again. By then, the fallen champion will be an inmate in Leavenworth, fighting not for glory but for the amusement of prison guards. It will be Christmastime, and the whole damned world will have been to hell by then and gotten lost on its way back to the light.

LOCAL GODS

*Glory drags all men along, low as well as high,
bound captive at the wheels of her glittering car...*

—Horace, *Satires* (33 BCE)



Hometown heroes open for business

Eddie Kane, described by one newspaper as “a machine of enormous vision packed into the tiniest human body you can think of,” wants more than he’s got. Being Mike and Tommy’s secretary and assistant is fine. But manager is better.

Wherever the Gibbons Brothers go, Kane follows. Over time, Mike and Tommy come to cherish his presence. “A fine piece of company,” they call him, half in jest, half in admiration. They never tire of his tall tales: misadventures with pool shark Willie Hoppe, or the midget prostitute with one eye, the busted cash register that wouldn’t open, the seatless bicycle,

the black bear on its elastic leash, the exploding eight-ball.

Whenever Kane recounts a particularly scandalous anecdote, he sneezes in place of using swear words, an absurd form of self-censorship that delights the brothers every time.

Mike periodically slips Kane an envelope of cash to pen snappy copy for the press. Kane ensures it's money well spent, feeding the sportswriters enticing snippets and dazzling headlines that elevate the Gibbons name.

Before sailing to Havana, Mike set Kane loose to establish a new gymnasium and training facility in downtown St. Paul: the Gibbons Brothers' Athletic Club. Kane not only secured the perfect site, the Knights of Columbus building at 409 Cedar Street, he handled permits, construction, and local law enforcement, flipping the shingle in record time.

When Mike returns from Cuba, the gym is already bustling. A framed sign hangs over the front door spelling out the club's rules:

1. Live a clean and moral life
2. Don't get hit any more than necessary
3. Box clean—it's the right way
4. No smoking. No drinking. (Oil and water don't mix)
5. Boxing and gym work must be fun
6. Sleep regular hours. Early to bed
7. Eat good, plain food
8. You can't burn the candle at both ends
9. Nothing substitutes for road work and gym work
10. If boxing is your business, protect your reputation

Advertisements for the gym in Twin City newspapers read: "Boxing is the proper sport for improving the strength, brain, character, and courage of our great nation's manhood. We can build you up. America is no place for mollycoddles. Every American boy should be healthy, clear-eyed, and a quick thinker. Scientific boxing and physical training will give you these qualities."

Before long, an extraordinary line-up of aspiring fighters floods the Gibbons Brothers' gym: brawny bully Billy Miske, dashing pipsqueak Johnny Ertle, Dakota Sioux Clay Turner, the deaf-mute Silent Martin,

the strapping footballer Mike O'Dowd, the "uncrowned Black maestro" Sam Langford, and Julian Eltinge the "very clever" female impersonator, as quick with his fists as with his costume changes. And then there's the local boy who lives on Summit Avenue, a young author, F. Scott Fitzgerald, who's been taking boxing lessons from Mike and Tommy. Years later, in his memoir, Fitzgerald writes, "I was trained in boxing by the Gibbons Brothers. I credit them for preventing me from getting pummeled in street fights."

*

In these hours, Mike and Tommy become local gods.

Newspapers roar with accounts of their every move. Fans hound them for autographs. Church reformers beg them to renounce boxing's moral hazards. In nightclubs, they're treated like royalty: plush seats by the bandstand and complimentary French champagne, which they often toss over their shoulders with a grin.

In the world of sports, Mike especially is held in high regard. As reported in *The New York Times*, "Detroit Tigers center fielder, Ty Cobb, nicknamed the Georgia Peach, the only '.400 hitter' in the big leagues, holding records for runs scored and stolen bases, is called 'the Mike Gibbons of baseball.'" Cobb so respects Mike's prowess that he sends members of the Tigers to Mike for training to enhance their physical conditioning.

Eddie Kane intensifies this white-hot glare by tapping into old connections in Chicago and New York. Soon, Mike and Tommy appear before the motion picture cameras of William Selig, "the man who created Hollywood." High atop Manhattan's Woolworth Building, they spar for a six-minute film that plays to sold-out houses across the country.

Sometimes, the brothers sneak into local theaters in cheap disguises—fake beards, tinted glasses, flamboyant hats—to watch themselves larger than life on the silver screen. They laugh, incredulous at how fast everything is changing.

*

Kane's dream of dreams is to manage both Gibbons Brothers outright. He sets his sights on the final name on Mike's "hit list": Packey McFarland.

Over several months, Kane tickles McFarland's pride with flattery,

then sweeps his legs with insults, flooding the sports pages with anonymous quotes hinting at Packey's fear of going toe-to-toe with the Phantom.

Once McFarland's ego is destabilized, Kane dizzies him up with facts, figures, dollars, and cents. He offers the Pride of the Stockyards a \$15,000 payday, then suddenly yanks the deal away without follow-up or explanation.

The gamesmanship drives McFarland mad. He's just become a father, so money matters more than ever. Determined to collar Kane, resolve all confusions, and hammer out a deal, McFarland heads to St. Paul. Just as The Cardinal predicted.

Over steaks and cheesecake, Packey proposes a fifteen-round bout for \$17,500.

"Pay me right," he says, "and we'll call this one 'for old time's sake.'"

The national press bursts with excitement: Mike Gibbons is, at last, on the verge of completing his three-man "hit list" and being crowned champion of the world. When tickets for the Labor Day Gibbons-McFarland fight go on sale in the lobby of the Ryan Hotel at Sixth and Robert Streets in downtown St. Paul, they sell out in three days. These days, there's no time to lose.

*

The rush of Mike's soaring fame brings fresh momentum to his former mentor, George Barton—the "glorious little fella," now thirty years old—who renews his crusade to legalize boxing in Minnesota and end the long standing era of sneak fights.

As a journalist, Barton knows every side of the story. He understands the protests and the opposition to legalizing boxing. First hand, he's grappled with the crooked promoters, sketchy rules, shady bouts, and the dangers of the game itself. But with Mike Collins and Hudson Arena, he's also witnessed how legal, well-regulated fights can bring transparency and honor to the sport.

Barton's proposal: legalize ten-round, no-decision bouts, governed by a three-man state commission. Propose a twenty-cent tax per ticket to fund social improvements in St. Paul.

No one greets this with indifference.

Reformers howl, smashing windows, lighting garbage bins on fire,

promising ruin to any politician who supports the bill. But city and state officials struggle to ignore Mike and Tommy's exploding popularity, not to mention the tax revenue the new law would generate.

To seal the deal, Barton teams up with Kane to pull one final card from the deck: celebrity.

*

The Cardinal and glorious little fella stage a special exhibition between Mike and Tommy at the state capitol. A VIP crowd gathers, including Governor Scott Hammond, the mayor, four state senators, and five hundred winners of a citywide lottery.

"How's this gonna go, big brother?" Tommy grins.

"We'll dance through the first round," Mike replies through his mouth-guard. "Then I knock you down. You pop back up. We shuffle some more. Maybe I knock you down again."

"So... wait," Tommy squints playfully. "When do I knock *you* down?"

Flashing a lethal grin, Mike says, "Whenever I let you."

The exhibition bout is a marvel of skill and showmanship, pushing Barton's boxing bill into law on April 14, 1915. Barton is soon appointed to the new state boxing commission. Governor Hammond, whose signature makes everything official, does not live long enough for reformers to claim vengeance at the ballot box. Five days after Christmas, at the age of fifty-two, a massive stroke sends him to dreamland.

*

With boxing legalized, the Gibbons Brothers stand taller than ever, but also become prime targets for the Saintry City's darker forces.

They begin hosting small, ticketed exhibitions at their gym, "gently extracting an admission fee" at the door. Though technically legal, city officials crack down under pressure from crooked cops, gangsters, and rival gyms losing members. The city declares the events sneak fights and orders them immediately halted.

Rumors of sweetheart deals, athletic monopolies, and under-the-table corruption fill the air. Ramsey County law enforcement wants a cut of the ticket money, but Mike and Tommy refuse to cave.

Suddenly, the brothers find themselves in a cat-and-mouse game with the St. Paul Police Department, especially Chief John O'Connor, hellbent

on knocking them out.

*

It's been long said the St. Paul Phantom is impossible to hit. One August night, Police Chief O'Connor finds the legend to be true.

"Into the brothers' gym stalked O'Connor," the *Duluth Herald* reports. "He spotted the audience, spotted the ring, and raised his arm to yell 'Stop!' But his jaw went slack, eyes popping, when, upon the canvas, instead of two fighters, sat two men in trunks, cross-legged, sewing with needles and yarn in a furious competition."

The crowd cheers as the raid becomes a farce. "One of the men in the ring told the coppers his name was Kid Crochet," the *Herald* adds.

Humiliated and stuttering, O'Connor storms out in a blizzard of rage. Many more raids follow, each yielding equally absurd "exhibitions": jump rope recitals, pantomime, dueting fiddles. Some nights, Mike prays for a raid just so he can make the cops look foolish again.

*

Thanks to their open-door policy, the brothers don't just shine. They elevate others, ushering in an entire generation of boxers who study what sportswriters call "the St. Paul style"—a sweet-science approach to ring combat epitomized by Mike's crisp footwork and defensive genius.

The Gibbons Brothers' gym becomes a crucible of talent. Inside its walls, the ethos is "lift as you climb." Mike and Tommy coach and spar with novices, hone the skills of established contenders, and keep meticulous notes in their Dope Books. When a serious rival drops by, Mike discreetly records the man's punching patterns and footwork in the spiral notebook he keeps under lock and key.

One devotee is teenaged Mike O'Dowd, a wiry telegraph lineman from Galway who has spent months trailing Mike like a worshipful shadow, studying, drilling, and memorizing every near-invisible move the Phantom makes.

"I didn't think O'Dowd would go far," Mike admits. "But he was tough, never backed down, and seemed to want it more than anyone."

Mike books O'Dowd's first fights, touting his protégé to the local press. Only eighteen, with steely, ragged eyes and prominent ears already mangled in battle, O'Dowd rises swiftly. After dusting Pittsburgh middleweight Walter Monaghan on the undercard of the Phantom's Hudson

rematch with Eddie McGoorty, O'Dowd receives a fighting name from local scribes. The Fighting Harp, they call him.

One night, while sparring after hours, O'Dowd accidentally thumbs Mike in the right eye. The blinding shock causes instant swelling and momentarily darkens the Phantom's vision. Even after the light returns, Mike sees double for an hour. For two days afterward, his depth perception is off.

"I recall some folks warning me I was teaching O'Dowd too much," Mike says. "But boxing is a craft. The best of us shorten the next fighter's road. It's what Packey McFarland once did for me."

*

July 12, 1915—St. Paul's first legal boxing match in twenty-four years. Tommy steps into the ring against childhood rival and bully Billy Miske. At twenty-three, Tommy is unbeaten in two dozen fights. Miske, a copper's son with eighteen wins in a row, is no pushover either. Four thousand fans fill the newly renovated St. Paul Auditorium at 143 W. Fourth Street: a gorgeous art-lined foyer, new, plush seats, a third balcony, two additional entrances and exits, a fresh coat of paint. No food, alcoholic drinks, or smoking are permitted now that the fight game's gone classy.

Though hugely revamped, the great hall in summertime is a sweat box. Blistering heat withers the crowd, reddening faces, soaking brows, rousing tempers. The frenzied house is ready for war.

For ten rounds, Tommy stages a master class in scientific boxing, as the *Minneapolis Tribune* proclaims. The pseudonymous reporter "Clinch" describes it this way: "Tommy Gibbons jabbed and stabbed, swung and cut, until Miske's face resembled a butcher's block after the preparation of five pounds of hamburger."

*

Yet beneath all the stoic discipline, hard hitting, and perpetual smile, Tommy prefers love to war. After the fight, Eddie Kane, with a battered satchel slung over one shoulder, playfully embraces him, says, "I'll be seeing you around, you glorious beast!"

They are more than colleagues now, but friends too. How far they've come. How far they'll go. Kane tips his hat and bids Tommy good night.

Freshly scrubbed and dashing in a three-piece suit, Tommy pockets his hands and hums a faint tune as he steps into the night. Under the audito-

rium's flickering lights, Kane lingers in the shadows, watching as Tommy approaches an iron bench haloed by starlight and June bugs. His confident stride transforms into a playful shuffle, almost a dance. On the bench, waiting for Tommy, sits one of the most beautiful women Kane has ever seen.

Before the waiting girl, Tommy does a playful soft-shoe, sticking the landing with jazz hands, a smile, and a bow. He brings the girl to her feet, presses his lips to her hand like a chivalrous knight. They smile at one another and embrace.

Kane stands there for a long while, smiling and alone. He hears Tommy whistling as the young lovers walk away and makes a note to himself: *learn how to whistle*.

*

Across the ocean, the drums of war can no longer be denied. Martial rhythms stalk city streets and open fields in Serbia, Austria, Hungary, Germany, and France, bleeding over borderlines and boundaries. This, the world war.

After only six months of battle, the international conflict has already become "a horror of trenches, vermin, barbed wire, typhus, deadly clouds of gas, and soldiers by the thousands, soldiers by the millions, bleeding their lives away," according to author and historian Roger Kahn.

At the frontlines, it is a constant, cosmic quake, another landscape vanishing every few hours, mothers' sons tumbling to hillsides where, if they are lucky, they'll receive proper burial.

Europe is at war, but to America, the terror across the vast ocean feels inconceivably far away. To most, the escalating bloodbath may as well be unfolding on another planet.

There are no television or radio broadcasts to localize the horror, no easy way to comprehend the nightmare of war "over there." Images arrive slowly, via cable dispatches, pen and ink sketches, and grainy newspaper stills. "Americans first saw the distant war as a contemporary *Iliad*, remote, compelling, and decidedly bloodless," writes Kahn.

For now, America remains neutral.

What comes next, Mike and Tommy and the rest of the world could never guess.

THE DEVIL'S OPERA

*Between a battle lost and a battle won,
There are kingdoms, empires, the world – or nothing...*

—Napoleon Bonaparte,
the morning of the Battle of Waterloo



Weights, measures, and the art of war

*Fall 1910
Dewey Theater
Minneapolis*

Five years ago, before he was the St. Paul Phantom sharp-shooting his way toward the middleweight crown, Mike Gibbons was just a kid, another wide-eyed Frogtown dreamer, a nobody in the middle of nowhere, throwing punches in fields and barns, breaking the law with not

much more than speed and desire, risking his reputation and whatever handsomeness he was born with on twenty-dollar sneak fights.

Then came the fateful week Packey McFarland waltzed into his world and turned it upside down: the red tights and top hat, the blushing, the brawling, the brotherhood. Everywhere, but the ring.

On their closing night at the Dewey, after the crowd drifted away, Mike and Packey stood backstage, sweaty and bruised, yet giddy with new camaraderie and a job well done. Suddenly, the Pride of the Stockyards hauled Mike onto the darkened stage.

"Tell 'em, Gibbons," McFarland ordered, pointing into the empty auditorium.

"Tell who?"

"Whoever's out there! Tell them who you really are!"

Mike hesitated, searching for words.

"Come on, boyo! Where's that crazy son of a bitch in the red tights?"

With a spark flaring in his chest, Mike squared his shoulders, stepped forward, and shouted toward the balcony's unfilled seats: "I am Mike Gibbons, and I'm going to be champion of the goddamned world!"

McFarland grinned, clapping his hands in a one-man ovation. "That's the way, boyo! Now go to New York and show them who you are," he cheered. "Or I swear to God above, I'll haunt your dreams forever."

They stood there in the darkness, laughing, two fools with the hearts of warriors, drunk on a future that could only hold wonder and possibility.

What they didn't know was almost everything.

*

Spring 1915

Mike Gibbons versus Packey McFarland: a fight that almost never happened, even if it absolutely had to.

For McFarland, retired three years and married to a millionaire's daughter, it was a calculated return, one final stroke of brilliance—a chance to prove his superiority and apply Sun Tzu's *Art of War* against his one true rival. The money wasn't bad either, an unprecedented \$17,500 (over \$540,000 today) or, per minute, a staggering \$600 (nearly \$18,000 adjusted).

For the world, it would be a spectacle, a clash of scientific masters, the definitive answer to an unresolved question: which man is truly the best?

For Mike, it was something deeper. Packey, his old friend “everywhere but the ring,” was the final, agonizing hurdle on his race for the crown. Victory meant cutting the tether of near-misses and claiming everything he had been fighting for.

It had been a long road to Brighton Beach, and Mike knew the numbers.

Clabby, one. McGoorty, two. McFarland? The third and final name on the sportswriters’ approved hit list.

Fifty thousand tickets sold, an all-time record.

Ten scheduled rounds.

And one. Just one.

One decisive victory to finish the list, claim the crown, and, if only by decree, be champion of the world at last.

*

April 1915
Chicago, Illinois

Fresh off triumphs over Clabby and McGoorty and following his exhibition with Jack Johnson in Havana, Mike Gibbons strode into the opulent piano bar of Chicago’s Planters Hotel. The air was thick with hushed deals, the smoke of expensive cigars, and the slow purr of jazz piano. At 163 pounds of precision and power, he moved like a man who knows what he was worth.

Across the table: Emil Thiry, Packey McFarland’s monocled manager, flanked by a trio of Brooklyn promoters.

Mike hoped for a \$2,500 payday. But the truth—the burning, shameful truth—was that he’d fight for free. The hunger consumed him: the need to be champion, not just in whispers but in headlines.

Before drinks arrived, he was offered five grand. He didn’t blink, just shook his head: no.

It was instinct, rebellion, pride. Eddie Reddy used to handle negotiations, carving the path, ensuring good money and fair weigh-ins. But

Reddy was long gone, and the Phantom was on his own.

*

Soup, crackers, whiskey. The offer climbed to \$7,500.

Laughing dismissively, Mike shook his head again. No deal.

"Boys, I'm starting to think you're here to insult me," Mike said, leaning back in his chair. "Packey's getting ten grand more than that. Let's cut the shits and giggles."

Over steaks, the numbers continued to rise, but Mike kept shaking his head, letting the game drag out.

"It felt like the third-degree, everything coming together, then blowing apart," he later recalls. "But I stayed cool as a cucumber."

*

Hours ticked by, the waitstaff changing shifts, tablecloths swapped for fresh linen, the pianist pivoting to a more melancholic tune.

Final offer: \$12,500.

All eyes on Mike, who drew a long, slow breath, letting the tension swell. After a dramatic pause, Mike lifted his right hand with a theatrical flourish and flashed five fingers. Did it again, then once more.

Fifteen.

A wine glass smashed onto the tabletop.

"*Fifteen?*" one of the promoters exploded. "*Fifteen thousand?*"

Mike stood, adjusting his coat with calculated nonchalance. "Well, if that's how you feel, gentlemen, goodnight," he shrugged, turning for the door, pausing just long enough to deliver the final blow. "Oh, and also: go straight to hell."

*

An hour later, aboard the train home, Mike unfolded the contract, running his fingers over the crisp ink.

Ten rounds. Fifteen grand. Five hundred dollars per minute.

For one magnificent moment, everything was perfect.

Except—

The weight.

Goddammit, the weight.

*

Mike Gibbons knew the number: 145.

He'd lived on the scales his entire career, bulking up for middleweight bouts, starving down for welterweight scraps. Always in between. Never settled. Never home.

Back in 1911, fluctuating between 143 and 147 pounds, he was a natural welterweight. But by 1912, he was already facing full-grown middleweights like Sid Burns and Eddie McGoorty, weighing in at 149 while they came in at 156, sometimes 158. Burns fell. McGoorty, a brutal lesson, etched deep in his ribs, nearly broke him.

Now, nearing thirty, The Phantom was a 163-pound middleweight, solid, lean, and fully formed. No training regimen, no starvation, no dehydration trick could drop him into the low one-fifties ever again.

But the contract in his trembling hands didn't care.

The numbers were clear: 145 pounds. A weight he hadn't touched since he was a teenager. Worse, McFarland's camp had set a \$2,500 forfeiture fee, if Mike failed to meet the scale's demands. Desperate for the fight and steering his fortunes without Eddie Reddy for the first time in his life, Mike signed anyway.

"In setting such steep obstacles for me, Packey McFarland was playing the art of war at high levels," Mike admits years later. "Ashamed and frustrated as I am to admit it, that never would have happened if I hadn't been flying solo—without Reddy—at the time."

So the impossible mission: eighteen pounds, ten percent of his body weight, in eight weeks.

If Mike Gibbons wanted to face Packey McFarland, he had to transform himself completely.

Or die trying.

*

Always in Mike's corner, Tommy, his fiercest defender, closely monitors his big brother stripping his body down to nothing. Together, they attack the weight with strategy and science.

Dawn: a lungful of air for breakfast. Then a ten-mile run.

Lunch: a cup of tea with lemon. Then to the gym for weights, core work, speed and heavy bags, jump rope, sparring.

Dinner: a piece of meat the size of a dollar bill, a ring of lettuce. Three

sips of water.

9 p.m.: a sweatbox Turkish bath.

Sleep. Wake up. Do it again.

"He's existing on rations pretty near the starving point," a Twin Cities sportswriter observes. "He shows the strain in every move he makes."

Tommy sees it too, the hollowing out, the unraveling, but says nothing, continues pushing his brother forward.

At first, the grueling regimen works. Eight pounds melt quickly away. Then comes the setback.

*

The opponent is "fast and ruthless" Leo Houck, the Lancaster Thunderbolt. Over ten rounds, Mike "outboxes, outfights, outgenerals" and "makes a punching bag" of the Pennsylvania contender, but not without significant cost.

Though the Phantom's face and body bears no signs of damage post-battle, a hard, errant fourth-round blow from Houck fractures several of his ribs. In the remaining rounds, Mike deals not only with the gloved man before him, but with chest pain, swelling, and shortness of breath.

Doctor's orders are clear: four weeks of complete rest. No running. No working out. No sparring. What's needed is time. Time Mike doesn't have.

Rather than recovering, five days later the Phantom steps into the ring at Ebbets Field, home of the Brooklyn Dodgers, to battle Soldier Bartfield. *The New York Times* writes, "The ring is built on the playing surface of the diamond, near home plate along the third base line, and its decorations were of the national colors. The ropes covered with green velour made the setting a very attractive one."

What was less attractive to the Phantom and his fans was Mike's ring performance. "I made a poor showing," he later writes. "I couldn't train. I had no power. The pain was too great. I didn't lose, but I also did not win decisively. I gave no alibis. The injury set me back, and I didn't say a word."

The doctor's assessment is more urgent this time: absolutely no training whatsoever for six weeks.

This makes the road to McFarland even closer to impossible. Mike's body musters a rebellion, punishing him for the continued abuse by clinging to every calorie. In a cruel betrayal, when Mike's training finally

resumes, the weight has crept back. Eighteen pounds of it. And now, there are only twenty-eight days to lose it.

Tommy stares at the numbers, then at his brother.

Mike doesn't need to hear it said. He already knows: there's no way in heaven or hell.

"Agreeing to 145 pounds against Packey," Mike later writes, "was the most serious mistake of my career."

*

Boxing history is a grim tapestry, woven from the wreckage of men who chased the siren's song of glory, and broken their bodies, minds, and lives on the unforgiving rocks of weight reduction. "Tearing down," they call it.

The lesson is brutal and undeniable: the withered fighter always loses. Sometimes, he loses more than just the fight.

"I'd sooner die decently," says Gentleman Jim Corbett, "than go to the morgue as a stiff, worn out by trying to melt off fat that rightly belongs to me."

The *El Paso Herald* agrees: "When a boxer is forced to make an unnatural weight, he places himself at the mercy of his opponent." The fighter sweats away his strength, leaving him "as weak as a kitten." Even the best boxer, in this state, has no chance of victory. Many are lucky to merely survive.

Mike knows this. He thinks of the Old Master Joe Gans, who starved ten pounds from his already lean body over an agonizing week in Goldfield, Nevada to make the mercilessly low weight mandated by Battling Nelson.

"His tongue was as dry as blotting paper," Robert Edgren recalls. "His body, desperate for water, tried to absorb every drop he dared sip before stepping into the ring."

Against Nelson, Gans fought and won. But many experts believed the rigors of such rapid, extreme weight loss left his body weakened and defenseless in the war against tuberculosis that claimed his life soon after.

"There is no sportsmanship in sending a boy into the ring with strength sapped by weight-making," opines the *Duluth Herald*. "Such matches are often an injustice to the spectators, who pay to see two well-matched men, and are given a rude surprise."

*

Packey McFarland isn't interested in sportsmanship. He's a pragmatist. A strategist. A cold-blooded competitor.

He isn't returning from retirement for honor. He left his pregnant wife and his comfortable Chicago penthouse for one reason, and one reason only: the biggest payday of his career.

"I didn't agree to come back against Gibbons so I could lose," McFarland boasts, his voice dripping with arrogance. "So I outsmarted him. He will never, ever make 145 pounds—and if he does, he'll be awfully soft pickings."

Without throwing a punch, McFarland is already winning the war.

*

September 9, 1915

Two Days to Fight

Brighton Beach, New York

When George Barton arrives, Brighton Beach is smothering, a hundred degrees in the shade, the humidity thick as wet wool, the tide a heaving, treacherous beast.

The boardwalk teems with fanfare and wagers and the relentless hammering of laborers racing to finish the wooden, bowl-shaped Motordrome. Tickets sold out a month ago, snatched up by "every gambler, burglar, skyscraper worker, safe blower, pugilist, millionaire, actor, politician, and industry titan on the Atlantic coast," reports the *Minneapolis Tribune*. For the first time, four thousand of those ticket-holders are women.

Barton shrugs off his coat, and rolls up his sleeves. All around him, the seaside city thrums: the iron grind and steam-hiss of incoming trains, the gallop of concessionaires, retired cops running security, hustlers peddling opera glasses and Cracker Jacks. Documentary filmmakers, sporting cartoonists, and a smattering of New York's power elite lean into the astonishments on every corner: the grand casino, the bathing pavilion, the Brighton Ferris Wheel and huge steel rollercoaster, and the 2,000-room hotel that had once been dragged 300 feet inland by steam engines to save it from slipping into the sea. At the local music hall, famed composer-in-residence John Philip Sousa strikes up the band.

At the Motordrome, twelve hundred reporters circle like gulls, filing

over 150,000 words a day on the imminent battle between Gibbons and McFarland. Though war has raged in Europe for nearly a year, the Brighton Beach fight dominates the front page of every American newspaper.

"If I'm to be licked in battle—and I won't be—I'd like it to be inside the Motordrome. It's the finest arena I ever saw," McFarland says. "And if I'm beaten, well, at least it'll be by a fine fighter and man like Mike Gibbons."

At the heart of the Motordrome—an engineering marvel conceived by two architects and built in 10 furious days by 150 carpenters, 100 horse teams, and with 200,000 feet of lumber—rises the ring itself. Perched thirteen feet above the ground, the elevated platform is surrounded by a web of scaffolding that supports a pair of 16 mm motion picture cameras, set to immortalize every second of combat.

In less than a decade, all of it—the arena, the casino, the hotel, the thrill rides—will vanish, replaced by housing in a neighborhood eventually called Little Odessa.

*

At Mike's training camp, Barton finds Tommy bent over a chalkboard, where two crudely drawn figures, framed by arcs, angles, and dense scribbles, stand in for Mike and McFarland. Tommy plots geometry like it's gospel, a web of physics masquerading as strategy.

"How's our boy?" Barton asks, his voice low and respectful.

"In the tub," Tommy says, eyes never leaving the chalkboard.

"Can I see him?"

"He's been hoping you'd stop by," Tommy says. "You're the only one he'll see."

*

Barton finds the Phantom curled small in the steaming whirlpool, head barely above the surface. "He was gaunt as a ghost," Barton later writes.

A damp towel clings to Mike's forehead. His eyes are sunken, lids dark with bruises. His skin is mottled and waxen.

"How do you do, brother?" Barton asks, masking his concern.

"I don't think Packey stands a chance in the world against me."

Mike forces a grin, dry and deadpan, then sinks slowly beneath the water, vanishing from sight.

*

The moment he's alone again, Mike drops to his knees, a strangled sob tearing loose from his throat.

Head in his hands, knotted into a tiny ball on the bathroom floor, he curses the vow he and Tommy made beneath the comet's tail. All of the ways he once believed he would—or even *could*—march toward glory. Fool's gold. Boyhood fantasies.

Hook, line, and sinker, the Phantom and the dreaming, head in the lion's mouth.

Tommy kneels beside him, hauls him gently upright, drapes a towel across his brother's trembling shoulders.

Mike's mind spins with thoughts of other fighters who had suffered their way into truth. *Halfwits and loons*, he thinks. *All of them.*

Beginning with me.

He collapses onto a cot in the darkest corner of the room.

"I was sick—very sick—and demoralized," Mike later confesses. "Afraid to fight. Afraid to lose. Afraid, honestly, that I might not survive."

*

Tommy shuts out the world. The Gibbons training camp goes dark: no one in, no one out.

With no new calories to burn, Mike clings to the edge of the earth. His body has devoured every store of sugar and fat, and is now cannibalizing itself, torching through its protein reserves, then blazing into his lean muscle. Stress hormones surge: cortisol, catecholamines, vasopressin. Fever rises. Anxiety skyrockets. His kidneys throb like lead weights, dragging him down, pinning him to the earth.

There is also the rage. The quiet, trembling rage. Not at the weight itself, but at having to lose it so quickly. At failing to foresee McFarland's clever gambit sooner. The Pride of the Stockyards, playing the long game, wearing him down for months. And Mike, blinded by his own hunger, pride, and desperate desire, walking straight into it.

Now he's burning off pounds with reckless fury, consequences be damned.

No matter how he tries to see it, it's too much, too fast.

*

Three pounds from his target weight, he struggles to tear open a letter handed to him by Tommy. Inside the envelope, words of love from Mae, and a crayon drawing of a boxing match from his son, Bobby. Tommy helps steady the pages in Mike's trembling hands.

"Come home handsome!" cheers Mae's note.

The letter stirs something in Mike, but from a far-off distance, like a fast-fading memory or music muffled behind a closed door. His heart lurches, tightens, then slips back into the endless hollow and irregular rhythm. He wants to smile, but doesn't remember how.

"When Mike Gibbons has been spotted around Brighton Beach, a rare occurrence these days, he's looked angry," *Chicago Herald's* Bill Forman writes. "He has broken down suddenly and cried in front of other men. He's been nervous and in uncertain humor. These are most unusual things for Gibbons."

Tommy can feel his brother's suffering, muted, but constant and unbearable. For all the times Mike's fiercely vowed to protect his little brother at any cost, the roles have reversed. Tommy stays close. He does not leave Mike's side.

All that's left to lose: three more pounds that "cling like barnacles." The brutal dieting required to make weight has already stripped the Phantom of almost everything else: strength, speed, focus, and stillness.

Sometimes he wonders if he'll ever get them back.

*

September 11, 1915

Brighton Beach, New York

3 a.m., Morning of the Fight

The waning moon dangles slivered in the raven sky, a pearl pendant adrift in infinite blackness, just six percent visible tonight, its glow dimly mirrored in the roiling sea.

A single file of automobile headlights crawls over a mile-long stretch of highway toward the vast, empty arena. The pre-dawn air churns with salt and smoke, as an overzealous, early bird vendor pops hundreds of pounds

of corn over a bonfire, scooping it into paper bags to hawk later that day.

Neat bundles of morning newspapers land with a thud on bone-dry sidewalks. Newsboys chant headlines like battle hymns: anthems of Gibbons and McFarland, arias of President Wilson's pledge to keep America out of the European bloodbath.

The carnage overseas is of mounting concern, but what everyone in the world most urgently needs to know this September 11 is: which of "the two great untouchables in the fistic game" will emerge victorious tonight?

Upon the swaying mirror of the Atlantic, between the dark night and new dawn, Mike Gibbons floats on his back in the ocean. A cascade of stars peers down with no regard for champions or chumps, or even the simple truth that their own light, within hours, will be extinguished by the rising sun.

*

Eight hours to weigh-in, Mike Gibbons is exactly eight ounces from where he needs to be. Half a pound. Close, but also impossibly far away.

His body is a wastebasket of wayward cells and torrid yearning. He is, quite literally, starving to death, his reserves of metabolic fuel having been long ago depleted. His mood is volatile, his brain on the fritz. He hasn't had a proper shit in three days.

Six hours and an eight-mile run later, he's on his knees again and praying. Sway, buckle, bend, and puke.

Tommy kneels beside him, places a cool hand on Mike's brow, and drapes a towel over his brother's shoulders like a cape. He clasps Mike's hands, fingers entwined, a silent promise sealed in flesh. Softly, Tommy prays.

Mike exhales hard, unintentionally collapsing against his brother, their foreheads pressing together.

"Shhh," Tommy soothes, pulling his brother closer. "I've got you, pal."

*

A sharp knock at the door, and George Barton enters. Tommy rises swiftly and protectively, shielding his brother from the rest of the world.

"He okay?" Barton asks.

"Not now, George. All respect."

"I just wanted—" Barton begins, but through the door he catches a

glimpse of Mike, trembling on all fours, dry heaving into a bucket. "You *sure* he's okay?"

Tommy turns sharply.

"I know you taught Mike to fight, Georgie," Tommy says sternly. "But I need you to turn around right now or, so help me, I'll break every vowel on your typewriter!"

Urgent voices echo down the hallway.

"I just wanted to let you know," Barton snaps, "they're on their way."

"Who?"

Tommy stiffens as someone raps "shave and a haircut" on the door. "McFarland!"

*



Friends... everywhere but the ring

When McFarland and Thiry file into the room, Mike is already on his feet, hands on his hips, a sardonic grin etched across his hollowed face. Lazarus has risen.

Robert Edgren, presiding over the weigh-in, later writes: Mike is "feverish, lips blistered, eyes bloodshot, nerves frayed and broken. But he looked whole—if you didn't look too closely."

By comparison, McFarland is radiant. His green eyes sparkle, and his auburn hair is thick and shining. He smiles like a man who's been sleep-

ing well and eating better. He reaches out to shake Mike's hand, but the Phantom refuses.

Beside him, Thiry—decked out in a long leather coat, feathered boa, and a ridiculous buccaneer hat—lifts his monocle and studies Mike's diminished condition, nodding in approval.

"I've heard some people call you the Phantom," Thiry says, circling Mike. "But to me, if I'm being honest, you look like *un foutu revenant*—a goddamned ghost!"

For Tommy, that's all the grace Thiry's going to get. He steps forward, positioning himself in front of his brother. With only a hard look, he causes the flamboyant boulevardier to stumble several steps back.

"At least you're not in tights tonight," Thiry smirks, taking one last shot. "The hard-on, this time, merely in your heart."

"Come a little closer," Mike growls. "I'll put your fucking eye out."

"Hey," McFarland chuckles, trying to lighten the mood. "What's got you so crispy, Gibbons?"

Mike steps past Tommy—a little too close to McFarland, a little too strong—and says, "One forty-seven, you sonofabitch!"

"What? The *weight*?" McFarland grins. "From what I hear—the scutlebutt, if you will—you're still one long, hard piss from making it!"

"*Still*?" Mike fires back. "Try 'only.'"

The room falls dead quiet, like in a bank robbery or Mexican stand-off: two fighters, their corners, a pair of sportswriters, and one old man with a handlebar mustache wheeling in a creaking brass-beamed scale. For a long, tense moment, everyone silently wonders if the scheduled ten rounds might ignite right here, right now.

Mike breaks the silence, his voice suddenly softer. "Look, McFarland, I'll always be grateful for the start you gave me, but—"

"I respect you too, Gibbons," McFarland interrupts, placing a hand on Mike's shoulder. "But all is fair. You fell for it. *'Keep your enemy under strain and wear him down. Exhaust him. In this way, you can make it impossible for the enemy to persevere. Thus the expert in battle moves the enemy, and is not moved by him.'*"

Mike knows the quote. Knows Packey's right. He'd fallen for *The Art of War*. He wants to look down in shame, but manages to hold

McFarland's gaze.

"You were so hungry to lock down the fight, it was easy as pie to get you to sign," Packey continues. "You remember *pie*, Gibbons?"

Mike clenches his jaw. He's not sure he has the strength to do much more. He's struggling to banish an old ring truth from his mind: that every battle is half-won before the first bell rings.

The fight with McFarland began the moment Mike agreed to the impossible weight.

And now, Mike's already half-lost.

McFarland played him. All Mike can do now is admire the brilliance of it the strategy—the cold, calculated, bitter execution of the art of war.

"When our business is done tonight, Gibbons," McFarland adds, with a faint smile, "I hope we can still be friends."

Mike's holds his stare, hard and unblinking, the message clear.

McFarland nods in understanding, his hand falling away as he turns. Then, halfway to the door, he glances back with a wistful grin and says: "Everywhere but the ring, right, boyo?"

*

McFarland's right: Mike *does* need to take a long, hard piss.

The stream of urine is slow to start. Acrid. Cloudy. Pain shoots through Mike's lower back and hips. He howls like a wounded animal.

Tommy kneels beside him, hands pressed gently to his brother's kidneys, steadying him.

It's precisely what takes the Phantom to target: 145 pounds, on the nose. He has made weight.

Now, he only needs to make good.

*



The crucible of Brighton Beach Motordrome, September 11, 1915

September 11, 1915

9:57 p.m., Day of the Fight

Three minutes to First Bell

Brighton Beach Motordrome

Brooklyn, New York

It's been dark for hours, starlight straining to burn through the thick veil of coastal fog.

Inside the great wooden Motordrome, fifty thousand souls roil, ripple, simmer, and seethe—more people than live in all but the twenty largest U.S. cities. They bathe in the blazing lumens of Klieg lights and carbon-arcs, writhing exuberantly in the artificial daylight. No sporting event in history has ever attracted a larger crowd.

"A white uniformed band, thirty-two members strong, gives a Wagnerian aspect to the affair," reports *Minneapolis Journal's* J.H. Ritchie.

The tart huff of citronella fails to repel an airborne invasion of mosquitos. The fierce rag-a-whirl of white towels blurring through the arena is part celebration and part frenzied defense against the storming blood-suckers. The combustible throng—"a motley mass of humanity, highbrow mingling with roughnecks," according to Ritchie—percolates in near riot

as overhead lights dim to darkness.

The air crackles with an almost unbearable tension as the motion picture cameras begin to roll.

In three minutes, the bell will toll, and the Devil's Opera will begin.

*

At center ring, Joe Humphreys, famed announcer of Madison Square Garden, steps into the light. Balding and bow-tied, his voice is legendary in sporting circles, "capable of overpowering the Pacific, the Atlantic, and everything in between."

But not tonight.

The heat has scorched his vocal cords to cinders. He does not try to shout over the din.

Instead, he calmly reaches into his coat, retrieves a pistol, and fires three shots into the sky.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The Motordrome stops cold.

No one has fired a gun inside a sporting arena since Wyatt Earp, the Wild West lawman who made his name in the O.K. Corral shootout, drew steel at the Tom Sharkey–Bob Fitzsimmons fight in San Francisco twenty years before.

As the sold-out congregation falls silent, a satisfied Humphreys pockets his weapon, clears his throat, and calls the fighters to the ring.

*

Packey McFarland is first through the ropes, "clambering in, dressed in blue pants and a loose-fitting jersey," writes *New York Journal American's* Damon Runyon. "His hands were already wrapped and bandaged. When he stripped off his pants, green trunks showed underneath, for McFarland's one of the few, authentic Irishmen in the game."

Three minutes later, Mike Gibbons appears.

"Wearing black pants and a gray sweater, he stalked over to Packey's corner," Runyon continues. "They looked carefully over each other's hands and bandages, then stared long at one another. But they exchanged not a word."

Overhead, the giant arc lights blaze, "making the fighters look like heroic figures from the silver screen," writes Ritchie in *The Journal*.

Years later, Mike Gibbons would remember the moment. “I heard the ring announcer yell my name, the call of battle sounding in my ears,” he writes. “I threw off the dark, dizzy spell that had circled me for days and remembered: I was here to fight. I was here to *win*. I told myself a thousand times that I was fit and ready for battle.”

In his corner, Tommy Gibbons tries not to hold his breath. He watches his brother like a man monitoring a gathering storm. In spite of himself, Tommy wonders: *Forget about winning, will Mike even stay on his feet for ten rounds?*

*

At 10:14 p.m., the first bell tolls.

Sixty-seven minutes later at 11:21 p.m., the final bell rings.

*

Five minutes after the fight, Mike is on his knees in the dressing room. Trembling. Heaving. Bile and chills.

He doesn't remember the fight. Doesn't know if he won or lost.

Just ninety minutes of blinding heat.

Tommy stands guard at the door, having already sent word to Mae and the family that everything is fine. He prays it's not a lie.

Mike shudders, then lunges for a bucket. The gallon of ice water he gulped down after the final bell explodes from his gut.

If he had dropped McFarland, even for a four-count, the battle's outcome would be simple to declare. But he hadn't.

Damon Runyon suggests the obvious: Mike was simply too depleted—too drained by the savage weight loss—to “genuinely rock McFarland at any stage.”

George Barton is even blunter: “I was astonished Gibbons survived the fight, so utterly broken was his body and spirit.”

“During the final week,” Barton continues, “Mike became so weakened and nervous, mumbling to himself, breaking into uncontrollable tears. When told of this afterward, he could remember none of it. Many of us believed this might be the Phantom's last fight—or maybe should've been.”

*

They say boxing is like jazz: the better it is, the harder it is to appreciate.

The 50,000 spectators packed into Brighton Beach Motordrome know they witnessed something extraordinary. But a knockout or clear victory? Absolutely not.

In one of the sporting world's greatest Rashomon moments, the outcome of Gibbons versus McFarland seems to shift depending on who you ask, where they sat, and what they'd hoped to see.

Ten rounds. No serious injuries. No knockdowns. No knockout.

A master class in scientific boxing, or just a frustrating stalemate?

*

Without judges, the verdict falls to the sportswriters to give a so-called "newspaper decision."

But as *Ring Magazine* editor Stanley Weston later writes: "In big fights, newspaper decisions could usually be counted on. That just didn't happen at Brighton Beach."

"This fight is often cited as the best example of what happens when two stellar boxers meet," one reporter notes. "They neutralize each other. Without a knockout, calling a winner is fiddlesticks."

Headlines reflect the bewilderment: "Boxing World in a Quandary Over Big Bout."

J.H. Ritchie laments the absence of "hard, wicked slams."

Boxing critic Mike Casey calls Gibbons and McFarland "two wary snakes," while the *New York Telegraph's* Bat Masterson—never a Gibbons fan—dismisses the fight as "a ferocious scowling match."

Bert Randolph Sugar sees the ten round extravaganza as "two porcupines making love."

*

Packey McFarland, ever the strategist, offers his own predictably smug take:

"The big mistake in this fight belonged to Gibbons. I insisted on a weight I knew would be impossible for him to make, and he fell for it, so I beat him by a country mile."

Unsurprisingly, Mike sees things differently:

"I don't think there's any doubt I beat Packey all the way. His punches had as much impact on me as a good shampoo and hair wash."

Speaking off the record, referee Billy Joh will only say: "They were

both pure genius! Best I've ever seen. So quick, so graceful! I know now why they call Gibbons the Phantom—he moves like a goddamned ghost!”

But what really happened? What *did* the “whirlpool of humanity” at Brighton Beach actually witness?

Even the most seasoned boxing reporters admit: a second, a third, a closer look is needed.

And George Barton, the glorious little fella, is already making it happen.

*

Aboard a private Great Northern railcar, Mike drifts in and out of consciousness, his mind untethered, his body wrecked by dehydration. He moans faintly. Feverish. Empty.

Beside him, Barton watches the countryside blur past the window. He knows the way home by heart.

But this isn't just a return trip. It's a mission, a high-stakes operation demanding Sun Tzu levels of strategy, the speed of a smuggler, and the sleight-of-hand of Harry Houdini. Barton knows the art of war, and he's playing a fierce game of it right now.

Hours earlier, under cover of night, he met two jittery young men on the splintering planks of an abandoned pier near Brighton Beach. Freelance cameramen for American Vitagraph, the country's most prolific film company—even if printing, distributing, or screening fight films in 1915 was strictly illegal. One of the boys had filmed the Gibbons-McFarland bout from ringside, the other from a crow's nest. Six thousand feet of 16mm film. Fifty cents per foot.

The cameramen had no qualms about being paid twice for their illicit labor. In the shadows and fog, Barton pressed a wad of cash into one man's fist. The other handed over two metal canisters. Inside: a wet print of the fight. A single copy. Uninsured. Unseen. Illegal.

Barton vanished into the night, the weight of history in his hands.

*

The rest now hinges on *New York World's* Robert Edgren.

Barton's plan? A secret tribunal and a forensic examination.

With bourbon, cigars, and catered lunch as bait, Edgren, at Barton's urgent request, assembles a jury of America's most formidable boxing

scribes: Grantland Rice. Damon Runyon. Ring Lardner. Robert Ripley. Hype Igoe. Tad Dorgan.

Their assignment: screen the fight film frame by frame, debate in private, then deliver a verdict simultaneously, in the morning editions. A definitive account. An authoritative consensus. The only way to resolve the Motordrome mystery.

"By slowing the St. Paul Phantom to twenty-four frames per second, his glory might finally be clearly seen," Barton writes. "At least, that was the big idea."

With the film canisters stashed beneath his seat, Barton exhales.

Beside him, Mike stirs.

"Did I win, Georgie?" he rasps.

Barton wraps an arm around his friend.

"It was close, Mike. It was close."

*

Barton's next move is against a ticking clock.

Edgren has promised to intercept the train and retrieve the reels of film, but he's buried under deadlines and can't confirm which station. There are seven stops left before Barton's train crosses the New York state line.

Barton knows the law.

Transporting fight films across state lines is a federal offense, a relic of the moral panic and race riots ignited by the Johnson-Jeffries battle in 1910. The penalty: a \$1,000 fine and up to five years in prison.

The first few stations come and go. No sign of Edgren.

By the sixth stop, Barton's pulse is a war drum. One station left.

At the seventh—the final chance to ditch the fight films before leaving New York and entering "outlaw country"—Barton leans out the railcar door and scans the platform.

For an eternity, nothing. Fog. Silence. It's getting late.

Then finally, movement. A trench coat flapping through the mist. A towering figure sprinting toward the train. Edgren.

"Close one," Edgren cheers, pulling himself onto the train.

Barton nods, handing him the canisters.

"Do your best, Bob," he says. "Then tell the world."

Edgren tips his fedora and winks, leaping from the train as it lurches

into motion again.

Barton slumps back into his seat. He's done what he can.

Now it's up to the Golden Pens.

*

The next morning, headlines scream across the nation.

The verdict isn't unanimous, but a clear majority emerges.

Chicago Tribune's Ring Lardner leads the Windy City's hometown chorus for McFarland. Damon Runyon, ever the measured hand, calls the fight a draw. Bat Masterson and *Milwaukee Leader's* Tom S. Andrews agree.

But the rest of Edgren's heavyweight tribunal declares Mike Gibbons the victor.

"Gibbons may have been burned to a cinder trying to make weight," writes Edgren, "but he was a cat on his feet, fast like a dancer, fists like lightning. The clear winner."

Grantland Rice, the Dean of Sportswriters, echoes him: "Mike Gibbons did the sharpest, cleanest hitting. His punches carried a harsh sting. He flitted in and out and all around McFarland, raining home gloves with merciless accuracy and lightning speed. Gibbons is entitled to honors."

But it's George Holmes of United Press, whose nationally syndicated column reaches the widest audience, who delivers the final word: "Gibbons never smiled during the entire battle. With blazing eyes and teeth bared, he strove desperately to put over a knockout. His speed and power were greater than his opponent's. He is not merely the winner, but now also (by sportswriter consensus) Champion of the World!"

*

For one perfect morning, Mike Gibbons is king.

The St. Paul Phantom. Master of the ring.

For a few brief, bright hours, the whole world savors the clarity and resolution.

The Phantom's beaten them all: Clabby, McGoorty, McFarland.

One. Two. Three. King me.

Champion of the World.

*

It doesn't last long.

That night, George Barton receives a telegram from Sydney, Australia, the fight game's faraway farm system, where fresh legends are minted, old warriors go to vanish, and grifters rehearse their next great con. It's the third-largest boxing hub in the world, after England and America.

Barton reads the telegram. Then again, then a third time, slower.

The words don't change. But everything else does.

He exhales through clenched teeth: *Mike Gibbons has a problem. A big one. A very big, fast-approaching, ocean-crossing, bone-cracking problem.*

The telegram is a declaration of war:

"Champion of the world, bullshit! I've got a boy down here in Australia who can lick Mike Gibbons with one hand tied behind his back! Hold the crown, sweethearts—Les Darcy's on his way to America!"

Classic Jack Kearns, Barton curses as he crumples the telegram in his fist. *That son of a bitch.*

*

Jack Kearns is a man with a hundred nicknames, none of them flattering or friendly: Doc, the Larcenous Leprechaun, the Beelzebub of Boxing.

He's been running scams since childhood. At six, he was stealing lapdogs from affluent neighbors and returning them for reward money. By seventeen, he was seducing widows out of their fortunes and land titles, and fighting as a lightweight with iron-packed gloves for bloody advantage. Now thirty-four, Kearns still hasn't found his moral compass.

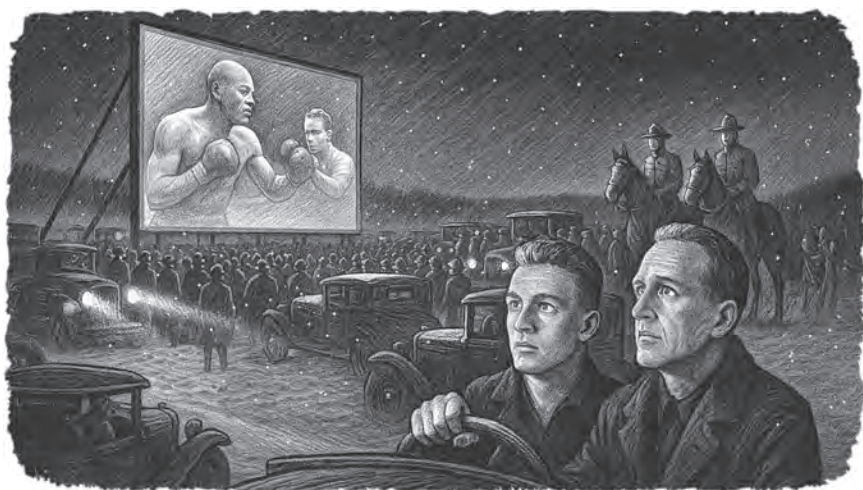
No one loves Jack Kearns. Maybe no one ever has. Nobody trusts him either, and nobody should.

But his telegram, whether fact or fraud, is enough to stop the presses, shatter the morning's clarity, and halt the coronation. Enough to smash Mike's championship crown before he even puts it on. Enough to change everything that was supposed to happen next.

THE VILLAINS WE NEED

*And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days*

—William Shakespeare, *Richard III*



Crossing the border to watch the lost and misremembered world return to life

Jack Kearns is so sick and tired of being broke, alone, and disrespected by the world that there's no law he won't bend, break, or piss on to improve his lot in life. That he also holds a deep-seated grudge against the Gibbons Brothers only makes his rampage more fun.

In early February 1915, Kearns was riding high, staking body, soul, and every last penny on Fighting Billy Murray, a California middleweight

he heralded as “the second coming of Stanley Ketchel.” For two years, Kearns invested everything he was, and had, into prepping Murray for the big time, even mortgaging his mother’s house to bankroll a six-month, cross-country campaign for the crown.

The tour began in Wisconsin, across the St. Croix River from St. Paul, where Murray was matched against Tommy Gibbons in a fight promoted by the Two Mikes—Gibbons and Collins—at Hudson Arena. Trains, cars, and boats arrived in the midst of a blizzard, but there was a bigger storm inside the ring itself. For ten rounds, the Phantom’s kid brother slipped and smashed Murray, tearing Kearns’ golden ticket to shreds.

The loss was catastrophic. Half a year’s worth of fights, canceled. The piggy bank, cracked open and empty. Back to square one, Kearns had nothing again. Broke once more and with all his bridges burned, he stowed away on a steamship and, for six weeks straight, vomited his guts out en route to Australia, where he hoped to start all over again.

Except for Les Darcy. Barely twenty years old and virtually undefeated in fifty bouts, Darcy—the Maitland Wonder, they called him—was quickly becoming a national hero. His dominance in the ring was perhaps the only thing ever that Kearns hadn’t exaggerated.

*

For Kearns, Darcy was the path forward. His ticket out. His fast track to better days.

What better way to launch his golden child in America than to intertwine his name with the world-famous Mike Gibbons, who had seemingly seized the middleweight crown at Brighton Beach only moments ago?

“If Gibbons is really the champion of anything,” Kearns sneers, “he must fight my boy Les Darcy. If he won’t? Then the whole world will know: Mike Gibbons is a fraud and a coward.”

The press laps it up. Headlines scream: “Mike Gibbons and Les Darcy Must Fight! Whoever Wins Will Be Crowned Undisputed Middleweight Champion of the World.”

Overnight, Darcy’s name is known to everyone around the globe.

That the promotional stunt rips the hard-won laurels from the Phantom’s grasp only feels to Kearns like justice.

*

The summer Halley's Comet blazed through the heavens, Les Darcy turned fifteen and set fire to the boxing world.

"A genial, slow-speaking lad" with "barbarous eloquence in his fists," he was a force of nature—elusive, unflappable, packing dynamite in both hands. After clearing the deck of Aussie amateurs, he turned his lethal gloves to the chins of battle-hardened, globetrotting American and English boxers—Jimmy Clabby, Eddie McGoorty, Jeff Smith, and Gus Christie.

Darcy won. Almost always.

Down Under, Darcy was a god; abroad, a curiosity.

In the cramped farmhouse he shared with ten younger siblings, a weary mother, and a father long bedridden after a gruesome farming accident, the teenage duelist was simply the "breadwinner." He fought, like Mike Gibbons and so many others, so that his family might have enough.

*

Before big fights, only music could calm Darcy's crippling anxiety. Closing his eyes and cradling his violin, he coaxed haunting notes from its strings, drowning out the roar of the crowd in Rushcutters Bay Arena. When finally at ease, the Wonder would wrap his hands for battle, step into the ring, and annihilate his next opponent.

By the time more than eight thousand of his countrymen met gory ends in the World War's Gallipoli Campaign, Darcy had annexed two of Australia's coveted boxing titles, middleweight and heavyweight divisions, destroying every challenger he faced—half of them by knockout. But still, he wanted more.

In the ring, Darcy was invincible. Outside, he was prey, most especially to Jack Kearns, the fast-talking American with "a heart of blarney and bullshit." Under Kearns' spell, the Maitland Wonder would rise to global fame—not as a champion, but as "a child of misfortune."

*

In early 1916, Mike and Tommy head northwest to clear their heads, reflect on the past, and plot their futures.

At the Canadian border near Winnipeg, Mike eases his brand new eight-cylinder Cole Eight motor car into a discreet spot to join a thousand other parked automobiles gathered in quiet defiance. Before them, a massive silver screen rises from Canadian soil, tilted toward the United States

like a beacon of rebellion. Tonight's main event: the first public screening of the banned Johnson-Willard fight film from Havana.

Americans have been warned: arrest awaits those who cross the border to watch. Yet they come anyway, cars and wagons pouring in packed with men of every color and creed, drawn like moths to the illicit glow of the outdoor motion picture show. U.S. officers prowling the border on foot. Canadian Mounties patrol on horseback. Coppers on both sides are too busy stealing glances at the big screen action to enforce any laws.

A light snow begins to fall, swirling in the gallery of golden headlights. Horns honk. Bonfires crackle. The Northern Lights smear and smudge their colorful fantasia across the nighttime sky. Then the projector's arc lamp flares, gears pulling celluloid frames into lifelike motion. These moving images of what's already happened, now happening all over again. The lost, forgotten, misremembered world returning to life.

The brothers gaze up at the colossal screen. There's Jack Johnson, still the outlaw king of the heavyweights, sparring at his training camp. The scene cuts to Johnson joking around with a group of sportswriters and dignitaries, including Damon Runyon and Mike Gibbons. Then quick, jittery shots of Johnson and Willard in the ring, warming up in their respective corners. Suddenly, the familiar face again appears: Mike Gibbons himself, at center ring, smiling in a smart suit and tie, straw hat in hand, giving a confident wave to the crowd. The ring announcer proclaims Mike the claimant to the world middleweight championship. Even the silent movie title card says so.

Cheers erupt along the border at the Phantom's big-screen appearance. Playful and proud, Tommy flashes his moonbeam grin and raises Mike's fist into the air.

Word is out: the Gibbons Brothers are here. The crowd shifts, rumbles and stirs, making a beeline that swells, cutting a path straight for their parked automobile.

"I think that's our cue," Tommy says with a wink.

With a final glance at the screen, they leap back into their car and speed away, tires spitting snow and gravel in their wake.

Behind them, the film plays on. Soon, the inevitable unfurls again: after seven years as the "unforgivably Black" heavyweight king and amid

the crowd's militant chants of "kill the black bear!" Jack Johnson—"an old man, striving to survive in a young man's game," as sportswriter Denzil Batchelor put it—is hammered to the canvas to "meet his doom."

He rolls onto his back at the edge of the ring, almost through the ropes, raising a glove to shade his eyes from the glare of the sun as the referee counts him out with a jubilation usually reserved for clock-watchers on New Year's Eve.

It seems cool and quiet down there on the canvas, far from the unforgiving sun and the bloodthirsty throng. Johnson slips into dreamland, resting at last—maybe for the first time in years—finally surrendering the crown that, he would later confess, had been, mostly, a curse.

*

The road to St. Paul stretches out endlessly before the brothers.

Like Jack Kearns and the rest of the world, Mike and Tommy believe they can see where these troubled times are headed. They think they know what's coming.

But they don't. Not all of it.

Definitely not the worst of it.

The drums of war, now the backbeat to every collapse and resurrection of the sun, can no longer be ignored. Two years have passed since a nineteen-year-old Serbian rebel defied the strangling yoke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with two bullets: one for the jugular of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the other for the belly of his Duchess. Fueled by vengeance, their combined militaries surged into Serbia like "a river of steel, gray and ghostlike."

Seventeen million troops from eight nations are now engulfed in a global war. America clings to its declaration of neutrality, but the position is quickly fraying.

Meanwhile, in Ireland, rebellion stirs. The voices of a rising nation swell, "summoning (the Emerald Nation's) children to her flag to strike for freedom." In April 1916, when Irish insurgents seize British strongholds during the Easter Rising in Dublin, they are crushed with brutal efficiency. Nearly four thousand are arrested, many of them friends or family of the Gibbons Clan. Sixteen rebel leaders are publicly executed.

In the Twin Cities, Irish immigrants march in solidarity. St. Paul's sons

clash with Minneapolis Protestants, who burn straw effigies of Saint Patrick in the streets. Storefronts are torched. Windows smashed. Automobiles turned over. Trash bins set on fire. Crowbars, fists, brass knuckles, handguns and angry words.

*

One afternoon, after a long run through the city, Mike finds himself standing in front of his family's church: St. Vincent's, at Blair Avenue and Virginia Street in Frogtown.

The church has never felt like home. Never filled his heart or soothed his spirit. But today, something draws him in.

Crossing himself, Mike steps inside. The hush of the sanctuary presses in all around him. He kneels at St. Jude's vigil, lights a candle, bows his head. He's not sure he's a lost cause the saint's side altar is dedicated to, but quietly considers it spiritual insurance. In spite of himself, his hands lace together. Without meaning to, he finds that he's praying for stillness, peace, and clarity.

A moment later, there is a firm hand on his shoulder. For a fleeting moment, dread coils in his chest: *Uncle Cusick?*

Mike looks up. It's not his uncle, but his father.

Thomas John gazes down at his son with something like a smile.

"When I first saw you here," he says softly, "I figured you must be lost. Walk me home, son?"

*

They walk a long time in silence.

The squawk of tugboats on the river. The horn blast and chuff of steam as a Great Northern train over Stone Arch Bridge on its way west to the Northern Tier. Loons swan-diving toward the Mississippi, wheeling up again. The sun, surrendering its post over the great world spinning, only so the stars can hum again.

"Father Dunphy let go a good one last Sunday," Thomas John finally says. "You know the story of the Apostle Paul, our city's namesake. Paul lived half his life as a villain, a savage Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus. He was mad with power. Had blood on his hands. He denounced God and Jesus, and every Christian too. Dunphy called him 'an enemy of the light.'"

Mike stiffens, bracing for his father's judgment between the lines.

"One day," Thomas John continues, "God struck Saul from his horse. Blinded him. Left him in the dark to rage and suffer. But in time, when nothing else relieved his anguish, Saul repented. And God was gracious. Restored his eyesight. Gave him a new name: Paul. With faith, conviction and new vision, Paul devoted the rest of his earthly life to spreading the gospel and changing the world."

Mike listens, trying to remember a time his father had ever spoken so much.

Thomas John puts an arm over his son's shoulders as they walk. Mike is almost smiling. They've walked like this before, but not since he was a little boy.

"It's what I've tried to do, Michael," his father says. "With my second chance."

*

Father and son, crossing the bridge together. As the day turns darker, Mike finds the nerve to ask about his uncle, Michael Cusick.

"Easy to see him as a villain," Thomas John sighs. "Not that I'll ever be a saint myself. But over time, God has shown me: your Uncle Michael is to be forgiven. Even thanked, perhaps."

"How can you say that?" Mike snaps, anger rising. "He tried to destroy us."

"It's taken time, but now I see," Thomas John says, "your uncle stood before me as a mirror. Of what I might have become. If I hadn't changed my ways."

"But what happened? When he came back to St. Paul, it felt like we were under siege," Mike burns. "Snakes. Rocks. Fire. And then, it all just stopped."

Halfway across the bridge, Thomas John pauses.

"Your uncle was never going to stop. Might be something the two of you have in common," Thomas John says, gazing a long time upon the Mississippi below. "Father Dunphy and I took it upon ourselves to find the thugs terrorizing our home. We tracked them. Learned their faces. Found their haunts."

Mike's imagination crashes from pillar to post. What had his father done?

"Dunphy and I made a plan," Thomas John continues. "Waited for

nightfall. Ready to persuade them to stop with strong words alone, if God allowed. But we were prepared to end it, no matter what it took.”

“What happened?” Mike asks, hanging on every word.

“I don’t rightly know,” Thomas John says. “The night before we were set to act, the little priest went out on his own. After that, the boys never troubled us again.”

Mike, incredulous, studies his father’s face—this man who had so often seemed his opponent, judge, and jury. For so long, the better man the son only wished he might one day become. And now this. The currents of parenthood, Mike learns in time, are more like oceans than rivers.

“Whatever Dunphy did,” Thomas John muses, “he reminds me all the time I owe him a new cane.”

With that, Thomas John turns up the path to his porch, throws open the front door, spreads out his arms wide to the waiting family, and cheers, as he always does on returning, “God bless us all!”

For a long moment, Mike stands still, looking through the windows of the house. Until now, he hadn’t realized that they’d been talking in front of the family’s home at 471 Burgess St., the place where he grew up.

*

If Brighton Beach had been hell on earth for Mike Gibbons, it was only a warm-up for the purgatory the next few years would bring.

The times uncertain, the hours blooming with anxiety. The global conflict, spreading like a crimson stain across multiple continents. It becomes harder and harder to know exactly what to fear. Still, mounting dread finds a way, filling the spaces where peace and contentment, prosperity and impossible dreams, once dwelled.

Over time, sportswriters learn to sing Kearns’ aria of discontent in perfect harmony: Mike Gibbons can’t be king until he beats Darcy, the supernova from a far-off land. The middleweight muddle, only recently resolved through study of the Gibbons-McFarland fight films, is reinvigorated in the press. “Sport’s Greatest Puzzle: Find the Middleweight Champion,” the headlines provoke.

Still recovering his health after the catastrophic weight loss required by the McFarland showdown, Mike begins to wonder if Joe Gans had been right all along. About wanting too much. About the championship

crown being just another thing to lose.

Maybe it's time to quit. Walk away from boxing. Fall in love again with Mae. Get to know his children. Stop before he can't come home handsome anymore.

Maybe.

*



Out of the ring, onto the streets, the Phantom wages war with his wife

"Do you want to quit?" Mae asks tenderly as summer approaches.

Mike turns her on the dance floor of their home, the first verse of a popular love song giving way to the second.

"After one bad night," she repeats, twirling him gently in return, "do you want to quit, Michael?"

He says nothing.

With all her strength, she pulls him close again. He's almost smiling.

"For three years now, I've marched with the girls for equal rights. Collected thousands of signatures. Pleaded our case to the governor, from valley to hilltop," she says. "Do you know how many 'bad nights' we've had, Michael?"

He knows. But still, he says nothing.

"We haven't had a good one yet," she says. "We're still losing, Michael. Every single day."

The song ends. The record and the needle skipping.
“Ask me if I’m ever going to quit,” Mae says.

*

Five years into his own fistic journey, Tommy Gibbons remains a man on a mission, but still fights in Mike’s shadow, the wilderness really: five hundred-dollar battles, mostly in small clubs, abandoned brownstones, even empty swimming pools.

But Tommy has fallen in love.

Her name is Helen Constance Moga. She’s dressed always in hand-made brown garments and carries the quiet grace of someone who has known profound loss. A tailor’s daughter, now an orphan, her face is an enigma of porcelain and grief, grit and soft beauty. Her eyes are always sad, until she pulls back her hair.

She teaches piano, singing, and painting to children at St. Agatha’s Conservatory of Music and Art, at the corner of Exchange Street and Cedar. The school and chapel are run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, under the iron gaze of Sister Celestine Howard, the Mother Superior. Mother Celestine is the younger sister of Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, the man responsible for underwriting the exodus of thousands of Catholics from impoverished Ireland, including the Gibbons family and Fr. John Dunphy.

The top floors serve as a convent, where the nuns reside, relax, and even roller-skate on the private rooftop loggia, penned by iron grillwork railings. Sister Celestine strides through the six-story Beaux Arts academy in heavy-soled black shoes, full veil and habit, crucifix at her breast, rosary at her waist, switch in hand for rapping knuckles. Her footsteps fall hard and loud, striking fear into the heart of every Catholic for miles.

With the sound of Mother Superior’s approach, Helen would often whisper the nun’s favorite refrain to her students: “Christ is coming! Look busy!” Instantly and with affectionate obedience, her students would scramble into focused activity before the nun’s arrival.

The convent’s and Archbishop’s position on boxing is not remotely mixed: it is a sin, and prizefighters, every decent, moral man, woman, and child knows, bring nothing but trouble.

But Helen is a woman in love. If she’s never felt courageous in her life,

she will stand for love. She tries to live strong and simply, reminds herself to stand tall a dozen times an hour. Tries to believe, without even a shred of evidence, that love can conquer all.

Helen and Tommy marry on May 27, 1916. Mike and Mae Gibbons serve as best man and maid of honor.

Mike and Mae also send the newlyweds to Montana's Glacier Park for their honeymoon. Knowing Helen's gift for music and Tommy's love of song, they deliver a Steinway piano to the newlyweds' home as a wedding gift.

*

Soon after, Mike goes on the record with George Barton.

"There isn't a man left for me to beat outside of Les Darcy," he says. "I want to retire and boost my brother Tommy into the position he deserves. But before I quit, I want to beat Darcy and walk away, clear and undisputed, with the middleweight title."

Barton rises from his desk without a word, walks across his office, pours a glass of water, takes a slow drink, then gazes thoughtfully out his office window.

"You don't like my plan?" Mike jabs.

Barton remains silent, his eyes fixed on something in the distance.

"You don't think I can beat Darcy?" Mike presses.

"You can or you can't. You will or you won't," Barton says, trying to identify the darkness on the horizon. "I just can't help but wonder: do you *have* to?"

*

Nine thousand miles of dirt and ocean separate Mike Gibbons and Les Darcy, a five-week steamship journey across a war-scarred world, so Mike stays close to the Saintly City and continues piling up bodies on his doorstep.

He drops Young Ahearn, the Brooklyn Dancing Master, just eighty-nine seconds into the first round. Ties up and twists New Jersey's Bayonne Globetrotter, Jeff Smith, through ten cyclonic rounds. Waltzes Englishman Ted "Kid" Lewis into dizzy defeat at Madison Square Garden. Bewilders and pummels light-heavyweight contender Jack Dillon—the Giant Killer, they call him—with a "rushing swarm of gloves" and "dazzling disappearances."

By Christmas 1916, he's thirty thousand dollars richer, but no closer to the crown.

With Mae's blessing, Mike donates half the year's winnings to the Irish Brotherhood. Maybe that's the way it works, he figures: fight with one hand, give with the other.

He's sure Uncle Cusick is smiling from his seat in hell.

*

Halloween 1916, Les Darcy turns twenty-one.

Pressure bears down on him from every direction: enlist and join the doomed ranks of Aussie soldiers, or be branded a coward forever.

The Maitland Wonder has other plans.

Determined to lift his family from poverty with American prizefighting riches, Darcy packs a single bag and slips aboard a cargo ship under the alias "Dawson." On his father's nightstand, he leaves a handwritten note promising to join his brothers at war once he's secured the family's future.

In America, Darcy knows only one man: Jack Kearns, the downtrodden, venomously optimistic raconteur who's shadowed him for months, spinning cockeyed schemes to smuggle him stateside and convert his fists into a fortune.

Whether the two ever made a formal deal remains unclear, even a century later. Kearns claims it was sealed with a handshake in Sydney, then became written in blood the moment Darcy's letter arrived confirming his imminent landing in New York.

In Kearns' constant reverie, Darcy's tiny ship will appear any minute now on the far horizon, the future becoming not only more possible but, with every smoky belch of the steamer's funnel, ever more golden. When the boat docks, Kearns dreams, he'll rush aboard, fold the Maitland Wonder into his arms like a long-lost son, and together they'll compose a triumphant symphony, rewriting their hardscrabble pasts into something glorious.

To prepare for this revolution, Kearns spends his last coins on a tailor-made suit and a gleaming pair of suede oxfords, his battle dress for the press conference he plans to hold, where he'll boast about the blitzkrieg of big-money battles he and Darcy will seize without breaking a sweat,

on their way to conquering the world.

*

For two weeks, Kearns paces the docks, hungry and broke, waiting, almost literally, for his ship to come in.

When Darcy finally materializes, just days before Christmas, he's not alone. He disembarks in a cloud of absurdity: swaddled in the perfumed embrace of four raven-haired beauties dressed only in boxing trunks, trailed by a dozen whiskey-soaked reporters, their pockets stuffed with catered snacks.

Darcy floats on air.

The gaudy parade, with its wide-eyed warrior at the center, leaves Kearns bewildered. He watches, fists clenching, as Darcy—his last great hope—vanishes into a waiting car. Tires screech. Horn blares three times. Kearns' last chance: going, going, gone.

"Noisy world," says a soft voice behind him. "Surprising, too. All the goddamn time."

Kearns doesn't need to turn around. He knows the voice: half secret, half threat.

There he is, Tex Rickard. Same ashen features, high forehead, inscrutable eyes, and Mona Lisa smile. They've met before, over lifetimes and across continents. From the very beginning, there has been only hatred between them. After today, it will be war.

"Hello, old pal," Kearns says, flashing his smarmiest smile. "Looks like we've got some talking to do."

"I don't believe we've ever met, sir," Rickard says, coyly sidestepping. "And I regret to say, I've nothing to spare for the hungry today."

It's a ruse Tex Rickard often played with men he despised but couldn't kill.

*

Born forty-five years earlier in the crossfire between Pinkerton Agents and his neighbor, the legendary gunslinger Jesse James, Tex Rickard became a fatherless child and man of the house before he turned twelve.

On his way to bagging a million dollars as a visionary boxing promoter, Rickard lived a hundred lives: ranch hand, cattle driver, small-town Texas marshal, prospector, and Yukon casino operator during the Klondike and Alaskan Gold Rush. His money always runs out. His wives always die.

His children too.

But Rickard survives. Always.

For years, Rickard has questioned whether boxing's golden bloom is worth the thorns—the gamblers, gangsters, backroom fixers, pugs, reformers, tax men, and grifters. It was the legendary lawman Wyatt Earp, who palled around with Tex in the gold fields of Dawson City and Nome, who introduced him to the profitable potential of boxing promotion, and a “ne’er-do-well” named Jack Kearns, who weighed miner gold on slippery scales in the back rooms of their Northern Saloon.

Earp, the renowned Deputy U.S. Marshal of Tombstone, Arizona's O.K. Corral gunfight fame, was a former boxing referee. He told a story during boxing's illegal days, when a fighter was hit so hard in the U.S. that he was counted out in Mexico. He refereed the scrap in a twenty-four-foot ring that was staged on the border between California and its southern neighbor, the location being chosen to prevent interference by federal authorities on either side. The fight between heavyweight champion Boston Strong Boy John L. Sullivan vs Michigan Giant Jack Burns, started on the American side of the ring. After a few rounds of terrific mauling, Sullivan slipped over a powerful right to the jaw, knocking Burns clear across the canvas. Wyatt walked across the border to the Mexican side of the ring and counted out Burns, thereby evading the laws of both nations against prizefighting. It is the only case on record of its kind.

It was Wyatt Earp and his brother Virgil who drew Rickard to the austere Nevada mining town of Goldfield to stage Joe Gans vs. Battling Nelson for the world lightweight title. Four years later, Tex undertook the Jack Johnson vs. “Great White Hope” Jim Jeffries affair in Reno for the heavyweight championship. So yes, he's flirted with the fight game before, promoting two of the most lucrative title fights in history.

But Rickard wants more. He wants to be king, to rule the world. He wants Madison Square Garden.

With Les Darcy suddenly on American soil, Rickard sees a new path to everything, and swoops in to make it his own.

In other words, once Les Darcy landed, Jack Kearns never stood a chance.

For five months, Les Darcy fights no one.

Rickard is running the show now with a short leash and an iron fist, forcing every pugilist in America, including Mike Gibbons, to bow, curtsy, and charm their way into the ring with the Maitland Wonder.

No matter how deep they dig, the answer never changes: *You can't have Les Darcy.*

"I'll force Darcy into fighting Mike," growls Eddie Kane, the brothers' new full-time manager, to any reporter who'll listen. "Or I'll run him out of this country myself, so help me God!"

Kearns is less refined.

"That son of a bitch Rickard stole the Aussie boy from me!" he bellows. "Before I'm dead and gone, I'll make damn sure he knows the full weight of my wrath. Maybe then he'll remember my goddamn name!"

But Rickard keeps Darcy, his money-printing machine with muscles, as a "look, don't touch" proposition. Darcy is allowed nowhere near a ring. Certainly not near Kearns. And absolutely never within swinging distance of Mike Gibbons.

Rickard knows the game. One rough night with a sweet scientist like Mike, and Darcy's done—too bruised to sell, too expensive to ship home.

Rickard has a better plan: a national vaudeville tour. Hyped by sports-writers, Darcy will become a stage act, his legend inflated without risking failure or bodily harm. After a year of theater coin, maybe a few soft bouts against minor threats and small fries.

But Mike Gibbons?

Probably never.

*

In a borrowed office at Madison Square Garden, Rickard lays it out for Mike.

"Let's say Darcy is a golden goose, and you actually are the best middleweight alive," Rickard says. "What kind of magnificent rube would I be to let you pluck his feathers before he's grunted out a single egg?"

Mike listens, but his eyes drift out the window and upward to the very top of the Garden tower. From the office window, he can see the svelte bronzed goddess of the hunt, Diana, gazing out over the city, slowly turning with the wind, her golden bow forever drawn. The alluring muse

to whom every fighter pays respect before putting up his dukes inside the Mecca of boxing.

Mike turns back to Tex, though he can't help but thinking he should've said a prayer.

Rickard leans in.

"If I let you have Darcy now, you'll drown me in sorrow," he says. "And I am so goddamn tired of swimming, Gibbons."

Like Jack Kearns, Mike never stands a chance.

*

On March 23, 1917, the Phantom's kid brother finally has a moment in the spotlight.

Amid rising calls for the Gibbons Brothers to battle one another for middleweight supremacy, Tommy bulks up a division, training on a regimen that includes a daily quart of vanilla ice cream, to challenge reigning light-heavyweight champion, Philadelphia-born Barney Lebowitz, fighting name Battling Levinsky, a Jewish thumper known for his mocking smile, eerie chuckle, and proclivity for flooring men with heavy-hitting and unpredictable ringcraft.

Despite Minnesota state laws requiring a knockout to transfer championship crowns, Eddie Kane and Levinsky's manager, "Dumb Dan" Morgan, strike a gentlemen's agreement the public agrees to accept. According to Morgan—supremely confident, in part because Levinsky will weigh fifteen pounds heavier at weigh in than his opponent—"If Tommy defeats the Battler so decisively that the newspapers give him the verdict, then he can wear the crown."

Minutes before the fight, Tommy ducks out a side-stage door, searches the cityscape for his pregnant bride. He finally spots her on a wrought-iron bench beneath a streetlamp and all the stars above. His heart swells, and he jogs briskly to where she waits.

"You're here!" he chimes.

"I said I would be," she smiles softly.

Tommy plants his feet firmly, fists on hips, striking a noble pose and turning his smiling face into a heroic, goofily grinning, portrait.

"What do you think?" he asks. "Mad, bad, and dangerous to know?"

Helen lowers her eyes, smiles to herself, and then her brow furrows

against her will. “How long will you be?” She asks quietly, placing a hand on her belly. “When will you come back to us?”

“No more than an hour,” Tommy says with a sparkle in his eyes. “Quicker, if I can.”

“And you’ll come back whole.”

“Better than that, darling,” Tommy says. “I might be just as cute—and wearing a crown!”

He leans down to kiss her. Helen reaches a hand tenderly to his face, kisses one corner of his mouth, then the other, so intensely it seems she is trying to memorize it.

“Just so you know,” she says, “you’re already my champion of the world.”

*

His mission clear, Tommy fights with the dexterity of a specter-like middleweight and the heat and power of a much bigger man—transforming the champion into a stationary punching bag for ten full rounds.

“Gibbons was the aggressor throughout, using his superior speed and science to the best advantage,” writes the *Pittsburgh Daily Post*. “Time and again, Gibbons rocked Levinsky’s head with hard left-handed swings that hurt the Hebrew Hammer.”

What Tommy does not do is send the champ to dreamland.

At the end of ten rounds, referee Curly Ulrich—unable to legally render a decision—still lifts Tommy’s gloved hand and thrusts it toward the heavens. The fight had been so one-sided, he could do no less.

Yet per the briar patch of boxing rules and regulations, Tommy’s claim to the light-heavyweight title is, in some quarters, disputed—even if his victory is not. It’s a quagmire the Phantom knows all too well.

Afterward, Mike takes Tommy’s face in his hands and kisses him on both cheeks.

“You, little brother,” he says, tears of pride in his eyes, “you have fully arrived.”

*

Maybe Tommy is light-heavyweight champion of the world. Maybe he isn’t. Maybe Mike Gibbons is middleweight champion. Maybe he isn’t.

They’ve done everything right. Everything they’re supposed to. They’ve trained hard. Fought hard. Won, fair and square.

Outside St. Paul Auditorium, at battle's end, Helen sits on the bench where Tommy left her. When the crowd inside erupts, she bristles. The rising pitch and volume crawl up her spine, raising gooseflesh on her arms and speeding her pulse.

Then she realizes: the sound is not grief, but jubilation.

She folds her hands into her lap, exhales deeply, and tries to smile. Her champion will appear soon, and she wants—more than anything in the world—for him to know just how much she loves him.

*

A year and a half after the Packey McFarland bout—after the Rashomon at Brighton Beach, the vanishing crown, the muddled aftermath—and fast approaching his thirtieth birthday, Mike has only one play left.

A Hail Mary: meet Les Darcy face-to-face and make him a breath-taking, irresistible offer.

After weeks of discussion and number-crunching, Mike and Mae agree: if they're ever going to risk everything, now's the time. This might be their last good chance.

*

Against all odds, Kane arranges a parley at Mader's, a private bar in Milwaukee. Mike walks in carrying a leather bag containing \$70,000 in cash. *The Washington Post* later reports that the heavy parcel of greenbacks "ranks next to the Johnson-Jeffries purse in Reno" as "the largest amount ever involved in a title fight."

Mike takes a deep breath, rests the bag on a barstool, waits for Darcy to appear. His father's weary wisdom rushes through his head: *What matters most...* He orders a beer he won't drink and smiles to himself.

*

Les Darcy is three hours late.

When he finally arrives, Mike sees it instantly: the hunger and fire. That familiar glint. The same palpable, but inchoate thing that lives in him.

Later, Mike writes:

"Darcy was a frank, unaffected, pleasant fellow.

"I'd like to fight you, Mike," he said with that catchy Aussie ac-

cent of his. "But later. I have to make a good impression in my first fight over here in America. I can't afford to lose right now."

"'Who can?'" I asked him.

"Darcy hesitated, then, almost apologetically said: 'It's for my family.'"

"He didn't need to be sorry. Fighting for family, that's something I've always understood.

"It's all I've ever done."

For a long moment, the bag of cash on the table between them, Mike studies the young man, this mirror of his own past.

"I liked Les Darcy an awful lot. I felt like we could be brothers," Mike concludes.

But Darcy holds firm. No fight. Not now.

"Maybe," Darcy says with a half-smile, "maybe after the war."

*

If Mike never gets his shot at Darcy, neither does Rickard. The legendary gambler holds his cards too long.

To boost Darcy's image as a wartime hero, Rickard insists the young Aussie enlist in the U.S. Army Signal Corps. A few weeks after drinking three-penny beers with Gibbons in Milwaukee, Darcy collapses during a strenuous military training drill. When he wakes, his teeth ache, his joints are stiff, and his throat burns. Doctors call it infected tonsils. Surgery follows. Then blood poisoning. Then pneumonia.

Strapped to a hospital bed, feverish and fading, Darcy slips in and out of delirium, often crying out: "The count is seven, but you'll never count ten on me!"

The Maitland Wonder never fights in America. He dies before breakfast on the morning of May 24, 1917. He's twenty-one.

*

Accompanied by Tommy and Kane, Mike attends Darcy's funeral, alongside San Francisco's famed pro boxing glove manufacturer, Sol Levinson.

Quietly, without fanfare, Mike covers the full cost of returning Darcy's body to his family in Australia.

When the coffin arrives in Sydney, more than 200,000 mourners line the route. It remains the largest funeral in Australian history.

Crushed by the weight of having failed to change his family's fortunes or serve his country in war, many believe he died of a broken heart.

*

In the wake of Darcy's death, newspapers around the world finally crown Mike Gibbons the undisputed middleweight champion of the world.

But it brings the Phantom no joy.

"I often wonder what would've happened if we'd met in the ring," Mike reflects. "I'm sure I could have beaten him. But under these circumstances, I can't ignore one thing: I never got a chance to beat Les Darcy. Father Time got to him first, and much too quickly."

*

Not that it matters for long.

On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson addresses a special joint session of Congress, and by April 6, the combined legislatures of the United States declare war on the German Empire.

"It is a fearful thing to lead this great, peaceful people into war," Wilson says. "America must now abandon the peace she has treasured. With God's help, she can do no other."

But America is not ready.

The military budget stands at a paltry \$100 million. For the past century, the United States has fought almost no one but itself. It has been fifty years since the end of the Civil War, and the Spanish-American War of 1898, involved only a small contingent of American troops, including lieutenant colonel Teddy Roosevelt and his "Rough Riders," and lasted only four months. Now, in 1917, the U.S. must summon the strength, speed, and strategy to support its allies across the globe engaged in the World War.

General Leonard Wood, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, does not sugarcoat it: "Practically speaking, we have no Army at all."

From a population of 103 million, only 75,000 soldiers are in active

service. Most of them are desk jockeys, with little experience beyond basic training. The idea of protecting the country—let alone saving Europe—isn't just improbable; it borders on delusion.

By contrast, neutral Switzerland, with just 3.5 million citizens, maintains an army of 200,000 men, backed by 300,000 seasoned reservists. Meanwhile, the Central Powers—Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria—have already deployed more than 25 million troops to the blood-soaked battlefields of Europe.

General Wood is exasperated. "This whole situation is a military absurdity," he groans. "The United States needs at least 450,000 men, at home and abroad."

*

The challenge is staggering: multiply the Army eightfold, train green recruits for the mechanized horrors of modern war, and ship them overseas, armed with little more than thirty dollars a month and a few vague instructions on not dying. The task is daunting but the mission is clear.

The American War Machine cranks into high gear, preparing the nation for uncertain times and unpredictable outcomes. The best minds in marketing, media, and politics fuse into one relentless engine of persuasion, broadcasting pro-war fervor from pulpits and opera houses, town halls and taverns, shoeshine stands and stadiums. The same machinery used to sell motorcycles and boxed cereal now sells patriotism, duty, and sacrifice.

America mobilizes. Escalates.

German composers like Beethoven and Wagner are booed. Films like *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* are cheered. Sauerkraut becomes "liberty cabbage." Hamburger is renamed "freedom steak."

Fear spreads. Passions flare. Nationalism soars.

In rallying against a foreign enemy, the still-simmering wounds of America's own Civil War begin, at least for some, to finally close.

This new, young century has found its villain.

It is not us. It's them. Over there.

*

The whole world, restless and uncertain. Time moves like a silent film, marked with grain and skipping frames, fraying and fading at the edges, as if it's already happened. Not a flowing river, but a collage of

fractured moments.

In St. Paul, Mae continues marching for women's rights, while doubling down on her work with the Orphan Trains. Alongside Father Dunphy and a devoted circle of civic-minded women, she receives boxcars of abandoned children from New York. Hundreds each week. Many of them infants. All in need of homes.

The work is exhausting and infinitely rewarding—more satisfying, Mae candidly confides, than the endless struggle for equal rights. But as the draft expands and men scatter to training camps, finding homes for the children becomes harder by the day.

Mike watches his bride and childhood sweetheart evolving still, more and more fiercely engaged with the wider world.

Tommy, still wondering if he'll ever escape his brother's shadow, builds a home with Helen. She's pregnant now and often fatigued, caught frequently in the unbridgeable chasm between joy and anxiety. Struggling with depression since childhood, her moods in pregnancy are a smashing chiaroscuro, the shadows stretching longer and darker.

Most nights, Tommy holds her hand and hums lullabies to the child in her womb.

Their parents, Thomas John and Mary Burke, now in their sixties, walk hand in hand through quiet streets. Their hair is graying, their steps slower, but their smiles quicker to surface. They often remember their wedding day in Ireland, when they were but two strangers who did not know or love one another. Now, they laugh at how sweet it would have been to fall in love before the world came undone. Still, they give thanks: at least near the end, they are sweethearts at last.

They pray often for the departed Michael Cusick—the rebel Q—who, in spite of all his sins, had cut them loose so they could begin again.

At the pulpit, Father Dunphy offers a blunt solution to the world's madness: "More prayer and more sports! Most especially, boxing. Sports-minded people don't have time to think about war."

George Barton hustles layouts to press twice a day at the *Minneapolis Daily News*. Even the sports page rattles with the winds of war. As St. Paul's fighters are being hooked from the ring and sent to Army training camps, fight cards are thinning.

Mike and Mae welcome their third child, a daughter, Virginia Mary. Mike holds her close, never wants to let her go. Never wants to leave home again. Not ever.

*

When President Wilson institutes the draft, American men, ages twenty-one to thirty-one, enlist with fervor. By June 1917, over a million men have answered the call.

But raising an army is only half the battle. Preparing it for the brutalities of modern, mechanized warfare—trench combat, gas attacks, machine guns, air raids—is another thing entirely. Much of this weaponry didn't exist a decade ago. Not even as nightmares.

General Wood oversees the rapid construction of seventeen sprawling training centers across the country. One of them, Camp Dodge, spans five square miles outside Des Moines, Iowa. Here, raw recruits will be shaped into soldiers.

Military strategists, desperate to build strength, discipline, resilience, and unity, return to a time-tested crucible. According to historian Douglas Lincoln Clubine, Army officials believe “wholesome athletics” will teach soldiers “self-control, self-surrender, alertness of mind and body, courage, and the ability to think and act quickly for oneself.”

General Wood moves with urgency. But war moves faster.

“The U.S. is like Harvard sending one good player into a football game against a fully trained team with five men for every position—and the game could start any minute,” Wood says.

America's military gamble now hinges on more than bullets; it needs camaraderie and readiness, which General Wood believes will be best forged on the playing field.

What Wood does not know yet is that he's about to get a game-changing assist from Mike Gibbons and the so-called “manly art of boxing.”

*

Mike and Tommy are among the first Minnesota boys to enlist.

On June 5, 1917, after a quiet breakfast with their parents, they kiss Mary and Thomas John, hug their wives and children, and—just as they did in boyhood—walk across the Stone Arch Bridge.

Only this time, it's not a game.

At the enlistment office, the brothers undergo routine physical examinations. Mike is cleared immediately. The Army sees stars in the Phantom, a potent symbol and powerful recruiting magnet. Where he goes, others will follow.

As the brothers leave the recruitment center, Tommy notices on the master sergeant's desk, the latest edition of the *National Police Gazette*. There on the cover of the shaded pink publication, announcing latest war and sport pictures, is the full-page smiling face of the St. Paul Phantom. The caption reads: "Mike Gibbons of St. Paul, Minnesota, Claims Middleweight Championship, and Willing To Defend Title Against All Comers."

Tommy nudges his brother and points to the magazine. Mike pauses, shrugs, and says, "Nice, but not the best timing. Our mission has changed."

Mike is ordered to Camp Dodge, assigned to the 88th Infantry Division, soon known as the "Fighting Blue Devils."

Tommy, however, is sidelined. A minor hernia requires surgery and disqualifies him from service, at least for now. The best surgeons have already been drafted.

Frustrated, he returns to the ring, where makes short work of George Chip, Gus Christie, Dakota Sioux brawler "Chief" Clay Turner, and deaf-mute slugger Silent Martin. All swift victories and modest paydays. Just enough to keep his hands warm and his name alive.

*

A month before Mike leaves for Camp Dodge, the Gibbons family gathers to celebrate his thirtieth birthday. He blows out the candles without making a wish.

Mae smiles through welling eyes, knowing he'll be gone soon, and praying for his safe return. That he will emerge unchanged and unbroken. That he'll come home handsome.

At the piano, Tommy and his pregnant bride belt out a rousing "Hail, the Conquering Hero" in Mike's honor.

Later that evening, Mike and his mother wash dishes together, wrapping leftovers for the church, extinguishing the candles around the house. Without realizing it, they've been humming the same old tune

the whole time.

Suddenly, Mike sweeps Mary into an impromptu dance. She startles, then laughs, a rare and radiant music. She's never been quick to joy. But now, held tightly in her grown son's arms, her heart is free. She flashes the same moonbeam smile Tommy always wears. For a moment, the constant ache of hard years is overruled.

Mike croons softly:

*It may be forever we part, little girl,
But it may be for only a while.
But if fight here we must,
Then in God is our trust,
So send me away with a smile.*

He twirls her gently, then pulls her close again.

Mary kisses his cheeks, a slow tear sliding down her face.

"I know you never felt loved enough, Michael John," she says. "But if you weren't, it wasn't because you shouldn't have been. You are one of the most courageous, brilliant, stubborn men I've ever known. I have to pinch myself sometimes just to believe I get to call you my son."

"Ma..." he says, heart suddenly heavy with all the years he'd made her worry. "Ma, I'm so sorry. All those times—"

"You beautiful fool," she interrupts, fierce with love. "What I need you to hear is this: I've always loved you. Some of your choices have concerned me. But I must confess, I always felt a joyful flutter in my belly when I'd hear you'd won. And those envelopes of money you left in the breadbox? They were often the difference between porridge and brisket at supper."

"Money in the breadbox?" Mike grins. "Doesn't sound like something I'd do."

"Nevertheless, bless you," she smiles. "It's something you did."

A quiet moment passes between them.

"Didn't you always say I should've been a priest?" Mike teases.

"Aye, and I might've been a nun!" Mary laughs. "*Then* where would we be?"

Together, they laugh, holding each other close, like they want to always

remember this moment that is already almost gone.

*

The night before Mike Gibbons leaves for Camp Dodge, Helen doesn't sleep, so neither does Tommy.

At 4:42 a.m., her water breaks. Seven hours later, at St. Joseph's Hospital, she gives birth to a son: Thomas Joseph Gibbons Jr., named for the clan's patriarch.

Thomas John and Mary Burke arrive quietly. They say a prayer first for the new baby, and then for the child they once conceived—born, then lost too soon, when they first arrived in America.

They've lived too long to deny that all things must pass. *God's will*, they often say. But they've also survived enough, and been blessed enough, to believe that what is lost is never truly gone. That sometimes, by grace, it returns.

The newborn is his father's reflection, as Tommy, in turn, is an echo of the child who was here, then gone too soon.

They count their blessings, however large or small, and pray with every breath.

Faith is not found, Thomas John thinks to himself. *It's what we make when there's no way left to bend or break.*

*

As the draft empties cities and gymnasiums, the Saintry City's fight game grinds to a halt. There are no longer enough boys in Frogtown to fill a ring.

Mike, Tommy, and Kane make the hard call and shutter the Gibbons Athletic Club, temporarily ending their three-way business pact.

After the war—if there is an after—Tommy and Kane will decide if the fistic path still leads to glory.

Mike has other plans.

*

On the steps of the Minnesota State Capitol, dressed in full military uniform, Mike stands before a small crowd of reporters. He speaks briefly.

"I'm forever grateful to the people of St. Paul for your kindness, your faith, and your unwavering support. Without your loyalty, my victories would have meant nothing. That's why I've called you here. Not just to thank you, but to say: as of this moment, I will no longer fight alone in

the ring. I will fight alongside brothers on the battlefields of France. In this struggle to preserve liberty, I am retiring from boxing. Today, I am no longer the St. Paul Phantom. I am another God-fearing man joining the good fight. Thank you. And God bless America.”

A stillness settles. The breeze tugs gently at his coat. Somewhere, cameras capture the moment on film.

For the uncrowned king, the winds of war have reshaped destiny.

“When this threat to our country is finally over,” Mike tells a reporter later that night, “I hope to return home among men who have served with honor. For years, I chased the middleweight championship, but my mission now is much greater than that. My greatest wish is that when we meet again, I will not just be Mike Gibbons, but an Army Major.”



A DOUBLE LOVE STORY: May 17, 1916, at St. Vincent de Paul Church in Frogtown, Tommy Gibbons wed Helen Constance Moga, the quiet, steadfast partner whose fragile mental health would test their bond for decades. Beside them, best man Mike Gibbons and maid of honor Mae Walsh Gibbons, the fiery suffragette.



A MANY SPLENDORED THING: Bound by a childhood promise to protect one another and their 1910 comet vow to seize boxing's championship crowns, Mike (right) and Tommy (left) Gibbons lived, fought, played, and loved like lions. These photos from Tommy's wedding capture a rare moment of peace and laughter, where love stands as a shield against the scars of their craft and the challenges to come.



THE GIBBONS DYNASTY GROWS: Above left is Helen with Tommy Jr. (the author's father) and baby Jack. Above right and below left, Mike is pictured with his sons in 1916 and 1920. While writing a boxing column for Chicago's *Day Book*, the Phantom praised the sport as a form of exercise, but vowed his own boys would never become professional prizefighters.



BOXING LESSONS FOR BOYS.

Mike Gibbons and His Sons Give Instructions In Health Producing Sport.



SLIPPING LEFT LEAD AND COUNTERING TO BODY, FORCED BY JACK AND BOB GIBBONS. A was left most protruded or it. One line is in body a is. Counter The One The One One's line and the One is that. One for them to protrude a one.

In the fourth installment of a series for Chicago's *Day Book* on March 11, 1916, Mike Gibbons used his sons, Bob and Jack, to demonstrate the art of slipping a left lead and countering to the body. As the "middleweight champion" columnist for the publication, Gibbons explained the technique in his own words:

"Body punches have decided many important ring contests and here again is the big chance for a boxer who knows how to slip blows. In the above picture one of my boys is shown in the act of missing a straight left to the head which was slipped aside by the other boy, who merely turned his head the fraction of an inch, getting out of the way of the path of the left lead."



Tommy Gibbons
World Light Heavyweight Champion (1917)

On March 23, 1917, the Happy Warrior decisively outpointed reigning light heavyweight champion Battling Levinsky, but so-called “no-decision” laws stipulated that only a knockout could transfer the title. Though Levinsky kept the physical crown, writers and historians widely awarded Tommy the mantle.



INK & CREED: At left is the July 1917 cover of the *National Police Gazette*, featuring Mike Gibbons. The era's most popular sports weekly, its pink pages helped turn once-outlaw prizefighters into national treasures. At right, a ringside sketch by Robert Edgren captures the Phantom's creed: "I made 'em miss, then I made 'em pay."



THE WONDER AND THE GHOST: In early 1917, Mike Gibbons (right) met famed Australian middleweight and heavyweight champ Les Darcy (left), known as the Maitland Wonder, in Chicago, and saw a reflection of himself—a quiet warrior fighting for his family. Mike offered Darcy a rich payday to settle the "middleweight muddle," but sudden illness tragically claimed the Aussie wunderkind only a few weeks later. Down Under, the news was a national heartbreaker. The Phantom quietly paid to send his body home, mourning the fight that never happened—and the 21-year-old phenom, whom he called "a fine boy with a great future . . . cheated by fate well before his time."



A NEW FIGHT: What good is boxing in a world at war? When the United States declared war to join the Allies against Germany in April 1917, raising an army was only half the battle. Preparing the country for modern, mechanized warfare—trench combat, gas attacks, machine guns—was another thing entirely.

America was about to get a game-changing assist from Mike Gibbons. Appointed Chief Boxing and Hand-to-Hand Combat Instructor for the U.S. Army, he prepared a generation of soldiers for global combat. Below, Mike (center with hat) referees a match at Camp Dodge, Iowa, in a photo captured by his St. Paul pal, Sergeant Rudolph “Doc” Cook of the 313th Regiment, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.





MIKE GIBBONS AND HIS CLASS OF MILITARY BOXERS:
Camp Gordon, Augusta, Georgia, 1918
U.S. Army Cantonment Boxing Instructors



MIKE GIBBONS
Chief Boxing, Bayonett,
Hand-to-Hand Combat Instructor
United States Army

First Row: J. N. Warren, Mike O'Brien, Johnny Coulon, Johnny Kilbane, Benny Leonard, Charley Leonard, Jimmy Barry, Billy Armstrong.
Mid Row: Tommy Ryan, Fred Dyer, Tommy Gibbons, D. Scanlon, First Lt. A. Abramson, Jerry Griffiths, Harry Brewer, Jeff Smith, George Cohan.
Back Row: George Blake, Frank Wynn, Jack (Twin) Sullivan, Bill Rackenbach, Packey McFarland, H. B. Sanders, Eddie Harlan, Ike Williams.



THE PROFESSORS GIBBONS: At Camp Dodge (left), the Phantom drilled the 88th Infantry Division—also known as the Fighting Blue Devils—in boxing and bayonet combat, believing his innovative method would decide a soldier's fate in the trenches. Both Mike and Tommy (right), pictured at Camp Gordon in 1918, answered the call of duty.



MAJOR IN A MINOR KEY: Mike Gibbons, U.S. Army, 1918. Across seventeen cantonments, the Phantom and his brother Tommy helped train millions of recruits. "When this threat to our free country is at last relieved," he told journalists, "I hope to be among the men who return home and, if I might dare to dream, as a hero of the cause." Though both were promised commissions—major and captain, respectively—the war ended before the service of either brother could be formally recognized.



END OF THE WORLD: Mike's fusion of ring craft with bayonet drills and unarmed hand-to-hand combat against a bayonet-wielding foe while wearing gas masks (depicted above) readied America's doughboys for victory. A century later, the fighting manual he authored (reporting for duty, below left) is still used by the U.S. Armed Forces. As newspapers noted on October 11, 1918 (below right), the Army moved to commission both brothers for their wartime training service. Only weeks later, it became a promise broken.



Gibbons Brothers Slated For High Army Rank





GLADIATORS AT ATTENTION: General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (center), and Secretary of War Newton W. Baker (in dark coat and hat) review Presentation of the National Colors of the 88th Division at Camp Dodge, Iowa.



FREEZE FRAMES: In this action image series created by U.S. Army photographer Sergeant Rudolph “Doc” Cook, Mike Gibbons (left) and George Blake demonstrate the “manly art.” As Army Captain John J. Griffith declared, Gibbons was tasked with “putting the enemy out of business.”



To Prevent Influenza!

Do not take any person's breath.
 Keep the mouth and teeth clean.
 Avoid those that cough and sneeze.
 Don't visit poorly ventilated places.
 Keep warm, get fresh air and sunshine.
 Don't use common drinking cups, towels, etc.
 Cover your mouth when you cough and sneeze.
 Avoid Worry, Fear and Fatigue.
 Stay at home if you have a cold.
 Walk to your work or office.
 In sick rooms wear a gauze mask like in illustration.

THE INVISIBLE ENEMY: While Mike and Tommy trained soldiers for battle, a deadlier enemy emerged: the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, which killed an estimated one hundred million people—more than the Great War itself. Government advertisements (above) tried to slow the spread, while nurses (below) loaded the sick and dead into ambulances.

Overcrowded army camps were ground zero—“perfect breeding grounds, making sitting ducks of enlisted men.” Infected soldiers were shipped to the front, propagating the sickness across Europe. Ultimately, the Spanish Flu caused an estimated 60 percent of all U.S. Army casualties in 1918–1919.





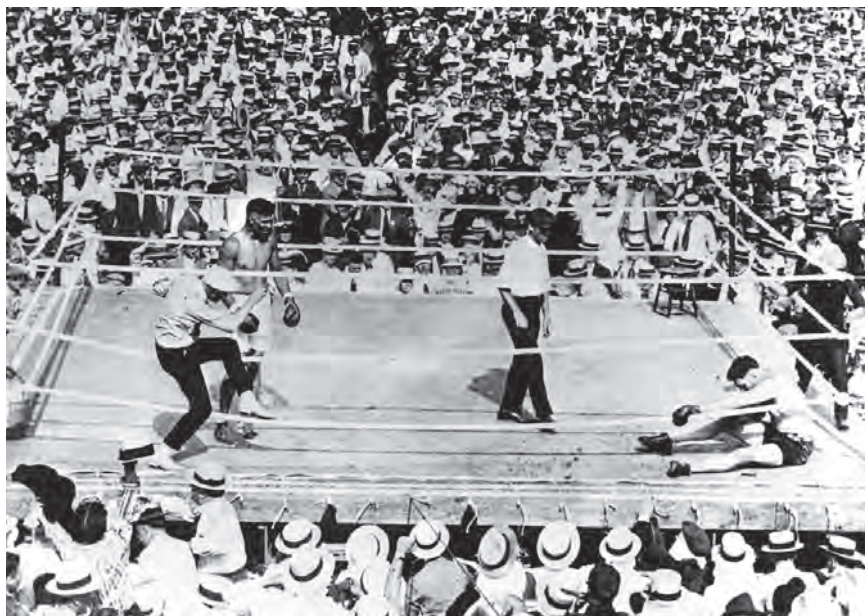
CITIES OF BOYS TO MEN: A bird's-eye view of Camp Dodge, Iowa (above), one of seventeen Army training camps, each housing roughly forty thousand soldiers—makeshift cities turning boys into warriors. Below, an Army recruitment advertisement.

LIVING PORTRAIT: At right, in the summer 1918, eighteen thousand Camp Dodge doughboys—including the Phantom and his former student Mike O'Dowd—pose for Chicago photographer Arthur Mole's morale-boosting "living portrait" of Lady Liberty.





THE MAULER'S RISE: Channeling desperation into unmitigated slaughter, the impoverished Jack Dempsey from Manassa, Colorado, stormed the fight game with a violent style that captivated the masses. On July 4, 1919, in the "Massacre in the Sun," he dethroned heavyweight king Jess Willard in a heart-stopping bloodbath. This brutal victory served as a final, convulsive fermata between the Wild West and the Jazz Age, cementing his legacy as the Manassa Mauler, the "dark destroyer" who forever changed the sport.



Jack Dempsey vs. Jess Willard
World Heavyweight Championship - Maumee Bay Arena
Round 4 - Toledo, Ohio - July 4, 1919



THE BOYS ARE BACK IN TOWN: After the war, Mike and Tommy (above) returned to the ring under new manager Eddie (the Cardinal) Kane (left). Their elegant sparring sessions (below) were a master class in the “sweet science”—a stark contrast to Dempsey’s merciless, sledgehammer ferocity.





THE WINDMILL & THE SHINING KNIGHTS: Colorful, unorthodox, and a notoriously foul fighter, middleweight legend Harry (the Pittsburgh Windmill) Greb (skipping rope, below left), was among the era's most feared contenders. He tangled repeatedly with the Gibbons brothers—losing badly to both Tommy in 1915 and Mike in 1917. In a 1919 disputed decision at Forbes Field, Greb hammered away at Mike over ten torrid rounds. Tommy avenged his brother twice in 1920, setting the stage for a final Greb vs. Tommy showdown (below right) at Madison Square Garden in 1922. Great matchups are the signature of enduring sports history, and in boxing, there are none better than the duels between the chaotic Windmill and the skilled Shining Knights of the Ring.





FATHERS FIRST: After World War I, the brothers' greatest roles became fatherhood. Mike (with his children, Bob, Jack, and Virginia, above left) fought to provide stability and cherished family above all. Tommy's household expanded as well; he is pictured (above right) reading to sons Tommy Jr. (left, the author's father) and toddler Jack. Below, the author's father and grandfather share a priceless moment.





**WILL THE TITLE ?
CHANGE HANDS TONIGHT ?**

2,450 Good Seats Left In the Vast Auditorium

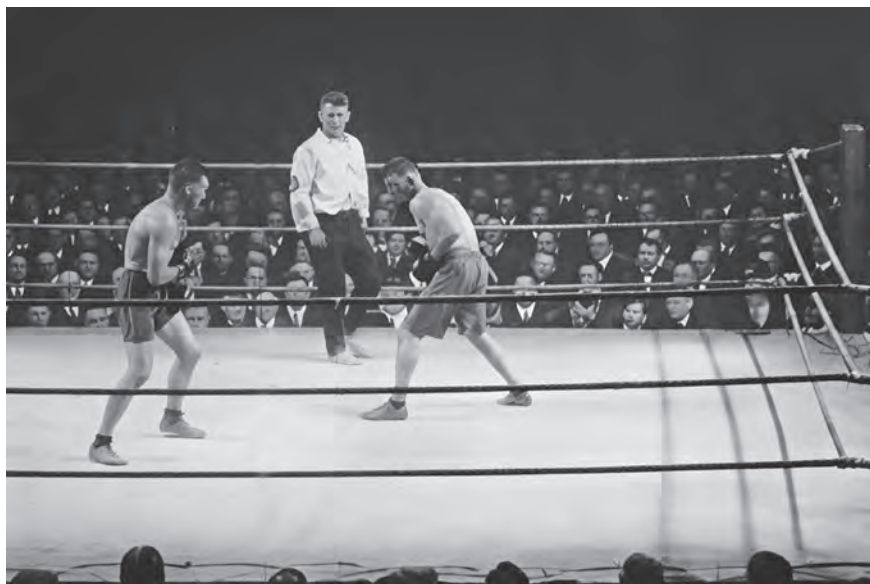
700 Seats at	\$10.00	ON SALE BY St. Paul Drug Co. The East Winchell H. Bryant and Winchell Winecke & Doerr 113 and 115th Streets and the Auditorium
600 Seats at	7.50	
750 Seats at	5.00	
400 Seats at	2.00	

World's Champion Mike O'Dowd
Will Defend His Middleweight Title Against
Phantom Mike Gibbons
The Master Boxer of the Age

Show Starts at 8 P. M. Sharp
Doors Open at 6:30 P. M.

LAST CHANCE DANCE: With training, love, and support from Sam (the Boston Bone Crusher) Langford (lower left), Thomas John Gibbons (lower center), and Father John Dunphy (lower right), the Phantom prepared for a final shot at the middleweight crown. His opponent: the Fighting Harp, Mike O'Dowd (above left), a war hero and his former student.





Mike Gibbons vs. Mike O'Dowd
World Middleweight Championship - St. Paul Auditorium
Round 10 - November 21, 1919

CROWN AND COMMUNITY: After battling Mike O'Dowd for the middleweight crown in St. Paul on November 21, 1919 (above, in the tenth round), the Phantom pioneered a new venture in his hometown: self-defense classes for women (below).



Mike instructs one of America's first women's self-defense classes.

Gibbons Athletic Association



LEARN TO BOX

The Gibbons Brothers Will Teach You!

BEGINNING AGAIN: After Mike retired, they reopened the Gibbons Brothers Gymnasium and published bestselling training manuals (above) to teach Mike and Tommy's influential "St. Paul Boxing Style" to a new generation, a method that continues to influence professional boxing and military training today. In time, their service to community and country would leave an even more lasting legacy.

Jack Johnson, heavyweight champion (1908-1915), lauded the Gibbons Brothers, "Mike and Tommy Gibbons were the last word in boxing skill and ring generalship. They were the cleverest boxers the ring has ever produced. Those two boys knew what it was all about. It was a treat for other pugilists, who appreciated the sweet science, to watch them in action. They were the personification of class and grace."



THE LAST WORD: Mike and Tommy Gibbons were masters of "the sweet science," a unique fighting art form that prioritized strategy over power. As six-time Hall of Famers, their dominance was undeniable. With a combined 96 percent win rate over 239 bouts, they are routinely ranked among the top fifty fighters of all time by major publications and historians. Notably, they were the first brothers inducted into Ring Magazine Hall of Fame and the International Boxing Hall of Fame. According to *St. Paul Pioneer Press* editor Don Riley, the brothers fought for "family, community, country, and the glory of God," and their bond remained incorruptible in the era's illegal fight game.

PART III

Toward Abundance or Oblivion

(1917–1920)



TEN ROUNDS AT CAMP DODGE

*God grant I have not wholly lost the way
But that, in seeking all the long years through,
The mist shall lift, and I shall find once more
The path that leads me to the dreams of youth
The lanes of light, the life I knew before
I left the old-time ways of faith and truth.
This endless dream: "someday I'm going home."*

—Grantland Rice, "Some Day,"
Songs of the Stalwart, 1918



The sadness and hunger, the banshee's wail, and his will to fight

Round 1

1872

County Mayo, Ireland

Even in the thickest fog, a lost Irishman could once find his way by the midnight hymn of church bells, their wind-stirred peal guiding him through the haunted tides of Lough Mask, the blighted fields of

Glennagashleen, and the slumbering giants of the Partry Mountains.

But it had been years since England slashed the tongue from every Catholic chapel's bell, thieving the song of Sunday mornings and the way back home for wandering souls.

Thomas John was born into that silence. Born to famine and insurgency and raised on Fenian fire—tales of shadowy heroes, whispered oaths sworn to bayonets and dynamite, endless prayers that the British would be forever driven from Irish soil. He thrilled to the breathless fables, wishing with all his might that someday the ghosts of warriors already fallen would miraculously rise again in the hedgerows and drive a stake through England's heart.

By twenty-two, newly married to a woman he neither knew nor loved, and with his first child stirring in her womb, Thomas John had already seen too much. Pulpits torched. Priests drowned in rivers. Chapel windows shattered like bones. Cobblers hanged for treason. Farmers burned alive in their barns. Mothers swinging hammers against British muskets, while rag-clad children hurled stones at boy soldiers not much older than themselves.

He'd watched brothers turn on fathers. Uncles betray sons. Entire families vanish in the night, smuggled aboard steamships, many of them lost at sea.

He had come to believe that freedom only mattered when it was gone.

Thomas John had been without church bells all his life. All that remained: the wind, the sadness and hunger, and his will to fight.

*

Life required more than survival now; it demanded provision. Thomas John chased the wind to its bounty, fishing by moonlight, snaring trout with his bare hands, unearthing burrowed animals, traversing miles under the cover of primrose and yew.

He kindled fire with a mere command, a phantom of the Emerald Isle, neither fit for heaven nor cursed enough for hell.

This world and all he knew, but a purgatory for the broken and ravenous, yoked in cages of flesh and bone, who could only live like the dead.

His midnight hunts were accompanied by two things: a leather bag and his father's shillelagh, a knotty, soot-seasoned broadsword of black-

thorn, oiled in hog's lard, a guardian against the darkness.

He had to believe it would be enough.

*

The Irish tell stories of the wind.

Thomas John knew them all, his every footfall marked by desolate winds, howling descants that "beat down the doors of heaven, and broke open the gates of hell." The bleak madrigal of Ireland's tempest, its "unearthly note" and "funereal cry," sometimes reminded him of the lullaby his mother crooned long ago over his cradle.

With so little left to lose, there was almost nothing left to fear, so he began tracking the keening wind across County Mayo, from the peat bogs of Tawnymackan to the mist-shrouded shores of Leenane, the peak of Croagh Patrick looming over Westport and through the Connemara woods.

He sought the source of Ireland's fateful ballad, hunting the banshee and her song, as if meeting the Devil might somehow confirm the existence of God.

In lore, the Irish banshee—or *bean sidhe*—is a fallen angel, a war goddess, a demon whose wailing serenade strikes dead the living and steals their souls. In a country strangled so long by famine and oppression, the dark faery's dirge believed to summon its victims by name, had become the island's national anthem.

Resolved, Thomas John marched through the gloaming, driven by whatever faith he could muster and the hope he might forever silence her.

Without reverence or dread, Thomas John stalked the godless drone until, blinded by fog, the banshee's thorny tongue assaulted his ears, grimly calling out a name he knew too well: "*Mary...*"

His wife.

A thunderous fury rose from deep within him, matching the banshee's unholy clamor. Shillelagh raised high overhead, he charged directly at the specter.

"*Mary...*"

Before him, the shadowy, misshapen form was splayed upon a jagged rock, raven tatters ribboning brittle, yellowed bones, the silver current of her torrid mane electric beneath a black cowl. Perfumed with ash and

brimstone, the banshee called out once more.

"Mary..."

The shillelagh swung like a guillotine, slashing through nothingness. In the blink of an eye, the wraith had vanished, replaced by a murder of crows, battering their inky wings into flight. The banshee, too, an escape artist.

Thomas John returned home that night, his bag empty.

But come morning, Mary still breathed, alive at his side.

Half a century later, the banshee's cruel tempest rages on, the haunted beckoning of her dreadful song no longer entombed on the Emerald Isle, but unmoored to devour the globe.

In the twentieth century, she will not let go of the world. Not until she's had her fill.

Round 2

Camp Dodge

Johnston, Iowa

July 1917



What good is boxing in a world at war?

When Mike Gibbons, newly assigned to the 88th Infantry Division, arrives at Camp Dodge, it is little more than a swampy stretch of land in the middle of nowhere. When he leaves fourteen months later, it looks much the same.

But in between, the Army raises a city, trains its sons, and ships them to battlefields across the Atlantic. Of the 100,000 men who answer the call—farmhands, ditch diggers, barbers, miners, new immigrants—nearly a third will return in zinc-lined pine boxes.

Crossing the gates in a lumbering Liberty Truck, Mike recalls leaving home more vividly than the muddy road behind him. It's only 250 miles south from St. Paul, but the road is rough and slick with rain. The long ride reminds him of his maiden trip to New York six years earlier. He can only hope this new journey reaps more certain victories.

Uniformed guards, rifles slung over shoulders, drag open the camp's barbed-wire gates. One of the boys speaks Italian, the other Swedish. Both arrived in America less than three years ago. One just turned eighteen.

*

Camp Dodge sprawls five miles in every direction. Once a quiet National Guard training ground, it's now home to the U.S. War Machine in its infancy—part majestic, part menacing, and all but inevitable.

Day by day, railcars deliver towering bundles of lumber, rapidly transformed into barracks, hangars, and chapels. Artillery trucks arrive with crates of rifles, machine guns, mortars, and grenades. Silver-haired officers inspect every load. Long lines of fresh recruits—"doughboys," they're called for the pale color of their uniforms—stomp through the mire, swinging hammers and grinding saws. Many brandish pickaxes, carving out zig-zagging trenches seven feet deep across the plains.

From dawn to dusk, the clang of metal, rumble of trucks, and hum of distant train whistles stitch into the air, a ragged tapestry of progress and dread.

*

Champion of the world or not, Mike Gibbons is among the first to arrive. Officers greet him warmly. New recruits break from their outdoor classroom to shake his hand, ignoring the patient old schoolteacher from Des Moines waiting at the lectern to resume lessons in reading, writing,

and French.

Unsurprisingly, the Phantom passes his Army physical, and moves to the check-in line. Inside a cathedral-like headquarters, he is issued a wool sack filled with uniform and gear: khaki breeches, wool leggings, a pressed shirt, everything double-stitched with removable buttons. A steel canteen. A bronze compass. A felt hat. A gas mask.

There will be time for training in combat, marksmanship, and trench warfare. Time to climb into freshly-dug trenches to rehearse the savage, close-quarter duels already claiming six hundred lives a day in Europe

There will be time to learn to fight and kill.

But first, there are lessons in French and, to Mike's surprise, singing. Led by the dean of Drake University's School of Music, daily choral lessons are mandatory. Army officials believe that music—especially patriotic anthems—unites soldiers like nothing else.

"There isn't anything in the world, not even letters from home, that will raise a soldier's spirit like a good, catchy marching tune," declares General Leonard Wood.

*

Mike is assigned a top bunk in a two-story barrack at the northern edge of camp, near the segregated quarters of the all-Black 366th Infantry. Sleep does not come easy.

Night after night, he roams the cantonment by lantern light, wind whipping across half-finished roads and scaffolding: a world not yet raised or in ruins. Trench lines. Fresh saplings. Crates of munitions. Snapshots in moonlight that resemble, more than anything, an unfinished movie set. The players: a city of young men, officers, medics, chaplains, some sleeping fitfully, some not at all. Mike wonders what it is they dream.

He's thirty now, a husband and father, a boxer uncrowned after a dozen years on the hunt. The new recruits, most of them a decade his junior, reflections of the boy he used to be, are restless and hungry, never kissed or knocked down, heads full of dreams and hearts less broken than bursting. Instinct over thought. Impulse over strategy. Unfettered by the road ahead. Not yet aware of all the ways a man can lose, even when he believes he's winning. They are dumb, beautiful, and perfect.

*

One night, a bonfire blazes between unfinished buildings, throwing sparks into the inky night. The glow paints Mike's shadow, tall and flickering, on a barrack wall.

Without meaning to, his feet slide into a familiar boxing stance, fists held low and lethal. From stillness, motion emerges.

Suddenly, he's jabbing at his own dark shadow. Sliding in and slipping away. Then rushing back and striking hard.

Faster than fire, the Phantom is alive again, if only for a moment.

Much later, when the flames subside, Mike stuffs hay from a wheelbarrow into his pillow and mattress, hoping for a better sleep.

All night long, though, he tosses and turns, wondering: *What good is boxing in a world at war? And were my dreams of glory ever anything but illusions?*

Round 3

To close the book on his prizefighting days, Mike Gibbons picks up a pen.

His 12,000-word memoir, "From 'Fraidy Cat' to Middleweight Champion of the World: Mike Gibbons' Own Story of How He Climbed the Pugilistic Ladder," is published in eight syndicated installments between November 7 and November 21, 1917.

The autobiography begins with the guileless dreams of a young fighter and ends with his meteoric rise in New York by late 1911. There are a lot of years after that Mike would just as soon forget.

In many newspapers, Mike's saga runs alongside a serialized revival of Washington Irving's short story, "Rip Van Winkle." The century-old tale follows a man who, weary of his unfulfilling life, wanders into the mountains with a band of hard-drinking strangers. After finishing the last bottle of their finest wine, the man falls into a deep sleep.

When he awakens twenty years later, the world is unrecognizable. All of his friends and family are lost or gone, many to a war he never fought. Most unsettling, he meets a man bearing his own name: his son, now fully grown and battle-scarred.

The story stirs in readers a nostalgia for things not yet lost, and a quiet dread for what's to come, as if deep down, they already know the next

twenty-five years will be hard and often terrible.

The future itself feeling like something worth sleeping through, if only they could.

Round 4



Camp Dodge's doughboys and the rest of America's military swallowed by darkness

Mike Gibbons is alone again.

Every night, the fog marches in, wrapping his ankles, swirling around his legs, pressing hard against his chest as he throws punches at his own shadow.

The wind groans, a low, bellowing dirge that does not purify the night, but poisons it.

The banshee. Here, then gone.

Mike knows her song, the unearthly note, the roar and sigh. He's heard it sometimes before big fights. He hears it now at Camp Dodge, often. It makes him think of home.

It is the vastness—the desolation—of Camp Dodge that speaks loudest to him. Every movement, a prelude to destruction and the art of war. The world unraveling, so it can begin again.

On November 11, 1917, President Wilson launches the first shot of American firepower over the proverbial bow, mobilizing National Army troops for overseas deployment.

Two nights later in St. Paul, Mary Burke Gibbons, with the wind calling her name, struggles to breathe.

The next morning, she is diagnosed with pneumonia. With antibiotic treatments still twenty years away, the illness is, for nearly half those who contract it, a death sentence.

On November 23, 1917, Mary, the woman Thomas John had once not known, but had come to love with all his might—is gone.

*

Mike Gibbons knows the telegram from home is bad news.

Gripping the unopened message in his fist, a cyclone of adrenaline shredding his soul, he storms two miles into the cantonment's flatlands to tear it open.

He reads it once, twice, then five more times.

Suddenly, he screams until his throat burns raw and his face turns the color of blood. Tears fall. Fury rises. His heart breaks.

Now he is a motherless child.

A dozen yards away, a grazing mule alone in the withered meadow glances up at the grieving man. Locking eyes with the beast, Mike bounds to his feet and charges the mule. Pouncing with menace, fists clenched, he lands a devastating right on the stunned animal's jaw.

The mule falls over dead. The Phantom collapses beside the animal, howling with grief, his heart in a thousand pieces, his right hand broken all over again.

Round 5

Mary Burke Gibbons is laid to rest at Calvary Cemetery, a few blocks from the family home on Burgess Street. Father Dunphy presides over her funeral. Thomas John Gibbons, her husband of forty-five years, speaks.

"My Mary," he says, voice cracking, "she always saw the strength in a person. Laid her eyes on their goodness, above all the rest. She always saw me as I wished to be, and that was enough for me. Quite enough. I

only hope my love was enough for her.”

At the church piano, Helen plays Mary’s favorite song, “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling.” Tommy stands beside her, meaning to sing. But when he opens his mouth, no sound emerges. Only tears.

Pacing at the back of the church, Mike cradles his bandaged hand against his chest, watching his brother falter, then clears his throat, and steps forward. Already singing as he reaches Tommy’s side, Mike wraps an arm around Tommy’s shoulder. He meets Mae’s eyes, then his father’s.

Together, the brothers remember their mother in song:

*In her good old Irish way
I’d give the world
if I could hear that song of my mother’s today
Too-ra-lo ra-loo-ral
Hush now, don’t you cry...*

*

For the first time in a century, there are no turkeys for Thanksgiving dinner. Every gobbling bird, more than a million of them, has been requisitioned for the troops. The rest of the country says grace over baked chicken.

In an address to the nation, President Wilson acknowledges the hardships of the moment. “In the midst of sorrow and great peril,” he says, “I pray we can still see the great blessings God has bestowed upon us.”

At the Gibbons home, dinner is served in silence. Eyes are low. Words are few. It feels as if they all have somewhere else to be, and are disappointed that they do not.

Thomas John sits at the head of the table, the one he built with his own hands a month after arriving in America. His children and grandchildren surround him, this man who had starved most nights of his life until he finally crossed an ocean, and now lives alone.

No one will leave the table hungry tonight, but they will feel hollow nonetheless. They are grieving, every one of them, their world reverberating with the deafening absence of Mother Mary’s song.

This, the sound of the world without Mary in it.

*

After the dishes are washed and the house quiets, Mike slips out back. Under the stars, he tightens the bandages on his broken hand, gazing at the old, burned-out barn where he and Tommy used to dream.

Three years ago, his mother planted winter berries in the space between the house and barn. Tonight, he sees they're beginning to bloom.

Every sorrow reveals another sorrow, he thinks to himself. And then there comes one more.

Behind him, the screen door creaks.

"Tomorrow you go," Thomas John says, stepping into the cold.

Mike turns, nods slowly, trying not to weep. His father pulls him into an embrace. Mike doesn't let go.

"I miss her too, boyo," Thomas John whispers. "Lucky for the Irish, we believe in ghosts. I'm expecting I'll be hearing her song again any minute now."

For a long while, they hold each other like this.

"There's something I want you to have," Thomas John says, leading Mike to the back porch. There, leaning against the door, the family's old fighting stick. "I don't need this anymore. But maybe you will."

Thomas John takes the shillelagh in his hands, twirling it over and over again, the blackthorn branch knotted and stout, five feet long, layered in so much soot it almost shines.

"It was your grandfather's. Then mine," he says. "The night we left Ireland, your mother remembered to bring it with us."

He hands it to Mike.

The weight of the fighting stick sends a riot through the broken bones in his hand, but he's also overcome with something else: a reverence, old and new.

As a boy, he dreamed a thousand times of swiping the mystical shillelagh, the sleek, serpentine, ancient weapon of war, that never left its tranquil resting place against the family fireplace. He wanted to swing it high overhead, shouting at the top of his lungs like an old Celtic warrior, until even the wind was struck deaf.

He grips the fighting stick now, its shape natural in his hands, despite the pain.

He swings, jabs, and retreats. Instincts he cannot unlearn.

His father watches him move, the shillelagh slashing through the night air.

"It's how we Irish have always fought," Thomas John says.

"Pop," Mike says, between breaths, "the Irish have never won."

"Well, maybe it's time we finally did!" he says, surprised to hear himself gently laughing for the first time since Mary went away.

Round 6

Dusted with new snow, Camp Dodge has transformed from wasteland to metropolis, larger now than all but fifty American cities.

Thirty thousand doughboys march in formation, boots polished to a mirrored shine, felt hats at precise angles. Their training lasts only ten weeks, yet every day, ten thousand more cross the ocean for the Western Front, where Germany launches its deadliest offensives.

Right hand nearly healed and heart still raw, Mike watches the young men depart. Many look eager. Others try hard to appear brave. But behind their eyes, Mike sees something else: an anxiety, loneliness—a quiet fear of what they might see or endure on the battlefield. Of how they'll sacrifice. What they'll be made to do.

Most of the boys have never thrown a punch, let alone driven a long blade into another man's throat.

Before leaving for Mary's funeral, Mike had shown a few enthusiastic soldiers the basics of boxing. Those men taught a few others. Word spread until a fistful became dozens. They weren't learning for sport, but to harden themselves for combat.

When Mike returns to Dodge, another telegram awaits, this one from former heavyweight champion and recently appointed U.S. War Department Athletic Director, "Gentleman Jim" Corbett. Believing that "agility of fists and feet, coupled with quickness of eye" is essential for modern warfare, Corbett names Mike as the Army's Chief Boxing Instructor.

"I knew from experience that boxing develops the aggression, self-confidence, speed, and skill a soldier needs," Mike later writes. "I believed that quick thinking and decisive action could mean survival, especially in the trenches."

But despite a staggering \$3 billion war budget (nearly \$70 billion today), Camp Dodge has no funds for boxing equipment. Mike doesn't blink, reaching out to Sol Levinson, an old friend in San Francisco who once boxed, but found his true talent was in crafting world-class gloves for better brawlers. Too old now for war, Levinson still wants to help. Within weeks, a thousand pairs of gloves arrive.

But Mike sees a greater need: a proper gym, more gear, maybe even an arena for the growing crowds. With permission from camp officers, he organizes an intramural boxing tournament, drawing fighters from the other sixteen national training facilities. Every Thursday night, matches fill the stands, raising money for the camps' athletic programs. Soldier bands, featuring drummers, fiddlers, and horn players, provide a rousing score, fueling the atmosphere.

The spectacles sell out weekly. Even Camp Dodge's Liberty Theater—"the Broadway of training camps," boasting five thousand seats—cannot accommodate the demand. If the Army wants to continue raising funds and morale, they need a bigger venue.

Mike calls in reinforcements: Tommy, still awaiting surgery, but already hailed as "a prospective boxing champion" with nineteen straight wins, and Kane, home on Navy leave from the USS *North Dakota*. Together, they stage an all-star benefit unlike anything the camps have ever seen: songs, skits, and demonstrations from billiards master Willie Hoppe, wrestling champion Earl Caddock, jugglers, wire-walkers, fire-eaters, acrobats, choirs, and brass bands.

In one night, they raise \$25,000. Within weeks, a new theater and fully stocked gym rise from nothing.

Over time, A-list entertainers follow: opera stars Enrico Caruso and John McCormack, pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski, and silent film royalty, like Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks. They all perform in the theater the Gibbons Brothers helped build.

*

Riding the momentum of their sold-out shows, Mike, Tommy, and Kane launch divisional boxing tournaments: elimination matchups between the best boxers from the seventeen Army training camps. Each two-night event sells out, raking in nearly \$20,000.

The crowds roar for every bout, from scrappy featherweight scraps to heavyweight slugfests. The soldier bands keep the energy high, their brass and drums thundering through patriotic anthems like “Over There” and “Sweet Adeline.”

Mike oversees it all, his shillelagh leaning against the corner post during matches. He referees most bouts, his sharp eyes catching every foul, his voice calm but commanding. When he’s not officiating, he’s in the gym, sparring with the best of the recruits, teaching them to move like he does—ghostlike, untouchable.

The biggest draw of all: a six-round “grudge match” between Mike Gibbons and Packey McFarland, now training at Kentucky’s Camp Taylor. Fifteen thousand soldiers pack the venue on April 25, 1918, their tickets paid for by grateful civilians.

“After their controversial affair at Brighton Beach in 1915, Gibbons and McFarland are deadly rivals,” writes Abe Pollock in the *Rocky Mountain News*. “There is still a lot of unfinished business between them.”

But this time, everything is different. Mike isn’t withered and gaunt from the rigors of making weight. Instead, he is Army-fed and strong, one hundred seventy-five pounds of solid muscle.

Lured into the match by Mike’s playful goading, McFarland arrives at Camp Dodge the day of the fight and embraces his old pal warmly.

“It was really good to see Packey again,” Mike writes. “We discussed (our upcoming fight) and agreed it would be a genuine boxing exhibition—instruction, not destruction.”

*

The box office, a complete sell-out. The flag, flown high. Soldiers, roaring with anticipation. Commanding officers, satisfied at the good work being done.

In Mike’s corner, Tommy rouses the warrior in his brother.

“You have a chance here, big brother,” he says. “A chance to show everybody once and for all that you’re Packey McFarland’s master.”

First bell rings. Cheers erupt from the stands and a powerful collision at center ring. A storm of fists and footwork, a blur of dazzling skill.

“I’d never seen Mike fight like that before,” Tommy recalls. “He was perfect that night. As perfect as he’d ever been.”

What strikes Tommy most isn't just his brother's precision or strength, but his joy. After a decade of being tossed and turned by the boxing world, Mike seems to be genuinely enjoying himself.

"Packey and I were there together in the ring, with no worries about making weight, or winning or losing. We didn't have a care in the world," Mike later reflects. "In the middle of wartime, that might have been one of the most peaceful moments of my whole life."

In the hush after the final bell, both fighters embrace, the crowd on its feet with deafening applause. The Phantom and the Pride of the Stockyards beaming, warmly bow to the frenzied crowd, then smiling at each other.

Friends. Everywhere but the ring.

*

After the Gibbons-McFarland fight, boxing fever sweeps the camp, its heightened value and influence rippling across all the Army training outposts.

"The fighting bonds the men," reports Army Athletic Director John J. Griffith. "Boxing promotes toughness, but also builds camaraderie and morale."

In this new frame, public sentiment shifts. Once frowned upon or outright outlawed, boxing is now seen as patriotic—a critical weapon in winning the war. As recruitment accelerates, even preachers begin calling it "the noble art," their sermons frequently invoking Saint Paul as God's faith-and-freedom-defending pugilist.

Newspapers carry banner headlines that read, "Boxing: The Single Best Way to Save the World from Tyranny!"

*

Shillelagh in his hands, bayonet on his mind, Mike knows the numbers, the strategies, the art of war. His plan to win the global conflict and earn a military commission for himself is only just beginning.

By the light of an Iowa moon, long after the last doughboy has collapsed into exhausted slumber, Mike moves through the night, braving the flatlands and the banshee wind. With him always: a pair of boxing gloves, his grandfather's fighting stick, and the bloodstained handkerchief gifted to him long ago by Joe Gans.

The latest battlefield reports confirm what Mike already suspects: most

combat overseas is not against airplanes and tanks, bullets and bombs. Rather, it's dueling in the trenches. Brutal and desperate. Face-to-face, blade to belly.

Mike's spine tingles with a game-changing hunch. It's not yet science or strategy, but something close to both.

On the north side of camp, in an empty field, he drops his gear and hums a tune, something he heard once on the wind, a long time ago. Gloves and shillelagh at his feet, handkerchief tucked at his waist, Mike taps his toe to set the tempo. Loose and easy.

Fists rising, then gliding through darkness, the Phantom begins to shadowbox the moon.

His head tilts side to side, hips rolling, fists thumping the air, keeping time on an invisible drum. Evolving the dance, his feet join in. Shifting left, lunging forward, an electric retreat, then a forceful charge. His hands follow. Feint, dodge, feint, then an uppercut, crashing through the silence.

In the middle of nowhere, Mike is a man in motion, grooving to his own melody.

When he notices the moonlight glimmering on the blackthorn club at his feet, Mike suddenly stops singing, as if considering a question only he can hear.

Then, with a flick of his boot, he kicks the shillelagh into the air, snatches it mid-flight, snaps it in close to his body. He weighs the weapon, studies it, and—softly, slowly—begins to sing again.

The shillelagh, passing back and forth, from hand to hand. Spin, turn, lunge, jab. Fists mixing with ancient timber, Mike slashes at the throat of an imaginary opponent, a merciless left hook, then a gruesome twist and fiery charge, the fighting stick slashing into the belly of his phantom enemy.

Feint, parry and riposte, retreat, counter, lunge, kick and thrust.

Mike moves as he always has, only now with the weight of a weapon in his hands.

Suddenly, as an idea blinks to life, he stops. The wind and the night have spoken.: the collision of fists and blades will decide the war.

In his journal that night, he writes it down: "Bayoneting is boxing with a bladed gun in your hands."

Round 7

In a fevered burst, Mike puts his theories to paper, a series of simple drills, fluid movements, and sketched diagrams of fighters mid-strike or poised to attack.

"They were sending boys through rooms full of poison gas six times an hour at Dodge, wearing nothing but primitive, threadbare masks," Mike recalls. "I didn't see how boxing with bayonets was any crazier than that!"

In Mike's pitch, the War Department doesn't see lunacy; they see genius. Secretary of War Newton D. Baker immediately recognizes the combat potential. So does Dr. Joseph E. Raycroft, a renowned Princeton physician turned National Training Camp Athletic Director, who believes Mike's visionary methods will "guarantee victory" and "a ninety-eight percent quota of fighting men returning home to safety." Captain John J. Griffith, head of athletics at Drake University, echoes the praise, crowing that Mike's systematic training will "put the enemy out of business!"

Secretary Baker wastes no time, immediately ordering "boxing and bayonets be made part of mandatory training at all military camps." He sends written testimony to Mike at Camp Dodge, "your methods are of the greatest value to the War Department and to the young men who will be receiving military training. —Cordially yours, Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War."

*

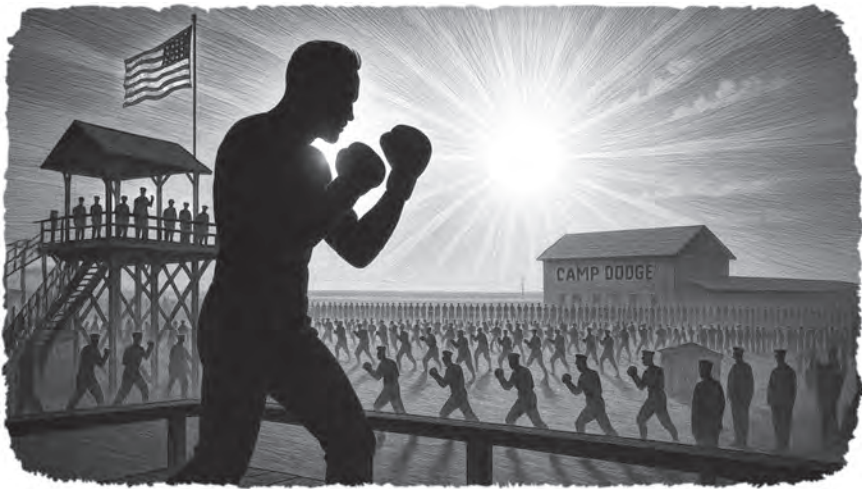
The War Department assigns photographer Sergeant Rudolph "Doc" Cook with the 313th Regiment, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to document Mike's hand-to-hand combat system in an extended set of images.

Before the war, Cook had worked for Camera Art Company on Cedar Street in St. Paul, next door to the Gibbons Athletic Club, where he occasionally worked out with the brothers and became their good friend. Reunited at Camp Dodge, where almost every familiar face was a welcome sight, Mike and Cook enlist doughboys, officers, and even the Phantom's kid brother as "enemy combatants," spending several afternoons staging combat scenes for the camera. A wide array of scenarios are captured by the camera: weaponless defensive and offensive hand combat forms, bayonet positions, jiu-jitsu postures to confront armed and armored opponents,

gas mask and knife-assault drills, as well as fundamental close combat boxing techniques.

The photos debut in the camp's twelve-page newspaper, *The Camp Dodger*, accompanying a series of articles by Mike, "Boxing Lessons for Soldiers," which are eagerly devoured by thirty thousand weekly readers. Soon, dozens of images from the Cook-Gibbons photo shoot are circulated through Army Headquarters to all seventeen training camps.

*



The Phantom training the troops to "put the enemy out of business"

Mike's system becomes one of the most sweeping combat reforms since the Revolutionary War. Newspapers nationwide herald the Phantom's transformation from uncrowned boxing king to the U.S. Army's god of war, with the *San Francisco Examiner* trumpeting, "Mike Gibbons Trains Uncle Sam's Fighters!"

But Mike won't teach every recruit himself. Instead, he'll personally train an elite corps of boxing legends—Benny Leonard, Johnny Kilbane, Tommy Ryan, Jack "Twin" Sullivan, Johnny Coulon, George Blake, Jeff Smith, Packey McFarland, and others—who will learn the method and spread it nationwide.

To scale further, the Army commissions the Signal Corps Motion Picture Section to film Mike's training regimen. The reels, preserved today in the Library of Congress and the National Archives, capture Mike Gibbons in action atop an elevated platform two dozen feet above his enthusiastic student body, leading legions of doughboys and boxers in "the manly art."

"Heads up and eyes front!" he shouts to begin every session.

At first, even the experienced boxers are clumsy with the bayonets, their movements stiff and timing off. But in time, they catch the rhythm and the choreography. Precision builds. Confidence rises.

As the morning sun climbs to high noon each day, the platoon's shadows stretch long and lean across the Iowa plains until the lethal dance is fully synchronized—committed not only to memory, but instinct.

The winter of 1917 through the approaching summer of 1918 at Camp Dodge is relentless—humid air thick with the buzz of flies and the distant rumble of artillery drills. Mike, molding raw recruits into fighters. Not just soldiers, but men who can think and move under pressure, who can survive the close-quarters savagery of trench warfare.

Hundreds of doughboys at every fifty-minute lesson, eager to learn from the St. Paul Phantom. They mimic his footwork, his elusive slips, his sharp, snapping jabs. Some are naturals; others, clumsy and wide-eyed, swinging away like they're chopping wood with a bowling ball. But Mike is patient, seeing in each man a spark of the boy he once was—hungry, unpolished, dreaming of glory.

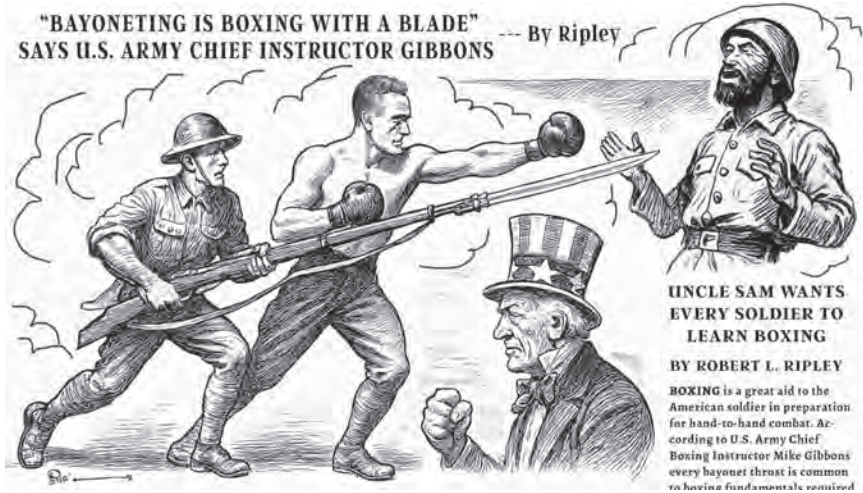
"Boxing's not about hitting harder," he tells them, circling the recruits. "It's about hitting smarter. Stay loose, stay sharp, and never let 'em see you coming."

The recruits nod, sweat-soaked, their faces a mix of awe and exhaustion. For many, Mike is their first brush with a real-life legend, a man whose name has been inked in newspapers from New York to Sydney. His presence alone boosts morale, and the boxing and bayonets program becomes a cornerstone of camp life, as vital as rifle drills or marching formations.

Between sessions, Mike writes letters home to Mae and the children, his words tender but guarded, never lingering on the war's grim realities. He asks about Virginia Mary's first steps, about Mae's work with the Orphan

Trains, about whether Tommy's hernia surgery has finally been scheduled. He tells them about the camp, the boxing, the boys who remind him of himself. But he never mentions the banshee's wail that haunts his sleepless nights, or the ache in his chest when he thinks of his mother's absence.

*



In the nation's newspapers, 'Believe It or Not!' cartoonist, 'Ripley, promotes boxing's role in the fight "over there"'

Within months, Mike's system is replicated at every training camp. In eighteen months, more than three million American soldiers are trained in the fistic, bayonet and hand combat regimen.

General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, supreme commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, praises Gibbons and the program. "This game of boxing is what makes the American Army the greatest in the world," he declares. "Nothing could rattle a man after this type of training."

It is the kind of military innovation needed to defeat the enemy, just as, a century earlier, the tactics and drills of General Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben had helped secure victory for General George Washington and the Patriot forces during the American Revolution.

Sportswriter Robert Edgren joins the chorus of hosannas, writing, "Mike Gibbons is doing great work as the Army's chief boxing and hand-to-hand combat instructor." For years, he claimed the middleweight crown

with little dispute, but the work ahead of him in the war effort may bring him even greater glory. He will not fight to destroy just one man, but all of the darkness that threatens our great nation.”

Mike is buoyed by the rumors rumbling through the ranks and press; his military commission is near. Major Mike Gibbons is almost real.

After a lifetime of chasing the boxing championship, his new mission—*surrender the crown, earn the commission*—is already coming true.

Everything is going according to plan until two things shake the ground beneath his feet.

Round 8

The first blow lands not in the ring, but on the silver screen.

Army Athletic Director Jim Corbett, once a vocal supporter of the Phantom, produces a training film to showcase “the Gibbons technique.” But when the cameras roll, Mike is nowhere to be seen. Instead, Corbett casts Al McCoy, the lackluster “cheese champ” who fluked the middleweight title from George Chip with a single lucky punch in 1914.

The film, starring Corbett and McCoy clumsily demonstrating Mike’s system, tours camps and theaters nationwide. To Mike, every flickering frame feels like an insult. Not just to his skill, but to his legacy.

*

The deeper wound comes next.

After forty-two cautious rounds and dodge-heavy title “defenses,” Al McCoy finally loses the middleweight crown. His conqueror: St. Paul’s own Fighting Harp, Mike O’Dowd.

Mike Gibbons knows the new champion well. Years earlier, he’d taught the kid “practically everything he knows.” Back then, the kid was living three lives at once, plowing through defenders on the football field, dangling thirty feet off the ground as an electrical lineman, and shadowing the Phantom everywhere he went.

At the Gibbons Brothers’ gym, O’Dowd sparred with Mike almost daily, hoping some of the magic would rub off. Mike booked his early fights, worked his corner, even helped sign him with powerful boxing manager Jack Reddy, Eddie’s older brother. Under Reddy’s guidance,

O'Dowd came out hot, rose fast, and never cooled off. By 1916, he was pummeling top contenders. Now, after years of muddle, the middleweights finally have an undisputed king.

And it is not Mike Gibbons.

Fight fans and sportswriters hold their breath: will the Two Mikes, mentor and protégé, battle for the crown? Their rivalry is pure dynamite. In an era desperate to shape order from chaos, the world watches and waits for one of the men to make a fist.

But Mike keeps telling himself that what matters most is not the crown. Not when there's a war to win. So he sticks to his new mantra: *surrender the crown, earn the commission.*

*

When twenty-three-year-old Mike O'Dowd arrives at Camp Dodge for training, it is with cruel irony: he's assigned to learn boxing from Mike Gibbons.

Their first meeting is silent, but tense. A *Camp Dodger* reporter likens it to "an Irish insurrection that made the Sinn Féin fracas overseas seem as peaceful as a skat match."

No fists fly. No harsh words are exchanged. But their eyes say plenty.

O'Dowd doesn't last a week before pulling the pin. "I'll beat Mike Gibbons in the ring one day," he boasts to reporters. "There's not room for both of us in St. Paul."

As O'Dowd's incendiary comments tear through the Army and sporting worlds, Mike remains silent as long as he can. But soon, he's trailing O'Dowd around camp, gaze as cold, fixed, and unyielding, like a locked and loaded Enfield.

The pressure mounts. Journalists, soldiers, and boxing fans cry out for the Two Mikes to "settle their beef," maybe as an Army fundraiser, morale booster, and wartime spectacle. Maybe to resolve the plight of the Phantom, long denied the championship reign many believe he indisputably deserves.

O'Dowd always walks away, head down, lips sealed, while Mike controls his frustration and fury by gripping Joe Gans' old, bloodstained handkerchief, as if it might offer wisdom, consolation, or reveal a path forward.

But war swallows all things, even the rivalry between Gibbons-

O'Dowd. So, for another moment, there is peace.

*

Then, one blistering one-hundred-degree day, it all begins to unravel.

Eighteen thousand of Camp Dodge's men stand, corralled in uniform, for an innovative photo project, massive in scale. Chicago photographers Arthur Mole and John Thomas plan to create a "living portrait" of the Statue of Liberty, using soldiers to form the colossal, storied emblem in a patriotic mosaic of flesh and fabric.

A local paper marvels: "The Statue of Liberty will be brought to life by means of the living soldiers who embody and defend it."

It's grueling work. From atop an eighty-foot tower, Mole shouts orders through a megaphone, as assistants mark Lady Liberty's outline with miles of rope. Troops are positioned with meticulous precision.

The photo shoot drags on for six stifling hours. Twelve men collapse from heat exhaustion.

The Two Mikes, nearly identical in height and build, are positioned side by side in the ambitious formation. As the sun begins to dip, their proximity grows unbearable, the temperature between them soaring.

"Just so you know," Mike seethes under his breath, "if I weren't gunning to be a Major, I'd knock every goddamned syllable out of your mouth. You, mouthing off to the world that you can beat me."

"Ease up, Grandpa," O'Dowd grins. "I'm the king now. I have to talk tough. They expect it."

"They expect you to win," Gibbons growls. "Which I taught you to do."

"And now I've got what you always wanted," O'Dowd fires back.

From high above, Mole calls out for another adjustment. The entire camp shifts eight inches to the left.

O'Dowd exhales, eyes still locked with the Phantom's. "Maybe after the war, Gibbons," he finally says. "If the world hasn't ended, maybe we'll fight then."

Round 9

Ten days later, six thousand men—Mike O'Dowd among them—ship

out from Camp Dodge to the battlefields of France. The Fighting Harp is the only reigning world champion to enter active combat.

Overnight, Dodge becomes a ghost town. Officers roam aimlessly. Support staff drift in eerie silence. The barracks, once alive with laughter and footfalls, now stand empty, waiting for the next wave of forty thousand recruits.

Mike Gibbons watches them go. Every soldier he trained. Boys turned warriors. He cannot help but wonder: *Did I teach them enough? Will they make it home? Will the war ever end?*

*

Weeks pass. Then months. Silence deepens as the Iowa winds turn bitter.

One morning, a slow, dirge-like procession appears on the horizon: a perfect line of six military trucks, bumper to bumper. A homecoming of sorts.

The trucks carry the dead. Fallen doughboys returned from France, ghosts now, packed into burlap sacks and pine boxes. Mike helps unload them, one lifeless soldier after another. Each face he recognizes tightens the fist of grief in his chest. Some nights, his sorrow howls louder than the wind.

At the segregated north end of camp, the all-Black 366th Infantry is tasked with digging graves. Their commanding officer, Lieutenant J.B. Morris, watches as the dead are lowered into the frozen ground.

Most of the 366th are "Alabama-enlisted"—a polite phrase for Black men forcibly conscripted from cotton fields and coal mines, pressed into service, then sent to the frontlines to die.

Under gray skies, shovels rise and fall. Graves open, then close. As they work, some soldiers sing low and steady. Spirituals. Songs of sorrow. Songs of survival.

The darkness at Camp Dodge grows deeper still. And it is not finished yet.

Round 10

Mid-May 1918, Mike Gibbons wonders if he'll ever see a living soldier again.

At last, he does. One at least: his kid brother.

Three months after undergoing surgery for the hernia that delayed his enlistment, Tommy finally arrives at Camp Dodge. The brothers stand together beneath a moonlit sky gazing out over the empty cantonment where the trenches gape like open wounds, barbed wire lies coiled and waiting, the artillery stands unmanned, the cannons cooled. For a fleeting moment, it feels like the old days.

Mike leads Tommy to the massive theater their fundraising helped build—hangar-like, with vaulted beams and top-of-the-line equipment. At the venue's heart: a boxing ring. The brothers lace up their gloves. For an hour, they spar, laugh, and reconnect.

Later that night, they join soldiers from the 366th. J.T. Brymn, a Black soldier with a knack for new musical stylings, has put together a sizzling band, the Black Devils. Ragtime, stride, and field blues. The music bursts with life in a world drowning in death.

Tommy sings, his baritone rich as molasses. Like a marching band conductor. Mike twirls the shillelagh with a grin. The music echoes and rolls into the vast, haunted hush of the Iowa prairie, where the jubilation fades to silence—a good thing, the Phantom might say, knowing that too much joy these days would never last, but might summon more darkness, both unspeakable and insatiable.

These days, he thinks, it always does.

*

A week later, Camp Dodge roars back to life with the arrival of forty thousand new recruits—and with them, a new nightmare.

On the night of May 24, a white man is attacked at Dodge. His seventeen-year-old girlfriend, a telephone operator at the camp, claims she was gang-raped by five Black soldiers.

There are no witnesses. No evidence. Just white accusation against Black skin.

“Military justice is swift and final,” historians Mary L. Jones and Michael W. Vogt write. By morning, four men are arrested. The fifth is never charged.

Within five days, all four are court-martialed. Three of them—Fred Allen, Robert Johnson, and Stanley Trammel—are convicted. With President Wilson's blessing, in the “first execution ever held within the

limits of a national Army camp,” according to *The Des Moines Register*, the convicted men are sentenced to be hanged in public at Camp Dodge. Gallows are erected overnight.

Colonel James P. Harbeson, a Spanish-American War hero turned Camp Dodge police commander, is ordered to pull the “lever of justice” that will drop the convicted to their deaths. Harbeson announces the executions will be held the morning after Independence Day on the north edge of the cantonment, near the Black barracks. All officers and soldiers must attend. Black troops in the front, nearest the gallows.

The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* refers to Harbeson’s justice as “a legal lynching.”

Unapologetically, Harbeson tells the newspaper, “This execution isn’t for vengeance. It’s to prevent others from going astray.”

*

July 5, 1918

9 am

“It was a very hot day with no wind,” recalls Lieutenant Russell B. Rathbun, forced to bear witness to the executions. “Thus, the voices of the condemned men reached the thousands of soldiers surrounding the scaffold.”

“As the gallows was approached, (we could hear one man’s plea of) ‘God save my soul’ rent the deathlike silence. ‘Have mercy,’ and ‘Oh Lord, save me,’ were also muttered,” according to *Des Moines Tribune* reporter Leslie Brooke, one of the few journalists allowed to cover the execution. “Soon the shrieks of Negro soldiers, unwilling and terrified spectators, driven into a hysterical state, added to the sickening scene.”

Lieutenant Rathbun will never forget it. “We were not experienced soldiers, just ordinary young guys who had only arrived at camp,” he remembers. “I saw some of my recruits weaving in the ranks, trying to stand at attention, but scarred forever.”

“It was the first intentional death that these troops had encountered and at the hands of their own Army, rather than the enemy’s,” according to historians Martin King and Michael Collins in their book, *Lost Voices*:

The Untold Stories of America's WWI Veterans. "For many, the forced witnessing of the public executions was as horrific as anything they would suffer on the Western Front."

*

Mike and Tommy stand together as Harbeson pulls the lever.

The trapdoor drops open. No ground beneath their feet, the men fall freely until the ropes snap taut. Legs kick, bowels release, bodies twitch. Eyes widen in horror and epiphany. Gurgles, grunts, howls, and hush.

And then nothing. Just stillness. And a horrible hush.

Gripping each other's arms tightly, praying without a sound, Mike and Tommy never speak of the event, but also never forget it.

*

After that, the gateway to darkness can only swing more widely open. Some call it the East Wind. Others, the banshee howl.

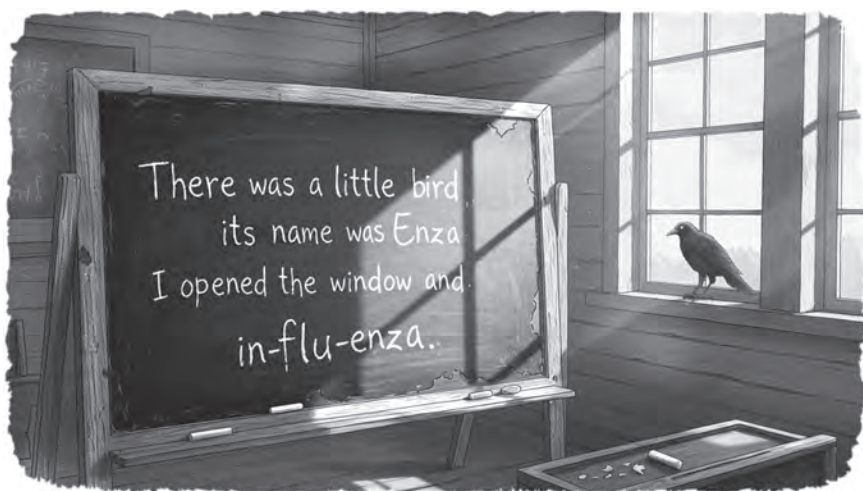
If the "legal lynching" and the world war were not sufficient hell for those on earth, then all the same, something worse now awakens: a new enemy, invisible, unrepentant, and savage, about to commence its remorseless march through history.

It will kill, and it will kill again. Every goddamned thing it pleases.

THE LITTLE BIRD

*It kept people apart,
killed those we loved,
sent us to bed sick and frightened.
It seemed like a ghost.
It came from nowhere and for no reason.*

—Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939)



President Wilson's foreboding nursery rhyme

In late September 1918, newspapers dare to print good news. After retiring from the ring to serve his country, Mike Gibbons is, according to the national press, tantalizingly close to achieving his hardest-won victory. “Within the coming week, Gibbons is set to receive a signal of honor from the War Department,” reports the *Buffalo Commercial*. “He is to be given the rank of major in the U.S. Army, and will be the first

athlete to earn a military commission in Uncle Sam's Army."

Tommy, now Chief Boxing Instructor at Camp Meade near Baltimore, stands on the cusp of a captain's rank.

For the Phantom, chasing boxing glory for a decade now, the news from Washington, D.C. serves as validation that revising his quest during wartime—*surrender the crown, earn the commission*—was not merely patriotic, but wise.

Yet history looms to upend his path once more. A shadow gathers, swift and merciless, over Camp Dodge and the whole wide world, poised to besiege the planet and shatter every hope and dream it can.

It feels like the end of the world.

*

But by month's end, Camp Dodge—and the world—is under siege. Even President Wilson acknowledges the invisible enemy in the form of a grim nursery rhyme:

*There was a little bird
its name was Enza
I opened the window
and in-flu-enza.*

Children across America sing it, not in joy or sorrow, but because no one knows what else to do. Not teachers, priests, politicians, or parents. Not even doctors.

The flu is not a sickness. It is a storm—tearing through lungs, blackening limbs, drowning victims in their own mucus. It doesn't just kill. It floods the body with poison.

The "mystery flu" first appears in March at Camp Funston, Kansas, an overcrowded Army training center. By spring, infected U.S. soldiers carry it across the Atlantic. By June, it's raging through China. When King Alfonso XIII falls ill in Madrid, newspapers dub it the Spanish Flu. The truth soon becomes clear: America's Army camps are ground zero for the virus spread.

Then, the dying begins—tens of thousands in a single day. Inexplicably, the strongest and healthiest are hit hardest. Two-thirds of U.S. fatalities are between the ages of eighteen and forty.

“Spanish Flu came on like a hurricane across the green fields of life,” writes the *Times of London*, “sweeping us away in hundreds of thousands.”

Symptoms are swift and cruel: headaches, vomiting, fever, hacking coughs, exhaustion. The body’s overstimulated immune system turns assassin, creating a cytokine storm of inflammatory proteins in the bloodstream—damaging organs, flooding the lungs. Skin turns cyanotic, a deep blue color resulting from oxygen loss, causing Army doctors to struggle distinguishing white soldiers from Black men. Historian John M. Barry writes, “You could bleed not just from your nose, but from your eyes and ears. It was a terrifying thing to witness.”

Science offers no answers. Virology is in its infancy. Doctors mistake the influenza for a bacterial infection. The true culprit isn’t identified as a virus until 1933. In 1918, with no vaccine or antibiotics, the market floods with bogus cures: laxatives, leeches, iodine drops, hot vapors. Even squirrel soup.

Seventeen Army training camps—each housing at least forty thousand men—become death traps. “Perfect breeding grounds,” says one doctor. At Camp Grant, Illinois, seventy men fall ill in one week. The next day, cases triple. Overnight, they double again.

At Camp Dodge, the flu spreads like wildfire.

In some Army camps, 20 percent of infected soldiers develop pneumonia. One-third of them die. Mary E. Hallock, head nurse at Dodge, reports the camp lost 775,151 “man-days” to the virus.

War rooms are accustomed to risk calculations and acceptable losses. But this? This isn’t war. Death doesn’t come from gas, bullets, or bayonets. It comes in the night, burrowing into the lungs of men as they slumber.

Through it all, President Wilson remains silent. Not one public statement about the pandemic. No warnings or calls for national unity against the disease. No acknowledgment of the dead. History later reveals why: he feared the truth would damage morale and imperil the war effort.

So, the country is left blind. The government and press downplay the illness, insisting all is well.

“Meanwhile the deaths were piling up by the thousands,” Barry writes. Quietly, the public’s trust begins to collapse.

In time, the truth will overwhelm the world.

At Camp Dodge, Mike and Tommy watch helplessly as 500 men fall in a single day. The cantonment locks down. Armed guards patrol the gates. No one in, no one out.

Within a week, 6,000 soldiers are sick. The virus burns mercilessly through the camp. One Army document reports soldiers waking up healthy, falling ill by noon, and dying before supper.

The Army is utterly unprepared. The hospital, built for 2,200, drowns under 8,000 patients. Barracks become makeshift wards. Healthy dough-boys shovel straw into corners, transforming bunks into sickbeds. The 400-member medical staff fights around the clock, but Camp Dodge was built for 42,000 men—and now holds 47,000. Under such conditions, says ward surgeon Theodore Willis, even basic care is “impossible.”

Ten days after the first infection, 450 soldiers are dead. The camp flag drops to half-mast and stays there. Two weeks in, Camp Dodge reports 10,008 cases. The *Omaha Daily News* declares: “Camp Dodge Death Rate Is Highest.”

After that, “the Army refused further public comment and quarantined the camp,” writes *The Des Moines Register*. “Daily reports from Camp Dodge stopped immediately.”

The dead overwhelm the mortuary, built to handle four bodies a day, not forty. Corpses pile up outside the barracks. *The Register* reports, “Camp Dodge smelled of rotting bodies for weeks.”



Camp Dodge at the end of the world

Mike and Tommy work in silence, faces wrapped in cloth masks, sweat stinging their eyes. Together, they lift bodies stripped of everything but dog tags and stack them into trucks bound for mass graves.

"As you lifted a body by its arms and legs, they often detached themselves from the torso, but this was not the worst thing," remembers Second Lieutenant Stuart Cloete. "Each body was covered inches deep with a black fur of flies that flew up into your face, into your mouth, eyes, and nostrils as you approached. The bodies crawled with maggots and had the consistency of Camembert cheese."

Coffins run out. *The Register* reports some of the dead are "dumped in a hole in the ground." Iowa State Senator Don Murray confirms, "I saw them take soldiers out of there by the truckload. They threw them into trucks like fence posts."

On the last truck to leave Dodge, Mike loads the body of Colonel Charles B. Hagadorn. The camp's commanding officer, broken by the deaths surrounding him, has put a bullet in his head.

*

The pandemic takes its time reaching Minnesota.

"Spanish influenza does not exist in (our city) and never has," declares St. Paul Health Commissioner Dr. H. M. Guilford on September 19, 1918.

Ten days later, officials reverse course.

On September 29, they confirm the truth: the flu has arrived. The first case? A man returning from a visit to his son at Camp Dix, New Jersey.

By October, the Spanish Flu slams into the Twin Cities "like a house on fire." People begin dying.

It's difficult to comprehend this second, invisible war. The world is already spiraling, consumed by years of brutal conflict. But now this.

"The pandemic was spectral because the war was what seemed like the real story of the time," writes historian Damir Huremovic. "People had been fighting the war for four years. They knew the characters. They knew the plot. But the flu lurked as this invisible trauma that made everything worse."

St. Paul is slow to impose safety measures and restrictions.

"There is no epidemic here," Mayor Laurence C. Hodgson insists on October 8. "Particularly not among civilians."

Five days later: 181 cases. Twenty-four dead.

Officials urge Americans to wear masks, believing they prevent “spray infections,” historian John M. Barry notes. But the cotton gauze masks of 1918 are too porous, often worn incorrectly, and provide scant protection.

“The masks worn by millions were useless, and there was no medicine or vaccine,” Barry writes. “Only preventing exposure to the virus could.”

Social distancing proves the most effective measure.

“The virus was too efficient, too explosive, too good at what it did,” Barry observes. “In the end, the virus did its will around the world.”

Professional boxing, already crippled by war, grinds to a halt. *The Ring* reports that promoters in Philadelphia, Boston, and New Jersey cancel fights under local health mandates. “How long the sport will be idle remains to be seen,” the article reads, “but it is positive that no matches of any importance will be undertaken while the epidemic continues.”

The Spanish Flu sweeps through the fight world. Bill Brennan, Tommy Burns, Tommy Nelson, Jim Jeffries, Jimmy Clabby, and Willie Ritchie all contract the virus. But it knocks out none of them.

*

As the death toll mounts, St. Paul’s mayor pleads with residents to wear masks and stay home.

“With more than half our doctors and nurses already in war service,” he warns, “we dare not take any chances here.”

In Minneapolis, a wedding becomes a grim super-spreader event. The bride and groom fall ill within twenty-four hours.

“The bride died on Thursday afternoon. The groom died the following morning. They were buried in the same grave,” laments one newspaper. “The priest who married them died ten days after the ceremony.”

On November 6, St. Paul locks down. With 4,000 confirmed cases and a death rate of 413 per 100,000, officials close schools, churches, theaters, restaurants, dance halls. Funerals are banned. Spitting is outlawed. Sharing cups discouraged.

Elevators in buildings under seven stories are shut down. Streetcar drivers are ordered to keep windows open for ventilation. Retail hours are tightly regulated. Postal carriers and Boy Scouts deliver influenza pamphlets door to door.

In the Gibbons household, no one is spared. Wives, children, even Thomas John.

“God’s will,” the aging man mutters constantly to himself.
Miraculously, they all survive.

*

By Thanksgiving, St. Paul—and much of the world—believes the nightmare is over. Then December brings another 7,200 cases. By New Year’s Day, more than 675,000 Americans have died.

In Minnesota, 10,000 perish, including 1,180 in St. Paul. In the Army camps, roughly 50,000 soldiers fall to influenza—more than die on the battlefield. Worldwide, the toll reaches over 100 million.

Among the dead: Frederick Trump, grandfather of the forty-fifth and forty-seventh U.S. president; ice hockey champion “Bad Joe” Hall, whose death forced the cancellation of the 1919 Stanley Cup Finals; brothers Horace and John Dodge, who founded the well-known Dodge Motor Company; the princes of Sweden, Japan, and Italy; newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst’s mother, Phoebe; Silk O’Loughlin, the diamond ring-wearing “autocrat of baseball” who umpired five World Series with his signature ear-shattering calls at home plate; William Osler, a cofounder of Johns Hopkins Hospital; *Cyrano de Bergerac* playwright Edmond Rostand; beloved, twenty-five-inch-tall circus dwarf, Admiral Dot; and Oyama Sutematsu, the first Japanese woman to receive a college degree.

Even President Wilson is not spared. He contracts the virus in early 1919 while negotiating the Treaty of Versailles.

“At the most crucial point of negotiations,” historian John M. Barry writes, Wilson’s diminished mental state forces him to cede control to France’s Georges Clemenceau and Britain’s Lloyd George. The two impose punishing terms on Germany, sowing the seeds for another, greater war.

“Historians agree that the harshness of the Paris peace treaty helped create the economic hardships, national reaction, and political chaos that would foster the rise of Adolf Hitler,” Barry notes.

In time, Wilson’s illness leads to two strokes, prolonged disability, and, in 1924, his death.

The east wind. The banshee howl. An insatiable storm calling out too many names.

War was the hell we thought we knew, the one we saw coming.

But the global pandemic, this was something else. Not a battle, but a purge.

*

Then, as suddenly as it began, the impossible happens.

The Spanish Flu, having gorged itself on millions, slows, staggers and fades.

Across the Atlantic, world leaders gather in a railway car in Compiègne, France, to sign an armistice set to take effect at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

But word travels slowly to the front. In the war's final six hours, 2,000 more soldiers die. At 10:59 a.m., one minute before the ceasefire, Private Henry Gunther of Baltimore, with the 313th Infantry, makes a last desperate charge. Trapped with his unit in the fog of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, he lunges forward alone, bayonet raised, toward two German machine-gun squads. His comrades scream for him to stop, but their voices are drowned by the staccato burst of enemy fire. A five-round volley strikes Gunther in the temple.

He is dead before he hits the ground. The last American killed in the war. The difference a minute can make.

*

Across Europe and back home, survivors begin their return, forever altered.

"Those of us who used to laugh at danger have stopped laughing," writes William Seabrook, an American ambulance volunteer. "We don't come back and tell each other with excited interest how close we were to a shell burst. It is sufficient that we came back at all."

Gold stars appear in windows across America, silent tributes to the 5.1 million dead. In Minnesota alone, 2,700 men sacrificed their lives. Another 12.8 million worldwide survive, but return home maimed, scarred, or psychologically shattered in ways no one yet understands.

Still, they are received as heroes. They have won the war and outlived the plague. The luckiest, including Mike and Tommy Gibbons, step off trains into waiting arms, whole, if forever changed.

The future, long suspended, begins to take shape again. Normal life resumes in fragments.

Many who read “*Rip Van Winkle*” in the newspapers that year wish they had slept through it all.

Mike Gibbons is not one of them. For the first time in his life, he doesn’t know the numbers, can’t predict what comes next.

But he hopes to be ready.

*

By New Year’s Day 1919, Camp Dodge has discharged 208,000 soldiers and is promptly deserted.

The whole world strives for normalcy. In America, the Eighteenth Amendment takes effect, prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages.

In a triumph for Mae Gibbons, the suffragettes and their allies, the Nineteenth Amendment finally succeeds. In recent years, Mae has worked alongside leaders of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, including Jeannette Rankin—the first woman to hold federal office in the United States and a Republican congresswoman from Montana—and the artist-activist Neysa McMein. Together, they have lobbied passionately for legislation enfranchising women in several states, including Minnesota, Montana, and New York.

They fight the good fight—and at last, they win. After decades of protest and advocacy, women will cast their votes for the first time on Election Day, 1920. The man they help elect is a handsome Republican, Warren G. Harding, whose “Back to Normal” campaign is conducted largely from his own front porch in Marion, Ohio.

*

Homecoming soldiers reclaim their places—at home, in their marital beds, on the factory lines, behind shop counters. Women cook for one more mouth again and remember how to make love. Children meet their fathers, some for the first time. Churchgoers pray harder and louder, hoping it might somehow help, grieving for whatever they’d lost or left behind, the dreams they’d dreamed and forgotten.

In the aftermath of pandemic and war, the United States emerges from a century-long formative phase as the undisputed global superpower—a military force that barely existed when the nation declared war, but became, through the efforts of doughboys and boxers alike, the decisive

factor in Germany's defeat.

There is cause to celebrate, but few remember how.

*

By June 1921, "the magic (at Camp Dodge) was all gone," observes an Iowa newspaper. "The grounds are now waist-high weed patches. Many barracks consumed by fires, were left to burn out. There, alone on a hillside, all that's left of a hospital is a brick fireplace. Over everything is an atmosphere of desolation."

"It has been just four years since Camp Dodge rose out of the Iowa cornfields almost overnight," eulogizes *The Des Moines Register*, "as if Aladdin had rubbed his magic lamp and demanded quarters for an Army where only fields had been before... Speed, speed, more speed—that was all that mattered."

After the war, Camp Dodge isn't merely abandoned, but dismantled, its every plank, cot, screw, bolt, pipe, and window auctioned off to the public at fifty cents on the dollar. The demolition company, Northwestern Lumber & Wrecking, worked swiftly, their two hundred laborers toiling "like dwarves against the task they have to perform." They are paid \$3.50 a day, half the wages of the men who built the camp.

"Camp Dodge is passing," writes *The Register*. "There is no blare of trumpets in the tearing down of the camp. Like some great metropolis of an ancient race, the soldier city, deserted and unused (since war's end), is being invaded by men whose purpose it is to wipe out every memory, every trace, of the people who once inhabited it."

A century later, historians excavate the weather-beaten grounds and buried trenches at the Iowa cantonment. They find broken ammunition boxes, empty shells, torn uniforms, shattered helmets, shrapnel, bone fragments, and at least one live hand grenade. The "detritus of war," they call it.

By July 1, 1921, *The Register* reports, the acres once occupied by Camp Dodge are as they once were—farmland. Returned to the people who try not to forget what they've endured, but hope beyond hope, that they might.

"The heart of Iowa," *The Register* muses, "is now just a cornfield again."

RHAPSODY IN RED

*I am a killer.
I come from killing. I go to more.
I drive red joy ahead of me from killing.
Red gluts and red hungers run
in the smears and red juices of my inside bones:
I cry for war.*

—Carl Sandburg, “Fight,” *Chicago Poems*, (1916)



All hail the new, man-killing champion of the world

*After the War
St. Paul, Minnesota*

“Church bells replaced bombshells,” writes George Barton, weeks after the shooting finally stops. “Marching bands rejoice where soldiers in rank once stood. Jubilant music displaces the deafening erup-

tions of mortars. The sickening sound of a bayonet gutting some mother's son in a faraway trench falls to a silence that never heals. Those lucky enough to come home will never be the same, nor will anyone who ever loved them."

Before the war, people said anything was possible.

After the war, everything seems permissible.

A third of all human life is lost in a flash of disease and war. The toll, unfathomable. Everyone has said goodbye to someone.

There is sadness, of course. But there is something more. A yearning. For order and release. Absolution and vengeance. A burning for redemption.

The world, punch-drunk, emerges from its nightmare, hungry for blood.

"The war inflamed the public's collective mind," Indiana author and poet H.W. Whicker writes, "until the killer part of humanity became the rage."

Boxing, in its raw brutality, is what the world needs now.

*

Once an art, boxing becomes a killing field.

"The war seemed to release a bloodlust on the part of boxing enthusiasts," writes Whicker. "They want power now. Slaughter. Bloodshed."

Scientific contests? A thing of the past.

"The public now prefers the knock-'em-down, drag-'em-out brand of battle," George Barton observes. "Once, they loved strategy, cleverness, and defensive tactics. Now, they want murder."

It is coming.

*

William Harrison "Jack" Dempsey is twenty-two when America enters the war. By then, he'd already spent a decade on the run.

Born hungry and howling in Manassa, a southern Colorado mining town, Dempsey had escaped his dirt-poor Mormon family as a child. He roamed the mountains, stowed away on railcars, fought for scraps. He worked in coal mines and saloons, where he let men hit him in the face with a shovel for a dollar. No matter what, he always got back up.

After years as a hopeless vagabond, he began fighting under the name

Kid Blackie. He could take an anvil-powered punch well enough, but even when he won, it was never for more than fifty bucks.

By 1917, Dempsey was lost and alone in the world, tired of it all, and ready to walk away from boxing forever.

That's when he met Jack Kearns in San Francisco. Kearns—the larcenous leprechaun who had just lost Les Darcy, first to Tex Rickard, then to Death itself—was sprinting through the full range of emotions: heart-break first, then fury. Standing on the Golden Gate Bridge, he seriously considered a swan dive into the Pacific, despite not knowing how to swim.

After Darcy's passing, Kearns was left with nothing. Not even desire. He was done. Or so he thought.

The night after seeing Darcy's body off to sea, Kearns dines in the Barbary Coast's Poodle Dog Restaurant. It's there and then that Eddie Kane and the Gibbons Brothers introduce the shattered con man to the destitute Dempsey.

"It was kismet!" Kearns yelps years later, still stoked by the memory, though the Gibbons' act of kindness did nothing to illuminate his heart of darkness.

In short order, Kearns caged the Colorado kid in his Oakland garage and turned it into a furnace of destruction, tutoring Dempsey in the brutal art of fistic demolition. Kearns transformed his protégé's hunger into rage, taught him to tear men apart with precision, to attack with the speed and savagery of a wolf pack.

Months later, they emerged from the garage as "The Two Jacks." The world never saw them coming.

At first, newspapers laughed off Kearns' outrageous claims that he was managing the next champion of the world. Then Dempsey started crushing skulls, barreling into the ring like "a human submarine destroyer," boasting an eighty-three-percent knockout rate. Most of his fights didn't last four rounds.

As Dempsey continued piling up bodies, the press caught on. Soon, the whole world knew his name, and the litany of nicknames that followed: Caliban of the Mines, the Dark Star, the Original Sin, the Lethal Beast from the Belly of the Earth, the Sacrificial Altar, the Hellfire, and the Bridge of Sighs.

Dempsey gave the world what it wanted: a hellish ride around the world in fifteen rounds, with climactic moments that left absolutely nothing to ambiguity.

“He nurtured our aggressions and stoked our imaginations with his destructive and explosive bursts,” writes acclaimed author and sports-writer Paul Gallico, who once briefly sparred with Dempsey. “He was giving every living man precisely the power and release for which he so desperately yearned.”

The Gibbons Brothers took notice. At Camp Dodge, both Mike and Tommy repeatedly sent word to Dempsey, inviting him to fight either one of them in a wartime fundraiser. Kearns refused. He’d already maneuvered Dempsey out of the draft, and wasn’t about to risk him in a bout against the Gibbons boys.

So Dempsey kept going, destroying everything in his path.

On Independence Day 1919, he carved his name into history forever in a dizzying shower of gore remembered, even today, as “the massacre in the sun.”

*

July 4, 1919

Jack Dempsey vs. Jess Willard

Heavyweight Championship of the World

Toledo, Ohio

Seventy thousand sweat-drenched fight fans pack into a pine coliseum hastily raised along the Maumee River. The summer sun is scorching, the air rippling with heat and expectation.

Master promoter Tex Rickard sells the spectacle as salvation and resolution. After a prolonged world war, he offers a clarified version fought in a ring battle between two men, where a clear winner emerges inside of twelve rounds. Ringside seats go for sixty dollars—a king’s ransom. Adjusted, Rickard nets \$8.5 million on the event.

In one corner: Jess Willard, the Cowboy Killer, the six-foot-six, 270-pound behemoth who once killed a man in the ring, then battered Jack Johnson over twenty-six brutal rounds to claim the heavyweight crown.

In the other: Jack Dempsey. Smaller. Meaner. Hungrier. Fury in flesh, murder in his fists. Dempsey: a new world order, wrapped in blood and bone.

Round one: The first blows are a four-shot combination from Dempsey, which send Willard crashing to the canvas. Dempsey floors the champion seven more times before the round is over.

It is a bloodbath—a final, convulsive fermata between the Wild West and the Jazz Age. For three devastating rounds, the ring explodes with sledgehammers and snarls. For nine grisly, indelible minutes beneath a punishing sun, fight fans witness a bone-crushing assassination, a startling, red-river Rorschach.

By the time the towels fly, Willard is pummeled to a pulp. Shattered ribs. Broken cheekbones. Dislocated jaw. Half an ear torn clean off. Blood boils on the canvas as Dempsey hovers, demon-like, over his prey.

His victory is not just decisive; it is absolute.

It is “the most one-sided fight ever seen in any ring,” writes Robert Edgren.

*

Onto the scarred hide of a young, rancorous, despairing nation, broad-sided, shell-shocked, and pockmarked with fresh graves from sea to shining sea, Jack Dempsey claws his name.

In return, sportswriters call him the Manassa Mauler.

Embodying all the horror that history’s ever been, he becomes more than champion of the world, but a sign of the times.

This humble, unschooled, two-fisted nomad—a nobody from the middle of nowhere—Dempsey is the east wind, the scorching thunder and pummeling inferno that cleanses and gratifies the people and the plains after the inconceivable intermezzo of recent years.

A savage king for a whiplashed world, Jack Dempsey becomes the most famous man on the planet—and also the villain that Mike Gibbons’ kid brother needs.

*

The day after Willard’s dismantling, the *New York Journal American* publishes a poem by Nellie Bly, the pioneering journalist who once infiltrated Gotham’s sordid asylums and circled the globe in a hot-air balloon

for Joseph Pulitzer's World. She's only just returned to the States after a year of reporting from the frontlines of the World War.

Her verse is simple, raw, and reverent, capturing America's almost religious devotion to the cyclical joyride of creation and destruction, growth and decline, rise and ruinous fall. To the colossal, ecstatic violence now required to engage the world at all.

The king is dead.

Long live the king.

Success is dragging all the world at its chariot wheels.

*Defeat, forgotten and abandoned,
is hauled away in an ambulance.*

Willard's day is done.

Dempsey's has just begun.

THE AFTERMATH

*Adhere to your purpose. If you falter and give up,
you will lose the power of keeping any resolution,
and will regret it all your life.*

*—President Abraham Lincoln,
in a letter to his wife's cousin, Quintin Campbell,
June 28, 1862*



No matter the outcome, mission, or heartache...

*Six Months Earlier
December 1918
Washington, D.C.*

Mike Gibbons tugs loose his tie and rolls up the sleeves of his Army uniform as he descends the steps of the War Department, fury in his stride, Tommy hurrying behind. The crisp air does little to cool the

slow-burning anger in the Phantom's chest.

An hour earlier, they sat in War Department headquarters, summoned by Secretary of War Newton D. Baker to finalize their promised military commissions and officer rankings.

According to the national press and the unpublished family memoir, *Fifteen Rounds with Tommy Gibbons*, "Tommy qualified as a captain, while Mike would have been at least a major. Maybe even a colonel."

Mike sensed trouble even before their train reached Union Station. Something wasn't right. Good news finds a man; bad news, he has to travel for.

Baker's verdict was stark: with the Armistice signed and battlefields cleared, no commissions would be granted to boxing instructors, not even the one who developed the hand-to-hand combat method and wrote the Army's training manual. The reasons were vague and contradictory, but final.

"We were told that if the ceasefire had been signed even a week or two later, the outcome would have been different," Mike later writes. "Whether true or not, this to me was just another verse in the bad-timing song that seemed to plague my life and work."

"I am, of course, happy the war is over," Mike tells *The World's* Vincent Treanor. "But I am also extremely disappointed. From the outset, Tommy and I were told we would be commissioned. It is rather discouraging after fourteen months of honest, hard work to learn the government ultimately did not find that work worthy of recognition. As a certain thing, if we ever have another war, I will not be on the list for a position as boxing instructor."

*

Without a word, Mike and Tommy watch as the morning sun over the nation's capital yields to a hostile huddle of pewter clouds.

When the dark veil tears open, new snow tumbles free and soft in a haloed hush over the National Mall, swallowing the scream that's entombed Washington for years now.

Perched atop three dozen white marble steps that stretch one hundred feet wide, framed by thirty-six towering Greek columns, an unfinished monument rises from reclaimed marshland. The brothers gaze across the

Reflecting Pool to the Potomac River, its frozen surface cold and heavy like their hearts.

Behind them, in a cavernous chamber two hundred feet deep and one hundred feet tall, a platoon of stonemasons, sculptors, and construction workers jab half-smoked cigarettes into submission on the sides of steel lunchboxes and resume their labor. Hammers and saws form a clamorous chorus, smothering the morning's quiet. Scaffolding clings like spider webs to a nineteen-foot marble throne that remains unoccupied.

Many of the workmen had returned from battle only weeks earlier.

After the comet of 1910, the chase for the middleweight crown, and the disruptions of Jack Kearns and Les Darcy, Mike had calculated his path, running the numbers again and again until, with confidence and patriotism, he believed he knew for certain what mattered most and what came next.

Surrender the crown. Earn the commission.

Workers pry open a large wooden crate, one of twenty-four, each weighing nearly six tons. Peering inside, one workman erupts with child-like exuberance: "We've got the head!"

Mike and Tommy rise to their feet, turn to the commotion, and witness the entire crew, many of whom had been on the job since the cornerstone was laid on February 12, 1915, gathering around to catch a glimpse of the marble head, several feet tall, bearing the face of a man gone fifty years now, but still heralded by poets as being composed of "steel and velvet." His giant, stone-rendered body remains crated for later assembly, as did Lady Liberty and all her pieces decades earlier.

No crown. No commission, Mike Gibbons rages. Goddamn it all!

*

Tommy, who had earlier abandoned his trademark cheer and resilience to leap to Mike's defense against Secretary Baker's cold dismissal, has calmed, resting a comforting hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Mikey, maybe it doesn't matter if the whole world knows what we did in the war," Tommy says. "We know. The people do. Father knows. So does God."

Mike flinches, considering his brother's words, even as he sinks further into the embrace.

"Maybe what matters most is that *we* know," Tommy continues, suddenly turning to Mike, clicking his boot heels together, and raising his right hand in a crisp military salute.

"What're you doing, Tommy Boy?"

"I'm honoring you," Tommy beams, "Major Gibbons!"

Mike shakes his head, glances at the Potomac, then at Tommy again. *No matter the weather, no matter how old, he thinks, the kid's always seeing the light.*

"I said," Tommy repeats, standing even taller, "I'm saluting you, Major Gibbons!"

Mike can't resist his brother any longer, returns the salute. "And I—" he begins.

"Smile when you say it, Mikey!" Tommy cheers.

Replacing the snarl on his lips with a reluctant, exaggerated smile that causes Tommy to laugh, Mike looks tenderly into his brother's eyes. "And I salute you, Captain Gibbons," he says. "And thank you, Tommy Boy, truly and with all of my heart, for being who you are."

Though the morning's offense still burns, the rage still simmers, and the wounds have not yet healed, the brothers are reconnected in this moment, bound together in laughter. No longer boys, still they strive to be better men, no matter the moment, the mission, or the heartache.

They won't return to Washington until May 30, 1922, when the Lincoln Memorial, its throne holding the giant, marble iteration of America's sixteenth president, is unveiled.

*

Back in St. Paul, the Phantom is no longer the only ghost in town.

Minnesota has lost two thousand boys to the war, and thousands more to the Spanish Flu. The seven hills of the Saintry City have become a playground for the dearly departed, a boardwalk for revenants and wraiths, a midway of specters and shadows.

Many mornings, it's impossible to tell where the river fog ends and the vapors of the missed and the missing begin. Everywhere, ghosts. Even Mike and Tommy's mother is gone now, another empty chair at another empty table. In time, there will be more.

St. Paul struggles to be what it once was. Nearly a third of the city's

storefronts stand shuttered, casualties of wartime economics and pandemic lockdowns. Some will return. Most will not.

Boxing takes a beating too. In 1918, Minnesota banned the sport outright to boost Army enlistments, closing most gyms and athletic clubs. A few have reopened, but dozens of ring careers have been interrupted, or ended for good.

In these mournful days, the city drifts in memory: open roads and big blue skies, neighborhood streets canopied by stately elms and maples, immigrant tribes coexisting, elevated trains and ferry horns. Hear the ballad of history as it starts all over again: newsboys hawking headlines; the doleful call of the fireman's cart; the shrill whistle of coppers in hot pursuit; the clip-clop of carriage horses and clanging of trolley bells; the melodic swagger of vaudeville barkers.

The city remains lush, green, and impossibly alive. As if time might roll on forever, straight over the edge of the world.

*

Mike tries not to dwell on the war, but many nights, he is haunted, startled awake by nightmarish visions of Camp Dodge, gasping as if run through by a bayonet's blade.

The doughboys coming home in coffins; the trio of Black boys, lassoed and lynched before the cantonment; gas masks, influenza, the dead and the dying. The bodies: naked, ravaged, piled high.

Sometimes the banshee's wail knocks him out of bed and into the night, driving him to the shores of Lake Como, where he stands alone and asks: *How can a good man do everything right and still fail?*

"Mike Gibbons is the greatest middleweight boxer who ever lived, yet he was never crowned," comments the *New York Tribune*. "Whatever will he do next?"

It's the same question Mike's been asking himself.

*

At thirty-two, Mike's past his prime and plump on Army grub, twenty-five pounds above the middleweight limit. His right eye flickers with blindness ever since the laces of O'Dowd's glove damaged his retina and scratched his cornea. His right hand and ribs ache when the weather turns cold. He's feeling his age.

Ten years in the ring, and a lifetime of scars. The heartbreak of war has only deepened the marks. Sometimes he wonders if he should give up. Walk away from it all. Sometimes he wishes he could forget Joe Gans' warning: *Don't want too much*.

But he can't help the yearning. The part of him still hungry for the crown.

He knows the numbers: thirty-four, thirty-seven, twenty-seven, thirty-five, thirty-seven, thirty-six. The ages when past champions—John L. Sullivan, James J. Corbett, Bob Fitzsimmons, Tommy Burns, Jim Jeffries, Jack Johnson, Jess Willard—faded from greatness, their crowns slipping away forever.

Mike knows the wisdom: for all of history, fighters rise and they fall. Sometimes, a fighter tries to rise again, but the record books are unwaveringly clear: in almost every case, the comeback fails.

The Ring puts it this way: "The history of boxing is replete with men who could fall into the following categories: those who quit in time; those who didn't; those who should have; those who should; and those who walk a tightrope and should before they fall."

He does not want to want what he can't stop wanting. After trying so long to quiet or kill the desire, he's weary—so weary—from the trying and the failing to be satisfied. Weary from the waiting and the hoping that the wanting might one day fully disappear.

But in that waiting, the wanting is reborn.

*

Summer 1919

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Weeks after Jack Dempsey's brutal defeat of Jess Willard, the carnage hits the silver screen.

At the Dewey Theater, the only air-conditioned venue in town, sell-out crowds pack a double feature: John Barrymore in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, followed by a ten-minute newsreel: "The Massacre in the Sun."

The Gibbons Brothers attend with their wives, driven by curiosity and a desire to study new boxing strategies. Mike, uneasy recalling photos of

Willard's crushed eye socket and shattered cheekbone, follows Tommy, who is obsessed with challenging Dempsey for the heavyweight crown.

"He's the villain I need," Tommy's begun whispering.

The lights dim and the crowd quiets as the theater's fleet-fingered organist launches a rousing overture from his Wurlitzer. Flickering images appear onscreen: Dempsey in a bobbing crouch, gloves raised, a hungry glare in his eyes; Willard, towering, but already doomed.

The reel stutters with scratches and grain, but the violence is vividly clear: blood spraying the canvas as the champion's face collapses under relentless blows.

Near the Gibbons Brothers, a father shields his young son's eyes. Mike glances nervously at Tommy, and sees not horror, but resolve. Tommy wants Dempsey—needs the champion and the crown, the fortune that it promises.

Mike doesn't need to ask why. He sees it all the time in Helen's face: drawn, anxious, fraying at the edges.

In the dark now, she trembles, breath falling shallow, pulse racing, pinned to her seat by the unstoppable horror projected larger than life before her. Every blow—this animal brutality awaiting her husband—makes her flinch. Her knuckles whiten as she grips her armrests. At Willard's final knockout, jaw dangling in bloody ruin, the screen flares with bright white light.

As Dempsey's hand is raised in savage triumph, something inside of Helen breaks. She stumbles up the aisle, half-blinded by tears.

Tommy bolts after her, Mike following, calling his name.

In the darkness, Mike hears the protective father cry out: "Stop it, stop it! It's murder!"

*

When Tommy carries Helen through the front door of their home, her brother, Dr. John Moga, the well-respected Twin Cities physician, knows exactly what's happened.

He's seen it before, in their mother, this slow, dark unraveling, the prelude to her suicide. Now it's coming for Helen.

When both Moga parents died young and close together, John stepped up to look after his little sister. It was John who gave Helen to Tommy

on their wedding day, who had become Tommy's close friend and confidant, who rose many mornings at dawn with Tommy for hunting and fly-fishing. It was John who warned Tommy again and again: "Don't ask too much of her."

With quiet efficiency, Moga administers a sedative, tucks Helen into bed. Her sleep is fitful.

On the porch under star-stitched skies, Tommy and Moga speak in hushed tones. Mike listens from the lawn, gripping his father's shillelagh. Moga uncaps a flask, but both brothers decline.

"This isn't going to get better, is it, Doc?" Tommy asks, his voice tight with fear.

"She's fragile, Tom. This illness is real and, so far, unstoppable," Moga replies, staring into the endless night. "There are treatments, but they're experimental. And very expensive."

Tommy looks down at the floorboards.

"I know you're after Dempsey's crown, Tom," Moga says. "But you don't need the fame. What you need is the goddamned money."

Tommy slowly nods, the truth a heavy weight.

"So I have to keep going," he says. "Fight my way to Dempsey. Win the championship purse. Get Helen the help she needs. Can you keep her safe while I do that?"

"She's my sister," Moga says without hesitation.

"How long do I have, John?" Tommy asks, voice trembling.

Moga looks at the stars, takes another drink from the flask, and doesn't answer.

"How long?" Tommy presses.

Mike hears the determination in his brother's voice. The fear, fury, and faith. The desperation of a man willing to face the deadliest fighter in the world. For love.

Even if it kills him.

*

A few hundred dollars a fight won't cut it. Not with Helen.

Tommy sees the shadows deepening in her eyes, the tremor in her hands.

He fights in church basements and union halls, knocking out B-list brawlers with ease.

"It's a job," he says. "But not a living."

He needs more. A mission. A clear-cut path to the crown and the championship money.

The newspapers catch wind of his ambition, even if his motives remain private. "If Tommy Gibbons wants a match with the heavyweight king," writes "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, "then he must focus, work hard, and beat all the top heavyweights in the game. That's the only way!"

*

The next morning, an electric hush settles over Mike's third-floor dance floor, now the brothers' makeshift training space and newly nicknamed the Dope Room. Its walls are lined with old leather bags, busted gloves, and yellowing photographs of fistic legends like Molineaux, Jackson, Corbett, Fitzsimmons, Ketchel, Darcy, Gans, and Johnson.

The far wall is freshly papered with emerging contenders: Edward "Gunboat" Smith, Harry "Pittsburgh Windmill" Greb, Billy "St. Paul Thunderbolt" Miske, Georges "Orchid Man" Carpentier from France, Harry "Brown Panther" Wills, William "Kid Norfolk" Ward.

Every man, a bona fide gladiator—and a potential stepping-stone toward Dempsey, "the man-killer" as some sportswriters have started calling him.

"There's not a chump among them," Mike says, studying the photos. "Combined, these ugly bastards have fought 546 times. Wanna guess how often they win?"

Tommy hears Mike's tone and, whether challenge or doubt, he doesn't like it. "It won't change what I have to do," Tommy says sharply.

Kane tries to lighten the mood. "Lemme take a wild, gobshite of a guess," he chirps. *"A lot?"*

Mike shoots Kane a dark look. "The number is eighty-three," Mike says grimly. "They win eighty-three percent of the time."

Silence. The number just hangs there, while no one breathes, moves, or dares to speak.

Suddenly, Kane skitters forward and pins one more photo to the wall. "Well, this handsome shamrock shouldn't rock the stats too hard," he cheers. "He made a splash overseas with the AEF during the war, but he's only fought eleven times."

"Who is he?" Tommy asks.

"The Fighting Marine," Kane says, "though I believe his parents preferred 'Gene Tunney.'"

"How many of those fights did he win?" Tommy asks, studying the photograph.

Before Kane can answer, Mike jumps in, his voice dark and low: "All of them."

*

That night, Mike lies awake, haunted by what he's seen in Tommy's eyes: the same fire and unshakable belief he himself once carried. Back when he was unstoppable, unhittable. Too quick to see, too fast to touch. The middleweight crown always just out of reach.

Now that same faith drives Tommy toward boxing's deadliest champion.

For Helen, Mike thinks, feeling the weight of his brother's quest.

Memories jolt through Mike's mind: the constant movement of feet and fists, the endless study, the yearning, the quiet confidence. The vigilance, much like goddess Diana's perpetually drawn bow, poised to strike. The clarity of youth. The refusal of mortality.

In a few weeks, he'll turn thirty-two. His face is still boyish, but the crow's feet have deepened around his surging blue eyes, his grin darkened by doubt. He's still always moving, if not quite as fast, and God knows, he never stops thinking.

Still, amid war, pandemic, and too many near misses, the dream for Mike Gibbons has faded away.

Or so he keeps telling himself.

*

"One more," Mike says to Mae, half-pleading, half-promising. "Just one more shot."

Mae is done with fighting. After finally winning the decade-long battle for the right to vote, she is ready for peace.

For ten years, she's endured the strain of her husband's training, his agonizing mood swings in the week before battle, the long absences, the constant threat that he'll be hurt, or worse, in the ring.

The slow drip of time over fifteen rounds: the wife, alone at home;

the husband, away at war.

She's done it all. Noticed the fresh scars on his face, the older ones finally fading. The streaks of silver now lining his temples. The cauliflower-ered left ear, a constant souvenir of his pioneer days with Herb Catherwood. Still handsome—but changed, and changing.

She watches him forget his car keys some days, a lunch date or an address—even his son's name once at bedtime. She's seen him suddenly lose his balance while dancing gaily, watched him fetch a drink of water, then bump into a wall on his way back to bed, coming up short on the right side.

She sees him in a way that others cannot. This is what it is: the early hours of a man unraveling.

She knows it plain: even coming home handsome, boxing has taken its toll on Mike Gibbons.

But she also sees it in her husband's eyes: the ancient fire and the young man's dream.

So she nods, her gentle smile concealing her troubled heart.

"One more," she agrees. "Then you come home handsome. For good."

*

Mike storms through the Saintry City like a ghost resurrected to haunt the world anew.

He charges into the St. Paul Athletic Club at 4th and Robert Street, where speed bags thump like war drums, men grunt through clenched jaws, and the canvas beneath them groans with footwork and fury.

He is propelled by the fire in his belly. Maybe it's madness, he thinks, or maybe it's pride. Regardless, he is not done wanting. Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Maybe not until he finally has it: the crown that's slipped through his gloves for a decade.

Across the gym, he sees the Fighting Harp, Mike O'Dowd, twenty-three and a war hero, a youthful whirlwind dominating his huge sparring partner with casual efficiency.

Mike O'Dowd: once the Phantom's student, now the middleweight king.

Mike rushes the ring as if overcome by the banshee herself. There he goes, crashing through the ropes, stomping onto the canvas as O'Dowd

lands a clean right and drops his sparring partner.

“O’Dowd!” Mike barks. “Guess what time it is!”

The champion turns with a cocky grin. “Didn’t hear you, Gramps,” he smirks. “Too busy being champion.”

Mike steps closer to O’Dowd. Too close. His blue eyes darkening, feral and fierce.

“Just thought you should know,” he snarls. “It’s after the war!”

THE GILDED CAGE

*O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beam
That brings to my remembrance from what state I fell,
How glorious once above thy sphere...*

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*



“Every story is a fishing story, is it not?”

After the war, after the plague, the days feel dark. But on May 29, 1919, the world prepares for a darkness of another kind: a total solar eclipse, the longest in five centuries. For nearly seven minutes, the moon will blot out the sun, plunging the earth into a deep shadow of awe and dread.

A decade earlier, Halley’s Comet sparked fears of doom. Now, the world is denied the light of the sun.

“What does an eclipse mean?” asked the men of long ago, writes Reverend Thomas B. Gregory in the *New York World*. “In ignorance, they imagined the worst—that the great God was angry with us, that the crack of doom was at hand.”

Yet twentieth-century man, astronomer and aspiring science-fiction writer Garrett P. Serviss, marvels at the celestial spectacle. “A solar eclipse should arouse profound awe in every beholder,” he writes in the *Buffalo Enquirer*. “The eclipse will appear in the form of a vast glory, composed of a glowing crown surrounding the black orb of the moon as it covers the sun... Great rays and streams of light, often in strange shapes, will extend millions of miles into space.”

Once wary, even Reverend Gregory comes to embrace the moment. “From an eclipse, we perceive the reign of law that never sleeps or falters, that keeps the great universe in perpetual harmony,” he writes. “This should not mark fear in us, but inspire us to do more and be better.”

*

Mike Gibbons knows the truth: timing is everything. And his timing’s been off for a long time. Maybe from the very beginning.

The outlaw status of the fistic arts, codified in the late nineteenth century, brought with it sneak fights, crooked coppers, prison cells, mob money, and a broken ladder to the top of the game. Added to this pandemonium were the newspaper decisions, variable fight rules, half-blind referees, and two-faced glove slingers. The childhood pal and first manager who disappointed him: Eddie Reddy. And, of course, the never-ending muddle.

After Stanley Ketchel, reeking of bacon and another man’s girlfriend, was gunned down in 1910, the division drifted rudderless for years, without much reason or rhyme. Pretenders came and went—Eddie McGoorty, George Chip, Jimmy Clabby, even Mike himself—each one grasping for the crown, only to miss by an inch.

It was the Phantom’s own protégé, Mike O’Dowd, who finally brought order to the chaos. On November 14, 1917, just a month after Mike was summoned to Camp Dodge, O’Dowd faced Al McCoy, “an absolute joke of a champion,” according to the *Minneapolis Journal*. From the opening bell, O’Dowd brought apocalypse, notching eight knockdowns before

flattening the “Cheese Champ,” once and for all, in the sixth round.

With that, a new king rose. The boy Mike Gibbons taught to fight.

That same night in Albany, New York, Young McDonald, a wide-eyed, no-name kid making his professional debut on the undercard, was killed in the ring by a punch to the heart.

The next morning, keen to redirect the rage and scrutiny of New York’s unforgiving public and press from recent revelations of his own financial scandal, Republican Governor Charles Whitman threw the well-funded, full-throated reformers and moralists a bone, repealing the state’s six-year-old Frawley Law. Instantly, boxing became illegal—and, mostly, dead—in New York.

Before Frawley Law was passed in 1911, four months before Mike Gibbons’ first trip to the big city, boxing in New York had been illegal for fifty-two years. The new legislation regulated the sport, forcing the creation of a three-man boxing commission with input from medical professionals, fair and consistent guidelines for venues, managers, and promoters, and a rulebook for fighters and referees.

It wasn’t perfect, but it worked like a charm. For a bunch of “criminals,” refugees from an immoral, long-outlawed sport until Frawley Law’s passage moments ago, boxing’s athletes and businessmen quickly, gratefully, and obediently adopted and adapted to the law and order. Boxing exploded. Madison Square Garden as the temple of fistiana was born. Suddenly, you could work almost any corner of the fight game and make a legitimate, occasionally even livable, wage. If you were great, then in a half dozen fights, give or take, you could become world-famous and change your stars forever. Ask Mike Gibbons.

Under Frawley Law, the place that rhymes with “fork” became the boxing mecca of the world, the essential pilgrimage for the best of the best, as if every pugilist and promoter had spent the entire nineteenth century watching cowboys and homesteaders feverishly and mercilessly expand toward the Pacific Ocean—*Go West, young man!*—knowing the whole damned time the real money would show up back east, in the Big Apple.

Frawley Law’s biggest glitch was of zero consequence to hard-hitting knockout artists and good boxers merely angling for decent money and regular work. But for the contender who was a sweet scientist, a “Rembrandt

of the ring,” a clever artist and Sun Tzu exponent rather than a consistent man-killer—especially if he was shooting for the crown—the new law birthed purgatory. To the immeasurable detriment of highly strategic fistic contenders like the St. Paul Phantom, Frawley Law banned referee decisions. Suddenly, only a knockout would convey certain victory. The goddamned no-decision, newspaper decision era. The middleweight muddle and the roads to nowhere.

When Governor Whitman repealed Frawley Law in 1917, it was nothing personal for or against Mike Gibbons. It probably had a little to do with the twenty-two-year-old boxer who died upstate with his father at ringside, but mostly, Whitman just desperately needed to shift the storyline from the bribes he’d taken to look the other way as the state boxing commission granted illegal licenses for big money.

Just like that, boxing in New York was outlawed again. Without lucrative gladiatorial showdowns, Madison Square Garden, the sport’s grandest, highest-paying stage, went dark several nights a week. Many athletic clubs, especially the ones struggling to keep a toe in the game, went down for the count. Wonderland to ghost town.

There were signs Mike Gibbons shouldn’t come back. He knows. Goddammit, he knows.

*

For the Phantom, once faster than fire, it comes down to this: one final shot at the crown.

To survive ten rounds with Mike O’Dowd, he’ll need speed. But to take the crown, by Minnesota state law, it’s power he’ll need. The knockout.

“Gibbons can win,” writes Fred Coburn in the *Star Tribune*, “but without knocking out his fellow townsman, it means nothing. He will always be king, but never crowned.”

And if O’Dowd dominates the battle? “Then, knockout or not,” Coburn adds, “it’s all over for good for the St. Paul Phantom.”

*

On the other side of the boxing world, Cardinal Eddie Kane works tirelessly to pave a path to glory for the fighters he’s come to love.

Matching Tommy Gibbons is easy. With stocky, cuff-linked St. Paul Playboy Mike Collins, Kane promotes what the *Minneapolis Tribune* calls

“the largest-scale and most important bout staged in Minnesota history”—a hard-hitting hometown showdown between Tommy and Billy Miske, a street-brawling terror whose shadow looms like a gathering storm.

Forged in the rough alleys of Frogtown, Miske spent his youth bullying boys under the protection of his father, a crooked cop on Chief O’Connor’s force. His grudge against Tommy Gibbons still smolders. “The feud coals always burned brightly,” Tommy recalls.

At their first fight, in 1914, Tommy thrashed Miske. In their 1915 rematch, he transformed Miske’s face into “a butcher’s chopping block.”

But things changed. After a series of mysterious sabbaticals in 1916, Miske returned to the ring a year later, tougher, sharper, and more lethal, a bona fide contender. Sportswriters even fitted him with a nickname: The St. Paul Thunderbolt. Since 1917, Miske has torn through top middleweights and light heavyweights, and even faced Jack Dempsey twice—first fighting him to a draw, then dropping a narrow decision.

Billy Miske is no joke. With Dempsey now the king of the heavies, Miske sees his own path: *knock out Tommy Gibbons, earn another shot at Dempsey, and this time, seize the goddamned title.*

*

Kane knows that brains alone won’t win a fight anymore. The Gibbons Brothers need more power.

“Gentleman Jim” Corbett agrees: “Sweetly scientific boxing is practically extinct today. It’s a lost art. These days, all that matters is the knock-out punch.”

After weeks of strategy sessions in the Dope Room, Kane arrives with a solution: a squat, broad-shouldered Black man, five feet six inches tall, with a pumpkin grin and a wingspan a foot wider than his height. This is Sam Langford. The Boston Bone Crusher, they call him.

“I hear y’all wanna learn how to hit a man so he stays down!” Langford lisps, embracing the brothers, his voice a warm rumble that belies the thunder his hands.

With 138 knockouts, Langford is a living legend. He’s beaten Joe Gans and Stanley Ketchel. “I always carry my own referee,” he cracks, playfully holding up his right hand, eyes gleaming with defiant pride. “Here he is now! Wanna say hello?”

The Gibbons Brothers first met Langford in June 1911 at Winnipeg Auditorium. Headlining the card, the Bone Crusher clobbered opponent Tony Caponi “into such bad shape, the police stopped the fight.” On the undercard, Mike Gibbons faced husky Black welterweight Joe “Knockout” Wilson. As Mike laced up, Langford slapped him on the back with good cheer, and encouraged him, “Be so good out there they can’t ignore you!” In the eighth round, inspired by Langford’s words, Mike hammered Wilson into dreamland.

Fast, powerful, and virtually unbeatable, Langford, now thirty-four, is nearly over the hill. As a Black fighter in a white man’s world, he knows he’ll never wear the crown. The “color line” keeps him out of contention. Yet, with an unbreakable spirit, Langford knows: the best he can do is keep fighting—and maybe help the next generation do a little better than he did.

“What’s that Dope Book of yours say about this Polish boy, Miske?” Langford asks, stretching his arms, shaking out his hands.

“Hard coming out,” Tommy mumbles. “Hard at the end.”

“How about in the middle?” Langford laughs.

In unison, Mike, Tommy, and Kane crow, “*Hard!*”

Over the next two weeks, Langford imparts power pointers to the Gibbons Brothers, reminding them of “a Joe Gans special”—pressing in close to an opponent, then “cutting him to death” with short, vicious blows that travel six inches or less. Langford refines the brothers’ pivot punches too, showing them how to draw greater power from the core and legs to minimize stress on their hands.

“The more you use the power in your feet, the less you’ve gotta worry about smashing up your hands for the hundredth time,” Langford says. “That tip’s mostly for you, Michael.”

*

To the surprise of everyone except Mike Gibbons, there’s nothing easy about the Phantom’s return to the ring. It is tentative, arduous, and—as one sportswriter quips—“fails to show the kind of athletic form you’d want to bet the farm on.”

Mike wins warm-up fights against soft targets like Billy Kramer, Len Rowlands, and a fading George Chip, but without the effortless grace that once made him a legend.

"The old speed wasn't there," Mike admits in a 1925 article. "My timing was off. So was my judgment of distance. It was discouraging."

His team—Kane, Langford, Tommy, even the sparring partners—can only hope the virtuosity returns with time.

In the Dope Room, frustration builds. Once patient, now short-fused, Mike's temper flares in workouts. Langford teaches with strength and cheer; too often, Mike claps back with jagged edges.

Tommy feels it most of all. He's waited years for his turn in the spotlight, but Mike's comeback keeps him stuck in the shadows, forever second-billed. Worse, he sees the rust and slack that have settled over his brother's once-flawless fistic ballet—the Phantom's trademark poetry in motion now pigeon-toed, off-rhythm, and skipping too many beats.

He feels it in his gut. Mike's still making all the right moves, but without the velocity of yesteryear, his punches only rarely landing now with the force he once commanded—precisely the sledgehammer power he'll need to take down O'Dowd.

"It was like hearing an opera singer go suddenly deaf mid-aria," Eddie Kane comments years later.

*

"Not so low with your hands, Tommy!" Mike snaps.

"Low hands are what we do, Mikey," Tommy says, standing his ground. "It's how we draw them in and drop the hammer."

Mike grabs Tommy's wrists, raising them brusquely. "Too low," Mike grumbles, "and you won't be quick enough to dodge, counter, or slam, let alone all of them!"

"I've already beaten Miske twice," Tommy defends, yanking free of his brother's grip.

"He's not the same man, Tommy Boy," Mike snarls. "Keep going like this, and you won't make it out of that fight alive."

The room goes silent. Kane, Langford, and the sparring partners watch, waiting to see if the brothers will start swinging at each other right here and now.

Tommy reaches for the high road with a slow exhale and a firm, but even, voice. "Mike, I need you to step out of the ring. Please," he says. "I've got three more boys before dinner."

Hands on his hips, Mike hears what his brother is really saying. After a long stare, he shrugs, then slides between the ropes and leaves.

Years later, Mike reflects: "Part of it was old habits. When Tommy was born, I made that dumb promise to God. I always felt responsible for keeping Tommy safe, so I pushed him. At least as hard as I pushed myself."

But there was more to it than that: the gnawing, unavoidable awareness that, in his thirties, the Phantom moves with a different kind of fire than he had at twenty-four.

"It's no joyful sensation to feel the tentacles of time at one's heels, to realize you're slowing down," he writes. "There might have been some of that in the lead-up to my title fight with Mike O'Dowd."

*

In spring 1919, the Boston Bone Crusher becomes one of the Gibbons Clan.

For six weeks at Lake Osakis, the training is brutal and urgent: free weights, heavy bags, mud runs, long swims, log-rolling, rope skipping, hunting, trapping, tree climbing, sprinting, twisting, shouting, and prayer.

Cheering on Mike and his team are Mae and the children, Eddie Kane, Father Dunphy, and George Barton, who takes leave from the newspaper to support his friend's comeback. Barton brings along a rag-tag squad of sparring partners, young jitterbugs and grizzled old-timers, from Captain McFayden's firehouse. They hit hard, move fast, and absorb plenty of punishment—just never in the same match.

In the camaraderie, spirits begin to rise. Langford's teachings become a lucky charm for the Irish brothers. Dunphy's recitations from *The Art of War* and the Good Book revive forgotten wisdom with puckish zeal. And Kane elevates the mission with his signature mix of devotion and zaniness: every time a sparring partner hits the mat, he belts out "Till We Meet Again," a sentimental ballad of the day. By night's end, the Cardinal's throat is raw.

Thomas John is here too, thinking of Mary and the world without her. Now sixty-nine years old and far removed from the knife and the torch of the Irish rebellion, he still refuses to watch his sons fight—but out of preference now, not protest. Instead, he stays close to the water, which, as the saying goes, "says nothing but what it knows." Fishing pole in hand, grandchildren at his side, Thomas John waits to see what small magic he

might pull from the serene depths of Osakis this late in the game.

Since Mary's passing, the men in her life have been adrift. Her widowed husband walks old roads, trying to remember the way her hand once fit into his. Mike sometimes feels Mary's warm, protective presence in the ring. When waking to his newborn's cry, Tommy often rocks the baby back to sleep on the porch beneath a prairie of stars, searching for his mother's face in the constellations.

They hear her sometimes. Not her name on the wind, but her voice in the water.

In those moments, the Gibbons men are at peace.

*

Every night, a bonfire lights the edge of the lake's tranquil shore. Mike watches the smoke unfurl in slow, spectral spirals, as if summoned by some invisible hand, each spark a flaring, fading ember of something already burned and blown away: hope or fear, maybe the past itself.

Family and friends press close, arms interlocked, sharing laughter and song. There are tall tales of the ring, distant lands, and wild adventures, thrilling adventures about angels, demons, mobsters, and rebels.

Always, there is love.

"Father Dunphy," Mike says one night, playfully ribbing the priest, "you've heard confessions from every one of us. But after all these years, you've never told us yours."

Dunphy, who's rescued Mike more times than he can count, all the way back to the Catherwood beatings, smiles with roguish charm. "What more could I say than to be who I am, Michael John?" he replies. "Open your eyes and see."

Thomas John cheerily raises his voice: "My boy may have a point, Father! How do we even know you're Irish?"

Dunphy laughs, eyes narrowing with mischief. He and Thomas John know each other's stories: the legends, the facts, and the old, secret truths they've spent a lifetime trying to set right.

"I'll tell you one thing," Dunphy says, loosening his collar as he stands. "But it won't be about my bald head, my magical cane, or how I became so irresistibly handsome. Those are matters between the Good Lord and me."

"So long as it's not another fishing story!" groans a sparring partner

with two black eyes.

Dunphy rolls up his sleeves, stalking closer to the fist-marked boy with theatrical swagger. "Pray tell, my child," he teases with mock condescension, "what other kind of story is there?"

Laughter surrenders to silence as Dunphy seizes the spotlight, circling the bonfire with impish flair. "Fishing is every story, is it not?" he begins, voice ringing with pulpit-pounding clarity. "Every day, we go to the water with rod, reel, and hope. Will the light be right? The hatch? The wind? The water? Will some beast or man have stolen what we need to survive? We pray not. We dream of abundance. We dream we will have enough."

Dunphy sits between Mike and Tommy, gently taking their hands in his.

"We cast our lines," he says softly, his tone warm but authoritative. "Again and again, days into months into years. Sometimes it's feast. Sometimes, famine. But every day, we go to the water, not knowing what we'll find. You know what we call that?"

"Another fish story?" someone mumbles in jest.

Everyone holds their breath to gauge Dunphy's response. When the priest begins laughing, so does the group.

"What we call that," Dunphy says at last, voice low, clear, and resonating with conviction, "is faith."

*

June 19, 1919

Tommy Gibbons vs. Billy Miske

Nicollet Park

St. Paul, Minnesota

The night before facing Miske, the St. Paul Thunderbolt, for a third time, Tommy pulls his big brother aside.

"You taught me everything, Mikey, and I'll always love you for it. But I've been thinking... What I mean is, I've been really wrestling with this," he says, stumbling but resolved. "My family's on the line here. Win or lose, I have to do this my way. Root for me, brother, but I don't need

you to protect me anymore.”

Mike listens, long after the words have stopped coming, his heart splintering under the weight of Tommy’s newfound independence. He slowly nods, pulls Tommy into an awkward embrace, kisses him on both cheeks. Mike says nothing of the raging sadness and demolition he feels inside.

Don’t know that you ever did, he thinks to himself.

*

Nine thousand ticket-holders flood Nicollet Park’s baseball stadium, where a regulation boxing ring has been raised over second base. Mike is one of them, weaving through the oversold crowd to find his seat. Pulse hammering with dread and pride, at this battle, the Phantom is merely a spectator.

He’s purchased a new straw hat for the occasion. Not for style, but to keep his hands busy. He has a habit of throwing sideline punches whenever Tommy’s in the ring, each shadow jab a bid to quell his galloping nerves.

On the undercard, Sam Langford faces Big Bill Tate, an inelegant wrecking ball from Jack Dempsey’s camp. Though Tate is thirty pounds heavier, fourteen inches taller, and eleven years younger, Langford is undaunted. With scientific precision, he weathers five rounds of cannon fire before Tate is disqualified by referee George Barton for “relentless holding.”

Then the main event.

At the opening bell, Miske charges the Phantom’s kid brother like “a fire-breathing dragon,” reports the *Minneapolis Tribune*. “His offense was relentless, but no match for the cleverness of Tommy Gibbons.”

Tommy’s footwork dazzles, a whirlwind of grace under pressure. His speed, like Mike’s in more golden days, is untouchable. But it’s his boldness and ferocity, the merciless double-fisted assault, that wins the night.

Billy Miske, snuffed out again. Three victories in a row over the Thunderbolt, one of Tommy’s most aggressive childhood nemeses, clearing the path for his pursuit of Dempsey and the heavyweight crown.

By the final bell, Mike’s new hat is in a thousand pieces. Hands still trembling, despite his brother’s dominant victory, he’s anxiously torn it to shreds.

*

After Tommy's victory over Billy Miske, Mike returns to the Dope Room. There are miles to go on the comeback trail.

He continues training with Langford, late into the night, windows open to the stars. They spar in darkness, wrapped in an easy breeze that hums with possibility.

"It's back to basics, Gibbons," Langford coaches, his voice a deep, resonant beacon. "You know the rule: you can't hit what you can't see."

"I can see, goddammit," Mike grumbles.

"Sure you can, Gibbons," Langford chuckles. "And I'm gonna be next year's Pope!"

Steady and sure, Langford grabs Mike by the shoulders, kicks his feet apart to a wider stance, and repositions his fists.

"Close your eyes, son," he says. "Don't try to see me. *Feel* me."

They tangle, tango, and tumble. At first, Mike is clumsy, his footwork stuttering, punches swinging wide. But night after night, incrementally, his timing improves. The new tricks—the shovel hook and pivot punch—start cutting clean and cruel, but are much less jarring to Mike's battered right hand.

Five nights in, Mike sinks a crisp blow onto Langford's jaw. He feels it ripple through his knuckles, wrist, and shoulder, surging up his arm. Powerful contact—and, miraculously, no pain.

Astonished to connect so mightily, Mike hears Langford hit the floor in the dark. A long silence follows, then Langford's laughter, a bewildered chuckle building into a booming guffaw. Mike can't help but join him.



"The only crown that's real, son, is the one already there inside of you."

Later, Mike and Langford walk the quiet shores of Lake Como, its still waters mirroring the starlit sky.

"This deep in the game, the hardest thing to remember is that it's one fight at a time," Langford says. "You can't fight every man you've ever faced all at once. And only a fool tries to teach history a lesson inside of ten rounds."

"Maybe you don't understand, Sam," Mike says. "I'm running out of time."

Langford stops cold. "Who are you fuckin', son?" he says, voice sharp but not unkind. "You think I don't understand running out of time? These days, anyone with a dream's got a fight, and there's never enough time."

Mike says nothing. Langford isn't finished.

"For ten years, all those scrawny white boys with typewriters been calling me the greatest heavyweight who ever lived," he says with pride and resignation. "Sweet words. But we both know, I'm never gonna wear that crown. They'll never give me, or any other Black fighter, a right, proper chance. Not since Jack Johnson damn near killed the White Hope in Reno. Naw, they don't dare let that happen again. Ain't even about right or wrong. It's just what it is."

Langford exhales, his gaze steady on the dark water, a titan reflecting on an unyielding world. "When *you* beat a champion, they put a golden

crown on your head,” he says. “But for all us ‘tar babies,’ there is no god-damned prize. No crown of gold. That’s just mumbo jumbo the world spins to keep us Black boys swinging away at each other.”

Mike stares across the lake, stirred by the Bone Crusher’s testimony.

“If you want a hat, go buy another hat,” Langford says, laying a hand on Mike’s chest. “But the only crown that’s real, son—the only one that matters—is the one already there inside of you.”

*

June 23, 1919

Mike Gibbons vs. Harry Greb

Forbes Field

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Mike Gibbons steps into the ring to face twenty-four-year-old Harry Greb. The Pittsburgh Windmill, they call him. Some sportswriters claim tonight’s bout could determine who is more deserving of a shot at Mike O’Dowd’s middleweight crown.

Two years earlier, in February 1917, Mike met Greb in what newspapers dubbed “a short, sweet smoker,” outboxing him so thoroughly that the young Windmill barked to his manager afterward, “From now on, match me with one guy at a time!”

But things are different now.

*

The Harry Greb of 1919 is a different animal altogether.

After the World War, he’s not just a fearless, tireless workhorse anymore; he’s become chaos incarnate, untamed by science or reason, a one-man insurrection in boxing gloves, wielding a devilish grin that mocks the very rules of the ring. As one journalist puts it, Greb is “one of the first fighters to embody the twentieth century’s bloodlust and fevered absurdity.”

During his stint in the Navy, Greb served as a boxing instructor, training under Mike Gibbons’ very methods. Still, he managed nineteen pro bouts during his enlistment. Since the Armistice, he’s on a forty-four-fight rampage, losing only twice, and he’s just getting started.

All-star sporting scribe John Lardner calls Greb “the right fighter at

the right time,” a feisty, rip-snorting warrior and a “mage of mayhem” who stomps the toes of the sweet science with wild abandon and disrespect.

Grantland Rice comments, “Greb comes upon an opponent like a swarm of bees... a cross between a wildcat and a hornet’s nest... He is one of the most remarkable athletic products in the history of the world.”

Post-war Greb has become known not only for breaking down his opponents’ bodies, but for shattering their will. Fueled by what he jokingly calls “smokestack lightning,” he vaults into the ring, radiating blunt havoc and imminent catastrophe, emerging as a legitimate threat to the crown.

Greb wears so many faces, the sportswriters can’t settle on a single nickname for the middleweight. Through the years, he’s known as the Iron City Express, the Rubber Man, the Smoky City Bearcat, and the Wildest Tiger. He’s called a buzzsaw, a perpetual motion machine, and a human dynamo. Damon Runyon dubs him “the King of the Alley Fighters”—and the dirtiest fighter in boxing history.

Greb’s style, if it can be called that, is “a helter-skelter whirlwind of punches,” both legal and not, “thrown from impossible angles, sometimes while airborne.” He rarely trains, yet grows stronger as fights wear on. *The New York Times*’ W. O. McGeehan calls the Windmill’s technique “the manly art of modified murder.”

Mike Gibbons writes, “Harry does things you don’t expect. He’s fast, and bounds like a kangaroo all over the ring, hitting high, low, and every which way. You never know what he’ll do next.”

“To win, Greb used every trick in the game,” Lardner writes. “He wore his trunks high to make it look like he was being fouled. From that fictitious starting point, he’d thumb, heel, and butt. His rapid punches worked both ways, coming and going. He bit ears, dragged glove laces over old wounds, held and hit. He disoriented every opponent. Only a few survived.”

Outside the ring, the Windmill moves with the same velocity and lack of moderation. He races expensive cars at breakneck speeds, often crashing them. He stays up too late, parties harder than anyone in his entourage, and chases women like there’s only one left in the world and he’s racing a thirty-second clock to tame, woo, and bed her. Runyon writes, “The most remarkable thing about this truly remarkable man is how, after the

insanity of his wild, larger-than-life days, he's able to muster the stamina to even slip through the ring ropes at night."

Yet after every bout—bruised or not, win or lose—Greb struts from his dressing room in a tailored three-piece suit, hair slicked to perfection, makeup expertly applied to erase all signs of violence from his face. He parades past his fans, grinning and swigging dark liquor, like everything's beautiful and nothing ever hurt.

Tonight, it falls to Mike Gibbons—the thirty-two-year-old St. Paul Phantom, chasing one last shot at the championship—to try and tame the beast.

*

Ringside tickets sell for \$10. Grandstand seats go for \$3 and \$2, plus war tax. More than seven thousand fans flood the stadium, eager to see if the St. Paul Phantom can once again subdue the Windmill.

At the opening bell, "Gibbons was alive," reports the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. "Well animated, giving a great exhibition of head-slipping, ducking, footwork, and all the other stunts that go to make up his brand of pretty boxing."

For three rounds, Mike is fast and fluid, "a scientific marvel... swinging like a gate." Greb struggles to find an opening, but he's watching, learning, biding his time.

By the middle rounds, just as the Phantom begins to fatigue, Greb catches his second wind and roars to life in a maelstrom of fury. Rounds eight and nine become, in the *Post-Gazette's* words, "a veritable nightmare for Mike Gibbons."

"Greb is hitting Mike with everything but the water bucket," the paper declares, "and Mike looked very put out about it."

The Windmill's chaos is a barrage without rhythm or mercy. Most of his shots are wild, but then—*crack!*—a brutal left slashes across Mike's right eye. The same eye injured years earlier while sparring with Mike O'Dowd. The jagged scrape of Greb's glove ignites a blinding wave of pain, and for one terrifying moment, the Phantom's vision fades to black.

"That blow fairly blinded me," Mike later writes. "Even after the pain subsided, the vision in my eye was hazy. I was practically blind and could only see Harry's shadow in the ring for the rest of the fight. Even com-

promised, I was able to dodge most of Greb's attacks, but a fighter can't hit what he can't see. So I did not knock the Windmill out."

*



The shackles of time and a desire reborn

Alone in his hotel room after the fight, Mike stands before a full-length mirror, quietly studying the damage. Tracing all the ways that time has remade him. If only he could go back.

Suddenly straightening his back, he clicks his heels and salutes his own reflection: "Major Gibbons!"

A knock at the door brings a telegram: "*You stink, Gibbons! Like old meat and cold potato salad.*"

It's signed: "*Love, Harry Greb—the man who showed you who you really are.*"

Mike clenches the note in his fist, his blood simmering at Greb's mocking audacity.

An hour later, there's another knock and another telegram.

"*You know why you're not the greatest anymore, Gibbons? Because you gave all your secrets away to the soldier boys, and now you're trying to beat us. You won the war, Gibbons, but you lost your secret weapons!*"

It's signed again, with a flourish: *Harry.*

Mike sits heavily on the bed, telegrams in hand, the sting of defeat

transforming into something harder. Something quieter. Not rage. Not shame. Something else.

The mirror waits, but this time he doesn't look.

*

Back in St. Paul the next day, Mike Gibbons reads his reviews.

Pittsburgh headlines are variations on a theme: "Barrage of Gloves Launched by Harry Confuses Phantom." Reporters say Gibbons fought "a cautious battle," while Greb "was always on top."

Some columns—even in the *Pittsburgh Press* surprisingly—declare Mike the winner: "Greb Flustered as Phantom Easily Earns Triumph." Others say he lost.

But Mike knows the truth: it was too damn close to call. Worse than that, he never found the opening he needed to test Langford's new knock-out punch—the one essential to defeating O'Dowd.

Then he sees the headline in a St. Paul paper: "Is the Great Mike Gibbons on the Toboggan?"

The column suggests the Phantom's best days are behind him, that his decline is "a foregone conclusion."

Mike tears the paper to shreds. When he looks up, his seven-year-old son, Mike Jr., is standing in the doorway, watching him, eyes wide with innocent concern. "What's the matter, Pop?"

"Everything's okay, pal," Mike says, forcing a smile. "Just a little bad luck."

"What's bad luck?" the boy asks, scrunching up his face.

Mike pulls him close. "Bad luck," he says, "is when a good man does all the right things... and God looks away."

By morning, the child will forget this, while the father still tries.

But something remains.

The Phantom's howling hunger to become.

THE LAST HURRAH

*No glint of glory from the height,
No flare of fame to call me far;
Merely the ground to make my fight
Against whatever odds there are.*

—Grantland Rice, “Whatever Odds There Are,”
The Final Answer, and Other Poems (1940)



Too old to fight. Too young to surrender the dream.

November 21, 1919

Mike Gibbons vs. Mike O'Dowd

Middleweight Championship of the World

St. Paul Auditorium

Sixty Minutes to First Bell

The ghost moves alone.

Bare-knuckled fists, slicing through dim light. Breath, coming sharp and measured, burning yet controlled. Pivot, feint right, pull back.

Feet, gliding over the floorboards.

Here, the shadowed figure of Mike Gibbons, fists rising and falling, carving the air, feeling the hunger and expectation of twelve thousand fight fans in his chest, their raised voices rattling his bones. His blue eyes turn dark and steely, as he dances through the half-light, launching screaming missiles at his own reflection.

Some things never change.

Inside the auditorium, a marching band wrestles against the riotous din of the sold-out house. The crowd is a living, snarling thing, a tempest of sweat, tobacco, and imported cologne, shot through with prayers for blood and the banshee wail. Ready for war, fight fans split into two almost equal factions: one for Gibbons, the other for his protégé.

Outside, a hundred coppers have roped off several blocks around the St. Paul Auditorium, hoping to hold the line against gate-crashers and street brawlers. But it's too late. Before a single ticket is torn, blood spills, teeth are lost, arrests are made.

*

Mike Gibbons is thirty-two. Too old to fight. Too young to surrender the dream.

It staggers him to recall that twelve years have passed since his first professional bout. Never knocked down. Never knocked out. Still always moving—and almost as fast. But the places that hurt? They stay hurt. Even when he wins. Even when he's healed.

He's spent his whole life running, just like his father before him. Running from hunger, from bad luck, from the crushing weight of expectation. Running on courage, strategy, and wit. Running to change his stars. To finally have enough.

For the first surviving American-born son of poor Irish rebels and immigrants, if you're not running, you're being swallowed by the past.

To clear his head, Mike returns to some of the greatest truths he's ever known: *If they can't catch you, they can't hit you. If they can't hit you, they can't hurt you.*

And, above all: *When you make them miss, definitely make them pay.*

*

The ten-round showdown sells out a week early. The box office haul:

\$35,000—almost \$700,000, adjusted.

Nationwide, the Golden Pens herald Gibbons versus O'Dowd as "the most important battle staged since the Willard-Dempsey" bloodbath in Toledo the previous Fourth of July. Beneath a banner headline—"Ketchel's Title is Prize sought by 'Two Mikes'"—the *Capital Times* exults, "At long last, the jinx on the middleweight division will be resolved!"

Champion O'Dowd will earn \$15,000, while "the other Mike" will bag \$11,000, plus a percentage of the gate and part-ownership of motion picture rights to the battle. Wagering is frenzied, with odds favoring the Phantom at ten to six.

For days, trains from across the United States and Canada pour into St. Paul. Reporters eager to witness what might be the Phantom's last stand, descend from New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco: Edgren, Rice, Igoe. Even Bat Masterson.

Mike Gibbons admits that his long relationship with O'Dowd lends this blockbuster, final stop on his crusade for the crown "an extra element of dramatic interest." He writes, "It was almost like fiction—a real story with a twist: here, the master is trying to take the title from his pupil!"

The *Buffalo Courier* sets the stage: "Will St. Paul be big enough to support two world champion middleweights, both of them full-blooded Irishmen?"

The article answers its own query with a grim flourish:

"It cannot. One of them must fall."

*

Fred Coburn of the *Tribune* poses the question everyone is asking: "Is it age over youth, or the other way around?"

The contrast between fighters is stark. Gibbons, "an old fox" and "scientific master," is renowned for his superlative ring strategy and "ability to use brains as well as brawn" in the ring. Almost a decade younger, O'Dowd is "a broad-shouldered, bull-rushing, brass-knuckled" brawler, all power and stamina.

"No boxer of thirty-two can hope to be as strong as a man at twenty-four," Coburn considers. "O'Dowd will not tire, but his friends predict that Gibbons will."

Two years ago, the victor would not have been debated. "The world

would have said ‘Gibbons’ in perfect harmony,” writes Keene Sharp in the pink-paged, recently launched weekly, *Boxing Blade*. “But today?”

Robert Edgren, who’s rarely missed a Gibbons battle and, all those years ago, christened him “the Phantom,” holds a modicum of hope for his old pal. Mike is brainy and crafty,” he writes, “and a hero of the war effort, who helped train more than three million soldiers, after all.”

Other sportswriters, even those who have showered the Phantom for years with accolades, fear he’s become “a relic of the past,” and worry that O’Dowd could “go through (him) like a hot knife through a pat of butter.”

Old West lawman Bat Masterson, never a Gibbons fan for reasons unknown, likely squealed in delight while typing his analysis: “It is my honest belief that O’Dowd can trounce Gibbons!”

*

It’s not only age that tilts the scales in the Fighting Harp’s favor. There is also this simple fact: Mike O’Dowd knows the Phantom’s game inside and out.

In a story headlined, “Two Irish Kings Try to Occupy Same Throne,” the *Minneapolis Tribune* paints the “almost sibling-like rivalry” in full: “O’Dowd was one of the neighborhood gang in St. Paul that once claimed Gibbons as its hero and idol, and followed him everywhere when he was just a boy. He was tough and became ambitious to become a fighter and clean up a fortune like the man who showed him all the tricks of the ring.”

Not only in Frogtown, but in the Army, too.

Years later, the Phantom confesses: “The question that kept me up at night was: Had I taught the boy too well?”

*



"Let's be men of our word."

His breath comes fast now, in sharp, tight bursts. Cold sweat beads on his skin, even as the fire in his belly spreads through his limbs, his blood and bones. His fists carve through the air, short jabs and scorching hooks, forged in the furnace of every war he's ever waged.

A voice cuts through the locker room: "Still runnin', Mikey?"

Mike lowers his fists. His shoulders ease as his younger brother steps into the room. Tommy Boy: graceful, steady, a grin tucked into the corners of his mouth like he's in on some private joke. Hair neatly combed. Sleeves rolled just so. A leather medicine bag slung over his broad shoulder. Always the gentleman. Always cheerful.

Tommy: the one who raises the lantern when darkness comes too near. "Ain't runnin'," Mike says, exhaling hard. "Just warming up."

Tommy steps closer. He sees the hesitation in Mike's movements: the subtle tremor in his brother's fingers, the quick flex and slow release. The fast blinking of his damaged eye. The split-second waver in his stance as a flash-pop of pain briefly blinds him.

With an encouraging smile, Tommy pulls out a roll of tape, and says, "Show me what you're taking into battle."

Mike extends his hands, steadying to his own surprise, as Tommy begins the ritual: palm down, looping tape over the big knuckle of the

thumb, back to the wrist, across the lower joint, again over the knuckles. Four turns. Then five. Six should do. Twice more across the top. Once more at the wrist, then make a fist.

New skin. Old ritual. Ancient prayer.

"Do you remember?" Tommy asks.

"Remember what?"

"The comet."

Mike blinks, caught off guard. Then it comes rushing back: the bright, burning streak of memory.

Summer of 1910. Two skinny Irish-American kids lying in the grass, gazing at the sky with reverence and awe as Halley's Comet tears across the heavens like a fiery blade.

"They said it was the end of the world," Mike says.

"And you said it was the beginning of everything," Tommy says. "That one day, we'd be champions."

"One day, we'd be *kings*," Mike says, flexing his fingers, feeling the tape hold firm around his fists, becoming a part of him. "Yeah, I remember."

"Good," Tommy nods, retrieving Joe Gans' battle-worn handkerchief from his leather bag and reverently tucking it into his brother's waistband. "Let's be men of our word."

*

The announcer's voice booms from the auditorium: "Tonight, for the middleweight championship of the world..."

Inhaling deeply, Mike rolls his shoulders, the distant ache in his bones, settling like old weather. Corroded over years by "the cruel hand of Father Time," the Phantom's once-lethal knockout punch is now an open question. Some sportswriters have called it "a suicide mission."

This is it. No crown, no commission. Win or lose, done for good.

But here and now, there is this: one last chance.

In less than an hour, he will be blinded by his own blood. His right hand and arm will rage like an inferno, nerves shrieking from shattered bones. His fists will no longer block or swing, but grope blindly through the blur, hunting on instinct alone.

For victory and the crown. For hope and meaning. For time.

For something he still cannot name.

He thumps his gloves together, the old defiance awakening, a final spark in his fading storm.

Before him, the tunnel blazes brightly with arena lights and flashbulbs, the roar of the crowd and the thunder of stomping feet.

“Come what may,” the Phantom says softly to himself, stepping forward, beginning his ring walk into history.

*

Inside the Arena

The sold-out house is in ecstasy—half of them chanting “Gibbons!”, the other half, “O’Dowd!”—as Referee Curly Ulrich, “one of the sport’s most respected officiants,” enters the ring in a crisp white silk shirt.

Champion Mike O’Dowd, a bounce in his step, slides between the ropes first, his signature emerald robe shimmering under the lights—golden harps embroidered along the sleeves like battle standards. With a practiced sneer, he shrugs off the robe, and his cornerman snatches it midair, just before it hits the canvas.

Then the challenger, the St. Paul Phantom, climbs onto the battlefield, greeted by a crescendoing ovation.

The Two Mikes lock eyes. It was always going to come to this.

“When we shook hands,” the Phantom recalls, “you could hear a pin drop.”

Ulrich’s rules are a mere formality. Gloves touch, but for a moment, neither man steps back. No taunts. No bluster, bravado, or bluffs. Just stillness.

What passes between them is unspoken, but charged. It’s in their eyes: the long, shared road. The sneak fights and bitter lessons. The war camps and the race for the crown. The pain endured in silence and the howl that kept them on the hunt.

Time, that most ruthless of trainers, has carved its lessons into them both.

The Phantom blinks and, for a moment, O’Dowd isn’t the reigning champion, but the thick-skulled, knuckle-bruised kid from Frogtown with impossible dreams and an iron jaw. Mike looks into the face of the man he once molded, bathing for a moment in pride over how far the boy had come. But then, the everything after. The luck of the Irish, some

might call it.

In that charged silence, as if history itself is leaning in, the Phantom and the Harp are no longer champion and challenger; they're old pals who have wanted more for as long as they can remember, and now bear witness to the weight of all that time has given and taken away.

"Thank you," says O'Dowd, breaking the silence. "For teaching me. And for waiting. Till after the war."

For maybe the first time, Mike sees O'Dowd for the man he's become. The champion's ears, welded by violence to awkward angles. The left eye, battered by too many hammers, forever frowning under a heavy brow. Still, behind the bruised flesh, there remains the stubborn spark of a boy, a trace of innocence that has somehow survived all the brutality.

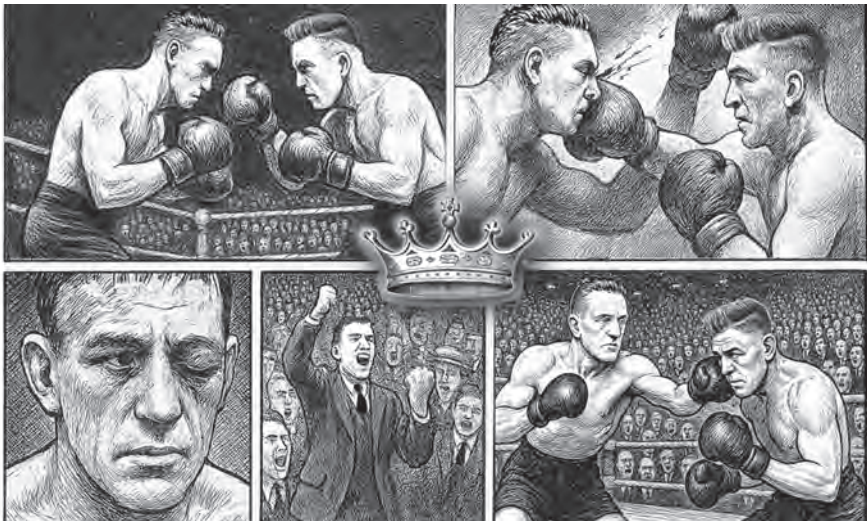
It's like looking into a mirror.

"I'd say let the best man win—" the Phantom begins.

"What if there isn't a best man, Gibbons?" O'Dowd interrupts. "What if it's just a couple of Irish fools trying to do better than they did yesterday?"

Gibbons slowly nods, thinks of his father. *What matters most is what we do next.*

*



It was always going to come to this

First Bell

Now it begins, with “a barrage of sound and fury from the crowd, the likes of which had never been heard in St. Paul before.”

“Sweet science be damned,” the Phantom writes later, “we flew straight at each other!”

The opening minute: a savage, bitter exchange of blazing blows.

“From the very start,” writes the *Bismarck Tribune*, “it was evident that the fighters were determined to settle their longstanding feud with a knockout.”

The Phantom, bursting out hot flurries with his left, “beating an endless tattoo on O’Dowd’s face,” making the champ swing wide and wildly miss.

But O’Dowd doesn’t flinch.

“He kept charging me,” Mike writes, “lunging into my blistering attacks with the same courage and tenacity he had displayed in the war.”

Mike, dancing back, snubs his nose in signature style. Watching. Studying. Taking measure. Noting, however ill-timed, just how good his former student has become.

“He’d taken every single thing I’d taught him,” Mike writes, “and mixed it up into his own style—awkwardly clever, doing everything in reverse, swinging like a runaway train!”

Some writers score the first round even. Many give it to the Phantom.

But deep down, Mike knows the truth: the tide is about to turn.

*

Between Rounds

Mike’s corner is a blur of hands, sponge, water, oiled massage, deep breaths, quick prayers, and the evaporation of time. Tommy and Kane work fast to prepare their man for what comes next.

Mike scans the crowd, searching for a lifeline, any familiar face to hold him steady.

Then he finds it: Packey McFarland at ringside, grinning like a lunatic.

There at the beginning. Now here for the end.

"Thought you could use some inspiration, brother!" Packey shouts through the ropes, eyes lit with mischief.

Melodramatically, he unknots the belt of his overcoat, flutters his eyelashes, gives peek-a-boo flashes of the full reveal, and then throws the coat wide open with the brazenness of a two-fisted Salome.

He's wearing red tights.

*

The laughter lifts Mike into the second round. Almost calms him.

In a world where everything slips away, Packey McFarland has not. It's a fact of life, in spite of it all: he and Packey are friends. Everywhere but the ring.

Sixty seconds in, the Phantom takes command, slowing the pace. Setting a new rhythm. Moving like he did back when George Barton first showed him how.

He doesn't merely look at his opponent across the ring. He *sees* him. Truly, clearly, and deeply. The surfacing patterns and dangerous combinations. The almost imperceptible tilt of O'Dowd's shoulder just before the hook. The faint drag in his step. His lungs, drawing breath just a little faster now. All in the blink of an eye. Just as Joe Gans once taught him.

Survive a hundred fights, and a boxer knows when the story's about to change.

Without warning, Mike Gibbons strikes hard. A clean, red-hot triplet that blasts the Harp against the ropes.

"O'Dowd looked foolish," the Minneapolis Journal's Edward G. Walker reports, "as Gibbons danced, dodged, and dominated."

But Mike knows better: No round stays easy for long.

Some other things he knows for sure: *Mike O'Dowd is eight years younger. He's got the lungs, the legs, and the charge of youth. He's gonna outlast me. My only chance in hell is to stop him. Drop him. Knock him out—before he destroys me.*

*

Two rounds down. Six minutes of battling, already done, and O'Dowd's just waking up.

Slumped on his stool, Mike Gibbons runs the numbers like a punch-drunk accountant: eight rounds to go, twenty-four minutes of mayhem,

and just one crisp, clean, killing blow to seize the crown.

His ribs throb. Breath comes ragged. Sweat stings his eyes. And he's feeling it: Father Time, stepping through the ropes, crowding the ring, stealing the spring from his step, leeching the snap from his fists.

Eddie Kane crouches low, wiping Mike's brow. Tommy kneels at his brother's side, hands firm on the Phantom's shoulders.

"*Dominus vobiscum*," he whispers. "God is with you, and so am I. Now go take care of business!"

*

Round Three

The Phantom springs to action, rejuvenated and on the hunt. Circling, measuring, reeling O'Dowd in. Step back, step in, slip, feint, and fire: a hot, staccato flurry to the body, sharp and mean, straight outta Sam Langford's gospel.

Weaken the son of a bitch, then drop him with the shovel hook.

Mike's dancing figure eights mid-ring, scouting for another opening in O'Dowd's armor. But the Harp shifts, his guard rising and falling like a busted elevator—hands high, then low, then high again. Tight. Tough. Relentless. No daylight between his arms.

Mike keeps after him, pressing, sliding, launching, missing. Then trying again.

Then—*slam!*

O'Dowd thunders in with a right hook. Mike dodges, but a split-second late and a half-inch shy. The shot lands flush, a thrashing spike pounding directly onto the Phantom's forehead.

He reels, wobbles, and weaves, the banshee wail screeching through his skull. Lights flare behind his eyes. He steadies himself. Barely. Tries to find his feet. Suddenly realizes: the world's gone dark.

He cannot see.

"O'Dowd's smashing blow opens a deep cut over Gibbons' brow," *Minneapolis Journal* reports. "Gibbons is bleeding so much into his own eyes that it must be like trying to see the sun during a total eclipse!"

O'Dowd storms back in, firing another sledgehammer. Mike stum-

bles backward, fists up, but blind. Jolted hard, he's clawing at air. Not swinging. Not blocking. Just protecting.

Doing his best to survive.

From ringside, Tommy's voice cuts through the arena like a battlefield bugle: "Stay with me, Mikey!"

Mike grits his teeth, shakes off the blood and the blow, circles left, twists right, buying a little time with a trio of wild jabs. None of them are pretty. None of them land. But he's kept the wolves at bay.

The bell saves him.

The Phantom staggers to his corner, battered and bleeding. But his jaw's still clenched with resolve, and his legs are still holding him up.

Not yet, he thinks. I'm not done yet.

*

Rounds Four to Six

The middle rounds are touch and go.

The Phantom, teasing, stalking, taunting. Mike O'Dowd, falling for it, winding up, blasting off, and missing by a mile as Mike suddenly vanishes. Bewildered, the Harp wheels around, suddenly smacked from behind by an invisible glove.

Mike, shoving into close range, delivering scalpel-like shots to specific organs. The science of shutting a man down.

O'Dowd, rebounding, giving chase with a flurry of pinwheel punches. Only one of them lands, but it smashes dead-on into the open wound above the Phantom's eye.

Even half-blinded by his own blood, Mike Gibbons is a ghost in the ring, "wildly applauded by the crowd for the virtuosity of his sweet science," the *New York World* reports.

Still, the sportswriter adds, "It appears the Phantom's having trouble seeing what he means to hit."

Mike "buys a little real estate in the ring" with a burst of heavy fire, then quickly stoops over to wipe his bloody face and clear his vision on the referee's white silk shirt.

"I was taking a lot of damage," Mike writes. "But I was staying alive."

War drums pound in his ears, a deafening bluster that sweeps him out of the ring and hurls him into the distant past. For a heartbeat, he's somewhere else: fourteen years old again, bare-knuckled in the family barn, fists raised like John L. Sullivan; duking it out with Herb Catherwood in the muddy alleyways of Frogtown; Tommy, the wide-eyed dreamer, caged in his brother's long shadow; Thomas John, lowering his head in grave disappointment, fury, and defeat; Mae and the boys, kissing him goodnight at the arena's side door only hours ago.

All of it. All at once.

Everything he's ever dreamed. Everything he's ever run from.

All the ways his life has led to this. Whatever happens next.

*

CRACK!

With a look of fierce epiphany in his eyes, Mike O'Dowd suddenly lunges, both sledgehammers swinging in brutal unison, stunning his former teacher with a tsunami of concussive crashes to the temple.

Already a river of blood in the canyon of his open wound, Mike's forehead is carved into an even deeper trench by O'Dowd's powerful pick-axes. In a tempest of gore, skull rattling, he's caught by the ropes before gravity can bring him down.

"A crown of thorns would have drawn less blood," one ringside reporter quips.

Eddie Kane leaps toward the ring. Tommy catches him by the suspenders, holds him back with a growl. The crowd riots to its feet.

Mike swoons, his head howling—cracked, numb, and stuttering—ringing hollow like the church bells of Old Ireland. Like a drowning man to driftwood, he stumbles into a clinch, holding up his body against the Harp's unfriendly embrace.

He should have known the road would end with Mike O'Dowd. It almost had to.

Referee Curly Ulrich muscled his way between the fighters, pries them apart like a butcher with a bone saw.

As they break, Mike bends low again, wiping blood from his eyes on Ulrich's shirt, "no doubt compounding the dry cleaner's nightmare," a

sportswriter japes.

Round after round, Mike returns to Ulrich's soft silk shirt, creating a canvas of crimson, the story of the fight in a single object, just as Joe Gans' bloodied handkerchief had long recounted the Old Master's trials and tribulations.

"Good old Curly's shirt was becoming quite the work of art," Gibbons chuckles years later.

But this battle is not yet a masterpiece, if it ever would be.

Right now, there is only time. And it's quickly running out.

*

Six rounds in, the crown remains up for grabs.

The Phantom flashes his "famous, deadly right" like a dagger, reports *The New York Times*, "but always a shade too high or too low."

"Of course I was missing," Mike seethes. "I couldn't see a goddamned thing!"

All he can do is keep moving. Dance in. Slip away. Come hither, then go to hell.

Bluff with both hands. Shuffle his feet. Play the angles with a torrent of misdirection.

Steal his attention. Make him miss. Then make him pay.

When the Phantom finally uncorks his lethal right—a game-ender in better days, but fragile now, this far down the line, after so much damage, like old dynamite in a damp box—he lands on nothing at all.

*

At ringside, Packey McFarland winces at the sight of his old pal's uncertain fate, leans over to Father Dunphy, one hand clutching a rosary, the other wrapped around his gold-handled cane.

"Our boy's not used to fighting a ghost; he *is* the ghost," Packey hollers. "But he can't dance all night long! He's gotta throw some bombs in there!"

Dunphy turns with an insurgent smirk, slamming his cane down on McFarland's foot.

"If you prayed half as much as you yapped," Dunphy digs, "our boy might've already won!"

*

Between rounds, Kane waters his fighter, rinses his mouth, pours cool water

down his trunks, and works futilely to stanch the bleeding over Mike's eye.

Tommy digs into his coat pocket and pulls out the battered leather Dope Book. Their secret weapon. Their gospel of pain and strategy. Every trick, every lesson, every hard-earned truth about the fight game, meticulously scrawled in ink by two scrappy kids who refused to quit.

"For something written by a couple of nitwits, it's not half bad," Tommy grins, jabbing a finger at a familiar page. "Page forty-seven. You feint, then step inside. O'Dowd always overcommits with his right. *Always*. So let him think he's got you. Bait him, draw him in, then hammer him with the uppercut. Got it?"

Mike nods absently, staring straight through the words on the page. Memories surge through his throbbing head. He's trying to breathe. To come back.

"I'm not believing you, Mikey," Tommy says, dropping to his brother's side. "Do you hear me? Do you *remember*?"

Mike lifts his head slowly, locking eyes with his brother. Blood in his eyes, he gives a fiery nod.

"Then show me, brother," Tommy says with uncommon ferocity. "And make it count."

*

Round Seven

Four rounds remain. A dozen minutes to glory.

Mike Gibbons channels the Dope Book's wisdom, stalking, dancing, and taunting like a ballerina on a murder spree.

O'Dowd falls for it, charges hard, blasting away with both fists, but missing wide.

Make him miss, the Phantom chats to himself, and *make him pay*.

Suddenly in flight, he's closing the gap, crashing down on O'Dowd with a blistering flurry of machine-gun lefts. Bones rattled, head dazed and bobbing beneath the arpeggiated assault, the Harp grunts, shimmying right, stumbling left, momentarily distracted by how in the hell to make a fist.

"That's when I saw my opening," the Phantom recalls. "The precise moment to throw my right, catch O'Dowd on the jaw, and send him to dreamland."

Inside his right glove, the Phantom clenches his ragged right, recalling the sage counsel of Sam Langford and his kid brother's blueprint.

Mike Gibbons knows the numbers.

Right here, right now, that number is one.

One punch.

One perfect, powderkeg shot.

One tumble to the canvas.

Then a ten-count, a crowd on fire, and the middleweight crown, finally his own.

Here it comes.

Step in. Bait him. Draw him in. Let him swing.

Then—*boom!*

The uppercut. The knockout blow.

It's all Mike Gibbons needs.

*

It's happening now.

The champion, Mike O'Dowd, flush with the reckless swagger of youth, barrels forward with a wrecking ball meant to end it all.

Tommy leaps to his feet, desperate and helpless to protect his brother from the end of everything.

Center ring, the Phantom holds steady. Calm in the chaos. Stillness amid the clamor. Drawing on all he knows and everything he's ever learned. He's slowing time, blinking through the red mist glazing his face and blurring his vision.

When O'Dowd fires off a gusty wide hook, he spins with the torque of his swing, leaving his left flank wide open.

This, the Phantom's cue.

He snubs his nose and, at the last possible moment, disappears.

O'Dowd whips his head around, scanning the ring for Gibbons, turns just in time to see the Phantom materializing behind him. Sliding left. Stepping in. Then letting it fly.

There goes the right, the explosive uppercut forged in lightning.

The kill shot, for sure.

O'Dowd's head snaps back on impact. Staggering. Limbs falling slack, eyes rolling wild. He flails for balance, drowning in air.

For the first time all night, the champion looks lost—spun in a help-
less ricochet, unsure of what comes next, the place and time, maybe even
his own name.

*

But something's wrong.

"I narrowly missed my target," Mike remembers, "landing a little high
on the side of O'Dowd's head. Worse than that, I was instantly paralyzed
by pain and numbness."

When the death blow connects, the bones in the Phantom's right
hand splinter like dry kindling. Crack, snap, and shatter. The knuckles
go first—three of them—then the pain stampedes up his arm in a white-
hot surge, sharp enough to buckle his knees.

His stomach turns. His fingers won't bend. His fist won't close.

"My right arm dropped, dead and helpless, to my side," he remembers.
"I'd taken my shot, and been blasted by the backfire."

"The blow shook up O'Dowd," the *Evening World* reports, "but
Gibbons winced terribly as he landed."

Blood dripping into his eyes, pain colonizing every cell of his body,
and the ring swirling like a cranked-up carousel, the Phantom runs the
numbers again.

The number is still one.

One hand.

One punch.

One broken man still chasing the crown.

*

Between Rounds

Mike Gibbons slumps on his stool, staring blankly, blood pooling in his
mouth.

He knows what he's up against.

"I couldn't see with my left eye, and couldn't hit with my right hand,"
he recalls. "I was doomed."

Playing the healer, Kane patches up his man without a word. He's

seen this before: the good ones who stay too long.

With a calm grin, Tommy kneels, forehead pressed to his brother's. "You still in there, brother?"

Drawing a long, ragged breath, trying to swallow the pain, Mike says nothing.

"You're not alone, Mikey," Tommy softly says. "Put on the whole armor of God. Be the Archangel. He's trained your hands for war and your fingers for battle."

Barely hearing the tumultuous crowd over the throbbing in his ears, Mike feels his father's ancient fury electrifying his spine and, against the odds, rises again.

"Aye," he growls, spitting blood to the canvas, "and the Devil never tires."

*

In the final analysis, it's a moment for philosophers: Mike Gibbons is fighting to win the crown. Mike O'Dowd is fighting to *keep* it.

So close to the end, psychology matters as much as stamina. What you give. What you take. What you show. What you fake.

Body breaking and desire blazing, the Phantom stays in constant motion. Gloves twitching, footwork sleek, keeping the dead arm alive through illusion and grit.

"If O'Dowd smelled blood in the water and realized I was hurt, it was all over," Mike recalls. "I had to keep him guessing until I could figure out another way to give him hellfire."

He studies the champion, his former pupil, like a professor proctoring a final exam: the arcs and angles, the rhythm as it shifts, the power as it ebbs, flows, and detonates.

Jaw set with a grim gaze, O'Dowd lunges—a double-fisted cannonball smashing through the fog of war.

Blasted from both sides, the Phantom is slammed against the ropes, spine whipped, breath stolen.

"I know O'Dowd believed this was the end," Mike later writes. "But I'd come too far. My only chance was to do something dangerous. Something I didn't want to do. If not now, then when."

*

The line between comedy and tragedy is thin.

Stop a story soon enough, and it sings with joy and possibilities. Let it run too long, and dead-end sadness—the grief of desire and redemption unrealized—steals the show.

Bell, breath, and boom.

The Phantom advances, his heart thundering louder than the crescendoing bloodlust of the raucous arena.

There's no dance in his approach this time. Only the truculent, flat-footed march of the wounded gunslinger. He squeezes the trigger three times in rapid succession, delivering a blinding salvo of anvils and bombs.

All of them land clean and hard, but none leave exit wounds.

"The pain impaled me like a rusted bayonet," Mike remembers, "but I couldn't stop. What mattered most was making O'Dowd believe the night could only end one way: with him knocked out on the canvas."

Overwhelmed by the Phantom's blistering assault, O'Dowd becomes, as one newspaper reports, "a fish that can't swim," a skittering zoetrope of confusion, drowning in knuckles and gloves,

But he does not fall down.

*

Round Nine

The end is near.

As the bell rings for the ninth, the arena's sweaty congregation stomps its feet, a riot of fists and raw voices, ready to erupt.

Shoulders down, Mike Gibbons catapults from his corner, colliding with O'Dowd like a battering ram, chest to chest, eyes locked.

Feet scraping and shuffling for position, seeking new ground or quick escape. Gloves crack like gunfire. Fists streak like torpedoes. Feint, parry, counter. Again and again. The crowd holds its breath.

The silent swelling of welts and dark blooming bruises, like ink on parchment. Blood and sweat, arcing in splatters and sprays, mist in the unforgettable storm. A brutal capoeira of grit, courage, and will.

*

Less than five minutes remaining, and the Phantom's got nothing left.

He'll never quit, of course, but like his father before him in darkest hours, he doesn't know how he'll go on.

He's sweating too much, short of breath for the first time in his career.

His mind has converted the pain in his right hand and arm to numbness. It doesn't hurt, but he also can't move it. Which means when he's wiping the goddamned waterfall of blood still flooding his vision, it's with his one good hand, his left. Which means the left is unavailable for offense or defense, neither blocking nor swinging.

The best he can do is dance like hell—which has never in recorded history, in or out of the ring, resulted in a knockout.

However the world is changing, against whatever odds there are, maybe the sweet science could be enough.

It would have to be.

*

With new focus and all the fire he can conjure, the Phantom narrows his eyes and curls his lip into a snarl, throws his shoulders back, and re-activates his right arm. He's doing the most convincing impersonation he can manage of the fighter he'd been when he was twenty-four, like O'Dowd is tonight. The youthful, artful warrior, faster than flames.

As theater, his performance is unconvincing, but damn it all, he's making one last push.

Rather than move to the middle of the ring, Mike slips and slides to the ropes, working the perimeter with a shuffle, brush, ball change, and stomp that bewilders O'Dowd. Steals his attention. Has him looking at all of the wrong things.

The table set now for the art of war.

The mission: rather than repeat the Dope Book sequence that earlier made O'Dowd quiver and quake, scramble it. Snap the pattern, invert the choreography, and make the most of your one-way ticket to victory or oblivion.

The new strategy means pushing off with the right foot and vaulting forward with the left, which requires the Phantom land decisively and fatally one more time with his ruined right hand.

"In the Army, we talked a lot about 'do or die.' It felt like that was the

gauntlet before me,” he remembers. “My right hand was wrecked, but it was the best weapon I had left to try and win the war.”

*

Here he goes: Mike Gibbons, playing the Hail Mary.

Advancing, sleek and seething, with a haunted drift and fluid weave, then rolling out the revamped maneuvers, designed to deceive. In this moment, the Phantom is everything: con man, gladiator, choir boy, escape artist, and cold-blooded assassin.

Perplexed by the sudden shift, O’Dowd missteps and fumbles. Instead of retreating, he steps right into the Phantom’s barrage.

It’s the moment Mike’s been waiting for. Spotting the opening, he makes his break, unbottling lightning. He blitzes the champion, going in for the kill with the punch he’s failed to conjure all night long.

This time, whether by luck, chance, or divine intervention, the blow lands. A cannon blast, branding apocalypse all over the champion’s startled face.

*

Time stutters. The world stops.

On impact, O’Dowd is knocked off his feet, sent airborne and spiraling, eyes vacant and mouth agape, “a man-shaped exclamation point, catapulted fifteen feet across the ring,” according to the *Bismarck Tribune*.

The crowd rejoices, hurling hats, seat cushions, and banners into the air with feral jubilation.

The Phantom’s pulse, a martial drum. He leans forward expectantly, feeling the seconds stretch into eternity as O’Dowd pirouettes through space like a rag doll cast away by an angry god.

Will it be enough?

*

In the stillness, Mike Gibbons remembers.

His mother, gone too soon, and already for too long.

His father, with the battered soul and broken heart.

Tommy Boy, the light in the dark.

Darling Mae, his reason, his way, the love that’s made every minute of his life worth fighting for.

Joe Gans lives again in the Phantom’s mind, riding the train home

to die in his mother's arms. Uncle Michael Cusick, fighting for Ireland's freedom until his flesh and spirit are torn apart. Jack Johnson, once king of the world, now held in chains at a federal prison in Kansas.

The Phantom doesn't mean to recall the trenches, the blackthorn stick, the bayonets, the shallow graves, the invisible plague, but he cannot forget.

The roads he's walked. The trails he's blazed. Every single thing he's ever lost or given away.

He glares across the ring where O'Dowd is still tumbling from orbit.

But will he fall? Will he hit the ground?

Goddammit, O'Dowd, the Phantom screams inside his head. *Fall down and stay down!*

Any other man would.

Mike O'Dowd does not.

*

Round Ten

It's come to this: one hand, one eye, the final round. Three minutes, and the end.

Still incredulous that O'Dowd survived the big bang and endless free-fall of the previous round's climactic, "night-night" punch, the Phantom rises slowly from his stool one last time.

Stirred by the gravity of the moment, the jam-packed house takes to its feet—first one fight fan, then five more, then an entire section—until the whole arena stands, elevating Mike Gibbons with their spirited ovation.

He lifts his gaze, scanning the faces, meeting their eyes, feeling their hearts.

With a quiet nod, he turns back to the ring and the mission at hand, makes the sign of the cross.

*

The bell rings.

Reborn after his brush with oblivion, O'Dowd surges from his corner as if launched from an archer's taut bow.

"Muscling furiously from his flat-footed stance, O'Dowd immediately pins and punishes his opponent," writes the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*' Dan Riley. "Gibbons tries vainly to keep the cascade of blood from his

swollen eye.”

Right side numb again, demons dancing through his broken bones, the Phantom does his best to defend with desperate lefts as the seconds bleed away.

He has no bombs left to launch. No bullets in the chamber. No powder to burn. No knockout punch to deliver.

“Gibbons’ famous right hand is letting him down,” the *New York World* reports. “It’s a struggle for him to use it even to block O’Dowd’s suddenly refreshed assault!”

With no other options, Mike returns to the beginning. To go the distance, he makes one last request of the one power he was born with: speed.

Battered as he’s been, bloodied as he is, the Phantom suddenly accelerates, rocketing in on O’Dowd with a buzzing squall of clean blows, then glissades out of reach with no time to spare. Here, then gone, “like he’s on roller skates,” writes boxing historian J. J. Johnston.

And in that final cannonade, the Phantom begins to shift—cells realigning, atoms igniting under fire. He becomes pulse and flare, shutter and flash, revelation and release.

In the blink of an eye, he is the utterly impossible made real—the ephemeral and ineffable, manifest and unveiled—before the exultant flock of Saintly City fight fans and their euphoric hymn.

In the end, Mike O’Dowd and the sold-out house share the same sacred experience: *before their very eyes, they watch the St. Paul Phantom fade away.*

*

Hear it now: the final bell, the sealing of some ancient tomb.

Time, it is done, and there will be no more.

The fighters, dazed, shambling, and weary, as Referee Ulrich, his shirt soaked through with the Phantom’s blood, summons them to center ring.

Teacher and student. Friends and foes. Immigrants. Countrymen. Twin warriors of St. Paul.

The crowd wells, a roaring sea that floods the hall.

The Phantom steps forward, meeting O’Dowd’s weary gaze. Arms like anchors, he pulls the younger man close. O’Dowd stiffens, then yields to the embrace.

"You're a great champ, young man," Mike whispers, pressing a kiss to O'Dowd's swelling cheek.

Most sportswriters award the fight to Mike Gibbons on points. Some do not.

Without a knockout, the scorecards are merely entertainment, not official judgment. By boxing law, the still-standing Mike O'Dowd remains middleweight champion of the world.

Minneapolis Tribune's Charles Johnson laments, "Mike Gibbons' final chance at the crown has come and gone today."

*

The Day After Battle
November 22, 1919

Right arm in a sling, brow stitched and bandaged, Mike Gibbons kneels before a wide-eyed newsboy holding up a pair of well-worn gloves for his autograph. Mike struggles with the pen, but gets the job done, offering the boy a reassuring smile.

"For the days when the road is rough," he says, shaking the boy's hand, "just give bad luck an uppercut."

Beaming, the newsie scuttles into the growing crowd outside St. Paul Auditorium. Near the entrance, Eddie Kane wrangles sportswriters and photographers into a roped-off press area. Flashbulbs burst like gunfire in the pale, heavy noonday sun as Mike approaches the podium. Hundreds of fans press forward for a closer look at their hometown hero, the battered warrior who fought valiantly and never fell.

Seeking stillness now as he had in the beginning, Mike winces at the pain in his ribs, draws a deep breath, and begins:

"Thank you for coming, and for standing by me through the years. I want to congratulate Mike O'Dowd, my fellow townsman and former student, on his brilliant title defense. He's a worthy champion, and I've told him so."

Mike pauses.

"As for me, this is the end of the road. I'm retiring from the ring. I've

fought the good fight. I've finished my course. I've kept the faith."

Standing nearby, Father Dunphy recognizes the words of the Apostle Paul from *Second Timothy* 4:7, and nods with a quiet smile. Beside him, Thomas John listens intently, hands clasped in front of him.

An unruly voice from the back of the crowd cuts through the reverent hush: "Hey, Gibbons, how does it feel to be the greatest—but never a champion?"

The question hangs in the autumn air like a pin-pulled grenade. Faces harden. Heads turn, searching for the young reporter who dared to ask.

A faint smile spreads across Mike's bruised lips as he scans the crowd, finding the faces that matter most.

"What do I feel?" he says at last. "Gratitude. For having the chance. For being able to take my shot. For living in a country where opportunity is assured, and where we're defined by our efforts, not our outcomes. Without that, we are merely hostages on this earth."

He lets the words settle before continuing.

"Everyone in the world knows I dreamed of crowns. But I've come to believe there are other, greater victories in life. Truer ones, like love, loyalty, and courage. Those are the only titles worth winning."

Thomas John bows his head, thinking of all he's lost, and all he's won.

"Some champions fight in the spotlight," Mike continues. "Others fight unseen, every day. Most of them are never crowned. They may not ever win. But they keep on fighting."

He surveys the crowd. Tommy Boy, standing proud. Eddie Kane, small but lion-hearted. Mae, holding baby Virginia, their young sons at her side, somehow more beautiful than the day they married. At the back of the crowd, Packey McFarland, George Barton, and Robert Edgren nod in friendly tribute.

"I'm grateful to them all," Mike says. "To my parents, who made the greatest sacrifice I can imagine, risking everything to cross an ocean so their children could have a shot at the American Dream. To my dear wife, Mae, who has fought battles I'll never know—not with fists, but with fire and will, standing toe-to-toe with an establishment that dismissed her. To every fighter I've ever faced. And to my brother, Tommy Boy. Go get

Dempsey already, would you?"

Tommy flashes his moonbeam smile, salutes his big brother.

"And to my brothers in the ring—Joe Gans, Sam Langford, Jack Johnson. Their grace and grit have shaped me. They never received their proper due, but they've also never stopped fighting. For something better. Something just. For those who will rise in their shadow. They will always be my champions."

Mike's gaze moves across the crowd once more.

"Greatness doesn't always come with a crown," he says. "It's forged in fire, in failure, in rising again. In the love we give. In the fights we wage that are bigger than ourselves, seeking victories that will outlive us."

His voice softens.

"I've been surrounded my whole life by greatness," he says, turning to Father Dunphy, "I've had God in my corner. I've done my best, and I am at peace. I'm thankful for all of it."

Mike finds the young reporter in the crowd again, holds the boy's gaze.

"Was I the greatest?" Mike muses. "That's not for me to say. Never was. Let history decide. I believe my record will tell the story of a man who gave everything he had and never backed down. Who found victory—not in a crown, but in the journey itself."

A long, contemplative silence follows before the crowd erupts in thunderous applause.

With a final nod and a quiet smile, Mike takes it all in, lifts his good hand to salute the crowd.

After that, the St. Paul Phantom steps away from the podium—walking not into the past, but into legend.

*

Next morning, *The New York Times* headlines: "The Great Phantom is Through!"

In a poem entitled "So Long, Phantom," nationally syndicated sports-writer William F. Kirk sings across three hundred newspapers:

*So long, Phantom! You played your part
As few have played the pugilist's role
With your lightning speed and fighter's heart
And both eyes fixed on Fate's bright goal.
And in the Who's-Who of the boxing crew
You have left your name most brilliantly writ
For never a fighter toyed with you
And never a foeman made you quit.*

Chicago sportswriter-illustrator Ed Hughes eulogizes the faded ghost:

“Mike Gibbons will always be ranked as one of the greatest middle-weights who ever lived. Even had circumstances dealt kindlier with him in the matter of the middleweight title, his renown would have been no greater, nor more enduring, than when he left the arena after meeting Mike O'Dowd in his last and losing fight. So long, Mike Gibbons, the St. Paul Phantom—wizard of your time, and nearly a champion!”

THIS SIDE OF PARADISE

You live as long as you are remembered.

—Ancient Proverb



For all he won, never the crown

St. Paul's own F. Scott Fitzgerald christens the new era: the Jazz Age, he calls it.

It surges through America, this reckless, roaring thing, a riot of brass and abandon, wild and electric. Welcome to the Roaring Twenties.

The syncopated rhythms of new music seize listeners by hips and hearts, heaving and howling, a hushed tumble into heartache, gallop into sultry innuendo, and tomcat prow. We swing, we sway, we thump and bop. The cleavage, breathless. The hemlines, rising. The songs, never played the same way twice.

Jazz: untamable, unnamable. Not for praying on bended knee, but for hip-swaying devotion. Field songs with hi-hats, folk music without saddlebags, church tunes where gods reveal themselves in triplets, improvi-

sational riffs, percussive strides on ivory keys, and the punching of horns.

"Sometimes it's hot," says a rising young horn player named Louis Armstrong. "Sometimes it's cool. But jazz is always jazz."

It isn't science. It isn't art. It's chaos and yearning, key changes and sudden stops. A haymaker one moment, a lullaby the next. A secret between the body and the song.

And a lot like boxing.

To Armstrong, it's plain and simple. "What we play," he says, "is life."

*

Nineteen twenty arrives like a cyclone: the Age of Anxiety, they call it. The Era of Wonderful Nonsense. The dawning of the Lawless Decade. The world's a carnival now, a grease fire on the midway.

President Woodrow Wilson, ravaged by the Spanish Flu, suffers a stroke and lingers at death's door. Unbeknownst to the public, he has lost the capacity to govern.

American women march to the polls for the first time, casting ballots for Warren G. Harding, a handsome grifter promising a "return to normalcy" after plague and world war.

Anarchists terrorize city streets, planting bombs from coast to coast and blowing a crater into Wall Street in the name of revolution.

The Chicago White Sox, including star outfielder "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, stand trial for conspiring to throw the 1919 World Series against the Cincinnati Reds.

Prohibition slams the country like a brass-knuckled fist. A desperately sober America drowns its post-war, post-pandemic sorrows in song, crooning sportswriter-humorist Ring Lardner's "Prohibition Blues." In Chicago, Al Capone stakes his claim. The bootlegging boom begins. The Tommy Gun makes its debut.

In St. Paul, things have never been wetter. Secret distilleries flood the heartland with illegal spirits, supplementing liquor smuggled from Canada and the Caribbean. Among the moonshiners: the offspring of Irish rebel, Uncle Michael Cusick, along with a rogue's gallery of America's Most Wanted: John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, Ma Barker, Pretty Boy Floyd.

Criminals rule the Saintly City, dubbed by *Esquire* magazine "the best place in America to hire a hitman."

Tex Rickard, impresario and impossible dreamer, saves Madison Square Garden from demolition, scraping together \$300,000 with circus mogul John Ringling to preserve the “temple of fistiana”—and the goddess Diana, continuing to watch over the big city. Soon, Rickard will reign as boxing’s King of Promoters.

The Two Jacks—Kearns and Dempsey—ride the momentum of the Toledo bloodbath against Willard to transform Dempsey into a global superstar and heartthrob: one of the first celebrity endorsers in advertising, a hero of vaudeville, a wealthy movie star, and a Broadway ham (despite merciless assessments that “he couldn’t act worth a lick” and, by his own admission, “was a terrible actor” who never improved). Nevertheless, Champion Dempsey’s notoriety attracts Hollywood’s biggest stars, especially Charlie Chaplin, who has already left his enduring mark on the cinematic boxing world. Chaplin’s iconic persona, “The Tramp,” known by his mustache, bowler hat, bamboo cane, and peculiar walk, transforms the silver screen with memorable boxing comedy roles beginning with *The Champion* in 1915. Their friendship quickly attracts other Tinseltown elite such as Douglas Fairbanks and Mae West, who after first meeting Jack writes in her memoir, “It was lust at first sight.”

Working his “day job,” Dempsey’s 1921 bout with French war hero Georges Carpentier becomes boxing’s first million-dollar gate. The Manassa Mauler is well on his way to legend.

Prizefighters become playthings and cash cows for the underworld—Capone in Chicago, Dutch Schultz and Owney Madden in New York, Boo Boo Hoff in Philadelphia, Danny Hogan and Tom Brown in St. Paul. The mob tightens its grip on the sport. “It was a case of take it or leave it with the mobsters,” recalls *The Ring’s* Nat Fleischer. “Practically every big-city fight club had criminal cash financing their operations. It was not worth one’s life to defy them.”

Willie Lewis, once a welterweight king until Mike Gibbons twice crushed his dreams in New York, learns the lesson too late. Double-crossed gangsters gun him down in a Manhattan phone booth outside his own café.

Nineteen twenty is a year where hours fly fast and fade quickly, where time is “loaded with intense nostalgia, corruption, lawlessness, and rebel-

lion, but on the other hand, an intense conservatism.”

The face of the world, perpetually vanishing, slipping away before it can be held. It’s always the end. Or just another beginning. Maybe the middle, only trying to carry on.

*

In New York, the future of boxing is rewritten after a three-year drought with passage of the Walker Law, sponsored by flamboyant state senator “Beau James” J. Walker. Suddenly, a hungry fighter can take a decent bite of the Big Apple again.

It shouldn’t matter to a retired Mike Gibbons. But it does.

The old system—the furtive sneak fights, the cursed “no decision” rule that sent so many promising careers on labyrinthine roads to nowhere—ensured that genius would never be enough for the St. Paul Phantom. He’d humbled world champions, run rampant through his three-man hit list, outclassed challengers from all over the world. Most champs and contenders avoided him like the plague. For all he won, never the crown.

But in this new decade, times are changing. Under the Walker Law, there’s an ironclad rulebook enforced by a three-man state commission and, most critically, referees are empowered to render official verdicts.

Everyone loves the knockout, but they’re no longer required to claim the crown.

*

The Walker Law also sheds new light on the past.

Mike Gibbons has run the numbers. The number is two.

Two fights. Two titles. Both within reach.

So close. So far. Long gone.

In 1915, per referee Billy Joh’s scoring and the consensus of Robert Edgren’s brigade of sportswriting authorities, Mike defeated Packey McFarland at Brighton Beach. Under Walker Law, the Phantom’s victory would have been undisputed.

In 1919, according to referee Curly Ulrich’s scorecard, Mike Gibbons edged out Mike O’Dowd for the win. With the Walker Law, the Phantom would no longer be uncrowned.

“If referees had been allowed to render a decision during the Phantom’s ring reign, and if title holders didn’t avoid him like they did so often,”

writes boxing historian Alexander Johnston, “he would have taken the title from any middleweight—no exceptions—any night of the week.”

Timing: in boxing, it means everything.

*

With his fighting days behind him, Mike Gibbons makes more room for love.

Sometimes he dances with Mae. Sometimes he plays catch with his children.

Sometimes he sits on the porch by the lake, watching the world go by: horse-drawn carriages giving way to rattling automobiles, businessmen marching grimly to work, mothers pushing baby carriages shaded by parasols along newly paved streets. One building rising as another one falls.

Without the chase for the crown, time loosens its grip on Mike Gibbons. The days blur, memories folding over themselves—once, now, next, never, all at once and not at all.

Another beginning ending. Another ending just begun.

*

One late-spring morning, Mike climbs into a rowboat on Lake Como, pushes off, and drifts. His right hand, still healing from the O’Dowd fight, refuses to steer. He is at the mercy of wind and water.

Once a god, now a man.

The current turns and redirects him every few minutes—a crisp hustle north, then a hard ripple east. The boat spins untethered in the weather, when a voice rises within him. A mantra George Barton taught him a lifetime ago, one he’s tried to embrace his entire career: *There will be action, but first things first—stillness. Stillness, where the spirit enters.*

Then another voice, older and deeper. His father, reciting Psalm 46:10, his favorite scripture, filling the ears of his first surviving child in this Promised Land of America: *Be still, and know that I am God.*

For the first time in a long time, Mike prays, “In this moment, please Lord, calm my restless mind. Quiet my anxious heart.”

Suddenly, Mike realizes he is weeping. Softly, to himself. Far from the world, where no one can hear. In this moment, he knows he is not alone. It is overwhelming and comforting. He covers his face with both hands, the ones his mother always hoped would belong to a priest.

Soon, he is asleep.

*

He wakes to a blinding sun. In his dream, he drifts far from home, to other times and places, ones he cannot recall. Now he's stranded in the middle of the lake, unable to row, paddle, or swim.

Before he can summon a prayer, the boat lurches. A hard tug, then another. Slowly, he's pulled to shore.

As his eyes adjust, he sees the shadowy figure who has saved him: his father.

*

Thomas John ties off the boat and drapes a heavy blanket over his son's shoulders. Old habits dying hard, he effortlessly builds a fire with two twigs and a hard look, the way he'd always done in Ireland's darkest hours.

For a long while, father and son sit in silence.

"You've always been my wild one, Michael John," his father finally says. "Your grandfather Richard used to say the same about me. Fortunately the good Lord is generous with redemption. Our countryman, Oscar Wilde, says it well, 'The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.'"

Mike turns, searching his father's face. Not just the trenches time had carved, but the quiet mercy blooming now where only judgment and fury once grew. Not sure where he's going with this.

Thomas John exhales, eyes fixed on the fire. "We all know the story of Saul on the road to Damascus. But as is true of any story worth telling once, it bears repeating forever," he says. "Saul, you might recall, was blinded by his pride. His hunger for power. His mission was misguided. His suffering, self-inflicted."

He pauses, letting the words settle as the fire sparks and crackles.

"But it was not without purpose," Thomas John says, resting a gentle hand on Mike's. "Saul suffered into truth. When he finally saw—*truly* saw—God's plan, he changed. He made amends, humbled himself before God. In doing so, he was restored. His sight. His meaning. His joy. He was even given a new name: Paul."

Mike closes his eyes. The ache in his hand has dulled. The fire in his

chest, calmed to embers. He draws a breath, deep and slow, and whispers the words he's heard his whole life, but is only now coming to understand: "What matters most—."

*

Always fast, always moving, Mike Gibbons turns his attention in retirement to what comes next. He's no longer fighting, but never far from the ring.

"Mike Gibbons has finished one glorious act and is determined to forge a second just as grand," reports the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. "These days, he cares only about two things: love and business."

At Johnny Salvatore's Rose Room Gym, the Phantom trains the next generation of boxers. His lessons are taken as gospel, and always sold out. Some nights, he swaggers into the YMCA, where sixteen years ago he persuaded George Barton to teach him. Now, Mike leads master classes for young hopefuls who have long revered him.

With Mae, he launches a self-defense class for St. Paul's women—suffragettes, factory girls, society ladies, all eager to learn from the Phantom.

With Tommy, he raises \$50,000 to resurrect the Gibbons Brothers Gym, left for dead by war and pandemic. Almost overnight, it comes roaring back: speed bags pounding, jump ropes whirring, fists snapping against leather, the sounds of Frogtown's dreamers spilling out onto the sidewalk and echoing across the seven hills of St. Paul.

Mike takes up writing, contributing to Mike Collins' Minneapolis-based *Boxing Blade*. In a month-long frenzy, he and Tommy pen two manuals: *How to Box* and *How to Train*, fully illustrated books that become instant national bestsellers. They expand the venture into a ten-lesson mail-order course: *Scientific Boxing and Physical Training with Mike Gibbons*. Price: one dollar.

"There are wonderful possibilities in a correspondence course," Mike tells the *Racine Journal News*. "I don't suppose I can develop world champions through the mail, but I can teach a fellow the rudiments of self-defense."

More than five thousand subscribe. Praise pours in, including accolades and endorsements from Secretary of War Newton W. Baker, General John J. Pershing, and former heavyweight champ James J. Corbett.

By summer, the gym and the correspondence school demand his full attention, but Mike never misses supper. He stays close to home. To Mae, the children, to Tommy and their father.

Sometimes he aches for more. Sometimes he kisses his wife.

Sometimes he misses what was. Sometimes he remembers why.

Sometimes he hurts. Sometimes he weeps. Sometimes his right hand burns like it's broken all over again. Sometimes his bad eye sends him stumbling into a wall. Sometimes he recalls things that never happened. Sometimes he dreams of what might have been.

Sometimes, it feels like it was all worth it. Sometimes, it feels like it's enough.

Every day, he tries to do better.

*

Five days before Christmas, Mike Gibbons falls asleep to the rumble of the rails on a Great Northern train. He dreams of the night after the championship fight with Mike O'Dowd.

A parade winds north from the St. Paul Auditorium, past Rice Park and the grand new library, where schoolchildren wave flags and newsboys race beside the drums. The procession climbs Wabasha Street, crosses the river, and turns west onto University, rattling past barbershops, cafés, and the Lexington baseball field, where boys have pretended for years to be the Phantom. He sees the copper dome of St. Paul Cathedral shimmer in the distance, hears the glorious song of the church's bells.

Veterans march beside suffragettes. A brass band belts Sousa. Streets are lined with soot-smudged railmen cheering from rooftops. Carriages roll past factory girls and ribboned war nurses. All of Frogtown spills into the street. Mike walks among them, hat in hand, the ghost of a grin on his lips.

They reach the lake by nightfall. Fireworks bloom above the pavilion at Lake Como. A jazz band plays near the bandstand. Boxing gloves hang from the branches of an old elm like leather ornaments. There's apple pie and sparring, dancing under the stars. A thousand citizens honor the man who *didn't* knock out Mike O'Dowd, but fought like hell trying.

*

At water's edge, Mike finds Packey McFarland setting a paper boat onto the lake, watching it drift in the breeze, pulled by the current until it's

lost in the darkness.

"Making a wish, brother?" Mike calls out.

Packey, turning to the Phantom, says, "Not sure I'll ever stop. You?"

Mike, shrugging, says, "I think I'm good. At least until the world starts ending again."

A long moment between the old pals. Friends, everywhere but the ring.

"We get two good times in life, brother," Packey says, draping an arm affectionately over Mike's shoulder. "Before we chase the crown, and after we're done fighting. One Irishman to another, go get the rest of your life, boyo!"

*

When darkness falls, Tommy flips a switch on a borrowed movie projector, tugging still images into movement and light. He's rigged the screen himself—old boxing canvases, stitched and stretched tight across a wooden frame, hung from the pavilion's rafters, three stories tall and swaying gently in the lake breeze.

From a narrow riser at the back, the Cardinal—little Eddie Kane—lifts a battered megaphone, black-painted tin, nicked from some forgotten fairground, and begins to sing. His voice, rough and unvarnished, deeper than expected, cuts through the cold.

Behind him, Wilbur Sweatman and his Society Orchestra, Minnesota's first integrated band in these deeply segregated times, fall in softly: clarinet, muted cornet, upright piano, snare brushed like a whispered hymn.

"*Bring back the good old days*," Eddie sings, voice cracking slightly at the edges. "*Let mem'ries light the way...*"

The crowd falls hushed. Flicker and scratch. A flash of light. Memories unravel out of order, but not out of place, a dream in reverse. Mike Gibbons is thirty-one, then twenty-eight, then twenty-three—then younger still. There he is, slipping punches, skipping rope, gliding through time. The ring, a chessboard, and he, its master. Every feint a question. Every jab a blunt reply.

"Hearts were lighter then, laughter stayed longer then,

Oh, bring back the good old days..."

Black-and-white grain washes over the lawn like lantern light swung through a familiar but forgotten room.

The reel skitters and jumps, a kaleidoscope of the Phantom's journey.

The silver dollar from long ago. Joe Gans' blood-speckled handkerchief. Catherwood's cauliflowered ear. Havana's roaring crowd. Jack Johnson's golden smile beneath the sun. The whispered prayers to Diana atop the Garden. Clabby's flying teeth. Packey and the red tights.

Mike Gibbons, here, gone, then materializing once more. Footwork carving diagrams across the canvas. A right hand whistling past his cheek. The crowd gasping, but the Phantom, watching the film, doesn't flinch at all. He already knows what happens next: he ducks low, slips the hammer by less than an inch, then springs back into light.

The soft tap of gloves in the Dope Room. And the Gotham skyline. The rooftop moviemaking at the Woolworth Building. Mike and Tommy, skipping rope and sparring playfully thirty stories above the world. Working and dreaming, as if the nightmare of the next five years would never come. The terror of war, the silence of pandemic, the dreams swallowed whole by history.

Then, see him now: the Phantom, standing alone. Arms crossed. Fists wrapped. A few weeks before Brighton Beach. Staring directly into the camera, his face already changed and changing again. The guileless smile, the sharklike grin, the steely eyes. Onscreen, his lips move with words he once spoke, but can no longer recall.

*"When friends were true, and skies were blue,
And nothing could slip away..."*

Watching the film beneath the star-studded sky stirs Mike deeply. Not just for what had been, but what *might* have been. He can only fill that space with gratitude. Mike Gibbons, here and now, surrounded by love and blood, friends and family, each of them a brick in his wall, a phrase or chapter in his story, wind that's foiled or fueled his dreaming.

He smiles at what's left of the world he loves. His boys tumbling through the grass. Mae rubbing noses with Virginia, wind curling their dresses. Thomas John on a bench, hands folded over his old shillelagh, watching his son in motion for the first time, and softly grinning, as if to say: *I finally see.*

The past, recorded now so it need not be remembered.
As if Mike Gibbons could ever forget.

Summer 1920

As a favor to his old pal, Robert Edgren runs a two-column feature headlined: "Mike Gibbons Surrenders Crown to Brother Tommy."

"Tom Gibbons, the most neglected middleweight and light-heavyweight in the country, has slipped overnight into the shoes of his famed brother, the retired St. Paul Phantom. 'It's Tommy's time now,' Mike says. 'Time to face Jack Dempsey. Time to become champion of the world.'"

As the new decade rises, Tommy emerges from Mike's shadow to battle Harry Greb—a rematch, their first meeting in five years. On November 16, 1915, Tommy handed Greb "one of the worst lickings of his career," battering him so severely that the Pittsburgh Windmill entombed himself in his St. Paul Hotel room for a week after the fight to let the damage privately heal.

Now, on May 5, 1920, at Forbes Field in Pittsburgh, Tommy Gibbons does it again. Over ten rounds, he "astonishes fans with his speed and accuracy," forcing Greb to repeatedly "swing, miss, and get punished." It's a decisive victory with Tommy serving Greb "the whipping of his life." Quietly, he avenges his brother's disputed outcome with the Windmill the year before.

While the consensus of sportswriters agrees that the Gibbons brothers always get the better of Harry Greb, Tommy feels no urge to celebrate. However formidable, Greb is only a waypoint, a stepping stone. The true summit, the only prize that matters, is Jack Dempsey and the heavyweight crown, the sole path to earning enough to save Helen's life.

It's taken a lot of years, but the Phantom's kid brother is finally given a fighting nickname. The Happy Warrior, they call him.

*

When Mike steps off the train, he's in northeast Kansas, just a few blocks from Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. Homesick and weary after seven years on the run, Johnson surrenders to U.S. federal agents on July 20, 1920, crossing the border at Tijuana, Mexico, and is now serving a 366-day sentence for driving across state lines with his white wife in 1911.

Soon I'll be free again, the Big Smoke thinks. *Or something like it.*

In prison, Johnson finds a way to survive. He's struck up a friendship with D. S. Dickerson, the prison warden and a lifelong fight fan. In exchange for fair treatment, Johnson agrees to box on the yard, entertaining inmates and guards alike. The arrangement is unorthodox, but Johnson's had worse deals in harder times. On fight nights, they even serve him sirloin.

Though forty-two and out of condition, he's retained a fair amount of his old firepower. In under six rounds, he knocks out 240-pound inmate Frank Owens.

As Mike approaches the ring, raised in the center of the yard, he watches a kid from Topeka—bold enough to call himself “the next Jack Johnson”—touch gloves with the real one. The fight lasts less than ten seconds and can be summarized like this: bell rings, Johnson punches, the kid from Kansas hits the canvas, out cold.

*

After Johnson showers, he joins Mike on the yard. It isn't dark yet, but it's getting there.

“Good goddamn, it's nice to see you, Gibbons,” Johnson says, flashing his gold-capped grin.

Mike smiles. Nods.

“You ever find your Steve Brodie?” Johnson asks.

Mike remembers the story from the Havana docks, but doesn't know how to answer.

“Lemme tell you something I learned about Brodie not so long ago,” Johnson says. “Turns out, by the time I made it to New York, the son of a bitch was already dead. And you know what else?”

Mike shakes his head.

“He never even jumped off the goddamned bridge!” Johnson laughs, like he's hearing the punchline of the world's greatest joke. “His mama sewed him a dummy, and he threw it over the edge. All that glory for a couple of sandbags in a suit!”

*

The sun dips. Shadows stretch. The warden serves them dinner.

“What are you gonna do, Jack?” Mike asks. “When you get out?”

Johnson downs a flute of champagne in a single gulp, wipes his lips with a cloth napkin, and leans back in his chair.

"I think what you're asking," he says, grinning, "is whether the Big Smoke is planning a comeback."

"Maybe," Mike says. "Maybe not."

"Well then, maybe I will and maybe I won't," Johnson smiles again, gold teeth flashing. "How about you, Gibbons? What're you gonna do now that O'Dowd's lost the middleweight crown?"

Mike already knows the news, for sure. He's run the numbers. Earlier that year—May 6, 1920—just eight months after the "Two Mikes" storied showdown in St. Paul, O'Dowd fell in a hotly contested decision to Johnny Wilson, an unheralded Italian southpaw with mob ties and a padded record. No one loves Wilson, dubbed—like Al McCoy before him—a "cheese champ." But he is, nevertheless, the new middleweight king.

Mike raises his glass, tosses the champagne over his shoulder with a shrug. "You know what they say, Jack—"

"I know *all* the things they say, brother."

Together, they laugh in harmony and recite the grim truth they both know too well: "The comeback always fails."

*



Farewell to the Happy Warrior, crossing the ocean to hunt Dempsey's crown

Tommy Gibbons stands at the edge of New York Harbor, inhaling the sharp scent of salt, coal, and iron. Lady Liberty, her golden torch lifted skyward, holds silent vigil in the distance.

Behind him looms the SS *Leviathan*, bound first for England, then Ireland, the land their parents fled long ago. Steam hisses from the hull. Sailors bark orders. Crates clatter onto cargo decks. Passengers press up the gangway, eyes bright with the promise of new worlds.

His bags are packed for the journey—an overseas hunt for worthy opponents and a more powerful punch, one step closer to war with murderous Jack Dempsey for the heavyweight crown. The comet vow, still alive in the kid brother's heart.

Uncertain of where he now belongs in his brother's life, Mike stands apart, hands in his coat pockets, watching Tommy and Eddie Kane sling their bags over their shoulders.

"You sure about this?" Mike asks.

Tommy grins: "Gotta be, Mike."

Mike exhales, nods, reaches into his pocket, and presses the old Dope Book into Tommy's hand.

"Kept me from dropping dead against O'Dowd," Mike says. "Maybe it'll help you too."

Tommy swallows hard, smiles, and slips the book into his coat.

"The day you were born, I swore to God I'd always protect you," Mike says, fighting back a wave of emotion. "Turns out, it's been you looking out for me the whole time."

With a moonbeam smile, Tommy pulls his brother into a tight embrace. "You've always been there for me, Mikey, strong and steady," he says. "I love you, pal."

"You show me all the time," Mike says. "Now go get 'em, Tommy Boy, and bring home the bacon!"

A gust of wind howls through the harbor, lifting Mike's words into the sky above. A steam horn chuffs a low departure call.

Eddie Kane, already halfway up the gangway, tosses a wink. "Try to stay out of trouble, Mike," he calls. "Maybe sit still for a minute. Enjoy the spoils of war."

Tommy lays a hand on Mike's shoulder. "Let's keep the faith, brother."

Mike nods and watches them board. The ropes pulled from dock moorings. The gangway lifted. His kid brother sails away, disappearing over the horizon into his own fight, his own story.

Time will tell.

Then, wind at his back, Mike turns for home and everything after.

*



Seven stories above it all, the view is finally enough

Sometimes Mike Gibbons meets George Barton for lunch on the rooftop of the Ryan Hotel. Once, long ago, it was the tallest structure in St. Paul. In 1920, it's not even the fifth.

Together, the glorious little fella and the St. Paul Phantom come to rest, perched above the city at noon. The light is blinding, the shadows short. The roar of the world, distant.

They gaze out over the Saintly City, running on forever, changing again and again, like their own children, before their eyes.

From high above, they see the places where once they fought and played. The beginning and middle, but not the end. They see the seven hills, the mansions of Summit Avenue, the sprawling emerald of the Great Northern railyards, Union Depot, the YMCA, St. Agatha's Conservatory, the smoky belch of old factories, the swamp of Frogtown, the glint of sunlight on faraway water. The deep woods and distant Mississippi, paddle

steamers and bridges, train whistles and arenas, rooftop battlegrounds and music halls. The streetcars, courthouse, firehouse, Lake Como in the distance, and the towering dome of the magnificent new cathedral.

They speak of windmills and maulers, assassins, thunderbolts and bear-cats, old masters, kings, fools. Chaos. Destruction. All the dreams they dreamed. All the nightmares they faced. The science sweet. The warring, sometimes artful. The things they'll sometimes try to remember—and sometimes try to forget. The laughs they shared. The friends they lost. The stories they've lived. The ones they've never told. Everything already beginning again, only to end too soon.

For a long, quiet moment, in perfect stillness, they almost believe it never will.

Barton, time short and belly full, rises slowly, pats Mike's shoulder. He returns to his office, his desk, his typewriter. Another story to tell. Another always on the way.

Mike Gibbons remains alone atop the building as the sun tilts west, the fiery sun surrendering for the day in a vibrant bath of oranges, pinks, and violet. The Phantom breathes deep and takes one last, long look at the world he's known, searching the horizon for any sign of what's to come.

He can't see it yet, but he knows it's coming in hot.

Only seven stories above it all, he smiles softly to himself. For the first time in a long time, maybe his whole damned life, the view is finally enough.

BENEDICTION

*I have fought the good fight.
I have finished the course.
I have kept the faith.*

*St. Paul the Apostle
2 Timothy 4:7*

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A CONVERSATION WITH AUTHOR DR. GERARD GIBBONS

1. In the book's introduction, you recall sitting on your grandfather Tommy's lap as your earliest memory. How did that moment fuel your decades-long journey to write this book?

That earliest memory—sitting on my grandfather Tommy's lap, feeling profoundly safe and loved—planted the seed for *Fight for Glory*. The sense of refuge I felt in his presence never faded, and it became the first doorway to this book. But the key was placed in my hand years later by his son, my father, Tommy Jr. Not long before he passed, Dad entrusted me with several sealed “mystery boxes” filled with clippings, photos, and letters. He left no instructions, no explanation. I believe now he knew I would one day feel their pull.

The deeper spark, however, may trace back to a conversation with my father as I was graduating from university in 1978. We were driving a dark Mojave Desert highway when I spoke of missing my older siblings, who had scattered across the West after my mother's death eight years earlier, when I was just fourteen. After listening quietly, Dad shared something my mother had told him in confidence before she died: she believed I was meant to honor family in some lasting way. My parents never played favorites, so his words startled me. I tucked them away and, in time, forgot.

Decades later, in August 2016—forty-six years after her passing, and nearly twenty years after my father's death—I finally opened the boxes. Inside, I found the threads of a much larger tapestry than I had imagined: my grandfather's boxing career, the Gibbons family's immigrant story, and the broader saga of early twentieth-century America. Those artifacts compelled me to write: not simply about boxing, but about how love, faith, and family endure through hardship.

As I pieced the story together, I saw how my grandfather and father mirrored each other in kindness, resilience, and devotion. Writing became both tribute and discovery: honoring their legacy while exploring how history lives in us. And in the quiet moments, I could not help but wonder: Was my mother's vision a prescient glimpse of the path I would eventually take? Over time, I've come to believe it was.

2. How did writing this book bring you closer to your family and yourself, and what moment led to a profound personal discovery?

Losing my mother at fourteen left me with a deep sense of incompleteness—an early encounter with mortality that shaped my voice with empathy and authenticity. Decades later, as I wrote *The St. Paul Phantom*, I began to understand how that loss, and later my father's passing, had quietly prepared me to recognize grief not only as

pain but also as a teacher. The Eastern idea of “suffering into truth” resonated deeply with me, and I saw how the Gibbons brothers’ losses—personal and professional—had forged their own resilience. Their struggles mirrored my own, and weaving that perspective into the narrative gave the story a universality that speaks to anyone who has faced hardship.

The most profound discovery came while reading Tommy’s letters to his wife, Helen. In his words, I felt the devotion of a man balancing glory with family sacrifice. Across a century, I forged connections with grandparents I never knew, and in that process, my own wounds of loss began to heal. This journey revealed that resilience is often inherited, carried through generations, and that the American story itself is one of perseverance. Writing this book offered me not just history, but a sense of wholeness I never expected.

3. When did the project pivot from family memoir into a broader American saga?

Although my father’s archive gave me a starting point, I knew little about my ancestors or the worlds they inhabited. Years of research—genealogy, census records, letters, and newspaper archives—changed that. What began as a family memoir quickly expanded into something larger. The Gibbons brothers’ journey from Irish immigrants to American boxing stardom reflected a universal immigrant narrative: risk, resilience, redemption, and opportunity.

As I reconstructed their lives and the world around them, the story grew into a mirror of the broader American saga—ordinary people striving for extraordinary chances in a land of promise. That evolution convinced me the story could speak far beyond family and deeply connect with contemporary audiences, as stories like *Rocky*, *Seabiscuit*, *Cinderella Man*, *A River Runs Through It*, and *The Boys in the Boat*.

4. You call boxing “a looking glass into the soul of the American Dream.” How did the sport offer a path for immigrants and the working-class? What does that mirror still reveal about social mobility today?

In the early twentieth century, boxing was America’s premier sport and a mirror of its aspirational spirit. For immigrants and the working-class, it offered one of the few avenues to rise. Fighters carried their heritage into the ring—Irish, Italian, Jewish, African American—and their communities rallied behind them, seeing in each bout a reflection of hope.

Mike and Tommy Gibbons, sons of Irish immigrants, embodied that promise: through skill, grit, and perseverance, they turned hardship into opportunity, mirroring the American Dream itself. Boxing’s appeal cut across race and class, suggesting that talent could transcend circumstance. Today, that same mirror reflects both aspiration and inequity—the Dream remains possible, yet fragile, and still worth fighting for.

5. Your prose reads very cinematically. Discuss this approach to storytelling on the page.

My first degree was in film and television production with a focus on cinematography, and that training shaped how I write. I've always believed strong prose should fire the imagination in visual, aural, and sensory ways. On the page, I try to write through the camera's eye: wide shots to frame historical context, close-ups for emotional intimacy.

Fight scenes unfold like tracking shots, capturing movement and rhythm, while shifts in perspective resemble "rack focus," moving fluidly between characters' thoughts and actions. For instance, Mike's ordeal at Brighton Beach is written with a shallow depth of field, narrowing to his illness and anxiety. This cinematic approach lets readers not just observe history, but inhabit it—making the story vivid, immediate, and immersive.

6. Ken Burns says writing history is about "waking the dead." Which character was hardest to bring to life? In telling Mike and Tommy's story, did you find the ancestral chain healed, or simply better understood?

Both brothers fascinated me, but they woke at different speeds. Tommy surfaced first: open-hearted, quick with a grin, sounding uncannily like my father. His warmth and plainspokenness made him easy to hear on the page, and the kinship—the way he constantly reminded me of my father—made him simpler to write and more resonant. Many days, it felt like I was palling around again with Dad.

Mike—the St. Paul Phantom—was harder. He lived in the margins: economical with words, precise in action, private by instinct. To coax him out, I became a detective—reading his letters, combing sports pages, tracing the observations of writers, and listening for his echo in Tommy's memoirs. The breakthrough came in understanding his "sweet science." His style—angles, feints, hand speed, foot speed, side-stepping, rhythm, distance, discipline—wasn't only boxing technique but temperament. Once I saw that, his voice emerged: measured, exact, fierce in thought more than volume.

Mike's mantra, "I make 'em miss, then I make 'em pay," revealed a philosophy of intellect and resilience over brute force. It minimized damage, extended his career, and mirrored a broader ethos of thriving through adaptability. Balanced with Tommy's warmth, Mike's cool intelligence gave the book its heartbeat: distinct voices, bound in shared purpose.

Ultimately, this process did more than help me understand the ancestral chain; it began to heal it. By inhabiting their triumphs and tragedies, personal wounds were mended and history transformed into a living legacy. Waking these ghosts affirmed my belief that the past is not truly dead. It still has profound gifts for the living—chief among them, a roadmap for mending our own broken connections.

7. What wisdom or roadmap for purposeful living did you take from Mike and Tommy Gibbons' lives?

From Mike and Tommy, I gleaned that true purpose is built on character. Though fighters by trade, they lived as men of faith, resilience, and service. They placed family first, were devoted husbands and fathers, loyal to friends, and generous to their community. They worked hard, carried themselves with humility, and faced adversity with courage and forgiveness. They took risks, learned from mistakes, and never quit—earning the nickname “Shining Knights of the Ring.” Their example taught me that a purpose-driven life rests on resilience, love, and commitment to something larger than oneself—benchmarks that remain timeless today.

8. Often in sports stories, female characters are given short shrift. In *Fight for Glory*, figures like suffragettes, activists, and mothers stand equal to the men. How did you shape Mae Walsh, Mike's wife, and use their relationship to explore gender expectations of the era?

Mae's early insistence that Mike quit boxing reflected traditional gender norms, where women sought stability over risk. Yet her own suffrage activism, sparked in part by Mike's determination, revealed how women of the era pushed against such boundaries.

Her journey—from resisting his career to respecting it while pursuing her cause—allowed me to explore evolving gender roles and the tension between tradition and progress. Their compromise, rooted in mutual respect, became a portrait of true partnership. Mike recognized Mae's conviction and strength, while she honored his craft. Together, they embodied the idea that marriage is not submission, but teamwork.

9. Faith is a central theme in the book, from the family's Catholicism to Father Dunphy's “Muscular Christianity.” How did writing those religious dimensions clarify or complicate your own faith?

Writing about the Gibbons family's faith, especially Father Dunphy's powerful call to “keep the faith,” became an unexpected journey back to my own Catholic upbringing. Immersing myself in their trials—their poverty, devastating losses, and profound moral tests—I found my own belief clarified. It reaffirmed faith not as an abstract idea, but as a vital source of resilience and strength, a discipline I had perhaps taken for granted in my own life.

At the same time, exploring these dimensions deeply complicated my views. I found myself wrestling alongside my great-grandfather, Thomas John, who, after renouncing his violent past as an Irish rebel, clung fiercely to the biblical call to “turn the other cheek.” This conviction created a powerful rift, putting him at odds with his sons and his priest. Father Dunphy's “Muscular Christianity”—his pragmatic belief that “it must please the Lord when a man knows how to end a fight”—forced me to confront

the difficult tension between radical forgiveness and righteous force.

The writing didn't offer easy answers, but it deepened my appreciation for faith as an active, often challenging dialogue—with God, with family history, and ultimately, with oneself.

10. Comment on the transformational early twentieth century in America and the cyclical nature of history. How has the world changed since the *Fight for Glory* era? How is it the same? Why does history matter?

These questions lie at the very heart of *The St. Paul Phantom*. After spending nearly a decade immersed in the early twentieth-century world of my ancestors, I've been struck again and again by the truth that history does not simply repeat—it *rhymes*, as Mark Twain observed.

The *Fight for Glory* era, with its bare-knuckled ambition and comet-lit dreams, was a crucible of transformative change, a momentous period of upheaval, much like our own today. It holds up a mirror to the present, reflecting struggles that, while not identical, feel deeply familiar. That resonance was impossible to ignore in 2020, as I was deep into the writing of the book. The headlines—civil unrest, political corruption, widening inequality, resurgent bigotry, international conflict, and a global pandemic—echoed the darker verses of the previous century with unsettling clarity.

On the surface, America today seems worlds apart from 1910. Then, most people lived and died within a few dozen miles of their birthplace; now we relocate frequently and communicate across continents in seconds. Where the nation was once 88 percent white, it has become a beautiful, complex mosaic. Homes once cloaked in darkness after sunset are now illuminated and connected around the clock. The sixty-hour workweek has yielded to forty, and a high school diploma—rare then—is nearly universal. Poverty persists, but its grip has been reduced by more than half. The civic ritual of reading a daily newspaper has given way to an overwhelming digital torrent, where information flows faster but truth is often harder to discern.

Yet beneath these staggering changes, the heart of the human story—the why we fight—remains constant. In 1910, as now, people wrestled with who belongs, who deserves a fair chance, and how to balance freedom with responsibility. As I wrote in the introduction: “Everyone had a dream, so everyone had a fight.” That remains as true today as it was then.

The seismic shifts of the early twentieth century—urbanization, technological leaps, mass immigration—found their perfect metaphor in the boxing ring. No sport makes time's consequences more visible. A boxer's half-life is brutally short, a frantic race to make his mark before talent and opportunity fade. In that way, the ring embodied the era's relentless march of progress, creating natural tension and drama.

This is why the past can serve as a lighthouse. On this writing journey, I learned that history matters. Renowned American historian David McCullough said it this way, “History shows us how to behave. History teaches, reinforces what we believe in, what we stand for, and what we ought to be willing to stand up for.” The vow the Gibbons brothers made under Halley’s Comet was never only about titles; it was about carving out lives big enough to carry the hopes of those they loved. Their story reminds us that heroism belongs not just to champions, but to ordinary people who show uncommon valor in daily life. It crystallizes in the family credo that threads through the book: What matters most is what we do next. A fighter’s prayer. An immigrant’s anthem. A dreamer’s north star.

The comet will always return. Progress will press forward. Hearts will break. Chaos will, at times, prevail. And still, we go on. Through stories like this, we can do more than remember the world as it was—we can rehearse who we might become. My hope is that readers finish the book inspired not only to understand the past, but to shape the future. We cannot change where we have been. But we can always decide where we are going. Better informed, more enlightened by the lessons of history, including our own historical heritage, we are better positioned to decide what we stand for.

11. After the extraordinary journey of researching and writing this book, what does the “Gibbons family legacy” mean to you now?

For me, the Gibbons legacy is defined by choices and character—by resilience, faith, and the courage to learn from mistakes. My great-grandfather’s wisdom, “What matters most is what you do next,” has become a guiding truth, one that has profoundly shaped my life both personally and professionally. Embracing his conviction that we can always be better than we were—living purposefully, facing challenges with courage and kindness, and carrying forward with faith and love, no matter the obstacles—has helped me become a better man.

It has also led me to reflect on my daughter, who has never heard these stories or met the remarkable people in them, yet carries their power in her own blood. In many ways, this book is a message in a bottle to her: a valentine, a postcard from yesteryear, and a thread to draw her closer to the clan, to her father, and, most importantly, to herself.

Family legacy is meant to be shared—for connecting, healing, and elevating. It is meant to bring greater truth into our lives and, through that truth, a deeper and more enduring love.

12. What is the single feeling you most hope stays with readers after the final page?

Above all, I hope readers leave the book inspired to live with purpose—continuing to learn, staying resilient, and leading with kindness. I want them to value stillness, those quiet spaces where the spirit enters, and where wisdom and guidance so often

emerge. The Gibbons story is one of triumph, loss, and perseverance, and my hope is that it encourages readers to face their own challenges with courage and grace. If the door to what you want is locked, find the window—or even the chimney—because there is always a way forward. Most of all, I hope readers feel strengthened to embrace failure, knowing it is the forge in which character is made.

DEAR READER: You are invited to visit my website for the Complete Q&A.

A full transcript of “A Conversation with Author Dr. Gerard Gibbons”—featuring additional questions and answers about *The St. Paul Phantom* and the *Fight for Glory* trilogy, including insights on the research, writing, characters, and story—is available at:

www.FightForGloryStory.com.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



DR. GERARD GIBBONS

Author of *The St. Paul Phantom*, *SHELBY 1923*,
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DR. GERARD GIBBONS is a noted non-fiction author, cinematic storyteller, producer, and historian. After more than thirty years as an award-winning filmmaker, brand strategist, and eye doctor, he has turned his attention toward his own family legacy and the never-been-told, true story of his legendary Hall of Fame prizefighting great-uncle and grandfather, Mike and Tommy Gibbons. He is now CEO of Fight for Glory, LLC, and is developing a series of stories, designed for literary, streaming, and cinema, based on his famous family. Gibbons is a member of the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO). His literary works have been awarded Book of the Year by the West Coast Boxing Hall of Fame.

Gibbons was formerly CEO and Founder of Visual Eyes Inc., a novel communications agency renowned for scenario-based storytelling focused on health-care, combat medicine, mental health, infectious disease, resilience, and behavior change. Gibbons' exploits carried him around the world with the U.S. Department of Defense, DARPA, U.S. Special Operations Command, U.S. Army Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Army Medical Materiel Command, U.S. Army Space & Missile Defense Command, U.S. Air Force Special Tactics, U.S. Navy Third Fleet, U.S. Marine Corps Chemical Biological Incident Response Force, Military Health System, Department of Veterans Affairs, NASA, SRI, MIT, Rocky Mountain Institute, National Science Foundation, CDC, countless Fortune 500 companies, Walt Disney, Special Olympics, government agencies, as well as advanced science, medical, and technology companies. Gibbons also founded EmotiveStorytelling.com.

Today, Gibbons—an avid photographer, guitarist, backpacker, and fly fisherman—spends much of his time near Joshua Tree, California. His motto, borrowed from his dad and grandfather: “Comport yourself with elegance and moderate your pace.”

www.fightforglorystory.com

COMING SOON



FIGHT *for* GLORY — VOLUME II
THE HAPPY WARRIOR
Some Fights are for Glory, This One's for Love

For Tommy Gibbons, the ever-smiling boxer they call the “Happy Warrior,” the Roaring Twenties are not about fame; they’re about survival. His beloved wife, Helen, is locked in a heartbreaking struggle with mental illness, and the immense prize money from a championship bout is the only hope to save their growing family. To do it, he must achieve the impossible: earn a title shot against the most feared man alive.

Armed with a quiet fire and a secret punch passed down from the Irish village his parents fled, Tommy sets his sights on Jack Dempsey, the ruthless, man-killing heavyweight champion of the world. His quest catapults him from overlooked contender to folk hero, throwing him into the dazzling and dangerous heart of Jazz Age America. He crosses paths with legends like Babe Ruth, Jim Thorpe, George Gershwin, Willie “the Lion” Smith, Harry Greb, Georges Carpentier, Gene Tunney, Tex Rickard, Ernest Hemingway, and Charlie Chaplin, but his focus remains singular, even as he navigates a world of mobsters and millionaires.

Just as the title is within reach, the greatest threat emerges from his own blood. His brother—the legendary St. Paul Phantom—makes a shocking return, igniting a fierce sibling rivalry that threatens to destroy everything Tommy is fighting for, both in and out of the ring.

The Happy Warrior is a sweeping true-life epic—a love story wrapped in blood and gloves, a tale of brother against brother, and a final, furious salute to a vanishing American dream.



FIGHT *for* GLORY — VOLUME III

THE SAINTLY CITY: A HELLUVA TOWN

From Prizefighters to Crimefighters

In the stunning conclusion to the *Fight for Glory* trilogy, the battle spills from the boxing ring onto St. Paul's blood-soaked streets—and once-celebrated boxing hero Tommy Gibbons, the Happy Warrior, is the only one who can answer the call.

The Great Depression has broken the Saintly City, turning it into a haven for America's most wanted—bootleggers, kidnappers, bank robbers, and gangsters like John Dillinger, “Creepy” Alvin Karpis, and Ma Barker's gang, all shielded by a corrupt police force.

When these dark powers target the Gibbons family—including brother Mike, the St. Paul Phantom, the former middleweight legend guiding his son toward a showdown with heavyweight champion Joe Louis—Tommy, devastated by his wife Helen's debilitating mental health and raising nine children as a single father, trades his gloves for a badge when he's elected Ramsey County sheriff. Suddenly, he's at war all over again.

Making a final stand for their family's safety and the future of their hometown, Tommy and Mike team with a crusading journalist and a young surveillance pioneer to confront an unholy trinity: the sadistic Public Enemies who rule the streets, and an ambitious J. Edgar Hoover, whose new FBI wants control at any cost. Along the way, they face old foes like former Dempsey manager Jack Kearns, now allied with Bugsy Siegel and the mob syndicates building Las Vegas.

Against a vivid backdrop of triple-crosses, machine-gun ambushes, explosive prison breaks, fixed fights, and the birth of modern detective work—Tommy Gibbons must complete his transformation from prizefighter to crimefighter, risking everything in one final, high-stakes battle royale for the soul of a city and the heart of the American Dream.

“A HIGH-VELOCITY WORK OF NARRATIVE HISTORY, FULL OF HEART, SOUL, AND FURY.”

—Steve Hockensmith, bestselling author of *Holmes on the Range*

AS THE TWENTIETH CENTURY ROARS TO LIFE, EVERYONE HAS A DREAM—SO EVERYONE HAS A FIGHT

For Mike Gibbons, a penniless and bullied Irish American kid from the hardscrabble streets of St. Paul, the fight is destiny. Beneath the light of Halley’s Comet in 1910, Mike and his younger brother, Tommy, vow to punch their way out of poverty and become champions of the outlawed prize ring.

Guided by a priest, a firefighter, and a beloved sportswriter—and mentored by America’s first Black champions, Joe Gans, Jack Johnson, and Sam Langford—Mike pioneers a dazzling new style of scientific boxing that carries him from backroom brawls to the roar of Madison Square Garden and into the orbit of historical titans such as Houdini, Tex Rickard, Theodore Roosevelt, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

But Mike’s meteoric ascent, steeped in romance and heroism, is fraught with conflict. Torn between his immigrant father’s bloody rebel past and his mother’s fear for his life, he falls for a fierce-willed suffragist who demands he abandon the ring forever. His loyalty is tested further when his greatest rival turns out to be his own brother.

Mike and Tommy’s daring quest spans rails and oceans—to the Nation’s grandest arenas, to the birth of jazz and cinema, through race riots, and the rise of organized crime, from famine-weary Ireland to Gotham’s bedlam, quake-scarred San Francisco, and the immaculate shores of Havana. Just as their dreams are within reach, World War I and a deadly pandemic upend the globe, calling them to trade gloves for uniforms to strengthen America’s fighting forces.

In the war’s aftermath, an aging Mike returns to the ring for one final shot at the championship against a dangerous young fighter he once trained.

The St. Paul Phantom is more than a boxing story. It is an inspiring, panoramic true story of courage, faith, love, brotherhood, and redemption—and a mirror reflecting the hope, promise, and opportunity of the American Dream.

BOOK OF THE YEAR—WEST COAST BOXING HALL OF FAME

“TIMELESS... ‘true-good story’ urgently needed today.”—Aaron Flint, Montana PBS

“ELECTRIFYING AND ELEGANT... told with journalistic precision, novelistic empathy, and a pulse-quickenning sense of action and romance.”—MensHealth.com



DR. GERARD GIBBONS is a storyteller at heart—an author, producer, and historian who has spent his career bringing remarkable stories to life. For more than thirty years, he worked as an award-winning filmmaker and brand strategist for clients including NASA, DARPA, U.S. Special Operations Command, and Disney Imagineering. He has now turned his focus closer to home, uncovering and sharing his own family’s extraordinary legacy.

The St. Paul Phantom tells the true story of his legendary Hall of Fame prizefighting great-uncle and grandfather, Mike and Tommy Gibbons. Through Fight for Glory, LLC, he is developing their saga for both page and screen. He spends time near Joshua Tree, California.

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