

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 Saintry 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 Saintry 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.”
