The Boxer and the Blonde

This is the story of Billy Conn, who won the girl he loved but lost the best fight ever

by Frank Deford

The boxer and the blonde are together, downstairs in the club cellar. At some point, club cellars went out, and they became family rooms instead. This is, however, very definitely a club cellar. Why, the grandchildren of the boxer and the blonde could sleep soundly upstairs, clear through the big Christmas party they gave, when everybody came and stayed late and loud down here. The boxer and the blonde are sitting next to each other, laughing about the old times, about when they fell hopelessly in love almost half a century ago in New Jersey, at the beach. *Down the Jersey shore* is the way everyone in Pennsylvania says it. This club cellar is in Pittsburgh.

The boxer is going on 67, except in *The Ring* record book, where he is going on 68. But he has all his marbles; and he has his looks (except for the fighter's mashed nose); and he has the blonde; and they have the same house, the one with the club cellar, that they bought in the summer of 1941. A great deal of this is about that bright ripe summer, the last one before the forlorn simplicity of a Depression was buried in the thick-braided rubble of blood and Spam. What a fight the boxer had that June! It might have been the best in the history of the ring. Certainly, it was the most dramatic, alltime, any way you look at it. The boxer lost, though. Probably he would have won, except for the blonde—whom he loved so much, and wanted so much to make proud of him. And later, it was the blonde's old man, the boxer's father-in-law (if you can believe this), who cost him a rematch for the heavyweight championship of the world. Those were some kind of times.

The boxer and the blonde laugh again, together, remembering how they fell in love. "Actually, you sort of forced me into it," she says.

"I did you a favor," he snaps back, smirking at his comeback. After a couple of belts, he has been known to confess that although he fought 21 times against world champions, he has never yet won a decision over the blonde—never yet, as they say in boxing, *outpointed* her. But you can sure see why he keeps on trying. He still has his looks? Hey, you should see her. The blonde is past 60 now, and she's still cute as a button. Not merely beautiful, you understand, but schoolgirl cute, just like she was when the boxer first flirted with her down the Jersey shore. There is a picture of them on the wall. Pictures cover the walls of the club cellar. This particular picture was featured in a magazine, the boxer and the blonde running, hand in hand, out of the surf. Never in your life did you see two better-looking kids. She was Miss Ocean City, and Alfred Lunt called him "a Celtic god," and Hollywood had a part for him that Errol Flynn himself wound up with after the boxer said no thanks and went back to Pittsburgh.

The other pictures on the walls of the club cellar are mostly of fighters. Posed. Weighing in. Toe-to-toe. Bandaged. And ex-fighters. Mostly in Las Vegas, it seems, the poor bastards. And celebrities. Sinatra, Hope, Bishop Sheen. Politicians. Various Kennedy's. Mayor Daley. President Reagan. Vice-President Bush. More fighters. Joe Louis, whom the boxer loved so much, is in a lot of the pictures, but the largest single photograph belongs to Harry Greb, the Pittsburgh Windmill, the middleweight champeen, the only man ever to beat Gene Tunney. When the boxer's mother died that summer of '41, one of the things that mattered most then was to get her the closest possible plot in Calvary Cemetery to where Harry Greb already lay in peace.

But then, down on the far wall, around the corner from Greb, behind the bar, there's another big photograph, and it's altogether different from the others, because this one is a horizontal. Boxing pictures are either square, like the ring itself, or vertical, the fighter standing tall, fists cocked high. If you see a horizontal, it's almost surely not a boxing photograph but, more than likely, a team picture, all the players spread out in rows. And sure enough, the photograph on the far wall is of the 1917 New York Giants, winners of the National League pennant, and there in the middle of the back row, with a cocky grin hung on his face, is Greenfield Jimmy Smith. The story really starts with him. He was the one who introduced the boxer and the blonde down the Jersey shore.

The book on Greenfield Jimmy Smith as a ballplayer was good mouth, no hit (.219 lifetime). His major talent earned him another nickname up in the bigs, Serpent Tongue. Muggsy McGraw, the Giants' manager, kept Smith around pretty much as a bench jockey. But after the Giants lost to the White Sox in the '17 Series, four games to two, McGraw traded him. That broke Smith's heart. He loved McGraw. They were both tough cookies.

"Ah, rub it with a brick," Greenfield Jimmy would say whenever anybody complained of an injury. He was just a little guy, maybe 5' 9", a banty rooster, but one time he went over to the Dodger dugout and yelled, "All right, you so-and-sos, I'll fight you one at a time or in groups of five." Not a single Dodger took up the offer.

Greenfield Jimmy's grandchildren remember a day in Jimmy's 60s, when he took them out for a drive. A truck got behind him coming up Forbes Avenue and sat on his tail, and Greenfield Jimmy slowed down. The truck driver rested on his horn until finally the grandfather pulled his car over and got out. Livid, the big truck driver came over and started hollering down at the little old guy. Softly, Greenfield Jimmy cut in, "Oh, I'm so sorry, but my neighbor over there saw the whole thing."

"What neighbor?" the big truck driver asked, twisting his head to catch a glimpse of this witness. That was his mistake. As soon as he turned to the side, Greenfield Jimmy reared back and popped him flush on the chin. The old man wasn't anything but a banjo hitter on the diamond, but he could sure slug off it.

Greenfield Jimmy played in the bigs as late as ‘22, but by then the 18th Amendment was the law of the land, and he was discovering that his playing baseball was getting in the way of a more lucrative career, which was providing alcoholic beverages to those who desired them, notwithstanding their legal unavailability. Sometimes, as decades later he confided to his grandchildren, he would even carry the hooch about in the big trunks that held the team’s uniforms and equipment.

Back in Pittsburgh, where he hailed from—the Greenfield section, as you might imagine—Greenfield Jimmy Smith became a man of substance and power. He consorted with everybody, priests and pugs and politicians alike. He ran some speakeasies and, ultimately, The Bachelor’s Club, which was the classiest joint in town—a “city club," so-called, as opposed to the numerous neighborhood clubs, which would let in anybody with a couple of bucks annual dues and the particularly correct European heritage. But The Bachelor’s Club was a plush place, and some of Pittsburgh’s finest made a great deal of walking-around money by overlooking its existence. Even after repeal, The Bachelor’s Club offered games of chance for those so inclined. It helped that, like so much of the Steel City constabulary, Greenfield Jimmy Smith was Irish.

The Bachelor’s Club was located in the East Liberty section of Pittsburgh—or ‘Sliberty, as it's pronounced in the slurred argot of the community. In a city of neighborhoods, before automobiles begat suburbs, ‘Sliberty was known as a very busy place; people came to shop there. For action, though, it was probably not the match of Oakland, a couple of miles away. Most neighborhoods in Pittsburgh were parochial, with a single ethnic legacy, but Oakland had more of a mix and stronger outside influences as well, inasmuch as it embraced the University of Pittsburgh and Forbes Field (where the Pirates played), and the Duquesne Gardens, which has got to be the only boxing arena that was ever set right across the street from a cathedral, which, in this particular case, was St. Paul’s.

The Gardens was an old converted carbarn— which, once upon a time, was a place where streetcars were kept when they were sleeping. Pittsburgh was strictly a streetcar town. That was how everybody got to the steel mills. Only in Pittsburgh, nobody ever said “carbarn.” They said “coreborn.” In Pittsburgh, even now, they don’t know how to correctly pronounce any of the vowels and several of the consonants. Even more than the a’s, they mess up the *o’s*. A cawledge, for example, is what Pitt is; a dawler is legal tender; and, at that time, the most popular bawxer at the Duquesne Gardens was a skinny Irish contender from ‘Sliberty named Billy Cawn, which, despite the way everybody said it, was, curiously, spelled Conn.

Greenfield Jimmy took a real liking to the kid. They had a lot in common. Somebody asked Conn once if he had learned to fight in the streets; no, he replied, it was a long time before he got to the streets from the alleys. Early in ‘39, after 50 fights around Pittsburgh and West Virginia and two in San Francisco, Conn finally got a shot in New York. “Uncle” Mike Jacobs, the promoter, brought him to Gotham in order to get beat up by a popular Italian fighter, a bellhop out of San Francisco named Freddie Apostoli. Only it was Conn who beat Apostoli in 10, and then, in a rematch a month later, with 19,000 fans packed to the rafters of the old Madison Square Garden on Eighth Avenue, he beat Apostoli in a 15-round bloodbath. As much as possible, then, the idea was to match the ethnic groups, so after Conn had beat the Italian twice, Uncle Mike sent him up against a Jew named Solly Krieger. And when the Irisher beat Krieger in 12, he was signed to fight Melio Bettina for the world light-heavyweight title the following July.

Suddenly, Conn was the hottest thing in the ring. “Matinee-idol looks,” they all said, curly-haired, quick with a quip, full of fun, free, white and (almost) 21. Money was burning a hole in the pocket, and the dames were chasing him. Right at the time, he took up with an older woman, a divorcée, and remember, this was back in the days when divorcée meant Look Out. He left her for a couple of days and came to Greenfield Jimmy's summer place down the Jersey shore in a Cadillac driven by a chauffeur.

Billy Conn was the cat’s meow, and Smith was anxious for his wife and kids to meet him, too. Greenfield Jimmy wasn’t just a provider, you understand, but also a great family man, and, they said, he never missed Mass. He thought it was really swell when Billy volunteered to take Mary Louise, his little daughter, out to dinner that evening. She was only 15, an for her to be able to go over to Somers Point and have a meal out with Sweet William, the Flower of the Monongahela, would sure be something she could tell the other girls back at Our Lady of Mercy Academy.

How would Greenfield Jimmy ever know that before the evening was over, Billy Conn would turn to the pretty little 15-year-old kid and say right out, “I’m going to marry you.”

Mary Louise managed to stammer back, “You’re crazy.” She remembered what her father had advise her—that all prizefighters were punchy—only it surprised her that one so young and good-looking could be that way. Only, of course, he wasn’t punchy. He had just fallen for the kid doll like a ton of bricks.

So now you see: It is Billy Conn who is the boxer in the club cellar and Mary Louise who is the blonde. By the time Greenfield Jimmy Smith (who prided himself on knowing everything) found out what was going on right under his nose, it was too late.

The Conn house is in the Squirrel Hill district. It has long been mostly a Jewish area, but the house was a good bargain at $17,500 when Billy bought it 44 yea ago, and he wanted to stay in the city. Billy is a city guy, a Pittsburgh guy. Billy says, "Pittsburgh is the town you can't wait to leave, and the town you can't wait to get back to." They loved him in Gotham, and they brought him to Tinseltown to play the title role in *The Pittsburgh Kid,* and later he spent a couple of years in Vegas, working the Stardust's lounge as a greeter, like Joe Louis at the Dunes down the Strip. His son Timmy remembers the time a high roller gave the boxer $9,000, just for standing around and being Billy Conn. But soon the boxer grew tired of that act and came back to the house in Squirrel Hill where, in the vernacular, he "loafs with" old pals like Joey Diven, who was recognized as the World's Greatest Street Fighter.

Pittsburgh may be a metropolitan area of better than two million souls, but it still has the sense of a small town. "Everybody's closely knitted," Diven explains. "A guy hits a guy in 'Sliberty, everybody knows about it right away, all over." Or it's like this: One time the boxer was trying to get a patronage job with the county for a guy he loafs with. But everybody was onto the guy's act. "Billy," the politician said, "I'd like to help you. I really would. But everybody knows, he just don't ever come to work."

Conn considered that fact. "Look at it this way," he said at last. "Do you *want* him around?" The guy got the job.

Pittsburgh, of course, like everyplace else, has changed... only more so. The mills are closed, the skies are clear and Rand McNally has decreed that it is the very best place to live in the United States. Oakland is just another cawledge town; the warm saloons of Forbes Avenue have become fast-food "outlets." Where Forbes Field once stood is Pitt's Graduate School of Business, and in place of Duquesne Gardens is an apartment house.

It was so different when Conn was growing up. Then it was the best of capitalism, it was the worst of capitalism. The steel came in after the Civil War—Bessemer and his blasts—and then came the immigrants to do the hard, dirty work of making ore into endless rolls of metal. Then the skies were so black with smoke that the office workers had to change their white shirts by lunchtime, and the streetlights seldom went off during the day, emitting an eerie glow that turned downtown Pittsburgh into a stygian nightmare. At the time Conn was a kid, taking up space at Sacred Heart School, H.L. Mencken wrote of Pittsburgh that it was "so dreadfully hideous, so intolerably bleak and forlorn that it reduced the whole aspiration of a man to a macabre and depressing joke."

The people coughed and wheezed, and those who eschewed the respiratory nostrums advertised daily in the newspapers would, instead, repair to the taprooms of Pittsburgh, there to try and cut the grime and soot that had collected in their dusty throats. The Steel City was also known as "the wettest spot in the United States," and even at seven in the morning the bars would be packed three-deep, as the night-shift workers headed home in the gloom of another graying dawn, pausing to toss down the favored local boilermaker—a shot of Imperial whiskey chased by an Iron City beer. An Iron and an Imp.

And then another. Can't expect someone to fly on one wing.

Conn's father, Billy Sr., was such a man. He toiled at Westinghouse for 40 years. Eventually, Billy would come to call his old man Westinghouse instead of Dad. But even in the worst of the Depression, Billy Sr. kept his job as a steam fitter, and he was proud of it, and one day he took his oldest boy down to the plant, and he pointed to it and said, "Here's where you're gonna work, son."

Billy Jr. was aghast. "That scared the s— out of me," he says. Shortly thereafter he began to apprentice as a prizefighter, and when he got to New York and began to charm the press, he could honestly boast that his greatest achievement in life was never having worked a day.

The mills meant work, but it was a cruel living, and even so recently as the time when Conn was growing up, two-thirds of the work force in Pittsburgh was foreign-born. "People think you gotta be nuts to be a fighter," he says now.

Well?

"Yeah, they're right. I *was* nuts. But it beats working in those mills."

The immigrants shipped in from Europe to work in the mills mostly stayed with their own—the Galway Irish on the North Side, the Italians in the Bloomfleld section, the Poles and Balkans on the South Side, the Irish in 'Sliberty, the Germans on Troy Hill. Harry Greb was German, but his mother was Irish, which mattered at the gate. Promoters liked Irishers. A good little lightweight named Harry Pitler, Jewish boy, brother of Jake Pitler, who would play for the Pirates and later become a Brooklyn Dodger coach, took the Irish handle of Johnny Ray to fight under. Jawnie Ray, one of Erin's own.

Everybody fought some in Pittsburgh. It was a regular activity, like dancing or drinking. It wasn't just that the men were tough and the skies were mean; it was also a way of representing your parish or your people. It wasn't just that Mr. Art Rooney, promoter, or Mr. Jake Mintz, matchmaker, would pit an Irishman against a Jew or a Pole vs. an Italian, or bring in a colored boy the white crowds could root against at Duquesne Gardens. No, it was every mother's son scuffling, on the streets or at the bar rail. It was a way of life. It was also cheap entertainment.

Greenfield Jimmy Smith, as we know, enjoyed fighting all his life. So did Billy Conn Sr., Westinghouse. Nearing *50*, he was arrested and fined a five-spot for street fighting only a few weeks before his son fought for the heavyweight title. Just for kicks, Westinghouse used to fight Billy all the time. When Westinghouse came to New York to watch his boy in the ring one time, Billy told the press, "My old man is a fighting mick. Give him a day or two here, and he'll find some guys to slug it out with."

Billy fought even more with his younger brother Jackie, who was an absolutely terrific street fighter. One time Jimmy Cannon wrote that "if the ring in Madison Square Garden were made of cobblestones," it would be Jackie Conn, not Billy, who would be the champion of the world. A night or so after Cannon's tribute appeared in the paper, Jackie came strolling into Toots Shor's. He was dressed to the nines, as usual. Jackie fancied himself a fashion plate, and he regularly rifled his brother's wardrobe. So Jackie took a prominent seat at the bar, and he was sitting there, accepting compliments and what have you from the other patrons, when a stranger came over to him and asked if he were Jackie Conn, the street-fighting champion of the world.

Jackie puffed up and replied that indeed he was, whereupon the stranger coldcocked him, sending Jackie clattering to the floor of Toots Shor's Saloon. "Now I'm the champion," the guy said.

Still, everybody says that Joey Diven was the best street fighter who ever lived. There are stories that he would, for amusement, take on and beat up the entire Pitt football team. Joey is a decade younger than Billy, in his 50's now, working as an assistant to the Allegheny County commissioner. He is a big, red-faced Irishman. That's unusual because most ace Street fighters are little guys. Does Billy Martin come to mind? Big guys grow up figuring nobody will challenge them, so they don't learn how to fight. Big guys break up fights. Little guys are the ones who learn to fight because they figure they had better. Billy always told his three sons, "Don't fight on the streets, because you'll only find out who's good when it's too late."

But Joey Diven was good and big. So first the other Irish pretenders in the neighborhood—the champion of this street or that bar—would come by to find him at the Oakland Cafe, where he loafed, and when he was done beating all those comers, the champs from the other neighborhoods would come over and insult him, so as to get into an interethnic fight.

Insults were automatic. People routinely referred to one another, face-to-face, with the racial epithets we find so offensive today. For fighting, it was the dagos and the Polacks, the micks and the jigs, and so forth. Sticks and stones. Before a fight with Gus Dorazio, when Dorazio was carrying on at the weigh-in about what color trunks he would wear, Conn cut the argument short by snapping, "Listen, dago, all you're going to need is a catcher's mitt and a chest protector." It was late in Conn's career before he took to using a mouthpiece, because, like his hero Greb, he got a kick out of insulting the people he fought.

On the street, stereotypes prevailed all the more. Usually that meant .. that everybody (your own group included) was dimwitted, everybody else practiced poor hygiene, everybody else's women were trash, and everybody but the Jews drank too much and had the most fun. Were the Irish the best fighters? Joey Diven says, "Ah, they just stayed drunk more and stayed louder about it."

One time Joey Diven was working as a doorman over at the AOH on Oakland Avenue. The AOH is the Ancient Order of Hibernians. You needed a card to get into the place, which was located on the third floor, or, as Joey explains it, "Up 28 steps if you accidentally fell down them." This particular night, a guy showed up, but he didn't have a card, so Joey told him to take off. "Come on, let me in, I'm Irish," the guy said. Joey said no card, no admittance, and when the guy persisted, Joey threw him down the steps.

Pretty soon there was a knock on the door again. Joey opened it. Same guy. Same thing: no card. "Come on, let me in, I'm Irish." Joey threw him down the steps again.

A few more minutes and another knock. And get this: It was the same guy. What did Joey do? He ushered him in, and said, "You're right. You must be Irish."

What made Joey Diven such a good Street fighter was that he held no illusions. Poor Jackie Conn (who is dead now) was different. He thought he could be as good as his brother in the prize ring. Jackie was on the undercard a night in '39 when Billy defended against Gus Lesnevich, but the kid brother lost a four-rounder. The failure ate him up so, he came apart afterward in the locker room. Just before Billy went off to fight Lesnevich, he had to soothe Jackie and make sure the brother would be taken to the hospital and sedated. Diven was different. "Ah, I didn't ever have the killer instinct like Billy in the ring," he says. "You see, even though Billy's such a God-fearing man, he could be ruthless in the ring. That's why Billy was so good."

Still, Joey will razz Billy good. For example, he says that Conn always was a rotten drinker— "Three drinks, and he's talking about the Blessed Mother or Thomas Aquinas." He also kids Conn that, when he travels, he still sleeps with all his valuables tucked into his pillowcase. Once when they were staying together in Las Vegas, Billy got up in the middle of the night to take a leak, and Joey was awakened by the sound of change rattling in the pillowcase. Billy was taking his nickels and dimes with him to the bathroom. "Hey, Billy," Joey said. "You didn't have to take the pillow to the toilet. There's nobody here." Conn stopped. "*You're* here," he said. Joey had a lot of fun with Billy. They had a lot of fun street fighting. It wasn't ever vicious. In those days, nobody ever drew guns or knives or even clubs. Nobody was loco with drugs. You could do all the same stuff Billy did in the ring—gouging and biting and that type of thing, plus the friendly name-calling—all the things that made up what used to be known as *a fair fight*. "No booting, though," says Joey.

"And it never took more than four or five minutes. Somebody would get in one good shot, and that would wear you out pretty quick, and after that there'd be a lot of mauling and rassling, and then it was history." It wasn't at all like in the movies, where the fights go on forev0er no matter how many times people get clobbered. "As soon as a guy said he'd had enough, that was it. No more," Joey says. That was the code. "Then you'd go back into the joint together and buy each other a drink, maybe even end up getting fractured together." An Iron and an Imp, twice. Do this again for both of us. One more time.

That was the sort of environment young Billy grew up in in 'Sliberty—scrapping with everyone in the neighborhood, running errands for the bootleggers over on Station Street, filching pastries from the bakery wagon to put a little something extra on the family table. There were four younger brothers and sisters. To help make ends meet, Billy's father didn't altogether shy away from the bootleggers; the authorities estimated there were 10,000 stills in the Pittsburgh area during Prohibition. Westinghouse sometimes brewed beer in the family bathtub. For Mrs. Conn, the former Marguerite McFarland, the most devout of Catholic women, this made it nearly impossible to ensure that cleanliness would take its assigned runner-up spot to godliness. "Be patient, woman, the beer'll be ready in a few days," Westinghouse would chide his wife as she fretted over her dirty-necked tykes.

Billy adored his mother. He was the one who named her Maggie, and he called her that as he grew older. He always gives nicknames to the people he loves the most. Maggie had come over in steerage from County Cork when she was a young girl, and she never did lose all of her brogue. She grew plump, but with her magnificent skin and blue eyes in a beautiful face framed by black hair, she was a colleen to the day she died. She lavished all that she could upon her oldest, and she was not frightened when he told her he wanted to be a boxer. She knew how hard it was in the mills, and when Westinghouse gave the boy gloves one Christmas, Maggie made him some fine, Celtic-green trunks.

Billy Conn leans back in his chair in the club cellar and takes a deep drag on his cigarette, and this is what he says: "Your mother should be your best friend."

Maggie's boy did have one other talent besides boxing and loafing, and that was art. He could draw, and if he were growing up in Pittsburgh today, when Irish boys stay in school and don't lace on gloves, no doubt he would become an artist or a draftsman of some sort. But he never pursued drawing, never even played team sports. His children—Timmy, Billy, Susan and Mike—all had to learn games from their granddad, Greenfield Jimmy, and they still like to laugh at their old man, the former champion of the world, because he throws like a girl.

He stayed two years in the eighth grade at Sacred Heart before one of the sisters suggested that he give up his seat to someone who might use it to greater advantage. He departed school then, but it didn't matter because already, as he puts it, "I was going to cawledge at Jawnie Ray's." That was in 'Sliberty. Ray had retired from fighting, but he ran a gym so he could keep himself in bootleg whiskey. It came in milk bottles and cost 15 cents a pint.

The first time Billy ventured into the gym, Ray was amazed at how tiny and smooth the boy's face was. And Billy couldn't have weighed more than 80, maybe 85, pounds. But Jawnie let him audition in the ring, and he saw the instincts and the courage right off. So he let Billy work around the gym, tidying the place up, fetching him his booze, earning the occasional chance to spar.

One day a bunch of older neighborhood toughs confronted Billy as he came back to the gym toting a pint of moonshine. "What are you, a messenger boy for the rummy?" one of them said, and they jostled and taunted Billy. He pulled himself up as tall as he could, and he hollered back, "You bums! Someday, I'm gonna be a champeen!"

They laughed, and he went on inside and gave Ray the moonshine. Billy came to call him Moonie for his addiction, and Moonie called him Junior. “All right now, Junior,” Moonie would say, swilling the rotgut, “keep your hands up and punch straight.” This was the shell defense Jawnie Ray taught. “Moonie was quiet, but he was a Michelangelo as a teacher. Hell, I didn’t know he drank until one day I saw him sober. You know how it is—no Jews drink. I get the one who does. Only I tell you one thing, Jawnie Ray knew more about bawxing drunk than anybody else did sober.”

Conn stayed with Ray in the gym three years but never was allowed to engage in an official fight. That was because Ray didn’t believe in amateur fisticuffs. If you were going to chance being hit in the kisser, then you should make a dawler off it. Also, what could you learn from some amateur? During one period in the late ‘30s and early ‘40s, the Pittsburgh area gave the world five champions, and Conn got to practice against a lot of talent in the gym. When Joe Louis came to town to fight Hans Birkie, Conn made a buck holding the spit box for the Brown Bomber. It was the first time he ever saw the man with whom he would be linked forever in boxing history.

Finally, when he was 17 years old, Ray drove him down to Fairmount, W. Va., where he went four rounds against an experienced 24-year-old named Dick Woodwer. There were probably 300 fans at the armory, and Woodwer outpointed the novice. Conn’s share was $2.50.

Ray gave him four bits. “Hey, Moon, what is this?” Billy said. “I get two and a half.”

“We gotta eat,” Ray said.

“Yeah, but how come we’re both eating out of my share?”

“You were the one who lost,” said Ray.

They never had a contract, but no other man ever managed Billy Conn. He even told the mob to back off when it tried to muscle in.

In the beginning, Ray had Billy fighting somebody somewhere every two weeks or so. Fairmount, Charleston, Wheeling, Johnstown. It was nickel hamburgers, 15 cent moonshine and 16 cent-a-ga1lon gas that kept them going. “You tell kids that nowadays, they’re sure you ran into too many of Joe Louis’s blows,” Billy says. And nowadays it’s not just the prices that are different. A prospect is brought along against handpicked roundheels on Sunday afternoon TV. After 10 bouts everybody gets to fight for the championship of something or other. Conn was barely out of West Virginia after 10 fights, and even after 14 he was hardly .500; then he had to win or draw 13 in a row before he was allowed a 10-rounder. It was against Honeyboy Jones.

But he was learning. Always, he learned. Even when he fought for championships, he seldom won any of the early rounds. “They don’t matter,” he says. They counted, but they didn’t matter, because that was the time you picked up the other guy’s style. And Ray put him in against everybody, every style.

Near the end of 1936, when Conn was still only 18, Ray threw the boy in against the older Fritzie Zivic. “He put an awful face on me,” Billy says, and he still honors Zivic, a Pittsburgh guy, by calling him the dirtiest fighter he ever met. But Billy outpointed Zivic and moved out of the welterweights.

A few months later, he won his 23rd in a row over a red-haired black powerhouse named Oscar Rankins, who knocked Billy down in the eighth with such a stiff blow that, says Conn, “I didn’t know I’d won till I read it the next day in the paper.” Years later, when Joe Louis heard that Conn had fought Rankins, he said to Billy, “The people who managed you must not have liked you very much. Nobody would let *me* fight that sonuvabitch.”

Conn’s favorite photograph in the club cellar is a wirephoto of himself bandaged and stitched after he won the rematch with Freddie Apostoli. The headline reads: IF THIS IS THE WINNER, WHAT DOES THE LOSER LOOK LIKE? Conn howls at that, and to this day he speaks with greatest affection about the fighters who did him the most damage.

Damn, it was fun. After he beat Zivic and made big money, $2,180, Conn bought himself a brand new Chevy for $600. When he whipped Bettina for the title, he said, “Gee, I’m champion. Now I can eat regular.” Then he went back home to Pittsburgh and out to ‘Sliberty. “I hadn’t been around the corner for a long time,” he says. But now he made a point of going back, and he found the guys who had ridiculed him when he had just been starting out, running errands for Jawnie Ray. They were loafing in a bar. “Remember the messenger boy you laughed at?” he asked, and they nodded, cowering. Billy brought his hands up fast, and they ducked away, but all he did was lay a lot of big bills on the hardwood. “Well, all right,” Billy said, “stay drunk a long time on the light-heavyweight champeen of the world.”

He bought Maggie anything she wanted. He gave her champagne, the real stuff. She loved champagne. He bought presents for his younger brothers and sisters, and for the dames he found and who found him. He was even interviewed by a New York fashion editor on the subject of how a woman should be turned out.

"I guess these women's fashions are O.K.," Conn declared. "That is, except those dizzy hats and the shoes some of them wear. . . . I wouldn't wear a boxing glove for a hat, but some girls do. . . . Plaid dresses are pips. I think plaid looks swell on any woman, and I like any color as long as it's red. . . . Some evening dresses are pretty nice, if they're lacy and frilly and with swoopy skirts. But most girls look too much like China dolls when they're dressed in evening dresses. But what the hell! They're going to dress up the slightest chance you give 'em. And I'm for giving 'em every chance."

"We're just a bunch of plain, ordinary bums having a good time," Jawnie Ray explained. He and Billy would scream at each other and carry on constantly. "I'm glad we ain't got a contract, you dumb mick sonuvabitch," Jawnie would holler, "because maybe I'll get lucky and somebody even dumber than you will steal you from me." "Yeah, you rummy Jew bastard," Billy would coo back. It was like that, right to the end. The last time Billy saw him, Jawnie was at death's door in the hospital, and Joey Diven and Billy were visiting him.

"C'mon, you guys, sneak me outta here for some drinks," Jawnie Ray pleaded from the hospital bed.

"Moonie," Billy replied, "the only way you're gettin' outta this place is with a tag tied on your big toe."

Sometimes Westinghouse joined the traveling party, too, and on one occasion, coming back from Erie, he and Jawnie Ray got into a first-class fight. As Conn described it in a contemporary account, "My old man swung. Jawnie swung. When it was finished, Pop had a broken nose and Jawnie had lost a tooth. That made them pals."

Yes, sir, it was a barrelful of monkeys. They all loved to throw water on one another, too, and to play practical jokes with the telephone and whatnot. Eventually, when Jackie had grown up enough to come on board, it made it even more fun because then Billy had a partner to scuffle with. Billy would always go after Jackie when he caught him wearing his clothes. One time Billy was voted Best-Dressed Sportsman of the Year, so that must have made Jackie the Second-Best-Dressed Sportsman of the Year.

The day before Conn defended his crown in Forbes Field against Bettina in September of '39, Billy found out that Jackie had been joyriding with his pals in Billy's new black Cadillac, so he put out a $300 bounty on his brother, and when he caught up with him he thrashed him bare-knuckled in the garage. "O.K., get it over," Jackie said when he had positively had enough, and he laid out his chin for Billy to paste him square on it. Billy popped him a right, and Jackie was sliding down the wall clear across the garage when Jawnie Ray and Uncle Mike Jacobs and the cops burst in, all of them in disbelief that Billy would get into a fraternal dustup right before a championship fight. They were much relieved to discover that the blood all over Billy was only Jackie's.

Billy wiped himself clean and outpointed Bettina in 15. He was the toast of Pittsburgh and the world, as well. The New York *Daily News* rhapsodized: "The Irishman is indeed a beauteous boxer who could probably collect coinage by joining the ballet league if he chose to flee the egg-eared and flattened-nose fraternity." When Conn fought in New York, Owney McManus, who ran a saloon in Pittsburgh, would charter trains, and hundreds of the Irish faithful would follow Conn to Gotham—the Ham and Cabbage Special, they called it—and loaf on Broadway, even if it meant that maybe when they went back to the mills in Pittsburgh they'd be handed a DCM.

A DCM is a Don't Come Monday, the pink slip.

When Conn fought in Oakland, at the Gardens, the streetcars would disgorge fans from all over the Steel City. Pittsburgh's streetcar lines were almost all laid out east-west, except for one, which ran north from the mills along the river. It was called the Flying Fraction because it was number *77/54—a* combination of two east-west lines, the 77 and the 54—and it went right past both the Gardens and Forbes Field. Three rides to a quarter, and if you were getting off for the fights you got a transfer anyhow and sold it for a nickel to the people waiting, so they could save 3 cents on their ride home. Photos of Conn went up in all the bars where those of Greb and Zivic were to be seen, and in a lot of other places where the Irish wanted strictly their own hero. And now that Billy had grown into a light heavyweight and had beaten all of them, it seemed like the only one left for him to fight was the heavyweight champion, the Brown Bomber himself. There wasn't anybody Irish in the country who wasn't looking forward to that. And by this point, there probably wasn't anybody Irish in Pittsburgh who hadn't seen Billy Conn fight, except for Mary Louise Smith.

"I've never seen a prizefight in my life," she said just the other day. Mary Louise just never cared very much for Billy's business, even when he was earning a living at it.

"You didn't miss anything," Billy replied.

But even if she hadn't seen him work, she was in love with him. She had fallen in love with the boxer. He gave her a nickname, too: Matt—for the way her hair became matted on her brow when she went swimming down the Jersey shore. She was still only a kid, still at Our Lady of Mercy, but she had become even more beautiful than she had been at that first dinner, and the sheltered life Greenfield Jimmy had imposed upon her was backfiring some. Billy had the lure of forbidden fruit. "I was mature for my age," Mary Louise says, "something of a spitfire. And I guess you'd have to say that when my father didn't want me to see Billy, I turned out to be a good prevaricator, too." She sighs. "Billy just appealed to me so."

"Ah, I told her a lot of lies," he says.

They would sneak off, mostly for dinners, usually at out-of-town roadhouses, hideaways where they could be alone, intimate in their fashion, staring into each other's blue eyes. It was so very innocent. He was always in training, and she was too young to drink, and kisses are what they shared. That and their song, *A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody*. Well, Billy made it their song, and he would request it from the big band on Saturdays when they would get all gussied up and go dancing downtown at the William Penn Hotel, which was the fanciest spot in Pittsburgh. And he was the champion of the world, and she was the prettiest girl, dressed all *lacy and frilly and with swoopy skirts.*

Even if Greenfield Jimmy didn't know the half of it, he could sense that it was getting out of hand. Mary Louise played Jo in *Little Women* at Our Lady of Mercy, and he liked that; he wanted her to be an actress, to be something, to move up. He liked Billy, he really did, and he thought he was as good a boxer as he had ever seen, but he didn't want his daughter, his firstborn, marrying a pug. So Greenfield Jimmy sent Mary Louise to Philadelphia, to a classy, cloistered college called Rosemont, and he told the mother superior never to let his daughter see the likes of Mister Billy Conn.

So Billy had to be content sending letters and presents. When he came into Philly for a fight, he had 20 ringside tickets delivered to Rosemont so that Mary Louise could bring her friends. The mother superior wouldn't let any of the young ladies go, though, and when Billy climbed into the ring and looked down and saw the empty seats, he was crestfallen. His opponent that night was Gus Dorazio, and despite Billy's lipping off at the weigh-in, Billy was even slower than usual to warm up, and the fight went eight rounds before Billy won on a KO.

Greenfield Jimmy was pleased to learn about these events and that Mary Louise was going out with nice young men from the Main Line, who went to St. Joseph's and Villanova, who called for her properly and addressed her as Mary Louise, and not anything common like Matt. Greenfield Jimmy sent her off to Nassau for spring vacation with a bunch of her girl friends, demure young ladies all.

As for Billy, he went into the heavies, going after Louis. "We're in this racket to make money," Jawnie Ray said. Billy had some now. He rented Maggie and the family a house on Fifth Avenue, an address that means as much in Pittsburgh as it does in New York. One of the Mellons had a mansion on Fifth with 65 rooms and 11 baths. "The days of no money are over, Maggie," Billy told his mother. She said fine, but she didn't know anybody on Fifth Avenue. Couldn't he find something in 'Sliberty? "Bring your friends over every day," Billy told her.

Maggie was 40 that summer, a young woman with a son who was a renowned champion of the world. But she began to feel a little poorly and went for some tests. The results were not good. Not at all. So now, even if Billy Conn was a champion, what did it mean? Of the two women he loved, one he almost never got to hold, and now the other was dying of cancer.

Conn's first fight against a heavyweight was with Bob Pastor in September of 1940. Pastor irritated him. "I hit him low one time," Billy recalls. "All right, all right. But he just kept on bitching. So now, I'm really gonna hit him low. You know, you were supposed to do everything to win." He knocked Pastor out in 13, then he outpointed Al McCoy in 10 and Lee Savold in 12, even after Savold busted his nose in the eighth.

All too often now, though, Conn wasn't himself. He couldn't get to see Mary Louise, and worse, Maggie was becoming sicker and weaker, and almost every cent he made in the ring went to pay for the treatment and the doctors and the round-the-clock nurses he ordered. "His mother's illness has Billy near crazy at times," Jawnie Ray explained after one especially lackluster bout. Between fights Billy would head back to Pittsburgh and slip up to see Maggie, and, against doctor's orders, he would bring her champagne, the best, and the two of them would sit there on an afternoon, best friends, and get quietly smashed together. They were the happiest moments Maggie had left.

June 18, 1941 was the night set for the Louis fight at the Polo Grounds, and Uncle Mike Jacobs began to beat the biggest drums for Conn, even as Louis kept trooping the land, beating up on what became known as the Bums-of-the-Month. Incredibly, 27,000 people—most of them coming off the Flying Fraction—showed up at Forbes Field to watch Conn's final tune-up in May, against a nobody named Buddy Knox.

Everywhere, the world was swirling, and that seemed to make even everyday events larger and better and more full of ardor. Even if Americans didn't know what lay ahead, even if they told themselves it couldn't happen here, that foreign wars

wouldn't engage us, there may have been deeper and truer instincts that inspired and drove them as the year of 1941 rushed on. It was the last summer that a boy hit .400. It was the only summer that anyone hit safely in 56 straight games. A great beast named Whirlaway, whipped by Eddie Arcaro, the little genius they called Banana Nose, ran a Derby so fast that the record would stand for more than 20 years, and he finished up with the Triple Crown in June. That was when the Irishman and the Brown Bomber were poised to do battle in what might have been the most wonderful heavyweight fight there ever was. And all this as the Nazis began their move toward Russia and Yamamoto was okaying the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The pace was quickening. Mary Louise was as impetuous now as the boy she loved. It couldn't go on this way anymore. On May 28, a couple of days after he beat Knox, Billy drove her to Brookville, way north out of Pittsburgh, and took out a marriage license. DiMaggio got a triple in Washington, at Griffith Stadium, to raise his streak to 13. Mary Louise was 18 now, and Greenfield Jimmy couldn't change her plans any more than he could her heart, but she and Billy were good Catholic kids, and they wanted to be married in the Church, and that meant the banns had to be posted.

So Greenfield Jimmy heard, and he fulminated, "I'm just trying to raise a decent family, and I know where these boxers end up." He said he would punch Billy's lights out, and Westinghouse said he would rattle Greenfield Jimmy's cage first. Greenfield Jimmy went directly to the rectory where the bishop lived in Pittsburgh. He banged on the door and said there had better not be any priest anywhere in Pennsylvania who would marry his flesh and blood to the pug.

It worked, too. The next Saturday, Billy left his training camp and went to a nearby parish named St. Philomena's. He and Mary Louise had someone who had promised to marry them at the altar at 9:30 a.m., and an excited crowd had gathered. But the priests wouldn't buck Greenfield Jimmy, and after a couple of hours of bickering, somebody came out and told the people there wouldn't be any June wedding this day.

Billy went back to prepare to fight the heavyweight champion. DiMaggio got three singles against the Brownies that afternoon.

The next time Billy left camp, a few days before the bout, he flew to Pittsburgh to see his mother. He probably didn't realize how close to the end she was, because she kept the news from him. "Listen, I've got to live a little longer," Maggie told everyone else in the family. "I can't worry Billy."

He couldn't bring her champagne this time. Instead, he brought her a beautiful diamond bracelet, and he gave it to her. "Maggie," he said, "this is for you." She was so sick, so weak, so in pain that she could barely work up a smile, but she thanked him the best she could. And then she pushed it back.

"Oh, it's so beautiful, Billy," she said. "But don't give it to me. Give it to Mary Louise." And Maggie told him then that he was to marry her, no matter what Greenfield Jimmy said, because he was her boy and a good boy and as good as any boy, and because he loved Mary Louise more than anyone else in the world.

Billy nodded. He kept his hand wrapped around the bracelet. He couldn't stay much longer. Just these few minutes had tired Maggie so. He kissed her and got ready to leave. "Maggie," Billy said, "I gotta go now, but the next time you see me, I'll be the heavyweight champion of the world."

Maggie smiled one more time. "No, son," she said, "the next time I see you will be in Paradise."

Tuesday, the 17th, the day before the fight, DiMaggio made it an even 30 in a row, going 1 for 4 against the Chisox across the river in the Bronx. That night, Billy slept hardly at all. And he always slept. Sometimes he would even lie down in the locker room while the undercard bouts were being fought and doze right off just minutes before he had to go into the ring. But this whole night he barely got 40 winks. And he wasn't even worrying about getting in the ring with Joe Louis. He was worrying about Maggie and Matt.

At the weigh-in the next morning Louis, who had trained down because of Conn's speed, came in at 199 1/2. Conn tipped 169. That made Uncle Mike a bit nervous. It was already *17—5* for the champion in the betting, and this weight spread was making the bout look like homicide. Uncle Mike announced Conn's weight at a more cosmetic 174.

Conn went back to his hotel to rest, but the Ham and Cabbage Special had just got in, and all the fans, wearing leprechaun hats and carrying paper shamrocks and clay pipes, came over to see him, and when a bunch of them barged right into his room, Billy went outside and loafed with them.

Finally, Jawnie got him back to his room, but who should come storming in, wearing a zoot suit and smoking a big cigar, but Jackie. Naturally, he and Billy started wrestling each other all over the suite, driving the trainer, Freddie Fierro, nuts. People can get hurt wrestling. At last Fierro was able to separate them, but Billy still couldn't sleep, so he looked in on Jackie and saw him snoring with his mouth open. He called down to room service, ordered a seltzer bottle and squirted it right into Jackie's mouth. You can bet that woke Jackie up.

Jackie chased Billy into the hall. Billy was laughing, and he wasn't wearing anything but his shorts. That was how Billy spent the day getting ready for the Brown Bomber. Just a few miles away, at the Stadium, DiMaggio went 1 for 3 to stretch it to 31.

Back in Pittsburgh the Pirates had scheduled one of their few night games for this evening, June 18. They knew everybody wanted to stay home to listen to the fight on the radio, so the Pirates announced that when the fight began, the game would be suspended and the radio broadcast would go out over the P.A. Baseball came to a halt. Most of America did. Maybe the only person not listening was Maggie. She was so sick the doctors wouldn't let her.

Billy crossed himself when he climbed into the ring that night.

And then the Pirates stopped, and America stopped, and the fight began, Louis's 18th defense, his seventh in seven months.

Conn started slower than even he was accustomed to. Louis, the slugger, was the one who moved better. Conn ducked a long right so awkwardly that he slipped and fell to one knee. The second round was worse, Louis pummeling Conn's body, trying to wear the smaller man down. He had 30 pounds on him, after all. Unless you knew the first rounds didn't matter, it was a rout. This month's bum.

In his corner, Conn sat down, spit and *said*, "All right, Moon, here we go." He came out faster, bicycled for a while, feinted with a left and drove home a hard right. By the end of the round he was grinning at the champ, and he winked to Jawnie Ray when he returned to the corner. The spectators were up on their feet, especially the ones who had bet Conn.

The fourth was even more of a revelation, for now Conn chose to slug a little with the slugger, and he came away the better for the exchange. When the bell rang, he was flat-out laughing as he came back to his corner. "This is a cinch," he told Jawnie.

But Louis got back on track in the fifth, and the fight went his way for the next two rounds as blood flowed from a nasty cut over the challenger's right eye. At Forbes Field in Pittsburgh the crowd grew still, and relatives and friends listening downstairs from where Maggie lay worried that Billy's downfall was near.

But Conn regained command in the eighth, moving back and away from Louis's left, then ripping into the body or the head. The ninth was all the more Conn, and he grew cocky again. "Joe, I got you," he popped off as he flicked a good one square on the champ's mouth, and then, as Billy strode back to his corner at the bell, he said, "Joe, you're in a fight tonight."

"I know it," Louis replied, confused and clearly troubled now.

The 10th was something of a lull for Conn, but it was a strategic respite. During the 11th, Conn worked Louis high and low, hurt the champ, building to the crescendo of the 12th, when the New York Herald Tribune reported in the casual racial vernacular of the time that Conn "rained left hooks on Joe's dusky face." He was a clear winner in this round, which put him up 7—5 on one card and 7-4-1 on another; the third was 6—6. To cap off his best round, Conn scored with a crushing left that would have done in any man who didn't outweigh him by 30 pounds. And it certainly rattled the crown of the world's heavyweight champion. The crowd was going berserk. Even Maggie was given the report that her Billy was on the verge of taking the title.

Only later would Conn realize the irony of striking that last great blow. "I miss that, I beat him," he says. It was that simple. He was nine minutes from victory, and now he couldn't wait. "He wanted to finish the thing as Irishmen love to," the ***Herald Tribune*** wrote.

Louis was slumped in his corner. Jack Blackburn, his trainer, shook his head and rubbed him hard. "Chappie," he said, using his nickname for the champ, "you're *losing.* You gotta knock him out." Louis didn't have to be told. Everyone understood. Everyone in the Polo Grounds. Everyone listening through the magic of radio. Everyone. There was bedlam. It was wonderful. Men had been slugging it out for eons, and there had been 220 years of prizefighting, and there would yet be Marciano and the two Sugar Rays and Ali, but this was it. This was the best it had ever been and ever would be, the 12th and 13th rounds of Louis and Conn on a warm night in New York just before the world went to hell. The people were standing

and cheering for Conn, but it was really for the sport and for the moment and for themselves that they cheered. They could be a part of *it,* and every now and then, for an instant, *that* is it, and it can't ever get any better. This was such a time in the history of games.

Only Billy Conn could see clearly—the trouble was, what he saw was different from what everybody else saw. What he saw was himself walking with Mary Louise on the Boardwalk at Atlantic City, down the shore, and they were the handsomest couple who ever lived, and people were staring, and he could hear what they were saying. What they were saying was: "There goes Billy Conn with his bride. He just beat Joe Louis." And he didn't want to hear just that. What he wanted to hear was: "There goes Billy Conn with his bride. He's the guy who just *knocked out* Joe Louis." Not for himself: That was what Mary Louise deserved.

Billy had a big smile on his face. "This is easy, Moonie," he said. "I can take this sonuvabitch out this round."

Jawnie blanched. "No, no, Billy," he said. "Stick and run. You got the fight won, Stay away, kiddo. Just stick and run, stick and run. There was the bell for the 13th.

And then it happened. Billy tried to bust the champ, but it was Louis who got through the defenses, and then he pasted a monster right on the challenger's jaw. "Fall! Fall!" Billy said to himself. He knew if he could just go down, clear his head, he would lose the round, but he could still save the day. "But for some reason, I couldn't fall. I kept *saying,* 'Fall, fall,' but there I was, still standing up. So Joe hit me again and again, and when I finally did fall, it was a slow, funny fall. I remember that." Billy lay flush out on the canvas. There were two seconds left in the round, 2:58 of the 13th, when he was counted out. *The winnah and still champeen. . . .*

"It was nationality that cost Conn the title," the *Herald Tribune* wrote. "He wound up on his wounded left side, trying to make Irish legs answer an Irish brain."

On the radio, Billy said, "I just want to tell my mother I'm all right."

Back in the locker room, Jawnie Ray said not to cry because bawxers don't cry. And Billy delivered the classic: "What's the sense of being Irish if you can't be dumb?"

Maggie lasted a few more days. "She held on to see me leading Joe Louis in the stretch," Billy says.

He and Mary Louise got married the day after the funeral. The last time they had met with Greenfield Jimmy, he said that Billy had to "prove he could be a gentleman," but what did a father-in-law's blessing matter anymore after the 12th and 13th rounds and after Maggie's going?

They found a priest in Philly; a Father Schwindlein, and he didn't care from Greenfield Jimmy or 'the bishop or whoever. As Mary Louise says, "He just saw two young people very much in love." They had a friend with them who was the best man, and the cleaning lady at the church stood in as the maid of honor. DiMaggio got up to 45 that day in Fenway, going 2 for 4 and then 1 for 3 in a twin bill. Greenfield Jimmy alerted the state police and all the newspapers when he heard what was going on, but Billy and Mary Louise were on their honeymoon in Jersey, man and wife, by the time anybody caught up with them.

"They're more in love than ever today, 44 years later," Michael Conn says. He is their youngest child. The Conns raised three boys and a girl at the house they bought that summer in Squirrel Hill.

That was it, really. DiMaggio's streak ended the night of July 17 in Cleveland. Churchill and Roosevelt signed the Atlantic Charter four weeks later, and on Nov. 26 the first subs pulled away from Japan on the long haul to Pearl Harbor. Billy was shooting a movie. It was called *The Pittsburgh Kid,* and in it he played (in an inspired bit of casting) an Irish fighter from the Steel City. Mary Louise was so pretty the producers wanted at least to give her a bit part as a cigarette girl, but she was too bashful, and Billy wasn't crazy about the idea himself. Billy did so well that the moguls asked him to stay around and star in the life story of Gentleman Jim Corbett, but the house in Squirrel Hill was calling. And Mary Louise was pregnant. "We were just a couple of naive young kids from Pittsburgh, and we didn't like Hawllywood," she says.

Joey Diven says that if Billy doesn't care for somebody a whole lot, he'll have them over to the house, take them down to the club cellar and make them watch *The Pittsburgh Kid.*

After Pearl Harbor, Conn fought three more times. Nobody knew it then, but he was done. Everything ended when he hit Louis that last big left. The best he beat was Tony Zale, but even the fans in the Garden booed his effort, and he only outpointed the middleweight. It didn't matter, though, because all anybody cared about was a rematch with Louis—even if both fighters were going into the service.

The return was in the works for the summer, a year after the first meeting. It was looked upon as a great morale builder and diversion for a rattled America. The victories at Midway and Guadalcanal were yet to come.

Then, in the middle of May, Pfc. Conn got a three-day pass to come home to the christening of his firstborn, Timmy. Art Rooney was the godfather, and he thought it would be the right time to patch things up between Greenfield Jimmy and his son-in-law, and so he and Milton Jaffe, Conn's business adviser, arranged a christening party at Smith's house and they told Billy that his father-in-law was ready to smoke the peace pipe.

On Sunday, at the party, Greenfield Jimmy and Conn were in the kitchen with some of the other guests. That is where people often congregated in those days, the kitchen. Billy was sitting up on the stove, his legs dangling, when it started. "My father liked to argue," Mary Louise says, "but you can't drag Billy into an argument." Greenfield Jimmy gave it his best, though. Art Rooney says, "He was always the boss, telling people what to do, giving orders." On this occasion he chose to start telling Conn that if he were going to be married to his daughter and be the father of his grandson, he damn sight better attend church more regularly. Then, for good measure, he also told Billy he could beat him up. Finally, Greenfield Jimmy said too much.

"I can still see Billy come off that stove," Rooney says.

Just because it was family, Billy didn't hold back. He went after his father-in-law with his best, a left hook, but he was mad, he had his Irish up, and the little guy ducked like he was getting away from a brushback pitch, and Conn caught him square on the top of his skull. As soon as he did it, Billy knew he had broken his hand. He had hurt himself worse against his own father-in-law than he ever had against any bona fide professional in the prize ring.

Not only that, but when the big guys and everybody rushed in to break it up, Milton Jaffe fractured an ankle and Mary Louise got herself all cut and bruised. Greenfield Jimmy took advantage of the diversion to inflict on Conn additional scratches and welts—around the neck, wrists and eyes. Billy was so furious about blowing the rematch with Louis that he busted a window with his good hand on the way out and cut himself more. *The New York Times,* ever understated, described Conn's appearance the next day "as if he had tangled with a half-dozen alley cats."

Greenfield Jimmy didn't have a single mark on him.

Years later, whenever Louis saw Conn; he would usually begin, "Is your old father-in-law still beating the s— out of you?"

In June Secretary of War Henry Stimson announced there would be no more public commercial appearances for Louis, and the champ began a series of morale-boosting tours. The fight at the christening had cost Louis and Conn hundreds of thousands of dollars and, it turned out, any real chance Conn had for victory. Every day the war dragged on diminished his skills.

The legs go first.

Conn was overseas in Europe for much of the war, pulling punches in exhibition matches against regimental champs. One time, the plane he was on developed engine trouble over France, and Billy told God he would do two things if the plane landed safely.

It did, and he did. He gave $5,000 to Dan Rooney, Art's brother, who was a missionary in the Far East. And he gave $5,000 to Sacred Heart, his old parish in 'Sliberty, to build a statue of the Blessed Virgin. It is still there, standing prominently by the entrance.

Conn was with Bob Hope at Nuremberg when V-E day came. There is a picture of that in the club cellar.

Then he came home and patched up with Greenfield Jimmy and prepared for the long-awaited rematch with Louis. It was on June 19, 1946, and such was the excitement that, for the first time, ringside seats went for $100, and a $2 million gate was realized. This was the fight— not the first one—when Louis observed, "He can run, but he can't hide." And Joe was absolutely right. Mercifully, the champion ended the slaughter in the eighth. In the locker room Conn himself called it a "stinkeroo," and it was Jawnie Ray who cried, because, he said, "Billy's finished."

As Conn would tell his kids, boxing is bad unless you happen to be very, very good at it. It's not like other sports, where you can get by. If you're not very, very good, you can get killed or made over into a vegetable or what have you. Now Billy Conn, he had been very, very good. Almost one-third of his *75* fights had been against champions of the world, and he had beaten all those guys except Louis, and that was as good a fight as there ever was. Some people still say there never has been a better fighter, a stylist, than Sweet William, the Flower of the Monongahela. But, of course, all anybody remembers is the fight that warm June night in the year of '41 and especially that one round, the 13th.

One time, a few years ago, Art Rooney brought the boxer into the Steelers' locker room and introduced him around to a bunch of white players standing there. They obviously didn't have the foggiest idea who Billy Conn was. Conn saw some black players across the way. "Hey, blackies, you know who Joe Louis was?" They all looked up at the stranger and nodded. Conn turned back to the whites and shook his head. "And you sonsuvbitches don't know me," he said.

But really he didn't care. "Everything works out for the best," he says in the club cellar. "I believe that." He's very content. They can't ever get him to go to sports dinners so they can give him awards and stuff. "Ah. I just like being another bum here," he says. "I just loaf around, on the corner, different places." Then Mary Louise comes around, and he falls into line. He never moved around much, Billy Conn. Same town, same house, same wife, same manager. same fun. "All the guys who know me are dead now, but, let me tell you, if I drop dead tomorrow, I didn't miss anything."

He's over by the photograph of Louis and him, right after their first fight. He still adores Louis, they became fast friends, and he loves to tell stories about Louis and money. Some guys have problems with money. Some guys have, say, problems with fathers-in-law. Nobody gets off scot-free. Anyway, in the picture Louis has a towel wrapped around a puzzled, mournful countenance. Conn, next to him, is smiling to beat the band. He was the loser? He says. "I told Joe later, "Hey, Joe, why didn't you just let me have the title for six months? All I ever wanted was to be able to go around the corner where the guys are loafing and say, 'Hey, I'm the heavyweight champeen of the world.'

"And you know what Joe said back to me? He said, 'I let you have it for 12 rounds, and you couldn't keep it. How could I let you have it for six months?'"

A few years ago Louis came to Pittsburgh, and he and Conn made an appearance together at a union hail. Roy McHugh, the columnist for the *Pittsburgh Press,* was there. Billy brought the film of the '41 fight over from Squirrel Hill in a shopping bag. As soon as the fight started, Louis left the room and went into the bar to drink brandy. Every now and then Louis would come to the door and holler out. "Hey, Billy, have we got to the 13th round yet?" Conn just laughed and watched himself punch the bigger man around. until finally, when they did come to the 13th, Joe called out, "Goodbye, Billy."

Louis knocked out Conn at 2:58, just like always, but when the lights went on, Billy wasn't there. He had left when the 13th round started. He had gone into another room, to where the buffet was, after he had watched the 12 rounds when he was the heavyweight champeen of the world, back in that last indelible summer when America dared yet dream that it could run and hide from the world, when the handsomest boy loved the prettiest girl, when streetcars still clanged and fistfights were fun, and the smoke hung low when Maggie went off to Paradise.