

THAT OLD GREY TRAIN

A Powerful Fight Novelette

By John D. MacDonald

No one remembered Singer Washburn now; the years had chugged by, and the old grey train had carried him far past the time when he'd be champ, past the time when he'd be retiring. Then he saw this kid Joe, with a mean streak in him, and knew that Singer Washburn wasn't useless yet—there were a few things he could do, and maybe doing them would somehow make up for what he'd lost...



Jug Smiled Broadly. "I'm the Champ, Aren't I, Barney?"

AFTER a long, long time, they unlocked the gate for me and they let me go. I stood in the warden's office and felt the cloth of the cheap suit where my hands hung next to my thighs, and he said, "Washburn, you did your stretch like a man and I don't think you're going to get into any more trouble." There were so many things I couldn't say to him—I couldn't tell him how my folks had wanted to educate one of the kids and sent me to Howard University, thinking they were going to have a colored boy that could make a living with the books in a white man's world. I was a junior when the dough got low, and I found a way to make some money. In those days I was lean and tough and fast. I did me some boxfighting, and the big trouble was, I was too good at it. If only I'd met a real good boy when I was first fighting.

You remember me. First they called me Young Washburn, then I got the name of "Singer" Washburn. I'd be in there with a good boy, the fight would be tough and then the music of it would get to me, the rhythm of it, and somewhere deep in my throat would start a tuneless chant, a heavy throbbing that must have been some kind of cousin to the war chants back in Africa. I know I've got some Senegalese blood in me and they're supposed to be pretty hard boys.

I quit school the week I turned pro. It wasn't until the year later than Johnny Rye bought my contract from Stevie. Maybe if Johnny Rye had been around when I turned pro, he wouldn't have let me quit school. He's that kind of a guy—one of those white men that can feel what it's like to be a Negro and be up in that ring with the crowd yelling, "Kill that eight ball! Murder that shine!"

Maybe because Johnny Rye was a very good welter in his day, he knows these things. Maybe it's just because he's a good man all the way through.

Anyway, he taught me all the professional tricks of the trade, and he brought me along slow to where I was ready for a shot at the light heavy title and it happened. You read about it. It hurt me and it hurt my race. I found out the gal I wanted to marry was cheating, and with that deep chant in my throat I went after the man and I tried to kill him with my hands. I would have, too. They stopped me. It took four of them to stop me—but I'm not proud of that. It shews you how crazy I was. Johnny did all he could, but I'd made the mistake of pulling it in a very tough state and they gave me ten. Good behavior cut it down to six.

I was twenty-five when I went in; thirty-one when they opened the gates. It's funny. At first I was crazy wild to get out. Then the years

chugged along like a slow train, taking me right past the place where I could have been champ, right on past the years I would have been defending my title, right on by the thirty mark where I'd planned to retire with the dough I'd saved from the fights I didn't have.

The old train, he chugged along and he slowed down and let me out, and by then I didn't want to get off. I wanted to keep right on riding in that grey train, with the grey cells and the bars and the tin plates and the shaved heads. You see, I was afraid to get off. What could I do? I was too old for the only trade I knew, and I hadn't finished my education. Life had given me just a little taste of big cars and good liquor. I'd managed to forget that on the grey train, but I knew that back out in the bright world I'd see it. all again and start wanting some. Without being able to get myself any. I couldn't figure on what to with myself and that old open door to the world had me licked.

The warden, he says, "What you going to do with yourself, Washburn?"

Even my name sounded funny to me. All those years being called seventy-nine two thirty-two. I couldn't answer him.

He said, "I tell you what to do, You forget about the cities, boy. You take yourself right on down to the deep

south and get yourself a share cropping job, get a healthy wife and raise a cabin full of kids. Then you can forget all this."

I didn't hate him for it. He was a well-meaning man and he thought he knew what was best. But you can't put shoes on a Nigra, get him used to them, and then tell him to go put his toes back in the dirt. Never.

I WANDERED on out with the silly feeling that the sky was going to fall right on my head and I couldn't stop looking around over my shoulder. I walked all one day, walking on the wrong side of the road so that nobody would want to give me a ride. I had a lot of walking to catch up on.

And when the five dollars the warden gave me was just about gone, I got me a job sweeping out a building and taking care of the lawn out in back.

They found out about me when the probation man came around and pretty soon I was walking again, heading toward the south. But all the time I walked, I knew I wanted to go see some fights. I wanted to smell the ring and see that spray of water under the lights when a man comes out from the corner and collects that Sunday punch that knocks the water off his hair.

After a while I did, and I hung around the dressing rooms; when they asked me who I was, I said my name

was Johnson. I got me a few bucks helping out in the corner and I was a lonely man. I weighed one ninety and there wasn't a bit of fat on me, but I knew the old steam and snap were all gone. No chance to try again, I helped them out one night, and went in with a white boy for the final bout when the other bum didn't show. It was funny to stand up there in the cigar smoke and hear that old bell clang out, to turn and touch gloves and drop back into the old game of figuring how you can hit the other boy without getting hit yourself.

I had my orders not to win and there was twenty-five bucks in it for me. That white boy sure was clumsy. He gave me a clean shot at the jaw in the second round and I dropped him. I stood in that neutral corner and prayed he'd find the guts to get back up on his feet. He made it, and I carried him around until he woke up. Then I let him slam me with a left and I made the fall look good. I stayed right there on my face and waited until the count of eight before I started to stir. He was a clumsy boy and even as slow as I was, he couldn't have licked me with a brick in each hand. His name was Sonny Vine.

I came out of the shower about fifteen minutes later and went back to the locker they give me to put my

clothes in. I was still wearing that suit I came out of the prison in.

Johnny Rye stood by my locker, his foot on the bench, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, the grey smoke curling up past his wide red face, his stone grey hair. All I could do was stop and stare at him.

He snatched the cigarette out of his mouth and said, "Washburn, you're one dumb nigger!" He scowled at me but there was something in his eyes that brought a big old lump into my throat. I couldn't say a word.

He said, "I found that you'd been let out and I waited for you to get in touch with me, I come down here to look this punk, Vine, and what do I find. I find you taking a lousy dive for him. Is that the way I taught you?"

"Mister Rye, you don't want me for anything. I'm all through. Too much time has gone by."

He walked over to me and his face got redder. "What the hell do you mean, I don't want you? Sure, you're all washed up as a fighter. But you know more about the business than any punk I got in the stable. I need you, Washburn, and, damn it, you're going to come back with me and work for me until I damn well tell you that I don't need you any more. And I intend to stay in this business for a long, long time."

He taught me right then what it is to have a friend, I knew he didn't need me at all, and I knew I had a job for life. Right then, as I fumbled for the handle on the locker, I knew that if he told me to cut both hands off at the wrist, I'd grin and do it. Somehow I had come home again and the lonely days were over.

HE HAD some other business and he sent me on alone up to Lake Benton in the Adirondacks. I rode in the back end of buses and I kept thinking of that suit the warden gave me. After I put on the suit Johnny bought me, I took the old one out and crammed it down deep into an ash barrel. The old grey train was a long way behind me. It was the same old training camp where I had been getting in shape for that shot at the title six years before. I got off in the center of the town of Benton and walked on out the dusty road, carrying my suitcase.

I turned down the familiar trail between the trees, and stopped when I came to the bend where I could see the first blue of the lake shining ahead. I walked on slow, smelling the woods, looking at the lines of the main camp, the outdoor ring with the peaked roof over it the shack which housed the light and heavy bags, the pulleys and the bars. Somebody was in the shack

singing hoarsely as he slammed the light bag around.

I walked on down and Barney Cizek, the ugly little guy who has been trainer for Johnny's boys for the last thousand years walked out onto the porch and looked at me blankly. Then his wrinkled face cracked into a wide grin.

"Holy Nelly! It's the Singer!" he gasped. He ran down the steps and grabbed my hand and danced up and down as he shook it. Then he yelled, "Everybody! Come on out here!"

Four guys came out, two from the house and two from the shack. I knew two of them, Fat Stan Bellows, a middleweight a couple of years younger than me, a trial horse with deceptive speed who works as a sparring partner for Johnny's better boys and also chops down the hopefuls from other stables—and Harry Jansen, a blond, dumb honest light heavy who is pure sparring partner and a nice guy.

Fat Stan grabbed my hand and said "How the hell are you, Wash? Nice to see you around. Do any fighting in the clink?"

Harry Jansen shook hands too and said, "You're heavier, Wash.

Then Barney introduced me to one of the strangers, Jug Hoffman, and told me that Jug had a shot at the welter title coming up in the Garden in a week. Jug shook hands and said,

"I heard about you, Washburn. Saw you fight a long time ago when I was fighting amateur." I liked his looks. He was one of those chunky, solemn boys, with a chopped up face and eyes without guile. He moved quickly and breathed audibly through his flattened nose. He looked every inch a scrapper.

I turned questioningly toward the last of the four, and Barney said, "You ought to remember Joe, Wash. Joe Rye. He's coming right along as a light heavy."

I remembered him then, but it was hard to figure out how a kid had changed so much. I remembered him as a skinny kid of seventeen, pale and quiet, who used to sit and watch practise rounds. He read a lot, too.

The skinny limbs had filled out. He was deep chested, broad shouldered and sullen. There was something wild and uncontrolled that was readable in his eyes.

Unlike the others, he made no attempt to shake hands. He said, "Hi," turned and strolled back toward the shack. He walked like a fighter.

The others were silent for a minute, and then they all began to talk at once as though to cover up for the kid. I told them how I had run into Johnny and he had hired me and they told me that there was a lot of work and they were glad to have me around. They told me about the good and bad luck that

Johnny had had with his string during the years that I was away.

Finally we were caught up on the news and I jerked a thumb toward the shack which was vibrating with the noise of Joe Rye slamming the heavy bag. I said, "How about the kid? I thought Johnny said once that Joe'd never be a fighter if he could help it."

Barney sighed and said, "That's the answer. He can't help it. He knows that if he doesn't handle Joe, somebody else will."

"Watch yourself if you spar with him, Wash," Fat Stan said heavily.

"What's the pitch?" I asked.

"He's one of the mean ones," Barney said.

I KNEW what he meant. There's a lot of them in the fight game. They find out that they can get into a ring and whip another man with their fists. The realization seems to unlock something inside of them, some ferocity that is more of the animal than of the man. After a little while it pervades their whole life, and they can't help thinking of every other human in terms of combat. They walk around with a growl in their throat and a chip on their shoulder, a beast walking like a man.

They turn cruel and savage in every aspect of life. They can't climb into a

ring without trying to kill the opponent, even when it is only training. It is a type of sadism. I know because I was close to being that way when Johnny first took me over. He cured me.

I said, "How did the kid get that way? I didn't think he was the type."

Barney shrugged. "He went into the army when he was twenty. He was such a quiet kid that I guess he had a rough time. Then he got sore and licked a guy that was picking on him. Now all he wants to do is go around beating the hell out of everybody."

"What's Johnny doing about it?"

"Hell, he can't see it. It's his own son, Wash, and I guess maybe being somebody's pop gives you a blind spot. He hates to have his kid in the fight racket, but since he can't do anything about it, he wants to have him be the best. He thinks that the mean Streak is spirit."

"How's the kid doing?"

"Good. Real good. He's had seven pro fights and got five knockouts, one decision and one loss on fouls. He ain't popular though," Barney said. "Down in Philly a month ago, he knocked out Harry Rosar in the fourth. While Harry was trying to get up, the kid clubbed him on the back of the neck. The fans don't like that stuff."

"You wait until you go a few rounds with him," Jansen said. "He scares the hell out of me."

"How good is Jug Hoffman?" I asked.

"Just about the best. He ought to take the title. Only trouble is he's weak on defense when the heat is on. You can see from his face that he's taken a lot of slamming around. He's been fighting since he was sixteen."

"Punchy?"

"Not at all. Seems to take it okay. We've been working on his defense."

I WENT in the camp with Barney and met Sam Tooker, the cook and janitor and he fixed me up with a late lunch. I didn't see all the rest of them together until dinner time. I was willing to hang back and take my dinner in the kitchen, but the rest of them seemed to take it for granted that I'd eat with them—and that is one of the nice things about the fight game. Your worth depends on what you can do with your hands, not what color you happen to be.

Joe Rye was a little late and I noticed the conversation died away when he got to the table. He glared at me as though I shouldn't be there, and then didn't look up again. He wolfed his food silently while I sat across from him thinking how it was too bad that a kid so good looking should have

that streak of mean blood in him. He was certainly built like a fighter, and he wore his blond hair cropped close to his skull. On the outside he looked more like he should have been rowing for some college crew rather than punching at heads. It's hard to tell where that streak'll crop up.

Joe finished and shoved his chair back. He walked out without a word or a backward look. The table conversation got lively again. I could see what was wrong with the training camp. One guy like that can sour the atmosphere for everybody. It made it worse to have the guy in question be the son of the manager. That limits the things you can do to keep him under control.

The others piled in early and Barney and I stayed up, sitting on the porch, looking out across the lake, talking about the old days. I don't know how we got started on Joe Rye again. Barney said, "It's too bad, you know. I can figure right now how the kid'll end up. He'll get better and better, and get a bigger and bigger head. Then, some day, some poor soda jerk or bartender is going to cross him up and Joe'll tear the guy's face off with his fist. You can't go around thinking like he does and not get into trouble."

It made me wonder how Joe would like his ride on a slow grey train where the years chug by.

Barney said, "The trouble is, it won't be just him that'll be hurt. It'll hurt Johnny and Sis. And me."

"Sis?" I asked, confused.

"Yeah. You remember her. My daughter. She was running around with Joe before he went overseas. Now, even though he's all different, she won't let herself see the change in him. I never wanted her to get tied up with a fighter, Wash."

"Have you tried to talk to her?"

"You can't talk to them, Wash. They know everything at that age. They got to get hurt all by themselves. The trouble is, when it happens, it's going to hurt me too. She's a pretty gal, Wash, but stubborn. You can't tell her what's ahead. Hell, I'd rather see her running around with Jug Hoffman who hasn't had half the education that Joe has had. Jug is a gentle guy and he goes at this fighting like it was a business, which it is. Joe has made it a kind of religion. I guess Jug wouldn't mind either. I've noticed the way he looks at Sis. Like a guy on the desert looking at a glass of water. And there'll be trouble if Joe ever sees him looking at Sis like that."

"Where is she?"

"Living down in the village. Working in a candy store so she can be near her big fighting chump. Joe's got his toughest fight yet coming up the night

after Jug's, otherwise he'd be down in the village tonight."

BARNEY gave me the small room at the end of the upstairs hall, and for a long time I stayed awake, thinking how glad I was that I had come back to the things I knew and understood—but there was a little cloud in the air, and I had a hunch that I was going to be in on the blow-off.

My first contact with Joe came sooner than I thought. After breakfast I went down to the shack and spent some time pasting the heavy bag, loosening up, getting the right roll into the punches. Then I took a long trot along the lake trail, puffing hard. At lunch I could have eaten the table right along with the food,

I took a quick nap after lunch and then wandered out to the ring. Fat Stan, giving away weight and reach, was going a round with Joe Rye. They were using the face masks and the big gloves. I watched, because I wanted to see how good Joe was. He was like a big cat—alternating between slow stalking and blinding flashes of speed. Fat Stan hadn't lost any of his art. He rolled the sting out of Joe's punches, slipped a lot of them, blocked others and jabbed his way out of trouble. But it wasn't the kind of fighting you expect to see at a training camp. Behind the mask, Joe's face was set and

blood-less, his eyes narrowed. I could see that Fat Stan was working hard to keep away from bad trouble.

Suddenly Stan was trapped in the corner over my head. He bounced out, jabbing, and then tried to slide along the ropes. In doing so, he made the mistake of carrying his elbows high and straightening up too far. Joe put his shoulders into a heavy left hook that landed just above Stan's belt. Stan whoofed and doubled over. Joe chopped him once in the kidneys and once behind the ear. Stan dropped onto his face. Joe swaggered away from him,

Stan got up, pulled the mask off and said, "What the hell do you think this is?"

Joe turned and smirked at him. "What's the matter, dearie? Does ims wanna dance instead of fight?"

"I don't want no clown showing off at my expense," Stan snapped.

Joe pulled his own mask off and dropped it on the canvas. He walked toward Stan, his lips drawn back from his teeth, saying, "Fatso, I'm going to show you what a licking really is."

Stan looked pretty uncertain and I could see the trouble ahead. Without thinking, in order to divert Joe, I said, "Could I try a round, Joey?"

Joe stopped and looked down at me. "The name is Mr, Rye, eight ball. Climb in and have some."

I pulled off my sweat shirt and climbed in. I put the mask on and Stan tied on the gloves.

I said, "Okay," and moved out and touched gloves with him. This time he was fighting somebody with more weight and a better reach. I was curious to see how he'd act. He jabbed lightly, feeling me out, and I countered with a jab of my own and a light left hook to the head. My timing was all shot; it was no longer instinctive. I had to plan out each move ahead like a man playing checkers. There wasn't any of the deep singing in my throat like there used to be. My rhythm was gone. And even when I told my right arm to shoot out there, it went out too slow, and it didn't hit where I wanted it to. This boy was a lot different than the Sonny Vine I had chopped down. I could see why, if Johnny wouldn't handle him, some other manager would.

HE JABBED and then rushed me into the ropes, swinging lefts and rights. I caught some of them on my forearms and felt the others light flares in my head. It was too rough against the ropes, so I covered up, bending far over. He tried to hook me in the face but couldn't get past my arms. I saw his feet back away, so I straightened up and followed him on out with jabs that weren't as fast as

they should have been. Even so, it surprised him, and he got his feet tangled trying to move off to my left. He tripped and his left swung back instinctively to protect himself from the fall. It gave me a clear shot, and I had the punch well started before I pulled it back. As I yanked it back, he got balance, and brought the left around and hit me high on the head. It was a good punch, slamming me back across the ring, fighting for balance. As I bounded off the ropes he was on me. I could see the right coming up the slot, and I told my right arm to get over in the way. It moved but not fast enough, my wrist brushing the glove as it came up and exploded on my jaw with all the weight of his rush and my bounce off the ropes.

It was like being hit with a sledge, and the mask didn't give me much protection.

When I could see clearly, he was standing in the middle of the ring, untying his right glove with his teeth. His mask was on the canvas at his feet. He said, "Washburn, you're a disappointment to me. I thought you'd be rougher than these other bums. Maybe I didn't know enough about the game when I used to watch you. You used to look pretty good." By the time I had the gloves off, he was already gone. It was just one of those things.

Johnny Rye got back late in the afternoon, and after I took a shower for dinner I walked out onto the porch. He was sitting on the railing, smoking a cigarette. He looked up and smiled at me. "How does it feel to be back, Wash?"

"Great, Mr. Rye."

"Why the formality, Wash. You used to call me Johnny." I couldn't tell him how I'd had a recent lesson about calling people by their first names.

I just grinned and said, "Okay, Johnny."

"I hear you mixed it up a little with the kid this afternoon, Wash. What do you think of him?"

"He's okay, Johnny. He can fight."

"He's really okay?" Johnny seemed pathetically anxious for my good opinion, and that was strange, because he had been judging fighters when my ambition was to grow up and be a traffic cop. It embarrassed me to have him ask in that tone of voice; it wasn't like Johnny. He was always so sure of himself and here he was begging for good words from a jail bird Nigra. He was up against something he knew in his heart. he couldn't handle, and so he was going around trying to make himself feel good. Hell, I couldn't tell him that his kid was smart enough and fast enough but too loaded down with hate and cruelty, could I?

So I just said, "He's a real good boy, Johnny. Real good."

Johnny grinned, "Took you, didn't he, Wash?"

And then I had to chuckle and say, "He sure did." I couldn't tell him that Joe had sucker-punched me when I refused to pop him as he was falling. I couldn't tell him how rusty I was, and how far off on my timing and coordination. It would have sounded like a bunch of excuses, and in the old days, I never made excuses to Johnny. Not a one. With Johnny, you win or you lose.

So the warm days went by and every day I got a little closer to the way I used to be—but I knew that I'd never be back there—not by a mile. You can't take a year off and expect to come back, much less six years. On the third day I found out that it was a joy to work out with Jug Hoffman. We kidded around and he made me fight like this boy he was going to meet. I went through it slow, and he'd move in with open gloves. We didn't use the masks. Then I'd go through the style as fast as I could manage, and Jug, he'd fly all over me, pulling the punches, and I knew that here was a boy who could handle himself.

He had a funny, perky way of moving around in the ring, skipping and yanking at the sides of his shorts with his gloved hands, snuffing hard

through that mashed nose, his feet making little hard slapping noises on the canvas. He had a nice stunt of bouncing and yanking at the shorts, and then flashing a left jab up when you were the least expecting it.

And he took criticism good. I showed him how he was taking the steam out of his own left hook by moving the shoulder too soon. I showed him how to throw the shoulder along with the punch after the hand had moved about five inches so that the full power exploded right at the point of contact. He liked that. He took about three hundred shots at the heavy bag until he had it just right, until he'd absorbed it into his fighting instincts—until it was a part of him, available for those thousandths of a second in the ring when there's no time for thought.

Before we turned in, Jug and I made a deal for a light workout the next day, Friday, because on Friday afternoon, late, Johnny was taking him into town for the fight Saturday night. Johnny was pleased when Jug told him that I'd helped him a lot and he was glad that Johnny had got me out there. It meant a good deal to know that I was helping Johnny, Johnny left right after dinner Thursday night, telling us that he'd be back in time, on Friday, to take Jug on down to the city.

As soon as Johnny had gone, Joe took the keys to Barney's car off the mantel, without asking him, and went on into the town of Benton to see Sis. Barney was sore about it, but there wasn't anything he could do.

AT BREAKFAST the next morning, while Joe was cramming his mouth full of eggs, Barney came in and said, "That was a cute trick, Joe. Next time you ask for my car, see?"

Joe mumbled, "Keep your pants on, Pop. She's your daughter, isn't she?"

Then it happened. Jug Hoffman thumped his coffee cup down on the table and said, "You better play that deal straight, Junior."

Joe stopped chewing for a moment. His eyes looked small and bright hot. He looked at Jug and said softly. "Where do you come in?"

"I know the girl and she's a good kid," Jug said. "Just play it straight or you'll have a lot of people to talk to. I happen to know she's stuck on you, but I couldn't tell you why. For my money, you're poison."

Joe stood up slowly, fists clenched. He said, "I give lessons to people who put their noses in my business. You ready for yours?"

"Any time," Jug said calmly. He finished his coffee and stood up. "You got reach and weight on me. See how much good they're going to do you.

Regular rounds. Barney'll referee and Stan'll call time. Regular gloves. No masks. I'll take Wash in my corner and you can take Harry."

Barney put both palms up and said, "No, guys. What'll Johnny say? Wait till after your fights. He'll blame me."

Joe turned to him and said, "Shut up, grandma. Let's roll this thing. I haven't liked the way this dumb punk has been looking at Sis anyway. I'll try not to cut him up too much." Barney gulped when he saw how hopeless it was to try to stop it.

I HAD the collodion and the tape laid out where I could grab them quick, and when Stan whacked the bell, I snatched the stool out and moved over so the post wasn't in my way. Jug circled fast, dancing on his toes, the muscles in his shoulders nice and loose, his face impassive. The mouth guard distorted his lips. The only sound was the slap of his toes on the canvas, the noise of his breathing.

In comparison, Joe looked clumsy, loose jointed, amateurish. You could tell from their eyes that this was something which had been building up for a long time. The difference between them was that with Jug, once the bell sounded, it was his trade and he went at it with the emotion of a master plumber tackling a pipe. With Joe it was something in the glands.

Jug bounced and yanked at his shorts. The left flashed out, slamming Joe's head back and Jug followed it up with a short right that had his back in it. Joe shook his head and backed away. When Jug followed up, Joe clubbed at him with swinging rights and lefts. Jug caught them on his arms and gloves and shoulders, riding with them to cut the shock. Joe rushed him and had him poised against the ropes for a fraction of a second. He slammed a pile-driver right, but Jug wasn't there to catch it. He circled and nailed Joe behind the ear on the way out.

Joe's face became something less than human. He charged blindly, snowing Jug under with pure weight and ferocity. Jug ducked some, but he couldn't duck all of them. He tried to stand toe and slug with the heavier man. It was a bad plan. He nailed Joe three times before a whistling left caught him and floored him. As he bounded up at nine, Stan banged the bell for the round.

I pushed the split on Jug's cheekbone shut and covered it with collodion. I whispered to him, "Boy, you've got to box him. Don't try to slug with him. Box him and counterpunch him. Make him take six to get in one." Jug nodded and I repeated it to make sure he got it. He rinsed his mouth and spat

into the pail. I sloshed some cold water on his chest, and jumped down at the bell.

Jug rushed out, dancing, and caught Joe with a solid left hook. Joe circled like a big cat, waiting until he could rush Jug into a corner. Jug saw his danger and danced clear, flicking the left out.

Joe shot across a straight right which missed, and collected a hard left hook to the middle and a right cross to the head. I could see that the left hook had bothered him a little. He opened his lips around the mouth guard to suck air. But he took his time and, in the middle of the round, rushed Jug into a neutral corner. Jug clinched, but Joe tore him loose with lefts and rights to the middle. When Jug bounced off the corner ropes, Joe slammed one home. Jug clinched again, and by the time Barney broke them, Jug was okay. Going away from the clinch, he threw one right down the groove that cut Joe's lip.

In the third round it settled down to a pattern. Jug would get in six clean blows on Joe's iron jaw, and then Joe would stagger Jug with a clean left or right. But I could see that it was working out the way I thought it should. Jug was taking brutal punishment, but his blows were having more effect.

The fourth, fifth and sixth were almost identical. In each round Jug went

down, but twice he was pushed rather than hit. Each time he took a shorter count.

The seventh brought it to a head. Joe had thrown so many punches that his arms had turned to putty. He grunted and snarled as he tried to force the punches across. Jug bounced, high, tugged at his shorts and went in, both hands held low. Joe saw the opening and swung a slow, heavy right. Jug slammed one across while the right was still floating at him. Jug puffed and slapped home a left and a right. Joe tried to make his arms work, but they wouldn't. And he wouldn't fall. Each time he tried to throw a punch, he was hit three times. At last, his arms dropped to his sides and he weaved. Jug measured him and slammed across an overhand right. It knocked Joe's mouth guard out. He started to fall. As he went down, Jug slammed in a left hook that finished it. Joe rolled over onto his face. He twitched once and lay still.

Jug walked back to the corner and said, to the world in general, "Game kid." His lips and his eyes were puffed and the cut on his cheek was widened. It didn't look as though he'd be in shape to fight.

He was gone by the time Joe came around. He yanked himself away from Stan and myself and walked unsteadily toward the camp.

JUG was pretty quiet about the whole thing. He took a long cold shower and we fixed him up as best we could, but it was a cinch that he had taken a terrible smashing around the face.

We started lunch, Jug eating quietly, and we didn't expect to see Joe at the table. It seemed likely that he'd come down when we were taking a nap and get something to eat. The door to his room was shut.

But, halfway through the meal, we heard his steps on the stairs and he walked in. He scowled at all of us and slid into his chair. He banged on the table with a fork to get some service. He wasn't marked up as badly as Jug was.

Nobody said a word. Tooker hurried in with a plate and set it in front of Joe and hurried back into the kitchen.

Even though he had started late, Joe finished before the rest of us did. He shoved his plate away and looked across the table at Jug. He said, "Okay, Golden Boy, so you can lick me. So what? When I've been at this as long as you have, I'll be the champ, not a third rate bum."

It was as violent as a slap in the face. Jug looked over at him blankly. He shook his head, as though to clear it. Then he smiled broadly and said,

"Champ! Johnny told me I'd be the champ if I licked the guy. I'm the champ, aren't I, Barney?" He grabbed Barney's arm. Jug grinned across at Johnny and said, "Thanks for telling me, kid. I forgot all about the fight. That's funny, ain't it? I forgot I'm the champ. Tell me that it's funny, guys. Who ever heard of a guy forgetting he was the champ? I did win, didn't I Barney?"

Nobody said a word. There was a sadness in Barney's eyes. He said gently, "Sure, kid. You're the champ Go on upstairs and go to bed."

Jug got up and walked to the door. Before he left, he turned and said to all of us, "Imagine me forgetting a thing like that!" He went up the stairs.

Joe looked at Barney and for once the scowl was gone from his face. He said, "What's the matter with him!"

Harry and Stan pushed their chairs away from the table and walked out. There were tears on Fat Stan's cheeks. Barney said, "Joe, maybe you never saw a guy go off the end before. You see, Jug's been fighting a long time. Every time he got slammed around the head, it give him what they call a pin point concussion. Each concussion left a little scar tissue on the surface of his brain. Some guys are more susceptible than others. We thought Jug was okay until three minutes ago. But you gave him the finishing touches—gave

him just enough more of those pin point concussions so that suddenly he cracks. Now he's punchy, kid, and he's worse off than the ones that build up to it gradual."

Joe said, "But can't he take a rest?"

"That stuff doesn't wear off kid. He won't be the same guy again. He's taken it for too long. He may get the title, but before the year is over he'll be sticking his face out for guys to hit him just so he can show them that it doesn't hurt. In a couple of years you can maybe find him hanging around some arena in Jersey trying to beg a ten dollar opening bout for whiskey money, trying to give some cheap promoter a snow job on how the great Jug Hoffman is as good as he ever was."

Joe looked pale. He said loudly, "It isn't my fault. It's the way he's been fighting for years. Look at his face."

Barney said gently, "That's right, kid. It isn't your fault." But there was a curl to his lip that said something else entirely.

Joe looked at him and I could see, in Joe's face, the shadow of what he had been once, and what he could have become if he hadn't turned into a fighting animal. Way down in him was a mess that hadn't quite burned out

I said, "Joey, that's the way it is for us guys. That's the end of the road."

He turned on me. "You're nuts, Washburn. I'll never let myself get pasted around that way."

I smiled and said, "You got a good start today, Joey."

He flushed and bit his lip. He said, "I'm learning. Nobody is going to do that to me in a little while."

I put a superior grin on my face and said, "Kid, you fight with your glands and not with your head. Maybe you can start out every fight thinking you're going to be cool and protect yourself but you'll end up every fight wide open—too anxious to land punches to give a damn about how many you take. You're a perfect fit for a straitjacket at the end of the road. Why I could go right out now and do the same thing to you that old Jug did. Only quicker."

He went out of the chair so fast he turned it over. He leaned close to me and yelled, "All you guys hate me because I got more stuff than you ever had. You're a has been, Washburn. Come out now and I'll knock you cold before you lay a glove on me. Come on!"

I yawned and said, "I'm coming. Go on out there and wait for me. Or will it make you too nervous, junior?"

He ran out and Barney looked at me, his eyes bugging out. "What the hell's got into you, Wash?"

"Just don't try to stop me, Barney. I'm doing this little job for Johnny. If I do it right, you're going to have a good son-in-law and maybe Johnny'll have himself a good son instead of a mean tempered meat ball."

IT WAS the same deal all over again, except that I stood up in the corner and said, "I don't need nobody to handle me in this corner, junior. And let's forget this foolishment about rounds. We'll just stay out there for the sixty seconds Ill need to chill you." He agreed. I acted cool on the outside, but on the inside I was praying. If my slow muscles didn't do what I told them to do, I'd do more harm than good to the kid.

I broke the padding of the gloves over my knuckles, Stan clanged the bell and we went out. I had to make him mad and open him up fast. I know the tricks but I've never used them before or since like I used them at that moment. When he stuck his hands out to touch gloves, I made like I was going to touch, and then threw a left in his nose. He roared and charged me. I slipped under his left and clinched. In the clinch I kneed him, slammed my head against his cheek, rubbed the laces across his nose, thumbed him in the eye and pushed him away.

It had the effect that I wanted. He charged at me wide open. I stepped

aside and brought my left up through with every ounce of power. He started to drop onto his face, so I clinched with him to hold him up, and danced him over to the ropes. When I had him balanced nice, I stepped back and gave him a left, a right and a left. The blows smacked across, ringing in the open air.

I didn't watch him fall. I walked away, feeling the tremor of the boards in the floor as he went down.

I climbed down out of the ring and as soon as I was on the ground, a hand grabbed me by the arm and spun me around. I looked down into the furious face of Johnny. His eyes had paled to the shade of his cigarette smoke. He called me a foul name and hit me in the face with a full arm swing. He hit me a second time.

He said, "I saw that stunt, Washburn. I take you out of the gutter and you have to show off by using every dirty trick you know on Joe. I'll give you five minutes to get off the place. And don't come back."

I didn't say a word. When I looked back from the porch of the camp, he and Barney were kneeling beside Joe. Barney was rubbing his wrists and Johnny was slapping his face lightly.

So I went back up the trail with my suitcase, pausing at the bend to take one last look at the blue lake. I walked into the village and caught a bus that

took me down to where I could get a bus for Baltimore.

I rode along in the back of the big bus and I could touch with my fingers the spots of pain that Johnny's hard fist had made on my face. They were spots that only hurt on the inside, not on the outside. The bus rumbled along and I watched the lights of the little towns and thought of how the people in the houses had something that they didn't even know about. They'd never know how a grey train can pick you up and chug along with you for a ride that's so long that you're afraid to get off it.

Johnny took me in when I needed it, and I didn't know how it had all come out until, after I sent my address, I got a note in Barney's childish handwriting. It was forwarded to me in Jacksonville where I was taking care of a parking lot. It said, *Joe has quit the ring. I thought you would like to no that. He and Sis are getting*

married in four months and Joe has went back to school. Johnny is still soar at you for what you did and he thinks Joe would have been champ but I no he is glad Joe has quit the ring. Maybe I can make him understand some day what you did. Jug got the crown as you no and Johnny has made him quit. He bought an annuity but he is not the same old Jug which is to bad. Please keep letting me no where you are if you move to another place. Joe has lost that mean streak after the lickings. Maybe some day Johnny will want you back. I do, anyhow. Your pal — Barney.

And so I've been in a lot of towns and they all look alike. Maybe, one of these days, I'll get that word from Johnny. He better not wait too long, though; because once you've taken a ride on that old grey train, it's awful easy to get back on for another ride.

THE END