A Boxer's Christmas Eve

By J. Joseph-Renaud

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

WITHIN FIVE ROUNDS.

I'M not particularly attractive when I cry, gentlemen, with my loose red cheeks, my tangled mop of gray hair, and my gold-filled teeth, but I cannot keep back my tears when I call to mind how Raymond Goutal, middleweight champion of France, fought Nick Morrison, middleweight champion of Great Britain, on Christmas Eve of 1910, at Paris. Neither the public nor the press knew of what was hidden behind this encounter.

The old manager, "Choppie" Chipperfield, paused and thoughtfully sipped at his tankard of stout. The diamonds set in loud rings which strangled his fat fingers advertised the fortune he had accumulated while managing boxers. Fat and jovial, the buttons of his dinner jacket straining at their thread almost to bursting point, with a ruddy face crowned with disheveled gray hair, old Choppie Chipperfield cut an unusually picturesque figure.

The cigar smoke floating around us veiled and nearly obscured the historic decorations of the Cheshire Cheese, that old Fleet Street tavern, into which, coming from the Beckett-Carpentier fight, we had dropped for a nightcap. There, Charles Dickens, Goldsmith, Reynolds, Doctor Johnson, and others equally famous were wont to go to drink and gossip until the dawn paled the candles. Choppie Chipperfield seemed a character of these old days rather than belonging to the present times.

After a pause, the plump manager went on with his story:

I was manager to Raymond Goutal, for I've trained Frenchmen, those frog-eating froggies! When their Carpentier and their Ledoux and other Frenchies begun to knock out good English boys, and when the swell Parisians had developed an appetite for the ring-while, in London, boxing was considered a sport for no others than coachmen—I got wind that there were some fat plums to be picked near the Seine, and so I crossed the Channel.

I opened a boxing stable and soon had a dozen froggies to coach and manage. It was easy work, for Frenchmen are naturally quick and tenacious fighters; once they get a grip they never leave go, as has been noticed on more than one or two occasions.

When Raymond Goutal first came to me he was young, a beginner, who for twenty francs would put on the gloves in the competitions at Grenelle, Clichy, and La Villette. But he carried a kick, which, if it went home, showed his opponent more stars in two seconds than any astronomer ever saw. He knocked cold in two rounds all the meat porters, casters, and navvies who tried their luck against him.

Then, boxing was in its infancy in France, and the opinion was still held that strength only was needed in the ring. When matched with these big fellows of brawn and muscle Raymond would feint with his left, hook with the right, and—the man was good for the stretcher. What grit he had! He was a glutton for punishment!

Blows straight from the hip, with all the

weight of the body behind them, and which would have flattened any other fighter, did not make Raymond even turn a hair. Slow on his toes as a dray horse, as he was at this stage, he quickly improved, though he never was an artist in footwork. He loved fighting, real fighting, too much willingly to dodge his opponent by stepping sideways or backward.

In three years I made him the middleweight champion of France.

All his winnings, which were steady and ample—for I understand the business side of the game as well as ring craft!—Raymond spent, not on himself, but solely on the cough of Berthe, his wife.

He was not one of those ladies' men, always to be seen among flashy women. He lived for his wife. Whatever effort or sacrifice you wanted of him, you had only to mention Berthe. She was a slip of a girl, a dark little Parisienne, with soft, melting eyes and cheeks like pink roses.

Having started work very young in a small workroom without ventilation where twenty-five girls sat sewing, she was already delicate when he married her. She had rosy cheeks and a frequent cough. Yes; all the blows he received in the ring and in training were borne so that she might have her medicines. At first it was cod-liver oil, raw beefsteaks, and doctors' fees to be paid for.

Then, she went to a little sanitarium near Versailles, and later a bigger one in Switzerland and more expensive doctors. In spite of all the treatment her cough got no better. I can even say that Raymond did not care for the ring. To him, success between the ropes meant money with which to cure Berthe and nothing else. Actually it was against his wife's illness that he was fighting. You could read the doctor's and chemist's bill on his battered face, his flattened nose, his ears misshapened like cauliflowers, and his broken teeth.

It was touching to see them together. He was so big and clumsy, but so gentle and protective; she thin enough to make you cry, with a hoarse voice and feverish cheeks, but pretty all the same.

She was proud of him and couldn't have been prouder had he been Napoleon. She carefully cut out and pasted into a book all the paragraphs which the sporting papers printed about her husband. How deeply she loved him! She had a way of clinging to him that seemed to say: "Don't let me go! Keep me alive! "

Well, Raymond Goutal was matched against Nick Morrison, middleweight champion of England, to decide the championship of Europe.

Nick was a red-headed fellow with the long nose and the cunning of a weasel. He was one of those remarkable dancers of the Corbett variety who always won on points, after avoiding close fighting for twenty-five rounds and wearing down his opponent with constant left jabs. His footwork was extraordinary. He two-stepped out of reach unceasingly, and, according to the modern style, when coming to close quarters he leaned forward and sheltered himself behind his arms and elbows.

That style is much used to-day, but when I learned boxing, fights took place in the good old style, with bare knuckles and on the grass, and when in a clinch we threw our opponent to the ground—or were thrown—as heavily as possible, just as in a street brawl. Anyone who crouched forward as they do to-day would have been inviting a heavy fall.

We used to hold ourselves upright, with head thrown back a little, firmly planted on both feet. In such a position it was impossible to dance about. You had to fight; you had to meet the punch of your opponent. Then, it was necessary to know how to parry and to feint; but the present-day style is to dodge blows by jumping aside or by sheltering behind one's arms.

Well, this weasel of a Morrison was, with his new methods, quite a clever lad. Try as you would, you couldn't keep him at close quarters. Against Raymond, who rushed in as soon as the gong sounded, the fight couldn't help but be interesting. It was a case of the bulldog against the weasel.

The reporters each morning filled columns in the press with comments and forecasts. The advance sale of seats was wonderful.

The match was to take place on Christmas Eve, a night which the froggies of Paris never spend at home. My opinion was that Goutal ought to win easily within five rounds, for, the first cross he could get, home, one would hear two thuds, the blow itself, and Nick's back meeting the floor. I gave my man five rounds in which to land this blow; such a margin was sufficient.

CHAPTER II.

HIS WAY WITH THEM.

THE training quarters were at Creil, about two hours out of Paris. Raymond Goutal did not round into shape as well as I had hoped. He did not put any enthusiasm into his exercises, and when on the road he sometimes stopped, shortwinded. In the ring he seemed to be thinking of other things.

The separation from his wife was bothering him more than usual, for the poor girl was steadily growing weaker. Twice a day a report reached him from the nurse, and when the news wasn't good, my man lost heart and became moody. I had to look after his mental needs more than his physical training.

"If you beat Nick;" I would tell him, "there will be a mattressful of bank notes for you, and you can spend it in taking Berthe into the Engadine for six months, where she will get her health back and from where even the dying return well and strong!"

That was not sufficient, however. I knew the little woman was so ill that I hadn't the courage to be more optimistic than was absolutely necessary.

Twice, I came across Raymond leaning over the big bridge, gazing contemplatively at the waters of the Seine—and he could not swim.

On the second occasion I spoke to him. "'What are you looking at? The fish?"

He answered in an accent of the Paris suburbs. "I am thinking of other Christmas Eves that I have spent with my wife. She loves Christmas, and we always enjoy that evening together. We go out somewhere; perhaps we listen to the old carols 'Minuit chretiens!' or 'Il est ne le divin enfant,' or 'Venez divin Messie.' Then we go home, eat a little supper prepared by her own dear hands. How happy we always are together! But I wonder how many more Christmas Eves I shall have with her."

Poor lad, I didn't dare to give him hope, or tell him that he must put such thoughts out of mind until the fight was over.

Besides, I felt certain he would send Morrison to get his cocktail at the bar of dreams. For Raymond was as clever as Nick in his way and could punch a great deal harder. He had already successfully dealt with "waltzers" of this type. He knew how to handle them. He would get close in and hammer away at his opponent's body with both fists. When his antagonist dropped his head forward, Raymond would smack an uppercut on the jaw. After that we would count up our share of the purse. Morrison could not avoid such gentle attentions for long, and then it would be "Good night, Morrison!"

Raymond's anxiety for Berthe must not prevent him from winning. He always had this worry, always. He was as used to it as he was to his old, worn sweater.

On Christmas Eve, the day of the fight, Raymond with his sparring partners, his seconds, and myself left Creil by motor, early in the afternoon. Before putting on the gloves, he wished to see Berthe.

She was not at all well—far from it. Even now I can see her lying in her bed, as white as the sheets. All that could be seen of her poor little face were two large dark eyes, wide and dilated, beneath her black hair.

When we arrived Berthe was cutting out from the morning papers paragraphs mentioning the fight. Rather, it was the nurse who was holding the scissors and guiding her hand, for she had not sufficient strength herself. On a small table were arranged bottles of medicine. This could scarcely create an altogether comforting impression on a boxer about to fight for a title.

I tried to cut short the interview. But Raymond remained there until the very last moment, until it was imperative for us to start.

Kneeling beside the bed, with Berthe's little wasted hand against his lips, he hid his tears. He pleaded not to go until he had heard the verdict of a well-known doctor, who was calling late that day.

Berthe spoke of nothing else but the fight, in a voice that could hardly be heard, but with a feverish rapidity. She frequently stopped to regain her breath. "Don't think of me, Raymond, mine!" she said. "Only think about keeping your left shoulder well up, as Mr. Choppie Chipperfield is always telling you. Don't rush in at the start! Let Morrison show himself; be careful when you break away in the clinches, for you know this is your weak point, and he will take advantage of it. Now you must be off, cheri, or else you will be

late for dinner and that will only trouble you in the ring.

"As soon as the fight is over, come back to me, for it is Christmas Eve and we will spend our usual happy evening together," she went on. "Even though I am ill we shall still have our little supper together. It will be ready near my bed. Oh, don't cry, dearest, only think of downing Morrison and of our happiness afterward! Think of that! You, cheri, a champion of Europe! Only win and I'll get better, I promise you. I know that I am surely going to get better."

He leaned over the little drawn face. After kissing him, her arms clung around his neck. She looked at him long, so very long.

"How you look at me!" he said. "Why do you stare at me like that?"

"Nothing. Good luck, dearest! Don't forget I look forward to spending this evening with the champion of Europe! And remember that I love you so much. No woman could love her husband more."

On the landing, the nurse whispered to us: "We shall hear presently what the great specialist has to say, but she is very low."

CHAPTER III.

BEFORE THE BIG BOUT.

AT nine o'clock, at the Cirque de Paris, Raymond had nearly finished changing in his dressing room. The program had already started. The house was packed from floor to roof. We could faintly hear the applause of the audience as a preliminary bout began.

Raymond's sparring partners, his seconds, and I were busy rubbing him down and bandaging his wrists. He sat there motionless in his dressing gown, head sunk on his chest. He made no reply to the jokes of his seconds, as they tried to distract his attention. He heard, but did not smile. He remained motionless in an armchair. Usually before a fight he couldn't keep still; he used to walk to and fro, chattering like a parrot.

Presently, I made a sign to the others, and they immediately expressed their intention to see the end of the fight which was then in progress.

After they had, gone, in order to take Raymond's mind off what was upsetting him, I went over the tactics he was to follow.

"When Morrison leads twice with his left, you must avoid the first and lightly break from the second," I said. "He will try to follow up with his left, and then you jump in with a left at his heart and with an uppercut with the right to his—"

"I don't care!" he broke in.

"What's that you say? You don't—"

"Choppie, what does it matter? The match, boxing, you, Choppie, and anything in the world! My little one is lost. I felt it when she wished me good luck. As for the rest—"

"You idiot," I cried, "don't you know that in cases of this sort the moment when the patient seems to be worse is just when he is about to take a turn for the better! Put Nick Morrison to sleep with a gentle cross to the jaw and then, with the money, you can give Berthe three months in the Engadine, and she will come back strong and bonny!"

Just as I was saying this, with as much conviction as I could, a hubbub arose in the hall. It was the interval before the big bout.

A few minutes later Raymond climbed into the ring.

CHAPTER IV.

THAT STABBING LEFT.

SELDOM have I seen a hall so packed with people as was the Cirque de Paris when we made our appearance. The police had to force a way for us; even the corridors were obstructed by smart women and men in evening dress who had paid fancy prices for their seats, but could not reach them.

At last, over their heads we could see the platform in the glare of the arc lamps, which, blurred in a fog of tobacco smoke, were suspended side by side to two motionless trapezes.

As soon as we caught the eye of the crowd, there was an outburst of cheers and shouts prompted by patriotic feeling and pride. It was seldom, at that time, that a Frenchman had a good chance of winning the championship of Europe, and in Paris enthusiasm is demonstrated, not by silence as in London, but by plenty of noise and

cheering.

Raymond didn't seem to hear the ovation, or to see anything. He climbed into the ring, sat down, and held out his hands for the gloves in a mechanical way, as if he were walking in his sleep. It was not his will which prompted him, but habit and instinct. I can see him now with his thick neck, his bulky shoulders, his hairy arms, his unconcerned look.

In the opposite corner, Nick was already seated. He was a lean red-headed Britisher with a face pointed like a weasel, very pale and tired looking. He was trained to perfection and ready to waltz far out of reach during the coming twenty rounds of the fight.

I was not worried—one punch from my man and it would be "A Waltz Dream" for Nick.

"Seconds out of the ring!"

The chairs were removed. The two men rose to their feet, each in his corner. A great silence fell; for a moment only the crackling of the arc lamps could be heard.

"Bong!" the gong sounded.

At once Nick was circling round Raymond with extraordinary quickness. His gloves feinted and flashed. A moment's pause and his left tapped my man above the right eyebrow. Raymond countered with his right, but missed.

Three times more the Englishman got home in the same way and in exactly the same spot, where now a bruise began to appear.

There was some laughter and cheers from the audience.

I hate that manner of fighting, having started boxing in the good old days of bare fists, in the days of John L. Sullivan and Peter Jackson. I like men who get to close. quarters and keep the fight going; but Nick's style was, of its kind, remarkable.

Raymond hardly seemed to worry over these little attacks, which he scarcely felt more than taps with a fan. Twice he tried unsuccessfully to close with his man, near the end of the round, which was won by Morrison on points.

During the rest, I spoke to Raymond. "Now you play your game. Put an end to these jabs; carry the fight to him. As soon as it becomes a real set-to, Morrison will drop peacefully to the floor."

He did not reply. Stretched out on his chair, passively submitting to the usual rubbing, his eyes staring above him, fixed on the hanging trapezes, he seemed miles away.

In the second round Morrison unceasingly planted his left in the same spot, above the right eyebrow, which began to swell. The jabs were like the tongue of a serpent, leaping in and out almost invisibly. The blows were of no great force, but continual drops of water will wear away granite.

In vain did the crowd shout "Go on, Goutal! Get him, Raymond!" My man would not take the fight seriously. He only started a few slow swings. Nick avoided these easily and continued his swift jabs.

I lost patience with Raymond. Between the rounds the remarks I made to him were far from polite.

"Choppie, I can't fight," he said, ignoring my words. "I am thinking of other things. It seems to me that there is another in the ring."

I have always had a pretty sharp tongue, but what reply could I make to this?

The gong sounded again.

Nick, on the advice of his manager, began to speed up. He no longer kept at a distance. He doubled and trebled his straight punches with the left. Raymond was bleeding from the nose and mouth. Twice he rushed Morrison, ferocious charges that ordinarily would have been irresistible, but which on this occasion had the sluggishness of a tamed elephant. He was welcomed, each time, by blows which made him stagger, and all the time that terrible left kept finding its mark above the right eye.

At the end of the round, Raymond had difficulty in finding his corner.

The public applauded Nick. Behind me I heard some one say that Raymond was a cheese champion.

In the next round Raymond was punished severely. Once he rushed in, and I had a gleam of hope. An uppercut brought him down for eight seconds, and the hope vanished. He regained his feet, but he remained dazed, his arms waving, scarcely knowing which way to turn to meet his opponent.

Nick had already drawn back his right for the final blow, when the gong sounded the end of the round.

I did my best to get my man into shape, but I

was sure, now, that he would not win. Instead of three-quarters of the purse we would only get one—which was annoying, when I had counted on the big end. Besides, I knew that Raymond could have won if he had only fought his best.

I got ready a towel to throw into the ring when the time was ripe. I was going to save my man from useless punishment.

Just then an attendant, who had succeeded in pushing his way through the crowd, reached our corner and held out a letter to Raymond.

Naturally, I was furious. But the attendant said that the messenger who had brought the letter had insisted that it should be delivered at once, even during the fight. I took the letter, and recognized Berthe's writing on the envelope.

I tore open the envelope and held the letter in front of Raymond, at the same time reading it over his shoulder. This is what it said, written in large, shaky, and sprawly characters.

> DEAREST: The specialist has just gone. He says that I am going to be much better, that my recent weakness was a favorable crisis, and if I go with you to the Engadine, I shall soon be quite well. He is letting me get up to-morrow. Come back soon. A little supper waits you. Beat Morrison and think of your BERTHE.

How could she, feeble as she was, have found enough strength to write all this? The devotion of a woman who loves is unconquerable; there is no greater force in the whole world!

I glanced at Raymond. He was a different man. On his battered face was an expression of happiness and determination which I shall never forget.

"Watch, Choppie, you are going to see things," he muttered as the gong sounded.

Poor lad, what could he do now? Battered with heavy blows, one eye closed and his wind almost gone! At best he could only last a little longer.

Already Nick was at him again, attacking furiously, throwing aside all thought of defense. Only the first two blows reached Raymond. At the third he stepped aside, sent in a straight punch to the heart with his right, which lifted the Englishman into the ropes. Unfortunately, Raymond hadn't enough strength left to follow it up, but the blow had been very hard and well placed, and a loud shout went up from the audience.

The Englishman landed a tap with his right, which only seemed further to arouse the Frenchman. A moment later Raymond almost brought off a terrific hook to the jaw. Unfortunately, it landed a little too high, just on the cheek. Two inches lower and it would have been a knock-out.

Morrison's seconds shouted out to him to be cautious. He took their advice, starting a series of rapid straight taps with the left, which now no longer found their mark. The bout still seemed lost, however. Why had not the letter arrived a little earlier? Morrison's cautiousness was the undoing of my man; there was not the least hope. Raymond could not hit this supple figure who danced about in front of him. He would be beaten by exhaustion.

Raymond landed two good stiff ones, but the blows merely made Nick still more careful. His defense was perfect.

Nick was depending almost exclusively upon his left; he stood with that shoulder well advanced. Suddenly, with a speed that no one would have thought him capable of, Raymond flashed beneath that extended arm and sent in a terrific swing to the right kidney. The sound of that terrible blow could be heard throughout the hall.

Crushed by the unexpected smash, Nick sagged. He clung to Raymond, leaning on him. The Frenchman brought up a right uppercut that straightened Nick out, lifted him from his feet, and dropped him flat on his back.

There Morrison remained, stretched out just as he had fallen, motionless, grotesque. An enormous roar came from the audience; they shouted, cheered, waved.

The referee counted the seconds. At "Ten!" Nick had not moved. It was thirty minutes afterward before he knew what had happened.

You can imagine the ovation which Raymond received. The whole hall howled with enthusiasm. I have never seen such frantic delirium. A Frenchman, for the first time in history, had become the champion of Europe!

They wanted to carry my man on their shoulders in triumph, but he pushed the people out of his way; He reached the dressing room,

muttering:

"Berthe—I won—Our supper—She is saved!" With the result that the reporters present wrote that Nick's blows had for the time being impaired his reason.

Raymond did not even want to have his face dressed, other than sponged. As our motor moved off an actress threw him a bunch of roses, but he looked neither at the flowers, nor at the dressed-up doll who threw them.

While we made our way to his home across Paris, he said: "Old Choppie, thank you. I gave you a lot of trouble. I was not much good at the beginning of the fight, but as soon as I heard what the specialist said, that my little one would be saved, well, you saw what happened. Nick's straight lefts were no use after that."

Arrived home, you should have seen the way he went up the five flights of stairs. No one would have believed that he had just finished a hard fight!

As soon as he opened the door, he shouted in his loud voice:

"It is I, Berthe! I beat him! I won! Here comes the champion of Europe!"

The bedroom door opened quickly, and he nurse appeared on the dark landing, finger to her lips.

"What's the matter?" cried Raymond. "If she's asleep you must wake her! There is reason enough!"

"No! Be quiet!" The nurse caught his arm, whispered to him for a long time. "Remember, she must not be wakened."

Raymond went into the bedroom, staggering a trifle. He took one of his wife's frail hands and pressed it to his lips.

I paused on the landing, wondering what the nurse had whispered to him. "The letter?" I asked softly. "She will get well?"

"A little after you two had gone, she felt worse," the nurse said. "Her breathing became more and more difficult. She insisted upon writing the letter, though I tried to persuade her to keep quiet. It was a terrible effort, but she managed to write those few lines. It was not until afterward that the specialist arrived."

"She wrote it before he came!" I exclaimed. "Why—in the letter she said that—"

"Yes; that was to inspire Raymond to win. Though she thought it was the end, she wrote that she was going to get well." The nurse smiled. "And she will get well, too! She dropped into a deep, peaceful sleep just before the doctor got here. He did not disturb her, but from what I told him he declared that he was sure that six months in the Engadine will make her practically all right."

I stumbled down the stairs, thinking of that brave little woman, gasping for breath, believing each second would be her last, writing to her husband to be sure and win. I admit that there were tears in my eyes. Nevertheless, I think that was the happiest holiday of my life.