

# The Might That Failed~



AFTER entering the sanctum of McGuire, the sporting editor of the *Morning Call*, Stanley Stanton paused expectantly. His chief, wading through some copy, looked up and nodded.

"That you, Stanton? Oh, yes!" McGuire turned to some notes beside him and reached for his cigarettes. "Did you ever happen to hear of 'Foxy' Finnegan?"

The youngest reporter on the sporting page smiled. There were few who were unfamiliar with Finnegan. The man was one of the cleverest managers who had ever taken an unknown boxer and made a champion of him. McGuire saw that the reporter had heard of the manager.

"Finnegan's in town again with a new white hope," said McGuire. "He's always worth a half column just on the strength of what he's done. You'd better take a look at the new world beater."

"What is he—a welter, sir?"

McGuire fingered a green eyeshade. "A light-heavy who answers to the name of 'Battling' Brannigan. Foxy's got him planted as a prelim in a Harlem sport club next week. Listen to everything he has to say, but take it with a grain of salt. By the way," McGuire considered the cub reporter's tall, sinewy figure thoughtfully, "didn't someone tell me that you box a bit yourself?"

"I did—a little," Stanton answered. "And I keep in condition."

"Then you ought to know the game pretty well. Let's see. It's after ten now. You're likely to find Foxy at Held's Gym from now until noon. You'd

better snap right up."

In the outer office, Stanley Stanton collected his headgear and sought the harried pavements of Park Row. The day was late March in a spring mood. He felt that he would have liked to walk all the way up to Christopher Square and the gymnasium, but recalled the need of haste and so took the Third Avenue elevated.

As he rode uptown, Stanton thought of the odd twist of fate that had placed him on the sporting sheet. When he had first come to the *Morning Call* from Minneapolis and the leading paper in that city, he had done some play and book reviewing—stodgy, uninteresting work for one who yearned for the excitement of the baseball stands, the smoky ringside, the football gridiron, the ice rink where hockey was king. Twice he had made efforts to be transferred, but both times had failed.

Then Quinn, the boxing expert, had jumped to another daily, there had been a shake-up all along the line and, as luck would have it, Stanton had been relieved of writing about highbrow literature and drama.

From the first his interest had been such that McGuire had nodded sagely at his copy and had made a mental note that Stanton gave promise of being as competent a man as Quinn. He gave the young man more important assignments—the basketball game between Brooklyn Tech and Baltimore Institute, sent him up to the Garden as assistant cover man for the six-day grind, jumped him to Lake Placid for the big midwinter carnival, and then had him review the ice-boat races on the

Shrewsbury.

Several times the sporting editor had considered raising Stanton's salary and would have had it not been for an unwritten law of the sporting sheet. This was that no cub reporter could benefit financially before he had won his spurs through his own efforts and in such a way that his paper was definitely benefited. Nevertheless, McGuire knew the young reporter was earning more than he actually received.

Stanton alighted at the proper station and headed west. Christopher Square was in an old section of the city where tenements and factories flourished like weeds in a neglected garden. Held's Gymnasium was at the extreme end of the square, housed in a shabby brick antiquity with unwashed windows, timeworn steps, and an unlatched front door.

In and out of this temple of slam, visitors came and left at will. There were no rules to observe, no doorbell to ring or custodian to question.

Stanton pushed the front door open and stuck his head in. Nobody was visible. He entered and caught the drone of voices coming from behind closed doors down a short corridor beyond. Near these doors a young man in a faded sweater lounged on a three-legged stool, reading a pink trade paper, and occasionally removing the cigarette that dangled from his lips.

"Is Mr. Finnegan around?" Stanton inquired.

The man looked up. "Yeah. Inside, bo."

The reporter tried the knob of the door, found it was unlocked, and stepped into the gymnasium. The first thing his gaze fell upon was the tall, bullet-headed figure of Battling Brannigan. Stanton seemed to know he was looking at Foxy Finnegan's white hope even before the other was pointed out by one of the loungers. The reporter stared with frank curiosity and narrowing eyes. The big boxer, he saw at once, was anything save prepossessing. Brannigan had a low, bulging brow, glittering eyes, a twisted nose, and a cauliflower ear. He was typical of the boxers pictured by cartoonists.

## II.

TURNING from Brannigan, who was skipping rope with the deft agility of a schoolgirl, Stanton recognized the rotund Finnegan, champing on a cigar and watching his protégé as a mother hen might a favorite chick. As the reporter went over,

Hurley, of the *News*, lifted a finger and introduced him.

"Glad to know you," the genial Foxy murmured, shaking Stanton's hand. "So Quinn's left the *Call*, eh? I hope McGuire gives me as good a break as when Quinn was down there. As I was telling the boys, I've got the future light-heavy champ of the world under contract. Yes, sir; Battling Brannigan is the biggest discovery I've ever made in all the years I've been digging 'em up!"

"There ought to be a story in where you discovered him," Stanton murmured.

Finnegan grinned. "There ought to, but there ain't. Brannigan came to me. He asked for a chance to show his stuff, and once I lamped it I threw a contract at him. I believe he hails from the sticks, but that don't cut any ice. This boy fights like a mad tiger, is as good with his left as his right, loves punishment, and has got a disposition as mean as a treed cat. What more can you ask?"

Hurley and several others laughed.

"Who's the victim next week, Foxy?" asked one of the listeners.

Finnegan puffed on his cigar. "A bim they call 'Lucky' Watson—one of the pushovers in Murray Bain's stable. He'll be lucky if he escapes with his life, believe me. I only framed the bout to show my friends what I've got. Brannigan will K.O. him in the first chapter. Wait and see if he don't."

Stanton hung around, watching, but said little. At length Brannigan, finished with the bag, put on the gloves with his sparring partner. Stanton waited until the exhibitions were concluded and went back to Park Row, where he found the sporting editor of the *Call* lunching at his desk.

"Well, what kind of a wiz has Foxy now?" McGuire asked. "Something marvelous, I suppose. Finnegan usually picks winners."

Stanton handed over his copy—what he had hammered out after mentally shaping it up on his way downtown. "Personally, sir," he began slowly, "this Battling Brannigan failed to impress me as being remarkable. He has a flashy style and a terrific wallop—when he gets it over. He's clumsy, however; he's no boxer, and I feel confident he can't take punishment. Hurley of the *News* and the others seemed quite enthusiastic. If you run my write-up there's apt to be some discussion. I wrote what I think, and the truth is seldom pleasant."

The sporting editor, running his eyes over the typewriting, chuckled. "Good stuff, Stanton!

Whenever it's possible to be unusual in the newspaper game—be unusual! If the other sheets all have a puff for Battling Brannigan, our knock will stand out twice as strong. A discussion creates interest, and I like your barbed-wire adjectives. It might be a good idea to get the dope on Lucky Watson. Ordinarily, a preliminary fight of this kind isn't worth a hoot. But inasmuch as Finnegan is concerned there'll be a lot of our readers anxious to learn what he's got. See Murray Bain and write an article."

"I'll interview him after lunch, sir."

McGuire pushed up his green eyeshade. "Look here, Stanton! You've got the makings of a first-class sport scribe, and I'd like to see you get ahead. Perhaps you're familiar with the rules here that a cub reporter has to turn in a scoop or give us a break on a feature before he receives a raise in salary. Just keep that in mind and don't overlook any side bets. Maybe you can dig something out of this scuffle that will give you your boost. Who knows?"

Stanton went up to the headquarters of Murray Bain that afternoon, but learned that Lucky Watson was laid up with a touch of grippe and that unless he made a rapid recovery, Bain intended to cancel the bout with Battling Brannigan.

### III.

THE following morning, when Stanley Stanton made his way across Christopher Square, he encountered Hurley in the act of leaving Held's Gym. The *News* representative, a man in the late forties, shook his head with genuine sorrow.

"My boy. I'm afraid you're due for not a little unpleasantness," said Hurley. "That stuff you wrote yesterday hasn't helped your popularity any with Finnegan and the bunch inside. In fact, I understand Brannigan is slightly red-headed because of it."

Stanton shrugged. "Everyone's entitled to his own opinion, isn't he?"

Hurley glanced at his watch. "Certainly. But why be so caustic in your comments? You could have panned Brannigan without getting in under his skin. If I didn't know that you had only met him yesterday, I'd be forced to think you had a grudge against him."

Once inside the gymnasium, Stanton noticed the hostile atmosphere. Several of the big light-heavyweight's handlers gave him baleful glances;

they whispered together at his entrance, and somebody laughed. The reporter crossed to the window where Foxy Finnegan, his round face ornamented with another cigar, stood staring out. The manager turned at his approach.

"Oh, so it's you?" Finnegan frowned. "Much obliged for those slams you put over yesterday. Er—if you'd assure me that McGuire was responsible for most of those dirty digs maybe I could cool Brannigan off. As it is, he's so sore that he says he's going to take you if he ever runs into you again. I told you he had a mean disposition. Now, if you will say that—"

"I can't," Stanton interrupted. "Mr. McGuire had nothing to do with what I wrote."

"Then," Finnegan snapped, "take a tip from me and blow before my boy shows up. Understand, I'm not ordering you out. I'm just suggesting it."

"Inasmuch as that's the case," the reporter remarked, "I'll stick."

Finnegan shrugged and turned away. Stanton realized the significance of what he had said when Battling Brannigan appeared a half-hour later. The light-heavyweight, flashily attired in a form-fitting suit of green serge, a chamois waistcoat, and a brown derby, hurried in, looked around, saw Stanton and, accompanied by a stir of interest, went directly over.

"What a swell nerve you've got!" the boxer snarled. "Not satisfied with writing all that guff yesterday, you've come back for more, have you? Put up your dukes and take it. I don't let no one write lies about me for anyone to print in any newspaper."

With his hands in his pockets, Stanton looked into the sneering face of the boxer. "I'm sorry I can't oblige you. I haven't any inclination to stage a battle with you—now. I'm here, representing the *Morning Call* and—"

"Yeah. And I know why! You're getting set to rip me up the back again and kill me off before I've even got a chance to show this town how I can strut my stuff. I wouldn't be surprised if Lucky Watson's crowd was paying you to dope this jazz. For the last time—put up your hands!"

"Easy, easy there!" the rotund Finnegan broke in. "You can't hit a defenseless man—"

"Who says I can't?" Brannigan bellowed. "I got witnesses who heard me warn him. I've told him to stand up to it, but he's lily-livered and yellow. So he gets cuffed, defenseless or not! Let this teach

him that he can't get away with more lies! How do you like this sort of—"

Brannigan uppercut with his right and crossed with his left. Stanton, hands still in his pockets, crumpled up as if he had been shot.

An hour or so later he presented himself at McGuire's desk and laid down his copy. The sporting editor considered him keenly.

"What's the trouble? You look rocky. And what's all this?" His gaze darted to the typewritten sheets before him. "'Battling Brannigan, Foxy Finnegan's New White Hope Beats Up *Call* Reporter Who Maintains Discovery a False Alarm!'" He read on in a silence broken only by chuckles. "Stanton, it looks as if we were building a mountain out of a molehill. So far, so good. This stuff is O.K., but we've got to look out for an anticlimax. What we need now is a punch, a finishing stroke, the O. Henry twist for a curtain."

The reporter smiled faintly. "I think I have that, sir. As you know, Lucky Watson is laid up with gripe, and Mr. Bain wants to cancel the bout with Brannigan. I'm going uptown directly to see if I can't make him change his mind and accept a substitute for the bout with Brannigan. I think I can."

The sporting editor looked up inquiringly. "Substitute? Have you got someone in mind to fight Foxy's find? If so, who is he?"

Stanton ran his fingers gingerly along the left side of his jaw. "Myself! Not only have I a score to even up, but I remember what you told me about not overlooking any side bets, sir!"

#### IV.

**F**INISHED with the rubbers in the basement dressing room of the Harlem A.C., Stanley Stanton threw a bathrobe over his ring togs as Murray Bain, tall, thin, and kindly eyed, stepped in from the corridor.

"Your bout, kid. Brannigan's just gone up. All right, boys," said the manager to the bucket brigade.

Two minutes later Stanton climbed through the ropes of the ring, his impression that of being on an island surrounded by a sea of shifting smoke through which the ghostlike faces of the audience glimmered. He went directly to his corner, accompanied by Bain and his seconds, rubbed his shoes in the resin box, submitted to an examination

of the bandages on his hands, and listened to the voices of the spectators that were like surf pounding on a rocky shore.

Then Murray Bain shoved a rubber tooth protector in his mouth and leaned over. "You're doing this, you seem to know what it's all about, and it's your fight. But one word of advice, Stanton. Don't carry the fight to Brannigan and don't mix it at close range so he can slug you. The way to beat him is to wear him down, box him!"

After a short time, the gong rang a number of times. The ring was cleared and an announcer addressed the crowd.

"In this corner, Battling Brannigan, the Man Killer of the Ozarks! In the other corner, 'Fighting' Stanton, the Pride of Park Row! Six rounds! Light heavyweights!"

Stanton saw that Brannigan intended to make short work of him. Battling rushed out of his corner, his crooked mouth twisted in a sneer, his arms swinging like flails. Stanton side-stepped, parried the attack, boxing lightly, and circled the other, jabbing at long range.

"Stand still, you cake-eater! Stand still, and let me lay you like a Persian rug! So you're the substitute who—"

Brannigan's sentence was clipped short by the glove that slid up to his mouth. Growling throatily he bored in, hooking and swinging in an endeavor to land a slumber punch. Stanton retreated in the face of the offensive, covering up, content to block until the first fury of the assault waned. Then he felt the ropes against his back and heard the roar of the crowd demanding a knock-out.

Stanton weathered the storm, the first violence of the onslaught fading. Brannigan slowed up. Stanton jabbed his way out from the ropes, stung his antagonist with a smart left to the jaw, and broke away from close confinement that meant toe-to-toe slugging. The sneer had left Brannigan's crooked mouth, and his lips were straight and grim. A baffled fury lighted his penetrating eyes, and Stanton fantastically remembered what he had written about him.

Could Brannigan take punishment? Could he stand up, every nerve strained to the breaking point, before terrific punching and still struggle on until raw courage and nothing else remained?

Stanton judged that possibly sixty seconds of the round were left. Brannigan missed a straight to the head, stumbled in closer, and hooked with his

left—a punch duet that left him wide for the counter. Stanton saw his opportunity and seized it quickly. Feinting with his left, he shot his right up and over to Brannigan's jaw—everything he had in it. Then, in the same dizzy instant, he drove his left to the solar plexus and stepped back.

With his arms dropping limply to his sides, Battling Brannigan swung around, toppled over, and buried his face in the canvas!

Ten or fifteen minutes later McGuire pushed a way into the dressing room and regarded his cub reporter with pursed lips. "I suppose," he began, "you're writing up this fight yourself."

"I'd like to, sir," Stanton answered.

The sporting editor inclined his head. "Sure; go to it! But just a suggestion. I've had this Brannigan

looked up, and I've found out that for the first time in his career Foxy Finnegan has had the wool neatly pulled over his eyes. You've fulfilled the unwritten law, and you'll get your raise all right, so make this assignment worthy of it. Play up the fact that Brannigan's no novice in the game, that he was in trouble with the boxing authorities in Minnesota, and at last had to leave there under another name because of crooked fighting. By the way—you might tell me where you learned to use your hands so scientifically!"

Stanley Stanton smiled. "Before I went in for reporting, sir," he explained, "I was the amateur welterweight champion of Minnesota. And—and I've got an awfully good memory for faces!"