

"IRISH CHAMPION"

by

ROBIN A. MOSHER

B. A., Washburn University, 1975

---

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1983

Approved by:

  
Major Professor

LD  
2668  
.R4  
1983  
M67  
C.2

A11202 244407

IRISH CHAMPION

Sweat soaked Charlie's faded work shirt and spotted his bib overalls. His back muscles ached and his wrists were scratched and rescratched from the wheat beards that worked their way into the cuffs of his gloves. Pausing, standing up straight to ease his back, he shook out his gloves and then untied the red bandanna that protected his neck, pushing up his worn straw hat to mop his brow. It was a hot day and hot work, fine hard work for a man. This was where a man ought to be, out in the clean air, under a sky the color of Sheila Monroe's eyes.

He retied the bandanna, breathing in the scent of fresh cut wheat with pleasure. Then he fell in behind the pushers again, the string of twelve horses that walked in a line behind the header, straining their heavy muscles to work the great blade forward through the expanse of green-gold wheat. The blade glittered long and sharp, slicing through row on row, wave on wave of the near-ripe wheat heads, its curve forcing the new cuttings onto the wooden table behind, which the twelve pushers shouldered. With the pleasurable ache of working the first day of harvest, Charlie moved rhythmically in the line of men. He bent his back over the header table, legs moving with the movement of the horses, scooping with his long arms because, unlike Cousin Jap and some of the others, he didn't like to use the wood-tined pitchforks. Then, long legs folded under him, he stacked the heads quickly, expertly on the ground, joining his bundle of green-gold with those of other men, all of them keeping the center of the stack tight and peaked in case it rained while the wheat was on the ground drying, sweating, ripening for the threshing machine.

As he straightened again, Charlie could see Rafferty, Cousin Jap's head man, a few yards ahead, looking shorter and stockier than usual because he walked behind the twelve great work horses, talking to them, cajoling them. Bony young Donovan, only seventeen, a year younger even than Charlie, flanked the lead horse, putting out a hand when there was need. It was hard to work twelve in one double harness. The third horse was balky, Charlie noticed, and the eighth kept nipping at his fellows, making them buck, so that Rafferty and Donovan cursed sometimes and had to stop the header and untwist the clumsy reins. Charlie watched the two hands carefully whenever he had a minute, knowing that he would take Donovan's place tomorrow and maybe Rafferty's by next week. Cousin Jap knew Charlie had a way with horses. But would he be able to handle twelve all in a line like that? Then he was busy again, stacking wheat heads beside Skelly and Scanlan. Charlie would miss them when it was time to go home, and he'd miss some others even more.

This place was a fine big farm, and as Charlie worked he thought of how it'd felt to live here all these weeks, to come this long way from home and get to know Cousin Jap and Cousin Annie. He smiled to himself, scooping up a new bundle, winking at Donovan, sidestepping away from the next hand in line. A ticklish bead of sweat bothered his temple and he tried to shake it off so that the men who stacked with him chuckled and called him "tall for a mutt dog." When was it that the proper Mrs. Quinlan had invited him, an overgrown eighteen year old, to call her Cousin Annie? It'd been a proud moment. Was it really just the day before yesterday? It already seemed so long ago. Bend, scoop, squat, stack. A different rhythm, a better one, than on last Saturday night. It was fine to work for such a one as Cousin Annie.

Yessir, he decided as he thought back on it, it really had been just two days ago! And here he was feeling so old, feeling like he'd been a man for

years and years. And just two days ago he'd been a boy, still just a green overtall boy with his head full of wild dreams. He'd changed in two days, changed more than he could quite take in. Here he was, sweating in this field and knowing it for what it was, good honest labor, fit for the best man alive. It felt good to sweat out here, right somehow, better than the sweat he'd been working up on Saturday nights. Not that it wouldn't be nice to get rich and own a big farm. But it seemed that was all Cousin Jap had. And Charlie wanted more.

He'd known it ever since he walked out of that lantern-lit barn on Saturday night to walk the eleven miles home. What he wanted was the feeling behind that look in Cousin Annie's eyes, that feeling that was serene and true even with all her troubles and grief. He wanted . . . well, he thought humorously as he stacked, wrists chafing at the sticky beards, he wanted a lot of different things now than he'd wanted two days ago, a lot of different things than he'd thought he wanted just four weeks ago when he came to Pratt and saw it for the first time. Yessir, he'd been a green boy then, green as May wheat.

A breeze flickered against his drenched shirt and cooled some of the fire of the Western Kansas sun. The rich smell of new harvested wheat filled him until he could hardly sort out the other scents--of working horses and working men and rich black earth. The sky was as blue as it must've been on the first morning of the world and the gold sun beat down from it. Gold and blue: the picture of Sheila Monroe returned. He hadn't even known Sheila before he came to Pratt, nor Cousin Jap and Cousin Annie, nor any of them. Yet now, he felt as if he'd known them as long as Ma and Pa and Fred back home. He'd done a lot of learning since he got on that train. It hadn't



been quite so hot that day four weeks ago, but it's been bright and sunny, the middle of May. And he'd felt fine.

When the conductor called out, "Next stop, Pratt," Charlie McGuire stood awkwardly in the aisle, clutching the carpet bag that contained both his extra work clothes and his Sunday suit in one hand, holding the back of a seat with the other. The car's ceiling was low so that he had to duck his head, but then he was used to ducking. It came with being tall.

As the wheels ground and squealed on the tracks, Charlie bent his knees for balance and clenched his calloused hand harder on the seat. He was here! Over two hundred miles from home, halfway across the state from Ozawkie, population forty-eight. Charlie McGuire, man of the world, world traveler, country boy turned railrider! The fancy so caught him up that without thinking he tried to straighten his shoulders but couldn't with the ceiling pressing down on his head. He smiled at himself, brought back to earth by sheer discomfort. Who was he trying to fox, anyway? Dreaming himself a man of the world, him, a boy who'd never been anywhere in his life. Only now he was somewhere. He was in Pratt.

He moved forward as soon as the train was full-stopped, fighting his impatience at the almighty slow pace of the passengers in front of him, keeping his eyes carefully away from the windows that lined the car. He didn't want even to glimpse Pratt until he was off the train, when he could savor every bit of the sight. Would it look just like Ma'd described? He wiped sweaty palms on the faded denim of his bib overalls, sighed as the matron before him stopped to wave out the door at someone, and then, after another long minute, plunged down the two steps and out into the open, moving forward a bit, out of the way, before he stopped to get an eyeful.

Pratt, Kansas. My, didn't it look fine! The station house was as big as Ma'd said. Charlie marveled at the sprawl of it, at the murmur of voices that was near as dense as before a Methodist rally back home, at the respectable looking piles of goods waiting to be loaded onto the train. Why, two or three wagon loads was the most Ozawkie ever put together!

There were more goods on the low station platform. And some distance away Charlie could see men in dusty workclothes and peculiar dark hats who called to one another in strange sounding English as they unloaded wagons laden with early produce. Charlie guessed they must be some of the Polish immigrants that had settled Pratt. Ma'd warned him about them and their foreign ways. She'd said he'd best to mind his p's and q's around their daughters. Quick to anger, she called them.

Opposite him, beyond the platform, two dozen saddle horses stood tied at long hitching posts before the station house. The only place he'd ever seen that many horses was at one of his own Pa's horse sales. Pratt must be fair-sized indeed to use up so much hitching room at the depot.

The sight of the horses filled him with nostalgia for home and he moved toward them, hardly realizing he did so, drawn by the snorts and champing that came to him through the other sounds. What were the folks back home doing right now? Probably out at the Thompsons', trying to help, to salvage whatever could be saved. Eyes dreamy, Charlie stubbed a booted toe against the platform steps, stopped, and found his attention diverted from the saddled beasts to the sound of clear male voices shouting, up on the platform itself, in an accent familiar to his ears. There, men were tossing parcels and bundles in a line toward an open boxcar, and they wore none of those peculiar soft hats the Poles did. Charlie climbed the three steps, carpet bag dangling from one hand, drawn to the cheerful, "Get your behind movin',

Colin!" and the equally cheerful retort, "I'll have me beer sooner if you move your own lazy arms, Stephen Baird!" Here were some of the Irish of Pratt, Ma's people!

He'd no doubt find Cousin Jap among these men. But his progress toward them was slow. He found himself hanging back shyly. And sometimes he had to stop and touch his straw hat, saying, "Beg pardon, sir," or "Beg pardon, ma'am." He noted that most of the folks, excepting the workmen both Irish and Pole, were dressed up as fine as Sunday for all it was a Monday afternoon. He'd have to write Fred about that! He also noted the pleasant mix of odors--warm horseflesh, spring growth, milling people, steam from the train. The combination of smells was different from home, from the aroma of fresh bread that flavored the snug farmhouse he shared with Ma and Pa and Fred, different from the warm breath of cows and horses in the barns, and from the rich, earthy scent of their acreage below the farmyard. Thinking of home stopped his shy progress toward the Irish workmen. What did he know of the world and its ways? What would he say to these men? He sought the flat, treeless horizon with his eyes, looking beyond Pratt where miles of young wheat seemed to stretch out forever, wheat he'd come west to harvest. It looked mighty green yet for cutting if anyone was to ask him. And it'd sure be different from the corn harvests back home.

The thought of corn smote him and he remembered guiltily that this trip was no boy's adventure. His mouth grimmed, remembering. They were counting on him, all of them. Pratt's harvest would have to save them because the corn was gone, wiped out. All those hours of work that him and Fred and Pa'd put in with the hired man, Raggedy Tom. All those days and nights of plowing in the new way the ag experts had recommended, deep plowing that turned over eight inches of soil behind steaming horses. And then planting for more

long weeks of bone-aching weariness. All for nothing. Charlie wiped his palms on his overalls again. Nineteen and eleven'd go down in history as the year of the big flood, the year the Delaware stripped the land of thousands of acres of crops and topsoil. He sidestepped out of the way of two Irishmen loading flats of wild berries and hoped he could make enough on this harvest. Him and Fred and Pa'd given their word to Raggedy Tom that he'd have work through corn harvest in October, and so they owed him a dollar a day, harvest or no. A man was only as good as his word.

"Charlie! Charlie McGuire!" The big voice that shook Charlie out of his thoughts was deep and a little hoarse sounding. "Speak up, boy, ain't that you?"

Charlie's eyes searched among the workmen for the speaker but it wasn't till he saw a husky, deep-chested man mounting the platform steps on the other end that he remembered Ma's description of her cousin, Jap Quinlan. "He always wears black," Ma'd said, stilling her usual quick movements and scrunching down her brows to help herself remember, "and he's big, though not tall like your Pa. You'll notice right off that he don't dress like most farmers, but then he married into a big farm, Jap did, and he likes to look fine."

Charlie noted with pride of kinship that every Irishman on the platform stopped his work to look at the man, all in black broadcloth like a preacher, with a black felt hat and hair graying below it at the temples, moved toward him. Cousin Jap had the same proud, shoulders-back walk as Ma.

"How'd you do?" the boy said, pulling at the brim of his worn straw politely, wondering shyly if there were other farmers in the depot crowd who looked so little like a farmer.

Cousin Jap peered up at him with a grin that folded his sun-dark skin into pleasant weathered lines beneath heavy brows. "My, my. My, oh my, oh my. Let me look at you, boy!" As if at a signal, the Irish workmen gathered round the blackclad man and the boy, staring in their turn, silent mouths grinning. Charlie felt peculiar as all those pairs of eyes traveled over him from the tips of his big, booted feet to the top of his old straw. Did every stranger get looked over so? Ma hadn't said that.

"Aren't you something now, boy?" Cousin Jap sighed at last. Charlie shifted his feet uncomfortably, clutching his carpet bag tighter.

"I'm overtall," he confessed haltingly, because the gathered men seemed to expect him to answer Cousin Jap, and Ma'd always said that his being so tall was really something.

The group of workmen chuckled delightedly, as if he'd said something clever. Some of them even moved up to slap him on the back. "Tall you are, boy," some of them agreed. "A fine lad," others echoed. And then they slapped Cousin Jap's back too. Charlie began to relax. These were mighty friendly folks. And they seemed to think the world of Cousin Jap.

When the men moved away, back to work, and Charlie followed Cousin Jap to the end of the platform, the older man put his hand on the boy's back and talked to him happily, immune to the frowning silence of the Polish workmen as they walked past the Poles' line of wagons. "Your Ma wrote you took after your Pa's side of the house," the man said with hearty satisfaction, nodding this way and that at the Poles. Not one of them nodded back nor, Charlie was sure, even so much as blinked. And the way they did stare at him, a stranger! Like he was the devil himself instead of just a farmhand come to work the harvest.

"And you do take after your Pa," his cousin went on, his big voice falling heavy on the silence. "Such a fine, big, strapping lad!"

"I'm big enough for a good day's work," Charlie said modestly, grateful when they stepped out from amidst those stiff-limbed Poles. "I'm six foot four in my stocking feet."

"Six foot four!" Cousin Jap echoed. "And strong too, by the look of you! Why you look a regular young horse, you do, boy--a little skinny maybe, but look at them arms on you! I never seen such a reach." The man's relish astonished the boy. Was Cousin Jap always so pleased when he got a new hand? Thoughtfully, Charlie shifted the weight of the carpet bag up under his arm.

"Tell me about your Pa," Cousin Jap demanded, leading Charlie past the station house and up a dusty path toward the town proper. "Is he brought down bad by the flood? Me and the Missus have been mighty worried about you folks."

Charlie, grateful for the sympathy, nodded. "Pa's some brought down," he said truthfully, "but he's been farming too many years to let a flood break him."

Cousin Jap nodded sadly. "That's right," he said, "that's right." They passed a tired looking row of houses that faced a whitewashed schoolhouse and went on, across a wide, dusty street, past a livery stable and a corral. From somewhere nearby, Charlie could hear the heavy clank, clank of a smithy.

"A fine man, your Pa," Cousin Jap said then. "Still trading horses, is he?"

"Yes sir," Charlie said. "He leaves as much of the farming as he can to Fred and me and trades for miles around." With interest he stared across the street at a barber shop, a large dry goods and a bankhouse built of red

brick. Pratt was quite some bigger than Ozawkie, all right. He and Cousin Jap stepped up onto a boardwalk, tipping their hats and standing aside as two young matrons and a line of very small children issued from the general store, their shoes thumping and clicking on the wood.

"I remember coming down Ozawkie way years ago," Cousin Jap reminisced, "for one of your Pa's horse sales. Must have been twelve years ago--you was a little cuss, anyhow."

"I'd have been six then," Charlie admitted, squinting in at the dark-seeming window of the wheel-wright's, boots thudding on the boardwalk, echoing the boots of a knot of men that walked a little ahead in those same peculiar hats Charlie'd seen at the depot.

"I'll never forget the entertainment over lunch," Cousin Jap went on. "No sir, I won't ever forget that. Boxin' you was, you and your brother."

"That'd be Fred and me."

"Fred, that's right," Cousin Jap nodded, "older'n you but built lower to the ground like the Quinlans." Charlie appreciated the memory of home. Ozawkie didn't seem so far away in the company of Cousin Jap.

"What are those men up there stopping for?" he asked uneasily, staring ahead as the knot of Poles stopped and leaned up against a storefront, beneath a hanging sign--"Borski's Inn." The Poles stared back at him in unfriendly silence.

"That saloon's their gatherin' place, that's all," Cousin Jap said, as if it was nothing. Indeed, he even nodded to the men before he left the boardwalk and led Charlie across the wide street. Fine gray dust rose in little puffs about their feet and then they were back on a walk again, opposite the silent, staring Poles. Charlie wondered uneasily what a gunsmith's was doing right next door to a saloon.

"Ah, here we are," Cousin Jap said cheerfully, taking Charlie's elbow just after they'd passed an imposing looking hotel. Charlie glimpsed the sign overhead with its overfull mug of foam, and then ducked through a low doorway, pulling off his hat as he went inside.

It was hard to see after the bright May sun for the saloon was dimly lit and smoke hung in the air below the low-beamed ceiling, dark with years of smoke. Charlie's nostrils itched at the heavy scent and he looked back into the long, narrow room with interest. Then, abruptly, he realized he was gaping like a green boy and that men were staring at him. He felt a flush begin at his neck and spread upward. The men, most of them in workclothes, sat at small tables or leaned against a long wooden bar.

In the quiet of the dingy room, Cousin Jap's deep hoarse voice seemed unnecessarily loud beside him. "Yessir, boy, I respect your Pa. Took his boys in hand when they was young'uns and taught them to spar like gentlemen. You and Fred still spar much, do you?"

Charlie moved forward under the pressure of his cousin's big hand, boots sliding a little on the sawdust covered floor, reaching the bar and feeling uncomfortable so that he fumbled with his hat. "A little," he admitted in a low voice, wishing Cousin Jap'd keep his voice down.

"A little," Cousin Jap repeated loudly, looking around the room expansively. "That's right, that's right." Charlie looked at him suspiciously because somehow, Cousin Jap's voice had taken on that tone Pa's voice got when he was ready to swap for a real fine horse.

"Give him a drink, Bill," his cousin told the barkeep. Bill looked Charlie over out of deepset eyes, set in a head that seemed caught between squared, narrow shoulders. "This's Cousin Emma's boy. You remember Emma, I guess."



The barkeep nodded once, moving his chin even lower into his chest. "A fine woman, your Ma," he said without changing his watchful expression. "What'll you have?"

Charlie's eyes played over the mirrored rows of bottles behind Bill in a kind of slow wonder. What would they taste like, these spirits that Pa and Ma so abhorred, that Reverend Duncan held forth against as devil's brew? And then he noticed all the eyes reflected in the mirror. Quickly he turned back to the barkeep. "Lemonade'd be fine for a hot day," he said softly.

"Lemonade!" Cousin Jap objected, his big voice again breaking the hush that held the room. "Better get him a beer, Bill."

Bill ignored the man, passing Charlie the lemonade. "You want whiskey?" he inquired, seemingly of the air. Cousin Jap looked quizzical for a moment. Then he grinned, that friendly grin that had so warmed Charlie at the station.

"You'll do, boy," he said. Then he turned on the barkeep. "You ever seen me drink anything but whiskey, Bill Sheridan?" The barkeep snorted and passed the man both glass and bottle. Charlie followed Cousin Jap to a table, looking at the bottle with fascination. The whiskey was the warm, red-brown color of a Hereford cow--not at all what he'd imagined from Reverend Duncan's description. Then he forgot the whiskey in facing the three men that shared the table Cousin Jap led him to. Why were they looking at him so? Did they all know Ma and guess what she'd say if she knew he was in a saloon? The thought made the hair on the back of his neck prickle. She'd be fit to stew.

"This's Charlie McGuire," Cousin Jap said heartily, his voice as deep and hoarse as ever. He, at any rate, was not bothered by the stillness of the place. "Good sized, ain't he? And these are some of my friends--here's

Mal Keegan," he nodded toward a red haired, round-faced man. "That skinny fella's Shade Michaels," he nodded to a sad-eyed man with a deeply lined face, "and that short one's Gust Katsbulas--Gust's a Greek, but we claim him for all that, don't we Gust?" Cousin Jap slapped the dark little man on the back. The Greek's dark eyes stared into Charlie's; they seemed almost liquid and they were distinctly foreign for all their cheerful friendliness.

"How'd you do?" Charlie said politely, sitting down and putting his hat and his glass on the table. He was thirsty but too ill at ease to know how to get his lemonade up to his mouth. He felt too warm all over. The three beers that sat before his new companions seemed to mock his plain lemonade.

"Nice to know you," Mal Keegan murmured, quickly shifting his nervous eyes away from Charlie, as if to watch the shot of whiskey disappear down Cousin Jap's throat.

"Hear you're gonna work the harvest," Shade Michaels said slowly, his teeth showing against his sunken cheeks as he spoke.

"Yes sir. And I was wondering," Charlie began hesitantly, "about why the wheat's still so gr-"

"An ath-a-lete born!" Gust Katsbulas cut him off, his accent rich and strangely musical. Charlie blinked in surprise. "Even in a saloon, he avoids the temptation of common man." At that the Greek's liquid eyes slid sideways to Cousin Jap who was emptying his second shot glass, and Mal giggled so that his whole body shook. Even Shade Michaels pulled a sad smile. The little Greek leaned across the table, face split by a grin of fine whiteness. He clasped Charlie's hand.

The boy sat up straighter. For some reason this small foreigner approved his lemonade, and Mal and Shade seemed to approve too. Suddenly he felt more comfortable in this strange place. He was able to lift his glass and drink.

The tartness of the taste cut through the smoke and the eyes that had seemed to stare before, looked friendlier.

Cousin Jap poured a third shot of whiskey and seemed almost to throw it back into his throat. "A born athlete! Yes, you said it, Gust, you got eyes. I seen this boy box once, just a little sparrin' with his brother. But he was good and he was trained young!"

Charlie eyed Cousin Jap, waiting, sipping at his lemonade. What was the man up to?

"He was born for it, born for it," Cousin Jap insisted.

Across from Charlie, Gust rolled his liquid eyes heavenward, dreamy, as if he could see beyond the beamed ceiling. "Ah, if only I could see such as that. There's nothing to make a poor Greek, far from his home, feel better than watching an ath-a-lete in the ring." He looked hopefully at Charlie. "Perhaps one day . . . "

Charlie frowned at his lemonade, listening to the clink of the whiskey bottle against Cousin Jap's glass--his fourth drink. "I'm here to work, you know. The harvest."

"Ah, the harvest!" Gust nodded quickly, enthusiastically. "But perhaps your cousin would give you some time? . . . "

Cousin Jap smiled expansively, leaning back in his chair and glancing around the table. "Well . . . ," he seemed to consider. Charlie, suspicious and more than a little curious, noticed that even the dour Shade Michaels seemed to wait for the man's decision, seemed to lean forward a little in his chair. And why not? In spite of himself, the boy felt his own heart begin to beat a little faster. Maybe there would be time. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to have a little fun of a Saturday evenin', Gust," his cousin said at last.

Gust, Mal, and Shade all nodded as if in answer and then Charlie nodded too because it seemed the thing to do. Everyone at the table looked at one another in a comradely way.

"We'll drink to it then," Cousin Jap said, lifting his shot glass. Gust, Mal, and Shade lifted their beer mugs and Charlie, in the excitement of the moment, lifted his lemonade glass. "We'll have a match, that's what we'll do," Cousin Jap said exuberantly so that his deep voice vibrated through the room above the clink of the glasses, "and we'll see what Charlie's good for!"

Charlie swallowed hard even before he tasted the lemonade. A match? "Maybe just a little sparring," he began. Then his doubts were drowned out because suddenly the whole room erupted in cheers, led by Gust Katsboulas who stood on his chair and waved his short arms toward the ceiling.

"A match!" the little Greek was crying. "A match on Saturday night!"

Charlie's eyes swept the bar in consternation. Why were they all so excited about a little sparring? What had he got himself into? Surely these men knew Cousin Jap was drunk.

"Come on, boy," Cousin Jap's deep voice interrupted his thoughts. "Mrs. Quinlan'll be getting anxious. And Sheila Monroe's been askin' after you these two days. She helps the Missus out, Sheila does."

"Ah, she's a pretty one," Gust winked from atop his chair, grinning widely as he climbed down.

"And sure to smack anyone that gets fresh," Shade Michaels put in dryly, his long face sad again after the brief excitement. Cousin Jap tossed down one last whiskey before he scraped his chair back from the table.

Charlie grinned at the men in spite of his unease about the boxing, knowing when he was being teased. Folks always liked to tease a young fellow about girls. Then he stood up, and grabbed his hat from the table and his

bag from the sawdusted floor. He ducked through the door after Cousin Jap, glad to be out of the dim place with its smoky air that made him feel almost bewildered. Gratefully he filled his lungs with the clear Kansas air. And on the way to the train depot where the buggy was hitched he marvelled that Cousin Jap was so steady on his feet, almost like he was sober.

All the way to Cousin Jap's farm, the older man talked, an endless stream of talk that wouldn't be interrupted, a stream of past and of present that rolled out on the deep voice in a slow rhythm that kept time with the walking pace of the matched bays pulling the buggy. At first, Charlie was impatient with the talk. He tried to interrupt, to ask Cousin Jap why he sent for him so soon when the wheat that stretched out on either side of the buggy road was too green to harvest. But the older man wouldn't be interrupted. And soon, Charlie found himself interested so that he forgot the wheat and the harvest and even the boxing.

"There wasn't nothing here but blowin' grass and willow trees that grew up along the creeks," Cousin Jap said. "And then some folks' moving west stopped here, first a few English and Germans and Swedes, then some Irish and Poles. People was content and lived like neighbors, they say, and then twenty, maybe thirty years ago, troubles started back in Europe . . . "

Charlie listened with polite interest as Cousin Jap recounted the history and then with quickening interest when the man mentioned the Irish and the Poles.

"The Irish here in Pratt began takin' in their kin, of course, that came over from the old country, and the Poles did the same, for they're as fond of their kin as any--maybe more clannish than some. There was a few Greeks too, like the Katsbulases who come no more'n twenty years ago, and even a few

I-talian. But most all the immigrants that've come since I was born've been Irish or Pole. Yessir, Irish or Pole."

Charlie nodded, thinking of all the workmen he'd seen today.

Then Cousin Jap went on. "The Irish took up land South and East of town, the Poles North and West and they was two different kinds of folks. Did things different. That's why the trouble started. At school the Pole kids couldn't understand the teacher and the Irish young'uns laughed and teased as young'uns will. And then there was trouble on Saturday nights. They used to have barn dances for the whole town, but some didn't want their girls dancin' with foreigners so there was hard words and then hard blows." Cousin Jap shook his head grimly at the memory, rubbing at his chin. "Now there ain't hardly no friendship a'tall between Pole and Irish, won't even speak, most of them. O' course me and your Ma's folks was here a time before the others come, come during the War Between the States, our people did. And so did Mrs. Quinlan's people; they was Swedes on her Pa's side . . . "

Charlie frowned, wishing Cousin Jap'd go on more about the Poles and the Irish. But drink seemed to make him ramble some.

"She had a fine dowry, Mrs. Quinlan did. I never expected more. And then her only brother was throwed from a horse and him not married yet. That's how the biggest part of the farm come to us. It made me a rich man and me without no young'uns of my own to pass it to." Cousin Jap paused again and then seemed to recall himself. "Of course Mrs. Quinlan and me get by with talking to the old Pole families, the ones that got here early like our people did and helped build up Pratt. But most folks'd cross the street before they'd come near a Pole--if they was Irish, that is."

"Ma told me there was trouble here between Irish and Poles," Charlie murmured, finally daring to put in a word. "But it don't seem right somehow, having the town divided. It ain't like Ozawkie."

"No, it ain't right! And we're uneasy a lot of the time, waitin' for trouble. That's why we're so glad to have you, boy." At that, Cousin Jap became hearty again, slapping Charlie on the back with a loud "thwack" that made the two horses prick up their ears.

"Me?" Charlie gasped, his wind knocked out.

"Yessir. You got it in you to avert a lot of trouble. Why, when you get in that boxin' ring Saturday night, there'll be a lot of men watching and cheering you on. They'll be feelin' like they're right in that ring with you and every time you hit that Pole, they'll be hittin' a Pole too. And every time that Pole hits you--if he hits you with a reach like you got--the Poles awatchin' will be hitting an Irish. There's nothing like a good boxing match to settle tempers!"

"Pole?" Charlie blinked in amazement. "Pole?" He frowned, trying to take in what Cousin Jap was saying. "You mean to say you're gonna match me up against a Pole?"

Cousin Jap nodded happily, holding the reins in one hand so he could clasp Charlie's arm. "That's right, boy; you're the new Irish Champion of Pratt, Kansas. And you'll be a friend to the Sheriff. He's a Swede and one who knows boxing'll keep down trouble."

Charlie's stomach sank so that even the jouncing of the buggy wheels on the hard-packed road couldn't raise it. Irish Champion! What would Ma say? Helplessly he looked out across the endless wheatfield, wondering if it was Christian to fight like what Cousin Jap was saying. A little fun with Fred was one thing. But this sounded more like fighting, more like punching and hurting and maybe even anger. "Pa says temper's got no place in a sparring match," he said hesitantly. "He says it's a gentleman's sport, not a fight."

"A fine man, your Pa," Cousin Jap said easily. "And he's right, you know. You and the Pole Champion won't get mad."

"Pole Champion?" Charlie echoed weakly. He thought back to the saloon and his own lifted glass, clinking with the others in the toast, giving his word. Lord, Lord, what had he got himself into?

"You'll have the time of your life," Cousin Jap promised, turning into a narrow lane that split an alfalfa field in two. Ahead, beyond the rich green, Charlie could see a whitewashed board fence, a large farmyard with numerous whitewashed buildings, and three big red barns. Swallowing hard, straightening his shoulders, he tried to compose himself. He was about to meet womenfolks!

Away from the barnyard, he could see the house, a neat two-storey square with green shutters and window boxes planted to flowers. Ma'd like window boxes like that. He'd have a look at them and see how they were built so he could make her some when he got home. What in heaven would Ma say to him if she knew he was going to fight some champion in the boxing ring? What would Pa say?

"There's Mrs. Quinlan," Cousin Jap said, driving in at the white gate and trotting the pair of horses up the lane to the house. "She can't wait to see you. It's a shame that woman never had no young'uns of her own. She'd have been a fine mother, a fine mother."

Charlie nodded, removing his hat even before the buggy stopped. Mrs. Quinlan was an angular, narrow-faced woman whose faded brown hair was pulled back tight in a bun. A mighty plain woman. Ma'd spoken well of her, her girlhood friend Annie, but she sure did look older than Ma!

Stepping down from the buggy beside Cousin Jap, he stood before the woman, feeling awkward in his patched overalls before her immaculate brown



skirt and her white ruffled shirtwaist. "Here's the boy, Annie." Cousin Jap's deep voice was very soft and the hoarseness was hardly evident as he spoke to his wife.

Mrs. Quinlan turned her eyes up to Charlie. He would never forget that moment in all his days. Such eyes as Annie Quinlan had, hazel eyes deep as two springs of moss-covered water, eyes that saw deeper than most folks, that searched him to his bare soul and yet did it so gentle, so kind, that it seemed more like she was blessing him than baring him. Where had she learned such serenity? Charlie stood still, feeling her quiet soak into his spirit. To think that Cousin Jap'd kept a woman like this waiting while he went to a saloon!

It was probably only a few moments that she looked at Charlie, that her deep water eyes filled him, before she smiled and broke the spell. The smile softened and blurred the angles of her face, rounding her cheeks. Then she looked closer to Ma's age. Charlie smiled back, smitten with Annie Quinlan, feeling foolish because for one moment he'd thought her plain.

"It's fine to see you son," she said softly, holding out her small hand and then standing there, holding on to his. "There's a mighty lot of you but you put me in mind of Emma for all that. You hold yourself that same proud way she has."

"Thank you, Ma'am," he said, feeling clumsy and shy.

Then she unclasped his hand and turned to Cousin Jap. Her smile disappeared and with it all of the softness. "You look flushed, Mr. Quinlan," she said, deep knowing eyes troubled.

"A warm day, my dear, a warm day," Cousin Jap replied, smiling broadly. As if to prove it, he removed a white handkerchief from his pocket with a flourish and patted at the shine of sweat on his face.

Mrs. Quinlan said nothing. She looked at him intently, her face sad and still. Cousin Jap looked back. Charlie turned away, disturbed somehow by the silent exchange between the two, feeling more an eavesdropper than if they'd actually spoken. He got his carpetbag from the buggy slowly and when he turned back around, Cousin Jap was staring off at the wheat, hands on his black vest, and Mrs. Quinlan's expression was pleasant. Charlie relaxed.

"I'd better get that inside and get your clothes shook out," the woman told him, reaching for the carpet bag in a motherly way. "They'll be too wrinkled to wear if I don't. And then what would your Ma say?"

Charlie handed her the bag cheerfully. "Yes'm," he said at once, hoping for another glimpse of those serene, green-brown eyes. Instead Mrs. Quinlan looked at the bag and silently, quickly brushed the sawdust from its bottom. Charlie flushed.

"Supper'll be ready soon," she said, turning toward the house, voice as soft for him as ever.

"Yes'm," he said miserably, and she glanced back at him, eyes gentle, as if she knew about the lemonade, as if she knew his good intentions. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," Reverend Duncan's voice reverberated in his head.

"You'd both best wash up," Mrs. Quinlan said. Then she sped up the flagged path with Charlie and Cousin Jap following more slowly. The boy watched her brown skirt billow out behind in the soft breeze of her movement, brushing the leaves of green, growing things that lined the path, changing from dark to light to dark again as she moved in and out of the shade of trees. She almost seemed to glide on the path, despite the carpet bag, while he felt heavy and clumsy. Perhaps it was her quiet spirit that made

her gliding and graceful. He didn't know. He only knew he was tired from the long day and Cousin Jap was panting heavily beside him.

Charlie's pleasure in the May dawn that colored the sky beyond clean starched curtains was dimmed a little by a nagging unease as he splashed his hands and face at the washstand and then pulled on his overalls. Just one day in Pratt and already he was roped into the middle of an old feud that was nothing to him. He was going to fight some Champion--fight, not just spar like he'd done with Fred. And he'd got his own self into it. Ma wouldn't like it, nor Pa either. Nor Mrs. Quinlan he'd be bound. And what would that pretty Sheila Monroe who he'd just met last night say when she heard tell of it? She'd laugh, like as not, and know him for the fool he was. Maybe he just didn't belong in such a big place as this, so different from what he was used to. Why, he'd never even seen a farm before that was big enough to hire on a girl and four permanent hands besides.

He was starting off all wrong here. He knew it when he got up, he knew it when he sat down to breakfast, and then it got worse. He was eating his flapjacks and sausage, enjoying them, trying to put his discontent aside, when Cousin Jap made a casual remark that started up the nag again and then some. He told his men, mostly his head man, Rafferty, that Charlie'd earn his keep by taking over the care of the horses.

"He'll see to them and look to their harness," Cousin Jap nodded to Charlie above the linen napkin he'd tucked into his collar over his fine white shirtfront. Then he put a forkful of fried potatoes in his mouth, chewed, swallowed, and went on, "The boy comes from stock that knows horses."

When Cousin Jap said that, Charlie looked toward the hired men uneasily. They wouldn't like him getting such an easy job. But they didn't seem a bit

put out. In fact, they grinned as if it was a joke and slapped the youngest one, Donovan, on the back.

"What about the harvest?" He couldn't help but ask it. He'd tried, after all, to ask it yesterday. Sheila Monroe, at his left elbow, hid a faint smile behind her lifted napkin at the question, and he flushed just like he had in the saloon the day before. But he wouldn't let her think he was dumb. "That wheat I saw yesterday didn't look like it'd be ripe enough to cut for three, maybe four weeks yet."

Cousin Jap chewed his sausage slowly. "Fine sausage, this is, Mrs. Quinlan." The woman, who sat at the other end of the table, nodded her thanks. Then Cousin Jap turned to Charlie. "You got a good eye, boy. Three, maybe four weeks is just what I'd say, barring rain of course." The hired men grinned wider than ever.

Charlie's eyes narrowed. "If the harvest's so far off, why'd you send for me so soon? You told Pa to put me on the next train."

Young Donovan's shoulders shook and Rafferty, dark and stocky, actually winked. Charlie saw Mrs. Quinlan press her lips together with quiet disapproval and stare down the table at Cousin Jap with her green-brown eyes. But Cousin Jap didn't seem to notice. He just smiled at Charlie. "Why because I need your help, boy," he said, deep voice reassuring. "I need the kind of care of my horses that your Pa trained you for, what with harvest coming on. And I pay better'n your Pa, so you might as well work for me as stay back and mend floodbroke fences."

Charlie swallowed a chunk of flapjack and his throat was dry enough that he had to wash it down with milk. It wasn't right, leaving Pa and Fred with all that work while he came to Pratt to tend horses. It wasn't right at all. Besides, he knew Cousin Jap hadn't answered his question, only he didn't dare

question him deeper, not with Mrs. Quinlan sitting there so straight and still.

"You'll make top wages, of course," Cousin Jap went on, pulling the napkin out from his collar carefully and wadding it beside his plate, "top harvest wages. That'll help your folks more'n anything." Charlie heard an intake of breath from Skelly, one of the hired men, but when he looked at him, the man didn't seem a bit sour. In fact, he smiled as big as Rafferty and nodded so knowingly that Charlie almost squirmed on the hard bench he shared with Sheila. Mrs. Quinlan looked at Cousin Jap steadily, silently. "Three dollars a day plus room and board," Cousin Jap finished.

"Three dollars a day!" Charlie exclaimed, eyes rounding, glad there was no food in his throat to choke him. "But I can't earn three dollars a day tendin' horses and mendin' harness. That's boy's work, work to do of an evening when your back's too broke to do anything else."

"See what a real worker says," Cousin Jap frowned on his four hired hands. "He don't whine about me having too many horses to keep up with. He says working with horses ain't no trouble."

Charlie gulped, sure he'd said the wrong thing. But Rafferty only shrugged. "He's green yet, Boss. He'll slack up when me and the boys teach him a thing or two."

Cousin Jap chuckled, but Mrs. Quinlan raised her brows. "You and the boys leave him be, Jack Rafferty." Then she turned her eyes on Charlie. "You take the three dollars a day, Charlie McGuire, because Jap Quinlan always gets his money's worth. I've an idea you'll earn your keep."

Charlie looked down at his plate, silenced by it all. Beside him, Sheila likewise looked down. What was she thinking? Her with hair the color of ripe wheat and eyes like a summer sky. What if he was to buy her

something with some of that money? Would she even have a present from him? Three dollars a day! Fred'd never believe it, nor would Pa and Ma for all they'd be pleased to have it. They'd be able to pay Raggedy Tom and then some. It was hard to take in. Why, in a month he'd be rich as a banker!

Hands stuffed in his overall pockets, walking in the cool of the morning toward the three big barns where the horses were stalled, he thought it all over. Here was Cousin Jap, his own Ma's kin, a grown man who seemingly knew right from wrong, paying him all that money before harvest even started. He ought to feel fine. After all, if Cousin Jap wanted to give him three dollars a day to tend horses, why should he mind? It wasn't like it was charity; he'd do the work. Charlie stopped on the path, frowning ahead at the corral. Because it just wasn't so, that's why. Cousin Jap wasn't paying him just to tend horses. He was paying him to box. That's what made Rafferty wink like he had, and Donovan shake with laughter.

Uncomfortably Charlie chewed on his lip, staring back down at the ground, walking on. He was getting paid to be Irish Champion, just like some old-time gunslinger come to town to cut folks down to size. Fighting and getting paid for it. He hated to think it. It seemed like a shameful thing, even if Cousin Jap didn't think so. But he'd given his word. He'd have to do it at least this once. Uneasily he thought of how it'd be to fight once and then say "no more" to Cousin Jap and his friends. It wouldn't be easy.

But Mrs. Quinlan'd said to take the money, hadn't she? He pushed back the first heavy barn door, grunting with the effort. He needed to keep busy, needed to keep his mind off it. He wasn't used to all this time for thinking.

At least it was good to find out that not all the hired men's grins had been over the boxing. Part of those grins had been over the horses. When

he got inside the barns and started counting, he found that Cousin Jap's farm was even bigger than he'd imagined. He'd be able to keep busy a good while on forty head or more of work horses and another half dozen for saddle and buggy. Near fifty horses! An unaccountable number back where he came from. Why, around Ozawkie a farm that could work a dozen horses was really something.

Still, even as he fed so many, even thinking of how it'd help the folks, the money nagged at him. And it kept on nagging as he curried the horses and brushed them and trimmed their hooves. He couldn't help but wonder if Cousin Jap'd really thought it all out. But he wasn't getting paid to think, that was sure. He was getting paid to box, and to comb tangled manes and tails, to mend harness, and clean the three barns. And after a while, working with the horses, feeling them under his hands, he felt some better. It was almost like being home again; him and horses had always taken to each other. But after he exercised them, rubbed them down, and did all he could find to do, it was still only three in the afternoon. It wasn't right being done so early, not when he was used to field work from dawn to dusk, not if he was really going to earn those three dollars.

Brooding, determined to shake himself out of his mood, Charlie tried to follow the hired men--Rafferty, Donovan, Skelly, and Scanlan--and do some of their work when he got done with his. They did the milking, the straining, the building, the mending, the tending to hogs and chickens and cattle. But after an hour of it, he realized that friendly as they treated him they were having trouble of their own just making work enough for four since he'd taken the horses from Donovan. So, on Wednesday, when he'd done all his work and even raked the stones out of the corral, he went up to the house and tried to help Sheila and Mrs. Quinlan some, toting trunks and boxes up and down



the stairs because Mrs. Quinlan said as long as she had the help, she'd get some furnishings moved.

But even with the extra jobs he had too much time to think. That was why he took up daydreaming instead. The dreams were a lot more comfortable than worrying over getting paid to be Irish Champion. When his work was done and the sun was still high, he lay on his back in the alfalfa field, invisible to the world, savoring the rich green scent. No place finer for dreaming than an alfalfa field. And three dollars a day was fine to dream about. On Thursday afternoon, he lay there and dreamed how with all his money, he could run off to California and start a new life. He'd get a job on a ranch and break wild mustangs and maybe join a rodeo when things got slack. Then it came to him another way--just one week at three dollars a day and he'd be able to send home eighteen dollars. That'd give the folks something to brag on him about.

The daydreams lulled him, soothed his conscience, so that by Friday he was thinking he could live with making banker's wage. He'd almost forgotten Tuesday morning's unease. After all, it wasn't like he was Wyatt Earp, a man with a big name that folks sought out to settle feuds. He just happened to be kin to a man who needed harvest hands, just happened to be oversized and trained at sparring. It was all a coincidence, that's what it was. Cousin Jap hadn't sought him out. It was the flood that'd made Pa think of sending him to Pratt. And if Cousin Jap wanted him early . . .

On Friday afternoon, with his chores done and the horses already looking sleeker and acting friendlier under his care, he went down to the creek with Cousin Jap to fish for flatheads in cool, green-brown water. And after a couple of hours of quiet talk and of pulling in medium-sized fish, Charlie pulled off his clothes and swung into the water from the willow trees that



drooped over the creek, dropping in with mighty splashes. Cousin Jap laughed from the bank where he sat, white sleeves rolled up, black jacket hanging from a willow branch. After a while, Rafferty, Donovan, Skelly, and Scanlan joined him in the creek, and Cousin Jap laughed at them all from the bank, comfortable with his fine catch and his pewter flask of whiskey, a flask that Charlie was already used to, that seemed almost a part of his burly, hearty cousin.

Saturday, after the horses were tended, Charlie made his way slowly toward the house. For the first time in days, Tuesday morning's unease was back, was a lump in his throat that wouldn't be swallowed. Even if Cousin Jap did think Charlie was foolish to worry about a little boxing match, the boy couldn't feel altogether right. He looked up toward the sun, squinting. Cousin Jap'd said to be ready by five o'clock. It was four now. He'd ought to get cleaned up and get a bite to eat from Sheila. Mrs. Quinlan was gone off to Pratt for market day but Sheila'd stayed behind to show Charlie how they all fended for themselves on Saturday evening.

That was nice of Sheila. But then she was a nice girl, mighty nice. Every evening after supper, when everyone sat on the porch for a time, Cousin Jap smoking, Mrs. Quinlan mending, the hands swapping jokes or singing or dozing against the rail, Sheila'd sit and listen to him talk of home. Or she'd tell of her home and all her five sisters. It was fine to talk with Sheila. He never felt uncomfortable with her as he did with some of the other folks here. Thinking of the girl, Charlie hurried through his washing, bent over the washstand, wishing he could just take the soap down to the creek. But there wasn't time. So, he used the rough wash cloth, then dumped the murky water and pulled on his clean set of work clothes. After he'd brushed his shoes and his hair he thought he looked as presentable as an overtall, awkward fellow could.

Downstairs, he found Sheila in the blue and white kitchen, standing at the wide window near the pump. The window looked out between two big shade trees onto one of the wheat fields. The wheat waved all green and gold in the afternoon breeze. Charlie, standing back from the girl, compared Sheila's thick braid that was wound close to her neck to the gold color in the wheat, and he looked, not out at the sky, but at the rounded forearms that showed beneath Sheila's calico sleeves and at how her skirt flared out from her slender waist.

"Blue and gold's just about the prettiest combination," she said dreamily without turning toward him. "When I get married, I'll wear a blue dress, blue as that sky, and I'll trim it all in gold . . . " She broke off, turning to him, blushing a little. "I guess you aren't much used to girls' daydreams," she rushed the words. "I forget with all my sisters that you've only got your brother at home."

Charlie looked appreciatively at her pink cheeks, and at the gold frame of hair that made a sky for her blue eyes, just opposite the picture out the window. She'd look fine in a blue dress trimmed with gold. Only he couldn't say so; he wouldn't have her think he was flirting. Sheila Monroe was proper. "I like to lay under a tree and look up at the sky through green leaves," he said instead. And Sheila looked pleased.

"Yes!" she said, turning back to the window. "Then you get blue and green together. Mary did that with her wedding skirt, my oldest sister. It was winter and she wore dark blue like a night sky and embroidered it with that deep green of pine trees." Suddenly Sheila stopped, laughing at herself and whirling around on him so quickly that her worn calico skirt belled out over narrow, booted ankles. "Poor old Charlie! Listening to girl talk!"

"I listen to my Ma," Charlie said with good humor, "so I know how women fuss. Ma's wedding dress is white stuff so thin it seems like to break, and it's covered all over with pink flowers." He flushed at the confession that he knew his Ma's dress. "She misses a girl to talk to so she has to settle for Pa and Fred and me."

"Pink on white. Your Ma must have dark hair like Mr. Quinlan's."

Charlie nodded, mystified as to how she could know that from the color of a dress, and charmed by the friendly chatter.

"You'll want some food, I guess," Sheila said, moving to the larder with a grace that reminded Charlie of a fine-bred yearling horse. "We all do for ourselves on Saturday evening cause it's market day and like as not, none of us'll be about at the same time. Mostly we eat bread and cheese and there's always milk or sweet cider to drink."

Charlie nodded as she brought bread, cheese, milk, cider, and a half a cake to the table.

"We don't always have cake," she confided, "but I hid it from the boys last night. I thought you might want it, seeing how you're always so hungry."

"I always did eat a lot," Charlie mumbled, embarrassed.

Sheila smiled, slicing bread with sure smooth strokes. "Mrs. Quinlan likes to see it. She says you're worth cooking for."

Charlie sat down silently and made himself a sandwich from the bread and cheese. He took an enormous bite and then a swig of cider while Sheila made a smaller sandwich for herself.

"I hear you're going to box tonight," she said casually after chewing a while in silence. "Are you any good?"

Charlie swallowed the bite in his mouth without chewing. "How do you come to know about my boxing match?" he asked uneasily. His throat felt scraped so that he gulped at his cider.

"The same as any Pratt Irish would know," Sheila said. "Jap Quinlan told of a boy cousin he had who was coming to harvest and knew how to box."

"Oh? What all'd he say?" Charlie asked uncomfortably.

Then Sheila's mouth firmed into a hard line and she looked at him with her blue eyes stern. "Jap Quinlan ain't one to tell much," she said flatly, "for all he seems to talk. He's a betting man and he wouldn't want to spoil the stakes."

"Betting man!" Three dollars a day, no better than a hired gunslinger, and now gambling. He should've known it. Even at the horsesales when him and Fred were boys, men'd laid down their two-bits before the sparring started. Reverend Duncan'd come down hard on Pa about that--talked loud about the fires of hell. And Pa'd stuck up to him and said how two-bits was just a way of making the entertainment more exciting. He'd said a friendly bet wasn't a harm to any man, that no one was making a bundle or getting skinned. Of course when Reverend Duncan started up to the house where Ma was, Pa'd promised to see it stopped. Ma didn't hold with gambling at all. Yet here he was, fighting a Pole in no feud of his own and letting Cousin Jap bet on him.

"Not that Jap Quinlan's alone in it. No man can bet alone. My own Pa-" Sheila stopped herself and Charlie knew it was because she didn't want to be disloyal to her own kin. She smoothed her skirt and sipped at the cider in her mug. "It's a shame how things have gotten in Pratt," she said after a moment. "The Irish and Poles can't keep their fists quiet long enough to socialize for the sake of their womenfolks. There ain't dances

here for everyone. They've got to be either Irish dances or Pole dances. And it's the fault of our men. They can't even be civil to each other. And Charlene Stivic's one of the nicest girls I know!" The last words burst from her like an explosion.

Charlie felt the weight of her disapproval, and he ate his sandwich with less and less appetite. It was the first time a conversation with Sheila had ever been uncomfortable. The sweet apple cider wouldn't seem to quench his thirst. "Cousin Jap said it'd help," he protested weakly, "said it'd get the fight out of everyone's system to watch a gentlemen's sparrin' match."

"Gentlemen's sparring match," Sheila sniffed. "A fight's a fight and betting's betting."

Charlie's neck hair prickled as if his Ma had spoken. "I'm duty bound now," he said softly.

"That's so," Sheila nodded wisely. "I heard how Jap Quinlan set it up with his friends to slicker you into it. They're a team, they are. Why, that Gust Katsbulas could sell a blind horse to a widow lady, and that pair of no-goods, Shade Michaels and Mal Keegan . . . " She smiled wryly. "Well, they're both just as onery as half-grown boys!"

Charlie looked sheepish, thinking of how he'd been taken in.

"But don't you worry about it, Charlie. After tonight you can quit. There's nothing that says you have to go on to another fight."

"I ain't even done with this one yet," Charlie protested. And again there was that tug of unease that went with getting three dollars a day, that went with the memory of the men cheering in the saloon and of Rafferty's broad wink at the table. What were those men expecting from him? What was Cousin Jap expecting?

"And I'm sure not saying I'd want you to lose," Sheila went on. "You better fight good, stranger or not. You're a McGuire and your Ma's a Quinlan even if you're not from Pratt. You got the Irish to uphold. It's the betting, really, that rankles at me . . ." Her voice trailed off and Charlie wished he could say something, wished he could reassure her. But suddenly there was no more time. Cousin Jap was outside calling to him. And Sheila was scrambling for a cloth to wrap the half cake in, then pushing it into his hands. "You'll be hungry later," she said breathlessly, nodding toward the cake.

And then he was outside on the flagged path, passing Mrs. Quinlan who was just getting home. "Good-bye, Ma'am," he nodded, touching his hat, troubled at her measuring look even as he was comforted by her "God be with you, Charlie." There was no time to stop and talk to her then. There was only time to wave to her and then climb into the buggy beside Cousin Jap, clutching the half cake.

The pair of bays stepped high, graceful as dancers, moving in a soothing rhythm that eased his thoughts. Sheila--Ma--Mrs. Quinlan--Pa--Fred--fighting--gambling. He let the thoughts spill out of him and then, in a little while, he began to smile to himself. After all, what was one fight? What was so bad about being a Champion this one time? And he was Irish! Sheila'd said it. Even if it wasn't his feud, he was bound to stand proud for his own blood, wasn't he? And Pa hadn't seen much harm in a little betting at an entertainment. Sometimes Reverend Duncan and Ma had maybe too many scruples. He pushed them out of his thoughts. They didn't belong inside him tonight. No, not tonight. Tonight was his night. He'd promised to do it anyway so what was the harm of enjoying it?

It was kind of exciting really, thinking about facing a real fighter in a real ring instead of just Fred in the barnlot at home. He let the excitement seep through him as he sat beside Cousin Jap on the spring buggy seat, let himself imagine the crowd yelling and the strong, dark Pole that would no doubt face him across the ring. He'd do all right. Pa'd taught him well.

He hugged the cake to him without thinking, and his blood began to sing. He wasn't off to die, after all. He was off to fight. It'd give him something to tell his children and his grandchildren, something to brag on. This fight'd be his wild oats.

The exhilaration that made his blood sing stayed with Charlie when he got out of the buggy at the near end of town, and entered the big, lighted barn with its row of high-strung lanterns. It filled him, swept him along, until he hardly knew where he was, hardly heard the din of male voices that rumbled below the cloak of cigar smoke and pipe smoke. He could see the platform at the barn's center with its thick corner posts and the two thick ropes that enclosed it, that made it a square ring. Yet it hardly seemed real. None of it seemed real, not the cloth wrapped cake in his hand, nor Cousin Jap beside him, nor the astonishingly large crowd, nor even Gust Katsboulas who came and took his arm and led him away from the crowd and the ring, into a dingy, cluttered tack room.

There, speaking quickly, soothingly in his musical voice, Gust shooed Cousin Jap out and helped Charlie change into borrowed dungarees that brushed his legs calf-length and bunched up in the belt at his middle. Then the little Greek gloved him in the heavy sixteen-ounce gloves and massaged his shoulders, his talk never stopping though Charlie hardly heard it.

"You could whip him one-handed," the Greek predicted with his bright smile. "The puny little fellow. Yes, you will make us proud."

The voice went on and on, praising and pumping until finally Cousin Jap came back and said, "Let's go, Charlie." And his voice was so thick and hoarse that Charlie knew, even in his daze, that the flask must already be empty.

Outside the tack room, Charlie blinked, blood singing so loudly in his ears that he could hardly hear the slaps he felt on his naked back. The straw was soft beneath his bare feet as he crossed the barn and he felt somehow like smiling. He mounted the steps and bent into the ring, hearing the roaring approval as he stood to his full height and looked down on the Pole who was well-muscled but near a foot shorter than he was.

At the "clang!" of the bell he danced out from his corner and the exhilaration stayed with him as he sparred lightly in the ring, getting the feel of his opponent. Soon he was confident. The muscular Pole couldn't even reach him; he was poorly trained for all his grit. Charlie found himself feeling sorry for the man and for the crowd of Poles that gathered on one side of the noisy barn. Hitting out softly, allowing his opponent a good show, he danced and played for three full rounds. At the end of each one, Gust Katsbuelas massaged his shoulders and congratulated him, calling him "a born champion," so that Charlie found himself remembering how he'd been beating Fred at sparring for several years now.

Cousin Jap, who stood in the corner with Gust and Charlie between rounds, said nothing. He eyed the Polish spectators thoughtfully while Gust massaged, his attention switching every so often back to the ring and the short, muscular Pole Champion in his corner. It was only after the fourth round of easy punches and dancing feints that Cousin Jap spoke at last, cutting off Gust's stream of praise with a wave of his newly filled flask. "You might as well take him this round, boy," the older man advised. "I don't know what



they're up to with this little fella' but you might as well quit playin' with him."

"He's small," Charlie protested, not liking the insult to his opponent, "but he's strong for all that. And he's catchin' on to sparrin'."

Cousin Jap nodded, lips pursed thoughtfully, brows frowning. "He's doin' all he can," he agreed, "for all he's not as big as a lot of Poles I've seen. But you ain't out there to teach him how to spar, boy, you're out there to uphold the Irish." He said no more but continued to stare at the Pole's corner as if he would see through their Champion if he looked long enough.

Doing as Cousin Jap said, Charlie quit tapping with his gloved hands in the fifth round and reached out his long arms to punch and jab until he knocked the Pole Champion down, admiring the way the smaller man kept getting back up, admiring how the fellow kept hitting at him even when so few blows connected. The Pole was feisty, that was sure!

Finally, in the sixth round, Charlie knocked the Pole down for good, and the swell of cheers wrapped round him like a cloak. He grinned as he helped his opponent to his feet. They were cheering for him, for Charlie McGuire, farmboy turned champion fighter. He forgot about not being a part of this feud, forgot his qualms about fighting strangers for money, and Cousin Jap's betting. He was Charlie McGuire, Irish Champion, and he glowed with an inner fire while men shook his hands and praised him. And when Gust Katsboulas guided him back to the tack room to massage him and help him out of the clumsy gloves, he listened hypnotized to the liquid, foreign voice, watched the liquid foreign eyes.

"You will be big, Charlie McGuire. You belong on the fight circuit. You will be the state champion very soon, I know. You could grow rich. Every man would know your name."

The voice wove on and on, in and out of his thoughts, making music that joined with the music of the voices outside the tack room door. He would be famous. Charlie McGuire's name would be sounded even in Washington, even in California, even in places he'd never heard of.

"And next week," Gust Katsboulas whispered on, "next week you will show them even more."

The next two Saturday nights it was the same except that he found his own suppers before he left home; Sheila Monroe did not keep him company on Saturdays though she still sat with him on the porch in the evenings, still talked of family life. She spoke to him no more of the sky, however, nor of imagined wedding gowns. And she rarely smiled at him. "You could have stopped," each of her silent gestures seemed to remind him. "You could have said no to the next fight."

But he didn't stop, couldn't stop, even when Mrs. Quinlan's green-brown eyes grew sad as they rested on him. The fighting was like a fever in him that pumped with the beat of his heart and drowned out all the other sounds in his ears, drowned out Ma and Pa and Reverend Duncan, drowned out Sheila and Mrs. Quinlan. Only Gust Katsboulas's voice was not drowned out--that liquid musical voice that somehow managed to weave itself into the very beat of his fever. The force of Gust's enthusiasm seemed to overpower his will. He took less pleasure in the horses that he worked, finding his pleasure instead in lying in the alfalfa and dreaming of his name strung on great banners on main streets of every town he visited. He saw himself in black broadcloth suits even finer than Cousin Jap's and black felt hats that he tipped to beautiful young women in blue dresses trimmed in gold.

Not that it was all fun. After the first fight, he always started out in the buggy with Cousin Jap uneasy, even a little scared. But somehow, in the course of the ride to town, he managed to get excited. He started thinking of the crowd that yelled and cheered and sometimes jeered. And he thought of how mostly he didn't even get hit. Strangely enough none of the Poles he fought were as good as Fred was; they couldn't reach his face. It bothered him some that his opponents were no match for him, of course, but it was exciting too; and he began to know the faces of every man in Pratt, and to take pride in his friendships with such men as Mal Keegan and Shade Michaels, Rafferty and Donovan.

It was only at night, in that stillness that came right before sleep, which seemed to quiet even the beat of his heart, that the old tug of unease sometimes bothered him. When it came, low and insistent, tugging, tugging, pictures of Ma baking bread came too, and of Sheila in blue, and of Pa with his forehead puckered. Sometimes he even got a picture of Reverend Duncan pounding his pulpit. Those nights, staring at the ceiling, he'd remember how Ma'd let Fred and him spar when they were small because she said it was natural for young'uns to scrap, and if they would anyhow, they'd best do it gentlemanly. But she hadn't let them fight at the horsesaes for years now, had put her foot down the year Fred turned fourteen and said they wasn't young'uns no more, but near men and in need of the discipline of men, the discipline that shows a man other ways to solve his differences than fighting.

Then he'd toss and turn and push his Ma out of his thoughts, only to have Mrs. Quinlan come into them, she who sat with him at meals and smiled on him gentle, not speaking but showing her disappointment. Charlie would try to convince himself that her troubled eyes were all on account of Cousin

Jap's drinking. Then, yearning for sleep that he'd never had trouble finding before, he'd push her out of his thoughts too. But those nights, even his sleep was troubled when it finally came. Sheila Monroe would haunt his dreams and her blue eyes would spill tears that turned into green-brown creek water, water that washed away the corn crop and tried to drown him in mossy stillness.

He woke from such nights tired, and he did his work quiet, concentrating so that he wouldn't have to think, daydreaming determinedly if he found time on his hands. And so, mostly the time passed pleasantly, because except for those occasional nights, those occasional dreams, Charlie's life was a marvelous adventure, a tale of success that he would share with grandchildren made rich by his skill with his fists. That was his dream. To be rich and famous, maybe even to be a world champion boxer. It was that dream he pondered on happily on the way to town the fourth Saturday night, resting on the buggy seat, staring off into the sea of wheat that waved, ever a little riper, on either side of the road. Harvest'd start any day now. The hard work would get him in good shape for the state fair. Besides, it'd feel more right to sweat in a harvest field than just to tend horses. Sometimes he still felt downright guilty thinking of Pa and Fred slaving at home to clear the wreck that was left of their land. He'd make it up to them when he got rich. He'd buy them a fine new farm as big as Cousin Jap's.

"What you thinkin' on so deep, boy?" Cousin Jap's voice broke through his thoughts. Charlie started, suddenly aware of the creak of freshly oiled harness, of the buggy wheels on the dusty road, of Cousin Jap in his broad-cloth beside him.

"Just home," he said slowly, "and of Pa and Fred mending and clearing without me."

Cousin Jap nodded, handing him the reins so that Charlie could feel the strong movement of the pair of bays as they stepped down the road. "They're in sore need of the money you give them," Cousin Jap said, taking the flat pewter flask from his inside coat pocket and drinking from it. "They need money more than anything right now." Then his eyes swept the waving fields just as Charlie's had and he nodded, as if pleased at what he saw. "You're doing for your family like a man," he went on, almost as if he was talking to himself. "I seen you take apart the header and the thresher and grease 'em like you knew what you was doing, and without being told. It's a man that does that, not a boy. And it's good you done it because we'll start harvestin' day after tomorrow."

Charlie felt himself sit up a little straighter at the praise.

"And there'll still be time for sparring on Saturday nights," Cousin Jap promised, waving his flask in the air. "It's a gentleman's sport, a part of a civilized country."

Charlie felt the now familiar surge of excitement flow through him. "Yes sir," he said. Cousin Jap took another drink from the flask and then replaced it in his pocket. Charlie held the reins loosely, gazing at the wheat and the sky, smelling the heavy green smell of June. It was fine what he was doing. What a story it'd make--when Charlie McGuire went to Pratt, Kansas to work the wheat harvest and turned champion boxer. Wouldn't Fred's eyes pop out when he got home and started telling? He wasn't a preacher, after all, that he always had to do right, always had to mind his Ma. He was eighteen years old, near a man, and making a man's wage. And he was strong enough to outbox any Pole in two hundred miles and more, he was sure of it.

Beside him, Cousin Jap sat smiling to himself in his expansive fashion, eyes crinkled at the corners until Charlie thought he looked the friendliest fellow he'd ever seen. "I'm bettin' that you'll keep on doing fine, boy," he said jovially as the buggy swung into the barnlot where men were gathered, waiting. "I'll bet you can take anybody they put up."

Inside the large lighted barn, Charlie's spirits soared still higher. He grinned at the men in suits and overalls who clapped him on the back and shook his hand, and he called them by name because he knew them now, knew their talk and their ways. Even with this his fourth bout, these men still couldn't say enough about his height, his reach, his skill at jabbing with his left and then coming in with his right uppercut.

And he was used to Shade Michaels' glum ways too, so that he could chuckle when the man said sadly, slowly, "They got 'em another new champion, one that's bigger'n anybody they put up so far."

"Six foot if he's an inch," Mal Keegan agreed from beside Shade, his red face bobbing nervously.

"Where'd they get him?" Charlie wanted to know, and Cousin Jap paused to listen keenly.

"Brought him in from somewhere South, I heard," a man with white whiskers answered, shouldering up to interrupt Shade's slow reply. "Kin to the Macoviks from what I hear. And ain't he a funny looking fella', though! Hee hee hee." The man's white whiskers folded up almost to his eyes as he laughed. "Longest damned arms I ever seen on a human--though one time I seen a travelin' show that had these wild critturs in it and he looks--"

"Shut up, Delbert," Mal Keegan ordered, eyes dodging furtively about. "You want to start something before the fight?"

"Ain't no nevermind to me," the old man sputtered, holding up his veined fists as if ready for a set to. "Besides, there ain't no Pole that'll stand up to a Irishman for long. Ain't that right, Quinlan?"

Cousin Jap narrowed his eyes, heavy brows frowning, noncommittal. He guided Charlie away, out of range of the old man and his talk. Shade and Mal moved with them and Gust Katsboulas literally seemed to prance up to the four of them, grabbing one of Charlie's arms, pulling him away from admirers who offered, on all sides, advice, beer, and cigars. "He must get ready," the little Greek kept telling the well-wishers. "You can talk with him very soon, as soon as he's finished with this new Pole, a few minutes maybe."

There were chuckles of approval from the men who overheard the little Greek, and the crowd parted to let the five of them through. When they reached the tack room Gust Katsboulas bustled about as usual, getting Charlie into his dungarees and his gloves, massaging and talking, while Charlie reflected with satisfaction that Cousin Jap'd been right. These bouts cheered folks up, both Irish and Pole, made 'em happy, kept them from fighting among themselves. He felt somehow, like Hercules, the strongest man in the world. He wouldn't let them down; he'd give them a good show.

And then he became aware of Mal's voice and Shade's across the tack room, leaning against harness and dusty saddles, talking to Cousin Jap. "This one's fought before," Shade was saying in his deliberate way, "and he's won some too from all I hear."

"He's got a reach on him too," Mal added. "Delbert wasn't lyin' about his arms. Hangin' down to his knees, they are, and heavy-muscled."

"In his prime," Shade frowned, teeth moving in his thin cheeks. "He's no young'un."

"But Charlie's an ath-a-lete," Gust cut in, making the three aware of him, gesturing with his short arms. "He's trained good by his Papa and he is the Champion."

Charlie watched Cousin Jap's face, thinking of the last two fights, of the smallish Poles, strong as wildcats, who danced with him about the ring but who knew too little about protecting, punching, jabbing to beat a real boxer. Those two fights had been almost as simple as the first one and Charlie'd fought them warily, pretending each was a contest, moving, feinting, punching softly until the sixth or seventh round. Then the Poles as well as the Irish were pleased.

"Charlie McGuire will be big," the little Greek was saying. "He will make a whole lotta' money on the fight circuit. He will beat the champion of every town and he will be famous."

Charlie smiled, still waiting for Cousin Jap's assessment. "It ain't like I laid out anybody much yet," he argued. "Them three Poles weren't even the size of Fred."

"It was skill and strength that put them down," Gust insisted. "You were born to fight!"

Charlie smiled again. "Better see how I do tonight. Sounds like maybe I got somebody my own size this time." But even as he spoke he couldn't help thinking how it'd be to have his name up all over Kansas and Nebraska and Missouri. Charlie McGuire, Famous Boxer, Takes All Challengers. To think of all the country he'd see and all the fairs and carnivals. People'd look up to him wherever he went and he'd be Somebody!

And then, finally, Cousin Jap spoke. Charlie focused his attention on the man as did Gust, Mal and Shade. "They been up to something, sending in those undersized champions." He sipped at his flask thoughtfully. "Yep.



I'd say they been waitin' to spring this fella' on us." Gust, Mal and Shade nodded.

"Why would they do that?" Charlie demanded. "That don't make sense."

A half-smile changed Cousin Jap's face as he contemplated Charlie. "You got some learnin' to do yet, boy." Then he turned to his friends. "We'll start the fight late," he said; "we'll make 'em wait, make 'em eager." The three of them nodded. Then he lay his hand on Charlie's bare shoulder, his voice affectionate. "You fight good tonight, boy. Mal and Shade wouldn't fool you. This'll be a harder fight than you've had before."

Charlie nodded, suddenly aware of the tightness in his belly, aware of the tension in the room. He didn't like his own suspicions. Why would Cousin Jap want to make the crowd wait? Why would the Poles save their real champion till now?

"You'll do fine," the older man went on. "You'll uphold the Irish and you'll end the Champion cause you got the edge."

Again Charlie nodded, sure because Cousin Jap was sure. And then, with Gust and Mal and Shade, he waited. Cousin Jap, as was usual, did not wait with them. His cousin never did spend that last quarter hour before a fight in the tack room. And tonight, Charlie was uneasy about that. Unaccountably, his mind pictured Sheila, plain and clear. Usually, he kept womenfolks out of his mind at a match. "It's just the betting, really, that rankles at me . . ." he could almost hear her say the words. And he wanted, suddenly, to tear the gloves from his hands and go away. Only he couldn't because it wasn't just his fight. It belonged to the Irish, the Irish that he must uphold. It would be wrong to leave now, wrong not to fight as best he could.

The crowd of men cheered when he came out, flanked by the three friends, joined by Cousin Jap who was flushed and smelling of whiskey. Charlie

looked up at the ring that was surrounded by tapering heaps of grain bags to keep spectators from coming too close. It was built up a few feet from the floor of the barn, just high enough to let everyone see, yet low enough that not a detail would be missed. The floor of the ring was sanded smooth, smooth as an old-time threshing floor used to get after years of stomping out the grain; there were no splinters to work their way into the boxers' bare feet. It was a fine ring. Pratt Kansans liked their boxing. And he wasn't the first Irish contender to enter this barn. Why, he'd heard that even Cousin Jap had stood his rounds here and done fine. Only those earlier matches had sort of died out after first one townsman, then another grew tired of doing his stint.

"You see that Pole, boy?" Cousin Jap spoke low into his ear. Charlie swung his head in the direction Cousin Jap indicated. He saw a group of Poles standing around a big, slouching man with a small head, a low forehead, close cropped hair, and arms that hung to the tops of his knees. He swallowed hard. The man's neck was made like a bull's, thick and muscled. And he was deep chested with thick, hard limbs.

"He does not look half human," Gust scoffed in the softest of whispers on Charlie's other side.

"He looks strong," Cousin Jap's deep voice overrode the Greek's comment. "He looks stronger than any Pole I seen in Pratt the last ten years. And them arms might be as long as yours, boy, for all he's shorter'n you. You might finally've met somebody who can reach you."

Charlie's mouth dried. "He's bigger than Fred," he said, "taller and heavier. For all I'm wiry, I don't think I'm as strong as him."

"Look at his face," Gust's whisper scoffed. "No forehead, spread nose-- he looks like a gorilla."

Charlie frowned, belly even tighter. "It ain't right to say such about what a fella' can't help."

"That's right, boy," Cousin Jap agreed, "and it ain't on the subject anyhow. You gotta watch out for them arms. You ain't used to bein' reached and--"

"Fred could always reach me," Charlie cut in. "I can take a punch."

"See, see," Gust chuckled. "The McGuire is not afraid."

Cousin Jap nodded. "Mebbe. But Fred knows boxin' and I'm standing here wondering if that fella' does. He's big and he's strong. But does he know how to spar?"

"If he don't," Charlie said eagerly, flexing his arms, raising the heavy gloves over his head, "then he's beat."

"You be careful, boy," Cousin Jap said, pulling out the flask again, then pushing back his black felt hat. "Even if he ain't boxed before, that fella's done some fighting and he's liable to pull a fast one or two on you."

Charlie nodded, back straight, blood singing with that special excitement that came before a fight. "I'll watch him," he promised. He was ready to be in the ring again. This fight would be a challenge, would tell him, tell them all what he was made of.

"Guard up and feet moving," Cousin Jap advised. "Keep him confused."

"The ape-man will be easy to confuse," Gust whispered.

Charlie shook off the little Greek, walking beside Cousin Jap to the crude steps that were moved up to the ring. The referee, a robust German storekeep in shirtsleeves by the name of Wolfe, nodded at Charlie and then signalled to the Poles in the other corner. Abruptly the voices in the room hushed. Charlie climbed into the ring.

"Charlie McGuire, Champion, meets Stan Pozniak, Challenger," the referee's voice rang out over the barn and then men cheered and booed and clapped their hands. Charlie's eyes swept the room, seeing all the familiar faces. Rafferty, Donovan, Skelly, and Scanlan stood among other young Irishmen near one corner of the ring. Cousin Jap and Gust flanked by Mal and Shade stood near another. There were other faces he knew too, upturned in the light of the lanterns. Most of the light, of course, centered on the ring itself and Charlie took a good look at Stan Pozniak. The man was strong all right, strong as a bull. But then Cousin Jap said he was strong as a horse. Could a horse beat a bull? He hunched his shoulders, arms up as Pa'd taught him and waited for the bell.

"Clang!" it sounded loud and clear and immediately the quiet was filled with cheers. "McGuire, McGuire, get him! Knock him down," came from one side. "Pozniak, Pozniak, take him quick!" came from the other. Charlie danced, moving his bare feet gracefully on the sawdust covered boards, concentrating all his senses on his opponent.

Strangely, however, the big Pole stood still, feet unmoving except to turn to whichever side Charlie came up on. And he didn't hold his arms like a boxer. He let them dangle toward his knees, looking so like an ape that Charlie actually flushed when the Irish crowd began hooting, "Get the gorilla, get the gorilla, get the gorilla." The poor fella' probably knew how he looked.

Finally, tired of dancing, tired of waiting for his opponent to catch on to the protective stance of pugilism, Charlie let his right arm snake out. Jab, to the Pole's chin. And the Pole hardly flinched. Jab, he hit out harder. Again, the small head barely moved. Charlie warmed to the fight. Even if the man didn't know much about boxing he could sure take a punch.

He threw his right uppercut, the one the crowd liked so much, trying to catch the Pole under the chin. But in this at least, Pozniak understood the importance of defense. He tucked his chin down against his chest and the blow slid off harmlessly. Charlie grinned. "Ain't you gonna hit me back?" he invited. "Don't seem right for you just to stand there while I hit at you."

Then he sent a flurry of body jabs into the Pole's hard stomach, and a hook with his left hand into the man's right cheek. Stan Pozniak swayed minutely. Sweat broke out on Charlie's face. It'd take some punch to get this fella' down! Not that it mattered. The Ref'd score his hits. But--

The thought swerved off with the force of a powerful blow to his head. Charlie blinked, amazed not only at the pounding pain of it but at its peculiar and unexpected source. Then, before he could gather his wits, "Bam!" it came again. What in the world kind of fighting was this? He could hear the swelling murmur in the crowd above the ringing in his ears, and the sweep of laughter that gathered on the Pole side of the barn. Then, the Pole's heavy arm swung again, up and around, windmill fashion, over his head and Charlie's, stopping in its revolution to thwack down on the top of Charlie's head with all the force of powerful muscles, with the heel and the laced wrist of the heavy boxing glove.

Charlie counted that third blow in a daze. His ears rang and his head ached and even with his eyes open he saw millions of tiny white lights, smaller than fireflies, bathing his opponent in glitter. Then he saw the heavy swinging windmill of an arm move again, rising, threatening. Would it push his very skull down into his shoulders? Why, he'd come out of this looking like Bill Sheridan, the barkeep. And in slow motion, he ducked sideways so that the blow glanced off of him.

Then, "clang!" and this time the sound didn't push his feet at the floorboards. It was only the bell ending the round. Painfully, holding his head very still, he swiveled around and shuffled to his corner. Who'd ever heard of anybody fighting with the flat of his hand, of coming down on the top of somebody's head? Pa'd never spoke of such fighting as that.

"You just gonna let him drive you down, boy!" Cousin Jap's voice roared through the pain in his skull, vibrating against his eardrums, cutting through layers of mashed brain.

"The top of my head," he mumbled foolishly. "Just swinging down like a sledge hammer on top of my head."

Something came out of Cousin Jap that sounded like a snort and he pushed Charlie down onto a stool and forced his lips open. Charlie felt a searing in his throat and the familiar smell of Cousin Jap's flask burned at his nostrils, burned through the layers of numbness that seemed to hold his brain. He shook himself like a doused dog and choked a little before he swallowed. Then he pushed the flask away. "Enough!" he gasped out of a voice hoarser than Cousin Jap's had ever been.

"Don't you just stand there no more!" Cousin Jap bellowed in his ear. "You get them hands up and you move your feet and you throw some punches or you're gonna lose this fight. And I'm gonna lose a sight of money!"

"Money?" Charlie blinked, voice still hoarse. "I get my head pounded and you're worried about money?" The bell clanged again, cutting him off and Charlie staggered to his feet, swaying for a moment until the whiskey warmed through him. Then he danced out into the ring, shoulders hunched, arms up. A roar of approval went up from the Irish crowd, as if they'd been holding their breath to see if he could stand. Charlie shot forward toward the Pole on the wave of the crowd's approval and threw a series of

body punches that he knew were harder than the ones he'd thrown in the last round. No more playing with this Pole. No more worrying over whether he'd stretch the fight out long enough. Pozniak'd nearly had him in the first round and Charlie didn't plan to go down in the second.

The Pole's small head snapped back fairly at a strong left jab followed by a swift right cross. Then a right jab and a left hook. The Pole actually backed off a couple of steps and Charlie's eyes narrowed. He'd have this fellow if it was the last thing he did.

Warily, throwing short, steady jabs, Charlie watched the powerful right arm of his opponent, trying not to let himself take another of those peculiar punches, wondering when the Pole would try another strategy, would try a body punch. With the power in those arms Charlie guessed a punch anywhere could be a staggerer.

The windmill swung and Charlie ducked away from it so that the Irish voices seemed to swell like a stormwind and the Pole voices moaned. Only then, the boy found that Stan Pozniak could work his left arm windmill style too, that in the first round, the big Pole'd only been playing with him. "Bam!" the left hand came down on the top of his head and the little white lights danced before his eyes again.

"Keep them feet moving!" Cousin Jap's deep voice bellowed from somewhere nearby, and then Charlie took heart again. He danced, ducked, feinted, and punched, avoiding the windmill, coming in from both sides of the Pole, trying to avoid standing directly in front of him. Two of the heavy-handed hammer strokes were deflected to his shoulders. Another two missed him entirely. And still Charlie jabbed and punched, throwing his weight into the left hooks that seemed to have the most effect on his big opponent, trying again and again to get under the Pole's tucked chin with his right uppercuts.

"Clang!" went the bell again, and this time, Charlie walked upright and strong to his corner while it was Pozniak who walked slowly, shaking his oddly small head atop the great bull neck.

"You gotta get him fast," Cousin Jap advised, offering the whiskey flask again. Charlie pushed it away, grabbing instead at the sweet water that Gust Katsbuelas held.

"I don't see how I can," he gasped, wiping away the dribble from his chin, wanting more to drink but understanding why Gust shook his head and corked the bottle.

"He'll take you if you ain't careful. That one good blow he landed staggered you."

Charlie nodded. "But it ain't gonna be easy to take him."

And it wasn't. Round followed round, blow followed blow, and the tireder he got, the more often the big Pole seemed able to land his sledge hammer hand on the top of Charlie's head. And besides the stars that half-blinded Charlie, besides the sheer weariness that he began to feel at his continual dancing and feinting, there was the echo of Cousin Jap's disgruntled tone in his ears, and of the words that repeated themselves at the end of each round. "You gotta beat him, boy. I stand to lose a bundle of money."

"Money, money, money," the words rang in his head to the rhythm of the dancing lights and Charlie made his punching hands and his dancing feet fall into the same rhythm. Money--dance--jab, money--duck--punch, money--feint . . .

"Clang!" went the bell again and Charlie dragged to his corner, aware that Pozniak too was tiring, even bloody from a cut on his cheek. But Charlie felt too weary to care, too weary even to wonder if he could win,



or how he'd feel at losing. He only wanted to endure, only wanted to last out the match.

"It's coming up round fourteen," Gust Katsbulas said and his voice seemed the lowest of whispers beneath the hum of the dancing white lights and the refrain of money--duck--punch.

"Wolfe won't call the fight on points," Cousin Jap's hoarseness was more evident than usual. "He won't dare now. You got the Pole on points, boy, but it'd cause a brawl to call this fight on points. We'd never get out of this place with our skins on. That means if you last the next two rounds, they call it a draw and you'll have to fight him again."

"Fight him again?" The words dazed Charlie, staggered him who was already staggered. "Again?" His voice squeaked as it hadn't since he was thirteen years old and he thought of Ma and how good it'd be to see her.

"Just don't let him hit you no more. A draw I can stand but a loss . . . " Cousin Jap's voice trailed off, the voice of the bell clanged, and Charlie felt himself pushed back out into the ring by four hands. Cousin Jap could stand a draw. But what about him? The sawdust on the floor stuck to his sweat wet feet and his drenched body made the dungarees feel rougher yet against his skin. Pozniak looked tired too. He hunched forward, small head down like a bull's, swaying a little from side to side. Charlie danced. Even without the white lights he knew the rhythm now. Money--dance--jab, money--duck--punch, money--feint--uppercut, money . . . Abruptly the rhythm stopped. The uppercut had caused a roar that blocked it out. It was the crowd! The crowd was roaring. He blinked. Pozniak was lying on the floor! He must've forgotten to tuck his chin.

"One, two, three," Wolfe's voice rose louder even than the crowd's. "Four," and then Pozniak staggered to his feet, swayed, straightened.

Charlie grinned, gratified at his opponent's courage. "Atta boy, Stan," he said.

And then Pozniak began moving both arms like a double windmill, charging at Charlie like a mad bull, feet making loud thumping noises, head ducked.

Charlie danced away, feinting, ducking, weaving beneath the blows so that they slid off of him. "Hey, I wasn't tryin' to get you mad," he apologized. "I'm real glad you got up!"

"Bam!" one of the blows landed on the top of his head and the lights started again and that put him back into the rhythm. Another sledge-hammer blow caught a piece of his ear and a burning, stinging pain assured him that it was bloody. And still Pozniak the Pole, Pozniak the bull, Pozniak the madman charged him, round and round the ring, lunging furiously, panting now in hoarse gasps that Charlie heard even through the rhythm of his own money--dance--jab. The big arms continued to swing, missing again and again until finally Charlie knew the truth of Pa's words--the words that he'd said grim and low to him and Fred as he held them, small hard-fisted boys, by the scruffs of their necks, frowning at their bloodied noses and their fierce expressions. "No man can defend himself when he's mad," Pa'd said, "no man can win a fight with someone else if he can't lick himself first." The memory made Charlie grin and the Irish roared approval while the white lights dulled because it'd been so long since the Pole'd landed a blow.

Feint--uppercut--money. Pozniak, his chin again undefended, staggered and Charlie closed in. Money--duck--punch. Pozniak lay at his feet, windmill stopped, arms limp at his sides. The crowd cheered and then quieted to a murmur while Wolfe counted. The Pole didn't move. Somehow Charlie knew he wouldn't. He stood there, staring at Stan Pozniak, letting the triumph soak through him. He'd earned this one. Earned it fair and square.

And if he'd lost, it would've been a good loss too. This Pozniak was a worthy opponent, was a strong man and a good fighter for all that he knew little about boxing, about feinting or jabbing or punching. If he did, he'd be a champion, sure enough.

"Eight-nine-TEN!" Wolfe cried. And then he came to Charlie and held his gloved hand high so that everybody could see that he'd won, that he was still Champion of Pratt, Kansas. And then there was cheering and shouting and laughing and hats were tossed in the air and Charlie grinned at the Irish, pleased and warmed by their exuberance. Then he turned his back on them and looked down into the set faces of the defeated Poles and he bent and pulled Pozniak to his feet and put his arm around the man's middle, supporting him, holding him. "Here's Stan Pozniak, one mighty fighter!" he cried out, his voice rising above the cheers behind him. And then the Poles cheered too, honoring their Champion in his worthy loss.

Gust Katsbulas led Charlie away from the crowd, back to the tack room, talking incessantly, excitedly about the road, about fighting anyone and everywhere because he, Charlie McGuire, an eighteen-year-old boy had defeated even that big Pole gorilla. He could take anybody, Gust insisted as he sponged him off.

Charlie hardly heard him. He flexed his sore muscles, stretched his aching hands and listened miserably to the rhythm that had helped him through the fight, that wouldn't stop ringing in his ears. Money--money--money. Cousin Jap was out there now, going through the crowd, collecting his money--his bundle of money.

When he was dressed, Charlie strode out of the tack room grimly with Gust still beside him, silent to all the Greek's wonderful plans for fighting at fairs and carnivals, refusing to be drawn into the clusters of men who

shouted and clapped him on the back once he was among them. He must've made them money. But how many others had Cousin Jap stolen wages from on account of him? How many Poles had harder feelings than ever toward the Irish? He strode out of the barn into the night, spirit uneasy, thoughts as scrambled as if Pozniak's great blows had loosened something inside his head.

"Charlie! Charlie McGuire!" his cousin's hoarse voice called out to him. He turned to see the sturdy, hatted figure in the square of light that spilled from the barn door. "Come on back and have some fun," the older man called.

"I'm going on home," Charlie called back, his voice harsh even to his own ears. "I want the walk."

"Want the walk!" Cousin Jap roared and several men around him roared too, crowding up to the barn door to look out at him and call to him. "Hear that boy! After all that fighting he still feels the need for a walk. A born athlete, just like ole Gust said!" Laughter spilled out of the barn beside the light.

"So long!" Charlie called, trying to sound friendly, trying to sound less bruised than he felt. And then he walked, long legs stretching over the miles and miles of road between the waving fields of wheat.

He knew he'd never fight again, never hear the shouts and the cheers and the friendly jeers of a crowd that had all their eyes on him. Ma wasn't the reason either, with her fine upright ways and her hope that he'd keep straight as he grew to a man. No, Ma didn't hold with fighting and he wasn't so sure he agreed with her. But the gambling. Not the two-bit gambling of a country horse sale, but real gambling, real skinning of folks. Lord only knew whose pockets he'd been taking his three dollars a day from, standing up in that ring every week. It made him cold to think it, cold to

see himself looking at Cousin Jap with admiring eyes, his own kinsman who took hardearned money he didn't need, who took food for tables, seed for crops, fodder for stock. Charlie's lips thinned as he thought on it. Maybe it would've been better just to lose the fight tonight, or to let it end in a draw and then quit. But no, the tension in his mouth slowly relaxed as he considered it, no, he'd likely done the thing he could best live with--his honest best.

On and on he walked into the starlit night. He thought of home, of Pa and Ma and Fred, and how they'd likely be missing him by now and how they'd miss him more and he them, by the time he was well done with this harvest. They'd find him grown when he got home, he guessed. Yep, they'd find him grown. And then he thought of Mrs. Quinlan. If she was still up when he got back to the house tonight, maybe they'd talk and maybe her knowin' eyes would shine all serene again. And one day, maybe Sheila Monroe'd tell him another of her daydreams. He'd be here all summer, after all. There was wheat cutting to do, then threshing and bailing straw. There was time for him and Sheila. The weariness settled comfortably on him as he walked and the stars twinkled bright around him.

## AFTERWORD

### ORIGINS

The oral tradition is very strong in my background. I grew up on a family farm which was fairly isolated from school friends. Therefore, my grandparents and their visitors were the only dependable playmates available to my siblings and me. A favorite "game" that we children played with our grandparents was reminiscing. This game began before I was old enough to read, and continued through years of hearing both fresh stories and repetitions of old ones. While reminiscing was a game to us children, it was a serious responsibility to my grandparents, particularly to my paternal grandfather whose family had carefully preserved an oral tradition of stories that began with the first Bigham settlers in Kentucky, and continued through western expansion, the Civil War, and more western expansion. From each generation a preserver was informally chosen, a story teller who must preserve the tales, names, voice inflections and even mannerisms of long dead ancestors. Further, each generation's story teller had a responsibility to add his own tales to the tradition.

An avid listener, I memorized many stories and parts of stories unconsciously. The oral history became a part of my identity, my link to both past and future. As I grew older, I became more instead of less interested in the reminiscing game, and my curiosity led me eventually to take notes and even to make, at last and too late, a few tapes of Grandpa's stories, told in his special story telling dialect. I was allowed to use these unorthodox and modern methods of preservation only because I am not the preserver of my generation. That duty belongs to the natural story teller in my large extended family, my brother.

My fascination with Grandpa's stories was linked to my fascination with stories in general. I was an insatiable reader as a child and my interest in folk tales and fiction was heightened by the oral tradition that surrounded me. Perhaps even then, I sensed the possibilities for creating fiction out of the family history. Certainly Laura Ingalls Wilder opened my eyes early to the practice of translating real experience into books. And Mark Twain, whose vivid descriptions, use of dialect, and humor somehow reminded me of Grandpa was a favorite of mine. Willa Cather's stories and books provided more proof to me that local history and the experiences of country folks translated into moving fiction. Her "Neighbor Rosicky" particularly had a profound effect on me. However, it was Janice Holt Giles, a post World War I novelist whose books I discovered in my teens, who most stirred me. I found revealed in her fiction what I had unconsciously considered throughout my childhood: a whole series of readable, moving stories based on the oral history preserved for generations by her husband's family.

My first attempt at a sustained narrative was to put into writing one of my family's stories. Intended as a Christmas gift for Grandpa, this attempt resulted in an extremely long and cluttered narration that digressed endlessly in much the same way that oral history does, but without its charm. It was a difficult, tedious, and almost wholly disappointing project. And certainly it was not fiction. My desire to please Grandpa was a damper to creativity. And, misunderstanding my few additions or deletions--necessary, I felt, for the sake of transitions--Grandpa, after reading my gift, made me sit down and correct inaccuracies.

This experience taught me valuable lessons. It proved to me that oral history does not translate well into writing if the translation is literal

instead of creative, it assured me that I had the stamina to write, it warned me never to share my writing with anyone, and it revealed to me my limitations as a potential writer. Perhaps it was partly as a result of this writing experience that I opted to study literature at Washburn University, and five years later, to study fiction writing techniques in graduate school.

The study of literature has been an ongoing experience of revelation and recognition. As college classes taught me to be more discerning about what I read, I found the simple themes of the oral tradition, of folk tales, and of children's stories revealed in all of literature. I recognized that Janice Holt Giles, Mark Twain, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Willa Cather were not alone in translating oral history into fiction. Reading Chaucer, Shakespeare, The Bible, Eliot, Hawthorne, and many others, showed me that all of literature is dependent on oral history, on a few simple themes. And in studying the techniques of fiction writing, I learned the truth of Holman's statement about the short story, that it is

. . . [a] form which comes to us from the ancient past, which drew its first breath from oral tradition, and which has existed as a portion of much of man's literary expression in all ages. [It] can ultimately be said to have no origin more specific than the inherent creative spirit of man satisfying his desire to tell and to hear stories.<sup>1</sup>

The short story, indeed fiction of any length, can and does work from oral narration. The two types share long-established story telling formulas. Fiction differs from oral history in being consciously made through craftsmanship and skill. It is more than a mere record of an incident or anecdote because it has a conscious structure. The oral tradition is based in history, the short story in art. Therefore, my goal in writing this report, to translate a part of my family's oral history into fiction,



becomes the challenge of balancing the twin forces of oral history and short story technique, of balancing life and art.

My graduate school experience has been a preparation toward achieving this balance between life and art in my writing. This is not to say, however, that my attempt in the creative portion of this report is altogether successful. I still have much to learn. Nevertheless, I feel that I have gained from the experience of writing "Irish Champion."

I chose to fictionalize this particular story, one added to the family tradition by Grandpa, for two reasons: first because his boxing experience in Pratt was interesting to me, and second because his Pratt story provided a clear sense of theme that some of our episodic family history does not. This theme, a young man's coming of age, is of course, a part of an ancient tradition begun in oral literature, then translated into such folk tales as "Jack the Giant Killer," into songs, myths, legends, and such heroic poetry as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Children's classics such as Porter's Freckles and Rawlings's The Yearling rely on this same theme as do such adult classics as Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Maugham's Of Human Bondage. This is not to say that Grandpa's oral tale provided me with the thematic unity or the thematic complexity that successful fiction requires. But it did offer a good basis for the fictional exploration of such a theme, as well as interesting characters and an authentic setting. In other words, it was able to provide the possibilities for achieving that necessary balance between memory and invention.

#### DESIGN

Probably my overriding concern in translating Grandpa's oral Pratt story into fiction became, as I worked on it, psychological authenticity.

The oral tradition tends to relate only facts. It relies on accuracy and simplicity. It requires vivid descriptions and interesting details but, like folk tales and many children's stories, it does not require the implied explanation of character motivation that adult literature demands. Further, the oral story teller need not explore the relationship between cause and effect that the short story must explore. Therefore, the demands of fiction necessarily change oral history, because the characters and situations in an oral story become in fiction, not simply remembered people and events, but created people participating in events for a reason. By requiring psychological authenticity, fiction enlarges the scope of oral history into a more universal experience. At the same time, it creates more rounded and therefore more individual characters who exert control over the basic story line and thus, necessarily, remove it even further from the original oral tale.

Working with the problems of characterization, psychological authenticity, and cause and effect meant making careful choices about which parts of Grandpa's Pratt story should be retained and which parts should rely on invention. I tried to set limits based on the relevancy of the original facts to what I perceived to be the theme. At all times, I forced myself to remember that relevancy to the story was more important than historical accuracy. Only by establishing such limits could I hope to achieve thematic unity.

After years of listening to Grandpa, excising details and sometimes whole sections from one of his digressive and episodic tales was like purposely excluding old friends. For instance, Grandpa's story began much earlier than does "Irish Champion." It began with a desperate campaign that bound zealously independent farmers of the Delaware River valley together in a common cause. These farmers tried to halt the plans of state engineers

to straighten the curves in the Delaware. However, despite petitions, meetings, angry words, and finally pleas by these farmers who feared a disastrous flood, "them damned engineers with their college educations" went ahead with their plans. This part of Grandpa's story, while interesting, centered on "Pa," and on Pa's efforts to block the engineers. Consequently, it did not have obvious thematic relevancy to Charlie's growing pains. Another of my changes in Grandpa's original story meant actually altering historical chronology. To avoid the inevitable digressions about World War I, I placed the story in 1911 instead of 1915.

Besides many of the details, some of which will be discussed later, my submitted version of "Irish Champion" retains, basically, five important facts from Grandpa's original:

- 1) The naive boy, trained to box as a child, goes to Pratt for the wheat harvest.
- 2) The hard-drinking Irish cousin sends for the boy early because he expects to use him for boxing and betting.
- 3) There is an on-going feud between the Poles and the Irish of Pratt.
- 4) The last, hard-won boxing match is with a long armed Pole who fights in an unconventional way.
- 5) A top harvest hand in Pratt did make an astonishing three times what a harvest hand would make in Northeast Kansas in 1911.

Limiting "Irish Champion" to these five facts meant leaving out some interesting parts of Grandpa's story, some charming digressions, and some humorous observations. One of the more important basic parts of Grandpa's story that I chose to leave out was his description of being jumped on in a darkened street after one of the boxing matches by a gang of dissatisfied young Poles and "gettin' a good lickin'." One of the humorous observations I chose not to include was about an automobile that Grandpa saw while in

Pratt. It had solid rubber tires--"rough ridin', but they wore good."

While the automobile with solid rubber tires was deleted strictly due to my self-imposed rule of thematic relevancy, the "good lickin'" was deleted due to another problem I was having as I wrote this story: length.

I aimed at writing a long short story of approximately 10,000 words. In this long story I planned to explore how Charlie's basic values affect his coming of age as he is caught up in experiences manipulated by a worldly cousin adept at psychology. Boxing was to provide the central motif for the story as well as its climax. However, as I wrote the story and my point-of-view character developed, he began to exhibit facets that were not part of my original design. Further, he developed an important and seemingly enduring interest in an altogether fictional character named Sheila Monroe. Therefore, my attempt at this short story became a failed effort. Instead of a complete and satisfying long short story, I find that I have created an incomplete novella. My feeling is that in order to achieve better success with this story, my subsequent revisions of "Irish Champion" must contain, among other things, at least two and possibly three more sections which focus on the relationship between Charlie and Sheila. A section on their first meeting, probably a section about their front porch talks that reflects Sheila's change in attitude toward Charlie as he continues to fight, and a final section on their reconciliation are, I think, needed to satisfy a reader that the whole story has been told. These additions would also serve the purpose of further exploring Sheila's character, thus making more clear the distinction between her function in the story and the function of Mrs. Quinlan.

## SPECIFICS OF TECHNIQUE

### Point of View

"Irish Champion" is my first attempt at a story with a male as the point-of-view character. Therefore, I was somewhat wary of how to approach it, unsure of my ability to create an authentic, well-rounded protagonist who was also a male. Then too, I had the challenge of working with a naive point-of-view character who must retain reliability of thought, word, and deed as he experiences, and who must do so in such a way as to provide necessary details to a reader who is more sophisticated than the point-of-view character. In planning the resolution for the story, I had to decide, and to write convincingly in terms of cause and effect, just what my point-of-view character would learn from his experiences, how he would learn, and how much of what he learned he would really understand. This consideration of resolution, within the strict confines of point-of-view, is another of the differences between oral story-telling and fiction writing. The oral tradition tends toward the expression of a final, clear cut "moral to the story" while fiction tends toward a more implicit understanding of resolution, created through psychological authenticity and cause and effect.

I was able to resolve at least part of the problem of dealing with a reliable male point-of-view character by changing the original story from first person to the less limiting third person narration. As for what Charlie learns from his experience, it may still be too explicitly stated to work successfully for fiction in "Irish Champion." I'm still revising.

### Chronology

A reasonable explanation of the relationship between cause and effect is one of the most important responsibilities that the writer of a piece of

fiction must grapple with. Unlike the oral tradition where events are simply presented as they happen, fiction must justify what happens next. I chose to begin the story two days after it actually ended partly for this reason. I wished to show character motivation in a way that would provide a guide to the reader. I also chose to begin after the main events of the story for another reason, however, which has more to do with the relevancy of the story as a translation from the oral tradition. Beginning the story after it happened echoes the oral tale in that it gives the same kind of comfort that a first-person narrative gives. That is, everything obviously comes out right in the end because here is this character engaged in remembering past events from a positive present atmosphere.

#### Style, Diction, Tone

Although I chose to tell this story in third person, I did give careful attention to preserving the tone of the oral tradition through the style, which retains some feeling of both the dialectal and the episodic, through the incremental repetition which echoes the voice of oral story telling and therefore establishes narrative rhythm, and through the use of the early twentieth-century farm diction which is suggested in the expository passages and indicated more strongly in the dialogue. This attention to tone is intended to add authenticity as well as local color to "Irish Champion," and to aid in developing the personalities of the different characters in the story. Of course I did not allow myself to be entirely authentic in my presentation of specialized diction, but rather to simply suggest it. Dialect, strictly rendered, is often difficult for the reader and therefore a detriment to understanding and appreciating a story.

## Character

I found working with character the most interesting part of writing this story. In order to establish psychological validity for each of my characters, in order to establish believable motivation that would help answer cause and effect questions, it was necessary to rely much more heavily on the authority of invention than on the authority of memory. Charlie became a person quite distinct from the boy Grandpa described in his Pratt story, though he retained Grandpa's physical size, boyish naivete, and respect for women. The Charlie that evolved out of my work on "Irish Champion" was a sensitive, somewhat romantic boy, more interested in people and horses than in the "new-fangled machines" that so fascinated Grandpa. Further, my invented Charlie lacked the streak of almost hard practicality that so characterized Grandpa.

Cousin Jap Quinlan too, became a different man from Grandpa's actual Pratt cousin though he did retain the whiskey, wealth, horses, and broadcloth suits that Grandpa described. The minor characters, the hired hands and Cousin Jap's friends, are entirely fictional and were invented to give authenticity to the narrative, for the sake of character revelation, and for the purpose of moving the plot. Grandpa's nameless, apelike Pole opponent is given more humanity in "Irish Champion" than in the oral tale through the simple device of giving him a name. Further, the unnamed Pole spectators at the various bouts are given more personality in "Irish Champion" through their trick of using three fairly inexperienced fighters before bringing in their real champion; Grandpa, unlike Charlie, found all his Pole opponents to be worthy fighters. I'm still unsure as to the validity of my deleting Grandpa's experience of being "licked" in the dark by a gang of discontented Poles after one of his fights. As I deleted it mostly due to the problem of



length, perhaps it is something I must consider adding in a subsequent revision, now that I am convinced "Irish Champion" should be a novella instead of a short story. Certainly such an addition after the third fight would work in the interest of cause and effect. It would help convince Cousin Jap of the Poles' dissatisfaction and thus increase both the stakes and the importance of the final bout. And certainly such an addition would allow for further exploration of some of the characters in the story as it would introduce the possibility of another scene between Charlie and the two women.

I consider the characters of Mrs. Quinlan and Sheila Monroe to be two of my most important inventions. The original Mrs. Quinlan was entirely different from the character in "Irish Champion," and there was no original for Sheila Monroe. My inclusion of these two characters became inevitable as I worked through a predominantly male story and encountered the problem of conveying some impression of my grandfather's very real, old fashioned gallantry and respect for the innate fineness and rightness of women. The influence of his mother comes into all the stories of his boyhood. Therefore, I invented a motherly personality for Mrs. Quinlan. Sheila Monroe, on the other hand, was invented out of the need of the fictional story as it evolved. A romantic interest for this naive and sensitive character seemed inevitable as he developed, but it was not until I had actually finished the story that I began to understand just how significant Sheila ought to be.

#### FUNCTION OF HISTORY

Translating facts based on oral tradition into fiction, was sometimes difficult. Grandpa's story simply provided no answers for cause and effect problems. And I had to create psychological authenticity that Grandpa's first-person narrative simply assumed. Therefore, as I rewrote and rewrote,



I often found myself revising out parts of Grandpa's story simply because they did not fit into the discipline required by fiction. On the other hand, I found that I also lacked some important and relevant details required for authenticity. With Grandpa gone, this lack of detail meant research. Such blanket statements as "I followed the harvest" had to be justified. So, I learned about wheat headers "pulled" from behind by eight to sixteen work horses walking side by side. I learned that unlike today, in 1911 wheat had to be harvested before it was fully ripe so that the wheat head would not "shatter out" on impact with the clumsy harvesting machines. I learned that it took two hours of work to harness often troublesome horses together before harvest began at six a.m. I learned something of early Pratt and of work clothes, dress clothes, sixteen ounce boxing gloves, and barefoot fighting. These details that Grandpa simply assumed in his oral tale could not be assumed if my fictional account was to retain a sense of historical authenticity.

Most of my research consisted of seeking out old friends, my grandfather's contemporaries, who retain clear memories of those early twentieth-century farms. I owe a particular debt to Bill Rhynas, 89, professional horseman, who followed the early wheat harvests of Kansas, Iowa, and Minnesota as a handler, a man who could work sixteen temperamental horses in the clumsy double harness with its one set of reins, and who was therefore much sought after. I also owe a great debt to my father, the preserver and story teller of his generation who, fortunately, asked many questions of his father and grandfather as he learned the old stories. That's why he knew just what the boxing ring looked like and what the gloves were like, and even, though I did not need a demonstration, how to box. He too was trained as a child by his grandfather in this gentleman's sport.

The unexpected amount of research required to write this story frightened me, not because I didn't enjoy it. I did. It frightened me because I am a person steeped in oral tradition from both my father's and mother's side of the family where, by the way, women are the preservers and protagonists. Further, I married into a family that is losing its oral tradition because its sole preserver has found no one in the dwindling Mosher/Michael clan interested in hearing and learning the old stories of Kentucky and Indians and privation that were passed down to a granddaughter who is now nearing 80. My research frightened me with the realization of how little I know, of how many interesting and important details will be lost to me and to the generations after me unless I begin recording Bill and my 88 year old maternal grandmother and my husband's great-Aunt Gretchen.

If one of my goals as a writer is to follow the precedent of Janice Holt Giles and the many other writers who have translated oral history into fiction, then I must take advantage of the marvelous resources available to me now. As Grandpa's death two summers ago proved, I have very little time.

## END NOTE

<sup>1</sup> William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, ed. C. Hugh Holman (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1960), p. 458.

"IRISH CHAMPION"

by

ROBIN A. MOSHER

B. A., Washburn University, 1975

---

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1983

"Irish Champion" is a long short story based loosely on a tale from my family's oral history. It depicts the experiences of young, naive Charlie McGuire during his working visit to Pratt, Kansas in 1911, and shows how those experiences bring about his coming of age. Eighteen-year-old, six-foot, four-inch Charlie goes to work for his middle-aged cousin, Jap Quinlan, an alcoholic adept at subtle psychological manipulation. Through Quinlan, Charlie becomes involved in an old Pratt feud between the Irish and the Poles, which finds its chief outlet in amateur boxing. Despite the warnings of his own conscience, and the disapproval of such important people in his life as pretty Sheila Monroe and Cousin Annie, Charlie continues to box, dreaming of eventual fame, until he comes face to face with the corrupt side of his "clean" fights: gambling.

The critical afterword discusses the origins of my interest in translating oral history into fiction, including some of the writers who most influenced my thinking and writing. It explores the relationship between the twin forces of oral history and created fiction, of life and art. Further, it specifically discusses problems which I encountered in writing "Irish Champion," problems of research, length, characterization, psychological and historical authenticity, style, and cause and effect. It also offers a brief criticism of the submitted version of the story and a summary of my plans for subsequent revisions.