



*Here Was One Town
Where a Boomer Stayed Long
Enough to Get in on a Purely Local Fight*

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NOT until his stomach began to yell for grub did Sky Shannon ever look for work. At times like these he sought the kind of work he knew the best, the kind which paid the maximum of profits for the minimum of effort.

His instinct was reliable, and his luck was good. The combination brought him at this time to the fight arena in Oil City. A

roadside advertisement had told him of the fights. He didn't have a match, of course, but he'd had experience with these tank-town slug-fests. The promoters crammed the card with a lot of haphazard talent, and, as often as not, some of it failed to answer the gong. This meant a last-minute scramble for a substitute, and that's where Sky Shannon trusted to his luck.

He found the Gusher Sports Arena

without trouble. His instinct guided him down a dimly lighted street to the competitors' entrance. He was early, but that didn't bother him. Very few things bothered him. He leaned his wide shoulders against the wall and relaxed with that complete and almost lifeless loosening of muscles which is supposed to be the prerogative of animals.

He was dressed in a worn zipper jacket of cheap cloth. The tieless collar of his shirt was ragged. Shapeless corduroy trousers had the dust of the road still upon them. It was the outfit of a bum, but there the resemblance ended.

There was a detached calmness to his face which argued indifference to the things he wore. His wide lips, in repose, were tilted at the corners. It was the mouth of a man who likes to laugh, and finds a lot to laugh about. His eyes, blue-gray, had the peaceful quality of a mountain lake. His forehead was unmarked with lines of worry, and his stubborn, wiry hair, light brown, was shot with glints of copper.

His head was tilted back, showing the strong column of his neck. He was looking at the sky. He liked the sky in all its phases. He liked its warmth, its coldness and its anger. He liked to have it over him.

A voice said, "Hi, bud. Got a fight?"

Sky Shannon brought his eyes down slowly. They rested upon one hundred and ninety pounds or so of muscle. The squareness of the other's face was startling. It started from the straight line of his black hair which paralleled a flat wide spread of jaw. The jaws bent upward at right angles do to complete the illusion of a box. His mouth was thin, and his nose too broad. His eyes were sooty little discs.

"Why, no," Sky Shannon said. "I haven't got a fight. I'd like one."

"You're lucky you ain't got one right now."

"I don't get it."

"Skip it. My name's Rocky Clegg. I ain't got a bout either. They wouldn't let me on the bill tonight—but I'll be there."

"You sound like you know the ropes." Sky Shannon made his tone sound envious. He also managed to inject a note of awed respect.

Clegg fell for it. "I use my bean," he bragged. Then, "You look like a right guy. Stick around, I'll show you how it's done."

"Gee, thanks," said Shannon dutifully.

Clegg's plan was simple and ingenious. A few early fighters showed their tickets and were admitted at the gate. Rocky Clegg moved a short distance up the dimly lighted street, and Shannon followed. Soon Clegg said:

"Here comes a heavyweight without his manager. Looks like a guy named Katz. He's a palooka. Here we go."

Clegg said, "Hi, Katz. Ya on the card tonight?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"You *were* on the card," said Clegg, then whipped a mallet fist to Katz' open jaw.

Katz went down like a poled ox. Shannon caught him before he could crack his skull upon the sidewalk.

"Very neat," said Shannon. "Now what?"

"Hell, that's all. Pretty soon his manager Abe Kramm comes out lookin' for his palooka. He's wild, see? He's got to have a man, so he takes me. Abe ain't particular."

"Doesn't this town have a clink?" asked Shannon.

"Reelax. This is a tough burg. The cops don't bother about little things like this."

"I was worried a little about *that*," admitted Shannon. "But if you say it's okay, well—"

Clegg never knew what hit him. He

was quite as unprepared as Katz. Sky Shannon's fist exploded on his jaw, and Clegg went down without a grunt. Shannon lined the two men up neatly against the wall, and strolled away. His luck still held. No one had seen it happen.

If he was worried, he didn't look it, as he leaned against the wall again, and resumed his peaceful contemplation of the sky. He showed no surprise when a hammered down little guy with eyes like two poached eggs, came scuttling out the door. He bawled:

"Where is that bum? I'll fry 'im in deep fat!"

"Howdy, Abe," grinned Shannon. "Katz couldn't get here."

Abe whirled and saw the shabby, lounging man against the wall.

"Who're you?" he yelped. "Where's Katz?"

"He couldn't get here," Shannon said again. "I'm fighting in his place."

"You're no heavyweight."

"Close to it. I've fought heavyweights."

Abe chewed a chunk from his cigar, and spat it out. He was in a jam, and he made up his mind fast.

"Okay, tramp, come on," he snapped. "You'll probably last as long as Katz."

TEN minutes later Sky Shannon was in the ring. He was matched with a flat-faced, hairy-eared two hundred pounder by the name of Fink. Fink seemed sore because they'd tossed a small man at him, and his disposition got worse steadily when he failed to bat Sky Shannon up into the rafters in the early stages of the first round.

There were several immediate threats of this when Fink's big mitts disturbed the air like a Montana blizzard, but they always missed by just enough to leave his opponent hale and hearty.

Sky Shannon was deceptive. There was a hint of angularity to his build which might tend to make him slow. This impression was intensified by the deliberate, almost lazy way in which he moved. He never seemed to hurry, yet always escaped annihilation. The answer was his incredibly smooth coordination.

Shannon moved about Fink carefully, respecting his big lethal fists. The grin still stayed upon his face, but there was a brittleness to it now. His eyes were steady and intent, watching carefully every move Fink made, studying the big man like a scientist studying a bug. He explored Fink's mug with a few swift darting lefts, which Fink blinked off. He reached Fink's middle with a couple of short hooks. It was just like hitting an oak slab.

A reporter made his way around the ring to Shannon's corner. He found Abe, bug-eyed, muttering fuzzily to himself. The reporter said excitedly:

"Where'd you find 'em, Abe?"

The manager was bewildered enough to be honest. "On the street," he admitted breathlessly. "Right outside I find him."

"He got class," the reporter said. "He's lousy with it. He's a little raw and crude in spots. But he's got class."

"You should tell *me* he's got class. If he can hit, I'll make a champ of him."

The question of Sky Shannon's hitting power was settled almost before the words had left Abe's mouth. Fink had let his irritation get the better of him. He uncorked a roaring right, missed, and left himself wide open like a sunflower. Sky Shannon moved in smoothly and nailed him with a left. It was half hook, half uppercut. Fink did a half loop to the canvas, and the fight was over.

Shannon collected his fifteen bucks, and said, "So long, Abe."

Abe beamed and said, "Tut, tut, you're my boy now. Them fifteen berries is just

sparrow feed. With me, soon you are rich. We'll go places."

"I'm going places now. So long."

Abe screamed like a stricken soul. He pleaded. He wept fat tears. Sky Shannon patted him upon the shoulder.

"You'll get over it," he said. "Other fine, unselfish managers like you have managed to recover. They've wanted to devote their lives to me—like barnacles. Anyway, I'm crazy."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. Batty as all hell. I hate fighting. I'm a man of peace. Solitude's my dish—the sky my roof. Farewell, my dauntless, honest Abe."

He slipped from the dressing room while Abe's jaw was still dangling on his chest. The little round guy stared at the empty door, then gasped:

"It's true. Like he says—he's nuts."

Shannon shouldered his way good naturedly through a group of reporters and curious fans, telling them exactly nothing. Once outside, he pulled air in his lungs. It was good, but not good enough. There wasn't enough of it.

HE TOOK a street car to the edge of the town, then went on foot from there. He reached the roadside diner where he had parked the shoulder pack which contained the simple things he needed on the road. He ate a husky meal, then donned his pack.

"Hitch-hikin', bud?" the waiter asked.

"No. Walking."

The waiter watched him leave. "Screwball," he muttered to himself.

Sky Shannon walked a half a mile, then stopped and sat beside the road for his daily sober period of reflection. He was conscientious about these periods although they seldom took much time. All he wanted to answer was one question. Was he ready, yet, to settle down? Had he

lost, or was he beginning to lose that heretofore incurable, wild urge to keep on moving, to walk all day and breathe clean country air, to climb into his sleeping bag at night, to watch the thing he loved the most—the sky?

Some day he'd settle down. That much was inevitable. He was only twenty-four. Time left—lots of time for roaming, and the urge tonight was strong and steady still. He got to his feet, stretched mightily and yawned, then hunted for a place to sleep.

He covered about a hundred miles in the next four days. It was night again, and he had found a small pine clearing a short distance off the road. He liked the smell of pine, and the pattern the pine trees made across the sky. He was about to climb into his bag when he heard a car turn off the road. A moment later the lights flashed in the clearing. He slid behind a tree as the car came moving in.

"Hell," he grunted with annoyance. "I should have known that the local guys would pitch their woo in a place like this. Okay, I'm off again."

He started to move quietly away when he noticed that the car lights were still on. He reasoned logically enough that if some guy and gal were there for necking, they wouldn't leave the headlights burning. He stepped back noiselessly to the shelter of the tree and saw four men leave the car. They moved into the cone of light, and Shannon's interest quickened. Few things surprised him, but he got a jolt just then. One of the men was the square-panned guy named Rocky Clegg.

There were two other men of Clegg's general build and ruggedness. The fourth was noticeably smaller than the others, younger, too. There was a white, drawn tenseness to the youngster's face which increased Sky Shannon's watchfulness. Rocky Clegg peeled off his coat, and said,

“Okay, let’s get it over with.”

The smaller man said, “Rocky, you’re a stinker. You know I haven’t got a chance against you.”

“Who said you had?” grinned Clegg. “But I’ve warned you, Pete. You gotta admit that. I’ve told you to stay away from Mary.”

“She’s my girl,” Pete insisted doggedly. “I’ll see her if I want to.”

“She *was* your girl,” said Clegg. “I’m movin’ in. She’s just my style.”

“You’re a fool, Rocky,” said Pete quietly. “She treats you friendly because she doesn’t know what a mug you are. When she finds you beat me up, she’ll hate your guts.”

“Me beat you up?” said Clegg with righteous irony. “Nothin’ of the sort. This’ll be a fair fight. Joe and Monk’re here to act as witnesses. Anyway,” he added shrewdly, “who’s goin’ to tell Mary we had this little argument?”

It appeared, from Shannon’s listening post, as if Rocky Clegg had scored a point. Pete gave himself away by the expression on his face, and Shannon guessed with accuracy that Pete possessed a stiff-necked pride which would keep him from running to a girl for sympathy after Clegg had finished with him.

The whole set-up stank to high heaven. It caused Sky Shannon to scratch his chin reflectively. It was a sorrowful gesture of resignation, the gesture of a man who sees his cherished peace and quiet shattered by events beyond his own control. It was noticeable, however, that Sky Shannon didn’t leave.

The slaughter was about to start. Accepting the inevitable, young Pete squared off gamely, resolved to get in as many socks as possible before Clegg battered his features beyond recognition.

Rocky Clegg was enjoying himself, and so were the pals he had brought along

to see the show. Clegg took his time, prolonging the threat of his vicious fists as long as possible. He moved in fast and took a savage swing. It was a deliberate miss, but Pete ducked instinctively, and Shannon could hear the hiss of Pete’s breath between his teeth. This appeared to be what Clegg had hoped for. He brushed aside Pete’s futile counter swing, then stepped back laughing.

Sky Shannon left his hiding place, and maneuvered for position. Pete made a desperate rush, and Clegg slapped him heavily with his open hand. Clegg wasn’t ready yet to chop Pete up.

Shannon slid like a silent shadow to the spot where the watchers, Joe and Monk, were standing side by side, their attention centered upon the amusing spectacle before them. They were standing at the edge of the headlights’ glare, which left the advantage of position definitely with Shannon. He slid behind a brush-like pine six feet behind them. He waited there a moment, to shake his muscles loose.

He wasn’t taking chances against odds like these. He was a very practical young man, with no desire to be a hero, or to get a face remodeling job from these tough babies. He moved, then, with a swift and careful accuracy.

A smooth jump landed him behind the pair, but they never had a chance to turn. His hands clamped on their necks, and a violent jerk of his powerful shoulders brought their heads together with a hollow clunk. He let them drop and left them. He knew they’d slumber where they were for some time yet.

He stepped across Joe’s body and then moved unhurriedly into the glare of light. Rocky Clegg was winding up for another open-handed slash at young Pete’s face, when his eyes fell on the apparition moving toward him.

Shannon said, “Hi, Rocky. Having

fun?”

Clegg didn't recognize Sky Shannon right away. When recognition came, it left Clegg goggle-eyed and stunned—a perfect set-up.

Shannon said, “Small world, Rocky, huh?”

Clegg snarled, “Why, you—” but had waited too long by a full half second.

Clegg started a spasmodic swing, but he might as well have left it packed in ice. Sky Shannon's hook flashed in again and took Clegg on the button. It was neatly timed, and it carried one hundred and seventy-five pounds behind it. Clegg spun halfway around, then did a nose dive to the ground.

SKY SHANNON turned, and rubbed the skinned place on his knuckles. He grinned at the flabbergasted Pete, and said, “I must be getting in a rut. I've got to watch myself. Conking this guy is getting to be a habit.”

“Who're you?” Pete jerked.

“Name's Sky Shannon. I was just behaving myself, trying to get a little sleep, and look what happened.” He sighed, and said, “Oh, well, let's scram before their alarm clock rings. You let the air out of those tires while I get my pack.”

Pete obeyed the order automatically. Two tires were flat when Shannon got back with his pack. Monk was groaning now, and Joe's twitching legs showed signs of life.

“Come on,” said Shannon. “Let's get out of here. We don't want more trouble, do we?”

They had covered some distance on the road before Pete seemed able to collect his thoughts. He said:

“It's lucky you happened to be around.”

“That's what *you* think.”

“I mean it was lucky for me.”

“That's different. How far is town?”

“Three miles.”

They walked awhile in silence. Sky Shannon was looking for another place to sleep, but he didn't see one right away. Probably his healthy curiosity was a little stronger at the moment than his yen for sleep.

“This guy Rocky Clegg's a nice guy, huh?” he mused. “I wonder what makes the monkey tick?”

Pete seemed anxious to be of any help at all. “He's a louse, all right,” he said. “But I think he's got a complex.”

“Who hasn't?” Shannon said. “What sort of a fighter is he?”

“Good,” admitted Pete. “But not quite good enough. That's his trouble. It looked for a while like he was going places. He got swell headed over it, and hired on as a sparring partner for the champ. He got too cocky, and the champ had to slap him down.

“Rocky got beat up bad enough to convince him he wasn't good enough for real big time. It broke his nerve, I guess, and soured him. Anyway he likes to fight guys, now, that he know he can hammer up. He likes to be a big shot in a place like Mercer. That's the town we're coming to.”

“I've known guys like that,” said Shannon. Then, bluntly, “I heard some talk about a girl.”

“Yeah, Mary Foster. I think she'll marry me some day if—”

“If what?” demanded Shannon as Pete hesitated.

“If I can hold out against Rocky Clegg,” Pete blurted desperately. “That dirty swine is tryin' to chisel in, and the only way he knows of doing it is with his fists. Tonight was just a start. I know Rocky. This won't stop him.”

“No,” sighed Shannon: “I guess it won't. Oh, hell.”

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” said Shannon irritably. “Nothing, except that I’m a chump. Are there any jobs in Mercer?”

“Why, yes,” said Pete. “Yeah, sure.” Excitement crept into his voice. “Mary’s dad owns a feed mill, the Foster Mill. That’s where I work. We can use another man.”

“Okay,” said Shannon without enthusiasm. “I’ll show up there in the morning.”

He saw a likely place to bed down for the night, and turned off the road.

Pete said in consternation, “Hey, Sky. Look, you can sleep in—”

“No dice,” Shannon called across his shoulder. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

SKY SHANNON kept his word, and went to work next day. He didn’t like it, it is true, but he refused to let this fact upset his disposition. It was clean work, at any rate, and juggling the one hundred pound sacks of grain was no hardship to the sort of muscles he possessed.

He didn’t talk much, but the others seemed to like him. His unruffled calmness was impressive. So was the way he tossed the heavy sacks about. He didn’t always hear a person speak to him the first time. His mind seemed wandering far beyond the labor at the mill. When his thoughts came back to earth at a repetition of the words, he would grin apologetically, and no one was offended.

Pete treated him with a puzzled combination of reserve and awe. He couldn’t dope out this man who had come into his life so violently. There was nothing in Sky Shannon’s calmness, nor in his slow deliberate movements, which would indicate this violence.

At lunch time Pete said, “Come into the office after you wash up, will you, Sky? I want you to meet Mary. She keeps books here for her dad.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Shannon. “I’ll be right in.”

HE LIKED the looks of Mary Foster when Pete introduced them with a touch of pride. She was a small girl with nice eyes, clear skin, and an impulsive, friendly smile. He couldn’t blame Rocky Clegg, or any man, for wanting to see Mary Foster as often as he could.

Pete said, “Sky’s new in Mercer. He doesn’t know the ropes yet. I thought maybe he’d like to have lunch with us.”

“Of course,” said Mary promptly.

“Thanks,” grinned Shannon. “But I’m afraid I’m not quite dressed for it.”

“I don’t think you’ll be thrown out at the place we patronize,” she promised him. “It’s a diner, but it’s clean.”

“Count me in, then,” Shannon said.

They found a vacant booth, and ordered. Sky Shannon didn’t have a lot to say, but he learned a lot by watching. He learned for instance, the thing he wanted to be sure of. These two were head over heels in love. You couldn’t miss that for a second.



Leaving the diner, they almost bumped into Rocky Clegg. It was a ticklish moment when Clegg spotted Shannon. His eyes lit up like a pair of blow torches. Shannon changed his feet slightly for a better balance, but Rocky Clegg stayed

halfway civilized. He grunted something unintelligible, and went stalking up the street.

“He seems to recognize us,” said Sky Shannon drily.

The others didn’t answer, but Mary studied Shannon with a strange intensity. They started walking. A block from the diner Pete said:

“I’ve got to drop in at the freight office. You folks go on ahead. I’ll see you at the mill.”

Pete headed for the railroad station. Shannon and Mary continued for some time in silence. Suddenly the girl said bluntly:

“I see you’re mixed up in this business, too.”

“What business?” Shannon stalled.

She made an impatient gesture. “Please, Sky. I’m neither blind nor stupid. I know how Rocky Clegg feels toward me and toward Pete. I know the danger Pete is in. Rocky is definitely a menace. That’s why I try to treat him fairly well. It’s the only way I know to keep him from hurting Pete. Maybe I’m a fool to use those tactics.”

“Well,” said Shannon diplomatically, “there are several ways of looking at it.”

“How do *you* look at it?”

“Who, me? I’m just an outsider. A guy who tries to mind his own business.”

“You must think me a fool, too, if you expect me to believe that.”

Sky Shannon grinned. “Sorry, Mary,” he apologized. “Maybe I *have* dealt myself a hand.”

“I’m glad,” she said, and let the matter drop abruptly.

Sky Shannon was surprised. He was relieved, too. Most girls would have pestered him with a lot of silly questions for which he had no answer. In a mess like this things had to be handled as they came.

TOWARD this end, Sky Shannon did not have to wait long for the next development. It came, in fact, as soon as he expected it, because he’d figured Rocky Clegg as the sort of guy who wouldn’t let an issue dangle in the air. Clegg showed up at the mill that afternoon.

Shannon was on the loading platform, stacking bags of medium cracked corn. Clegg barged up, exuding trouble. He glared up from below, and rasped:

“Come down here, punk, and get your teeth knocked in!”

“Why?” inquired Shannon reasonably.

“You know damn well why!” Rocky snarled. “You’ve slugged me twice already when I didn’t have a chance. It’ll be different this time. Come down here, you yella rat!”

“You know, Rocky,” said Shannon mildly, “I sometimes think you’re a little dumb, the way you open up and ask for trouble. Why don’t you use your head now and then?”

“Come down!” raged Clegg.

The disturbance had drawn the other men from their work. Four big fellows moved out on the loading platform, backing Shannon up. Shannon, still unruffled, summed things up:

“Even if you *were* good enough to knock my teeth in, Rocky, you couldn’t get very far with it. I don’t think these boys here would like it. Besides, you might end in the clink. Ever think of that?”

Apparently Rocky hadn’t. He grappled with the thought, and didn’t seem to like it.

“I’ll get you sometime,” he said hoarsely. “This town ain’t big enough for both of us.”

“You’ve got something there,” admitted Shannon. “And I sort of like it here. I might even give you a chance to chase me out, if you’d do it legally.”

Clegg glared suspiciously. "Meaning what?"

"There's a boxing ring in Mercer."

Clegg's mean eyes glittered with quick hope. "You mean you'd fight me in the ring?" he asked incredulously.

"Sure. Any time."

Clegg's lips stretched in a wicked grin.

"Keep your bundle packed, tramp. You'll be hittin' the road again right soon—that is, if you can walk. I'm fixin' things right now."

Clegg hurried away with purpose in his stride. As a fixer he apparently knew his fight fans, because the battle was arranged for two nights later. News of it traveled fast, and the grudge angle didn't hurt the build-up. Clegg shot off his mouth plenty.

Sky Shannon, naturally, had nothing to say about arrangements. He learned he was to fight a fifteen round bout. He also gathered from the attitude of the town folk that they hoped he'd win, but that they didn't think he would. It was an attitude of friendly pity which might have undermined the morale of a person less self-contained than Shannon. As it was, the fight fans saw no change in him. He remained the same—apparently disinterested, unexcited, as if the thing were just a friendly practice bout.

He was still that way, as he sat in the corner of the outdoor ring, waiting for the fight to start. Clegg, across from him, sat crouched and glowering, trying to crack Shannon's nerve by the very ferocity of his glare. It was wasted time. Sky Shannon sat relaxed upon his stool, and watched the stars.

When the formalities were over, and the two men shed their bathrobes, a small gasp of alarm came from the fans. It was caused by the discrepancy in the fighters' builds and sizes. Clegg loomed big, with ropes of muscle crawling around like

pythons. Shannon, by comparison, was slight. His muscles were flat and long. They stood out clearly across his chest and back. His stomach had a corrugated look.

Something in Sky Shannon changed, however, when the bell rang. It was as if a dull knife had suddenly become sharp. The far-away look dropped from his eyes, as he moved out from his corner. There was an alertness there, an intense, bright boring quality, which must have struck Clegg forcibly. He checked his opening rush as if a warning bell had sounded in his brain.

Shannon took quick advantage of Clegg's hesitation. His left licked out and spat lightly on Clegg's face. It was an experimental, somewhat insulting jab, intended to needle Clegg. It did.

With an angry grunt Clegg hooked hard with his left. Shannon didn't seem to move, much, but the swing whicked harmlessly past his nose. It could have torn the nose off, had it landed, but it didn't. It only served to throw Clegg off balance, and Shannon's own left came ripping in to catch Clegg high on the head.

It was not a decisive wallop, but it staggered Clegg, and made him look bad. It was reasonable to expect that the man a might uncork a few wild fireworks then, but Clegg suddenly showed a quick intelligence which had not been obvious outside the ring.

He kept his head, moved back, and took more care. It had been brought upon him forcibly that he had under-estimated Shannon, but the knowledge only served to arouse in Clegg a normal caution which no good fighter should neglect. It did not increase his respect for Shannon, nor make him doubt the outcome. His experience merely told him that the fight might last a little longer than he'd counted on. He changed his tactics, worked methodically, and kept his guard in place.

Sky Shannon continued the process of

feeling the big man out. He moved about him loosely, peppered him with tantalizing lefts, and stored the things he learned deep in his memory.

He found that Clegg was thoroughly dangerous. The guy had a primitive slyness which had to be acknowledged. Clegg was faster than he appeared to be, and his boxing, for a big man, was exceptionally sound.

A new intentness came in Shannon's eyes. Clegg had to be watched every instant of the time. The big guy could explode with unexpected suddenness. He showed this toward the middle of the round, when he came in like a thunderbolt, plowing right through the straight left which Shannon snapped to head him off.

Shannon's backers gave a yell of fright as Clegg's big fists banged home. One caught Shannon on the head, but he rolled away from it enough to break its force. The other battered at his stomach, dangerously low, but a quick, instinctive body-twist caromed it off the rigid muscles.

Another matter that had worried Shannon was settled promptly then. Till now, he had accepted the fact that the referee, a peppery little guy named Burk, might be one of Rocky's men. Shannon clinched fast, and tied Clegg up. Burk broke them and stepped between.

"Watch those low ones, Clegg," he snarled. "And I ain't kiddin'."

Clegg grunted something in reply, then came at Shannon hard, hoping to follow the advantage of the two blows he had landed. His judgment was poor here because Shannon wasn't hurt as badly as Clegg had hoped. Shannon ducked Clegg's blistering right, and snaked his head away from the following uppercut. Clegg bounced against Shannon's crouched body, but before Clegg had a chance to clinch, Shannon battered wicked

pair of bull's-eyes to Clegg's mid-section.

Clegg didn't seem to like it, but the fans did. They bellowed their delight, as Clegg backed away and covered up. Instinct warned Shannon not to follow his advantage, and the instinct served him well. He took a quick step forward, and fainted, as if to come in slugging.

Clegg fell for it. He came out of his cover-up like a jack in the box, his big arms swinging. The catch was that Shannon wasn't there. He slid easily aside and let Clegg fan the air. The crowd laughed, and Clegg's black scowl went blacker.

For the rest of the round he made use of his superior weight, clinching often, getting in a few close pokes, then leaning heavily when Shannon tied him up. He was pulling this stuff when the bell rang.

Sky Shannon reached his corner in good shape. A handler had been provided for him, and the man seemed to know his stuff. Shannon wished for a moment that there was some smart manager there to direct him, but he shrugged away this thought. He'd learned a lot about Clegg in that round.

He added to his knowledge in the second round. He deliberately kept out of trouble, memorizing Clegg's every movement and expression. It wasn't an exciting round. There were few solid blows exchanged. It was the sort of round which usually brings protest from the fans, but these fans, pulling for Shannon strong, were tolerant.

Shannon sat expressionless between rounds, except for one quick grin which he flashed at Pete and Mary, who were close up at the ring-side. Mary's face was drawn and tight. Her eyes were big and dark with worry. Pete sat stiffly, knowing what the outcome of this fight might mean to him and Mary.

Clegg had gained confidence in the

second round. He showed it when he came out for the third. He was more dangerous now than he had ever been before, because he had also learned things about Sky Shannon.

Clegg forced the fighting with a swift and savage ruthlessness. His confidence was at its peak. He had the weight, the past experience, and the hate to make it stick. He was ready, now, to shoot the works, and he shot them with everything he had.

SHANNON fought back with a cool and steady calmness, but the odds were heavily against him. His speed saved him many times, but Clegg got through some nasty wallops just the same. Shannon got in some himself, but the speed and ferocity of Clegg's attack would not allow him to get set.

Sky Shannon was not trained for a fight like this, but he saw now, with a tight grimness, that Rocky wasn't either. He knew, before it was half over, that Rocky Clegg was staking everything in this round. He'd never attain this speed and savageness again. Weather this round, Sky Shannon told himself. That's all you've got to do.

He almost made it—almost stayed upon his feet. Not quite. In the closing seconds Clegg broke through with a terrific right. It crashed upon Sky Shannon's jaw. His knees gave way, the lights went out, and he landed hard upon the canvas.

The lights, however, did not stay out long. They came back, blurred at first, then bright and searing to his eyeballs. He was lying on his back near the center of the ring. Someone was counting over him:

"Five! Six! Seven!"

There were other lights above the ring-lights, pale pin-points in the sky. Stars—millions of them, beckoning to Sky Shannon. It may not, of course, have been

the stars. More likely it was nothing more mysterious than vitality, the terrific resistance of a rugged body, which brought Sky Shannon to his feet before the referee reached ten.

Whatever it was, it gave Clegg pause for thought. He couldn't grasp it. His wallop should have floored a horse and kept it down, yet here this guy was, on his feet once more and coming at him.

Clegg lost a great chance then, those seconds which he squandered staring. He moved at last, but then it was too late. The bell rang, and the round was over.

The fans were strangely silent in the minute interval. They stared with fascination at Sky Shannon, while he stared steadily at the sky. It even seemed that strength was flowing rapidly into his body. The proof of this came at the bell when Shannon left his stool. He left it low and fast. He met Clegg in Clegg's corner, and crashed a right against Clegg's nose. Blood spurted, and Clegg covered up like a turtle.

Only his eyes were visible, and the look in them was strange, unbelieving. He had given everything he had, and this crazy man was bringing the fight to him.

Shannon stepped away, and Clegg rushed him. It was a swinging, sort of desperate rush, as if Clegg had to prove to himself that he was wrong.

He didn't prove it. Shannon stepped inside his swings and slashed two wicked smashes at his face. Sky Shannon's eyes were not calm now. They were flat, expressionless, impersonal. Clegg caught their impact as he staggered back. Clegg's lips twitched, and he drew a quick, hard breath.

Clegg tried to fight, but the smoke had left his punches. Something inside him had left too. That was the most striking thing of all. It robbed him of co-ordination, courage, and the will to fight. It left him as

a hulking, blundering bulk, shrinking like a dog from punishment.

Sky Shannon became a pitiless machine. The expression on his face was one of sheer distaste, the hard expression of a man who steels himself to do a nasty job.

He could have knocked Clegg out. He didn't do it. Instead, he chopped Clegg's face into a bloody mess. He hammered the man's confidence and his inherent viciousness into a quivering heap which would never rise again in Mercer. It had to be done before the citizens of Mercer, and that's the job Sky Shannon did.

He did it thoroughly before he applied the mercy punch. It finally blasted on

Clegg's jaw, and knocked him kicking for the third and final time.

A half-hour later Shannon said goodbye to Pete and Mary. Pete's face was red with arguing, and Mary was crying frankly.

"But Sky," Pete pleaded, "you can't do this. You can't just wander off alone. This town needs guys like you."

"Thanks, Pete," said Shannon. "But I've got to go—that's all."

"But—why?" asked Mary tearfully.

"I—I don't know," said Shannon very slowly. "I honestly don't know. So long, kids, and the best of luck."