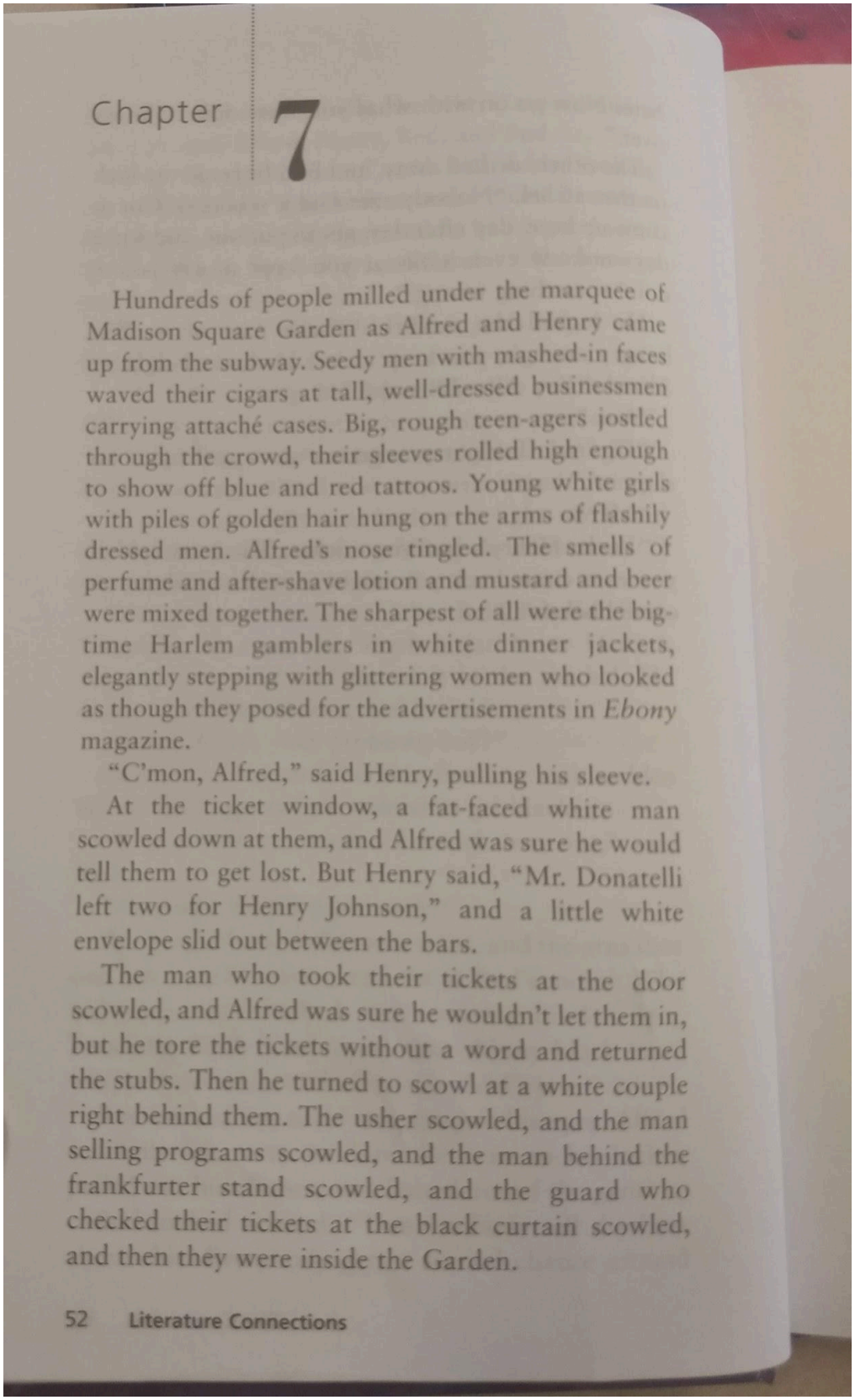
The Contender Chapter 7



Chapter 7

Hundreds of people milled under the marquee of Madison Square Garden as Alfred and Henry came up from the subway. Seedy men with mashed-in faces waved their cigars at tall, well-dressed businessmen carrying attaché cases. Big, rough teen-agers jostled through the crowd, their sleeves rolled high enough to show off blue and red tattoos. Young white girls with piles of golden hair hung on the arms of flashily dressed men. Alfred's nose tingled. The smells of perfume and after-shave lotion and mustard and beer were mixed together. The sharpest of all were the big-time Harlem gamblers in white dinner jackets, elegantly stepping with glittering women who looked as though they posed for the advertisements in *Ebony* magazine.

"C'mon, Alfred," said Henry, pulling his sleeve.

At the ticket window, a fat-faced white man scowled down at them, and Alfred was sure he would tell them to get lost. But Henry said, "Mr. Donatelli left two for Henry Johnson," and a little white envelope slid out between the bars.

The man who took their tickets at the door scowled, and Alfred was sure he wouldn't let them in, but he tore the tickets without a word and returned the stubs. Then he turned to scowl at a white couple right behind them. The usher scowled, and the man selling programs scowled, and the man behind the frankfurter stand scowled, and the guard who checked their tickets at the black curtain scowled, and then they were inside the Garden.

Alfred caught his breath. It was huge. It was almost a circle, and the seats rose right up the walls toward a ceiling of cables and beams. In the center of the floor, gleaming white under hundreds of spotlights, was the ring. The ropes were wrapped in red velvet.

"Keep movin'." Someone stepped on the back of his shoe, and Alfred stumbled on. Three more scowling men, in blue uniforms, pointed them on until they reached their seats—attached wooden chairs on the arena floor ten rows away from the ring.

A dignified little man in a bright blue tuxedo climbed through the ropes and pulled down a microphone from the tangle of wires and blazing lights over the ring. He asked them all to please rise for the national anthem. The music swelled out of an organ and boomed through the half-empty arena, sending little shivers up Alfred's spine.

"Hey, brothers, how's it goin'?" Jelly Belly plopped into a seat next to Henry, his great stomach bouncing under a pink sport shirt. He peered over at Alfred. "You the one nearly got caught in the middle of that thing today? Yeah, didn't recognize you in the Sunday suit."

Self-consciously, Alfred began to loosen his tie, but Jelly Belly tapped his hand. "Don't, brother, we need a little class around here."

"Did you see Willie?" asked Henry.

"Just came from him," said Jelly Belly.

"How is he?"

"He's Willie, y'know what I mean? Mr. Donatelli's in there, telling him just how to fight Becker and Willie is nodding his head and everybody knows, sure as hunger, Willie's gonna go in there and do it *his* way."

"I read in the paper coming down here," said Alfred, "that Willie Streeter could be the next champion."

"Mr. Donatelli's counting on it," said Henry.

Jelly Belly bounced up. "Chow time. Anybody want a hot dog?" He waved at one of the hot dog vendors.

"Hey, Jelly," said Henry, "you know Mr. Donatelli said you gotta cut down on all that—"

"You lightweights gotta worry about the pounds," said Jelly, winking at Alfred, "but us heavies need to keep up our strength."

The preliminary bouts were a blur of bodies and punches for Alfred, but he jumped up every time Henry and Jelly did. He nodded when Jelly poked him and said, "Some hook Chico's got, huh?", and he tried to look knowing when Henry yelled, "Y'ever see footwork like that, Alfred?"

He tried to follow the action, but he kept thinking about the day he and James found the boxing and wrestling magazine on the street. They flipped right past the boxing section to the wrestling pictures. James decided they should become professional wrestlers, and he made up their names. Mosely of the Jungle and Bad Brooks. When they got back to Alfred's stoop, James started jumping up and down, pounding on his chunky chest and howling so loud people leaned out of their windows to watch. Alfred fell off the stoop laughing, and James ran down and put a foot on his stomach. An old lady stared at them, and James growled, "That's how Mosely of the Jungle triumphs. They all die laughing." Alfred tried to push the thought away and concentrate on the fights.

"Here we go," said Henry.

Mr. Donatelli, solid and square, moved down the

aisle, clearing a path for Willie Streeter, a tall, handsome Negro who waved to the crowd. He wore a white robe with his name on the back. Bud Martin and Dr. Corey were right behind him. The crowd started cheering and clapping even before Willie slipped gracefully through the ropes into the ring, and sat down on a three-legged stool. He sat there quietly, as Donatelli whispered in his ear and Dr. Corey and Bud knelt to massage his arms and legs. The three older men were wearing long-sleeved white sweaters with willie streeeter written across the back in red letters.

The ring announcer pulled the microphone down again. "Ladeeez . . . and gentlemen. A ten-round bout. In this corner, wearing black trunks and weighing one hundred seventy-four pounds, from Houston, Texas . . . Junius Becker."

There was some polite applause and a few boos. Half a dozen people sitting together near ringside cheered for Becker.

"And in this corner, in white trunks"—the crowd began to cheer loudly and steadily—"weighing one hundred seventy-four and one-half pounds, from New York City . . . Willie Streeter."

The cheering and the applause grew as Willie stood up. He smiled and waved a red glove at the crowd. So cool, thought Alfred. So confident. He settled back to watch Willie beat up poor old Junius.

The first few rounds were slow. Willie and Junius were circling, throwing out punches that were easy to duck or knock away. Henry was squirming in his seat, "Stick him, Willie, keep him off balance."

Jelly, his voice becoming shrill, shouted, "Move in on 'im, Willie, please, Willie."

Between the rounds, Willie nodded as Donatelli whispered in his ear. Alfred tried to imagine himself

up there, taking a long drink of water from the taped-up bottle in Bud's hand, spitting it out in one long stream into a bucket, opening his mouth so Dr. Corey could jam in the white mouthpiece.

The bell rang, and both fighters rushed together, Willie's left arm pumping out like a machine, slamming into Becker's face, rocking him backward against the red velvet ropes.

"Keep on 'im, Willie, don't let him rest," shrieked Jelly.

Henry shouted, "Stick, stick . . . Look at him, Alfred, he's . . ."

Whatever Henry said next was swallowed in the crowd's roar as the two fighters smashed into each other, banging heads and stumbling backwards. Becker fell to one knee, his gloves on the canvas floor.

The referee began counting, "One . . . two . . . three . . ." Becker shook his head, as if to clear it. ". . . four . . . five . . . six . . ." Then he climbed to his feet. ". . . seven . . . eight." The referee wiped Becker's gloves on his gray shirt and stepped aside, signaling the two men to continue boxing.

Suddenly the crowd went, "Oooooohhhhh," and Jelly leaned toward Alfred. "He's hurt."

Willie was bleeding. It looked like a deep cut to Alfred, right on the outside corner of Willie's left eye.

"Willie's in trouble," said Jelly.

Alfred saw it immediately. Becker was aiming his punches at the bleeding eye, and all the fight seemed to be draining out of Willie. He wasn't attacking anymore, he was just dancing backwards, his gloves up in front of his face. Becker rushed in, punching away at the unprotected belly. All Willie's coolness and confidence seemed to be gone.

At the end of the round, Donatelli, Bud, and Dr. Corey swarmed over Willie. Bud moved in with a gob

of yellowish paste on the tip of his finger, but the manager waved it away. He peered at the cut eye and called over the referee. Suddenly, the crowd was booing and Junius Becker was waving his arms and Willie Streeter was trying to struggle away from Bud and the dentist.

"What happened?" asked Alfred.

"Technical knockout, TKO," said Henry. "Mr. Donatelli had the fight stopped."

The crowd continued to boo as Donatelli and Bud each grabbed one of Willie's arms and dragged him down the ring steps and up the aisle.

Jelly jumped up. "Come on," he said.

It took them fifteen minutes to work their way through the crowd, even with Jelly's belly leading the way. On all sides the booing rose, and a man cupped flabby hands around his mouth and yelled, "Ya sissy, I cut myself worse shaving every morning."

They finally entered a long, dim tunnel. A big guard stood cross-armed in front of a closed door.

"Sorry, fellas, you can't come . . . Oh, Jelly, how are ya?" He unlocked the door and waved them into a large room, bare except for some benches and old lockers. Willie was sitting on an upholstered table, clenching and unclenching his taped hands as a doctor worked on his eye. Donatelli was whispering to him, and Bud and Dr. Corey were shaking their heads. Two men with State Athletic Commission badges on their jackets were staring up at the ceiling. The only other person in the room, a husky young man with a broken nose, came over to Jelly, his hand outstretched.

"My man Spoon," said Jelly, grabbing the hand. "What's the mood?"

"Not good," whispered Spoon, loosening his tie from his button-down collar.

"How's Willie taking it?"

"We'll see in a minute."

The doctor put a strip of white adhesive tape over Willie's cut, and left. Willie touched it, tapped it, blinked his eye, and whirled on Donatelli. "I woulda won and you know it, I woulda won that fight, I woulda . . ."

The manager's face reddened, and it seemed to Alfred that he swallowed down something he was about to say.

"Look, Willie, do you want to go through life with one eye, for one lousy fight?"

"Nothing wrong with my eye," yelled Willie, as Donatelli, his mouth a slit, turned away. "You can't even look at me after what you did, throwin' in the towel like that."

"Talk about it tomorrow," said Donatelli.

"Right now," yelled Willie, jumping off the table. His eyes swept his audience, all looking at their shoes. "If you're scared of a little blood, I can get a manager who isn't."

"Go right ahead," said Donatelli.

"You watch your mouth," growled Bud, grabbing Willie's arm. "After what you did in there tonight you oughta be down on your knees to that man, give you a way to save your gutless damn face—"

"Bud, leave him alone," said Donatelli.

"No chance, Vito," said Bud. Willie tried to jerk his arm loose, but the thin fingers tightened. "You never did know the difference between pain and injury, did you, Willie, you was always so—"

"Leave him alone," said Donatelli. He looked very tired.

Spoon raised his eyebrows at Jelly, who nodded and gently pushed Alfred and Henry toward the door. "We better go."

Out in the corridor, the guard touched Jelly's shoulder. "What's going on in there?"

"Nothing much."

"What's all the yelling?"

"Very painful stitches," said Spoon, his dark face expressionless.

"Oh."

The four of them walked toward a red exit sign. Spoon was shaking his head. "Too bad. Mr. Donatelli was really counting on Willie to go all the way."

"But it's just one defeat," said Henry.

"More than that," said Jelly. "Willie showed some dog tonight."

"Dog?" asked Alfred.

"It's true," said Spoon, stopping. "It was a bad cut, but if Willie had forgotten about it and kept pressing Becker he would have won, he might even have knocked him out in that round. But he got scared, it was the first time he had ever gotten hurt, really hurt, and he got scared. The way he concentrated on protecting that eye left him wide open, and Becker was sure to hurt him somewhere else. Mr. Donatelli saw that and stopped the fight, to save him from being hurt and to save him, I think, from showing himself a coward in front of the crowd. I can't think of another manager who would have done that."

"Me either," said Jelly. He grinned. "Same old Spoon. You're still giving lectures."

Spoon smiled and opened the exit door. "Sometimes I forget I'm not in front of a classroom."

A crowd of older men stood in front of the Garden, arguing about the fight. A workman on a ladder was pulling Willie Streeter's name off the marquee, letter by letter.

"I'm driving uptown," said Spoon. "Can I give anyone a lift?"

"Thanks," said Jelly, "but I got a girl friend lives around the corner and I promised to do her a favor tonight. She goes to cook and baker's school and I'm gonna check her homework."

"Same old Jelly Belly."

"I'm a growing boy, Spoon. I think these guys are going uptown. You know Henry Johnson, and this is a new tiger comin' around the gym. I don't even know his name."

"Alfred Brooks."

"Hi, I'm Bill Witherspoon." He shook hands with Henry and Alfred, and tapped the front of Jelly's pink shirt. "School's out in a few days, Horace. I'm coming up to the gym and see if I can whip some of that belly off you."

"All muscle," said Jelly. "Be good, men."

Spoon's car was an old blue Plymouth, and the three of them squeezed into the front. The back seat was covered with papers and books.

"Sorry you're so crowded," he said, moving the car into traffic, "but I'm studying for my permanent teacher's license and I've been collecting every scrap of paper I can get my hands on." He stopped for a light, and looked at Alfred. "Do you want to be a fighter?"

"I'm going to try," said Alfred. The light changed and Spoon looked away. Alfred watched the street lights play on Spoon's face. There were thin scars around his eyebrows, and two crossed blue scars on the bridge of his battered nose. "I saw your name on a fight poster up in the gym."

"Did you?" Spoon smiled out at the traffic. "For a while I was rated the Number Seven light-heavyweight contender."

Alfred leaned forward. "How come you quit?"

"It was very simple. One day, Mr. Donatelli said,

'Billy, I think it's time.' That's all he said. 'Billy, I think it's time.'"

"Why was that?"

"I was beginning to take too much punishment. I was winning, but I was starting to get hit regularly. This thing," he touched his nose, "was a big part of it. I argued, of course, but there isn't much point arguing with the boss unless you're right and he's just testing you. He told me he felt I should go back to college, full-time. I had taken a few courses at night. I had the money he made me save while I was going good, and I still had my eyesight and my hearing and my brain in one piece. I graduated from City College and I started substitute teaching. Last year I married a teacher. Mr. Donatelli was the best man." Spoon shrugged. "There I go, another speech. You fellows better tell me where to turn."

They rode the rest of the way in silence, Spoon driving carefully as the clean, well-kept buildings in the quiet white neighborhoods gave way to shabby houses on streets filled with black children and garbage. Once Henry whispered something to him, but Alfred let it go by—he was too busy winning the championship of the world, doing everything Mr. Donatelli told him to, never getting hurt or in trouble, smiling modestly down at Jelly and Spoon and Bud and Dr. Corey as the referee raised his arm.

"It's a long road, Alfred."

"Huh?" The car was parked in front of Henry's house, and Spoon was smiling at him.

"It's all right. I still have daydreams about what might have been." Spoon offered his hand. "Nice meeting you, Alfred, and seeing you again, Henry."

"You'll be coming up the gym?" asked Alfred.

"I'll be there. Good night."

"Good night. Thanks for the ride."

The car pulled away, and Henry tugged at his sleeve. "Want to sit on the stoop for a while?"

"I got to run tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Well, take it easy."

"Yeah."

Alfred took a few steps, then turned. "Henry?"

"Yeah?"

"Henry, I want to . . . uh, well, thanks a lot, Henry, you and your father too, for carrying me home that night."

Henry's thin face beamed. "Oh, sure, man, that's all right. You got KO'd, right? Can't win 'em all."

"Thanks."

He walked fast, in a hurry to get into bed and play the whole day back in his mind. The policemen on the corner raised their eyebrows at him, smiling and nodding like that, and the people on the stoop he waved to looked at each other, but Joe Louis had a good word for everybody and Sugar Ray and Cassius were men enough to be sweet. He started to say hello to the three boys standing in front of his stoop, but the word died in his throat when they turned around.

"Where you been, Uncle Alfred? We been waiting up all night for you," said Hollis.

"Now, let's us take a little walk," said Major, grabbing his arm.