

NORMAN MAILER

The Presidential Papers



NEW YORK

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

THE ELEVENTH PRESIDENTIAL PAPER

—Death

Ten Thousand Words a Minute

Champions are prodigies of will—one of the elements which separates them from club fighters or contenders is an urge which carries them through crises other fighters are not willing to endure. Thus the chance is always present that a champion can be killed in the ring. This of course was the underlying theme in the first Patterson-Liston fight; its echoes appear throughout the piece.

The close relation of death to existential politics need not be forced. The formal argument is doubtless beyond one's means, but it could be said that just as matters such as conscience or moral decision make up intrinsic dilemmas for the language analysts of Anglo-American philosophy, so the reluctance of modern European existentialism to take on the logical continuation of the existential vision (that there is a life after death which can be as existential as life itself) has brought French and German existentialism to a halt on this uninhabitable terrain of the absurd—to wit, man must lead his life as if death is meaningful even when man knows that death is meaningless. This revealed knowledge which Heidegger accepts as his working hypothesis and Sartre goes so far as to assume is the certainty upon which he may build a philosophy, ends the possibility that one can construct a base for the existential ethic. The German philosopher runs aground trying to demonstrate the necessity for man to discover an authentic life. Heidegger can give no deeper explanation why man should bother to be authentic

than to state in effect that man should be authentic in order to be free. Sartre's advocacy of the existential commitment is always in danger of dwindling into the minor aristocratic advocacy of leading one's life with style for the sake of style. Existentialism is rootless unless one dares the hypothesis that death is an existential continuation of life, that the soul may either pass through migrations, or cease to exist in the continuum of nature (which is the unspoken intimation of cancer). But accepting this hypothesis, authenticity and commitment return to the center of ethics, for man then faces no peril so huge as alienation from his own soul, a death which is other than death, a disappearance into nothingness rather than into Eternity.

This idea is taken up in "Ten Thousand Words a Minute"; it comes to brief overt focus after the description of the Paret-Griffith fight, and for that matter is repeated with variations through many of the papers in this book. In the December column in *Esquire* there is a section not printed here in the *Miscellany*, which speaks of Dr. Robert A. Soblen's suicide. He was an elderly man convicted by America for espionage, but let out on bail during his appeal because he was dying of cancer. Jumping his bail, he escaped by airplane to Israel. Forbidden to enter that country, he tried on his enforced return to America to commit suicide in England.

He is condemned to go to jail for life, he is doomed to die of cancer, and yet, obviously dissatisfied with the notion that his fate is final, he makes two curious attempts at suicide.

Obviously there is a difference to him in the way he dies. He seems to have a mania not to die in an American jail. His instinct tells him to clear a space, to find a private place in which to die. But he expresses his instinct with the power of a major passion. It gives a hint of the secret. It suggests that the way we die, the style of our death, its condition, its mood, its witness, is not trivial. May it be that the way we die affects the direction in which our death may turn? Soblen is deep in cancer. Can it be that one can die profoundly deep in cancer or not nearly so deep?

We are apparently a light-year away from political pre-occupations and yet it is a distance which must be traversed. In the Middle Ages man endured his life as a preparation for his death, and lived out this displacement so com-

pletely that life was in danger of perishing by famine, plague, and the untamed encroachments of nature. Modern man, in conquest of nature, chooses to ignore death and violate its logic. The result may be a destruction not only of life, but of Being, of our route from the world to Eternity and back again. A politics devoted exclusively to the immediate needs of society murders death as absolutely as theology once massacred the possibilities of life.

Remember that old joke about three kinds of intelligence: human, animal, and military? Well, if there are three kinds of writers: novelists, poets, and *reporters*, there is certainly a gulf between the poet and the novelist; quite apart from the kind of living they make, poets invariably seem to be aristocrats, usually spoiled beyond repair; and novelists—even if they make a million, or have large talent—look to have something of the working class about them. Maybe it is the drudgery, the long, obsessive inner life, the day-to-day monotony of applying themselves to the middle of the same continuing job, or perhaps it is the business of being unappreciated at home—has anyone met a novelist who is happy with the rugged care provided by his wife?

Now, of course, I am tempted to round the image out and say reporters belong to the middle class. Only I do not know if I can push the metaphor. Taken one by one, it is true that reporters tend to be hardheaded, objective, and unimaginative. Their intelligence is sound but unexceptional and they have the middle-class penchant for collecting tales, stories, legends, accounts of practical jokes, details of negotiation, bits of memoir—all those capsules of fiction which serve the middle class as a substitute for ethics and/or culture. Reporters, like shopkeepers, tend to be worshipful of the fact which wins and so covers over the other facts. In the middle class, the remark, "He made a lot of money," ends the conversation. If you persist, if you try to point out that the money was made by digging through his grandmother's grave to look for oil, you are met with a middle-class shrug. "It's a question of taste whether one should get into the past," is the winning reply.

In his own person there is nobody more practical than a reporter. He exhibits the same avidity for news which a businessman will show for money. No bourgeois will hesitate to pick up a dollar, even if he is not fond of the man with whom he deals: so, a reporter will do a nice story about

a type he dislikes, or a bad story about a figure he is fond of. It has nothing to do with his feelings. There is a logic to news—on a given day, with a certain meteorological drift to the winds in the mass media, a story can only ride along certain vectors. To expect a reporter to be true to the precise detail of an event is kin to the sentimentality which asks a fast revolving investor to be faithful to a particular stock in his portfolio when it is going down and his others are going up.

But here we come to the end of our image. When the middle class gather for a club meeting or a social function, the atmosphere is dependably dull, whereas ten reporters come together in a room for a story are slightly hysterical, and two hundred reporters and photographers congregated for a press conference are as void of dignity, even stuffed-up, stodgy, middle-class dignity, as a slew of monkeys tearing through the brush. There is reason for this, much reason; there is always urgency to get some quotation which is usable for their story, and afterward, find a telephone: the habitat of a reporter, at its worst, is identical to spending one's morning, afternoon and evening transferring from the rush hour of one subway train to the rush hour of another. In time even the best come to remind one of the rush hour. An old fight reporter is a sad sight, he looks like an old prizefight manager, which is to say, he looks like an old cigar butt.

Nor is this true only of sports reporters. They are gifted with charm compared to political reporters who give off an effluvium which is unadulterated cancer gulch. I do not think I exaggerate. There is an odor to any Press Headquarters which is unmistakable. One may begin by saying it is like the odor in small left-wing meeting halls, except it is worse, far worse, for there is no poverty to put a guilt-free iron into the nose; on the contrary, everybody is getting free drinks, free sandwiches, free news releases. Yet there is the unavoidable smell of flesh burning quietly and slowly in the service of a machine. Have any of you never been through the smoking car of an old coach early in the morning when the smokers sleep and the stale air settles into congelations of gloom? Well, that is a little like the scent of Press Headquarters. Yet the difference is vast, because Press Headquarters for any big American event is invariably a large room in a large hotel, usually the largest room in the largest hotel in town. Thus it is a commercial room in a commercial hotel. The walls must be pale green or pale pink,

dirty by now, subtly dirty like the toe of a silk stocking. (Which is incidentally the smell of the plaster.) One could be meeting bureaucrats from Tashkent in the Palace of the Soviets. One enormous barefaced meeting room, a twenty-foot banner up, a proscenium arch at one end, with high Gothic windows painted within the arch—almost never does a window look out on the open air. (Hotels build banquet rooms on the *inside* of their buildings—it is the best way to fill internal space with revenue.)

This room is in fever. Two hundred, three hundred, I suppose even five hundred reporters get into some of these rooms, there to talk, there to drink, there to bang away on any one of fifty standard typewriters, provided by the people on Public Relations who have set up this Press Headquarters. It is like being at a vast party in Limbo—there is tremendous excitement, much movement and no sex at all. Just talk. Talk fed by cigarettes. One thousand to two thousand cigarettes are smoked every hour. The mind must keep functioning fast enough to offer up stories. (Reporters meet as in a marketplace to trade their stories—they barter an anecdote they cannot use about one of the people in the event in order to pick up a different piece which is usable by their paper. It does not matter if the story is true or altogether not true, it must merely be suitable and not too mechanically libelous.) So they char the inside of their bodies in order to scrape up news which can go out to the machine, that enormous machine, that intellectual leviathan which is obliged to eat each day, tidbits, gristle, gravel, garbage cans, charlotte russe, old rubber tires, T-bone steaks, wet cardboard, dry leaves, apple pie, broken bottles, dog food, shells, roach powder, dry ball-point pens, grapefruit juice. All the trash, all the garbage, all the slop and a little of the wealth go out each day and night into the belly of that old American goat, our newspapers.

So the reporters smell also of this work, they smell of the dishwasher and the pots, they are flesh burning themselves very quietly and slowly in the service of a machine which feeds goats, which feeds The Goat. One smells this collective odor on the instant one enters their meeting room. It is not a corrupt smell, it does not have enough of the meats, the savory, and the vitality of flesh to smell corrupt and fearful when it is bad, no, it is more the smell of excessive respect for power, the odor of flesh gutted by avidities which are electric and empty. I suppose it is the bleak smell one could

find on the inside of one's head during a bad cold, full of fever, badly used, burned out of mood. The physical sensation of a cold often is one of power trapped corrosively inside, coils of strength being liquidated in some center of the self. The reporter hangs in a powerless-power—his voice directly, or via the rewrite desk indirectly, reaches out to millions of readers; the more readers he owns, the less he can say. He is forbidden by a hundred censors, most of them inside himself, to communicate notions, which are not conformistically simple, simple like plastic is simple, that is to say, monotonous. Therefore a reporter forms a habit equivalent to lacerating the flesh: he learns to write what he does not naturally believe. Since he did not start presumably with the desire to be a bad writer or a dishonest writer, he ends by bludgeoning his brain into believing that something which is half true is in fact—since he creates a fact each time he puts something into a newspaper—nineteenths true. A psyche is debauched—his own; a false fact is created. For which fact, sooner or later, inevitably, inexorably, the public will pay. A nation which forms detailed opinions on the basis of detailed fact which is askew from the subtle reality becomes a nation of citizens whose psyches are skewed, item by detailed item, away from *any* reality.

So great guilt clings to reporters. They know they help to keep America slightly insane. As a result perhaps they are a shabby-looking crew. The best of them are the shabbiest, which is natural if one thinks about it—a sensitive man suffers from the prosperous life of his lies more than a dull man. In fact the few dudes one finds among reporters tend to be semi-illiterates, or hatchet men, or cynics on two or three payrolls who do restrained public relations in the form of news stories. But this is to make too much of the extremes. Reporters along the middle of the spectrum are shabby, worried, guilty, and suffer each day from the damnable anxiety that they know all sorts of powerful information a half hour to twenty-four hours before anyone else in America knows it, not to mention the time clock ticking away in the vault of all those stories which cannot be printed or will not be printed. It makes for a livid view of existence. It is like an injunction to become hysterical once a day. Then they must write at lightning speed. It may be heavy-fisted but true, it may be slick as a barnyard slide, it may be great, it may be fill—what does it matter? The matter rides out like oats in a conveyor belt, and the un-

conscious takes a ferocious pounding. Writing is of use to the psyche only if the writer discovers something he did not know he knew in the act itself of writing. That is why a few men will go through hell in order to keep writing—Joyce and Proust, for example. Being a writer can save one from insanity or cancer; being a bad writer can drive one smack into the center of the plague. Think of the poor reporter who does not have the leisure of the novelist or the poet to discover what he thinks. The unconscious gives up, buries itself, leaves the writer to his cliché, and saves the truth, or that part of it the reporter is yet privileged to find, for his colleagues and his friends. A good reporter is a man who must still tell you the truth privately; he has bright harsh eyes and can relate ten good stories in a row standing at a bar.

Still, they do not quit. That charge of adrenalin once a day, that hysteria, that sense of powerless-power close to the engines of history—they can do without powerless-power no more than a gentleman junkie on the main line can do without his heroin, doctor. You see, a reporter is close to the action. He is not *of* the action, but he is close to it, as close as a crab louse to the begetting of a child. One may never be President, but the photographer working for his paper has the power to cock a flashbulb and make the eyes of JFK go blink!

However, it is not just this lead-encased seat near the radiations of power which keeps the reporter hooked on a drug of new news to start new adrenalin; it is also the ride. It is the free ride. When we were children, there were those movies about reporters; they were heroes. While chasing a lead, they used to leap across empty elevator shafts, they would wrestle automatics out of mobsters' hands, and if they were Cary Grant, they would pick up a chair and stick it in the lion's face, since the lion had had the peculiar sense to walk into the editor's office. Next to being a cowboy, or a private eye, the most heroic activity in America was to be a reporter. Now it is the welfare state. Every last cigar-smoking fraud of a middle-aged reporter, pale with prison pallor, deep lines in his cheeks, writing daily pieties for the sheet back home about free enterprise, is himself the first captive of the welfare state. It is the best free ride anyone will find since he left his family's chest. Your room is paid for by the newspaper, your trips to the particular spots attached to the event—in this case, the training camp

at Elgin, Illinois, for Patterson, and the empty racetrack at Aurora Downs for Liston—are by chartered limousine. Who but a Soviet bureaucrat, a British businessman, a movie star, or an American reporter would ride in a chartered limousine? (They smell like funeral parlors.) Your typing paper is free if you want it; your seat at the fight, or your ticket to the convention is right up there, under the ropes; your meals if you get around to eating them are free, free sandwiches only but then a reporter has a stomach like a shaving mug and a throat like a hog's trough: he couldn't tell steak tartare from *guacamole*. And the drinks—if you are at a big fight—are without charge. If you are at a political convention, there is no free liquor. But you do have a choice between free Pepsi-Cola and free Coca-Cola. The principle seems to be that the reporting of mildly psychotic actions—such as those performed by politicians—should be made in sobriety; whereas a sane estimate of an athlete's chances are neatest on booze. At a fight Press Headquarters, the drinks are very free, and the mood can even be half convivial. At the Patterson-Liston Press Headquarters there was a head bartender working for Championship Sports whose name was Archie. He was nice. He was a nice man. It was a pleasure to get a drink from him. You remember these things afterward, it's part of the nostalgia. The joy of the free ride is the lack of worry. It's like being in an Army outfit which everyone's forgotten. You get your food, you get your beer, you get your pay, the work is easy, and leave to town is routine. You never had it so good—you're an infant again: you can grow up a second time and improve the job.

That's the half and half of being a reporter. One half is addiction, adrenalin, anecdote-shopping, deadlines, dread, cigar smoke, lung cancer, vomit, feeding The Goat; the other is Aloha, Tahiti, old friends and the free ride to the eleventh floor of the Sheraton-Chicago, Patterson-Liston Press Headquarters, everything free. Even your news free. If you haven't done your homework, if you drank too late last night and missed the last limousine out to Elgin or Aurora this morning, if there's no poop of your own on Floyd's speed or Sonny's bad mood, you can turn to the hand-outs given you in the Press Kit, dig, a *Kit*, kiddies, worked up for you by Harold Conrad who's the Public Relations Director. It's not bad stuff, it's interesting material. No need to do your own research. Look at some of this: there's the

tale of the tape for each fighter with as many physical measurements as a tailor in Savile Row might take; there's the complete record of each fighter, how he won, how many rounds, who, the date, so forth; there's the record of how much money they made on each fight, how their KO records compare with the All-Time Knockout Artists, Rocky Marciano with 43 out of 49, batting .878, Joe Louis at .761, Floyd at .725 (29 in 40) and Sonny Liston going with 23 for 34, is down at .676, back of Jim Jeffries who comes in at .696. There's a column there, there's another if you want to dig into the biographies of each fighter, six single-spaced pages on Patterson, four on Liston. There's a list of each and every fighter who won and lost the Heavyweight Championship, and the year—remember? Remember Jake Kilrain and Marvin Hart (stopped Jack Root at Reno, Nevada, 12 rounds, July 3, 1905). You can win money with Marvin Hart betting in bars. And Tommy Burns. Jack O'Brien. In what year did Ezzard Charles first take Jersey Joe Walcott; in what town? You can see the different columns shaping up. If you got five columns to do on the fight, three can be whipped right up out of Graff/Reiner/Smith Enterprises, Inc. Sports News Release. Marvelous stuff. How Sonny Liston does his roadwork on railroad tracks, what Sonny's best weight is (206-212), what kind of pound-ages Floyd likes to give away—averages 10 pounds a bout—Floyd's style in boxing, Liston's style in boxing. It's part of the free list, an offering of facts with a little love from the Welfare State.

It is so easy, so much is done for you, that you remember these days with nostalgia. When you do get around to paying for yourself, going into a room like the Camelot Room at the Sheraton-Chicago, with its black-blood three-story mahogany paneling and its high, stained Gothic windows looking out no doubt on an air shaft, it is a joy to buy your own food, an odd smacking sensation to pay for a drink. It is the Welfare State which makes the pleasure possible. When one buys all one's own drinks, the sensation of paying cash is without much joy, but to pay for a drink occasionally—that's near bliss.

And because it is a fight, cancer gulch has its few oases. The Press Headquarters livens up with luminaries, the unhealthiest people in America now meet some of the healthiest, complete self-contained healthy bodies which pass modestly through: Ingemar Johansson and Archie Moore, Rocky

Marciano, Barney Ross, Cassius Clay, Harold Johnson, Ezard Charles, Dick Tiger on his way to San Francisco where he is to fight Gene Fullmer and beat him, Jim Braddock—big, heavy, grey, and guarded, looking as tough as steel drilled into granite, as if he were the toughest night watchman in America, and Joe Louis looking like the largest Chinaman in the world, still sleepy, still sad. That's part of the pleasure of Press Headquarters—the salty crystallized memories which are released from the past, the night ten or eleven years ago when Joe Louis, looking just as sleepy and as sad as he does now, went in to fight Rocky Marciano at the Garden, and was knocked out in eight. It was part of a comeback, but Louis was never able to get his fight going at all, he was lethargic that night, and Marciano, fighting a pure Italian street-fighter's style, throwing his punches as if he held a brick in each hand, taking Louis' few good shots with an animal joy, strong enough to eat bricks with his teeth, drove right through Joe Louis and knocked him out hard. Louis went over in a long, very inert fall, as if an old tree or a momentous institution were coming down, perhaps the side of a church wall hovering straight and slow enough in its drop for the onlooker to take a breath in the gulf of the bomb. And it had been a bomb. Louis' leg was draped over the rope. People were crying as they left Madison Square Garden that night. It was a little like the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: something generous had just gone out of the world. And now here was Marciano as well, in the couloirs and coffee shop and lobby of the Sheraton-Chicago, a man looking as different from the young contender he had been on his way to the championship as Louis now looked the same. Louis had turned old in the ring. Marciano retired undefeated, and so aged after he stopped. Now he seemed no longer to be carrying bricks but pillows. He had gotten very plump, his face was round and no longer lumpy, he was half bald, a large gentle monk with a bemused, misty, slightly tricky expression.

And there were others, Bill Hartack, Jack Kearns who at eighty-plus still looked to be one of the most intelligent men in America, Sammy Taub, the old radio announcer who used to talk as fast as the cars on the Indianapolis Speedway, "and he hits him another left to the belly, and another, and another, and a right to the head, and a left to the head." Taub made bums sound like champions—it is doubtful if there was ever a fighter who could throw punches

fast enough to keep up with Taub, and now he was an old man, a grandfather, a bright, short man with a birdlike face, a little like a tiny older version of Leonard Lyons.

There were many, there were so many, preliminary fighters who got their money together to get to Chicago, and managers, and promoters. There were novelists, Jimmy Baldwin, Budd Schulberg, Gerald Kersh, Ben Hecht. As the fight approached, so did the Mob. That arid atmosphere of reporters alone with reporters and writers with writers gave way to a whiff of the deep. The Mob was like birds and beasts coming in to feed. Heavy types, bouncers, plug-uglies, flatteners, one or two speedy, swishing, Negro ex-boxers, for example, now blown up to the size of fat middle-weights, slinky in their walk, eyes fulfilling the operative definition of razor slits, murder coming off them like scent comes off a skunk. You could feel death as they passed. It came wafting off. And the rest of the beasts as well—the strong-arm men, the head-kickers, the limb-breakers, the groin-stompers. If a clam had a muscle as large as a man, and the muscle grew eyes, you would get the mood. Those were the beasts. They were all orderly, they were all trained, they were dead to humor. They never looked at anyone they did not know, and when they were introduced they stared at the floor while shaking hands as if their own hand did not belong to them, but was merely a stuffed mitten to which their arm was attached.

The orders came from the birds. There were hawks and falcons and crows, Italian dons looking like little old shrunken eagles, gulls, pelicans, condors. The younger birds stood around at modest strategic points in the lobby, came up almost not at all to Press Headquarters, posted themselves out on the street, stood at the head of escalators, near the door of the barbershop, along the elevator strip, by the registration desk. They were all dressed in black gabardine top-coats, black felt hats, and very large dark sunglasses with expensive frames. They wore white scarves or black scarves. A few would carry a black umbrella. They stood there watching everyone who passed. They gave the impression of knowing exactly why they were standing there, what they were waiting to hear, how they were supposed to see, who they were supposed to watch. One had the certainty after a time that they knew the name of every man and woman who walked through the downstairs lobby and went into the Championship Sports office on the ground floor. If a figure

said hello to a celebrity he was not supposed to know—at least not in the bird's private handbook—one could sense the new information being filed. Some were tall, some were short, but almost all were thin, their noses were aquiline, their chins were modest, their cheeks were subtly concave. They bore a resemblance to George Scott in *The Hustler*. Their aura was succinct. It said, "If you spit on my shoes, you're dead." It was a shock to realize that the Mob, in the flesh, was even more impressive than in the motion pictures.

There were also some fine old *mafiosos* with faces one had seen on the busts of Venetian doges in the Ducal Palace, subtle faces, insidious with the ingrowth of a curious culture built on treachery, dogma, the evil eye, and blood loyalty to clan. They were *don capos*, and did not wear black any longer, black was for subalterns. They were the leaders of the birds, fine old gentlemen in quiet grey suits, quiet intricate dark ties. Some had eyes which contained the humor of a cardinal; others were not so nice. There was an unhealthy dropsical type with pallor, and pink-tinted bifocal glasses—the kind who looked as if they owned a rich mortuary in a poor Italian neighborhood, and ran the local Republican club.

All the birds and beasts of the Mob seemed to be for Liston, almost without exception they were for Sonny. It was not because his prison record stirred some romantic allegiance in them, nothing of service in India together, sir, or graduates from the same campus; no, nor was it part necessarily and absolutely of some large syndicated plot to capture and run the Heavyweight Championship of the World so that the filaments of prestige which trail from such a crown would wind back into all the pizza parlors and jukeboxes of the continent, the gambling casinos, the after-hours joints, the contracting businesses, and the demolition businesses, the paving businesses, the music of the big bands, the traffic in what is legit and what is illegit—like junk and policy—no, in such a kingdom, the Heavyweight Championship is not worth that much, it's more like the Polish Corridor was to the Nazis, or Cuba to us, it's a broken boil. In their mind Patterson was a freak, some sort of vegetarian. It was sickening to see a post of importance held by a freak, or by the manager of a freak.

II

Before the fight much was made of the battle between good and evil, and the descriptions of the training camps underlined these differences. Patterson trained in a boys' camp up at Elgin which gave the impression of a charitable institution maintained by a religious denomination. The bungalows were small, painted white on their outside, and were of a miserable, dull stained-pine-color within. The atmosphere was humorless and consecrated. Nor was Patterson about. It was two days before the fight, and he had disappeared. Perhaps he was training, conceivably he was sleeping, maybe he was taking a long walk. But the gym up the hill was closed to reporters. So we gathered in one of the cottages, and watched a film which had been made of Patterson's fights. Since it had been put together by a public-relations man who was devoted to Patterson, the film caught most of Floyd's best moments and few of his bad ones.

At his best he was certainly very good. He had been an extraordinary club fighter. As a middleweight and light-heavyweight he had put together the feat of knocking out a good many of the best club fighters in America. Yvon Durelle, Jimmy Slade, Esau Ferdinand, Willie Troy, Archie McBride had been stopped by Patterson, and they were tough men. One reason a club fighter is a club fighter, after all, is because of his ability to take punishment and give a high, durable level of performance. The movies brought back the excitement there used to be watching Patterson on television in 1953 and 1954 when he would fight the main event at Eastern Parkway. I knew nothing about fights then, but the first time I saw Patterson, he knocked out a rugged fighter named Dick Wagner in five rounds, and there had been something about the way he did it which cut into my ignorance. I knew he was good. It was like seeing one's first exciting bullfight: at last one knows what everybody has been talking about. So I had an affection for Patterson which started early. When Patterson was bad he was unbelievably bad, he was Chaplinesque, simple, sheepish, eloquent in his clumsiness, sad like a clown, his knees looked literally to droop. He would seem precisely the sort of shy, stunned, somewhat dreamy Negro kid who never knew the answer in class. But when he was good, he seemed as fast as a jungle cat. He was the fastest heavyweight I had ever seen.

Watching these movies, it was evident he could knock a man out with a left hook thrown from the most improbable position, leaping in from eight feet out, or wheeling to the left, his feet in the air, while he threw his hook across his body. He was like a rangy, hungry cat who starts to jump from a tree at some prey, and turns in flight to take an accurate, improvised swipe at a gorilla swinging by on a vine.

But the movies were only half pleasing. Because Patterson's fascination as a fighter was in his complex personality, in his alternations from high style to what—in a champion—could only be called buffoonery. The movies showed none of his bad fights, except for the famous third round with Ingemar Johansson in their first fight—an omission which not even a public-relations man would want to make. In the perspective of boxing history, those seven knockdowns were no longer damaging; Patterson's courage in getting up was underlined in one's memory by the way he came back in the next fight to knock Johansson out in the fifth round. So one was left with the disagreeable impression that this movie was too righteous.

Naturally I got into a debate with Cus D'Amato and a young gentleman named Jacobs, Jim Jacobs as I remember, who was built like a track man and had an expression which was very single-minded. He was the Public Relations Assistant, the man who had cut the movie, and a serious handball player too, as I learned later. In the debate, he ran me all over the court. It was one of those maddening situations where you know you are right, but the other man has the facts, and the religious conviction as well.

What about all the times Patterson has been knocked down, I started.

What times?

What times? Why. . . . I was ready to stammer.

Name them.

Johansson. Rademacher.

Go on.

Roy Harris.

A slip. I could show you the film clips.

Tom McNeeley.

Also a slip, but Floyd's too nice a guy to claim it was, said Jacobs. As a matter of fact. Rademacher hit him when Floyd was tripping over his own foot as he was going backwards. That's why Floyd went down. Floyd's too much of a

gentleman to take any of the credit for a knockdown away from a talented amateur like Rademacher.

"As a matter of fact," went on Jacobs, "there's one knock-down you haven't mentioned. Jacques Royer-Crecy knocked Floyd down to one knee with a left hook in the first round back in 1954."

"You better not argue with this guy," said Cus D'Amato with a happy grin. "He's seen so many movies, he knows more about Floyd's fights than I do. He can beat *me* in an argument." With that warning I should have known enough to quit, but it was Sunday and I was full of myself. The night before, at Medinah Temple, before thirty-six-hundred people (we grossed over \$8000) I had had a debate with William F. Buckley, Jr. The sportswriters had put up Buckley as a 2½-to-1 favorite before our meet, but I was told they named me the winner. Eight, one, one even; seven rounds to three; six, three, one even; those were the score-cards I received. So at the moment, I was annoyed that this kid Jacobs, whom I started to call Mr. Facts, was racking me up.

Therefore, I heeded Cus D'Amato not at all and circled back to the fight. Jacobs was calling Patterson a great champion, I was saying he had yet to prove he was great—it was a dull argument until I said, "Why didn't he fight the kind of man Louis and Dempsey went up against?" A big mistake. Jacobs went through the record of every single fighter Jack Dempsey and Joe Louis fought as champions, and before we were done, by the laws of collected evidence, he had bludgeoned the court into accepting, against its better judgment, that Pete Rademacher was the equal of Buddy Baer, Tom McNeeley of Luis Firpo, Hurricane Jackson of Tony Galento, and that Brian London riding his much underrated bicycle could have taken a decision from Bill Brennan.

Jacobs was much too much for me. I quit. "I'm telling you," said Cus D'Amato, having enjoyed this vastly, "he beats me all the time in arguments."

While this had been going on, two small Negroes looking like starchy divinity students had been glowering at me and my arguments. Every time I said something which was not altogether in praise of Patterson, they looked back as if I were a member of the White Citizens Council. I never did get a chance to find out who they were, or what they represented (Jacobs was keeping me much too busy), but one could

lay odds they were working for one of the more dogmatic Negro organizations devoted to the uplift of the race. They had none of the humor of the few Freedom Riders I had met, or the personal attractiveness some of the young Negroes around Martin Luther King seemed to have. No, these were bigots. They could have believed in anything from the Single Tax to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters for all I knew, but they were dead-eyed to any voice which did not give assent to what they believed already. So it was depressing to find them in Patterson's camp, and thus devoted to him. It fit with the small-trade-union bigotry that hung over this establishment.

Outside, in the air, the view while dull was not so dogmatic. Sammy Taub, the radio announcer of my childhood, had a voice full of an old Jew's love for Patterson. "Oh, Floyd's got the real class," said Mr. Taub, "he's a gentleman. I've seen a lot of fighters, but Floyd's the gentleman of them all. I could tell you things about him, about how nice he is. He's going to take that big loudmouth Liston apart, punch by punch. And I'm going to be there to watch it!" he said with a grin and an old announcer's windup.

Next morning I spent more time with D'Amato on the way to Liston's camp. We went together in the limousine. It was the day before the fight, and D'Amato was going out as Patterson's representative to check on the gloves. There had been trouble with this already: D'Amato had objected to Liston's plan to wear a pair of gloves made by a Chicago manufacturer named Frager. It seems the eight-ounce Everlast gloves with curled horsehair for padding had not been large enough to fit Liston's hand. So his manager, Jack Nilon, had come up with gloves which had foam-rubber padding. D'Amato objected. His argument was that Liston's knuckles could punch closer to the surface of the glove riding in foam rubber than in horsehair. The unspoken aim must have been to irritate Liston.

But one couldn't encourage D'Amato to talk about the challenger. D'Amato talked only about his own fighters. How he talked! He had stopped drinking years ago and so had enormous pent-up vitality. As a talker, he was one of the world's great weight lifters, not brilliant, but powerful, nonstop, and very solid. Talk was muscle. If you wanted to interrupt, you had to bend his arm off.

Under the force, however, he had a funny simple quality, something of that passionate dogmatism which some

men develop when they have been, by their own count, true to their principles. He had the enthusiastic manner of a saint who is all works and no contemplation. His body was short and strong, his head was round, and his silver-white hair was cut in a short brush. He seemed to bounce as he talked. He reminded me of a certain sort of very tough Italian kid one used to find in Brooklyn. They were sweet kids, and rarely mean, and they were fearless, at least by the measure of their actions they were fearless. They would fight anybody. Size, age, reputation did not make them hesitate. Because they were very single-minded, however, they were often the butt of the gang, and proved natural victims for any practical jokes. Afterward everyone would hide. They were the kind of kids who would go berserk if you were their friend or their leader and betrayed them. They would literally rip up a sewer grating or a manhole cover in order to beat their way a little closer to you.

I was certain he had been this kind of kid, and later I heard a story that when D'Amato was little, he started once to walk through a small park at night and saw a huge shape waiting for him in the distance. He said he had the feeling he could not turn back. If he did, he would never be able to go near that park again. So he continued down the path. The huge shape was discovered to be a tree. D'Amato's critics would claim that he spent his entire life being brave with trees.

The likelihood, however, is that for a period D'Amato was one of the bravest men in America. He was a fanatic about boxing, and cared little about money. He hated the Mob. He stood up to them. A prizefight manager running a small gym with broken mirrors on East Fourteenth Street does not usually stand up to the Mob, any more than a chambermaid would tell the Duchess of Windsor to wipe her shoes before she enters her suite at the Waldorf.

D'Amato was the exception, however. The Mob ended by using two words to describe him: "He's crazy." The term is given to men who must be killed. Nobody killed D'Amato. For years, like a monk, he slept in the back room of his gym with a police dog for a room-mate. The legend is that he kept a gun under his pillow. During Patterson's last few weeks of training before fighting Archie Moore for the championship in 1956, a fight he was to win in five rounds, D'Amato bunked on a cot in front of the door to Floyd's room. He was certain that with the championship so close to

them the Mob would try to hurt his fighter. What a movie this would have made. It could have ended with a zoom-away shot of the Mob in a burning barn.

The trial of it is that the story goes on. D'Amato was one of the most stubborn men in America. And he was determined that no fighter connected to the Mob in any way would get to fight Floyd. The only trouble was that the good heavyweights in America had managers who were not ready to irritate the men who ran boxing. If they took a match with Patterson, and he defeated their fighter, how could their *ex*-contender ever get a fight on television again? D'Amato may have had the vision of a Lenin—as he said with a grin, “They’re always calling me a Communist”—but he never could get enough good managers to begin his new party. Patterson, who was conceivably the best young heavyweight in history at the moment he won the championship, now began to be wasted. He was an artist, and an artist is no greater than his material. The fighters D'Amato got for him now were without luster. So were the fights. After a few years, D'Amato's enemies began to spread the canard best calculated to alienate Patterson. They said D'Amato got him nothing but cripples to fight because Patterson was not good enough to go into the ring with a real heavyweight. To a champion who even now would look for a training camp which might bear resemblance to Wiltwyck, that charity school for near-delinquent adolescents where he first had learned to fight; to someone like Patterson, who as a child would weep when he was unjustly accused; who would get down and walk along the subway tracks on the Eighth Avenue El at High Street in Brooklyn because he had found a cubbyhole for workmen three feet off the rails where he could conceal himself from the world by pulling an iron door close to over him, lying there in darkness while the trains blasted by with apocalyptic noise; to a man who had been so shy as an adolescent that he could not speak to the thirteen-year-old girl who was later to become his wife and so brought a fast-talking friend along to fill the silence; who as a teen-age fighter, just beginning to go to the gym, was so delicate that his older brother Frank once told the reporter Lester Bromberg, “I can’t get used to my kid brother being a name fighter. I remember him as the boy who would cry if I hit him too hard when we boxed in the gym”; to a champion who as a young professional had refused to look while his next opponent, Chester Mieszala, was spar-

ring at Chicago's Midtown Gym because he considered it to be taking unfair advantage; to a man who would later sit in shame in a dark room for months after losing his championship to Johansson, the canard that he was a weak heavyweight kept in possession of his kingdom by the determination of his manager never to make a good fight must have been a story to taste like quicklime in his throat. Patterson had put his faith in D'Amato. If D'Amato didn't believe in him. . . . It's the sort of story which belongs on radio at eleven in the morning or three in the afternoon.

The aftermath of the first Johansson fight, however, blew out the set. It was discovered that D'Amato directly or indirectly had gotten money for the promotion through a man named "Fat Tony" Salerno. D'Amato claimed to have been innocent of the connection, and indeed it was a most aesthetic way for the Mob to get him. It's equally possible that after years of fighting every windmill in town, D'Amato had come down to the hard Bolshevistic decision that you don't make an omelet without breaking eggs. Whatever the fact, D'Amato had his license suspended in New York. He was not allowed to work in Floyd's corner the night of the second Johansson fight. And thereafter Patterson kept him away. He gave D'Amato his managerial third of the money, but he didn't let him get too close to training.

If this partnership of Patterson and D'Amato had been made in Heaven, then God or man had failed again. The last sad item was the Liston fight. Patterson had delegated D'Amato to make some of the arrangements. According to the newspapers, Patterson then discovered that D'Amato was trying to delay the negotiations. Now D'Amato was accepted in camp only as a kind of royal jester who could entertain reporters with printable stories. He seemed to be kept in the cabin where I met him at the foot of the hill, forbidden access to the gymnasium the way a drunk is eighty-sixed from his favorite bar. It must have been a particularly Italian humiliation for a man like D'Amato to sit in that cabin and talk to journalists. There were any number of fight reporters who could not go into court and swear they had never had a free meal from the Mob. Some of the food may have been filet mignon. At least so one might judge by the violence of their printed reactions to D'Amato. A reporter can never forgive anyone he has attacked unjustly. Now D'Amato had to receive these cigar butts like a baron demoted to a concierge. He could speak, but he could not act.

Speak he did. If you listened to D'Amato talk, and knew nothing other, you would not get the impression D'Amato was no longer the center of Patterson's camp. He seemed to give off no sense whatever of having lost his liaison to Floyd. When he talked of making the Liston fight, one would never have judged he had tried to prevent it.

"I didn't," he swore to me. "I wanted the fight. Floyd came up to me, and said, 'Cus, you got to make this fight. Liston's going around saying I'm too yellow to fight him. I don't care if a fighter says he can beat me, but no man can say I'm yellow.'" D'Amato bobbed his head. "Then Floyd said, 'Cus, if this fight isn't made, I'll be scared to go out. I'll be afraid to walk into a restaurant and see Liston eating. Because if I see him, I'll have a fight with him right there in the restaurant, and I'll kill him.' I wouldn't try to keep Floyd from having a fight after he says something like that!" said D'Amato.

We were now arriving at Aurora Downs. The limousine took a turn off the highway, went down a blacktop road and then went through a gate onto a dirt road. There was a quick view of a grandstand and part of a small abandoned racetrack. Under the grandstand, the challenger's gym had been installed: it was there Liston had jumped rope to the sound of *Night Train*, performing with such hypnotic, suspended rage that the reporters gave most of their space to describe this talent.

We were meeting now in the clubhouse restaurant, its parimutuel windows boarded up, its floor empty of tables. It was a cold, chilly room, perhaps a hundred feet long, roped off at the rear to give privacy to Liston's quarters, and the surfaces all seemed made of picture-window glass, chromium, linoleum, and pastel plastics like Formica. The most prominent decorations were two cold-drink vending machines, side by side, large as telephone booths. They were getting small play from the reporters because the day was dank, one of those grey September days which seem to seep up from Lake Michigan and move west. As many as a hundred of us must have come out in our various limousines to see the finale of Everlast vs. Frager, and we gathered in an irritable circle, scrimmaging four and five deep for a view of the scales, an ordinary pair of office scales for small packages, and of two pairs of gloves on a plain wooden table. Disappointed with how I came out in the scrimmage, I pulled back far enough to stand on a chair. The view was

now good. A thin man in a green sweater, a man with a long, hungry nose and a pocked, angry skin still alive from an adolescence where one hot boil had doubtless burst upon another, was now screaming at everybody in sight, at D'Amato whom he seemed ready to attack, at Nick Florio, brother of Dan Florio, Patterson's trainer, and at a man named Joe Triner who belonged to the Illinois State Athletic Commission. It developed he was Jack Nilon, Liston's manager or adviser, a Philadelphia caterer, wealthy in his own right, who had been brought together with Liston by various beneficent forces in Philadelphia who decided Sonny needed rehabilitation in his front window as much as in his heart. So Nilon represented American business, acting once again as big brother to a former convict with talent. How Nilon could scream! It turned out, bang-bang, that the new gloves for Liston were a fraction over eight ounces. Nilon was having none of that. Triner, the Commission man, looked sick. "They weighed eight ounces at the Commission's office today," he said.

"Don't give me none of that," screamed Nilon. "They got to weigh in right here. How do I know what kind of scale you use?"

"What do we want to cheat you on a quarter of an ounce for?" asked Triner.

"Just to get Sonny upset, just to get Sonny upset, that's all," screamed Nilon as if he were pouring boiling oil.

Liston now emerged from the depths of the clubhouse and walked slowly toward us. He was wearing a dark-blue sweat suit, and he moved with the languid pleasure of somebody who is getting the taste out of every step. First his heel went down, then his toe. He could not have enjoyed it more if he had been walking barefoot through a field. One could watch him picking the mood up out of his fingertips and toes. His handlers separated before him. He was a Presence.

"What the hell's going on?" Liston asked. He had a deep growl of a voice, rich, complex, well-modulated. His expression had the sort of holy disdain one finds most often on a very grand old lady.

They started to explain to him, and he nodded petulantly, half listening to the arguments. His expression seemed to say, "Which one of these bullshit artists is most full of it right now?"

While he was listening he pulled on one of the gloves,

worked his fist about in it, and then slapped the glove down on the table. "It still don't fit," he cried out in the angry voice of a child. Everybody moved back a little. He stood there in disgust, but wary, alert, as if some deep enemy were in the room, someone who could damage him with a psychic bullet. His eyes bounced lightly, gracefully, from face to face. Which gave the opportunity to see into them for a moment. From the advance publicity one had expected to look into two cracks of dead glass, halfway between reptile and sleepy leopard, but they had the dark, brimming, eloquent, reproachful look one sees sometimes in the eyes of beautiful colored children, three or four years old. And in fact that was the shock of the second degree which none of the photographs had prepared one for: Liston was near to beautiful. For obvious reasons it is an unhappy word to use. But there is no other to substitute. One cannot think of more than a few men who have beauty. Charles Chaplin has it across a room, Krishna Menon across a table. Stephen Spender used to have it, Burt Lancaster oddly enough used to have it—there was no comparison between the way he looked in a movie and the way he looked in life. They say Orson Welles had it years ago, and President Eisenhower in person, believe it or not. At any rate, Liston had it. You did not feel you were looking at someone attractive, you felt you were looking at a creation. And this creation looked like it was building into a temper which would tear up the clubhouse at Aurora Downs. One knew he was acting, no contender would get violent the day before a championship fight, and yet everyone in the room was afraid of Liston. Even D'Amato did not speak too much. Liston had the stage and was using it. "Let's see that glove, let's weigh it again." They leaped to put it on the scales for him. He squatted and made a huge dumb show of scowling at the numbers as if he were just another blighted cotton picker. "Sheeet, who can read the numbers," he pretended to be saying to himself.

"He's not going in the ring with gloves over regulation weight," shouted another dragon, Pollino, the cut man for Liston, a lean Italian with an angry, chopped-up face.

"Well, this scale isn't the official scale," said D'Amato mildly. "The gloves are eight ounces."

Pollino looked like he'd leap across the table to get his hands on D'Amato's neck. "Wha' do you call official scale?"

shouted Pollino. "There is no official scale. I'll bet you a thousand dollars they're more than eight ounces."

Nilon came in like a shrike from the other side of Liston. "Why do you bother my fighter with this?" he screamed at the officials. "Why don't you go over to Patterson's camp and bother him the day before the fight? What's he doing? Sleeping? He doesn't have a hundred reporters looking down his throat."

"I don't want to stand much more of this," snapped Liston in the child's voice he used for display of temper. "This is the sort of thing gives reporters a chance to ask stupid questions." Was his dislike of reporters a reminder of the days when four or five policemen would have given him a going-over in a police station while the police reporter, listening to the muffled thuds, would be playing cards in the next room? Liston did not talk to white reporters individually. At Press Headquarters the bitter name for him was Malcolm X. "Just stupid questions, that's all," he repeated, and yet his manner was changing still again. His mood could shift as rapidly as the panoramic scenes in a family film. Suddenly he was mild, now he was mild. He tapped the gloves on the table, and said in a gentle voice, "Oh, they're all right. Let's use them." Then lightly, sadly, he chuckled, and added in his richest voice, "I'm going to hit him so hard that extra quarter of an ounce isn't gonna be any more than just an extra quarter of an ounce he's being hit with." The voice came home to me. I knew which voice it was at last. It was the voice Clark Gable used his last ten years, that genial rum squire's voice, the indulgent "I've been around" voice. Headmasters in prep schools sometimes have it. Liston had it. He must have studied Gable over the years. Perhaps in the movies one sees in prison.

A little more bickering went on between Pollino and Florio. They were like guerrilla troops who have not heard that the armistice has been declared. Then quiet. We were done. But just as the meet was ready to break, Liston held up a hand and said, "I don't want to wear these gloves. I've changed my mind. We've had a special pair made for me. Bring the new gloves over." And he glowered at the officials and dropped his upper lip.

It was a very bad moment for the officials.

Two assistants marched in carrying a white boxing glove. It was half the size of a shark. A toot of relief went up

from the press. Liston grinned. As photographers rushed to take his picture once more, he held the great white glove in his hands and studied it with solemnity.

When we got back to the car, D'Amato smiled. "Very unusual fellow," he said. "He's more intelligent than I thought. Good sense of humor."

I made a small speech in which I declared that Liston made me think not so much of a great fighter as of a great actor who was playing the role of the greatest heavyweight fighter who ever lived.

D'Amato listened attentively. We were in a space age, and the opinions of moon men and Martians had also to be considered. "Sonny's a good fighter," he said finally.

Then we talked of other things. I mentioned my four daughters. D'Amato came from a family of seven brothers. "I guess that's why I never got married," he said. "I don't know, I never could figure it out. No dame could ever get me. I wonder why?"

"A lady once told me she'd never marry a man she couldn't change."

"It's just as well I didn't get married," said D'Amato.

On the night of the fight I shared a cab to Comiskey Park with Pete Hamill of the New York *Post*. We caught a cabdriver who was for Patterson, and this worked to spoil the ride. As the fight approached, Hamill and I had been growing nervous in a pleasant way, we were feeling that mixture of apprehension and anticipation which is one of the large pleasures of going to a big fight. Time slows down, the senses become keyed, one's nose for magic is acute.

Such a mood had been building in each of us over the afternoon. About five we had gone to the Playboy Club with Gene Courtney of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, and it had looked about the way one thought it would look. It was full of corporation executives, and after cancer gulch, the colors were lush, plum colors, velvet reds with the blood removed, a dash of cream, the flesh-orange and strawberry wine of a peach melba, Dutch chocolate colors, champagne colors, the beige of an onion in white wine sauce. The bunnies went by in their costumes, electric-blue silk, Kelly-green, flame-pink, pinups from a magazine, faces painted into sweetmeats, flower tops, tame lynx, piggie, poodle, a queen or two from a beauty contest. They wore a Gay-Nineties rig which exaggerated their hips, bound their waist in a ceinture,

and lifted them into a phallic brassiere—each breast looked like the big bullet on the front bumper of a Cadillac. Long black stockings, long long stockings, up almost to the waist on each side, and to the back, on the curve of the can, as if ejected tenderly from the body, was the puff of chastity, a little white ball of a bunny's tail which bobbed as they walked. We were in bossland.

We drank, standing at the bar, talking about fights and fighters, and after a while we came to the fight we were to see that evening. Courtney had picked Liston by a knockout in the fifth, Hamill and I independently had arrived at Patterson in the sixth. So we had a mock fight to pay for a round of drinks. Courtney had bought a cigarette lighter in the Club—it was a slim, inexpensive black lighter with a white rabbit's face painted on the surface. When we put the lighter flat on the table and gave it a twirl, the ears would usually come to rest pointing toward one of us. We agreed that each spin would be a single round, and each time one ear pointed at Courtney or at me, it would count as a knockdown against our fighter. If both ears pointed at one of us, that would be the knockout.

Well, Liston knocked Patterson down in the first round. In the second round the ears pointed at no one. In the third round Patterson knocked Liston down. For the fourth, Liston dropped Patterson. "The fifth is the round," said Courtney, spinning the lighter. It went around and around and ended with one ear pointing at me. Liston had knocked Patterson down again, but had not knocked him out. I took the lighter and gave it a spin. The ears pointed at Courtney. Both ears. Patterson had knocked Liston out in the sixth round.

"Too much," said Hamill.

I had given an interview the day before to Leonard Shecter of the *Post*. I had said: "I think Liston is going to have Patterson down two, three, four times. And Patterson will have Liston down in the first, second, or third and end it with one punch in the sixth." The cigarette lighter had given me a perfect fight.

Well, the Playboy Club was the place for magic, and this mood of expectation, of omen and portent, stayed with us. All of one's small actions became significant. At the hotel, signaling for the cab which was to take us to the ball park, the choice felt wrong. One had the psychology of a ghost choosing the hearse he would ride to a funeral, or of a

general, brain livid after days of combat, so identifying himself with his army that he decides to attack first with the corps on his left because it is his left foot which has stepped first into the command car. It is not madness exactly. It is not madness if Montgomery or Rommel thinks that way. If the world is a war between God and the Devil, and Destiny is the line of their battle, then a general may be permitted to think that God or the Devil or the agent of both, which is Magic, has entered his brain before an irrevocable battle. For why should the gods retire when the issue is great? Such a subject is virtually taboo, one must pass by it quickly, or pass for mad, but I had noticed that whenever I was overtired, a sensitivity to the magical would come into me. I now had had little sleep for ten days, and I had been drinking for the last three: when I was very short of sleep, liquor did not make me drunk so much as it gave a thin exaltation, a sensitivity not unlike the touch of drugs in the old days; it was like gasoline burning an orderly flame in the empty chambers of one's reserve. I think one begins to die a little when one has had but three or four hours of sleep each night for a week; some of the cells must die from overexcitement, some from overwork, and their death must bring some of the consciousness of death, some little part of the deep secret of death into the living, weary brain. So I took the cab because it was the second in line at the hotel, and the first cab had not wished to go to the ball park. But a feeling of gloom came over me as if I had committed a serious error.

The driver, as I have said, was for Patterson. He was a big round Negro about thirty with a pleasant face, sly yet not quite dishonest, but he had a pompous manner which seemed to fill the cab with psychic gas as dead as the exhaust from a bus. He was for Patterson, Hamill was for Patterson, I was for Patterson. We were left with nothing but the search for an imaginary conversationalist to argue for Sonny.

How this driver hated Liston! He went on about him at length, most of it not near to printable. "This guy Liston is no good," said the cabdriver. "I tell you the good Lord is going to look down and stop that man because he isn't worth the flesh and blood and muscle that was put into him. Now I don't care," said the cabdriver, going on comfortably, "that Liston was in prison, some of the best men in this country have come out of the can, I nearly did time myself,

but I tell you, I don't like Liston, he's a bully and a hustler, and he's no good, he's no good at all, why if you were walking along the street and you saw a beautiful young child, why what would you think. You'd think, 'What a beautiful child.' That's what Patterson would think. He'd go up to that child and have a pleasant conversation or something, and go away, but what would Liston do, he'd have the same pleasant conversation, and then he'd get to thinking this is an awful good-looking kid, and if it's a good-looking kid it must have a good-looking mother. That man's an opportunist," said the driver severely, "and I tell you how I know, it's because I've been a hustler, I've hustled everything you can hustle, and there isn't anything anybody can tell me about Liston. That hustler is going to get ruined tonight."

Now the trouble with this speech was that it turned out to be as oppressive as it was amusing, and one's fine mood of excessive, even extreme sensitivity began to expire under the dull force of the exposition. It was hopeless to try to explain that Liston, whatever his virtues, however discovered his faults, could not possibly be as simple as the driver described him.

It was a fact, however, that Liston did not seem to be loved by the Negroes one talked to. It was not only the grey-haired Negroes with the silver-rimmed glasses and the dignity of the grave, the teachers, the deacons, the welfare workers, the camp directors, the church organists who were for Patterson, but indeed just about every Negro one talked to in Chicago. One of the pleasures preceding the fight had been to conduct a private poll. Of the twenty Negroes polled by our amateur, all but two or three were unsympathetic to Liston. The word was out—"You got to stick with the champion." I must have heard that phrase a dozen times. Of course the Negroes spoken to were employed; they were taxicab drivers, house servants, bellboys, waiters, college students, young professionals. Some answered cynically. There were a few with that snaky elegance one finds in colored people like Sugar Ray Robinson, and had seen at the fringes of Liston's court out at Aurora, the sort of Negro always seen standing on a key street corner in Harlem, the best-dressed Negro of the intersection. I had assumed they would instinctively be for Liston, and perhaps they were, but I was a strange white man asking questions—there is no need to assume the questions were asked so skillfully or decently that the truth was obliged to appear. Patterson, was

the safe reply. It demanded nothing, especially if they were not going to see me again and so would suffer no loss of respect for their judgment. Patterson was a churchgoer, a Catholic convert (and so of course was Liston, but the cynical could remark that a Christmas candle in the window looks nice in a department store), Patterson was up tight with the NAACP, he was the kind of man who would get his picture taken with Jackie Robinson and Ralph Bunche (in fact he looked a little like Ralph Bunche), he would be photographed with Eleanor Roosevelt, and was; with Jack Kennedy, and was; with Adlai Stevenson if he went to the UN; he would campaign with Shelley Winters if she ever ran for Mayor of New York; he was a liberal's liberal. The worst to be said about Patterson is that he spoke with the same cow's cud as other liberals. Think what happens to a man with Patterson's reflexes when his brain starts to depend on the sounds of "introspective," "obligation," "responsibility," "inspiration," "commendation," "frustrated," "seclusion"—one could name a dozen others from his book. They are a part of his pride; he is a boy from the slums of Bedford-Stuyvesant who has acquired these words like stocks and bonds and income-bearing properties. There is no one to tell him it would be better to keep the psychology of the streets than to cultivate the contradictory desire to be a great fighter and a great, healthy, mature, autonomous, related, integrated individual. What a shabby gentility there has been to Patterson's endeavor. The liberals of America had been working for thirty years to create a state of welfare where the deserving could develop themselves. Patterson, as one of the deserving, as one of those who deserve profoundly to be enriched, ends with "introspective." The void in our culture does not know enough to give him "the agen-bite of inwit."

The cynical Negro, talking to a white stranger, would pick Patterson. Yet there was more to it than that. "You got to stick with the champion." They were working, they had jobs, they had something to hold on to; so did Patterson. They would be fierce toward anyone who tried to take what was theirs: family, home, education, property. So too they assumed would Patterson be fierce. They could hardly be expected to consider that the power to keep one's security loses force when it is too secure. Patterson earned \$1,825 his first year as a professional fighter, \$13,790 his second year, not quite \$40,000 his third year when he was fighting main events at Madison Square Garden. By his fourth year,

just before he won the title, it was \$50,000. Since then he has made more than \$3,500,000 in six years. For the Liston fight he would pick up another \$2,000,000 from attendance, theatre television, and other rights. The payments would be spread over seventeen years. It was a long way to have come, but the psychic trip was longer. Responsibility, security, and institutional guilt was not necessarily the best tone for the reflexes in his leaping left hook.

But the deepest reason that Negroes in Chicago had for preferring Patterson was that they did not want to enter again the logic of Liston's world. The Negro had lived in violence, had grown in violence, and yet had developed a view of life which gave him life. But its cost was exceptional for the ordinary man. The majority had to live in shame. The demand for courage may have been exorbitant. Now as the Negro was beginning to come into the white man's world, he wanted the logic of the white man's world: annuities, mental hygiene, sociological jargon, committee solutions for the ills of the breast. He was sick of a whore's logic and a pimp's logic, he wanted no more of *mother-wit*, of *smarts*, or *playing the dozens*, of battling for true love into the diamond-hard eyes of every classy prostitute and hustler on the street. The Negro wanted Patterson, because Floyd was the proof a man could be successful and yet be secure. If Liston won, the old torment was open again. A man could be successful *or* he could be secure. He could not have both. If Liston had a saga, the average Negro wanted none of it.

Besides there was always the Mob. Liston had been a strong-arm man for the Mob—they were not so ready to forgive that. He represented the shadow of every bully who had run them off the street when they were children, he was part of the black limousines with four well-dressed men inside, sliding down the dark streets. One did not try to look into the eyes of the men who rode in those limousines.

But there was one reason beyond any other for picking Patterson, and it went deeper than the pretensions of his new dialogue or the professional liberalism of his ideas, his pronouncements or his associates. Patterson was the champion of every lonely adolescent and every man who had been forced to live alone, every protagonist who tried to remain unique in a world whose waters washed apathy and compromise into the pores. He was the hero of all those unsung romantics who walk the street at night seeing the vision of

Napoleon while their feet trip over the curb, he was part of the fortitude which could sustain those who lived for principle, those who had gone to war with themselves and ended with discipline. He was the artist. He was the man who could not forgive himself if he gave less than his best chance for perfection. And so he aroused a powerful passion in those lonely people who wanted him to win. He was champion, he was a millionaire, but he was still an archetype of the underdog, an impoverished prince.

And Liston was looking to be king. Liston came from that world where you had no dream but making it, where you trusted no one because your knowledge of evil was too quick to its presence in everyone; Liston came from that world where a man with a dream was a drunk in the gutter, and the best idealism was found in a rabbit's foot blessed by a one-eyed child. Liston was voodoo, Liston was magic, Liston was the pet of the witch doctor; Liston knew that when the gods gathered to watch an event, you kept your mind open to the devils who might work for you. They would come neatly into your eye and paralyze your enemy with their curse. You were their slave, but they were working for you. Yes, Liston was the secret hero of every man who had ever given mouth to a final curse against the dispositions of the Lord and made a pact with Black Magic. Liston was Faust. Liston was the light of every racetrack tout who dug a number on the way to work. He was the hero of every man who would war with destiny for so long as he had his gimmick: the cigarette smoker, the lush, the junkie, the tea-head, the fixer, the bitch, the faggot, the switchblade, the gun, the corporation executive. Anyone who was fixed on power. It was due to Liston's style of fighting as much as anything else. He had no extreme elegance as a boxer, he was a hint slow, indeed he may not have been a natural boxer as was Patterson, but Liston had learned much and attached it to his large physical strength, he had a long and abnormally powerful left jab, a pounding left hook, a heavy right. He had lead in his fists. The only man who had ever defeated him, a club fighter named Marty Marshall, had said, "Every time he hit me, it hurt all over." In his last twenty-five fights Liston had knocked out the other man twenty-one times. So his force appealed to those who had enlisted with an external force. At the Playboy Club, drinking with Courtney and Hamill, I made a bet with a former Harvard man (Business School, no doubt), who told me Liston had it made. He put up fifty

against my twenty-eight and we left the money in the bartender's till. I was not to go back.

So it approached. The battle of good and evil, that curious battle where decision is rare and never clear. As we got out of the cab, several blocks from Comiskey Park, two little Negroes, nine or ten years old, danced up to us in the dark, the light of a Halloween candle in their eye. "Give me silver," one of them cried in a Caribbean voice, "give silver, sir," and left us with an orange piece of paper, a throw-away from a nightclub. "Come to Club Jerico after the Fight," said the misspelled legend. "Come to Club Jerico." Je-rico. I—rich.

III

On the afternoon of the night Emile Griffith and Benny Paret were to fight a third time for the welterweight championship, there was murder in both camps. "I hate that kind of guy," Paret had said earlier to Pete Hamill about Griffith. "A fighter's got to look and talk and act like a man." One of the Broadway gossip columnists had run an item about Griffith a few days before. His girl friend saw it and said to Griffith, "Emile, I didn't know about you being that way." So Griffith hit her. So he said. Now at the weigh-in that morning, Paret had insulted Griffith irrevocably, touching him on the buttocks, while making a few more remarks about his manhood. They almost had their fight on the scales.

The accusation of homosexuality arouses a major passion in many men; they spend their lives resisting it with a biological force. There is a kind of man who spends every night of his life getting drunk in a bar, he rants, he brawls, he ends in a small rumble on the street; women say, "For God's sakes, he's homosexual. Why doesn't he just turn queer and get his suffering over with." Yet men protect him. It is because he is choosing not to become homosexual. It was put best by Sartre who said that a homosexual is a man who practices homosexuality. A man who does not, is not homosexual—he is entitled to the dignity of his choice. He is entitled to the fact that he chose not to become homosexual, and is paying presumably his price.

The rage in Emile Griffith was extreme. I was at the fight that night, I had never seen a fight like it. It was scheduled for fifteen rounds, but they fought without stopping from the bell which began the round to the bell which ended it,

and then they fought after the bell, sometimes for as much as fifteen seconds before the referee could force them apart.

Paret was a Cuban, a proud club fighter who had become welterweight champion because of his unusual ability to take a punch. His style of fighting was to take three punches to the head in order to give back two. At the end of ten rounds, he would still be bouncing, his opponent would have a headache. But in the last two years, over the fifteen-round fights, he had started to take some bad Maulings.

This fight had its turns. Griffith won most of the early rounds, but Paret knocked Griffith down in the sixth. Griffith had trouble getting up, but made it, came alive and was dominating Paret again before the round was over. Then Paret began to wilt. In the middle of the eighth round, after a clubbing punch had turned his back to Griffith, Paret walked three disgusted steps away, showing his hindquarters. For a champion, he took much too long to turn back around. It was the first hint of weakness Paret had ever shown, and it must have inspired a particular shame, because he fought the rest of the fight as if he were seeking to demonstrate that he could take more punishment than any man alive. In the twelfth, Griffith caught him. Paret got trapped in a corner. Trying to duck away, his left arm and his head became tangled on the wrong side of the top rope. Griffith was in like a cat ready to rip the life out of a huge boxed rat. He hit him eighteen right hands in a row, an act which took perhaps three or four seconds, Griffith making a pent-up whimpering sound all the while he attacked, the right hand whipping like a piston rod which has broken through the crankcase, or like a baseball bat demolishing a pumpkin. I was sitting in the second row of that corner—they were not ten feet away from me, and like everybody else, I was hypnotized. I had never seen one man hit another so hard and so many times. Over the referee's face came a look of woe as if some spasm had passed its way through him, and then he leaped on Griffith to pull him away. It was the act of a brave man. Griffith was uncontrollable. His trainer leaped into the ring, his manager, his cut man, there were four people holding Griffith, but he was off on an orgy, he had left the Garden, he was back on a hoodlum's street. If he had been able to break loose from his handlers and the referee, he would have jumped Paret to the floor and whaled on him there.

And Paret? Paret died on his feet. As he took those eighteen punches something happened to everyone who was in psychic

range of the event. Some part of his death reached out to us. One felt it hover in the air. He was still standing in the ropes, trapped as he had been before, he gave some little half-smile of regret, as if he were saying, "I didn't know I was going to die just yet," and then, his head leaning back but still erect, his death came to breathe about him. He began to pass away. As he passed, so his limbs descended beneath him, and he sank slowly to the floor. He went down more slowly than any fighter had ever gone down, he went down like a large ship which turns on end and slides second by second into its grave. As he went down, the sound of Griffith's punches echoed in the mind like a heavy ax in the distance chopping into a wet log.

Paret lay on the ground, quivering gently, a small froth on his mouth. The house doctor jumped into the ring. He knelt. He pried Paret's eyelid open. He looked at the eyeball staring out. He let the lid snap shut. He reached into his satchel, took out a needle, jabbed Paret with a stimulant. Paret's back rose in a high arch. He writhed in real agony. They were calling him back from death. One wanted to cry out, "Leave the man alone. Let him die." But they saved Paret long enough to take him to a hospital where he lingered for days. He was in coma. He never came out of it. If he lived, he would have been a vegetable. His brain was smashed. But they held him in life for a week, they fed him chemicals, and made exploratory operations into his skull, and fed details of his condition to *The Goat*. And *The Goat* kicked clods of mud all over the place, and spoke harshly of prohibiting boxing. There was shock in the land. Children had seen the fight on television. There were editorials, gloomy forecasts that the Game was dead. The managers and the prizefighters got together. Gently, in thick, depressed hypocrisies, they tried to defend their sport. They did not find it easy to explain that they shared an unstated view of life which was religious.

It was of course not that religion which is called Judeo-Christian. It was an older religion, a more primitive one—a religion of blood, a murderous and sensitive religion which mocks the effort of the understanding to approach it, and scores the lungs of men like D. H. Lawrence, and burns the brain of men like Ernest Hemingway when they explore out into the mystery, searching to discover some part of the secret. It is the view of life which looks upon death as a condition which is more alive than life or unspeakably more deadening. As such it is not a very attractive notion to the Estab-

lishment. But then the Establishment has nothing very much of even the Judeo-Christian tradition. It has a respect for legal and administrative aspects of justice, and it is devoted to the idea of compassion for the poor. But the Establishment has no idea of death, no tolerance for Heaven or Hell, no comprehension of bloodshed. It sees no logic in pain. To the Establishment these notions are a detritus from the past.

Like a patient submerged beneath the plastic cover of an oxygen tent, boxing lives on beneath the cool, bored eyes of the doctors in the Establishment. It would not take too much to finish boxing off. Shut down the oxygen, which is to say, turn that switch in the mass media which still gives sanction to organized pugilism, and the fight game would be dead.

But the patient is permitted to linger for fear the private detectives of the Establishment, the psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, might not be able to neutralize the problem of gang violence. Not so well as the Game. Of course, the moment some piece of diseased turnip capable of being synthesized cheaply might prove to have the property of tranquilizing a violent young man for a year, the Establishment would wipe out boxing. Every time a punk was arrested, the police would prescribe a pill, and violence would walk the street sheathed and numb. Of course the Mob would lose revenue, but then the Mob is also part of the Establishment, it, and the labor unions and the colleges and the newspapers and the corporations are all part of the Establishment. The Establishment is never simple. It needs the Mob to grease the chassis on its chariot. Therefore, the Mob would be placated. In a society with strong central government, it is not so difficult to turn up a new source of revenue. What is more difficult is to enter the plea that violence may be an indispensable element of life. This is not the place to have the argument: it is enough to say that if the liberal Establishment is right in its unstated credo that death is a void, and man leads out his life suspended momentarily above that void, why then there is no argument at all. Whatever shortens life is monstrous. We have not the right to shorten life, since life is the only possession of the psyche, and in death we have only nothingness. What then can there be said in defense of sports-car racing, war, or six-ounce gloves?

But if we go from life into a death which is larger than our life has been, or into a death which is small, if death comes to nothing for one man because he swallowed his death in his

life, and if for another death is alive with dimension, then the certitudes of the Establishment lose power. A drug which offers peace to a pain may dull the nerve which could have taught the mind how to carry that pain into the death which comes on the next day or on the decades that follow. A tranquilizer gives coma to an anxiety which may later smell of the dungeon, beneath the ground. If we are born into life as some living line of intent from an eternity which may have tortured us or nurtured us in death, then we may be obliged to go back to death with more courage and art than we left it. Or face the dim end of going back with less.

That is the existential venture, the unstated religious view of boxers trying to beat each other into unconsciousness or, ultimately, into death. It is the culture of the killer who sickens the air about him if he does not find some half-human way to kill a little in order not to deaden all. It is a defense against the plague, against that plague which comes from violence converted into the nausea of all that nonviolence which is void of peace. Paret's death was with horror, but not all the horror was in the beating, much was in the way his death was cheated. Which is to say that his death was twice a nightmare. I knew that something in boxing was spoiled forever for me, that there would be a fear in watching a fight now which was like the fear one felt for any *novillero* when he was having an unhappy day, the bull was dangerous, and the crowd was ugly. You knew he would get hurt. There is fascination in seeing that the first time, but it is not as enjoyable as one expects. It is like watching a novelist who has written a decent book get run over by a car.

Something in boxing was spoiled. But not the principle, not the right for one man to try to knock another out in the ring. That was perhaps not a civilized activity, but it belonged to the tradition of the humanist, it was a human activity, it showed a part of what man was like, it belonged to his ability to create art and artful movement on the edge of death or pain or danger or attack, and it had much to say about the subtleties of human style. For there are boxers whose bodies move like a fine brain, and there are others who pound the opposition down with the force of a trade-union leader, there are fools and wits and patient craftsmen among boxers, wild men full of a sense of outrage, and steady oppressive peasants, clever spoilers, dogged infantrymen who walk forward all night, hypnotists (like Liston), dancers, lovers, mothers giving a scolding, horsemen high on their legs.

There is knowledge to be found about our nature, and the nature of animals, of big cats, lions, tigers, gorillas, bears, walruses (Archie Moore), birds, elephants, jackals, bulls. No, I was not down on boxing, but I loved it with freedom no longer. It was more like somebody in your family was fighting now. And the feeling one had for a big fight was no longer clear of terror in its excitement. There was awe in the suspense.

But then there is nothing else very much like being at a Heavyweight Championship fight. It is to some degree the way a Hollywood premiere once ought to have been; it's a big party with high action—there is the same rich flush of jewelry, bourbon, bare shoulders, cha-cha, silk, the promise that a life or two will be changed by tonight; it is even a bit like a political convention; it is much more like an event none of us will ever see—conceive of sitting in a classic arena waiting for a limited war with real bullets to begin between a platoon of Marines and two mounted squads of Russian Cossacks—you'd have the sensation of what a Heavyweight Championship can promise. A great heavyweight fight could take place in the center of a circus.

Ideally, it should take place in New York. Because Broadway turns out and Hollywood flies in with Las Vegas on the hip, and many of the wings and dovecotes and banlieues of what even a couple of years ago was called Café Society is there, and International Set (always seeing their first fight), and Big Business, and every good-looking call girl in New York, and some not so good-looking, and all the figures from the history pages of prizefighting in America, as well as ghosts there are some to claim—the ghost of Benny Leonard, the ghost of Harry Greb. Plus all the models, loose celebrities, socialites of high and lower rank, hierarchies from the racetrack, politicians, judges, and—one might offer a prayer if one really cared—one sociologist of wit and distinction ought to be there to capture for America the true status of its conflicting aristocracies: does Igor Cassini rate with Mickey Rooney or does Roger Blough get a row in front of Elizabeth Taylor? Is Frank Sinatra honored before Mrs. Woodward? Does Zsa Zsa Gabor come in ahead of Mayor Wagner? The First Sociologists of America are those professionals who sell the hot seats for a big fight in New York.

In Chicago, there was little of this. If there are nine circles to Hell, there were nine clouds over this fight. D'Amato was

not licensed to manage in New York. Small matter. Patterson once again would fight in New York without him. But Liston was not cleared to fight by the State Boxing Commission—the shadow of the Establishment lay against him. So the fight was transferred to Chicago which promptly took fire. If Patterson-Liston was not clean enough for New York, it was not cool enough for Chicago. The local newspapers gave the kind of publicity one tastes in cold canned food. The stories on training were buried. Interest was greater outside the city than within. Yet little of Broadway arrived and less of Hollywood. You cannot get producers and movie stars to travel a distance to watch two Negroes fight. A bitch lives to see a white man fight a black man. She's not prejudiced—depending on the merits, she'll root for either, but a Negro against a Negro wets no juice.

And then there was poor weather. The day before the fight was misty, chilly. It rained on and off, and cleared inconclusively on Tuesday, which was cold. Fight night was cold enough to wear a topcoat. Comiskey Park was far from filled. It could hold fifty thousand for a big fight; it ended with less than twenty in paid admissions. Twenty-six thousand people showed. Proportions were poor. Because of theatre television, Patterson would make more money on this fight than any fighter had ever made, and there was much local interest in cities all over America. Parties were got up to go to the theatre, see it on television. The press coverage was larger than average, larger let us say than any of the three Johansson fights or the Marciano-Walcott fights. It was the biggest fight in ten years, it was conceivably the biggest fight since Louis fought Schmeling the second time, and yet nobody in the city where it was fought seemed to care. Radio, with its roaring inside hysteria, had lost to television, that grey eminence which now instructed Americans in the long calm of Ecclesiastes: vanity of vanities, all events are vanity.

So for a celebrity hunter, ringside was nothing formidable at this fight. The good people of Chicago turned out modestly. The very good people—which is to say, the very rich—turned out for ringside, and had a chance to cross the outfield grass, luminous green in the half-light of the baseball towers, and walk to their seats under the great folded wings of the grandstand. Ever since the Romans built the Colosseum, arenas take on a prehistoric breath at night—one could be a black ant walking inside the circle a pterodactyl must

have made with its wing as it slept. Or is it hills like dark elephants of which we speak?

I had a seat in the working press five rows from the ring. An empty seat away was Jimmy Baldwin. There had been a chill between us in the last year. Not a feud, but bad feeling. We had been glad, however, to see each other in Chicago. Tacitly, settling no differences, not talking about it, we had thought to be friendly. But the unsettled differences were still there. Two nights ago, at a party, we had had a small fight. We each insulted the other's good intentions and turned away. Now we sat with a hundred-pound cake of ice on the empty seat between us. After ten minutes, I got up and went for a walk around the ring.

The Press section occupied the first six rows. Back of us was an aisle which made a larger square around the square of the ring. On the other side of this aisle was the first row of ringside seats. This was as close as you could come to the fight if you had entered by buying a ticket. So I took a sampling of the house as I walked around the square. If this had been New York, you would expect to find twelve movie stars in the front row. But this was Chicago. Behind us were a muster of local Irish politicians, big men physically in the mold of Jimmy Braddock, not unhappy tonight with their good seats.

The front row to my right and the front row across the ring from me was given over in part to the Mob. They were the most intricate faces one would find this side of Carpaccio or Bellini, chins with hooks and chisels, nostrils which seemed to screw the air up into the head, thin-lipped mouths like thin-nosed pliers, eyes which behind their dark glasses scrutinized your interior until they could find the tool in you which would work for them, and then would flip away like the turning of a card. Yes, those two rows of seats made up a right angle of *don capos* and a few very special Catholic priests, thin, ascetic, medieval in appearance, as well as a number of field officers dressed in black like subalterns, but older, leaner, with more guilds at their command. They were well-seated. They filled close to every seat around the corner.

It proved to be Patterson's corner.

That was art. They did not have to do much more. Sitting there, they could devote their study to Patterson. He would see them when he came back to his corner, his seconds would be obliged to look at them each time a new round began

and they climbed down the steps from the corner. The back of the cornermen's necks would be open to detailed inspection, the calves of Patterson's leg, as he sat resting on the stool, would be a ready target for mental arrows. Like Lilliputians they could shoot thousands of pins into Gulliver.

I completed the tour. The last row, Liston's corner, was routine: musclemen, mobsters, business-sporting, a random sample. Turning the angle I came back to my seat, and sat watching a preliminary, shivering a little in the cold. It was much too cold for a fight. The sensitivity to magic I had felt earlier in the evening would not come back. There was just a dull sense of apprehension. Everything was wrong.

The preliminaries ended. Visiting fighters were called up from the crowd to take a bow. Archie Moore drew a large hand: he was wearing a black-silk cape with a white lining and he twirled the cape with éclat. It said: "Go away, all solemn sorcerers, the magic man is here."

Patterson and Liston arrived within a minute of each other. The visiting fighters who were gathered in the ring said hello to each man, shook their gloves, and went back to their seats.

The Star-Spangled Banner was played. Liston stood in his corner with his handlers, the referee stood in the middle of the ring, and Cus D'Amato stood alone, eight feet away from Patterson and his seconds. Since D'Amato was across from me, I could see his face clearly. It was as pale as his white sweater. His face was lifted to the sky, his eyes were closed. While the anthem played, D'Amato held his hand to his heart as if he were in anguish. I had the impression he was praying with fear.

The anthem ended, the fighters took their instructions from the referee, and stripped their robes. Their bodies made a contrast. Liston, only an inch taller than Patterson, weighed 214 pounds to Patterson's 189. But the difference was not just in weight. Liston had a sleek body, fully muscled, but round. It was the body of a strong man, but the muscles looked to have been shaped by pleasure as much as by work. He was obviously a man who had had some very good times.

Whereas Patterson still had poverty in his muscles. He was certainly not weak, there was whipcord in the way he was put together, but it was still the dry, dedicated body of an athlete, a track man, a disciplinarian: it spoke little of leisure and much of the gym. There was a lack eating at it, some misery.

The bell rang.

Liston looked scared.

Patterson looked grim.

They came together with no vast impact, trying for small gains. Each was moving with large respect for the other. Liston had the unhappy sweaty look in his eye of the loudest-talking champion on a city block—he has finally gotten into a fight with one of the Juniors, and he knows this Junior can fight. If he loses he's got much to lose. So Liston was trying to make Junior keep distance.

Patterson was not doing much. He threw a fast left hook which missed, then he circled a bit, fighting from a crouch. He lunged in once very low, trying to get under Liston's long jab and work to the stomach, but his timing was not acute and he drew back quickly. There had been no inspiration, no life, and a hint of clumsiness. But it had been intellectually sound. It caused no harm. Then he tried again, feinting a left hook, and slipping Liston's left jab, but as he came in close, Liston grabbed him with both arms, and they bulled back and forth until the referee separated them. Now, they each had an unhappy look on their faces as if they were big men who had gotten into an altercation in a bar, and didn't like the physical activity of fighting. Each of them looked like it would take three or four rounds to warm up.

All this had used a minute. Liston seemed to have gained the confidence that he was stronger, and he began crowding Patterson to the rope, throwing a good many punches, not left hooks, not left jabs, not uppercuts or straight rights, just thick, slow, clubbing punches. None of them landed on Patterson's body or head, they all banged on his arms, and occasionally Patterson would bang Liston back on the arm. It is a way of fighting. A strong slow fighter will sometimes keep hitting the other man on the shoulder or the biceps until his arms go dead. If the opponent is in condition, it is a long procedure. I was surprised at how slow Liston's punches were. From ringside, they looked easy to block. He had a way of setting himself and going "ahem" before he threw the punch. It is, of course, one thing to block punches from your seat at ringside, and another to block them in a ring, but when a fighter is punching with real speed and snap, you can't block the punches from where you sit. Even from thirty feet away, you are fooled.

All that was fooling me now was Patterson. He seemed sluggish. He was not getting hit with Liston's punches, but he was not hitting back, he seemed to miss one small op-

portunity after another. He was fighting like a college heavy-weight who has gone in to work with a professional and is getting disheartened at the physical load of such sparring. He had the expression on his face of somebody pushing a Cadillac which has run out of gas.

Then occurred what may have been the most extraordinary moment ever seen in a championship fight. It was very spooky. Patterson, abruptly, without having been hurt in any visible way, stood up suddenly out of his crouch, his back a foot from the ropes, and seemed to look half up into the sky as if he had seen something there or had been struck by something from there, by some transcendent bolt, and then he staggered like a man caught in machine-gun fire, and his legs went, and he fell back into the ropes. His left glove became tangled in the top rope, almost as Paret's arm had been tangled, and that murmur of death, that visitation which had passed into Madison Square Garden on the moment Paret began to die, seemed a breath from appearing now, Patterson looked at Liston with one lost look, as if somehow he had been expecting this to happen ever since the night it happened to Paret; it was the look of a man saying, "Don't kill me," and then Liston hit him two or three ill-timed punches, banging a sloppy stake into the ground, and Patterson went down. And he was out. He was not faking. He had started to pass out at the moment he stood straight on his feet and was struck by that psychic bolt which had come from wherever it had come.

Patterson rolled over, he started to make an attempt to get to his feet, and Baldwin and I were each shouting, "Get up, get up!" But one's voice had no force in it, one's will had no life.

Patterson got up somewhere between a quarter and a half second too late. You could see the critical instant pass in the referee's body, and Patterson was still getting his glove off the ground. The fight was over: 2:06 of the First. It must have been the worst fight either fighter had ever had.

Liston looked like he couldn't believe what had happened. He was blank for two or three long seconds, and then he gave a whoop. It was an artificial, tentative whoop, but it seemed to encourage him because he gave another which sounded somewhat better, and then he began to whoop and whoop and laugh and shout because his handlers had come into the ring and were hugging him and telling him he was the greatest fighter that ever lived. And Patterson, covered

quickly with his bathrobe, still stunned, turned and buried his head in Cus D'Amato's shoulder.

From the stands behind us came one vast wave of silence. Here and there sounded cheers or applause, but you could hear each individual voice or pair of hands clapping into the silence.

"What happened?" said Baldwin.

IV

What did happen? Everybody was to ask that question later. But in private.

The descriptions of the fight fed next morning to The Goat showed no uncertainty. They spoke of critical uppercuts and powerful left hooks and pulverizing rights. Liston talked of dominating Patterson with left hands, Patterson's people said it was a big right which did the job, some reporters called the punches crunching, others said they were menacing, brutal, demolishing. One did not read a description of the fight which was not authoritative. The only contradiction, a most minor contradiction, is that with one exception, a wire-service photograph used everywhere of a right hand by Liston which has apparently just left Patterson's chin, there were no pictures—and a point was made of looking at a good many—which show Liston putting a winning glove into Patterson's stomach, solar plexus, temple, nose, or jaw. In fact there is not a single picture of Liston's glove striking Patterson at all. It is not highly probable the photographers missed every decent punch. Fight photographers are capable of splitting the strictest part of a second in order to get the instant of impact. The fine possibility is that there was no impact. There was instead an imprecise beating, that is a beating which was not convincing if the men were anywhere near to equal in strength. Something had happened to Patterson, however. He fought as if he were down with jaundice. It was not that he did not do his best; he always did his determined best; he did just that against Liston. It is just that his best this night was off the spectrum of his normal condition. Something had struck at him. From inside himself or from without, in that instant he straightened from his crouch and stared at the sky, he had the surprise of a man struck by treachery.

Now I am forced to give a most improper testimony, be-

cause I felt as if I were a small part of that treachery and one despairs of trying to explain how that could be so.

A man turns to boxing because he discovers it is the best experience of his life. If he is a good fighter, his life in the center of the ring is more intense than it can be anywhere else, his mind is more exceptional than at any other time, his body has become a live part of his brain. Some men are geniuses when they are drunk; a good fighter feels a bit of genius when he is having a good fight. This illumination comes not only from the discipline he has put on his body or the concentration of his mind to getting ready for his half hour in the open, but no, it comes as well from his choice to occupy the stage on an adventure whose end is unknown. For the length of his fight, he ceases to be a man and becomes a Being, which is to say he is no longer finite in the usual sense, he is no longer a creature of a given size and dress with a name and some habits which are predictable. Liston-in-the-ring was not just Sonny Liston; much more he was the nucleus of that force at Comiskey Park (and indeed from everywhere in the world from which such desire could reach) which wished him to win or hated him with an impotence that created force, to wit, hated him less than it feared him, and so betrayed its hate since the telepathic logic of the unconscious makes us give our strength to those we think to hate but favor despite ourselves. Just so, Patterson-in-the-ring was not Floyd Patterson sparring in his gym, but was instead a vehicle of all the will and all the particular love which truly wished him to win, as well as a target of all the hatred which was not impotent but determined to strike him down.

When these universes collided, the impact if not clear was total. The world quivered in some rarefied accounting of subtle psychic seismographs, and the stocks of certain ideal archetypes shifted their status in our country's brain. Sex had proved superior to Love still one more time, the Hustler had taken another pool game from the Infantryman, the Syndicate rolled out the Liberal, the Magician hyped the Artist, and, since there were more than a few who insisted on seeing them simply as God and the Devil (whichever much or little of either they might be), then the Devil had shown that the Lord was dramatically weak.

The Goat would demand that this fight be reported in a veritable factology of detail. America could not listen to

questions. The professional witnesses to the collision, the pipers of cancer gulch, were obliged to testify to a barrage of detailed punches, and the fighters reexamining their own history in such a mirror of prose would be forced to remake the event in their mind. Yet so long as one kept one's memory, the event was unclear. The result had been turned by betrayal. And it was by one's own person that the guilt was felt. I had been there with half a body from half a night of sleep for too many nights, and half a brain from too many bouts of drinking drinks I did not want that much, and dim in concentration because I was brooding about the loss of a friendship which it was a cruel and stupid waste to lose. And Baldwin too had been brooding. We had sat there like beasts of burden, empty of psychic force to offer our fighter.

Now, too late, in the bout's sudden wake, like angels whose wings are wet, we buried our quarrel; this time it might stay buried for a while. "My Lord," said Jimmy, "I lost seven hundred and fifty dollars tonight."

Well, we laughed. I had lost no more than a paltry twenty-eight.

Later, I went back to the dressing room. But Patterson's door was locked. Over a hundred reporters were jammed into Liston's room, so many that one could not see the new champion, one could only hear his voice. He was resounding very much like Clark Gable now, late Gable with the pit of his mannerism—that somewhat complacent jam of much too much love for the self. Liston had the movie star's way of making the remark which cuts, then balm-ing it with salve. "Did you take your ugly pills?" says the actor to the leading lady, and gives his smile at her flush. "Why honey, dear child, I'm only kidding." So Liston said, "The one time he hurt me was when he got up to a knee at nine. I was afraid he would come all the way up." Which was class. It whipped. A minute later, some banana oil was uncorked. "Yessir," said Liston at large, "Floyd is a heck of a man."

I left that dressing room and tried to get into Patterson's, but the door was still locked. Ingemar Johansson was standing nearby. They were interviewing him over a pay telephone for a radio program. Johansson had a bewildered combative look as if someone had struck him on the back of the head with a loaded jack. He had knocked Patterson down for seven times in one round, there had been wild lightning and "toonder," but he had not been able to keep Patterson

down. Now Liston had taken Floyd out with a punch or two or three no witness would agree upon.

"Do you think you can beat Liston," was the interviewer's question.

"I don't know," said Johansson.

"Do you think you have a chance?"

Johansson looked sad and Swedish. "One always has a chance," he said. "I would make my fight and fight it, that's all."

One never did get into Patterson's dressing room. After a while I left and walked around the empty ringside seats. It was cold now. Some of the events of the last few days were coming back to me in the cold air of Comiskey Park. They were not agreeable to contemplate. I had done a few unattractive things. I did not want to count them.

But then in fact I had been doing so much that was wrong the last two days. If one is to talk of betrayal and try to explain what was yet to happen, the account must slip back a bit into what had happened already. On Monday, The New York *Times* had shown a story on the first page of the second section about William F. Buckley and myself and our debate on Saturday night. It had culled some dismembered remarks from the exchange, added a touch of wit from each of us, and called the result a draw. I did not take it well. For I had prepared for the debate, I had honed myself like a club fighter getting ready for the champion. I had been ready, and Buckley, who had been working at other things, was not as ready. He had been speaking in Texas the day before and flew into Chicago only that morning. The afternoon of our debate he was still writing his speech. Saturday night, Medinah Temple had held almost four thousand people. It was built like an opera house with an enormous apron on the stage, and balconies which made a turn around the house through more than half a circle. One spoke with the audience sitting deep to one's left and deep to one's right, close in front and high overhead. Despite its size it was not unlike the theatre in *Les Enfants du Paradis*, and it had been dramatic for our separate styles. Buckley, tall and thin, spoke from high on his toes, his long arm and long finger outstretched in condemnation, a lone shaft of light pointing down on him from above while he excoriated the Left for Cuba, and myself for "swinishness." In my turn I led an intellectual foray into the center of his positions, arguing that if conservatism was a

philosophy which saw each person in his appointed place so that men were equal only before God and in Eternity, that the radical in his turn conceived the form of the world as a record of the war between God and the Devil where man served as God's agent and sought to shift the wealth of our universe in such a way that the talent which was dying now by dim dull deaths in every poor man alive would take its first breath and show what a mighty renaissance was locked in the unconscious of the dumb.

Afterward, the people I met on the street and in restaurants or at a party would congratulate me and say I had won. And I had felt exactly like a club fighter who has won a very big fight. But the test of a poor man is profit, and I squandered mine. Something pent up for years, dictatorial and harsh, began to slip through my good humor after I read the verdict in the *Times*. There might be other debates with Buckley in the spring. He would be ready next time. It was raw to lose a victory. I did not take it well. Actors speak of a motor inside themselves. I could not stop mine, one did not want to now, and I drank because the drink was fuel.

Yes, I had done everything wrong since then, I had even had the fool's taste to be pleased with the magic of the cigarette lighter. If I had been a part of the psychic cadre guarding Patterson, I had certainly done everything to make myself useless to him. I could even wonder at that moment, my mind quick with bitterness toward the *Times*, whether the entire liberal persuasion of America had rooted for Floyd in the same idle, detached fashion as myself, wanting him to win but finding Liston secretly more interesting, in fact, and, indeed, demanding of Patterson that he win only because he was good for liberal ideology. I had a moment of vast hatred then for that bleak gluttonous void of the Establishment, that liberal power at the center of our lives which gave jargon with charity, substituted the intolerance of mental health for the intolerance of passion, alienated emotion from its roots, and man from his past, cut the giant of our half-wakened arts to fit a bed of Procrustes, Leonard Bernstein on the podium, John Cage in silence, offered a National Art Center which would be to art as canned butter is to butter, and existed in a terror of eternity which built a new religion of the psyche on a God who died, old doctor Freud, of cancer. Yes, it was this Establishment which defeated Patterson precisely because it supported him, because

it was able to give reward but not love, because it was ruled by a Goat who radiated depression like fallout searches for milk.

A long night was to follow, of curious pockets and creepy encounters. Too much magic had been put into one place, and now it was as if a bomb had exploded prematurely, imperfectly. The turbulence of the air had eyes of calm, and gave telepathic intensity to the dark. One would think of an event with rising concentration and around the turn of one's thought would appear, quite real, smacking of the flesh, some man or woman who belonged to the event. Walk-through the Park, a person shouted my name. Then another cry. It was the voice of each of the men who had promoted the debate with Buckley, John Golden and Aaron Berlin. We took off extempore together to have a drink and go on to my party, and on the way, walking through the streets of the South Side near Corniskey Park, two gloomy Negro adolescents fell in and walked along with us. They were eighteen or nineteen, shabby. They wore flat leather caps. One had turned the short peak around to the back of his head. They had been blasted tonight by Floyd's defeat. Everything would be more difficult now. They did not want to hate Patterson, but they could hardly speak.

Poor Patterson. He was alienated from his own, from his own streets, his own vocabulary, his own manager, he was even alienated from his own nightmare. What could the Establishment tell him of that odyssey which set him once walking on subway tracks to discover a hole not too many inches away from where the trains went by. "Oh," said the Establishment, "he wanted to go back to the womb. How interesting!" But they could not tell one why he had this wish, nor why it was interesting. The womb was part of their void, of the liberal void, they would not begin to guess that a champion who could find a way to go to sleep minutes before a big fight must have learned early to live on the edge of his death. The psychic roar of a prizefight crowd was like the sound of the subway. Yes, Patterson had gone out early to explore because he had known, living in terror down in Bedford-Stuyvesant part of town, down in a world of curse, evil eye, blasted intent, that the forces of the past which had forced their way into the seed which made him now wanted no less than that he be extraordinary, that he be great, that he be a champion of his people. But he had succeeded too quickly. He had come too early upon the scene. The Es-

tablishment had made him a Negroid white. His skin was black, his psychology had turned white, poor blasted man, twice cursed. He could have the consolation that his championship had gone on to another black.

But it was unfair. He deserved more than this, more than this gutted performance. One would now never know if he lost before he reached the ring, whipped by the oatmeal of the liberal line, or if the Devil had struck him down with vastly greater ease than the Devil had intended. No matter how, the result had been awful. That this brave, decent, sensitive, haunted man should have been defeated with such humiliation. It was awful.

The party was very big, and it was a good party. The music went all the way down into the hour or two before breakfast, but no one saw the dawn come in because the party was at Hugh Hefner's house which is one of the most extraordinary houses in America and the living room where much of the party was going was sixty feet long and more than thirty wide, and almost twenty high, yet there were no windows, at least I never saw the sky from that room, and so there was a timeless spaceless sensation. Staying as a houseguest in his home, there had been servants ready all twenty-four hours these last few days, one had been able to get the equivalent of any drink made at any bar at any hour of the world, one could have chili at four a.m. or ice cream at ten, the servants had been perfect, the peace when empty of the house was profound, one never saw one's host except for once or twice in some odd hour of the night. He had a quality not unlike Jay Gatsby, he looked and talked like a lean, rather modest cowboy of middle size; there was something of a mustang about Hefner. He was not the kind of man one would have expected to see as the publisher of his magazine, nor the owner of the Playboy Club, nor certainly as the undemanding host of his exceptional establishment. Timeless, spaceless, it was outward bound. One was in an ocean liner which traveled at the bottom of the sea, or on a spaceship wandering down the galaxy along a night whose duration was a year. The party went on, and I drank and I drank some more. The swimming pool was beneath the dance floor, and there were bathing suits for those who wanted them, and some did, and people went to look through the trapdoor in the living room which pried open over a fall of fifteen feet into a grotto of the pool below. Above was the orchestra and the dancers in a Twist. The

Twist was not dead in Chicago, not hardly. If there were such a thing as sexual totalitarianism, then the Twist was its Horst Wessel, and all the girls with boy's bodies were twisting out their allegiance. I hated the Twist. Not because I had become a moralist on the stroke of twelve, not because I felt sex without love was determined to be bad, but because I hated too much life for sex without any possibility of love. The Twist spoke of some onanism which had gone on forever, some effort which had lost its beginning and labored to find no end, of an art which burned itself for fuel.

Now, after the knockout, in some fatigue-ridden, feverish whole vision of one's guilt and of Patterson's defeat—for of course the fighters spoke as well from the countered halves of my nature; what more had I to tell myself of sex versus love, magic against art, or the hustler and the infantryman?—out of a desire to end some war in myself, as if victory by Patterson might have given me discipline, and the triumph of Liston could now distract me only further, out of a fury to excise defeat, I began in the plot-ridden, romantic dungeons of my mind, all subterranean rhythms stirred by the beat of this party, to see myself as some sort of center about which all that had been lost must now rally. It was not simple egomania nor simple drunkenness, it was not even simple insanity: it was a kind of metaphorical leap across a gap. To believe the impossible may be won creates a strength from which the impossible may indeed be attacked. Fidel Castro alone in the jungle, with a dozen men left, seven-eighths of his landing party dead, lost, or captured, turned to his followers in the sugar-cane and said, "The days of the dictatorship are numbered." If he had been killed that moment they would have said he died as a madman. He was not mad, he was merely all but impossible. But in his mind, he saw a set of psychic steps which led to victory. And in my mind, half-gorged from juice, the beginning of a resolution was forming. I did not know it, but I was getting ready to tell myself that I must have a press conference next morning in which I would explain why Floyd Patterson still had an excellent chance to defeat Sonny Liston in their next fight, and why in fact—this would be indigestible for The Goat—why the fight which had taken place had been a mysterious dumb show substituted by inexplicable intervention for the real event. Opportunity came. This was a party like a pinball machine; there were bonuses on the turn of the lights, and a little later I was having a drink with a man from Cham-

pionship Sports, I had drinks with several of them that night, but on the conversational ride we took together with the liquor, I dunned this man into some half-muttered acceptance of an idea which did not seem at all impractical at two in the morning. I would do publicity for the second Patterson-Liston fight, I was the only man in America who could save the second fight because I believed that Patterson had a true chance to beat Liston the next time they met. And it made sense: at that hour, in the blasted remains of the promotion, with no thought of a return of all promising, the confidence I offered was enough to trap the promise of a conference for the press. Liston was seeing reporters at eleven-thirty; I could have mine at eleven, a semifinal on the eleventh floor.

"And what will you say?" asked the reporters, a little later.

"I'll say it tomorrow."

But the party did not end until seven in the morning. I had the choice of sleeping for a few hours or not sleeping at all, and decided it would be easier not to fall asleep. So I talked for an hour or two with the housekeeper while the drinks began to fade, and then shaved very slowly and dressed and went out to walk the twelve or fifteen blocks from Hefner's house to the hotel. I was tired now, I felt something of the exhilaration a fighter must know in the twelfth or thirteenth round of a fifteen-round fight when he has fought his way into some terrain of the body which is beyond fatigue and is riding now like a roller coaster on the beating of his heart, while the flashbulbs ricochet their red-and-green echoes of light into his skull. The awe of his venture has fined down now into the joy that whether he wins or loses, he has finally lifted into flight, something in himself has come up free of the muck.

At the hotel, I went first to fight headquarters downstairs. In the eyes of the man from Championship Sports who had agreed last night to let me meet the press, I could now see a critical lack of delight.

"It's been changed," he said. "Sonny Liston is having his conference at eleven. You had better have yours afterward."

That would not work. After Liston talked to the reporters they would want to file their stories.

"What floor will it be on?"

"The ninth."

I thought to go to the ninth floor. It was a large mistake.

Later I learned reporters were waiting for me on the eleventh. But an amateur's nose for the trap is pointed to the wrong place. I was afraid to go to the eleventh floor for fear the conference would begin two floors below. Naturally, Liston was late. On the ninth floor, in the banquet room, there were but a few reporters. I went up to the dais, sat down on a chair at one end. For several minutes nobody paid attention. Then one or two men became curious. What are you doing up there, they wanted to know. Well, I was going to sit up there, I told them, while the champion was having his press conference. Afterward I wanted to say a few things. To what effect? To the effect that I still thought Patterson was the better fighter.

A few of the movie cameramen here for TV newsreel began to take their interest. They came up with light meters, set cameras, measured distance. A flashbulb went off, another. The room was filling.

Now officials began to ask me to leave. They asked pleasantly, they asked with bewilderment, they asked in simple menace. I kept saying that I had been invited to speak at this conference, and so would not leave. Who had invited me? Reporters wanted to know. I had the sense to say I would not give the name until it was my turn to speak. I had some sense it would be bad for the man who invited me—I did not want to offer his name for nothing.

"If you don't leave," said the last official, "we'll have to remove you by force."

"Remove me by force."

"Would you give a statement, Mr. Mailer," said a reporter for the *Times*.

"Yes." The answer was formal Chinese. "I came here prepared to make a case that I am the only man in this country who can build the second Patterson-Liston fight into a \$2,000,000 gate instead of a \$200,000 dog in Miami. I wish to handle the press relations for this second fight. For various and private reasons I need to make a great deal of money in the next two months." Two or three journalists were now taking careful notes.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. Its touch was final—the end of a sequence. "Would you come with us?" On one side was a house detective. On the other side was another house detective.

"No."

"We'll have to carry you out."

"Carry me out."

They lifted the chair in which I was sitting. I had not expected this to happen. It was too simple. And there was no way to resist. The publicity from a scuffle would feed a circus. Nonetheless, if you are not a pacifist, to be transported in a chair is no happy work. Once we were quits of the dais, there was nothing to do but slip off. I walked to the elevator. Fifteen minutes of cool, reasonable debate went on downstairs before one of the detectives agreed to telephone up for permission. I would be allowed at least to see Sonny's conference with the press.

When we got back, Liston was much in command. He sat in the center of the long table, on the dais, flanked by four or five men on either side. Questions were admiring, routine. "What did you think of Patterson's punch?" someone asked, a reporter.

"He hits harder than I thought he would," said Liston.

"He never landed a punch."

"That's true," said Liston, "but he banged me on the arm. I could feel it there."

Someone asked a new question. Liston answered in a reasonable voice. Then he said something grim. About reporters.

"Well, I'm not a reporter," I shouted from the back of the room, "but I'd like to say . . ."

"You're worse than a reporter," said Liston.

"Shut the bum up," shouted some reporters.

"No," said Liston. "Let the bum speak."

"I picked Floyd Patterson to win by a one-punch knockout in the sixth round, and I still think I was right," I shouted to Liston.

"You're still drunk."

"Shut the bum up," shouted several reporters.

A reporter asked another question. Nilon was quick to answer it. I had had my moment, lost it. The conference went on. There were questions and answers about the finances of the fight. I was weary. After a while, I sat down. The faces of the people who looked at me were not friendly. When the conference ended, I went up to a reporter who was a friend. "Next time ask your question," he said. "Don't stand there posing."

An ego made of molybdenum could not have concealed from itself that one had better not quit now. The losses would be too great.

So I went back to the dais and tried to approach Liston.

Two very large Negroes stood in the way. "I want to talk to the champion," I said.

"Well, go up front. Don't try to approach him from behind," snapped one of the Negroes.

"Fair enough," I said, and went down the length of the table, turned around, and came up again to Sonny Liston from the front. A man was talking, and I waited ten or fifteen seconds till he was done, and then took a step forward.

"What did you do," said Liston, "go out and get another drink?"

He was sitting down, and I was standing. Since he sat there with his forearms parallel, laid out flat on the table in front of him, it gave to his body the magisterial composure of a huge cat with a man's face.

"Liston," I said, "I still say Floyd Patterson can beat you."

A smile came from the Sphinx. "Aw, why don't you stop being a sore loser?"

"You called me a bum."

Each of us was by now aware that there were reporters gathering around us.

Something unexpected and gentle came into Liston's voice. "Well, you *are* a bum," he said. "Everybody is a bum. I'm a bum, too. It's just that I'm a bigger bum than you are." He stood up and stuck out his hand. "Shake, bum," he said.

Now it came over me that I had not begun to have the strength this morning to be so very good as I had wanted to be. Once more I had tried to become a hero, and had ended as an eccentric. There would be argument later whether I was a monster or a clown. Could it be, was I indeed a bum? I shook his hand.

A few flashbulbs went off, and Liston's face looked red to me and then green and then red and green again before the flare of the light left my retina. His hand was large and very relaxed. It told little about him. But a devil came into my head. I pulled his hand toward me, and his weight was so balanced on his toes that his head and body came forward with his hand and we were not a foot apart. "Listen," said I, leaning my head closer, speaking from the corner of my mouth, as if I were whispering in a clinch, "I'm pulling this caper for a reason. I know a way to build the next fight from a \$200,000 dog in Miami to a \$2,000,000 gate in New York."

Out of Liston's eyes stared back the profound intelligence

of a profound animal. Now we understood each other, now we could work as a team. "Say," said Liston, "that last drink really set you up. Why don't you go and get *me* a drink, you bum."

"I'm not your flunky," I said.

It was the first jab I'd slipped, it was the first punch I'd sent home. He loved me for it. The hint of a chuckle of corny old darky laughter, cottonfield giggles, peeped out a moment from his throat. "Oh, sheeet, man!" said the wit in his eyes. And for the crowd who was watching, he turned and announced at large, "I like this guy."

So I left that conference a modest man. Because now I knew that when it came to debate I had met our Zen master. I took a cab and rode the mile to Hefner's place, feeling the glow of fatigue which is finally not too unclean, and back at the mansion lunch was chili so hot it scorched the throat. I had a glass of milk, and Baldwin dropped by and we spoke in tired voices of the fight and after a while he inquired about the health of my sister and I replied that she was fine, she was looking beautiful, why didn't he consider marrying her, quick as that, which put me one up on old Jim again, and we shook our writer's hands and said good-by, each of us to go back to New York by separate flight, he to write his account, I to mine. Next day, and the following day, and even on the days of the next week, some favorite pets of The Goat kept taking little bites at me. First it was a red jaybird named Mr. Smith and then it was A. J. Liebling, a lovely owl. (One couldn't mind what an owl didn't see, but it was supposed to hear.) Then a wily old hamster named Winchell gobbled some of the remaining rump, and Dorothy Kilgallen, looking never in the least like a chinless lemur, took the largest bite of all. She wrote that I had tried to pick a fight with Archie Moore. Well, I had never tried to pick a fight with Archie Moore because Mr. Moore had indicated already that he could manage to handle a pugilist like Mr. George Plimpton of *The Paris Review*, and Mr. Plimpton and I were much in the same league. Indeed, Mr. Moore had said, "I almost broke my back not hitting Mr. Plimpton."

It could have been very nice. Nobody minds if they read in the papers that they were thrown in a swimming pool when in fact they did not go near a glass of water. The lies of The Goat were not onerous and his pets were sweet: it was just that later one was called in to see a high probation

official and was told that probation, about to end, would now be extended further. One would have to pay this bit for the caper. I did not mind so much. I had learned a lot and educations were paid for best in cash. But what I lost was also nice, I was sorry to see it gone. Some ghost of Don Quixote was laid to rest in me and now I could never be as certain as that morning on the walk whether Patterson indeed could ever bring in his return. To shake the hand of the Devil must quiver the hole: who knew any longer where Right was Left or who was Good and how Evil had hid? For if Liston was the agent of the Devil, what a raid had been made on God, what a royal black man had arisen. Sonny, the King of Hip, was Ace of Spades, and Patterson, ah, Patterson was now an archetype of all which was underdog. He would be a giant if he won. If he could rally from his flight and shave the beard he glued on his mouth; if he could taste those ashes, and swallow to the end, and never choke; if he could sleep through the aisles and enormities of each long night, pondering if the Devil had struck him down (and so might strike again—what fear could be worse than that!) or, even worse, be forced to wonder if the Lord had passed him by for Sonny, if Sonny were now the choice, having carried the blood of his Negritude through prison walls; if Floyd could sleep through those long dreams, and be cool to the power of the dead in Liston's fists (and the rents in his own psyche); if Patterson could keep from pulling apart and could put himself together; if he could shed the philosophy which drained him and learn to create for himself till he was once again the heavyweight with the fastest, hardest hands of our modern time; if he could go out into the ring with the sullen apathy of his followers now staring him in the eye; if he could move in and take that next fight away from Liston and knock Sonny out, then a great man would be with us, and a genius our champion rather than a king. So one would hope for Patterson one more time. Genius was more rare than royalty and so its light must reach a little further into our darkness down the deep waters of sleep, down one's long inner space. The first fight had been won by the man who knew the most about Evil; would the second reveal who had studied more of the Good? would they meet in the clangor of battle or the fiasco of a doomed dead cause? would we witness a dog in Miami or the lion of New York?