

FLESH OF MY FLESH *By Barker Shelton*

How Far Is a Father Justified in Insisting That His Son Shall Fulfill His Own Blasted Ambitions?

THE stout young woman who had been breezing briskly into the kitchen of the Shugrues' flat every few minutes for the last half hour or so seemed a most efficient sort of person. While there was no atmosphere of rush or bustle about whatever she did, she accomplished it with amazing rapidity. And each time she appeared on the scene she had a smile for Con Shugrue, gazing with great interest into the kitchen window, and a little nod of assurance for him, and a commonplace word or two intended to convey to him without telling him in so many words that she was doing her best. It was as if there was nothing to worry about. A wholly trustworthy party, this stout young woman. You could tell in a minute she knew her job. You wouldn't make any mistake in putting all sorts of faith in her, despite the fact that her uniform was that of a nurse still in training. Con Shugrue felt this because the nurse, because the gossip of the neighborhood whisperer that when you applied for a nurse at the Dispensary you must perform accept without a murmur whatever the Dispensary chose to send you. By blind luck he had drawn a prize—a prize that was open to criticism in only one respect. She always left the kitchen door open. Every time she came into that kitchen she left the door ajar, and she persistently neglected to close it behind her when she left. For good and sufficient reasons Con Shugrue wanted that door closed.

Since the stout young woman was just departing with a lot of shiny steel things in a bowl of steaming water, it was a good bet that she would be left wide open. It was, so Con left his observation post at the window and shut it once again; shut it as softly as he could, but, at the same time, as tightly as he could, against sounds that sent cold creeps up and down his spine and the faint, sweetly sickish odor of ether.

Then he went back to his window to resume his waiting watchfulness. The block of dreary tenements in which the domestic gods of the Shugrues were established was on the left hand side of a street that ran up so sharp a slope it seemed to be trying to stand on end, and the flat that set Con Shugrue back \$24.75 every month was the uppermost one of the five in that particular house. Con, therefore, had an excellent view from the kitchen window; of roofs shining with the glare of a March sleet storm, and chimneys that looked as if an ambitious confectioner had tried his hand at frosting them, and lights in rows and circles and triangles and squares. Electric signs made smudges of red and green and orange and blue on the low, eastward driving clouds which had momentarily ceased dripping particles of hail and rain that froze as it struck.

Con Shugrue's eyes were fixed on a string of fiery red letters that stood out against the black March sky. They winked at him and mocked him, and beckoned him and stabbed him. They made him scowl and set his teeth into his under lip, and then shrug his shoulders in a sorry attempt at resignation, which was intended to remind the fact that his right shoulder developed shooting pains even yet when he tried that movement on it. He scowled harder at the blazing red letters. They spelled out for him the name "COLLISEUM A. C."

Under those letters the present lightweight champion of the world would be having a merry argument of it with a certain party who was sure his own claims for championship honors were better founded. The little affair was scheduled for ten rounds. That was all the law allowed. There was a feeling prevalent among the wise birds occupying either side of the contention that ten rounds were amply sufficient. Whatever number of rounds the affair lasted, these same wise birds knew would be full of action, and the sort of action they loved but seldom found. Therefore the old Coliseum would be crowded. Every last seat of those tiers sloping upward from the ring would be jammed with knowing men. Who would win? Well, the time until the main bout was staged swung the talent displayed to them in the preliminaries. A chance to leap into the limelight, that!

Con could see those jammed tiers of seats, the fog of blue smoke that shrouded the lights above the ring shining through it. He could hear the pounding of feet, the first thrilling mob grove of delight as the fighting took on speed in one of those preliminary bouts; growing to a roaring rumble as it became yet faster; the staccato rattle of blows; the patient, monotonous whining of movie machines going on with no letup.

But for the untoward circumstances he had not taken into his reckoning he might have been there tonight; a contender in one of those preliminaries, showing his speed, his cleverness, his punch, to eyes he could most desire to see such qualities in him.

"Well, show 'em what we got at the Coliseum in March," Al Dorsey had told him. "The night Biller and Lewis has to back up the hot air they've been throwing at each other. They've been gassing so much back and forth the place will be packed. It'll be the chance of a lifetime to show up a comer. I'll set you on in preliminary with somebody—who it isn't matter much. You could take care of any of them now."

Every word of that conversation came back to him now; the first thrill of it that evening months ago in a corner of the basement of Dorsey's little sporting goods shop which Al had rigged up for training quarters. Al's hand on his shoulder as he spoke and himself, panting on an up ended box as he unclashed his gloves, seeing life heading for pleasant places.

Al Dorsey had happened into the molding room of the Pratt Car Wheel Works one noon hour, had seen him fooling with some of the other men, had watched him closely, asking him a few questions, requested more of the fooling, watched closer, and taken Con Shugrue under his wing.

Skeptical at first, thinking little of it, Con had said nothing about it to anybody. Neither had he allowed himself any pleasant delusions. But he had worked faithfully with Al Dorsey several evenings a week, with an aptitude for the work which Al himself could never have guessed.

Then Annie had to give up her work in the loft where they made the feather flowers. Annie didn't think it was necessary, but the doctor was firm about it. It took money to get by and live even half decently, and with Annie's weekly contribution no pressed and the need of money in the future loomed yet more urgently, Con saw where it behooved him to find some extra work.

He found it in the Bay State Garage, four evenings a week, which left him two evenings for the finishing touches in Al Dorsey's basement. All of which might have worked out satisfactorily with the closest sort of figuring if a benighted swab with more indifference than brains hadn't dropped a heavy Stillson wrench over the side of a car and into the pit one night at the Bay State Garage.

It struck the bottom of the pit via Con Shugrue's right shoulder. And this was calamitous, while they managed to patch and strap the shoulder so Con was missing at the Car Wheel Work but ten days and from the garage but two weeks, the speed had gone forever from that particular shoulder when it was pronounced fit once more.

Al Dorsey trotted him around to various men who might do something to limber it up. Successively they shook their heads. Al Dorsey learned three new oaths in his overweening disappointment. The men to whom he had taken



"Straight from the shoulder! Attaboy! Attaboy! Did you get that, Annie?"

Con Shugrue explained at length why no operation would help and why no system of exercise or massage or baking on bandaging would be effective. And Al Dorsey learned two more new ones.

Wherefore Con Shugrue saw his visions faded and did the best he could about it, and anything he hadn't thought of first there was told him in it, so why mope about it now? Eminent sane philosophy. Only visions, once they have taken a grip, are leath to let go. They have a way of popping up persistently, poor unaided ghosts, to jangle and wrench the soul and present trains of futile might-have-beens.

Just such little might-have-beens were having their will of Con Shugrue now as he scowled at the smudge of red letters on the roof of the Coliseum, dimmer because the sleet was beginning again. If, for instance, that pinheaded boob hadn't dropped his Stillson wrench, or had dropped it from the other side of the car, or if he had been working at the other side of the pit at the moment, or if Annie could have held down her job in the feather loft a little longer, or if he had met Al Dorsey a little sooner or had met Annie a little later in his life.

He heard the footsteps of the stout young woman crossing the floor of the diminutive dining room of the flat. She was opening the kitchen door. So, of course, he'd have to close it after her again presently. He turned about. The stout young woman came in. This time she carried what she had been carrying a hastily gathered bundle of laundry to be duly wrapped up. She grinned at Con, and transferred whatever it was she carried from her own arms to his. It did not seem to have much shape. A thin wall started him into the realization that there was something alive in it.

"Can I have another squint at them big fists of my son?" he asked the nurse.

She seemed not only willing but highly pleased to grant this request of his.

"It is a hard climb to the Shugrue apartment up the narrow little street that seems trying to stand on end. Moreover, after the ascent of the sharp slope has been accomplished there are four flights of stairs to be negotiated before the uppermost flat is reached. Neither of these conditions is conducive to the general comfort of a man who recently has been taking on weight far too rapidly and to whom an attack of the flu has bequeathed the unwelcome legacy of a good imitation of asthma. An overwarm day had not been further to upset the equilibrium of a party of this description.

The October holiday seemed to have become a trifle confused as to its identity. Anyway, it had taken to itself a temperature that would have done credit to a Fourth of July.

Wherefore at the top of the third flight of those stairs by which he gained his domicile Con Shugrue found it advisable to heave out a lifebuoy in the shape of a word of encouragement to the heavy man puffing and blowing and stumbling upward in his wake.

"Only one more flight after this, Al, and we're there."

Mr. Dorsey was wondering why he had come, or at least why he had not deferred coming until a cooler day. No prodigy of a kid that ever lived was worth all this discomfort. As for the prodigy part of it, he had his own mental reservations on that point. Kids were always prodigies to their parents; much overrated; one had to be prepared for disappointments.

Still in a way, he could see where it was the only decent thing to do; to humor this paternal exuberance of Con Shugrue's out of respect to certain high and now defunct hopes which had been mutually his and Con's.

At the sound of the key in the latch Mrs. Shugrue came into the hallway. Three of them in the left seat, elbow room. She was a smaller, freer woman than Dorsey had expected Con's wife would be; prettier, too, a certain fetching grace and lightness about her. Dorsey, unmarried himself and firm in his belief that marrying young was a good deal like standing your chances in life against a blank wall and assassinating them one after another in cold blood—witness this case of Con Shugrue, for example—forgot Con a whole lot at the sight of her.

"Annie," said Con, "I want you to shake hands with my good friend, Al Dorsey. Al wants to see the kid."

Annie shook hands with her husband's friend. Al murmured that he was glad indeed to meet Mrs. Shugrue, which was the truth, and Annie said she was pleased to meet Mr. Dorsey, which wasn't. Con pushed open a door on one side of that triangular room. Al Dorsey made

ready to spill the enthusiasm he knew was expected of him and to say the things he was expected to say. He found himself standing with Con beside a small iron crib. Mrs. Shugrue had betaken herself to the kitchen.

"Well, what do you know about it?" said Con proudly.

"A fine kid, Con. Sure, a right fine kid."

"I'll say so, if I am the father of him. Did you ever see a huskier kid at seven months?"

"I never did," said Dorsey, which was perfectly true, considering the fact that he had probably never inspected a seven months old baby before.

"Look at the fists on him, will you?" Dorsey centered his interest on the fists.

"Ain't they cute?" said he, and realized at once from Con's face that he had made a conversational misce.

"Cute nothing!" Con denied. "They're big as young hams. Old whalers of fists for such we feller as him. Which means, so they tell me, he'll be a husky young brute, that he'll grow to prize them big fists of him. 'Big enough for a prize fighter,' says the nurse when she sees them the night he's born. That's what seems to strike her about him more than anything else, them big fists of his. 'Big enough for a prize fighter,' she says of 'em."

Mr. Dorsey took another look at them. "They sure are big fists for the size of the kid," he revised his former estimate of them.

"Some day them fists is going to have a regular old mule kick of a punch in them, Al."

"They'd ought to," Dorsey agreed.

"And the little bit of a kid will grow up to match them fists of his. All that I couldn't be because of the busted shoulder he shall be. And more maybe, because, no doubt, he'll be bigger and huskier than ever I was."

"I see," said Dorsey.

"And when that day comes I'll want you to train him, Al, the same as you was a training me, and put him where he ought to go. That'll be the top, Al. Nothing short of the top will do."

Al Dorsey did a little mental arithmetic. "I'll be an old man then, Con," he said.

"But you'll be a wise one, all the same. I don't mean for you to put on the gloves with him. Will you do that, Al? All that I couldn't be you to take him in hand and show him what you can show him and tell him all the things you can tell him, and watch him and shape him and get him placed right. There's a lot in starting right, ain't there? Well, do that for him, and have an oversight of the whole training of him."

Mr. Dorsey accepted the commission.

"Now lemme show you the material you'll have to work on," said Con.

From the foot of the crib he took up a celluloid rattle with jingling bells around its edge. He shook it before the baby's face. Two chubby hands came up and clutched the handle.

"You wouldn't believe the grip he can get on it," Con told the other man. "But now just watch."

He proceeded to take the rattle away. The small face wrinkled into a scowl. But there was no sound, no wails, no tears.

"Do you mind that? Never a whimper out of him. I'm teaching him early to take what's coming to him and be game."

"Fine!" Dorsey enthused, although he saw nothing particularly marvelous in all this.

"And he is game all right. Even now that kid's game."

"Sure he is," Mr. Dorsey conceded a yawn.

"Now watch again."

Con poked the baby's cheek with one forefinger. The small hands pushed the prodding finger away. Con chuckled in great delight.

"Did you get that?" he asked.

"The way he's playing with you?"

"He's not playing with me. He's fighting me off. Look at the scowl on his face. Fighting me, he is, I say."

"Well, well, now! I be hanged if he ain't!"

"You told me once I had the real fighting blood in me, do you remember?"

"I told you the truth, Con. You sure have got it."

"And it's in him, too."

"Never a doubt of it."

Annie came into the hall as Con was showing Dorsey out. "Won't Mr. Dorsey stay and have a bit of dinner with us?" she asked her husband.

being but necessary thing has been accomplished.

"Who is this Mr. Dorsey?" Annie asked him when the door had closed behind their visitor.

"An old friend of mine, Annie. A man that would have done a lot for me, if he'd had the chance or if he hadn't been cheated out of the chance of doing it."

"One of his ears is awfully funny, isn't it?"

"Don't you like him?"

Annie thought her answer over carefully before she gave it. "No," she said finally.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It's just that I don't like him. Maybe it's because of that funny ear. But I want you to show the baby to your friends. Con I want you to show him to all your friends, whether or not I take a dislike to them. I'm glad you're proud of him."

"Annie started for the kitchen to take up the belated dinner. He followed her.

"When Al Dorsey has done all he can for him," he went on.

"Al Dorsey? What can Al Dorsey do for him?"

"Everything, like he could have done for me if things had gone right."

He lit a pipe and sat down by the open window of the kitchen. Annie worked away by the stove.

"What's all this Mr. Dorsey could have done for you, Con, and why didn't he do it?" she asked him, after one of those ten little pauses that told him she had been waiting for him to go on without the prompting question.

"He could have put me into the way of making heaps of money. We might have had wads of it, and stories about me in the paper and pictures of me heading 'em, and a limousine of our own, no doubt in time, and things like that."

"Well, why didn't he do it for you?"

"I'd have made good from the start, Al said. I had the speed, the shiftness, and the punch. It was all ready for my first appearance. It was to be at the Coliseum in one of the preliminaries one night when the place would be crowded with reason of the main bout drawing out a full house. But I busted the shoulder and it went stiff on me."

A spoon clattered to the floor. His wife forgot the dinner she was taking up. She turned about in sudden, distressed alarm.

"You were going in the ring, Con?" she asked between set lips.

"In the ring, Annie. And up to the top after I once got started. I had all the stuff to do it, Al said so."

"Is that what your friend Dorsey will do for little Con?"

"He promised to do it this morning; in there after he had looked over the kid and seen the gameness of him and the spirit, and him only seven months old, at that."

"Oh, Con, not that! Nothing like that!"

"What would you have him, girl?"

"I don't know. Whatever he wants to be. More anything but that."

"There's money in it, more than he'd ever make at anything else, probably. When you get to the top there's a lot coming to you out of the pictures and turns you do in vaudeville, besides the income from the fights themselves."

"Money?" she said scornfully.

She stood by the stove, twisting a corner of her apron in her fingers. She was not looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on a warping crack in the kitchen floor.

"Con," she said at last, and the slowness with which she spoke told of the difficulty she was finding in making herself clear. "I want you to be glad we've got him. I want you to be glad at any cost. That's the main thing, for you to be glad he's here. I was so afraid once, just before he was born, you didn't want him. I don't want to be hurt like that again."

"Want him? Of course, I want him. Have done with all this foolish talk about me not wanting him, Annie!"

"You didn't want him at first," she persisted.

where about the place; not in the kitchen; not in the dining room; nor yet in the last resort, the front room. A vague suspicion, which struck Con as the most absurd idea in all the world even as it possessed him, prompted him to open a closet door. The closet looked as if a cyclone had gone through it. Everything of Annie's that had hung in that closet had gone from the hooks.

"She must have took the kid out somewhere, Al," he announced as calmly as he could. "Over to one of her friends, probably. I guess I'll have to show you some other evening how he looks with them gloves on."

The quarters of the Quill Bureau of Investigation are not imposing. They do not keep faith with the name of the concern. One small, inside office in an old building suffices its needs.

The single window in the place opens on an air shaft. The furnishings are one second-hand filing cabinet, two chairs with sagging cane seats, a framed portrait of Allan Pinkerton, standing beside Lincoln in front of a tent, and a scoured, cigar scorched desk, at which, squeezed into the inadequate confines between the arms of the desk chair and overflowing it somewhat, sits Joseph B. Quill, head of the bureau and its entire working force as well.

Con Shugrue was impressed with neither the place nor with Mr. Quill. The latter seemed far too heavy both physically and mentally for the delicate details of confidential investigation.

A fellow workman at the car wheel works had suggested Mr. Quill and his bureau to Con. And, since he was here and Mr. Quill was already asking for the third time what he could do for him, there seemed nothing else to do but state the nature of his errand. So Con took a photograph from his pocket and laid it on the desk. It was a likeness of Annie and himself.

"I should like you to find out the present whereabouts of this lady," said Con.

Mr. Quill gazed on the photograph. The man in the picture being undoubtedly the one who was speaking to him and the habitments of the lady being of the bridal variety, he got the right answer at the first try.

"Your wife?" said he.

"Quite so."

"She's beat it, I take it."

"She has."

"How long ago?"

"Three days."

"What was the trouble?"

"That's what I want to find out."

"There's always reasons for everything," said Mr. Quill. "Don't be afraid to tell me the whole story. How about another man?"

"Nothing in that."

"But you do know some reasons why she left you, think hard, and don't be afraid, as I say, to tell me everything. The more I know about it, the quicker I'll be apt to find her for you."

"There was a kid," said Con slowly. "We hadn't actually quarreled about him. But there was some difference of opinion between us—about what he'd be when he grew up."

"She let the kid with her, of course?"

Con nodded.

"Did she have much money with her?"

"Only a very little. Maybe not any at all."

"Has she ever worked at any job? Before you married her or since?"

"Oh-huh. She worked on feather flowers for a number of years."

Mr. Quill took up a pencil. He jotted down Con's answers to terse questions as to her name, age, weight, color of her hair and eyes, and certain details of the clothing she had taken with her.

"Ought to be easy," said Mr. Quill. "Ten dollars in advance to cover possible expenses."

Con gave him the ten dollars.

"Where will I get you when I've found out anything?"

Con mentioned the car wheel works as the best bet in the daytime and gave the address of the flat where he might be located after six at night.

Just before closing time that evening Mr. Quill came into the molding room at the car wheel works to find a note pinned to the door.

"You haven't located her already?" Con asked him eagerly.

"Maybe not; but try this address." He passed Con a slip of paper with a street and number scribbled on it. "Mrs. Annie Shaughnessy came there with a baby three evenings ago, and took a room. Mrs. Bedloe runs the house. Better look into this."

The latter advice was wholly superfluous. Con went straight from the car wheel works to the address on that slip of paper. It was a dowdy street. He rang the bell of a house that matched the street.

A dispirited looking woman opened the door; Mrs. Bedloe who ran the place, no doubt.

"Will I find Mrs. Annie Shaughnessy here?" Con asked her.

"I'll see if she's in."

"Let me save you that trouble," said he, pushing past her and mounting the stairs.

At the top of the third flight he tried a door knob cautiously. It turned noiselessly in his careful fingers; the door opened a crack. It was not locked, then. He went in, closed it, set his back against it. Annie bounded out of a sorry looking rocking chair by the yet sorrier looking bed, where the baby was asleep.

"Annie, what crazy foolishness is this?" he growled.

"I saw the gloves on him. It was the last straw. You shan't make a fighter of him!"

"I thought you said you wouldn't interfere."

"I said I'd try not to interfere."

"You're coming home with me."

She shook her head. "No, Con. I've thought it all over. I'd rather it would be you that was cheated than him."

"Who's cheating him?"

"You," she flared. "What's all this you're doing but cheating him? What's all this talk about him being a fighter when he's not out of his crib, and prodding him and poking him and taking things he wants away from him and scowling at him so he won't whimper when you do it, and keeping at him until he won't think of anything when he begins to think except what you want him to? What's all that but cheating him? Maybe he'd rather take the orders or be a pet or love music or something like that. And he won't know because you've filled his poor head with the stuff you want it filled with. No, if any one's got to be cheated, it shan't be him."

"I suppose," he said with biting irony, "you'll work in the feather loft again to support him and give him a grand education when he grows up."

"I'll save every cent for him I can," she said.

"What you'll do," he said shortly, "is get on your things and the kid's things and come home with me."

"Will you promise to stop all the things you've been doing to him?"

"I'll promise nothing of the sort."

"That's the way I thought it would be," she said, dully. "So we'll stay here. And I'll give him a chance to choose for himself, if I have to work my hand off to do it."

"Annie, that child is a real heid. He's got head blood in him. My fighting blood is in his veins. Teach him to be game? Teach him to fight? It comes to him naturally, without any teaching. It's in him. Born there. He gets it from me. Get on your things and his! Do you hear?"

She went over to the door and opened it. Standing there, very straight and very white, she motioned him to leave.

"I hate the way you've acted about him," she said between her clenched teeth. "And hating the way you've done, I've come to hate you. Now go and leave us alone."

"Hate me, do you? What for? For trying my best to make something out of that kid that I know he'd be better than anything else in the

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