



Vital Ingredient

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Published: 1956

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

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"CHAMP, what's with ya lately?" Benny asked the question as they lay on the beach.

"Nothing," Frankie answered. "Just fight-nite miseries, I guess."

"No it ain't, Frankie. It's something else. You losin' confidence in Milt? That it? Can't you hold it one more time? You guys only need tonite and you got it. One more to make Ten-Time Defenders—the first in the game, Frankie."

"We won the last two on points, Benny. Points—and I'm better than that. I keep waiting, and waiting, for my heels to set; for Milt to send it up my legs and back and let fly. But he won't do it, Benny."

"Look, Champ, Milt knows what he's doing. He's sending you right. You think maybe you know as much as Milt?"

"Maybe I just do, Benny. Maybe I do."

Benny didn't have the answer to this heresy. By law this was Frankie's last fight—as a fighter. If he won this one and became a Ten-Time Defender he would have his pick of the youngsters at the Boxing College, just as Milt had chosen him fifteen years before. For fifteen years he'd never thrown a punch of his own in a fight ring.

Maybe because it was his last fight in the ring he felt the way he did today. He understood, of course, why fighters were mentally controlled by proved veterans. By the time a fighter had any real experience and know-how in the old days, his body was shot. Now the best bodies and the best brains were teamed by mental control.

Benny had an answer now. "Champ, I think it's a good thing this is your last fight. You know too much. After this one you'll have a good strong boy of your own and you can try some of this stuff you've been learning. Milt knows you're no kid anymore. That's why he has to be careful with you."

"I still have it, Benny. My speed, my punch, my timing—all good. There were a dozen times in those last two fights I could have crossed a right and gone home early."

"Two times, Frankie. Just two times. And them late in the fight. Milt didn't think you had it, and I don't think you did either."

Milt, Frankie's master control, came down to the beach and strolled over to join them. Milt had been a Five-Time Defender in the Welter division before his fights ran out. Now he was skinny and sixty. His was the mind that had directed every punch Frankie had ever thrown.

He studied the figure of Frankie lying on the sand. The two-hundred-pound fighting machine was thirty years old. Milt winced when he

compared it to that of the twenty-two-year-old slugger they would have to meet in a few hours.

Benny said "Hi," and ambled off.

"Well, boy, this one means a lot to both of us," Milt said.

"Sure," was all Frankie could answer.

"For you, the first Ten-Time Defender the heavyweight division has ever produced. For me, The Hall of Boxing Fame."

"You want that pretty bad, don't you, Milt?"

"Yeah, I guess I do, Frankie, but not bad enough to win it the wrong way."

Frankie's head jerked up. "What do you mean, the wrong way?"

Milt scowled and looked as though he wished he hadn't said that. He turned his head and stared hard at his fighter. "There's something we maybe ought to have talked about, Frankie."

"What's that?"

Milt struggled for words. "It's just—oh, hell! Forget it. Just forget I said anything."

"You figure we win tonight?"

"I think maybe we will."

"You don't seem very sure. On points, huh?"

"Yeah, maybe on points." Milt turned his eyes back on Frankie's eager face. "Frankie, boy—there's something about being a Ten-Time Defender that's, well—different."

Milt took a deep breath and was evidently ready to tell Frankie exactly what he meant. But Frankie broke in, his voice low and tense. "Milt—"

"Yes?"

"When I get in there tonight—turn me loose!"

Milt was startled at the words. "Release *control*?"

"Yeah—sure. I think I can take Nappy Gordon on my own!"

"Nappy can stick his fist through a brick wall—all night long. And Pop Monroe knows all there is to know and some he makes up himself. They'd be a tough pair to beat. Our big ace is that they have to beat us. We *got* the Nine-Times."

"I can take him, Milt!"

There was a strange light in Milt's eyes. He did not speak and Frankie went on. "Just one round, Milt! If I slip you can grab control again."

"You just want a try at it, huh?"

There seemed to be disappointment in Milt's voice; something Frankie couldn't understand. Milt seemed suddenly nervous, ill-at-ease. But

Frankie was too eager to give it much attention. "How about it, Milt—huh?"

Milt had been squatting on the sand. He got to his feet and looked out across the water. "All right. Maybe we'll try it."

He seemed sad as he walked away. Frankie, occupied with his own elation, didn't notice ...

In the studio dressing room, a few hours later Milt and Frankie were warming up. Frankie in the practice ring and Milt perched on a high chair just outside the ropes.

Everything was just as it would be in the fight. Three minutes work, one minute rest. Frankie noticed how slowly and carefully Milt was working him, and how he watched the clock.

Frankie had nothing to do now but watch, as a spectator would; watch as Milt moved him around. Milt could control every muscle, every move and every reflex of his body. It had taken them five years to perfect this routine. That was the training period at the College of Boxing, and was prescribed by law.

In their first fight they had been at their peak. Frankie was Milt's second boy and Milt knew boxing as only a Champion Welter with thirty years of experience could know it. For fifteen years he had watched and studied while a good veteran had directed his body. And for another fifteen years he had been the guiding brain to a fine Middleweight.

As a Welterweight, Milt had learned to depend on speed and quick hands. In Frankie he had found the dream of every Welter—a punch. Frankie's body could really deliver the power. At first, it had been the heavy hitting that had won the fights; lately, Milt had relied more and more on the speed and deception he had developed in Frankie.

Frankie felt the control ease out and knew the warm-up was over. He slipped on his robe and he and Milt went to join the others in the TV studio.

There would be no crowd. Just the cameras, the crews and officials. The fight would be televised in 3-D and filmed in slow motion. If a decision were needed to determine the winner, it would be given only after a careful study had been made of the films.

There was little to be done in the studio and Milt had timed Frankie's warm-up right to the minute. The fighters and their controllers took their positions: the controllers seated in high chairs on opposite sides of the ring; the fighters in opposite corners.

As the warning buzzer sounded, Frankie felt Milt take control. This one he would watch closely.

At the bell Frankie rose and moved out slowly. He noticed how relaxed, almost limp, Milt was keeping him. There was only a little more effort used than in the pre-fight warm-up. His left hand had extra speed but only enough power to command respect. The pattern was just about as he had expected. As the fight went along the left would add up the points. But his thoughts were centered on a single question. *How is it going to be on my own?*

In the early rounds he was amazed at the extreme caution Milt was employing. Nappy Gordon's face was beginning to redden from the continual massage of Frankie's brisk left and occasional right. But Frankie felt that his own face must be getting flushed with eagerness. The glory of going in and trying to do it by himself; of beating Pop Monroe without Milt's help. He wondered if Milt would have to clamp on the controls again. He sure hoped not. But there wasn't anything to really worry about. Milt could beat Pop Monroe and he wouldn't let Frankie take a beating by himself.

Frankie's attention was caught by some odd thoughts in Milt's mind. Milt didn't seem to be sending them, yet they were clear and direct: *You really think you've got it, boy? That vital ingredient?*

What you talking about?

Huh? Me? Oh, nothing. Take it easy. But Milt's thoughts were troubled.

When you going to let me go?

I said, take it easy. We'll see.

The sixth round came and Frankie felt no weariness. Milt was working him like he was made of fragile glass. Nor was Nappy tiring so far as he could notice. Pop Monroe was trying for just one solid blow to slow down the Champ. So far nothing even jarring had come close to landing.

In the seventh Frankie noticed a little desperation in Monroe's tactics. To win now Monroe and Gordon needed a knockout. Frankie had only to stay on his feet to be home safe. But when was Milt going to let him go? Milt had turned in a masterpiece of defensive fighting. The left had deadly accuracy and now the openings were truck-sized as Monroe had come to ignore the light tattoo of the Champ's punches.

Milt withdrew the control in the middle of the seventh round. It hit Frankie like a dash of cold water, the exultation of being on his own! He looked over at Milt, perched rope-high in his control chair at ringside. Milt was looking at him, his face tight and grim; almost hostile.

Frankie circled warily, a touch of panic coming unbidden. What to do? He hadn't known it would be quite like this. He tried to remember how it was—how it felt to move in the various ways Milt always sent him. Funny how you could forget such things. The left hook—that jab—how did they go?

A pile driver came from somewhere and almost tore his head off his shoulders ...

He was looking up at the ceiling. He rolled his eyes and saw Pop Monroe's face—smiling a little, but also puzzled. Even with his brain groggy, Frankie knew why. He'd stepped wide open in Nappy's looping right and Pop couldn't figure Milt doing a thing like that.

Pop looked over at Milt. Frankie followed Pop's eyes and saw the look Milt returned. Then the spark of understanding that passed between them. Odd, Frankie thought. What understanding could there be?

He was aware of the word seven filling the studio as the loud speaker blared the count. He was up at nine.

Nappy swarmed in now. Frankie felt the pain of hard, solid blows on his body as he tried to tie up this dynamo Poppy Monroe was releasing on him. He couldn't stop it, dodge it, or hide from it.

But he finally got away from it—staggering. Nappy came at him fast and the left jab Frankie sent out to put him off balance didn't even slow the fury a bit. Frankie took to the ropes to make Nappy shorten his punches. It helped some, but not enough. No man could take the jolting effect of those ripping punches and keep his feet under him. Frankie didn't—he was down when the bell ended round nine.

In his corner the seconds worked quickly. He looked at Milt and saw a dead-pan expression. Milt wasn't sending him anything. Punishing him of course. Frankie took it meekly; ashamed of himself. Milt would take over again when the bell sounded. Frankie knew that he couldn't stay away from Nappy for another round. Nobody could. Monroe smelled a knockout and Frankie was never fast enough to run away from the burst of viciousness that would come at him in the form of Nappy Gordon. No, Milt would take over.

At the bell, Frankie moved out fast, waiting for the familiar feel of Milt expertly manipulating his arms and legs and body; sending out the jabs and punches; weaving him in and out.

But Milt didn't take over and Pop sent Nappy in with a pile-driver right that smashed Frankie to the floor. Frankie rolled over on his knees and shook his head groggily, trying to understand. Why hadn't Milt taken over? What was Milt trying to do to him?

Milt's cold face waved into focus before Frankie's blinking eyes. *What was Milt trying to do?* Frankie heard the tolling count—six, seven, eight. Milt wasn't even going to help him up. Sick and bewildered, Frankie struggled to his feet. Nappy came driving in. Frankie back-pedalled and took the vicious right cross while rolling away. Thus he avoided being knocked out and was only floored for another eight-count.

Milt—Milt—for God's sake—

The round was over. Frankie staggered, sick, to his corner and slumped down. The handlers worked over him. He looked at Milt. But Milt neither sent nor returned his gaze. Milt sat looking grimly off into space and seemed older and wearier than time itself.

Then Frankie knew. Milt had sold him out!

The shocking truth stunned him even more than Nappy's punches. Milt had sold him out! There had been rare cases of such things. When money meant more than honor to a veteran. But Milt!

Numbed, Frankie pondered the ghastly thought. After all, Milt was old. Old men needed money for their later years. But how could he? How could he do it?

Suddenly Frankie hated. He hated Nappy and Pop and every one of the millions of people looking silently on around the world. But most of all, he hated Milt. It was a weird, sickening thing, that hatred. But only a mentally sickening thing. Physically, it seemed to make Frankie stronger, because when the bell rang and he got up and walked into a straight right, it didn't hurt at all.

He realized he was on the floor; the gong was sounding; he was getting up, moving in again. There was blood, a ringing in his head.

But above all, a rage to kill. To kill.

He remembered going down several times and getting up. Not caring how he had swung under Milt's control—only wanting to use his fists—to kill the thing weaving in front of him.

Nappy. A grinning, weaving, lethal ghost.

He felt a pain in his right fist and saw Nappy go down. He saw Pop's face go gray as though the old man himself had felt the force of the blow. Saw Nappy climb erect slowly. He grinned through blood. Frankie—ghost-catcher. He had to get him.

He was happy; happy with a new fierceness he had never before known. The lust of battle was strong within him and when Pop weaved Nappy desperately, Frankie laughed, waited, measured Nappy.

And smashed him down with a single jarring right.

The bell tolled ten. Pop got wearily off his stool and walked away. Frankie strode grimly to his corner, ignored Milt, moved on into the dressing room.

He knew Milt would come and he waited for him, sitting there coldly on the edge of the table. Milt walked in the door and stood quietly.

"You sold me out," Frankie said.

There was open pride in Milt's eyes. "Sure—you had to think that."

"What do you mean, think? You didn't pick me up when Pop flattened me. I saw the look between you and Pop."

"Sure." Milt's eyes were still proud. "You had to know. That's how I wanted it."

"Milt—why did you do it?"

"I didn't do it. I just had to make you think I did."

"In God's name—why?"

"Because I'm sentimental, maybe, but I've always had my own ideas about the kind of fighter who should be a Ten-Time winner. All my life I've kept remembering the old greats—Dempsey, Sullivan, Corbett—the men who did it on their own, and I wanted you to get it right—on your own—like a real champion."

Frankie was confused. "I wanted to go on my own. Why didn't you tell me then?"

"Then you'd have lost. You'd have gone down whimpering and moaning. You see, Frankie, all those old fighters had a vital ingredient—the thing it takes to make a champion—courage."

"And you didn't think I had it?"

"Sure I did. But the killer instinct is dead in fighters today and it has to be ignited. It needs a trigger, so that was what I gave you—a trigger."

Frankie understood. "You wanted me to get mad!"

"To do it, you had to get mad—at me. You're not conditioned to get mad at Nappy or Pop. It's not the way we fight now. It had to be me. I had to make you hate me."

Frankie marveled. "So when Pop looked at you—"

"He knew."

Frankie was off the table, his arms around Milt. "I'm—I'm so ashamed."

Milt grinned. "No, you're not. You're happier than you ever were in your life. You're a real champion. Great feeling, isn't it? Now you know how *they* felt—in the old days."

Frankie was crying. "You are damn right! Thanks."

Milt looked years younger. "Don't mention it—*champ*."

THE END

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