

What they said about Thomas Myler's previous books

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Thomas Myler has served up another collection of gripping boxing stories. The author packs such a punch with his masterful storytelling that you will feel you were ringside inhaling the sizzling atmosphere at each clash of the titans.

A must for boxing fans.

Ireland's Own

There are few more authoritative voices in boxing than Thomas Myler and this is another wonderfully evocative addition to his growing body of work.

Irish Independent

Another great book from the pen of the prolific Thomas Myler
RTE, Ireland's national broadcaster

Boxing's Hall of Shame

Boxing scribe Thomas Myler shares with the reader a ringside seat for the sport's most controversial fights. It's an engaging read, one that feeds our fascination with the darker side of the sport.

Bert Sugar, US author and broadcaster

Well written and thoroughly researched by one of the best boxing writers in these islands, Myler has a keen eye for the story behind the story. A must read for all fight fans.

Yorkshire Post

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Irish Independent

Admired and respected around the world, Thomas Myler has surpassed himself with this latest offering.

Dublin Herald

Boxing's Greatest Upsets: Fights That Shook The World

A respected writer, Myler has compiled a worthy volume on the most sensational and talked-about upsets of the glove era, drawing on interviews, archive footage and worldwide contacts.

Yorkshire Evening Post

Fight fans will glory in this offbeat history of boxing's biggest shocks, from Gentleman Jim's knockout of John L Sullivan in 1892 to the modern era. A must for your bookshelf.

Hull Daily Mail

Book of the Month

Lonsdale Sports

Myler's ability to dig deep, gather plenty of background information, coupled with his easy-flowing style of writing, paints a fascinating scene building up to the contests. We urge you to add this book to your collection.

Boxing News

Myler doesn't just deal with what happened inside the ropes but also provides a balanced overview of the controversies, personalities and historical contexts that make these fights worth reading about.

Ring

Ringside with the Celtic Warriors

The offering from this highly respected boxing writer is well up to the standard we expect from him.

Boxing News

Thomas Myler has come up with another gem. His credentials and easy, readable style make this a must book for fight fans.

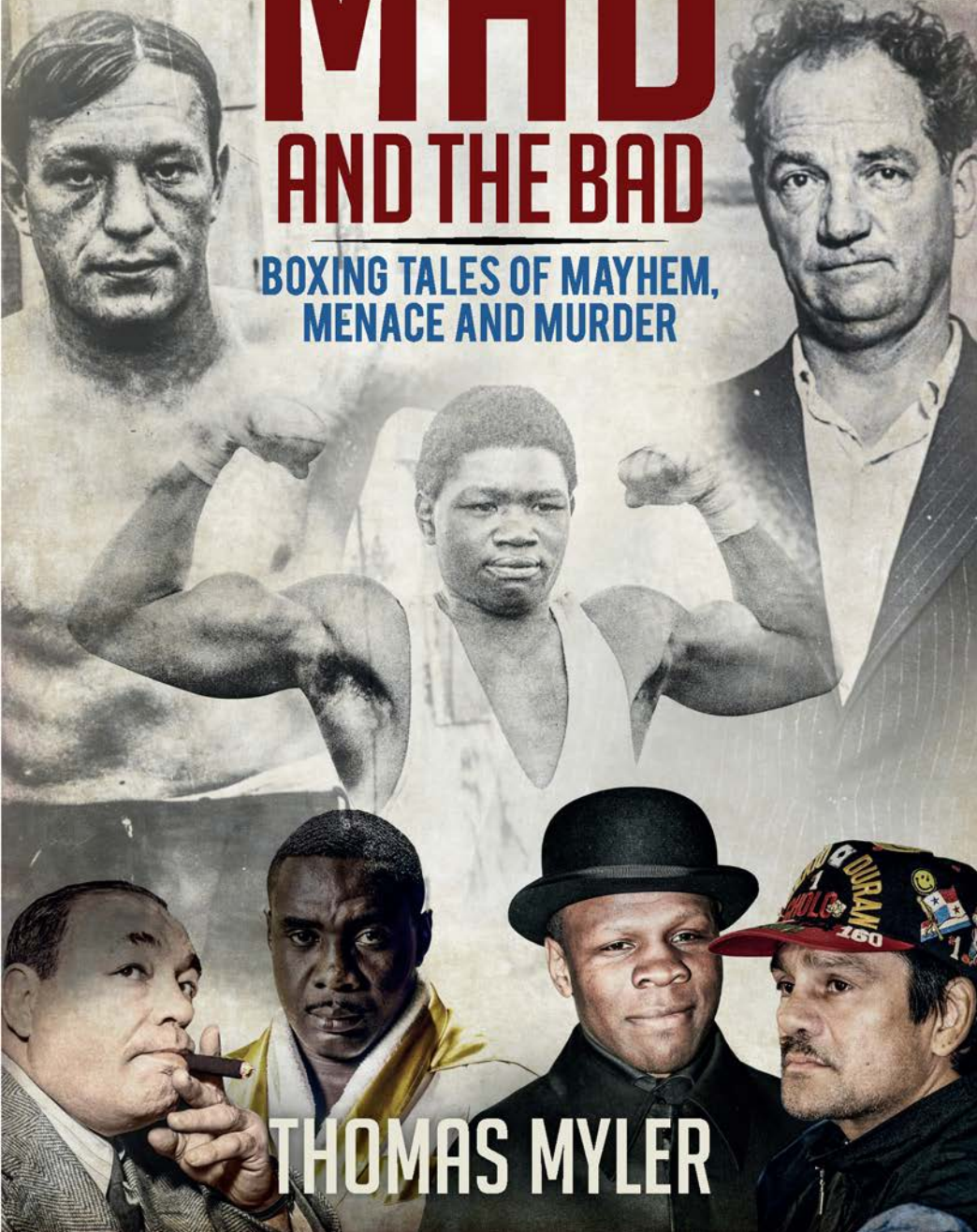
The Sun

As a ring historian, Thomas Myler has few peers.

Belfast Telegraph

THE MAD AND THE BAD

BOXING TALES OF MAYHEM,
MENACE AND MURDER



THOMAS MYLER

Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	3
1 Eight weddings and two suicide notes	7
2 Nightmare on 41st Street	30
3 Lord of the manor.	57
4 Mammy's boy lived and died by the gun.	81
5 The man they loved to hate	107
6 Flight of The Hawk	135
7 Title fight ends on sidewalk.	149
8 Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse.	176
9 Rocky road from a Brooklyn slum	203
10 Blue collar warrior who wouldn't be denied	231
11 Champ with a passion for pigeons.	259
12 Two Ton, the octopus, the kangaroo and the bear.	286
Selected bibliography.	307
Index.	308

Introduction

THE world of sport has thrown up many individuals who would certainly come under the heading of wild cards. There was George Best, a wizard on the football field and a demon off it. Once asked what happened to the fortune he earned, he quipped, 'I spent the lot on booze, birds and fast cars. The rest I just squandered.' Another football star, Eric Cantona, may have held on to his money but there were no excuses for his shameful antics on the field. He once launched a kung-fu kick at a fan followed by a hail of punches.

Alex 'Hurricane' Higgins certainly lived up to his name, whether he was at the snooker table or away from it. His misdemeanours included head-butting officials, assaulting a 14-year-old boy, being stabbed by a girlfriend he angered and spending time as a homeless man. There was, too, John McEnroe, the superbrat of tennis. He swore at officials, called an umpire a 'jerk' and was reprimanded for his countless on-court outbursts. More recently, he was even critical of modern great Serena Williams, a 23-time Grand Slam winner, saying she would not be in the world's top 700 if she played on the men's circuit, although he later apologised for the comment.

Then there is the drug culture, which is rampant in sport. In swimming, Michelle Smith-de Bruin won three Olympic gold medals before her career ended in shame following allegations of tampering with a urine sample. The claims were never proven but the stigma has remained. Bad boys in athletics as far as

drugs are concerned include Ben Johnson and in cycling Lance Armstrong's name stands out. The list goes on and on.

What of boxing? Yes, the noble art has come up with its bad boys. Some were wacky warriors and others were masters of menace, with many careers ending in tragedy. The mad and the bad.

Nigel Collins, the esteemed author, columnist and former *Ring* magazine editor, put it well when he wrote, 'For many true boxing legends, the glory of victory was quickly superseded by physical and mental ruin, illness and sometimes tragic death. Some were involved in crime, some were murdered, some committed suicide. There have always been exceptions, of course, but the stereotype has ample basis in fact.'

Going back to the bare knuckle era, there was Dan Donnelly, an Irish fighter of much promise until he took to the bottle and died at the age of 32. Still in the bare knuckle days, there was Jack Slack, said to be the inventor of the notorious rabbit punch, long since outlawed. This was a blow to the back of the head or to the base of the skull, which could damage the cervical vertebrae and kill instantly. The punch's name is derived from the technique used by hunters to kill rabbits with a quick, sharp strike to the back of the head. The heavyweight champion of England and a butcher by trade from Norfolk, Slack was also a celebrated fight fixer, and crooked fights were common by the time he lost his title.

Henry 'Hen' Pearce, from Bristol, known as 'The Game Chicken', was another. Pearce was drunk more times than he was sober while he was champion of England. He would contract tuberculosis and other ailments and died at the age of 32 'a physical wreck', in the words of a contemporary chronicler.

Yankee Sullivan, the Irish bare-knuckle battler born in County Cork and raised in east London, also found himself on the wrong side of the law when he was arrested in San Francisco during a round-up of underworld suspects. He was found dead in his prison cell but whether he was secretly killed by a visiting

INTRODUCTION

member of the Vigilantes, an organisation that took the law into its own hands, or committed suicide remains a mystery.

Even the great John L Sullivan was a victim of his own success. John L was the man who made the transition from bare knuckles to gloves and in 1892 became the first universally recognised heavyweight champion of the world. Storming into a bar, he would bang his ham-like right fist on the counter and declare, 'My name is John L Sullivan and I can lick any son-of-a-bitch in the house!' There were never any takers. Addicted to the bottle at an early age, he would spend much of his retirement lecturing on 'the evils of drink'.

Many survived the pitfalls of success in those far-off days, as have many modern greats, because boxing will always have its wild cards and wacky warriors. It is the nature of the sport that has survived over the centuries.

Historians can trace the origins of boxing back to ancient Greece, where excavations at Knossos on the island of Crete have revealed that a form of the sport was known among its inhabitants as early as 1500 BC. Other research revealed that boxing's roots date back to as early as 5000 BC, to a time when the Pharaohs of Egypt attended fights in which contestants bound their fists in rawhide straps, known as the cestus, leaving their fingers bare. These were also used by the gladiators in ancient Rome and the most perfect example is the seated figure wearing the cestus that can be seen in the National Museum in the Eternal City.

Over the years and up to the present day, boxing has fallen victim to reformers, lawmakers, abolitionists and so often the ineptitude of its own management. But it has come through, though certainly not unscathed, because of the boxers themselves, who put their lives on the line every time they climb into the ring. Many had their ups and downs, their good days and their bad days, as you will read in the following pages.

Some were all-time greats, others were not so great. But they all had one thing in common. They were fighters. Some were

THE MAD AND THE BAD

wayward warriors, others masters of menace, often both. But they had that indefinable characteristic – they could fight, and fight like hell. Some ended in tragedy while others survived the pitfalls of success. In the final analysis, they were all knights of the squared circle and have embellished the long, rich history of what the great A J Liebling of the *New Yorker* called the Sweet Science. You will meet many of them in the following pages. Enjoy the journey.

Chapter 1

Eight weddings and two suicide notes

THE hotel manager and the detective stood looking down at the man on the bed, who had killed himself during the night. 'He's Norman Selby, that's the name he checked in,' said the manager. 'Yes,' said the detective. 'He was also known as Kid McCoy. He was a famous boxer in his day and a world champion at that, one of the best.'

It was the night of 18 April 1940 and the scene was the Tuller Hotel in Detroit. McCoy/Selby had checked into the hotel alone and asked for a call at 10am the next day. When he failed to answer the call, the manager went upstairs with a passkey and found him dead on his bed, fully dressed, and called the police. An overdose of sleeping pills had put him out. Beside his body were two notes, both signed Norman E Selby.

One was to the local paymaster at the Ford motor company, where he had been working, to pass on his salary as was due to him to his wife, his eighth and final spouse. The other, which was longer, said, 'For the past eight years I have wanted to help humanity, especially the youngsters who do not know nature's laws, that is, the proper carriage of the body and the right way to eat etc.

'Everything in my possession I leave to my dear wife Sue Ellen Selby. To all my dear friends I wish the best of luck. Sorry

I could not stand the madness of this world any longer. In my pockets you will find \$17.75.'

McCoy's suicide has remained a mystery all these years. The 'madness' was of his own creation. Several of his friends confirmed his health had been good in spite of his wild and erratic lifestyle. At 66, there was a bit of grey in his curly hair but his fair-skinned face was devoid of wrinkles and he was nearly as neat, trim and supple as when he was world middleweight champion and a claimant to the welterweight title.

Even the detective suspected a trick as the body lay there, half expecting McCoy to suddenly open his eyes and jump up. It would not have been a surprise because Norman Selby, alias Kid McCoy, was one of the world's greatest tricksters, inside and outside the ring. He also happened to be one of the ring's best ever boxers. In over 100 fights, he was beaten in only six of them, with 64 ending in either clean knockouts or stoppages. In 1991, he was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in New York.

Remarkably, McCoy was just a middleweight at around 160lbs yet he was able to take on and beat some of the world's leading heavyweights.

Active from the 1890s into the early years of the 20th century, McCoy's record is studded with illustrious names such as James J Corbett, Tommy Ryan, Joe Choynski, Jack Root, Tom Sharkey, George LaBlanche, Mysterious Billy Smith and many others. The Kid is credited with inventing the corkscrew punch, a blow delivered with a final punishing twist that could tear an opponent's skin in an era of skin-tight gloves in many states. McCoy was able to slash and maul opponents, sometimes to excess, to gain victory.

McCoy, too, was also a notorious womaniser, with most of his earnings, estimated at over a quarter of a million dollars, spent on satisfying his boundless thirst for pleasure. Of his eight wives, he married one of them three times – and shot another to death. There was vanity in him as well as guile, wit and cruelty.

Above all, there was the self-satisfaction of setting himself a task – and carrying it out whatever the circumstances.

McCoy got tremendous pleasure in many psychological ploys and illegal tactics that went unnoticed by referees and away from the gaze of ringside officials. If McCoy felt he could get away with it, then he would try – and more often than not succeeded. A clever boxer in his own right, he often feigned sickness before a bout or told the media he had failed to train, hoping to lure his opponent into a false sense of confidence. Naturally on fight night, McCoy was usually fully fit and ready, and it was too late for the opponent to do anything about it.

One night in Paris, he boxed a local hero called Jean Charlemont, who was a champion in the art of *la savate*, which is fighting with the feet, with kicking allowed. McCoy, however, figured that such tactics called for urgent measures. Keeping well out of the way of the Frenchman's flying kicks for two rounds, the Kid jerked his head towards the overflowing gallery. Puzzled, Charlemont asked McCoy in a clinch, 'Why are you indicating something or someone up there?' 'Well,' said McCoy, 'there's a beautiful girl up there who keeps waving.'

When Charlemont turned his head to where McCoy indicated, the Kid lashed out with a big left hook and the Frenchman went down for the full count. Back in the dressing room as the fully dressed McCoy was about to leave, Charlemont walked in and asked him why he had resorted to such trickery. 'No hard feelings, Jean, but I thought I would teach you a little lesson,' said McCoy. 'Never let a woman turn your head, you might really get hurt.'

On another occasion, against an opponent whose name has been lost in the mists of time, McCoy filled his mouth with loose teeth and at an opportune moment spat them out. When his horrified opponent dropped his guard and started to apologise for the damage he had done, McCoy flashed across a hard right and dropped his man to the canvas for the full count.

Against a bare-footed black fighter in South Africa, simply known as King of the Kaffirs, McCoy sprinkled his own corner with tacks. In the first round, the Kid lured his opponent into the corner as the King screamed in agony after stepping on the tacks. When the fighter looked down at his bare feet, McCoy swung a right hand and knocked his man senseless.

On another occasion, against Bob Day in Toronto, McCoy purposely tripped up his opponent. As Day struggled to get to his feet, he foolishly grabbed McCoy's outstretched left hand. 'Upsa daisy,' said McCoy, as he pulled Day towards him and let him have it with a smashing right cross. Day was out for six minutes.

Other times, McCoy boxed fairly and squarely with no hint of underhandedness, displaying a fine upright style with a wide variety of punches. This led a New York newspaperman to write after one of these bouts, 'Last night we saw the real McCoy.' The term would grow into popular usage in describing someone or something as the genuine article.

McCoy was born on a farmland in rural Rush County, Indiana on 13 October 1872 to Francis and Emily Selby. The baby was christened Norman. In common with parents everywhere, they had all sorts of ambitious plans for Norman's future. Emily envisioned the boy becoming a doctor while Francis could see him as a lawyer. On occasions, after downing a few drinks too many, he pictured Norman in the White House. But their dreams ended when it became apparent that their offspring was allergic to classrooms and books, both of which he considered boring.

After four years, and now aged 15, Norman could stick it no longer and stuffing his few belongings into a bag one night, climbed out of the back window and hurried off to the local railroad station. The plan was not to get a ticket, as he had no money, but to jump on to the side of a freight train, or even under it, and hang on. This practice was known as riding the rails, or riding the rods.

As to how Norman Selby became Kid McCoy, it seems that on one occasion after his father had reported him missing, two policemen nabbed the teenager as he hopped off a train pulling into Cincinnati, Ohio. 'Are you Norman Selby?' asked one officer. 'No,' said Selby. 'I'm Charlie McCoy.' The night before, he had seen a sign for McCoy Station. The police officer released him and ever afterwards Norman Selby was Charlie McCoy, later Kid McCoy.

'I lived off the land and, while it was a gruelling life, it kind of prepared me for what was to come,' he recalled in later years. 'I got into all kinds of fights with railroad cops, brakemen and other hobos. I was a skinny runt who looked like fair game to anyone who wanted some punching practice. I learned plenty from those railroad scraps and reckoned I might do well as a boxer.'

Skipping the amateurs, which he regarded as a place for sissies anyhow, McCoy made his professional debut with a four-round decision over Pete Jenkins in St Paul, Minnesota at the age of 17. It would be several years before he invented the 'corkscrew punch'. It happened in his own backyard on another of his infrequent visits home. Sitting on the front step, McCoy idly watched the family kitten toying with a cloth ball. Quick to note that the kitten's paw shot towards the ball at an angle instead of a straight line, he wondered what would happen if he hung the same twisting stroke on the end of a jab, like the spin given a bullet by a gun's rifling.

Going quickly to the Selby family barn, he filled a large bag with grain and suspended it from a rafter to practice his new blow. 'It worked fine,' McCoy remembered. 'It hurt my knuckles but I ripped the bag to shreds. There was grain spilling all over the floor. I had discovered a deadly new punch.'

Twitching with excitement, he made for the nearest bar, where he deliberately picked a fight with the biggest fellow he could find. The fight did not last long. As the big fellow came forward, McCoy cocked his left fist and let him have it with his

‘corkscrew punch’. The fellow fell backwards clutching an ugly wound to his face. ‘You have a knife in your hand,’ the man said, demanding the Kid open his fist. McCoy did so for all to see. Just a pair of bony hands.

McCoy made steady progress in the professional ranks and was learning all the time. When he heard that Bob Fitzsimmons, the world middleweight champion from Cornwall, was training for a fight in Louisiana, he made his way there and got a job as a cook and general utility man for the champion. More importantly, he watched Fitzsimmons working out in the ring and claimed he picked up valuable tips. He even got to spar with the Englishman.

In his first three years McCoy had 26 fights, winning 19, losing one and drawing six. By the end of 1895, he had added another nine wins, one loss and a draw. By now, McCoy was one of the leading contenders for the world welterweight title held by Tommy Ryan, a talented New Yorker of Irish extraction.

Although largely forgotten today, in his time and for many years afterwards Ryan was considered one of the greats. A brilliant boxer and hard puncher with both hands, Ryan honed his ring skills in lumber camps and it seemed only natural he would become a fighter, and a good one at that. In July 1894, at the age of 24, he won the world welterweight title by outpointing Mysterious Billy Smith over 20 rounds in Coney Island, New York.

He defended the title successfully by stopping Nonpariel Jack Dempsey, not to be confused with the heavyweight champion of later years, in three rounds. Ryan would subsequently win the world middleweight title.

At ringside for the Dempsey fight was McCoy – and for good reason. He wanted a title fight with Ryan and felt he could beat him. They were old friends. Ryan had befriended the Kid a year or so earlier by engaging him as a sparring partner, giving him a bed and three meals a day. McCoy’s unscrupulous temperament and manipulations, even against friends, would now manifest

itself in a scheme designed to bring about the downfall of his generous benefactor.

Even though they had boxed hundreds of rounds together, Ryan never tried to hurt McCoy, although there were times when the Kid retreated to his quarters with a bloody nose and large red welts decorating his lily-white skin. He took his lumps without complaining but he never forgot. Inwardly, he developed a bitter hatred towards the world champion. It was not so much the punishment he received as jealousy. McCoy envied Ryan's lofty position in boxing, with his fat bank account, his luxuries and his aloof attitude.

McCoy had stayed in Ryan's camp a little over a year and made good use of every minute. He studied the New Yorker's style and made mental notes about his strong and weak points, including how he pulled back or slipped inside jabs and how he hooked to the body and often stood back to admire his handiwork. By the time McCoy left the Ryan camp, he reckoned to know more about Tommy than he knew about himself.

McCoy's association with the world champion gained him much publicity and enabled him to gain bouts with established boxers. Before long, he had strung together some impressive wins and boxing writers were taking notice of this cocky kid with fast hands. McCoy now wanted to fight for the world championship but he realised he would have to qualify by defeating some leading contenders. Instead, he took the short cut. When Ryan left the ring after stopping Nonpariel Jack Dempsey, McCoy publicly challenged him to a title fight. Ryan said he would talk to his advisors and let McCoy know. The Kid's masterplan was beginning to unfold.

When the challenge was printed in the New York newspapers, Ryan dismissed it as a publicity stunt. 'Let him go through the contenders and let's see what he is worth,' Ryan told reporters. But McCoy was in a hurry. He did not reply to Ryan's comments but instead went to the champion's training camp just outside New York City and sought him out. Even

though Ryan might not have a fight coming up, he always insisted on keeping in shape.

After exchanging pleasantries, the pale McCoy put his plan into action. 'Tommy,' he said, almost with tears in his green eyes. 'Please don't get the wrong idea about what you read in the papers. It's all poppycock. I know deep down that you can lick me any day in the week but you see, I'm down on my luck. Sure, I get fights but there's no big money in them. I'm looking for one big payday to pay my debts and nothing would help me more than a fight with you for the world title.'

Ryan said nothing at first, allowing McCoy to state his case. The Kid praised the champion's fine natural ability and said he hoped he would hold the title for a long time. 'I'd really appreciate it if you would accept my challenge as an old friend,' pleaded McCoy, 'and you could carry me along for a few rounds for the fans' sake and I'd get a good purse to ease my financial worries.'

'Remember when you'd hold me up in the ring after landing a good shot in those old sparring sessions? Ah, those were the days. In fact, nobody knows this except my doctor but I'm dying of consumption. You only have to look at my pale face. My medical bills are still unpaid.'

'With that in mind, you might persuade the promoter to increase our purses. A little more for me and a little more for you. I wouldn't even mind if the promoter made it more for the winner and leave the loser's purse the same. You deserve as much as possible for doing me this great favour, Tommy.'

Ryan listened to it all before rubbing his chin reflectively. 'OK, you're on,' he said finally. 'But I won't put my title on the line. Later on, we could talk about a title fight. As to the purse monies, I'll talk to the promoter and I'm sure he'll agree. But don't worry about the result or getting hurt. I'll carry you for a few rounds as you suggest and all will be fine. I'd do anything to help out an old pal, that's for sure. I can assure you that you can count on me.'

As McCoy was leaving the camp, he couldn't help a smile crossing his face. He fully respected Ryan's ability and a fully trained and mentally alert champion might be more than he could cope with. But a half-trained Ryan might be a different matter altogether. There would be no title on the line but the Kid reckoned that an impressive showing would force the authorities to demand they meet for the championship. Ryan might even retire, which would leave the division wide open, with McCoy the top contender.

In any event, the Kid was sure Ryan would take things easy on his 'down-and-almost-out' challenger. Why, Ryan might not even train hard, even though he always stayed in light training just to keep ticking over. The fight was set for 2 March 1896 at Maspeth, a small residential and commercial community in the Queens borough of New York and founded by English and Dutch settlers in the 17th century.

Boxing writers and sports editors in New York and across the nation gave McCoy little chance of upsetting the talented champion, who entered the ring as a solid favourite to dismiss his opponent in the early rounds. Even if the battle went the scheduled 20 rounds, there was unlikely to be a different result. Ryan's overall skill and hitting power would be too much for the untested McCoy. After all, the Kid did not look very sharp in training whereas Ryan was his usual buoyant self, even if he often cut short his sessions for what he considered an easy fight.

McCoy looked sluggish when the newspapermen visited his camp, but it was a trick. When they left, the Kid got down to hard training, pounding the heavy bag, punishing his sparring partners, doing his roadwork and getting into what he would call 'the physical and mental condition of my life'. He told one of his team that Ryan would get the shock of his life. 'The guy expects a walkover,' he said. 'Wait until he gets into that ring.'

McCoy reached the arena early and quickly donned his boxing togs. Ryan arrived soon after and instead of undressing, he rested on the rubbing table. Before Ryan could doze off, there

was a knock on the door and in walked McCoy. Ryan couldn't believe it. His opponent was no longer the sorrowful figure he had met earlier to first discuss the fight. McCoy was bright eyed, cheerful, cocky and more importantly looked in prime condition. Where was that pale look? Ryan discovered later that McCoy had put a light powder on his face.

Extending his right hand, McCoy said, 'Good luck out there, champ, because you'll certainly need it.' Before the flabbergasted Ryan could reply, McCoy turned on his heels and walked out. The champion had been conned, and it was too late now to do anything about it. His title was safe but he could not afford to lose in a non-title match and lose all credibility as a world champion.

McCoy entered the ring to a faint, half-hearted ovation, compared to the cheers that greeted Ryan. At the bell, the Kid moved around and landed a few light left jabs, followed by Ryan. In a clinch, McCoy whispered to his rival sarcastically, 'Don't forget your promise, Tommy. No surprises. You wouldn't want to double-cross me now, would you?' In Ryan's poor physical and mental condition, he was in no state to pull off any surprises or any double-crosses. Whenever Ryan shot a left jab or a hook with either hand, McCoy simply brushed them off as if swatting flies.

For round after round, McCoy punished the champion with all kinds of combination punches, left jabs followed by damaging hooks from both gloves and uppercuts on the inside when they were in the many clinches that marred the bout. McCoy also used his deadly corkscrew punch at every opportunity. No matter what Ryan tried, the Kid went one better. Witnesses to the one-sided battle claimed that McCoy could have knocked out Ryan at any stage but preferred to torture the champion for his own satisfaction. In the 12th round an overhand right staggered Ryan, who now had cuts over both eyes and a bloody nose, but McCoy grabbed him and held him up.

Finally, in the 15th round, a powerful left hook followed by a smashing right landed flush on Ryan's jaw and sent him to the

blood-stained canvas. He rolled over a few times then just lay still as the referee counted to ten and out. At the age of 23, Kid McCoy was technically the best welterweight in the world, even if he did not have the title.

Instead of staying in the welterweight division, where he would have been a strong favourite to win the title officially, McCoy changed his mind and decided to go for the big boys, with the heavyweight championship of the world his ultimate target. In any event, he had outgrown the welterweight division, with its limit at 145lbs. McCoy now weighed around 156lbs and could easily make the middleweight limit of 160lbs if he wanted to. Why not? A world title was a world title.

The Kid's old sparmate, Bob Fitzsimmons, had relinquished the middleweight title to pursue the heavyweight crown, so McCoy was matched with Dan Crendon from Bridgeport, Connecticut for the vacant world middleweight championship in Long Island City on 17 December 1897. The Kid won on a stoppage in the 15th round.

McCoy never bothered to defend the title because he still wanted bigger fish – the heavyweight championship. The light-heavyweight division, with its limit at 175lbs, would not be established until 1903, so the heavyweight class was the next logical step and where big money could be made. Besides, McCoy felt he could beat most of the heavyweights anyhow. 'As my old pal Bob Fitzsimmons used to say, the bigger they are, the harder they fall,' he would tell newspapermen.

McCoy started his heavyweight campaign on 20 May 1898 with an impressive 20-round decision over tough Gus Ruhlin in Syracuse, New York. Ruhlin, who boxed out of Akron, Ohio, was a good fighter with a strong wallop in his right hand, but he was inclined to be erratic.

When he was good, he was very good but when he was bad, it was an altogether different story. Ruhlin gave McCoy some worrying moments but the Kid was always on top with his fast, shifty style. By now, there were stories circulating that

the rugged Irishman Tom Sharkey was being considered as an opponent for McCoy.

From County Louth on Ireland's East Coast, Sharkey was one of the toughest heavyweights in the business, even though he was only 5ft 8ins in his bare feet. The fifth of ten children born to James Sharkey, a railwayman, and the former Margaret Kelly, he had very limited schooling. He always had a sense of adventure and yearned to see the world. Going to work on the small merchant ships that plied their trade to Liverpool and ports in Scotland, he would subsequently work as a cabin boy on larger vessels before getting jobs on bigger ships that took him all around the world.

'I enjoyed my time at sea,' he recalled in later years. 'I would often take the wheel with permission of the captain and would stay at it for 18, 19, 20 hours at a stretch without sleep. I travelled the seven seas, from London to Cape Town, from Hong Kong to Sydney, from San Francisco to the coast of China, through the Indian Ocean and ports where no white man had ever set foot.

'I had my share of moments with typhoons in the Indian Ocean and hurricanes in the Pacific and no fewer than four shipwrecks. Many a day and night I spent in an open boat with not a drop of water passing my lips. You could say that my experiences read like something out of *Sinbad the Sailor*, only mine were true.'

A few weeks after sailing out of New Orleans port, Sharkey found himself in New York harbour, when he decided to leave his own ship for good, make his way to the Brooklyn navy yard and enlist in the US Navy. It was while watching the training sessions aboard ship every evening from 7pm to 9pm, with officers acting as referees, that he got the boxing bug. Soon, he was invited to join the sessions and enjoyed them so much that he made up his mind to become a boxer. He quickly established himself as a formidable opponent for any of his shipmates to tackle.

His training period completed, Sharkey was assigned to the cruiser, the USS *Philadelphia*, when it was rushed to Honolulu

early in 1893 to protect American interests during a revolution that had broken out against the ruling native dynasty. It was on the Hawaiian island that Sharkey began his actual ring career and after blasting his way through the heavyweight championship of the American fleet, rivalry developed with British sailors stationed there. As it happened, they were no match for the powerful Irishman with a heavy wallop in both hands.

At one stage, the British Navy imported its own champion, Jim Gardner from England, 'to give this little Irishman a lesson and restore pride to their fleet', but Sharkey put him down and out in four rounds. Even though neither boxer was paid and the match was technically an amateur contest, some sources claim that the Gardner bout was Sharkey's first as a professional. Indeed there are conflicting contemporary reports as to when the Irishman actually began his professional career, with several historians coming up with different dates.

Record compilers also differ and not even his recent biographers Moira Sharkey, a distant relation, and Greg Lewis are certain. *Ring* magazine was, and still is, unclear as are the various websites that are always a good source of information. The *International Boxing Register*, published in association with the International Boxing Hall of Fame in New York and regarded universally as the world's official record book, lists the Gardner fight in Honolulu as Sharkey's first official fight, which took place appropriately enough on St Patrick's Day, 17 March 1893.

Wherever the facts lie between his amateur and professional careers, Sharkey put in 18 months in Honolulu and in that time had 14 fights, all ending in knockout victories. Some sources show that he lost one, George Washington putting him away in seven rounds in February 1894, though it has never been officially verified. During that summer, the USS *Philadelphia* left Hawaii and pulled in at the Mare Island naval base in San Francisco. With his naval service coming to an end, Sharkey became a civilian and continued his ring activities in the Bay

areas of Colma, best known to historians as the burial place of the Wild West gunfighter Wyatt Earp, and nearby Valejo.

Sharkey took on all-comers in a busy career but he is probably best remembered for his two titanic battles with the great James J Jeffries, particularly the second one for Jeffries's world heavyweight championship at the Coney Island Athletic Club, New York on 3 November 1899. It turned out to be one of the fiercest fights in ring history and was held under the glare of 400 blazing arc lamps radiating 100°F heat, set up so the fight could be held in the brightest light possible for the benefit of the Biograph Company that was filming it. Both boxers later complained that because the lights were so low, their scalps were blistered by the halfway stage, even though a large umbrella had been placed over each corner as a shade during intervals.

For 25 torrid rounds, both fighters battled away without giving as much as an inch. At the final bell, with both contestants on the verge of exhaustion and very glad to hear the welcome sound of the gong, referee George Siler, who combined his ring duties with his day job as chief sportswriter on the *Chicago Tribune*, raised Jeffries's right hand as winner and still champion. Sharkey complained he was robbed, stamping his feet and shouting, 'I won, I won', but to no avail. Big Jeff was still king of the heavyweights and would successfully defend his title six more times before retiring undefeated in 1904, only to make an ill-advised comeback six years later and lose to Jack Johnson.

Almost a year before the second Sharkey-Jeffries fight, the tough Irishman accepted an offer to take on Kid McCoy over 25 rounds at the Lenox Athletic Club, New York. The date was 10 January 1899 and he agreed without any hesitation. The winner was promised a shot at the world heavyweight title held by Bob Fitzsimmons, Jeffries's predecessor. For the wily McCoy, it was a chance too good to miss. Yes, he would be giving away considerable weight but at 5ft 11ins he was three inches taller and would use that to his advantage by jabbing and hooking, picking up the points, while the occasional corkscrew punch

would not go astray either. Sharkey brushed aside McCoy's chances. 'He's only a middleweight, for god's sake,' he retorted. 'It'll be all over in a round or two.'

It was snowing heavily on the day of the fight but that did not stop the fans from packing the arena for what promised to be a great night of action. When they stepped on to the scales the previous day, there were gasps from those in attendance at the vast difference in their respective weights, though it should not have come as a surprise. Sharkey weighed 178lbs, a fully fledged heavyweight, while McCoy tipped the balance at 156lbs, four pounds inside the middleweight limit. But McCoy vowed not to allow the 22lbs pull in the weights to deter him. He had a job to do and he would do it.

Billed as 'A Battle Between Science and Strength', McCoy was reported to have bet \$100 on himself while Sharkey allegedly placed \$200 on his own chances. The purse money of \$20,000 would be split, 75 per cent to the winner plus a percentage of the gate. When they climbed into the brightly lit ring to do battle, 'Sharkey looked disgustingly healthy alongside McCoy,' recalled Mike Sherry in *Boxing and Wrestling* magazine in 1955. 'His arms and legs were at least twice the width around, and his ruddy suntanned skin was in deep contrast to the Kid's sickly yellowish complexion. McCoy looked like a fugitive from a graveyard.'

When Sharkey removed his green dressing robe, his green trunks had an American flag for a sash. McCoy wore a white robe and white shorts, with the stars and stripes draped around his middle. As both men were having their gloves put on, referee Tim Hurst observed that there was too much tape on McCoy's hands and ordered the American to take at least two feet of it off. The Kid's handlers sheepishly obliged.

When Hurst called the two men together for their final instructions, McCoy placed his right hand on Sharkey's massive chest, which was decorated with tattoos of a four-masted sailing ship and a large star, a legacy of his days in the US Navy. 'You

and that ship are going to sink soon, Mr Sharkey,' said McCoy. 'Don't be a fool, McCoy,' said the Irishman, his face turning an angry red. 'That ship stays upright and so will I. You'll see.'

The opening round set the pattern for the fight. The heavy-shouldered Sharkey attempted to reach the taller McCoy but the Kid nimbly danced away. 'While Sharkey was shorter, McCoy looked like a mere stripling in comparison,' reported the *New York World*. 'Sharkey looked gigantic, enough to make two of him. It seemed a match between Hercules and Apollo.' As two rounds passed, McCoy had a clear advantage, having won both sessions on his better boxing and nifty footwork.

The pattern changed dramatically in the third round when McCoy connected with his corkscrew punch to the jaw. Sharkey, caught by surprise, went to the canvas but did not take a count. Seconds later, another corkscrew punch exploded on his jaw and he went down for the second time. The roaring crowd were on their feet now and Sharkey took a short count. It was not looking good for the Irishman and at the bell he looked decidedly worried.

McCoy seemed to slow down in the fourth round, perhaps conserving his energy for what could well be a long encounter. But Sharkey was still very much in the fight and fans and newspapermen began to notice a slight shift in the battle. The Kid was still reaching the shorter Sharkey with his long jabs and hooks but the blows were beginning to lack authority. Also, Sharkey's solid smashes to the body were producing a weakening effect on his opponent's wind and legs.

By the seventh round, McCoy appeared to be falling behind on points as the persistent Irishman kept on the attack. The Kid connected with a long left hook, only to get a powerful right to the face in return. Quickly, Sharkey connected with a left hook to the stomach and McCoy went down. Lying on the canvas groaning and with his face contorted as though he were in terrible pain, he was yelling, 'Foul, foul', but referee Hurst wasn't having any of it as he was familiar with McCoy's tricks.

The wily Kid would take advantage of any opportunity to win. Hadn't Hurst known about McCoy's tricks and schemes, particularly the time he conned the great Tommy Ryan into believing he was sick and went on to trounce the world champion into a humiliating defeat?

Sharkey was turning out to be McCoy's toughest opponent and despite his skilful boxing, clever footwork and regular foul tactics, the Kid was losing as the rounds went by. Sharkey was by far the stronger puncher and several times rocked the lighter man with heavy blows from both hands. In the tenth, he connected with the powerful right cross that sent McCoy down to be counted out. But nobody heard the count amid all the din. As McCoy struggled to his feet, Sharkey rushed in and threw a smashing left hook over the referee's shoulder and the Kid went down for the second time.

Hurst immediately sent Sharkey to his corner. Was he being disqualified for hitting after the fight was officially over? 'I wish I knew what's going on,' the bewildered Sharkey said to one of his seconds. Hurst then held up his hands, called for silence and said, 'The referee decides that McCoy is too weak to continue and awards his decision to Sharkey on a tenth-round knockout.'

The next day, Hurst explained to newspapermen at a press conference that both boxers attended, 'I counted the Kid out and waved my hands to signify that the fight was over. But for whatever reason, I wasn't understood. Sharkey couldn't get it into his head that he had won and to make sure he ran over and flattened McCoy for the second time. I couldn't actually believe that Tom had fouled deliberately and inasmuch as the fight was over when the act was committed, I felt my ruling was just and fair.'

McCoy said, 'I was defeated but I still think I can whip Sharkey and I demand a return match. I made the mistake of being too cautious and waiting too long to apply my best shots. I should have been able to avoid his wild punches but it was clearly my fault that they landed. There were two punches

in the eighth and ninth rounds which were fouls and which the referee did nothing about. I knew I was going in against a heavier man but I felt I could handle him, and I did until the sudden finish. I would dearly love to fight Sharkey again and I think you all agree that I would have a very good chance of beating him.'

Sharkey said, 'I won the fight fair and square. I simply knocked the man out and that's all there really is to it. I thought I had him by the tenth round and that is what happened. The Kid can hit hard and he is fast, and while I have some speed myself the public know that I can hit hard. McCoy is a good, game fellow and I give him all the credit in the world for that, but he can't beat me and deep down he knows it.'

They never fought again as Sharkey's team had their sights firmly set on a world heavyweight title fight against Bob Fitzsimmons, and feelers had already gone out. But Fitz lost his title to James J Jeffries in June 1899 and Sharkey would go on to meet the new champion in Jeffries's first defence five months later. As recounted earlier, the rugged Irishman went the full 25 bitter rounds and lost the decision.

Meanwhile, McCoy made up his mind to continue taking on all-comers, irrespective of weight. In his first fight after the Sharkey encounter, he fought the formidable Jewish heavyweight Joe Choynski in the latter's hometown of San Francisco on 24 March 1899 and won over 20 rounds. It was a notable performance as Choynski had been in the ring with past and future world heavyweight champions such as John L Sullivan, James J Corbett, Bob Fitzsimmons and James J Jeffries, and would establish himself as one of the outstanding heavyweights around the turn of the 20th century.

It would be first of three classic encounters between the pair. They boxed a six-round draw in Chicago seven months later and on 12 January 1900, in New York, McCoy left no doubt about his superiority by knocking out Choynski in the fourth round. 'I always found McCoy a tricky customer,' Choynski would recall

in later years. 'I found it extremely hard to nail him. He was all over the place.'

McCoy said in an interview in 1937 with Nat Fleischer, editor of *Ring* magazine, 'My good record at the time, especially the knockout over Choynski, should have gotten me a title fight with Jeffries, but Jeff wasn't having any. He was running scared of me. What other conclusion can you come to, Nat? I continually challenged Jeffries to no avail. I had started off that year, 1900, in good form by knocking out the Irish heavyweight Peter Maher in five rounds. Then followed four more wins, including the Choynski victory, and I was in a good position for a title shot but nothing happened.'

When an offer came to fight the former world heavyweight champion James J Corbett on 30 August 1900 at Madison Square Garden, New York, McCoy accepted. Once again, he would be the lighter man but he told newspapermen he had discovered a weakness in Corbett's defence and would exploit it to the fullest. However, two weeks before the fight, there were rumours that the bout was fixed. George Siler said in the *Chicago Tribune* that he had been told by a prominent manager that McCoy would take a dive and pocket 'a substantial sum' from a betting syndicate.

A rumour that both boxers had agreed to equally share a purse of \$33,810 instead of the normal 75 per cent to the winner and the remaining 25 per cent to the loser lent credence to the allegations. Both boxers denied the claims, declaring that the split would be 50-50, but the rumours gained such widespread attention among the public that the arena was far from full and the \$35 box seats were empty. Corbett had all the physical advantages, being two inches taller than the 5ft 11ins McCoy, and at 190lbs had a 20lb pull in the weights. James J entered the ring as a 2/1 on favourite.

Scheduled for 25 rounds, few expected the fight to last even ten. After referee Charles White called both men to the centre of the ring to explain the rules, 'the prizefighters waived the

formality of shaking hands and eyed each other with anything but friendly glances,' reported the *New York Times*. It was clear that there was no love lost between them.

At the bell, McCoy took the offensive and crowded in on Corbett but no blows were struck. Both missed with long jabs and McCoy neatly sidestepped a right cross and countered with a fast left hook that glanced off Corbett's chin. The round ended with both contestants feeling each other out. James J opened the second round more aggressively, driving back the lighter man with jabs and swings and for the first time McCoy was looking worried. Corbett increased the pace further in the third and while some of his swings missed the target, the blows that did land hurt McCoy and the Kid was staggered by a long right to the jaw. McCoy hung on and the bell sounded before the two could be separated.

Corbett continued his assault in the fourth round and McCoy was now looking decidedly jaded. In the fifth, encouraged by the shouts of his followers, Corbett landed effective blows to the head and body. McCoy tried to save himself by holding on but Corbett was now anxious to finish the fight as soon as possible. The Kid made a brief recovery by getting through with some hard blows to the chest, but James J pushed him off and landed some sharp uppercuts and swings that the tired McCoy failed to avoid.

There was no escape now for the lighter man. McCoy rushed into a clinch but Corbett pushed him away and landed powerful rights and lefts to the body that sent McCoy to the canvas. The Kid managed to get to his knees with his head down and remained in that position as the referee counted him out. The time of the knockout was 2:03 of the fifth round.

The *New York Times* report, under a heading 'McCoy Knocked Out by Fierce Blows to the Body', seemed satisfied that the fight was genuine. 'The fight while it lasted was as ferocious an encounter as ever has taken place in the city,' the paper said. 'What was looked for was a craftily contested bout between

the most skilful glove fighters of the time, long drawn out by cautious and scientific masters of sparring. What was really seen was a modicum of scientific boxing, then a rough grappling and swift exchange of blows, all in favour of the heavier man, and a clean knockout after a furious attack by Corbett.'

George Siler, who had brought up the 'fake fight' story in the *Chicago Tribune* in the lead-up to the bout, reported, 'It was hard to believe that the fighters were not acting. At the end, one had the same feeling as a person coming away from a clever but decadent play – he wants to take several long breaths of good, fresh air and a drink of cool, clear water to take the taste out of his mouth.'

McCoy insisted to his dying day that he threw the fight and got a 'nice little financial reward' for his efforts, but Corbett was adamant that the fight was on the level. 'The accusation hurt me more than anything else that has ever been said about me,' he wrote in his autobiography *The Roar of the Crowd*. 'I saw no evidence of McCoy's reported efforts to "lie down" and he fought very hard in the fight. I had bluffed my opponents sometimes but it was beyond me ever to descend to fixing a fight.'

The fix-or-no-fix story eventually died down, especially after the US vice-president, Theodore Roosevelt, declared that he had enough evidence to suggest that the fight was on the level. McCoy continued his career, taking on all-comers, and managed to get a fight in April 1903 for the world light-heavyweight title, a newly formed weight division created by a Chicago newspaperman named Lou Houseman to bridge the gap between the middleweight and heavyweight divisions. Matched with Jack Root in a ten-rounder in Detroit, McCoy lost the decision.

Undaunted, the Kid turned his attention to anybody who was willing to take him on – anywhere in the world. He turned up in Nice in January 1912 and outscored the Irishman Petty Officer Matthew 'Nuttty' Curran over 20 rounds. Not satisfied with the verdict, Curran demanded a return. It was not until

August 1914 that they met again, this time at the old Blackfriars Ring in London in a scheduled 20-rounder.

McCoy was 40 years of age at the time and feeling it after 23 long years in the ring. By the 15th round he looked tired and worn, although still ahead on points. Suddenly, the timekeeper sitting by the ring in evening dress took a tall glass of whisky and soda from an attendant and placed it carefully on the apron of the ring. A moment later, McCoy ran into a right cross from Curran, fell to the floor near the timekeeper's seat, snatched up the highball and drank it off. It rejuvenated the Kid and he went on to win the remaining rounds and the decision.

McCoy carried on with his ring career for another two years before making his final ring appearance on 4 August 1916, when he won a decision against Artie Sheridan in Mission, Texas. 'I always wanted to go out a winner and I'm happy I've now achieved that,' he told newspapermen in his dressing room.

As it was, McCoy made more front-page headlines during his hectic and often wild private life than for anything he achieved in the ring. Some years earlier, the Kid was hanging around with Mrs Elizabeth Ellis, a wealthy widow worth \$7m whose late husband had made a fortune building locomotives in New York. McCoy and Ellis eventually married and the Kid, now wearing a dignified moustache, spent most of his days riding round in Elizabeth's fleet of luxury cars or aboard the family yacht. The fact that McCoy had been married six times already was neither here nor there.

To nobody's great surprise, the couple divorced on the grounds that 'Charles simply refused to end his playboy lifestyle and settle down,' in the words of the latest Mrs McCoy. The Kid was called up for army service in 1917 and did a year with the 29th Infantry Division, and sold bonds. On being demobbed, he worked as a salesman and a private detective, as well as opening a bar and a gym in New York.

In the ensuing years, there were periods of bankruptcy and modest affluence, of riding horses in Hollywood B movies

and making friends with the likes of Charlie Chaplin and the director D W Griffith. He made personal appearances at boxing venues and social gatherings but became addicted to alcohol and was now broke. McCoy's unusually quiet life might have gone on indefinitely had he not met one Mrs Teresa Weinstein Moers at a party in Los Angeles.

A wealthy antiques dealer and wife of Wilbert E Moers, Teresa was literally swept off her feet – and out of her marriage – by the charming former world champion. The couple moved into an apartment and were described by neighbours as 'a devoted couple'. But the cosy arrangement did not last. There were frequent quarrels over his womanising and heavy drinking. It all came to an end on the night of 12 August 1924 when, after a wild drinking party at their place, McCoy shot Teresa through the head.

McCoy was arrested the following morning when, dishevelled and apparently drunk, he rushed into Mrs Moers's antique shop a few blocks away, terrifying customers and staff as he waved a gun before dashing out into the street, where he shot and injured two men and a woman. The police nabbed him as he was running blindly through nearby Westlake Park.

Charged with murder, McCoy was defended by a promising young attorney called Jerry Geisler, who would later become famous as the lawyer for troubled movie stars. Despite Geisler's contention that Teresa had argued with McCoy and that the gun he had in his hand went off accidentally, the jury, which was out for a record 78 hours, found him guilty of manslaughter. Judge Charles Crail sentenced McCoy to 24 years in San Quentin, the state penitentiary near San Francisco.

A model prisoner, the Kid served just seven years before being released on parole. He lectured on the evils of drink, worked for the Ford motor company in Detroit for several years and married again, for the eighth time. Tragically, his life would come apart for the last time with two suicide notes scrawled in a hotel room in the spring of 1940.