

PEERLESS

Philip Burns

First Impression 2025

ISBN

Paperback: 979-8290716626

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“...the science of the sword never approached perfection until the sword became the sole weapon of both attack and defence.”

Driscoll, J: “The straight left and how to cultivate it”

Athletic Press, 1920

ROUND 5: 1908

1908 was to be a big year for Jim, though it started off with another hollow victory. On New Year's Day Jim stepped into the ring at Aberdare to meet Jack Roberts for the third time. Roberts was suffering from poor form, having won just one of his last 12 bouts and on this occasion showed signs of tiredness towards the end of the first round, failing to get up after being knocked out in the second.

In February, Jim was back at the National Sporting Club in Covent Garden making his third defence of his British Feather title. Having defended it twice from Joe Bowker (famed for having not been defeated by any other man), this time it was Charlie Griffin who wanted a crack at the title. The Commonwealth Boxing Council also decided that this would be the inaugural contest of their Feather title.

The contest was set at twenty rounds, with £200 a side and the purse of £340 to the winner.

In the ring, Jim was by far the superior fighter; nimble footed he was able to slip past his opponent's attempts and return to resume before Griffin's composure was back. A sharp left and a blow to the ribs was often followed by a clinch which wasted time. This became a repeated pattern until Griffin lost his temper and started butting the underside of Driscoll's chin. After repeated reprimands from the referee Griffin was eventually disqualified in the fifteenth round.

Jim returned home triumphant, jubilant and - for the first time in a while - solvent. At least he would be, once he cleared his tab.

A few days later, as news of his victory had spread, Jim and Edie were playing cards when a knock at the door interrupted them. Sister Mary Frances and Sister Mary Josephine from Nazareth House were on the doorstep. Edie welcomed them inside and Jim filled up a kettle to boil on the hearth for some tea.

They chatted for a while, and then Sister Mary Frances found her way to get to the point. "Mister Driscoll, Mother Superior has asked us to talk to you about some of the children who have just joined us. There's four of them, the poor things, their daddy is goodness only knows where, and their mammy has been taken into the hospital and isn't expected to make it so we've been asked to look after them but they've got nothing, sir, not a thing but the clothes on their back."

"And not even shoes on their feet," added Sister Mary Josephine.

"That's right, the poor wee lambs, not a shoe between them"

"And so we've got a list of some clothes we need to get for them, but we don't have enough money -"

"Our purse is empty -"

"So, we need to ask you, of your charity, if you might answer their prayers?"

Jim thought for a moment and then said "I'll tell you what, if you go to Edie's sister's shop on Caroline Street, tell them we said it's okay, if you pick out what you need for the children and I'll square it with Alex?"

"Oh Mister Driscoll, that's ever so kind of you!"

"And you, Mrs Driscoll, to be married to such a generous husband - you must be so proud."

"So proud!"

Another day, another knock at the door, only this time it was Father Greishaber and two ladies Jim and Edith knew from St Paul's, Mrs Dewhurst and Mrs Morecraft. They were believed to be sisters, possibly twins, but nobody really knew for sure.

The kettle was boiled, tea was poured; Jim and Edith kept the small talk going as long as they could but the two ladies did not utter a word between them, leaving Father Greishaber to do all the talking which for him was not a problem. After the tea was drunk and the chatter dried up he cleared his throat dramatically - the way he always did when about to preach - and told Jim and Edith that he had come to see them today to ask for their help. They all knew about the poverty in Newtown and some of the parishioners wanted to set up a

lunch club where anyone could go and get a hot meal - could Jim help out with the groceries bill?

“Of course, what do you need?”

Not all the calls at the door were polite petitions to help the less well-off. Early one morning Jim was rudely awoken, by a knock at the door. He shushed Edie to go back to sleep and made his way downstairs. He was greeted by the officious frame of Harry Duggan, so large he almost sheltered Jim from the cold spring air.

“Good morning, Mister Driscoll, I'm sorry to trouble you but I need you to settle your account.”

“What? What account?”

“You've run up a bit of a tab at the racecourse and it's a bit of a problem, see I can't pay my boys and they've got their rent to pay and all, and -”

Jim moved outside, pulling the door almost closed behind him and lowering his voice.

“Yes, I see, of course. How much is it?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Here you are,” replied Duggan, with no attempt to bring his voice down, “I've written it all out for you, it adds up to £8,3s,4d but let's call it £8, if you could?”

“Well I'm not sure I have that much on me, I'm sorry -”

“Jim? Jim who is it?” Interrupted Edie.

“I'm sorry, I can't do this now.” he said nervously to Duggan “But if you call into the Duke this evening I'll leave it at the bar for you. Sorry - I really have to go.”

“But Mister Driscoll, I really-“

Jim closed the door and stood with his back against it, not listening to Duggan. Edie came down the stairs and saw the worried look on his face.

“Jim? Jim, darling, what is it?”

“Nothing to worry about, just a mate from the races wanting to borrow a few bob.”

“Oh you're too kind, you are, it'll be the ruin of you.” Of course, she didn't believe a word of it but nevertheless headed to the kitchen, to start clearing the hearth. Jim joined her, scooping the ashes onto the pages of last week's Sporting Life.

“Edie, love,” he said, surprisingly nervously, “I’ve got something I need to talk to you about. I’ve been talking to Boyo and the others about what’s next and we all agree that, well, the thing is I need, I think we have to..”

“Just spit it out Jim - what is it you and Boyo think you have to do?”

Jim paused, looking at Edie, utterly besotted and stumbling over his words so afraid he was of how she would react “America. I have to go to America. Abe Attell has to defend his title and I’ve heard he wants me to be the one he fights for it. We can put together a list of bouts over a few weeks and I can bring home enough money to clear out the debts and-“

“Debts? I thought we were okay - you’ve just brought £500 back from that title fight, what aren’t you telling me?”

By now they had both stopped clearing the hearth, the ashes were wrapped up and the fireplace was ready to be reset. The remaining Sporting Life pages were scribbled on with betting odds and lists of money.

“I’ve had to borrow some money from your Dad, not a lot, just to see us through while I couldn’t do any shows and this chest infection cleared up. But it’s okay, this trip will help clear everything.”

Edie was stunned - she thought they were financially safe “How much is this going to cost us? And when - when are you planning to go?”

“In the autumn, probably early October and probably have the title fight just before Christmas. It’d be lovely if you could come over for that!”

“Bea’s baby is due, I can’t go gallivanting around the world, I need to be here with her. Why don’t you delay it to next summer and then I can come with you?”

“It’s not down to me, it’s Jacobs, the promoter in New York. He wants the title fight in December and if it’s not me it’ll be someone else, and if they win then who knows when I’ll get a chance again.”

Edie eyed him, suspiciously. “You didn’t say how much it’ll all cost.”

“Well, Sullivan introduced me to this fella who came over from New York to see us and he says we can stay with him. And he’s got the contacts to promote the fights and add us on to the billing with some other big names. If I do ten warm up bouts before the title I could be bringing home \$10,000 - that’ll set us up for life, Edie. I just know this is going to work.”

She stepped away from him, arms folded and clearly anxious. “No, no. This isn’t right. For heaven’s sake Jim, there’s no way you can go trotting around the world when you’ve just admitted we’ve barely enough to live on and you’ve got people knocking at the door telling you to pay your debts.”

Jim started to respond but she cut him off. "Yes, I know who Harry Duggan is and I heard what he said to you. You're not an idiot, Jim, so stop acting like one. You need to sort yourself out but this isn't the way."

"Edie love, boxing is the only thing I can do. And I know I'm good enough to be the best. This is the right thing to do."

Edie poured herself a glass of water from the jug on the table, drank it slowly, and calmed down fractionally. "Tell me this then, how much have we got in the bank now? There was over four thousand pounds when we were married, and your prizes have been thousands - are you telling me that's all gone?"

Jim couldn't bring himself to answer aloud, but his eyes said it all.

"Oh for Christ's sake! You've lost it all? Is that what you're telling me?"

"That's why I need to do this trip to America. It'll see us right..."

Edie glowered at him with barely hidden disgust, threw her glass at the sink, turned on her heels and stormed out of the kitchen, leaving Jim sat at the fireplace.

He heard the front door slam behind her, leaving him alone in the silence and the dirty hearth.

Jim spent the day wondering where Edie was, and what he should do about it. In the end he decided to head into town and call in at the Volunteer. It was dark by the time he got there and although the rain had stopped it was still bitterly cold. A fire was raging in the snug, where a dozen or so older customers were making their pint last as long as they possibly could to avoid heading back out for the cold walk home.

Eliza and Bob were both at the bar when Jim walked in, but there was no sign of Edie.

"Go on, Bob," Eliza nudged her husband who otherwise would have kept his scowl fixed on Jim all night.

Bob tilted his head and headed to the doorway that led to their flat upstairs, ascending wordlessly with slow, heavy steps.

Jim followed him to his study where Bob lit a candle, then a second, then a third, slowly illuminating the room. A table with a green felt surface, big enough for about 6 people to sit around took up most of the space, Bob took the dealer's seat and indicated that Jim should take the seat opposite him.

“Well, what is it this time?” His overture lacked any warmth and failed to disguise his contempt, which he only tried to hide when Edie was around.

“We've got a little money problem,” said Jim, sounding far more nervous than he actually was “and when we got married you told us you would always be able to provide for us if we need it-“

“I meant Edith, not you.” Bob growled.

“Okay, well, this is to help her really. I've got the chance to go to America and win a world title but the thing is, I need some backers to put up the money for me to cover the costs.”

“Show me” Bob mumbled, still not bothering to look Jim in the eye.

“Sorry?”

“I said ‘Show me!’” Now Bob had turned his gaze and was staring right at Jim.

“Uh - show you what?” Jim asked.

“Your detailed plans for this adventure. You've set out all your costs and worked out the least and the most you're likely to earn from it all, right? So what's the risk and what's the return?”

“Um, I've just told you that I think-“

“Son, do you seriously expect me to hand over cash in exchange for your thoughts? If you want to borrow this money you need a budget and a plan, you need to show how the costs will be managed, and show me what I'll get in return.”

Jim was clearly surprised by the business nature of the response “Borrow? Oh right, well, if you wanted it back then I'm sure I can do that. Yes, I'll pay you back exactly what you lend me, as soon as I get back and the bank does whatever it is they do -”

“I'm sorry Jim, that doesn't work for me.” Bob had already decided he had heard enough and was not going to listen to any more of Jim's plan.

“Huh?”

“I don't think I'm able to help you.” With that, he stood up and walked towards the door. “And put the candles out, would you?”

Again, Jim was left alone, his thoughts of winning a title in America slowly unravelling.

Leaving the Volunteer he headed south back down the Hayes, occasionally greeted but more often ignored as he lost himself in his own thoughts. Edie was probably with Bea and Alec in their place on Caroline Street but he didn't want a confrontation with her, less still with at least one sister in her corner. Instead, he

headed in the opposite direction and crossed the railway by the footbridge on Pellet Street which brought him out on Pendoylan Place. As he turned the corner into Ellen Street he could see the lights of the Duke of Edinburgh still on, and then noticed Harry Duggan coming out of the pub and heading straight towards him. Remembering that he had promised to leave the money for him at the bar, Jim turned and ran round to North William Street and had made it to the far end before seeing Duggan on Pendoylan Place, heading to the footbridge. Jim breathed an enormous sigh of relief when he realised they could have crossed on the bridge if he had been just a few minutes later.

Doubling back onto Ellen Street, Jim headed to the pub rather than his house. Ocker, jovial as usual, was at the bar and greeted him as he walked through the door. "Jim!"

"Ocker!" He replied smiling.

"Come here son, you alright?" Ocker embraced Jim with a bear hug, partly affectionate, partly another show of patriarchal dominance to which Jim was oblivious.

"Yeah, good thanks. You?"

"Ah, tidy. Here, I hear you need a favour?"

"Blydi 'ell, word travels fast, but yeah, if you can?"

"Come on, let's go up." Then, turning to his assistant at the bar, "You'll be grand on your own." It was a statement, not a question, so he didn't wait for a response.

Upstairs in the sitting room, Ocker ushered Jim in. "Come in, come in, make yourself at home" as he stooped to stoke the fire. "Funny enough I just had a visit from your friend Harry Duggan, came here to pick up the money you left for him. £8, wasn't it?"

"Oh shit, I completely forgot." Jim was mostly telling the truth; he had intended to borrow the money from Bob Wiltshire and leave it for Duggan to collect.

"Well, he didn't," said Ocker, reclining into his armchair, "and lucky for you we've had a good week in the bar."

"You paid him for me?"

Ocker nodded, with a slightly menacing smile. "But that's not what you came here to talk about, is it?" On the table to his side was a half finished bottle of whiskey which he held up for Jim to see "Drink?"

“Yeah lovely, thanks. No, you’re right, there's something else. I need to find some backers, some investors if you like. People who will help fund a trip to America. The world title is up for grabs, see. And I know I’m good for it.”

“World title, eh? And what sort of prize comes with that?” Ocker handed Jim a much smaller glass of whisky than his own, clinking the glasses. “Cheers”

“Cheers. Well there's the appearance fee for the title fight itself which would be at least a grand; and the purse for the winner would be at least that again. And my agent there - Charlie- is putting together a load of fights in the run up to the title so that's bound to be another few grand or so. And then any challengers I take on afterwards when I come back with the title would bring about the same, probably more. I don't think there's a trophy or anything, but the title is worth more than one of them any day.”

“I know a few people, and I might be able to help out a bit myself - since you're family. Why haven't you gone to the bank?”

“Ah, thanks Ocker. I would go to the bank but I've still got some things to sort out there. And Charlie - that's Charlie Harvey, the promoter from New York - I met him when we were all down in London, he says I can stay with him so I just need to cover the cost of the journey and some spends while I'm there.”

“Edie not going with you?”

“No, it's not her thing,” wasn't a complete lie, he continued “Besides she wants to be here with Bea when the baby comes.”

Ocker picked up a notebook from the desk and returned to his seat. Opening the book, he started making notes. After a few silent minutes he asked, “When are you planning to do this?”

“Probably looking at a crossing at some time towards the end of September, but Charlie needs to know soon, by the end of the month I think, so he can line up all the bouts.”

“And for how long?”

“He said if I can be there for the start of October we can get six or seven in before a title fight just before Christmas. Attell's got to defend by the end of February and I need to be on a boat back no later than 20th so I can be at the Salty Arms, I promised Sister Margaret that I'd be there. But I hope we can get it all sorted so I'm back by Christmas. So let's say three months, plus the crossings.”

“Attell?” queried Ocker, peering over his glasses at Jim.

“He's the current title holder, and-“

“And you seriously think you've got a chance, you could do this, become World Champion?”

“Absolutely, I know I can. I know Attell is one of the strongest defensive boxers and they say he can keep dodging the big hits for round after round, cos all he has to do is not get knocked out and the title stays with him. But a good, sharp, straight left to the side of his head and he'll go down quick enough. And there's no-one who can do that better than me.”

“So you need to leave enough money at home for Edie to keep the wolf from the door for three months, pay the rent and so on, and keep the house warm over the winter; your tickets on the liner; train tickets to and from - Liverpool or Southampton? And some pocket money. And when you come home you'll pay it all back?”

“Absolutely!” Jim was clearly quite excited by the way Ocker had described it so differently to Bob's earlier dismissal.

“What about security?”

“Oh I think I can look after myself, and besides, Boyo is coming with me - I did mention that didn't I?”

“No. You did not.” snapped Ocker.

“Ah. Well yeah, he's coming too, to help me train and be in my corner so that whe-”

“That's not really what I meant.”

“You mean Edie? I'm sure she'll be fine, there's plenty of family around.”

“No Jim, you don't get it do you.” By now clearly frustrated “I mean financial security. How can I be sure I'll get my money back - whether you get the title or not?”

“I don't understand?”

Ocker now played his hand; having teased Jim a bit he was now able to present a solution to the problem he had invented.

“Tell you what, you take your silver belt to the bank and we'll write up a contract saying that if you come home and can't pay me back the cash, then the belt is mine. But if you do, and you pay me back in full, then it stays yours. How about that?”

“My belt? I'm not sure Mam or Edie would be too happy about me risking that.”

“But you're going to win, so there's no risk, right?”

Jim thought for a minute. He genuinely believed he was capable of winning the title, and even if he didn't, he would certainly earn enough to pay Ocker back. "Yes, yes I will. Let's do it!"

"Excellent, then I think you've got yourself the backing you need, Jimmy m'lad. I'll see you get the money you need. Tell your Yankee friend to roll out the red carpet, you'll be on your way!"

"Ah, thanks, Uncle Ocker, that's brilliant. Don't tell Mam will you - I want to tell her myself."

"No problem, no problem at all. Let's keep this between us, shall we?"



Jim Driscoll

15 December 1880 - 30 January 1925

NSC British Featherweight Champion	1906, 1907, 1908, 1910-13
Commonwealth Boxing Featherweight	1908, 1910
European Featherweight Champion	1912-1913