

OUT at the gate the postman's whistle sounded shrill and clear.

—Here, said Mrs. Wilson, What's this?

Without even excusing themselves the boys had rushed from the breakfast table with a loud clatter of plates and spoons. They broke out of the house, their bare feet whispering quickly over the concrete path to the front gate. Already they could see the big brown-paper parcel perched up on the white letterbox, and the postie smiling and waving cheerfully as he turned his bike away.

Eric reached the box first. The parcel tumbled down into his arms. They, both tugged at it, breaking the twine and peeling off the thick layers of wrapping so that the tissue-covered gloves were soon revealed. The paper fell away, fluttering over the front lawn in the breeze, leaving the four gloves to be held and admired in their shiny and exciting brand-newness.

—Hey, shouted Mr. Wilson, striding down the path. What's going on?

Eric looked up guiltily, holding the gloves forward.

—Who sent you those? demanded Mr. Wilson.

—They're ours, Mike announced proudly in a high, squeaky voice.

—Yours? What the devil?

—Yes, Eric explained. We sent away for them.

—And what did you use for money? Seashells?

—It was those seeds we went selling, Eric continued. If you sell enough they give you special prizes. We asked for boxing gloves. We could've had a ukulele or a tennis racket.

—So that's what all my garden money's gone into this year, eh?

Mr. Wilson looked at the gloves. Eric looked down at his feet. Mike smiled a toothless smile up at his father.

—I'm landed with four quids' worth of seeds I didn't want just so you could get yourselves these, eh? Mr. Wilson asked.

Eric was silent.

Mr. Wilson relented. He patted Mike on the head.

—Well, come back in the house. And pick up all that paper mess.

He looked down at the gloves in Eric's hands again.

—They all right? he asked.

While Mike scampered round gathering up the litter of paper, Eric smiled shyly up to his father.

—They're beauties, he said. Can we try them on now?

—You've got the breakfast dishes first, said Mr. Wilson firmly. Or have you forgotten your Saturday morning jobs already? And the Lord only knows what your mother's going to say.

I'M going to be the best, best boxer in the whole world, Mike declared as they hurried through washing and drying the dishes. And I'm going to clean up everyone in the world and I'm going to clean up—

—You'd better clean up those dishes properly first, eh? said Mr. Wilson, who had just come to oversee their work. That's before you tackle Joe Louis, of course.

—And I'm going to get as rich as rich, Mike said. And we'll get a motor car. We'll get lots of motor cars.

—One car each? asked Mr. Wilson.

—One car each, Mike repeated seriously.

—That's pretty generous, said Mr. Wilson.

THE GLOVES

by Maurice Shadbolt



Soon everything was washed and cleared away without anything broken.

—All right, said Mr. Wilson, with a trace of apprehension. I suppose you can start punching each other's noses now.

Mrs. Wilson came bustling into the kitchen with a worried face.

—Do you really think it's wise, John? she asked. Couldn't we put the things away till they're older? Mike's too little altogether.

Eric hung his head. Even Mike looked crestfallen. Mr. Wilson seemed to take a very long time making up his mind.

—It won't do them any harm, he said at last. After all, they've got to look after themselves sometime, don't they? The noble art of self-defence and all that sort of thing, you know.

—All I can say is you've got a poor attitude towards your children, she replied quickly and sharply. At their age—heavens above, John.

—I'll watch they don't hurt each other, he promised.

—That's a lot of consolation, Mrs. Wilson said, leaving the kitchen in a bad temper.

—A lot of consolation, they heard her mutter again as she began to work the polishing mop angrily and loudly over the living-room floor.

—Can we go now? Eric asked.

Mr. Wilson sighed and frowned.

—All right, he said in a flat tone. All right.

—I'll get the scrapbook, Eric, Mike piped.

Without waiting for reply he dashed from the room and returned presently hugging their big scrapbook: on the cover big schoolboyish lettering said "Boxing Pictures." And underneath, carefully clipped and pasted, was a faded newspaper photograph of a boxer.

—We don't want that, Eric said disparagingly. You better take it back.

Disappointment spreading over his face, Mike edged away.

—Aw, all right, Eric compromised. We'll look at it when we're tired.

Outside, under the warm morning sun, where the bright flower beds held the lawn into a green square, Mr. Wilson laced the gloves tightly so they fitted snugly over the small hands.

—Now, he said. Let's see you in action, eh?

Mike poked out a timid left arm towards Eric.

—You've got to close up your glove, Mr. Wilson said. Like this.

Mike closed the glove.

—Look, said Mr. Wilson. I'll tell you what. Just pretend you're fighting me, not Eric. That's right, now come at me. That's the boy.

Mike made an unsure advance towards his father.

—Don't be scared, boy. That's it. No—keep your right hand up. That's your guard. That's the way.

Mike raised his guard slowly, looking up at his tall father. His eyes were appealing and frightened. He seemed to freeze.

—Don't be scared, boy. I won't hurt you. Look—I, haven't even got any gloves on. I can't hit you, now can I? Not without gloves.

—You never ever have gloves on when you hit me, Mike said with a pained expression. You always hit me hard and you don't ever have gloves.

—So that's it. I won't hit you, don't worry. Mr. Wilson gave a half-embarrassed laugh.

—You got to promise, Mike said.

—All right, said Mr. Wilson.

—God's honour. You got to say that.

—God's honour, Mr. Wilson repeated. Cross my heart.

—All right, Mike said, satisfied. Now can I hit you?

Mr. Wilson began to dance up and down in a queer, jerky fashion.

—Now you come and try and hit me, he said. You just try.

His arms flailed wildly into the empty air above Mike's head. In a matter-of-fact way Mike moved up to his father's big, wide stomach, tapped a tentatively light left against it, then drew back his right fist slowly and deliberately and swung it in hard: there was a hollow thump, a choked shout of surprise, and Mr. Wilson doubled up, pitching forward on to the lawn. He lay there gasping for air.

Mike's eyes grew wide with terror. He turned and fled down the garden path.

AFTER lunch Mr. Wilson delivered his verdict. Avoiding his wife's eyes, and while the boys listened in silence, he announced:

—If they want to learn they can learn from someone expert. Now Pete Kelly's the man. He'd only be too glad to have someone to teach.

—That dreadful little man with the pug nose and cauliflower ear? Mrs. Wilson demanded. Really, John, I think it's the limit, sending them off to him. It's beyond me how all this started. I told you in the first place you shouldn't have helped them by buying all those seeds. That's the trouble with you, you'll never teach them to be independent. Letting them get things they don't know what to do with—I don't know what came over you, I'm sure. Now look at the trouble we've got. Boys hitting their father and you wanting to send them to that man. We should burn the things.

—We've got to be fair, said Mr. Wilson. Boys are all the same, you know. They all want to learn how to stick up for themselves. Anyhow, a bit of a punch and they might want to give the whole thing up—

—Like you? she asked.

Still refusing to meet her eyes, he ignored the question:

—I'll send them down to old Kelly with a note this afternoon. It's better they learn off someone who knows something about it. I'd go with them myself except that there's some race results I'm wanting to listen to. I'll offer him a few bob to teach them—the poor old devil could do with it.

MR. KELLY used to be a champion boxer, Eric said with authority as he walked with Mike down into the town. He carried the gloves and the letter. Mike had insisted on bringing

the scrapbook too: he hurried along to keep up with Eric's brisk steps.

—I know that, Mike replied indignantly. You don't know everything.

Eric walked silently for a while.

—Anyhow, Mike taunted, I know something you don't know.

Eric preserved an aloof silence.

—I saw Mr. Kelly one day in the park, Mike continued triumphantly. He was laughing away all by himself. And there wasn't nobody round. And he was just sitting there laughing all by himself. I saw him. He didn't see me.

Eric still wouldn't say anything. They were walking along the main street now. There were other kids round, too: but they weren't going to learn boxing from a champion. They were only going to the afternoon pictures.

—Eric, Mike said at last in a soft, curious voice.

—What? Eric asked sharply.

—What was he laughing like that for? All by himself?

Eric thought for a few seconds.

—Because, he said presently. Because he must've remembered something funny, that's what. He must've thought of a hang of a funny joke.

—Oh, Mike said, nodding profoundly and looking up to Eric with admiration. I never thought of that. That's funny.

Mr. Kelly's place was funny, too. It was a little room, right on the main street, up above the bootmaker's shop, where he lived all by himself. You had to go through a side door and climb a rickety creaky staircase that got darker up towards the top.

—You go first, Mike said as they began to climb.

—You're scared, Eric accused.

—I'm not. I'm not scared a bit.

—Well, if you're not scared, you go first. Here's the letter.

Mike reached the top of the stairs and knocked timidly on the door. Inside the room they heard a sudden clinking noise, like the sound of bottles being knocked together and pushed away. Presently there were footsteps, the door opened a little way, and Mr. Kelly looked through: he was dressed in a dirty singlet with patched working trousers and sandshoes.

—Hullo, he said. Who's that?

He blinked hard, trying to see them properly.

Without speaking, Mike pushed the letter into his hand.

—Come in, boys, Mr. Kelly said, holding the door wide: they went through into the tiny room. There was a bed on one side, with the blankets all rumpled. And there was a little table and on it a milk bottle and some bread and a frying pan and a burnt sausage and some egg-shells. And there was a glass with something coloured in it. On the wall there was a picture of Mr. Kelly when he wasn't so old; he was stripped down to his boxing shorts and he held up his bare fists to the camera. Underneath there were some silver cups, but they mostly seemed to be filled with old papers or cigarette butts and ash. And on a small

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