

Irvin S. Cobb

For an otherwise proper gray lady, *The New York Times* certainly worked itself into a tizzy over the Jack Dempsey–Georges Carpentier fight at Boyle’s Thirty Acres in Jersey City, New Jersey. Coverage of Dempsey’s fourth-round knockout consumed not just the sports section on July 3, 1921, but almost the entire paper. The highlight of this deluge was the story that Irvin S. Cobb (1876–1944) wrote from ringside before and during the fight, capturing the spectacle in and out of the ring in vivid colors and only briefly caving in to the heat of the moment. On loan from *The Saturday Evening Post*, Cobb was the country’s reigning journalistic star as well as a novelist, screenwriter, actor, and radio commentator. He basked in adulation as the Mark Twain of his time, and a hotel, a bridge, and a brand of cigars were named after him. Almost a century later, he would be nearly forgotten were it not for the story he hammered out at ringside, tearing each page from his typewriter so it could be telegraphed to the *Times*.

Cobb Fights It Over Again

IT is recorded that, once upon a time, Aaron Burr, being challenged by Alexander Hamilton, bade Hamilton to meet him over in Jersey and there destroyed his enemy. Yesterday afternoon, also New Jersey history, in a way of speaking, repeated itself, which is a habit to which history is addicted. Challenger and challenged met, and again the challenger lost the issue.

Posterity has appraised the loser of that first duel as of more value than the winner who survived. One is moved, to wonder whether in the present instance the analogy will continue. Carpentier, an alien, a man who does not speak our language, was the favorite of the crowd before the fight started and while it progressed, and, if I am one to judge, was still its favorite when he came out of it summarily defeated though he was. Dempsey, a native born, will never forget, I am sure, the vast roar of approbation which arose from thirty acres of

close-packed humanity about him when for a half-minute it seemed that he was slipping toward defeat. The thing never happened before when an American champion fought before an American audience. But then we never had for a champion a man whose war record—his lack of one rather—was stained with a taint.

Even so, and to the contrary notwithstanding, he showed himself a better man, as a fighter, than the Dempsey who whipped Willard two years ago at Toledo. Carpentier was the soul of the fight, but Dempsey was the body of it. Considering the thing purely in its pugilistic aspects, he won on merit—won because he was bigger and stronger, because he had more endurance than the Frenchman, and because, as it turned out, he was almost as fast upon his feet, when the needs of the moment demanded speed, and almost as clever a boxer as his opponent was. And to top all, he had a short arm blow, using either arm at will to deliver it, the like of which has not been seen on this Continent since Stanley Ketchel passed out.

LOSES LIKE A GENTLEMAN

It was that drum-fire on his body which wasted Carpentier's substance of resistance, so that when the decisive jolts reached his jaw he had naught left in him with which to weather the blast. He fought fairly, did Carpentier, and like a gentleman he was licked fairly. As a gentleman and a fighter he bulks tonight as the man the majority of the audience hoped to win and for whom, as a gallant soldier and a brave man, they wish good luck through all his days.

As for Dempsey, unless this country should go to war again, it seems probable that he will continue to be our leading fighter for quite some time to come.

Let us consider the matter chronologically, as it were.

At noon of the day when a championship battle is to be fought two hours later almost anything that happens is news. A prominent music hall performer, entering unostentatiously, accompanied only by his private photographer, his personal press agent and his official announcer—one such just came in as I did—constitutes a thrill. A slew-jawed functionary sowing powdered resin broadcast upon the canvas carpet of the ring amounts to a positive sensation. The sight of a near or Hudson seal society leader eating a proletariat ham

sandwich in a box is worth a bulletin. And the mere appearance of a moving picture star is a riot. Such being the case, one begins one's preliminary story thus:

Not since the good old days when the courtesies of the press always were extended to the profession with food and drinks free and no questions asked, have I seen so many distinguished journalists gathered in one spot. We sit, we in whose hands the present destiny of English literature rests, in concentric rows about the fighting platform, like so many drops that have coagulated at the bottom of a huge funnel. Terracing up beyond and behind and on every side of us rise the banked tiers of the biggest amphitheatre this world has seen since the Caesars sat in the Circus Maximus having their Christian martyrs fried on one side. It is the biggest arena ever built of match work and pine planking. Assuredly were the weather as sultry as usually it is in these latitudes it would be the hottest. But the whimsical gods of the weather have been mighty good to us this July day. Under a London-colored sky, as gray and almost as thick as a fog, the centre of population of the United States which for this date has shifted from somewhere in Indiana to New Jersey's chief city, finds a measure of comparative comfort.

Even at this early stage of the proceedings one figures that the crowd, enormous as it promises to be, will be well handled. Every other man in sight appears to be either an assistant manager, a deputy promoter, an usher or a constable. The khaki of young traffic cops' uniforms shows against the blue background of serried ranks of their brother gendarmes who have shifted to the darker plumage of the matured of the species and become plain, flat-footed policemen.

Through a hundred entrances the multitude flows in steadily, smoothly, without jamming or confusion. The trickling streams run down the aisles and are absorbed by capillary attraction in the seats. If it takes all sorts of people to make up the world then all the world must be here already. That modest hero of the cinema, Tom Mix, known among friends as the Shrinking Violet of Death Valley, starts a furore by his appearance at 12:15, just as the first of the preliminary bouts is getting under way. His dress proclaims that he recently has suffered a personal bereavement. He is in mourning. He wears a sea-green sport suit, a purple neckerchief, a pair of solid-gold-filled glasses and a cowboy hat the size of a six-furlong track. Actress ladies in makeup and

also some few in citizens' clothes jostle against society leaders and those who follow in their wake.

The arts, the sciences, the drama, commerce, politics, the bench, the bar, the great newly risen bootlegging industry—all these have sent their pink, their pick and their perfection to grace this great occasion. A calling over of the names of the occupants of the more highly priced reservations would sound like reading the first hundred pages of *Who's Ballyhoo in America*. Far away and high up behind them, their figures cutting the skyline of the mighty wooden bowl, are perched the pedestrian classes. They are on the outer edge of events if not actually in it.

Conspicuous at the front, where the lumber-made cliffs of the structure shoal off into broad flats, is that type which is commonest of all alongside a fight ring. He is here in numbers amounting to a host. There must be thousands of him present. He is the soft-fleshed, hard-faced person who keeps his own pelt safe from bruises, but whose eyes glisten and whose hackles lift at the prospect of seeing somebody else whipped to a soufflé. He is the one who, when his favorite pug is being hammered to a sanguinary Spanish omelet, calls out: "That's all right, kid—he can't hurt you." I see him countless repeated. For the anonymous youths who in the overtures are achieving a still greater namelessness by being put violently to sleep he has a listless eye. But wait until the big doings start. Then will his gills pant up and down as his vicarious lusting for blood and brute violence is satisfied.

Bout after bout is staged, is fought out, is finished. Few know who the fighters are and nobody particularly cares. Who is interested in flea-biting contests when he came to see a combat between young bull-elephants? Joe Humphrey, the human Cave of the Winds, bulks as a greater figure of interest as he vouches for the proper identities of these mute, inglorious preliminary scrappers than do the scrappers themselves.

It's 11 o'clock now. Where an hour ago there were wide vacant stretches of unoccupied seating space, now all is covered with piebald masses—the white of straw hats, the black of men's coats, with here and there bright patches of cola-like peonies blossoming in a hanging garden, to denote the presence of many women in gay Summer garb. The inflowing tides of humanity have inundated and swallowed up

the desert. Still there has been no congestion, no traffic jams. However the fight may turn out the handling of the crowd has been competent. Tex Rickard is the world's greatest showman.

The hour of one has arrived. Harry Stevens, the official caterer, can't figure within ten thousand of what the full attendance will be and so prepares to slice another ham. One thing is sure—today Boyle's Thirty Acres has given to Tex Rickard a richer harvest than any like area of this world's surface ever yielded.

At this moment—one-sixteen—atmospheric troubles impend. A drizzle has begun to fall. It is a trickle as yet but threatens to develop into an authentic downpour. The air has grown sodden and soggy with moisture thickened to the saturation point. It is as though one breathed into a wet sponge. I figure this sort of thing, continuing or growing worse, will slow up the two chief clouters when their turn comes.

Governor Edwards of New Jersey comes at one-thirty; the first good solid knock-down in the ring at one-thirty-six. Both are heartily approved with loud thunders of applause. Not everyone can be the anti-dry sport-loving governor of a great commonwealth, but a veritable nobody can win popular approval on a day like this by shoving his jaw in front of a winged fist. There are short cuts to fame though painful.

The shower has suspended, but the atmosphere is still as sappy as a wet shirt. This certainly is a stylish affair. I have just taken note of the fact that the corps of referees all wear white silk blouses and white trousers like tennis players and that the little fat boy who holds up big printed cards with numerals on them to show the number of the next round is done up in spotless white linen like an antiseptically bandaged thumb. The humidity with which the air is freighted is beginning now to be oppressive. Even the exertion of shoving a pencil across paper brings out the perspiration and the two ambitious novices up in the ring are so wet and so slick with their own sweat that they make you think of a pair of fresh-caught fish flapping about in a new sort of square net.

At intervals a zealous member of Governor Edwards's staff rises up, majestic in his indignation, and demands to know why some presumptuous commoner is permitted to stand or stoop in front of

his Excellency. One almost would think the Governor was a new laid egg and that this gentleman laid him. No less a personage than Tad Dorgan, himself a famous fight impresario, is ejected from the sacred precincts. At the ringside the police guards are having trouble with total strangers, who, lacking the necessary credentials, nevertheless have managed to slip inside the boundaries of the press division.

Along here the sun shows a watery, cocked eye through the misty heavens and coats are peeled off. Bleared heat can be just as hot as the other kind—if not hotter. But it clouds over again as the big hour draws nearer. For the most part time drags. These six and eight round appetizers lack savor. The crowd manifests its feelings. It didn't come here for sardines; it craves raw beef. For one tame bout there is a chorus of hoots.

It's 3 o'clock. Prompt on the appointed hour, for once in the history of championship goes, the men are brought forth on time. Carpentier comes first, slim, boyish, a trifle pale and drawn looking, to my way of thinking. He looks more like a college athlete than a professional bruiser. A brass band plays the "Marseillaise"; ninety-odd thousand men and women stand to greet him—or maybe the better to see him—and he gets a tremendous heartening ovation. Dempsey follows within two minutes. A mighty roar salutes him too, as he climbs into the ring and seats himself within the arc of a huge floral horseshoe; but so near as may be judged the applause for him, an American born, is not so sincere or spontaneous as the applause which has been visited upon the Frenchman.

He grins—but it is a scowling, forbidding grin—while photographers flock into the ring to focus their boxes first on one and then on the other. Dempsey sitting there makes me think of a smoke-stained Japanese war idol; Carpentier, by contrast, suggests an Olympian runner carved out of fine-grained white ivory. Partizans howl their approval at the champion. He refuses to acknowledge these. One figures that he has suddenly grown sulky because his reception was no greater than it was.

A little crowd of ring officials surround Dempsey. There is some dispute seemingly over the tapes in which his knobby brown hands are wrapped. Carpentier, except for one solicitous fellow-countryman, is left quite alone in his corner.

Dempsey keeps his eyes fixed on his fists. Carpentier studies him closely across the eighteen feet which separates them. The Gaul is losing his nervous air. He is living proof to give the lie to the old fable that all Frenchmen are excitable.

Overhead aeroplanes are breezing, and their droning notes come down to be smitten and flung up again on the crest of the vast upheaval of sound rising from the earth. A tiresome detail of utterly useless announcements is ended at last.

As the fighters are introduced, Dempsey makes a begrudged bow, but Carpentier, standing up, is given such an ovation as never before an alien fighter received on American soil. It is more plain by this test who is the sentimental favorite. The bettors may favor Jack; the populace likes Georges.

Without handshaking, they spring together; Carpentier lands the first blow. Dempsey, plainly enraged, is fast; Carpentier is faster still. But his blows seem to be wild, misplaced, while Dempsey, in the clinches into which they promptly fall, plants punishing licks with swift, short-armed strokes. The first half minute tells me the story. The Frenchman is going to be licked, I think, and that without loss of time. A tremendous roar goes up as Dempsey brings the first blood with a glancing lick on the side of his opponent's nose; it increases as the Frenchman is shoved half through the ropes. The first round is Dempsey's all the way. He has flung Carpentier aside with thrusts of his shoulders. He has shoved him about almost at will.

But midway of the second round Carpentier shows a flash of the wonderful speed for which he is known. With the speed he couples an unsuspected power. He is not fighting the defensive run-away-and-come-again fight that was expected of him. He stands toe to toe with Dempsey and trades 'em. He shakes Dempsey with a volley of terrific right-handed clouts which fall with such speed you do not see them. You only see that they have landed and that Dempsey is bordering on the state technically known as groggy.

It is a wonderful recovery for the Frenchman. His admirers shriek to him to put Dempsey out. To my mind the second round is his by a good margin. Given more weight I am sure now that he would win. Yet I still feel sure that Dempsey's superiority in gross tonnage and his greater aptitude at in-fighting will wear the lesser man down and make him lose.

The third round is Dempsey's, from bell to bell. He makes pulp of one of Carpentier's smooth cheeks. He pounds him on the silken skin over his heart. He makes a xylophone of the challenger's short ribs. The Frenchman circles and swoops, but the drubbing he gets makes him uncertain in his swings. Most of his blows go astray. They fly over Dempsey's hunched shoulders—they spend themselves in the air.

In the fourth round, after one minute and sixteen seconds of hard fighting—fighting which on Carpentier's part is defensive—comes the foreordained and predestined finishment. I see a quick flashing of naked bodies writhing in and out, joining and separating. I hear the flop, flap, flop of leather bruising human flesh. Carpentier is almost spent—that much is plain to every one. A great spasmodic sound—part gasp of anticipation, part groan of dismay, part outcry of exultation—rises from a hundred thousand throats. Carpentier totters out of a clinch; his face is all spotted with small red clots. He lunges into the air, then slips away, retreating before Dempsey's onslaught, trying to recover by footwork. Dempsey walks into him almost deliberately, like a man aiming to finish a hard job of work in workmanlike shape. His right arm crooks up and is like a scimitar. His right fist falls on the Frenchman's exposed swollen jaw; falls again in the same place even as Carpentier is sliding down alongside the ropes. Now the Frenchman is lying on his side.

Dempsey knows the contract is finished—or as good as finished. Almost nonchalantly he waits with his legs spraddled and his elbows akimbo harkening to the referee's counting. At the toll of eight Carpentier is struggling to his knees, beaten, but with the instinct of a gallant fighting man, refusing to acknowledge it. At nine he is up on the legs which almost refuse to support him. On his twisted face is the look of a sleep-walker.

It is the rule of the ring that not even a somnambulist may be spared the finishing stroke. Thumbs down means the killing blow, and the thumbs are all down now for the stranger.

For the hundredth part of a second—one of those flashes of time in which an event is photographed upon the memory to stay there forever, as though printed in indelible colors—I see the Frenchman staggering, slipping, sliding forward to his fate. His face is toward me and I am aware that on his face is no vestige of conscious intent. Then the image of him is blotted out by the intervening bulk of the

winner. Dempsey's right arm swings upward with the flailing emphasis of an oak cudgel and the muffed fist at the end of it lands again on its favorite target—the Frenchman's jaw.

The thud of its landing can be heard above the hysterical shrieking of the host. The Frenchman seems to shrink in for a good six inches. It is as though that crushing impact had telescoped him. He folds up into a pitifully meagre compass and goes down heavily and again lies on the floor, upon his right side, his face half covered by his arms as though even in the stupor following that deadly collision between his face and Dempsey's fist, he would protect his vulnerable parts. From where I sit writing this I can see one of his eyes and his mouth. The eye is blinking weakly, the mouth is gaping, and the lips work as though he chewed a most bitter mouthful. I do not think he is entirely unconscious; he is only utterly helpless. His legs kick out like the legs of a cramped swimmer. Once he lifts himself half-way to his haunches. But the effort is his last. He has flattened down again and still the referee has only progressed in his fateful sum of simple addition as far as "six."

My gaze shifts to Dempsey. He has moved over into Carpentier's corner and stands there, his arms extended on the ropes in a posture of resting. He has no doubt of the outcome. He scarcely shifts his position while the count goes on. I have never seen a prizefighter in the moment of triumph behave so. But his expression proves that he is merely waiting. His lips lift in a snarl until all his teeth show. Whether this be a token of contempt for the hostile majority in the crowd, or merely his way of expressing to himself his satisfaction is not for me to say.

The picture lingers in my mind after the act itself is ended. Behind Dempsey is a dun background of gray clouds, swollen and gross with unspilt rain. The snowy white horizontals of the padded guard ropes cut across him at knee and hip and shoulder line; otherwise his figure stands out clear, a relaxed, knobby figure, with tons of unexpended energy still held in reserve within it. The referee is close at hand, tolling off the inexorable tally of the count—"Seven, eight, nine"—but scarcely is one cognizant of the referee's presence or of his arithmetic either. I see only that gnarled form lolling against the ropes and, eight feet away, the slighter, crumpled shape of the beaten French-

man, with its kicking legs and its sobbing mouth, from which a little stream of blood runs down upon the lolled chin.

In a hush which instantaneously descends and as instantaneously is ended, the referee swings his arm down like a semaphore and chants out "ten."

The rest is a muddle and mass of confusion—Dempsey stooping over Carpentier as though wishful to lift him to his feet; then Dempsey encircled by a dozen policemen who for some reason feel called upon to surround him; two weeping French helpers dragging Carpentier to his corner and propping him upon a stool; Carpentier's long, slim legs dangling as they lift him and his feet slithering in futile fashion upon the resined canvas; Dempsey swinging his arms aloft in tardy token of appreciation for the whoops and cheers which flow toward him; all sorts of folks crowding into the ring; Dempsey marching out, convoyed by an entourage of his admirers; Carpentier, deadly pale, and most bewildered looking with a forlorn, mechanical smile plastered on his face, shaking hands with somebody or other, and then the ring is empty of all save Humphreys the orator, who announces a concluding bout between Billy Miske and Jack Renault.

As I settle back now to watch with languid interest this anticlimax, three things stand out in my memory as the high points of the big fight, so far as I personally am concerned.

The first is that Carpentier never had a chance. In the one round which properly belonged to him he fought himself out. He trusted to his strength when his refuge should have been in his speed.

The second is that vision of him, doubled up on his side, like a frightened, hurt boy, and yet striving to heave himself up and take added punishment from a foe against whom he had no shadow of hope.

The third—and the most outstanding—will be my recollection of that look in Dempsey's lowering front when realization came to him that a majority of the tremendous audience were partisans of the foreigner.