

The Paper Crown

That low punch Sharkey delivered in the infamous fourth round knocked Max Schmeling into a tinsel title and the muddled heavyweight situation into a deeper muddle—but the real foulee was the fan

By Grantland Rice

IT IS a simple matter to place a crown upon someone's head—if you happen to have a crown and a head handy at the time. But to make the crown fit is another job.

When Jack Sharkey low-punched Max Schmeling into the title this summer he crowned a champion upon whom few would bet even money to defeat any one of his three rivals—Sharkey, Stribling and Carnera. Here was a new title-winner who looked much less effective as a champion than he looked as a challenger.

Max Schmeling appeared to be on his way to a real championship when he walked out of the ring after finishing Paulino in June, 1929. He was then only a trifle over twenty-three years old. He had beaten Joe Monte, Joe Sekyra, Johnny Risko and Paulino Uzcudun in succession and had whipped them soundly.

He seemed to be the most promising fighter. He was young, strong, smart, game, a good puncher and fairly fast. He was aggressive and willing to fight. All he missed at the time was experience. He still showed the need of more competition and increased boxing ability.

When I saw Schmeling at his Endicott training camp before the Sharkey affair he seemed to be one of the most intelligent boxers in the game. He had a fine face, a pleasant manner and more than the usual amount of personal or impersonal charm.

But for some reason he had lost something during his year of ring idleness. Whether it was the result of a motor accident that injured one of the ligaments around his ankle or his effort to learn more about boxing, thereby changing his style, the young German was not the Schmeling of the year before.

At the age of twenty-four he had gone back instead of moving forward. He did no road work, no bag punching, no rope skipping, three of the training essentials for leg stamina, foot speed and arm endurance.

Most of those who saw both men had no hesitation in picking Sharkey to win. Some of Schmeling's own sparring partners felt this way about it. Part of the vital spark had blown out. Some of his speed was gone and he had lost much

of the sting that once lingered in his right-hand punch.

It was apparent at the end of three rounds that the likely-looking German challenger of 1928 and 1929 was going to have a hard time to survive the full route against the sharp and hard-hitting sailor. Sharkey was mixing up much more of an offensive assortment than Schmeling could handle.

Then a low punch from Sharkey suddenly catapulted the losing boxer into the middle of the throne-room. The battle had been billed as a heavyweight championship, and as Schmeling was a foreign entry at the time when the outcry against this country in behalf of Phil Scott was still somewhat noisy, there was nothing to do but award him a crown he had in no sense earned.

Schmeling Hasn't Proved It

It was not Schmeling's fault that Sharkey interpolated the low blow. But that doesn't alter the fact that he had little championship material when he fell to the floor near the end of the fourth round. Later on he might have worn Sharkey down or discouraged him. But he wasn't proving his case when the party broke up, as most heavyweight parties end, in a foul.

Then Young Stribling knocked out Otto von Porat in one round in Chicago and a few days later on Primo Carnera, the Italian mastodon, cast his mighty shadow over the ring landscape by taking everything George Godfrey had and showing enough possibilities to be rated around the top.

So here they stand as summer moves along toward another autumn—Schmeling, Sharkey, Stribling and Carnera—

the queerest collection of pugilistic talent ever mentioned in connection with the main title.

There was Schmeling, the champion, who would hardly draw even money against any of the three others.

There was Sharkey, who had almost everything a champion needs except a cool head, blowing his fourth shot at the title he should have won at least two years ago.

There was Young Stribling, who for some time had shown even more ring class than Jack Sharkey, but who, through an astonishing lack of aggressiveness in many of his most important fights, had also missed chance after chance to make his way to the front.

And finally stood the mammoth Carnera, weighing 265 pounds yet fast on his feet, an improving fighter who had seemed too big and too strong to be hurt. Even the sizzling rights and lefts thrown by the tremendous Godfrey, nailing him on the head and stomach, failed to make any impression. Carnera is abnormally fast for his weight.

Carnera is a freak only in the sense that while he is around six feet seven inches in height and weighs from 260 to 270 pounds in training he is also perfectly proportioned and is not the lumbering, awkward type. He handles himself much after the manner of an athletic human who might weigh 180 or 190.

Schmeling would have almost no chance against Carnera. He couldn't hurt the Italian and he is no faster while being outweighed by eighty pounds. Sharkey and Stribling might know too much, although the Italian is a far better fighter than the cruder product Stribling fought in London and Paris last winter.



Max's unearned crown cannot survive the situation in which he wears it

In connection with Stribling and Sharkey it can be said that both have all the physical make-up needed to win any championship, unless they run across a freak. Otto von Porat had been rated in the upper list, yet Stribling knocked him out in one round.

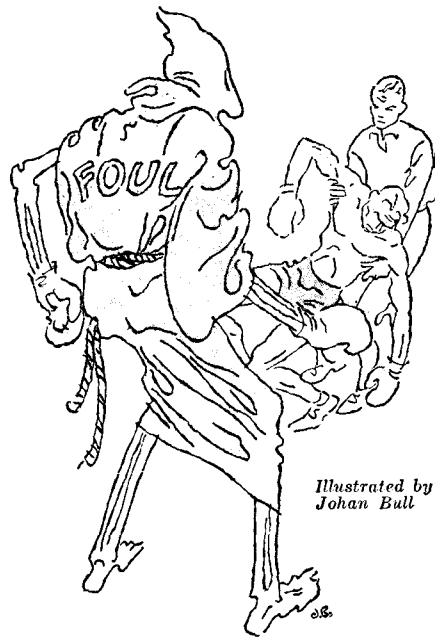
Stribling has fought more battles than Dempsey, Tunney and Sharkey put together. Many of these were against set-ups of the 24-carat variety, but many have been against the top-notchers in the trade. He is young, fast, strong, a hard hitter and a high-class boxer who is cool and crafty in the ring. But in the big spots he has never yet been able to make up his mind to let a few go and see what would happen.

It's Time for a Change

Sharkey reminds you of a baseball pitcher with speed and curves but who in a pinch unfurls a wild pitch and loses the ball game. Yet these are both rated above Schmeling as he looked in his last appearance.

The Schmeling who met Sharkey is not going to wear his crown very long, not as long as two seconds after the finish of his next important fight. But, with his intelligence and courage, he may be able to find the form he showed as the best young prospect.

It might be noted here that unless the foul evil and the racketeer influence in boxing are removed there may be no championship to fight for or defend within another year. The game has been bounding down hill faster than any competition now on the docket and about one more bound will leave it in the gravel ditch, ready for the first truck that can be backed up to cart away the debris and dump it somewhere out of public sight.



Illustrated by Johan Bull

Right Number

A Short Short Story complete on this page

By Bernice Brown

Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson



VANDERBILT 2500," a telephone number—what a funny name for a race horse! He seemed to be thinking of lots of funny things now. Strange. Of course, he was going to die. People who were dying did think of funny things. He'd read about it, though of course he hadn't read much. More, though, than anybody thought he had. Tony Valeska was the silent kind. That perhaps was the reason for his success.

How changed the room was. For one thing the cigarette smoke was gone. Tony didn't like cigarette smoke. He didn't smoke himself, or drink. The others did of course. That was why he was one up on them. His eyelids flickered.

"Who shot you, Mr. Valeska?"

Tony looked at the young police sergeant, who sat with notebook in hand. There was a doctor there, and a nurse. The room was quiet. A wind from the harbor billowed the curtains. How quickly they had put the place to rights. The table was gone, and the chips and the cards. Oh, he remembered it all distinctly now. She had called him at five-thirty. He did most of his sleeping in the daytime of course.

"Mr. Valeska. Five-thirty, please."

Funny thing, her voice. He had never seen her. She was one of the dozen hotel telephone operators whose quick hands switched in and out the wires that connected voices with each other. What strange connections their hands made, too. Tragedy, comedy, romance. All of those had come over his wire.

Again his eyelids flickered.

"Who shot you, Mr. Valeska?"

Tony Valeska smiled, that smile that had made him one of the greatest poker players of all time. Nobody knew what it meant. He might have nothing. He might have a full house. Oh, he'd had that shot coming to him. There was such a thing as retribution.

The nurse arranged a pillow. Curious how she knew that was just what he wanted. He felt almost peaceful. Perhaps it was because of what the doctor had given him, a prick in the arm with a long slim needle. He had seen the light glance off of it in the doctor's hands. And then had come peace.

"Who shot you, Mr. Valeska? You might as well tell me."

Again he smiled. He could write a

book about the reason he had been shot. It wasn't just a simple act of desperation because a certain man had lost three hundred thousand dollars. What was three hundred thousand dollars in a game like this night's had been? No, his death was tied up with a hundred other things, fixed races, building rackets, bootlegging—all sorts of things.

Men in high places were mixed up in it, too. He smiled. How little the office of a man protected him from temptation. How human everyone was. Next to a priest, perhaps, only Tony Valeska knew how human men were. He felt a great pity for the world at once. That was strange too, for him, Tony Valeska—who had felt so little pity for anyone in his life before.

"Who shot you, Mr. Valeska?"

WHAT a persistent fellow that police sergeant was. He might get a lieutenantship if this confession could be wrung from death. How interested he'd be too, if he only knew. How interested the whole city would be. Well, it was too bad. They'd have to search elsewhere for the name of the murderer.

The telephone bell rang and the nurse, with a quick hand, muffled the sound.

"Who shot you, Mr. Valeska?"

Poor young fellow, that sergeant. Why didn't he go home? He looked like a decent chap. . . . Yes, there was decency still in the world. And beauty. He thought of his own city. He had been born in the slums, of course. But even in the slums there had been beauty. He had liked the sunlight as it filtered onto the pavements through the iron trestles of the elevated. He liked the slanting searchlights at night, like giant pinwheels against the sky. . . . He thought of that girl's voice: "It's six o'clock, Mr. Valeska." "It's nine

o'clock." "It's twelve-thirty." No matter what moment he left the call for, she had never failed him. A hundred times the jangling of that bell had broken into his sleep. For a second he had loathed it. And then he had lifted off the receiver.

True, he had never seen her. She might be young or old, pretty or plain. It didn't matter. But her voice for one moment reconciled him to existence. Tony Valeska was no poet, except as every great man is a poet. But her voice was to him spring and dawn and sunlight on water. It was the cherry trees that come out first in Central Park, and the sapphire blue of evening sky above the Plaza square. It was the close-cropped turf of a race track. It was the beautiful clean running of horses. Yes, he liked horses. They were beautiful in action. Oh, he'd fixed races enough. He'd arranged it so that good horses lost and poorer ones won. But that wasn't the horses' fault.

"Who shot you, Mr. Valeska?"

He was sorry he was going to miss that race tomorrow. He'd fixed it of course. "Vanderbilt 2500" was going to win and he wasn't half the horse that Lucy Dale was, or Black Maria. Funny name for a horse. No, he'd never see another race. He'd never see the close-cropped turf or the sun glinting off the backs of smooth-brushed animals.

"Who shot you, Mr. Valeska?"

He'd never hear that girl's voice again either. "Six o'clock, Mr. Valeska." He was feeling weaker now. It couldn't be far off. The young sergeant could go home soon.

And then all at once he thought of something. What a fool he had been not to think of it sooner, while he was still sure of his voice. Perhaps he couldn't speak at all now. And still if

a man wanted anything badly enough he knew there was a magical reserve of strength in him somewhere that got the thing for him.

"I want to telephone," he said. Oh, yes, they had heard him. There was a moment's consultation. The doctor, he could see, was against it. But the young sergeant was anxious to have him. He might let something out.

The nurse propped the receiver against his ear and held the mouthpiece to his lips. He must be very careful. He didn't want the girl mixed up in any of this. And yet he had to do something for her before he died. Perhaps she wouldn't be on duty now. Still, he had had a lot of luck. Even that pistol shot perhaps had been lucky.

The nurse snapped up the receiver hook.

"Number, please?"

It was her voice. No, its reassurance hadn't been only a delusion of delirium.

"Listen carefully," he said. He felt quite strong at once.

"Number, please?"

He paused. He must be careful what he said, the line to his room was probably tapped. He mustn't connect her in any way with him, and yet he must get his message to her. Surely she hadn't been a telephone operator in a hotel frequented by racing men all these years without learning something about tips on horses.

"Listen. Get Vanderbilt 2500. Understand?" He stopped. "If you can't get it now, tomorrow morning as soon as possible. Understand?"

There was a moment. "Yes, sir. Vanderbilt 2500."

HE SMILED. "Right number." That was all. She had understood.

The nurse at last took the telephone away from his lips.

"He didn't spill anything after all," said the sergeant. "Wonder who he wanted?"

"He's delirious," snapped the doctor. He was angry to have his patient disturbed.

The young police sergeant bent over him, the old question in his eyes. But Tony Valeska couldn't have answered now if he'd wanted to. He only smiled.

"Who killed you?" the sergeant whispered.

This time Tony Valeska didn't hear him. But the curious thing was that the smile remained on his lips.