

Norene

Sam Ferris took care of his boys, getting them not only fights with set-ups, but feminine companionship as well

By Edward Newhouse

THE day he got me that semi-final spot in Fort Wayne I knew I would sign with him. I had stalled him off until I made sure he could do me good, but as soon as I collected my end of the purse, I knew Sam Ferris would be my next manager. He had four other boys, a feather, two middleweights, and Tiny Gomez, who rated space in the Chicago papers because he was taller than Carnera and weighed as much. Sam never for a moment thought Gomez would get any place, and he was thinking ahead when he asked me to sign. I was thinking back about the four rounds I went in Grand Rapids for twenty dollars, no expenses.

In Fort Wayne Sam got me a hundred, as well as a wonderful little Italian opponent, not

exactly made to order but almost as good. All that kid had was a scowl and a forward shuffle that probably made him look relentless to some customers. After the fight he removed the scowl, and, although he could hardly stand on his feet, he wobbled over to my corner and asked if I was all right. It was the politest bout I had since the amateurs, and I was grateful to Sam.

ALL THE way back to Chicago Sam was shooting breeze about the promoters he'd gone to school with, and the cousins he had, one a precinct captain, the other an alderman in New York. By Valparaiso he had me fighting Barney Ross and preparing for a tour of Europe. I liked him. For one, he said he'd

been in the ring himself and had no "they can't hurt us" ideas. Then as soon as we pulled in at the station, he phoned somebody and came out of the booth with another semi-final cinched for two weeks ahead.

"Whom do I fight?" I said grammatically.

He named a name and said I would not have any trouble. That made me feel very good. Had he put the contract in front of me then, I would have signed it.

"I'm no racketeer," Sam said. "I make my living off fighters so I take care of them. Don't that make sense?"

"Sure."

"You got a girl?"

"Why?"

"Now don't get me wrong. You're free,



Lithograph by Hirschfeld

white, and twenty-one. I'm not going to try and run your life for you. All I asked is if you got a girl."

"No," I said.

"And that's all I asked. Getting dosed ruined the best boy I ever had, and I know this ain't your town, and I don't want you wolfing it up with the first tramp hustler you meet. I keep a healthy girl that's good to my string and to nobody else. Tonight I'll take you up to the place, and if you like her, all right. If you don't, I'll see that you get your pick of a few others who are healthy. But this one is good-looking, and you'll like her. Her name's Norene. And I don't want you giving her money because I take care of that. You give her money, and she'll go back to the folks in Weston."

"Does she want to go back?" I said. I was just twenty-one, and Norene was a beautiful name, and she was probably a beautiful girl whom I would save from a life of shame, and back home in Weston she would pray for me every night, especially the night I'd be fighting Ross for the championship. Two pearly tears of happiness would roll down her cheeks as the announcer counted ten over Barney.

"You never know," Sam Ferris said. "I do all right by her. Anybody can get along with me. I had Norene doing this for about six months now, and she never kicks. Give them enough rope and they'll skip, though. You want to go see her?"

We dropped our bags at his place. He had the cab wait and then drive us to a house off Washington Park. On the way he still piled it on hot and heavy about the things he was going to do for me, but I was thinking of Norene who turned out altogether different from what I had imagined. My Norene had been blonde and languorous. This one was dark and not beautiful, only good-looking, and small. I couldn't help thinking of Tiny Gomez.

SHE WAS alone in a well-furnished but badly lit room and she looked at me only after Sam



Etching by Ralph Rabin

Ferris told her he was signing me up. He said I was a good kid, and she ought to take care of me. Norene didn't answer and kept looking at me until I had to turn away. We all had a drink, and Sam warned me against getting tanked, and he stood up, said: "See you tomorrow." She went with him to the door and they remained in the hall for some time, talking. The radio she was supposed to listen in on while I beat Ross was in a corner, but the station had just signed off for the night. I had forgotten that the radio I thought of was really in Weston where her parents lived. I wondered if Sam had noticed how drunk she was. When she came back, she saw me replacing the cork.

"You think I'm too drunk?" she said.

"No."

"I'm drunk," she said, "but not too drunk. So you're signing up with Sam Ferris. What did he tell you about me?"

"Nothing much."

"The hell he didn't. He told you I was

signed up with him too in a different way, but that's where he's a goddamned liar. I don't have to do a goddamned thing he tells me, him or anybody else. He can go to hell and take his fighters with him."

I got up and I said, "You could have told me that five minutes ago so Sam would have paid the carfare."

"You don't have to go," Norene said, uncorking the bottle. "Only I don't want you to get the wrong idea. How'd you get to sign up with Sam Ferris? What's an educated boy like you doing in the ring anyway?"

She sounded as though she wanted to reclaim me from my life of shame, and I smiled at the notion, and she got sore at me for smiling. I said I hadn't had any more education than she, and I asked where she had gone to school, wondering if she'd mention Weston.

"Sam Ferris is paying my way through finishing school," Norene said.

We both began drinking, and I got so drunk I did not know where I was or what I was doing. In the morning I woke up alone in the apartment. There was little I remembered, but I had no hangover. I came late to the office, and they told me Sam would be down at the gym.

SAM WAS working that musclebound slug-nut Gomez. He had my contract with him, and I read it. I could not look at that round-heeled bastard Gomez without thinking of Norene. I used to be sorry for him on account of the pastings he took, but then I felt like telling him to go back to swinging a grappling hook in San Diego where he belonged. I watched Sam's featherweight working two rounds with a bantam, and I was beginning to see why he'd handed me that fine contract. Still and all, it was a fine contract, and I knew Sam Ferris could do me a lot of good. We started for the notary public, but one of the crums came downstairs and said I was wanted on the phone.

The girl's voice said, "This is Norene. How do you feel? Did you tell Sam Ferris what I said about me not working for him?"

"No."

"Well, don't. He's liable to get sore. I do work for him, you know. I told you he was a goddamned liar, but he ain't. I guess now you think I am."

"No. I don't think so."

"Well, maybe I am," she said. "Only don't tell him what I said because he won't like it a bit."

I told her I wouldn't, but she made me promise again and again.

Back in the gym I said to Sam, "What kind of hold have you got on this girl Norene?"

"I ain't got any kind of hold over her," Sam said. "Has she been complaining?"

"Not a bit. Would you wonder if she did?"

"Would I wonder? You ask me, would I wonder? Where do you think I found the girl before I set her up in that apartment? She's getting uppity now and proud, but I picked her out of the gutter. She got no kick coming."

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The Melancholy Railings

Here you come with your old music,
A clear case of arrested development!
And with your twilights, chilly ones,
Whispering of newspapers scraping in the wind.

Take your alphabet to the drawing-rooms,
To the phthisic old ladies who hobble on Fifth Avenue
With black poodles bobbing on their bosoms,
Wheeze it to the harps of the mystical individualists.

I have been seduced by the bricklayer of daylight
Flicking his trowel over the fresh walls.
The adult anger of the crowd has got me
Trampling the broad lawns without a bound.

HAROLD ROSENBERG.