

Woman at the Ring Side

WOMAN'S place is at the ring side. This is the dictum of 1921, at least for a part of New York "society."

Boxing has come back to legitimacy in New York State, into a world that has decided that it is not only permissible for enfranchised woman to attend fights, but even a bit "smart." Boxing had been out a while for a squeamish part of the world, which had decided that the fight was crude and vulgar—certainly no place for a lady. Those were the dark days of the sport, when roughly clad men gathered by night in some pseudo-athletic club to look on at and to gamble upon the illicit thing. The nearest the ladies ever got to that phase of boxing was a George Bellows lithograph.

But now boxing has come back to a different world—a world of mole-skin cloaks and of violets, of ornate women, of men in dinner coats, and of waiting limousines.

Largely this new appearance of fashionable women at fights is imported from England and France. In England itself, native soil of the sportswoman, the new feminine sport of attending fights is no older than the war. So testifies Captain E. V. Chandler, heavyweight champion of the British Army, who came to New York for the championship bout of the International Sporting Club on Jan. 17. This was the fight, by the way, that was attended by so many "society women" that it called the attention of the land to the new feminine rôle of "fight fan."

The English lady of fashion, it seems, got the habit while she was a nurse or an aid or a canteen worker, or some of those things that brought her in close contact with the army. Those were the warlike days when the boxing ring had ceased to be a business for tough, cauliflower-eared professionals and a hangout for gamblers. Boxing had gone back to the primal purpose for which all sport was invented, the fitting of man's body and spirit for the serious business of war. Anyway, Miss Mid-Victoria had been dead some years; sensibilities and "vapours" were quite out of vogue; a mere bleeding nose meant nothing to the woman who had learned to tend wounds.

Therefore the Englishwoman took kindly to the manly art. After the war was over she kept on liking it—until now a boxing bout in London is as much a society event as the opera. And, because the society woman went, the woman who read the society news about the society woman went, too.

The French tale is a bit different, though the outcome of popularizing Le Box has been the same. It is the story of Carpentier, idealized and adored as a sort of superstage nationalized matinee idol. Carpentier was such a "gentleman." Didn't he even produce a glowing war record and a decoration that justified the institution of boxing as a man-builder? Any woman felt justified in attending Le Box—and from just such women the custom of attending fights leaked up to the "ladies."

Meanwhile in New York State the ground was being prepared for the return of the professional prize-fight by our own war. The "manly sport of boxing" was taught to our infantry soldiers to fit them for hand-to-hand combats. Such men as Theodore Roosevelt and Admiral Sims were advocating the law which should bring professional fights back to respectability and legality. And, when that law was finally passed, less than a year ago, it was quite unexpectedly discovered that the women had caught the fever from the French bourgeoisie and from English society alike—as a trip to Madison Square Garden will show you on a night when the fight fans are gathering.

For scattered through the audience are all grades of femininity—from

the stout blond sportswoman who sits on the bleachers at the races and gets her "tips" from a friend that's married to a jockey, to a box full of the best New York society. The Roosevelt family, by the way, are indefatigable fight fans. Boxing bouts have been taken up by all sorts of women—from Anne Morgan, who would turn their proceeds into the useful channels of war relief, to the two little shopgirls, powdering their noses at the Garden, who have been brought by their men friends to see the show.

And we are all of us—all of us women, that is—being welcomed by the men. That's the joke on them. Get a man to start a discussion in any part of the audience (fight audiences, understand, don't wait for introductions), and you'll learn that, down in their hearts, three-fourths of the men would rather not have us there. It was the one place left inviolate in business or pleasure that was still No Woman's Land. "I'd hate to think of my mother here," they remark, just as they did when men argued that it would not be ladylike for a woman to go to the polls—only to add cautiously, "Not that I have any real argument against women at fights."

For the first time we've broken in on a perquisite of man, without his even putting up a struggle—and that for two reasons. The first reason is that the fans are so busy insisting that there is nothing brutal in the sport, lest again it be put in bad odor with the makers of blue laws, that it cramps their style in explaining why the women should not be present. And, secondly, these same equality-demanding women now help make the laws. Never was mere man so up a tree.

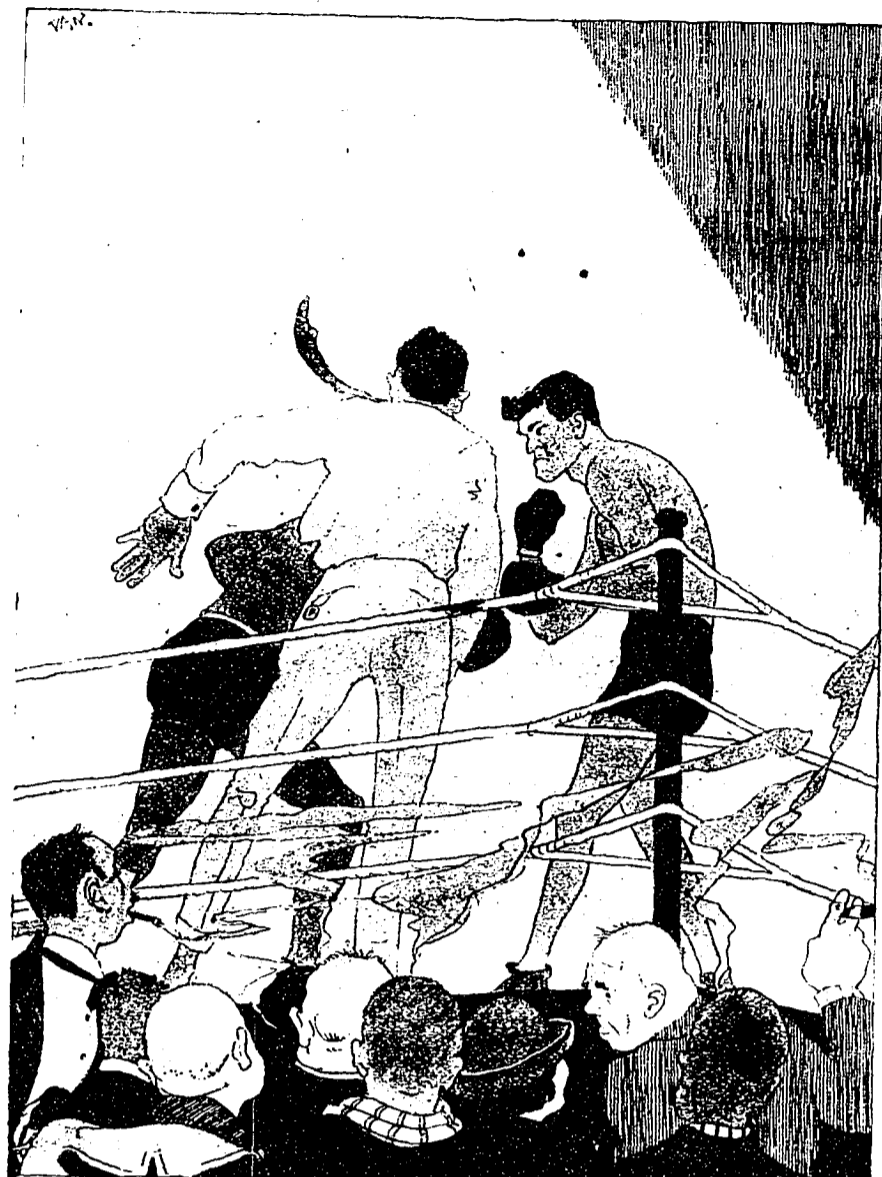
Therefore we are being accepted somewhat as honored guests by the very general public of the ring-side.

"Hi, there! Hats off in front!" brays a voice ten seats in the rear. And, as feminine hands are raised, the same voice brays out. "Not you, lady; just gents' derbies."

"That's right; smash him in the kisser!" excitedly shouts the fat male who bellows over the seat of the small female, then turns politely to the small female. "Pardon me, ma'am, but does my cigar smoke annoy you?"

The same dual nature is found, even in the headquarters of the International Sporting Club, in the mind of its founder and managing director.

"Pardon me, Ma'am, does my smoke annoy you?"



William Gavin, who admittedly was the greatest influence in bringing about the New York State law that now permits fights.

"Give me some good reason why women shouldn't attend fights?" he asks smiling. "The whole history of civilization could be written in terms of allowing woman this or that sport privilege. In the beginning of the world she was robbed of this joy, because her task was merely to prepare the food and to bear the children—while sport—why, it was invented to fit man for the fight and for the hunt.

"In the croquet period, sport for women was at its lowest ebb. Now the tide is full. And the turn of the tide, understand, was when Florence Nightingale proved that women be-

longed in man's fiercest struggle. In this last war women showed that they could go through the most bloodcurdling situations with a coolness envied by men. Why, it's perfect nonsense to talk about their being shocked at a clean, scientific fight. Look at my wife. She's been hunting in South Africa—has in her possession the second finest lion's head on record. Heard him roaring in the night, when the rest of the party were asleep, and went out with a gun by herself. Horribly daring thing to do, but she brought him down. That's the kind of women we've got these days."

"Then you haven't any prejudice against women going to fights?" He grinned at his own discomfiture. "To confess the truth, I have a

certain prejudice. However, more briskly, "I'll get over it—will have to get over it, just as men have had to get used to seeing women smoke. It's wrong and selfish, and nobody but an old crab wants to keep women away from a perfectly innocent amusement, because of prejudices left over from a period when boxing was on a less sportsmanlike plane. Women are at the fights to stay because they like it."

Women are at the fights to stay, one of them would like to add, because at a boxing bout no special education is required to understand what is going on, because what the contestants are trying to do to each other is so direct and simple. The uninitiated lady asks no questions of her escort. That alone should be enough to give permanency to the new custom of taking her. The contestants so conveniently carry their goals with them that she can't get mixed up about which side is winning. And, even if she does lose count, there are the simple remarks of her neighbors to save the day.

"You're wasting my time," from a man behind her informs her that the action's slow. While the next door neighbor who remarks with gusto, "Now he's got eight rounds under his belt, he'll open up the short guy's nose," serves as libretto. Woman may sit without questions while the fight lasts, and then tell her escort afterward, looking up in his face significantly, that she does love a big strong man.

That, in itself, gives "fight fanning" standing as a sport, for women. For, each new sport for women, in the final analysis, rises or falls according to whether it assists her in her original primeval sport, the winning of favor in man's eyes.

Usually a game has grown fashionable and popular for women in the ratio of the becomingness of the costume it fostered. Never was medieval lady more graceful than when on her slim wrist perched her pet hawk—while the entire huntswoman spirit of the Renaissance culminated in the Court of Charles II, in having your portrait painted as Diana with a bundle of arrows.

True, the curtain raisers for each new sport, the first doughty adven-



"Never was medieval woman more graceful than when her falcon perched on her wrist."

After an Old Tapestry.

(Continued on Page 25)

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(Continued from Page 16)

turers, have usually come because they are genuine sport lovers. Usually such women have been of the leisure class, those who could afford to have suitable costumes made. After that, if the costume were sufficiently becoming, it was a landslide. The hard-pressed pretty girl artists began to use it on their cover designs. The hard-pressed fiction writers introduced it in their short stories for the popular priced magazines. First it was the tennis girl; lately it has been the aero maid.

However, from a Methodist Church in Pittsburgh come words to remind us of what was once woman's sphere and that woman's chief charm was to be a sensitive plant. "It was a degradation to the womanhood of America to think that Anne Morgan should degrade herself into auctioning off seats for a prizefight," says the voice of this ministerial authority.

In spite of this timely warning, the twentieth century continues to destroy one by one the nineteenth century's sweet Tennysonian sensibilities.

"After all," points out a woman who was shocked to find that when she attended her first fight she wasn't shocked at all. "Didn't we pretend to those old sensibilities a

little, anyway, because we thought the men liked it? I've a strong suspicion that fainting with grace was the scientific sport of that period. Just think of the practice bouts it required before the mirror."

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