



Polly Adler exiting a police patrol wagon after being raided

## From Nobody to a Legend

**T**he epic slugfest between Jack Dempsey and Jack Sharkey in Yankee Stadium couldn't have come at a better time, as far as Polly Adler was concerned. July and August were always tough months in her business; really, in every branch of Broadway's Billion Dollar Beauty Trust. Action on the Main Stem was slow during the dog days of summer, in this age before air-conditioning. The big money men of Wall Street and midtown decamped to Europe with their wives, or to country homes on Long Island, Westchester, or the Jersey shore. The high-stakes gamblers and racketeers who were Polly's most loyal customers hightailed it to Saratoga Springs for a blissful month at the racetrack. Most speakeasies and nightclubs closed, and the leg-and-fanny revues went on tour, taking with them many of the showgirls who moonlighted in Polly's house of ill repute.

But receipts was down far more than usual in that summer of 1927. Up until now this had been Polly's best year ever. After seven years in the skin trade, she had finally worked her way into the blue-chip clientele who thought nothing of dropping a couple hundred bucks for a roll in the hay and a few rounds of drinks. It wasn't just her house. All that spring Broadway's nightlife was booming as never before, fueled by the soaring stock market and the thriving bootleg liquor industry. The Big Street seemed gripped by a feverish, almost hysterical atmosphere of debauchery, with more shows, more nudity, and more cash changing hands than in any season in memory.

By July, however, the money river mysteriously seemed to dry up. One by one “the after-dark palaces of joy,” as *The Morning Telegraph* dubbed them, were closing their unmarked doors for lack of business.

Perhaps it was the spiraling prices in the nightclubs—lately even the top-hat-and-ermine set were starting to grouse about the size of their bar bills. Maybe it was the growing allure of Harlem, which was all the rage among the more daring joy-seekers. It didn’t help that the city was in the grip of a vicious heat wave. Every day 8 million sweating citizens swelled the already-crowded stoops and sidewalks in search of a cool breeze. Every night thousands carried their alarm clocks and pillows to rooftops and fire escapes, hoping for a little relief. Even the hoopla over the historical transatlantic flights of Richard Byrd and Charles Lindbergh, including two tickertape parades up Fifth Avenue, did little to boost revenue. So the return of Jack Dempsey—the biggest entertainment draw in America, bar none—in a major prizefight was like the answer to a heathen’s prayer.

Boxing was always a hot topic among Polly’s clientele, second only to horse racing. But this matchup between Dempsey, the legendary Manassa Mauler, and the young upstart from Boston had sent the whole city into a frenzy of excitement. Tex Rickard, the impresario of Madison Square Garden who’d set up the bout, was predicting over \$1 million in ticket sales. Newspaper coverage of the event was feverish, with more than five hundred reporters and photographers planning to be in attendance, and more than a million words in print before the first bell rang. This was Dempsey’s last shot at a comeback, and every high roller who could get his hands on a ticket planned to be there to see it. Everyone in the underworld hospitality industry—the bootleggers, bookmakers, nightclub managers, crap game runners, gold diggers, and prostitutes—was eagerly anticipating the arrival of so many fresh bankrolls eager to be plucked.

Everyone agreed it would be a close fight. The smart money was flocking to the younger, fitter Sharkey, but the sentimental coin was all on the Manassa Mauler. In Polly’s social circles—what might charitably be called the Broadway demimonde—Jack Dempsey was the very ideal of a rags-to-riches Horatio Alger hero. “Plus a few things Mr. Alger didn’t go in for,” Dempsey noted wryly: “beautiful movie and stage stars, a lot of laughs, pressure groups, knocking good guys senseless as a way of life,

war, suicide, divorce.” He’d clawed his way to the top with a barbaric fighting style and generous helpings of hype. For the last four years, he’d been living the coddled life of a Hollywood celebrity, getting laid, getting drunk, and spending money hand over fist—a combination that had cost him his title in 1926 but burnished his popularity. Now, at the ancient age of thirty-two, he was attempting a feat never seen before: to take back the heavyweight crown.

To be honest, Polly didn’t really care who won. “I was never much of a fight fan,” she admitted. Nor was she a fan of Dempsey. “I knew him way back and never liked him and still don’t.” It was common knowledge that his first wife had worked as a prostitute, and rumor was that he had been her pimp—and, Polly noted pointedly, “I cannot deny that I mortally hate pimps.” But he was an exception. As a rule, she was fond of boxers. Like prostitution, prizefighting attracted ambitious youths from tough homes, whose only shot at climbing the ladder of success lay in their strong, svelte young bodies.

Like him or not, a good night for Dempsey meant a good night for Polly and her girls. This was the peak of the “One Good Party Era,” as one columnist dubbed it, when one well-oiled sucker on a spending spree could cover her overhead for a month or more. In her business, there were always unexpected expenses. She never knew when she’d be raided or shaken down by the cops, or when an overwrought customer might draw the wrong kind of attention, requiring her to shut down and move her operation—each time costing her a bundle of money and putting her at terrible risk. So a wise madam took advantage of every opportunity. And in her experience, nothing made a man want to party like the surging adrenaline of watching two hulking fellows beat each other bloody.

It was Dempsey’s former manager, Jack “Doc” Kearns, who’d helped build Polly’s reputation as the place for big spenders to celebrate. A fast-talking, wisecracking hustler who favored pastel suits, diamond stickpins, gold-tipped walking sticks, and violet-scented cologne, Doc demanded constant action. He drank voraciously, gambled recklessly, tipped the girls lavishly, had a passion for practical jokes (with a particular fondness for the hotfoot). He routinely bought drinks for everyone in the house, both friends and strangers. When he was in town, Doc was one of Polly’s best customers. “He used to tell me that whenever a fighter comes inside

a woman, he loses his strength,” said Dempsey. “Doc believed that, but you sure couldn’t prove it by the way Doc liked to live himself.”

Adding to his charm, Kearns usually brought an entourage of newspapermen with him, all eating and drinking on his (or his fighter’s) dime. In gratitude, the reporters gave his boxers unlimited ink in their newspapers. Tex Rickard called this “sugaring” the sports writers. Kearns referred to it as “movement money.” Polly’s less colorful clients simply called it an “expense account,” but the idea was the same. “Like a stripteaser,” said Kearns, “I always figured you couldn’t get anywhere without exposure.”

This was where Polly came in. It was a truth universally acknowledged among the denizens of Broadway that “ninety-five per cent of the sucker money is brought in by a skirt,” as one wag put it. That was as true for sports promoters as it was for theatrical producers, factory owners, advertising executives, politicians, or bootleggers. A swell party stocked with easy women was just the thing to convince a fellow to close a contract, make a deal, or pen an enthusiastic column. Like bootleg booze, girls were the grease that made the machinery of the metropolis run smoother.

In that sweltering summer of 1927, Polly Adler was Manhattan’s top supplier of party girls. Unlike Jack Kearns, Polly’s bacchanalian hospitality earned her no headlines. If anything, her kindness to the ink-stained wretches of the press kept her safely out of them. But it did win her exuberant word-of-mouth at Billy LaHiff’s tavern, Dinty Moore’s diner, Lindy’s delicatessen, the Algonquin Hotel, and the all-male sanctum of the Friars Club—wherever men regaled each other with stories of gorgeous women and epic parties. Her house had become one of the notorious late-night hotspots where a fellow who’d won a long shot at the track or made a killing in the stock market could show off his good fortune.

Unfortunately for the freeloaders in the press box, Kearns and Dempsey parted ways in 1925. But Doc had a new protégé, the welterweight champion Mickey Walker, a scrappy Irish slugger from New Jersey who rivaled Kearns in his appetite for booze and broads. Now, this one she liked. The Toy Bull Dog, as the sportswriters nicknamed young Walker, returned the sentiment. “She was a sharp businesswoman, a financial brain. You had to be somebody to go there, and you had to pay

plenty, no matter who you were or how well you knew her,” said Mickey. “In my book, she is a real champ.”

Doc and Mickey were among Polly’s best prospects for raking in some real dough that week. Right this moment they were on their way back from a raucous romp through Europe. But Doc had telegraphed to say they would be sailing into the port of New York on the day before the big bout. “The Queen Madam,” as Mickey called her, was keeping an anxious eye on the telephone, hoping to hear from the boys as soon as they landed. She was counting on the fact that after their weeks abroad, Mickey and his manager would be making the rounds of all the late-night joints, with a mob of thirsty reporters and gossipmongers in tow. Someone was going to get all that business—she just had to make sure she was one of them.

It was exhausting sometimes, always being on high alert like this, waiting for the phone to ring, listening for an ominous knock at the door, and looking over her shoulder for signs of unscrupulous cops, undercover investigators, blackmailers, and sociopathic customers. When she thought of the thousands of dollars she’d paid out to double-crossing cops and the abuse she took from coked-up racket boys, sometimes it made her blood boil.

But then, that was the secret to her success: her ability to take it on the chin without squawking, then get back up with a smile on her face. To an outsider, “it might seem that I have got Polly Adler confused with Pollyanna,” quipped Polly. “I can only say that I am one of those people who just can’t help getting a kick out of life—even when it’s a kick in the teeth.”

Still, enough good weeks, enough big spenders, and she’d leave this racket in a hot minute. Until then, she said—like the good Jewish girl she’d always meant to be—“I would do nothing but work until I had saved enough money to quit the whorehouse and find myself a decent man.”



*Whore* is a word that jars the ear and tastes bitter on the tongue. The English language abounds in more polite, poetic, and precise terms to describe a woman who trades sex for money: *prostitute*, *sex worker*,

*lady of the evening, working girl, fallen woman, call girl.* Many more are unapologetically rude: *hooker, gash, cunt, and piece of hide* were all commonly heard in the dives of New York after the Great War.

Women who made a business of sex in those days often turned up their noses at the term *prostitute*, preferring to call themselves *hustlers, party girls, or regulars*. But everyone in the sex trade used the word *whore*. “In those days prostitutes weren’t called chippies or tarts or call girls or any other fancy names,” remembered the columnist Danton Walker. “They were known, quite properly, by the Biblical name: whores, and their establishments were called whorehouses.” It was, after all, one of the world’s oldest words, used to describe the world’s oldest profession.

No one meeting Pearl Adler on the street would have taken her for a fallen woman, let alone the proprietress of Manhattan’s most renowned bordello. “She was homey,” remembered the journalist Irving Drutman; “one would have placed her, and how mistakenly, as the ubiquitous mama in a family-run delicatessen.” Only twenty-seven years old, give or take, and tiny—barely five feet tall in her highest heels—she had a kewpie doll face and a sweet smile that revealed a girlish little gap between her two front teeth. She dressed conservatively in beautifully tailored clothes, often of her own design. Her hair was fashionably bobbed at the neck, her hands tastefully manicured. No ankle bracelets, heavy makeup, or the jungle-red nail polish associated with women of the night. Her jewelry was a tad showy and she had a well-known weakness for mink coats, but no more so than any ambitious Manhattan gold digger.

It was easy to underestimate her, at least until she opened her mouth. She was blessed with “the voice of a longshoreman” in the words of Oscar Levant—naturally husky and roughened by cigarettes, scotch, and a thousand late nights. It was so deep that telephone callers frequently mistook her for a man, much to her annoyance. “I can still hear her hollering over the phone, “This is Polly Adler, God damn it. Stop calling me mister,”” remembered one friend with amusement. Thirteen years after fleeing the Jewish Pale of Russia, she still spoke with Yiddish inflections, generously sprinkled with immigrant malapropisms and Broadway slang.

Not everyone liked her, of course. Rival madams didn’t care for her upstart ambitions. Some of the Broadway butterflies who worked for her

chafed at her ban on drugs and pimps, her insistence that they go to bed with whoever came through the door, and her frequent lectures on social etiquette. Men who were touchy about their own social status often took comfort in belittling her. “I knew Polly Adler,” sniped the famously combative writer John O’Hara; “she was a noisy bore, who looked like Mike Romanoff in drag” (a reference to the infamous Russian-born con man-turned-Hollywood restaurateur). She’d been snubbed in public more times than she could possibly remember, even if she had wanted to.

Nonetheless, her fans outnumbered her foes. Slumming intellectuals and Broadway bohemians were tickled by her blunt realism and lightly louche wisecracks. Fellow Jews from the old country found her house *haimish*, a cozy home away from home. Many in the underground gay community—both male and female—found her parlor a retreat where they could relax and be themselves. Everyone, from Park Avenue aristocrats to Lower East Side hooligans, appreciated her ironclad discretion.

“Polly Adler was one of the most fascinating females I ever knew,” recalled the playboy songwriter Jimmy Van Heusen. “How the hell do you explain why you like someone? Polly was warm and funny, smart and gutsy and fun to be around. We liked each other and didn’t take the time to think about it much.”

There were plenty of other madams in Manhattan, but none of them seemed to have the combination of charisma and brains that made Polly one of the “authentic Big Shots” of the town, as one Broadway columnist dubbed her.

Polly was more modest. “I was a creation of the times, of an era whose credo was: ‘Anything which is economically right is morally right’—and my story is inseparable from the story of the twenties,” she wrote later. “In fact, if I had all of history to choose from, I could hardly have picked a better age in which to be a madam.”

She’d opened her first brothel in 1920—a self-styled “house of assignation” in a two-bedroom apartment across from Columbia University—the same year the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, banning the sale or transportation of all intoxicating liquors, became the law of the land. For over a decade, the forces of moral order had been busy shutting down brothels and gambling halls. Now the final piece was in place. “It is here at last!” declared the triumphant Anti-Saloon League. “Now for a new era of clean thinking and clean living!”



Maybe so in Middle America, wherever that was. But in “Gotham and Gomorrah,” as that bible of the middle classes, *The Saturday Evening Post*, dubbed New York City, they were having none of it.

By the time Polly was marking her first anniversary in business, Manhattan had become the blazing eastern front of the first great culture war of the twentieth century. In one of the most spectacular examples of the law of unintended consequences in American history, Prohibition gave the world of vice a cachet it had never had before.

“From the parlor of my house I had a backstage, three-way view,” remembered Polly with pleasure. “I could look into the underworld, the half-world and the high.” Her house became a favorite oasis of the bootleggers and bookmakers who were eager to blow their ill-gotten gains. But Polly had even bigger ambitions, requiring her to master the art of publicity. She cultivated gossip columnists and influential newspapermen and she frequented the chic nightclubs and late-night rendezvous with a rotating posse of glamour girls.

By 1924, her house had become an after-hours clubhouse for the adventurous Broadway bohemians who gathered at the Algonquin Hotel for lunch; writers, performers, and publicists like Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Donald Ogden Stewart, and the king of the Broadway wisecrackers, George S. Kaufman. Their imprimatur led her to the heavy hitters of Madison Avenue, Park Avenue, and Wall Street.

Executives in the garment industry and the flourishing fields of radio, motion pictures, and advertising employed her girls to woo clients. Wall Street traders passed along stock tips on their way to the bedroom. Racketeers used her parlor as an informal headquarters where they could confer with politicians and judges, away from prying eyes. Gamblers found it a safe haven for high stakes poker and crap games. Entertainers knew they’d hit the big time when they could afford an evening with her girls. Crooked cops of every rank made her place their home away from home—a decidedly mixed blessing.

There was danger in such notoriety, however. That spring she’d caught the attention of the undercover investigators of the Committee of Fourteen, a coalition of moral reformers committed to stamping out prostitution and sexual deviancy in New York. They’d tracked her to the Kentucky Club, where she was an avid fan of Duke Ellington and his sizzling jazz band. They’d traced her to the Dover Club, where come-

dian Jimmy Durante had hired one of her occasional call girls to work as a hostess and comic performer. If the Committee decided to stir up the wrong people, she could be in for trouble, no matter how many palms she greased.

Then there was the problem of her parents. With her newfound fortune, Polly had brought her father and two of her brothers to New York from eastern Europe. In June 1927, Moshe Adler filed his naturalization papers to become a citizen, and she planned to bring her mother and three youngest brothers to America in the coming months. Much as Polly longed to see her mother again, she dreaded the prospect of lying to her face. Her father might have understood her career—he was a man of the world—but her mother would be devastated if she learned the truth.

At this point, Polly could have declared victory and retired from the life. In an era when well-paid women made about thirty dollars a week, she was pulling in at least \$60,000 a year, well over \$900,000 in today's currency. She was heavily invested in the stock market and had saved a fine nest egg—enough to buy into a legitimate business or go back to school. She'd spent enough time around horseplayers and dice-tossers to know the golden rule: the only way to beat the odds was to quit the game when you are winning.

But that wasn't so simple. It was an axiom of the underworld: once in the rackets, always in the rackets. Her career was deeply intertwined with syndicated crime, and the mob didn't look kindly on retirement. As one gangland titan warned her, "Once you're tagged as a madam it's for keeps."

Besides, she wasn't sure she was ready to retire. She was only twenty-seven, but she'd seen enough of human hypocrisy to know that in the square world, she'd be just another nobody, or worse. "As Miss Pearl Adler, the reformed procuress and honest citizen, I was a social outcast," she said tartly. "As Madam Polly, the proprietress of 'New York's most opulent bordello,' society came to me."

The way her luck was running, she just needed to stick it out a little longer, until she had so much money that she'd never have to work again and no one would dare look down on her. Ask any gambler: only a rank sucker would drop the dice when she had a hot hand.

The weekend before the fight, the excitement and tension on the Main Stem rose to a feverish pitch. A steady stream of pugs, pimps, degenerate gamblers, and the racketeers who were boxing's biggest fans and, increasingly, its primary investors, began rolling into Manhattan in anticipation of the festivities on July 21. This "Dempsey-Sharkey thing brought the strangest assortment of unique characters into Broadway the Great Alley has ever seen," marveled a reporter from *Variety*, the weekly show business journal. Special trains brought fans from Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and Pittsburgh. They were a tough crowd. When conductors on one "fight special" coming up from Baltimore tried to stop a hundred or so passengers from drinking in one of the cars, a full-scale free-for-all erupted. The fans battered the conductors and crew with such fury that a platoon of police had to storm the train when it got to Philadelphia.

The out-of-towners stampeded into the Roaring Forties, the rough-and-tumble neighborhood between Fifth and Tenth avenues, where every block boasted a dozen speakeasies and a scruffy poolroom. The sidewalks were jammed around Cauliflower Row, at Eighth Avenue and West 49th Street outside Madison Square Garden, where the fight promoters and managers, ticket scalpers, horseplayers, and cauliflower-eared old boxers gossiped and schemed.

They were carrying serious kale and throwing it around with gusto in all the Broadway nightspots. "At one table one night we saw the most notorious gunman in Chicago, surrounded by his henchmen; at another was pointed out to us the leading bootlegger and beer-runner of a mid-western border city, and the mayor of the same city was in his party," wrote the reporter from *Variety*. "There seemed to be no limit to the amount of money the gang had or wanted to spend."

All the bookmakers were seeing heavy action, from the small-time poolroom and cigar-store bookies to the "betting commissioners" down on Broad Street. It was estimated that at least a million dollars changed hands that week. Dempsey was the sentimental favorite, but the younger, fitter Sharkey was heavily favored by the oddsmakers. Even Arnold Rothstein, the Big Street's savviest gambler, was trumpeting the fact that he'd plunged heavily on the Boston gob, betting an astounding \$400,000 on Sharkey to win at 8-to-5 odds.

Amid the revelry, there was an ominous undercurrent of anxiety among the Broadway mobsters and their out-of-town guests. Like most madams, Polly prided herself on possessing a sixth sense, an ability to sniff out trouble before it arrived. But no one needed special powers to sense the trouble brewing. New York's volatile underworld had been enjoying a period of relative calm, after two years of violent clashes between gangs vying for control of the city's liquor trade. But a series of unfortunate events were shaking the fragile peace.

On July 9 Jack "Legs" Diamond, one of New York's most notorious strong-arm men, was picked up on a narcotics charge. Nothing unusual in that. But this time it was whispered that the police had been tipped off by Arnold Rothstein, who employed Diamond as a debt collector and bodyguard. Word was that Rothstein was growing irritated by Legs's habit of borrowing large sums of cash and forgetting to repay them. Now Legs was furious and swearing vengeance. Happy as many were to see the hotheaded gunman get a rap on the knuckles, having Legs on the warpath could create a lot of headaches.

But Legs's saga paled when the big shocker came that same Friday: a federal judge ruled that William Vincent Dwyer would be spending the next two years in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta.

"Big Bill" Dwyer, as he was known to his admirers, was one of Polly's most important patrons. He sported thick black eyeglasses and the plump profile of a well-fed accountant. Over the last seven years, Dwyer had risen from the Irish ghetto of Hell's Kitchen to be crowned the "King of the Bootleggers." Using a potent combination of grease and muscle, he'd built an international smuggling operation and a network of illegal breweries, distilleries, and speakeasies that had grossed an estimated \$40 million over the last few years. Along with his partners, Frank Costello and Owney Madden, Dwyer established a powerful cartel, known as the Combine, that had stabilized the lawless market for bootleg booze in New York and systematically corrupted a huge swath of the Coast Guard, the New York Police Department, and the upper reaches of the judiciary. The Combine paid out an estimated \$10,000 a day in bribes.

Dwyer was an exuberant host who spent lavishly on "business entertainment" for politicians, judges, and cops. Prostitutes were a critical part of his program of graft and grease, and Polly was the Combine's

preferred procurer and party thrower. Big Bill was “her benefactor,” as one friend delicately phrased it—one with an unlimited bankroll and extraordinary political influence.

So it came as a nasty surprise when Big Bill was arrested by federal agents. But that was nothing compared to the shock of Dwyer’s conviction six months later. Dwyer had spent the last year out on bail, filing appeals, but now the verdict was final: he would be spending the next two years in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta. With Dwyer heading off on what he called “a little vacation,” Polly was losing both a big chunk of business and a critical source of protection.

Dwyer hadn’t even left the city yet, but already rival bootleggers were circling like vultures, looking for cracks in the Combine’s monopoly. Polly’s house was considered neutral territory by the gangs, where mobster etiquette demanded they set aside any beefs while they were in the house. But if warfare broke out among the tommy-gun tycoons, such courtesies would fall by the wayside.



A warm, heavy rain had been falling all week, but on the morning of the fight the showers tapered off, leaving only the echoes of thunder in the distance. Along the Broadway grapevine, however, the rumble of rumor was growing louder.

For a several days now, “the gentry who talk from corners of their mouths” had been whispering that the fight was “in the bag” for Dempsey; he was going to knock out Sharkey with a foul punch, some said in the fourth round, others in fifth. Now, on the morning of the fight the coterie of professional gamblers and big-time bookmakers who orbited around Arnold Rothstein—the “Wise Men of Gotham,” in the *New York Sun’s* phrase—who had been touting Sharkey suddenly began hedging their bets, putting down big money at long odds on the ex-champ.

The logic of the wise guys was financial rather than fistic: a Dempsey victory would force a rematch with Sharkey for the heavyweight championship, providing another guaranteed gold mine for everyone in the fight game. And if Dempsey had to win to make the sporting fraternity happy, chances were exceedingly good that he would.

By six p.m. 110,000 expectant fans had converged on Yankee Sta-

dium. Rough pine benches catering to the hoi polloi covered the entire infield. At ringside, hundreds of sportswriters, telegraph operators, and radio announcers took up the first four rows of seats, balancing typewriters over their laps and leaning into their microphones.

The crowd was heavy with celebrities, politicians, high-ranking cops, leading businessmen, and underworld figures. "I suppose you would call it a cosmopolitan assemblage," joked the writer Damon Runyon. "I made a hurried dash down an aisle and fell under the hurrying hoofs of fourteen kings of the world of finance, twenty nine merchant princes, six bootleggers and five ticket speculators, all owners of estates on Long Island and of Rolls-Royce cars." The democratic smell of cigar smoke and sweat wafted on the light breeze over a sea of straw boaters, gray fedoras, and the occasional top hat.

Outside the stadium, spectators perched atop billboards, fences, rooftops, and water tanks to peer over the walls. Across the country, a whopping 50 million listeners were gathering around radios in drugstores, barbershops, speakeasies, and pool halls. Back in Manhattan, Polly and her girls finished their primping and then curled up around the radio receiver in her parlor.

At ten o'clock, after a series of preliminary bouts by lesser fighters, the two star pugilists strode to the ring through a blinding sea of flashbulbs, as eighty thousand fans rose with a roar, whistling, shouting, and stamping their feet in excitement.

At first the Manassa Mauler seemed almost groggy, with none of his old spark. Sharkey was easily outboxing him, closing the first round with a flurry of slashing blows to the head. By the end of the second round, the once-fierce Dempsey looked ragged and exhausted. By round five, he had deep gashes around his eyes, and his mouth and nose were bleeding, as he kept his head down, batting away at Sharkey's abdomen.

In the sixth round, Dempsey's fists began drifting below the beltline, earning him a warning from the referee against fouling Sharkey. Dempsey ignored him. At the top of the seventh, he drove two sharp blows into Sharkey's gut. Again the referee warned him. Again Dempsey hit low. In outrage, Sharkey turned his head to the referee to complain.

Seizing on his opponent's distraction, Dempsey pounded his famous left hook into the Boston boy's jaw. Blindsided, Sharkey crumpled to the canvas. The referee paused and murmured something to Sharkey, still

writhing and clutching his crotch, and then he began to count. When he got to ten, the stadium exploded. The crowd was flinging their hats into the ring, screaming “Foul!” and “Quitter!” while the radio announcers shouted to be heard above the chaos.

It was “an extremely queer, strange, weird, bizarre, and ill-scented finish” to an otherwise splendid event, as the reporter Grantland Rice observed. Even Polly’s pals in the press box could not agree on whether “the Battle of the Strange Coincidences,” in sportswriter W. O. McGeehan’s phrase, had been fixed. But for the gamblers who had guessed right, it was a spectacular night.

As for Polly, the fight went just as she’d hoped. There was nothing to make a man open his wallet and drop his pants like a come-from-behind knockout and a surprise winner.



“No one starts out to be a whore,” Polly once observed. She most certainly did not. As a girl in the small Russian village of Yanow, she’d had grand ambitions. An unusually clever and self-possessed child, Pearl Adler was blessed with a passionate desire for an education, in a culture where girls rarely received more than a few years of schooling. Had she been born in America, they’d have dubbed her one of the “New Women,” who insisted a girl could be as capable and independent as any boy.

Like the strong-willed daughters in the stories of Sholom Aleichem, she was eager to shake off the confines of village life, to see the world and make something of herself. In Yiddish, she would have said she aspired to be a *mensch*, a person of substance and respect, a Somebody. When twelve-year-old Pearl announced that she wanted to continue her studies in the nearby city of Pinsk, Moshe Adler hired a tutor to help her win one of the few spots reserved for Jews.

But as the old saying went, *Mentsch tracht, Got lakht*—Man plans and God laughs. In 1905, when she was around five years old, the Russian Empire was rocked by an attempted coup against the ruling monarchy. When the revolution failed, Jews became the primary scapegoats. As Pearl grew older and political discontent deepened, the vise of anti-Semitism tightened. Repressive laws and taxes grew heavier, and Jewish neighborhoods lived in fear of being attacked by drunken mobs. In

1913, just as his daughter was readying herself for her entrance exams, Moshe decided he'd had enough. The family was moving to *die Goldine Madina*—the Golden Land of America.

Resettling such a large family required more capital than he had on hand, so they would travel one by one. As the oldest child, Pearl was the first to go, landing on Ellis Island in December 1913. She lived with friends of her father while waiting for the rest to arrive. Six months later Europe was engulfed in war, cutting off all travel from Russia and leaving Pearl stranded among strangers.

She had to make a decision—some would say it was a bad one.

From the perspective of a social worker, Polly's path was a cautionary tale of the evils of dance halls and Coney Island dreams. To the socialists, she was the archetypal victim of an inhumane capitalist system. She embodied the worst fears of the Yanovers, who blamed America for stealing their daughters away from God. For Broadway watchers, she was no different from thousands of high-spirited young women let loose in the city: first a free-spirited flapper, then a gold digger, and finally a whore. But Polly was determined to buck the naysayers. After seven years in the vice racket, she was not yet in the gutter or the grave.

She was not without regrets. But when pressed, she was unrepentant. "How else could I ever have gotten to a place in life where almost anybody you asked 'Who is Polly Adler' could tell you right off and the kind of business she ran? When could a girl with no education and no social standing have met so many important men—and have them call you by your first name like they did me?"

As the hard-boiled babies of Broadway liked to say, sometimes the wages of sin are a house on Fifth Avenue.



By the time the crowds were pouring out of Yankee Stadium, the house was ready. Champagne was chilling on ice, and the bar groaned with bottles of top-shelf booze. The lights were dimmed in the spacious living room, lending a flattering glow to the girls' cheeks, and the tables were laid out with cigarettes, lighters, ashtrays, playing cards, and dice. The tidy bedrooms were generously stocked with condoms and cotton "pleasure towels," as she called them. A formidable African American maid in a crisp uniform, who went by the snazzy nickname "Showboat,"



prepared to take hats, pour drinks, change sheets, and keep a wary eye out for trouble. A bevy of satin-clad beauties perched on the upholstery, waiting impatiently for the telephone to ring.

It didn't take long. There on the other end of the line was the big fish Polly had been waiting for. Walter Reade, Broadway playboy and theater owner, had hit the jackpot and was looking to celebrate in high style.

Like Doc Kearns and Big Bill Dwyer, Walter Reade was, to quote *Variety*, "a spectacular figure" on the Big Street—exactly the kind of high-profile, hard-partying big spender whom Polly was trying so hard to cultivate. Unlike those two rascals, however, Reade counted as minor Broadway royalty. He was the nephew of Oscar Hammerstein I, the theatrical visionary who had discovered Times Square, and first cousin of lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, who helped revolutionize musical theater. Up until the Kaiser's War, he had been known as Walter Rosenberg. But *Rosenberg* carried none of the allure of the Hammerstein name, and all the disadvantages of sounding both Jewish and German. So he traded it in for an Anglophile upgrade—dropping the *berg*, translating *rosen* to "red," then tacking on the Old English *e* for an extra touch of class.

Also like Kearns and Dwyer, Reade's tycoon veneer barely concealed his close ties to the half-world of professional gamblers, loan sharks, prostitutes, and political fixers. Although married with two young children, the balding, bespectacled theater owner had a well-deserved reputation as an unrepentant womanizer, a foul-mouthed brawler, and an obsessive gambler who at one time was said to keep a roulette wheel in his automobile that could be flipped over to make a craps table. Only six months earlier, in April 1927, Reade had purchased three theaters with an estimated worth of \$2.2 million, at Broadway and 45th Street, right in the heart of the Roaring Forties, Manhattan's new Tenderloin District. There was speculation that Reade was acting as a front for a consortium of secret investors, which nowadays was a code word for racketeers.

Whether he possessed good luck or inside dope, it didn't matter to Polly. All she needed to know was that Walter Reade had had the wisdom to bet on Dempsey to win by a knockout in the seventh round, earning a cool \$70,000 from his unfortunate bookmaker. Now he was on his way over with a couple carloads of pals to help him spend his winnings.

She directed Reade and his entourage to 115 West 73rd Street, one of the large apartment buildings going up across the Upper West Side, where neighbors were inclined to mind their own business. It wasn't as fancy as her place in midtown, but it was a quick cab ride from Times Square, and it was convenient both for the Broadway butterflies who worked for her and for the racketeers, garment factory owners, and showbiz bigwigs who called the neighborhood home. It was also safer. Down in the speakeasy belt, kidnapping—"the snatch racket," as the rod boys called it—was starting to become a serious inconvenience.

A half dozen of her finest girls were on hand. Gloria Powers, Jean Darling, Eloise Pryor, Frances Marion, Mary Brooks, and Lottie Lee, all white women in their early twenties (although their real names and ages were anyone's guess), were clad in the simple evening dresses and tastefully restrained makeup that she insisted upon. At twenty dollars a trick, men wanted someone who looked like a naughty debutante, Polly insisted, and "and not a painted slut." "A lady in the parlor and a whore in the bedroom"—that was her motto.

It was a night that passed into legend—the kind of rip-roaring, no-holds-barred blowout that lucky guests would reminisce about for years to come. There were "corks popping right and left, champagne being sipped out of slippers and other even more exotic receptacles, rose-garlanded dancing girls fighting their way out of pies (at least that's how literary gentlemen of my acquaintance used to tell it)," remembered Polly with pleasure.

The joint was running full tilt when, above the roar, she heard a *thump thump thump* at the front door. Suddenly she was face-to-face with Officer Christopher Confrey and a crew of undercover vice cops. Officer Confrey, a fifteen-year veteran of New York's Finest, had the irksome habit of padding his salary by shaking down prostitutes. It wasn't her first time tangling with him, nor would it be her last.

The pugnacious Walter Reade was savvy enough to know how to take care of these matters. Motioning to Confrey, he offered him a handsome bribe of two thousand dollars to take their business elsewhere. "But the boys weren't having any that night, which meant that seven of the girls and I were hauled out and stuffed into the pie wagon."

Now, this was what got her steamed. She was well known for meeting shakedown with generosity and good humor. She had squandered

a small fortune on tickets to police banquets and fundraisers and had hosted more parties for them, on the house, than she cared to remember. What she resented were the cops who took her bribes, guzzled her booze, and slept with her girls, then hauled her in when they needed to fill their monthly arrest quota, score points with their bosses, or put a bonus in their bank accounts.

“I had been raided before, but this was a four-star, five-alarm, full-dress affair in gorgeous color,” remembered Polly. Down the girls went, spilling onto 73rd Street and into the big black patrol wagon. As usual, not one of her ‘guests’ was arrested. But Walter and his pals were not ready for the fun to end. He and his well-oiled revelers clambered into their cars and took off behind the paddy wagon as it made its way to the station house. Polly was fingerprinted and booked under her current alias: Pearl Davidson, age twenty-six.

“However, not even the Bastille could have held us that night,” remembered Polly. “Our customers bailed us out almost before we were booked, and when we came out of the station house a great wave of cheers went up from several carloads of gentlemen who were waiting at the curb to escort us back to the house.” There they picked up where they left off, lapping up liquor, fondling the girls, and commandeering her kitchen for one of her famous hearty breakfasts.

But while the johns partied on, Polly was already counting her losses for the evening. Once again she had fallen into the clutches of the vice ring, a nearly foolproof system of extortion. One official report neatly summed up their methods: “The stool pigeon or the officer framed the woman, the officer arrested her, the bondsman bailed her out at an exorbitant charge and steered her to an attorney from Lawyers Row, on West 10th Street across from Women’s Court. The lawyer gouged her savings and either himself, or through the bondsman, ‘fixed’ the arresting officer and the District Attorney.”

It would cost Polly \$200 to \$500 per girl to keep them out of jail, split up among the ring. Officer Confrey would get twenty-five dollars per girl to soft-pedal the evidence or skip his appearance in court. John C. Weston, the deputy district attorney for the Women’s Court, would get another twenty-five dollars a head to do a poor job prosecuting the case. (“He rode the horse to lose,” in the lingo of the racetrack.) If the magistrate was on the take, he too might be paid a fee to dismiss the charge or

find in her favor. Everything left over went to the bail bondsmen and the lawyer, and the woman walked free. Those who failed to cough up the cash, or who foolishly insisted on their innocence, were almost certain to be sent off to Bedford or the women's prison. Polly always paid.

The party rolled on until nine in the morning, when Polly and her girls had to return to court to enter their plea. Determined not to miss any of the fun, the drunken revelers once again climbed into their cars and set off in a rowdy parade to the Women's Court in Greenwich Village.

In the dank, gaslit halls of the Jefferson Market Courthouse, Polly and her rambunctious posse picked their way through the throngs of lawyers, pimps, and bail bondsmen shepherding bleary-eyed shoplifters, pickpockets, runaways, and ladies of the evening.

As they made their dramatic entrance into the majestic second-floor courtroom, the clerks, probation officers, and spectators all turned to stare and whisper. There, Polly remembered proudly, "were my girls, tall and beautiful, gliding down the aisle like swans on a mirrored lake, with me bustling along them like Donald Duck." It was going to cost her plenty to spring all of them, but the boost to her reputation was priceless.

The deputy district attorney, John C. Weston, a graying, heavysset man in his mid-fifties, watched the entire scene, "grinning from ear to ear."

"Reduce your prices, Polly," murmured Weston, "and every man here will be your client."