

Chapter 9 Excerpt

In 1913, the first black man to become heavyweight champion of the world was arrested by the United States Government for white slave trafficking. Jack Johnson's real crime was humiliating white men in the ring and taking their women to bed in celebration, but he was indicted for eleven violations of the Mann Act.

Named for its sponsor, James Robert Mann, a conservative Republican Congressman, the Mann or White Slave Traffic Act of 1910 was worded in such a way that any man who crossed a state line with a white woman other than his wife and had sex with her could be prosecuted. After his conviction by an all-white jury, Johnson escaped while on bond and fled to Europe. Although embarrassing, Johnson's flight was a major victory for white America, which had long sought "to remove the golden smile" from Johnson's face.

After the retirement of the legendary James J Jeffries in 1905, the vacant title was captured by a mediocre fighter named Marvin Hart. In his first defense of the title, Hart was beaten by the little-known Tommy Burns, a German-Canadian whose real name was Noah Brusso. Burns was an active but uninspiring champion, and public interest in the heavyweight division deteriorated sharply during his tenure. Poor gates and popular fascination with the flamboyant Johnson helped to weaken boxing's color barrier.

Burns was white but he was an unpopular foreigner, and certain boxing interests came to believe that a black champion would bring interest and money back to the game. Serene in their belief in white supremacy, these people were convinced that the reign of any black champion would be very temporary and that Johnson's certain defeat would reaffirm white racial supremacy. For his part, Burns declared himself ready to fight Johnson anytime, anywhere—if guaranteed \$30,000, an enormous sum at the time. An attempt by Johnson's white manager, Sam Fitzpatrick, to arrange a bout with Burns at the prestigious National Sporting Club in London came close, but it fell through because the proposed purse was not enough for either party.

Burns, who had always avoided black fighters, defeated a string of white challengers across Europe while continuing to demand a huge purse to meet Johnson. Finally, in Australia, Burns got the huge payday he had been demanding. Hugh "Huge Deal" McIntosh offered him the unprecedented sum of \$25,000, to defend his title against the first black man to fight for the heavyweight title. Johnson had to settle for \$5,000. Burns had knocked out eight challengers in a row and was installed as a 3 to 1 favorite.

The Australian press, which was as racist and even less restrained than its American counterparts, portrayed Johnson as a threatening black menace. Despite or because of the hostile environment, Johnson handled the world champion easily and contemptuously. He had waited a very long time for the opportunity, had endured numerous insults, and was determined to make the hapless Burns pay for every insult he had ever received from every white man. He knocked him down in the very first round and taunted him throughout the fight. Johnson made Burns look like a pitiful amateur. He spoke to him constantly, making insulting references about his wife and mother, even chatting with ringside spectators during the clinches.

By the thirteenth round Burns was badly beaten, his jaw broken, his eyes cut and bruised, and his body covered in blood. The police entered the ring but Burns refused to concede. In the fourteenth, Johnson dropped Burns for a count of eight. Spectators shouted for the slaughter to be stopped, and the police again entered the ring. This time they stopped it and Jack Johnson was declared, by promoter and referee

Hugh McIntosh, the first black heavyweight champion of the world.

Perhaps because the fight had taken place halfway across the world, Americans, black and white, initially paid relatively little attention to the bout. But that began to change when the unapologetically racist novelist Jack London sounded the call for Jim Jeffries to come out of retirement and defend the white man's honor. London, the author of bestsellers such as *Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, and *The Star Rover*, had written of the fight: "There was no fight. No Armenian massacre could compare with the hopeless slaughter that took place in the Sydney Stadium today. But one thing now remains; Jim Jeffries must now emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that golden smile from Jack Johnson's face. Jeff, it's up to you. The White Man must be rescued."

Jeffries was a reluctant savior. He was not, he made it clear, interested in rescuing the white race. But Johnson's behavior as champion soon made the pressure on the former champion to come out of retirement virtually irresistible. Johnson was not content with just defeating the flower of white American manhood; he needed, it seemed, to humiliate and degrade them. He forced the popular lightweight heavyweight champion Philadelphia Jack O'Brien to sign for their fight in the back room of a sleazy saloon in a black ghetto. After knocking down Victor Mchagden in the first round, he spent the rest of the fight telling jokes to the spectators.

More provocatively to white Americans, the black champion flaunted his liaisons with white women and his surprisingly dissolute lifestyle. His superiority was so great, he seemed to be saying, that he could defeat the best white fighters without even bothering to train and get in shape. As Johnson defeated one Great White Hope after another, the clamor from white America grew increasingly louder. Finally, Jim Jeffries acceded to those entreaties and "The Fight of the Century" was scheduled for the most sacred of American holidays, July 4, 1910, in Reno, Nevada. Jeffries explained that he was responding to "that portion of the white race that has been looking to me to defend its athletic superiority."

Into this racial cauldron stepped the fight promoter, Tex Richard. The conditions were perfect, he realized, to make a great deal of money. Others may have flinched at fanning the flames of racial hatred, but Richard employed a highly professional publicity campaign that played on the deeply entrenched racial fears and animosities of the American people. Inflamed by Richard's campaign, white newspapers filled their pages with crude, racist insults. In a typical comment, one newspaper described Johnson as a coward who would be defeated as soon as he looked the champion in the eye, "for Jeffries had Runnymede and Agincourt behind him while Johnson had nothing but the jungle." Black newspapers reacted to these racist statements with defiant support of the black champion. The *Chicago Defender* editorialized that Johnson would be fighting "race hatred, prejudice" and "Negro persecution."