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## [The Boston Strong Boy]

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“Shake the hand that shook the hand of John L. Sullivan!”

I offer my hand thus, through the medium of printer's Ink. John L. Sullivan, former heavyweight champion of the world, was 53 years old when I interviewed him, as a young newspaper reporter, in the summer of 1911 while he was stopping at the Claypool Hotel in Indianapolis, Indiana. He shook my hand on that occasion. Without meaning in the least to hurt me, he gave my carpals such a sardining that they still ache at the memory, after all these years. He was that strong, even at 53.

“Come on up, my boy!” he boomed over the telephone, when I called him from the lobby. Then, at the entrance to his room, came the handshake. He took my card, waved me to a chair near a table and walked over to the double window, where the morning sunlight streamed through the curtains.

I took a good look at him and saw what seemed like an unusually big Irish policeman, off duty in plain clothes. That was the first impression. Further inspection, however, showed me more - a great deal more. To tell the truth, he did not look as big as my knowledge of his ring exploits had led me to expect. He was tall, but his great shoulders and the paunch

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which he had developed at 53 prevented this from being apparent at first glance. He weighed, I should judge, well over 200 pounds, but having seen him walk across the room, on the balls of his feet, with all the lightness and grace of a cat, I had trouble in convincing myself that even this was true.

He had a well-shaped head - not the "bullet" type of many pugilists - and dark hair which was turning gray. He carried this head at a proud angle which gave emphasis to his prominent jaw. His face was somewhat florid, so that even without knowing who he was, one would have said "Here is a man who has been a hard drinker." He had a fine mustache in the old tradition. Starting below his nostrils this mustache, a few shades grayer than his hair, extended in leisurely fashion over his lip and all the way across his face on both sides. The under edges were a trifle ragged and the curl at the ends was upward. He had a custom of snorting sometimes, as he was about to say something, after which he would stroke his mustache, first on one side, then on the other. I got the idea that this stroking business acted as a sedative on him.

He wore a wing collar around his bull neck. During the interview he told me that he had these made to order, since the largest stock size was much too small for him. His shoulders were broad, without being in any sense square. They sloped beautifully into arms which seemed not unusually long or heavy. The hands were large and powerful, as I had received recent evidence. He sported a blue tie, bow fashion, with a conservative white shirt, but his suit, while of good cut and material, did not set well upon him. The knees of his trousers bagged and the whole could have stood pressing. He had a fancy vest of flowered material and a heavy watch chain, prominent across the front.

John L. Sullivan's eyes, to my mind, were his most remarkable physical characteristic. They were the rare type which change color according to emotion. I decided at first that they were blue and rather mild, then a little later, as we talked, that they were steel gray and hard. Once or twice I could have sworn that they turned black and shot sparks of red fire, as he became vehement about this or that point.

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In repose his features were rather pleasant - just a trifle on the stern side, perhaps. But when anger stirred him, he could assume the most ferocious scowl I have ever seen on a human. I began to understand why some of the men he fought were beaten even before he hit them.

He talked with a perceptible, but not pronounced, brogue. When he became excited, however, this brogue grew thicker. He made small errors in grammar, which stamped him as a man of little education, but remembering how brief his education really was, one had to admit that he talked remarkably well.

"Mr. Sullivan -", I began.

"Let me see," he rumbled, glancing again at my card, "You have an Irish name. Call me John L. I give you permission."

"No king, making a ruling from the throne, ever spoke with greater, more sincere majesty. Believe me, I needed permission to take such a liberty with the old warrior. I told him that I had been sent up by my paper to learn what he had to say about fighting, in a most general way and along the lines which might seem good to him. He asked me to draw my chair up to the table. He would stand, he said, as he could think better on his feet.

"Well, there's nothing to fighting," he opened up, "Just come out fast from your corner, hit the other fellow as hard as you can and hit him first. That's all there is to fighting."

He laughed, then at once grew serious.

"What I should like to talk about is something else. Whiskey! There's the only fighter that ever really licked old John L. Jim Corbett, according to the record, knocked me out in New Orleans in 1892, but he only gave the finishing touches to what whiskey had already done to me. If I had met Jim Corbett before whiskey got at me I'd have killed him. I stopped

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drinking long ago, but of course, too late. Too late for old John L., but not too late for millions of boys who are starting out to follow the same road. I desire to use the years of life which remain to me to warn these boys, to turn them back. John L. Sullivan, champion of the world, could not lick whiskey. What gives any one of them the notion that he can.”

I didn't wish to hear anything about temperance, but the famous scowl was in evidence and the red sparks about which I was telling you gleamed in the dark eyes. You would think twice about trying to stop John L. Sullivan, no matter what he was doing. I listened, therefore, while for the next twenty minutes, without a break, he paced up and down the room talking about whiskey. He talked with eloquence, too. Billy Sunday could have gotten ideas. He snorted and stroked his mustache. Once a small chair got in his way. He kicked it absently, without seeming to use much force, but the chair flew end over end all the way across the large room. When the torrent of words ended, I put my cards on the table.

“John L.,” I said with truth, “you have given me a talk about whiskey which I shall never forget, but if I go back to my city editor with nothing else, he will throw my story into the ash-can and me, too, I expect. He wants you to talk about fighting. After all, you were the fighting champion, not the temperance champion.”

He sighed and sat down, then looked at me with a quick smile. His mood had changed.

“I'm just an old man now,” he resumed, “and what I have to say about fighting has all been, said - thousand times or more, I guess. Mostly, I said it with my dukes (fists). I leave talking to these present day fighters. Jim Corbett is one of the best talkers that ever lived.”

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“I thought you and Jim made it up years ago,” I ventured. I referred to the feud, well known in sporting circles, between these two great champions. For a long while John L. could not forgive Corbett for taking the championship from him. In New York mutual friends at last got them together and forced them to shake hands. Corbett was willing enough, but John

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L., even though admitting freely that the pompadoured speed merchant had beaten him fairly, could never quite forgive him.

“Oh, of course,” he roared, slapping his knee, “Jim and I are great friends now. I still say, though, that if I had met him before whiskey got me, I'd have put him away like I did the others. I'm trying to give you now the real inside story of that fight in New Orleans. Tell your city editor, damn him, that whiskey has more to do with fighting than he imagines.”

“Who gave you the toughest fight of your career?” I asked.

“Well, that's a question! Most of them were plenty tough. Jake Kilrain was one of the hardest to lick. Charley Mitchell, the Englishman, gave me a lot of trouble, too, but in a different way. By talking to me all the time in the ring, from the first bell, he got my goat. He threw more insults in my direction than blows. When I took out after him, he ran. He did not dare to stand up and slug with me and that is why I had trouble in licking him.”

“Yes, Charley Mitchell had the reputation of being a bad actor, all right,” I agreed, “but should we expect too much of Englishmen?”

“Well, no, not as a rule. But I have known a few who were strictly on the up and up. One in particular.”

“Who was that?”

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“Why, King Edward VII,” said John L. “He was a real fellow. Common as an old shoe. We got well acquainted when I was across the pond. He made me forget that I was taking to royalty.”

“Yes, if some of the things they say you said to him are true,” I laughed, “that must have been the case.”

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“Oh, none of that stuff is true. I always remembered that I was an American, and never slobbered in the dirt to him or any other king. On the other hand,[I?] treated King Edward with the full respect due his station at all times. This seemed to get on his nerves a little, because he told me, in exactly these words, to forget that he was royalty and to treat him just like he was one of the boys. After that, I did as he asked. I suppose all those newspaper yarns which try to make a chump out of me started on that account.”

“How about that story which tells about you killing a horse with on blow of your fist?”

“That's another one, That never did happen. I always liked horses and I swear on the cross that I never killed one, with my fist on any other way.

“In fact,” he continued, look at a gold watch almost as large as an alarm clock, “most of the real harm I ever did in this world was done to just one man - yours truly, John L. Sullivan. I make no secret of that. Even the fellows I pounded in the ring were all right again after a few days - [crowing?] fresh challenges at me as if nothing had ever happened to them. Today, many second-rate fighters make more money than I made when I was champion of the world. Fighters new seem to think of nothing buy money. I thought first of the fact that I was champion of the world and I was always ready to prove that I was, any time, any place, against any contender. I fought in barns, on barges and in the back rooms of [saloons?]. The 7 gate, as they say, was a secondary consideration. I would bet heavily on myself and, of course, always won until Jim Corbett beat me for the championship. That time I lost my shirt. Thousands of my friends all over the country, who thought I was unbeatable, I guess, lost their shirts, too. That is the thing which made me so sore about this fight.”

“Yes,” I hastened to agree, “the old-timers cannot understand, even today, how you came to lose. But I have never heard any man question your honesty.”

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“Well, I have traveled a long, hard road,” he went on - and the eyes were blue and mild again - “but I have been honest all the way. I toured this country from one end to the other, offering \$50 to any man who could stay on his feet for three rounds in the ring with me. Nobody ever collected, but don't think they didn't try! Can you imagine the champion of the world doing that today?”

I couldn't and said so frankly. Then, judging the interview to be at an end, I started to leave. He walked with me to the door.

“I realize,” he concluded, “that it is hard for me to say anything new about fighting. I never had a great deal to say, even when I was champion of the world, because, as you have said, I was a fighting champion, not a talking champion. I give you permission to write anything about me you please, within reasonable limits. My fighting days are all over and what's printed now makes little difference to me. If you can get some of the things I have said about whiskey past that city editor of yours, so much the better. If he wants a story about fighting, he'll have to pay some attention to whiskey, because I say to you again, that in spite of the record, whiskey is the only fighter who ever licked John L. Sullivan, champion of the world!”

Thus ended my first and last interview with the Boston Strong Boy. 30