

~~THE PRIZE-WINNING STORY OF 1944~~

A DARK MAN LAUGHS

By *Al Laney*

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ABOUT TWO WEEKS ago we began a search through Harlem for Sam Langford, the old Boston Tar Baby. Inquiries up and down Lenox and Seventh Avenues in bars and grills, cigar stores, newsstands and drugstores failed to turn up a lead. Zoot-suited youths accosted on street corners invariably looked blank and asked, "Who he?" A dozen times we were told positively that Sam was dead.

This is the man competent critics said was the greatest fighter in ring history, the man the champions feared and would not fight. The man who was so good he never was given a chance to show how good he really was. You'd think he'd be a hero to every youth in Harlem.

Sam is not dead. We found him at last in a dingy hall bedroom on 139th Street. He was just sitting there on the edge of his bed listening to the radio. That is all there is for Sam to do now, for he is old and blind and penniless. The Negro woman who admitted us said Mr. Langford's room was the third door down a corridor so dark you had to feel your way. Sam stood up when we entered and fumbled for a string attached to a pale bulb in the ceiling. There was a look of surprise on his flat broad face.

"You come to see me?" he asked with wonder in his low melodious voice. Sam has been sitting there in the dark for a long time and there have been no visitors. It took him some time to understand that this was an interview and there would be a story in the paper.

"What you want to write about old Sam for?" he said. "He ain't no good any more. You ever see me fight?"

We lied to Sam, said we had and that he was the greatest we ever saw. That seemed to please him mightily and he laughed loud. Any one who never saw Sam in the ring is bound to be surprised at his height. He is only 5 feet 6½ inches and yet at 165 pounds he brought down such giants as Jack Johnson, Harry Wills and the towering Fred Fulton. His short legs, long arms, great shoulders and wide girth give him a curiously gnomelike appearance. All of his 210 pounds now seems to be above the hips. But he is a gnome with a prodigiously broad flat nose, a cauliflower ear and an immense amiability.

Sam receives a few dollars a month from a foundation for the blind. It is not enough but he makes it do. His days are all alike. He rises early and two small boys lead him to a restaurant for breakfast. He is back in his room by one o'clock and then he just sits in the dark until late in the afternoon when he goes out to eat again.

This would seem to be a dreary existence, but Sam was never addicted to thinking or to brooding over his fate in the days when they told him he was lucky to get fights at all and he does not brood now. We had been led to believe by what we had read that this stepchild of fistiana was a stupid man who had been plucked clean by the thieves and then thrown out to starve. A child of the jungle, they used to call him.

It was therefore a surprise to find that Sam is not stupid. He is even intelligent, though ignorant by the world's standards. He never went to school a day in his life and certainly he is a simple creature, almost childlike. His memory is good, he is an excellent mimic and you would go far to find a more interesting storyteller.

And all the stories Sam tells are amusing ones. He will not be drawn into telling the other kind. He remembers them but if you ask him about the old days when he was given the business by all and sundry he chuckles and tells another funny story. He

laughs all the time he is talking and his laugh is so infectious, his face so expressive, you forget he is blind. When he tells his stories and laughs he seems almost a happy man. There is no drop of hate in his soul for any one.

Sam said he was born March 4, 1886, in Weymouth, Nova Scotia, but that is just a date he thought up. He admits he doesn't know and since he was fighting before 1900 he probably is in the middle sixties. He asked about his old friends among the boxing writers and said be sure to get in that he remembered them and sent his greetings. He said he didn't want anybody to feel sorry for him.

In a way Sam is right. His joviality and cheerfulness in adversity envelop you in sadness but he does not inspire pity. He has somehow achieved the feat of rising above it with simple dignity.

"Don't nobody need to feel sorry for old Sam," he said. "I had plenty good times. I been all over the world. I fought maybe three, four hundred fights and every one was a pleasure. If I just had me a little change in my pocket I'd get along fine."

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Between the time he wrote the above column and Christmas time, Mr. Laney conducted a campaign to establish a trust fund for Sam Langford. Close to \$10,000 was contributed by readers of the article, and Mr. Laney wrote the following column that appeared on Christmas Day morning:

"Chief," said Sam Langford yesterday, "this gonna be the best Christmas I ever had. Maybe you could put it in the paper."
What Sam wanted was to convey to all his thousands of friends the fact that he is happy and that he understands quite well that it is they who have made it possible. He has a simple faith in the power of the press and he believes that if it is in the paper every one will see it.

Sam's faith is justified. It is almost a year now since his story was told in this newspaper. At that time Sam was blind and penniless and hungry and he was very lonely indeed. Now he is a man fixed for life so that he never again will be hungry. His

friends to the number of several thousand sent money for him and this money, gathered into a fund, was used to take care of Sam modestly as long as he will live.

Many of these friends never have seen Sam. That is one of his remarkable qualities. You do not have to know him to be his friend and know the kind of man he is. But Sam's friends did not just contribute months ago and then forget that Christmas was coming. Sam wishes this column to acknowledge, besides greetings by mail, the following gifts:

A fine guitar, three boxes of cigars, two of which were purchased by G. I.'s in post exchanges; a pair of gloves, a bottle of gin, several neckties, an anonymous gift of \$5 with which he is to buy the best Christmas dinner he can find; a quantity of hard candy, of which some one remembered that he is immensely fond; and various other items good to eat at Christmas time.

All of these things Sam had around him last night. He had friends around him, too, and there will be friends with him today. A year ago today Sam's total wealth was twenty cents. With it he bought a meager breakfast and then he sat the day out on the side of his bed, all alone. No one came to see him, for no one knew he was there. He had been a great man in his day, the famous Boston Tar Baby, the greatest fighter of them all, but now he was long since forgotten, believed by many to be dead.

But this is another Christmas Day. He is not alone any more, his dingy room is gay with Christmas decorations and a candle burned in it last night. His belly will be stuffed with turkey and fixin's today and he will play his guitar and sing and he will laugh. To hear Sam laugh and sing is one of the most profound Christmas experiences a man can have.

He cannot see the decorations or the candle's light, but they make a very great difference to him. Sam is by no means a religious man in the conventional sense, but we were wondering last night how many men there are who understand so well as he the real meaning of Christmas.

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Sam wants all of his friends to know that he is happy today and we would like them to know, too, that he is the most completely happy man we have ever seen. Not many are able to be completely happy. For most of us there always are reservations of one kind or another. But not for Sam. He is like a child in the enjoyment of his presents and the remembrance of his friends. He is celebrating Christmas in that spirit.

"You see that bottle, Chief?" he said last night. "If you come back here on the Fourth of July it'll still be some in it. But tomorrow I'm gonna have myself a couple of good belts. Oil myself up some for a little geetar playin'. Boy! Listen to that thing talk. She shore talk sweet, don't she?"

"You tell all my friends I'm the happiest man in New York City. I got a geetar and a bottle of gin and money in my pocket to buy Christmas dinner. No millionaire in the world got more than that, or anyhow they can't use any more. Tell my friends all about it and tell 'em I said God bless 'em."

AL LANEY, born in Pensacola, Florida, on January 11, 1896, says he wasted about a quarter of a century covering such things as politics, fires, divorces, murders and cat shows before tumbling to the fact that sports reporting is a softer touch. Got wised up finally in July of 1928 when the French Davis Cup team, having won the trophy from the United States the year before, staged the challenge round in Paris. At the end of the first day he determined definitely to keep after sports editors until one offered a regular job. This occurred at the *New York Herald Tribune* in October, 1935. Been at it ever since with no regrets.