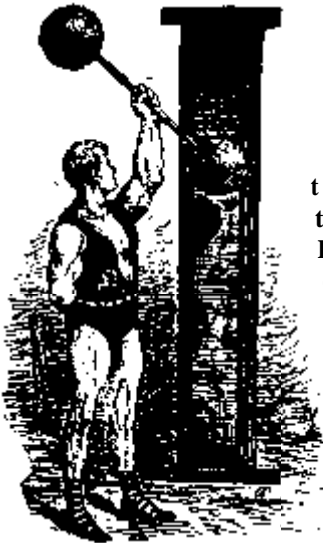


David Chapman

## SANDOW'S FIRST TRIUMPH

Excerpted from:  
David Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994)



It gives us great pleasure to present to our readers this chapter from David Chapman's new biography of Eugen Sandow. Those of you who have read David's series of historical articles in *Iron Man* know, already, that he is a fine researcher, a skillful writer, and a dedicated student of the history of the Iron Game. A school teacher in Seattle, Washington, Chapman has worked on this

biography of Sandow's life in his spare time for the past decade. His decision to use an academic publishing house like the University of Illinois Press meant several extra years of work for Chapman, as he had to go back and document all his sources and quotations. However, the book which he and the University of Illinois Press have subsequently published is a real boon for the Game. Now, for the first time, we have a documented history of the life of Eugen Sandow at our disposal. Copies of *Sandow The Magnificent* may be ordered for \$26.95 through your local bookstore or by contacting the University of Illinois Press at 1325 South Oak Street, Champaign, Illinois, 61820; Tel: 217-333-0950.

Appearing at the music hall attached to the Royal Aquarium in Westminster were two outrageous athletic charlatans: Sampson and Cyclops. They had put together a popular act involving feats of strength and trickery. To make their performance seem more credible, Sampson, the brains of the partnership, loudly announced each night that he would pay anyone foolish enough to try it one hundred pounds sterling if he could duplicate the feats of his "pupil" Cyclops, and £500 if anyone could duplicate his own feats. To Attila,

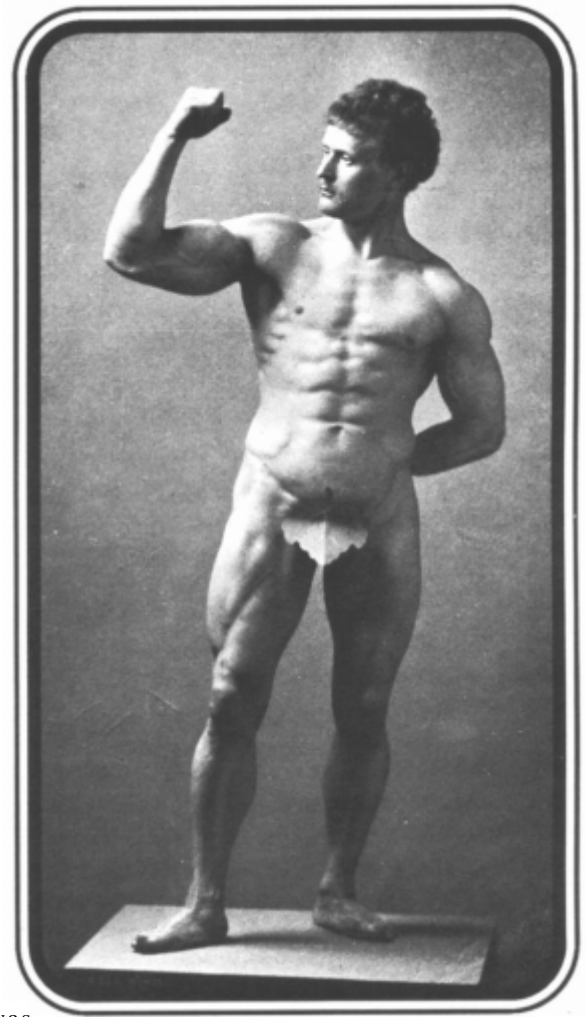
who had by this time started his own physical culture studio in Bloomsbury, Sampson's

offer was too good to pass up. He sent for Sandow who was then in Italy, encouraging him to come to London and take up the challenge.

As Attila well knew, it was a common tactic for vaudeville strongmen to issue dares from the stage for anyone to come up and attempt to duplicate their feats. This was a fairly safe offer, for most strongmen had devised tricks that were nearly impossible for uninitiated amateurs (and professionals too, for that matter) to perform. These feats often included tricks of dexterity, strength, and acrobatics that would foil even the mightiest athlete if he were unused to the materials or lacked a carefully tuned sense of balance.<sup>1</sup>

Their opponent in this case, Charles A. Sampson, was a man who was even more slippery than the average professional Hercules. He was born on April 16, 1859 in the French city of Metz in Lorraine. Eventually, he emigrated to America where he took up residence in Detroit, Michigan. The strongman was well formed and muscular, but obviously not so powerful as he tried to make his credulous fans believe. Sampson once reported that his great strength came about as a very literal bolt from the blue. At the tender age of fourteen he was struck by a tremendous flash of lightning. The boy languished on his sickbed for six months, and when he eventually recovered Sampson found that he had acquired an almost superhuman strength.<sup>2</sup>

His appearance at the Royal Aquarium, however, was not





THIS CARTOON OF THE SAMPSON / SANDOW MATCH APPEARED IN A PROMINENT BRITISH NEWSPAPER IN 1890, AND WAS REPRINTED IN *HEALTH AND STRENGTH* ON DECEMBER 3, 1938.

his first venture upon the boards of the British music hall. Prior to this he had appeared at the Canterbury Theatre of Varieties where he claimed to lift overhead a barbell boldly marked 2,240 Pounds—one imperial ton! The bell rested on two large barrels. As a gesture of his honesty, Sampson invited several members of the audience to come up and try to lift the enormous weight—all unsuccessfully. After this, Sampson's manager gave a long, flowery speech explaining the great degree of difficulty involved in this trick. Then following a long drumroll and suitable grimaces and false starts, the strongman slowly and painfully raised the bell higher and higher until he held it at arm's length above his head.

When he returned the weight to the barrels, he was always greeted with a thunderous ovation. He might have gotten away with this ruse, except one night someone tried to lift the barbell after Sampson had finished, not before when they were invited to. It seems that while the manager was giving his long introductory speech, two secret holes were opened in the weight and the heavy sand inside was drained into the barrels on which it rested.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this brush with exposure, Sampson did not retreat from the theatrical scene; he merely regrouped his efforts and came up with new "feats of strength." Throughout his career, he had gained

a reputation for harness lifting, and one of his first efforts at this involved lifting an elephant. The ponderous creature was put on a large wooden platform over which a sturdy scaffolding had been constructed. The strongman then dramatically mounted the scaffold and placed a leather harness over his head connected by chains to the platform below. After much grunting and theatrics, the platform was slowly raised six or seven inches above the floor. Sampson would then collapse, letting the platform and pachyderm plummet the few inches to the stage as attendants rushed to give the strongman a few whiffs of *sal volatile*. One night though, Sampson collapsed, but the platform mysteriously remained suspended in mid-air. The management thought best to ring down the curtain unceremoniously.

In 1891, two years after his fateful match with Sandow, Sampson had apparently improved his harness apparatus, for he succeeded in convincing some important people who should have known better that he lifted two large bay horses and two accompanying hostlers whose combined weight added up to 3,809 pounds. Several weeks later he claimed to have lifted an astonishing 4,008 pounds. Despite the best efforts of many people (Sandow included), no one could say for sure how the wily Sampson engineered these feats of legerdemain—for they certainly had nothing to do with real strength.<sup>4</sup>

Several years earlier, Sampson had met and hired a strapping young Polish wrestler who called himself "Cyclops". His real name was Franz Bienkowski, and he looked every inch the oldtime vaudeville strongman. He was heavyset with a thick, bull neck. He shaved his head and had gracefully curling mustaches. His greatest claim to fame was the supposed ability to tear coins in two. There are many who believe this was another sleight of hand and that no one could mangle coins the way Cyclops claimed he could.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the case, he was a perfect foil for the clever and volatile Sampson: he was strong looking and not too bright. So with these colorful and unusual characters poised to attack it is little wonder that the ensuing battle attracted unusual attention both in the close circle of performing strongmen and in the public at large.

As soon as he had made the channel crossing, Sandow contacted his old master, Attila, who immediately started preparing him for the upcoming contest. One of the first stops Sandow had in London was at the prestigious National Sporting Club. Attila knew that since his young charge was virtually unknown in England, it would be necessary to obtain a few credentials before scoring his future victories. That way he would have a little moral and political backing should the need arise.

By the time Sandow and Attila attempted to gain allies there, the venerable NSC had been in existence as an informal body for many years. The Club came into being when prize fighting was one of London's most popular sports. The Prince Regent was a member of a rowdy NSC coterie called "The Fancy" which often came afoul of the law, but the Prince's attendance

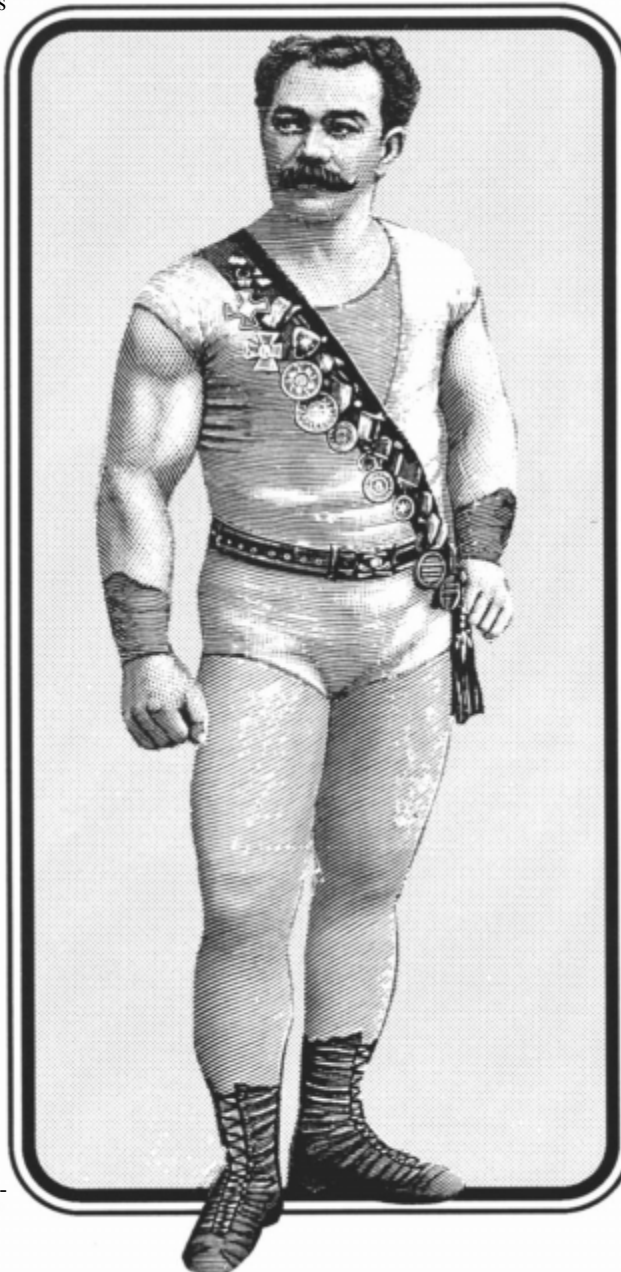
at their boisterous assemblies prevented the magistrates from having them all imprisoned.

Despite the antics of the royal reprobate, the society's more reputable members gradually attempted to turn boxing into a respectable sport.

Thus, the organization was officially founded in 1891 with this purpose in view. It enforced the rules of its most famous member, the Marquis of Queensberry, stamped out fixed fights, and by the turn of the century awarded the Lonsdale Belts to fighters of merit. Perhaps appropriately, the club's headquarters are still on the boulevard named after their erstwhile protector, Regent Street.<sup>6</sup>

With Attila acting as his interpreter, Sandow arrived at the National Sporting Club and asked to present his case before the director, Mr. John Fleming. The members of the club greeted the two courteously but without enthusiasm. No one could quite believe that Sandow had the strength to defeat such well-known strongmen as Sampson and Cyclops. Fortunately, Sandow was able to perform one of his most convincing (and most frequently used) acts of strength: he spied one of the members who displayed the greatest girth and then lifted him bodily from the floor and gently placed him on a nearby table. Fleming was pleased with the display, but became even more fervent when the young East Prussian stripped off his clothing and his magnificent physique became apparent to all.<sup>7</sup>

After attending several of Sampson's performances, Attila and Sandow were ready to make their move. On the evening of October 29, 1889, Fleming and other members of the National Sporting Club took a box at the Aquarium and waited until the Frenchman made his nightly challenge. Apparently, Sampson was no



SANDOW'S MENTOR, PROFESSOR ATTILA (LOUIS DURLACHER), IN AN ILLUSTRATION FROM THE *NATIONAL POLICE GAZETTE* IN 1893.

less amazed than the audience when Attila arose and announced that he had a challenger who was ready to take on Sampson immediately. No doubt seeing little bank notes rapidly flying away, Sampson attempted to squirm out of his predicament. He did not know who this young man was, and how dare he take on "The Strongest Man on Earth"? Sandow would have to beat Cyclops first, only then would he submit to a contest. But just to show that his heart was in the right place, Sampson handed over £100 to the manager of the theater, Captain Molesworth, for safe keeping. This was not at all satisfactory to Sandow, Attila announced. He had come all the way from Italy for the £500, and for nothing less. Sampson proclaimed that he was in the right and refused to budge from his position. There the situation might have remained had it not been for a hastily arranged compromise between Fleming and Molesworth. Sandow would compete against Cyclops first, then if he was victorious he would go against his master at a later date. Reluctantly, Sandow and Attila agreed.

With the stipulations finally settled, Attila, Fleming, and the entire NSC group trooped onto the stage along with their man, Sandow. The audience by now was getting impatient with all these claims and counter-claims. It cannot be said that Sandow had the sympathy of the galleries; this was soon to change, however. Sandow came on the stage dressed in a fine suit of evening clothes specially prepared to be ripped off at once. Underneath he wore an athletic costume complete with tights and Roman

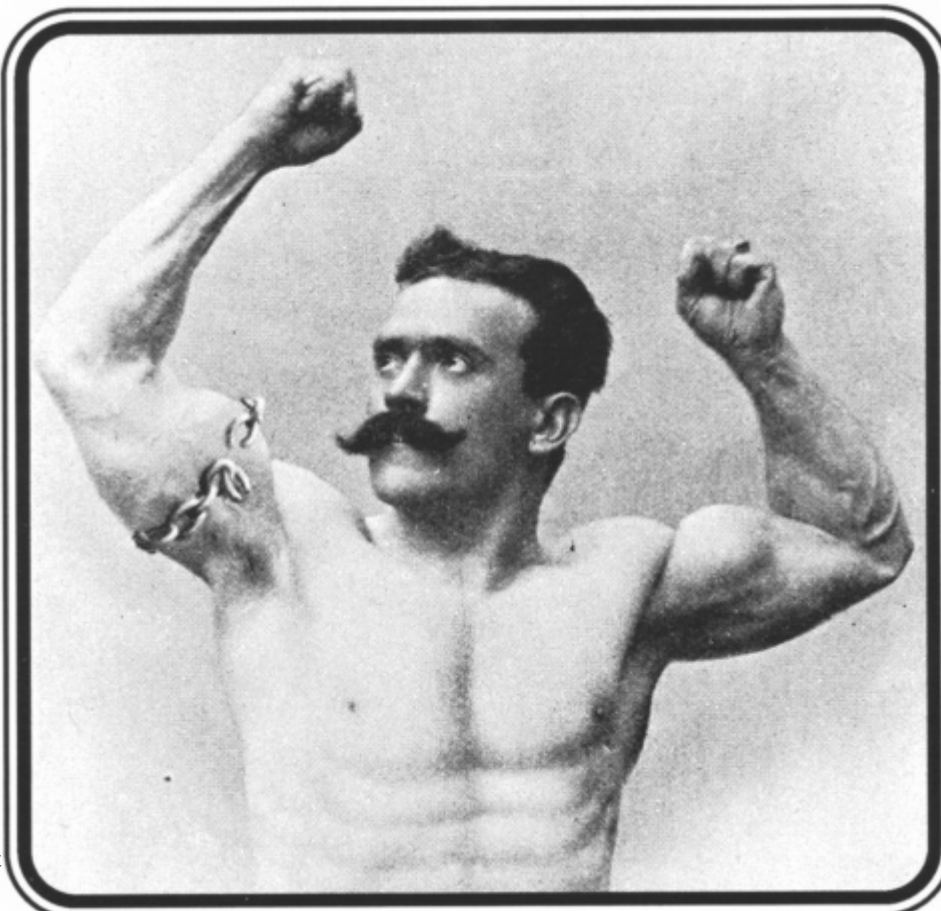
sandals. To make his appearance seem even more debonair, he also donned a stylish monocle. Keeping this bothersome item in its proper position is said to have caused him more trouble than he was to experience in his contest with Cyclops.

As he came on stage, thanks to the monocle, Sandow tripped over some of the weights and other properties on stage causing a great deal of derisive laughter to come from the hall. The mood of the audience quickly changed, however, when he finally got rid of the pesky eyepiece, ripped off his foppish evening dress, and revealed a beautiful, well-formed, athletic physique. Sampson and Cyclops were also visibly moved by this revelation.

Finally the contest began in earnest. Cyclops picked up a 150 pound dumbbell and then another weighing 100 pounds and pressed them both above his head. Sandow responded by lifting the 150 pounds once and the 100 pounds twice over his head. The challenger had thus won round one almost effortlessly.

Test two was presented again by Cyclops who jerked a 220 pound barbell overhead using both hands. Much to the delight of the audience, by now switching their allegiance to the young underdog, Sandow was able to press the same weight as his rival using only one hand.

The third test was a "press on back." Cyclops got down on the stage floor on his back and slowly lifted a barbell weighing 250 pounds into the air. Sandow was able to duplicate this feat easily. Since the last test had been successfully completed and since Sampson and his



THIS RETOUCED PHOTOGRAPH, FROM HIS BOOK, *STRENGTH*, SHOWS CHARLES SAMPSON SUPPOSEDLY BREAKING A SOLID-LINKED STEEL CHAIN BY FLEXING HIS BICEPS.

pupil did not seem able to think up any new stunts, Fleming and the other NSC members concluded that the contest was over and that Sampson must pay his debt. Not so, complained the fiery-tempered showman. Sampson explained loudly that before a true test of strength was complete it had to include a measure of endurance. Therefore, all the stunts had to be performed over and over again until only one man remained. The audience, however, had different ideas; they had no desire to sit in their seats and be bored to death waiting for one of the men to collapse. It seemed obvious to them that Sandow was certainly the equal, and probably the superior of Cyclops.<sup>8</sup>

"Cries and counter-cries were heard" reported a witness, "and a soldier made himself conspicuous in the gallery by the animated manner in which he took the part of the newcomer, and by taunting Sampson with having lost his money."<sup>9</sup> While all the commotion was going on, Sandow quietly sat down to rest.

The turmoil was finally calmed by Molesworth who announced that since he was the stakeholder, he would make sure that justice was done. Could Sampson name some final test that would decide the issue once and for all? Sampson agreed reluctantly. Cyclops stepped forward and picked up a dumbbell marked 150 pounds in his right hand and a kettlebell weighing 100 pounds in his left. He slowly lifted the dumbbell overhead twice, then let it crash dramatically to the floor of the platform.

Shouts of "Don't do it; don't try it; you have already won your money!" greeted the young athlete as he came forward and felt the weight of the ponderous dumbbell.<sup>10</sup> He smiled suavely in response to the warnings as he poised the heavy bell in the right hand and grasped the other in his left. Then, almost effortlessly, Sandow raised and lowered the bell not twice but seven times amid thunders of applause.

Once more Sampson flew into a paroxysm of indignation and chagrin but to no avail. The £100 prize money was handed over to the young German with the promise of another meeting to determine whether Sandow was superior to Sampson or not. Sandow had been victorious in the first battle, but the war was far from won.

After their triumph over Cyclops, Sandow and Attila retired home in order to plot their next moves. Because they had seen several of Sampson's performances, they knew that one of his favorite tricks was the breaking of chains which he would wrap around his arm and then burst by muscle contraction. In order for this feat to be accomplished well, it was necessary to have trick chains that fit perfectly. So after nosing around for a while, they found the maker of Sampson's chains in a little street off Leicester Square. Not only were they able to get chains that were perfectly molded to Sandow's arm, but they also arranged for the maker to be present in the audience at the Aquarium on the night of the contest in order to verify that these chains were exactly the same kind and quality as the ones Sampson used in his act.<sup>11</sup>

By all accounts the scene at the Aquarium on the night of Saturday, November 2, was something akin to a madhouse. The news had spread throughout the sporting world of London that something big was in the making. Large groups of people crowded around, trying to get in to see the contest between Sampson, the self-proclaimed "Strongest Man on Earth," and the young, virtually unknown German lad. It was reported later that tickets were being sold from £1 to £5—one source even put the top price at 50 guineas.<sup>12</sup> "The beauty of the turnstile system was well illustrated," remarked the reporter from the *Daily News*, "for without these revolving barriers of iron the eager multitude would probably have carried the place by storm."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the curtain rose. Sampson came to the footlights, dapper, radiant in medals, tights, and dainty boots, and smiling with confidence. He made a little speech, the first of an unforgivable series delivered or attempted before the evening ended. He wanted fair play; he offered £500 to anyone who would come on the stage and perform the feats he performed. Never mind where such a man came from; let him appear. But to Sampson's relief and the audience's amazement, no one came forward. Where was Sandow? Sampson paced nervously back and forth across the stage waiting for his adversary, but no one appeared. Sampson again made a short speech stating that he did not want the challenge money, that he would donate it to charity, and besides he was cold, there was a draft in the hall. Again he paced back and forth.<sup>14</sup> Finally, he swung his cape around with a flourish and was about to skulk off stage when a great commotion arose caused by a group of men vaulting over the side-box onto the stage. It was the National Sporting Club group again, led by Fleming. They had been trying to gain entrance into the theater all the while, but because of the huge throng outside and a doorman who stubbornly refused to open the stage door for anyone, they had been delayed. If it had not been for Sandow who broke down the door, they might still be waiting outside.<sup>15</sup>

At last Sandow entered. There was general cheering at seeing the young German. The two judges for the evening were both peers of the realm: the Marquis of Queensberry, the originator of the rules of boxing and the nemesis of Oscar Wilde, and Lord de Clifford, an avid sportsman of the day. It can only be imagined what sort of mental state Sandow was in—he had just barely missed the entire action. Yet he never gave the impression of being perturbed in the slightest. "Phlegmatic" was how he was described.<sup>16</sup>

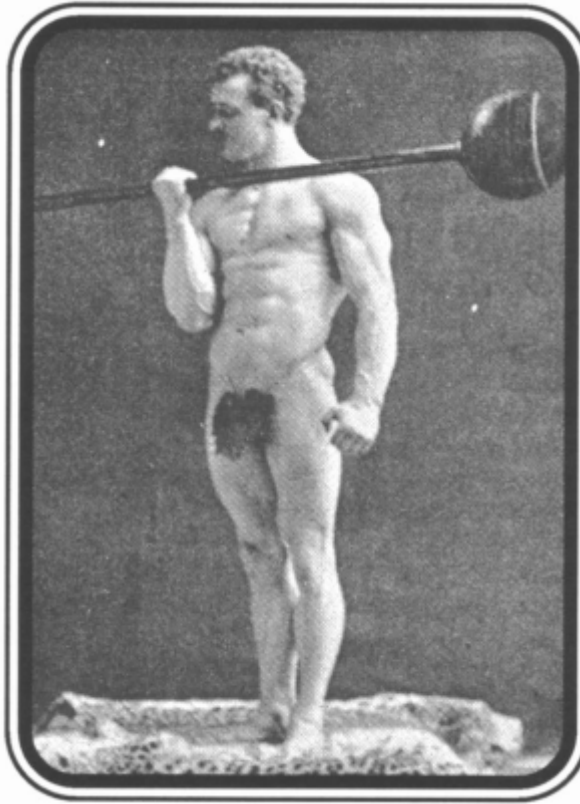


“A beginning might never have been made,” remarked a reporter, “but for the judges, who decided that Sampson must do the feats of strength he was in the habit of doing every night.” As a result of this move to get things rolling, some wag in the front stalls shouted out. “Ah, I always said the House of Lords was a useful institution.”

Sampson began the exhibition with iron pipe bending. He used his chest, leg, and arms to bend the pipe and then straighten it back again by blows. He did the work gracefully and swiftly. Sandow labored more, was clumsy, and took more time, but eventually he performed the task. Upon completion of this first feat, Sampson made a few loud and disparaging remarks about his opponent’s apparent difficulty in performing the job. But the audience remained firmly on the side of the challenger—besides, as Molesworth announced, Sandow had never done the trick before in his life.

Then came the feat of breaking a wire rope fastened around the chest. Sampson performed it with the ease of one accustomed to the trick of twisting the ends of the wire strands together. Sandow was obviously unacquainted with the knack, and it was only after the audience shouted a few instructions and several fruitless tries that he succeeded. “It was a splendid effort of strength. The man seemed like to burst in his effort to obtain the requisite expansion of chest.” When at last he was able to break the iron rope, most of the audience leaped to its feet and cheered raucously.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps a little overconfident, Sampson next proceeded to his forte: chain breaking. He put one on his own forearm and coolly offered another to Sandow. It was obviously too small for the German, and he rejected it with a gesture of contempt. To everyone’s surprise, Sandow brought out a chain of his own from his pocket and, true to his word, the chain maker was in the audience and was happy to verify that the chains were exactly the same as those used by Sampson. In order to verify the strength of his chains even further, Sandow passed them to members of the audience, taking them back at last from a pretty woman who sat conveniently near the stage.<sup>18</sup> The spectators may have been satisfied, but not the explosive Frenchman “The unfortunate Sampson protested, gesticulated, argued trod the



IN THIS ILLUSTRATION FROM *SANDOW'S SYSTEM OF PHYSICAL TRAINING* (1894), SANDOW'S IMPRESSIVE MUSCULARITY IS READILY APPARENT.

deck, and generally cavorted around.” But all this was to no avail, for Sandow was able to break his chain as easily as Sampson.

Sampson was clearly outraged that his rival had so easily beaten him at his own game. He ranted and raved to the audience until they shouted him down. Then he turned his attentions to the judges, but with equal success. Finally, amid much hubbub, the judges said that they would declare Sandow the winner of the contest if the German would perform some further proofs of strength on his own. Accordingly, he first lifted a stiffened and upright man from the ground and then did some crowd-pleasing feats with an improbably large dumbbell weighing 150 pounds.

All this time Sampson was throwing one of his frequent connivance fits. Someone shouted from the stalls offering Sampson £50 if he could duplicate any of Sandow’s feats. But by this time he had had enough. Sampson grabbed his cape and stalked off the stage in a frightful huff. Finally, the only one left was Sandow. The judges duly named him the winner. He said a few words of thanks in German, and the eventful evening was over.

Unfortunately for the vanquished strongman, there was a clause in Sampson’s contract which stated that if he were ever defeated after one of his nightly challenges, then his contract with the theater would become null and void.<sup>19</sup> It is no wonder then that Sampson carried his protests of unfairness off the stage and into the press.

As it turned out, however, there were other reasons for Sampson’s vociferous outbursts, but they were not destined to be revealed for another five years. For now he had to be content with writing to every newspaper he could think of pleading for another chance, another match with the upstart German. However, the theater-going public was beginning to wonder if Sampson really was “The Strongest Man on Earth” or not.

Sampson had another reason for acting the role of the slighted hero: there was still the matter of the £500 prize. This had never been paid to Sandow, despite the ruling of the judges. For a man who often resorted to lawsuits on the flimsiest pretexts, Sandow strangely declined to press the matter in the courts. He meekly settled for an award of £350 paid to him by the Aquarium management. But all

thought of litigation was put aside in the excitement of the moment. Sandow was victorious. That was all that mattered.

Shortly after this, Sampson quietly left town. With the cheek of the professional charlatan he took up his strongman act in various cities in the United States and Europe. In 1893 he turned up in Michigan, where among other things, he claimed to have lifted the heavy cannon in front of the Detroit City Hall.<sup>20</sup> In 1895 he published a self-serving book called *Strength* in which he made many extravagant claims of Herculean power.

During the year 1898 he surfaced again in the Russian capital, St. Petersburg, still proclaiming himself "The Strongest Man on Earth." True to form, he continued to use a number of fancy tricks, trying to convince the gullible public that he was as strong as he said he was. One person who was not convinced was the great wrestler and strongman, George Hackenschmidt, "The Russian Lion." Hackenschmidt showed up at one of Sampson's performances and easily exposed his tricks. After the show Sampson tried to talk the Russian into returning with him to London and there challenging Sandow to another match—this time with a much more formidable partner. But Hackenschmidt refused, and there the matter rested.

The Russian again encountered Sampson in 1904. By this time Hackenschmidt was residing in London, making a living as a wrestler. Sampson called at his home and Hackenschmidt immediately saw that Sampson was suffering severe financial hardship. The older man asked the Russian Lion for a loan of £10. He was willing to put up his weights and other paraphernalia as collateral for the loan. Hackenschmidt agreed and handed him the note, and Sampson duly deposited all of his equipment in the basement of the house. That was the last the Russian ever saw of him, for sometime after that Sampson managed to get into the house, take back the equipment, and leave town for good. He disappeared from sight, finally fading mercifully into the murk of history.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile the youthful, twenty-two year old victor was reaping the benefits of instant celebrity. "When we left the Aquarium after the contest," Sandow wrote, "the great crowd followed us cheering, and the four-wheeled cab into which we got, was lifted up by these enthusiasts. The crowd cheered us all the way to my rooms."<sup>22</sup> Newspapermen clamored to interview him, everyone wanting to know more of this remarkable young man. Sandow—probably on the advice of Attila—maintained for a moment the fiction that he was not interested in the slightest in a music hall career, but this was just a ploy to raise the stakes with the theater managers. By the time he went to bed that night, Sandow had a contract to appear at the Alhambra Music Hall for the very generous sum of £150 per week. Attila was paid the less magnificent sum of £30 per week and agreed to act as mentor-cum-manager to the burgeoning star. Sandow had taken another step on the long road to greater glory. He must have found it very difficult to sleep that night.

## Notes:

1 Even with these precautions, many a stage Hercules was occasionally caught unawares. Later in his career, Sandow, himself, fell victim to this tactic. In 1893 he offered a prize of \$1,000 to anyone who could duplicate his lifting feats. Unfortunately, a burly Swedish lifter, Hjalmar Lundin, took him



at his word, jumped the stage and reproduced every lift. A nervous and embarrassed Sandow declared that the lifts were not done in "as perfect form" as he had done them. Thus the prize was denied the challenger despite the vociferous hoots of the audience. Siegmund Klein, "Sandow—Truth and Fiction," *Strength & Health* (December 1948), 32. Also see David Chapman, "Gallery of Ironmen: Hjalmar Lundin," *Ironman* 51(October 1992), 146.

2. C.A. Sampson, *Strength: A Treatise on the Development and Use of Muscle* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1895) 38-42.

3. Leo Gaudreau, *Anvils, Horseshoes, and Cannons, I* (Alliance, Nebraska: Iron Man Publishing, 1975), 165.

4. *Ibid.*, I: 167.

5. Gordon Venables, *Mighty Men of Old* (York, Pa.: *Strength & Health*, 1940), unpaginated [22].

6. Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert eds., *The London Encyclopaedia* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 535.

7. William Pullum, "Strong Men Over the Years," a foreword to *The Amazing Samson As Told By Himself* (London: Samson Institute, 1926), 12-13.

8. *Ibid.*, 13-15.

9. Quoted in G. Mercer Adam, ed., *Sandow's System of Physical Training* (New York: J. Selwin Tait & Sons, 1894), 49.

10. *Ibid.*, 50.

11. Pullum, "Strong Men Over the Years," 17-18.

12. *Ibid.*, 18.

13. Quoted in Adam, *Sandow's System of Physical Training*, 55-56.

14. *Ibid.*, 56.

15. Eugen Sandow, *Strength and How to Obtain It* (London: Gale & Polden, nd.), 96-97.

16. Adam, *Sandow's System of Physical Training*, 58.

17. *Ibid.*, 58-60.

18. Unidentified clipping dated July 2, [1893], in Attila's personal scrapbook. Todd-McLean Collection. The University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

19. Pullum, "Strong Men Over the Years," 21.

20. Sampson, *Strength.*, 49.

21. George Hackenschmidt, "Charles Sampson: King of Showmen and Knave of Strongmen," *Mr. America* 5(June 1962), 68-72.

22. Sandow, *Strength and How to Obtain It*, 98-99.