



APOLLON THE EMPEROR OF ATHLETES

BY PROFESSOR EDMOND DESBONNET

I lived in Lille in 1889, and one morning while crossing a street I came across a huge horse-drawn wagon piled high with weights, dumbbells, railroad wheels and grills of iron bars. The vehicle was festooned with gaudy flags and it displayed posters featuring an extraordinary athlete draped in an ancient Roman cloak with his right arm emerging from this antique robe. At the strongman's feet crouched a lion, the symbol of strength. This piece of printed matter announced the arrival of the famous Apollon who was coming to the Flemish capital for the very first time and would make his debut at the Théâtre des Variétés on the me Jean Roisin.¹ As you might well understand, I was at the theater that evening, bored with everything that came on the stage and anxiously awaiting the much anticipated turn that I had come to see.²

Finally, the orchestra struck up a triumphal march and the

curtain rose on scenery representing a stronghold with an entry door made of heavy iron bars turned toward the audience. When the curtain rose, the stage was plunged into a half-light, but then rapid footsteps which caused the floorboards of the stage to tremble announced the arrival of the athlete who played the role of an escaping prisoner. In the murky light we could barely distinguish Apollon's form which was wrapped in a large, dark cloak. He was bent over in order to elude the gaze of the sentinels who were pacing on the walkways of the castle.

Suddenly, the alarm was sounded. The prisoner was discovered, and he then had but one option: He must escape toward the audience, but the iron bars stood in front of him. He threw himself at the gate and shook the bars violently, but the iron refused to bend. The guards advanced in the dark, and we could hear their cries. The

prisoner's strength was truly unleashed in the face of this danger, and he grasped the bars in his fist shaking them vigorously. While forcing the bars, the man's arm was extended across the gate, and we saw that it was as big as an ordinary man's thigh. The only sound in the theater was a gasp of amazement at this sight.

The prisoner's cloak opened in a little in the effort and we discerned a leg which resembled the pillar of a temple. Grasping two bars in his hand, Apollon pulled them together using a tremendous grip strength. He then squeezed his head and upper body through the bars with still more effort, and eventually the bars yielded, and the prisoner was free.

Light then flooded the stage, and Apollon, this god of beauty and strength, tossed aside his cloak with a proud gesture thereby revealing himself to the audience in a silken costume which clung tightly to his muscular physique. The impression made by this handsome athlete who was elegant, strong, and endowed with a unique form, was unforgettable. The dramatic entrance through the bars was truly magnificent. Had the feat been performed by an athlete who did not possess Apollon's muscular bulk and the visage of a Roman gladiator, the whole thing would have been ridiculous and perhaps a little grotesque. This feat could only have been performed by Apollon.

While the stronghold set was removed, Apollon came to the edge of the stage and displayed his impeccable physique for the admiring crowd. One first noticed his beautifully shaped and highly expressive head with its long, naturally curly brown hair. Next, in quick succession, the spectators saw his white, evenly spaced teeth which gleamed as the giant smiled broadly; his small ears molded closely to his skull; his fine brown mustache; and his clear, gray magnetic eyes. I have never forgotten the strongman's nearly superhuman beauty after having the good fortune of seeing him for the first time, particularly since he was in the prime of life.

Finally, out came the weights and barbells, and Apollon prepared to deal with the masses of iron. To begin with, he did a series of arm extensions and rim lifts with twenty-kilo block weights, which in his hands seemed to be as light as wooden paving blocks. Next, he juggled a block weight of fifty kilos with the greatest ease, making the cast iron twist in the air once, then twice in front of him and next tossing it over his shoulder twice and catching it by the ring, finally stopping it in an arm extension. Apollon then climbed up on a fairly high table and bound a fifty-kilo weight to his right foot, then taking a twenty-kilo weight in each hand, he lifted his right leg and proceeded to lower his entire weight on his left leg until the leg with the fifty-kilo weight touched the floor. The great strongman then pulled himself up once more using the strength in his leg and thigh all the while performing a double arm extension with the two twenty-kilo weights until he brought the weights back to the table. It was extraordinary! This feat bore the name of "The Roman Table."

He continued by lifting his eighty-kilo block weight, snatching it easily and ending in an arm extension, pausing for a time with this mass stretched out horizontally. [Ed Note: Desbonnet's meaning is unclear. Although he could snatch by the ring an eighty-kilo block weight, neither he nor anyone else could hold 176 pounds at arm's length horizontally.]

From here, he passes to the feat called "The Bridge of Death." This consisted of juggling fifty-kilo weights gripped only by their narrow rims between Apollon's thumb and forefinger and held over the head of a man lying on the ground. Next, a piano was placed on the strongman's chest together with a pianist playing an entire tune. During this feat, the strongman's head and feet rested on two chairs which had been set a short distance apart and with his body extending across the void. The total weight of this load was around 350 kilos.

He then finished by lifting an immense pair of railroad wheels which had been connected by a bar of such thickness that very few strongmen were able to budge them off the ground. (These locomotive-car wheels weighed exactly 118 kilograms.)³

Only those who have actually seen Apollon perform his feats can appreciate the man's strength by seeing the almost casual way he handles even the greatest loads. Signs of effort are completely foreign to this great Hercules — everything is accomplished by great strength. Let us bow down before this man, this demigod. He is most certainly the King of Strength — he is most certainly the Emperor of Athletes.

One of Apollon's feats of strength which he executed regularly in his performances was done with the aid of two ropes attached to each of his impressive forearms. In this way, Apollon holds back two automobiles attempting to drive off in opposite directions. Nothing could be simpler!



APOLLON'S BIOGRAPHY

Louis Uni, known as Apollon, was born in Marsillargues (Hérault) on January 28, 1862. His ancestors were all tall and strong and had lived in the region. Tradition says that Louis Uni was a descendant of Marsillargues's founder, a gladiator named Unicus, meaning "Unique." This ancient Roman was remarkable for his beauty, his physique, and his vigor. The gladiator was fated to be thrown to the lions a few days distant on the occasion of a special Roman holiday, so he fled Rome one day at the head of a troupe of gladiators in order to escape from the games of the circus. Little desiring to try his strength against that of a lion or some other ferocious beast, Unicus, the unconquered gladiator, came to the seacoast, seized a

large fishing vessel, and fled across the Mediterranean. The men were pushed onward by a favorable wind, and eventually they reached the coast of Gaul where the boat beached itself near the mouth of the little River Vidourle. The fugitives continued their journey up this coastal river that runs through the provinces of Gard and Hérault until they arrived at a place which seemed propitious. Here they stopped, pitched their tents, and Marsillargues was founded. Unicus was the leader of this colony, and later his descendants called themselves simply Uni, and they (according to tradition) were the ancestors of the famous Louis Uni, better known as Apollon.

Regardless of whether this little story is true or not, it is indisputable that Louis Uni possesses the most typical appearance of a Roman gladiator that it is possible to imagine. Antiquity has never produced features of equal beauty.

Whether you are an antiquarian or simply curious, call to mind the statue of the Emperor Justinian — there you have a perfect representation of the athlete Apollon. In order to get a correct idea of the great man's physique, it is necessary to imagine some famous gladiator of the later Roman empire — one who might have become the darling of the patricians, the idol of the mob, and a rival in popularity to Caesar himself.

Today, Louis Uni is in his prime, and those who have seen him cannot forget him as he appears draped in his red Roman cloak leaving bare the arms of terrifying power that are as oak trees. Such men have personified strength for sixteen or eighteen centuries. He would have been noticed in the history of an era when Godefroy de Bouillon [1061?–1100] fought against the Saracen warriors and split the enemy from skull to saddle with one blow of his long sword.

Apollon's first appearances caused a sensation in his role of a gladiator as he burst the iron bars of his prison and the chains which encumbered him. Without any special training, he was able to accomplish such feats of strength easily — feats which other strongmen can only do after much hard work and many years of practice. Apollon is still the only one who can seize with just one hand four twenty kilo weights and swing lift or snatch them easily overhead without the slightest effort.

Truly, he is superb. This demigod is as impeccably built as the Farnese Hercules, and when he uses his gigantic strength as in the feats mentioned above, he brings all his muscles into play.

A strongman is remarkable when he measures forty centimeters in the arm and the calf; Apollon measures fifty-one centimeters [approximately 20"] in the arm and the leg. Next to this man who stands 1 meter 90 centimeters tall, other men appear miniscule and stunted. Apollon is incomparable in the one-handed snatch. He puts the weight into the air by the strength of one arm with little effect on the rest of his body, whereas a number of athletes bend their legs and even then can only get halfway through the lift before giving up.

On December 20, 1896 at my school of physical culture in

Lille, Apollon snatched a 160-pound barbell with his right hand. He then attached four weights which together added up to 176 pounds and repeated the same snatching feat. Afterwards, he swing lifted the weights twice in very rapid succession without returning the weights to the floor. All of these feats were done to perfection with only the arm coming into play. If Apollon wanted to "cheat," he would not lift four twenty-kilo weights, but at least five.

Apollon worked little in France since he was always able to find excellent engagements in foreign countries. Ah! If he had only been German, English or Russian, then French music hall managers would have been willing to pay dearly for his services. In England they would have erected a statue in his honor. But what can we do? The French are always French; they love the exotic, eager to celebrate the foreign and to ignore their fellow countrymen.

Here are Apollon's measurements taken in 1896: height 1 meter 90, chest (normal) 1 meter 29, chest (expanded) 1 meter 36, waist 1 meter, arm (flexed) 49 centimeters, forearm (relaxed) 42.5, forearm (flexed) 46, calf 50, weight 120 kilos.

Casts were made of Apollon's arm at different times in his career, and I have these in my collection. Here are Apollon's measurements taken at the height of his strength in 1900: Height 1 meter 90, chest (normal) 1 meter 28, chest (expanded) 1 meter 38, waist 1 meter 02, right arm (flexed) 51 cm., forearm (relaxed) 44.5 cm, forearm (flexed) 48.5 cm, calf 52 cm., weight 127 kilos.

Here, then, is Apollon's complete life story:

Apollon's grandfather measured 2 meters 02; his father was very strong, and he stood 1 meter 92 in height. People quote many prodigious feats of strength that Apollon's father was able to perform. He died seventy-five years of age from an accident. Apollon's mother was small but very strong. She died at eighty-five in 1906. Apollon has a sister who lives in Nîmes and who stands at 1 meter 84 in height. The strongman also had a brother who measured 1 meter 83, but he died of a fall from a horse when he was in the 11th Cuirassiers in Lyon; he was only twenty-two at the time of his death.

Due no doubt to the effects of atavism, the young Louis Uni thought of little but strength, the stage, the arena, the circus, and so forth. When he attained the age of fourteen, the lad escaped his parents' house and joined a traveling Italian circus at Lunel near Marsillargues. It was during a performance at the Caramagne Circus that the police nabbed the boy in the midst of his acrobatic turn and returned him to his father.

Finally with many misgivings, Louis's parents allowed him to leave home and work with Felix Bernard [1857-1900] and Pietro Dalmasso [1852 - ?] who wanted to make him into a wrestler.⁴ This, however, did not accord well with his tastes since he did not have a sufficiently combative temperament. He preferred working with weights.

Alas, the athlete's life is not always rosy, and the young Uni

came to know days when he went to bed with a grumbling belly, for he sometimes found himself working with a troupe which led a hand-to-mouth existence. When young Uni saw several famous strongmen snatch or swing lift three twenty-kilo weights, he responded by lifting four; if he had seen them lifting four, he would quite simply have lifted five. No one ever came along to spur him on to anything heavier.

Pietro had the young athlete snatch a seventy-seven-kilo barbell in the following fashion: he put the barbell in front of Apollon's feet at a distance of ten centimeters from Apollon's toes and had him do a one-handed snatch with the weight under the pretext of training him. The young Apollon lifted just as Pietro wanted and seemed to take no notice that the level of difficulty had been increased by about twenty percent.

Apollon worked with Victor Sosson from whom he won his seventy-seven-kilo dumbbell by snatching it overhead. He traveled also with the Ossud and Coradi circuses, and he even returned from Italy by foot since he did not have enough money to pay the train fare to Menton. Louis worked as well with Henri Péchon [1850-?] and August "the Butcher" [1849-?] In Toulouse an amateur, Mr. Valinot, made a cast of Apollon's arms, and these are casts which figure in my collection. Apollon was sixteen and a half at this time.

At Coursant he snatched a large axle of sev-

enty-eight kilos which because of its width few strongmen could have budged off the ground. Baby of Ariège [a wrestler active in the 1880-90s] was among the spectators. Apollon then went to Bordeaux to the Jeantien carnival arena where he had a very successful run; eventually all of Bordeaux came and applauded the young colossus. Several Catholic priests came to see him there and later invited him to dine with them. Husbands brought their pregnant

wives to see Apollon perform and then had the women touch young Uni's arm in the hopes that the sight of such a handsome man would lead to the favorable physical development of their progeny.

Lacaisse the wrestling impresario came to Bordeaux at this time to have a match with Pietro, but he took one look at Apollon and immediately saw how he could make a profit from him. He took Louis Uni to Paris where he made his debut at the Folies Bergère with his iron bar number. Apollon had a tremendous success there, and from the Folies, he went to the Hippodrome where he lifted four hoses while being suspended from a trapeze. He performed also at the Grand Orient on the Rue Cadet. He trained at the arena of the athlete Paris who was called "the boat man" where he lifted eighty-seven kilos which Sandow [1867-1925] was unable to press up. He performed also at the



APOLLON AT THE AGE OF SIXTEEN WITH WHAT IS BELIEVED TO BE THE SEVENTY-SEVEN KILO DUMBELL WHICH HE WON FROM VICTOR SASSON BY SNATCHING IT TO ARM'S LENGTH OVERHEAD.

PHOTO COURTESY: TODD-McLEAN COLLECTION

Cirque d'Hiver.

Since there were no shot-loading barbells (or only very few in that far off time), twenty-kilo block weights were usually used. One day, Lacaille, [amateur weightlifter, Count Georges] San Marin [active circa 1885], Bernard and Pietro wanted to find out just how strong Apollon really was. They filled up four hollow twenty-kilo weights with lead until they arrived at a weight of ninety kilos. They then took these to Joigneret's [1834-1896?] gymnasium on the rue des Tilleuls in Montmartre, and after letting Joigneret in on the trick, they took Apollon and bet a bottle of champagne that the strongman could not do a one-handed snatch of the four "twenty-kilo" weights on the first try. Apollon was convinced that his friends were playing a joke on him since they had seen him lift eighty kilos about fifty times at least, and he was reluctant to bet since he thought the men were making fun of him. When he was certain that they were serious, he made the bet and lifted the weights on the first attempt apparently without the slightest notice of the unexpected presence of the ten additional kilos.

Apollon next performed in London at the Aquarium with Felix Bernard Pietro, Limousin [1860-?] and Bazin "the Rifleman" [1841-1888]. The arrival of the young Uni in London was a great event since the English had never seen a colossus like Apollon.

One day Apollon moved into a splendid carnival booth at the annual fair called the "Fete de Neuilly, and he thereby created unpleasant competition for Marseilles's wrestlers who had their own stall at the fair.⁵ Here then is an extract from a newspaper relating to this sensational exhibition.

Wrestlers who are jealous of their calling and are poisoned by wrath, ready and willing to smash anyone, including those who get in their way, especially the public and the competitive athlete! None other than Marseilles's troupe and the troupe of Apollon, both of them professional strongmen, promise to fight it out in a Homeric battle. Great will be the enjoyment this year when Parisians of both genders who love sporting displays view the phenomenal attraction at this year's Fête de Neuilly.

Marseille or Apollon?

Marseille, or the archaic style wrestling, features its older, breathless, flabby, wrestlers with their drooping masses of flesh cinched into their tights. Even so, these men are known to the public, and applauded and supported by the generosity of the public out of the kindness of its heart.

Apollon, or the new style wrestling, features the great Apollon who is fresh from his debut this winter at the Folies Bergère and performances at the Grand Orient. Apollon and the wrestlers from the south of France: Boyer of Nîmes, Boyer of Marseille, Lagneau of Paris, and Robinet of Toulouse.

Apollon's fair booth was never empty during the entire Fete de Neuilly. The men who made up Apollon's troupe had such beautiful physiques that they completely overshadowed the ugly, obese wrestlers who comprised the Marseille group.

Fran here, Apollon went to Lille, Antwerp, Brussels (where he subdued several lions in the Pezon Menagerie), Louvain, and Liege where he beat Lhonneux, the strongest man in the city. At Wulff's establishment in Brussels he beat the German Karl Abs [1851-1898] who could not deadlift the fifty-pound weight by holding it by the rim (although Apollon did run-lift arm extensions with it), nor could he take an eighty-eight-kilo barbell to his shoulder with one hand (this was the same weight with which Apollon did a right-handed snatch every night).

Apollon next left with Paul Pons [1864-?] to tour across Europe, with Pans taking on all comers in wrestling and Apollon accepting all bets when it came to feats of strength. In 1889 during the Exposition [Universelle de Paris], Apollon became the champion of the Athletic Arena of the Quai Debilly where he was head and shoulders above the most famous strongmen in the country. From his very first arrival in the ring, Apollon was given tremendous ovation without even having to perform any feats in order to justify this enthusiasm. The mere sight of this demi-god was sufficient to satisfy the crowd, and despite the valor of wrestlers like Bernard, Pietro, Crest [1860-?], Fournier, and others, all eyes were on Apollon — on his masculine beauty in all its splendor.

What one always admired with Apollon was the simplicity of his attitudes. He never displayed eccentric or forced poses; the athlete never puffed out his chest while sucking in his belly in an attempt to make his already powerful physique look even more so. He never flexed his mighty biceps just to impress an audience; Apollon contented himself with just being himself, without boasting without flexing anything. He had only natural poses; his bearing was as majestic as that of an emperor but without any aristocratic arrogance. He was a magnet for the public's affection, and that was as it should be.

Apollon made a great deal of money with his engagements, and eventually on the advice of some poorly informed friends, the gentle giant got it into his head to become the director of a theater where he could perform every evening. He hoped that by doing this he could increase his bank account. He therefore took over the Cafe Fontaine, 6 rue Fontaine in Paris, renovated it, and shortly after, under the name of the "Concert Apollon," put on theatrical programs with athletic acts thrown in. He had quarrels with the entertainers and annoyances of every sort, and he finally had to abandon the theater after having lost a tidy sum of money.

The strongman then left for Tours, and there he directed another music hall, but he was no luckier with this venture and returned

to Paris in 1906 where he had to dust off his old act once more. My friend Albert Surier and I went to see him at the Étoile-Palace Theater where he was performing, and the following review appeared in the magazine Sports on October 4, 1906 under the byline of Albert Surier.⁶

APOLLON RETURNS TO THE STAGE

After an eclipse that has been all too long, Apollon, the king of strongmen, has returned to the stage. He is currently performing in an act that the gentle giant describes as "new" on the boards of a music hall near the Arc de Triomphe.

It is practically useless to recount the exploits and the measurements of this incomparable athlete. We all realize that virtually no one has attained the same dimensions as he. If Apollon had

wanted to train by the rational processes currently in use, he would have assuredly raised athletic records to a point where no one would have been able to touch them.

But Apollon has remained a strongman according to the old-time definition; he juggles with real twenty-kilo weights more easily than a carnival Hercules might with phony weights weighing in truth ten or twelve kilos.

Apollon begins his current act with his famous entrance from behind the iron gate, snapping bars and chains. Then he juggles with a fifty-kilo weight, grabs it using only his thumb and forefinger and then passes it above the face of a man lying on the ground as if he were carrying a lace fan. Next comes the "Roman Table," followed by lifting with one hand an enormous seventy-kilo weight until it is at arm's length overhead.

Apollon usually precedes his performance with a discourse that is always appreciated by those who are acquainted with the finer points of athletics. "Here is my weight," he declares. "It weighs 140 pounds, at least it does when it's at arm's length. If I ain't able to do it, I'll leave it where it's at." Do not look too closely at his grammar or his logic, for despite his shortcomings, the exploits of this amazing man are not exactly within the reach of most people.

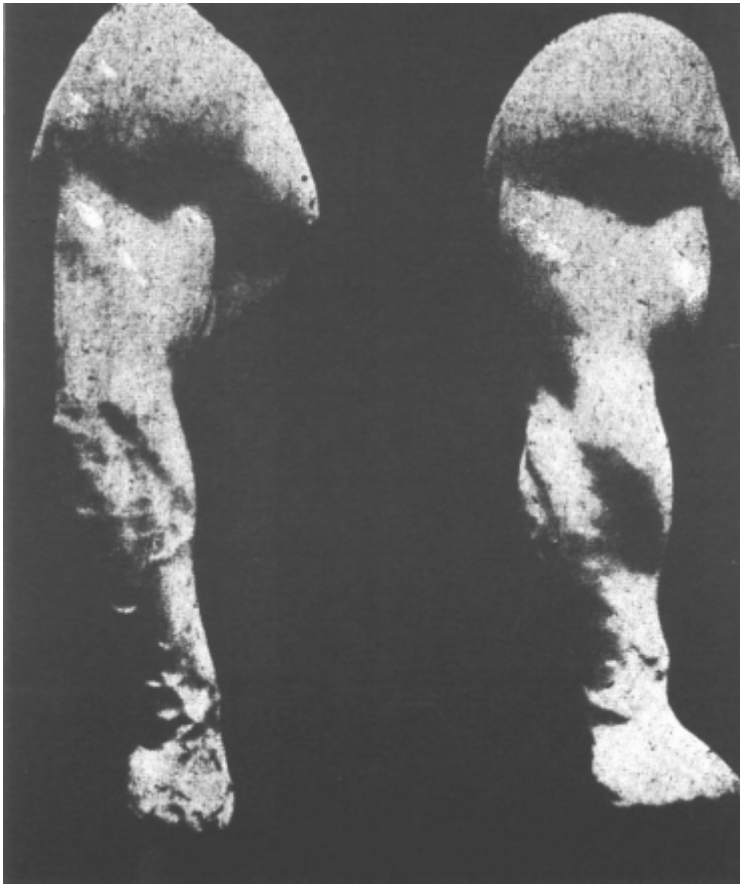
As a finale, Apollon extends himself across two chairs, his neck resting on one chair back and his feet on the other. In this position he supports a piano weighing 660 pounds while several bars of music are played on it.

Although he is a little dulled by the years, Apollon has retained his muscular power of long ago. Like the marble caryatids that support palatial porches, Apollon gives the impression of invincible strength.

Since I was one of Apollon's great admirers, I would like to have seen him quickly amass a big fortune on account of his strength and his physique. Because of this, I devised for him an athletic act where the artistic side would have played the greatest role. I am convinced that Apollon would have made a fortune if he had followed my advice and if he had adopted my special act consisting of artistic poses appropriate to his type of face and build, to his corpulence, to his deportment, and (because of his simplicity of mind) to his cerebral development.

Here, let us indulge in a brief parenthetical discussion prior to explaining the act that I imagined for Apollon.

What is more elegant, more beautiful, suiting more to display masculine beauty than the costume of a torador worn by a real bullfighter who is dark, small, well muscled, broad shouldered, agile, and vigorous? Clearly, there



PART OF LOUIS UNI'S FAME CAN BE TRACED TO HIS MASSIVE BONE STRUCTURE AND UNUSUALLY LARGE MUSCLES. HERE, FOR INSTANCE, A PLASTER CAST OF APOLLON'S ARM ON THE RIGHT IS CONTRASTED WITH THAT OF A PROFESSIONAL WRESTLER FROM THAT ERA NAMED WOLFF. WOLFF'S ARM MEASURED 16 3/8" WHILE APOLLON'S BICEPS MEASURED OVER TWENTY. EVEN MORE UNUSUAL, HOWEVER, WAS APOLLON'S ENORMOUS FOREARM.

are few masculine costumes which can rival this ideal apparel. Why do we consider it to be so splendid? It is because it is worn only by those who make their living in the bull ring, and because of the exercises they use to acquire speed, suppleness, and strength, they are all (or nearly all) well put together. Their form-fitting costumes simply would not look well on those who do not possess an excellent physique.

But suppose for an instant that this pretty costume were to be worn by a tall, thin blond man having "chicken legs" and long, thin arms and with his elbows poking through the cloth. If this man had never partaken of physical exercise, then you would immediately have a very bad opinion of the toreador's outfit. Those who have seen the giants of 1 meter 85 like Padoubny [1871-?] or Zaikine [c. 1908] attired as Cossacks, have quite rightly admired these two handsome specimens of the Slavic race. The costumes display the men's broad shoulders and narrow waists, and we all might regret that this attire is not worn in France. Imagine the same costume worn by a short, thin man with a hollow chest and utterly without muscles, and you will have a very unfavorable impression of this costume which at one time might have seemed so handsome.

It is equally true for the Cossack's uniform as it is for the toreador's costume: it is the man inside that matters. An athletic act must conform to that which it presents: to an energetic face, energetic gestures: to a feminine face, feminine gestures.

Apollon had the head of a Roman and the measurements and girth of a gladiator. This man needed to be placed in a set representing a Roman amphitheater: he should have been clothed in a gladiator costume, and given the gestures of an arena fighter who seeks the needs and joys appropriate to his primitive brain: combat, games, wine, orgies, and battle.

Here then is the act I imagined for Apollon together with descriptions of the sets.

The first set would represent the Gladiators' School at Pompeii: Vesuvius appears in the background as it belches out smoke and flames.

In the second scene: the courtyard of the school of gladiators with all the athletes' cells arranged around it and with different characters painted on the canvas background. The first scene: the cell of a gladiator; inside Apollon trains for his next combat. The different physique poses show us the gladiator's workout. This is "Unicus" (unique, the one and only) the handsomest and strongest of all the gladiators, the idol of the plebeians, the favorite of the Roman courtesans.

Apollon is scantily dressed, and he takes up two dumbbells, the cestus [type of boxing glove], a rapier, a shield, etc., and he shows the public the different methods of training for the professional gladiator's terrible art.

The second set shows the Roman Coliseum on a festival day —just such a day when the ancient Romans demanded with such

avidity for their *panem et circenses*. The circus is packed from top to bottom.⁷ At the back one can see Caesar's box in front of which stand the gladiators who are about to fight that day. They bow to the ruler before perhaps dying.

After a triumphal march, Unicus makes his entry dressed for combat. He displays his half-naked body, one arm covered by a protective sleeve decorated with chain mail the other arm naked and guarded by a shield, greaves of steel cover his lower legs and calves, a helmet with a lowered visor is on his head. Coming before the imperial box, Unicus pulls up the visor to his helmet, bows, raises his right hand holding his short gladiator's sword, and in a loud clear voice delivers the famous greeting, "Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant."

A revolving pedestal would permit the audience to see the gladiator's gestures and equipment completely.

Then, according to the needs of the program, Unicus would simulate a battle with a real or imaginary adversary.

After a series of blows, the gladiator is wounded: he collapses to the ground and presses a hand to his wound where his life's blood trickles away; his other hand is placed on the floor preventing him from falling horizontally. His desperate eyes seem to want to pierce the ground in order to dig the bed of his final slumber. His thoughts fly to his native land where his aged parents wait for him desperately, perhaps his doomed eyes also perceive the pleasures which awaited him had he been the victor.

Finally, he shows us the agony that radiates from him before his death. He succumbs at last in front of his fellow gladiator who shows no pity for the dying man's youth strength, or beauty. Then the gladiator slumps down stretching himself out to full length showing his great size to good effect. We see his monstrous forearms hanging inert, his enormous legs, and his pale head. His corpse seems to reproach the entire human race for having permitted this horrible crime — and all for the barbaric pleasure offered to bloody brutes. It is a useless sacrifice of a beautiful human body and a waste of precious life for a needful race.

The third set reveals a Roman brothel. The victorious gladiator comes to spend the money earned by his muscles in sensual pleasures. After countless drinks from the cup that cheers, the gladiator seeks to conquer the favors of the serving girl who has helped to induce his drunkenness. But Messalina, in her constant search for handsome men, keeps an eye on the victor because she desires him. Taking advantage of her victim's intoxicated state, Messalina manages to drag the man off his couch and then pretends to be one of the inmates of the house of pleasure.

The role of Messalina would be played by Apollon's wife since she possessed a distinctive figure and because she had a queenly bearing and would be able to infuse the role of Claudius' wife with great mastery.

Apollon would finish the act with some characteristic Roman

poses. For an encore, he would perform inside a special frame, the results of which would be not without success.

They would be:

- 1st Milo of Croton pulling apart his tree stump
- 2nd Farnese Hercules in repose
- 3rd Samson and Delilah
- 4th Samson destroying the temple of the Philistines
- 5th Nero experimenting with poisons on his slaves
- 6th Cain and Abel
- 7th Strength protecting Woman
- 8th Mars and Venus, etc. . . .

Never, I believe, could a strongman act have aroused artistic ideas like the one that might have been presented by Apollon. Let us not forget that Apollon had a head that was absolutely typical of the ancients, and he had the physique to go with it. This is something that one does not find easily, especially if one wants to represent a characteristic Roman since those specimens have become exceedingly rare because of the different hybrids which have drowned the primitive types.

In any case, Apollon did not understand at all that he could put on a similar act, despite his taste for everything that had to do with gladiators. The act could have been shown in Paris, London, Rome, Berlin, Naples, Saint Petersburg, then in the great cities of America and finally in Oceania where every attraction coming from Europe meets with an overwhelming success. The hearty colossus simply could not understand that he could make a fortune without his weights, dumbbells, or enormous loads — in fact, with nothing more than a few props and a painted backdrop. He constantly asked me if I could not include a few feats using four twenty-kilo block weights, his famous eighty-kilo rectangular weight, and his piano supported on his mid-section in the ancient Roman act. Needless to say, I never wanted to mix these acrobatic feats with my reconstruction of antiquity: that would have been sacrilege, and I did not want to commit such a blunder.

It only remains to cast an eye over several newspaper clippings from various cities where Apollon performed. These highly complimentary excerpts verify the interest that the entire press gave to Apollon. It is particularly important to remember that the press at this time was not very sympathetic to sport and that there was not a single magazine which was exclusively dedicated to sport as we have nowadays.

From Périgueux

He is most assuredly the best strongman in the world. Contrary to many others, he delivers more than he promises. A mere glimpse of this perfect example of strength and elegance will be enough to stimulate the curiosity of amateurs.

Apollon and Hercules, gods of strength, must have had the

same powerful appearance as this man. Those who defeated the terrible monsters of antiquity must have looked like him. At once strong and supple, his tense arms play with enormous weights as a child might toy with a ball. Apollon suspends himself with his head placed on the back of one chair and his ankles placed on the back of another, and on his chest is slung a piano. Then a gentleman perches himself at the instrument and plays it as if he were resting on a polished parlor. Apollon arises with a smite on his lips when he is relieved of this enormous weight.

The strength-loving public would certainly want to see this phenomenon who, like Hercules, can display himself by performing incomparable feats.

From Limoges

When Apollon appeared on the stage of the Alcazar or in a circus ring, the mere sight of him elicited hurrahs of enthusiasm from the astounded spectators.

From Castres

We should rather call this giant king of strength "Hercules." He has remained unbeaten until now, and perhaps he is invincible. The name of Diana's brother might actually be more appropriate because of the man's admirable and supremely elegant musculature.

Apollon was born in Arles — that ancient Roman city — and we wonder if he just might be the descendant of an ancient race and if drop or two of gladiator's blood might circulate in his veins. His vigorous physique evokes the era of Olympic wrestling and makes us think of wild beast tamers in the arena upon whom the decadent emperors deigned to smile.

From Mont-De-Marsan

Apollon, a superbly muscular young man of twenty-three years has earned the nickname "the strongest man of the nineteenth century." That he is truly worthy of this title surprises us not at all; after all, he possesses arms that are as large as the thighs of ordinary men.

From Algiers

In his feat called "The Bridge of Death:" Apollon juggles with a fifty-weight directly over the head of a man lying on the floor and catches the weight by pinching it with his fingertips just a few centimeters from the "patient's" face.

The muscular strength of this Hercules is equally spread throughout his body. For instance, the power of one of his hams is called into play when he climbs upon a table. He lifts up (in addition to the bulk of his own body) a fifty-kilo weight attached to one foot and carries with both outstretched arms a twenty-kilo weight

at the same time.

It is a feat that can only be described as "prodigious."

From Tunis

Apollon placed a piano on his chest and then had the orchestra director climb up, too. The poor man had doubtless never played on the abdomen of a god, and he pounded out a terrific din that passed as a tune. A wiseacre was heard to remark that the conductor was certainly weaker on the piano than Apollon was underneath it.

From Lyon

Apollon is certainly a worthy descendant of the well-known ancient gladiators whose names have been preserved in history. We were reminded of the king of strength by his entrance on the stage, his passage through the enormous bars, and his sweeping movements as he posed in his cloak.

From Lille

Apollon claims to be a real Parisian, and to prove it, he expresses how he feels in the midst of his exercises by saying, "Fai caou" [It's hot].⁸

From Havre

at the Alcazar Theater of Havre

. . . Crest, whose strength has not prevented gracefulness; Fournier from Lyon; and Andre who reminds us of Alfred. This Andre, the elegant Parisian model who has been applauded so heartily at the old Circus Ingouville, is a handsome young man with a beautiful form and aristocratic limbs. Andre is the last word in unclothed elegance. Then we come to Apollon who, because of his physique, calls to mind the ancient Farnese Hercules.

From Bordeaux

*And how might we praise you,
You who are both Hercules and Apollon?
You who have carried so long and far the fame
Of our dear France;
You who have burst your chains,
Oh, Champion of the universe
How might we celebrate your rebirth
If not in verse?
Your muscles are chiseled in perfect proportion
And our eyes are very pleasantly charmed
By the grace of your presence,
But the strength which God has given you
You flaunt so effortlessly.*

We hardly notice the swelling of steely muscles on your body. You betray no emotion on your face when you lift overhead an axle and two railroad wheels weighting 150 kilos. That is a real feat of strength!

From Liège

Apollon takes an iron bar as fat as a finger in his right hand and by giving it three sharp raps with his left hand, he bends it in two; from this action, as one might well understand, his blood is liable to gush out following this feat. Apollon finishes by hanging from a trapeze by his knees while lying and balancing a draught horse weighing 750 kilos.

From Saint-Étienne

Apollon is called "the god of music" because he smilingly supports a piano on his chest. People were allowed to come on the stage in order to lift and test the weights that Apollon uses.

From Paris

When, one wonders, are the French going to recover from their mania of believing that everything foreign is superior? Thus, at this time when wrestling is a very popular spectacle, why do we make such a big to-do over champions from Greece, Romania, Turkey, England, America, and who know where? Especially since our beautiful land of France has produced such brawny fellows as Apollon and others.

Go see them and you will come back convinced that the old Gauls might still compete fearlessly with the men of any other nation. Is that not correct, Apollon? Is that not correct?

From Grenoble

He is always superb with his musculature worthy of [Léon] Cladel's [1835-1892] famous painting Ompdrailles.

From Valence

As the start of his performance, he enacted the escape of a prisoner from the Bastille. In order to put his plan in action, he bent the huge iron bars of his cell.

From Montpellier

Do not confuse the real Apollon with the pygmies who masquerade under his name. They ate like the ass in the fable who covered itself with a lion's skin.

From Saint-Étienne

This Hercules (as he deserves to be called), this colossus arrives on stage amid the noise of a fusillade, and he then forces open the bars of a prison cell.

From the Newspaper *The People*

And after seeing Apollon, it seemed that he symbolized the great masses of people who although colossally strong and solid, allow themselves to be led by a few myrmidons, and thus are easily crushed. Just like Apollon who is not disturbed by a buzzing fly, the people remain too benevolent.

From Namur (1890)

What a man! What stature and what strength! He looked like one of those ancient heroes that we find in old prints. So must have looked the athletes and wrestlers of ancient Rome. Imagine a height of 1 meter 90 at least, arms measuring 53 centimeters around, legs to match in stature, and a chest that is not disproportional either. Apollon is indeed worthy of his name. He is a handsome man in every sense of that word—a veritable Hercules with all the grace of the god whose name he sports. Apollon can certainly be considered one of the strongest men in the entire world.

He was born in Arles, that most Roman of all cities, famous for being the home of pretty girls (and also of handsome boys if one is to judge by the specimen who is today among us). Had he worn a toga and tunic, he would have looked like a Roman emperor. His strength is superhuman. Next to Apollon, the strongest men are as children. Most certainly, Apollon deserves to be seen as a truly curious phenomenon.

**From Perpignan
Concert Parisien**

Apollon, the strongman-acrobat, ends tomorrow, Sunday. We have never seen a man of equal strength in Perpignan.

From Namur

Apollon is a handsome man in every sense of that term. He is admirably built; his physique is very harmonious; between his enormous arms and above his legs which are veritable columns, rests a well-situated torso that is nicely chiseled, sinewy, and strongly muscled. His biceps are models of nervous energy.

When he appears before the public in his flesh colored tights, partly concealed by the scarlet Roman cloak that glistens with golden threads, he calls to mind (as if to deceive us) those vigorous athletes and gladiators who long ago elicited the lust-filled glances of highborn Roman ladies on the Appian Way.

It is an extraordinary and remarkable thing when Apollon seizes a fifty-kilo weight by a mere pinch grip and holds it over the head of one of his wrestlers. He then throws down the weight with the ease of a player who tosses a card on the table.

From Toulouse

The spectacle which the valiant Apollon has given us is

so fine as to run no risk of turning to horror if, by a possible accident, the mass of iron which he uses were to crush the skull of his brave and ravishing assistant. The highlight of the evening was the feat in which Apollon places on himself a long iron device from the extremities of which hang two wooden boats equal in weight to a dozen men.

When everything is ready, assistants lift the two boat supports and Apollon thus supports on his chest an apparatus weighing almost one thousand kilos.

From Nantes (1897)

The modern gladiator, Apollon, experienced a crescendo of success every evening. He was applauded and called, and since this Hercules is gentle as a lamb and enjoys giving others pleasure, he took up his weights, his train wheels, and the Roman table and performed his feats a second time.

From London

**The International Wrestling Championship
at the Westminster Aquarium**

There is at this time a man stronger than all those we have seen in England. He is a Frenchman who is called Apollon. He has competed against Sandow, but I doubt that he would risk his recent victories on another stage since he was engaged exclusively by the directors of the Alhambra. Apollon is twenty-five years old, and his forearm is stronger than his biceps. He lifts a cluster of iron blocks weighing more than 189 pounds. I can attest to this fact. He lifts overhead an enormous 157-pound barbell in a single movement and juggles it with other weights which apparently possess a weight equal to that of an ordinary anvil. He offers £200 to anyone who can do the same.

Here are Apollon's measurements taken in the lodgings of the colossal Frenchman by Mr. Horne: height 1 meter 89.5mm, chest 1 m 30, arm 49 cm, forearm 0.4475m, thigh 70.5, calf 50, body-weight stripped 242 pounds.

From London

Apollon desires to deposit £200 for contests of weightlifting with Cyclops [pseudo. of Franz Bienkowski 1862-1922], Louis Cyr [1863-1912], Sandow, Sampson [1859-?], etc. Apollon lifts a 360-pound barbell and raises 1,400 pounds; The props which he brings for his athletic performances weigh five thousand pounds. He is the largest strongman that we have seen since Emile Voss [?-1910] and Carl Abs.

From London

Apollon throws a fifty-six-pound weight into the air, and he catches it in the palm of his right hand; next, he does the same

thing with a 160-pound weight, then taking it between his thumb and index finger, he throws it about six feet. A magnificent 188-pound barbell is then brought out which he easily lifts overhead, keeping it there for around twenty seconds, and laying it gently back down on the floor. Finally, four weights weighing two hundred pounds were lifted overhead with a single hand by means of a handkerchief passed through the rings.

Apollon is six feet three inches tall (1 meter 925) and weighs 274 pounds in his street clothes.

From London

Yesterday evening Apollon went to see Cyclops and Sampson's performance. He came up onto the stage just like an ordinary spectator in order to lift the weights of the two strongmen. Sampson spoke to him in French begging him not to take away a colleague's livelihood. Apollon then withdrew.

After the show, the three strongmen met once more at a pub frequented by music hall artists, and Cyclops displayed his famous arm. At the request of several fans, Apollon bared his own arm, and the frightful arm of Cyclops seemed to be that of a child in comparison. Never in the history of strongmen did anyone ever see an arm like that of Apollon.



Excerpt from *The Little Journal* for Monday, October 9, 1893
"Strong Men"

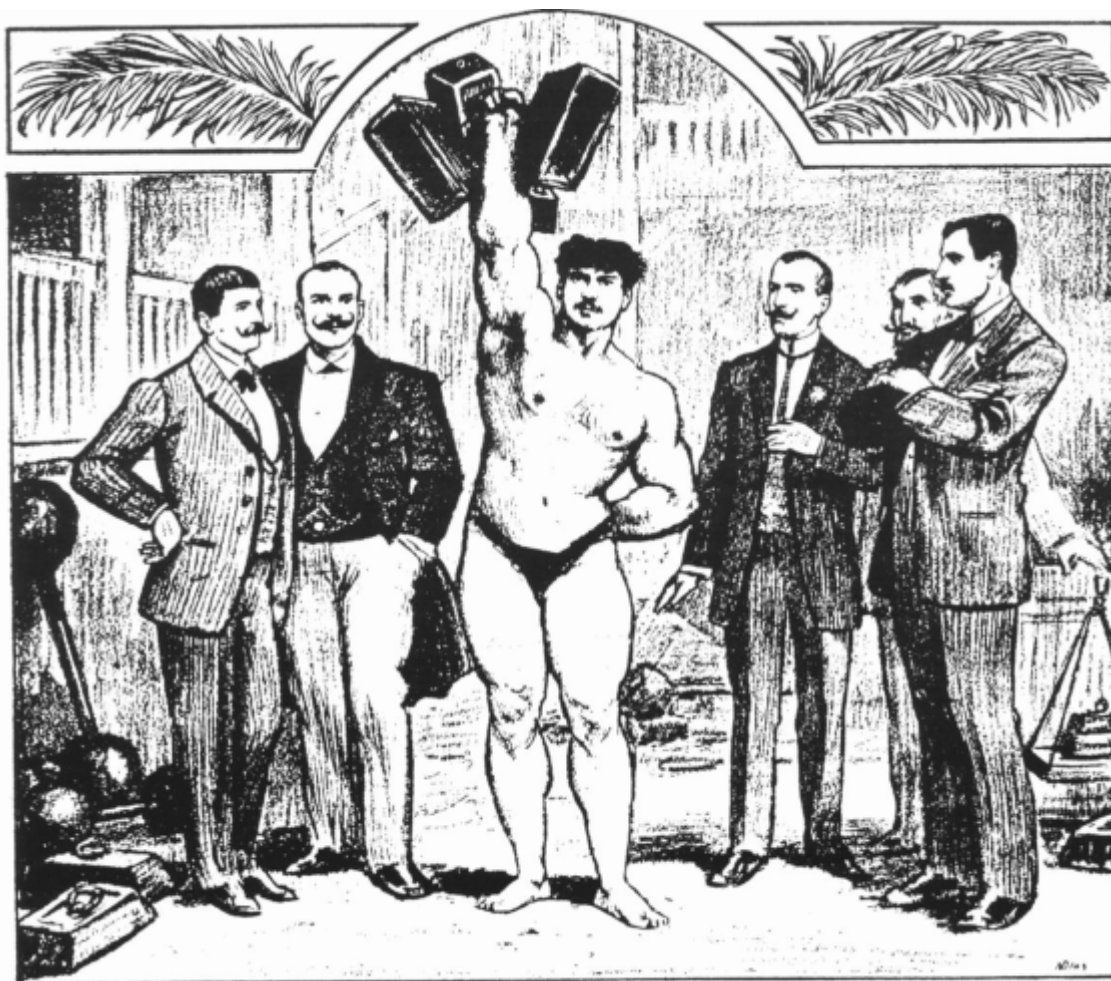
What is a strongman? If I were to ask you this question out of the blue, you might doubtless mull over my query with a bit of astonishment and tell me that a strongman is a strong man. But you are going to see that my question is not as simple as it might seem. You doubtless recall the porter who trudged more than a day with a two hundred pound sack on his shoulders. Obviously, this porter is a strong man; nevertheless, I would be prepared to wager that if this man were asked to lift a few dumbbells, he would easily be beaten by any athlete. It is naturally quite true that one must have muscles in order to carry such a weight on one's shoulders,

but it is more a matter of practice and balance. One must be otherwise muscled in order to handle the dumbbells. The truth is, as Mr. Strehly who is both one of the most distinguished university professors and an outstanding gymnast, has testified, when one establishes a comparison between the strength of two individuals, we often use comparisons that are extremely exaggerated.⁹

Strength is much like height: two or three centimeters make the difference between a medium and a tall build just as a third or a quarter more in the number of kilos marked on a dynamometer registers the difference between a strong man a very strong man. We have therefore considered that those readers who are interested in physical exercises might be happy to learn what is the maximum attained in a few feats by today's professional and amateur strongmen. We will inform these exercise fans in the surest way while taking advantage of our own background as well as that of Mr. Strehly. In addition, we will use the extremely precise information supplied to us by Mr. Joigneret, a citizen of France and the world, who has had the greatest experience in athletics.

Let us first say a few words about Mr. Joigneret (a person who is most certainly not an ordinary figure of a man). Mr. Joigneret is a former strongman and gymnast whose reputation is very great. It was he who first lifted a horse white suspended by his feet and who earned hearty ovations for his work in America. This man opened an establishment in Montmartre which he gave the unusual name of "The Gymnastic Cafe." This restaurant is divided into two parts; on one side there is a wood floor with several tables, and on the other there is an arena covered with sawdust for weightlifting and wrestling. There cannot be a single strongman in any corner of the globe who is not familiar with this cafe where everyone in the world of strength is ranked according to his merits.

Mr. Joigneret's barbells and dumbbells are very carefully weighed as soon as they arrive, and since the feats are performed in the presence of professionals who naturally have an interest in belittling his competitor's strength, one can easily see that trick-



A RARE ILLUSTRATION OF THE DAY COUNT GEORGES SAN MARIN BET APOLLON A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE THAT HE COULD NOT SNATCH "EIGHTY" KILOS WITH ONE HAND. WITNESSING APOLLON'S SUCCESS WHAT WAS ACTUALLY NINETY KILOS ARE (L-R) FELIX BERNARD, CHARLES BATTÀ, APOLLON, SAN MARIN, GYM OWNER JOIGNEREY, AND PAUL PONS.

cry is not possible. The same goes for measuring the different parts of the body since these statistics are carefully taken and entered.

The big weights are lifted in four differing ways: the clean and jerk, the swing, the snatch, and the bent press. The clean and jerk consists of taking the barbell to the shoulder, then with a vigorous movement of the tower body, it is brought overhead. The maximum that has been done is 196 pounds; this fine feat of strength was performed by a model named Henri Pêchon. Several athletes have done 150, but thereafter we fall to 120 pounds representing the medium strength range for very fit people. The swing is performed by rocking the dumbbell between the legs as if it were the pendulum of a clock, then taking advantage of this oscilla-

tion, the lifter swings in a semicircle until he brings the weight overhead. The maximum in the swing is 150 pounds; it was accomplished by Pons, a giant of a man who is famous in the wrestling world. Among those who have done 135 pounds, we can list Louis de Lyon, Charles Poiré [1866-1939], and the amateur San Marin. Many have done 120 pounds. The snatch consists of grabbing the weight smartly from the ground and lifting it overhead perpendicularly along the body.

Several years ago a colossus arrived in Paris who could boast of neither technique nor a great deal of training, yet he lifted weights that no one else before him could lift. Apollon, for such was his name, snatched 176-

pounds in block weight and a 160-pound barbell. To give an idea of this man's dimensions, let us say that his biceps measure forty-seven centimeters and his forearm forty-two. An athlete name Limousin once managed to snatch 143 pounds. The average is 120 pounds.

The bent press is performed by putting the weight overhead while bending the body to the side opposite the same weight which one holds in one's hand Sandow the strongman lifted two hundred pounds in this way. Some claim that he attained the phenomenal total of 260 pounds, but I must admit I have never seen such a thing. Many athletes have bent pressed 150 pounds. The maximum for the two-handed barbell belongs to Apollon who did

284 pounds. We can list after him André with 252 pounds and San Marin with 240 pounds. The average is 180.

The arm extension is one of the most familiar of all strength exercises, but it is also the one which is the easiest to counterfeit. We have heard it said that Apollon had performed an arm extension of one hundred pounds. Obviously, in order to attain such a figure, he had to cheat, that is to say to rest the greater part of the weight on the forearms in such a way as to minimize the length of leverage. We can list several athletes who do very correct arm extensions with six pounds.

We cannot end without remarking that whatever may have been written on this question our strongmen have not grown weaker. On the contrary, they are stronger today than ever before. Thanks to gymnastics societies, the progress has been enormous for the last ten or fifteen years.

If while you were at school, you were a fan of gymnastics, you must remember certain feats which were performed only by your teacher or by professionals in the circus. Today these feats are performed very easily by a very great number of young people. The same is true of weightlifting. All the records that we have quoted here have only been accomplished in the last fifteen or so years.

—Thomas Grimm

As we can see, already at this time Apollon seemed clearly superior by far than all the athletes named in this article from *The Little Journal*, but Apollon's strength was never fully known. No one had ever pressed him to accomplish any feat of strength whatsoever. Therefore, we cannot evaluate fairly in terms of kilos the athletic feats which he performed nor can we compare him with today's athletes because at the time when Apollon was at his peak of strength there was no Weightlifting Federation that would officially register records, no closely monitored method to know if an exercise was correct or incorrect, neither judge nor dynamometer to assure the regularity of a classic exercise. In addition there was no decent, graduated and balanced equipment which might permit a barbell or other weight to be loaded little by little until it reached a lifter's maximum weight. It was necessary, by way of example, to be very strong in order to handle three twenty-kilo block weights in the snatch. Quite a few of today's athletes who now snatch 140 or 150 pounds do so because of good equipment and progressive training, but they could never snatch three twenty-kilo weights unless they had been faced to do so from the start. They simply would not have the strength to put the weights up all at once; they would become discouraged and would completely abandon their ineffectual attempts at the end of a month or two.

I speak from experience in this case, for I am among those in the latter category. I recall that at twenty-two years of age, after I had worked out since the age of fifteen, I struggled ineffectually with

a forty-kilo dumbbell. Had I never made the effort to have a light thirty-kilo barbell made expressly for me which I could press easily and which I was able to make gradually heavier in response to my improving physique, I would have continued to strain vainly to lift the forty-kilo bell. At the end of several months, despite my fervor for athletics, I would have been discouraged and would never have been able to lift nearly seventy kilos with one hand. Nor would I be able to lift sixty-five kilos at the Montmartre Athletic Society of Paris in front of the president, Eugene Robert, and seventy members of the club as I did at the age of nearly forty. Thanks to good equipment and progressive weight training, I had thus managed to increase my maximum from around forty kilos to sixty-five kilos, which is to say a gain of twenty-five kilos.

When at the age of eighteen, Apollon encountered four twenty-kilo weights, he lifted them with ridiculous ease. If we therefore admit that Apollon would have gained by knowledgeable training and good equipment as much as I had, since he had double my own strength (lifting double what I was able to lift), he would then have gained fifty kilos over his old maximum, that is 130 kilos. We can see from this that Apollon was born twenty years too early, or rather our training methods and our modern equipment had arrived twenty years too late.

There is another very important question which has never been examined and which conclusively demonstrates Apollon's extraordinary muscular strength. The great athlete had always worked with his muscles alone. Unlike many strongmen who supplement their muscular strength by an exaggerated expenditure of nerve impulses, Apollon never needed to tap his nervous energy. These people accomplish their feats with will power rather than with the muscles of their arms. For example, some very energetic athletes (and we commend them for their energy) only lift their maximum weight once from time to time, and when they choose not to do so, remain much below their own records. Example: an athlete of this type works without an audience to urge him on and will hardly lift sixty kilos in a one-arm press, but his maximum might be sixty-five or sixty-eight kilos. In nineteen attempts out of twenty he will not be able to reach his maximum, unless he makes a major call on his nervous system, a situation that would necessarily tire him by the expenditure of nervous impulses.

Apollon, on the contrary, lifted with his muscles, pressing his weights to the maximum every day. One could ask him to press or jerk seventy-two kilos at any time of the day: he would do it at once and without the slightest fatigue. This was proof either that he could lift a vastly heavier weight or else that he did not need to call upon his will in order to lift heavy weights; that is the evidence of real muscular power.

Take a hundred strongmen, learn their records, and then ask them to lift their maximum on the spot. There would be ninety-

nine who could not do it. One would not be warmed up, another would have a sore arm or a pain in the groin, a third would not feel like it, a fourth would be tired. In short, no one would say to you as Apollon used to say, "I will lift 176 pounds." They would bring him the weights, and before you know it the four weights would rise into the air. Unlike many strongmen who lift using too much flexibility, Apollon side-presses without even bending his legs so as to move his body underneath the weight. In these cases, it is not the weight which rises at arm's length, it is rather the body which bends in order to allow the arm to stretch out in mid-path.

Certain athletes of 1 meter 80, for example, fall back on their heels, their legs completely folded under their body. The weight rises only 1 meter 20, and the body bends to the side in order for the arm to extend. As soon as it is extended, the legs straighten up, the body becomes upright, and the weight is thus side pressed. [Ed Note: He means bent pressed.]

Apollon, on the other hand lifts the weight two meters high at least, takes it to the end of his arm without bending his legs or his body while letting his arm do the work. Ask yourself then, if Apollon had coordinated his movements and if he had bent his legs while arching his body excessively, what this strongman might have lifted if he wanted to.

Here are several feats of strength performed by Apollon in front of me and a number of amateurs:

One day in 1889 in Lille, Apollon competed against the strongman, Batta [pseudo. of Charles Estienne 1866-1939]. The judges who were charged with choosing the feats decided on the two-banded barbell. Apollon did not have one: what was he to do? He decided to visit a dealer in secondhand ironworks named Mr. Garde on the Boulevard des Écoles, and there he found two train-car wheels attached to an enormous axle which was much too thick even for the bands of Batta. All told it weighed exactly 118 kilos, and the strongman paid ten centimes per kilo for this contraption. Among all of Mr. Garde's employees, even those who were used to handling the heaviest loads, no one could pick up the 118-kilo makeshift barbell, including the great Edgard, one of the workers who wielded a sledge hammer; this huge man who measured one meter eighty-six in height had been hired specifically for his extraordinary strength. Apollon took the axle and tested it to see if it felt good in his hands. When he was satisfied, Apollon announced to the manager, "Take this to the Théâtre des Variétés. It'll do."

First off that evening Apollon lifted the train wheels as if he were merely raising his cane. In his match with Apollon, Batta could only get the famous axle to his shoulders, resting it lightly on his chest for a moment — this despite the man's legendary grip strength. Apollon, however, had lifted the device like a feather.

One day in 1892 Apollon came to Lille with the wrestler

Pons in order to do a series of athletic performances. He brought with him his equipment which consisted of a barbell which weighed ninety-six kilos empty and four hollow balls (two large and two small) arranged in the following fashion: a bar joining the two large balls passing through holes drilled in the center of the spheres. The enormous balls were hollow and could be filled with sand which Apollon could easily find in any town. That spared him the shipping costs since the barbell traveled empty.

When the two large balls were put in place, the bar stuck out thirty centimeters out from the balls on each side. On this extension were attached two other balls which when filled were twenty kilos each. In a special locker were two absolutely empty balls but similar to the smaller filled balls except that they weighed only three kilos each.

When the barbell was deposited in the midway of a circus or in a room of a theater or music hall, the two full bells were screwed to the larger balls which raised the weight of the four-bell bar by thirty-four kilos and brought the total to 130 kilos.

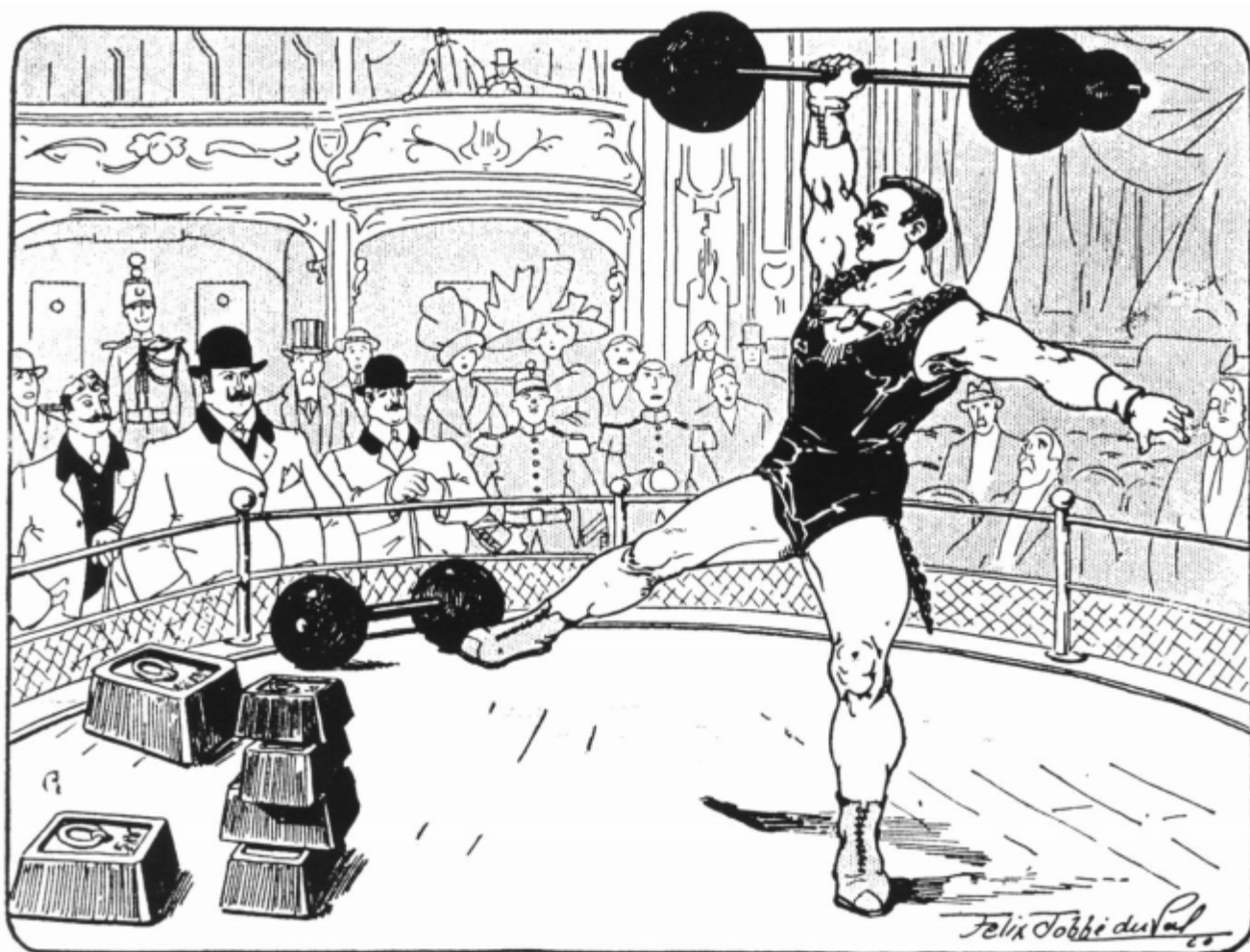
When the strongman had to use the weights on stage, he removed the filled balls and screwed in their place the two empty balls. In this way Apollon did not tire himself out and did not risk harming the stage floor with his barbell which (despite the empty bells) weighed 96 kilos. Even so, very few people could move the enormous weight from off the ground because of the thickness of the bar. I confess that I, too, was among those who could not lift it. I could not even pick up the barbell when it was empty.

The spectators who had tried to lift the barbell when it was fully laden were dumbstruck with admiration when they saw Apollon easily lift the barbell on the stage, and not a soul suspected the subterfuge. But one day the management of the Théâtre de Variétés wanted to let people living in the surrounding area of Lille see Apollon and a quartet of wrestlers without fear of missing the last train or streetcar. They therefore arranged a matinee for Sunday, December 18, 1892.

Here, taken from my archives, is the newspaper clipping from the time announcing this show:

At the request of a great number of customers, tomorrow, Sunday December 18, 1892 at three o'clock, there will be a huge athletic tournament between four amateurs from the cities of Lille and Roubaix. Wrestling with Messrs. Masson and Louis le Faouët. New feats of strength by Mr. Apollon: 150-kilo double barbell!

This was at the time of the Roubaix Fair, and the justifiably famous Rasso Trio, consisting of Nordmann Hertzog, and von Paar, was appearing at the Franco-Russian Circus at Roubaix.¹⁰ At exactly the same time, the Circus Lenka was at the Hippodrome in Lille, and Batta was engaged there as a strongman. But the Rassos, hav-



THIS DRAWING DEPICTS THE VISIT OF THE RASSO TRIO TO SEE APOLLON'S SHOW AT THE VARIEITES THEATER IN LILLE, FRANCE, IN 1892. NOTE THE "DOUBLE" BARBELL, THE BLOCK WEIGHTS, AND THE ELEGANTLY CLAD WRESTLERS WHO WERE NOT ABLE TO MATCH APOLLON'S 341 POUND SHOW-STOPPING LIFT.

ing learned of Apollon's presence in Lille, decided to profit from the show on Sunday afternoon in order to get acquainted with this colossus whom they had never seen, but they had heard much of from other artists. They arrived at around eleven o'clock at the Théâtre de Variétés precisely when Apollon along with Pons, Batta, and I were overseeing the ring setup for the four wrestling matches. Immediately, one of the athletes warned Apollon's wife of the presence of the Rassos and told her of the many feats of strength performed by these strongmen. When Mrs. Apollon saw the great Godefroy Nordmann who, thanks to a large overcoat with absurdly large epaulettes, seemed to be even bigger than Apollon himself, the woman was immediately struck with terror. She called to her husband saying, "You had better use your heaviest weights since the three Rassos are here to challenge you and to try to take over your engagement at the theater." When he heard this news, Apollon was furious, and he sent off in

search of twenty-five kilos' worth of sand. He sent a waiter at the music hall named Maës who was also a great fan of Apollon's strength and had him fill the huge balls of his barbell with this sand. He then had the sand moistened in order to make the barbell even heavier. After filling the balls with the twenty-five kilos of wet sand, he then filled the smaller, hollow balls, and then Apollon lifted the barbell in order to assure himself of its weight. Finding the device still too light for his taste, he said to Batty, "Put another twenty or so kilos of sand in the bar and then have the thing placed in the middle of the ring. As for me, I'm going to grab something to eat, then I'll put on my costume for the show."

Batta then replied, "Everything is fine, old chap. You can leave. I understand. Don't worry."

Apollon then left, and in the meantime Pons arrived and asked what Batta was up to. After hearing the explanation, Pons told



APOLLON, DRESSED AS A GLADIATOR, WITH HIS WIFE, JOSEPHINE, IN PARIS CIRCA 1892.

him, "Don't fool around with all that. We don't have time to refill that barbell. Look. Here's the key to the locker where we keep the weights. Go get the solid balls and screw them onto the bar in place of these here. Apollon is strong enough to lift it. At Joigneret's he lifted 142 kilos. Then, later when he misses his barbell, we'll have a good laugh at his expense." [Ed Note: the meaning is unclear. If Pons thought Apollo was strong enough to lift it, why would he "miss" the barbell?]

Batta was very happy to play a trick on his friend, Apollon, and he changed the empty balls for the solid ones, and convulsed with laughter when he thought of the look on Apollon's face when he picked up the barbell. The bar started out by weighing ninety kilos

empty; the sand added another twenty-five; the filled balls were another forty kilos, and that brought the total to 155 kilos. In order to test the weight, Batta attempted to lift the barbell and thanks to the strength of his hands he succeeded in budging this phenomenal weight a little. But Batta admitted that he "tried his damndest and that Apollon was in for a hot time" (those were his own expressions).

The show began around two o'clock. The theater seats had been removed from the floor, and the wrestlers and athletes had to perform in the middle of the audience. The weights were brought in, and these were close enough for the audience to touch. The wrestlers were Félix Bernard, Léon le Faouët; Paul Pons; three men from Lille and Pierre Cnude, Louis Moury, and Joseph le Brasseur (one of Batta's cousins); a phony wrestler who called himself Rabasson; and Desnoullez Adophe from Roubaix. The strongman was Apollon. Batta saw to the placement of the equipment, for Apollon was still in his dressing room where his wife showered him with encouragement and urged him to have the energy to prove to Rasso that he was in truth the strongest man in the world. Nobody needed to inspire Apollon. He was already sufficiently agitated. Batta and Pons had put him in high dudgeon by telling him that little Rasso was exceptionally strong when it came to lifting barbells. He had tried Apollon's weights, they reported, and it was only a matter of time before Rasso lifted them, and so on and so forth.

At last, Apollon came on stage, all the while staring fixedly at the three Rassos who were seated in the first row near the weights and barbells. Apollon came forward and

announced to the audience, "Gentlemen, I have been informed that there are certain strongmen who are desirous of touching my weights. I put them at their disposal, and I will offer a prize of one thousand francs to whoever can repeat a single one of my feats. I will begin by doing a one-handed snatch of eighty-five kilos with these here: one weight of twenty-five kilos and three others of twenty kilos each. All amateurs take note!"

Batta tied the four weights together, and Apollon snatched the eighty-five kilos on the first attempt. He lowered the weights between his arms without letting them touch the ground and then raised them two additional times into the air. The Rassos watched

but did not move.

Apollon did a rim lift with a twenty-five-kilo weight which he then extended until his arm was completely outstretched. Then he passed the weight back and forth between his right and left hand several times always holding it by the rim. Apollon juggled with a real fifty-kilo weight, throwing it behind his right shoulder and catching it in front at the height of his right shoulder, and then he extended his arm with a slight backward thrust of his body. The Rassos still watched but did not move.

Apollon brought a 143-kilo dumbbell with an enormous handle: he positioned it behind him with his heels touching the globes of the barbell and reached for the dumbbell behind him, snatching it overhead without moving his feet. It was unbelievable! Fantastic! All the weightlifting fans in the audience broke into unrestrained applause. The Rassos remained motionless. [Ed Note: Obviously, the 143 kilos is a misprint, as no one could do a one-hand swing with 315 pounds.]

Apollon brought in his eighty-kilo rectangular weight, snatched it aloft with one hand, juggled with it and then caught it with his outstretched arm — all this in the space of just three seconds and with only a slight wobble of his body. It was incredible. The Rassos came up to touch the weight and returned to their places while looking on in total amazement.

A barbell was placed on the stage and Batta announced that the device weighed 155 kilos. He said that Apollon offered a prize of one hundred francs to any man who could pick up the huge weight with two hands and raise it until the lifter was completely erect. [Ed Note: A deadlift.] Apollon then came onstage in front of the barbell, hefted it to find the exact middle, returned it to the floor, took two steps back, and at last approached the weight. On the very first attempt he brought the bar up to eye level and from there jerked it into the air without even resting it on his chest. After that, he found the balance point and neatly slid the barbell onto one hand, while doing so he lifted one leg at a right angle. Then he let the barbell fall from overhead and caught it in the bend of his arms and from there he gently set it back down.

Apollon had lifted a 342-pound barbell without for an instant realizing that it was filled any heavier than that which he had ordered. As for Batta, Pons, and me, we stared at one another dumbfounded. At that point we realized that Apollon's true strength would never be known.

The Rassos looked first at one another and then at the barbell on the stage. The strongest of the three came up to try [to deadlift] the weight. He succeeded with great difficulty in lifting it from the floor, but when he attempted to stand up, the barbell slipped out of his hands before he had even brought it to knee level. If we consider that his man was capable of lifting a 130-kilo barbell [overhead] we can judge the difference in strength between Apollon and him. It is only fair to add that the thickness of the bar handicapped Rasso

who did not have the necessary hand strength to grip a bar of that size.

When Apollon saw that Rasso could not lift the barbell, he said to Batta loudly and a bit patronizingly, "The little fellow isn't bad. What do you think, Batta? I really thought he was going to win the hundred francs." Happy as a king, Batta replied to Apollon, "He could very well win the prize, but first he'll have to eat his vegetables."

One week later the Rassos abandoned the name by which they had so much success and so many profitable engagements. They decided to perform under the name of "The Three Apollons" thereby giving indirect homage to the man who had galvanized them so thoroughly.

What a pity that similar performances could not be authenticated and that we cannot now certify the weight of the barbell that Apollon lifted. The barbell could not be weighed exactly, and no one dreamed that the day would come when codified weights and barbells would be important for the archives of an honest and dependable sport.

One day Apollon came to my physical culture school in Lille in order to give an exclusive performance for the students at the school. A big, globe barbell weighing 205 pounds was lying in the middle of the floor. This barbell was famous all over northern France because of its difficulty. The bar was able to turn loosely within the balls when anyone wanted to lift it, and consequently few were the athletes who were able to pick it up with one hand and take it as high as their knees. Cyclops and Noel the Gaul [pseudo. of Noël Rouveyrolis 1863-1939], to name but a few, had not been able to lift this barbell so much as a centimeter: and yet these two men were remarkably strong. Léon Sée and Vandenoche alone in all the north had lifted this barbell on the first attempt.

I said to Apollon that the ability to lift this barbell would qualify anyone as a real strongman. He smiled incredulously, thinking that I was trying to pull his leg. But after Apollon saw that I was serious, he lifted the barbell in his right hand, hefted it as if it were a walking stick and tossed it up 1 meter 20 centimeters into the air and caught it in his left hand once more. All the while he was watching me to make sure that I was not making fun of him. After he had returned the weight to the floor, he announced in his deep, masculine voice, "I believe that I can snatch this."

Immediately, we all protested, but Apollon took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeve revealing his huge forearm, and approached the barbell. On the very first attempt he snatched it to arm's length with such force that the weight went completely past his head. It landed three meters behind him, narrowly avoiding a collision with Mr. Paul Corman, an amateur who was standing behind Apollon just when the colossus first grabbed the barbell.

At another time, although still at school in Lille, I present-

ed him with a seventy-kilo barbell with a very thick bar. Not one of the strongest men could shoulder this barbell with one hand despite being able to press sixty-five kilos at this time in my life, I could not budge the weight from the ground.

Apollon took the barbell and lifted it automatically, not suspecting that it might escape from his fingers. When he saw that his hand was empty and that he had failed to snatch seventy kilos, he became furious. He attacked the bar once more, and this time he lifted it as if it were a feather; he lowered the bell into a horizontal position and held it there for three seconds. Evidently his arm was not sufficiently extended; his body was bent back sharply, and his arm was turned slightly to the outside. Still, if we consider the effort used to support a seventy-kilo bar with an outstretched arm, we remain confounded by the vigor, the articular ligaments, and the muscles of this man. Those who have not seen this feat cannot comprehend a similar effort. Unfortunately, we cannot evaluate the lift in kilos since the movement was not correct and cannot therefore be counted as true arm extension. [Ed Note: Clearly, Apollon's arm must have been greatly bent and he must have stopped the 154-pound barbell well before the level of his shoulder. Even so, if Desbonnet's recollection is at all accurate, it is an amazing feat.]

An amateur from the north of France named Florent Marchand was renowned for his strength. This man was present at the aforementioned performance (there were sixty or seventy spectators on that evening — and every one a lifter). Marchand could lift 112 kilos with two hands and snatch around seventy kilos with one hand, but when he had seen Apollon's exploit, he said, "We are all miserable little runts, and starting today I will never touch another weight or barbell." He kept his word and retired from the ring.

On another occasion Apollon was visiting Paris, "The Boat Man" [1850-1909], along with Sandow. Apollon was presented with four twenty-kilo block weights so that he might press them aloft, and we wanted to tie them together in order to make it easier for him to do the job.

"Do you want a handkerchief?" Paris asked Apollon, observing him approach the enormous handful of weights which had not been tied together.

"Whatever for?" the famous colossus replied calmly. "Do you think I have a snotty nose and that I need to wipe it?"

Then passing a finger in each of the four rings, he brought the four weights together in his prodigious grip, and using a single effort lifted the weights at arm's length in spite of the bruises made by the weights when they crushed his hand.

The feat caused a genuine astonishment among the spectators of this rare exploit, and Sandow was the first to congratulate Apollon. He might well have done so, for this feat of strength was quite simply unprecedented, and was something that certainly could

not have been done by anyone else.

Here is another strength feat performed by Apollon. The scene is set at my school in the Faubourg Poissonnière. At this time I had a student named Briançon who had a special barbell made for himself. The globes were mounted in the form of discs, and they looked like large versions of the candy wafers known as "pastilles" so that is why we gave the nickname of *Briançon Pastilles* to this weight. The bar was very flexible, and because of the shape of the "pastilles" was very easy to handle, so he had additionally arranged for it to be much heavier than an ordinary barbell. It weighed ninety-two kilos: forty-one kilos for each pastille and ten kilos for the bar itself. But there came a time when Briançon no longer wanted to practice with a huge weight, so he made a gift of his barbell to Victorius, and Briançon asked us to send it to him.

On precisely the same day that I was disassembling the device in order to send it off, Apollon stopped by to pay me a visit. He was accompanied by the secretary of the Weightlifting Club of France, Mr. Louis Chappellier; they had come to meet the strongman, Batta, who was at my establishment.

"What's that?" Apollon asked as he pointed to the barbell in question.

"That," I replied "is Briançon's pastille which I am sending to Victorius. Briançon just gave it to him as a gift."

"Oh," said Apollon simply, and he then changed the subject. During this time my servant continued to take the barbell apart and to pack it for sending. After taking off one of the pastilles, the boy needed to carry it to the other end of the room, and, I assure you, he had to do so with both hands and with much difficulty.

Apollon had seen the effort which the poor blighter had to expend, so when he saw that he was about to start back for the second trip with the second pastille, Apollon spoke. "Leave that there. Go on," he told him. "I'll carry that for you." Immediately seizing the pastille by the rim, he carried it thus in his outstretched arm. It was securely squeezed in his enormous grip until he had placed it at the other end of the room with no appreciable effort.

"Here!" he said to me in his funny southern accent, "Have a Pastille!"

If we remember that the pastille in question weighed forty-one kilos and that it was around twelve centimeters thick then we should be left awestruck after an exploit like this. I would certainly never have believed it if I had not seen it myself. But I did see it — with my own eyes — and it convinced me one further time that Apollon's strength was indeed limitless. In another type of lift, the athlete Batta (a man who possessed remarkable

grip strength himself) tried vainly to lift the pastille by the rim with both hands. He could not even succeed in lifting the pastille off the floor, and he therefore accorded Apollon an unbridled admiration particularly since he had personally witnessed the strongman lift the pastille. [Ed Note: It is extremely unlikely that Apollon (or anyone) could pinch grip a plate with one hand that a man like Batta could not pinch grip with two hands.]

Another day, Apollon came to 48 Faubourg Poissonnière, and there in a corner he spied a dumbbell with weights shaped like church bells. He asked me, "What's that thingamajig over there?"

I replied, "It's for deadlifting with two hands. You stand in front of the bell and grab hold of the bar which goes across. Right now it weighs live hundred pounds. John Grönn [1868-1913] who is extremely strong recently lifted it off the ground very easily and has since lifted it several times."

Apollon came up to the bar, and lifted it playfully. He looked on the interior and saw the bar that went from one bell to the other. He then passed his enormous hand over the center fill hole, grasped the bar and pulled with one hand while steadying himself with the other on a stair rail that was within his reach.

Slowly, as if it were a heavy carriage which was starting up, the enormous mass trembled and then rose. It remained suspended by the single hand of this colossus who had easily lifted with one hand that which the strongest men could barely budge with two. Those spectators who were present were absolutely dumb struck; they were speechless on account of their extreme surprise. The dumbbell weighed exactly five hundred pounds.

At another time Apollon came to see me after my return from the English weightlifting competition. I had taken Maspoli to the English championship and there he had won an easy victory over the strongest English amateurs. I told him of the ups and downs of the trip, and I said to him, "In London I saw a man who possessed a terrific grip strength. His name's Paddely, and he is an Englishman who is an instructor at the Sandow school in London. He broke Batta's record of 121 kilos on the Régnier Dynamometer (authorized position); the Englishman took it to 132 kilos. It was marvelous: the record was beaten by 11 kilos."¹¹

While I was speaking, I showed Apollon the Régnier Dynamometer which was hung in my anthropometric chamber. I use this device in order to register the strength of my students at different periods of their training. With his hands in the pockets of his jacket, Apollon looked at the dynamometer with disinterest as if it were an object of little importance. He had never wanted to try "all three little gadgets" as he had called them. I would have liked to have him try it just to see what he could do, but this was not exactly an easy task. Even so, I had an idea and as will be seen from what follows,

it was a good one.

"Well," I said to Apollon, "Poor old Batta who had the record for so long can no longer take it back from Paddely, a young man in the full flower of his strength. So you see my dear Louis, since Batta cannot be in the running any longer it means that this is just another record which has been lost to the French. What is worse, it will never again return to France, for I do not know of a single man who can win back the record."

During this conversation, I stole a glance out of the corner of my eye at the hearty but uncharacteristically pensive Apollon. I followed the thoughts as they made their sluggish way through the brain of this colossus. He contemplated and looked constantly at the dynamometer. I felt him weakening, so I attacked.

"Batta," I said to Apollon, "told me the other day, 'There is only one who could most certainly break my record, and that is Apollon. But he won't want to try your apparatus since he is too afraid of doing poorly. In any case, a strength feat without weights simply doesn't interest him; to him it's just a *gadget*.'"

While listening to my words, Apollon took his hands out of his pockets and reached out his enormous right hand toward the apparatus. He asked me, "How do you work this gadget?"

I showed him once and then put the needle in place and gave the device to Apollon who put his two huge hands on the grips and gave it a simple squeeze without even moving the muscles of his face. The needle of the dynamometer made a jump and on the first attempt came to 153 kilos thus breaking the Englishman Paddely's record by twenty-one kilos. Apollon returned the contrivance to me and said while rubbing his hands and making a grimace, "You won't catch me out again with your gadgets. That hurt my hands. I won't try it anymore."

Despite repeated entreaties, Apollon refused to touch the dynamometer any more. I reckon that on that day he could have easily reached 170 to 180 kilos on the dial, for he had neither enough time to press nor had he applied sufficient effort

One day in Bordeaux in 1888 Apollon was working in a fair in Jantien's Arena. Across from his booth was another housing two men who were then at the peak of their strength: Andre Brandelli (nicknamed "Little Andre of Paris") and Victor Jadin. Mutual friends of the three strongmen discussed among themselves the relative strength of these champions and at last they bet that Jadin could do some strength feat which Apollon could not duplicate.

After learning of this, Jadin replied that he defied any athlete — Apollon included — to swing-lift his famous dumbbell with the turning plates which he called "Jadin's Roller." This roller weighed 130 pounds and Jadin himself could lift it only with great difficulty since the bar was very thick and it turned in the plates. The proposal was repeated to Apollon and he replied "Bring the apparatus to me,

and you will see what I can do.”

Someone went to get Jadin who arrived soon afterward followed by several other athletes, among whom were Felix Bernard, Eugene Robert, and Little Victor. They all trooped into Apollon's booth with the famous dumbbell and threw it at the strongman's feet defying him to lift it. Apollon said to Jadin, “Lift it first, and we will see what happens.”

Jadin pulled himself together, grasped his roller, and with a great deal of difficulty, swing-lifted the weight a single time and then let it fall back to the ground.

Apollon looked this little audience, and asked, “How many people are here?” Twelve spectators were counted in the group. “Fine,” he said, “I will make a lift for every person here.” He grabbed the dumbbell, swing-lifted it, and counted, “One.” It descended and then came up again. He counted “Two.” Thus it went until he had counted out twelve times without dropping the dumbbell. Apollon raised the bell once more and said “Isn't there anyone else to oblige?” While he was tilting, the serving girl from the cafe where the athletes ate arrived to tell them that lunch was ready. Apollon lowered the dumbbell and then lifted it again a thirteenth time announcing in a loud stentorian voice, “This one's for the waitress!”

André Brandelli who was an extraordinary athlete has recounted to us a prodigious feat of strength performed by Apollon at the Bordeaux fair in 1889. André, who was very proud of his strength, had a barbell weighing 252 pounds, and he was the only person at this time who was able to lift it. He took the bell with him to Bordeaux, and when he had a big show he lifted his famous 252-pound barbell in two stages. It was a feat the likes of which no one had ever seen before.

Apollon was annoyed by André's claims that he was the only one who could lift his barbell, so one day while André was training, Apollon took his revenge. He removed his jacket and vest and gave the barbell a tentative heft. Then Apollon marshaled all his energy, came up to the barbell, and snatched it overhead with both hands in one swift movement without even stopping at his shoulders as André did. You would find it impossible to picture André's stupefaction. That is why you should never mention Apollon in front of little André, for he would turn bright red with anger.

Another time at Neuilly, Apollon was performing in the Marseille fair booth in a troupe of athletes that included Max Sergy, the well-known master of ceremonies who was himself an excellent wrestler. In order not to tire out the gentle colossus, the director had supplied Apollon with three false weights that were marked “20 Kilos” but which actually weighed only ten kilos apiece. The wrestlers called the ten-kilos “bogus weights” [*poids tocs*] and the real one of twenty kilos they called “bona fide weights” [*poids chouat*].

Apollon had given another name to the false weights; he called them “saucepans” because they sounded hollow. Apollon had been presented to the public as the king of strength and the only one in the world who pressed four twenty-kilo weights at every performance.

Now it happened that one day Apollon was a little under the weather. He had passed the night drinking champagne surrounded by fans and strength enthusiasts who had encouraged him to tell about his various adventures while downing glass after glass of champagne. Not wanting to work that day, the strongman claimed to be indisposed so as not to have to go on stage. Instead he went off to get a little rest.

Max Sergy loved practical jokes, so he got together with the other men of the Marseille troupe, and they resolved to play a little trick on Apollon. Seeing Apollon seated at the dining table enjoying a hearty luncheon to recuperate, the athletes hid the counterfeit weights and replaced them with the real twenty-kilo weights. Max, himself, was asked by his employer to introduce Apollon to the public during the first show which was scheduled to take place at four o'clock. Around 3:30 the honest strongman arose from the table slightly flushed and with an abdomen that was bulged out from the substantial meal which he had just finished. Apollon was drowsy and a good deal more inclined to go to bed than to dress for the parade of athletes. Finally, Marseille insisted, and Apollon got into his costume but he grumbled all the while.

The barker finished his patter, the public entered the ring, and the feats of strength began. Max came forward and said “Ladies and gentlemen, we have the honor of presenting the king of strength, Apollon, the strongest man in the world. He will prove this title to you by lifting four twenty-kilo weights which have been tied together as if he were picking up a feather. We beg you to give your attention to this feat of strength which is the only one of its kind in the world. Take note of the ease with which Apollon does his work!”

During this speech, Apollon was in the process of digestion, breathing as heavily as an ox, and rubbing both hands on his belly which was swollen by the huge meal that he had just consumed. The four authentic twenty-kilo weights were tied together and put in the middle of the ring. Max shouted, “Attention!”

Apollon beamed his most gracious smile, crouched down, gathered together the weights and picked them up, but when he discovered that they were too heavy, put them back down and rose up completely flustered. He shot a glance to the right, then a glance to the left toward the stony-faced wrestlers. Then he walked back a few steps, breathed deeply a little, rubbed his belly with his hands, and returned to the weights. He crouched down once again, gathered up the weights, picked them up, and found them . . . even heavier. He shot a glance to the right, a glance to the left and saw the luminous smiles on the faces of his fellow athletes. Then he understood that he was the victim of a practical joke. He stared daggers at Max and

announced in his *basso profundo* voice these words which were incomprehensible to the public but very clear to the wrestlers: "Ladies and gentlemen, ordinarily I have three saucepans, but I see that I have friends who do not like them. Well, that makes four bona fides. Fortunately, Apollon is always ready!"

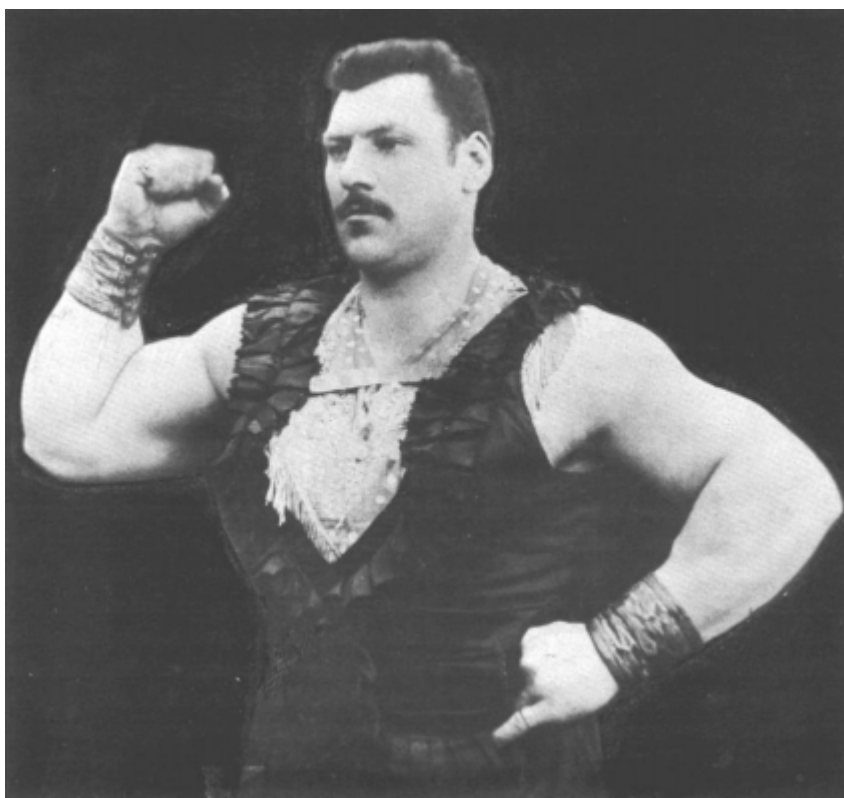
As soon as he had spoken these words, Apollon grasped the four weights and despite the discomfort that he felt from his luncheon, he lifted the quartet of weights as if they were feathers. Then, casting a look of triumph toward his friends, he marched around the ring with the enormous load at the end of his outstretched arm. The wrestlers were dumbstruck with admiration when they saw this feat of strength which was performed under the worst conditions, after a night passed without sleep and after a meal eaten with little prudence. Believing that he had to lift a mere fifty kilos, Apollon had taken no precautions and had gorged himself at lunch, and everyone knows that after a copious repast, it is nearly impossible to produce a serious effort.

Another time in Lille, Apollon experienced a misadventure with the iron bars which comprised part of his act. My friend, Léon Sée, has written about this incident in *La Culture Physique* in a curious article which you are about to read. It is titled:

Apollon's Prison Bars

Apollon's strength seemed to be nearly infinite. He performed the most stunning feats of strength; these include times when he pressed aloft four twenty-kilo weights tied together with a handkerchief in a single movement without even tensing his leg muscles or when he pushed the indicator on the Régnier Dynamometer to an extent which today sounds incredible. This strongman who called to mind an ancient Roman gladiator, this superman, this demigod of strength seemed to perform his feats almost effortlessly.

When San Marin put before him four weights, Apollon lifted them without even realizing that they were actually filled with more than eighty kilos of lead. What then was the extent of this superhuman strength? Unto what hitherto inaccessible heights might his strength be carried? Might he put up 120, 130 kilos? Would he one day do a two-handed jerk of four hundred pounds? No one knew because Apollon was, alas, as indolent as he was strong.



DRESSED FOR WORK, APOLLON SHOWS OFF HIS MASSIVE FOREARMS IN THE EARLY 1890s.

—PHOTO COURTESY THE TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

Nothing was more difficult than to make him lift the lightest barbell; neither the pleadings of his best friends nor promises of the most tempting rewards could make him perform a feat that would immortalize his name and show once and for all that he was an equal of Samson and Milo of Croton.

One person, however, exercised a great influence over this colossus: his wife. She was a small dark haired woman with an energetic face, and when she ordered sharply with her southern accent, "Come on, Apollon. Lift it!" her husband would slowly turn his big head with its tightly curled hair, give her a timid look, and the dumbbell which he had a moment before refused to lift because he "did not feel in top form" or because he had a "pain in his arm" would rise up. This would all be done with unforgettable ease—an ease that was discouraging to the other strongmen present and disconcerting to the experts who sought to know the limits of the giant's strength. But one evening Apollon took his strength to its full extent, and the modern Hercules performed a feat which almost certainly would have caused the mythic Hercules to hesitate. It was an impressive spectacle — fantastic even.

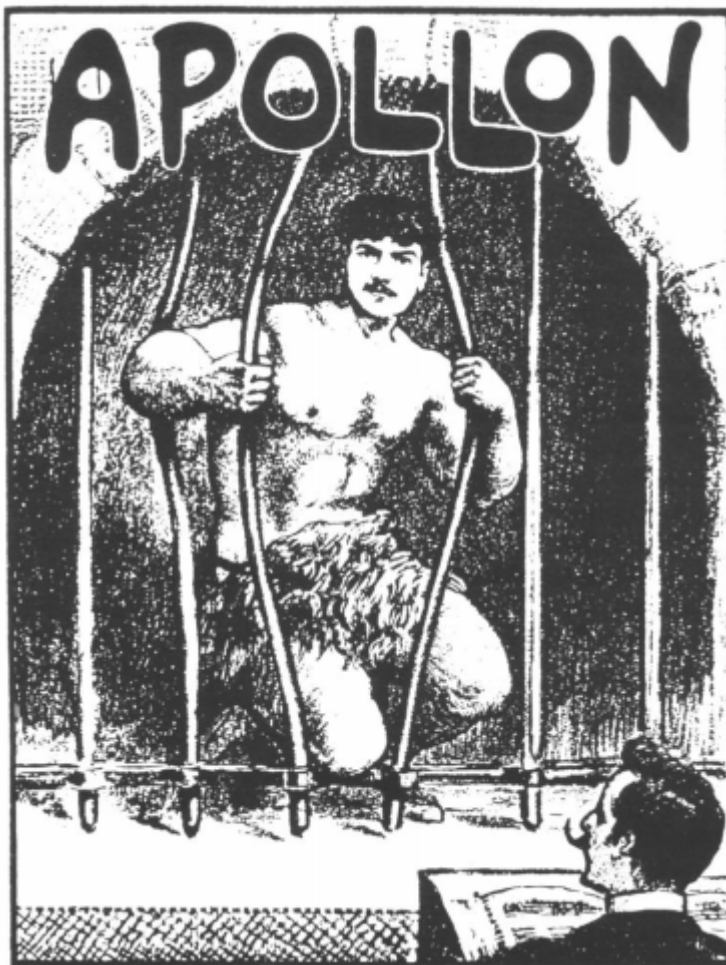
It was about nineteen years ago, and Apollon was performing in the music halls of Paris and the other major cities. His act consisted of unique and unforgettable feats of strength. The strongman was at that time twenty-five years old. His incomparable musculature and physique in all its enormity were completed by a superb head that conveyed energy and harmony; all went to create a unique being. Apollon was one of those phenomena of power that a capricious Nature produces perhaps once in ten centuries.

I have seen all the most renowned strongmen of the stage: Sandow with the superb physique; Batta, the Gentleman Athlete, who lifted a horse at arm's length; Cyclops, who bent and twisted coins. I have applauded Paris, the boat man, and I have admired John Grün, the breaker of horseshoes. But none of these acts were comparable

to that of Apollon. I do not know which artist of genius devised this thrilling scenario, but I am certain that no one could forget it after once seeing it.

When the curtain rises, the stage is in partial darkness. We can just make out on the stage enormous iron prison bars two meter high. All at once behind these bars we hear noises that break the suspenseful silence: several shouts and then footsteps of a fleeing man. Then, gunshots ring out over the heads of the audience, and the flash of those explosions briefly illuminate the inky darkness. A shadowy figure draped in a cloak runs across the stage behind the bars. This is the prisoner who seeks to escape from the fortress. This is Apollon.

The dark shape stops directly behind the iron gate, then two enormous hands seize it in an attempt to rattle the thick, metal bars. Suddenly, a huge, bare arm appears and passes between two of the bars. Is it really an arm? Is it not the leg of a giant? No, an enormous hand extends from the forty-four-centimeter fore-



THIS CONTEMPORARY DRAWING SHOWS APOLLON PERFORMING HIS "ESCAPING PRISONER" ACT AT THE FOLIES-BERGERE IN PARIS IN 1889.

arm, and it grasps the massive iron rods; this the arm of Apollon. Although the other arm is invisible, its hand grasps the adjacent bar, and using an irresistible pressure the two hands and the two bars slowly begin to move apart. In the gradually widening space a monstrous shoulder soon appears and pushes against one of the bowed rods. Both hands now seize the other bar. The monstrous arm, now clearly visible slowly extends, and through the yawning gap which he has just produced, the fugitive Hercules passes his entire body.

The powerful giant now appears on the other side of the bars and abruptly shrugs off his cloak just at the same moment that the spotlights flood him with their light, thus revealing his incredible physique in his silken tights. All of this action is so astounding, so terrific that several seconds pass before the breathless audience is able to explode with its seemingly endless applause.

Next, the strongman has his weights, barbells, and dumbbells brought out and completes his unforgettable entrance with several feats of strength. He juggles with a fifty-kilo weight and catches it with his outstretched arm; he performs a one-handed press with a short dumbbell weighing close to eighty kilos and then lifts an enormous 118-kilo barbell which even the strongest athletes can barely budge from the ground.

During the day Apollon's prison bars were displayed outside the theater or music hall like a ladder, and skeptical passers-by could come and exhaust themselves in vain attempts to bend the immovable bars.

It was in 1889, and Apollon had just arrived in Lille. He was to have his first performance that very evening at the Théâtre des Variétés in the rue Jean-Roisin [Desbonnet's note: today demolished]. His imposing equipment which included his dumbbells, his weights, and his enormous bars (still bent from his previous evening's performance) had been unloaded with great difficulty by

a large contingent of workmen. After having sent the first of these items to the theater, Apollon took the bars to a blacksmith whose address he had been given in order to refit the bars and to restore them to their original appearance. The smith was then to return the prop to the theater in the rue Jean-Roisin.

The blacksmith gladly accepted the job, and the strongman left with his mind at ease. Apollon thus contentedly lurched along the quiet, narrow streets of the Flemish capital as the sight of his oversized frame caused pedestrians to stare in amazement.

"How the devil could these bars have been damaged like this?" wondered the good Flemish worker aloud to his helper as his hammer gradually pounded the red-hot bars back into shape. "I wonder if I should perhaps temper them? That's it! I'll harden them until they are as strong as possible. There will no longer be any danger that they will bend again." So without realizing the terrible consequences of his deed, the blacksmith emptied several buckets of cold water on the heated bars, thus tempering them until they were nearly as hard as steel.

On that fateful evening I was with Desbonnet backstage at the theater, impatient to see the strongman once more in his extraordinary act. Apollon finished dressing, and during the intermission the prison bars were placed behind the lowered curtain, and there it was bolted solidly to the struts of the set. When Apollon declared that everything was ready, nearly all the stage lights were killed, and the curtain rose. The rifle shots were fired, and after the necessary running back and forth needed to set the scene, Apollon quickly fell to attacking the iron bars.

His powerful hands seized the two middle bars and the brawny muscles of this colossus produced their effort. But to his unspeakable surprise, nothing moved. Apollon pulled harder; he set his back into the task, but in vain. The bars refused to budge. Then without letting go, the strongman turned toward his wife who was standing in the wings. His anguished head was lowered, and with the unforgettable look of a wounded beast he said in a deep stage-whisper, "I don't know what's happening. I can't get through!"

Madame Apollon immediately suspected her husband of laziness; her severe, imperious little voice rose, and in her southern, country dialect she ordered, "You just hurry up and pull harder. Come on, go through the bars. Get a move on!"

Thus ordered, the strongman set himself once more to his task. Heedless of the performance, he threw the cloak which was constraining him off his shoulders, and pulled with all the strength of his enormous muscles. When he did so, the veins on his neck swelled to a terrific degree. The impact of his shaking caused the entire set to shudder, and in fact the whole building seemed to have been struck by a hurricane.

Little by little under the pressure of these prodigious, superhuman efforts, the bar began to bend. A profound silence reigned in the hall as the astonished spectators held their breath. The only sound was the "ugh!" which escaped from Apollon's enor-

mous chest every time he made a new effort. For the first time in his life Apollon was forced to exert himself the full extent of his strength; he had already pulled two of the bars toward one another; his powerful hands now seized both bars at the same time and inexorably closed the gap between them. When he let go, the bars were touching one another.

Despite severe bruising, Apollon could soon put his shoulder through. Then using his hand and back as if drawing a bow, he produced a final effort that was incredibly powerful. The half-broken bars widened, and through an opening that was just barely sufficient, the giant slowly and painfully slid his head, his torso, and finally his entire body through the bars.

Apollon had accomplished the most tremendous feat of strength of his entire career. He was panting and covered with sweat. His huge chest rose and fell like a blacksmith's bellows, and his gasps for breath could be heard clearly at the back of the theater. He then came forward toward the audience, staggering a little, his eyes bloodshot, his body worn out. He gave a weak flourish of his hand and said simply, "There. That's done."

When his weights and barbells were taken out to him he was notable to lift them. He was able to press an eighty-kilo weight no higher than his shoulder. He tried to juggle with his 160-pound weight, but on the first attempt he dumped it and it fell heavily, jarring the boards of the stage.

"I beg you to excuse me," he said winded and disoriented. "I don't know . . . what I . . . I don't feel well . . . I'm afraid . . . unable to do my feats. . . and to smash. . . the stage." He then waved to the audience and staggered offstage. No one in the theater said a word. The audience sat silent; they had the feeling that they had just witnessed something extraordinary.

In the wings, Apollon collapsed in a chair and lolled his head on to his chest. His forearms rested on his knees, and although they were normally of unusual thickness, now they were pumped up by the titanic effort which he had just accomplished. They must have measured at least forty-eight centimeters, and as they rested on the thighs of the devastated strongman, they seemed to have been deformed into something not quite human.

Apollon had always been a little paranoid, and forever after he remained convinced that on that day he had been the victim of a jealous rival's clever machinations.

Another day a robust young man named F. who had arms measuring forty-six centimeters, and calves of forty-seven centimeters, a chest of 1 meter 30, and weight of 115 kilos attended Apollon's show in a large northern city. He was very strong and superbly built. He was accompanied by a group of friends who were convinced that F. was the strongest man alive. Unfortunately, they made so much noise during the show that Apollon came toward them and asked them to be quiet. A few hotheads among them took this admonition rather badly since they believed that any behavior was permitted, trusting in the great strength of their friend, F. One thing

led to another, and despite the pleas of F., one of the hotheads came forward and said "Mr. Apollon, there is an amateur here who will undertake to do everything that you can do."

Apollon, who was about to begin working with his twenty-kilo weights, reddened and then paled when he saw himself challenged so discourteously. As his anger got the better of him he replied, "Really! Let this man come forward and we will have a good laugh."

F. stood his ground like a good fellow (he had, after all, said nothing in all this), but his friends pushed him to the middle of the arena so he could hardly refuse to participate, and upon my word, he made the best of a bad situation. Confident in his strength, F. resolved to do at least do a few nice arm extensions with Apollon. But the strongman was determined to teach the little smart aleck a lesson and not to cover him in easy glory gained from a measly twenty-kilo weight.

Apollon said, "Come on, then, sir. We'll see if you are strong."

F. came forward and said, "Mr. Apollon, with your permission, we will start with some arm extensions with twenty-kilo weights."

Apollon looked at him with a supercilious expression and answered, "An arm extension with a twenty-kilo weight? That's fine for children, sir. We, however, will start with four weights, and then we will begin to add a little more." He then had four weights tied together and announced, "I will start," as he lifted them overhead on the first attempt with a one-handed press. Then, after putting them back on the floor, he said, "Your turn sir."

After F. had seen the strongman lift the four weights as if they were feathers, he thought to himself, "These are hollow

weights. If they are easy for Apollon, they will be the same for me."

He approached the four weights, but when he attempted to lift them, he realized clearly that the weights were genuine. Troubled at having fallen into this hornet's nest where his reputation was in jeopardy, he marshaled all of his energy and pulled on the four weights in order to bring them to his shoulder with one hand. He was unable to do so, but he tried again and after several attempts succeeded in bringing the weights to his shoulder with one hand, thus showing that he actually was remarkably strong. But F. was bothered by the four weights which moved and fell back on his forearm thus hurting his hand and he was unable to get them higher than his shoulder.

Then Apollon grabbed the weights, and as the strongman pressed them up with his hands, he said these simple words to young F., "Go sir! Get off the stage. You're about as strong as my sister." Poor F. was forced to leave amid the laughter of the audience, and



IN 1926, APOLLON APPEARED AS "TRITON" IN THE MOTION PICTURE *MARE NOSTRUM* DIRECTED BY REX INGRAM. WITH APOLLON IN THIS PUBLICITY STILL IS KADA-ABD-EL-KADER, WHO PLAYED ULYSSES FERRAGUT IN THIS ALLEGORICAL FILM ABOUT THE SEA BATTLES OF WORLD WAR I.

—PHOTO COURTESY THE TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

A five hundred-page book would be insufficient to cite all the feats of strength accomplished by the colossus, Apollon.¹² What a pity that all his feats were not done under the control of official dynamometrists. Unfortunately, the Weightlifting Club of France still did not exist around 1889 at the time when Louis Uni was at the height of his strength and possessed the sacred fire which allowed him to accomplish so many feats of athletic prowess. How regrettable it is additionally that no one then considered making a full-body cast of this superman, this super athlete. The sight of this statue would inspire our sons and grandsons with admiration. I am filled with sadness when I think that nothing will remain of this marvel of strength and beauty when Apollon at last sleeps in the tomb and that only a few casts of his arm and leg will record the earthly presence of a demigod. While reading the account of the prodigious feats accomplished by this man and while looking at the different photographs in this work, our descendants will try in vain to reconstruct in their mind's eye the superb human edifice which was Apollon. Despite all their best efforts and their most vivid imaginings, the dream will forever remain a thousand times less than the reality. There has only been one Apollon; there will surely never come another.

Notes:

¹ Desbonnet's note: "Gone Today and replaced by the Northern Credit Bank."

² In a later article, Desbonnet admits that Apollon's appearance in Lille was not quite the surprise he implies in this chapter. At this time (1889), Desbonnet ran a school of physical culture, and an unnamed correspondent in Paris had sent him newspaper clippings describing Apollon's prowess. Desbonnet was immediately anxious to see this modern giant, and if possible, bring him to Lille to perform. He visited the manager of the Théâtre des Variétés who authorized the young man to go to Paris and seek out Apollon and engage him for the Lille music hall. Paris at this time was enjoying the Exposition Universelle, and Apollon had come to the city to entertain at this extravaganza. Unfortunately, by the time Desbonnet had arrived in the French capital, Apollon had departed for another engagement at Bordeaux, but he was able to negotiate with the strongman's manager, and he arranged for Apollon's appearance not only at the theater but also in his own gymnasium. Edmond Desbonnet, "L'apparence de l'athlète: La Grille d'Apollon," *La Culture Physique* 32.460 (August 1928): 241-2.

³ Probably no other piece of lifting equipment has fostered so many articles or so much speculation as Apollon's railroad axle. The best account is: Joe Roark, *Musclesearch* 20 (August/September 1988).

⁴ When I could, I have included the dates of prominent figures.

⁵ Marseille Aîné [the elder] was born about 1832 and died circa 1892. He was the head of a family of wrestlers who flourished in the first wave of the French athletic renaissance in the 1850's and 60's. Marseille also gathered around him a group of skilled but rather uncouth fighters who were able to hold their own in the rough and tumble world of fairs and vaudeville. Apollon's troupe consisted

of young, handsome, superbly muscular men, and the contrast between the two schools was dramatic, as the newspaper clearly indicates.

⁶ Surier became a well known writer on the subject of physical culture. He wrote two popular works, *Comment on devient beau et fort* [*How to Become Handsome and Strong*] (Paris: *La Culture Physique*, c. 1905) and *Forts par la culture physique* [*Strength through Physical Culture*] (Paris: *La Culture Physique*, c. 1915). His greatest contribution to the field, however, came as editor of the influential magazine *La Culture Physique* in February of 1904.

⁷ "Le cirque est plein du haut en bas," is a direct quote from the Toreador song in Bizet's famous opera Carmen.

⁸ This is a sly dig at Apollon's provincialism. By making an exclamation in the dialect of the *langue d'oc*, spoken in the wilds of south France, the writer is showing that Apollon is anything but a sophisticated Parisian.

⁹ Georges Strehly was author of *L'acrobatie et les acrobates* [*Acrobatics and Acrobats*] (Paris: Delagrave, 1903) and was a frequent contributor to the various Desbonnet publications.

¹⁰ The Rasso Trio formed and reformed many times over the years, but it nearly always consisted of extremely powerful men. Apollon and his feisty wife demonstrate the respect other strongmen had for the Rasso's strength and abilities. The men comprising the trio were especially talented when they encountered the French strongman. Godefroy Nordmann was extremely arrogant in demeanor, and looked down his nose at nearly everyone. By contrast, the other two members of the troupe, Heinrich Hertzog and Johann von Baar, were as generous and kind as their colleague was conceited and self-important. This version of the Rasso Trio flourished around 1890-95. For additional information, see David Webster *Sons of Samson: Volume 1 Profiles* (Irvine: author, 1993).

¹¹ "Paddely," was actually "James Pedley," and the year was 1902. The British light heavyweight had a well deserved reputation for great strength. Sandow himself is said to have remarked that Pedley was "the strongest Englishman that he had ever met." (Tromp can Digge-len, "My Strength Memoirs," *Muscle Power* 16.2 (August 1953): 66). This estimation of the man's power was echoed by such luminaries as George Hackenschmidt and W.A. Pullum. It was in the area of grip strength, however, that Pedley excelled. He was famous for the ability to lift a two hundred-pound dumbbell by the endnuts using only the tips of his thumbs and fingers. A full description of this as well as a comparative chart of his capabilities on the Régnier and Collins Dynamometers can be found in David Willoughby's *The Super Athletes* (South Brunswick: Barnes, 1970), 216-17, 233.

¹² Desbonnet, did, in fact, write a book about Apollon which appeared in the early 1920s: *Un demi-dieu de la Force: Apollon* (Paris: Librairie Athlétique, 1923). It was a slender, illustrated paperback originally produced as a premium for those subscribing to either of the Desbonnet magazines.

