

ould say, "and, after that, the match with the Big Feller."

"And then we go traveling," said August, dreamily. "Vienna and Berlin and Dresden—"

"Huh!" said Garrity. "What's the matter with Cork and Dublin?"

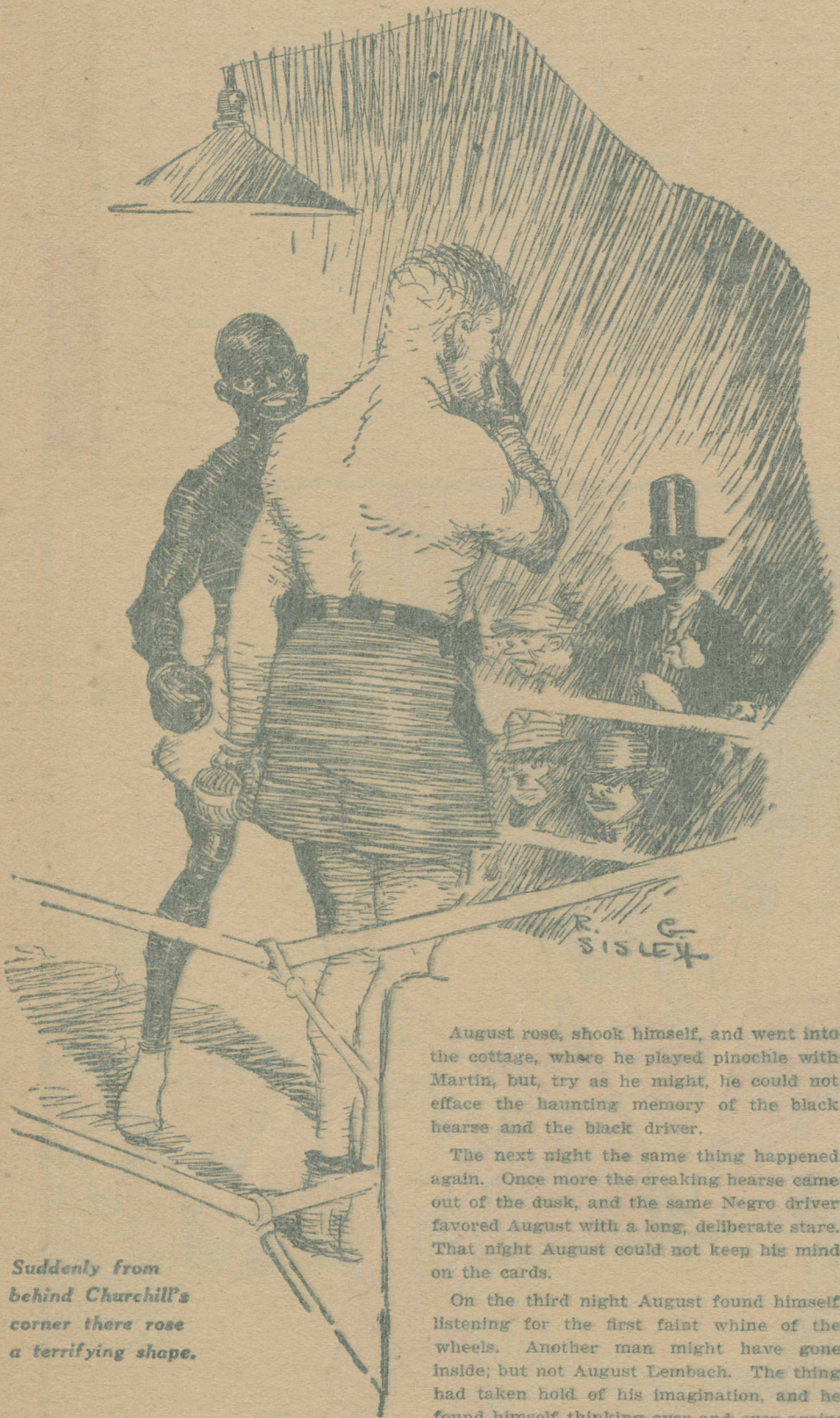
"O, well," said August with resignation, "I suppose we see them, too, eh?"

"See that!" bragged Martin, proudly. "He ain't worrying about this coon. He ain't even worrying about fighting the champion. O, I tell you, this boy ain't got a nerve in his body!"

That evening, just at dusk, August sat alone on the front porch of the cottage inhaling the fragrance of the roses and drinking

The somber equipage drew abreast of the house, and then, for the first time, August noticed the driver—an immensely tall, cadaverous looking man in a black frock coat and an old fashioned stovepipe hat.

As if in answer to August's scrutiny, the tall driver turned his head, and August saw, with a vague and unidentified tremor, that the driver was a Negro, as black as the hearse upon which he rode and of which he seemed so much a part. Through the gathering gloom the whites of his eyes were plainly visible, and, turning his long neck, the Negro continued to stare at August until the hearse was fifty feet down the road, the wheels keeping up their constant, whining song.



Suddenly from behind Churchill's corner there rose a terrifying shape.

in the quiet beauty of the scene. From the dining room at the rear of the house came faint murmurs; the camp followers were engaged in their nightly game of craps, but the cries for "Big Dick, the bartender," and "Eighter from Decatur," seemed very far away. August's feet were on the porch railing, but, in reality, August was miles away from anything which savored of fighting and violence. In fancy, he was where the blue of the distant mountains was beginning to turn purple and the long shadows were creeping over the cañons and ravines.

Out of the stillness of the evening there came a creaking, whining sound, a false note in the symphony of the dying day. It sharpened to a squeal of protest, and August turned his head. Along the yellow, dusty road came a queer looking vehicle. At first August thought it was only a heavily loaded wagon, but as it came nearer he made out the lines of a hearse—a rusty, black hearse, its curtains drawn and its shabby plumes jerking stiffly as the creaking wheels jolted in and out of the ruts in the roadway.

August was conscious of a sense of resentment. What business had a hearse to be out at this time in the evening, and on this quiet country road? But, to save his life, he could not have taken his eyes off the thing.

August rose, shook himself, and went into the cottage, where he played pinochle with Martin, but, try as he might, he could not efface the haunting memory of the black hearse and the black driver.

The next night the same thing happened again. Once more the creaking hearse came out of the dusk, and the same Negro driver favored August with a long, deliberate stare. That night August could not keep his mind on the cards.

On the third night August found himself listening for the first faint whine of the wheels. Another man might have gone inside; but not August Lembach. The thing had taken hold of his imagination, and he found himself thinking over and over again:

"What does it mean? What does it mean?"

That was his first sleepless night. Garrity, in the next room, heard the giant thrashing about in his bed, and attributed it to nervousness. He rose and tiptoed to the door. August was sitting by the side of his bed looking out of the window upon the road.

"G'wan back to bed!" said Garrity, roughly. "What's the matter with you, anyway? Are you worryin' about that coon?"

"What coon?" asked August, with an undeniable start.

"Why, this Churchill."

"No," answered August, honestly. "I wasn't thinking about him at all."

"Well, then," demanded Garrity, "what's eating you? Are you worryin' about anything?"

"I don't know, Martin," said August, heavily. "I don't know. I just can't seem to get to sleep."

"Aw, forget it!" scolded Garrity. "Get back in the hay and go to sleep!"

Obediently, August rolled himself in his blankets, but sleep would not come, and in the morning he refused to touch his breakfast.

"They're all like this before a big fight," said Martin to the sparring partner. "I used to worry my head off toward the end

of my training. But that was when I'd been some time in the game. We'll have to kid this feller along and keep him cheerful."

"A swell chance!" said the sparring partner, moodily. "Yesterday he rammed me with that right hand and loosened three teeth, and all the sucker would say was that he thought I was going to duck it."

"Praise be," said Martin, "he's still got the wallop. He'll be all right when he gets in the ring."

But the next night, and the next, the black hearse moved slowly past the training quarters, and always when August was alone on the porch. The big fighter slept little those nights, and when he did, his rest was disturbed by dreams of a tall, cadaverous Negro, whose white eyes bored through and through him like hot gimlets.

On the night before the battle there was a pale moon, and at 2 o'clock in the morning August, lying wide eyed on his bed, with every muscle set and tense, heard a sound which drew him creeping to the window, with cold shivers playing up and down his backbone. Out of the dark to the south came the unmistakable whining of wheels and the soft, muffled thud of shod hoofs. A black shape loomed against the yellow ribbon of the roadway, seemed to hang for an instant motionless, and then moved forward at a snail's pace.

Hardly daring to breathe, August watched every detail of the loathed vehicle emerge from the darkness, complete to the last tattered plume. There, on the box, was the tall Negro driver, his upturned face ghastly in the moonlight and his white eyes fixed steadily upon August's window. August shrank back behind the curtain, but he felt those eyes even in the dark. When he dared to look again, there was the hearse, standing in front of the house, the driver's face still upturned to the window.

Martin Garrity, asleep in the next room and dreaming of money, leaped out of his bed at the sound of a strangled cry, and an instant later he was shaking August by the shoulder.

"For the love of heaven, Owgust, don't take on like that! You're worse than a woman with the hysterics! What's the matter?"

It was five minutes before August could tell him, and Martin strode to the window and drew the curtain aside.

"Come and look!" said the manager, sternly. "There's nothing there. A hearse? I tell you, you dreamed it. You've had a nightmare, Owgust, that's what ails you."

After a time Martin believed that he had convinced August Lembach of the unreality of the nocturnal vision.

"Just to think," muttered the manager, as he again sought his repose, "to think of a big slob like that havin' nerves! And seein' things, too! I'll be glad when this fight is over."

Sledgehammer Garrity sat on a rubdown table in the dressing room of the fight pavilion. He seemed almost cheerful.

"It's the fight that will divert him," said Martin, sagely. "You see how much better he is already. Listen, now, Owgust. Waste no time with this coon. Go right after him. He's got a jaw like a pie crust. Give him the old one-two: the left to the belly and the right to the jaw. O, man, but it's a fine house they have out there!"

"That's good," said August. "And don't you want me to box this coon?"

"Divvle the bit!" said Martin, emphatically. "Hang it on him the first round, if you can. Come on, now, we're goin' out. Gather up them buckets and things."

August strode down the aisle to the ring with the manner and bearing of a real champion. After all, here was something to keep his mind off hearse and such unpleasant subjects. The crowd gave him a hearty welcome, for he was the favorite, save in a portion of the gallery set apart for the persons of color.

Churchill, a chunky, coal black Ethiopian, with an immense mop of woolly hair, was already in his corner. He leaped across the ring and showed every tooth in his head as he offered his homely black paw to August.

"All I says," chuckled Churchill, "is may de bes' man win, white or black!"

"The winner will be white!" snapped Martin Garrity. "You bet your spare wool on that, coon."

"That," said Churchill, who seemed to be a jovial soul, with a sense of humor, "is a matter which we two gentlemen am about to decide, an' not with ouah mouths, eitheh!" He pranced back to his corner, immensely pleased with himself.

"Seem lak to me," he remarked to Pete Gilman, "as if that Dutch boy ain't happy this evenin'." He shook hands all right, but his hand was as cold as a lizard's tail. Pete, you reckon he's nu'vous?"

"Shouldn't wonder," said Gilman. "Hurry up and get these gloves on!"

Martin Garrity watched his protégé with the eye of a hawk, and found nothing amiss with his bearing.

"He's forgotten all about his scare last night," thought Martin. "I used to be the same way; all right when I got into the ring."

Almost before August realized it, he was standing in the angle of the ropes, listening to the final announcement of the referee.

"These men have agreed—twenty rounds—straight Queensberry rules—winner to be matched—"

"Remember now, Owgust," Martin was saying as he leaned over from behind. "Remember! Get in one on his jaw as soon as you can. This coon ain't game, and he won't stand the gaff. If he won't mix it with you, feel him out for a while, but get in that good slam at his jaw as soon as he leaves an opening."

"Sure!" said August. "Sure!"

"Are you all ready, down there?" whispered Pete Gilman. "As soon as the bell rings, up with you on that chair!"

There was an instant of silence. The referee glanced at the timekeepers and then swung his right hand into the air.

"Let her go!" he cried.

As the bell clanged, August took a step out of his corner toward the middle of the ring, but what was that commotion in the other angle of the ropes? Suddenly from behind Churchill's corner there rose a terrifying shape—a tall, cadaverous Negro in a rusty, black frock coat with white cotton gloves on his hands, and, horror of horrors! an ancient stovepipe hat upon his head! And the eyes of this apparition—the large, white eyes—were fixed upon August in a stare that every nerve of his body remembered.

Some time after that August awoke with a shudder. In his nostrils there was a strange, penetrating odor which caused him to gasp and move his head from side to side, as if to escape from it.

"There, now," said a voice, which he dimly recognized as belonging to Martin Garrity. "There, now, you're coming out of it, all right. Easy." Martin was pressing a fat, green bottle of smelling salts to August's nose. August blinked a few times and looked about him. He was back in the dressing room, which seemed overfull of strange faces, in which, despite his dazed condition, August read sympathy or reproach.

"O-o-o-h!" grunted August. "Did you see it, Martin?"

"Did I see what?" Martin's voice rose almost to a yell. "I saw you walk right up to that coon and drop your hands at your sides, that's what I saw! And you let that coon cop you with the first punch! Did I see it?"

"Yes, sir," said one of the reporters, "it seemed to me that he stuck out his jaw to be hit!"

"Do you think he was doped?" chimed in another earnest searcher for information.

"Yes!" said Martin bitterly. "He was doped with what dopes most of 'em, a good wallop on the chin, the big Dutch pig!"

But August minded none of these things. He went quietly back to sleep, and it took two doctors an hour to bring him to consciousness again.

"He's had a shock of some kind," said one of the medical men, "something beside the blow."

"That's it!" said Martin, savagely. "Get him an alibi of some kind, because he needs one bad."

At the same moment "Bud" McManus and Pete Gilman were sitting down to a thick beefsteak in the back room of an all night restaurant, with a cold quart on the floor beside them.

"You're a marvel!" said Bud, lifting his glass.

"Well," said Gilman, modestly, "there's a lot of angles to this fight game, and a smart fella has to know 'em all. This was a good game to work on a Dutchman, but it wouldn't do to try it on an Irishman."

"And why not?" asked Bud. "An Irishman has got a goat to be got the same as anybody else."

"Because," said Pete, "an Irishman would have loaded up a scatter gun with slugs and shot old 'Sad-face' plum off that hearse! A little more of the grape, Bud?"