

A Boxing Bout with the Czar

Willie Pantzer and his Imperial Pupil—Story of an Extraordinary Encounter

Of course, I've had a lot of queer times, off and on," mused Willie Pantzer, originator of the sensational act, in which, with his troupe, he is now appearing in "Jack and the Beanstalk" in Auckland. "A person can't go roaming up and down the world, year in and year out, without strange experiences befalling him. Humping into a war or two or a revolution now and again is to be expected when you lay your course over Europe and the two Americas. But I count the queerest time of all was when I taught boxing to the present Czar."

It was in his dressing-room at His Majesty's Theatre that Pantzer thus spoke. He had just come off the stage, and the roar of applause his act provoked was just dying down.

"It's not such a bad life either," he said, as he started to double-hand a huge rough towel across his muscular shoulders; "I'm thirty-one, and good for a lot of years of strenuous life yet; and I've been an acrobat ever since I could remember."

"Yes; but what about teaching Nicholas the noble art?"

"Oh, you want to hear about the Czar? Well, as I said, it was queer. A few years back I was playing an engagement at the Aquarium, St. Petersburg, when my manager told me one night that an officer from the Court wanted to see me. I said all right, and in a few minutes he was back with a gorgeously uniformed Russian. The officer informed me that the Czar was interested in my work. He didn't tell me why, but made no end of inquiries about myself. He wanted to know if I was any relation of the Pantzer who taught Emperor Alexander III. Weight-lifting and other athletics. Now, that was my father, and when I said so the information seemed to please him. When he finished cross-examining me, he went out and cross-examined my manager. He evidently wanted to be satisfied about me. Incidentally, I might mention he asked me my opinion about politics and the conditions of his country, and when I said I knew nothing about either and was not interested in such affairs, he grew more cordial than ever.

"He must have taken back a good report, for a day or two later I was commanded to go to the palace. Of course, I went; but I had to go to school first—that is, a Court ceremonial officer told me a lot of things I was and was not to do; also, how I was to dress. I had to get gold buttons sewed on my dress coat and make preparations. Then I was met by another officer of the Czar and driven to the Palace. At the gate I had to be identified by the first man—the one who waited upon me in my dressing-room. I was photographed and searched. These preliminaries through, I was taken into the presence of the Czar. There he was in one of the reception rooms, and everybody about him was in uniform. I had to advance through them and speak to him. He made it very easy.

"I've heard of you," he said, "and I would like to see you perform, but," he added, with a shrug of his shoulders, "circumstances are against me attending the Auditorium."

"He spoke in French, but it was a Muscovite shrug of the shoulders, and it conveyed that there were better jobs going than that of Czar.

"I've sent for you," he went on, "because I wish to see your method of exercise. I am not satisfied with my system of physical training."

"We went into another room, the officers following. It seemed that they were there to keep an eye on me. The Czar then asked me to go through some of the feats I performed on the stage. So I stripped to the silk tights I had put on underneath my dress clothing and stood before him. He felt my muscles and said:

"I would like to be as strong as that."

"I turned somersaults for him and did as much of my performance as was practicable without paraphernalia. He was most interested, and laughed and talked to his officers about me as if

there wasn't a nihilist in his kingdom. "What exercises should I take?" he asked after a time.

"I looked at him said said he should box."

"Can you box?" he asked. "I showed him my cauliflower ear, and explained that it was a souvenir of the game. He examined it with great curiosity, and said he had no desire to wear such an adornment.

"But I have often wished to learn boxing," he said; "it is an American sport. Are you American?"

"I told him I was a naturalised citizen, coming from an English mother and a German father. That also won his interest.

"It was arranged that I should give him boxing lessons. But we had to wait. Ordinary boxing gloves would not do, so the officers of the Court informed me. So, under my direction two pairs of gloves—fine silk, stuffed with the softest eiderdown—were made. His were designed so that he could deliver a good blow, and mine so that if I did hit him—well, there would be no cauliflower ear!

"I was asked what the Czar should wear, and when I said a gymnasium suit would be best—sweater and knickers—the Court officers were horrified. They pronounced it out of the question. Finally the Palace wardrobe fitted him out in a costume of silk, cut loose, so as to give him freedom of movement, without making him look like a pug.

"When the details of stage management were complete, it was arranged that I should again attend the Palace, where a room had been fitted up, all sorts of provision being made for soft falling.

"You must not hit the Czar," I was cautioned, "Show him everything, but don't hit him."

"Suppose I should become a little excited some time and send one in?" I asked.

"You must not," was the direction, which, of course, made it very difficult for me.

"He was pleased as a boy when we finally got the gloves on, and I began to teach him how to dodge a swing. As I had instructions not to hit him, this he found easy. The fun began when I asked him to hit me. He was timid about it, and didn't try very hard at first, but as I side-stepped, ducked, and parried—at the same time encouraging him—he warmed up. When, however, he found he could not touch me, he grew amazed, and wanted to know how it was he couldn't get one home on me. So I showed him, and even before the lesson was over he had grasped some of the principles of the science.

"Lessons went on for three weeks. I taught him how to hit in a way to overcome a parry, and finally he caught me a good blow in the stomach. I made a fake fall, and in a moment he was apologising. I laughed and showed him my stomach muscles, and asked him to hit me as hard as he could. At first he did not like the idea, but finally he went at me, only to find he hurt his arm with the jolt more than he hurt me. That astonished him, for I don't suppose he ever hit a man in his life—at least, not in that part of his anatomy. I couldn't resist showing him a little trick.

"If your Majesty will permit me, I'll show you something," I said.

"I took off my glove and doubled up my fist, and advanced it toward his solar plexus. Half-a-dozen officers rushed forward in an instant.

"Proceed," commanded the Czar, who was interested.

"I gave him just a twist of the knuckles in the solar plexus, and he jumped back in surprise. I don't suppose anyone had ever dared to do such a thing to him before.

"What would happen if you were to strike me there?" he inquired.

"I didn't tell all that would likely occur, but just remarked that he would be knocked out, using the English phrase. He speaks perfect English, by the way.

"He would have me explain the knock-out, and I told him how Corbett had been outed by Fitzsimmons by a solar-plexus blow, upon which he wanted to

hear of the other prize fights, and had me show him how the trick was done—on one of his officers.

"He gradually got some ring craft, throwing off timidity and coming in and hitting good and hard. At times he got worse in. One day when I was not looking he made my nose bleed. In an instant he was all apologies, but when I told him that was part of the game he was delighted.

One day I showed him an uppercut, and after he had practised it on me for a while, he suddenly turned round on one of his officers and knocked him out. I counted ten over him when he didn't come to in the prescribed time; the Czar was tickled immensely, and tried to catch some of the others. It struck me I would be getting myself unpopular.

"I can whip you all now," said the Czar one day to his officers.

"At the end of three weeks I had to leave St. Petersburg to go on tour. The Czar did not want me to go. You see I had changed him from the little father into the little pug. He said he would make me an officer in the household troops, if I would stay with him. He had an idea that it would be a good thing if the officers of his guard learnt boxing, and that the game should be introduced among the men.

"But when one had wandered up and down the earth all his years he could not settle down to a steady job. I knew St. Petersburg would prove deadly dull, even if you were a favourite round the Court. And besides, it wasn't the most pleasant thing in the world to get up day after day and have even the Czar pummel him and not be able to swing a left into his beard. And I never liked those silk gloves, anyway. When you got a bit from them it felt like mother putting violet powder on you, they were so soft. So I refused to stay. The Czar gave me 1,000 roubles and this diamond ring."

The acrobat showed a huge diamond, which he says is almost too big to wear. But seeing it was given to him by the Czar of all the Russias, he has a better excuse for it adorning his hand than most people.

"And what do you think of the Czar?" he was asked.

"I would not think him very strong," said Mr. Pantzer. "He is a bit jumpy and nervous. But he would throw off his brooding at times, and give me a good rough up. I would not say he was lacking in physical courage. He leads about the most uncomfortable life in the world, I should say—not being able to trust anyone about him. I guess I'd rather be an acrobat."

State-owned Newspapers.

Although State-owned newspapers in native dialects such as the Government of India have decided to issue a new departure, the King is nevertheless a pretty extensive newspaper proprietor. His best journalistic property is the "London Gazette," which is sold at a shilling and makes a steady profit of £20,000 a year. Many Government departments have their organs in the Press, the Board of Trade issuing two—the "Labour Gazette," which comes out monthly, and the weekly "Board of Trade Journal." This latter can boast of a wider range of correspondents than any other journal in the world. Every officer in the British Consular Service is bound by official regulations to keep it supplied with items of commercial interest.

Ladies' Club Bar.

Boston (Mass.) is thrilled with horror. The Madison Club a highly exclusive ladies' social institution—has started a bar! One result is a split in the membership. Another has been the passing of a resolution by the Women's Christian Temperance Union to the effect that "the drinking of high-balls by women is a disgrace to the city." Parents are being urged not to allow their daughters to join the club that has a bar; and the correspondent of the "Daily Chronicle" finds all the evidences of a characteristically impassioned American crusade. On the whole, we are rather disposed to side with the crusaders.

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