The Life

OF

"Starlight"

(E. W. ROLINS)

Ex-Middle Weight Champion of Australasia

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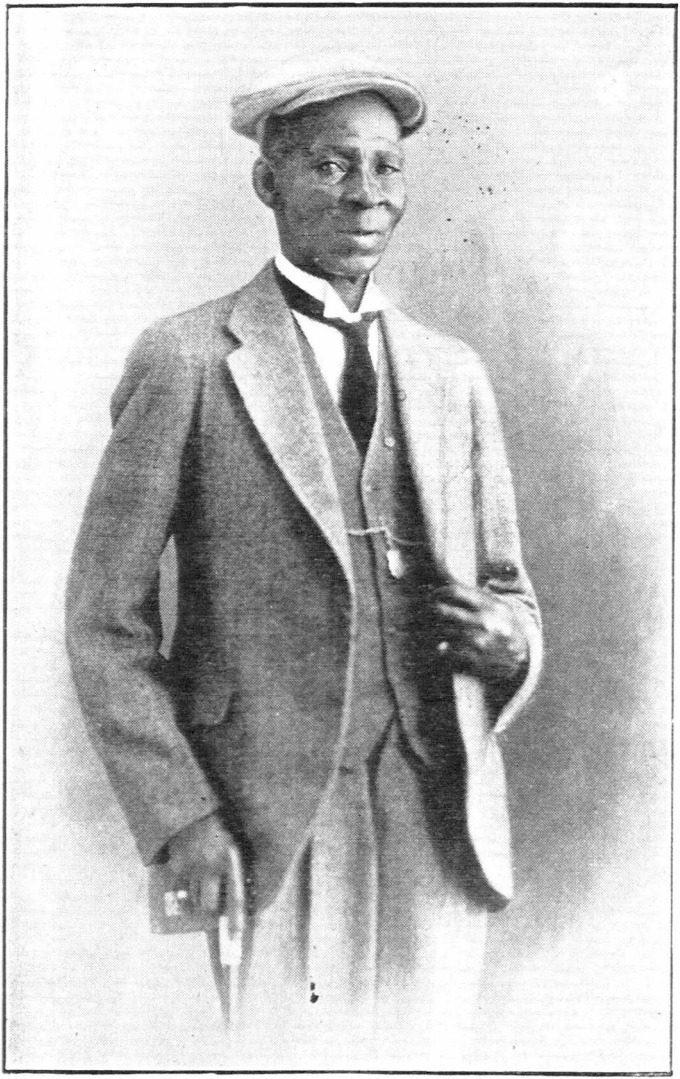

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"Starlight" at the age of seventy-five.

Foreword

THIS little sketch is compiled from memory. In the main it is correct. I have avoided any exaggeration. Throughout my career I fought, roughly, 200 fights in England and Australasia

"STARLIGHT."

Melbourne, April, 1928.

The Life of "Starlight"

SHAKESPEARE said that "Man in his time plays many parts." I can vouch for the truth of the statement after my seventy-five years' experience of this world. I have known the bitterness of failure and the sweetness of success; the company of the great, and the company of the derelict. My way have been devious ones, taking me into the highways and byways of life. From the palm-fringed banks of the Demerara River to the coral-banked pearling grounds of Northern Australia is a far cry. It is a farther and a much more fantastic cry from pearling lugger to the Mecca of sportsmen—the National Sporting Club, London—and the company of the King of England.

My life has been a kaledeioscopic one, in which scenes and faces in East, West, North and South have passed in swift review. Looking back upon it all I have no regrets. I played the game as I thought it should be played, according to the rules, and without fear or prejudice.

When I commenced boxing at the late age of thirty-four, I had already battled with seas, men, and circumstance, and was thus well-fitted for the rigours of the ring. I can tell you that in the day when I fought, boxing was not the pillow-cushion stunt it is now. But of that more anon.

Those first battles with seas and circumstance remain in my memory. There were nights on

hurricane-swept sailing ships when it seemed to me that the whining rollers that broke on board out of the darkness were hounds of Hell, and that their foam was the froth from their jaws as they panted after a victim.

However, it's a great life if you don't weaken. When one is at the top of a mast in a heavy sea one doesn't need to. Weakness in those circumstances is the surest means of getting a passport for the Golden Stairs or the Devil's Colliery.

I was born in 1852 near Georgetown, capital of British Guiana, and it was in this region, on the shores of the picturesque Demerara River that I spent my boyhood. The wanderlust seized me early, and I could never submit to the discipline of school or home life. For two years I was at a convent school in Georgetown; but, I am afraid, I was a bad pupil. My father, who had fought in the First West Indian Regiment in the Crimean War, was chief coachman to Governor Cartwright, of Demerara, and he was high up in Masonic circles.

I ran away from school, and got a job gathering peel on a sugar cane plantation at two dollars (about 8/4) a week, but I had been there only about six weeks when a coloured policeman came along, and said I must return home. We walked the fifteen miles from the plantation to my home, and my return was the signal for a gathering of all our relations to see the prodigal son restored to the bosom of his family. They all wanted to know why I had run away, and I told them that I did not like being flogged for not knowing my lessons. My father gave my mother strict injunctions to keep me until he returned, and she occupied the interval in telling me funny stories. She used to give me a shilling or sixpence a week for my school fees.

but I used to spend most of it on lollies and fruit. There were no picture shows then for us to spend our money on.

When my mother died I was nine years of age, and had returned to school, and improved my education a good deal. Her death marked the end of what home life I had until I married, for after that father never bothered about me, nor me about him, and I began my long career of wandering—as sailor, cook, pearl diver, boxer, and any other trade at times which would provide for my immediate necessities. My Uncle Tom, who was a sergeant of police in Demerara, took me to live with him, and I had wide-eyed visions of being a policeman; but I soon discovered that I was being trained more as a housemaid than as a policeman, and after three months I kicked over the traces.

"My mother never reared me for this caper," I told my uncle. "Good-bye; I'm going to paddle my own canoe. In thirty or forty years' time you may or may not see me."

I took my hat and coat, for I had no boots, and thus equipped I started out on my long life of wandering. The sea called me irresistibly, and I longed to see the strange lands beyond it. So down to the wharf I went in search of a job, despite the fact that I was little more than ten years old at the time.

"Well, darkie, what do you want?" a man on one of the ships at the wharf asked.

"I want to go to England," I replied; and he took me to the skipper of the barque, Polly Greenwich.

"Can you climb the mast and furl a sail?" he asked me.

I assured him boldly that I could do anything, and he signed me on as a seaman at £2 a month.

I rushed back to my uncle's, greatly excited, and proudly announced that I was a full-blown sailorman. My uncle gave me a few dollars, and rigged me out with seaboots and a monkey jacket, and I was off on what was destined to be more than fifty years of travelling in many parts of the globe.

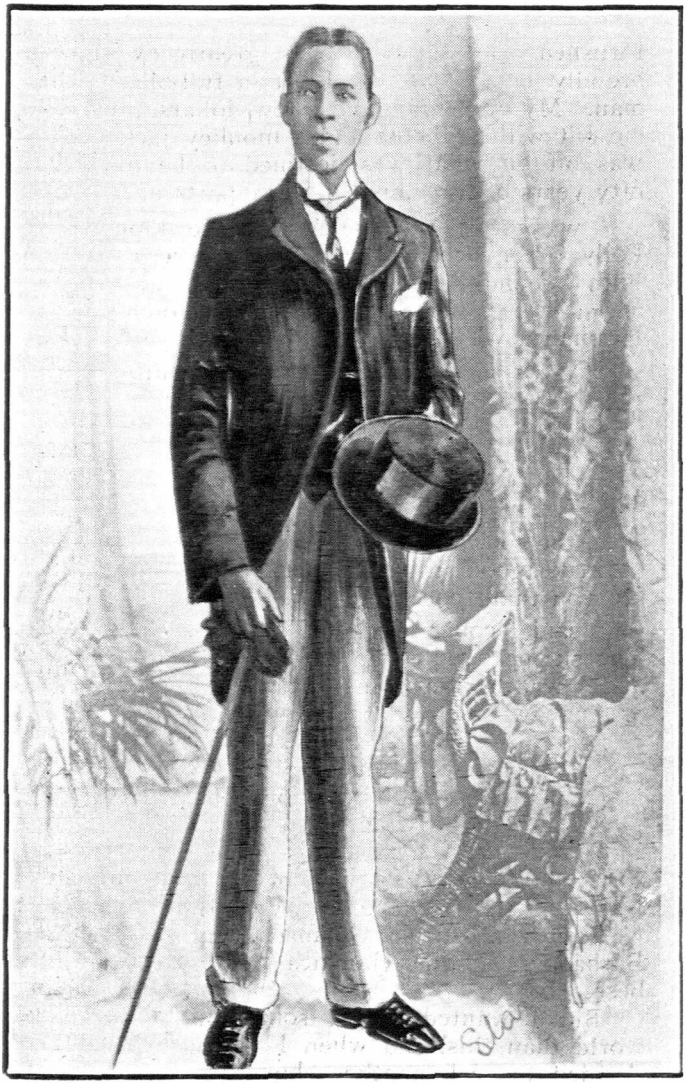
I was fortunate in being with the skipper of the Polly Greenwich, for he treated me very well, and both he and his wife, who sailed with him, did me many kindnesses. They were Scotch folk, and I remained with them for about five years.

My initial voyage lasted three months, but for the first month I could not take much interest in anything. I was too busy "heaving to," both over the side of and about the ship.

"Now, look here, Edward. You'll never make a sailor," the skipper said to me one day. "However, the cook is dead, and we'll give you a chance to make good in that department of marine line. Do you think you could cook?"

I said I could try, and I was put in the galley. The skipper's wife had taken over the cook's job, and I was her assistant. Between the two of us we managed to feed the crew, and she taught me all that I know about ship's cooking. She treated me as one of the family, which consisted of two boys and a girl. The skipper had his home at Greenock and during the five years that I was with him I always stayed at his place when we were ashore. Our usual voyage in the Polly Greenwich was from Greenock to the West Indies, calling at Georgetown, British Guiana, Grenada, St. Lucia, Barbadoes, Cinquet, Jamaica, Montserrat and Berbese.

But I wanted to see something more of the world than this, and when I was about sixteen I decided to seek another ship, although both the



"Starlight" at the age of forty-seven.

skipper and his wife had been extremely kind to me. When I told them of my intention, they did not want me to go; but the wanderlust had seized me. I took train from Greenock to London, my worldly wealth consisting of £10, for which I had to thank the skipper and his wife.

In London I was a stranger in a strange land, and in the new found wonders of the giant city I soon lost my sense of proportion. I was staying in a sailors' boarding-house near the docks, my board costing me £1 a week, and it was not long before I was in with a crowd of sailors. They plied me with drink, and made a great fuss of me. I was greatly flattered at the time, but my pride disappeared with my money, for it was not long before my lack of cash ended the boarding-house keeper's interest in me, and I was fired out, to get along as best I could.

For weeks I lived from hand to mouth, dossing in odd corners and yards, and getting food as best I could. In those hard days, when I was generally cold and miserable, and half - starved, I often thought with longing of the comfortable existence I had deserted on the Polly Greenwich. Warm West Indian skies called me insistently in those days, when London would often be under a depressing blanket of rain and fog, and when the smell of food was cruelly tantalising but unobtainable.

I haunted the wharves day and night in search of a job which would take me back home, and at last I landed a job, thanks to the training I had got on the Polly Greenwich, as third cook on a small steamer bound for Georgetown. On arrival I was discharged, and had to look around for some means of keeping the wolf from the doormat and putting some food under my belt.

I was a strong lad, tall and well built for my years, despite the hard life I had led in my early years, and at the age of seventeen I became a soldier of the Queen as a private in the 2nd West Indian Regiment. I suppose there must have been some martial instinct handed down to me by my father; but it did not last long.

Certainly the army provided the necessary to go under the belt, but there was very little to put in the pouch on pay day, and the discipline did not appeal to the boy who had run away from home. I spent a term of service in Barbadoes and Jamaica, and it was in the latter place that I decided to "break ranks" permanently.

At dead of night I made my way, furtively, to the wharves, and slipped aboard a sailing vessel. Creeping stealthily forward, I found a refuge in the chain locker. To be sure, it was a meagre one, for the space was cramped, and rank with many ship smells. In my eagerness to escape from barrack life, I had made no provision for food, and when the ship put to sea I found myself in dire straits. I dare not appear too soon for fear that the ship would put back and hand me over to the military authorities, and for four days I had to bear the double burden of seasickness—for I was right up in the bows—and hunger. To this day I hardly know which took the most out of me.

Then relief came in the form of a good belting from the mate who discovered me, though at the moment I did not appreciate it. But that belting meant food. I was put to work in the galley, and was lucky to strike a very decent white man in the cook. After a two months' voyage I was again in London, destitute. My "home," as it had been before in the great city, was any old cranny I could squeeze into. I haunted the docks fruitlessly for a

job on a boat for weeks, eating by those mysterious means known only to those who have had to forage for themselves.

I was young and trusting, and when one day a runner for a sailors' boarding-house (kept by Patsy Callaghan, ex-amateur champion of England, in Limehouse, Crossway, London East) picked me up and gave me regular food and shelter, I thought that, after all, the world wasn't such a bad place. He promised me a ship, provided me with a rig, and in a fortnight I was serving before the mast of the four-masted ship, "Lord Beaconsfield," bound for "Sydney Town," which I reached in April, 1881.

My opinion of the "kindly" boarding-house keeper of Limehouse changed drastically when I went to the skipper of the "Lord Beaconsfield" and asked him for my wages. I learned that the alleged sailors' friend had done business in the usual way, and had collected in advance from the ship not only the board I owed him, but also a nice present for himself.

Those were the days when waterside boarding-houses were agents for ships seeking crews. The man who was broke was glad of a job, and only realised long afterwards, as I did, that he had been politely "shanghaied."

We were bearthed at Woolloomooloo, and, disgusted with the trick that had been played on me, I deserted. I got in touch with another sailors' boarding-house "keeper," and in return for food and shelter he found me a job as a deck-hand on a pearling lugger at Thursday Island, at the munificent wage of £2 a month, and a lay of shell, at Captain Riddell's station.

It was a hard but interesting three years that I spent aboard luggers around the reefs of the

North. We had to face not only the ordinary difficulties of collecting the precious pearl and shell from the ocean depths, but also the sudden menace of tropic storms, which arise almost in a moment and sweep the unprepared into Eternity. The pearling grounds are rough and ready schools for a man. Men cooped up in a small lugger for weeks at a time develop deadly hatred towards their best mates, and a fight is the only way to "let off steam." You feel better after it.

I had many rough and tumbles in my pearling days, and when I returned from Thursday Island to Brisbane in 1884 I was as hard as nails, and little inclined to take any "slack" from anybody. I had £400 when I landed in Brisbane, and I had a year of luxury. A lot of the local boys used to call me "Nigger" and "Darkey," and after one of the fights which such remarks generally involved I was told that I should take boxing lessons. I was introduced to the Black Diamond (Jack Dowridge, lightweight champion of England) and Jimmie Lawson, and they taught me the finer points of the game.

After going broke in Brisbane, I took a berth as scullery man on one of the Howard Smith boats along the Australian coast. One day I got into an argument with the coloured boxer, Charlie Martin, who was known as Moonlight. We made a pact to get a match to see who was best. I saw Jack Dowridge, who then had a tobacconist's shop and boxing saloon at the corner of George Street and Turbitt Street, Brisbane.

"If you want to fight," said he, "I'll fix an eight round contest, and give a purse of £5 to the winner."

The night that Moonlight and myself stepped into Jack's ring, George Powell, lightweight cham-

pion of Australia, who was referee, asked me what name he should announce. I said I didn't know.

Boldrewood's "Robbery Under Arms" was being played in Brisbane at the time by the Dampier Company. The bushranger, Starlight, was a star figure in the play, and Powell had a brain-wave.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "Moonlight and Starlight will now meet in an eight round contest."

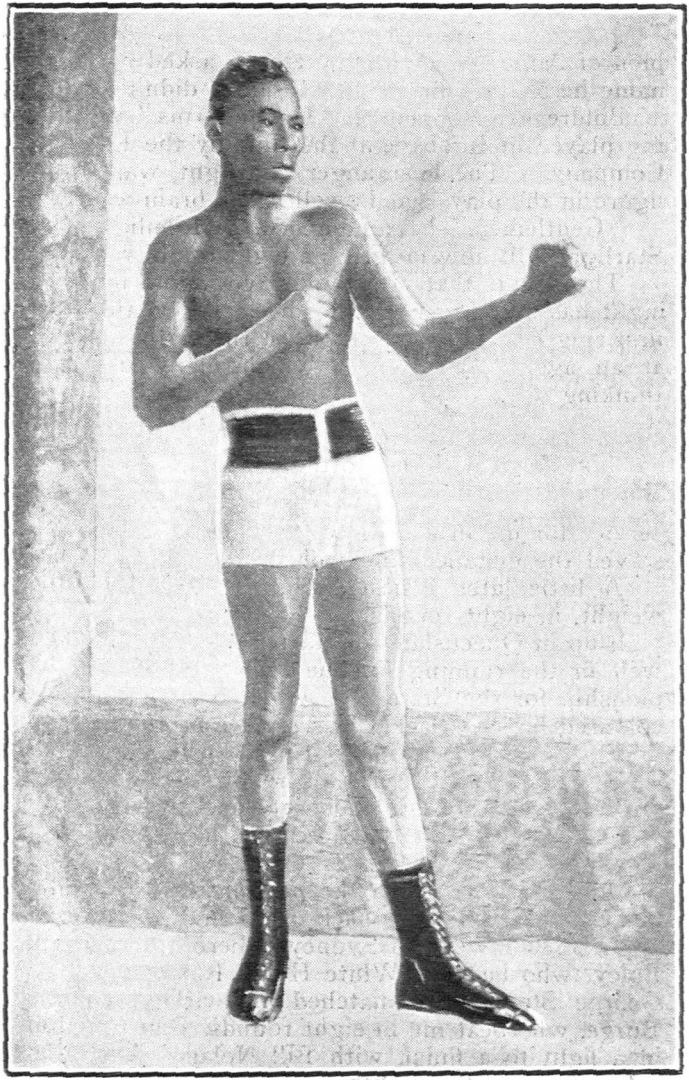
The name that was conferred upon me that night has stuck to me ever since. I won that, my first ring fight, by a knockout in the sixth. I was at an age, thirty-four, at which many men are thinking of giving up the ring rather than entering it.

Powell then matched me in an eight round contest with Dan Williams, whom I knocked out. "Mysterious Billy Smith" undertook to do a like service for me in a bout of the same length, but I stayed the distance, and won on points.

A little later I bested Harry Stanley, heavyweight, in eight rounds. This match brought me high up in Queensland pugilistic circles, and I was well in the running for the middle-weight championship for the State. I got it by defeating the coloured boxer, Black Chris. It was a fight to a finish, and I knocked him out in the fifteenth round.

Those were the days of really hard fighting, with gloves that were so loosely packed that when you hit you did so practically with the bare fist. The gloves were known as "skin gloves," because of the ease with which the padding could be slipped from the knuckles back on to the hand.

In 1889 I went to Sydney, where I met Larry Foley, who had the White Horse Boxing Club, in George Street. He matched me with Iron Bark Burge, who beat me in eight rounds. A little later in a fight to a finish with Bill Nolan I won with a knockout in the eighth.



"Starlight," at forty-five, in boxing attitude.

One of the hardest battles I had during my early days in Sydney was with Jim Hall. It was to have been a fight to a finish, but we made it so willing that the police stopped the bout in the twenty-fifth. the decision going to Jim on points. We got £10 each for our trouble—a very small purse compared with the ones which are now offering.

Foley arranged a match with Bob Fitzsimmons, then middle-weight champion of Australia, and later world's heavyweight champion. The fight stopped in the ninth through me breaking my hand.

It was a fifteen round contest for £10 each, and we staged it at Larry Foley's. It was a ding-dong go. The first mat hit went to Bob, but I beat the clock, and went to it again. Early in the ninth I put him down with one to the point, and by giving him more than ten I lost the match, for I broke my hand, and could not go on.

Although Bob was given the decision he was always of opinion that I had won, and afterwards told me so.

Going to Victoria in 1891, I met Jim Hall and Ruenalf unsuccessfully, but beat Cranky Morris at the Apollo Hall, in Bourke Street (kept by Martin Costello, the middleweight champion). I scored a victory in my next fight, also against Tut Ryan, on points in eight rounds. Mick McInearney got a points decision over me, but I bested Watty Duggan and Cranky Morris in a return bout. Another fight against Tut Ryan also went to me.

Fouls cost me the next two decisions to Cranky Morris and Jack Perryman, and later I was beaten by Peter Felix in nineteen, Harry Goddard in seven, and Tut Ryan.

In all my fights in those days, the biggest purse I ever got was from my match with Dan Creedon for the middle-weight championship of Australia.

Mr. W. R. Virgo gave a £75 belt and £300, of which £225 was for the winner and £75 for the loser, who, as it happened, was myself. It was a twenty round bout, and Dan beat me in the tenth, though I got the better of him later in an eight round battle.

I decided to try my luck in England, and well I recall the day of my departure. It was the day after the Melbourne Cup of 1896, when New Haven landed both the Cup and the Derby. I saw the Cup, and my faith in New Haven brought me a very useful £42.

On arrival in London, I had an interview with the National Sporting Club, Covent Garden, and was matched with Jack Steele, whom I defeated in seventeen rounds.

My next fight was with Frank Craig (the Coffee Cooler) at the National Sporting Club, for the Middle-weight Championship of Europe. It was a twenty round go, and lasted the full distance. I won on points, and received what was to me then a small fortune—£300. It seemed so after the trivial purses I had got in so many bouts in Australia.

On that occasion I was introduced by Peter Jackson to Lord Lonsdale and King Edward VII., then Prince of Wales. The latter was a keen follower of the ring, and he presented me with a gold-topped Malacca cane.

I stopped Cyclone Muldoon in nineteen rounds, and at Newcastle-on-Tyne I annexed the middle-weight championship of Northern England by defeating George Crisp in nineteen rounds.

I was then forty-seven years of age, and for the next two years I gave exhibitions of sparring, ball-punching and club swinging in various London music halls, receiving up to £16 a week.

Returning to Sydney in 1900 I had a few more fights. I defeated Jim Fogerty in seventeen rounds, but in a fight with Billy Smith I was forced to retire in the tenth with a broken wrist. Going to Melbourne, I lost to Fred Preston. In a bout with Jack Lees, of Port Melbourne, I had to retire in the fifteenth with a broken hand. I defeated Charlie Wood in two twenty round contests, but after a few more fights I began to realise that I was getting too old for the rigours of the ring.

For a time I was boxing instructor at Government House, Wellington, New Zealand, and I also taught the Earl of Hopetoun's son to box at Government House, Melbourne. I was instructor at the Eastern Hill Fire Station for seven years, and also had a spell at sea again at my old trade of cook. While I was on the Cooma I was fighting my battles over again with pots and pans as opponents one evening, when the referee in the shape of a big stock pot, and with assistance of a sudden heave of the ship, gave the decision against me. Later on I went on tour with the Chu Chin Chow Company.

My last ring fight was in 1909, when, after being out of the game, except as an instructor, for ten years, I fought Joe Lee, of Port Melbourne, at the Cyclorama. It was the night before my youngest boy was born. He, alas, is dead now.

Thus ended my twenty-three years as a boxer. I started late and finished late, at the age of fifty-seven, and since that time I have followed my first trade, which I learnt in those far-off days on the Polly Greenwich.

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