



Suddenly four burly forms appeared and barred the path of Rufus.

The Executioner

By CHARLES PIFER

CHAPTER I

UNDER the great arc lights of the abattoir, clad only in bibless denim overalls that had once been blue, hatless, barefoot and barren to the waist, Big Rufus appeared a black Satan incarnate.

A long, keen knife, dripping red gore, clutched in a blood-drenched hand, swept out and in with clock-like regularity and matchless precision to stifle the shrill squeals of the doomed hogs as the endless chain of them swept by the black executioner, one by one.

Blood be-splattered and dripping perspiration, the great black torso of Big Rufus was a sickening sight. Muscles of his biceps and along his barrel chest rippled like live black snakes as the keen knife swept out and in, out and in. No lost motions here, no misses. One black hand steadying the

doomed porkers, the other driving the knife to the hilt into the exposed throats and withdrawing the dripping blade, all in a single moment—in and out, in and out.

Above the clamor of the slaughterhouse the rotund, slightly pectoral voice of the executioner broke out intermittently in mournful, tuneless chants; and the rise and fall of the lethal knife beat time to them all:

*“Look down, look down that lonesome road
Before you travel long . . .”*

*“Ol’ man river, ol’ man river;
Yu don’t know nothin’; yuh must
know somethin’ . . .”*

A curious little man in a checked suit stopped nearby. Heeding the warning card: “Don’t talk to the workmen,” the visitor said no word, but his pinpoint eyes noted carefully every move of black Rufus. Not the faintest flicker of expression crossed

the little man's sallow face as his gaze took in the long muscular legs of the black slaughterer, the tapering shoulders, the catlike, poetical sweep of the body in action. Strength, skill, and blood-lust seemed to be personified in this one black being.

The little man in the loud-checked suit moved on again, unnoticed by Black Rufus. Long since, he had quit ostentating for the benefit of curious visitors. Time was when Black Rufus played up to every gallery, sticking the pigs so that their blood would spurt like water from an overcharged pipe, drenching him in gore amid the mingled "ahs" and harsher expressions from his onlookers. Rufe had quit that. It had been too hard to get the drying blood from his kinky black hair; and Mame had convinced him that it was foolish for him to act so.

Mame, she knew her way around. After all, as maid to Councilman Harrington, of the seventh ward, she knew who was who and what was what. Mame knew a good man when she saw one, big Rufus reflected often.

Under the hot showers, his body free from second trick carnage gleamed like polished ebony. Big Rufus flexed his biceps. The corded muscles along his upper arms pressed hard against the black satiny covering. What was it that his ol' Mammy had tol' him? "You has 'herited your Pappy's strength, Rufe; use hit to keep yo'self out o' troublement, not to git yo' in." Mammy had tol' him that when he headed no'th from Alabam' a year ago. Mammy was smart, Mammy and Mame.

Black Rufus hurried. Tonight he was taking Mame steppin'. It meant a slice off the bankroll; but Mame was sho' worth it. Rufe would have written to Mammy about Mame, but he couldn't write and Mammy couldn't read.

MUSCLES, unfatigued by eight hours of incessant action, flowed freely over Big Rufe's body as he strode along down the dimly-lighted street toward his boarding house. He felt like bursting into song, but stifled the urge, remembering how a policeman had once accused him of being drunk for singing.

Suddenly, from the shadows of a looming warehouse, four burly forms appeared and barred the path of Big Rufus.

"Is this him?"

"Yeah."

Rufe drew up, expectant. Probably some mistake; didn't nobody have no call to go stoppin'

him. But the quartet came nearer, forming a half-circle, menacing.

"You-all mus' be a'pickin' on de wrong pusson. Who does you-all figure I be, anyhow?"

"Work in the slaughterhouse, don't you?" one of the men growled.

"I does, yassah; but I ain't done nobody no hurt," Rufus stated, crouching, prepared. "You better leave me 'lone, cause I is a powerful stron' man."

In answer, all four of the attackers moved in upon the big negro, aiming pile-driving blows at him.

With the speed of a black panther, Rufus charged into the center of the group. His great, ham-like hands beat a one-two on the dim faces of the central figures, and two hurtling bodies shot backward and down before the force of the blows. Undaunted, the remaining couple hammered away at the big negro's head. A chuckle broke through Rufe's thick lips. Scornful of their futile punches, he fastened a vise-like grip on the collar of each and with a surge of strength brought their heads together with a resounding crack. Released, the two forms slid like rubber men to the sidewalk.

Big Rufe surveyed the four still forms for a moment in silence. He wasn't sorry; they had asked for it. Rufe scratched his head in wonder. Why had they jumped onto him, anyway?

From around the corner of the warehouse another figure came then. The newcomer stopped, as if in doubt, and then hurried up.

"What's goin' on here?"

He was vaguely familiar, even in the faint light. It was the little man of the checked suit who had visited the plant that afternoon.

"I don' know, Boss. I was comin' along mindin' mah own business when all four them gemmens starts fightin' me. I pertects mahself, yas-sah."

The little man bent down examining the fallen men, one after the other. He came erect, serious.

"What did you use on these men, a sledge-hammer?"

"Nossah; I jest used mah two fists, suh; I'se a powerful stron' man, suh."

"Strong? I'll say you're strong. Every damn one of these guys is deader'n a mackerel. You're in a hell of a fix, black boy."

Big Rufus stroked the back of his thick neck with a troubled hand. Dead! Down where he came from that meant one thing—a hanging. Rufe didn't

like the thought. He didn't want to be no guest of honor at a hanging.

"What are you going to do now, Black Rufus?"

Rufe started. "How come you-all know mah name?"

"They told me at the slaughterhouse today," the little man replied. "What are you going to do about these killin's?"

"Spect I'll be goin' back to Alabam' right short, suh. I craves a place wheres I kin be peaceful, suh."

"Runnin' away won't do you any good," the little man snapped; "they'd get you in twenty-four hours. Your best bet is to stay right here in good ol' Chi, black boy. I'm the only fellow who knows you done this, see; and I'll not turn you in if you do as I tell you."

Rufus rubbed a dazed hand across his eyes. "I spect you is c'rect, suh. What does I do?"

"Did you ever fight with gloves on, in the ring?"

"You mean prize box? Nossah, I ain't got no stomach to go bloodin' folks up."

"Well, black boy, that's my proposition. My name's Carson, Ed Carson. I'm in the fight game, see? You've got the earmarks of a heavyweight champion, and that's what you're goin' to be. I'll be your manager and train you, and you get ten percent of the split. How about it?"

Big Rufus rubbed the back of his neck in a troubled gesture. "Fraid I can't do no prize box-fightin', Mist' Carson, suh. First place, I ain't got no stomach to go to bloodin' folks, and, second place, Mame she say she don't like no prize box-fighters."

"Who's Mame?"

Rufus hesitated. He didn't like to bring Mame into this. She wouldn't like it, either.

"Mame's mah girl. She say she got no time for no fightin' niggers, no how. She done slap Trombone Johnson's face."

Carson whistled amazement, "Trombone Johnson? You don't mean Harrington's boy?"

"Yassah; Mame works fer Mist' Harrington."

Carson's chuckle contained no humor. "What a break! You wouldn't mind beatin' the ears off that Johnson guy, would you, black boy?"

"I reckon I'd better ask Mame," Rufus said hesitatingly.

"Oh, no, you don't. From here on Mame's out of the picture. You're goin' to be a fighter, see? An' I don't want no women messin' with no fighters of mine; get me?"

"Yassah; but I don't want to be no prize box-fighter, suh."

"You don't want to hang, either, do you? Do you do as I say, or do I put the cops wise to these killin's?"

Rufus nodded a mournful head. "Reckon I better do as you-all say; but I ain't got no stomach to go bloodin' folks."

CHAPTER II

"SO you want to get your boy into the ring with Trombone, do you, Crafty? You know the answer to that one—go get him a reputation. Ebony Executioner, eh? That's a good name; but just between us, who did this black boy of yours ever whip?"

"Crafty" Carson regarded Councilman Sam Harrington's well-fed person over the flat top of the intervening office desk. There was the suggestion of a sneer on Carson's sallow face. Ever since Harrington had caused Crafty's suspension for trying to fix a fight two years before, Carson had hated the big sportsman. And when Harrington outmaneuvered him to get the management of Trombone Johnson, Golden Gloves heavyweight champion, that hatred had crystallized.

"I've got a thousand bucks that says that the Executioner can murder that black ham, Johnson, in less than five rounds, Harrington," Carson snarled.

The councilman chuckled. Carson's petty rages always amused Harrington.

"Thousand bucks? That's chicken feed, Crafty; talk real dough, if you want to talk to me. How about ten grand? Remember Trombone's out of the ham-and-egg class now. He's sure to be the next heavyweight champ. Don't you read the papers?"

"I thought so," Carson rasped. "Afraid to put that big black four-flusher in against my man. You know damn well I ain't got ten grand."

"Sure," Harrington chuckled, "and I know damn well you haven't a fighter, too. What do you want for a nickel, Crafty? Did you really expect me to put Trombone into the ring against an unknown ham negro that you picked up out of some bread line?"

"All right," Carson said through scarcely moving lips, "you say my man can't fight. I'll show you what I think of him. Name any damn man you please, and if the Executioner don't knock him for

a loop in the first round, we don't get one thin dime; but if he does out your man in the first, we get a crack at Trombone Johnson. Put up or back up now, Harrington."

"We'll put that in writing, Crafty," the councilman said softly, as he nipped the end off a black cigar. "This so-called Executioner of yours will meet Lauby next Friday night at the Coliseum."

"You ain't kiddin' me none, Harrington," Carson rasped. "Fix the papers; my boy'll kill that punch-drunk bum."

Harrington blew a cloud of smoke across the desk at Crafty Carson. "Yeah? Aren't you forgetting that Lauby has never been down, much less out?"

"I ain't forgettin' nothin'. When do we get a chance at your prize pushover after we take care of that old punchin' bag? Just put that in writin'."

"We'll make it the following Friday night," Harrington told him evenly, as he pushed a button on the flat-topped desk to call a stenographer.

"**T**HERE'S a colored girl outside says she wants to see Rufus."

"Tell her to go fly a kite," Carson snarled, continuing the taping of big Rufe's hands.

"She says it's important," the rubber insisted; "says her name's Mamie Smithers. I tol' her to go away; but she wouldn't leave."

"Wouldn't, eh?" Carson growled. "We'll see about that. I'll kick her nervy royal out o' here, myself."

Big Rufe arose to his feet.

"You'll ain't goin' to do no kickin', Mist' Carson. I'se gwine to see Mamie, mahself, ri' now."

"You ain't goin' to do nothin' of the kind, black boy," Carson rasped; "remember, you do as I say, or else." Crafty turned to the rubber. "Git rid of her. If she wants to argue, threaten to call a cop; that'll get her goin'."

As the rubber went out, through the opened door there drifted the hum of many voices from the filled Coliseum. The first bout of the evening, between the veteran, Lauby, and the unknown black, fighting under the name of The Ebony Executioner, was due to start.

Crafty Carson inspected the completed job on the black boy's hands. Great white paws, they appeared, attached to the end of gorilla-like arms.

Dressed in short green trunks, the big black looked like a statue of Hercules carved from black granite.

Big Rufus had fallen into a sullen silence. He had come to hate this little beast of a man for his sarcasm and continued threats. Only the lifelong training that had taught him to hold inviolate the bodies of all whites had kept big Rufe's hands off Crafty Carson; that, and the fear of being hung for murder.

Carson was talking as they made their way out of the dressing room and through the mildly excited crowd toward the roped-in ring in the center of the big hall. What was he mouthin' about? Somethin' 'bout goin' in there and killin' that ol' punch-drunk so-an'-so with one punch. Rufus said nothing, simply nodded his kinky head. He didn't like the feel of the big gloves. He didn't like anything about fightin'. As he had said, he didn't have no stomach to go bloodin' folks.

"**T**HE EBONY EXECUTIONER," the announcer was bellowing through a microphone. Rufus remained seated in his corner, scornful of the mingled cheers and cat-calls. He wasn't fighting to please the crowd; he was there because he had to be. One thing he held in common with his manager, Crafty Carson, a wish to get it over as soon as possible.

Automatically Rufus listened to the instructions of the referee and the last words of Carson, who was in his corner as second. Rufe heard neither. The stool was dragged from the ring, the bell clanged, and he slid out to meet his charging opponent.

Lauby, a squat, powerful white man with a flattened nose and a cauliflower ear—grim reminders of his profession—came rushing in, flat-footed, and with his gloves well up to protect his chin. Shifting in close, Black Rufus drove two short, choppy blows into Lauby's unprotected guts. To the crowd the punches appeared impotent; but a look of mingled surprise and pain distorted the old white fighter's countenance, and his thick knees buckled as he sank slowly, wearily to the mat.

Black Rufus retreated automatically to a neutral corner, as Carson had taught him to do. Rufe waited in stolid silence, watching the thick arm of the white-clothed referee rise and fall, keeping time to the droning of a voice unheard in the roar of the crowd.

Lauby gathered his wits with a visible effort and

pulled his legs in under his prone body. At the count of nine, he arose and lumbered forward to meet his black opponent, to force his way into a clinch.

Black Rufus sidestepped the rush and again sank a vicious right hand into Lauby's body. Then, as the white man was falling forward, guard down, the Executioner's left glove smashed solidly into the flattened nose.

Face-downward, the white fighter dropped to lie inert. A bright stream of blood crept out from under his face, staining the dirty gray canvas on which he lay.

In the opposite corner of the ring, Rufus waited watchfully as the referee's arm again rose and fell over the prostrate white man. Fascinated, Rufus watched the stream of blood creeping from under the opponent's face. Blood!

Different this blood from that of animals. Animal blood meant nothing—just like so much water; but human life blood was different. It had a curiously sickening taste and odor in spite of the salty quality. Rufe could taste Lauby's blood now. It was making him sick. Things were getting dark before his eyes, spinning around and around. Then the referee blotted out the view of the blood and raised Rufe's gloved hand, and a moment later a jubilant Carson was dragging him out of the ring, hollering things unheard in the roar of the crowd.

CHAPTER III

“MR. HARRINGTON, could I talk a spell with you, suh?”

“Surely, Mamie; what shall we talk about, the Einstein theory of relativity, the Malthusian idea of the dangers of procreation, or who's going to win the pennant?”

“Quit your funnin', Mister Harrington; I don't know none of them things. I wants to talk to you about this here fight tonight.”

“Oh-oh, don't tell me that you've finally capitulated to the advances of Romeo Trombone Johnson, Mamie, after making me warn him to leave you alone. Well, you needn't worry about Trombone, he can take care of himself.”

“I'se not worried 'bout that black coon, Mister Harrington, hit's t' other one that I'se worried 'bout, suh.”

“You know this Executioner, do you, Mamie?”

“I sure does. Fact is, I'se goin' to marry him

only he don't know it yet.”

Harrington chuckled. “If you're figuring on asking me to have Trombone let your boyfriend win, you're out of luck, Mamie; I don't fix fights. Besides, I'm out to get Crafty Carson, the bird that manages your big moment, and tonight's my chance. Your Executioner is slated for the block, Mamie.”

“But you don't understand, Mister Harrington; Rufe can lick Trombone Johnson anytime. Fact is, he's done done hit.”

“What's that?” Harrington dropped a lighted cigar into his fat lap and retrieved it hurriedly. “You say he's whipped Trombone?”

“Sure has,” Mamie told him proudly. “I tol' Rufus 'bout your fightin' man botherin' me, an' Rufe slapped him down two different times right 'fore mah eyes. Nobody can lick that Rufus.”

“You're a lot of encouragement to me, Mamie,” Harrington told her dryly. “If what you say is the gospel, it looks like Carson is going to have the laugh on me. Say, if your friend's that good, he's slated for the heavyweight title; so you're in luck, Mamie.”

“No, I'm not. I don't crave to marry no high-flyin' champeen fighter. I don't want no fighter a-tall. It's jest that that small fry white man is bossin' Rufus and won't let me see him, and Rufe's got to lose.”

“But I thought you said that he could lick Trombone?”

“He can, but he won't if you does as I tells you,” Mamie said significantly.

TROMBONE JOHNSON was a big man, bigger yet than Rufus. But there was little to choose between them as they stood undraped in opposite corners of the roped-in square. Each was tall, clean-limbed, and with smoothly flowing muscles. Under the overhanging lights they looked very like, and many there were in the capacity crowd that had to wait for the announcer's introduction to distinguish between the principals, all set for the main go.

Big Jim Durfey, popular referee, took the floor in the ring's center.

“In this corner, on my left, Trombone Johnson, leading colored contender for the heavyweight championship of the world, fighting at two hundred and thirteen pounds.”

Johnson raised his long arms high above his shaven pate and clasped his hands together in the

age-old salute of fighters. The crowd roared approval. Johnson was a crowd-pleaser.

"And on my right, in this corner, The Ebony Executioner, weighing two hundred and two pounds, the only man who ever knocked out Toughy Lauby."

A cheer broke and died into scattered jeers. Black Rufus ignored the crowd entirely.

"This is the main go of the evening. These men will fight for fifteen rounds, and may the best man win."

The bell clanged, and big Rufus darted from his corner. They met in the center of the ring and traded punches for a brief moment. Johnson backed away, and Rufus followed him around the ring. Johnson leaped in to spear Rufe with a hard left, but took a stiff right to the body that started him in reverse again. Following relentlessly, Rufus backed Trombone into a corner, but Johnson tied him up in a clinch and hung his weight on Rufus until Durfey broke them.

Rufus beat a one-two on Trombone's ribs, but caught him going away and inflicted no damage. Following up, the Executioner forced Johnson into a corner with body punches, and hammered a hard left to Johnson's face when his guard came down to protect his body.

Trombone clinched again and hung on, apparently in distress. Referee Durfey tore them apart and warned them both for hitting in clinches.

Again the paralyzing one-two punches connected with Johnson's midsection, and he went down on one knee where he remained as the referee counted. Rufus retreated to a neutral corner and waited, crouched, expectant.

At the count of eight, Johnson arose and slid into a clinch as the bell clanged to end the first round.

CARSON was there in Rufe's corner acting as his second. Crafty was jubilant as he kneaded the rippling muscles of his coming champion. But a note of pessimism diluted his cup of joy. Why did Sam Harrington look so damn confident squatting there at the ringside under his fighter's corner?

Couldn't Harrington see that Trombone didn't stand a show? Why, then, that look? You'd think by looking at the fat louse that Trombone had the fight in the bag. And who was that negro girl parked there in a ringside seat near Harrington? Something damned funny goin' on here. . . .

The "seconds out" notice came, and Crafty, with a last word of advice to the imperturbable Executioner, slid through the taut ropes with his paraphernalia.

The Executioner answered the second round summons with a gliding rush, meeting the slower Trombone coming out of his own corner and catching him with a long left hand to the jaw. A red stream of blood gushed from Harrington's fighter as he forced his way into a clinch.

Durfey tore them apart, and for a sickening moment the Executioner beheld the red-smeared face of the other fighter as they sparred. Then another long left hammered against the side of Trombone's head, and a red stream shot from either ear.

Johnson closed in, wrestling with black Rufus and dying him red as they tussled. The blood-crazed fans, sensing a kill, called for the referee to break them, and Durfey complied.

Trombone presented a gory sight, with blood streaming from nose and ears alike, drenching his black satiny body with red. Cries of "stop it, stop it" came from less blood lustful of the crowd, and the referee pushed the Executioner back for an instant to examine Trombone's injuries. It looked as if he intended to award the fight to Carson's man on a technical knockout.

Then, before the astounded eyes of the crowd, the Ebony Executioner crumpled up in an insensible heap at the feet of Referee Durfey.

PANDEMONIUM, and reverberating howls of "fake," rocked the big hall as Durfey stood looking contemptuously down at the fallen gladiator. The referee raised his white-clothed arms for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen, from all appearances, the fighter known as the Executioner is indisposed. I hereby award this fight to Trombone Johnson, on forfeit, and I shall recommend to the boxing commission that the Executioner and his manager be barred from the ring indefinitely."

Trombone Johnson crawled through the ropes and strode down the aisle with a broad grin on his red-smeared countenance. Behind him followed his manager, Sam Harrington, with an equally broad grin. Things were looking up for them both. Trombone's record was bloody but unbowed, and Harrington was the winner of a nice side bet from Crafty Carson. But, best of all, both Carson and his

fighter were barred from the ring.

In their dressing room, a spirited argument was taking place between the revived Executioner and his manager.

"Why didn't you tell me that you passed out when you saw human blood, you doublecrossin' baboon?"

"I tol' you that I didn't have no stomach to go bloodin' folks," Rufus insisted mournfully.

"Well, I got my men here to lay you out right," Carson told him. He opened the outer door to the dressing rooms. "Come in, boys, and give this big black ape the works."

Four huskies entered and advanced upon the nonplussed Rufus.

Light dawned upon the Ebony Executioner. "You-all am the gemmens what I wus tol' was dead."

"Dead, hell," one of the men snorted, "from the way you passed out at the sight of a little blood, you couldn't kill a flea. Take him, guys."

Rufus met their rush without retreating. Four times he struck, four terrific punches which

contained all of the rage pent-up by months under the thumb of the browbeating Carson. Four men littered the floor of the dressing room and lay motionless.

Carson bolted for the door. As he opened it to escape, a comely negro girl barred his way.

"Not so fast, white man." She addressed the aroused Rufus. "Does you-all want to chastise this weasel, honey-lamb?"

Big Rufe shook his head in mournful negation. "No, Mamie; I'se afeard I might kill 'im, 'cause I'se a powerful stron' man, an' I'se powerful mad. Best let 'im go."

Crafty Carson went.

Meantime, in another dressing room Trombone was fit to be tied as he scrubbed away at his red-smearred countenance.

"Mist' Harrington, how come this here blood what you stuck in mah nose an' ears won't come off? How come?"

Harrington chuckled. "Those blood capsules contained red ink, Trombone. It'll have to wear off, I reckon."