

SOCK OF AGES



By THOMAS THURSDAY

A fighting organist! From the Brotherhood Mission to the white glare of the prize ring! Punch for punch he gave, but the big sock came in the last frame, with the crowd on its feet and the referee in a daze.

I BEEN managing prizefighters so long I think I must of staged that well-known brawl between "Kid" Goliath and "One Sword" David, back in the days when six-ounce gloves and fifty-buck ringside seats wasn't heard of. Many's the queer bird that has ambled into my stable, took a few jabs on the chin and ribs, then went sadly back to his dishwashing, bookkeeping, or his flute playing. However, we'll cut out the lecture and take our text today from Matthew—in round numbers, Matthew Westfield, of Yankville, Nebraska. And of all the box fighters that have sailed into my ken, Matthew wins the gold-studded cream puff for being a strange, odd, and curious specimen of the roped arena.

I meet this fella in a accidental way, the same being via a street riot which is always interesting to everybody that don't get touched. Me and "Hit-the-mat" Maloney—a retired heavy that I keep to tryout newcomers—are walking down Eighth Avenue one night, in the burg of New York City, when we imbibe a earful of music from a street meeting, that sounds like "Lead, Kindly Light." We happen to be on the opposite side and, as a rule, we never pay no more attention to such affairs than we do to pathology or the Einstein theory, not that we shouldn't ought to!

The little bunch of well-meaning ladies and gentlemen are about half finished playing this noted tune of the ages when a collection of playful

ruffians decide to break up the meeting.

"Dan," says Hit-the-mat to me, "let's go over and see what's what! They ain't no reason that I can see why them boys and girls can't sing and preach, if they want to. Anyways, I got a soft spot in my heart for all such. When I was a grade-A tramp, passed up by all my hundred percent friends, why, boys and girls of that kind took me outta the gutter, gave me a bath, a suit of clothes and a job."

Just then we're interrupted by a female shriek from one of the singing and playing ladies, and Hit-the-mat and me dash across the avenue. We note that one big roughneck has his arms around the neck of the cornet player, and keeps saying, "Gimme a kiss, kid; gimme a kiss, can't you? C'mon—quit this fool business and I'll take yuh to a cabaray where you'll hear some real jazz!"

He gets no further with that sort of oratory. A little, square-shouldered bird gets up from where he's playing the portable organ, and puts both hands on the back of the disturber.

"Brother," he says in a kindly manner, "please don't do that. Sister Rose hasn't bothered you, and I'm afraid that you're disrupting our meeting."

"Well, look at little Agnes!" flings back the tough bird. "So a shrimp like you is gonna protect the goil, hey? Well, yuh poor dumbbell, for two cents I'd—"

Hit-the-mat grits his teeth in both plain and fancy rage and starts to jam his way toward the

argument. But before he gets near them, the little organist has the rough customer by the collar and is trying to pilot him out of the crowd.

"I'm sorry to do this, brother," the organist is saying, "but you have brought it upon yourself. I'm afraid that you and your friends had better—"

Wham! One of said friends comes up from behind and socks the little chap in the neck with a right-hander that would have made even Dempsey think the Woolworth Hut had flopped on his head. Gosh, what a wallop that was! Then the fun begins. The disturber has about five pals with 'im, and they start to show what they could do in the gentle line of assault and battery. Soon as the organist gets that first punch from the rear, he settles to the ground, but just for a moment. He's up on his pins before the count of five, while the ladies in the meeting take a course in assorted hysterics. Then no less than three of the ruffians start to wade into the little tune-player, and he gives blow for blow, and I'll say that he was no mean fist-slinger!

"Dan," snorts Hit-the-mat, "this is one brawl I'm gonna get into for nothing! Come on, let's go!"

We do. Me and Maloney plow into the midst of the fracas, and a pleasant time is enjoyed by all; all except the rough gents. Boy, that was a set-to that would have made Napoleon think Waterloo was just a rehearsal! When the little organist sees that we're on his side, he murmurs a "Thank you, brothers!" and wades in, with both hands pumping like a Dutch windmill.

The police come along just in time to send the leavings of the five meeting-wreckers to the nearest hospital. The organist gets the credit for kayoing at least two of the birds, while me and Hit-the-mat divide honors among the rest.

So that's how I come to get hold of Mr. Matthew Wakefield, organist for the Brotherhood Mission by night, and bookkeeper by day. And although it takes me near a week to convince Matthew that he had the makings of a lightweight champion in his makeup, why, he finally succumbs, with a strange light in his eyes at our next meeting.

"Mr. Hogan," he says, "I think that I may be able to do some good work among the boys that fight for a living. They need me. I'm sure I wasn't cut out to be a prizefighter myself, but I'll sign under your management for six months. But please bear in mind, Mr. Hogan, that I'm not in the game for either glory or money. I'm in it for something much higher than either. Are you satisfied?"

"Sure!" I says. "I don't care what you're in it for. All I want you to do is to lick every boy that I set up before you. Sign here!"

So I get his signature to a contract, and we're off.

THE first day that Mr. Matthew Wakefield is in my stable of glove-slayers I christen him with a name that will sound like something, to wit: "K.O. McCauley, The Fighting Organist." He agrees to the change, saying that he wouldn't want his folks to know that he was a fighter. So that's all settled and we start in to do some intensive training. Hit-the-mat shows Matthew everything he knows, and a lot of things he don't know, and one or two things he thinks he knows, but don't.

It takes Hit-the-mat near a week before he can break K.O. McCauley from the habit of leading with his right mitt, instead of his left. His strongest wallop seems to be a fiery smash to the chin with his right, followed by a lightning jab with his left to the solar plexus, after the manner of Bob Fitzsimmons, which contains almost as much power as Niagara Falls. Hit-the-mat ought to know. He gets both at full steam, and lays down for a nap, and a study of the solar system.

Well, I finally get a match for K.O. McCauley in one of them duck-in-and-duck-out burgs, known to the map as Hollywell, Pennsylvania. His adversus in this case is a lightweight entitled "Wildcat" Koop. He strips around one-thirty-five—a few pounds more than my boy—and, according to his manager, why, he has knocked out everybody from Columbus to the Marines. These fight managers are modest boys, eh?

We're booked to go on in the first preliminary at what they call the Town Hall. This place ain't a regular fight arena, understand, but one of them joints where they pull off everything from Sunday school recitations to a murder. It caters to movies, Uncle Tom's Cabin shows, and the day before we get there, why, the customers was treated to a lecture by no less than Miss Clarabel Louise Snoopsniffer, entitled "Blue Noses Are Better Than Red."

The hall seats about a thousand, but they seldom got that many into the camp, except on fight nights. Then the manager had to send out for camp-stools and special officers of law and disorder to pacify the jovial miners, who really consisted of half of the burg's population. The rest were scenario

writers. The miners craved action from the first gong, and any fight that didn't deliver at least one of the battlers to the yearning hands of the town's doctor, why, it was considered to be a frame-up or knitting bee. In fact, me and my entourage—that's a good word; wonder what it means?—no more than hit the town when we are met at the station by the manager. He calls us to one side and informs us that if we came there to fight we wouldst be welcome. However, if we merely came to stall ten rounds, we could do that thing right there in the railroad station. What's more, if K.O. McCauley didn't show the real fighting spirits, why, some of the miners would be glad to jump into the ring and give a demonstration.

All of which meant that the boys liked plenty action, plenty gore, and plenty roughhouse a la carte. They had no more use for boxers than I have for the smallpox. They demands sluggers, and the more that Wildcat Koop socked my boy, and the more K.O. McCauley returned the wallops, why, the better the boys at the ringside would enjoy the performance. Some cuckoo town, what?

That evening at the hotel, a young lady, who would have made Cleopatra look like the current photographs of Mr. Dante, calls and asks to see K.O. McCauley. She wants to see him alone and would I kindly leave the room? Well, I thought it might be some trick of the opposition, and I refuse to budge. Then K.O. nods to me to kindly leave the room, either via the door or fall out the window. Ten minutes later, the charming caller trips out, wiping her eyes, and I trip in to see what happens.

"Did she poison you?" was my first demand. "You gotta lot to learn about the prize-ring business, young man. I've had prettier ladies than that wreck boys of mine with stuff out of a bottle, sent with the compliments of the opposing camp. What was the idea?"

"Oh, nothing like that!" grinned Mr. Matthew Wakefield. "But—er—if you don't mind, I prefer to keep the young lady's secret. You aren't offended, are you? It is a delicate matter, and I'll admit that it has me puzzled. She asked a hard thing. I didn't make any definite promise, but merely said I would think it over."

Well, I let it go at that. What the young damsel wanted, I don't know. But so long as she hadn't poisoned my boy, I didn't care very much. However, I am to learn later that she don't do *me* any good!

That night the Town Hall is jammed with a collection of wild-eyed and fight-mad miners. The ring is all set on the stage, right beneath the curtains. I liked that curtain idea O.K. In case of a riot, you could always ring down the curtain, couldn't you? That ought to keep the customers out, if need be.

The referee is a bird named Joe Jerome, who claims that he was once the champion welterweight of Perth Amboy, Brazil, and the North Pole. He introduces Wildcat Koop first, and the applause was divided between snorts and hisses. It was hard to tell whether they was for Mr. Koop, or against him. Then he introduces Mr. Matthew Wakefield, alias K.O. McCauley. Listen to this:

"In this corner-r—!" bawls Joe Jerome—"we have a genuwine surprise, 'Eat-'em-alive' McBeenan, the Michigan Bone Crusher!"

At that mistake, my boy rushes out of his corner and snaps over to the referee.

"Brother," he whispers, "I beg your pardon, but you have made a mistake in your introduction. Please announce me as K.O. McCauley, which is quite bad enough."

"Forget it!" snorts Joe Jerome. "I know what your title is, but it ain't strong enough for *this* bunch; see? Our paytrons like rip-snortin' names. Now get back to your corner, or I'll award the fight to Wildcat Koop!"

I say less than nothing. What's the use of arguing with a stonehead like him, eh? Anyways, for all I care, he could of introduced my boy as Lon Chaney.

"Never mind, Matthew, old boy," I soothe him. "Names don't mean anything, anyhow. If Napoleon Bonaparte's name had been Algernon Half-off, why, he would have been some war magnate just the same. Let's go!"

The bell.

Wildcat prances to the center of the ring, crouches like a pretzel, if you know what I mean, and waits for K.O. to come out and take it. But for all Mr. Matthew Wakefield cared, the Wildcat could of been in Egypt! He ignores his handsome adversus entirely, walks to the rope nearest to the audience, and holds up his hands for silence.

"Gentlemen and brothers!" he opens up. "Before Brother Koop and I entertain you with our—er—boxing exhibition, I ask your kind indulgence for what I am about to do, because I am aware that it is not the customary procedure in ring

circles. However, I ask you to be gracious enough to remain quiet for a minute or so. Gentlemen and brothers, I thank you for your kind attention.”

Then what do you suppose this bird does, huh? He does nothing less than pull the oddest stunt I have ever witnessed in the squared arena! He hops beneath the ropes, skips over the footlights, and lands beamingly in the orchestra pit. Then he walks to the organ, pulls out a couple of plugs or something, and starts to play. He no more than hits a few notes when some of the miners begin to howl and toss peanuts at him. The majority, however, are as speechless and curious as I am.

Matthew pays less than no attention to what's going on, but steps on that old organ with enthusiasm. He throws his head back and let's go with “Rock of Ages.” And, ladies and gentlemen, that boy could play it! Before he's half finished, he's got the whole house looking sorta bleary-eyed and leaning over in their seats, with their chin in their hands. When he reaches the second part of the grand old melody, he raises his alto voice, and sings like a whole flock of song birds. And when he concludes, there ain't a man in the Town Hall that ain't tamed, pacified, and feeling better. He gets enough applause at the end to satisfy Galli-Curci and McCormack.

He jumps back into the ring, bows to one and all, and says, “Thank you, brothers. I feel better now, and I hope you feel the same. Let the fight commence.”

The half-dazed referee motions for the gong, it clangs dully—it must of been a cowbell—and the fight begins.

THE Wildcat turns out to be more than his name implies. He should of been dubbed the Marines! Fight? Boy, he just plowed in, with his both arms swinging like a Indian-club performer, but he only lands on my boy with a single crack to the right ear, which he shakes off with a sad grin.

Round one was a good draw. Neither one seemed able to hit the other. At the beginning of the second, the customers get back to normalcy and howl for a little gore. A first round in that camp that doesn't do a little damage, in their opinion, was a offense against the entire city.

My boy steps out in the second frame and clips Mr. Wildcat Koop plum on the nose. The Wildcat winces, calls Matthew a pretty name, and comes back with a bone-crushing right to the jaw.

Matthew ducks, and the blow misses by no less than a Philadelphia block. After which they mix, clinch, and do everything but kiss. The customers don't care for that! Hoarse voices begin to come forth and demand to know when the foot-race stops, and when the fight begins. Wildcat's father, who has a ringside seat gets extra noisy.

“Wade into 'em, boy!” yells Pop. “Yore old man is here watchin' yuh, remembah! Git to 'im, son; jus' like yore dad shows yuh!”

Wildcat's Pop was there with the nifty advice, what?

The second round ends like a draw. The third and fourth look the same to me. The fifth favored my boy, while the sixth went to Wildcat. The seventh favored K.O. McCauley, who drew first blood via a corking smack to Wildcat's nose. That made Wildcat real angry. He tries to retaliate with a southpaw slam to my boy's stomach, but misses by a yard.

The seventh finds both kind of groggy.

“Keep at his ribs; keep at his ribs!” yells Hit-the-mat Maloney. “He don't like it there. Atta boy!”

By this time I make the discovery that Mr. Matthew Wakefield ain't there with what they call the fighter's heart, when it comes to giving another brutal punishment. Ounce for ounce and man for man he's far ahead of his opponent, but that don't mean nothing unless he fights, does it? The matter with him was the same with some other fighters—he's got a brain in his head instead of a load of blackberry jam and concrete. Besides that, he's got too much imagination. Each time he wallops Wildcat I notice that he winces when the blow struck, like he was getting it himself. After he draws the claret from Wildcat's nose he comes back to the corner at the end of the round, and says, “Mr. Hogan, I detest this business, really!” So there you are.

The eighth frame was fifty-fifty. Clinching, in-fighting, and a few straight blows that don't do neither any damage. The ninth looks about the same as the eighth. But the tenth and final frame was a whizzer!

“This is your chance, boy!” I inform Matthew. “Wade in and slug. So far it looks like a draw and that don't get us any reputation. Hammer away and forget that brother-feeling stuff!”

Wildcat leads off with a short right to the ribs and follows with a terrific sock to the chin with the

left. Down goes Mr. Matthew Wakefield. He's up at the six count, and a few sympathetic fans are belling for him to knock the native son into some part of Canada. My battler comes to life and smacks Wildcat with a vicious right to the tip of the button. Down goes Wildcat. It was the first blow that Matthew had failed to deliberately "pull," and believe me, it was strong enough to goal the Army! But Wildcat was one of those birds, like Bat Nelson, who could be hit with two counties and get up at the count of eight. When Wildcat finally gets to his legs, he wobbles around for a minute, punch-drunk.

"Finish 'im now!" yells Hit-the-mat. "Now you got 'im—now you got 'im!"

"Steady son, steady!" howls Wildcat's interested pop. "Yore father is here, remembah! If you don't lick that pork-and-beaner, I'll wallop you when you git home!"

Just before the final gong they pull a circus stunt. Both start a right-hander in motion at the same time, aim it at one another's jaw, and—bing! Both succeed in landing at the desired spot. My boy wobbles for a second, then settles to the canvas for a rest. Wildcat spins around a few times, and duplicates Matthew's act. It looks like double knock-out!

The referee is dazed. So is everybody else. Then he takes a look at Wildcat, then a slant at K.O. McCauley. After which, he looks at both of his hands, then starts a double count. He times Matthew with his right hand and counts over Wildcat with his left!

At "seven" both boys begin to stir around the mat and blink their eyes. Then Wildcat gets to his pins. Matthew follows him a second later. They're about to go to war again, when the final bell stops the melee.

Well, it looks like a draw to me! The customers lean expectantly forward in their seats, and wait for Joe Jerome to render the decision. Joe scratches his noodle for a moment and tries to think. Then he monkeys with his ears. After that he comes to life, walks over to our corner, and grabs the right hand of Mr. Matthew Wakefield.

"The winnah!" he yells.

I'm what they call delirious with extreme pleasure. Hit-the-mat shows his feelings by turning handsprings around the ring. The fans take the decision quietly for a moment, then they begin to disagree, and it looks like a riot may be enjoyed by

all. Wildcat's papa is so peeved that he gets red, white, and yellow in the face, and has to be sat on before he wrecks the entire show.

Now comes what most folks called the world's premier boob stunt, performed by Mr. Matthew Wakefield, alias K.O. McCauley. However, I'll just record it, and you can judge for yourself.

After the referee awards him the decision, my boy shakes his head sadly for a moment, then walks deliberately over to Wildcat's corner, nabs his right hand, holds it up, and says in a calm voice:

"Brother, you win."

Mr. Pandemonium breaks loose after that! Wildcat's charming pater, i.e., pop, comes back to life and rises to remark that K.O. McCauley was not only right, but that he was the greatest and squarest box fighter that ever entered the ring, et cetera. Midst the uproar, a bird from the Boxing Commission hops into the ring, and shouts:

"I declare all bets off! This looks like a frame-up!"

It was, but *I* didn't know it!

WHEN we land in the dressing room, I demand for the tenth or fifty-ninth time, I forget which, whether or no Mr. Matthew Wakefield had gone suddenly looney or was just a natural born sucker. He don't reply for a moment, but starts to remove his fight togs. Then he gives me the dope.

"Mr. Hogan," he begins in that brotherly tone of his, "I apologize to both you and Mr. Maloney for my unprecedented action tonight. However, I know that you did not bet on me to win, so it doesn't matter much, does it?"

"We're out just twenty-five smackers!" snaps Hit-the-mat. "If we win, we would of got fifty. You made a fine pair of tramps out of us, believe you me, you did!"

"Sorry," returns Matthew, "but I had two good reasons for acting as I did. Reason number One is Miss Lillian Koop, the sister of Wildcat Koop. You may recollect that she called to see me at the hotel before the fight. She informed me that her father, who was inclined toward gambling and drinking, had stolen the combined savings of both her and her mother, which they had thought safely hidden in an earthen crock, and had bet the entire amount on his son to win the fight tonight. Well, the bout meant but little to me, win or lose. So that, gentlemen, is reason number One. The second is

one that you may not entirely agree with; it is this: it is my conscientious opinion that Wildcat Koop had a shade the better of the go. Therefore I felt it to be my duty to award it to him, regardless of the referee's decision. And that, I judge, is all I have to

say. Will you forgive me?"

Well, if *you* was in my shoes, what would you answer, eh?

Yep; I says the same!