

# KING *of the* CONGO

*The Story of Beezy 'Keewani' Thomas, the Court Jester of Stillman's  
Gymnasium and Jacobs' Beach*

By IRVING RUDD

**H**E was short and ugly, his face a mass of scars, and he was the proud possessor of two cauliflower ears which proved that when he was a fighter, he did not block all the punches thrown at him with his elbows.

Self-styled "Champ of the Congo" Beezy Keewani was one of the strangest characters ever to drift into the fight game—

a racket which has housed the finest specimens of queer people ever assembled. Thomas was a full-blooded African, born in the French Congo, the son of a native chief. Beezy's father had 50 wives and 30 children, so says Beezy. For the first 14 years of his life Beezy led the normal, romantic existence of the jungle boy. It was a carefree, indolent life with plenty of naps in the hot sun, fishing, joining the tribe (Continued on page 11)



Beezy, the "Lucky Man" for Tony Canzoneri, amusing spectators at Stillman's with an imitation of "my Mah-ster Tony," in training. In the above are, left to right, Al Ramo, trainer; Harry Levy, Lou Stillman, owner of the gym; Jack Curley, his chief of staff; Red Kelly, trainer; Benny Valgar and Lou Brix, manager of Sixto Escobar. Brix died three years ago.

## King of the Congo

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in the hunts, and reluctantly sharing in the work in the tribal gardens.

After his father died, Thomas no longer felt any home ties binding him, so he shipped on a freighter to Marseilles.

Then came cruises to most of the Mediterranean ports, a trip to South America, back to France again, across the Atlantic once more to New York and Keewani settled in America. He was a kitchen boy for a wealthy Red Bank, N. J., family, and it was there that he made the acquaintance of Mickey Walker who took a great liking to the little Negro boy. The former middleweight king fastened the ring name of Beezy Thomas to the colorful little lad and carried him around the training camps for laughs. Mickey even taught Beezy to box.

\* \* \*

IN due time Beezy drifted to the natural habitat of all characters of clout—Stillman's Gym—where he became as much a fixture as the punching bags suspended from the ceiling. He shined shoes, provided plenty of chuckles, and earned quite a bit of money by boxing on the side. You won't find his record in Nat Fleischer's great all-time book, because his fistic career revolved around one Long Sing Que. Long Sing was a Chinese flyweight boxer and had really mingled with a lot of good up and coming kids, but Beezy had his number. They boxed each other at smokers and charity affairs in what has been unofficially reckoned to be 125 bouts! Beezy knocked Long Sing Que out only once in these furious settos which never failed to bring down the house.

It was while shining shoes at Stillman's that Tony Canzoneri took a fancy to the Congo boy and engaged him as training camp jester. When Canzoneri was training for his second fight with Jackie "Kid" Berg, Beezy called him aside and seriously confided, "You goan win tree roun. Me pray in Congo language for you. No can lose when Beezy make voodoo."

Canzoneri laughed uproariously at Thomas' unusual earnestness. However, when he won in the exact round that Beezy predicted, Tony found himself almost believing in the "magic" of the little Negro. After that Tony and Beezy were inseparable. Resplendently attired in a silk topper, white tie and tails the little mascot would station himself near Canzoneri's corner and put the "hex" on the great champion's opponent.

\* \* \*

LATER, Thomas went back to shining shoes and entertaining the mob at Stillman's. If he liked you, the little Negro put the "good" sign upon you and success was assured. But, as many a citizen of bashed beak boulevard will grimly attest, if this Eighth Avenue witch doctor wreaked the vengeance of his unseen gods upon some hapless individual, misfortune was certain to dog the unfortunate one's footsteps forever.

It was a hilarious sight when Beezy faced his arch enemy, big lumbering "Bat". Norfolk. There would be Beezy, a flyweight at his heaviest, squaring off and flailing the air with threatening punches at big Bat



Beezy Thomas as he appeared in Stillman's Gymnasium holding up the round card.

who stood at least four inches over six feet. "Go way now liddle man," Norfolk would rumble.

Many have seen Thomas, an amazing linguist who spoke English, French, Italian and Yiddish fluently, face the giant-sized trainer and mutter imprecations in many tongues; and bashing his head against a wall ten, twenty, even thirty times with resounding thuds, he would invoke black magic. It was a strange sight to see his eyes roll as in a half-stupor he muttered imprecations.

\* \* \*

POOR little Beezy vanished one day. Someone had tipped off the immigration authorities that the pint-sized pug had entered the country illegally. The last heard from Beezy was that he was in France. When Hitler overran the Maginot Line and later visited Paris, the boys on Jacobs' Beach were assured that Adolf's goose was cooked if only Beezy could get close enough to put the evil sign on the Bavarian madman's head.

It never came off. The "hex," that is. Perhaps it worked only in the smoky confines of Stillman's. Maybe poor Beezy's heart wasn't in it any more after being shipped so far from the great country he loved. Whatever the reason, his memory is still highly respected by many a fighter who will earnestly claim that his subsequent success was due to Beezy's blessings.

The "Champ of the Congo"—a fistic character that long will be remembered on Jacobs' Beach.

## England's Mike Jacobs

(Continued from page 7)

knocked about like that again. The only way to do that was to stop fighting, so I did and married her. It's just on 26 years now. Fay was right about me as a fighter."

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AS he talks thus, the big square-shouldered heavy body shakes with quiet laughter and the pale eyes sparkle. He is interrupted by telephone callers, to whom he says: "I'll call you back," and writes down the name and number.

Solomons is proud of his accomplishment so far and of his organization. With him and his brother Maxie, in all their dealings, is Sammy Burns, son of ex-welter champion Sid Burns, who, in 1910, went the distance with Carpentier.

Burns, who bears an astonishing square-rigged resemblance to the promoter, is an old newspaperman who, as reporter, publicity man and organizer, has been in the middle of every big fight in this country for many years.

Solomons visualizes the program attractions. Burns works them out in terms of pounds, shillings and pence.

"It's all a matter of scaling the house," says Burns. "Any mug can throw in a pot of money and grab off the plums. Jack doesn't do that. He makes the plums."

It is a fact that Solomons is the first British promoter in years to go about the business on a purely professional basis. Our promoters have been too prone to cover up their match-making deficiencies with big-syndicate subsidies. Solomons aims to stop that. He takes a realist view of such people as Mike Jacobs.

"What's he got that we haven't got?" he says. "We have a beautiful organization. You saw the beautiful—and this has reference to paying-capacity, not physical attraction—people we had at the ringside at Tottenham. We sell out our ringside every time we run a show—before we announce a name on the bill.

"That's done on confidence. We don't take any liberties, and the fight fans know it."

This is Solomons. He has the stage and, in Bruce Woodcock, he has the best British heavyweight prospect for many years.

In order to obtain the best available American talent to compete against the British in International post-war matches, Jack has contracted to have Nat Fleischer, Editor of THE RING, act as his club American representative. All business on the other side of the Big Pond will be transacted through THE RING Editor, one of America's foremost authorities on boxing.