

Fighter's Fiasco

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Good heavyweights are scarcer than feather pillows in an Eskimo's igloo, so the first time I took a gander at this „Bambo“ Bamoulian, I got all hot under the collar and wondered if I was seeing things. Only he wasn't Bambo then, he was just plain Januz Bamoulian, a big kid from the Balkans, with no more brains than a dead man's heel. But could he sock! I'm getting ahead of myself...

I am walking down the docks wondering am I going to eat, and if so, not only when but where and with what, when I see an ape with shoulders as wide as the rear end of a truck jump down off the gangway of a ship and start hiking toward another guy who is hustling up to meet him. It looks like fireworks, so I stand by to see the action, and if the action is going to be anything like the string of cuss words the guy is using, it should be good.

This guy is big enough to gather the Empire State Building under one arm and the Chrysler Tower under the other, and looks tough enough to buck rivets with

his chin, so I am feeling plenty sorry for the other guy until he gets closer and I can get a flash at him. And that look, brother, was my first gander at the immortal Bambo Bamoulian.

He is about four inches shorter than the other guy, thicker in the chest, but with a slim waist and a walk like a cat stepping on eggs. He is a dark, swarthy fellow, and his clothes are nothing but rags, but I ain't been in the fight racket all these years without knowing a scrapper when I see one.

Me, I ain't any kind of a prophet, but a guy don't need to be clairvoyant to guess this second lug has what it takes. And what is more, he don't waste time at it. He sidles up close to the big guy, ducks a wide right swing, and then smacks him with a fist the size of a baby ham, knocking him cold as a Labrador morning!

Old Man Destiny doesn't have to more than smack me in the ear with a ball bat before I take a hint, so I step up to this guy.

„Say,“ I butt in. „Mightn't you happen to be a fighter?“

„How would you like to take a walk off the pier,“ he snarls, glaring at me like I'd swiped his socks or something. „You double-decked something-or-other, I am a fighter! What does that look like?“ And he waves a paw at the study in still life draped over the dock.

„I mean for money, in the ring. You know, for dough, kale, dinero, gelt, sugar, geetus, the—“

„I get it!“ he yelps brightly. „You mean for money!“

What would you do with a guy like that?

„That's the idea,“ I says, trying to be calm. „In the ring, and with the mitts.“

„It's okay by me. I'll fight anybody for anything! For money, marbles, or chalk, but preferably money. Marbles and chalk are kind of tough on the molars.“

„Then drop that bale hook and come with me. I am the best fight manager in the world, one of the two smartest guys in the universe, an' just generally a swell mug!“

„That's okay. I like you, too!“ he says.

Ignoring what sounds faintly like a crack, I say, „They are wanting a fighter over at the Lyceum Club. And we'll fight whoever they got, we don't care who he is.“

„We? Do both of us fight one guy? Mister, I don't need no help.“

„No, you fight. I'm the brains, see? The manager, the guy that handles the business end. Get it?“

„Oh, so you're the brains? That's swell, it gives you somethin' t'do, an' we'll manage somehow.“

I looks at him again, but he is walking along swinging those big hooks of his. I catch up, „Don't call me mister. My name is McGuire, *Silk* McGuire. It's Silk because I'm a smooth guy, see?“

„So is an eel smooth,“ he says.

A few minutes later, I lead my gorilla into Big Bill Haney's office and park him on a chair in the outer room with his cap in his mitts. Then I breeze inside.

„Hello, Bill!“ I says cheerfully. „Here I am again! You got that heavyweight for the four-rounder tonight?“

„What d'you care?“ he says, sarcastic. „You ain't had a fighter in a year that could punch his way out of a paper bag!“

„Wrong,“ I says coldly. „Climb out of that swivel chair and cast your lamps over this—“ And I dramatically swing the door open and give him a gander at my fighter, who has parked his number tens on the new mahogany table.

„Hell,“ he says, giving Bambo the once-over. „That ain't no fighter. That chump is fresh off the boat.“

„No wisecracks. That guy is the greatest puncher since Berlenbach and faster than even Loughran. He's tougher than a life stretch on Alcatraz, and he ain't never lost a battle!“

„Never had one, either, huh?“

Big Bill looks Januz over with a speculative glint in his eyes, and I know what he sees. Whatever else he may have, he does have color, and that's what they pay off on. My bohunk looks like a carbon copy of the Neanderthal man, whoever he was, only a little tougher and dumber.

„Okay,“ Haney says grudgingly. „I'll give him the main go tonight with *Dead-Shot* Emedasco. Take it or leave it.“

„With who?“ I yelps. „Why, that guy has knocked over everyone from here to China!“

„You asked for a fight, didn't you?“ he sneers. „Well, you got one. That clown of yours would've dragged down about twenty bucks for getting bounced on his ear by some preliminary punk; with the *Dead-Shot* he'll get not less than five centuries. Why are you kicking?“

„But this guy's a prospect. He can go places. I don't want him knocked off in the start, do I? Chees, give a guy a chance, won't you?“

„Forget it. That's the only spot open. I filled that four-rounder yesterday, and then Hadry did a run-out on the main event, so I can shove your boy in there. If he lives through it, I'll give him another shot. What do you call him?“

„Hey, buddy?“ I barks at him. „What d'you call yourself?“

„Me? I come without calling,“ he grins. „But my name is Bamoulian. Januz Bamoulian. J-a-n-u-z—“

„Skip it!“ I says hastily. „We'll call you Bambo Bamoulian!“

I touch Haney for a fin, so we can eat, and we barge down to Coffee Dan's to hang on the feed bag. While Dan is trying to compose a set of ham and eggs, I go into a huddle with myself trying to figure out the answers. This big tramp *Dead-Shot* Emedasco is poison. Or that's the way he sounds in the papers. I have never seen him, but a guy hears plenty. I usually get all the dope on those guys, but this is one I missed somehow. He has been touring the sticks knocking over a lot of guys named Jones, and on paper looks like the coming heavyweight champ.

The way Bambo charges them ham and eggs, I decide we better fight early and often, and that I'd rather buy his clothes than feed him. But while I am on my third cup of coffee, me not being a big eater myself as I'm nearly out of money again, I look up and who should be steering a course for our table but „Swivel-Neck“ Hogan.

Now, I like Swivel-Neck Hogan like I enjoy the galloping cholera, and he has been faintly irritated with me ever since a poker game we were in. He had dealt me a pair of deuces from the bottom of the deck, and I played four aces, which

relieved him of fifty bucks, so I know that whenever he approaches me there is something in the air besides a bad smell.

„Hey, you!“ he growls. „The skipper wants ya.“

„Say, Bambo,“ I says, „do you smell a skunk or is that just Swivel-Neck Hogan?“

„Awright, awright,“ he snarls, looking nasty with practically no effort. „Can dat funny stuff! The chief wants ya!“

As I said, I like Swivel-Neck like the seven-year itch, but I have heard he is now strong-arming for „Diamond-Back“ Dilbecker, a big-shot racketeer, and that he has taken to going around with a gat in every pocket, or something.

„Act your age,“ I says, pleasant-like. „You may be the apple of your mother’s eye, but you’re just a spoiled potato to me.“ Then I turns to Bambo and slips him my key. „Take this and beat it up to the room when you get through eating, an’ stick around till I get back. I got to see what this chump wants. It won’t take long.“

Bambo gets up and hitches his belt up over his dinner. He gives Swivel-Neck a glare that would have raised a blister on a steel deck. „You want I should bounce this cookie, Silk?“ he says, eagerly. „Five to one I can put him out for an hour.“

„It’d be cheap at twice the price,“ I chirps. „But let it ride.“

When we get to Dilbecker’s swanky-looking apartment, there are half a dozen gun guys loafing in the living room. Any one of them would have kidnapped and murdered his own nephew for a dime, and they all look me over with a sort of professional stare as though measuring up space in a cornerstone or a foundation. This was pretty fast company for yours truly, and nobody knows this better than me.

Dilbecker looks up when I come in. He is a short, fat guy, and he is puffy about the gills. I feel more at home when I see him, for Diamond-Back Dilbecker and me is not strangers. In fact, away back when, we grew up within a couple of blocks of each other, and we called him Sloppy, something he’d like to forget now that he’s tops in his racket.

„McGuire,“ he says, offhand. „Have a cigar.“ He shoves a box toward me, and when I pocket a handful I can see the pain in his eyes. I smile blandly and shove the stogies down in my pockets, figuring that if I am to go up in smoke it might just as well be good smoke.

„I hear you got a fighter,“ he begins. „A boy named Bamoulian?“

„Yeah, I got him on for tonight. Going in there for ten stanzas with Emedasco.“ Now, I wonder as I size him up, what is this leading up to? „And,“ I continue, „he’ll knock the Dead-Shot so cold, he’ll keep for years!“

„Yeah?“ Dilbecker frowns impressively. „Maybe so, maybe no. But that’s what I want t’see you about. I got me a piece of Emedasco’s contract, and tonight I think he should win. I’d like to see him win by a kayo in about the third round.“

Dilbecker slips out a drawer and tosses a stack of bills on the desk. „Of course, I’m willing to talk business. I’ll give you a grand. What do you say?“

I bit off the end of one of his cigars, taking my time and keeping cool. Actually, I got a sinking feeling in my stomach and a dozen cold chills playing tag up and down my spine.

Dilbecker's at a loss for patience. „Take it, it's a better offer than you'll get five minutes from now," he growls. „Things could happen to you, bad things... if you know what I mean."

He's right, of course. He's got a room full of bad things on the other side of the door. I hate to give in to this kid I used to know on the old block but what the hell... lookin' at him I realize it may be my life on the line. Nevertheless, a man's got to have his pride.

„Don't come on hard with me, Dilbecker. You may be a tough guy now because you got a crowd o' gun guys in the next room but I remember when the kids from St. Paul's used to chase you home from school!"

„Yeah? Well you forget about it!" he says. „Set this fight and don't make me mad or both you and the Slavic Slugger'll wake up to find yourselves dead!"

Now, I'm not bringing it up but I helped him escape from the parochial school boys a time or few and I took my lumps for it, too. I'm not bringing it up but it's got my blood pressure going anyway.

„Awright, you said your piece," I says, as nasty as I can make it. „And now I'm sayin' mine. I'm sending my boy out there to win and you can keep your money and your gunsels and your damned cigars!" I tossed the load from my pocket on his desk. „I got connections, too. You want to bring muscle? I'll bring muscle, I'll bring guns and sluggers, whatever it takes."

He laughs at me, but it's not a nice laugh. „Muscle? You? You're a comedian. You should have an act. You bum, you been broke for months. You know better than to put the angle on me. Now get out of here, an' your boy dives t'night, or you'll get what Dimmer got!"

Only a week ago they dragged „Dimmer" Chambers out of the river, and him all wound up in a lot of barbed wire and his feet half burned off. Everybody knows it is Dilbecker's job, but they can't prove nothing. I am very sensitive about the feet, and not anxious to get tossed off no bridges, but Bamoulian will fight, and maybe—a very big maybe—he can win!

Also, I don't like being pushed around. So, am I brave? I don't know. I get out of there quick. I got the rest of my life to live.

So we go down to the Lyceum and I don't tell the big ape anything about it. He's happy to see me and raring to go; I don't want to distract him any. I'm bustin' a sweat because I've got no connections, no muscle, no gun guys and Sloppy Dilbecker has. I do, however, call in some favors. There's an old car, which is sitting right outside the dressing-room door, and a pawnshop .38, which is in my pocket. And running shoes, which is on my feet.

Now it's nearly time and I am getting rather chilled about those feet by then, although it looks like they'll be warm enough before the evening is over. Several times I look out the dressing-room door, and every time I stick my head out there, there is a great, big, ugly guy who looks at me with eyes like gimlets, and I gulp and pull my head in. I don't want Bambo worried going into the ring, although he sure don't look worried now, so I says nothing. He is cheerful, and grinning at me, and pulling Cotton's kinky hair, and laughing at everybody. I never saw a guy look so frisky before a battle. But he ain't seen Dead-Shot Emedasco yet, either!

Once, I got clear down to the edge of the ring, looking the crowd over. Then I get a chill. Right behind the corner where we will be is Sloppy Dilbecker and three of his gun guys. But what opens my eyes and puts the chill in my tootsies again is the fact that the seats all around them are empty. The rest of the house is a sellout. But those empty seats... It looks like he's saving space for a whole crew of tough guys.

It is only a few minutes later when we get the call, and as we start down the aisle to the ring, I am shaking in my brand-new shoes. Also, I am wondering why I had to be unlucky enough to get a fighter stuck in there with one of Dilbecker's gorillas. And then, all of a sudden I hear something behind me that makes my hair crawl. It is the steady, slow, shuffling of feet right behind me.

When I look back, I almost drop the water bottle, for right behind me is that big dark guy who has been doing duty right outside our door, and behind him is a crowd of the toughest looking cookies you ever saw. They are big, hard-looking guys with swarthy faces, square jaws, and heavy black eyebrows.

While Bambo takes his stool, I see them filing into the empty seats behind Sloppy, and believe me they are the toughest crowd that ever walked. I ain't seen none of them before. And except for one or two, they ain't such flashy dressers as most of Dilbecker's usual gun guys, but they are bigger, tougher, and meaner looking and when Cotton touches me on the arm, I let a yip out of me and come damn near pulling a faint right there. Who wouldn't, with about fifty of those gun guys watching you?

When I look around, Emedasco is already in the ring. He is a big mug weighing about two hundred and fifty pounds and standing not over six feet seven inches!

We walk out for instructions, and as the bunch of us come together in the center of the ring, Bambo hauls off and takes a swing at Dead-Shot's chin that missed by the flicker of an eyelash. Before we can stop them, Emedasco slammed a jarring right to Bambo's head, and Bambo came back with a stiff left to the midsection! Finally we got them separated, and I tell Bambo to hold it until the fight starts, and when the bell rings we are still arguing.

Emedasco charged out of his corner like a mad bull and takes a swing at Bamoulian that would have torn his head off had it landed, but Bambo ducked and sank a wicked left into the big boy's stomach. Then, as Emedasco followed with a clubbing right to the head, he clinched, and they wrestled around the ring until the referee broke them. They sparred for a second or two, and then Bambo cut loose with a terrific right swing that missed, but hit the referee on the side of the head and knocked him completely out of the ring and into the press benches.

Then those two big lugs stood flat-footed in the center of the ring and slugged like a couple of maniacs with a delirious crowd on its feet screaming bloody murder. Emedasco was a good sixty pounds heavier, but he was in a spot that night, for if ever a man wanted to fight, it was my Bambo Bamoulian.

I was so excited by the fight that I forgot all about Dilbecker, or what might happen if Bamoulian won, which looked like it could happen now.

When the next bell sounded, Bambo was off his stool and across the ring with a left he started clear from his own corner, and it knocked Emedasco into the ropes.

But that big boy was nobody's palooka, and when he came back, it was with a volley of hooks, swings, and uppercuts that battered Bambo back across the ring, where he was slammed to the floor with a powerful right to the beizer.

The dumbfounded crowd, who had come to see Emedasco knock over another setup, were on their chairs yelling like mad, seeing a regular knock-down-and-drag-out brawl like everybody hopes to see and rarely finds. Bambo was right in his element. He knocked Dead-Shot Emedasco staggering with a hard left to the head, slammed a right to the body, and then dropped his hands and laughed at him. But Emedasco caught himself up and with one jump was back with a punch that would have shook Gibraltar to its base. The next thing I know, Bambo is stretched on his shoulder blades in my corner, as flat as a busted balloon.

I lean over the ropes and yell for him to get up, and you could have knocked me cold with an ax when he turns around and says, grinning, „I don't have to get up till he counts nine, do I?“

At nine he's up, and as Emedasco rushes into him, I yell, „Hit him in the wind! Downstairs! In the stomach!“

Holding the raging Emedasco off with one hand while the big guy punches at him like a crazy man, my prize beauty leans over and says, „What did you say, huh?“

„Hit him in the stomach, you sap!“ I bellowed. „Hit him in the stomach!“

„Oooh, I get it!“ he says. „You mean hit him in the stomach!“ And drawing back his big right fist, he fired it like a torpedo into Emedasco's heaving midsection.

With a grunt like a barn had fell on him, Emedasco spun halfway around and started to drop. But before he could hit the canvas, Bambo stepped in and slammed both hands to the chin, and Emedasco went flying like a bum out of the Waldorf, and stayed down and stayed out.

We hustled back to the dressing room with the crowd cheering so loud you could have heard them in Sarawak, wherever that is, and believe me, I am in a sweat to get out of there.

As we rush by, I hear a wild yell from the big ugly guy who has had his eye on me all evening, and when I glance back that whole crowd is coming for me like a lot of madmen, so I dive into the dressing room and slam the door.

„Hey, what's the idea?“ Bambo demands. „Somebody might want to come in!“

„That's just what I'm afraid of!“ I cry. „The hallway is full of guys that want to come in!“

„But my brother's out there!“ Bambo insists, and jerks the door open, and before you could spell Dnepropetrovsk, the room is full of those big, tough-looking guys.

I make a break for the door, but my toe hooked in the corner of Bambo's bathrobe, which has fallen across a chair, and I do a nosedive to the floor. The gun goes sliding. Then something smacks me on the dome, and I go out like a light.

When I came to, Bambo is standing over me, and the guy with the black eyes is holding my head.

„Awright, you got me! I give up!“ I said. „You got me, now make the most of it.“

„Say, you gone nuts?“ Bambo squints at me. „What's eatin' you, anyway? Snap out of it, I want you t'meet my brother!“

„Your who?“ I yelps. „You don't mean to tell me this guy is your brother?“

„Sure, he came to see me fight. All these guys, they my people. We come from the Balkans together, so they come to see me fight. They work on the docks with me.“

I am still laughing when we drop in at the Green Fan for some midnight lunch, and it isn't until we are all set down that I remember it is one of Sloppy Dilbecker's places. Just when I find I am not laughing anymore from thinking of that, who should come up but Swivel-Neck Hogan. Only he is different now, and he walks plenty careful, and edges up to my table like he is scared to death.

„Mr. McGuire?“ he says.

„Well, what is it?“ I bark at him. I don't know why he should be scared, but bluff is always best. And if he is scared, he must be scared of something, and if a gun guy like Swivel-Neck is calling me mister, he must be scared of me, so I act real tough.

„Sloppy—I mean Diamond-Back—said to tell youse he was just ribbing this afternoon. He ain't wantin' no trouble, and how would youse like to cut in on the laundry an' protection racket with him? He says youse got a nice bunch of gun guys, but there is room enough for all of youse.“

For a minute I stare at him like he's nuts, and then it dawns on me. I look around at those big, hard-boiled dock workers, guys who look like they could have started the Great War, because, when it comes right down to it... they did. I look back at Swivel-Neck.

„Nothing doing, you bum. Go an' tell Sloppy I ain't wanting none of his rackets. I got bigger an' better things to do. But tell him to lay off me, see? And that goes for you, too! One wrong crack an' I'll have the Montenegrin Mafia down on you, get me?“

He starts away, but suddenly I get an inspiration. Nothing like pushing your luck when the game is going your way.

„Hey!“ I yells. „You tell Sloppy Dilbecker that my boys say they want the treats on the house t'night, an' tell him to break out the best champagne and cigars he's got, or else! Understand!“

I lean back in my chair and slip my thumbs into the armholes of my vest. I wink at Bambo Bamoulian, and grin.

„All it takes is brains, my boy, brains.“

„Yeah? How did you find that out?“ he asks.

