

APOLLON

From Edmond Desbonnet's *Les Rois de la Force*

[The Kings of Strength]

Paris: Librairie Berger-Levrault, 1911

Translated and Introduced by

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Ed Note: As readers of *IGH* know, David Chapman has undertaken the task of translating Edmond Desbonnet's *Les Rois de la Force* [*The Kings of Strength*], one of the classic texts on the history of the Iron Game. We are deeply grateful to David for sharing his labor of love with us, and with all of our readers.



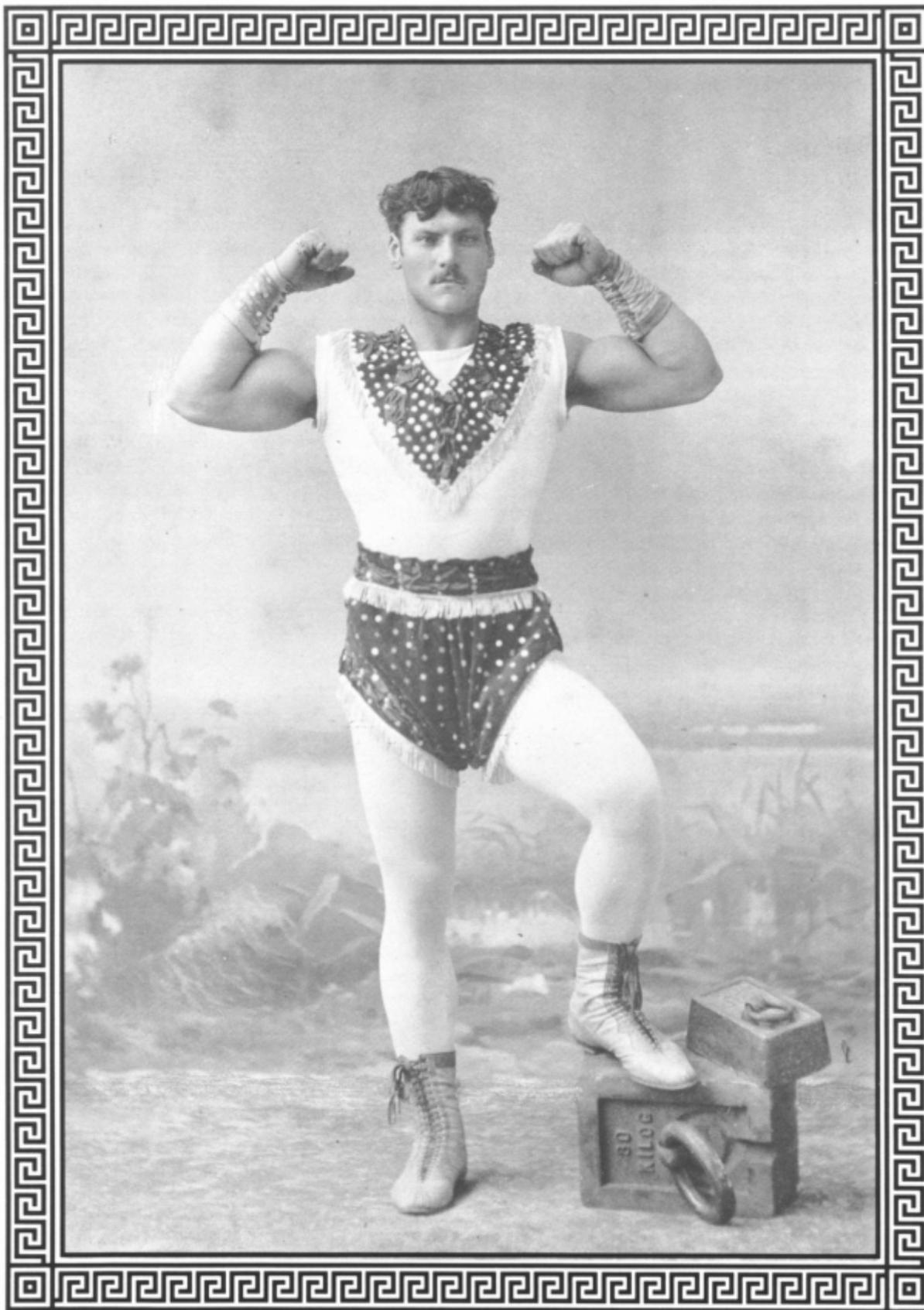
“Certain people,” Edmond Desbonnet reflected in later life, “are born painters, poets, or musicians; others are warriors, brigands or orators. I was born a professor of physical culture.”¹ If we are to believe his pronouncements, there was never any doubt in his mind that he would devote his life to the “regeneration of the French race” through the medium of physical exercise. Desbonnet had always been attracted to muscular strength and physical beauty, and thus it was only natural that he would later become one of Europe’s most influential proponents of fitness and exercise. After investing and losing all of his and the greater part of his mother’s considerable fortune in an attempt to establish schools of physical culture in the north of France, Desbonnet decided to take one last chance and go to Paris. There, he hoped to be successful in the gymnasium business. It was a risky enterprise, and he came close to failure, but gradually the young man was able to build a clientele and become successful. At the apogee of his physical culture empire, there were about two hundred Desbonnet Schools all over the Francophone world.

When it came to muscle building, Desbonnet’s emphasis was always on moulding a slim, wiry physique, not a stocky, bulky body. Even so, the father of French physical culture was quick to admit that some men were far above the common herd when it came to strength and muscularity, and the regular rules of physical beauty did not apply to them. These were strongmen in every sense of the term, and they were the athletes that had fascinated Desbonnet since

his earliest childhood. As the accounts in *The Kings of Strength* attest, young Edmond had a nearly photographic memory when it came to these idols of strength that he had worshiped in his youth. It was not until he reached the ripe old age of twenty-one, however, that he was able to attend a performance that galvanized him as never before. It was then that he first witnessed Apollon.

Just as Desbonnet had been born a professor of physical culture, Louis Uni had been born a strongman. Tall, massively built and willing to show off his extraordinary muscular power, Uni had performed around France for a year or two by the time Desbonnet first saw him. During that time, he had acquired the stage name that he was to keep until the end of his life, “Apollon,” the French word for the ancient god of culture and manly beauty. In 1889 Apollon came to Desbonnet’s hometown of Lille in Northern France, and he amazed the young man in the audience with such unprecedented strength that Desbonnet was stunned to his core. Here was a man whose strength was far in excess of that of any of his contemporaries, and from that time onward Desbonnet made Apollon the subject of glorification in books and countless magazine articles.

Apollon needed all the help he could get since there were very few ways for strongmen to make a living in the early days. At the top of the ladder were those who performed in a music hall act where they displayed their strength and agility in a variety theater. At the bottom of the scale were the poor, street corner performers



AS THIS RARE CABINET CARD SHOWS, FEW PROFESSIONAL STRONGMEN HAVE BEEN SO BLESSED BY NATURE. AT SEVENTEEN YEARS OF AGE, LOUIS UNI – APOLLON – STOOD 6' 31/4" TALL AND WEIGHED 253 POUNDS.

PHOTO COURTESY: TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

who did their feats outdoors with a few miserable props and threadbare costumes. Somewhere in the middle were those who performed at the seasonal fairs that dotted the French calendar. These *fetes foraines* as they were called provided temporary employment to a number of strongmen who were able to find themselves a place in one of the *baragues* or carnival booths which dotted the site of the festival. These fairs are unlike anything in Anglo-American culture, and since Apollon performed in them it is useful to say a few words about them.

Although these fairs were similar to American carnivals, they had some striking differences, too. One of which was the booths where most of the entertainment took place. These gaudily decorated, temporary structures featured a porch-like walk in front, stairs that took the customers up to the door, and then down into the performance arena where a crude stage was set up. In order to seduce passersby into the booth, the performers regularly held “parades” when all the athletes (in the case of a strongman or wrestler’s booth) would line up and the barker would begin his patter. After the tout had finished his business, the audience would pay for their tickets and tile in to see the show. Taunts and good-natured banter between the audience and the performer were more or less expected in this type of entertainment, and (in the case of wrestlers) after members of the troupe fought one another, they would then dangle a tempting cash prize before the crowd and entertain challenges from the audience.²

Many other strongmen had made a decent living with their performances at the fairs, but Desbonnet points out that Uni was an utter failure in this line. Poor Apollon’s lack of business sense — or any other kind of sense for that matter — is one of the principal themes that run through Desbonnet’s account of his friend’s life. It is clear that the clever and quick-witted Edmond had little respect for his colleague’s laziness and mental torpor. Uni is constantly portrayed as a jovial but rather stupid man who used as little energy as he could get by with. A constant refrain that Desbonnet expresses over and over is “What might Apollon have achieved had he chosen to exert himself?” Despite the Professor’s obvious respect for the strongman, it sometimes appears that Desbonnet fell into the strongbody/weak-mind fallacy — then again perhaps Apollon was every bit as obtuse as he was presented.

The portrayal of Apollon as a henpecked giant is also a common literary convention. We are reminded of a host of other great men who were abused and dominated by beautiful, conniving women. Samson was unmanned by the wily Delilah, Socrates was abused by Xantippe, and Hercules was forced to wear women’s clothes and spin wool with the ladies at the court of Princess Omphale. Perhaps it is also significant that Apollon’s wife came from a family of circus entertainers; his spouse’s specialty was lion taming. Considering Desbonnet’s wide reading in the classics and his genius as a raconteur, we must wonder if he was absolutely faithful to the truth in

this instance. Unfortunately we shall probably never know for sure.

In 1911 when Desbonnet published his “history of all strongmen from ancient times to our own day,” Apollon was still in superb physical fettle and he continued to perform around Europe. But like so many others whose biographies were recounted in *The Kings of Strength*, Apollon was destined to come to a melancholy end. Somewhere along the way, Apollon had separated from his high-strung wife, but not before she had borne him a daughter. Because of his schedule of performances, he saw very little of his family, and eventually they became completely estranged. Then, in 1923 a sad announcement appeared in the magazine *La sante par les Sports*; it was an appeal for assistance, and read in part: “the famous strongman desires employment as a right-hand man [*un homme de confiance*]. Our champion has retired from the stage with an adequate fortune, unfortunately it was in Russian securities which are unproductive at the moment. Life is expensive, and Apollon would be happy to have guaranteed room and board in exchange for work which he would furnish. Apollon could serve as a handyman castle watchman forest warden, etc. Anything that he might oversee would be well guarded.”³ As bad luck would have it, Apollon had invested in Russian stocks and bonds at a time when the Communist revolution had rendered all such capitalistic holdings totally valueless.

Perhaps his appeal for employment yielded success, for about a year later it was announced that the once-great athlete would embark on a new and somewhat unexpected career as a movie star. Apollon had performed earlier as a strongman in the sentimental stage melodrama *La Loupiotte* [The Kid], but in 1924 the magazines announced that he would play the title role in a new film grandiloquently called *Episodes of Roman Life under Tiberius*. The obviously elderly strongman appeared in a series of publicity pictures with his co-star, the pretty French-Canadian actress Madge Kindall. Apollon appears in his brief Roman robe, displaying his thick, muscular legs as well as his much vaunted Roman physiognomy.⁴ It is unclear at this remove whether or not the movie was ever produced, but in 1926, the former strongman appeared in an even more prestigious production. He was cast in the role of “Triton” in a Rex Ingram photoplay entitled *Mare Nostrum*. This was an allegorical epic set during World War I involving sea battles and beautiful spies and enjoyed a moderate success in Europe and the U.S., but it was pulled from circulation in the late 1920s because of its anti-German content.⁵

These measures must not have had much impact on Apollon’s finances, for not long afterward another brief article appeared announcing the great man’s death on October 18, 1928.⁶ Although the news had been conveyed to the sporting world via *La Culture Physique* and the premier sports magazine of the time, *l’Auto*, Apollon’s funeral was very sparsely attended. Desbonnet reported that aside from the widow Uni, only a few faithful friends walked behind the coffin on its way to the cemetery.

Apollon had admitted himself into the hospital a short time earlier to have an operation on a throat abscess caused by excessive tobacco use and aggravated by inattention to earlier symptoms. He was sixty-seven years of age when he died. "Apollon," wrote Desbonnet, "who performed gloriously before millions of spectators came to die alone, without fanfare, without fortune, and virtually abandoned in a little provincial town. This is the sad and undeserved fate meted out to the greater part of professional strongmen. Sic transit gloria mundi . . ."⁷

Although Desbonnet was disappointed by the tiny crowd of mourners at the great man's funeral, he was determined to keep the strongman's memory evergreen. The writer's true feelings were best expressed when he bid his old friend adieu in the obituary he wrote for *La Culture Physique*. "Until we meet again, dear and greatly missed Apollon," he lamented. "We will sing your glory and the sadness of your unhappy fate. You may believe in us. Great and noble form, you have departed but you leave us with your memory intact."⁸ True to his word, Desbonnet dedicated himself thereafter to perpetuating the memory of his amiable, flawed, and extraordinarily powerful friend Louis Uni.

—David Chapman

Notes:

¹Edmond Desbonnet, "Chacun a sa tache ici-bas: L'homme sachant ce qu'il veut et voulant ce qu'il fait porte toujours bien sa destinee," *La Culture Physique* 42.576 (April 1938): 107.

²For more information on the traditional French fairs, see Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

³"Qui Veut Employer Apollon," *La Sante par les Sports* 27.92 (June 1923): 168.

⁴Dupont-Servoise, "Apollon au Cinema," *La sante par les Sports* 28.106 (August 1924): 223-4.

⁵Leo Gaudreau, "Tid-bits of Strongmanism," *Muscle Power* 3:2 (July 1947): 33. Also see Ann Lloyd (ed.) *Movies of the Silent Years* (London: Orbis, 1984), 138-139. The athlete appeared in *Mare Nostrum* under the stage name "Apollon Uni." I have been unable to find any information about the earlier film, *Episodes de la vie romaine sous Tibere*.

⁶"Louis Uni dit Apollon n'est plus," *La Culture Physique* 32.463 (November 1928): 346.

⁷Edmond Desbonnet, "Apollon repose a Evreux," *La Culture Physique* 32.463 (December 1928): 382.

⁸"Louis Uni dit Apollon," 346.