

CHAPTER 4

BUTCHERS BLOCK

Alathea and Joseph walked together; the boys skipped away in front. Joseph wore his grey rough woollen sleeveless shirt and long trousers. He was wearing his work boots, carrying his boxing boots, towel and sweat cloths in a canvas bag.

Although he looked totally calm on the outside, he felt somewhat nervous about this fight. His opponent was a butcher from Huddesfield called Partridge, a burly man of substantial weight and size who was also carrying a fair amount of fat. His fists were huge and had been known to do serious damage to more than one man's face and body. His one weakness was his lack of stamina, being a firm believer that exercises and running weakened a man. A good feed of meat and bread was much better.

As Joseph walked he considered his tactics and confirmed in his own mind the best moves to make. 'Stay away from those fists. Keep moving around and wait till he tires— if he don't knock me out first! One hit from those fists could send any man senseless,' he concluded.

The fight was to take place in the middle of the village common, located in the valley between the hills. It was a large grassy field surrounded by wooden pit posts that were used as a fence. There was a roped-off square area in the middle where the fight was to take place. Scattered around the field were crudely erected stalls with food and home-knitted goods for sale. Three stalls were occupied by men with bags in their laps. They had the usual miner's Sunday clothes on; these were the local bookmakers, eager to make a shilling.

'Let's have yer bets, put yer money here to win.' They called out.

A small horse and cart was trotting around the outside, taking children for a ride for a h'penny. Other children sat in front of a tall, brightly-covered box where a Punch and Judy show was being performed. They were transfixed by the puppets, screaming with laughter and shouting each time Judy laid into poor old Punch with a stick. Punch would yell and squeal and the children would squeal with him. Jack and Thomas ran to the puppet stand and sat down to watch as Joseph and Alathea walked across to the boxing ring.

A crowd had collected around the boxing ring. Joseph and Alathea eased their way through the crowd, the spectators calling out words of encouragement as they neared the ring. Two of Joseph's work mates, acting as his assistants, were at the ringside waiting for him. They had placed a crude stool made from boxwood in the corner and had a bucket full of water with a cloth in it standing nearby.

'Aah, there yer are, me lad,' said Mick Maltby, one of his assistants. 'We thought you might have changed your mind,' he added with a grin.

'Not much bloody chance of that,' Joseph growled back. 'But I admit I must be mad to do this just for a bob or two.' He leaned on the ropes.

Alathea picked up the canvas bag Joseph had dropped and removed the boxing boots. She loosened the laces and handed them to Joseph one at a time as he put them on.

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‘Thank you love,’ Joseph said as he leaned over and kissed her cheek. ‘Wish me luck.’

‘You don’t need luck.’ She smiled at him. ‘You’re as good as that Tom Cribb any day.’

Joseph’s idol was a bare knuckle fighter called Tom Cribb, a famous champion with a lengthy career of seventeen years, twelve of them as bare knuckle world champion from 1812 to 1824. Joseph had based himself on his style of fighting, aggressive but steady, taking his time and wearing down his opponents.

Joseph climbed through the ropes into the ring, took off his woollen shirt and handed it to Mick. He leaned against the corner post, his arms stretched along the ropes, and observed his opponent in the far corner. Partridge looked back with a leer, a look of pure hatred and malice. He punched the air a few times with his huge fists as if to put fear into Joseph. But Joseph had met his type many times before. The theatrics had little effect, except to put a smile on his face.

A man in a battered suit climbed through the ropes. Holding his arms in the air he addressed the crowd.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, today we have one of the last of the bare knuckle Champions— Mister Joseph Cardwell defending his title of heavyweight champion of Yorkshire against George Partridge of Huddesfield, butcher, a fighter of some repute.’

He lowered his arms and waved the fighters to the middle of the ring.

Joseph’s body was well proportioned with broad muscular shoulders falling to a small waist, kept thin by hard physical work and the meagre fare of a miner’s diet. In contrast, Partridge was bulked out from rich foods and meats that would never grace a miner’s table. As he moved towards the middle of the ring Joseph flexed his shoulders to loosen them up.

‘You will fight by the Marquis of Queensbury’s rules and anyone breaking those rules will be disqualified. No hitting below the belt. No biting or kicking. No shouting and no obscene language,’ the referee bellowed so all could hear. He sent them to their respective corners and moved away.

The time keeper hit the gong to indicate the beginning of round one. The crowd immediately started shouting encouragement to their favoured boxer. Jack and Thomas raced across from the Punch and Judy show to watch the fight, squeezing their way through the dense crowd until they were alongside their father’s corner.

Partridge rushed forward to the middle of the ring, eager to engage Joseph, and led with a left hook followed by a right aimed at Joseph’s head. Joseph was expecting this type of aggressive fighting and deftly stepped back and sideways. Partridge grunted, brought his fist in to cover his face and jabbed with his right hand. Joseph danced backwards and sideways, the other fighter following him in a stumbling gait.

‘Stand still, ya bugger, so I can hit ya,’ Partridge snarled. Joseph smiled and moved to his left, starting to swing his left hand towards the side of Partridge’s head

Partridge thought he was clever in seeing it coming and moved his head to his left. But the blow never arrived; Joseph had already switched to his right, bringing it up to meet Partridge’s evading head.

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Thwack! The blow landed on Partridge's ear and the side of his head. Joseph felt the impact on his knuckles and right up to his elbow. Partridge let out a roar of pain and stepped back two paces. The crowd cheered in support and called out encouragement.

Partridge, having learnt the hard way not to take Joseph lightly, spent the rest of the round chasing a retreating, or so he thought, Joseph.

As round two began Partridge rushed out again, eager to attack, convinced that Joseph was backing away. He swung blows rapidly at Joseph and finally connected with his right ribs. He saw his opponent sag a little and moved in for the kill. Joseph felt the heavy impact of blows on his arm muscles. Partridge tried to land a fatal blow. Joseph continued to dance around with Partridge following him with tiring steps.

The next three rounds were spent in avoiding each other's blows and continual moving around by Joseph. By this time Partridge was losing his temper and snarling like a madman. He rushed in, not caring about being hit, swinging rapid left and right blows at Joseph's head.

The sudden attack caught Joseph off guard and he received three heavy blows to the side of his head before recovering enough to move out of Partridge's way. His head felt light and the people around him became a blur, the noises around him disappeared and his legs felt as if they were no longer there.

'That's it, I'm finished,' he thought to himself. 'Oh well, I can give up fighting now.' But he was determined to at least stay standing. Through the haze he could see Partridge snarling at him, saying something, 'Why isn't he hitting me?' he thought/ 'He should be in for the kill.'

He started backwards and felt someone's hand on his shoulder pulling him back. He looked at Partridge who was moving away for some odd reason, then turned to who was pulling him.

It was his second Bob Suthers, pointing towards the stool, and he realised the round had finished, although he had not heard the gong. Thankful, he sat on the stool and shook his head.

'Bugger me, I thought you were a gonna that time,' Bob said, wiping Joseph's face down with a dripping wet cloth. 'Can you carry on, or should I throw the towel in?'

Joseph's hearing was coming back and his vision was clearing.

'You throw that towel in and you'll bloody well get thrown in after it,' he replied, only half serious. He felt someone else pulling at his arm and turning saw Jack and Thomas standing close by.

Jack grabbed his left arm with both hands and said, 'Good on ya, you can do it, Dad, I know you can.'

'Yeah. You're the best,' Thomas added.

Joseph felt a rush of pride in his children and this gave him new strength. He jumped up in response to the gong.

He punched in a defensive mode for the next two rounds, allowing his head to clear, and managed to avoid most of Partridge's blows, some of which were wild and easily anticipated. He had not landed any telling blows and Partridge believed he had the fight won. But Joseph was biding his

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time, allowing his head to clear and building up his strength, waiting as Partridge slowly tired.

Partridge again attacked with a flurry of blows, trying a repeated left, right combination, but the blows did not have the same strength as before. Joseph was ready for him, and as the blows came he ducked and swung his right fist up, slamming into Partridge's midriff with all his power. There was a whooshing sound from Partridge as the wind was forced out of him, blowing his cheeks out, and his eyes opened wide. Joseph saw his chance. He swung his left fist with all his shoulder behind it. It impacted on Partridge's temple like a miner's pick on a coal face. Partridge's head swung sideways and he started to stagger.

'It's time,' thought Joseph. He stepped back, observing Partridge trying to regain his composure and balance. He leaned to his right then brought his right fist up as hard as he could. It roared up to strike Partridge squarely under his chin.

Partridge's head flew back. His eyes glazed over. He toppled slowly to the ground, bounced on the grass with a thud and lay still.

The referee stepped over him and started counting. By the time he had finished, Joseph was standing in the neutral corner with his arms resting on the ropes.

'The winner, and still the heavy weight champion of Yorkshire, Mister Joseph Cardwell!' the referee shouted, pointing to Joseph, who waved casually to the cheering, ecstatic crowd of mine workers.

His supporters were mostly from his own mine or close by, and were cheering loudly. Some, with great faith in Joseph's ability, had risked a few shillings and increased their wealth, much to their pleasure. The procession home was noisy, with supporters cheering the family on their way. A few pressed the occasional coin into Alatheia's or Joseph's hand in appreciation of their winnings, and they accepted this not as charity but as their due for a battle won.