

# Leopold the Great

by

**Graham Noble part 1**

When the Japanese experts first came over to Britain, they attracted students who in turn tried to carve out their own niche in the rather small and unorganised jujutsu world of the time. One way to make a name was by competition, but actually there wasn't much in the way of organised amateur competition in those days; contests did take place but these were often professional, for side bets of a few pounds.

One of the students of Tani and Miyake at the London School of Ju-jitsu was Ernest Regnier, who returned to Paris and became the founder of Jujitsu in France. Regnier was a good athlete who made a stir in French sporting circles in 1906 when he beat wrestler George Dubois in a no-rules match. The best-known English Jujutsu man was Alf Hewitt, who claimed the English Championship. He was a tenacious and scrappy competitor, and although he was defeated in challenge matches by both Tani and Miyake (in 31 and 16 minutes respectively), he pushed both Japanese hard. According to the newspaper report of his match with Tani, after 18 minutes Hewitt "put on an armlock which took the Jap all his time to get out of. For over 5 minutes he struggled all manner of ways and finally got out of danger. A series of severe locks were



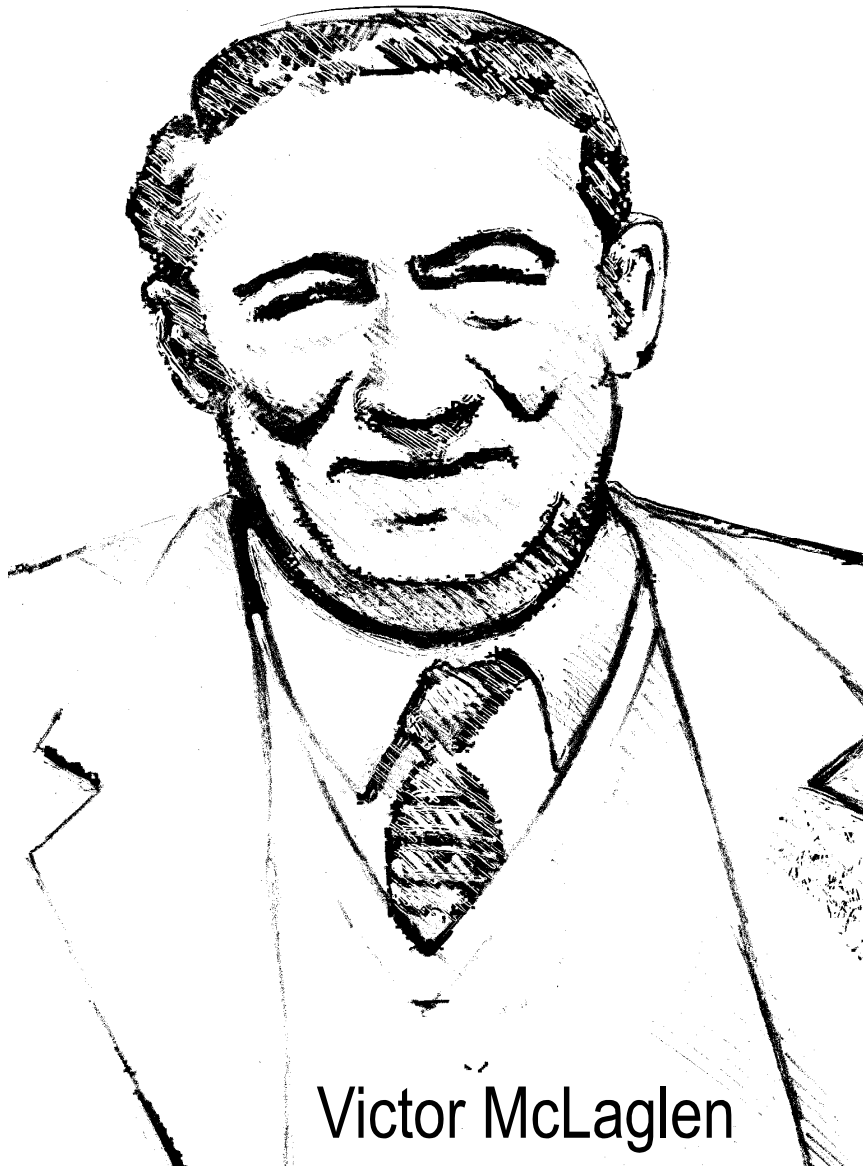
Capt. Leopold McLaglen

placed and checked, but a neck hold applied from underneath caused Hewitt's retirement in 31 min. 30 sec." If you were a professional at the turn of the century you more or less had to claim to be a champion. Many of the Japanese who came here had won tournaments back in Japan, and they were strong competitors, but is difficult to make any real judgements of their comparative strength; the first real All Japan Judo Championship wasn't held until the early post-war years, and the first World Championship only

took place in 1956, So anyone making claims of World Champion status in the early 1900s was being somewhat premature. That didn't stop people making such claims, however, and in fact one of them wasn't even Japanese - the most flamboyant, and least qualified of all the "World Champions" - Captain Sydney Temple Leopold McLaglen.

He was born around 1884 in the Mile End district of London, apparently one of a large family of eight sons and one daughter. The sons, all big strapping lads, seemed to have shared interests in both boxing and the army. Leopold's older brother Fred served in the First World War and was killed in 1917. Another brother, Victor, was a captain in the 'Cheshires'. Victor fought as a professional boxer, and then later became an actor in films, one of my favourite character actors as a matter of fact. He usually played hard-fisted, hard-drinking types with a heart of gold, and it was Victor McLaglen who had the famous fist fight with John Wayne in that engaging piece of Irish blarney "The Quiet Man."

Victor McLaglen was a larger than life character, at least on film, and so, it seems, was Leopold. I have not been able to ascertain the details of his army career, but Leopold McLaglen said that he had served in the Boer War (1899-1902), and he did author two books on military subjects: *The Infantry*



Victor McLaglen

*Officer's Pocket Book*, and *Bayonet Fighting For War*. In a note in his 1922 *Police Jujitsu*, McLaglen stated that his close quarter method of bayonet fighting had been used in the Great War, and by the officers and men of the Zeebrugge Storming party, which must have been a famous military action of the period.

Jujutsu had become a fairly popular novelty attraction in the early 1900s, and when Leopold McLaglen left the army he embarked on a career as a professional Jujut-

su player and teacher. Where he had actually learned the art remains a mystery. I suppose he could have picked it up from teachers such as Tani or Uyenishi, or perhaps from their pupils, but in fact his technique was rather different from these Japanese instructors.

According to McLaglen himself, he was a tall skinny schoolboy when he began learning the art. He was always getting bullied by other boys, but fortunately one of his uncles, who had been attached to the British lega-

tion in Tokyo, returned from Japan with a Japanese servant, a student who was a Jujutsu practitioner. At age 12, Leopold began learning jujutsu from this Japanese and after a month, "he was able to whip any boy in the school." By the age of 19 he was able to defeat his teacher.

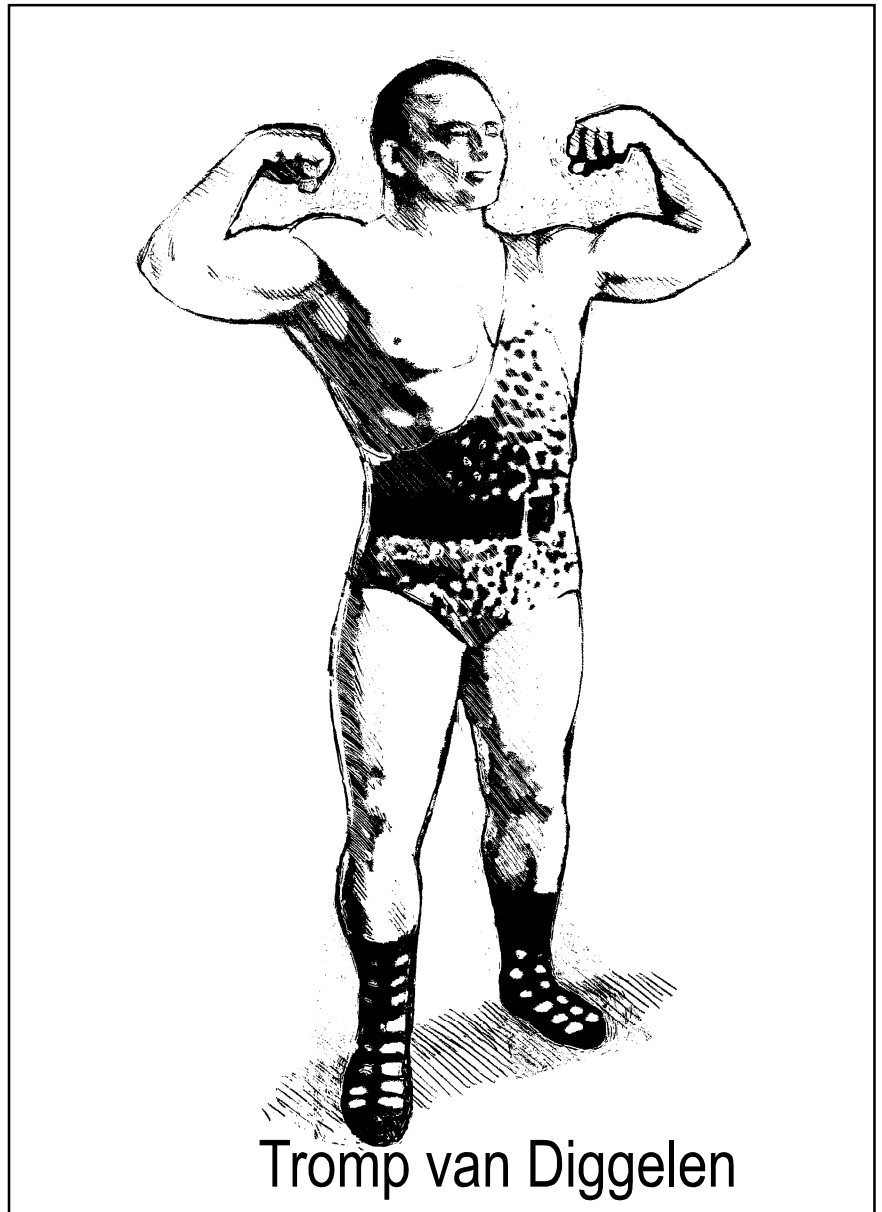
His later claims to the World championship were tenuous, to say the least, but he was a showman who could convince an ignorant public that he had fought and won important jujutsu contests all over the world. To many people, whose knowledge of the Far East extended about as far as the exploits of Sax Rohmer's fiendish Dr. Fu Man Chu, McLaglen's tales of defeating the Japanese Champion, "before the Son of Heaven, the Mikado himself, and a seething crowd of his disappointed subjects," must have sounded thrilling and authentic. He told how he defeated two Japanese champions in Calcutta, fighting, for some reason, on two carpets worth \$500 each. In a mixed styles match he had beaten a boxer in three rounds, leaving the man unconscious for over three hours. And there was the time he was attacked by a knife-wielding assailant in San Francisco and broke the attacker's jaw. He claimed to be a specialist in the Japanese art of Katsu, or resuscitation, having learned the art from a Japanese he had beaten for the World jujitsu championship in

1907.

"The Japanese became very friendly with me," wrote McLaglen, "and showed me all he knew of the science, and from other sources in the far East, I acquired greater knowledge by experimenting on monkeys, and also by testing my system on the natives of Africa."

McLaglen showed his improved system of resuscitation in his books and on the courses he taught, and in doing this he saw himself as a benefactor of mankind. He thought that many hundreds of soldiers killed in the Great War could have been saved by his methods, and he believed that in time his method would be adopted throughout the world, for the benefit of humanity. "In my travels," he wrote, "I have on many occasions restored cases of fainting and epileptic fits, but my most interesting subject was a native of Darasalam, a seaport town on the East coast of Africa. He was felled by a heavy piece of timber, which struck him across the back and shoulders. The native was laid out, and when the doctor came he examined and sounded his heart. There was not the slightest pulsation and the corneal reflex was gone, and after a lengthy examination the native was declared dead and was about to be taken off and buried.

"I was attracted to the scene and told all that happened. The native's shoulder was dislocated. The doctor had no objection to me examin-



Tromp van Diggelen

ing the man and without any doubt he was dead, but only in one sense of the word. Had I not stimulated the different nerves he would have remained dead."

What Leopold McLaglen was doing in Darasalam I don't know, but he really was a world traveller. In 1913, to the accompaniment of much newspaper publicity, he arrived in South Africa to carry out a music hall tour. Tromp van Diggelen, the well known wrestler and physical culture teacher, agreed to assist him

in his demonstrations, and, initially at least, he was rather impressed by the six foot six inch *World Champion* describing him as, "Not the type of adventurous manhood that one could easily brush aside. Not only did he have a magnetic personality, but his aplomb was something truly stupendous." The two men went along to the Standard Theatre in Johannesburg to go through a rehearsal, and the much smaller van Diggelen, who had worked out with Yukio

Tani in London, quickly realised an amazing thing: he could handle the supposed world champion easily. Moreover, McLaglen was unable to apply any of his holds unless van Diggelen cooperated. As Tromp wrote: "To my astonishment I found that the 'World Champion of Ju jitsu' could not put me out unless I quitted. This was something quite foreign to me. I was used to wrestling without pulling the punches as the boxers have it, and here I found that if I used my utmost endeavours and my strength, I was going to spoil the show for after all, Leopold's whole demonstration was supposed to show that Jiu jitsu was a means of defence that could overcome any form of attack"

In fact, Tromp van Diggelen soon realised that this was a form of entertainment rather than a competition and the two men worked out a routine that would demonstrate Leopold McLaglen's skill. Evidently van Diggelen did not take it too seriously as he also helped work out a show-piece whereby McLaglen would illustrate his amazing skill at paralysing the nerve centres of the human body. van Diggelen was a noted muscle control expert and as he assumed different positions, McLaglen would press a supposed nerve centre. Immediately Tromp would contract the relevant muscle, causing it to jump and become rigid. He would stand there as if paralysed until McLaglen released the hold.

Of course it was nonsense, but van Diggelen was surprised at how well it played with the audience.

"During our act the next night the big crowd responded magnificently" he wrote. The stunt was undoubtedly a winner. I was glad I had invented the idea for the pressure was all 'bunk', and it could not influence the muscular control at all. 'Leopold the Great' was quite a hero when he showed how powerless my muscles became through his vast knowledge of nerve centres. As I usually had my back to the audience while this was going on, I did my part with a broad grin on my face."

McLaglen's act followed a standard format. It would open with Tromp van Diggelen, dressed as a tramp, attacking a "fashionably dressed young lady". After being thrown all over the place the tramp would run cowering into the wings. After this there would be an appearance by McLaglen's wife who was known as "The Georgia Magnet". Her act consisted of challenging anyone in the audience to try to lift her off the ground. She weighed only 110lb and as far as I know no one succeeded. van Diggelen tried, but couldn't budge her an inch. Her act thus preceded Aikido's "*Unliftable Body*" by several decades.

The highlight of the show had now arrived. Leopold McLaglen would give a short talk on the science of Jujitsu.

He would "paralyse" Tromp van Diggelen with his manipulation of nerve centres, and then engage him in contest, disabling him easily with Jujitsu throws and holds.

Things went well for the first couple of nights, so well that on the third night McLaglen grew overconfident and stepped to the front of the stage. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he announced, "to show you one of the amazing things that can be done, I will undertake to put any man who will come onto the stage to sleep in 5 seconds by merely applying pressure to the carotid artery in the neck."

Tromp van Diggelen describes what happened next. "There was a dead silence. Nobody seemed to have the least desire to be put to sleep. Then suddenly a sturdy man of middle height rose up in the stalls and, shaking his fist at the gigantic Leopold called out: 'You can't do that stuff to me, I'm damned sure.' As he came forward to mount the short stairs onto the stage I noticed he looked almost boyish. He had fair hair and a ruddy complexion that spoke of fitness, and the way that he walked showed that he was angry, and I sensed that he was tough." A couple of friends followed him onto the stage. This thing had evidently been planned by a resolute man who knew his own abilities, he had not come up merely to be put to sleep, but to have a showdown with Leopold who, although almost

double his weight and with a 'World Title' had not intimidated him in the least. Thunder was in the air; my partner was going to be called upon to 'do his stuff'.

"The crowd seemed to know this sturdy challenger and began yelling 'Get stuck into him Robbie.' I sensed trouble, and how right I was. Robbie Roberts, whose name had been shouted up to me by the conductor of the orchestra, started to peel off his jacket. While his arms were still imprisoned in the sleeves, McLaglen, to my utter amazement, stepped forwards and struck him in the face. I was horrified, and Robbie Roberts went raving mad. In a second his coat had been flung to the stage and he did exactly what the screaming audience expected of him. That middle-weight with the bloom of school boyhood on his face tore into my big stage partner like a tornado. Never in a boxing ring have I seen such a furious attack.

"McLaglen was forced back against the scenery. It seemed to me that he was lifted clean off his feet by the tremendous blows that were thudding into his mid-section. Now he was facing something beyond his abilities to cope with and seemed incapable of applying any of his art. Suddenly 'Leopold the Mighty' retreated up the stone stairway leading to our dressing rooms. As he ran he yelled 'Help Tromp! He's hit me low'

"By now the curtain had

been rung down on the frightful pandemonium which went on in the auditorium. The show had come to an end. Tearing up the stairs, I rushed in on Leopold. 'You've not been hit low, I saw every move, and,' I yelled at him, 'I'm sending for a doctor.' After he had been duly examined the doctor told us that there was no sign of him having been hit low or fouled in any way. That was all I needed and told 'Leopold the Great' that I positively refused to appear with him again."

After this fiasco Robbie Roberts challenged McLaglen to a formal contest and the Wanderers Hall was packed the night of the match, but McLaglen refused to enter the ring. There was nearly a riot, and the crowd had to be given their money back.

Robbie had trained with van Diggelen in preparation for that match, working out in boxer versus wrestler style. Tromp was able to pin Robbie after several minutes of fighting, but it was never easy and Robbie's punches were always a threat. Robbie Roberts was a Canadian who made a living as a bookmaker and gambling club owner. He seemed to operate on the fringes of the law and he had a reputation as a hard man. There was a rumour that he had once killed a man with a punch, a Greek in Krugersdorp.

After the McLaglen contest fell through, van Diggelen lost touch with Robbie Roberts, but then a couple of

years later he met Tromp and said that he needed to get fit again, "*They are after me,*" he said, though van Diggelen never did find out who "they" were.

He advised Roberts to get hold of a gun if he was in trouble but Robbie said that he didn't need a weapon. "They got Chapman down from Rhodesia to fight me on the stones," he said. "I got him under and I got his ear in my mouth. I chewed it. It was fine!" He said that Chapman had been so smashed up in the fight that he had been crippled for life, and these were stories that shocked the sportsmanlike van Diggelen.

Three days later Robbie Roberts was found dead from gunshot wounds in a room in the Canton Hotel. After he was buried there was an official investigation and his body had to be exhumed. The verdict was suicide but Tromp van Diggelen couldn't believe that his friend would kill himself, and couldn't help thinking of those words, "They are after me." van Diggelen was sure that it must have been murder, and yet, in 1954 Robbie Roberts' son, who was also a bookmaker, and was said to have inherited his father's knockout punch, was found dead of gunshot wounds in a car. He left a wife and child. A letter and a pistol were found beside the body. So maybe Robbie Roberts did commit suicide, and it was in the genes all along.