

CHAPTER XX

The dog, like the horse, abases the base. Being base, Waiter Merritt Emory was abased by his desire for the possession of Michael. Had there been no Michael, his conduct would have been quite different. He would have dealt with Daughtry as Daughtry had described, as between white men. He would have warned Daughtry of his disease and enabled him to take ship to the South Seas or to Japan, or to other countries where lepers are not segregated. This would have worked no hardship on those countries, since such was their law and procedure, while it would have enabled Daughtry and Kwaque to escape the hell of the San Francisco pest-house, to which, because of his baseness, he condemned them for the rest of their lives.

Furthermore, when the expense of the maintenance of armed guards over the pest-house, day and night, throughout the years, is considered, Walter Merritt Emory could have saved many thousands of dollars to the tax-payers of the city and county of San Francisco, which thousands of dollars, had they been spent otherwise, could have been diverted to the reduction of the notorious crowding in school-rooms, to purer milk for the babies of the poor, or to an increase of breathing-space in the park system for the people of the stifling ghetto. But had Walter Merritt Emory been thus considerate, not only would Daughtry and Kwaque have sailed out and away over the sea, but with them would have sailed Michael.

Never was a reception-roomful of patients rushed through more expeditiously than was Doctor Emory's the moment the door had closed upon the two policemen who brought up Daughtry's rear. And before he went to his late lunch, Doctor Emory was away in his machine and down into the Barbary Coast to the door of the Bowhead Lodging House. On the way, by virtue of his political affiliations, he had been able to pick up a captain of detectives. The addition of the captain proved necessary, for the landlady put up a stout argument against the taking of the dog of her lodger. But Milliken, captain of detectives, was too well known to her, and she yielded to the law of which he was the symbol and of which she was credulously ignorant.

As Michael started out of the room on the end of a rope, a plaintive call of reminder came from the window-sill, where perched a tiny, snow-white cockatoo.

"Cocky," he called. "Cocky."

Walter Merritt Emory glanced back and for no more than a moment hesitated. "We'll send for the bird later," he told the landlady, who, still mildly expostulating as she followed them downstairs, failed to notice that the captain of the detectives had carelessly left the door to Daughtry's rooms ajar.

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But Walter Merritt Emory was not the only base one abased by desire of possession of Michael. In a deep leather chair, his feet resting in another deep leather chair, at the Indoor Yacht Club, Harry Del Mar yielded to the somniferous digestion of lunch, which was for him breakfast as well, and glanced through the first of the early editions of the afternoon papers. His eyes lighted on a big headline, with a brief five lines under it. His feet were instantly drawn down off the chair and under him as he stood up erect upon them. On swift second thought, he sat down again, pressed the electric button, and, while waiting for the club steward, reread the headline and the brief five lines.

In a taxi, and away, heading for the Barbary Coast, Harry Del Mar saw visions that were golden. They took on the semblance of yellow, twenty-dollar gold pieces, of yellow-backed paper bills of the government stamping of the United States, of bank books, and of rich coupons ripe for the clipping--and all shot through the flashings of the form of a rough-coated Irish terrier, on a galaxy of brilliantly-lighted stages, mouth open, nose upward to the drops, singing, ever singing, as no dog had ever been known to sing in the world before.

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Cocky himself was the first to discover that the door was ajar, and was looking at it with speculation (if by "speculation" may be described the mental processes of a bird, in some mysterious way absorbing into its consciousness a fresh impression of its environment and preparing to act,

or not act, according to which way the fresh impression modifies its conduct). Humans do this very thing, and some of them call it "free will." Cocky, staring at the open door, was in just the stage of determining whether or not he should more closely inspect that crack of exit to the wider world, which inspection, in turn, would determine whether or not he should venture out through the crack, when his eyes beheld the eyes of the second discoverer staring in.

The eyes were bestial, yellow-green, the pupils dilating and narrowing with sharp swiftness as they sought about among the lights and glooms of the room. Cocky knew danger at the first glimpse--danger to the uttermost of violent death. Yet Cocky did nothing. No panic stirred his heart. Motionless, one eye only turned upon the crack, he focused that one eye upon the head and eyes of the gaunt gutter-cat whose head had erupted into the crack like an apparition.

Alert, dilating and contracting, as swift as cautious, and infinitely apprehensive, the pupils vertically slitted in jet into the midmost of amazing opals of greenish yellow, the eyes roved the room. They alighted on Cocky. Instantly the head portrayed that the cat had stiffened, crouched, and frozen. Almost imperceptibly the eyes settled into a watching that was like to the stony stare of a sphinx across aching and eternal desert sands. The eyes were as if they had so stared for centuries and millenniums.

No less frozen was Cocky. He drew no film across his one eye that showed

his head cocked sideways, nor did the passion of apprehension that whelmed him manifest itself in the quiver of a single feather. Both creatures were petrified into the mutual stare that is of the hunter and the hunted, the preyer and the prey, the meat-eater and the meat.

It was a matter of long minutes, that stare, until the head in the doorway, with a slight turn, disappeared. Could a bird sigh, Cocky would have sighed. But he made no movement as he listened to the slow, dragging steps of a man go by and fade away down the hall.

Several minutes passed, and, just as abruptly the apparition reappeared--not alone the head this time, but the entire sinuous form as it glided into the room and came to rest in the middle of the floor. The eyes brooded on Cocky, and the entire body was still save for the long tail, which lashed from one side to the other and back again in an abrupt, angry, but monotonous manner.

Never removing its eyes from Cocky, the cat advanced slowly until it paused not six feet away. Only the tail lashed back and forth, and only the eyes gleamed like jewels in the full light of the window they faced, the vertical pupils contracting to scarcely perceptible black slits.

And Cocky, who could not know death with the clearness of concept of a human, nevertheless was not altogether unaware that the end of all things was terribly impending. As he watched the cat deliberately crouch for the spring, Cocky, gallant mote of life that he was, betrayed his one and

forgivable panic.

"Cocky! Cocky!" he called plaintively to the blind, insensate walls.

It was his call to all the world, and all powers and things and two-legged men-creatures, and Steward in particular, and Kwaque, and Michael. The burden of his call was: "It is I, Cocky. I am very small and very frail, and this is a monster to destroy me, and I love the light, bright world, and I want to live and to continue to live in the brightness, and I am so very small, and I'm a good little fellow, with a good little heart, and I cannot battle with this huge, furry, hungry thing that is going to devour me, and I want help, help, help. I am Cocky. Everybody knows me. I am Cocky."

This, and much more, was contained in his two calls of: "Cocky! Cocky!"

And there was no answer from the blind walls, from the hall outside, nor from all the world, and, his moment of panic over, Cocky was his brave little self again. He sat motionless on the window-sill, his head cocked to the side, with one unwavering eye regarding on the floor, so perilously near, the eternal enemy of all his kind.

The human quality of his voice had startled the gutter-cat, causing her to forgo her spring as she flattened down her ears and bellied closer to the floor.

And in the silence that followed, a blue-bottle fly buzzed rowdily against an adjacent window-pane, with occasional loud bumps against the glass tokening that he too had his tragedy, a prisoner pent by baffling transparency from the bright world that blazed so immediately beyond.

Nor was the gutter-cat without her ill and hurt of life. Hunger hurt her, and hurt her meagre breasts that should have been full for the seven feeble and mewling little ones, replicas of her save that their eyes were not yet open and that they were grotesquely unsteady on their soft, young legs. She remembered them by the hurt of her breasts and the prod of her instinct; also she remembered them by vision, so that, by the subtle chemistry of her brain, she could see them, by way of the broken screen across the ventilator hole, down into the cellar in the dark rubbish-corner under the stairway, where she had stolen her lair and birthed her litter.

And the vision of them, and the hurt of her hunger stirred her afresh, so that she gathered her body and measured the distance for the leap. But Cocky was himself again.

"Devil be damned! Devil be damned!" he shouted his loudest and most belligerent, as he ruffled like a bravo at the gutter-cat beneath him, so that he sent her crouching, with startlement, lower to the floor, her ears wilting rigidly flat and down, her tail lashing, her head turning about the room so that her eyes might penetrate its obscurest corners in quest of the human whose voice had so cried out.

All of which the gutter-cat did, despite the positive evidence of her senses that this human noise had proceeded from the white bird itself on the window-sill.

The bottle fly bumped once again against its invisible prison wall in the silence that ensued. The gutter-cat prepared and sprang with sudden decision, landing where Cocky had perched the fraction of a second before. Cocky had darted to the side, but, even as he darted, and as the cat landed on the sill, the cat's paw flashed out sidewise and Cocky leaped straight up, beating the air with his wings so little used to flying. The gutter-cat reared on her hind-legs, smote upward with one paw as a child might strike with its hat at a butterfly. But there was weight in the cat's paw, and the claws of it were outspread like so many hooks.

Struck in mid-air, a trifle of a flying machine, all its delicate gears tangled and disrupted, Cocky fell to the floor in a shower of white feathers, which, like snowflakes, eddied slowly down after, and after the plummet-like descent of the cat, so that some of them came to rest on her back, startling her tense nerves with their gentle impact and making her crouch closer while she shot a swift glance around and overhead for any danger that might threaten.