CHAPTER XXIII

Came the crate. Because Del Mar brought it into the baggage-room, Michael was suspicious of it. A minute later his suspicion was justified. Del Mar invited him to go into the crate, and he declined. With a quick deft clutch on the collar at the back of his neck, Del Mar jerked him off his footing and thrust him in, or partly in, rather, because he had managed to get a hold on the edge of the crate with his two forepaws. The animal trainer wasted no time. He brought the clenched fist of his free hand down in two blows, rat-tat, on Michael's paws. And Michael, at the pain, relaxed both holds. The next instant he was thrust inside, snarling his indignation and rage as he vainly flung himself at the open bars, while Del Mar was locking the stout door.

Next, the crate was carried out to an express wagon and loaded in along with a number of trunks. Del Mar had disappeared the moment he had locked the door, and the two men in the wagon, which was now bouncing along over the cobblestones, were strangers. There was just room in the crate for Michael to stand upright, although he could not lift his head above the level of his shoulders. And so standing, his head pressed against the top, a rut in the road, jolting the wagon and its contents, caused his head to bump violently.

The crate was not quite so long as Michael, so that he was compelled to stand with the end of his nose pressing against the end of the crate. An

automobile, darting out from a cross-street, caused the driver of the wagon to pull in abruptly and apply the brake. With the crate thus suddenly arrested, Michael's body was precipitated forward. There was no brake to stop him, unless the soft end of his nose be considered the brake, for it was his nose that brought his body to rest inside the crate.

He tried lying down, confined as the space was, and made out better, although his lips were cut and bleeding by having been forced so sharply against his teeth. But the worst was to come. One of his forepaws slipped out through the slats or bars and rested on the bottom of the wagon where the trunks were squeaking, screeching, and jigging. A rut in the roadway made the nearest trunk tilt one edge in the air and shift position, so that when it tilted back again it rested on Michael's paw. The unexpectedness of the crushing hurt of it caused him to yelp and at the same time instinctively and spasmodically to pull back with all his strength. This wrenched his shoulder and added to the agony of the imprisoned foot.

And blind fear descended upon Michael, the fear that is implanted in all animals and in man himself--the fear of the trap. Utterly beside himself, though he no longer yelped, he flung himself madly about, straining the tendons and muscles of his shoulder and leg and further and severely injuring the crushed foot. He even attacked the bars with his teeth in his agony to get at the monster thing outside that had laid hold of him and would not let him go. Another rut saved him, however, tilting

the trunk just sufficiently to enable his violent struggling to drag the foot clear.

At the railroad station, the crate was handled, not with deliberate roughness, but with such carelessness that it half-slipped out of a baggageman's hands, capsized sidewise, and was caught when it was past the man's knees but before it struck the cement floor. But, Michael, sliding helplessly down the perpendicular bottom of the crate, fetched up with his full weight on the injured paw.

"Huh!" said Del Mar a little later to Michael, having strolled down the platform to where the crate was piled on a truck with other baggage destined for the train. "Got your foot smashed. Well, it'll teach you a lesson to keep your feet inside."

"That claw is a goner," one of the station baggage-men said, straightening up from an examination of Michael through the bars.

Del Mar bent to a closer scrutiny.

"So's the whole toe," he said, drawing his pocket-knife and opening a blade. "I'll fix it in half a jiffy if you'll lend a hand."

He unlocked the box and dipped Michael out with the customary strangle-hold on the neck. He squirmed and struggled, dabbing at the air with the injured as well as the uninjured forepaw and increasing his pain.

"You hold the leg," Del Mar commanded. "He's safe with that grip. It won't take a second."

Nor did it take longer. And Michael, back in the box and raging, was one toe short of the number which he had brought into the world. The blood ran freely from the crude but effective surgery, and he lay and licked the wound and was depressed with apprehension of he knew not what terrible fate awaited him and was close at hand. Never, in his experience of men, had he been so treated, while the confinement of the box was maddening with its suggestion of the trap. Trapped he was, and helpless, and the ultimate evil of life had happened to Steward, who had evidently been swallowed up by the Nothingness which had swallowed up Meringe, the Eugenie, the Solomon Islands, the Makambo, Australia, and the Mary Turner.

Suddenly, from a distance, came a bedlam of noise that made Michael prick up his ears and bristle with premonition of fresh disaster. It was a confused yelping, howling, and barking of many dogs.

"Holy Smoke!--It's them damned acting dogs," growled the baggageman to his mate. "There ought to be a law against dog-acts. It ain't decent."

"It's Peterson's Troupe," said the other. "I was on when they come in last week. One of 'em was dead in his box, and from what I could see of him it looked mighty like he'd had the tar knocked outa him."

"Got a wollopin' from Peterson most likely in the last town and then was shipped along with the bunch and left to die in the baggage car."

The bedlam increased as the animals were transferred from the wagon to a platform truck, and when the truck rolled up and stopped alongside Michael's he made out that it was piled high with crated dogs. In truth, there were thirty-five dogs, of every sort of breed and mostly mongrel, and that they were far from happy was attested by their actions. Some howled, some whimpered, others growled and raged at one another through the slots, and many maintained a silence of misery. Several licked and nursed bruised feet. Smaller dogs that did not fight much were crammed two or more into single crates. Half a dozen greyhounds were crammed into larger crates that were anything save large enough.

"Them's the high-jumpers," said the first baggageman. "An' look at the way they're packed. Peterson ain't going to pay any more excess baggage than he has to. Not half room enough for them to stand up. It must be hell for them from the time they leave one town till they arrive at the next."

But what the baggageman did not know was that in the towns the hell was not mitigated, that the dogs were still confined in their too-narrow prisons, that, in fact, they were life-prisoners. Rarely, except for their acts, were they taken out from their cages. From a business standpoint, good care did not pay. Since mongrel dogs were cheap, it was

cheaper to replace them when they died than so to care for them as to keep them from dying.

What the baggageman did not know, and what Peterson did know, was that of these thirty-five dogs not one was a surviving original of the troupe when it first started out four years before. Nor had there been any originals discarded. The only way they left the troupe and its cages was by dying. Nor did Michael know even as little as the baggageman knew. He knew nothing save that here reigned pain and woe and that it seemed he was destined to share the same fate.

Into the midst of them, when with more howlings and yelpings they were loaded into the baggage car, was Michael's cage piled. And for a day and a part of two nights, travelling eastward, he remained in the dog inferno. Then they were loaded off in some large city, and Michael continued on in greater quietness and comfort, although his injured foot still hurt and was bruised afresh whenever his crate was moved about in the car.

What it was all about--why he was kept in his cramped prison in the cramped car--he did not ask himself. He accepted it as unhappiness and misery, and had no more explanation for it than for the crushing of the paw. Such things happened. It was life, and life had many evils. The why of things never entered his head. He knew things and some small bit of the how of things. What was, was. Water was wet, fire hot, iron hard, meat good. He accepted such things as he accepted the

everlasting miracles of the light and of the dark, which were no miracles to him any more than was his wire coat a miracle, or his beating heart, or his thinking brain.

In Chicago, he was loaded upon a track, carted through the roaring streets of the vast city, and put into another baggage-car which was quickly in motion in continuation of the eastward journey. It meant more strange men who handled baggage, as it meant in New York, where, from railroad baggage-room to express wagon he was exchanged, for ever a crated prisoner and dispatched to one, Harris Collins, on Long Island.

First of all came Harris Collins and the animal hell over which he ruled. But the second event must be stated first. Michael never saw Harry Del Mar again. As the other men he had known had stepped out of life, which was a way they had, so Harry Del Mar stepped out of Michael's purview of life as well as out of life itself. And his stepping out was literal. A collision on the elevated, a panic scramble of the uninjured out upon the trestle over the street, a step on the third rail, and Harry Del Mar was engulfed in the Nothingness which men know as death and which is nothingness in so far as such engulfed ones never reappear nor walk the ways of life again.