

CHAPTER XXV

It was at eleven in the morning that the pale youth-god put collar and chain on Michael, led him out of the segregation ward, and turned him over to a dark youth-god who wasted no time of greeting on him and manifested no friendliness. A captive at the end of a chain, on the way Michael quickly encountered other captives going in his direction. There were three of them, and never had he seen the like. Three slouching, ambling monsters of bears they were, and at sight of them Michael bristled and uttered the lowest of growls; for he knew them, out of his heredity (as a domestic cow knows her first wolf), as immemorial enemies from the wild. But he had travelled too far, seen too much, and was altogether too sensible, to attack them. Instead, walking stiff-legged and circumspectly, but smelling with all his nose the strange scent of the creatures, he followed at the end of his chain his own captor god.

Continually a multitude of strange scents invaded his nostrils. Although he could not see through walls, he got the smells he was later to identify of lions, leopards, monkeys, baboons, and seals and sea-lions. All of which might have stunned an ordinary dog; but the effect on him was to make him very alert and at the same time very subdued. It was as if he walked in a new and monstrously populous jungle and was unacquainted with its ways and denizens.

As he was entering the arena, he shied off to the side more

stiff-leggedly than ever, bristled all along his neck and back, and growled deep and low in his throat. For, emerging from the arena, came five elephants. Small elephants they were, but to him they were the hugest of monsters, in his mind comparable only with the cow-whale of which he had caught fleeting glimpses when she destroyed the schooner Mary Turner. But the elephants took no notice of him, each with its trunk clutching the tail of the one in front of it as it had been taught to do in making an exit.

Into the arena, he came, the bears following on his heels. It was a sawdust circle the size of a circus ring, contained inside a square building that was roofed over with glass. But there were no seats about the ring, since spectators were not tolerated. Only Harris Collins and his assistants, and buyers and sellers of animals and men in the profession, were ever permitted to behold how animals were tormented into the performance of tricks to make the public open its mouth in astonishment or laughter.

Michael forgot about the bears, who were quickly at work on the other side of the circle from that to which he was taken. Some men, rolling out stout bright-painted barrels which elephants could not crush by sitting on, attracted his attention for a moment. Next, in a pause on the part of the man who led him, he regarded with huge interest a piebald Shetland pony. It lay on the ground. A man sat on it. And ever and anon it lifted its head from the sawdust and kissed the man. This was all Michael saw, yet he sensed something wrong about it. He knew not

why, had no evidence why, but he felt cruelty and power and unfairness. What he did not see was the long pin in the man's hand. Each time he thrust this in the pony's shoulder, the pony, stung by the pain and reflex action, lifted its head, and the man was deftly ready to meet the pony's mouth with his own mouth. To an audience the impression would be that in such fashion the pony was expressing its affection for the master.

Not a dozen feet away another Shetland, a coal-black one, was behaving as peculiarly as it was being treated. Ropes were attached to its forelegs, each rope held by an assistant, who jerked on the same stoutly when a third man, standing in front of the pony, tapped it on the knees with a short, stiff whip of rattan. Whereupon the pony went down on its knees in the sawdust in a genuflection to the man with the whip. The pony did not like it, sometimes so successfully resisting with spread, taut legs and mutinous head-tossings, as to overcome the jerk of the ropes, and, at the same time wheeling, to fall heavily on its side or to uprear as the pull on the ropes was relaxed. But always it was lined up again to face the man who rapped its knees with the rattan. It was being taught merely how to kneel in the way that is ever a delight to the audiences who see only the results of the schooling and never dream of the manner of the schooling. For, as Michael was quickly sensing, knowledge was here learned by pain. In short, this was the college of pain, this Cedarwild Animal School.

Harris Collins himself nodded the dark youth-god up to him, and turned an

inquiring and estimating gaze on Michael.

"The Del Mar dog, sir," said the youth-god.

Collins's eyes brightened, and he looked Michael over more carefully.

"Do you know what he can do?" he queried.

The youth shook his head.

"Harry was a keen one," Collins went on, apparently to the youth-god but mostly for his own benefit, being given to thinking aloud. "He picked this dog as a winner. And now what can he do? That's the question. Poor Harry's gone, and we don't know what he can do.--Take off the chain."

Released Michael regarded the master-god and waited for what might happen. A squall of pain from one of the bears across the ring hinted to him what he might expect.

"Come here," Collins commanded in his cold, hard tones.

Michael came and stood before him.

"Lie down!"

Michael lay down, although he did it slowly, with advertised reluctance.

"Damned thoroughbred!" Collins sneered at him. "Won't put any pep into your motions, eh? Well, we'll take care of that.--Get up!--Lie down!--Get up!--Lie down!--Get up!"

His commands were staccato, like revolver shots or the cracks of whips, and Michael obeyed them in his same slow, reluctant way.

"Understands English, at any rate," said Collins.

"Wonder if he can turn the double flip," he added, expressing the golden dream of all dog-trainers. "Come on, we'll try him for a flip. Put the chain on him. Come over here, Jimmy. Put another lead on him."

Another reform-school graduate youth obeyed, snapping a girth about Michael's loins, to which was attached a thin rope.

"Line him up," Collins commanded. "Ready?--Go!"

And the most amazing, astounding indignity was wreaked upon Michael. At the word "Go!", simultaneously, the chain on his collar jerked him up and back in the air, the rope on his hindquarters jerked that portion of him under, forward, and up, and the still short stick in Collins's hand hit him under the lower jaw. Had he had any previous experience with the manoeuvre, he would have saved himself part of the pain at least by springing and whirling backward in the air. As it was, he felt as if

being torn and wrenched apart while at the same time the blow under his jaw stung him and almost dazed him. And, at the same time, whirled violently into the air, he fell on the back of his head in the sawdust.

Out of the sawdust he soared in rage, neck-hair erect, throat a-snarl, teeth bared to bite, and he would have sunk his teeth into the flesh of the master-god had he not been the slave of cunning formula. The two youths knew their work. One tightened the lead ahead, the other to the rear, and Michael snarled and bristled his impotent wrath. Nothing could he do, neither advance, nor retreat, nor whirl sideways. The youth in front by the chain prevented him from attacking the youth behind, and the youth behind, with the rope, prevented him from attacking the youth in front, and both prevented him from attacking Collins, whom he knew incontrovertibly to be the master of evil and hurt.

Michael's wrath was as superlative as was his helplessness. He could only bristle and tear his vocal chords with his rage. But it was a very ancient and boresome experience to Collins. He was even taking advantage of the moment to glance across the arena and size up what the bears were doing.

"Oh, you thoroughbred," he sneered at Michael, returning his attention to him. "Slack him! Let go!"

The instant his bonds were released, Michael soared at Collins, and

Collins, timing and distancing with the accuracy of long years, kicked him under the jaw and whirled him back and down into the sawdust.

"Hold him!" Collins ordered. "Line him out!"

And the two youths, pulling in opposite directions with chain and rope, stretched him into helplessness.

Collins glanced across the ring to the entrance, where two teams of heavy draft-horses were entering, followed by a woman dressed to over-dressedness in the last word of a stylish street-costume.

"I fancy he's never done any flipping," Collins remarked, coming back to the problem of Michael for a moment. "Take off your lead, Jimmy, and go over and help Smith.--Johnny, hold him to one side there and mind your legs. Here comes Miss Marie for her first lesson, and that mutt of a husband of hers can't handle her."

Michael did not understand the scene that followed, which he witnessed, for the youth led him over to look on at the arranging of the woman and the four horses. Yet, from her conduct, he sensed that she, too, was captive and ill-treated. In truth, she was herself being trained unwillingly to do a trick. She had carried herself bravely right to the moment of the ordeal, but the sight of the four horses, ranged two and two opposing her, with the thing patent that she was to hold in her hands the hooks on the double-trees and form the link that connected the two

spans which were to pull in opposite directions--at the sight of this her courage failed her and she shrank back, drooping and cowering, her face buried in her hands.

"No, no, Billikens," she pleaded to the stout though youthful man who was her husband. "I can't do it. I'm afraid. I'm afraid."

"Nonsense, madam," Collins interposed. "The trick is absolutely safe. And it's a good one, a money-maker. Straighten up a moment." With his hands he began feeling out her shoulders and back under her jacket. "The apparatus is all right." He ran his hands down her arms. "Now! Drop the hooks." He shook each arm, and from under each of the fluffy lace cuffs fell out an iron hook fast to a thin cable of steel that evidently ran up her sleeves. "Not that way! Nobody must see. Put them back. Try it again. They must come down hidden in your palms. Like this. See.--That's it. That's the idea."

She controlled herself and strove to obey, though ever and anon she cast appealing glances to Billikens, who stood remote and aloof, his brows wrinkled with displeasure.

Each of the men driving the harnessed spans lifted up the double-trees so that the girl could grasp the hooks. She tried to take hold, but broke down again.

"If anything breaks, my arms will be torn out of me," she protested.

"On the contrary," Collins reassured her. "You will lose merely most of your jacket. The worst that can happen will be the exposure of the trick and the laugh on you. But the apparatus isn't going to break. Let me explain again. The horses do not pull against you. They pull against each other. The audience thinks that they are pulling against you.--Now try once more. Take hold the double-trees, and at the same moment slip down the hooks and connect.--Now!"

He spoke sharply. She shook the hooks down out of her sleeves, but drew back from grasping the double-trees. Collins did not betray his vexation. Instead, he glanced aside to where the kissing pony and the kneeling pony were leaving the ring. But the husband raged at her:

"By God, Julia, if you throw me down this way!"

"Oh, I'll try, Billikens," she whimpered. "Honestly, I'll try. See! I'm not afraid now."

She extended her hands and clasped the double-trees. With a thin writhe of a smile, Collins investigated the insides of her clenched hands to make sure that the hooks were connected.

"Now brace yourself! Spread your legs. And straighten out." With his hands he manipulated her arms and shoulders into position. "Remember, you've got to meet the first of the strain with your arms straight out.

After the strain is on, you couldn't bend 'em if you wanted to. But if the strain catches them bent, the wire'll rip the hide off of you. Remember, straight out, extended, so that they form a straight line with each other and with the flat of your back and shoulders. That's it. Ready now."

"Oh, wait a minute," she begged, forsaking the position. "I'll do it--oh, I will do it, but, Billikens, kiss me first, and then I won't care if my arms are pulled out."

The dark youth who held Michael, and others looking on, grinned. Collins dissembled whatever grin might have troubled for expression, and murmured:

"All the time in the world, madam. The point is, the first time must come off right. After that you'll have the confidence.--Bill, you'd better love her up before she tackles it."

And Billikens, very angry, very disgusted, very embarrassed, obeyed, putting his arms around his wife and kissing her neither too perfunctorily nor very long. She was a pretty young thing of a woman, perhaps twenty years old, with an exceedingly childish, girlish face and a slender-waisted, generously moulded body of fully a hundred and forty pounds.

The embrace and kiss of her husband put courage into her. She stiffened

and steeled herself, and with compressed lips, as he stepped clear of her, muttered, "Ready."

"Go!" Collins commanded.

The four horses, under the urge of the drivers, pressed lazily into their collars and began pulling.

"Give 'em the whip!" Collins barked, his eyes on the girl and noting that the pull of the apparatus was straight across her.

The lashes fell on the horses' rumps, and they leaped, and surged, and plunged, with their huge steel-shod hoofs, the size of soup-plates, tearing up the sawdust into smoke.

And Billikens forgot himself. The terribleness of the sight painted the honest anxiety for the woman on his face. And her face was a kaleidoscope. At the first, tense and fearful, it was like that of a Christian martyr meeting the lions, or of a felon falling through the trap. Next, and quickly, came surprise and relief in that there was no hurt. And, finally, her face was proudly happy with a smile of triumph. She even smiled to Billikens her pride at making good her love to him. And Billikens relaxed and looked love and pride back, until, on the spur of the second, Harris Collins broke in:

"This ain't a smiling act! Get that smile off your face. The audience

has got to think you're carrying the pull. Show that you are. Make your face stiff till it cracks. Show determination, will-power. Show great muscular effort. Spread your legs more. Bring up the muscles through your skirt just as if you was really working. Let 'em pull you this way a bit and that way a bit. Give 'em to. Spread your legs more. Make a noise on your face as if you was being pulled to pieces an' that all that holds you is will-power.--That's the idea! That's the stuff! It's a winner, Bill! It's a winner!--Throw the leather into 'em! Make 'm jump! Make 'm get right down and pull the daylights out of each other!"

The whips fell on the horses, and the horses struggled in all their hugeness and might to pull away from the pain of the punishment. It was a spectacle to win approval from any audience. Each horse averaged eighteen hundredweight; thus, to the eye of the onlooker, seven thousand two hundred pounds of straining horse-flesh seemed wrenching and dragging apart the slim-waisted, delicately bodied, hundred-and-forty pound woman in her fancy street costume. It was a sight to make women in circus audiences scream with terror and turn their faces away.

"Slack down!" Collins commanded the drivers.

"The lady wins," he announced, after the manner of a ringmaster.--"Bill, you've got a mint in that turn.--Unhook, madam, unhook!"

Marie obeyed, and, the hooks still dangling from her sleeves, made a short run to Billikens, into whose arms she threw herself, her own arms

folding him about the neck as she exclaimed before she kissed him:

"Oh, Billikens, I knew I could do it all the time! I was brave, wasn't I!"

"A give-away," Collins's dry voice broke in on her ecstasy. "Letting all the audience see the hooks. They must go up your sleeves the moment you let go.--Try it again. And another thing. When you finish the turn, no chestiness. No making out how easy it was. Make out it was the very devil. Show yourself weak, just about to collapse from the strain. Give at the knees. Make your shoulders cave in. The ringmaster will half step forward to catch you before you faint. That's your cue. Beat him to it. Stiffen up and straighten up with an effort of will-power--will-power's the idea, gameness, and all that, and kiss your hands to the audience and make a weak, pitiful sort of a smile, as though your heart's been pulled 'most out of you and you'll have to go to the hospital, but for right then that you're game an' smiling and kissing your hands to the audience that's ripping the seats up and loving you.--Get me, madam? You, Bill, get the idea! And see she does it.--Now, ready! Be a bit wistful as you look at the horses.--That's it! Nobody'd guess you'd palmed the hooks and connected them.--Straight out!--Let her go!"

And again the thirty-six-hundredweight of horses on either side pitted its strength against the similar weight on the other side, and the seeming was that Marie was the link of woman-flesh being torn asunder.

A third and a fourth time the turn was rehearsed, and, between turns, Collins sent a man to his office, for the Del Mar telegram.

"You take her now, Bill," he told Marie's husband, as, telegram in hand, he returned to the problem of Michael. "Give her half a dozen tries more. And don't forget, any time any jay farmer thinks he's got a span that can pull, bet him on the side your best span can beat him. That means advance advertising and some paper. It'll be worth it. The ringmaster'll favour you, and your span can get the first jump. If I was young and footloose, I'd ask nothing better than to go out with your turn."

Harris Collins, in the pauses gazing down at Michael, read Del Mar's Seattle telegram:

"Sell my dogs. You know what they can do and what they are worth. Am done with them. Deduct the board and hold the balance until I see you. I have the limit of a dog. Every turn I ever pulled is put in the shade by this one. He's a ten strike. Wait till you see him."

Over to one side in the busy arena, Collins contemplated Michael.

"Del Mar was the limit himself," he told Johnny, who held Michael by the chain. "When he wired me to sell his dogs it meant he had a better turn, and here's only one dog to show for it, a damned thoroughbred at that. He says it's the limit. It must be, but in heaven's name, what is its turn?"

It's never done a flip in its life, much less a double flip. What do you think, Johnny? Use your head. Suggest something."

"Maybe it can count," Johnny advanced.

"And counting-dogs are a drug on the market. Well, anyway, let's try."

And Michael, who knew unerringly how to count, refused to perform.

"If he was a regular dog, he could walk anyway," was Collins' next idea.

"We'll try him."

And Michael went through the humiliating ordeal of being jerked erect on his hind legs by Johnny while Collins with the stick cracked him under the jaw and across the knees. In his wrath, Michael tried to bite the master-god, and was jerked away by the chain. When he strove to retaliate on Johnny, that imperturbable youth, with extended arm, merely lifted him into the air on his chain and strangled him.

"That's off," quoth Collins wearily. "If he can't stand on his hind legs he can't barrel-jump--you've heard about Ruth, Johnny. She was a winner. Jump in and out of nail-kegs, on her hind legs, without ever touching with her front ones. She used to do eight kegs, in one and out into the next. Remember when she was boarded here and rehearsed. She was a gold-mine, but Carson didn't know how to treat her, and she croaked off with penumonia at Cripple Creek."

"Wonder if he can spin plates on his nose," Johnny volunteered.

"Can't stand up on hind legs," Collins negatived. "Besides, nothing like the limit in a turn like that. This dog's got a specialty. He ain't ordinary. He does some unusual thing unusually well, and it's up to us to locate it. That comes of Harry dying so inconsiderately and leaving this puzzle-box on my hands. I see I just got to devote myself to him. Take him away, Johnny. Number Eighteen for him. Later on we can put him in the single compartments."