

CHAPTER XXIX

"Guess I'll have to wash my hands of him," Collins told Johnny. "I know Del Mar must have been right when he said he was the limit, but I can't get a clue to it."

This followed upon a fight between Michael and Collins. Michael, more morose than ever, had become even crusty-tempered, and, scarcely with provocation at all, had attacked the man he hated, failing, as ever, to put his teeth into him, and receiving, in turn, a couple of smashing kicks under his jaw.

"He's like a gold-mine all right all right," Collins meditated, "but I'm hanged if I can crack it, and he's getting grouchier every day. Look at him. What'd he want to jump me for? I wasn't rough with him. He's piling up a sour-ball that'll make him fight a policeman some day."

A few minutes later, one of his patrons, a tow-headed young man who was boarding and rehearsing three performing leopards at Cedarwild, was asking Collins for the loan of an Airedale.

"I've only got one left now," he explained, "and I ain't safe without two."

"What's happened to the other one?" the master-trainer queried.

"Alphonso--that's the big buck leopard--got nasty this morning and settled his hash. I had to put him out of his misery. He was gutted like a horse in the bull-ring. But he saved me all right. If it hadn't been for him I'd have got a mauling. Alphonso gets these bad streaks just about every so often. That's the second dog he's killed for me."

Collins shook his head.

"Haven't got an Airedale," he said, and just then his eyes chanced to fall on Michael. "Try out the Irish terrier," he suggested. "They're like the Airedale in disposition. Pretty close cousins, at any rate."

"I pin my faith on the Airedale when it comes to lion dogs," the leopard man demurred.

"So's an Irish terrier a lion dog. Take that one there. Look at the size and weight of him. Also, take it from me, he's all spunk. He'll stand up to anything. Try him out. I'll lend him to you. If he makes good I'll sell him to you cheap. An Irish terrier for a leopard dog will be a novelty."

"If he gets fresh with them cats he'll find his finish," Johnny told Collins, as Michael was led away by the leopard man.

"Then, maybe, the stage will lose a star," Collins answered, with a shrug

of shoulders. "But I'll have him off my chest anyway. When a dog gets a perpetual sour-ball like that he's finished. Never can do a thing with them. I've had them on my hands before."

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And Michael went to make the acquaintance of Jack, the surviving Airedale, and to do his daily turn with the leopards. In the big spotted cats he recognized the hereditary enemy, and, even before he was thrust into the cage, his neck was all a-prickle as the skin nervously tightened and the hair uprose stiff-ended. It was a nervous moment for all concerned, the introduction of a new dog into the cage. The tow-headed leopard man, who was billed on the boards as Raoul Castlemon and was called Ralph by his intimates, was already in the cage. The Airedale was with him, while outside stood several men armed with iron bars and long steel forks. These weapons, ready for immediate use, were thrust between the bars as a menace to the leopards who were, very much against their wills, to be made to perform.

They resented Michael's intrusion on the instant, spitting, lashing their long tails, and crouching to spring. At the same instant the trainer spoke with sharp imperativeness and raised his whip, while the men on the outside lifted their irons and advanced them intimidatingly into the cage. And the leopards, bitter-wise of the taste of the iron, remained crouched, although they still spat and whipped their tails angrily.

Michael was no coward. He did not slink behind the man for protection. On the other hand, he was too sensible to rush to attack such formidable creatures. What he did do, with bristling neck-hair, was to stalk stiff-leggedly across the cage, turn about with his face toward the danger, and stalk stiffly back, coming to a pause alongside of Jack, who gave him a good-natured sniff of greeting.

"He's the stuff," the trainer muttered in a curiously tense voice. "They don't get his goat."

The situation was deservedly tense, and Ralph developed it with cautious care, making no abrupt movements, his eyes playing everywhere over dogs and leopards and the men outside with the prods and bars. He made the savage cats come out of their crouch and separate from one another. At his word of command, Jack walked about among them. Michael, on his own initiative, followed. And, like Jack, he walked very stiffly on his guard and very circumspectly.

One of them, Alphonso, spat suddenly at him. He did not startle, though his hair rippled erect and he bared his fangs in a silent snarl. At the same moment the nearest iron bar was shoved in threateningly close to Alphonso, who shifted his yellow eyes from Michael to the bar and back again and did not strike out.

The first day was the hardest. After that the leopards accepted Michael as they accepted Jack. No love was lost on either side, nor were

friendly overtures ever offered. Michael was quick to realize that it was the men and dogs against the cats and that the men and dogs must stand together. Each day he spent from an hour to two hours in the cage, watching the rehearsing, with nothing for him and Jack to do save stand vigilantly on guard. Sometimes, when the leopards seemed better natured, Ralph even encouraged the two dogs to lie down. But, on bad mornings, he saw to it that they were ever ready to spring in between him and any possible attack.

For the rest of the time Michael shared his large pen with Jack. They were well cared for, as were all animals at Cedarwild, receiving frequent scrubbings and being kept clean of vermin. For a dog only three years old, Jack was very sedate. Either he had never learned to play or had already forgotten how. On the other hand, he was sweet-tempered and equable, and he did not resent the early shows of crustiness which Michael made. And Michael quickly ceased from being crusty and took pleasure in their quiet companionship. There were no demonstrations. They were content to lie awake by the hour, merely pleasantly aware of each other's proximity.

Occasionally, Michael could hear Sara making a distant scene or sending out calls which he knew were for him. Once she got away from her keeper and located Michael coming out of the leopard cage. With a shrill squeal of joy she was upon him, clinging to him and chattering the hysterical tale of all her woes since they had been parted. The leopard man looked on tolerantly and let her have her few minutes. It was her keeper who

tore her away in the end, cling as she would to Michael, screaming all the while like a harridan. When her hold was broken, she sprang at the man in a fury, and, before he could throttle her to subjection, sank her teeth into his thumb and wrist. All of which was provocative of great hilarity to the onlookers, while her squalls and cries excited the leopards to spitting and leaping against their bars. And, as she was borne away, she set up a soft wailing like that of a heart-broken child.

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Although Michael proved a success with the leopards, Raoul Castlemon never bought him from Collins. One morning, several days later, the arena was vexed by uproar and commotion from the animal cages. The excitement, starting with revolver shots, was communicated everywhere. The various lions raised a great roaring, and the many dogs barked frantically. All tricks in the arena stopped, the animals temporarily unstrung and unable to continue. Several men, among them Collins, ran in the direction of the cages. Sara's keeper dropped her chain in order to follow.

"It's Alphonso--shillings to pence it is," Collins called to one of his assistants who was running beside him. "He'll get Ralph yet."

The affair was all but over and leaping to its culmination when Collins arrived. Castlemon was just being dragged out, and as Collins ran he could see the two men drop him to the ground so that they might slam the

cage-door shut. Inside, in so wildly struggling a tangle on the floor that it was difficult to discern what animals composed it, were Alphonso, Jack, and Michael looked together. Men danced about outside, thrusting in with iron bars and trying to separate them. In the far end of the cage were the other two leopards, nursing their wounds and snarling and striking at the iron rods that kept them out of the combat.

Sara's arrival and what followed was a matter of seconds. Trailing her chain behind her, the little green monkey, the tailed female who knew love and hysteria and was remote cousin to human women, flashed up to the narrow cage-bars and squeezed through. Simultaneously the tangle underwent a violent upheaval. Flung out with such force as to be smashed against the near end of the cage, Michael fell to the floor, tried to spring up, but crumpled and sank down, his right shoulder streaming blood from a terrible mauling and crushing. To him Sara leaped, throwing her arms around him and mothering him up to her flat little hairy breast. She uttered solicitous cries, and, as Michael strove to rise on his ruined foreleg, scolded him with sharp gentleness and with her arms tried to hold him away from the battle. Also, in an interval, her eyes malevolent in her rage, she chattered piercing curses at Alphonso.

A crowbar, shoved into his side, distracted the big leopard. He struck at the weapon with his paw, and, when it was poked into him again, flung himself upon it, biting the naked iron with his teeth. With a second fling he was against the cage bars, with a single slash of paw ripping down the forearm of the man who had poked him. The crowbar was dropped

as the man leaped away. Alphonso flung back on Jack, a sorry antagonist by this time, who could only pant and quiver where he lay in the welter of what was left of him.

Michael had managed to get up on his three legs and was striving to stumble forward against the restraining arms of Sara. The mad leopard was on the verge of springing upon them when deflected by another prod of the iron. This time he went straight at the man, fetching up against the cage-bars with such fierceness as to shake the structure.

More men began thrusting with more rods, but Alphonso was not to be balked. Sara saw him coming and screamed her shrillest and savagest at him. Collins snatched a revolver from one of the men.

"Don't kill him!" Castlemon cried, seizing Collins's arm.

The leopard man was in a bad way himself. One arm dangled helplessly at his side, while his eyes, filling with blood from a scalp wound, he wiped on the master-trainer's shoulder so that he might see.

"He's my property," he protested. "And he's worth a hundred sick monkeys and sour-balled terriers. Anyway, we'll get them out all right. Give me a chance.--Somebody mop my eyes out, please. I can't see. I've used up my blank cartridges. Has anybody any blanks?"

One moment Sara would interpose her body between Michael and the leopard,

which was still being delayed by the prodding irons; and the next moment she would turn to screech at the fanged cat as if by very advertisement of her malignancy she might intimidate him into keeping back.

Michael, dragging her with him, growling and bristling, staggered forward a couple of three-legged steps, gave at the ruined shoulder, and collapsed. And then Sara did the great deed. With one last scream of utmost fury, she sprang full into the face of the monstrous cat, tearing and scratching with hands and feet, her mouth buried into the roots of one of its stubby ears. The astounded leopard upreared, with his forepaws striking and ripping at the little demon that would not let go.

The fight and the life in the little green monkey lasted a short ten seconds. But this was sufficient for Collins to get the door ajar and with a quick clutch on Michael's hind-leg jerk him out and to the ground.