

CHAPTER XXXI

A post card from Davis to Collins explained the reasons for Michael's return. "He sings too much to suit my fancy," was Davis's way of putting it, thereby unwittingly giving the clue to what Collins had vainly sought, and which Collins as unwittingly failed to grasp. As he told Johnny:

"From the looks of the beatings he's got no wonder he's been singing. That's the trouble with these animal people. They don't know how to take care of their property. They hammer its head off and get grouched because it ain't an angel of obedience.--Put him away, Johnny. Wash him clean, and put on the regular dressing wherever the skin's broken. I give him up myself, but I'll find some place for him in the next bunch of dogs."

Two weeks later, by sheerest accident, Harris Collins made the discovery for himself of what Michael was good for. In a spare moment in the arena, he had sent for him to be tried out by a dog man who needed several fillers-in. Beyond what he knew, such as at command to stand up, to lie down, to come here and go there, Michael had done nothing. He had refused to learn the most elementary things a show-dog should know, and Collins had left him to go over to another part of the arena where a monkey band, on a sort of mimic stage, was being arranged and broken in.

Frightened and mutinous, nevertheless the monkeys were compelled to perform by being tied to their seats and instruments and by being pulled and jerked from off stage by wires fastened to their bodies. The leader of the orchestra, an irascible elderly monkey, sat on a revolving stool to which he was securely attached. When poked from off the stage by means of long poles, he flew into ecstasies of rage. At the same time, by a rope arrangement, his chair was whirled around and around. To an audience the effect would be that he was angered by the blunders of his fellow-musicians. And to an audience such anger would be highly ludicrous. As Collins said:

"A monkey band is always a winner. It fetches the laugh, and the money's in the laugh. Humans just have to laugh at monkeys because they're so similar and because the human has the advantage and feels himself superior. Suppose we're walking along the street, you and me, and you slip and fall down. Of course I laugh. That's because I'm superior to you. I didn't fall down. Same thing if your hat blows off. I laugh while you chase it down the street. I'm superior. My hat's still on my head. Same thing with the monkey band. All the fool things of it make us feel so superior. We don't see ourselves as foolish. That's why we pay to see the monkeys behave foolish."

It was scarcely a matter of training the monkeys. Rather was it the training of the men who operated the concealed mechanisms that made the monkeys perform. To this Harris Collins was devoting his effort.

"There isn't any reason why you fellows can't make them play a real tune. It's up to you, just according to how you pull the wires. Come on. It's worth going in for. Let's try something you all know. And remember, the regular orchestra will always help you out. Now, what do you all know? Something simple, and something the audience'll know, too?"

He became absorbed in trying out the idea, and even borrowed a circus rider whose act was to play the violin while standing on the back of a galloping horse and to throw somersaults on such precarious platform while still playing the violin. This man he got merely to play simple airs in slow time, so that the assistants could keep the time and the air and pull the wires accordingly.

"Of course, if you make a howling mistake," Collins told them, "that's when you all pull the wires like mad and poke the leader and whirl him around. That always brings down the house. They think he's got a real musical ear and is mad at his orchestra for the discord."

In the midst of the work, Johnny and Michael came along.

"That guy says he wouldn't take him for a gift," Johnny reported to his employer.

"All right, all right, put him back in the kennels," Collins ordered hurriedly.--"Now, you fellows, all ready! 'Home, Sweet Home!' Go to it, Fisher! Now keep the time the rest of you! . . . That's it. With a full

orchestra you're making motions like the tune.--Faster, you, Simmons. You drag behind all the time."

And the accident happened. Johnny, instead of immediately obeying the order and taking Michael back to the kennels, lingered in the hope of seeing the orchestra leader whirled chattering around on his stool. The violinist, within a yard of where Michael sat squatted on his haunches, played the notes of "Home, Sweet Home" with loud slow exactitude and emphasis.

And Michael could not help it. No more could he help it than could he help responding with a snarl when threatened by a club; no more could he help it than when he had spoiled the turn of Dick and Daisy Bell when swept by the strains of "Roll Me Down to Rio"; no more could he help it than could Jerry, on the deck of the Ariel, help singing when Villa Kennan put her arms around him, smothered him deliciously in her cloud of hair, and sang his memory back into time and the fellowship of the ancient pack. As with Jerry, was it with Michael. Music was a drug of dream. He, too, remembered the lost pack and sought it, seeing the bare hills of snow and the stars glimmering overhead through the frosty darkness of night, hearing the faint answering howls from other hills as the pack assembled. Lost the pack was, through the thousands of years Michael's ancestors had lived by the fires of men; yet remembered always it was when the magic of rhythm poured through him and flooded his being with visions and sensations of that Otherwhere which in his own life he had never known.

Compounded with the waking dream of Otherwhere, was the memory of Steward and the love of Steward, with whom he had learned to sing the very series of notes that now were being reproduced by the circus-rider violinist. And Michael's jaw dropped down, his throat vibrated, his forefeet made restless little movements as if in the body he were running, as truly he was running in the mind, back to Steward, back through all the ages to the lost pack, and with the shadowy lost pack itself across the snowy wastes and through the forest aisles in the hunt of the meat.

The spectral forms of the lost pack were all about him as he sang and ran in open-eyed dream; the violinist paused in surprise; the men poked the monkey leader of the monkey orchestra and whirled him about wildly raging on his revolving stool; and Johnny laughed. But Harris Collins took note. He had heard Michael accurately follow the air. He had heard him sing--not merely howl, but sing.

Silence fell. The monkey leader ceased revolving and chattering. The men who had poked him held poles and wires suspended in their hands. The rest of the monkey orchestra merely shivered in apprehension of what next atrocity should be perpetrated. The violinist stared. Johnny still heaved from his laughter. But Harris Collins pondered, scratched his head, and continued to ponder.

"You can't tell me . . ." he began vaguely. "I know it. I heard it. That dog carried the tune. Didn't he now? I leave it to all of you.

Didn't he? The damned dog sang. I'll stake my life on it.--Hold on, you fellows; rest the monkeys off. This is worth following up.--Mr. Violinist, play that over again, now, 'Home, Sweet Home,'--let her go. Press her strong, and loud, and slow.--Now watch, all of you, and listen, and tell me if I'm crazy, or if that dog ain't carrying the tune.--There! What d'ye call it? Ain't it?"

There was no discussion. Michael's jaw dropped and his forefeet began their restless lifting after several measures had been played. And Harris Collins stepped close to him and sang with him and in accord.

"Harry Del Mar was right when he said that dog was the limit and sold his troupe. He knew. The dog's a dog Caruso. No howling chorus of mutts such as Kingman used to carry around with him, but a real singer, a soloist. No wonder he wouldn't learn tricks. He had his specially all the time. And just to think of it! I as good as gave him away to that dog-killing Wilton Davis. Only he came back.--Johnny, take extra care of him after this. Bring him up to the house this afternoon, and I'll give him a real try-out. My daughter plays the violin. We'll see what music he'll sing with her. There's a mint of money in him, take it from me."

* * * * *

Thus was Michael discovered. The afternoon's try-out was partially successful. After vainly attempting strange music on him, Collins found that he could sing, and would sing, "God Save the King" and "Sweet Bye

and Bye." Many hours of many days were spent in the quest. Vainly he tried to teach Michael new airs. Michael put no heart of love in the effort and sullenly abstained. But whenever one of the songs he had learned from Steward was played, he responded. He could not help responding. The magic was stronger than he. In the end, Collins discovered five of the six songs he knew: "God Save the King," "Sweet Bye and Bye," "Lead, Kindly Light," "Home, Sweet Home," and "Roll Me Down to Rio." Michael never sang "Shenandoah," because Collins and Collins's daughter did not know the old sea-chanty and therefore were unable to suggest it to him.

"Five songs are enough, if he won't never learn another note," Collins concluded. "They'll make him a bill-topper anywhere. There's a mint in him. Hang me if I wouldn't take him out on the road myself if only I was young and footloose."