CHAPTER XXXII

And so Michael was ultimately sold to one Jacob Henderson for two thousand dollars. "And I'm giving him away to you at that," said Collins. "If you don't refuse five thousand for him before six months, I don't know anything about the show game. He'll skin that last arithmetic dog of yours to a finish and you won't have to show yourself and work every minute of the turn. And if you don't insure him for fifty thousand as soon as he's made good you'll be a fool. Why, I wouldn't ask anything better, if I was young and footloose, than to take him out on the road myself."

Henderson proved totally different from any master Michael had had. The man was a neutral sort of creature. He was neither good nor evil. He neither drank, smoked, nor swore; nor did he go to church or belong to the Y.M.C.A. He was a vegetarian without being a bigoted one, liked moving pictures when they were concerned with travel, and spent most of his spare time in reading Swedenborg. He had no temper whatever. Nobody had ever witnessed anger in him, and all said he had the patience of Job. He was even timid of policemen, freight agents, and conductors, though he was not afraid of them. He was not afraid of anything, any more than was he enamoured of anything save Swedenborg. He was as colourless of character as the neutral-coloured clothes he wore, as the neutral-coloured hair that sprawled upon his crown, as the neutral-coloured eyes with which he observed the world. Nor was he a

fool any more than was he a wise man or a scholar. He gave little to life, asked little of life, and, in the show business, was a recluse in the very heart of life.

Michael neither liked nor disliked him, but, rather, merely accepted him. They travelled the United States over together, and they never had a quarrel. Not once did Henderson raise his voice sharply to Michael, and not once did Michael snarl a warning at him. They simply endured together, existed together, because the currents of life had drifted them together. Of course, there was no heart-bond between them. Henderson was master. Michael was Henderson's chattel. Michael was as dead to him as he was himself dead to all things.

Yet Jacob Henderson was fair and square, business-like and methodical. Once each day, when not travelling on the interminable trains, he gave Michael a thorough bath and thoroughly dried him afterward. He was never harsh nor hasty in the bathing. Michael never was aware whether he liked or disliked the bathing function. It was all one, part of his own fate in the world as it was part of Henderson's fate to bathe him every so often.

Michael's own work was tolerably easy, though monotonous. Leaving out the eternal travelling, the never-ending jumps from town to town and from city to city, he appeared on the stage once each night for seven nights in the week and for two afternoon performances in the week. The curtain went up, leaving him alone on the stage in the full set that befitted a

bill-topper. Henderson stood in the wings, unseen by the audience, and looked on. The orchestra played four of the pieces Michael had been taught by Steward, and Michael sang them, for his modulated howling was truly singing. He never responded to more than one encore, which was always "Home, Sweet Home." After that, while the audience clapped and stamped its approval and delight of the dog Caruso, Jacob Henderson would appear on the stage, bowing and smiling in stereotyped gladness and gratefulness, rest his right hand on Michael's shoulders with a play-acted assumption of comradeliness, whereupon both Henderson and Michael would bow ere the final curtain went down.

And yet Michael was a prisoner, a life-prisoner. Fed well, bathed well, exercised well, he never knew a moment of freedom. When travelling, days and nights he spent in the cage, which, however, was generous enough to allow him to stand at full height and to turn around without too uncomfortable squirming. Sometimes, in hotels in country towns, out of the crate he shared Henderson's room with him. Otherwise, unless other animals were hewing on the same circuit time, he had, outside his cage, the freedom of the animal room attached to the particular theatre where he performed for from three days to a week.

But there was never a chance, never a moment, when he might run free of a cage about him, of the walls of a room restricting him, of a chain shackled to the collar about his throat. In good weather, in the afternoons, Henderson often took him for a walk. But always it was at the end of a chain. And almost always the way led to some park, where

Henderson fastened the other end of the chain to the bench on which he sat and browsed Swedenborg. Not one act of free agency was left to Michael. Other dogs ran free, playing with one another, or behaving bellicosely. If they approached him for purposes of investigation or acquaintance, Henderson invariably ceased from his reading long enough to drive them away.

A life prisoner to a lifeless gaoler, life was all grey to Michael. His moroseness changed to a deep-seated melancholy. He ceased to be interested in life and in the freedom of life. Not that he regarded the play of life about him with a jaundiced eye, but, rather, that his eyes became unseeing. Debarred from life, he ignored life. He permitted himself to become a sheer puppet slave, eating, taking his baths, travelling in his cage, performing regularly, and sleeping much.

He had pride--the pride of the thoroughbred; the pride of the North American Indian enslaved on the plantations of the West Indies who died uncomplaining and unbroken. So Michael. He submitted to the cage and the iron of the chain because they were too strong for his muscles and teeth. He did his slave-task of performance and rendered obedience to Jacob Henderson; but he neither loved nor feared that master. And because of this his spirit turned in on itself. He slept much, brooded much, and suffered unprotestingly a great loneliness. Had Henderson made a bid for his heart, he would surely have responded; but Henderson had a heart only for the fantastic mental gyrations of Swedenborg, and merely made his living out of Michael.

Sometimes there were hardships. Michael accepted them. Especially hard did he find railroad travel in winter-time, when, on occasion, fresh from the last night's performance in a town, he remained for hours in his crate on a truck waiting for the train that would take him to the next town of performance. There was a night on a station platform in Minnesota, when two dogs of a troupe, on the next truck to his, froze to death. He was himself well frosted, and the cold bit abominably into his shoulder wounded by the leopard; but a better constitution and better general care of him enabled him to survive.

Compared with other show animals, he was well treated. And much of the ill-treatment accorded other animals on the same turn with him he did not comprehend or guess. One turn, with which he played for three months, was a scandal amongst all vaudeville performers. Even the hardiest of them heartily disliked the turn and the man, although Duckworth, and Duckworth's Trained Cats and Rats, were an invariable popular success.

"Trained cats!" sniffed dainty little Pearl La Pearle, the bicyclist. "Crushed cats, that's what they are. All the cat has been beaten out of their blood, and they've become rats. You can't tell me. I know."

"Trained rats!" Manuel Fonseca, the contortionist, exploded in the bar-room of the Hotel Annandale, after refusing to drink with Duckworth. "Doped rats, believe me. Why don't they jump off when they crawl along the tight rope with a cat in front and a cat behind? Because they ain't

got the life in 'm to jump. They're doped, straight doped when they're fresh, and starved afterward so as to making a saving on the dope. They never are fed. You can't tell me. I know. Else why does he use up anywhere to forty or fifty rats a week! I know his express shipments, when he can't buy 'm in the towns."

"My Gawd!" protested Miss Merle Merryweather, the Accordion Girl, who looked like sixteen on the stage, but who, in private life among her grand-children, acknowledged forty-eight. "My Gawd, how the public can fall for it gets my honest-to-Gawd goat. I looked myself yesterday morning early. Out of thirty rats there were seven dead,--starved to death. He never feeds them. They're dying rats, dying of starvation, when they crawl along that rope. That's why they crawl. If they had a bit of bread and cheese in their tummies they'd jump and run to get away from the cats. They're dying, they're dying right there on the rope, trying to crawl as a dying man would try to crawl away from a tiger that was eating him. And my Gawd! The bonehead audience sits there and applauds the show as an educational act!"

But the audience! "Wonderful things kindness will do with animals," said a member of one, a banker and a deacon. "Even human love can be taught to them by kindness. The cat and the rat have been enemies since the world began. Yet here, to-night, we have seen them doing highly trained feats together, and neither a cat committed one hostile or overt act against a rat, nor ever a rat showed it was afraid of a cat. Human kindness! The power of human kindness!"

"The lion and the lamb," said another. "We have it that when the millennium comes the lion and the lamb will lie down together--and outside each other, my dear, outside each other. And this is a forecast, a proving up, by man, ahead of the day. Cats and rats! Think of it. And it shows conclusively the power of kindness. I shall see to it at once that we get pets for our own children, our palm branches. They shall learn kindness early, to the dog, the cat, yes, even the rat, and the pretty linnet in its cage."

"But," said his dear, beside him, "you remember what Blake said:

"'A Robin Redbreast in a cage
Puts all heaven in a rage.'"

"Ah--but not when it is treated truly with kindness, my dear. I shall immediately order some rabbits, and a canary or two, and--what sort of a dog would you prefer our dear little ones to have to play with, my sweet?"

And his dear looked at him in all his imperturbable, complacent self-consciousness of kindness, and saw herself the little rural school-teacher who, with Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Lord Byron as her idols, and with the dream of herself writing "Poems of Passion," had come up to Topeka Town to be beaten by the game into marrying the solid, substantial business man beside her, who enjoyed delight in the spectacle of cats and

rats walking the tight-rope in amity, and who was blissfully unaware that she was the Robin Redbreast in a cage that put all heaven in a rage.

"The rats are bad enough," said Miss Merle Merryweather. "But look how he uses up the cats. He's had three die on him in the last two weeks to my certain knowledge. They're only alley-cats, but they've got feelings. It's that boxing match that does for them."

The boxing match, sure always of a great hand from the audience, invariably concluded Duckworth's turn. Two cats, with small boxing-gloves, were put on a table for a friendly bout. Naturally, the cats that performed with the rats were too cowed for this. It was the fresh cats he used, the ones with spunk and spirit . . . until they lost all spunk and spirit or sickened and died. To the audience it was a side-splitting, playful encounter between four-legged creatures who thus displayed a ridiculous resemblance to superior, two-legged man. But it was not playful to the cats. They were always excited into starting a real fight with each other off stage just before they were brought on. In the blows they struck were anger and pain and bewilderment and fear. And the gloves just would come off, so that they were ripping and tearing at each other, biting as well as making the fur fly, like furies, when the curtain went down. In the eyes of the audience this apparent impromptu was always the ultimate scream, and the laughter and applause would compel the curtain up again to reveal Duckworth and an assistant stage-hand, as if caught by surprise, fanning the two belligerents with towels.

But the cats themselves were so continually torn and scratched that the wounds never had a chance to heal and became infected until they were a mass of sores. On occasion they died, or, when they had become too abjectly spiritless to attack even a rat, were set to work on the tight-rope with the doped starved rats that were too near dead to run away from them. And, as Miss Merle Merryweather said: the bonehead audiences, tickled to death, applauded Duckworth's Trained Cats and Rats as an educational act!

A big chimpanzee that covered one of the circuits with Michael had an antipathy for clothes. Like a horse that fights the putting on of the bridle, and, after it is on, takes no further notice of it, so the big chimpanzee fought the putting on the clothes. Once on, it was ready to go out on the stage and through its turn. But the rub was in putting on the clothes. It took the owner and two stage-hands, pulling him up to a ring in the wall and throttling him, to dress him--and this, despite the fact that the owner had long since knocked out his incisors.

All this cruelty Michael sensed without knowing. And he accepted it as the way of life, as he accepted the daylight and the dark, the bite of the frost on bleak and windy station platforms, the mysterious land of Otherwhere that he knew in dreams and song, the equally mysterious Nothingness into which had vanished Meringe Plantation and ships and oceans and men and Steward.