

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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young
man
with
a
trumpet

by . . . *Frank Belknap Long*

The animals did the best they could with what they had. But a certain rare talent for the magnificent was missing until—

WHEN Man left Earth forever the animals still carried on proudly.

They knew, of course, that they could never hope to equal the Great One's shining accomplishments. But even the wart-hog and the lowly cricket were determined to avoid his mistakes and the tragic impulsiveness which had led to his defeat on a battleground of his own choosing.

It may seem surprising to some, but what they missed most of all was music. It was more the pity because animals in general have an excellent idea of pitch and can swing and sway in quite miraculous fashion to nature's inimitable rhythms.

They finally decided that something should be done about it. So they went into a huddle and came up with an astounding interrogative aphorism: *Why not try?*

The leading spirit in this conclave of daring was, of course, the ass. He stood up on his hindlegs and gave vent to a tremendous bray. This was the more remarkable because—unlike his far less intelligent cousin, the horse—the ass has little talent for vocal improvisation.

If you've read Orwell's ANIMAL FARM and the delightful little fantasies by Dal Stevens—the latter an exclusive FANTASTIC UNIVERSE presentation—you'll know that animals quite frequently "go it on their own" in truly amazing fashion. And here comes Frank Belknap Long with a whimsically delectable and prophetic confirmation of this, guaranteed to make you gasp in wonderment.

It was a most commendable effort but it failed dismally. A bray is not music. It may have some of the qualities of music, but a single chord, however magnificently sustained, does not make for rapture on a tonal plane.

In fact, regrettable as it may seem, the fox and the wart-hog held their ears, the skunk exuded an unforgivably unpleasant effluvia, and the prairie dog darted like a streak of midsummer lightning into his burrow.

The wolf tried next. His howl was distinctly on the ferocious side and it contributed nothing to the pleasures of the moment, even though there was an undercurrent of primitive amorousness in it which should have delighted the females of his species.

"You'll have to do better than that!" the crocodile said, a comment which could have been put down to pure masculine pique, for the crocodile is notoriously sluggish in his mating habits.

The bullfrog tried next, as if to prove that, while not exactly hairy-chested, he was in all respects the exact opposite of the crocodile. The cacophony of croakings which emanated from his throat was undeniably impressive, but a tone-poem with a buzzsaw accompaniment is, at best, a contradiction in terms.

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter," quoted the wart-hog, his uncouth swiftness-on-the-trigger debasing the

lines with an ironic implication never intended by Keats.

"A legacy of song and story as impressive as Man's should be the exclusive heritage of the elite," said the Hornbill, with a patronizing, scholarly vanity.

His own contribution was a tragic flop. It was artificial and stilted, and it provoked the hyena to gales of laughter. Almost instantly the hyena realized that he had betrayed himself, and could have bitten his tongue out. He had intended to improvise out of character, with a melodious persuasiveness, but the laughter was accepted by everyone as an ordeal that had to be endured and could now be dismissed as a *fait accompli*.

"I'm glad that's over," breathed the Spoonbill, and went into a solo that made even the Hornbill shudder, despite their undoubted kinship as members of a team whose erudition and bald-domed superiority could not be challenged.

It was now the turn of the big cats. The less said about their roars the better. The lion's was fiercely belligerent, the tiger's playful and beguiling, for contrary to popular belief the tiger is an amiable beast. But how could such formidable vocalisms conjure up visions Mozartian?

Then it happened. A small, wiry figure arose and without even awaiting his turn lifted to his lips an incredible instrument of sound. It was fashioned of brass, and it flared at its tip like an earphone—

the earphone of some pitifully ancient individual who has lost all touch with reality, and thinks of sound as a crutch.

But the instrument was neither an earphone nor a crutch. The fox with his native sagacity and the Hornbill with his learning and knowledge of prehistory recognized it for what it was.

It was a trumpet, and—it was golden. It never had been brass except in a wearisome literal sense which did not matter at all. So golden indeed was it that there came from it now, like a banner resplendently unfurled, an incomparable salute to the dawn.

Never had man dared to dream of such music. It was as if Ulysses, lashed to his mast, had burst his bonds at last, and was with swift breast strokes approaching the island of his heart's desire.

For this was siren music. This was the music of the spheres. It was the music almost of Man dying young—Shelley in the blue Mediterranean, Bix Beiderbecke in canyons of steel, his last high imper-

ishable note winging its way into the blue infinite.

Almost, but not quite, it was Man music. By dint of long, patient practice it had simply taken on those shadings of absolute perfection—the "little more"—that are the hallmarks of genius in its lonely and solitary pilgrimage under the stars.

Was it Eddington who first affirmed that if you set a monkey to pounding on a typewriter through all eternity he will eventually write Hamlet or King Lear? The statement has since found innumerable supporters who have paraphrased it in one way or another.

But this was not Shakespeare. This was music, sensuous and unadorned.

The monkey lowered his horn, and stood very still and straight and proud while thunderous applause echoed and re-echoed through the glade and the star-bright meadows beyond.

He had known all along that he could do it.

