

## *Monkey Tricks* *How They Are Trained For Hand Organ Service\**

*Brian Flora*

*“You sell-a de a monk-a?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“How Mooch-a?”*

*“Twenty -five dollars.”*

*“Diavolo! Twenty-five-a peasters! Me-a give you a seven doll-a! You rob a poor Itala! No, no. Eight doll-a. Hey?”*

*“No, sir. Twenty-five dollars or nothing. You can’t dicker with me. I have only one price for my animals.”*

The speakers were Guiseppe Falieri, an Italian who had recently arrived in this city, and Mr. Reiche, the animal importer of New York. The Italian was one of those fortunate sons of Italy who arrive in this country with a little money. Among the poorer classes of Italians, those who immigrate to this country with just enough money to pay for their passage hire out as laborers on railroads, aqueducts, and so forth. Those who have a little more money buy a push cart, or a peanut stand. But the Italian who is fortunate enough to possess \$100 invests in a hand organ and a ring tailed monkey. The purchase of this outfit is a serious undertaking to the man interested. He consults all his friends and asks their advice, especially in the selection of the monkey.

Almost every day a dozen of this class of Italians come in to the animal store to purchase one monkey. Guiseppe Falieri was one of these. He examined fifteen monkeys, one of which has too large a head to suit him. Another’s teeth were imperfect. Fourteen were worthless to his eyes for the purpose for which he intended them, but the fifteenth was a bright intelligent little animal and he coveted it with eagerness. Finding that Mr. Reiche was determined not to lower his price, Guiseppe turned his attention to Mr. O’Toole, the chimpanzee. Said he:

*“How mooch-a de big monk-a?”*

*“One thousand dollars.”*

*“T’ousand doll-a!”*

Holding up his hands in dismay Guiseppe looked about him in a bewildered way. He tried to secure a “ring-a-tail-a-monk” for \$10, and being unsuccessful sadly left the store. Mr. Reiche explained to the reporter that his absence was only temporary, as he was sure to return and secure the animal upon which he has set his heart.

“There has not been so large a demand for the little hand organ monkeys,” said Mr. Reiche, “since the Common Council of New York refused to issue licenses to the Italians two years ago. Previous to that time we used to sell as many as two hundred and fifty ring-tailed monkeys each year to the organ grinders. This kind of monkey comes from South America, principally from Brazil. They are shipped in lots of twenty-five. They are classed by the trade as the Crown or Capuchin variety. Why the Italians prefer this species is a matter of conjecture, as there are many other kinds which would answer the purpose equally as well. The ring-tail, however, is very quick of perception, and learns rapidly.

As the interdiction of monkeys has not extended beyond the corporate limits of New York, the organ grinder who has a tamed monkey is obliged to exhibit it in the country towns in the vicinity, although he sometimes makes long journeys with his little companion perched upon his organ. When a poor Italian buys a monkey the act is regarded as one of the most important of his career. It is as if he were about to adopt a child. He...

Here the narrator was interrupted by the entrance of a dozen Italians, headed by Guiseppe. There was a woman in the company who held a baby in her arms. The monkey which had pleased Guiseppe so much an hour previously was taken from its cage and passed from hand to hand. It made an interesting picture. The whole party looked as grave as if it were a question of life or death. An animated dispute arose about the merits of the little animal, which Guiseppe abruptly ended by taking a leather purse from his pocket and paying for the monkey in gold. With much showing of white teeth and many smiles, the party went out into Park Row, while proud Guiseppe hid the monkey under his coat and lingered behind to whisper confidentially as if it were a state secret:

*“Name-a de monk, Mateo.”*

“I am always foolish enough to feel a trifle sorry for the poor little monkeys when they are sold,” resumed Mr. Reiche, when the door had closed. “Why? Because while in their native forest they roam at will through the trees and have any amount of fun; but once in the possession of the organ grinder and life is real, life is earnest for the ‘ring-tail-a monk-a.’ Take Mateo, for instance, as Guiseppe has already christened him. His education will begin today, no doubt, to fit him for the serious work of gathering pennies for his master instead of berries for himself. Mateo and his master will eat and sleep together for many years, probably, as the ring-tail is a very hardy monkey. This companionship undoubtedly facilitates the training process considerably.”

“Is the monkey trained by the use of kindness or fear?” said the reporter.

“Both,” was the reply. “If the monkey is wild and ugly, the first thing to be done is to take all the fright out of it. To attain this result hunger is the Italian’s first resource. The better and more humane method, however, and the one giving the best and most permanent results is to break the monkey’s spirit by rendering it entirely helpless and unable to harm or resist. This is done with the help of ropes and gags. In this condition the . . . monkey is worried and irritated until it arrives at a condition bordering on frenzy. A state of weakness and depression ensues, all resistance ceases, and the animal allows itself to be handled. As soon as this point is reached, the severity of the treatment is lightened and by degrees the animal is fondled and finally released. In nine cases out of ten this treatment is effectual in making the monkey lose all of its former ferocity and becomes as meek as a peeping chicken.”

“Does this treatment not weaken the monkey?”

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“No. It does not seem to affect its strength in the least. Besides, the Italian is careful not to injure what is so valuable a piece of property to him. Having broken the monkey’s spirit, it is now the trainer’s business to make friends with Mateo. This he does by giving it candies and nuts and by caressing it. Should he then return to insubordination, the monkey is quickly pulled down to the floor by means of a rope run through a ring in the floor and fastened to a collar around the animal’s neck. Then a switch is brought into play until it is glad to submit.”

*“Having passed through the a-b-c’s what is the next step in the education of the ring-tail?”*

“The next step,” said Mr. Reiche, “is to make it come when called. This is a very important part of the training, as it gives the master full control of the animal. The collar around the monkey’s neck is made to fit closely and the edges are unusually sharp, so that a jerk upon the rope fastened to the collar causes pain. The man walk away from the monkey a short distance and calls it by name, always repeating the word a number of times and at each call giving the rope a slight jerk. At each tug the monkey draws nearer and nearer, because the collar hurts its neck, until it is close to the trainer, when it is taken up and fondled. This process is repeated for many days, increasing the power of tugs on the rope if necessary, until the monkey will come after the first pull. It will quickly learn to identify the call with the pain at its neck, and come to its master as soon as it is called in order to avoid the pain it anticipates.”

*“Mateo is now in his a-b-ab’s. What comes next?”*

The next move is the reverse of the first; that is, teaching the monkey to leave the master and go where bidden at a certain command or in obedience to a wave of the hand. This is accomplished in much the same manner as is related above, with the difference that the string or rope is reached through a pulley fastened in the wall. The master places himself with the monkey at the wall opposite the pulley, and gives the rope a tug, which naturally draws the monkey toward the pulley. In a very short time the monkey learns to run off at the wave of the hand. Pulleys are then attached along the different walls and the rope frequently changed from one to the other. This will at first bewilder the monkey and he will often run off in the wrong direction, only to be checked. The hand of the master always being pointed in the direction the animal should go, it soon learns to watch the hand and follow the direction indicated. This is one of the most important phases of the monkey’s education, as it enables the Italian when exhibiting the monkey in the street to send it up and into windows to collect pennies.”

*“But how is the monkey taught to fetch small articles?”*

“Oh, that is a simple matter,” was the reply. “A coin is placed in the monkey’s hand. If it drops the coin the monkey is rebuked and the coin put into its hand until, after repeated trials, the copper is retained. Each time this is done the master repeats a certain word in Italian which is the equivalent of the word ‘fetch’. After the idea of holding the coin is firmly fixed in it mind, the

monkey will hold out its hand to receive it, and will finally grab for it. When this point is reached, the penny is laid before the monkey upon the floor, whereupon the monkey will pick it up. The coin is then gradually moved further and further away, and finally thrown on the other side of the room. With a wave of the hand, the monkey is then sent to pick up the coin and told to fetch it. This usually finishes the education of the ordinary hand organ monkey. It has received all the instruction necessary for practical financial purposes, and is put to work right away.”

*“But some monkeys take higher degrees, do they not?”*

“Yes, a few, but rarely is a monkey educated to do the tricks now-a-days which were taught to them ten years ago. It was a common thing in the streets of New York at that time to see a monkey performing on a wooden pedestal in the street. These accomplishments of the monkeys are fast falling into the soup. But the little animals would learn just as quickly now as they did then if put to it. To teach a money to put on and take off its hat, the hat is first placed on it head and then taken off and replaced by the master guiding the monkeys hand by taking hold of its arms, accompanying the two movements by separate commands and an occasional pinch. Practice soon makes the monkey perfect in these movements. During all these lessons the monkey has been dressed and has become accustomed to wearing clothes.”

*“How is a monkey taught to walk upon its hind legs?”*

“The hands, or fore feet, are fastened to its back. The body of the monkey is then raised to a standing posture by means of the string fastened to its collar. The same impulse of avoiding pain which caused the animal to come when called is the motive in this instance as well. When the animal has become accustomed to standing, the hands are released. When once the monkey is accustomed to walking upright, it is an easy manner to teach the animal to walk a tight-rope. In fact, owing to the formation of its feet, the monkey finds it very easy to dance on the dating slack-wire! The power to preserve his balance is born in the monkey and he is really quite in his element on the rope. While walking about, it is an easy matter to teach the monkey to dance. By continual repetition the animal soon learns how to ring a bell, strike the cymbals, and to turn the crank of a small organ.”

*“How is it taught to shoot a gun?”*

“By gradually making it acquainted with the noise of an explosion. This is done by first exploding percussion caps and then light charges at a distance from the monkey, gradually bringing the monkey nearer. In this manner the animal soon becomes indifferent to the noise and will hold the gun with perfect fearlessness. The fingers of the monkeys left hand are then placed firmly on the trigger and its knuckles are given a sharp rap which explodes the powder. In a very short time the monkey will pull the trigger at the motion of a stick.”

Additional images and information about the history of the street organ are available at the web site, [www.floraco.com/organs](http://www.floraco.com/organs).

After careers in radio, advertising, and performance art, mid-life crisis resulted in Brian Flora becoming an organ builder. Brian builds a variety of street and chamber organs in the high mountain desert.