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*Venus was bad enough, but Hollywood
was worse. Then there was that pesky
kid and his . . .*

ODD BIRD

By
SHELLY LOWENKOPF
and
JERRY J. WILLIAMS

THE whole trouble with that crazy bird would never have happened if I'd just read that letter.

The page caught me with it, just as I was leaving the studio. "Good luck, Lew," he said. "I hear you finally made it. You're going home!"

"Yeah," I said, grinning. "See you on Earth." I had hardly interrupted my stride, and was just pushing the door open when he called me again.

"Hey, wait a minute! I've got a registered letter for you."

I waited for him to catch up with me, pocketed the letter and scribbled my name in his receipt book. It was a letter from the network on Earth. Any other time, I would have read it immediately, but now I was in a hurry. I was going home . . . to Earth.

It was no secret that I'd worked hard on Nick Ehrens' Venus TV circuit to earn an Earth assignment. I had wanted to be successful real bad; bad enough to come to Venus. It couldn't be as rough as they said, I thought. But I was wrong.

Hurrying to my jetcar, I sniffed the air disdainfully. No matter how many pipes they pumped it through, the Venusian atmosphere still smelled like the smog Los Angeles got rid of, when I was a kid. The air was a small thing, by itself; but add the ridiculously cramped quarters, with pop-away furniture, an almost C-ration diet, and changeless brown clouds pressing against a plastic fishbowl of a sky, and you begin to get the idea. For the pioneer, life on Venus was a tribute to the ingenuity of Man; but for me, it

was a tribute to the greater charms of life on Earth.

It emphatically wasn't the sort of world I wanted for Bette, my wife, or our small son, Curt. I had quickly made up my mind to get out of Venus as soon as I possibly could. The only way was through my work.

At first, it seemed hopeless. For a year, I dutifully ground out continuity for WVENUS, working strictly on panel shows and late movies. Gradually, my written patter built that old warhorse of a movie host, Barry Cohn, into a personality. At the end of my second year on Venus, nearly all the Colonies were sitting up for Cohn's Owl Movie.

Then I got my big brainstorm. Why an "Owl" Movie? Why not use native talent? Why not a *Gufuzzl* Movie? Why not? The Venusian Gufuzzl not only looks like an owl—if you don't look too close—it has a hell of a lot more personality. Besides, it could almost sing. And that old anthropological chestnut about the Gufuzzl being related to Man wouldn't hurt the publicity, either.

It started out as a stunt, but it caught on. At first, we just changed the name of the show. Emboldened by favorable comment, we introduced a Gufuzzl perched on a chair and sipping coffee with Cohn, who ostensibly was watching the movie right along with the viewer, in a studied leisurely fashion. The Gufuzzl looked even more leisure-

ly than Cohn and was a lot funnier.

Over a period of time, the Gufuzzl's part was built up. We gave him a cigar to smoke while he was enjoying his coffee. We let him sing snatches of songs, and coached him in dancing bits. When the Gufuzzl began to get too popular, Cohn objected, and the program director was only too happy to oblige. Cohn got back his Owl Movie, and the Gufuzzl got a show of his own.

I was made program director of the Gufuzzl show as a full-time job. It was no small task to build a whole half-hour show around this odd bird, but it was my chance, and I knew it. I racked my brain digging up new situations that would exploit the talents of the hairy little beast. I was aided by the fact that all Gufuzzls are natural mimes; you can't teach them much, but you can learn to utilize what they have. I took to showing the Gufuzzl old movies with popular entertainers of the past. Even I laughed at the result when the bird, dressed in a straw hat, white ducks and a cane, gave his impressions of Maurice Chevalier.

The rating of the Gufuzzl Show jumped so high, I heard from Nick Ehrens himself. An interplanetary telegram is an expensive epistle, and Nick didn't waste words. But it said everything I wanted to hear: *Success Gufuzzl show amazing. Send Lew Earth.*

When I got home, I found

everything packed and ready for the movers, including some things I didn't want to take.

"We can't take that," I objected, pointing to a bulky lamp-stand.

My wife showed well-rehearsed shock. "But darling, no one at home has one like this. It's made out of genuine Venusian diamondwood. We simply have to take it back with us."

"Look, Bette, doll," I said, "when we get back to Earth, we'll have a house . . . a whole house of our very own. We'll start with everything brand new . . . none of this self-effacing stuff." I gave a chair a contemptuous kick and it collapsed into the wall. "I don't want anything that will remind me of this place."

"Still," Bette argued reasonably, "we spent five years of our lives here, and we should have something to show for them."

I felt a pang of conscience and kissed her. "Okay, you win. We'll take the lamp. The freight will be ten times what the silly thing's worth, but at least it's genuine."

We stood by silently while the men from Venus Van and Storage loaded our belongings into the truck.

"It's been a long time, honey," I said, giving her hand a squeeze. "And I know it hasn't been too pleasant. Wait'll we get back to Earth. I'm going to make it up to you."

She smiled at me, a dreamy look coming into her eyes. "A

house with a lawn, Lew? And real trees? I can see them now."

"Hey!" I looked around. "Where's Curt?"

"He's still brooding because you won't let him take his Gufuzzl along."

"I explained to him that animals aren't allowed on the ship."

"He says you have enough pull to get a permit."

I shrugged irritably. "There's no time to waste. I want to get out of here. It would take weeks . . . especially for a Gufuzzl. There aren't many left, and the authorities aren't anxious to part with them."

"Well, he feels pretty bad about it."

I thought I detected an accusing note in Bette's voice. It was true that I'd given Curt the bird on his third birthday, while I was still in the first glow of enthusiasm for the show. Since then, the two of them had become inseparable—almost literally—because the bird's favorite perch was on Curt's shoulder.

"Curt!" I called. "Curt, it's time to go."

He marched defiantly into the room, the Gufuzzl on his shoulder. They were sharing a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, of which both were inordinately fond.

"I thought I told you to give that bird back to Venus Zoological."

"I decided to keep him, Daddy," he replied without batting

an eyelash. He wiped the peanut butter from his mouth and the bird obediently brushed his beak with his own shaggy counterpart of a hand.

"Well, you can't," I said abruptly, then dropped coaxingly to my knees in front of him. "Listen, when we get back to Earth, I'll give you a nice dog. There's nothing like a nice dog."

"They can't fly," Curt said, disdainfully. "Besides, I hear they have fleas. I don't want one."

I slammed my fist down on the table and it disappeared with a snap into the wall. "You have five minutes," I announced grimly, "to get rid of that bird."

He turned and went out of the room without saying a word. The Gufuzzl, however, glared at me, and emitted a sound suspiciously akin to the old-fashioned razzberry.

The trip back to Earth was made in an incriminating silence. Bette thought I'd been too harsh with Curt; after all, she pointed out, if I hadn't wanted him to keep the bird, why had I given it to him? Curt sat quietly in his seat, turning the pages in a picture book. Bette eyed him consolingly over her *Venusian Digest*, then turned to me with an accusing look.

"See," I said, defensively, "he's forgotten about the bird already."

"That's not true," she objected. "He's just doing a grand job

of not showing how hurt he is. He's trying to lose himself in that book."

"Listen," I said, "when we get back to Earth, I'll get him a dog. Two dogs. Every boy ought to have a dog."

Bette shook her head stubbornly "It's not the same. That bird was his best friend. Besides, he's bound to feel lonely on a new planet. The bird would have helped him a lot until he made some new friends."

I sighed with resignation. I would make it up to Curt later. Right now, I was too preoccupied with the future to be much concerned.

I wondered what Nick Ehrens would be like, and what my assignment would be. I remembered the station manager's parting words. "Ehrens is an exacting man," Burdock had said. "Fair, but exacting. For your sake, I hope you make a good start with him." His smile was edged with contempt. "Since you worked so hard, I'd hate to see you back here."

Burdock was envious of my success, but I knew what he meant. There were two kinds of men in Venus television: those trying to prove themselves, like me; and those who had failed on Earth and retreated, like Burdock. For the latter, there was no second chance. I could understand his feelings about me, although we had never wasted any affection on each other.

Before I knew it, we had shut

off our star drive, and were in Earth's atmosphere. Soon, we were looking into blue water glittering under white clouds, and nostalgia momentarily overrode my anxiety.

I rushed Bette and Curt through the Port Authority, and shamelessly abandoned them as soon as we settled in a Los Angeles hotel. "Look, honey," I said, "this is important. TV on Earth moves fast, and Ehrens moves even faster. He'll want to see me right away." Ignoring her icy reserve, I gave her a fast peck and took the monorail to the studio.

What I said to Bette was true, but most of all, I was curious to see what my new job would be. After working two years with a bird that looked like a bespectacled old man in a racoon coat, I was anxious to move into the big league.

Even in a huge city like Los Angeles, the immense crystal pile of the Ehrens Studios was easily recognized. I felt lost in the huge lobby, but my ego was quickly revived when the smiling receptionist told me Mr. Ehrens was expecting me.

Nick Ehrens was pretty much what I expected, a brisk, friendly man with a no-nonsense attitude. As I entered, he jumped up from behind his desk and came around to meet me. He was a big man, big enough to make his sprawling octagonal office seem crowded.

"Welcome back to Earth," he said, thrusting out a beefy hand

and giving mine a vigorous shake. "By golly, you didn't waste any time in getting here." His eyes shone. "I'd hoped you wouldn't. As a matter of fact," he continued in a more business-like tone, "I've been kind of counting on it." He looked at me in a calculating approval.

I tried to make some sort of response, but it wasn't necessary. He propelled me to a chair, and was back at his desk. "I know you're anxious to see your new show," he chuckled, "and I'm equally anxious to show it to you." He turned toward a panel in his desk. "Charlie," he said briskly, "run the tape on Interplanetary Circus."

I now saw the reason for the shape of the office. What I'd taken to be walls of opaque glass were actually television screens. One of them hummed and lighted, and I was dumbfounded by what I saw.

He had been watching for my reaction, and now he laughed heartily. "By golly, Lew, I hope we make half as big an impression on our audiences when we unwrap this show!"

"I'm to be the director for this . . . this!" I gasped.

"You bet," Ehrens said, with satisfaction. "I wouldn't let anyone else touch it."

What was unreeling before me was the most outlandish assortment of animal acts I had ever seen, or for that matter, that had ever been seen by anybody. Under the direction of a

dozen or so brightly outfitted trainers, pink Lunar penguins croaked in an a capella chorus, two Martian unicorns duelled with French precision, and a Saturnian feathered elk galloped around a ring with five Australian wallabies bouncing on its back. There were lots more that I was too dazzled to remember.

"Not bad, eh?" Ehrens said. "Of course that's just a test tape. We're still working out improvements. That Uranian lizard, for instance—he's already improved his juggling act. He can handle five balls and a live duck at the same time."

"He can?" I said stupidly.

"You bet. Just think of the appeal," Ehrens was breathing enthusiastically in my ear. "Grownups and kids alike will be crazy for this. The ratings will be terrific. And it will cost us a pretty penny, I can tell you . . . getting all those beasts under contract."

"But . . . but why me?" I managed to say.

"That's the beauty of it," Ehrens chuckled, shucking the silver wrapper off a clear Plutonian filler and popping it in his mouth. "Your Gufuzzl has got 'em all beat." He waved the smoke away. "Not one of these animals can touch it for sheer viewer pull."

"*My Gufuzzl!*"

"Well, naturally. It's the greatest gimmick yet. Your Gufuzzl will be the featured act on the show! Sort of a ring master." He took a deep drag on his

cigar, eyeing me with obvious enjoyment. Noting my hanging jaw, he became concerned. "Nothing wrong, is there? You understood my letter?"

Suddenly I remembered the letter I had thoughtlessly jammed into my pocket back in the Venus studio. "No . . . nothing wrong."

He looked tremendously relieved. "Well. Then you know. Certainly couldn't afford to have anything go wrong on this show. We've put millions into it." His tone became hard and business-like again. "We've got to have this ready in two weeks. The rest of the animals are all set. Think you can have your Gufuzzl ready to work by then?"

I nodded wordlessly, clutching the letter in my pocket.

A smile of satisfaction spread across Ehrens' features. "Good. I knew I could count on you." He aimed his cigar at me. "Be sure to get the bird over here tomorrow. Want to fit him for his costume. Going to dress him up just like a ringmaster. You know, red coat, top hat, bull whip . . ." He chuckled.

Ehrens slapped me on the back, propelling me toward the door. "I know you have a lot of things to do, just being back and all. But see me as soon as you can in the morning."

As soon as I was out of the building, I tore open the letter. It was just as I had feared. The letter was from Ehrens, and contained specific instructions for

me to bring the Gufuzzl with me to Earth. If for any reason I couldn't, I was to cable him immediately, and wait for instructions. I painfully remembered signing a receipt for the letter.

I rushed back to the hotel room, and was relieved to find that Bette and Curt had gone out. After five minutes of bad connections, I got Burdock's fuzzy image on the interplanetary phone. I swallowed my pride and let him know I was in trouble, and needed a Gufuzzl in the worst way.

Burdock took a great pleasure in reminding me it was contrary to regulations to take animals out of Venus; Gufuzzls were scarce, and the authorities were particularly loath to part with them. I knew, and he did too, that he could get one for me if he wanted, and that obviously he didn't want to.

I considered calling Venus Zoological direct, but I knew I didn't have a chance. Had I been there, I could have managed it; but I wasn't, and now I was an outsider. Given enough time, I still might be able to do it, but time was something I didn't have.

I banged the cancel button in vexation, and got a little pleasure out of seeing Burdock's smirking face dissolve in front of me. I wasn't through yet; or so I thought. After twenty minutes of wrangling with state and federal authorities, I got the word: I couldn't get either of

the two Gufuzzls in the United States.

I was getting panicky. I got hold of Interplanetary Transport, and was blithely informed that the next starship to Venus left in two weeks. I was thrown into new depths of despair when I learned positively the astronomical cost of chartering even a slow ship to that planet.

It seemed unreasonable that a Gufuzzl couldn't be had. I pummeled my brain, and figured on placing ads in the international newspapers. That would take a lot of time and money. Already I had spent a small fortune on the interplanetary phone. And my time was running out, too.

A new thought hit me. I was now resigned to the fact that I wasn't going to get a Gufuzzl, not for a while anyway. Since I would sooner or later have to admit this to Nick Ehrens, I might be able to salvage my job if I had an alternative to coat this bitter pill.

I quickly pressed for a new circuit. After some fast talking, I got hold of a taxidermy shop. The ancient face on the view-screen was more than a little confused at the outrages I wanted him to perform on an American owl, but he said he could do them. Cancel, and a new circuit: a prominent actor's agency put me in touch with a well-known puppeteer, who was equally confused. But the name of Nick Ehrens worked wonders. Finally, I pressed the cancel bar with a sigh of relief. With a taxider-

mist and a puppeteer, I figured I could come out with a passable Gufuzzl, if no one looked too closely. But I would have to sell Ehrens on the idea.

I was about to press for Ehrens' office when Bette breezed into the room. I glanced up, annoyed at the interruption, but my glance became one of an approving stare. She pirouetted in front of me. "Like it?" she asked, delightedly showing off her first new Earth dress in years. "You know, you can't go wrong in black?"

I was more than impressed. It was a Bette I hadn't seen in a long, long time. She had always worn her clothes well, and on Venus she managed skillfully with the skimpy stuff that was available. But seeing her now, I felt guilty for depriving her of the beauty that was rightfully hers.

I pulled her to me and kissed her. "You didn't waste any time," I said.

"There was a fashion show, right here in the hotel. Can you imagine it? It was simply wonderful. So many beautiful things." Her eyes danced. "And this dress was one of the most reasonable."

"The hat, too?" I observed.

"Well . . ." she grinned impishly and turned to the window. "It's a wonderful evening," she said, evasively raising the blind. "Oh!" She stepped back.

I went over to the window and saw what had startled her. The

sky was black and clear with brilliant stars. A crisp new moon made the monorail a silent silver line across the grandeur of the city. I felt a lump in my throat. It was a magnificent sight.

"So many parks and trees," she murmured softly. "I feel like I'm alive again. Oh, Lew." She pressed my arm.

"Curt? Where's Curt?" I asked, suddenly aware of his absence. "He should see this."

"He'll be up in a minute. I let him stay to see them unload all our luggage. Anything to take his mind off that bird."

I took a deep, shuddering breath and returned to the screen of the viewer. I pressed for Ehrens' office. He was surprised to see me. "Speak of the devil!" he said with a start. "I was just going to call you, Lew. It's about the Gufuzzl."

"Yes," I said. "About the Gufuzzl, you know only one or two people have seen a Gufuzzl here on Earth." I began in a conciliating tone.

He was smoking another cigar, and he jabbed it in my direction. "Right you are! That's just the problem."

My mouth was open and I shut it. "How do you mean?" I asked weakly.

He frowned. "We have a sponsor all lined up for Interplanetary Circus, but he's a suspicious old cuss. He doesn't believe the Gufuzzl is as versatile as we say. He can't see using the Gufuzzl as the feature attraction. Now he won't put up the money

for the show until he actually sees the bird in action."

"Sees it?" I asked hoarsely. "You mean, actually sees it?"

Ehrens nodded curtly. "Exactly." He shrugged. "It's not so hard to understand. The whole show hangs on the bird. After all we've gathered together a lot of weird beasts, the Gufuzzl is the only one that can imitate Maurice Chevalier."

"Well, yes . . ." I began.

"Ehrens looked at his watch. "Tell you what. We've got all the contracts made up, and we're anxious to close the deal tonight. How would it be if we dropped by to see you? You know, just to show the old man what the Gufuzzl can do. Then I can get him to sign the papers."

"Well, I . . ."

"You don't have any objection, do you? We won't keep you, and we can be there in ten minutes." His smiling countenance faded from the screen with the word "good."

I sighed. "Oh, no," I said with resignation. "No objections."

"What was all that?" Bette asked curiously. "The boss isn't coming here tonight, is he?"

"I'm afraid he is," I murmured, head in my hands.

"Oh, my," she protested. "And I haven't a thing to wear."

"Stop it," I said. "You're killing me."

She began running around the room, gathering up her coat and handbag. "He'll want something to drink. I'll run down to the

liquor shop and get some of that wonderful French brandy."

"Never mind," I said. "We can't afford it."

"Afford it!" She laughed gaily and gave me a peck on the forehead. "How you do talk."

"Ha, ha," I said. I took a deep breath. I was going to have to tell her sometime, and it might as well be now. "Bette . . ." I began, and stopped.

"Yes?" She looked at me inquiringly.

I tried to speak, but couldn't. She was too alive, too happy, too radiant. How can you tell someone who's just been reprieved that it was all a mistake, and now she has to go back to prison for life? I knew she felt about Venus the same way I did, and to liken it to prison was no exaggeration.

There was a knock on the door. "Here we go," I said. "Let's just let matters take their course, and they'll explain themselves, I'm sure," I said glumly and flung the door open with a flourish.

Curt looked up at me. "Oh, I was afraid maybe I had the wrong room. I wasn't sure about the number." His voice trailed off.

I stared at him in disbelief. Clutched in his hand were the remnants of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and on his shoulder . . .

He looked up at me in wide-eyed innocence. "He followed me home, Daddy. Can I keep him?"

THE END