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ILLUSTRATIONS by Emsh, Orban and Bowman

W. W. Scott — Editor

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QUARANTINED SPECIES

by J. F. BONE

illustrated by ORBAN

Those Venusian horgels were cute, clever, intelligent. They made perfect pets. They were lovable. — But that was the big trouble. They were much, much too lovable!

“DID you ever own a cat?” Thompson asked. He leaned forward, a small gray man in his late sixties, and peered at his visitor through oldfashioned bifocals across the breadth of desk which separated them. The young man standing before the desk fidgeted impatiently as Thompson looked down at the interview card which read “Edward Farnsworth,—Agent, Worldwide Shows”, and scratched the ears of the big Siamese cat sitting on his lap. The cat looked up with incurious blue eyes, regarded Farnsworth with a peculiarly dispassionate stare, stretched, yawned, and closed

his eyes again. It was perfectly apparent that the tall swarthy visitor was a matter of complete disinterest. “Now take Cato, here,” Thompson continued. “He’s a fine specimen of a cat. Have you owned anything like him?”

“Once,” Farnsworth said. “When I went to Venus. But I don’t see what this has to do with my business with you. All I want is a simple answer. Do I or do I not get permission to import a pair of Venusian horgels?”

“You do not,” Thompson said succinctly.

“This makes the fourth time,” Farnsworth sighed. “So



I'll have to go to higher authority, I suppose."

"There is no higher authority, son. This is the end of the line."

"You bureaucrats!" Farnsworth's voice was filled with poorly suppressed anger. "You sit here behind a desk and play God! Tell us working people what they can and can't do just as though you knew all the answers, and never give a tinker's dam about the fact that your stupid decisions can ruin people. Just why in heaven's name won't you allow something cute and clever like the horgels to be brought to Earth? There's nothing wrong with them. They'll survive nicely in a terrestrial environment—and they'll save our show from bankruptcy. People will simply love them if they're given a chance."

"I suppose they would," Thompson said, "but I doubt if they'll ever get a chance to do it. They're a quarantined species." There was an odd note of grimness in his voice. "Cat's don't like them," he added obliquely.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I repeat,—have you ever owned a cat?"

"And I repeat, sir, I did. It was mandatory to own one on Venus,—although why it was, God only knows. There are millions of cats there, and to require a man to lead a Siamese around on a leash is sheer foolishness!"

"You're like all the rest," Thompson sighed. "You confuse words with facts. You never owned a cat in your life."

"But—"

"You just think you did," Thompson concluded gently.

"I have papers to prove it."

"So what? Did your cat ever obey you when it didn't wish to? Did it ever sacrifice its comfort for your own? Did it ever go out of its way to be good to you?"

Farnsworth shook his head. "I can't say that it did," he admitted. "It was a nasty selfish brute. I loathe cats!"

"But you like horgels."

"Yes,—I'm quite fond of them. They're cute, and clever, —and loveable."

"Hmp! Yes,—they are.

That's the trouble with them. They're *too* cute, *too* clever, and *too* loveable!"

"That's impossible!"

"That so?— Just a moment son. How long were you around those horgels?"

"Just a few days. A swamp-rat owned them. Kept them in a locked cage, and never touched them. He even had one of the natives feed them. The poor little things were terfified. I don't think they'd ever been in a cage before, and I can't see why they were. They're the softest most endearing things. They'd make perfect pets."

"Undoubtedly they would," Thompson said. "Well, there's no damage done. Oh by the way, did you see any cats about the place?"

"No,—none but my own,—I heard them. Nasty brutes that yowled all night."

"That's one worry taken care of. I was afraid that I'd have to ask you where that trader lived, and I know you wouldn't tell me. Thompson beamed pleasantly at him over his spectacles. "The cats will take care of them. It's just a matter of time."

"You mean that they'll kill

those inoffensive little things?"

"Of course. It's a matter of priority rights." There was iron in Thompson's voice. "Cat's are great believers in direct action. Now sit down, young man and I'll tell you why you'll never get an entry permit from this office, and why you'll never again be allowed to visit Venus."

"But you can't do that!"

"I already have," Thompson said gently. "I revoked your ship permit before I ever saw you."

"You what?"

"You heard me son. Venus is closed."

"But why?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you."

Farnsworth sputtered, but did what he was told. At least, he reflected bitterly, he should get something out of this highly unsatisfactory interview.

"**T**HAT'S fine," Thompson beamed. "There's nothing like acquiring knowledge. And the first bit of knowledge you should acquire is that I haven't always been a bureaucrat. Once I was a biotechnician in the Space Service, and I was a member of the first ex-

pedition to Venus. There were five of us on the "Venus I". Archie Slezak the pilot, Ed Smith the navigator, Mitsui Watanabe the engineer, and myself. And then there was Katy, the ship's cat.

She was an unlisted crew member, a big, black, short-haired cat of dubious ancestry. From her size, I'd judge that there was a little wildcat somewhere in her family tree, but despite the fact that she looked like a black panther, she was affectionate enough in her way, and we all endured her,—all except Watanabe. He liked her. I think he smuggled her aboard before we took off even though he never admitted it. He was a sucker for pets. But she never paid too much attention to him. Generally she was nosing around in dark corners of the ship once acceleration pressure was off.

We had a little artificial gravity of course, but it was about one eighth Earth normal, just enough to keep our feet. Katy loved it. It was nothing for her to leap twenty feet across the control room, and land on one of our shoulders,

so lightly that we hardly felt her. She had an incredible judgment of distance, and would amuse us by the hour with her antics.

As far as cats went, she was likeable enough, but I never really trusted her. There was a little too much of the wildcat in her." he reached down and scratched Cato's ears and smiled when the big tom swore at him in low Siamese.

"Then why—" Farnsworth began.

"Save it son,—I'll explain. As I was saying, we all thought she was amusing but useless until the day she came floating into the control room with a dead rat in her jaws. It was a pregnant female filled with pups, and I'll tell you it scared us silly!

Rats and spaceships just don't go together. They breed fast and mutate easily in the drive radiations, and once they get started they're hard to control. It's particularly bad if an intelligent mutation appears, but Katy stopped that threat before it ever got started.

We got into spacesuits and blew the ship down. Not even

rats can live in a vacuum, and we kept the ship open long enough to make sure the last trace of air was removed from the fiberglass insulation of the hull. Fortunately, none of our unwanted guests had been exposed to the drive radiations long enough for mutations to appear, so we managed to get a complete kill. Watanabe had fixed a pressure tank for Katy, and during the blowdown she sat in it as smug as a dowager empress while we killed off the rats.

After that, Katy was a heroine. And did she take advantage of it! It was almost as though she knew she had reached privileged status. She'd boss us around, and glare at us to move if we were sitting on one of her favorite spots. She wasn't very nice about it, and if you've been bossed by a cat you'll understand what I mean.

She liked to be petted, but wanted affection on her own terms and time, and she picked the damndest times. Whenever Smitty was busy with calculations, there would be Katy sitting in the middle of his papers, tail straight up in the air,

her back arched, and her purr as loud as a dynamotor. And when I checked the algae tanks for ecological balance, there she'd be trying to unbalance the ecology. And if Mitsui wanted to check the engines he always had to check the cat first. She was a pest.

But poor Slezak got it worst. For some unknown reason Katy liked him,—and Archie hated cats. She'd fuss over him, croon cat talk to him, and then slump bonelessly on his lap and sleep.

Archie's body temperature probably had a lot to do with it, since it was a full degree warmer than the rest of ours, but Slezak used to say that she did it deliberately out of sheer orneriness,—and I wouldn't disagree with him.

Anything was possible where Katy was concerned. She looked on the ship and all that was in it as her personal property, especially created for her comfort and amusement, and she used it just that way. There was something direct about her that didn't bother with such niceties as form and attitude. She was a cat,—we

were only human,—and she was never averse to putting us in our place.

WE spent two months coasting under minimum power, and then started the braking run. We blasted down after turnover until we got the trajectory straightened out, and then let Venus do the rest. We circled the planet just above the ion belt where the few molecules of atmosphere slowed us down without too much overheating, making close range observations of the world below.

We checked the atmosphere. The upper layer was mainly carbon dioxide and formaldehyde, just like the astronomy boys said it would be, but it was neither thick nor cloudy. The clouds were all down at the surface. As you know, Venus has a heavy-gas based atmosphere, but even then the oxygen content was high enough to be breathable if you didn't mind the smell of embalming fluid.

Our orders called for landing if it was feasible, so Slezak cleared the board and trimmed ship for a setdown. We made it

all right, and landed on one of those humps of land that stick up out of the swamp. There wasn't much to see, of course. Venus was a pretty dismal place what with the steady rain and air that smelled like a cut-rate undertaking parlor. But I shouldn't have to tell you what Venus is like. You've been there too."

"It still is bad," Farnsworth said. "It hasn't improved much."

"Any improvement in Venus would be a lot," Thompson continued. "Well, we did the usual things,—planted the flag and claimed the planet, and then while Slezak and I stayed with the ship, Smitty and Watanabe went exploring. We drew straws for the honor, and Archie and I won.

We stayed close to the ship, peering through the rain for what seemed hours, walking around a little and stretching our legs. We weren't equipped for any real exploration work but we had to do some to make the claim legal. The real work would come later, after the lads back home evaluated our data,

but at least we had the honor of being the first humans to set foot on the planet." Thompson coughed rackingly and smiled when the spasm passed. "The memory still gets me," he explained. "I never could stand formaldehyde. My lungs got over being partially embalmed years ago, but thinking of Venus still makes me cough."

IT was about an hour before Smitty and Mitsui came back. Mitsui had a horgel in his arms. The kid was a sucker for animals, but this time we all thought he really had something. None of us had ever seen a horgel before, and it looked so innocent and appealing that we couldn't help falling for it.

With its pink fur and violet eyes it looked for all the world like a child's doll, a pint-sized teddy bear with a button nose, black, handlike feet, and an expression of utter trust on its pointed face. But that didn't explain all of its appeal. I guess there is a little of the mother in every man, because the damn thing touched something within us that could only be called the maternal instinct. There's noth-

ing else that can describe it. It made us feel all soft inside, and every one of us wanted to hold it and protect it."

"I know," Farnsworth said. "I've held one."

"Mitsui had fallen in love with it. You know how emotional the Japanese are. He was cuddling it in his arms and whispering sweet words into its shell-like ears, and it was crooning back at him. His actions would have made me sick except that I wanted to hold it so bad that it hurt. I wanted to feel the softness of its fur, to pet and fondle it. I wanted it like I'd want a woman. Smitty was green with jealousy and even Slezak looked interested. All of us were acting a little queer. I suppose, but it seemed all right at the time.

Katy didn't react like we did. She came to the entrance port, stepping delicately as though she was treading on eggs and was afraid of breaking them,—but the moment she saw the little pink puffball in Watanabe's arms her whole attitude changed. Her back arched and her tail looked like

a bottle brush! She let out one yowl of pure hate and leaped for Mitsui! Her claws dug into his jacket as she clawed upward toward the horgel, a screaming, spitting fury of insane rage!

The horgel screamed just once. It sounded so much like a hurt baby that we were paralyzed for a moment,—and while we were all standing there, it leaped from Mitsui's arms and ran clumsily across the seared landing area to the jungle some fifty yards away. But it never reached it. Katy was after it like a thunderbolt! She caught it after it had gone about twenty yards, and by the time we reached the scene, she had swiftly and completely demolished it.

Now I've seen cats kill many times, but it always seemed to be more for the fun of it than anything else. Cats appear to hunt for the sport of the thing, but there was no sport in Katy. She simply caught the horgel and tore it to ribbons!

Mitsui was heartbroken. From the way he acted it was almost as though Katy had

killed his baby brother. "I loved that little thing!" he sobbed. "I've never seen anything so trusting and affectionate. Oh! *damn* that dirty cat!"

I cocked an interested ear. Mitsui was always the one who had defended Katy. He always liked her,—wasted three times the affection on her than any of the rest of us did. But right now he would have cheerfully killed her. Katy apparently realized how he felt, because she beat a quick retreat to the ship and hid in one of the dark corners she knew so well, while Mitsui prowled after her calling the wrath of his Japanese ancestors down upon her murderous head. Katy, of course, ignored him.

Mitsui calmed down after an hour or so, but he spent the rest of the evening building a strong box with a barred door. "It's not that I don't like Katy," he said apologetically. "But I loved that little thing."

He waited patiently until Katy came out of hiding, scooped her up and popped her surprised body into the box. "Now stay there until you can learn to behave yourself," he

said grimly. Then without a word to us he walked outside and in a half hour came back with another of the pink things, exactly like the one he had lost. He was grinning from ear to ear. "There's a village over there," he said pointing outside the port, "and these animals are as thick as fleas on a dog's back. The natives keep them for pets."

So Mitsui Watanabe was the first one of us to discover the dominant intelligence of Venus. But we weren't thinking of that. We just wanted one of those delightful creatures for our own. And this time there was no drawing straws. We set out in a body, leaving a raging Katy behind us safely locked up in the box.

THE village was a cluster of mud huts filled with little humanoid natives. You know what they're like,—stupid, imitative primitives who follow you around looking for something to beg or steal. I understand that they're no different now than they were.

The only difference was that the village simply swarmed

with horgels. They were everywhere, scampering familiarly through the village for all the world like a lot of pet dogs.

As far as we could tell, the humanoids were a harmless lot. From what we could see, they spent their time fishing and taking care of their pets and children. The way they coddled those pink furballs was amazing. I even saw nursing mothers feed them at the same breast they fed their children! It was a perfect expression of the love and tenderness the horgls inspired.

The natives didn't object when we scooped up a horgel apiece and held them in our arms. There were plenty of them and they seemed to be community property. The horgels apparently liked us as much as we liked them, because it was no time at all before we were all acting like kids despite our space ratings, and since you've held a horgel you know how we felt."

Farnsworth nodded. "They are appealing," he said. "I never experienced a sensation quite like holding one of them.

There's no word for it."

"Sure there is, son. Try love." Thompson's voice softened and then turned cynical. "Anyway, we took them back to the ship with us, and Katy went crazy in her box. She swore, snarled, screamed, spat and clawed until she was exhausted, and then lay on the bottom of the box and growled at us. It wasn't a nice noise but it did her no good. The box would have held a bobcat. And we weren't listening.

We were fascinated by the horgels. They were wonderful,—soft, clever, affectionate and intelligent too. Mitsui taught his to sit up in a matter of minutes, and for hours afterwards we explored their repertoire of accomplishments.

They could do almost everything but talk,—and they could darn near do that. They seemed to know instinctively what we wanted,—and what would please us most,—and then they did that thing. It was a happy time for all of us. We never had so much fun simply watching the antics of our new found pets. They were natural comedians, and kept us laughing

most of the night. And when we finally turned in, each of us held his horgel in his arms.

And no one remembered to feed Katy.

It probably would have done no good if we had, since she was so mad that she would have refused food. And her disposition didn't improve. But we didn't forget her completely—after a day or so we gave her food and left her alone. If she wanted to eat,—all right. Otherwise we didn't care. Being a cat, and being sensible, she ate. But there was no gratitude or affection for our kindness. She just crouched in the back of the box and spat at us.

WE spent several days on the island in the swamp, but found nothing of interest outside of the natives and the horgels. We took pictures, made notes, and tried to make some sense out of that perfectly incomprehensible native language. But about the only thing we learned was the name of the pink creatures and that everybody loved them.

Of course we had to take off sooner than we would like, but Venus was passing conjunction,

and if we waited too long our fuel supply wouldn't take us back to Earth. So we loaded our horgels and ourselves into the ship, blasted off for Earth, and bade farewell to the formaldehyde stink of Venus' air.

We were a week out, and had built up to terminal velocity when it happened. Somehow Katy managed to open her cage and escape. The first I knew about it was when she killed my horgel,—bit through its spine as it lay sleeping on my bed. She was so quiet that I never knew what had happened until I woke to find my poor little puffball lying cold and stiff in the circle of my arm.

I looked for the cat all the next period, and every free chance I had thereafter. I wanted to kill her. Losing my horgel was just like losing a child! I was disconsolate,—and consumed with envy for my more fortunate crew members. Their horgels were still alive and mine was dead! And my companions were utterly selfish! They must have known how I felt, but they wouldn't share their horgels with me for

a moment. I felt like a single man on a desert island peopled by happy and contented couples. I was left out,—and I was miserable!

It's odd how the horgels took on the attributes of all the desirable women I had longed for but never had. The loss of my pet and the obvious callousness of my companions to my feelings made the sense of loss even more sharp than it would have been otherwise. I took it badly. At first I was hurt and miserable. But gradually I began to hate the others for their good fortune, their cruel selfishness, their lack of consideration. And finally my thoughts turned toward murder.

What right did these others have to possess horgels when I had none? I brooded about it during the days we sped Earthward. I was damned if they were going to have all the pleasures of companionship while I was left out in the cold.

I thought it over carefully, and finally decided that Smitty was the one who would least be missed. I waylaid him in the passageway that period, and damn near fractured his skull

with a wrench. He dropped to the deck, blood streaming from his head,—but I didn't give him a thought until I had his horgel. Once I had that pink puffball safe in my arms, I felt sorry for him and carted him up to his shockcouch where I patched up his injuries as best I could. But I didn't give up the horgel.

Peculiarly enough, none of the others seemed the least shocked at what I had done. As long as it was for a horgel, and since the horgel wasn't theirs, it was all right. But as Smitty improved, I began to fear that he would try to take it back, and that, I swore grimly, would never happen. The pet I had stolen was just as precious as the one I had lost,—and I wouldn't trade the world for it. It was my joy and pleasure, and I guarded it fiercely from harm.

I couldn't forget Katy and her hatred for the creatures, and that cat was still loose, roaming somewhere through the ship looking for more horgels to kill. But I didn't search for her. I wasn't going to take any chances on losing my pet.

Instead I stayed in the open where it was safe,—and carried the wrench with which I'd nearly brained Smitty. It wasn't for Katy alone. I was equally afraid that Smitty would try to take the horgel back from me once he recovered.

But I needn't have wasted the energy. As the days passed and there was no sign of Katy, our vigilance relaxed, and the horgels didn't like to be held all the time. They were active little things who liked to romp.

So we finally gave in and allowed them the freedom of the control room, after searching it carefully, of course. There they would tumble and play with each other while we watched with fondly possessive eyes. Smitty looked at them from his shockcouch where he lay with his head bandaged,—and his eyes were murderous when he looked at me. I knew what was passing through his mind, and in a strange sort of way I sympathized with him, but a pet like the horgel was worth all the hate Smitty could generate. I felt good. I had a pet and he didn't.

IT was then that Katy struck! She must have been waiting with devilish patience for her opportunity, because when Mitsui opened the door to go aft to inspect the drives, she darted in.

A sweep of her claws disembowelled the closest of the fragile little creatures, and with a leap and pounce she seized the other in her jaws and disappeared down through the door in one of those long swift leaps that she had perfected on the outward voyage. It was done so swiftly that neither Slezak nor I had time to move. Mitsui had time only for a startled curse as Katy sailed down the shaft toward the stern with the heart-trending scream of the horgel following her. It died to a choked whimper as she disappeared.

We found the torn pink body in the drive room, a few minutes later but there was no sign of Katy.

But now instead of three horgels and four men, there was one horgel and four men.

Slezak and I stood it for a week until we made an agree-

ment based on desperation and loss. We would take the last horgel from Mitsui and share it between ourselves. If we had to kill Mitsui to get it, well,—that was his bad luck.

We shook hands on it, but I knew from the look in his eye that he didn't intend to keep his promise. I had enough of broken promises,—so I decided to kill him after we had disposed of Mitsui. Then I would kill Smitty and have the delightful creature all to myself without any one to bother my enjoyment. And I'd never give Katy another chance.

It was all perfectly logical. After all, there was only one horgel and it should belong to the one who could best take care of it. I was obviously the one since I had lost two already and was fully conscious of the menace Katy represented.

But it was hard to catch Mitsui off guard. He went around with the horgel buttoned under his jacket and a loaded pistol in his pocket. Apparently he'd smuggled the gun aboard in defiance of the regulation which prohibited side-

arms aboard ship. He said it was for Katy, but Slezak and I knew better. We knew the gun was for us if we tried to take the horgel from him. It made us cautious.

Much as we wanted that loveable little creature, we didn't want to die for it. There could be no enjoyment of its charm if we were dead. And we couldn't carry rifles. Even if we could have stood up to their recoil in one eighth G, they were too big and clumsy to carry in the cramped quarter of the ship.

It was a weird situation, one that might have been laughable except for its deadly undertones. Smitty recovered enough to walk around and naturally joined forces with us have-nots. He was still pretty weak, but any help lessened the odds. However I was always conscious of the speculative look in his eye when he looked at me.

I would have to get rid of Smitty permanently after we had gotten Mitsui's pet or he would join forces with Slezak to murder me. I caught them whispering together once or

twice, and the guilty looks they gave me were enough proof of their intentions. But none of us wanted to brave Mitsui's gun.

IT stayed that way for nearly a week. We were just entering Earth's atmosphere, and Mitsui was busy with the engines when we made our bid. I jumped him from behind, while Slezak and Smith took him from the side.

But I had forgotten that a Jap knows jiu jitsu like we know boxing. He bent,—and suddenly I was flying over his head. I landed with a thump that knocked the breath out of me. I was sick and paralyzed with the shock, but I saw with satisfaction that Slezak had gotten the engineer's gun.

But Mitsui wasn't through yet. He caught Smith with a judo blow that almost tore his head off, and turned on Slezak, a squatly bronze fury with death in his hands. Slezak didn't even have time to raise the gun.

But the fight had ripped Mitsui's jacket open and the horgel fell from the torn cloth. With a howl of terror, Mitsui

bent to pick up the pink furred creature. Slezak's gunbarrel landed on the back of his head with crushing force before any of us saw what had caused him to cry out. And Katy leaped from behind a motor mount, snatched the horgel from Archie's clutching hands and killed it with one quick bite!

Completely disregarding Slezak's anguished cry, she clawed and ripped the thing to bloody ribbons, and then arched her back and spat at him as if to say "well, I've killed the last of the little monsters,—now what are you going to do about it?"

Slezak bent over and picked the cat up almost tenderly, turned,—and smashed her head against the bulkhead with a full armed blow that would have killed a horse! Then he got down on his knees and picked at the bloody shreds of the horgel and cried like a baby!

SOMEHOW or other we managed to get the ship down, but when the reception committee met us, their congratulations turned to stares of

horror. Of course they found out what happened, and the next expedition to Venus instead of carrying explorers carried cats,—a couple of hundred of them. The ship marked the landing site carefully, released the cats and came home. After that we sent exploration parties,—and we've been operating like that ever since. It's been better than forty years now that we've been trying to clean up that planet,—and we're obviously not through yet."

"Did you ever go back to Venus to see what your cats have done?" Farnsworth asked.

Thompson shook his head. "No," he admitted. "I never returned. I didn't have the heart to," he added. "I like horgels too. But as long as I'm a few million miles away, it isn't so bad. I can even be philosophical about it. But up there, feeling as I feel and knowing what I know it'd drive me mad!"

Incidentally, Farnsworth, that's the reason you're grounded. Now that you know that we are methodically exterminating the horgels, Venus is no longer a safe place for you

to be. The Government, strangely enough, worries about the welfare of its citizens, and has no desire to see him in physical or mental danger when it isn't necessary. Since you've already held one of the horgels, you're no longer a safe risk. You're conditioned!"

Farnsworth's protest was ignored as Thompson swept on, speaking rapidly to forestall any possible interruption. "You see, the smart boys found out what the trouble was. Horgels are a menace. We never looked at them the right way. Instead of us owning the horgels, it was the other way around—and they were greedy. They didn't want one man, they wanted all men! On Earth, an animal like that would be more disruptive than the Atom War. What that last one on the ship did to us was only a small sample of what they could do here if given a chance." Thompson shivered. "We missed that only because of Katy."

"But why did the cat hate them so?" Farnsworth asked curiously.

Thompson sighed and rose to his feet, dislodging Cato who jumped lithely to the floor, voicing his disapproval. He looked down at the cat and smiled. "You may think you own me, old boy,—but what you think and what I think are two different things." He faced Farnsworth and answered slowly. "As regards your question, there are two possible answers. The biologists say it's because of the horgel's body odor,—it's sort of the reverse of catnip in its effect. But I think they're wrong. I think it's more basic than that. You see, like I said, you don't own a cat. The cat owns you,—and those things were cutting in,—violating Katy's prior rights. Katy had been queen of the ship, and she couldn't stand competition,—for which the human race should be forever grateful."

THE END