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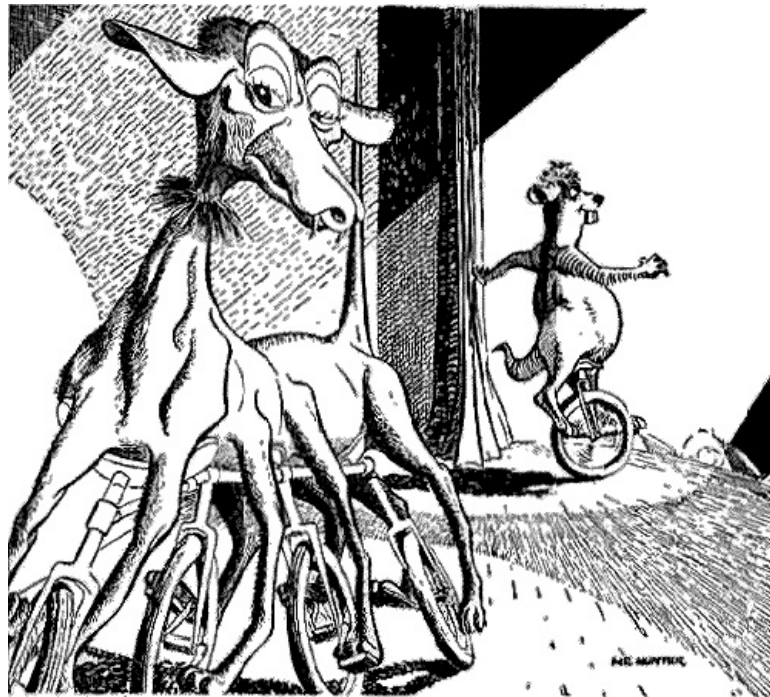
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SHOW BUSINESS ***

Here's the behind-the-scenes lowdown on Luna City life and a promoter of Martian dancing girls, vaudeville, and—other things. But remember: stop us if you've heard this one!



SHOW BUSINESS

By Boyd Ellanby

Illustrated by Mel Hunter

EXCEPT for old Dworken, Kotha's bar was deserted when I dropped in shortly after midnight. The ship from Earth was still two days away, and the Martian flagship would get in next morning, with seven hundred passengers for Earth on it. Dworken must have been waiting in Luna City a whole week—at six thousand credits a day. That's as steep to me as it is to you, but money never seemed to worry Dworken.

He raised the heavy green lids from his protruding brown eyes as I came in. He waved his tail.

"Sit down and join me," he invited, in his guttural voice. "It is not good for a man to drink alone. But I haf no combany in dis by-de-gods-deserted hole. A man must somet'ing be doing, what?"

I sat down in the booth across from my Venusian friend, and stared at him while he punched a

new order into the drinkboard.

"For me, another *shchikh*," he announced. "And for you? De same?"

Against my better judgment, for I knew I'd have plenty to do handling that mob of tourists—the first crowd of the season is always the roughest—tomorrow, I consented. Dworken had already consumed six of the explosive things, as the empty glasses on the table showed, but he exhibited no effects. I made a mental note, as I'd so often done before, that this time I would not exceed the safe terrestrial limit of two.

"You must be in the money again, drinking imported *shchikh*," I remarked. "What are you doing in Luna City this time?"

He merely lifted his heavy eyelids and stared at me without expression.

"Na, in de money I am not. Dere are too many chiselers in business. Just when I t'ink I haf a goot t'ing, I am shwindeled. It is too bad." He snorted through his ugly snout, making the Venusian equivalent of a sigh. I knew there was a story waiting behind that warty skin, but I was not sure I wanted to hear it. For the next round of drinks would be on me, and *shchikh* was a hundred and fifty credits a shot. Still, a man on a Moon assignment has to amuse himself somehow.

So I said, "What's the latest episode in the Dworken soap opera? What is the merchandise this time? Gems? Pet Mercurian fire-insects? A new supply of *danghaana*?"

"I do not smuggle drugs, dat is a base lie," replied my friend stolidly. He knew, of course, that I still suspected him to be the source of the last load of that potent narcotic, although I had no more proof than did the Planetary Bureau of Investigation.

He took a long pull at his drink before he spoke again. "But Dworken is never down for long. Dis time it is show business. You remember, how I haf always been by de t'eater so fascinated? Well, I decided to open a show here in Luna City. T'ink of all the travelers, bored stiff by space and de emptiness thereof, who pass through here during the season. Even if only half of them go to my show, it cannot fail."

I waited for some mention of free tickets, but none was made. I was about as anxious to see Dworken's show as I was to walk barefoot across the Mare Imbrium, but I asked with what enthusiasm I could force,

"What sort of act are you putting on? Girls?" I shuddered as I recalled the pathetic shop-worn chorus girls that Sam Low had tried to pass off last year on the gullible tourists of the spaceways. That show had lasted ten nights—nine more than it deserved to. There are limits, even to the gullibility of Earth-lubbers.

"Yes, girls," replied Dworken. "But not what you are perhaps t'inking. Martian girls."

THIS WAS more interesting. Even if the girls were now a little too old for the stage in the Martian capital, they would still get loud cheers on the Moon. I knew. I started to say so, but Dworken interrupted.

"And not de miserable girls dey buy from de slave traders in Behastin. Dese girls I collected myself, from de country along de Upper Canal."

I repressed my impulse to show my curiosity. It could all be perfectly true—and if it were not the opening night would tell. But it sounded a lot like one of Dworken's taller tales. I had never been able to disprove any one of them, but I found it a *little* hard to believe that so many improbable things had ever happened to one man. However, I like being entertained, if it doesn't cost me too much, so finally I said,

"I suppose you are going to tell me you ventured out into the interior of Mars, carrying a six weeks' supply of water and oxygen on your back, and visited the Xo theaters on the spot?"

"How did you know? Dat is just what I did," solemnly affirmed my companion. He snorted again, and looked at his glass. It was empty, but he tilted it into his face again in an eloquent gesture. No words were needed: I punched the symbols for *shchikh* into the drinkboard on my side of the table. Then, after hesitating, I punched the "two in" signal. I must remember, though, that this was my second and last.

His eighth *shchikh* seemed to instill some animation into Dworken. "I know you feel skepticism—I mean skepticism—after my exploits. You will see tomorrow night dat I speak true."

"Amazing!" I said. "Especially as I just happen to remember that three different expeditions from Earth tried to penetrate more than a hundred kilometers from Behastin, but either they couldn't carry the water and oxygen that far, or they resorted to breathing Mars air, and never came back. And they were Earthmen, not Venusians who are accustomed to two atmospheres of carbon dioxide."

"My vriend, you must not reason: it was so, it always will be so. The brinciple of induction is long exbloded. I did indeed breathe Mars air. Vait! I tell you how."

He took another long swig of *shchikh*. "Vat your Eart'men did not realize was dat dey cannot acclimate themselves as do we Venusians. You know de character of our planet made adaptability a condition of survival. It is true dat our atmosphere is heavy, but on top of our so-high mountains de air is t'in. We must live everywhere, de space is so few. I first adapted myself on Eart' to live. I was dere a whole year, you vill recollect. Den I go further. Your engineers construct air tanks dat make like de air of mountains, t'in. So, I learn to live in dose tanks. Each day I haf spent one, two, three hours in dem. I get so I can breathe air at one-third the pressure of your already t'in atmosphere. And at one-sixt' the tension of oxygen. No, my vriend, you could not do this. Your lungs burst. But old Dworken, he has done it.

"I take wit' me only some water, for I know de Martians dey not give water. To trade, some miniature kerosene lamps. You know dey got no fuel oil now, only atomics, but dese little lamps dey like for antiques, for sentiment, because their great-grandfathers used dem.

"Well, I walk through Vlahas, and not stop. Too close by the capital. Too much contact with men of odder planets. I walk also through Bhur and Zamat. I come to a small place where dey never see foreigner. Name Tasaaha. Oh, I tell you, ze men of ze odder planets do not know Mars. How delightful, how unsboiled, are ze Martians, once you get away from de people by tourists so sboiled! How wonderful, across the sands to go, free as birds! The so friendly greetings of de Martian men. And de Martian women! *Ah!*

"Well, in Tasaaha I go to t'eater. Such lovely girls! You shall see. But I saw somet'ing else. That, my friend, you hardly believe!"

Dworken looked down at his empty glass and snorted gently. I took the hint, although for myself I ordered the less lethal Martian *azdzani*. I was already having difficulty believing parts of his narrative; it would be interesting to see if the rest were any harder.

My companion continued. "They not only have de chorus, which you haf seen on Earth, imported from Mars—and such a chorus! Such girls! But they had somet'ing else."

"You recall your terrestrial history? Once your ancestors had performers on the stage who did funny motions and said amusing remarks, de spectators to make laugh. I t'ink you called it 'vaudeville.' Well, on Mars they have also vaudeville!" He paused, and looked at me from under half-shut eyelids, and grinned widely to show his reptilian teeth.

I wondered if he'd really found something new. I would even be willing to pay for a glimpse of Martian vaudeville. I wondered if my Martian was too rusty for me to understand jokes in the spoken lingo.

"They haf not only men and women telling jokes. They haf trained animals acting funny!" Dworken went on.

This was too much. "I suppose the animals talked, too?" I said sarcastically. "Do they speak Earth or Martian?"

He regarded me approvingly. "My friend, you catch on quick." He raised a paw. "Now, don't at conclusions jump. Let me explain. At first, I did not believe it either.

"Dey sprang it with no warning. Onto de stage came a *tllooll* (you know him, I t'ink), and a *shiyooch'iid*. The *shiyooch'iid* was riding a bicycle—I mean a monocle. One wheel. The *tllooll* moved just as awkward as he always does, and tried to ride a tandem four-wheeled vehicle which had been especially for him made."

In spite of my resolve, I chuckled. The picture of a *tllooll* trying to ride a four-wheeled bicycle, pumping each of his eight three-jointed legs up and down in turn, while maintaining his usual supercilious and indifferent facial expression, was irresistibly funny.

"Wait!" said my friend, and again raised a paw. "You have as yet not'ing heard. They make jokes at same time. De *shiyooch'iid* asks de *tllooll*, 'Who was dat *tlloolla* I saw you wit' up the Canal?' and the *tllooll* replies, 'Dat was no *tlloolla*, dat was my *shicai*.'"

I doubled up, laughing. Unless you have visited Mars this may not strike you as funny, but I collapsed into a heap. I put my head on the table and wept with mirth.

It seemed like five minutes before I was able to speak. "Oh, no!"

"Yes, yes, I tell you. Yes!" insisted my friend. He even smiled himself.

IF YOU don't know the social system of the Martians there is no point in my trying to explain why the idea of a *tllooll's* being out with that neuter of neuters, a *shicai*, is so devastatingly funny. But that, suddenly, was not quite the point.

Did it happen? I had large doubts. Nobody had ever heard a *tllooll* make any sort of a sound, and it was generally supposed that they had no vocal chords. And no *shiyooch'iid* (they somewhat resemble a big groundhog, and live in burrows along the canals of Mars) had ever been heard to make any noise except a high-pitched whistle when frightened.

"Now, just a minute, Dworken," I said.

"I know, my vriend. I know. You t'ink it is impossible. You t'ink the talking is faked. So I t'ought too. But wait."

It seems Dworken had inquired among the audience as to who owned the performing animals. The local Martians were not as impressed as he was with the performance, but they guided him to the proprietor of the trained animal act. He was a young Martian, hawk-nosed, with flashing black eyes, dusky skin, and curly hair.

"So I say to him, dis Martian," Dworken continued, "'If your act on the level is, I buy.' I had three small diamonds with," he explained.

"But de Martian was hard to deal wit'. First, he said he would not sell his so-valuable and so-beloved animals. De only talking animals on Mars, he said—de liar! At long last I get him to make a price. But, on condition dat he bring ze animals around to my inn in the morning, for a private audition."

"I suppose," I interrupted, "you were beginning to have some doubts as to the Martian's good faith? After all, a talking *tllooll* and a talking *shiyooch'iid* all at one time is quite a lot to ask. I would have—"

"Blease, vriend, blease!" interrupted my companion. "Do you not t'ink old Dworken knows dese things? Of course he does! I t'ink. De owner, he is pulling a fake, I guess. I know dat animals do not really talk."

"Next morning, I t'ink he no show up. But no, I am mistaken. Bromptly at nine o'clock he come to my inn with a little dogcart, wit' de animals. He puts dem on de stage in de bar of de inn. They act like before."

"But they didn't talk, of course?"

"Oh, my vriend, dat's where you are wrong. Dey talk like nobotty's business. De jokes are funnier than ever. Even dirtier, maybe. But Dworken is not fooled. He t'ink. 'Aha!' I say to de Martian, 'You fake this, what? De animals not talk. Suppose you have them do de act while you outside stay, what?' Then I t'ink I have him."

"Ze Martian tear his curly hair, flash his black eyes. He takes insult that I t'ink he is fake. 'Name of de Martian gods!' he cry. But at last he agree to go away, and tell animals to go ahead."

"Dworken, you were a sap to string along with him even that far," I said wearily. "I hope you hadn't paid the guy any money."

He shook his head. "No, my old and best," he said. "Dworken no fool is, even on Mars. No, no money. But wait! De animals go on without the owner. Same stage business, same talk, same jokes, and even funnier yedt. What?"

I started at Dworken. He did not smile, but finished off the eleventh *shchikh*—the fifth I had bought him.

"Listen," I said. "Are you sitting there telling me you have a *tllooll* and a *shiyooch'iid* that can really talk?"

"You listen, my vriend. Like you, I t'ink something is wrong. I say to Martian owner, 'My vriend, maybe I buy your act, if you tell me how it is done. But you know as well as I do dat it is impossible to dese animals to talk. Tell me what is de trick?'"

Dworken lifted his glass and shook it, as though he could not believe it was empty, then looked at me questioningly. I shook my head. He snorted, looked melancholy, writhed up from his chair and reached for his fur cape.

"Vell, thanks for de drinks," he said.

A dark suspicion crept into my mind, but I could not restrain myself.

"Wait, Dworken!" I shouted. "You can't just leave me up in the air like that! What happened then?"

Dworken snorted into his green handkerchief.

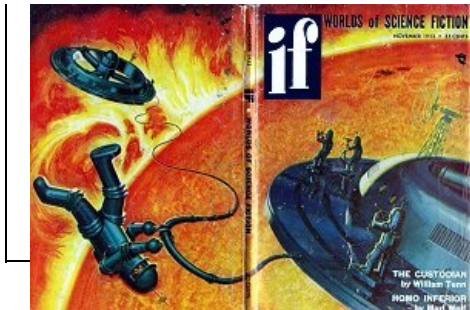
"De Martian admitted it was a fake, after all," he said mournfully. "Can you imachine it? What a chiseler!"

"'De *shiyooch'iid*,' he said, 'can't really talk; de *tllooll* just t'rows his voice!'"

THE END

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