



## CAGE, STAND, AND ALL

*by Constance McCutcheon*

“Here’s the bird.”

Pete walked over to an antique bronze birdcage suspended from a high antique stand. The cage swung lightly within the stand’s hoop. Pete opened the cage door carefully and made a mooching sound with his lips, coaxing the bird out. With the blue parakeet on his finger, he looked up proudly. “You can take Pepe out every once in a while if you want. If you hold him on your finger like this, he won’t fly away. I take him out in the evening, don’t I, Pepe?” he queried the little bird briefly, then lifted it swiftly to the cage

door and jerked once to deposit Pepe back inside. The guest watched all with a sober look; he would be taking care of Pepe while Pete was on vacation in South America.

Very early in the morning a few days later, Bob returned to Pete's apartment as arranged and took formal possession of cage, stand, and all; returned with them to his home, placed them in the only free corner of his small, one-room, plant-filled apartment, then stood back and regarded the ensemble. The bird would be at home with him for six weeks, there in that corner. He took two swift steps, opened the cage door, and stood back. He made no move to close it again. He checked Pepe's water, then, after taking a mischievous, melodramatic look over his shoulder, removed the small dish of bird feed from the cage and placed it on the table in the center of the apartment. He then explained to the bird:

"My apartment is small, I know, but I think it might be big enough for you, Pepe. When you come out of there and take a look around, you'll find nothing in it that will overwhelm you. There are lots of plants for you to fly around in and land on, but they do not conceal any predators. Even though I'm telling you all this, I know you'll have to start out cautiously and ascertain the facts of your new circumstances for yourself, because you're a smart bird. There's no reason for you to believe me. You won't believe me. You shouldn't believe me! I wouldn't believe you if you told me the same thing in the jungle. But I've got to go to work now and I'm very, very sorry, Pepe, but I've got to be there all day. Eight hours, sometimes nine. I have to sit in a room too and stay there all day, but I get a chance to go outside when I walk to the cafeteria for lunch, and I'm not alone. I'm sorry that you will be all alone the whole—oh jeez!" he exclaimed, looking at his watch, and was gone. Pepe was left alone for the entire day in a strange apartment with the door of his cage open and his food in a dish on a

table in the middle of the deep, plant-filled, one-room jungle.

Bob had a wonderful idea the next day. He played Kitarro music for Pepe during his absence, working it out so that the tape continually flipped itself when it got to the end of a side. The sound track was a mixture of birds singing in forests, of sea sounds, of far-off trumpets sounding over a plain, and other such wonderful, mildly wilderness-evoking sounds. Bob didn't know if Pepe would like it, but if he had been a bird he thought he would have liked it. Thus he broached the subject of his temporary, rather exciting acquisition to his officemate.

"You don't think maybe you're torturing it without realizing it?" Bob's Hungarian officemate asked, gnashing his teeth slightly and wincing nervously, not at Bob but at life and work in general. Bob had never gotten to the point where he felt completely at ease with this colleague.

"Ah ha ha ha!" Bob bellowed in a melodramatic, howling laugh. "He's got company now! It's not punk music. It's not rock. It's Kitarro! Pepe will think he's in the woods. It's better than hearing nothing all day, don't you think?"

"That is true," came the affirmation, skeptical for all that. "But what did he hear all day before he came to you? Maybe the shock will kill him. He's just a little bird, with just a little heart."

The music did not kill Pepe, nor did the venture he made out into the wild apartment the very first day, nor did the conversation he had to endure with the talkative Bob. Evenings were lively, with Bob chatting to the bird, drinking a beer with the bird sitting beside him on the table or, as time went on, on the toe of his slipper which Bob placed for him on the shelf above the table where Pepe seemed to like to perch, partially protected by the hanging tendril of a lustrous philodendron. Bob toasted Pepe with every chug of his beer, and little Pepe began to respond: "Cheers!" In the middle of the second week, Pepe greeted Bob when he came

home from work, flying to his shoulder and piping into his ear: “Cheers!”

“Joker!” Bob grunted, snapping his head away, as pleased as he was shocked by the unexpected rush.

On the weekend, Bob had to spray his plants, explaining to Pepe that there were bugs all over them and that Pepe would have to stay out of direct range of the pump spray he was using. “But I’ve checked at all the stores and this is a very environment friendly spray. It is not poisonous to pets or plants or birds. It may not even kill the bugs,” he muttered to himself as he began the work.

“Cheers!” Pepe cried, watching intently from a distance.

“Cheers yourself, you joker,” Bob replied. “I’ve got to do all the work while you just sit there.”

“Joker!” Pepe replied. This caused Bob to take a second, careful look at Pepe.

“Joker?” Bob asked.

“Joker!” replied the bird.

Bob pointed to himself. “Bob.”

“Bob! Cheers!” Pepe cried, and Bob laughed delightedly.

“You are some special bird,” he said aloud. “Pete never mentioned you could talk. I didn’t know parakeets could talk. Maybe they can’t and you’re a genius. You may be the only talking parakeet in the world.”

Bob continued to talk aloud, but got on with his work. He carried the first huge plant into the bathroom, set it in the deep bathtub, and carefully sprayed each of its leaves with his friendly insecticide. He then waited until the plant had dried a bit, carried it back to its place, dusted that part of the shelf with a cloth he had handy there, and started on the next plant. It took most of the day and late into the evening because Bob worked methodically and thoroughly. This was one reason Bob had no girlfriend; he didn’t see where men got the time. There might be enough time for

plants or perhaps for a girlfriend, but not for both if a fellow pursued other interests as well, like earning a living. Pepe spent his time flying into the bathroom and watching, then flying into the living room and watching. In the bathroom, Bob noticed that the mirror fascinated Pepe.

That evening, Bob broke off the handle of a wooden spoon that had split but which he hadn't wanted to throw away. "This will do it!" he said, now always talking aloud for Pepe's benefit. "This is a little surprise for you, Pepe!"

"Pepe!"

"You can watch all you want, joker, but you'll never figure out what I've got in mind for you." After a quarter of an hour, it was finished, and Bob invited Pepe to fly up and try out his new perch in front of the huge bathroom mirror. Later, Bob made improvements so that Pepe also had a bowl of water by the bathroom perch deep enough to bath in, something Pepe began to do whenever Bob shaved in the mornings. "We make a regular team," Bob remarked one morning only half in glee as he caught in the face some of the spray from Pepe's bathing.

"Team!" Pepe cried, returning to his wooden perch. But Pete was already back from his vacation and had arranged with Bob to pick Pepe up the following evening. Bob felt a little silly about hiding it, but he did not mention the fact to Pepe. When Pete appeared at Bob's door the next evening, he looked healthy and relaxed from his trip, a bright, hand-woven rug draped over his arms to thank Bob for taking care of Pepe. After Bob insisted that he had had no problems with Pepe and that he had really enjoyed having the bird, Pete left with Pepe and Pepe's things.

So Bob went back to his solitary, bachelor's routine, one that had never bothered him before, one that had never struck him as lonely before. He wasn't lonely. Not in the least. He had friends, both men and women, with whom he met and had grand evenings. He led an active, but not exaggerated social life. He always had. But he missed Pepe.

Pepe's absence hurt a bit. Then one evening, a week after Pepe had been taken from him, just as Bob was sitting down to dinner, the phone rang. It was Pete.

"Look, Bob," Pete began, hesitating. "What are you doing now? ... Eating dinner. Well, finish then. But do you think you can come over to my place afterwards, what in half an hour? An hour? It's pretty weird, but I think it's important. Hurry if you can. Thanks."

In half-an-hour's time, Bob was ringing Pete's bell. Pete opened the door and ushered him into the living room. The birdcage was standing in the corner next to a set of heavily laden books shelves, empty.

"Bob, this is pretty shameful, but I don't know what to do." He walked over to the birdcage and pointed inside. "Look at him. Did this happen when he was with you? You didn't mention anything."

At first Bob saw nothing except the empty cage. Pepe wasn't in it. After a long moment of searching, when he did spot the bird, his heart broke. Pepe was slumped up against the cage wires on the cage floor in the dirt. He had lost color and seemed to be a light puff of death, nothing more, although he blinked from time to time.

"Is he sick?" Pete asked. "I can't do anything with him. He doesn't even come out evenings to stand on my finger. He doesn't eat. He doesn't drink. He's going to die."

"I think he's sick," Bob said, looking at Pepe sadly. "It's not normal for a bird to stand in its own shit like that. I think you're right. I think he will die. He's lost his color."

"But he had it when I got him back from you. What am I going to do with him? What can I do?"

Bob shrugged and stood staring with helpless longing at his little friend.

"I know it's an incredible imposition, Bob. I know it. Maybe the change was too fast or something, but ... he was getting along better with you, I think. He wasn't ready to die at your place, was he? As soon as I got him home last week,

he went wild. He flew around and around in the cage like crazy, and was even shouting things. It wasn't normal. I thought it was hysteria, you know, maybe glad to see me or be back home, but birds don't get hysterical, and, well, he's not jumping for joy now. Maybe he flew against something and injured himself," he mused, staring into the cage again.

"No, I don't think that's it."

Pete turned to his friend with a serious look. "I know it's an incredible imposition. I know it, and I don't want to burden you, Bob, I really don't but, really, if it's at all possible ..."

Bob regarded him silently with steady, sober eyes, sadness traced through every line of his face.

"Can you take him back again, Bob? I *give* him to you, cage and stand, food, everything I've got, all the paraphernalia. I don't want him to die here. I don't want him to die. What do you think? Do you think that would help? Do you think it's too late? He's such a little guy."

Swiftly Bob removed the bandana from around his neck, took Pepe quickly but carefully out of the cage and tucked him up in it to protect him from the cold on the way home, and gingerly laid him back on the cage floor where Pepe lay as if dead cushioned in the red cloth. Declining the beer Pete offered him, Bob took the cage and stand which he knew neither he nor Pepe would need if Pepe survived, and left, barely taking leave of the distraught Pete.

Within fifteen minutes, everything was set up in Bob's apartment as it had been a week before. As Bob was remounting the wooden perch in the bathroom, he began to have doubts about whether Pepe would recover when he was startled by a flutter and a gentle pull on his shoulder.

"Cheers!" Pepe cried right into his ear.

"Joker!" Bob replied, his heart flooding with joy.

"Joker!" Pepe cried into his ear again.

"All right, all right!" Bob said, tilting his head away from Pepe's shrill cries.

“All right! All right!” Pepe stepped closer to Bob’s neck and nuzzled him. Bob didn’t move. Pepe stayed there a long time leaning up against his neck, then suddenly broke loose to flutter up to his wooden perch and bath bowl.

The next morning the two shaved, bathed, and stared into the mirror at each other. Bob went reluctantly to work while Pepe stayed home, courageously guarding the plant kingdom all day long against Kitarro’s wildlife.

