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DUMB MARTIAN

from THE BEST OF JOHN WYNDHAM

John Wyndham

SPHERE BOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION

AT a very tender age my latent passion for all forms of fantasy stories, having been sparked by the Brothers Grimm and the more unusual offerings in the children's comics and later the boy's adventure papers, was encouraged in the early 1930s by the occasional exciting find on the shelves of the public library with Burroughs and Thorne Smith varying the staple diet of Wells and Verne.

But the decisive factor in establishing that exhilarating 'sense of wonder' in my youthful imagination was the discovery about that time of back numbers of American science fiction magazines to be bought quite cheaply in stores like Woolworths. The happy chain of economic circumstances by which American newstand returns, sometimes sadly with the magic cover removed or mutilated, ballasted cargo ships returning to English ports and the colonies, must have been the mainspring of many an enthusiastic hobby devoted to reading, discussing, perhaps collecting and even writing, science fiction – or 'scientifiction' as Hugo Gernsback coined the tag in his early *Amazing Stories* magazine.

Gernsback was a great believer in reader participation; in 1936 I became a teenage member of the Science Fiction League sponsored by his *Wonder Stories*. Earlier he had run a competition in its fore-runner *Air Wonder Stories* to find a suitable banner slogan, offering the prize of 'One Hundred Dollars in Gold' with true yankee braggadocio. Discovering the result some years later in, I think, the September 1930 issue of *Wonder Stories* seized upon from the bargain-bin of a chain store, was akin to finding a message in a bottle cast adrift by some distant Robinson Crusoe, and I well remember the surge of jingoistic pride (an educational trait well-nurtured in pre-war Britain) in noting that the winner was an Englishman, John Beynon Harris.

I had not the slightest anticipation then that I would later meet, and acknowledge as a good friend and mentor, this contest winner who, as John Wyndham, was to become one of the greatest English story-tellers in the idiom. The fact that he never actually got paid in gold was a disappointment, he once told me, that must have accounted for the element of philosophical dubiety in some of his work.

Certainly his winning slogan '*Future Flying Fiction*', although too late to save the magazine from foundering on the rock of economic depression (it had already been amalgamated with its stable-mate *Science Wonder Stories* to become just plain, if that is the right word, *Wonder Stories*), presaged the firm stamp of credibility combined with imaginative flair that characterized JBH's writings.

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (the abundance of fore-names conveniently supplied his various aliases) emerged in the 1950s as an important contemporary influence on speculative fiction, particularly in the exploration of the theme of realistic global catastrophe, with books such as *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Kraken Wakes*, and enjoyed a popularity, which continued after his sad death in 1969, comparable to that of his illustrious predecessor as master of the scientific romance, H. G. Wells.

However, he was to serve his writing apprenticeship in those same pulp magazines of the thirties, competing successfully with their native American contributors, and it is the purpose of this present collection to highlight the chronological development of his short stories from those early beginnings to the later urbane and polished style of John Wyndham.

'The Lost Machine' was his second published story, appearing in *Amazing Stories*, and was possibly the proto-type of the sentient robot later developed by such writers as Isaac Asimov. He used a variety of plots during this early American period particularly favouring time travel, and the best of these was undoubtedly 'The Man From Beyond' in which the poignancy of a man's realisation, caged in a zoo on Venus, that far from being abandoned by his fellow-explorers, he is the victim of a far stranger fate, is remarkably outlined for its time. Some themes had dealt with war, such as 'The Trojan Beam', and he had strong views to express on its futility. Soon his own induction into the Army in 1940 produced a period of creative inactivity corresponding to World War II. He had, however, previously established himself in England as a prominent science fiction writer with serials in major periodicals, subsequently reprinted in hard covers, and he even had a detective novel published. He had been well represented too – 'Perfect Creature' is an amusing example – in the various magazines stemming from fan activity, despite the vicissitudes of their pre- and immediate post-war publishing insecurity.

But after the war and into the fifties the level of science fiction writing in general had increased considerably, and John rose to the challenge by selling successfully to the American market again. In England his polished style proved popular and a predilection for the paradoxes of time travel as a source of private amusement was perfectly exemplified in 'Pawley's Peepholes', in which the gawping tourists from the future are routed by vulgar tactics. This story was later successfully adapted for radio and broadcast by the B.B.C.

About this time his first post-war novel burst upon an unsuspecting world, and by utilizing a couple of unoriginal ideas with his Gernsback-trained attention to logically based explanatory detail and realistic background, together with his now strongly developed narrative style, 'The Day of the Triffids' became one of the classics of modern speculative fiction, surviving even a mediocre movie treatment. It was the fore-runner of a series of equally impressive and enjoyable novels including 'The Chrysalids' and 'The Midwich Cuckoos' which was successfully filmed as 'Village of the Damned'. (A sequel 'Children of the Damned' was markedly inferior, and John was careful to disclaim any responsibility for the writing.)

I was soon to begin an enjoyable association with John Wyndham that had its origins in the early days of the *New Worlds* magazine-publishing venture, and was later to result in much kindly and essential assistance enabling me to become a specialist dealer in the genre. This was at the Fantasy Book Centre in Bloomsbury, an area of suitably associated literary activities where John lived for many years, and which provided many pleasurable meetings at a renowned local coffee establishment, Cawardine's,

where we were often joined by such personalities as John Carnell, John Christopher and Arthur C. Clarke.

In between the novels two collections of his now widely published short stories were issued as 'The Seeds of Time' and 'Consider Her Ways'; others are re-printed here for the first time. He was never too grand to refuse material for our own *New Worlds* and in 1958 wrote a series of four novellas about the Troon family's contribution to space exploration – a kind of Forsyte saga of the solar system later collected under the title 'The Outward Urge'. His fictitious collaborator 'Lucas Parkes' was a subtle ploy in the book version to explain Wyndham's apparent deviation into solid science-based fiction. The last story in this collection 'The Emptiness of Space' was written as a kind of post-script to that series, especially for the 100th anniversary issue of *New Worlds*.

John Wyndham's last novel was *Chocky*, published in 1968. It was an expansion of a short story following a theme similar to *The Chrysalids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*. It was a theme peculiarly appropriate for him in his advancing maturity. When, with characteristic reticence and modesty, he announced to a few of his friends that he was marrying his beloved Grace and moving to the country-side, we all felt that this was a well-deserved retirement for them both.

But ironically time – always a fascinating subject for speculation by him – was running out for this typical English gentleman. Amiable, erudite, astri-gently humorous on occasion, he was, in the same way that the gentle Boris Karloff portrayed his film monsters, able to depict the night-mares of humanity with frightening realism, made the more deadly by his masterly precision of detail. To his great gift for story-telling he brought a lively intellect and a fertile imagination.

I am glad to be numbered among the many, many thousands of his readers whose 'sense of wonder' has been satisfactorily indulged by a writer whose gift to posterity is the compulsive readability of his stories of which this present volume is an essential part.

— LESLIE FLOOD

## DUMB MARTIAN (1952)

when Duncan Weaver bought Lellie for — no, there could be trouble putting it that way — when Duncan Weaver paid Lellie's parents one thousand pounds in compensation for the loss of her services, he had a figure of six, or, if absolutely necessary, seven hundred in mind.

Everybody in Port Clarke that he had asked about it assured him that that would be a fair price. But when he got up country it hadn't turned out quite as simple as the Port Clarkers seemed to think. The first three Martian families he had tackled hadn't shown any disposition to sell their daughters at all; the next wanted £1,500, and wouldn't budge; Lellie's parents had started at £1,500, too, but they came down to £1,000 when he'd made it plain that he wasn't going to stand for extortion. And when, on the way back to Port Clarke with her, he came to work it out, he found himself not so badly pleased with the deal after all. Over the five-year term of his appointment it could only cost him £200 a year at the worst — that is to say if he were not able to sell her for £400, maybe £500 when he got back. Looked at that way, it wasn't really at all unreasonable.

In town once more, he went to explain the situation and get things all set with the Company's Agent.

"Look," he said, "you know the way I'm fixed with this five-year contract as Way-load Station Superintendent on *Jupiter IV/II*? Well, the ship that takes me there will be traveling light to pick up

cargo. So how about a second passage on her?" He had already taken the pre-cautionary step of finding out that the Company was accustomed to grant an extra passage in such circumstances, though not of right.

The Company's Agent was not surprised. After consulting some lists, he said that he saw no objection to an extra passenger. He explained that the Company was also prepared in such cases to supply the extra ration of food for one person at the nominal charge of £200 per annum, payable by deduction from salary.

"What! A thousand pounds!" Duncan exclaimed.

"Well worth it," said the Agent. "It's nominal for the rations, because it's worth the Company's while to lay out the rest for something that helps to keep an employee from going nuts. That's pretty easy to do when you're fixed alone on a way-load station, they tell me — and I believe them. A thousand's not high if it helps you to avoid a crack-up."

Duncan argued it a bit, on principle, but the Agent had the thing cut and dried. It meant that Lellie's price went up to £2,000 — £400 a year. Still, with his own salary at £5,000 a year, tax free, unspendable during his term on Jupiter IV/II, and piling up nicely, it wouldn't come to such a big slice. So he agreed.

"Fine," said the Agent. "I'll fix it, then. All you'll need is an embarkation permit for her, and they'll grant that automatically on production of your marriage certificate."

Duncan stared.

"Marriage certificate! What, me! Me marry a Mart!"

The Agent shook his head reprovingly.

"No embarkation permit without it. Anti-slavery regulation. They'd likely think you meant to sell her — might even think you'd bought her."

"What, me!" Duncan said again, indignantly.

"Even you," said the Agent. "A marriage licence will only cost you another ten pounds — unless you've got a wife back home, in which case it'll likely cost you a bit more later on."

Duncan shook his head.

"I've no wife," he assured him.

"Uh-huh," said the Agent, neither believing, nor disbelieving. "Then what's the difference?"

Duncan came back a couple of days later, with the certificate and the permit. The Agent looked them over.

"That's okay," he agreed. "I'll confirm the booking. My fee will be one hundred pounds."

"Your fee! What the—?"

"Call it safe-guarding your investment," said the Agent.

The man who had issued the embark-ation permit had required one hundred pounds, too. Duncan did not men-tion that now, but he said, with bitter-ness:

“One dumb Mart's costing me plenty.”

“Dumb?” said the Agent, looking at him.

“Speechless plus. These hick Marts don't know they're born.”

“H'm,” said the Agent. “Never lived here, have you?”

“No,” Duncan admitted. “But I've laid-over here a few times.”

The Agent nodded.

“They act dumb, and the way their faces are makes them look dumb,” he said, “but they were a mighty clever people, once.”

“Once, could be a long time ago.”

“Long before we got here they'd given up bother-ing to think a lot. Their planet was dying, and they were kind of content to die with it.”

“Well, I call that dumb. Aren't all planets dying, any-way?”

“Ever seen an old man just sitting in the sun, taking it easy? It doesn't have to mean he's senile. It may do, but very likely he can snap out of it and put his mind to work again if it gets really neces-sary. But mostly he finds it not worth the bother. Less trouble just to let things happen.”

“Well, this one's only about twenty — say ten and a half of your Martian years — and she certainly lets 'em happen. And I'd say it's a kind of acid test for dumb-ness when a girl doesn't know what goes on at her own wed-ding cere-mony.”

And then, on top of that, it turned out to be neces-sary to lay out yet another hundred pounds on clothing and other things for her, bring-ing the whole invest-ment up to £2,310. It was a sum which might possibly have been justi-fied on a really*smart* girl, but Lellie ... But there it was. Once you made the first pay-ment, you either lost on it, or were stuck for the rest. And, anyway, on a lonely way-load station even she would be com-pany — of a sort...

The First Officer called Duncan into the navi-ga-ting room to take a look at his future home.

“There it is,” he said, waving his hand at a watch-screen.

Duncan looked at the jagged-surfaced cres-cent. There was no scale to it: it could have been the size of Luna, or of a basket-ball. Either size, it was still just a lump of rock, turning slowly over.

“How big?” he asked.

“Around forty miles mean dia-meter.”

“What'd that be in gravity?”

“Haven't worked it out. Call it slight, and reckon there isn't any, and you'll be near enough.”

“Uh-huh,” said Duncan.

On the way back to the mess-room he paused to put his head into the cabin. Lellie was lying on her bunk, with the spring-cover fastened over her to give some illusion of weight. At the sight of him she raised herself on one elbow.

She was small — not much over five feet. Her face and hands were delicate; they had a fragility which was not simply a matter of poor bone-structure. To an Earth-man her eyes looked unnaturally round, seeming to give her permanently an expression of innocence surprised. The lobes of her ears hung unusually low out of a mass of brown hair that glinted with red among its waves. The paleness of her skin was emphasized by the colour on her cheeks and the vivid red on her lips.

“Hey,” said Duncan. “You can start to get busy packing up the stuff now.”

“Packing up?” she repeated doubtfully, in a curiously resonant voice.

“Sure. Pack.” Duncan told her. He demonstrated by opening a box, cramming some clothes into it, and waving a hand to include the rest. Her expression did not change, but the idea got across.

“We are come?” she asked.

“We are nearly come. So get busy on this lot,” he informed her.

“Yith — okay,” she said, and began to unhook the cover.

Duncan shut the door, and gave a shove which sent him floating down the passage leading to the general mess and living-room.

Inside the cabin, Lellie pushed away the cover. She reached down cautiously for a pair of metallic soles, and attached them to her slippers by their clips. Still cautiously holding on to the bunk, she swung her feet over the side and lowered them until the magnetic soles clicked into contact with the floor. She stood up, more confidently. The brown overall suit she wore revealed proportions that might be admired among Martians, but by Earth standards they were not classic — it is said to be the consequence of the thinner air of Mars that has in the course of time produced a greater lung capacity, with consequent modification. Still ill at ease with her condition of weightlessness, she slid her feet to keep contact as she crossed the room. For some moments she paused in front of a wall mirror, contemplating her reflection. Then she turned away and set about the packing.

“—one hell of a place to take a woman to,” Wishart, the ship's cook, was saying as Duncan came in.

Duncan did not care a lot for Wishart — chiefly on account of the fact that when it had occurred to him that it was highly desirable for Lellie to have some lessons in weightless cooking, Wishart had refused to give the tuition for less than £50, and thus increased the investment cost to £2,360. Nevertheless, it was not his way to pretend to have misheard.

“One hell of a place to be given a job,” he said, grimly.

No one replied to that. They knew how men came to be offered way-load jobs.

It was not necessary, as the Company frequently pointed out, for super-annuation at the age of forty to come as a hardship to any-one: salaries were good, and they could cite plenty of cases where men had founded brilliant subsequent careers on the savings of their space-service days. That was all right for the men who had saved, and had not been obsessively interested in the fact that one four-legged animal can run faster than another. But this was not even an enterprising way to have lost one's money, so when it came to Duncan's time to leave crew work they made him no more than a routine offer.

He had never been to Jupiter IV/II, but he knew just what it would be like — something that was second moon to Callisto; itself fourth moon, in order of discovery, to Jupiter; would inevitably be one of the grimmer kinds of cosmic pebble. They offered no alternative, so he signed up at the usual terms: £5,000 a year for five years, all found, plus five months waiting time on half-pay before he could get there, plus six months afterwards, also on half-pay, during 'readjustment to gravity'.

Well — it meant the next six years taken care of; five of them without expenses, and a nice little sum at the end.

The splinter in the mouthful was: could you get through five years of isolation without cracking up? Even when the psychologist had okayed you, you couldn't be sure. Some could: others went to pieces in a few months, and had to be taken off, gibbering. If you got through two years, they said, you'd be okay for five. But the only way to find out about the two was to try...

"What about my putting in the waiting time on Mars? I could live cheaper there," Duncan suggested.

They had consulted planetary tables and sailing schedules, and discovered that it would come cheaper for them, too. They had declined to split the difference on the saving thus made, but they had booked him a passage for the following week, and arranged for him to draw, on credit, from the Company's agent there.

The Martian colony in and around Port Clarke is rich in ex-space-men who find it more comfortable to spend their rear-guard years in the lesser gravity, boisterous morality and greater economy obtaining there. They are great advisers. Duncan listened, but discarded most of it. Such methods of occupying one-self to preserve sanity as learning the Bible or the works of Shakespeare by heart, or copying out three pages of the Encyclopaedia every day, or building model space-ships in bottles, struck him not only as tedious, but probably of doubtful efficacy, as well. The only one which he had felt to show sound practical advantages was that which had led him to picking Lellie to share his exile, and he still fancied it was a sound one, in spite of its letting him in for £2,360.

He was well enough aware of the general opinion about it to refrain from adding a sharp retort to Wishart. Instead, he conceded:

"Maybe it'd not do to take *areal* woman to a place like that. But a Mart's kind of different..."

"Even a Mart—" Wishart began, but he was cut short by finding himself drifting slowly across the room as the arrester tubes began to fire.

Conversation ceased as everybody turned to on the job of securing all loose objects.

Jupiter IV/II was, by definition, a sub-moon, and probably a captured asteroid. The surface was not cratered, like Luna's: it was simply a waste of jagged, riven rocks. The satellite as a whole had the form

of an irregular ovoid; it was a bleak, cheerless lump of stone splintered off some vanished planet, with nothing whatever to commend it but its situation.

There have to be way-load stations. It would be hopelessly uneconomical to build big ships capable of landing on the major planets. A few of the older and smaller ships were indeed built on Earth, and so had to be launched from there, but the very first large, moon-assembled ship established a new practice. Ships became truly space-ships and were no longer built to stand the strains of high gravitational pull. They began to make their voyages, carrying fuel, stores, freight and changes of personnel, exclusively between satellites. Newer types do not put in even at Luna, but use the artificial satellite, Pseudos, exclusively as their Earth terminus.

Freight between the way-loads and their primaries is customarily consigned in powered cylinders known as crates; passengers are ferried back and forth in small rocket-ships. Stations such as Pseudos, or Deimos, the main way-load for Mars, handle enough work to keep a crew busy, but in the outlying, little-developed posts one man who is part-handler, part-watchman is enough. Ships visited them infrequently. On Jupiter IV/II one might, according to Duncan's information, expect an average of one every eight or nine months (Earth).

The ship continued to slow, coming in on a spiral, adjusting her speed to that of the satellite. The gyros started up to give stability. The small, jagged world grew until it overflowed the watch-screens. The ship was manoeuvred into a close orbit. Miles of featureless, formidable rocks slid monotonously beneath her.

The station site came sliding on to the screen from the left; a roughly levelled area of a few acres; the first and only sign of order in the stony chaos. At the far end was a pair of hemispherical huts, one much larger than the other. At the near end, a few cylindrical crates were lined up beside a launching ramp hewn from the rock. Down each side of the area stood rows of canvas bins, some stuffed full of a conical shape; others slack, empty or half-empty. A huge parabolic mirror was perched on a crag behind the station, looking like a monstrous, formalized flower. In the whole scene there was only one sign of movement — a small, space-suited figure prancing madly about on a metal apron in front of the larger dome, waving its arms in a wild welcome.

Duncan left the screen, and went to the cabin. He found Lellie fighting off a large case which, under the influence of deceleration, seemed determined to pin her against the wall. He shoved the case aside, and pulled her out.

“We're there,” he told her. “Put on your space-suit.”

Her round eyes ceased to pay attention to the case, and turned towards him. There was no telling from them how she felt, what she thought. She said, simply :

“Thpace-thuit. Yith — okay.”

Standing in the airlock of the dome, the outgoing Superintendent paid more attention to Lellie than to the pressure-dial. He knew from experience exactly how long equalizing took, and opened his face-plate without even a glance at the pointer.

“Wish I'd had the sense to bring one,” he observed. “Could have been mighty useful on the chores, too.”

He opened the inner door, and led through.



“Here it is — and welcome to it,” he said.

The main living-room was oddly shaped by reason of the dome's archi-tec-ture, but it was spacious. It was also ex-ceed-ingly, sordidly untidy.

“Meant to clean it up — never got around to it, some way,” he added. He looked at Lellie. There was no visible sign of what she thought of the place. “Never can tell with Marts,” he said uneasily. “They kind of non-register.”

Duncan agreed: “I’ve figured this one looked aston-ished at being born, and never got over it.”

The other man went on looking at Lellie. His eyes strayed from her to a gallery of pinned-up terres-trial beauties, and back again.

“Sort of funny shape Marts are,” he said, musingly.

“This one's reckoned a good enough looker where she comes from,” Duncan told him, a trifle shortly.

“Sure. No offence, Bud. I guess they'll all seem a funny shape to me after this spell.” He changed the subject. “I'd better show you the ropes around here.”

Duncan signed to Lellie to open her faceplate so that she could hear him, and then told her to get out of her suit.

The dome was the usual type: double-floored, double-walled, with an insulated and eva-cuated space between the two; con-struc-ted as a unit, and held down by metal bars let into the rock. In the living-quarters there were three more size-able rooms, able to cope with increased personnel if trade should expand.

“The rest,” the out-going man explained, “is the regular station stores, mostly food, air cylin-ders, spares of one kind and another, and water — you'll need to watch her on water; most women seem to think it grows natu-rally in pipes.”

Duncan shook his head.

“Not Marts. Living in deserts gives 'em a natural respect for water.”

The other picked up a clip of store-sheets.

“We'll check and sign these later. It's a nice soft job here. Only freight now is rare metalli-ferous earth. Callisto's not been opened up a lot yet. Hand-ling's easy. They tell you when a crate's on the way: you switch on the radio beacon to bring it in. On dispatch you can't go wrong if you follow the tables.” He looked around the room. “All home com-forts. You read? Plenty of books.” He waved a hand at the packed rows which covered half the inner partition wall. Duncan said he'd never been much of a reader. “Well, it helps,” said the other. “Find pretty well anything that's known in that lot. Records there. Fond of music?”

Duncan said he liked a good tune.

“H'm. Better try the other stuff. Tunes get to squir-rel-ling inside your head. Play chess?” He pointed to a board, with men pegged into it.

Duncan shook his head.

“Pity. There's a fellow over on Callisto plays a pretty hot game. He'll be disapointed not to finish this one. Still, if I was fixed up the way you are, maybe I'd not have been inter-es-ted in chess.” His eyes strayed to Lellie again. “What do you reckon she's going to do here, over and above cook-ing and amu-sing you?” he asked.

It was not a question that had occurred to Duncan, but he shrugged.

“Oh, she'll be okay, I guess. There's a natural dumbness about Marts — they'll sit for hours on end, doing damn all. It's a gift they got.”

“Well, it should come in handy here,” said the other.

The regular ship's-call work went on. Cases were unloaded, the metalli-ferous earths hosed from the bins into the holds. A small ferry-rocket came up from Callisto carry-ing a couple of time-expired pros-pec-tors, and left again with their two replace-ments. The ship's engineers checked over the station's machinery, made re-new-als, topped up the

If water tanks, charged the spent air cyl-inders, tested, tink-t ered and tested again before giving their final okay.

Duncan stood outside on the metal apron where not long ago his pre-deces-sor had per-formed his fan-tas-tic dance of wel-come, to watch the ship take off. She rose straight up, with her jets push-ing her gently. The curve of her hull became an elon-gated crescent shining against the black sky. The maul driving jets started to gush white flame edged with pink. Quickly she picked up speed. Before long she had dwindled to a speck which sank behind the ragged sky-line.

Quite suddenly Duncan felt as if he, too, had dwindled. He had become a speck upon a barren mass of rock which was itself a speck in the immen-sity. The indif-ferent sky about him had no scale. It was an utterly black void where-in his mother-sun and a myriad more suns flared perpe-tually, without reason or purpose.

The rocks of the satellite itself, rising up in their harsh crests and ridges, were without scale, too. He could not tell which were near or far away; he could not, in the jumble of hard-lit planes and inky shadows, even make out their true form. There was nothing like them to be seen on Earth, or on Mars. Their unweathered edges were sharp as blades: they had been just as sharp as that for millions upon millions of years, and would be for as long as the satellite should last.

The un-changing millions of years seemed to stretch out before and behind him. It was not only him-self, it was all life that was a speck, a briefly tran-si-tory acci-dent, utterly un-im-por-tant to the uni-verse. It was a queer little mote dancing for its chance mo-moment in the light of the eternal suns. Reality was just globes of fire and balls of stone rolling on, sense-lessly rolling along through empti-ness, through time un-imagin-able, for ever, and ever, and ever...

Within his heated suit, Duncan shivered a little. Never before had he been so alone; never so much aware of the vast, callous, futile lone-li-ness of space. Looking out into the black-ness, with light that had left a star a million years ago shining into his eyes, he wondered.

“*Why?*” he asked himself. “What the heck's it all about, anyway?”

The sound of his own un-answer-able question broke up the mood. He shook his head to clear, it of specu-lative non-sense. He turned his back on the uni-verse, reducing it again to its proper status as a back-ground for life in general and human life in parti-cular, and stepped into the airlock.

The job was, as his prede-cessor had told him, soft. Duncan made his radio contacts with Callisto at pre-arranged times. Usually it was little more than a formal check on one another's continued existence, with perhaps an exchange of comment on the radio news. Only occasionally did they announce a dispatch and tell him when to switch on his beacon. Then, in due course, the cylinder-crate would make its appearance, and float slowly down. It was quite a simple matter to couple it up to a bin to transfer the load.

The satellite's day was too short for con-ve-nience, and its night, lit by Callisto, and some-times by Jupiter as well, almost as bright; so they dis-regar-ded it, and lived by the calen-dar-clock which kept Earth time on the Green-wich Meri-dian setting. At first much of the time had been occu-pied in dis-posing of the freight that the ship had left. Some of it into the main dome —neces-sities for them-selves, and other items that would store better where there was warmth and air. Some into the small, air-less, unheated dome. The greater part to be stowed and padded care-fully into cylinders and launched off to the Callisto base. But once that work had been cleared, the job was cer-tainly soft, too soft...

Duncan drew up a programme. At regular inter-vals he would inspect this and that, he would waft him-self up to the crag and check on the sun-motor there, et cetera. But keeping to an un-neces-sary programme requires reso-lution. Sun-motors, for instance, are very neces-sarily built to run for long spells with-out atten-tion. The only action one could take if it should stop would be to call on Callisto for a ferry-rocket to come and take them off until a ship should call to repair it. A break-down there, the Company had explained very clearly, was the only thing that would justify him in leaving his station, with the stores of precious earth, un-manned (and it was also con-veyed that to contrive a break-down for the sake of a change was unlikely to prove worth while). One way and another, the programme did not last long.

There were times when Duncan found himself wonder-ing whether the bringing of Lellie had been such a good idea after all. On the purely prac-tical side, he'd not have cooked as well as she did, and probably have pigged it quite as badly as his pre-deces-sor had, but if she had not been there, the necessity of looking after him-self would have given him some occu-pation. And even from the angle of company —well, she was that, of a sort, but she was alien, queer; kind of like a half-robot, and dumb at that; certainly no fun. There were, indeed, times — in-creas-ingly freq-uent times, when the very look of her irri-tated him intensely; so did the way she moved,*and* her gestures,*and* her silly pidgin-talk when she talked,*and* her self-contained silence when she didn't,*and* her with-draw-ness,*and* all her dif-ferent-ness, *and* the fact that he would have been £2,360 better off without her ... Nor did she make a serious attempt to remedy her short-comings, even where she had the means. Her face, for instance. You'd think any girl would try to make her best of that — but did she, hell! There was that left eye-brow again: made her look like a sozzled clown, but a lot she cared...

“For heaven's sake,” he told her once more, “put the cock-eyed thing straight. Don't you know how to fix 'emyet ! And you've got your colour on wrong, too. Look at that picture — now look at your-self in the mirror: a great daub of red all in the wrong place. And your hair, too: getting all like sea-weed again. You've got the things to wave it, then for crysake wave it again, and stop looking like a bloody mermaid. I know you can't help being a damn Mart, but you can at least*try* to look like a real woman.”

Lellie looked at the coloured picture, and then com-pared her reflec-tion with it, criti-cally.

“Yith — okay,” she said, with an equable detachment.

Duncan snorted.

“And that's another thing. Bloody baby-talk! It's not ‘yith’, it's ‘yes’. Y-E-S, yes. So say ‘yes’.”

“Yith” said Lellie, obligingly.

“Oh, for — Can't you *hear* the difference? S-s-s, not th-th-th. Ye-sss.”

“Yith,” she said.

“No. Put your tongue farther back like this —”

The lesson went on for some time. Finally he grew angry.

“Just making a monkey out of me, huh! You'd better be careful, my girl. Now, say ‘yes’.”

She hesitated, looking at his wrathful face.

“Go on, say it.”

“Y-yeth,” she said, nervously.

His hand slapped across her face harder than he had intended. The jolt broke her magnetic contact with the floor, and sent her sailing across the room in a spin of arms and legs. She struck the opposite wall, and rebounded to float helplessly, out of reach of any hold. He strode after her, turned her right up, and set her on her feet. His left hand clutched her overall in a bunch, just below her throat, his right was raised.

“Again?” he told her.

Her eyes looked helplessly this way and that. He shook her. She tried. At the sixth attempt she managed: “Yeths.”

He accepted that for the time being.

“You *can* do it, you see — when you try. What you need, my girl, is a bit of firm handling.”

He let her go. She tottered across the room, holding her hands to her bruised face.

A number of times while the weeks drew out so slowly into months Duncan found himself wondering whether he was going to get through. He spun out what work there was as much as he could, but it left still too much time hanging heavy on his hands.

A middle-aged man who has read nothing longer than an occasional magazine article does not take to books. He tired very quickly, as his predecessor had prophesied, of the popular records, and could make nothing of the others. He taught himself the moves in chess from a book, and instructed Lellie in them, intending after a little practice with her to challenge the man on Callisto. Lellie, however, managed to win with such consistency that he had to decide that he had not the right kind of mind for the

game. Instead, he taught her a kind of double solitaire, but that didn't last long, either; the cards seemed always to run for Lellie.

Occasionally there was some news and enter-tain-ment to be had from the radio, but with Earth some-where round the other side of the sun just then, Mars screened off half the time by Callisto, and the rota-tion of the satel-lite itself, recep-tion was either im-pos-sible, or badly broken up.

So mostly he sat and fretted, hating the satellite, angry with himself and irritated by Leslie.

Just the phleg-matic way she went on with her tasks irri-tated him. It seemed an injus-tice that she could 'take it all better than he could simply *because* she was a dumb Mart. When his ill-temper became vocal, the look of her as she listened exas-pera-ted him still more.

"For crysake," he told her one time, "can't you make that silly face of yours *mean* some-thing? Can't you laugh, or cry, or get mad, or some-thing? It's enough to drive a guy nuts going on looking at a face that's fixed perma-nent like it was a doll just heard its first dirty story. I know you can't help being dumb, but for heaven's sake crack it up a bit, get some expres-sion into it."

She went on looking at him with-out a shadow of a change.

"Go on, you heard me! Smile, damn you, smile!"

Her mouth twitched very slightly.

"Call that a smile! Now, there's a smile!" He pointed to a pin-up with her head split pretty much in half by a smile like a piano key-board. "Like that! Like this!" He grinned widely.

"No," she said. "My face can't wriggle like Earth faces."

"Wriggle!" he said, incensed. "Wriggle, you call it!" He freed him-self from the chair's spring-cover, and came towards her. She backed away until she fetched up against the wall. "I'll make yours wriggle, my girl. Go on, now — smile!" He lifted his hand.

Lellie put her hands up to her face.

"No!" she protested. "No — no — no!"

It was on the very day that Duncan marked off the eighth com-pleted month that Callisto relayed news of a ship on the way. A couple of days later he was able to make contact with her him-self, and con-firm her arrival in about a week. He felt as if he had been given several stiff drinks. There were the prep-ara-tions to make, stores to check, defi-cien-cies to note, a string of nil-nil-nil entries to be made in the log to bring it up to date. He bustled around as he got on with it. He even hummed to him-self as he worked, and ceased to be annoyed with Lellie. The effect upon her of the news was imper-cep-tible — but then, what would you expect...?

Sharp on her estimated time the ship hung above them, growing slowly larger as her upper jets pressed her down.

The moment she was berthed Duncan went aboard, with the feel-ing that every-thing in sight was an old friend. The Captain received him warmly, and brought out the drinks. It was all routine — even Duncan's babbling and slightly ine-briated manner was the regular thing in the circum-stances. The only depar-ature

from pattern came when the Captain introduced a man beside him, and explained him.

“We've brought a surprise for you, Superintendent. This is Doctor Whint. He'll be sharing your exile for a bit.”

Duncan shook hands. “Doctor . . .?” he said, surprisedly.

“Not medicine — science,” Alan Whint told him. “The Company's pushed me out here to do a geological survey — if geo isn't the wrong word to use. About a year. Hope you don't mind.”

Duncan said conventionally that he'd be glad of the company, and left it at that for the moment. Later, he took him over to the dome. Alan Whint was surprised to find Lellie there; clearly nobody had told him about her. He interrupted Duncan's explanations to say:

“Won't you introduce me to your wife?”

Duncan did so, without grace. He resented the re-proving tone in the man's voice; nor did he care for the way he greeted Lellie just as if she were an Earth woman. He was also aware that he had noticed the bruise on her cheek that the colour did not altogether cover. In his mind he classified Alan Whint as one of the smooth, snooty type, and hoped that there was not going to be trouble with him.

It could be, indeed, it was, a matter of opinion who made the trouble when it boiled up some three months later. There had already been several occasions when it had lurked uneasily near. Very likely it would have come into the open long before had Whint's work not taken him out of the dome so much. The moment of touch-off came when Lellie lifted her eyes from the book she was reading to ask:

“What does ‘female emancipation’ mean?”

Alan started to explain. He was only half-way through the first sentence when Duncan broke in:

“Listen — who told you to go putting ideas into her head?”

Alan shrugged his shoulders slightly, and looked at him.

“That's a damn silly question,” he said. “And, any-way, why shouldn't she have ideas? Why shouldn't any-one?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I never understand you guys who apparently can't say what you mean. Try again.”

“All right then. What I mean is this: you come here with your ritzy ways and your snazzy talk, and right from the start you start shoving your nose into things that aren't your business. You begin right off by treating her as if she was some toney dame back home.”

“I hoped so. I'm glad you noticed it.”

“And do you think I didn't see why?”

“I'm quite sure you didn't. You've such a well-grooved mind. You think, in your simple way, that I'm out to get your girl, and you resent that with all the weight of two thousand, three hundred and sixty pounds.

But you're wrong: I'm not."

Duncan was momentarily thrown off his line, then:

"My*wife*," he corrected. "She may be only a dumb Mart, but she's legally my wife: and what/ say goes."

"Yes, Lellie is a Mart, as you call it; she may even be your wife, for all I know to the contrary; but dumb, she certainly is not. For one example, look at the speed with which she's learned to read — once some-one took the trouble to show her how. I don't think you'd show up any too bright your-self in a language where you only knew a few words, and which you couldn't read."

"It was none of your business to teach her. She didn't need to read. She was all right the way she was."

"The voice of the slaver down the ages. Well, if I've done noth-ing else, I've cracked up your igno-rance racket there."

"And why? — So she'll think you're a great guy. The same reason you talk all toney and smarmy to her. So you'll get her think-ing you're a better man than I am."

"I talk to her the way I'd talk to any woman any-where — only more simply since she's not had the chance of an edu-ca-tion. If she does think I'm a better man, then I agree with her. I'd be sorry if I couldn't."

"I'll show you who's the better man —" Duncan began.

"You don't need to. I knew when I came here that you'd be a waster, or you'd not be on this job — and it didn't take long for me to find out that you were a goddam bully, too. Do you suppose I've not noticed the bruises? Do you think I've enjoyed having to listen to you bawling out a girl whom you've deli-be-rat-ely kept ignor-ant and defence-less when she's poten-tially ten times the sense you have? Having to watch *aclod-kopf* like you lord-ing it over your 'dumb Mart'? You emetic!"

In the heat of the moment, Duncan could not quite remember what an emetic was, but any-where else the man would not have got that far before he had waded in to break him up. Yet, even through his anger, twenty years of space expe-rience held — as little more than a boy he had learnt the ludi-crous futi-lity of weight-less scrap-ping, and that it was the angry man who always made the bigger fool of him-self.

Both of them simmered, but held in. Some-how the occa-sion was patched up and smoothed over, and for a time things went on much as before.

Alan continued to make his expeditions in the small craft which he had brought with him. He examined and explored other parts of the satellite, returning with specimen pieces of rock which he tested, and arranged, carefully labelled, in cases. In his off times he occupied himself, as before, in teaching Lellie.

That he did it largely for his own occu-pation as well as from a feeling that it should be done, Duncan did not alto-gether deny; but he was equally sure that in conti-nued close asso-cia-tion one thing leads to another, sooner or later. So far, there had been nothing between them that he could put his finger on — but Alan's term had still some nine months to go, even if he were relieved to time. Lellie was already hero-wor-ship-ping. And he was spoil-ing her more every day by this fool busi-ness of treat-ing her as if she were an Earth woman. One day they'd come alive to it — and the next step would be that they

would see him as an obstacle that would be better removed. Prevention being better than cure, the sensible course was to see that the situation should never develop. There need not be any fuss about it...

There was not.

One day Alan Whint took off on a routine flight to prospect some-where on the other side of the satel-lite. He simply never came back. That was all.

There was no telling what Lellie thought about it; but some-thing seemed to happen to her.

For several days she spent almost all her time stand-ing by the main window of the living-room, looking out into the black-ness at the flaring pin-points of light. It was not that she was waiting or hoping for Alan's return — she knew as well as Duncan him-self that when thirty-six hours had gone by there was no chance of that. She said nothing. Her expression main-tained its exas-pera-ting look of slight sur-prise, un-changed. Only in her eyes was there any percep-tible differ-ence: they looked a little less live, as if she had with-drawn herself farther behind them.

Duncan could not tell whether she knew or guessed any-thing. And there seemed to be no way of finding out with-out planting the idea in her mind —*if* it were not already there. He was, with-out admit-ting it too fully to him-self, nervous of her — too nervous to turn on her roundly for the time she spent vacantly mooning out of the window. He had an uncom-for-table aware-ness of how many ways there were for even a dim-wit to contrive a fatal acci-dent in such a place. As a pre-cau-tion he took to fitting new air-bottles to his suit every time he went out, and check-ing that they were at full pres-sure. He also took to placing a piece of rock so that the outer door of the air-lock could not close behind him. He made a point of notic-ing that his food and hers came straight out of the same pot, and watched her closely as she worked. He still could not decide whether she knew, or suspected ... After they were sure that he was gone, she never once men-tioned Alan's name...

The mood stayed on her for per-haps a week. Then it changed abruptly. She paid no more atten-tion to the black-ness out-side. Instead, she began to read, vora-ciously and indis-crimi-nate-ly.

Duncan found it hard to under-stand her absorp-tion in the books, nor did he like it, but he deci-ded for the moment not to inter-fere. It did, at least, have the advan-tage of keeping her mind off other things.

Gradually he began to feel easier. The crisis was over. Either she had not guessed, or, if she had, she had decided to do nothing about it. Her addic-tion to books, how-ever, did not abate. In spite of several remin-ders by Duncan that it was for*company* that he had laid out the not in-con-sider-able sum of £2,360, she con-tinued, as if deter-mined to work her way through the station's library.

By degrees the affair retreated into the back-ground. When the next ship came Duncan watched her anxiously in case she had been biding her time to hand on her sus-picions to the crew. It turned out, how-ever, to be un-neces-sary. She showed no ten-den-cy to refer to the matter, and when the ship pulled out, taking the oppor-tunity with it, he was re-lievedly able to tell him-self that he had really been right all along — she was just a dumb Mart: she had simply for-gotten the Alan Whint inci-dent, as a child might.

And yet, as the months of his term ticked steadily away, he found that he had, bit by bit, to revise that esti-mate of dumb-ness. She was learn-ing from books things that he did not know him-self. It even had some advan-tages, though it put him in a posi-tion he did not care for — when she asked, as she some-times did now, for expla-nations, he found it un-pleasant to be stumped by a Mart. Having the



practical man's suspicion of book-acquired knowledge, he felt it necessary to explain to her how much of the stuff in the book was a lot of non-sense, how they never really came to grips with the problems of life as he had lived it. He cited instances from his own affairs, gave examples from his experience, in fact, he found himself teaching her.

She learnt quickly, too; the practical as well as the book stuff. Of necessity he had to revise his opinion of Marts slightly more — it wasn't that they were altogether dumb as he had thought, just that they were normally too dumb to start using the brains they had. Once started, Lellie was a regular vacuum-cleaner for knowledge of all sorts: it didn't seem long before she knew as much about the way-load station as he did himself. Teaching her was not at all what he had intended, but it did provide an occupation much to be preferred to the boredom of the early days. Besides, it had occurred to him that she was an appreciating asset...

Funny thing, that. He had never before thought of education as anything but a waste of time, but now it seriously began to look as if, when he got her back to Mars, he might recover quite a bit more of the £2,360 than he had expected. Maybe she'd make quite a useful secretary to someone ... He started to instruct her in elementary book-keeping and finance — in so far as he knew anything about it...

The months of service kept on piling up; going a very great deal faster now. During the later stretch, when one had acquired confidence in his ability to get through without cracking up, there was a comfortable feeling about sitting quietly out there with the knowledge of the money gradually piling up at home.

A new find opened up on Callisto, bringing a slight increase in deliveries to the satellite. Otherwise, the routine continued unchanged. The infrequent ships called in, loaded up and went again. And then, surprisingly soon, it was possible for Duncan to say to himself: "Next ship but one, and I'll be through!" Even more surprisingly soon there came the day when he stood on the metal apron outside the dome, watching a ship lifting herself off on her under-jets and dwindling upwards into the black sky, and was able to tell himself: "That's the last time I'll see that! When the next ship lifts off this dump, I'll be aboard her, and then — boy, oh boy...!"

He stood watching her, one bright spark among the others, until the turn of the satellite carried her below his horizon. Then he turned back to the air-lock — and found the door shut...

Once he had decided that there was going to be no repercussion from the Alan Whint affair he had let his habit of wedging it open with a piece of rock lapse. Whenever he emerged to do a job he left it ajar, and it stayed that way until he came back. There was no wind, or anything else on the satellite to move it. He laid hold of the latch-lever irritably, and pushed. It did not move.

Duncan swore at it for sticking. He walked to the edge of the metal apron, and then jettied himself a little round the side of the dome so that he could see in at the window. Lellie was sitting in a chair with the spring-cover fixed across it, apparently lost in thought. The inner door of the air-lock was standing open, so of course the outer could not be moved. As well as the safety-locking device, there was all the dome's air pressure to hold it shut.

Forgetful for the moment, Duncan rapped on the thick glass of the double window to attract her attention; she could not have heard a sound through there, it must have been the movement that caught her eye and caused her to look up. She turned her head, and gazed at him, without moving. Duncan stared back at her. Her hair was still waved, but the eyebrows, the colour, all the other touches that he had insisted upon to make her look as much like an Earth woman as possible, were gone. Her eyes looked back at him, set hard as stones in that fixed expression of mild astonishment.

Sudden comprehension struck Duncan like a physical shock. For some seconds everything seemed to stop.

He tried to pretend to both of them that he had not understood. He made gestures to her to close the inner door of the air-lock. She went on staring back at him, without moving. Then he noticed the book she was holding in her hand, and recognized it. It was not one of the books which the Company had supplied for the station's library. It was a book of verse, bound in blue. It had once belonged to Alan Whint...

Panic suddenly jumped out at Duncan. He looked down at the row of small dials across his chest, and then sighed with relief. She had not tampered with his air-supply: there was pressure there enough for thirty hours or so. The sweat that had started out on his brow grew cooler as he regained control of himself. A touch on the jet sent him floating back to the metal apron where he could anchor his magnetic boots, and think it over.

What a bitch! Letting him think all this time that she had forgotten all about it. Nursing it up for him. Letting him work out his time while she planned. Waiting until he was on the very last stretch before she tried her game on. Some minutes passed before his mixed anger and panic settled down and allowed him to think.

Thirty hours! Time to do quite a lot. And even if he did not succeed in getting back into the dome in twenty or so of them, there would still be the last, desperate resort of shooting himself off to Callisto in one of the cylinder-crates.

Even if Lellie were to spill over later about the Whint business what of it? He was sure enough that she did not know *how* it had been done. It would only be the word of a Mart against his own. Very likely they'd put her down as space-crazed.

... All the same, some of the mud might stick; it would be better to settle with her here and now — besides, the cylinder idea was risky; only to be considered in the last extremity. There were other ways to be tried first.

Duncan reflected a few minutes longer, then he jettied himself over to the smaller dome. In there, he threw out the switches on the lines which brought power down from the main batteries charged by the sun-motor. He sat down to wait for a bit. The insulated dome would take some time to lose all its heat, but not very long for a drop in the temperature to become perceptible, and visible on the thermometers, once the heat was off. The small capacity, low voltage batteries that were in the place wouldn't be much good to her, even if she did think of lining them up.

He waited an hour, while the far-away sun set, and the arc of Callisto began to show over the horizon. Then he went back to the dome's window to observe results. He arrived just in time to see Lellie fastening herself into her space-suit by the light of a couple of emergency lamps.

He swore. A simple freezing out process wasn't going to work, then. Not only would the heated suit protect her, but her air supply would last longer than his — and there were plenty of spare bottles in there even if the free air in the dome should freeze solid.

He waited until she had put on the helmet, and then switched on the radio in his own. He saw her pause at the sound of his voice, but she did not reply. Presently she deliberately switched off her receiver. He did not; he kept his open to be ready for the moment when she should come to her senses.

Duncan returned to the apron, and reconsidered. It had been his intention to force his way into the dome without damaging it, if he could. But if she wasn't to be frozen out, that looked difficult. She had the advantage of him in air—and though it was true that in her space-suit she could neither eat nor drink, the same, unfortunately, was true for him. The only way seemed to be to tackle the dome itself.

Reluctantly, he went back to the small dome again, and connected up the electrical cutter. Its cable looped behind him as he jetted across to the main dome once more. Beside the curving metal wall, he paused to think out the job—and the consequences. Once he was through the outer shell there would be a space; then the insulating material—that was okay, it would melt away like butter, and without oxygen it could not catch fire. The more awkward part was going to come with the inner metal skin. It would be wisest to start with a few small cuts to let the air-pressure down—and stand clear of it: if it were all to come out with a whoosh he would stand a good chance in his weightless state of being blown a considerable distance by it. And what would she do? Well, she'd very likely try covering up the holes as he made them—a bit awkward if she had the sense to use asbestos packing: it'd have to be the whoosh then ... Both shells could be welded up again before he re-aerated the place from cylinders ... The small loss of insulating material wouldn't matter... Okay, better get down to it, then...

He made his connections, and contrived to anchor himself enough to give some purchase. He brought the cutter up, and pressed the trigger-switch. He pressed again, and then swore, remembering that he had shut off the power.

He pulled himself back along the cable, and pushed the switches in again. Light from the dome's windows suddenly illuminated the rocks. He wondered if the restoration of power would let Lellie know what he was doing. What if it did? She'd know soon enough, anyway.

He settled himself down beside the dome once more. This time the cutter worked. It took only a few minutes to slice out a rough, two-foot-circle. He pulled the piece out of the way, and inspected the opening. Then, as he levelled the cutter again, there came a click in his receiver: Lellie's voice spoke in his ear:

“Better not try to break in. I'm ready for that.”

He hesitated, checking himself with his finger on the switch, wondering what counter-move she could have thought up. The threat in her voice made him uneasy. He decided to go round to the window, and see what her game was, if she had one.

She was standing by the table, still dressed in her space-suit, fiddling with some apparatus she had set up there. For a moment or two he did not grasp the purpose of it.

There was a plastic food-bag, half-inflated, and attached in some way to the table top. She was adjusting a melt plate over it to a small clearance. There was a wire, scotch-taped to the upper side of the bag. Duncan's eye ran back along the wire to a battery, a coil and on to a detonator attached to a bundle of half a dozen blasting-sticks...

He was uncomfortably enlightened. It was very simple—ought to be perfectly effective. If the air-pressure in the room should fall, the bag would expand; the wire would make contact with the plate: up would go the dome...

Lellie finished her adjustment, and connected the second wire to the battery. She turned to look at him through the window. It was infuriatingly difficult to believe that behind that silly surprise frozen on her

face she could be properly aware what she was doing.

Duncan tried to speak to her, but she had switched off, and made no attempt to switch on again. She simply stood looking steadily back at him as he blustered and raged. After some minutes she moved across to a chair, fastened the spring-cover across herself and sat waiting.-

“All right then,” Duncan shouted inside his helmet. “But you'll go up with it, damn you!” Which was, of course, non-sense since he had no intention whatever of destroying either the dome or himself.

He had never learnt to tell what went on behind that silly face — she might be coldly determined, or she might not. If it had been a matter of a switch which she must press to destroy the place he might have risked her nerve failing her. But this way, it would be he who operated the switch, just as soon as he should make a hole to let the air out.

Once more he retreated to anchor himself on the apron. There must be *some* way round, some way of getting into the dome without letting the pressure down ... He thought hard for some minutes, but if there was such a way, he could not find it — besides, there was no guarantee that she'd not set the explosive off herself if she got scared...

No — there was no way that he could think of. It would have to be the cylinder-crate to Callisto.

He looked up at Callisto, hanging huge in the sky now, with Jupiter smaller, but brighter, beyond. It wasn't so much the flight, it was the landing there. Perhaps if he were to cram it with all the padding he could find ... Later on, he could get the Callisto fellows to ferry him back, and they'd find some way to get into the dome, and Lellie would be a mighty sorry girl — *mighty* sorry...

Across the levelling there were three cylinders lined up, charged and ready for use-He didn't mind admitting he was scared of that landing: but, scared or not, if she wouldn't even turn on her radio to listen to him, that would be his only chance. And delay would do nothing for him but narrow the margin of his air-supply.

He made up his mind, and stepped off the metal apron. A touch on the jets sent him floating across the levelling towards the cylinders. Practice made it an easy thing for him to manoeuvre the nearest one on to the ramp. Another glance at Callisto's inclination helped to reassure him; at least he would reach it all right. If their beacon there was not switched on to bring him in, he ought to be able to call them on the communication radio in his suit when he got closer.

There was not a lot of padding in the cylinder. He fetched more from the others, and packed the stuff in. It was while he paused to figure out a way of triggering the thing off with himself inside, that he realized he was beginning to feel cold. As he turned the knob up a notch, he glanced down at the meter on his chest — in an instant he knew ... She had known that he would fit fresh air-bottles and test them; so it had been the battery, or more likely, the circuit, she had tampered with. The voltage was down to a point where the needle barely kicked. The suit must have been losing heat for some time already.

He knew that he would not be able to last long — perhaps not more than a few minutes. After its first stab, the fear abruptly left him, giving way to an impotent fury. She'd tricked him out of his last chance, but, by God, he could make sure she didn't get away with it. He'd be going, but just one small hole in the dome, and he'd not be going alone...

The cold was creeping into him, it seemed to come lapping at him icily through the suit. He pressed the jet control, and sent himself scudding back towards the dome. The cold was gnawing in at him. His feet

and fingers were going first. Only by an immense effort was he able to operate the jet which stopped him by the side of the dome. But it needed one more effort, for he hung there, a yard or so above the ground. The cutter lay where he had left it, a few feet beyond his reach. He struggled desperately to press the control that would let him down to it, but his fingers would no longer move. He wept and gasped at the attempt to make them work, and with the anguish of the cold creeping up his arms. Of a sudden, there was an agonizing, searing pain in his chest. It made him cry out. He gasped — and the unheated air rushed into his lungs, and froze them...

In the dome's living-room Lellie stood waiting. She had seen the space-suited figure come sweeping across the levelling at an abnormal speed. She understood what it meant. Her explosive device was already disconnected; now she stood alert, with a thick rubber mat in her hand, ready to clap it over any hole that might appear. She waited one minute, two minutes ... When five minutes had passed she went to the window. By putting her face close to the pane and looking sideways she was able to see the whole of one space-suited leg and part of another. They hung there horizontally, a few feet off the ground. She watched them for several minutes. Their gradual downward drift was barely perceptible.

She left the window, and pushed the mat out of her hand so that it floated away across the room. For a moment or two she stood thinking. Then she went to the bookshelves and pulled out the last volume of the encyclopaedia. She turned the pages, and satisfied herself on the exact status and claims which are connoted by the word 'widow'.

She found a pad of paper and a pencil. For a minute she hesitated, trying to remember the method she had been taught, then she started to write down figures, and became absorbed in them. At last she lifted her head, and contemplated the result: £5,000 per annum for five years, at 6 per cent compound interest, worked out at a nice little sum —quite a small fortune for a Martian.

But then she hesitated again. Very likely a face that was not set for ever in a mould of slightly surprised innocence would have frowned a little at that point, because, of course, there was a deduction that had to be made — a matter of £2,360.

## **BOOK INFORMATION**

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