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## Poor Henry

by E. C. Tubb

*One of the annoying things about Mars was that no intelligent life lived there—except a few Earth colonists intent upon high pay. Henry was one of the fortunate few who managed to have an ambitious wife with him—not that it did him much good.*

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition. [Notes](#)

The sand car stopped, the motor whining down into silence, and Henry swore a little as he operated the unresponsive controls.

“Damn it! What’s wrong now?”

“Please!” Lucy wasn’t a prude but she didn’t want Henry to forget his manners either. “I’m sure that swearing at it won’t do any good.”

“Sorry, darling.” Henry did blush, a crimson tide suffusing his face and accentuating his fine, blonde hair. “I’m not used to having a woman around, especially such a beautiful woman as you.”

“Silly.” Lucy smiled at him, secretly pleased with his boyish adoration. “Is that why you married me?”

The answer to that took some time and many gestures and it wasn’t until much later that Henry returned to the problem of the breakdown. Irritably he swung the rheostats and kicked at the pedals. Nothing. The sand car remained a lifeless heap of metal and plastic.

“That mechanic! He told me that this vehicle had been thoroughly checked. Just wait until we get back.”

Lucy nodded. Henry was right, of course, it would serve the man right to be discharged and perhaps fined by the tourist bureau. Personally she had no time for bad servants and she was pleased to see that, in that respect at least, Henry would prove no trouble. But future actions wouldn’t get them back to the Dome. She stared at her husband.

“Can’t you mend it?”

“I don’t know.” He kicked at the pedals. “I’ve driven these things nearly all over the planet but I’ve never bothered to take a mechanic’s course. After all, why should I? I’m a business man, not a grease monkey.”

“That’s right, dear. But couldn’t you twiddle a wire or something?” Lucy looked at the rolling dunes beyond the plastic windows. “We can’t stay here all night.”

Henry nodded, somehow feeling that he was being put to a test and that, unless he repaired the vehicle, he would suffer for it in many ways later on. Lucy was beautiful—at least he thought so—but there was a certain hardness about her mouth and her eyes that would have warned a more experienced man at first sight. Henry hadn’t bothered with first sight or second. He was young, on a planet where women were scarce, and Lucy had been redolent of all the good things of Earth.

He hadn't even stopped to think why, if she was such a bargain, she had found it necessary to travel to Mars in order to find a husband.

Henry was very young.

Slowly he unbolted the engine cover and stared helplessly at the twisting wires and mysterious connections. Cautiously he touched them, jerking back as current stabbed at his fingers. "Damn! At least the batteries are charged, that's something."

"Is it," she said distantly. A smear of dirt had marred the smooth perfection of her dress. "Really, Henry! Can't you be more careful?"

"I'm sorry, darling, but there isn't much room in here." He blushed as he spread more dirt on her stocking. "Sorry."

"If you're going to make the cabin filthy perhaps I'd better wait outside." Lucy stared at the scene beyond the window. "Is it safe?"

"Of course, and if you wait outside it will give me more room in which to work."

"Well then?" Lucy didn't move, but her expression was unmistakable. Henry swallowed, unlatched the door, and stepped out onto the barren plain. Lucy followed him and, for a moment, the two stood motionless as they stared over the eternal sands of Mars.

"I feel funny." Lucy sat down and pressed her hands to her chest. "Giddy and a little sick."

"It's due to the thin air," explained Henry quickly. "You can breath it—just, and then only because of your conditioning. The air inside the Dome and the cars is always kept much higher than outside." He fussed around her as she slowly recovered. "Just sit quietly and don't move. That way you'll use less oxygen and won't feel uncomfortable."

"I've never been outside before." Lucy forced herself to smile. "Why can't I breathe properly?"

"The air here is too thin to support human life. That is, it would be unless you have been conditioned to it. You have, everyone who arrives on Mars has to take the treatment." He gestured vaguely. "Something to do with increased corpuscles in the blood or something, I don't know much about these things, but it works."

"I feel better now." Lucy relaxed on the harsh, gritty sand. "You get back to work, dear. Don't forget that we have an appointment for dinner to-night. It wouldn't do to miss it."

"No, dear."

"Our social calendar is just as important as your business. It isn't just what you can do, you know Henry. It's knowing the right people. The Addams's can help us a lot."

"Yes, dear."

"Well, then?" Lucy looked towards the motionless vehicle. "Hurry and fix it, Henry."

"Yes, dear." He moved away from her side and entered the sand car.

Lucy smiled. Henry was a good boy, rather young but all the more easily controlled. Automatically her hand went to her face, the fingers caressing the skin as she tried to discover whether the scars of the plastic surgery were noticeable. They weren't, but then she paid more than enough for a perfect job and

the beauticians were very efficient.

She sighed as she settled back, staring up at the cloudless sky, so dark as to be almost black. Stars shone up there, tiny points of light still bright despite the shrunken ball of the sun, and, as she looked at them, she tried to decide which was Earth.

Not that it mattered. It was good to be free of care, with a young and handsome husband only too willing to be managed, and with the prospect of an enviable life ahead of her. Mars was still rough, still very much the frontier planet, but already there was a skimming of culture, a small and exclusive circle of the important and wealthy. To Lucy the terms were synonymous.

Something traced a rapid path over one shin, hesitated a moment, then she jerked to a sudden pain. Her scream coincided with the vanishing of a glistening black body, then Henry was at her side, his arms around her, his hands caressing her hair.

“Darling! What’s wrong?”

“Something bit me! Something horrible and black. I saw it!”

“Where?” He stared down at the unbroken skin. “Where is it, dear?”

“I don’t know. Don’t ask such stupid questions.” Anger and fear made her voice harsh and brittle. “I tell you that I saw it.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Did I tell you, Henry. Black and insect-like. It bit my leg.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Don’t keep saying ‘yes dear’ like a fool! Hurry up and mend the car.”

“Yes, dear.” He turned away, hesitated at the door of the vehicle, then looked back. “You know, dear, there isn’t anything on Mars that could hurt you. Are you sure…”

“Yes.” She stepped back as something glistened on the sand. “Look! There’s another of them?”

“Where?” Henry lunged forward his eyes searching the desert. “That?”

“Yes.”

“Why, Lucy, that can’t harm you. It’s just a sand-ant, just like the ants back home. Look.” He spread his fingers on the sand and let the little insect run across them “See? Harmless.”

“It bit me,” she insisted stubbornly. “I felt it.”

“Perhaps it was a sharp grain of sand?” he suggested. “Or nerves? A sensitive girl like you would be bound to feel a little out of place here.” He stepped forward, his intention obvious, but she turned just in time to avoid his hungry arms.

“Have you mended the car yet?”

“Not yet.” He sighed as his arms fell to his sides. “I don’t know what’s the matter with it. The fuses seem intact and I can’t see anything wrong with the wiring. Must be a short somewhere.”

“Does that mean we’re going to be stuck out here all night?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve tripped the emergency radio-call and someone will be coming after us.” He scowled towards the setting sun. “Just wait until I get back! That mechanic!”

“It’s too uncomfortable in the car,” said Lucy. “Can we wait out here?”

“Of course. There are covers in the vehicle and we can build a barrier of sand to shelter us from what wind there is.” Henry smiled. “You know, darling, this is awfully romantic. Just you and me alone together out on the desert... I’m so lucky to have such a beautiful wife.”

“Yes, dear.” She remembered not to wince as he kissed her. Youthful husbands had their advantages but they had their disadvantages too. A more mature man would never dream of trying to make love in the centre of a wilderness. But then a mature man would never have married her.

Later, when Henry had fetched the covers and piled sand into a rough heap against which they rested, she questioned him about hope of rescue.

“They’ll pick up our radio-call back at the Dome and send out for us,” he explained for the tenth time. “We’re quite safe, nothing can harm us, it’s just a matter of time.”

“They should have been here by now,” she said crossly. “Really! The inefficiency is terrible! What the Addams’s will say I simply can’t think. How could you do such a thing?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You should have checked the car before we started. It was a ridiculous thing to do in the first place, all this sand...” She dug her fingers viciously into the reddish grit. “Mars! Why did I ever come here?”

“It was fate,” said Henry simply. “We were fated to meet and fall in love. I do love you, darling. I can’t tell you how much. I...”

“Look,” she said hastily. “There’s some more of those horrible ants.”

Henry grunted, hesitated a moment, then reluctantly stopped to examine where she pointed. The sand, where she had disturbed it, was swarming with little black bodies. Henry laughed.

“They can’t hurt you. Probably they’ve been attracted by the warmth of our bodies. Forget them.”

“I hate insects.” Lucy shuddered and frowned towards the half-hidden ball of the sun. “It’s getting dark. Will they be able to find us at night?”

“Yes, dear,” said Henry wearily. “I keep telling you that they will follow our signal. Now will you please stop worrying.”

“I can’t understand why you couldn’t mend the car. Surely a man should know about such things? It isn’t right that a woman should have to trust herself to a man who is so helpless when it comes to an emergency. I must say, Henry, that I’m a little disappointed in you.”

“Please, Lucy. It wasn’t my fault.”

“That’s what you men always say. Whose fault was it then if not yours? Mine? Am I to blame that we’re stuck out here in this horrible desert?” She sniffed. “I should think that a man would have more consideration for his wife than to blame her when anything went wrong.”

“I’m not blaming you, darling. I...” Henry clutched air as she moved away. “Please, dearest. Don’t let’s quarrel.”

“I’m not quarrelling.”

“Then...”

“No.” Again she moved just in time. “Look! There are some more of those ant things. Bigger ones this time.”

“So there are.” Henry squinted down in the dying light. “That’s odd! I’ve never heard of these before.”

“I thought that Mars was devoid of life.” She sounded accusing as if it was his fault that the books had been proved wrong. “Now it seems that the desert is teeming with insects.”

“Not exactly teeming, dear.” Henry grasped at something and held it before his eyes. “You know, we could have made an important discovery. Look at this fellow! Almost three inches long!”

“Insects can’t grow that big,” Lucy said primly. “I’ve read about them. Something to do with their weight or something.”

“Their mass increases with the cube but their strength only by the square.” Henry nodded. “On Earth the largest ant is just under an inch long. If you double its size it will weigh eight times as much but only have four times the strength. Increase its size three times and it would weigh twenty-seven times as much and have nine times its original strength. That’s why this fellow is so important. Even allowing for reduced gravity it still seems big.”

“Throw it down, Henry. It’s horrible!”

“No, I...” Henry swore and threw the wriggling body away from him. “Damn it! The thing bit me!”

“There! I told you that they bit and you wouldn’t believe me. It serves you right, Henry, for being so stubborn.”

“Yes.” Henry slapped at his leg. “It must have been a big one that bit you.” He brushed at his arm. “Damn them! The things seem to be everywhere.”

“Please!” Lucy moved away from her husband. “Do you have to swear?”

“I...” Henry jumped to his feet and tore something from his neck. “Lucy! Help me! The ants are all over me!”

“I can’t, Henry, and it’s wrong of you to ask me.” Lucy stepped further away from the prancing figure of her husband. “You know that I hate insects. Why don’t you just knock them off?”

“You stupid bitch!” Henry yelled as he thrashed in pain and terror. “Can’t you see that the damn things are attacking me?”

“Henry! How dare you talk to me like that?”

“Lucy! For God’s sake do something! I’m being eaten alive!”

He was too. Attracted by the blood from his bitten finger, drawn no doubt by its moisture content, the big, three-inch insects seemed to pour out of the sand as they swarmed towards him. They crawled up his legs, along his arms, scurried up his back and, wherever they could, they bit through his skin and into

his flesh.

The new supplies of blood only served to attract them the more.

He went insane then. He shrieked and rolled, swore and cursed, begged and pleaded and, when that didn't work, piled invective and insult onto his wife's head. No self-respecting woman could stand such language. No-one, with the slightest claim to breeding and decency, could ever even admit that she knew what the words meant. Lucy had always considered herself to be a lady.

The sand car was a mess with the dust covers removed from the engine and the seats disarranged, but, with the door shut, it did serve to protect her delicate ears from the gutter-language outside. Primly she settled down to wait until Henry should have recovered his senses. She wouldn't forgive him at once, oh no, she would make him suffer first until he fully realised what he had done. Then, after he had been duly humbled, she would permit some of those minor liberties common between married couples.

She smiled as she visualised the future.

It was better this way. Henry was young and the youthful are always impetuous. His love making for example... Lucy forced herself not to think of that. He was healthy and able to work hard. Twenty years perhaps would see him bald with a paunch and ulcers, but they would be a good twenty years and she, with care, might just be able to retain her appearance.

It would take money, of course, lots of money, but Henry would supply that.

She opened the door a crack and listened. The screaming had stopped and so had the insults. Good. Soon he would be coming over to apologise for his performance. It was really disgusting that a grown man would make such a fuss over a few insect bites. Why, one time at a picnic she had literally been eaten alive by mosquitoes, and she was certain that nothing could be worse than that.

And so she settled down to wait, and wait, and wait. Waiting until the dawn broke and the rescue car came churning over the sand.

But there was no sign at all of Henry, not even a clean-picked bone.

Poor Henry.

**The End.**

### **Notes and proofing history**

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