

By the Winner of the SCIENCE WONDER STORIES Cover Contest.

This story from the pen of the prize-winner of the November 1929 cover contest of SCIENCE WONDER STORIES fulfills our good expectations for him.

Mr. Tanner possesses an undeniable gift of portraying convincingly the strangeness and the atmosphere of the places that he writes of.

The present interplanetary story is really quite a simple one, and therefore is a relief from more involved stories. But because of its simplicity it carries a directness and forcefulness that is hard to equal.

Mr. Tanner shows vividly some of the difficulties that an interplanetary traveler would meet on a strange planet, encountering a strange sort of life.

The Flight of the Mercury

by Charles R. Tanner

I sat at the entrance to my tent and gazed up at the sky. Like diamond dust, the Milky Way flung its misty haze across the zenith, and I speculated dreamily on the brilliance of the stars and planets in these tropical latitudes. It was a midnight in August, and above me Mars glowed like a large ruby; its yellowish-red light in strange contrast to the blues and whites of the stars about it. I gazed at it reflectively, as I had done a thousand times before, and then I jerked my pipe from my mouth with an ejaculation at surprise.

Across the darkness of the heavens, a darker object was speeding! An airplane, here in the desert, over a hundred miles from a civilized settlement! I watched it in amazement and my amazement only increased as I saw that it was rapidly approaching the ground. When I first saw it, it was little more than a spot in the heavens; yet as I continued to gaze, it drew nearer and nearer until I could make out all the details of its form.

It was a huge, tri-motored mono-plane, and its entire body glistened like a polished copper. It moved with a speed that was remarkable, but as it drew nearer the ground, I could see that its speed was being reduced, and that it was maneuvering for a landing. All the time that I stood staring at it I was half-aware of something strange about it, but it was not until it was close to the ground that I realized that it was absolutely silent! That the engines were running seemed obvious from the accuracy with which the ship was manipulated; but although it was now no more than a quarter of a mile from me, I was still unable to hear the slightest sound from the propellers. I heard a thump as it struck the ground and, a moment later, I was hurrying off to see who and what the strange visitor was.

As I approached it, I began to see that there were more strange things about this machine than I had at first expected. For one thing, it was all metal, and the metal, which was either copper or copper-plated, glistened red in the light of the newly-risen moon. And for another, I saw as I came close that the three "propellers" were not propellers at all, but huge gray disks fully eight feet in diameter. They were three in number, and were situated at the rear of the plane instead of in front.

Pondering on the strangeness of the visitor, I had drawn nearer to it and was now beneath one of its huge wings. As I paused, the cabin door opened and a man emerged—a blue-eyed, light-haired man of about thirty-five, who looked as if he might have been a specimen from some museum case labeled "pure Nordic type." He was dressed in a dark wool bathing-suit, and, as he saw me in the light that emerged from the open door, he came forward eagerly, with extended hands.

"My word, what luck! A white man! You know, I never expected to run across a white man here in the Sahara! I do hope you speak English. My French and Spanish are terrible."

I hastened to assure him that I was acquainted with the English language and he grinned at my accent.

"American, what? I don't suppose it's necessary to tell you I'm British. My accent must be as obvious to you as yours is to me. What?"

I agreed with a smile and then in-vised him up to my tent.

"It's not often that I have a visitor in this neck of the woods," I said, "and I must admit I'm a little curious about that plane of yours. Is that some new kind of propeller you have there?"

"New kind of propeller? My word, yes! Wait till I get into some proper rags and I'll tell you something about it."

He disappeared into the plane again and I noticed with surprise that there were double walls to the cabin and that the door was operated on a valve system, there being an outer and an inner door, with a vestibule be-tween. I stood there, puzzling over the strangeness of the vehicle until the stranger returned, this time clad in a sack suit that bore all the earmarks of having been recently cut by a London tailor.

"It's quite a neat little bus, eh? he beamed as he emerged from the car.

The Stranger's Story

I nodded acquiescence and we strolled back to my tent. Arous-ing my servant, I bade him prepare a pot of tea (don't tell me I don't know my Englishman), and in a few moments we were seated at the tent door conversing like lifelong companions. I explained the purpose of my expedition into the desert, arid discussed at some length the hopes I had of adding materially to the archeological knowledge of the district.

"Jolly interesting," my visitor exclaimed, when at last I had finished, "but, my word! I've got a story that is a story !" and setting down his tea-cup (which he had emptied for the fourth time), he filled his pipe, lighted it and began to tell me his tale.

"My name is Harold Davies Fox-Kirton, and if that sort of thing interests you, I may as well admit that I have a title—Lord Dunsmere. But my friends call me 'Dirk,' " and he affectionately patted a short dagger that hung in a holder at his belt. I looked at it and then leaned forward with interest and surprise, for it was of Bedouin make and was thickly covered with jewels.

"Always wear it," smiled the Britisher. "Present from a silly old egg in Morocco, who thought I once saved his life. But that's another story, so that's that.

"But to continue — I've always been a sort of ex-perimenter, and this bus is—well, what you might call my magnum opus. I've been working on it ever since directly after the war and there are at least a half dozen new ideas incorporated in it.

"But the greatest of all is my 'ether-propeller.' And it's such a simple idea, too. I can't understand why someone else hasn't invented it years ago !"

"Ether-propeller ?" I asked, "You mean a propeller that drives through the ether?"

"Exactly, old man, that drives through the ether. Have you ever studied radio theory to any extent?"

I admitted a very slight knowledge of radio and he continued:

"Well in that case, you are probably familiar with the wave analogy. You know, where they compare a broadcast note to a stone thrown in the water?"

"Of course," I answered. "The note or 'dot' in the transmitter sets up waves in the ether, just as a stone thrown in a pond sets up waves in the water."

"Right-o. Or just as a hand clap sets up sound waves in the atmosphere," he continued, "That's it exactly. Well, I've just carried the analogy a little farther, Just as a screw drives a vessel through the water, or as a propeller drives a plane through the air, so this 'ether-propeller' of mine drives a car through the ether."

"By George! You have an idea, all right! How did you ever come to think of it ?"

"Just to satisfy an old ambition of mine. Ever since I was a lad, I've longed to visit places that were never explored before. I knew, though, that there wasn't much left to explore on this planet, and I don't suppose I

was more than fourteen years old before I was struck with the desire to visit the other ones.

“Of course, it seemed a hopeless ambition. But then along came radio, and the idea of communicating with Mars by wireless took up quite a hit of my time. I lived radio from the time I was seventeen until the outbreak of the War, and then all my work was swept aside and I found myself in Flanders.

“I don’t suppose the War would have actually meant so much in my life if it hadn’t been that I chose aviation as my branch of the service. But after the War (in which I bore a charmed life, and came out without a scratch), the idea of an ether-propeller came to me with a bang. I began to work it out at once, but it was ten years before I could get it finished.

“You see, my idea was something like this. I figured an aerial revolving somewhat on the order of an electric fan, with a ‘shield’ behind it to reflect the waves, like a beam. And I figured that the waves would have to be extremely short, approximating the X-rays in length, so that the atoms of matter would ‘ride’ on them as they passed. You understand, it was quite impossible to produce waves that short with the present type of transmitter, so my first job consisted of inventing something that would produce excessively short waves. I worked for seven years on that problem alone, and finally produced a radio-valve that was quite different from any ever made before. It incorporated features of both the radio-valve and the X-ray bulb, and it sent out waves that were only the minutest fraction of a millimeter in length.

An Astounding Statement

“I thought my troubles were over then, but, Great Scott, they were only just begun! I hooked up my transmitter to a revolving aerial, switched it on and—nothing happened. After studying the matter over, I at last decided that the speed of the aerial was too slow. So it was up to me to increase that speed somehow.

“Well, old chap, I won’t go into all the details of my experimenting. When I finally completed my ether-propeller, it was built something like this. I took a very thin tapering piece of copper about four feet long and four inches wide. Then I prepared a liquid bake-lite bath, and dipped the copper in it. When the copper was removed, a thin film of bakelite adhered to it, which, on drying, formed a very efficient insulator. Over this, a copper plating was formed, taking care that it should be deposited more heavily at the end where the copper was already thickest. This process was then repeated, and continued until there was built up a great semi-circle consisting of thousands of layers of alternate copper and bakelite insulator. Another of these semi-circles was now made and they were then fastened together to make a disk.

“And now I was able to bring into use the wisdom of another experimenter. Burton Farley, the great chemist, had succeeded, the year before, in discovering and isolating osmium B, an isotope of the element osmium, and had discovered in it a peculiar property. Normally a rather inert metal, when an electric current passed through it, it combined with the oxygen of the air to form an osmium oxide, a non-conductor. Of course, the electric current could not pass through the oxide, and so it ceased, and this, remarkably enough, caused the osmium to release the oxygen and revert to its original form.

“I utilized this peculiar element in the following fashion. Around the rim of my ‘circle’ I placed a band of osmium B of just the right thickness. Then around that I placed a band of copper. The current would pass from the transmitter to the copper band and, through the osmium to the first thin copper plate, which thus acted as the aerial. But as the osmium between the copper band and the first copper plate became oxidized, it immediately stopped the current, which sought release through the second thin plate of copper. Here the same process occurred, driving the current to the third plate and so on around the circle.

“Now the osmium was carefully measured so that, just as the current completed the circle, the return of the osmium to its original state was begun. The result was that the current again found passage through the first plate and began the revolution all over again. Being entirely automatic, I secured a speed of over a hundred thousand revolutions a second! Neat, what?

“Well, on my first experiment with it, I used a wave-length that I figured was about that of an atom of copper. I held various elements before the circle, as I have called it, but felt only a tiny pull until I put up a piece of copper. My word! It took that bit of copper out of my hands like a shot! The propeller was lying on a table and it hurled the copper upward and buried it over an inch in the ceiling.

“So then it was merely a matter of time until I had built a nice little copper bus, named it the Mercury,

after the old chap who used to fly between the heavens and the earth, and was all ready to strike out for Mars, Venus or any way-points!"

"By George! Do you really mean it?" I ejaculated, "Are you actually going to Mars in that car?"

"Going to Mars?" he answered, "Wait a bit, old chap. You don't understand. I'm just getting back!"

On to Mars!

For over a minute, I gazed at him in astonishment. Somehow, the idea that he was going to Mars was not nearly so hard to believe as that he had actually accomplished that incredible feat! For the first time since his story was begun I felt a doubt of the truth of his narrative.

He noticed my incredulity and laughed good-naturedly.

"I'll have you believing me before we say good-by," he grinned. "There are some mighty queer things in that car of mine, things that I feel sure will convince you or anybody."

Somehow, his careless matter-of-fact manner did more toward convincing me than anything that he might have offered in the way of proof, and I urged him to go on with his tale.

"Well," he continued, "when the Mercury was finished, you can imagine I lost no time preparing it for a trip into space. It was loaded with food and tubes of compressed oxygen, and I took along a lot of guns and ammunition, too. No telling what one may find on a trip to a world entirely different from ours, you know! And I had a rubber suit like a diver's, that had a metal headpiece connected to an oxygen tube, and this headpiece had windows of thick lead glass. That was for keeping out the ultra-violet rays of the sun, which would obviously be much more powerful on thin-atmosphered Mars than upon the Earth, quite sufficient to blind one if his eyes were exposed to their glare for any length of time.

"And oh! there were a lot of other things that I took along, but, don't you know—in the end I forgot to take any tea! You've no idea how refreshing these cups have been.

"So then at last I was ready, and one clear night I hopped off from my landing-field and headed for Mars. It was just like that, old chap, no mathematics, no careful aiming of my space-ship, none of the stuff that is so dull in most of the science stories one reads. You see, my ether-propeller enabled me to drive the Mercury just as easily as an ordinary plane, and so I just steered for my destination."

He paused for a moment, and puffed meditatively at his pipe.

"There's so little to tell about that flight," he said, after some moments of silence. "I rose up into the air, higher and higher, hour after hour, and it seemed that I was never going to cut loose from the Earth. My speed at first was about a hundred and fifty miles an hour, but it kept increasing, three miles a minute, five miles a minute, eight miles a minute, until at six o'clock it was approaching a mile a second. I almost said 'by dawn', but, you understand, there wasn't any dawn. Mars was almost in opposition, and I was keeping my course as closely as possible directly toward her. So that kept me speeding westward, and held me in the Earth's shadow.

"My speed was accelerating all the time, even though there was the gravity of the Earth pulling in the opposite direction. You've no idea how uncomfortable a constant acceleration can be; but I held to it, for I was anxious to see just how fast my bus really could go. But I was doomed to be disappointed in this, for I never had the nerve to let it get above forty miles a second."

"Forty miles a second!" I cried, "but how could you avoid meteors and such particles of matter at that speed?"

"I suppose I did take a chance," was the answer, "but I rather imagine that that end of it has been a bit over-drawn by writers. At least, I never ran across any of those wanderers of space. If I had, there in the early part of my journey, it would have been the end, for I couldn't have steered the car away from it. You see, I was a damn' sick egg.

"I reached the speed of forty miles a second about the time I passed the moon's orbit. I decided that this

speed was quite enough and ceased the acceleration. And then, my word! it was just like being in an elevator that suddenly began to drop swiftly. You know, that queer feeling that one gets in the pit of one's stomach? Well, it was just like that, only—it kept on! There was still enough gravity to keep me on the floor then, but by the time we reached five million miles from the Earth, almost the last traces of gravitational pull had vanished. Of course there was a pull still there, but it was quite unnoticeable.

“It was about this time that I got my idea of constantly varying the speed of the machine, so that the acceleration would act as a substitute for the gravity. I would drop the speed lower and lower until I was going no more than a hundred miles an hour, and then pick it up until I was back at forty miles a second again.

“In this way, I constantly had an effect of gravity, even though I had to spend half of my time walking about on the ceiling. And so my illness vanished. But I can assure you, old fellow, that the idea of space sickness has been quite underestimated by the imaginative writers. It's something that has got to be allowed for.

Strange Life

“Well, that's enough about the trip. It got to be the most boring, tiresome thing that I have ever lived through. It was only the promise of the wonders at the end of it that kept me going on. And at last one evening, I landed upon the surface of Mars.”

He relapsed into another period of silence, and after a while again took up the thread of his story.

“Like most students of the planet Mars, I'd always suspected that the green tracts seen in the telescopes were vegetation, so I planned to land at the apex of that vast triangle known as the Syrtis Major, as the spot on Mars most likely to support comfortably both Martian life and Terrestrial, as represented by myself.

“It was dusk when I landed, and I was completely fagged from the work of the day. So without so much as a look out of the window I threw myself down on the cot and fell asleep.

“The next morning, you may be sure, I was up with the sun. As soon as I left the cot, I rushed to the window and gazed out at as unearthly a scene as might be imagined.

“I had landed on a low, rolling plain that stretched nearly a mile to a group of flat-topped, reddish cliffs in the distance. All the ground between me and the hills was covered with large groups of translucent, pale green globes that grew in scattered clusters over the ground and ranged in size from a few inches to as much as two feet in diameter. Here and there stood red, branching things not unlike cacti, their branches waving vaguely in the air as though searching for something. And far in the distance grew tall, tapering things, for all the world like a group of Lombardy poplars.

“Well, that was my first glimpse of the life of the planet Mars. I stood gazing at it in the light of the rising sun, and presently I began to wonder if this was animal life or vegetable. You see, those things breathed! You could see them expanding and contracting gently and regularly, the globes and the cactus-things; and it even seemed that there was some movement in the tall things in the distance. But there was no use in speculating, sitting here in the plane, so I hurried to make preparations to go outside.

“First I tested the temperature and the air. The temperature was all right, about six degrees above freezing, but the air! It exerted a pressure of only a little over six pounds to the square inch, and on analysis proved to have a far larger proportion of nitrogen than the earth. There was some oxygen, but not nearly enough to support human life. And there was hydrogen too, and carbon dioxide, in a ratio to the oxygen of about the same as we have on the Earth. In a word, except for the excess of nitrogen, there was about as much air as we would expect about nine miles above the surface of the Earth.

“So I unpacked my oxygen helmet and 'diving suit' and got into them, prepared to saunter forth. I realized now, how lucky I was in having those thick windows in the helmet. In this air, the ultra-violet light would have soon blinded me.

“Well, I stepped out of the car into a group of green globes, and then for the first time I thought about the gravity. Somehow, while I was in the car, it hadn't dawned on me that I was accepting the lesser gravity of Mars in a very matter-of-fact manner. I don't understand even yet why I didn't have trouble adapting myself, but I believe that the many days in space under a constantly changing acceleration had trained me

un-consciously to accept any degree of gravity imposed upon me.

“At any rate, there I was walking along among the globes much the same as if I was on the Earth. The globes seemed to be semi-transparent, you could faintly see some outline of internal organs and veins or trachea. There was no doubt at all that they were complicated organisms. But as they were rooted in the ground, I decided that they were some sort of vegetable. After thinking it over on the way home, however, I don't believe now that they were either animal or vegetable, but something unique.

“And, now I noticed another form of life. All about among the globes were little rods of a darker green. about the length of one of those cigars that you Americans called ‘stogies.’ For the most part they grew straight up in the air, but there were quite a number that lay flat on the ground, and one of these would occasionally give a sort of flip to its tail and shoot across the ground for about a foot. And twice I saw one reach a spot which it evidently considered favorable, where-upon it immediately buried its nose in the ground, stuck its bally tail into the air and became an immovable vegetable. I tried to pull one of these things up, but it seemed to be well rooted in the ground!

“Then my attention was attracted to one of the cactus-things that happened to be not far away. There were none of the other things within five or six feet of it, but as I looked, one of the little green cigars flipped itself across the vacant space surrounding it. Like a flash, one of the stiff-looking branches swept down and caught it, and, contracting, like the eye of a snail when you touch it, folded the thing inside the main trunk of the ‘cactus.’ Again I was forced to revise my estimate of the form of life these creatures were.

Hostility!

“I picked my way among the things, avoiding them as much as possible, for I didn't know what they might be capable of, and I've been stung once by a jelly-fish and have no desire to have it happen again. But the globes must have been harmless for I accidentally trod on several and although I didn't harm them much, they made no attempt to harm me.

“I made my way toward the tall things in the distance, for the rods, the globes and the ‘cacti’ were the only forms of life near me, and I was anxious to inspect everything in sight. But the clarity of the air was deceiving and the distance of the things must have been greater than I thought, for it was nearly noon before I finally reached them.

“And then their appearance was disappointing enough - just thin central rods they were, with tough, dark green plates radiating from them in all directions. But my disappointment was not to be long-lived, for it was in this group of things that I found the greatest mystery that I was to see on Mars.

“Just as I entered the ‘grove’ I saw it—a huge globe nearly five feet in diameter, mounted on four stiff metal legs, a globe of just the same pale green color as the smaller ones, but one that gave clearly the impression of being artificial, mechanical. And as I drew near, it lowered itself on its legs, drew them up into it, and sat down on that squat, globular body and watched me! I hadn't a doubt, you know, from the beginning that this was a creature of some sort of intelligence, and that it was wondering what in the world I was.”

He paused again, and after a moment went on, a reflective, philosophical tone in his voice.

“Have you ever thought how little we know about Nature's ways of producing thinking beings? We hu-mans have hardly the faintest idea of the thinking processes of even the higher mammals. And when it comes to the birds and the insects, why, we're just at a loss where to start. Yet such insects as the bees or ants have evolved a very complicated social system without using, so far as we know, anything like what we call reason. Instinct governs them entirely, and yet they have a system of government superior in every way to that of us humans.

“But if we are at a loss to interpret the acts of these intelligent little insects, how are we to understand the creatures of another world? Back in the Proterozoic Age or the lower Cambrian, the ancestors of insects and men were probably brothers; but the creatures of Mars are totally unrelated to us. Yet, strange to say, there are some persons who expect to find familiar creatures, yes, even men, upon Mars.

“And so, in describing the events that followed, I want you to remember that I am as much at a loss to account for the actions of the creature as you. And I wouldn't be surprised, you know, if it were just as much

at a loss to account for mine.

“When I first spied it, I just stood still and looked. Somehow, I wasn’t surprised. There was no use in being surprised at anything one found there. So for a while I just stood still and looked—waiting, you know, for the Martian to start things. But the Martian evidently had the same idea as I; so after a little I began to make signs. I pointed to myself, and then to my plane, visible, off there across the plain ; and then I motioned up into the sky in the general direction of the sun.

The Martian made no response, so I began all over again, this time supplementing my gestures with a one-sided conversation. I knew, of course, that it couldn’t understand, but I hoped that it would grasp that I was using some intelligent mode of expressing my thoughts, at least. The Martian never moved, however, and I began to feel no end silly, you know, swinging my arms around and chattering away there.

“But at last something did happen, although I haven’t the least idea what it all meant. I’ve mentioned, I believe, that the Martian was of the same translucent shade as the globes that covered the ground. Well, after a while a brown spot began to form on a part of the thing nearest me. It got larger and larger and after a while a sort of streamer of mist or vapor emerged from it and stretched out toward me. As it approached, I started with surprise, for on the end of that streamer was a little round solid button, a brown glistening thing that came nearer and nearer and finally touched me.

“And then the Martian jumped as if it had been shocked, and the streamer of vapor snapped back into the brown spot which faded out far quicker than it had formed. And again we stood and stared at each other.

“After a while I had another idea. Surely the Mar-tian would appreciate the intricacies of my plane. All that I could see of the creature was that globe and a faint glimpse of complicated machinery in the interior; but I figured from that, that it would surely comprehend some part of my machine; so I decided to go over and bring the Mercury back.

“And then something new and—well, sinister developed. As I turned to retrace my steps, the Martian glided around me and planted itself between me and my machine. I tried to walk around it, but it moved again, just keeping itself between me and the bus. I turned away, feeling a deuced queer sensation in the pit of my stomach, and pretended that I intended to walk in the opposite direction. It swept around me and planted itself in my path again, and quick as a flash I whirled and started to run in the direction of the plane.

“But quick as I was, the Martian was quicker, and in a moment it was ahead of me and had again placed itself directly in my path. And from then on, try as I might, I couldn’t keep the thing from in front of me, whenever I tried to move.

Stalemate!

“I did manage to gradually work my way nearer to my plane by a series of rushes in first one direction and then another, but as the afternoon grew later it began to appear that I could never reach the Mercury by nightfall. Although that may not seem so serious at first thought, just remember that the temperature of a Martian night must be far below zero. And I was hardly dressed to battle with a temperature of the polar regions.

“So I redoubled my efforts, but it soon became plain that sunset was going to find me quite a way from the plane, with the Martian still between it and me. And at last the sun did set, while I was still some three hundred yards from the bus.

“Have you ever run across the phrase, ‘the night fell with tropical suddenness’? Well, the suddenness of nightfall in the tropics is a snail’s pace compared to nightfall on Mars. So clear is the air that it remains almost broad day until the last tip of the sun has set. Then it’s just like a black curtain sweeping up over the sky from west to east, and night is upon you.

“And with the coming of night, I discovered a new phenomenon of this world. Even before darkness entirely covered us, I could see that all the little globes that covered the ground were turning black. The cigar-shaped things were popping out of the ground, and as they fell on their sides, they, too, were turning black. And as the last faint rays of daylight fell upon the Martian. I saw that some subtle change had come over it, too. With renewed hope, and driven by the fear of freezing if I stayed there very long, I again tried to

get around the Martian, and this time it remained quite motionless, and I was soon running like mad toward my plane, my teeth chattering with the sudden and increasing cold. I dashed through the doors, slammed them shut and turned on all the heaters in the cabin. Then I prepared and finished a much-needed supper, and turned in for the night.

"You know, I've thought quite a little bit about that sudden change that came over the Martian world at sunset, and I've come to the conclusion that that sudden cessation of life corresponds to our sleep. But with the extremes of temperature, and the thinness of the atmosphere, the Martian sleep is a thing far more overpowering than ours, apparently just a sudden overwhelming unconsciousness that lasts until the next sun-rise. At any rate, the next morning when I awoke, the sun had already risen, and on glancing outside, I saw that the Martian world was again its normal pale green self.

"I saw another thing, too, for directly outside my door squatted the globular Martian. It had evidently awakened and finding me gone, had hastened to the only place that its reason or instinct told it that it could find me. And when, after breakfast, I tried to leave the plane, I found the Martian just as determined to keep me in it as it had been the day before to prevent me from getting into it.

"Well, old chap, it seems absurd to admit it, but it was a stalemate! For three days. I remained in the vicinity, trying to elude the Martian or at least trying to penetrate the mystery of it but in the end I gave it up. I decided that that particular part of Mars was no place for me, and so I started the plane and left for parts unknown.

"But once I was in the air again, I went into a funk. I don't know whether it was the air, or my food or what, but I got into the worst spell of the blues that I'd ever had in my life. And it all ended in my turning the plane back toward the Earth! You see, I figured that this Martian game was just a little too much for one man, and that I'd better come back for reinforcements. And so here I am, back on the Earth, feeling like a Columbus that had turned back in sight of San Salvador."

He finished his narrative, refilled his pipe and sat smoking, thoughtfully.

"Anti-climax, what?" he said at last, "No princess rescued, no rebellion quelled, not even the usual guide to give an explanation of the wonders I saw. I feel no end a bally fool. I shouldn't have tried to do it all by myself. But I'm going back to London in the morning and get a staff of scientist Johnnies and trot them up to Mars and let them do a little observing. Then when we return perhaps we'll have a more interesting tale to tell, eh?"

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and stood up.

"I won't impose on your hospitality any further, old man. I can sleep just as well in the cabin as I could up here, anyhow. So I'll just toddle along. See you in the morning," and he sauntered away. I watched his form as he walked away, and finally I, too, arose and entered my tent.

The next morning when I arose his plane was gone! I supposed, of course, that he had returned to London, and I watched eagerly for news of him. But even after my return to civilization, I heard nothing of him, and I have finally concluded that he never returned to London at all. I wonder—I just wonder if his curiosity overcame him and he returned to Mars? Or, perhaps, did he go to Venus?

THE END