

# TALES OF WONDER

*and Super-Science*

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*That Mile-Wide Swath Of Destruction Through The Grotesque Jungle Of Venus Baffled The Explorers From Earth. . . Until They Saw—*



# WORLD OF HORROR

*By*

CLARK ASHTON  
SMITH

*Author of The Amazing Planet,  
Marooned in Andromeda, etc.*

**I** DO not mean to boast when I say that cowardice has never been among my failings. It would be needless to boast, in view of my honourable record as an ether-ace in six interplanetary expeditions. But I tell you that I would not return to Venus for any consideration—not for all the platinum and radium in its mountainsides, nor all the medicinal saps and pollers and vegetable ambergris of its forests.

There will always be men to imperil their lives and their sanity in the Venusian trading-posts, and fools who will still try to circumnavigate a world of unearthly dangers. But I have done my share, and I know that Venus was not designed for human nerves or human brains. The loathsome, multi-

form fecundity of its over-heated jungles ought to be enough for anyone—not to mention the way in which so many posts, with their buildings of neo-manganese steel, have been wholly blotted out between the departure of one space-freighter and the arrival of the next.

No; Venus was not meant for man. If you still doubt me, listen to my story. . . .

I was with the first Venusian expedition, under the leadership of Admiral Carfax, in 1977. We were able to make no more than a mere landing, and were then compelled to return Earthwards because of our shortage of oxygen, due to a serious miscalculation regarding our needs. It was unsafe, we found, to breathe the thick, vapour-laden air of

Venus for more than short intervals; and we couldn't afford to make an overdraft on our tanks.

In 1979, we went back, more fully equipped for all contingencies this time, and landed on a high plateau near the equator. This plateau, being comparatively free from the noxious flora and fauna of the abysmal, steaming jungles, was to form the base of our explorations.

I felt signally honoured when Admiral Carfax put me in charge of the planetary coaster, whose various parts had been brought forth from the bowels of the huge ether-ship and fitted together for local use. I, Richard Harmon, was only an engineer, a third assistant pilot of the space-vessel, with no claim whatever to scientific renown; and the four men entrusted to my guidance were all experts of international fame. They were John Ashley, botanist, Aristide Rocher, geologist, Robert Manville, biologist and zoologist, and Hugo Markheim, head of the Interplanetary Survey.

Carfax, and the remaining sixteen of our party, were to stay with the ether-ship till we returned and made our report. We were to follow the equator, landing often for close observations, and make, if feasible, a complete circuit of the planet. In our absence, a second coaster was to be fitted together, in preparation for a longitudinal voyage around the poles.

The coaster was of that type which is now commonly used for flying at all levels within the terrestrial atmosphere. It was made of neonin-tempered aluminium; it was roomy and comfortable, with ports of synthetic crystal tougher than steel, and could be hermetically closed. There were the usual engines, run by explosive atomic power, and a supplementary set of the old electro-solar turbines in case of emergency.

The vessel was fitted with heating and refrigerating systems, and was

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Some of the most popular of our stories are those depicting the exploration of other planets, once man has set foot on them. Here we have such a story by an American writer who has gained many admirers for the remarkable atmosphere which he is able to infuse into his tales. In this instance, it is the sweltering world of Venus which is the subject of his imaginings, and there are few who could so graphically convey just how horrific that planet may be, and what utterly alien forms of life may exist there. We hope to publish more of the work of this master of imaginative writing.

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armed with electronic machine-guns having a forty-mile range; and we carried for hand-weapons a plentiful supply of infra-red grenades, of heat-tubes and zero-tubes, not knowing what hostile forms of life we might encounter. These weapons were the deadliest ever devised by man; a child could have wiped out whole armies with them. But I could smile, now, at their inadequacy. . . .

The plateau on which we had landed was far up in a range which we named the Purple Mountains, because they were covered from base to summit with enormous two-foot lichens of a rich Tyrian hue. There were similarly covered areas in the plateau, where the soil was too thin for the sustenance of more elaborate plant-forms. Here, among the multitudinous geysers, and the horned, fantastic peaks that were intermittently visible through a steam-charged atmosphere, we had established ourselves in a lichen-field.

Even here, we had to wear our refrigerating-suits and carry oxygen whenever we stepped out of the ether-

ship; otherwise, the heat would have parboiled us in a few minutes, and the ultra-terrestrial gases in the air would have speedily overpowered us. It was a weird business, putting the coaster together under such circumstances. With our huge, inflated suits, and masks of green vitrolium, we must have looked like a crew of demons toiling in the fumes of Gehenna.

I SHALL never forget the hour when the five of us who had been chosen for that first voyage of discovery said good-bye to Admiral Carfax and the others, and stepped into the coaster. Somehow, there was a greater thrill about it than that which attended the beginning of our trip through sidereal space. The 23,000 miles of our proposed circuit would, of course, be a mere bagatelle; but what marvels and prodigies of unimagined life or landscape might we not find! If we had only known the truth! But, indeed, it was fortunate that we could not know. . . .

Flying very slowly, as near to the ground as was practicable, we left the plateau and descended through a long, jungle-invaded pass to the equatorial plains. Sometimes, even when we almost grazed the jungle-tops, we were caught in voluminous, rolling masses of cloud; and sometimes there were spaces where we could see dimly ahead for a few miles, or could even discern the white-hot glaring of the dropsical Sun that hung perpetually at zenith.

We could get only a vague idea of the vegetation beneath us. It was a blurred mass of bluish and whitish greens, of etiolated mauves and saffrons, tinged with jade. But we could see that the growths were of unearthly height and density, and that many of them had the character of calamites and giant grasses, rather than trees. For a long while we sought vainly an open space in which to alight and begin our investigations.

After we had flown on for an hour

or two above the serried jungle, we crossed a great river that couldn't have been so very far below the boiling-point, to judge from the columns of steam that coiled upward from it. Here we could measure the height of the jungle, for the shores were lined with titanic reeds, marked off in ten-yard segments, that rose for a hundred yards in air, and were overshadowed by the palm-ferns behind them.

But even here, there was no place for us to descend. We crossed other rivers, some of which would have made the Amazon look like a summer creek; and we must have gone on for another hour above that fuming, everlasting forest ere we came to a clear spot of land.

We wondered about that clearing, even at first sight. It was a winding, mile-wide swath in the jungle, whose end and beginning were both lost in the vapours. The purplish soil seemed to have been freshly cleared, and was clean and smooth, as if a whole legion of steam-rollers had gone over it. We were immensely excited, thinking that it must be the work of intelligent beings—of whom, so far, we had found no slightest trace.

I brought the coaster gently down in the clearing, close to the jungle's edge; and donning our refrigerating-suits and arming ourselves with heat-tubes, we unscrewed the seven-inch crystal of the man-hole, and emerged.

The curiosity we felt concerning that clearing was drowned in our wonder before the bordering forest. I doubt if I can give you any real idea of what it was like. The most exuberant tropical jungle on Earth would have been a corn-patch in comparison. The sheer fertility of it was stupendous, terrifying, horrifying—everything was overgrown, overcrowded, with a fulsome rankness that pushed and swelled and mounted even as you watched it.

Life was everywhere; seething, bursting, pullulating, rotting. I tell

you, we could actually *see* it grow and decay, like a slow moving picture. And the variety of it was a botanist's nightmare. Ashley cursed like a longshoreman when he tried to classify some of the things we found. And Manville had his problems, too, for all sorts of novel insects and animals were flopping, crawling, crashing and flying through the monstrous woods.

I'm almost afraid to describe some of those plants. The overlooming palm-ferns, with their poddy fronds of unwholesome mauve, were bad enough. But the smaller things that grew beneath them, or sprouted from their boles and joints! Half of them were unspeakably parasitic; and many were plainly sarcophagous.

There were bell-shaped flowers, the size of wine-barrels, that dripped a paralysing fluid on anything that passed beneath them; and the carcasses of flying lizards and strange, legless mammals were rotting in a circle about each of them, with the tips of new flowers starting from the putrefaction in which they had been seeded. There were vegetable webs in which squirming things that had been caught—webs that were like a tangle of green, hairy ropes. There were broad, low-lying masses of fungoid white and yellow, that yielded like a bog to suck in the unwary creatures that had trodden upon them. And there were orchids of madly grotesque types that rooted themselves only in the bodies of living animals; so that many of the fauna we saw were adorned with floral parasites.

**E**VEN though we were all armed with heat-tubes, we didn't care to go very far in those woods. New plants were shooting up all around us; and nearly everything, both animal and vegetable, seemed to have alimentary designs upon us. We had to turn our heat-tubes on the various tendrils and branches that coiled about us, and our suits were heavily dusted with the white pollen of carnivorous flowers—a

pollen that was anæsthetic to the helpless monsters on which it fell.

Once, a veritable behemoth, with a dinosaur-like head and forelegs, loomed above us suddenly from the ferns it had trampled down, but fled with screams of deafening thunder when we levelled our heat-rays upon it, till its armoured hide began to sizzle. Long-legged serpents, larger than anacondas, were stalking about; and they were so vicious, and came in such increasing numbers, that we found it hard to discourage them. So, we retreated towards the coaster.

When we came again to the clearing, where the soil had been perfectly bare a few minutes before, we saw that the tips of new trees and plants were already beginning to cover it. At their rate of growth, the coaster would have been lost to sight among them in an hour or two. We had almost forgotten the enigma of that clearing; but now the problem presented itself with renewed force.

"Harmon, that swath must have been made within the last hour!" exclaimed Manville to me, as we climbed back into the vessel behind the others.

"If we follow it," I rejoined, "we'll soon find who, or what, is making it. Are you fellows game for a little side-trip?" I had closed the man-hole, and was now addressing all four of my companions.

There was no demur from anyone, though the following of the swath would mean a diagonal divagation from our set course. All of us were tense with excitement and curiosity. No one could venture a surmise that seemed at all credible, concerning the agency that had left a mile-wide trail, and also we were undecided as to the direction of its progress.

I set the engines running, and with that familiar roar of disintegrating carbon atoms in the cylinders beneath us, we soared to the level of the fern-tops, and I steered the coaster along the swath in the direction towards which its

nose happened to be pointing. However, we soon found that we were on the wrong track; for the new growth below us became disproportionately taller and thicker, as the mighty jungle sought to refill the gap that had been cloven through its centre. So I turned the coaster, and we went back in the opposite direction.

I don't believe we uttered half a dozen words among us, as we followed the swath, and saw the dwindling of the plant-tops below till that bare, purplish soil reappeared. We had no idea what we would find, and we were now too excited even for conjecture. I will readily admit that I, for one, felt a little nervous: the things we had already seen in the forest, together with that formidable recent clearing which no Earthly machinery could have made, were enough to unsettle the equilibrium of the human system.

As I have said before, I am no coward; and I have faced a variety of ultra-terrene perils without flinching. But already I began to suspect that we were among things which no Earth-being was ever meant to face, or even imagine. The hideous fertility of that jungle had almost sickened me. What, then, could be the agency that had cleared the jungle away more cleanly than a harvester running through a grain-field?

I watched the vapour-laden scene ahead in the reflector beside me; and the others all had their faces glued to the crystalline ports. Nothing untoward could be seen as yet; but I began to notice a slight, unaccountable increase of our speed. I had not increased the power—we had been running slowly, at no more than one hundred and fifty miles per hour; and now we were gaining, as if we were borne in the sweep of some tremendous air-current, or the pull of a magnetic force.

The vapours had closed in before us; now they eddied to each side, leaving the landscape visible for many miles. I

think we all saw the Thing simultaneously; but no one spoke for a full thirty seconds. Then Manville muttered, very softly: "My God!"

In front, no more than a half-mile distant, the swath was filled from side to side with a moving mass, of livid, angle-worm pink, that rose above the jungle-tops. It was like a sheer cliff before us, as we flew towards it. We could see that it was moving away from us, was creeping onward through the forest. The mass gave the impression of a jelly-fish consistency. It rose and fell, expanding and contracting in a slow, rhythmic manner, with a noticeable deepening of colour at each contraction.

"Life!" murmured Manville. "Life, in an unknown form, on a scale that would not be possible in our world."

**T**HE coaster was now rushing towards the worm-coloured mass at more than two hundred miles an hour. A moment more, and we would have plunged into that palpitating wall. I turned the wheel sharply, and we veered to the left and rose with an odd sluggishness above the jungle, where we could look down. That sluggishness worried me, after our former headlong speed. It was as if we were fighting some new gravitational force, of an unexampled potency.

We all had a feeling of actual nausea, as we gazed down. There were leagues and leagues of that living substance; and the farther end was lost in the fuming vapours. It was moving faster than a man could run, with that horribly regular expansion and contraction, as if it were breathing. There were no visible limbs or appendages, no organs of any distinguishable kind; but we knew that the Thing was alive and aware.

"Fly closer," whispered Manville. Horror and scientific fascination contended in his voice.

I steered diagonally downward, and felt an increase of the strange pull

against which we were fighting. I had to reverse the gears and turn on more power, to prevent the vessel from plunging headlong. We hung above the pink mass at a hundred-yard elevation, and watched it. It flowed beneath us like an unnatural river, in a flat, glistening tide.

"*Voyez!*" cried Rocher, who preferred to speak in his native tongue, though he knew English as well as any of us.

Two flying monsters, large as pterodactyls, were now circling above the mass not far below us. It seemed as if they, like the vessel, were struggling against a powerful downward attraction. Through the air-tight sound-valves, we could hear the thunderous beating of their immense wings as they strove to rise, and were drawn gradually towards the pink surface.

As they neared it, the mass rose up in a mighty wave, and in the deep, mouth-like hollow that formed at the wave's bottom, a colourless fluid began to exude and collect in a pool. Then the wave curved over, caught the struggling monsters, and lapsed again to a level, slowly palpitating surface above its prey.

We waited a little; and I realised suddenly that the onward flowing of the mass had ceased. Except for that queer throbbing, it was now entirely quiescent. But, somehow, there was a deadly menace in its tranquillity, as if the Thing were watching or meditating. Apparently, it had no eyes, no ears, no sense-organs of any sort; but I began to get the idea that, in some unknowable manner, through senses beyond our apprehension, it was aware of our presence and was considering us attentively.

Now, all at once, I saw that the mass was no longer quiescent. It had begun to rise towards us, very stealthily and gradually, in a pyramidal ridge; and at the ridge's foot, even as before, a clear, transparent pool was gathering.

The coaster wavered, and threatened

to fall. The magnetic pull, whatever it was, had grown stronger than ever. I turned on fresh power; we rose with a painful, dragging slowness, and the ridge below shot abruptly into a pillar that loomed beside us and toppled over towards the vessel.

Before it could reach us, Manville had seized the switch that operated one of the machine-guns, had aimed it at the pillar, and released a stream of disintegrative bolts that caused the overhanging menace to vanish like a melting arm of cloud. Below us, the pyramidal base of the truncated pillar writhed and shuddered convulsively, and sank back once more into a level surface.

The coaster soared dizzily, as if freed from a retarding weight; and reaching what I thought would be a safe elevation, we flew along the rim of the mass, in an effort to determine its extent. And as we flew, the Thing began to glide along beneath us, at its former rate of progression.

I don't know how many miles of it there were, winding on through that monstrous jungle like a glacier of angle-worm flesh. I tell you, the Thing made me feel as if my solar plexus had gone wrong. It was all I could do to steer the coaster.

There was neither head nor tail to that damnable mass, and nothing anywhere that we could identify as special organs; it was a weltering sea of life, of protoplasmic cells organised on a scale that staggered all the preconceptions of biology. Manville was nearly out of his senses with excitement; and the rest of us were so profoundly shocked and overwhelmed that we began to wonder if the thing were real, or were merely an hallucination of nerves disordered by novel and terrific planetary forces.

**W**ELL, we came to the end of it at last, where the pink wave was eating its way through the jungle. Everything in its path was



being crushed down and absorbed—the four-hundred-foot ferns, the giant grasses, the grotesque carnivorous plants and their victims, the flying, waddling, creeping and striding monsters of all types. And the Thing made so little sound—there was a low murmur, like that of gently moving water, and the snap or swish of trees as they went down, but nothing more.

“I guess we might as well go on,” observed Manville regretfully. “I’d like to analyse a section of that stuff, but we’ve seen what it can do, and I can’t ask you to take any chances with the coaster.”

“No,” I agreed, “there’s nothing to be done about it. So, if you gentlemen are all willing, we might as well resume our course.” And I set the vessel back toward the equator, at a goodly speed.

“Christ! That stuff is following us!” cried Manville, a minute later. He had been watching from a rear port. Intent on steering forthrightly, it had not occurred to me to keep an eye on the Thing. Now, I looked into the rear reflector. The pink mass had changed its course, and was crawling along behind us, evidently at an increased rate of progression, for otherwise we would have been out of sight by now.

We all felt pretty creepy, I assure you. But it seemed ridiculous to imagine that the Thing could overtake us. Even at our moderate speed, we were gaining upon it momentarily; and if need be, we could treble our rate, or soar to higher atmospheric levels. But even at that, the whole business made a very disagreeable impression.

Before long, we plunged into a belt of thick vapours and lost sight of our pursuer. We seemed to be traversing a sort of swamp, for we caught glimpses of titan reeds and mammoth aquatic plants, amid winding stretches of voluminously steaming water. We heard the bellow of unknown leviathans, and saw the dim craning of their hideous heads on interminable

necks, as we passed. And once, the coaster was covered with boiling spray from a marsh-geyser or volcano, and we flew blindly till we were out of it again.

Then we crossed a lake of burning oil or mineral pitch, with flames that were half a mile in height; and the temperature rose uncomfortably, in spite of our refrigerating system. Then there were more marshes, involved in rolling steam. And after an hour or two, we emerged from the vapours, and another zone of prodigiously luxuriant jungle began to reveal its f-onded tops below us.

Flying over that jungle was like moving in a hashish eternity. There was no end to it, and no change—it simply went on and on, through a world without limits or horizons. And the white, vaporous glare of the swollen Sun, ever at zenith, became a corroding torture to nerves and brain.

We all felt a terrific fatigue, more from the nervous tax than anything else. Manville and Rocher went to sleep, Markheim nodded at his post, and I began to watch for a place where I could bring the coaster safely down and take a nap myself. The vessel would have kept its own course, if I had set the gears; but I didn’t want to miss anything, or take any chance of collision with a high mountain-range.

But it seemed there was no place to land in that interminable, bristling wilderness of cyclopean growths. We flew on, and I grew sleepier and sleepier. Then, through the swirling mists ahead, I saw the vague looming of low mountains. There were bare, needle-sharp peaks and long, gentle scaurs of a blackish stone, almost entirely covered with red and yellow lichens, taller than heather. It all looked very peaceful and desolate. I brought the coaster down on a level shelf of one of the scaurs, and fell asleep almost before the heavy thudding of the engines had died.



I DON'T know what it was that awakened me. But I sat up with a start, with a preternaturally distinct awareness that something was wrong. I glanced around at my companions, who were all slumbering quietly, and then I peered into the reflectors, where the entire landscape about us was depicted.

I was unable to believe it, for a moment—that worm-coloured glacier that had crawled up the scarp beneath us, and was now hanging over the vessel like a sheer, immeasurable, flowing precipice. It had reached out in mighty arms on either side, as if to surround us. It seemed to blot out the misty heavens as it hung there, pulsing and darkening, and all a-slaver with rills of a hueless fluid from the mouths that had formed in its front.

I lost a few precious seconds ere I could start the atomic engines; and as the vessel rose, the top of that loathsome cliff lengthened out, and fell over like the crest of a breaking billow. It caught us with a buffeting shock, it enveloped us, we went down tossing and pitching as into a sea-trough; and our interior grew dark and blind till I switched on the lights.

The vessel was now lurching nose-downward, as that unbelievable wave sucked it in. My companions were awake, and I shouted half-incoherent orders to them as I turned on the full power of our cylinders, and also set the electro-solar turbines going. The sides and ceiling of the coaster seemed to bend inward with the pressure, as we sought to wrench ourselves free.

My companions had flown to the machine-guns; they pumped them incessantly, and bolts of electronic force tore like a broadside of lightning into the mass that had engulfed us. We tried literally to blast ourselves out, with each gun revolving at the widest possible radius. I don't know how it was ever done; but at last the pressure above us began to give, there was a glimmering of light through our rear

ports, and pitching dizzily, we broke loose.

But even as the light returned, something dripped on my bare arms from the ceiling—a thin rill of water-clear fluid that seared like vitriol, and almost laid me out with the sheer agony as it ate into my flesh. I heard someone scream and fall, and turning my head, saw Manville writhing on the floor beneath a steady drip of the same fluid. The roof and walls of the coaster were rent in several places, and some of the rifts were widening momentarily. That execrable liquid, which doubtless served as both saliva and digestive juice, had been eating the adamantine-tempered metal like acid, and we had not escaped any too soon.

The next few minutes were worse than a whole herd of nightmares. Even with our double engine-power, even with the machine-guns still tearing at the mass beside us, it was a struggle to get away, to combat the malign extra-gravitational magnetism of that hellish life-substance. And all the while, Venusian air was pouring in through the rents, and our atmosphere was becoming unbreathable. Also, the refrigerating system was half useless now; and we sweltered in a steaming inferno, till each of us donned his air-tight insulative suit in turn, while the others held to the guns and the steering.

Manville had ceased to writhe, and we saw that he was dead. We would not have dared to look at him overlong, even if there had been time; for half his face and body were eaten away by the corroding liquid.

WE SOARED gradually, till we could look down on the horror that had so nearly devoured us. There it was, mile upon mile of it stretching up the mountainside, with the farther end somewhere in the jungle below. It seemed impossible, in view of the distance we had traversed, that the Thing was the same life-mass we

had met earlier in the day. But whatever it was, it must have smelt us out somehow; and seemingly it didn't mind scaling a mountain to get us.

Or perhaps it was in the habit of climbing mountains. Anyway, it was hard to discourage, for our gun-fire seemed to make mere pinholes in it, that closed up again when the gunner's aim shifted. And when we started to drop grenades upon it from our hard-won elevation, it merely throbbed and heaved a little more vehemently, and darkened to a cancerous red, as if it were getting angry. And when we flew off on the way we had come, towards the jungle and the swamp beyond, the damnable Thing started to flow backwards beneath us, along the lichen-mantled slope. Evidently, it was determined to have us.

I reeled in the seat, with the pain of my seared arms, as I held our course. We were in no condition to continue the circuit of Venus, and there was nothing for it but to return to the Purple Mountains. We flew at top speed, but that flowing mass of life—protoplasm, organism, or whatever it was—fairly raced us.

At last we got ahead of it, where it slithered in mile-wide devastation through the jungle—but not very far ahead, at that. It hung on interminably, and we all grew sick with watching it. Then suddenly we saw that the Thing had ceased to follow us, and was veering off at a sharp angle.

"What do you make of that?" cried Markheim.

We were all so amazed by the cessation of pursuit that I halted the vessel, and we hung in mid-air, wondering what had happened. Then we saw. Another endless mass, of a vermin-like grey, was crawling through the jungle to meet the pink mass. The two seemed to rise up in sheer columns, like warring serpents, as they neared each other.

Then they came together; and we could see that they were battling, were

devouring each other, were gaining and losing alternately as they flowed back and forth in a huge area from which all vegetation was speedily blotted. At length, the pink mass appeared to have won a decisive victory; it poured on and on, without cease, ingesting the other, driving it back. And we watched no longer, but resumed our flight toward the Purple Mountains.

I have no very distinct recollection of that flight; it is all a blur of incalcescent vapours, of boundless, fuming forests, of blazing bitumen lakes and volcano-spouting marshes. I lived in a reeling eternity of pain, sickness, vertigo, and towards the last, a raging delirium in which I was no longer aware of my surroundings, except by fits and starts. I don't know how I held on, how I kept the course: my subliminal mind must have done it, I suppose.

The others were all pretty sick, too, and could not have helped me. I seemed to be fighting an immeasurable, formless monster in that delirium; and after a dozen æons of inconclusive combat, I came out of it long enough to see that the Purple Mountains were jutting their horns from the vapours just ahead. Dimly, I steered along the jungle-taken pass and across the plateau; and the glaring heavens turned to a sea of blackness, a sea that fell and bore me down to oblivion, as I landed the coaster beside the glimmering bulk of the ether-ship.

**S**OMEHOW, very tortuously and vaguely, I floated out of that sea of blackness. I seemed to take hours in regaining full awareness, and the process was painful and confusing, as if my brain were unwilling to function. When I finally came to myself, I was lying in my bunk on the ether-ship, and Admiral Carfax and the two doctors of the expedition were beside me, together with Markheim and Rocher.

They told me I had been unconscious for fifty hours. My collapse, they

thought, had been partly due to unnatural nerve-strain and shock. But my arms were both in a terrible state, from the ravages of the vitriolic animal fluid that had dripped upon them. It had been necessary to amputate my left arm at the elbow, and only the most skilful care had saved the other from a like fate. My companions, though ill to the point of nausea, had retained consciousness, and had told the story of our unbelievable adventures.

"I can't see how you managed to drive the coaster," said Carfax. This, from our reticent and praise-sparing chief, was an actual brevet.

My right arm was a long time in healing—indeed, it never became quite normal again, never regained the muscular strength and nervous quickness required for aviation or space-flying. And I wasn't so sorry, either: my nerves were badly shaken, and I was content to let others do their share, when the holes in the acid-eaten coaster had been calked with metal melted by our heat-tubes, and another exploring party was sent out along the equator.

We waited for a hundred hours on the plateau in the Purple Mountains; but the coaster didn't return. Radio communication with it had ceased after the first nine hours. The second coaster was put together, and went out with Admiral Carfax himself in charge. Markheim and Rocher also insisted on going along. We kept in touch with the vessel till it began to approach the enormous tundras in which the sunlit

hemisphere of Venus terminates, and beyond which are the frozen realms of perpetual twilight and darkness.

The radio reports were full of incredible things, and I won't tell you how many of those moving life-masses were sighted, eating their way through the hideously fertile jungles, or crawling out of the steam-enveloped Venusian seas that gave them birth. Nothing, however, was found of the first coaster. Then the reports ceased, and a black horror settled upon us who had remained in the ether-ship.

The huge space-vessel was ill-adapted to horizontal flight within atmospheric levels. But we set out, anyway, and tried to find the coasters, though we all knew there could no longer be anything to find. I won't detail our trip; we all saw enough to turn our stomachs permanently, and those horrors of immeasurable life were sweet and charming in comparison with some of the things that our searchlights revealed on the dark side of the planet. . . .

Anyhow, we gave it up at last, and came back to Earth. And I, for one, have been well satisfied to remain on terra firma. Others can do the exploring, and work the Venusian mines and plantations. I know too well the fate of those lost parties and their vessels. And I know what has happened to the warehouses of neo-manganese steel that have utterly disappeared, and have been replaced by a half-grown jungle. . . .

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