

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO FLYING SAUCERS?

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The other night, as I was standing outside my house in Colombo, Ceylon, I saw the finest of the six or seven Flying Saucers I've encountered during the last ten years. It was a brilliant light, moving silently and rapidly in a dead straight line across the starry sky. I would have taken it for an artificial satellite, or a high-flying aircraft, were it not for the fact that its brightness pulsed and fluctuated in a most peculiar manner. Like all good Unidentified Flying Objects, it sent a little shiver running up and down my spine, and made me wonder if, perhaps, *this time . . .*

But the next morning, again like all the others, it turned out to have an absurdly simple explanation. (No, I'll let you worry about it for a while.) However, it started me thinking about the rise and fall of the UFO's, and I believe that some useful lessons can be learned from this peculiar episode in our recent history.

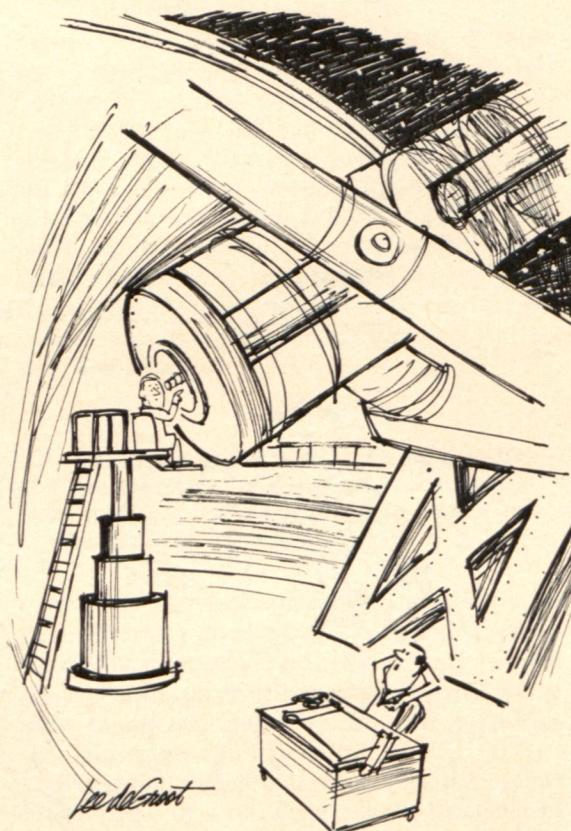
Of course, people still see UFO's, for the simple reason that there are so many of them around; if you have never seen one, it means that you don't keep your eyes open. But the public is no longer worried by them, and the subject is no longer news. The hysterical credulity of the late 40's has been replaced — except in the minds of the few surviving cultists — by a realization of the fact that the heavens are full of extraordinary sights (astronomical, meteorological, and electrical) which the average man may encounter only once or twice in his lifetime. (What would you make of a rainbow, if you'd never seen it before?)

Perhaps what really killed the visitors-from-space concept of Flying Saucers was the International Geophysical Year. For eighteen months, the skies of Earth were combed from pole to pole by thousands of observers with cameras, radar and every conceivable type of scientific instrument. What they discovered filled whole libraries; but they never discovered a single Flying Saucer.

Then, of course, came the astronauts. Space was no longer utterly inaccessible, no longer an unknown territory to be filled with mythical monsters — as the old-time geographers filled in the blank areas of their maps with such legends as "Here be dragons." There were plenty of mysteries in space, and plenty of strange sights; Colonel Glenn's "fireflies," for example. But again — no Flying Saucers.

Today, nearby space is combed by the Ballistic Missile warning systems, watching every second of the night and day for a threat which we know exists. Their radar beams can, quite literally, detect single nuts and bolts and broken fragments of satellites. Nothing bigger than a football moves for long over major areas of this planet without being detected; at this moment, about five hundred orbiting objects are being tracked as they circle the Earth.

Knowledge reduces the opportunity for genuine mistakes, and also dispels fear and fraud. We



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will hear no more of encounters with "little green men from Venus," now that Mariner has shown that the surface of that planet is sealed in utter darkness beneath a poisonous atmosphere scores of times denser than our own — and at a temperature hot enough to melt some metals. In the unlikely event that things *do* live on Venus, they may well be green and little; but they won't be men.

No — Flying Saucers are dead — yet by a strange paradox, the idea associated with them has never been more alive than at this moment. Fifteen years ago, scarcely any reputable scientist cared to speculate about life on other worlds; today, this is fast becoming one of the central problems of astronomy.

Until recently, scientists shied away from life-in-space discussions for a very good reason. They hate to get involved in questions that cannot be answered, preferring to leave them to the philosophers and the theologians. But, within the last decade, it has become obvious that this great question *can* be answered, either by direct rocket probing and exploration, or by improvements in telecommunications which seemed completely impossible only a few years ago. We can now send radio signals right across the Solar System, and the invention of the fantastic laser — which produces intense and almost parallel beams of light — has made it possible to think seriously of sending messages to the stars. If, of course, there

is anyone at the other end to receive them . . .

Quite apart from the dazzling prospects opened up by rockets, radio telescopes and laser beams, the whole attitude of the scientific world towards life in space has changed out of recognition. In the 1930's, the astronomers were cockily confident that planets like Earth were so rare that there might be no more than a handful in the entire Universe. Today, they have decided that planets are commonplace, and that there must be billions of more-or-less Earth-like worlds. At the same time, biologists have developed highly plausible theories to account for the origin of life from non-living materials, and believe that this is an inevitable and natural process on all heavenly bodies where certain simple conditions are obeyed. (And perhaps on others where they are not; but we can only speculate profitably about the types of life we know here on Earth.)

There is no longer an unbridgeable gap between dead rock and living cell, as there was twenty years ago; in the history of this enormous Universe, that gulf must have been crossed millions of times. And what of the perhaps equally great gulfs between life and consciousness — between consciousness and intelligence — between intelligence and the technology that can conquer space? How often are *those* crossed? We do not know, but we guess that it must have happened many times. If science has taught us anything, it is that we and our world are in no way unique.

So here we have this ironic situation. At the very moment when we are starting to understand the many strange apparitions in the skies, and no longer rush to explain them as visitors from space, scientists are asking in tones of increasing perplexity, "Well — why aren't there any visitors from space? Where is everybody?"

There are many answers to this quite baffling question — all of them unsatisfactory. (Some samples: space is just too big for intelligent races to meet, except by pure luck; we're too unimportant to warrant more than one visit every few million years; we're quarantined as infectious — etc., etc.) The truth is that we simply don't know, but we may be able to make some intelligent guesses when our first deep-space probes start reporting back. So let us wait patiently until then, rather than get involved in any more of the half- and wholly-baked speculations which, for the last fifteen years, have hindered the serious scientific approach to the most important question that man can ask of the Universe.

Oh yes — my latest Saucer. Well, every night the Colombo Observatory sends up a small balloon to check the wind. So that it can be tracked, it carries a light. An electric bulb and battery would be cheap enough — but a candle is even cheaper, and quite adequate . . .

It really does make a lovely, pulsating UFO as the wind sends it zipping across the stars. I never expect to see a better one — until the real thing comes along. ☐