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Invasion of the Martians

by JUDY COCKROFT

Or are those little green men all in the mind?

THERE you are, driving down the road at night, minding your own business, when suddenly you catch sight of something in the sky.

It's not like any aircraft you've ever seen; it's flashing colourful lights and moving erratically at enormous speed. As it passes overhead your radio goes dead. Then it disappears.

Scoff not... this kind of thing seems to happen to several hundred apparently sane and respectable Britons every year.

Many of them shake their heads in disbelief and swear off a drink again; others are so frightened that they dare not tell a soul; and a small percentage enjoy a brief moment of glory in the spotlight of the local press.

Such a story invariably prompts similar, often embellished revelations and "experts" dust off the old theories about little green men from Mars.

Saucer shapes are frequently formed naturally in the atmosphere by pollution, pulverised dust and water particles, and lights can be caused by many things.

Ball lightning is a favourite among the natural phenomena and it is now known that moving lights often occur in the months before an earthquake, emitted by rocks under pressure.

Otherwise a "spaceship" could really be an aircraft, weather balloon, meteorite or burned-out debris from satellites and other objects falling to Earth.

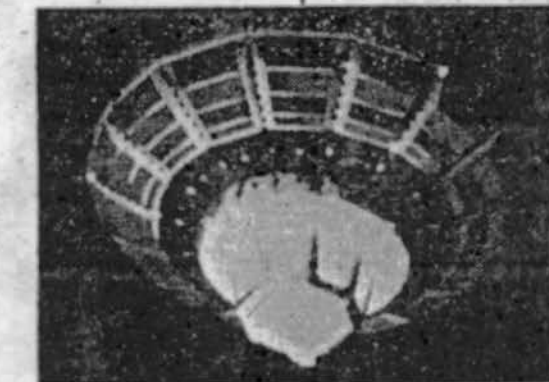
Treaties

Scares have even been started in America by what turned out to be loads of illegal marijuanas, blasted over the Mexican border by a rocket launcher to beat the border patrolmen.

NASA has even claimed that the Russians use apparent UFO sightings to cover up tests of strategic weapons which violate international treaties.

Sadly, there is not a scrap of real evidence to indicate that we are being watched or visited by super-intelligent beings from another planet.

Stories that various governments have actually made contact or possess the bodies of aliens who died on Earth, have to be taken with the proverbial pinch of salt. Credibility is decidedly challenged by those people



The "flying saucer" photographed over Surrey recently. It was really a hot air balloon, but many people were fooled.

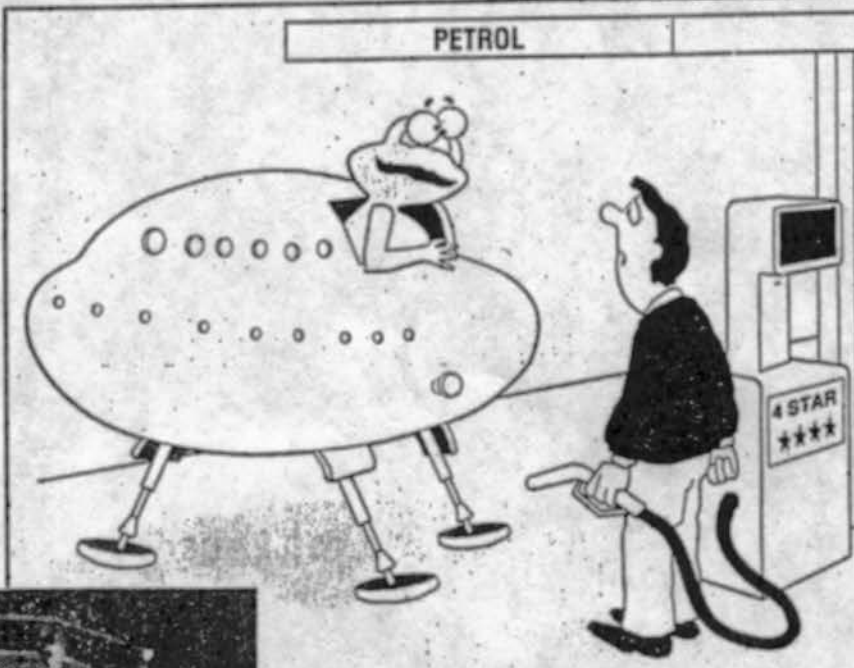
who say they have been kidnapped and examined by strange creatures.

Yet a survey in America as long ago as 1966 indicated that five million Americans claimed to have seen a UFO or to have met aliens. Six out of ten say they believe in the phenomenon as do 20 per cent of Britons.

In Britain as many as 400 sightings are reported each year although UFO societies believe that 10 times as many more go unreported because people are afraid of being ridiculed.

Yet some are not afraid to speak out. Twenty years ago, Peter Hough was a schoolboy doing a morning paper round when he spotted something unusual.

"I saw an object that looked very crudely like an aircraft. It resembled two pieces of wood nailed together like a cross. I



"Fill her up please mate..."

as satellites, aircraft or weather phenomena. We're not in the business of promoting myths. We are seriously investigating the phenomenon."

Jenny Randles, director of investigations with the British UFO Research Association, coordinates the team of investigators who look into reported sightings.

She has been interested in UFOs for many years but first began investigating them in 1973 when she was teaching science at a school in Cheshire.

After a series of reported sightings in a nearby wood, and after several of her pupils told her about unusual experiences, she turned the mystery into a school project. Most of the lights were discovered to have been landing lights from aircraft in a holding pattern.

She said: "You must realise that 90 to 95 per cent of UFO sightings turn out to be identifiable." BUFORA works closely with the police, the Ministry of Defence and Jodrell Bank, to whom most of UFO sightings are usually reported. "They ask us to follow through anything they can't explain."

She said there are about 160 different phenomena which have been misinterpreted as UFOs in one way or another. "But once you have cases which you can't explain you have to look further. In keeping with

modern science, but extending the boundaries a bit.

"UFOs and spaceships are not the same at all. That is an extreme hypothesis, and cases of people undergoing alien contact are an entirely different issue."

Such cases, she said, generally involve respectable, intelligent people whose credibility and sincerity can easily be established. That such "contacts" occur around the world she said, was the subject of several theories.

"It could be some extreme form of hallucination or a visual experience triggered by some kind of natural energy phenomenon which stimulates certain parts of the brain.

Explanation

Writer David Barclay, from Shipley, West Yorkshire, also thinks there is a psychological explanation for the phenomenon — that we are compensating for the lack of romance and mystery in our modern lives.

He says of watching inexplicable shapes and lights in the sky: "There's an unreality about the thing. Your eyes are trying to make it turn into something else, like a jumbo jet, which it isn't. There is a dreamlike quality to the whole experience.