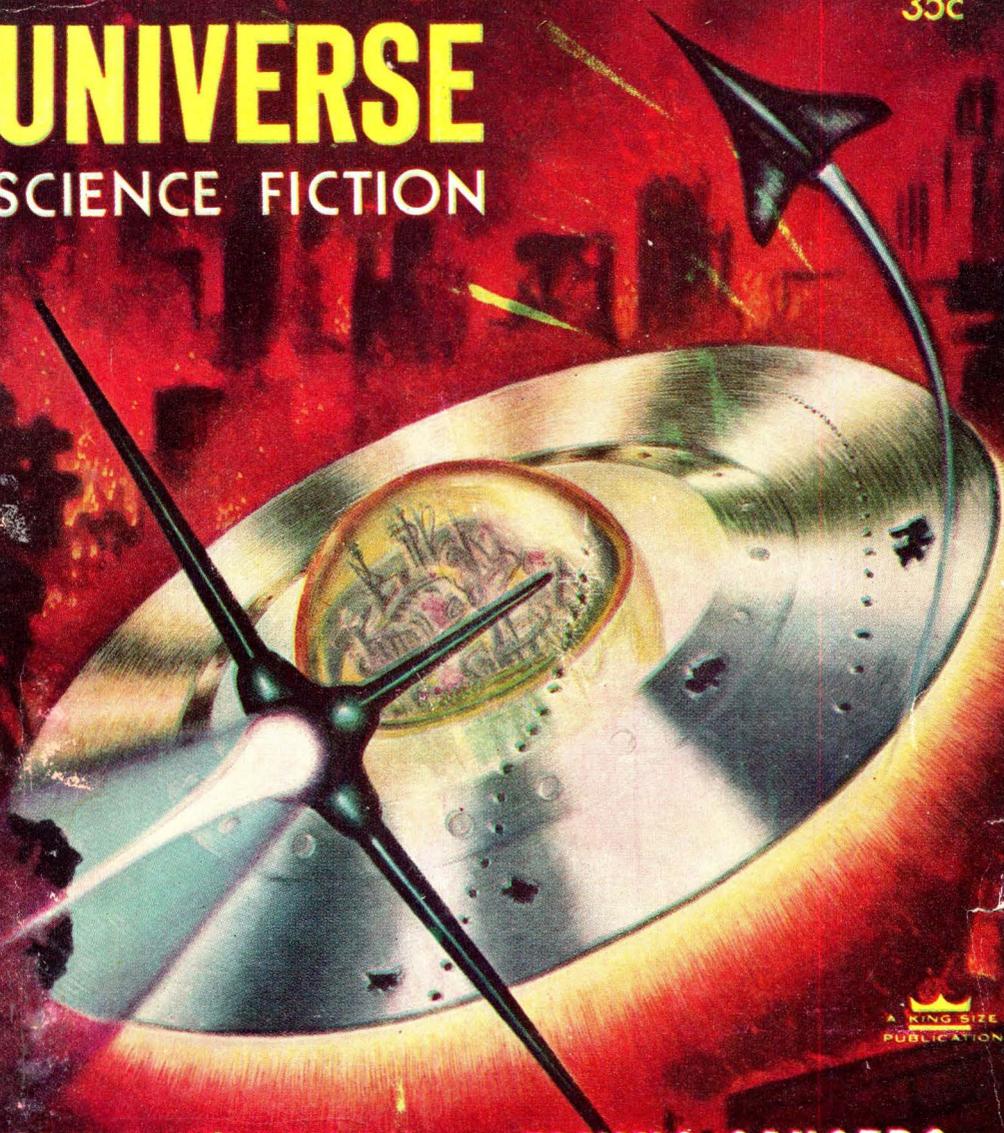


# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

SCIENCE FICTION

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A KING SIZE  
PUBLICATION

**IVAN SANDERSON on FLYING SAUCERS**

ARTICLES AND STORIES BY GRAY BARKER • HARLAN ELLISON • RICHARD WILSON

**VOLCANERO** A Novelet by ROBERT E. GILBERT

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

FEBRUARY, 1957

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**the  
ships  
in  
the  
sky**

by...*GEORGE H. SMITH*

It was a long, long time ago  
when the Cloud Ship came...

IT WAS a Saint's day and one of those mornings for which England is noted, a morning so misty that it "made a sort of twilight amid the gross and watery vapours." High Mass had been held at the Church of Saint Nicholas in Lynn as usual and now the townspeople and farmers were coming out the door and sniffing the fresh, wet smell of the earth as they thought with pleasure of the things they could do and the rest they would get on this day, so different from the rest of the days they spent in endless toil. For this was the Middle Ages and the fate of most of them was the same as that of all the other peasants of their time.

The priest stood before the door of the church admonishing some of the younger blades about their too frequent trips to the local alehouse. As he turned to accept a basket of eggs, the tithe of a widowed woman, a shout went up from a group of boys who had been among the first to rush out when the services were over.

"Father! Father!" they shouted, running towards him.

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*It had to be a demon! How else could the stranger have come down like that from the sky? Who were these men, actually, who were known to be on the cloud ships seen in the sky? Were they demons—or...?*

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"What is it, boys?" the priest asked. "Must you be so noisy on the good saint's day?"

"But father," one of them caught his breath long enough to say, "there's a ship's anchor caught on that old tomb in the corner of the churchyard."

"A ship's anchor with a rope going up into the sky!" someone else added.

"Now, boys, when was the last time you came to confession?" the priest said. "Ship's anchors and ropes into the sky indeed!"

"We saw it...we saw it," they insisted. "Come and see for yourself, father. We're not lying. Peter the Blacksmith is there and he saw it too."

Convinced of the boy's sincerity by their voices, the priest lifted up his robe and hurried after them into the section of the churchyard where the nobility and landowners of the area had been buried in tombs. As he came through the heavy, soaking mist he saw a crowd of his parishioners standing about staring at something on one of the large stone tombs. He pushed his way through them murmuring assurances to the obviously astounded and frightened people. Then he saw it and stopped dead in his tracks. It was a large iron ship's anchor and stretching upward from it into the mist was a cable which moved as

though something or someone up above was pulling on it.

"A cloud ship...a cloud ship," the people were muttering. "Listen, father, you can hear the people on it talking...way up above."

The priest had heard of the so-called cloud ships which had been seen all over Europe during the last few years. Ships that reputedly floated high above the earth and that were seen moving among the clouds. He also had heard the tale the Bishop Agobard of Lyons had recorded years before of the three men and a woman from one of the ships that he had rescued from a mob. From these four strange people, the Bishop reported learning that they had come from a place called Magonia and had lost their ship and that all the others had been killed or had died. A strange story, indeed, but a story based on the word of a priest and a prince of the church. There were other stories, too, of knives and other objects falling from the skies. One of these had fallen through the roof window of a house in Bristol. And now here was this strange thing, right here in Lynn before his very door.

He could hear the shouts of the strange high-flying mariners as they strove to free the ship from its accidental berth.

"What does it mean, father" someone asked. "What is happening?"

"Wait...wait," he tried to calm them. "Whatever it is, it is God's will that they are there."

"Look!" a woman screamed shrilly pointing upward and a gasp went up from all those who stood about the tomb. Directly above them, just beginning to appear through the mist was the figure of a man coming down the cable hand over hand toward the anchor.

"It is God's will...it must be God's will," the priest said softly rubbing unbelieving eyes. "But how can such things be?"

"He is coming down to free the anchor," Peter the Smith said. "They couldn't get it loose by just pulling at it and have sent a man down to pull it free."

Surely the blacksmith was right because now the stranger loomed directly over their heads and they could see him plainly. For a moment they stood frozen with astonishment and then the more timid of them began to edge away. Finally the women and children broke and ran back toward the church but the priest, the blacksmith and several husky peasants stood their ground as the man from above landed feet first on top of the tomb and began to tug at the anchor.

"Grab him!" someone yelled, "and we'll find out if he's man or demon. Stand by

to exorcise him, father." And before the priest could interfere, the men grabbed the stranger and after a brief struggle bore him to the ground.

"We've got him...we've got him, father," one of them panted. "Send somebody for the holy water. We've captured the demon from the sky."

"Let him go," the priest said. "He is no demon but a man like us."

The stranger was still struggling in the brawny arms of the men of Lynn but suddenly his strength seemed to give way and he began choking and gasping for breath. They all watched bewildered and in a few minutes the man from the sky was dead.

"...he gave up the ghost, stifled by the breath of our gross air as a shipwrecked mariner is stifled in the sea." writes the chronicler Gervase of Tilbury. "Moreover his fellows above, judging him to be lost, cut the cable after an hour's wait and sailed away into the sky."

Gervase says that he saw the anchor himself, the same anchor the people of the village had seen caught on the tomb. They had taken it and worked it into the door of their church in commemoration of the strange visit of the men from the sky.

The cloud ships of the Middle Ages were a mystery almost as great as the flying saucers of our time. All that Gervase of Tilbury and Archbishop Agobard tell us of them is that they were seen in the sky and were known not to be of supernatural nature since there were men aboard them.

A strange story but surely no stranger than those we hear everyday about unusual sightings in the sky. And no stranger than other stories that have come down to us from practically every age. The oddest part of this particular one is that it is far more scientific than some of those we hear today about little green men. The way the man from the sky strangled in our atmosphere is quite accurate for any being from another planet unequipped with a spacesuit would do so despite the tales we hear of creatures from outer space walking about with no protective covering at all and

talking to carefully chosen witnesses.

I wonder what a man from the Middle Ages would call an Unidentified Flying Object. Maybe he would call it a Cloud Ship. It doesn't take too much imagination to interpret this whole story into modern terms. Ships were of course the only thing that the Bishop and Gervase of Tilbury had with which to compare the strange sightings of their times. The idea of the anchor and cable were carried over from the ship concept. The only peculiar part is their saying the man strangled in the air of earth for the people of that time knew nothing of outer space or of the possibility of other planets and other races. Gervase couldn't possibly have known that a being from another planet would likely strangle in our atmosphere.

They called them Cloud Ships then. I wonder what they'll be calling U. F. O.'s a thousand years from now.

