

GOOD ADVICE FROM THE PAST

By Waveney Girvan

“WHEN any new and unexplained phenomenon offers itself to our inquiry, the first duty of the investigator is to inform himself, with the most scrupulous accuracy, of all the circumstances, however minute, which accompany it; and if past observation cannot answer all circumstantial inquiries which his understanding may suggest as necessary, he must patiently wait the recurrence of a like phenomenon, and diligently observe. When he shall thus have collected all the circumstances that can be imagined to throw light on its origin, he will then, and not until then, be in a condition to justify an inquiry into its cause.” This excellent advice is to be found in *Popular Physics*, a book written by Dionysius Lardner, D.C.L., and published in 1856. Dr. Lardner was a prolific writer on science and ranged widely in his interests. It can be recorded that he practised what he preached: he was fair and open-minded, much more so than many of his successors. It is of interest to speculate as to what he would have made of flying saucers had he been alive today.

Clarity of thought

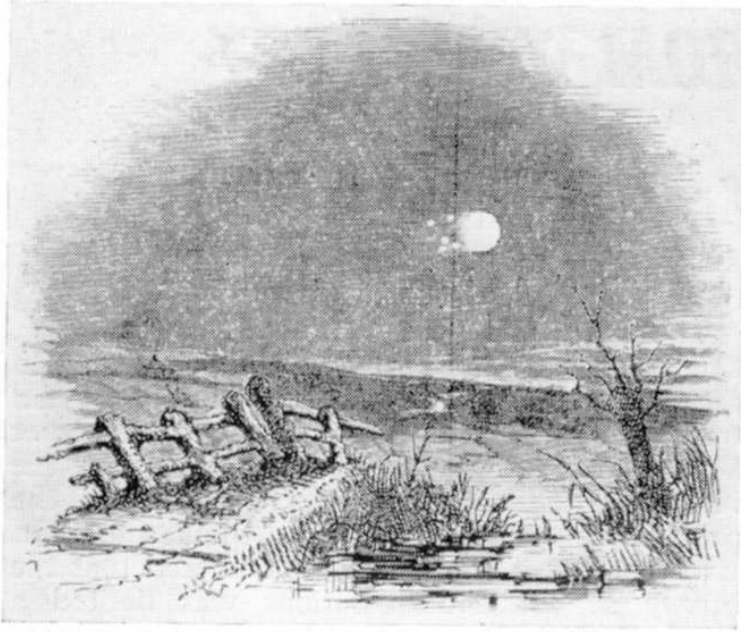
As it happens, it would appear that he *was* confronted with the mystery of UFOs, for his words of wisdom appear early in his chapter on meteoric stones and shooting stars. He realised, obviously, that many things that were observed must remain an enigma and he approached his subject with humility. He used the generic description of strange objects as meteors, but it is clear that he did not, like so many scientists of today, claim that by calling an object by a familiar name he had automatically explained the object away. Here, for instance, is his comment on the subject: “On more attentive inspection, it was seen that the meteors exhibited three distinct varieties; the first consisting of *phosphoric lines*, apparently described by a point; the second of *large fire-balls*, that at intervals darted along the sky, leaving numerous trains, which occasionally were in view for a number of minutes, and in some cases for half an hour or more; the third, of undefined, *luminous bodies*, which remained nearly stationary for a long time.” (The italics are Dr. Lardner’s.)

The word “undefined” has a very modern ring. The scientific writers of today, however, would set about these poor “undefineds” until they had translated them into weather balloons, the planet Venus, mirages, hoaxes, hallucinations and the rest of the gallimaufry so dear to the heart of the professional sceptic. We must, I think, salute Dr. Lardner, but it should be remembered that the supply of conventionalisations was limited a hundred years ago. It was too late for witches and dragons and it was too early for the weather balloon and its radio-sonde. Even the doctor’s elastic brain would have been stretched too far to accommodate an aeroplane, let alone a sputnik.

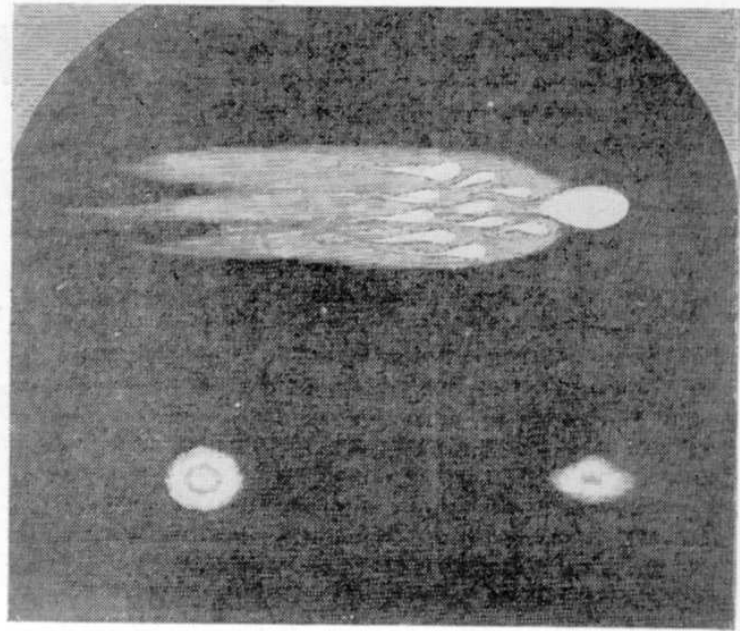
Rational explanation

Dr. Lardner was also extremely honest in his observations. He referred to the hypothesis currently being offered to explain the origin and behaviour of the meteors which had been observed by reputable astronomers. He concluded by remarking: “Instead of meteors being attracted to the earth, some of them are observed actually to rise upward and to describe orbits which are convex toward the earth, a circumstance of which, on the present hypothesis, it seems difficult to give any rational explanation.” A hundred years ago a certain caution is to be observed in the scientific world. Today a lack of rational explanation no longer deters—an irrational one will serve just as well.

The worthy doctor, although designating all such unidentified objects as “meteors,” was the first to admit that the full explanation was beyond the body of contemporary knowledge. He instances many dramatic incidents which had been recorded in several parts of the world. On August 9, for instance, between 9 p.m. and midnight, 149 such objects were observed at Geneva and its neighbourhood. Of these 149, three had the appearance of round discs, or globes, of a ruddy red colour, measuring from four to five minutes in diameter and twenty-six were more brilliant than the planet Venus. Twenty-seven were remarkable for their white, bluish light. Other colours varied between blue, yellow and orange. On November 11, 1832,



Meteor of the evening of Sunday, November 13, 1803.



Meteor of August 18, 1783, as seen from Windsor. The two lower figures represent it a few seconds before its explosion.

similar objects caused a panic at Limoges. For five hours, from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. the sky circus continued and gave rise to the belief that the end of the world was at hand.

Two illustrations from Dr. Lardner's book are here reproduced, and as the author keeps an open mind so shall I and add no comment to his own captions.

To revert to Dr. Lardner's good advice which was quoted at the beginning of this article, I think it should be addressed not only to the complete sceptic. His words would seem to apply equally well to those who, while believing in the reality of flying saucers, refuse to contemplate

the possibility of contact. The FLYING SAUCER REVIEW's policy has always tried to follow Dr. Lardner's advice: "He (the investigator) must patiently wait the recurrence of a like phenomenon, and diligently observe. When he shall thus have collected all the circumstances that can be imagined to throw light on its origin, he will then, and not until then, be in a condition to justify an inquiry into its cause." It cannot be denied that the contact claims are evidence (however unsatisfactory they may appear to many), that they recur and that, in the context of the whole saucer mystery, they call for the most searching inquiry.

Men of other planets

The Vatican newspaper's views

The London *Daily Express* reported that the current issue of the Vatican newspaper, *Osservatore Romano* had reverted to the subject of intelligent beings on other planets. It commented that if people did indeed live there they could be beyond redemption. Further, it said that space people are outside man's path to salvation as laid down by the doctrine of original sin and the redemption of Jesus Christ.

The newspaper then continued: "But if intelligent beings do exist on other planets there must be a way of saving them. At the end of life they might be destined to a natural happiness in the natural enjoyment of God. Or they might be in a supernatural state, like Adam before his sin. Then they would be without disease, death or ignorance. . . and would pass without dying to the happiness of paradise."