

THE BEHOLDERS

by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

"There is something behind the flying saucer stories," said Manderley. "Not all of them, I grant you that. I am willing to admit the usual quota of motor car headlights reflected from low clouds met balloons and, even, Venus at her brightest. I could tell you a true story about that—the officers of a large transport that had got out of Singapore one jump ahead of the Japanese saw Venus during the day, at about eleven o'clock in the morning, through a break in the clouds, and assumed that it was a Japanese observation balloon or blimp. Then the panic started.

"Anyhow," Manderley started ticking off his points on the fingers of his right hand, "we know this much about the saucers. Firstly—they can be seen. Secondly—they can be photographed. Thirdly—they can be picked up by radar. Fourthly—they've been knocking around for one helluva long time."

"And that," said Scrivens, "is the weak point in your arguments. They have been knocking around a long time. You've read Charles Fort, as we all have, and you know that his books are full of accounts of strange lights in the sky way back in the nineteenth century, and before. These lights in the sky have been knocking around for a long time. In the days before flying they were assumed by the credulous to be of supernatural origin. When Man first took to the air, they were assumed to be big dirigible airships on secret trials. In these days, when space travel is just around the corner, they are assumed to be spaceships manned by extraterrestrials. And here's a rather interesting point—some observers see them as 'saucers'—just because they are so conditioned by the word itself—others, notably airline pilots and the like—see them as fairly conventional rocket ships. But it all boils down to this. Somebody—he may be a country bumpkin, he may be a 'trained observer'—sees a light in the sky that he cannot account for. His imagination goes to work. If he knows nothing of astronautics he sees a huge, spinning disc. If he has read a few articles on rocketry he sees a rocket."

"That BOAC airliner captain didn't see either," Manderley pointed out. "Too—he saw his saucers by daylight. And they were neither flying discs nor rockets—they were changing shape the whole time."

"Clouds," said Scrivens. "Or some sort of mirage—a distorted reflection, possibly, of his own aircraft."

"Your trouble," said Manderley, "is that you can't forget that you're a past president of the Astronautics Society, that you've made your name (and your living) writing books—and good ones, I admit—on rocketry. You've got to the stage where you neither would nor could believe in a spaceship unless (a) it were a rocket and (b) had been designed by the bright boys of the Society . . ."

"Your trouble, Bill," replied Scrivens, "is that you aren't a real science fiction writer. You've always tended towards fantasy. You've always hankered after the rich and strange—and when science gets in the way . . . well, it's just too bad for science."

"Fantasy does become science eventually," said Manderley. "What about Rhine, and psionics?"

"Psionics is not a science—yet. But you're very silent, Susan. What are your views on the flying saucers?" His hostess smiled.

"Am I supposed to have any, Arthur? You and Bill are the science fiction writers—and if I hadn't met Bill I'd never have known that such a thing as science fiction existed."

"If you'd never met Bill you'd still have read about flying saucers," said Scrivens. "For the purposes of this argument you're the intelligent laywoman. Bill and I both have a certain bias. You haven't. What are your views?"

"Well," she said, "I've read Adamski's first book, and I've read Allingham's book . . ."

"Bill," cried Scrivens, "don't you supervise this woman's reading?"

"Bill got the books," said Susan Manderley.

"From the library," said her husband. "I had no intention of buying them. I wanted to read 'em myself—out of curiosity."

"All right, you read 'em," said Scrivens. "It can't be helped now. What did you make of them?"

"This is going to hurt," said Susan. "Bill's not the only writer in the family—I've done my share, you know. I can recognize sincerity when I see it, when I read it. I'm quite convinced that both Adamski and Allingham did meet the men from the flying saucers."

"Susan!" cried Manderley. "You can't say that!"

"Can't I?" she asked sweetly. "I am saying it."

"But the absurdity of it all. Just consider the facts—the biological facts. Life on this world has evolved to suit Earthly conditions. Allingham's saucer men were, according to Allingham, Martians—yet they were, according to Allingham, human. Just consider the inferior mass of Mars, the thin atmosphere, the aridity. Intelligent life may have evolved—but it'd be something suited to those conditions. Adamski's saucer men—and women—came from Venus. We don't know much about conditions there—but they will, certainly, be wildly dissimilar from those on Earth. Life will have evolved to suit those conditions."

"There was that other crank in the U.S.A.," said Scrivens, "who started the story about the little men—but men, mark you—three feet tall who were found in a crashed saucer."

"All right," said the girl. "You write about Martians and Venusians, don't you? All right, Arthur—I'll let you off. The only Martians and Venusians in your stories are the descendants of the original Earth colonists. But you, Bill, have a decided fancy for Venusians built on the same lines as Disney's almost-human frogs. And I seem to remember that you peopled Mars with

an intelligent plant. Don't argue—you did. Are your frogmen any more probable than Adamski's Venusians? Is your thinking Virginia creeper any more likely than Allingham's Martians?" She was warming up nicely. "The whole damn trouble with you science fiction writers (I didn't know the breed until I married one) is that you think that you know. Oh, you read reference books—I admit that. You read Hoyle's latest book on astronomy, and you're very impressed by his theories, especially those about Venus. I remember that you bored me with a long dissertation about the—according to Hoyle—seas of mineral oil and clouds of oily smog. Yet you still make Venus a lush, watery, jungly sort of world in your stories—and you will do so until you get round to writing a story about a line of interplanetary oil tankers. The same with Mars—you just love the canals. It doesn't matter if they were dug by that highly improbable intelligent plant of yours, or by some long-dead race who left all sorts of intriguing artifacts and ruins behind 'em—but canals you must have. Yet, when somebody like Adamski or Allingham flouts your conventions you're up in arms against him."

"You'll be saying that you believe Worlds in Collision next," sneered Manderley.

"And why shouldn't I if I want to?"

"Why not, darling? You read it in The Reader's Digest, so it must be true." He turned to Scrivens. "How any intelligent woman can read that rag just beats me."

"I could make a few remarks about your reading habits," said Susan. "The magazines that you bring home with half-undressed females sprawled all over the front cover and at least half the inside pages!"

"Research," said her husband. "Research."

"Research be damned. You're just a dirty old man before your time. If you took as much interest . . ." She broke off suddenly. "I don't know what you think of us, Arthur."

"And it all started with flying saucers," he grinned. "It's a good job we're drinking sherry and not tea—otherwise there might be some real flying saucers!"

It was a feeble joke, but it eased the tension. Scrivens looked at his watch.

"We said we'd be out at Keith's by seven-thirty," he said. "We'd better get moving."

Susan sat in the front seat with Scrivens. Manderley, sitting by himself at the back, was inclined to sulk. This, he thought, is a habit of which I shall have to cure myself. Yet—let us face the facts—things aren't what they were between Susan and myself. Not in any way. We've gone off the rails somewhere. Our dreams just haven't come true. Tonight's silly quarrel was symptomatic of what is happening—this flaring up over an absurd thing like a discussion of flying saucers. . . .

He stared out of the window at the countryside through which they were

passing. He forced his thoughts away from the morbidly subjective channel that they had been following. He thought, There is not much traffic out tonight.

The evening was fine and clear. Low in the west hung a crescent moon with, just above it, the shimmering point of light that was Venus. The trees were black silhouettes against the pale, but darkening, blue of the sky.

But Venus is a morning star at this time of the year, thought Manderley. That's not Venus. And it's moving. . . . An airplane? No, it can't be. . . .

"Arthur," he said suddenly, "you're in the know. Has anybody put up an artificial satellite yet?"

"No, although we don't really know what's going on behind the Iron Curtain. Why?"

"What's that thing in the sky, then? Above the new moon and a little to the right . . . coming this way . . ."

Scrivens stopped the car suddenly.

"This," he said tensely, "we must see. God, what I'd give for a camera! But note every detail, both of you! Every detail!"

"I can hear it now," said Manderley. "A humming noise, like a giant bee . . ."

"No," Scrivens contradicted him. "That's rocket drive. You could never mistake that peculiar, screaming roar for anything else."

"I can't hear anything," said the girl.

The thing was approaching fast. Manderley strained his eyes, began to make out details. He saw the gleaming, lenticulate hull, rimmed with pale fire, and, as it tilted for the descent, the dome on top of it that must house the control room. The thing was flying low, and it was huge, and as it swept directly overhead it blotted out the sky. Silently it landed behind the car, blocking the road and crushing the hedges on either side of it.

"What do we do now?" asked Manderley. "Drive like hell to the nearest town, make our report and get ourselves laughed at by the whole world, and especially by those in the same trade as ourselves?"

"I'm getting out of the car," said Scrivens. "I want to meet whoever—or whatever—is piloting this thing."

"Is this wise?" asked Susan.

"As wise as running away would be—wiser perhaps."

"I'm coming with you," said Manderley. To his wife he said, "Stay in the car. If any sort of hell starts popping—get out of here fast!"

"What do you take me for?" she demanded. There was a flash of shapely legs as she eased herself from the seat, then she was standing on the road

with the two men.

Manderley didn't see any door open in the side of the saucer—yet, suddenly, standing on the road and facing them was a being. He could not be sure of its actual shape—it was encased in a dull-gleaming armor with an opaque, featureless helmet that must be, Manderley decided, a spacesuit. It stood, as it were, on a tripod—was the third limb another leg, or a tail like that of a kangaroo?

Inside his head a voice was speaking.

We come in peace. We are from the fourth planet of the sun that you call Antares. We have been seeking for a suitable ambassador, one of your species, who can represent us on this planet.

"But I'm not qualified," said Manderley aloud.

You are. You are not a scientist—yet you know something of science. And you have imagination.

Manderley glanced at the others.

Scrivens, he saw to his amazement, was talking too. He listened to the incredible words.

"Of course I shall do my best to have the fault in your rocket motors repaired—I'm not without influence, you know. Payment? Well—if you insist . . . a trip to the Moon and back..."

The voice in Manderley's mind, the voice that had been speaking with such clarity, died to a mumble. He looked at his wife. She was not speaking, but her lips were parted, and there was a look on her face that he had not seen for a long time, for too long a time. He saw her step forward, her arms open to embrace the being in the spacesuit.

Manderley shouted. He caught the girl with his left hand, flung her behind him. With his right fist he swung a blow at the helmeted head. But he met no resistance, and the impetus of his action sent him sprawling on to the roadway. Dimly he was aware that his wife was kneeling beside him, dimly he was aware that the saucer had lifted, was hanging above them. He tensed his body for the killing impact of whatever sort of weapon the aliens might use.

They were helping him to his feet then—Scrivens and Susan. Scrivens was furious. He pointed a shaking hand to where the strange visitant was now no more than a fainter star among the faint stars, a tiny, drifting speck of light vanishing in the vast reaches of the darkling sky.

"What did you think you were doing?" he shouted. "So much we might have learned! The secrets of space travel within our grasp—and you had to attack an inoffensive being half your size and frighten him away!"

"Not so fast," said Manderley. "Tell me—what did you see? What did you hear?"

"A rocket, of course. A big rocket. An airlock. door on its side opened, and a

man—I'll call him that—came out. He was about three feet tall, and heavily furred (I don't think it was clothing). He had a face rather like that of a wise cat. He seemed to be feeling the heat rather badly and was having trouble with his breathing. He communicated by some form of telepathy, and told me that he was the captain of the first rocket from Mars to Earth, and that he had not intended to make a landing but that the rocket motors were giving trouble. He asked our help in repairing them."

"A rocket . . ." said Manderley. "Then why weren't we incinerated when it took off? Look at the asphalt of the road—unmarked!"

"You're right. What did you see?"

"A saucer. A huge, lenticulate disc, of metal construction. I thought that it crushed the hedges on either side of the road when it landed—but the hedges look untouched. And the thing that came out of it was in a spacesuit, and it either had three legs or two legs and a tail. It was a telepath. It told me that it came from Antares IV and that it was looking for some suitable Earthman to act as the agent for its race here on Earth. Then I saw Susan walking into its arms, and . . ."

"But what do you make of it, Bill?"

"You know the old saying—Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It's the same with flying saucers. Adamski's was manned—and I use the word deliberately—by Venusians. I suppose that he had some sort of fancy for the planet Venus—but not the scientific education to realize that a Venusian could not possibly be human. Allingham's saucer was manned by Martians—and the same applied to him. That BOAC captain probably saw the saucers as they really are—things of changing shape."

"But why should my saucer—even though it was a rocket—have been manned by Martians?" asked Scrivens.

"Because Mars—and not the Moon—is really the goal of all you rocketry people. Look at von Braun's very detailed plans for the voyage, the landing and the exploration. But let me finish what I was going to say—it's been an idea of mine for some time, but I haven't gotten around to using it yet—which is that the saucers aren't spaceships, but living beings and intelligent ones. Just imagine intelligent creatures living on the floor of the ocean deeps! What would they, what could they, know about us? An occasional wreck might come drifting down, giving rise to all sorts of wild conjectures about something living in what would be, to them, a hard vacuum. Well—suppose that there are beings, as much natives of this world as we are, living at stratospheric levels but with the power of making descents to what is, to them, the ocean floor. They might not be life as we know it, they might be mere swirls of energy drawing their life force direct from the sun. They'll have been getting curious about us of late our high-altitude aircraft, balloons and rockets must have got them rather worried. They may—assuming that they are masters of hypnotic technique—have devised a method of finding out just what makes us tick. They come down in some lonely place—and the person to whom they show themselves sees what he expects to see, what he wants to see. No two persons will see the same."

Manderley sat down on the grass verge of the road, pulled his pipe out of his pocket, filled it and lit it.

"What did you see, Susan?" he asked quietly.

"It was small," she said quietly. "It was a gleaming, golden bowl rather than a saucer. I don't know how it was propelled or where it came from. And there was a man. He wasn't wearing a spacesuit, and he hadn't got fur—just a man. And he wanted me to come with him to wherever it was that he had come from—west of the moon, perhaps . . . I don't know."

"And you were going with him," said Manderley.

"Yes, I was going with him. Because . . . because ... can't you see? Won't you see? Because he was you, as you used to be...."

Manderley relit his pipe. He said nothing.

"And then you—the real you—came between us. (I didn't know, then, that it was some horrible monster you thought you were saving me from.) But it was the real you—and I realized then how much I should lose by flying off with an ideal that never existed, never could exist...."

"I'm going to walk back along the road to that pub we passed," said Scrivens. "I want to use their telephone. You can sit in the car if you like."

They never heard him.