

the

explanation

by GEORGE WHITLEY

We weren't sorry when a halt was, called. It was rough work hacking your way through that jungle.

Have you seen any men with tails—or any flying saucers—recently? George Whitley, the pseudonym of a prominent. British SF writer who' has mixed feelings about UFOs reports on an expedition to the back parts of Papua and the discovery there of a decidedly unusual lost tribe.

WE WERE talking that night about flying saucers—"we" being the Westernport Science Fiction Club. Don't get the idea that all science fiction fans are believers in flying saucers—take it from me, they're not. Furthermore, the big majority of them take a very dim view of those gentlemen who claim to have met real live Martians, Venusians or whatever who have made the voyage to Earth in their lenticulate spacecraft. Such published absurdities give science fiction an undeserved bad name—undeserved, because no real science fiction writer would ever entertain the idea that either Mars or Venus could support beings even remotely human in physical characteristics.

We were talking about flying saucers that night mainly because of a new addition to our club library—THE REPORT ON UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS, by Ruppelt. It's a fascinating book, and leaves one with the impression that there just might be something behind the saucer sightings. Browning—one of our members whose tastes in reading have always run more to fantasy than to science fiction proper—maintained that Ruppelt, with his admission that 23% of the sightings remain inexplicable, makes it quite obvious that the saucers are of extra-Terran origin. He maintained too that many of the sightings explained by various authorities have never been explained, but only explained away.

It was, I'm afraid, a very uneven argument— Browning versus nine of us. We just refused even to consider the possibility that the saucers might be visitants from Outer Space. We just refused to believe that there was not some natural, and obvious, explanation for every sighting. We just laughed at the idea that any sort of space travel was possible without conventional rocket drive. Browning's idea of a combined gyroscope and bar magnet whiffing along the lines of magnetic force was, to us, just ludicrous.

The meeting had reached the stage of an Irish parliament—everybody talking and nobody listening—when Corrigan dropped in. Corrigan is the sub-editor of our local rag— THE WESTERN-PORT TIMES AND HERALD—and writes science fiction, which he sometimes sells, in his spare time. He was not alone—the stranger with him was very much like him in feature but taller and thinner, and was tanned more deeply than any of us could afford to be even by the end of summer.

We were not surprised when Corrigan introduced the newcomer to us as his brother. He had talked often of his big brother Bill. Bill was the bright boy of the family and had graduated from local rags to the big city dailies and,

as we had been told frequently, had succeeded in seeing a good deal of the more out of the way parts of the world at his employers' expense. He was, we were told after the introductions had been made, just back from Papua, where he had accompanied an expedition organized by one of the big oil companies.

"Is it true," asked Browning eagerly, "that there are still men with tails there?"

"I've never seen one," grinned Bill Corrigan. "But don't let me interrupt the argument you were having when we came in; it sounded like a good one. What was it all about?"

"Flying saucers," I said. "We don't believe in 'em—but Browning, here, does. He has a romantic nature. He even tries to make out that most of the explanations of saucer sightings aren't explanations at all, but merely explaining away..."

"They are so explaining away," maintained Browning, his fat face earnest. "What do you say, Mr. Corrigan?"

Bill Corrigan laughed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not an expert on flying saucers—or unidentified flying objects, as they are called these days. All that I hope is that if there's a landing—a real, genuine, dinkum landing—I'm on hand with a good cameraman and a scad of reliable and reputable witnesses..."

"But what do you think, Mr. Corrigan?" persisted Browning.

"Drop it, Jack," I said. "We'll save the saucers for some other night. They'll keep. For once in our lives we have a distinguished guest to entertain—and I'm sure that all of us would rather listen to him than to your twaddle, even though he hasn't seen any men with tails, or flying saucers..."

I realized, too late, that I had been unforgivably rude to Browning, that the sort of talk that was common currency among ourselves would not impress strangers. Bill Corrigan ignored me—well, I deserved it—and addressed himself to Browning.

"Talking of flying saucers and such—I did find a lost tribe," he said quietly.

"What's that to do with flying saucers?" asked his brother.

"Let me tell the story my way," replied Corrigan, a slight edge to his voice. "Talking of flying saucers—I found a lost tribe. Period.

"It's a fascinating country, Papua," he went on. "There's so much of it that's never been explored, even with the use of aircraft. There may well be, tucked away in some inaccessible valley among the mountains, a tribe of tailed men or a herd of animals that should have been extinct millions of years ago. There are rumors, of course, and every now and again somebody will stumble upon some Shangri La (James Hilton has a lot to answer for!) of which, unluckily for my profession, the inhabitants are very little different from the tribesmen living in more accessible localities.

"I don't know how much my brother has told you about me, but I'll put you into the picture in any case. I was sent along by my paper to accompany the Regal Oil Company's expedition into the interior. I've no need to tell you that in these days, bearing in mind the game of power politics being played in the middle East, oil is news.

"Bailey, the geologist, was in charge of the expedition. Besides myself, there were three other white men. We had, of course, the usual retinue of guides and carriers, and an interpreter who was supposed to be capable of handling conversations in any of the languages or dialects we were likely to encounter. Air cover had been arranged with the local airline, whose pilots had to keep their eyes over us and our signals.

"I could go into detail about our expedition—but it's all in my book, anyhow. Come to that—it's all in at least a dozen books. It was only at the end that we strayed off the beaten track, and until then the peoples we encountered had all been well written up by anthropologists and others.

"It was on the banks of the Rainbow River—that's a good translation of the native name—that Bailey started to show signs of real interest. The cause of his rather more than mild excitement was obvious even to me—a film on the surface of the water that was iridescent in the rays of the sun. Bailey took samples and made tests, and declared that this shimmering film was mineral oil and that there must be a seepage into the river upstream from us.

"The manufacture of canoes from suitable logs took our bearers a remarkably short time—after little more than a day encamped by the river our expedition was waterborne. A dug-out canoe is not the most comfortable means of transport—but it's better than walking!

"All went well until we got to the rapids—and then our carriers went on strike. We thought at first that it was a strike for extra payment—a sort of portage bonus—but our interpreter soon made things clear. There were, it seemed, people living above the rapids, and our carriers were frightened of them. No, they weren't head hunters. They weren't cannibals. It was just that there was something dreadfully wrong with their way of life that was, as far as we could gather from the interpreter, just looking for trouble. Not that there ever had been any trouble—but when it did strike it would be as well for innocent bystanders to be well clear.

"Bailey, as I have told you, is a geologist, not an ethnologist—but he was, I could see, intrigued by this vision of brown skinned Ajaxes defying the lightning. I was too, of course. We kept on questioning our interpreter as to just what was wrong with the people above the rapids, but he lacked the vocabulary to make himself clear. All that we could get out of him was the information that this hitherto undiscovered tribe made a practice of treading on the corns of both gods and devils and that, sooner or later, an alliance of supernatural powers would make a spectacular end to them.

"After a deal of discussion we decided to leave the carriers and the interpreter—they were immune to all inducements—at the foot of the rapids and to press on ourselves, carrying what we could in the way of provisions and equipment. It was a foolhardy decision—had not the interpreter been

so sure about the pacific character of the people above the rapids we should never have made it.

"The going was tough. The climbing was bad enough by itself—having to hack our way through the jungle did not improve matters. We were not sorry when Bailey called a halt that night. After a cold and scrappy meal out of tins we slept soundly, in spite of the pain of our various lacerations, contusions and abrasions, in spite of the vicious and hungry insects.

"The next day we climbed, and the next. All of us were beginning to dismiss the interpreter's story as so much moonshine—not that it much mattered, Bailey reminded us; we had still to discover the source of the seepage of oil into the river.

"It was on the morning of the fourth day that we reached, at last, the head of the rapids. We were all of us surprised by the quiet, beauty of the valley and the lake that we found there. The landscape, too, had that tamed quality that one associates with Man—with Man at a certain minimal level of culture, that is. We could see the village from where we were—a sizable place, a mile or so away. The thin, blue smoke, of cooking fires told us that it was inhabited.

"Bailey decided—and wisely—that it would not be good policy to stumble into the village looking like the wrecks we felt. We stripped and took it in turns to wash in the lake, at least two of us maintaining a careful watch all the time for crocodiles and possibly hostile natives. We washed our clothes and spread them in the sun to dry. We shaved. We made a leisurely meal of the last of our provisions and some huge, ripe bananas that we found growing near our bathing place.

"It was in the early afternoon that we started walking towards the village along a well trodden trail. We proceeded with caution, alert for ambush, for pitfall. When we were about a quarter of a mile from the settlement a man came out to meet us, striding with the easy assurance of one who has lived in peace all his life and fears no man.

"He was tall, even by European standards, and he was naked except for a gold band around his left upper arm. His skin was very dark, but his features were more Caucasian than Melanesian.

"He said, when he was a few feet from us, 'Good afternoon, gentlemen—" It wasn't so much the words that puzzled me as the faint suggestion of dialect that I couldn't place at the time.

"He was, he told us courteously, the son of the Chief. He apologised for his father's failure to greet us in person—the old man, it seemed, was suffering from a slight hangover. It was a pity that we had missed the party..."

"What party?"

"The native was taken aback by our ignorance. All white men, his manner implied as he answered, should celebrate Burns Night..."

"By this time we had reached the village. It was spotlessly clean. There were no heaps of decaying garbage to offend the eye and nose. What few

dogs we saw were plump and well cared for. Even more remarkable, the children neither ran from us in terror nor crowded around us in curiosity. Oh, they were curious enough, as were their mothers, but it was a polite sort of curiosity. The men, our guide informed us, were still indoors, still recovering from the celebration.

"The Chief's house was bigger than the others. It was, of course, built of wood, with a roof of native thatch. But it was, as were all the other houses, uncompromisingly plain and severe in appearance. There were no elaborate, gaudily painted carvings around the doorway. There were, amazingly, windows—not glazed, but filled with a sort of mosquito netting of native manufacture.

"Inside, the house was cool and clean. The room into which the Chief's son led us was airy and spacious. It was furnished in European style—there was a table, and there were chairs made out of bamboo. There was, even, a bookshelf along one wall. I edged close to this, got a good look at its contents. There was a volume of Burns' verse. There was Winwoode Reade's *THE MARTYRDOM OF MAN*. There was, in fact, a fine collection of late Victorian or early Edwardian rationalist literature.

"The Chief came in then—a portly old gentleman with snowy white hair. Like his son, he was naked. Like his son, he spoke perfect English with that hint of Scottish accent. Like his son, he displayed in his features a strong suggestion of European ancestry. His eyes were a rather faded, but startling, blue.

"He shook our hands in the European manner. He was glad, he said, of the excuse to take a hair of the dog that had bitten him the previous night.

He clapped his hands, and a girl came in with a tray, fashioned from split bamboo, on which were bamboo drinking mugs and two earthenware jugs, one of them porous and sweating. In the porous jug was cool water. In the other was—whisky. Oh, it wasn't Scotch, but, believe it or not, those naked savages had succeeded in distilling a liquor that would pass for at least a medium-grade rye!

"As you can well imagine, I had my notebook out and my pencil ready. Oh, the Chief's son wanted us to tell him what was happening in the outside world, but the Chief himself was the type of old man who enjoys listening to the sound of his own voice. He was more than willing to tell us the history of his tribe. First of all, he enlightened us as to the reason for the bad reputation held by his people. It was, he said, because they were rationalists, believing in neither totem nor tabu, god nor devil. 'Everything,' he assured us, 'everything has a rational explanation...' And as he talked I felt that the ghost of old David McInnes who, years ago, had stumbled upon this tribe, who had taught them his language and his own tribal customs, who had impressed upon them his own hard-headed respect for facts, who had married the Chief's daughter and become Chief himself, must be hovering over the village and smiling with more pride than the ghost of a missionary revisiting the scene of his spiritual triumphs.

"Oh, it was fascinating... The continuity of it all, even to the accent.... And then, over the pleasant baritone of the Chief's voice, we heard another

sound, a droning hum, swelling in intensity. Bailey got to his feet.

" 'We must make a fire," he said.. 'A big fire, with plenty of smoke...'

" 'A fire?' asked the Chief. ` But it isn't cold. It is not yet sunset...'

" 'There's no time to waste."

"He led the way outside. The Chief, puzzled but still courteous, followed him. The rest of us followed the Chief.

"We could see the Dakota clearly. It was flying over the center of the valley, the opposite shore of the lake.

Men and women and children were standing in the single street of the village, looking at the aircraft. Some of them were pointing at it. When they saw their Chief, however, they contrived to ignore the aeroplane most elaborately.

" 'What do you want a fire for?' asked the Chief again, obviously puzzled, yet determined to gratify the wishes of this unreasonable guest.

" 'I want to make a signal to the big iron bird."

"Well, we've heard a lot lately about U and Non-U words and phrases—and 'big iron bird', in this part of Papua at least, seemed to be most definitely Non-U. The Chief gave Bailey a look that said, more plainly than any words, that he had let the side down with a resounding crash.

"To the aeroplane, then,' said Bailey.

"A signa1?' asked the Chief. 'To... To propitiate it?'"

" 'Of course not!' Bailey was dancing up and down with impatience. 'We want to tell them where we are. Then they'll come and drop stores, and equipment ...'

'Then you are going to propitiate it,' said the old man. 'Mr. Bailey, I'm shocked. I thought that all men were rationalists ...'

" `What the hell has rationalism got to do with it?'

"'Everybody knows,' said the Chief reasonably, 'that those things aren't gods. They may be cloud formations, they may be some sort of mirage—but there must be a rational explanation! ' "