



#### MEN ON THE MOON?

*Just one hundred years ago this fall, in 1835, the scientific and newspaper world was aroused over reports that a famous astronomer in South Africa was secretly using a super-telescope so powerful that it could detect living inhabitants on the moon's surface; a race of hairy moon men. This old print depicts what was supposed to have been seen through the wholly imaginary telescope.*

ASTRONOMY

## Moon Hoax, Newspaper Prank, Now Just a Century Old

By JAMES STICKLEY

JUST a hundred years ago this autumn people in America and Europe were eagerly discussing a strange subject: whether or not there were winged men on the moon! By taking advantage of the reputation of a great astronomer who was in a distant and inaccessible part of the world, a New York newspaper man perpetrated a hoax which even deceived some scientists who should have known better.

It started in the *New York Sun* for August 25, 1835. Nearly the entire front page on that date was devoted to what purported to be an account of "Great Astronomical Discoveries Lately Made by Sir John Herschel, LL.D., F.R.S., etc., at the Cape of Good Hope," reprinted, it was said, "from a supplement to the *Edinburgh Journal of Science*." It started out with this grandiose opening:

"In this unusual addition to our journal, we have the happiness to make known to the British publick, and thence to the whole civilized world, recent dis-

coveries in astronomy which will build an imperishable monument to the age in which we live, and confer upon the present generation of the human race a proud distinction through all future time. It has been poetically said that 'the stars are the hereditary regalia of man, as the intellectual sovereignty of the animal creation.' He may now fold the Zodiack around him with a loftier consciousness of his mental supremacy."

Then it went on, continuing for six instalments on succeeding days, to tell how Sir John had discovered how to make a much more powerful telescope than any ever constructed before, or, for that matter, since! This was supposed to have been done by "a transfusion of artificial light through the focal object of vision." In other words, the image of the distant object, formed in the eyepiece of a telescope, was treated as a real object itself, and magnified by projecting more light into it, and then through the lenses of a microscope! Of course, the idea is ridiculous. The "focal object" is not a real object at all, but is made of light, like a picture on

a movie screen, and adding more light to it only blurs it. If the bright lights of a movie theater are turned on during the show, the picture is entirely obliterated.

But using this totally imaginary scientific principle, Herschel was said to have built a telescope with which objects on the moon only a fraction of an inch in diameter could be seen. Animals, like buffalo, antelope, and sheep, were seen, and finally flying men, who were named "Vespertilio-homo," or "bat-men." Some of them seemed to be very intelligent, and had beautiful buildings, one of which seemed to be a temple.

So much interest did the story arouse, that it was immediately reprinted as a pamphlet, and 60,000 copies were sold in a month. Then it was republished in England, and translated into French and German, so that it soon spread over the civilized world. All this time Herschel himself, the great son of a still greater father, Sir William Herschel, was actually studying the heavens from South Africa. He had gone there the previous year, with his huge telescope, to observe stars not visible from England. With no fast mail, cables, or radio, he knew nothing about this abuse of his name until it was too late to stop it.

Later it proved that the author of the hoax was Richard Adams Locke, who became editor of the *Sun*, so little was his reputation affected. A French astronomer, Nicholas Nicollet, who had emigrated to the United States a few years before, has been charged with aiding him because of his animosity towards Francois Arago, another French astronomer who is said to have accepted the story at its face value. However, though Nicollet might have furnished some material, the bulk of it could hardly have been written by a man with his scientific training, and Locke must have the main credit, or blame, as the case may be!

*Science News Letter, October 19, 1935*

### SOME ENIGMAS OF MODERN SCIENCE

by Guy Clinton

asks for a reconsideration of some currently accepted postulates and theories. Your bent for philosophical thought will be stimulated. Price: cloth bound, 80c; paper bound, 60c. Published by author.

Send orders to Retail Book Department

**SCIENCE NEWS LETTER**

2101 Constitution Avenue, Washington, D. C.