



House of Flying Objects

By Robert Wallace

The extraordinary occurrences began at three-thirty on the afternoon of Monday, February 3, 1958, in the home of Mr. James M. Herrmann at 1648 Redwood Path in the town of Seaford, Long Island, New York.

The weather was cold and clear, the temperature about 29 degrees, the relative humidity 43 per cent. In the house were Herrmann's wife, Lucille, and his two children, a thirteen-year-old daughter who is also named Lucille, and a twelve-year-old son, James Jr. As they were not expecting anything unusual to occur, their recollections are not absolutely precise. But they are agreed that at about 3:30 P.M. a number of bottles containing various liquids, in various rooms of the house, suddenly began to "pop" and to jump about.

In the Herrmanns' bedroom a bottle of holy water on the bureau became uncapped and tipped over, spilling some of its contents. In the bathroom a bottle of shampoo and a bottle of medicine behaved similarly, as did a bottle of liquid starch in the kitchen and a bottle of bleaching fluid in the basement.

None of the Herrmanns actually saw any of the bottles move—on this occasion—but all heard them. As they hurried to investigate the sounds, they discovered that the bottles had been freshly spilled and therefore could not have been tipped over earlier by some intruding child or vandal.

The bottles were all sealed with screw caps of metal or plastic, which require two or three rotations for removal. The noises which accompanied the uncapping were loudly audible throughout the house and sounded somewhat like the popping of champagne corks.

None of the bottles contained a carbonated liquid, although some—perhaps the starch, bleach, and medicine—did contain fluids which might have generated gas under some conditions. But the liquid in the holy-water bottle was chemically nothing more than plain water.

The reaction of the Herrmanns was not fright but amazement. Mrs. Herrmann, a practical, intelligent, and quiet woman, a nonpracticing registered nurse, decided to telephone her husband at his office in New York City.

"What," she said to him, "is going on around here?"

"I am thirty-five miles away, dear," said Mr. Herrmann. "How should I know what's going on around there?"

Mr. Herrmann, an airline representative, is like his wife, a calm and hard-headed individual. "Well," he said at length, "as long as no one has been hurt and no great damage done, I won't come home early."

Accordingly he took his usual commuters' train and arrived in Seaford at

7 P.M., prepared to deal with whatever chemical phenomenon or practical joker he might encounter. But he found nothing unusual at home. His wife and children had recovered from their amazement, and all were inclined to forget the affair.

Nothing occurred on Tuesday, and by Thursday, February 6, the odd events of Monday had begun to fade in the Herrmanns' minds. But then, at approximately the same time in the afternoon, with the same individuals present, another half-dozen bottles in various parts of the house loudly popped their caps and tumbled about.

On Friday, again at the same time and with the same individuals in the house, more bottles popped and jumped.

On Sunday morning, February 9, Mr. Herrmann had his chance for first-hand observation. The starch, turpentine, and holy-water bottles popped again. At about 11 A.M., while Mr. Herrmann was standing in the doorway of the bathroom talking to son James, who was brushing his teeth, something even more dramatic took place. Before Mr. Herrmann's wide eyes, a bottle of medicine quietly moved eighteen inches in a southerly direction across a dead-level sink top and smashed into the sink. Meanwhile the bottle of shampoo moved twelve inches in a westerly direction across the same sink top and fell to the floor. No human hand had been near the bottles, and there were no devices in the bathroom that could have propelled them.

Mr. Herrmann telephoned the police. Patrolman James Hughes of the Nassau County police approached the assign-

ment with the weary skepticism of a man who has often been summoned to arrest a three-headed Martian in the attic and found a mouse in the cellar. Still, he was polite: Mr. Herrmann is not only a respected member of the community, with no record for making screwball complaints, but also a reserve captain in the police department.

Patrolman Hughes collected the Herrmann family in the living room and began to ask questions which soon proved unnecessary. Even as he spoke, bottles began to pop in the bathroom nearby. Patrolman Hughes returned to the station house with the word that something was certainly wrong at the Herrmann house.

The Nassau County police then assigned to the case a detective named Joseph Tozzi. Tozzi has a sharp and pleasantly cynical mind and is a keen observer of detail. It was his immediate notion that, if the bottles were indeed moving, they were being moved by one or more human beings, either directly or by means of some contrivance. He also considered the possibilities of falsehood and hallucination. Tozzi did not then, and does not now, believe in the supernatural.

Tozzi observed that most of the disturbances had taken place more or less along a line from the northeast to the southeast corner of the house. Perhaps, in some odd fashion, a high-frequency radio transmission along this line had caused the motion. A licensed ham radio operator indeed lived nearby, but it developed that he had not turned on his transmitter for three years.

On February 15 the holy-water bottle spilled for the fourth time. Later that day, at about 7:40 P.M., the Herrmann children and an adult relative were seated in the living room watching a television program. Suddenly a porcelain figurine arose from a table, moved three feet through the air, and dropped to the rug. By this time news of the occurrences in the Herrmanns' house had been carried in New York newspapers and sent by wire services throughout the country. Soon letters and telephone calls began to come in large numbers.

Among the early letters were some reasonable suggestions. Mrs. Helen Connolly of Revere, Massachusetts, wrote to tell the Herrmanns to take heart. She had had the same trouble in her house, she said, but worse. Tables, large upholstered easy chairs, and even an artificial fireplace had flown about her living room—but the cause had been found and the occurrences halted. The cause had been a downdraft in her chimney and the cure a patented metal chimney cap. Detective Tozzi interviewed Mrs. Connolly by telephone, concluded that she was a reasonable person, and decided, with Mr. Herrmann, to try her advice. A rotating metal turbine-type cap was installed on the chimney.

Soon afterward, while Detective Tozzi was in the house, a porcelain figurine in the living room took off from a table, flew some twelve feet, and smashed with a thunderous report against a desk. The metal cap is still on the chimney, since it does not appear to do any harm. It cost only nine dollars.

Among the visitors to the Herrmann

house during the height of the disturbances was a physicist, Mr. Robert Zider. Using a Y-shaped, wooden dowsing stick, Mr. Zider finally announced that there were streams of water beneath the house and that these could have been the root of the trouble. The Herrmanns and Detective Tozzi thanked Mr. Zider for his opinion.

Detective Tozzi pursued his investigations with patience, carefully considering every suggestion that came by letter or telephone. Sonic booms from passing aircraft? Certainly not, said the Air Force, after reviewing its flight records. Radio waves? No, said the Radio Corporation of America, which checked and found no unusual signals. Underground vibrations? An investigation revealed nothing extraordinary.

On the evening of February 20 the occurrences resumed with increased violence. A bottle of ink loudly popped its screw top, flew across the dining room, and smashed against a wall. Another porcelain figurine sailed across the living room and smashed against a desk. A heavy sugar bowl flew off the dining room table but did not break. Detective Tozzi observed the sugar bowl during the latter part of its flight and also noted that no one had been close enough to its take-off point to have thrown it. Young James had been seated at the table but not within reaching distance of the bowl.

The foregoing barrage was too much for the Herrmanns. Late on the evening of the twenty-first, they evacuated the house and went to visit a relative. During their absence nothing unusual took place in their house—or in the relative's. But



on the evening of the twenty-third, soon after the Herrmanns' return, the sugar bowl flew off the dining-room table again. This time it smashed.

On February 25 at half-past seven in the morning, when the Herrmanns' bedroom was unoccupied, an eighteen-inch plaster statue flew about twelve feet from a bureau top to the wall opposite, striking and denting the frame of a large mirror but not breaking the glass. The statue itself was only slightly damaged.

By this time the Herrmanns' mail had become heavy—perhaps twenty-five letters a day.

"Dear people, you are being visited by those from Space. Speak friendly to them. They come for America's good."

"Herman, I was read about your trouble in the paper. Sound like it could be ghostlys and ghostly don't like sulphur. Burn some in every room and if it ghostly it will go away."

Several of the letters were from obvious crackpots, but the great majority of correspondents were people of good will, setting aside various real-estate agents who wondered whether the Herrmanns might consider selling their house for \$37.50, more or less. A few saw the opportunity for making money. "Dear Herman: Have you considered opening your weird house to the public and charging admission?"

For all practical purposes the house was open to the public. The Herrmanns were willing to listen to anyone who came to the door or telephoned—and the telephone had begun to ring seventy-five times a day. Most callers were reasonably considerate as to time; ordinarily,

the Herrmanns could count on being able to sleep from 12:30 A.M. to 6:00 A.M. without being awakened by the dark drilling of the phone to hear a voice say "Repent!" or "The Sputniks are causing it."

As time wore on, an increasing number of callers and correspondents suggested that the disturbances were caused by a poltergeist, the "noisy ghost" of folklore. Traditionally, poltergeists are prankish but not malevolent, inclined to commit precisely the sort of nuisances that had been taking place in the Herrmanns' house. There are numerous records of poltergeists in the scientific and quasi-scientific literature of Europe and the United States, although there is probably no case of poltergeistism anywhere that has been authenticated beyond reasonable doubt. But there are reputable scientists who do believe in the existence of some as-yet-unexplained natural force which can mysteriously cause objects to move about, and for which poltergeist may be merely a silly name. A substantial body of sound scientific evidence, much of it accumulated during the past thirty years by Dr. J. B. Rhine at the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University, points to the conclusion that some people, under some conditions, can influence the behavior of matter without touching it. The force involved, the power of mind over matter, is called psychokinesis.

None of the letter writers suggested psychokinesis as the phenomenon involved in the Herrmann household. "Poltergeist" was as close as any of them came. Several assumed that since some-

thing supernatural was perhaps taking place, the Herrmanns themselves must have occult knowledge. "I have had forty-three fires in my place of business in one night," wrote one. "Can you tell me the reason?" Another said, "I too have had the same trouble, especially with Canadian whisky corks, but when I purchased it in Washington, D.C., the same thing happened. What is causing it?"

Whatever the cause, the Herrmanns' troubles continued. Moreover, the size of the affected objects increased. On February 24 a heavy bureau toppled face forward to the floor in the room of twelve-year-old James. Detective Tozzi, who was in the house at the time, is certain that no member of the household was close enough to the bureau to have pushed it. On February 25 when young James was doing his homework alone in the basement playroom, a ten-pound phonograph suddenly took off from its table and sailed fifteen feet across the room. It was this occurrence, to which the newspapers promptly referred as "The Case of the Hi-Fly," that caused a good deal of suspicion to be focused on young James. It called to mind the fact that the boy had been on the scene, or very close to the scene, during about seventy-five per cent of all the incidents. To many of them he had been the sole witness. He is an exceptionally bright boy, an honor student, a builder of models, and a reader of science fiction. These qualifications inspired some reporters to "solve" the case by pinning the blame on James. This seems unfair, particularly in view of the fact that Detective

Tozzi, a tough-minded policeman, has not accused the boy.

Nevertheless, some scientific minds had been thinking about James. When the disturbances were at their height in mid-February, news of them arrived at Dr. Rhine's Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University. The stories were of particular interest to Dr. Rhine's assistant, Dr. J. Gaiher Pratt, who decided that it might be worth while to make a trip from North Carolina to New York to investigate them. Dr. Pratt is a sober scientist who would not think of using the word "ghost" in polite conversation. He has never seen objects moved as a result of mental power. But he does believe that mind *may* influence matter. "It is within the realm of possibility," he once remarked, "that if eight million New Yorkers at one time concentrated on moving the Empire State Building, it might move a bit."

Dr. Pratt arrived in Seaford on February 25. The Herrmanns received him as they received all comers. If Dr. Pratt could suggest an explanation, the Herrmanns would be grateful.

In the annals of poltergeists it has been consistently noted that the mysterious motion of objects has taken place in households containing adolescent children. It has been speculated that some children at some time may have psychokinetic power of which they may be quite unaware. They may be as astonished as anyone else at the sudden motion of an object but may still in some unknown way be responsible for it. Dr. Pratt did not advance this extraordinary theory in regard to James. He merely

said that he had come to Seaford as an observer with an open mind. But he did spend much of his time in James' company. Soon after his arrival he seated himself with James at the table in the basement playground where James had been sitting when the phonograph flew across the room. For a considerable period he played a game, "Careers," with James, looking past the boy's shoulder at the replaced phonograph and at other loose, light objects in the room. He was sufficiently distracted to lose the game.

Whatever Dr. Pratt may have hoped, the fact is that nothing unusual took place during his stay, and he returned to North Carolina on February 28. Perhaps it seemed to him that the psychological atmosphere was not right: there were too many reporters, too many phone calls, too much nervous rushing about.

When Dr. Pratt left, there had been no unusual incident in the Herrmann house for three days—the longest uneventful period since the disturbances began on February 3. The Herrmanns and Detective Tozzi had begun to think that their troubles were over.

But on the evening of the fifth day, when all the Herrmanns were in the house, a dish crashed to the floor in the dining room. Later a night table fell over in James' room. In neither case did it appear that James had been close enough to the objects to have moved them deliberately. On March 4 a bowl of flowers flew off the dining-room table and a bookcase tipped over in the cellar. Again there was no ready explanation. Was it possible that a resumption of relative quiet changed the atmosphere back

again so that the disturbances were repeated?

One is left with assorted thoughts. Can the entire affair be an elaborate hoax? To take this view one must question the honesty of Mr. and Mrs. Herrmann, which may be easy to do at a distance but which seems impossible at first hand. Besides, there is Detective Tozzi, a shrewd young man who reflects credit on the Nassau County police force.

One can only say of the objects what Galileo said of the earth: "*E pur si muove*"¹—nevertheless, it does move. How or why, no man yet knows.

Talking it over

1. Is the writer of this article more interested in reporting the facts of the case or the feelings of the people involved? Give examples to support your answer.

2. What do you know about members of the Herrmann family? In one sentence explain the most important thing about the family in relation to the case of the flying objects.

3. *a.* Describe some of the suggestions and warnings received by the Herrmanns.

b. Which did you consider the most sincere? The funniest?

c. What do they show about the various ways different people react to strange phenomena?

4. Define the terms *poltergeist* and

¹"*E pur si muove*" (e pür si mü ö'va). In the seventeenth century Galileo was imprisoned for his supposedly non-Christian belief that the earth moves around the sun. At a public hearing he was forced to kneel and deny his belief. According to legend, as he rose from his knees he whispered, "*E pur si muove*."