



# Eustace Tilley Views our Profession: The Astronomer as Portrayed in the Cartoons of *The New Yorker* Magazine



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## Abstract

Astronomy has always enjoyed broad public appeal, as evidenced by the extensive media attention given to the recent “demotion” of Pluto by the IAU. While public planetaria and college courses provide limited outreach, most members of the public have little formal exposure to astronomy as a scientific discipline. Consequently, public opinion as to what astronomers do is largely shaped by the news media and by popular culture.

One icon of “elite” popular culture is *The New Yorker* magazine. Founded by Harold Ross and his wife Jane Grant, *The New Yorker* was intended to be a sophisticated cosmopolitan humor magazine. The first issue appeared on newsstands on February 17, 1925. While humor was always an important aspect of the magazine, *The New Yorker* quickly established itself as a forum for serious journalism and fiction. It currently boasts a worldwide circulation of well over one million readers.

For many readers the cartoons are the highlight of each issue of *The New Yorker*, and since its first issue more than 70,000 have appeared in print. These have been analyzed to see how professional astronomers are typically portrayed. Not surprisingly, the average reader would conclude that observational astronomy is done almost exclusively at visible wavelengths with ground-based telescopes, usually large-aperture refractors which protrude through the slit of a traditional hemispherical dome. In a few cases the artist has been inspired by a real (and readily recognizable) telescope. Radio and space-based telescopes are rarely cartoon subjects. The professional astronomer is typically portrayed as a middle-aged male, unfortunate when one considers the large representation of women in our field. Amateur astronomy appears with surprising frequency, but rarely as a serious pursuit. Finally, astronomical objects (Pluto, Halley’s comet, etc.) frequently appear as cartoon subjects when they have been in the news, but rarely otherwise.



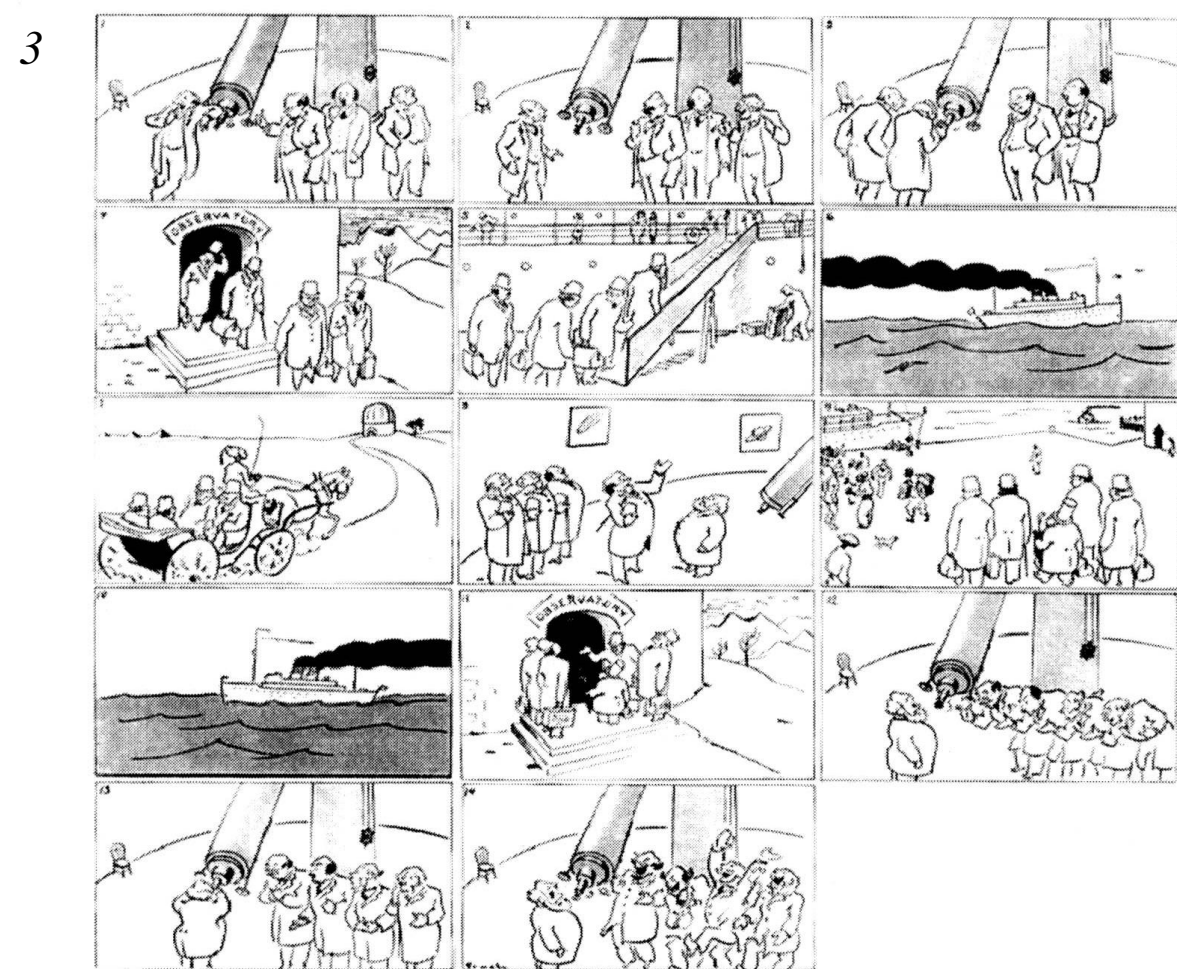
1  
“I hope my address to the American Astronomical Society will bring us the credibility we’ve been seeking.”



2  
THE ASTRONOMER

I’m not sure I have much credibility (1); the Program Committee scheduled this for the last day of the meeting! The first *New Yorker* cartoon with an astronomical theme (2) appeared in the 1925 October 3<sup>rd</sup> issue. Despite the title it does not depict a professional astronomer, but rather an urban dweller trying to view the sky within the confines of the city. “The Jest” (3) appeared in the 1935 January 5<sup>th</sup> issue; this remarkably elaborate fourteen-panel series depicts astronomers playing an elaborate (but childish) prank on a colleague.

3  
THE JEST



4  
“The new planet has changed everything. I have to alter your encounter with a dark woman to a capacity for hard, arduous work.”



5  
“I see here that the universe is now thought to be full of inexplicably dense clumps.”



6  
“Of course, when Lynn and I signed the lease on the penthouse, we had no idea about the comet.”



7  
“I want to see Halley’s Comet, all right. But I could skip the hype.”



8  
“Just tell him we’re taking him someplace dark where he can see the comet.”



9  
“MAN! THAT’S THE CLOSEST I’VE BEEN TO EARTH IN 60,000 YEARS AND THAT’S ABOUT AS CLOSE AS I EVER WANT TO GET.”

Highly publicized astronomical events and discoveries frequently become subjects for cartoonists. Some examples include the 1930 discovery of Pluto (4), the discovery of large-scale structure in the Universe in the late twentieth century (5), the apparitions of Comets Kohoutek (6), Halley(7), and Hale-Bopp (8), and Mars’ close approach to Earth in August 2003 (9).

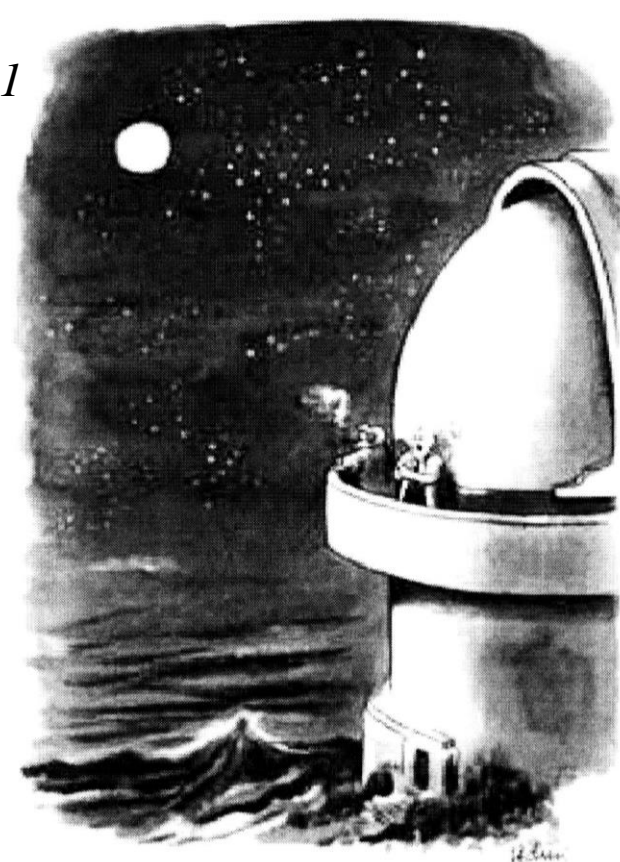


10



"You have a nice view up here."

11



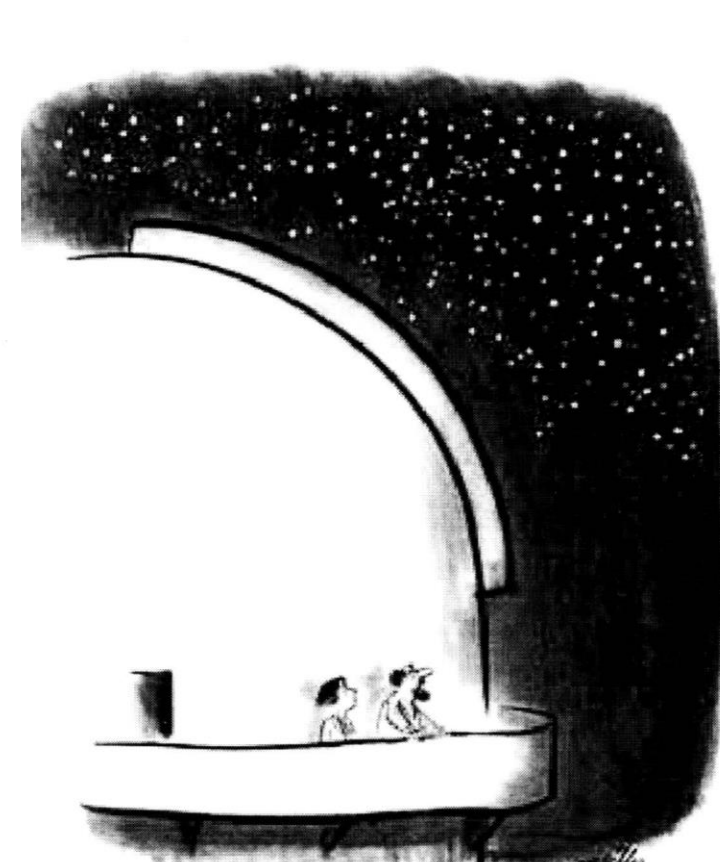
"I've learned one thing about the universe. There's no money in astronomy."

12



"I've never been able to figure out the cycle of the quiet disappearance and after an indeterminate interval the mysterious reappearance of men's trouser cuffs."

13



"Yes, a hole in space three hundred million light-years across does make me pause and feel tiny and insignificant, but a glance around at my peers usually restores my equanimity."

14



"It makes a four-star restaurant look pretty damn small and insignificant, doesn't it."

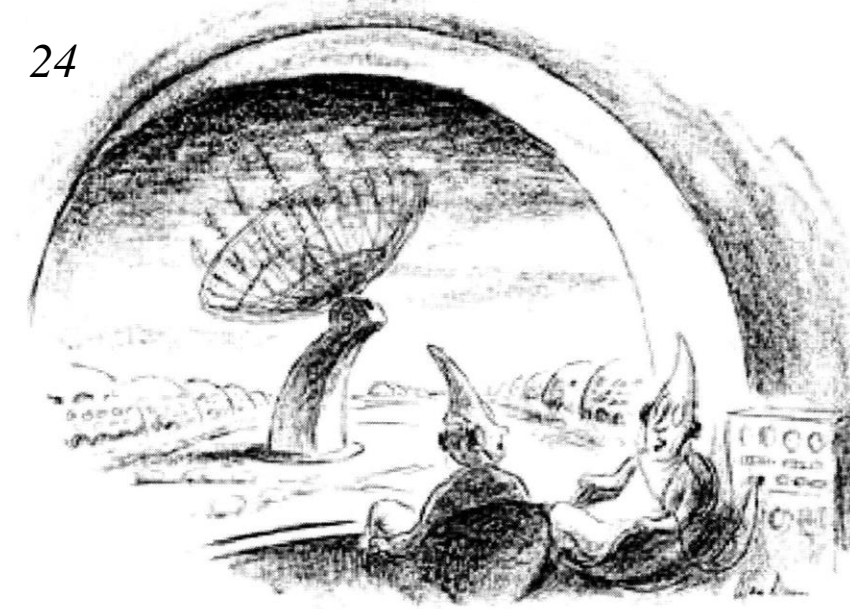
15



"I don't believe Copley is really trying to unravel the mysteries of the universe."

In cartoons, astronomers are frequently pictured in conversation while on the catwalk surrounding an observatory dome. Since they are publicly perceived as being deep thinkers investigating the mysteries of the Universe, the topic of conversation is often purely mundane to provide humorous contrast (10-15). In some cases the telescope is unrealistically represented as protruding through the dome (16-19). However, some remarkably accurate depictions of real astronomical telescopes (20-23) have appeared in the pages of *The New Yorker*!

24



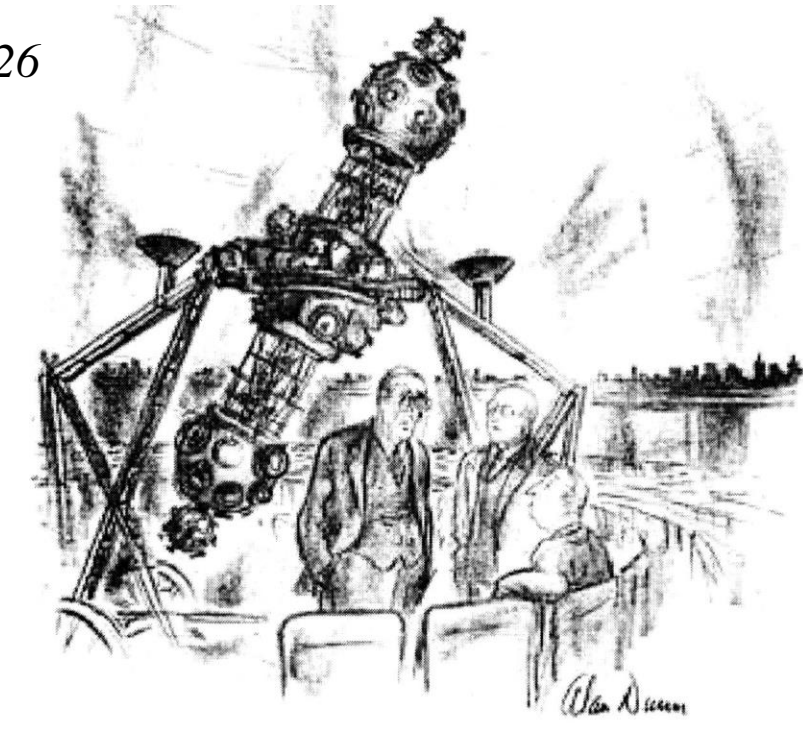
"I really can't make up my mind who I hope gets here first. As I understand it, it would be a question of which you'd rather join—the Communist Party or the Teamsters Union."

25



In the cartoons of *The New Yorker* nearly all astronomical observations are obtained with optical telescopes! The only radio telescope to appear in its pages (24) was martian, rather than terrestrial. A rather bizarre refractor (25) appeared in the issue of 2000 October 9.

26



"My idea was to open this planetarium with the light from Arcturus, but we found the Chicago Fair used that."

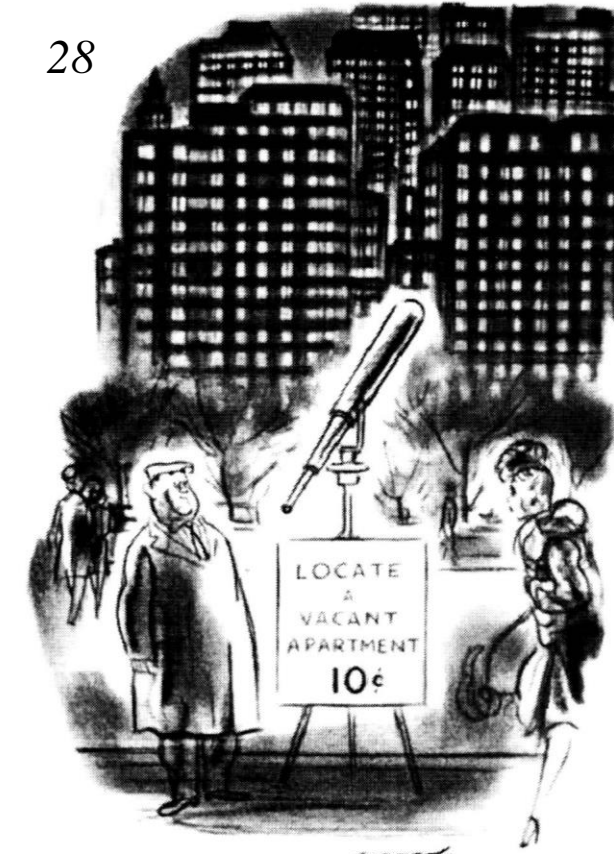
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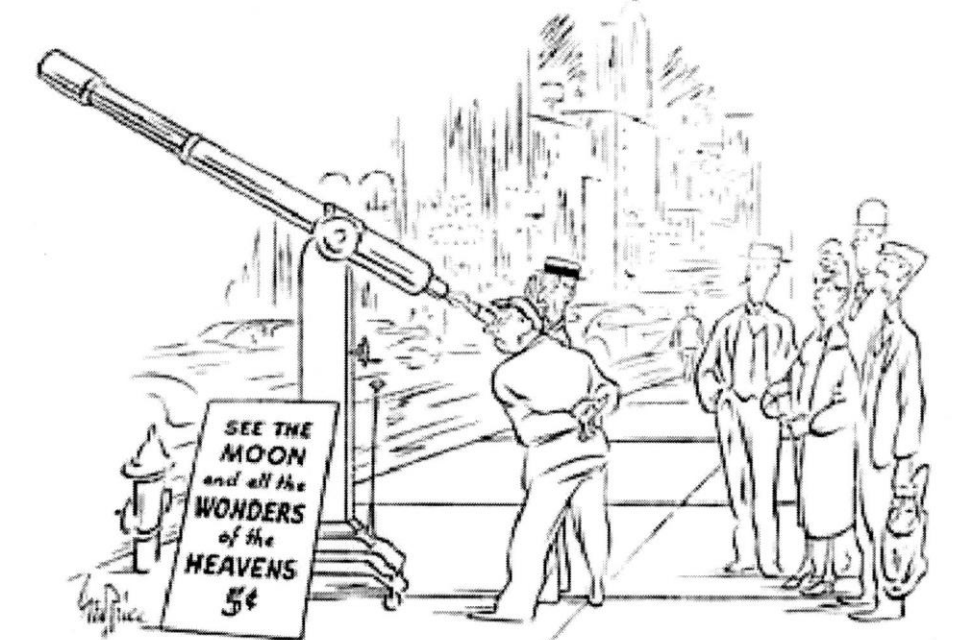
"We shall stop the sun as Joshua did, only much quicker."

Planetarium operators are sometimes depicted (26-27), but only at New York's Hayden planetarium! And sidewalk astronomers abounded in mid century (28-29), with telescopes put to many uses.

28

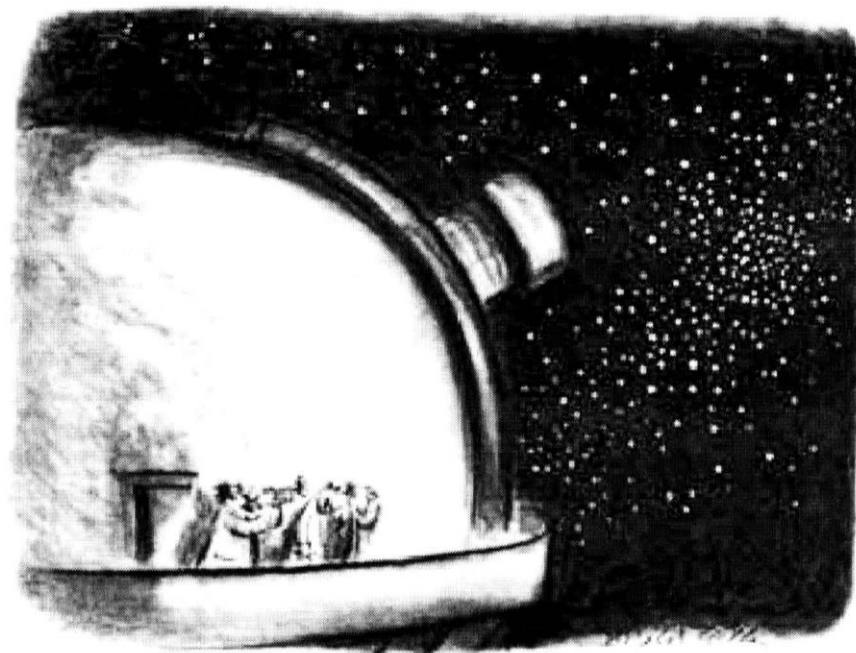


29



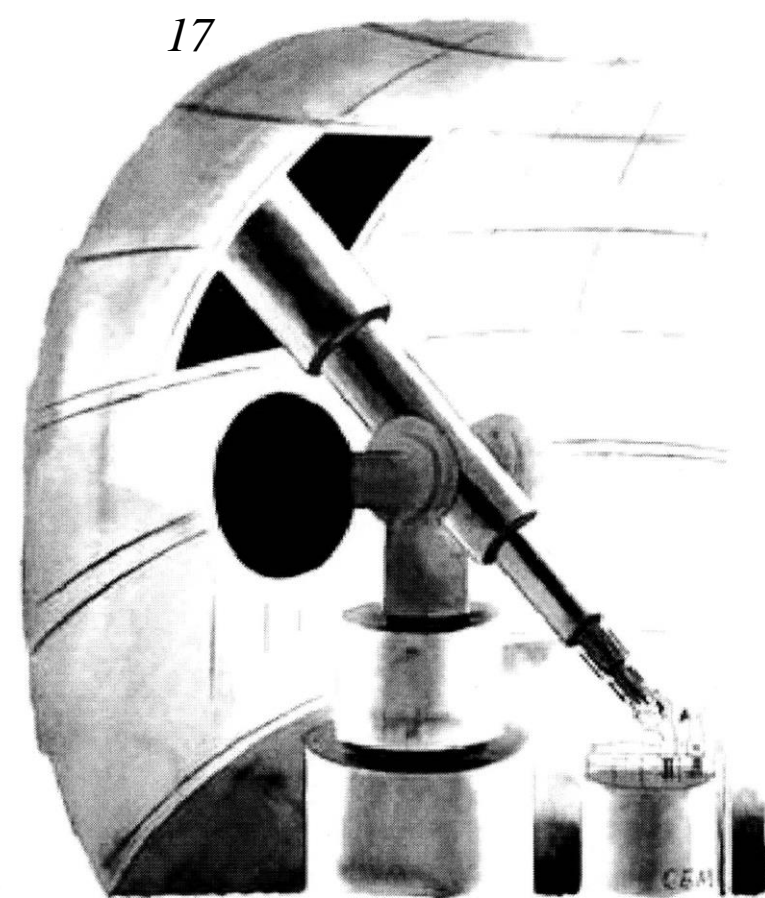
"Now in a loud voice, Joe—"Those winged creatures are angels, I take it."

16



"Good God, man—not 'Stardust' again?"

17



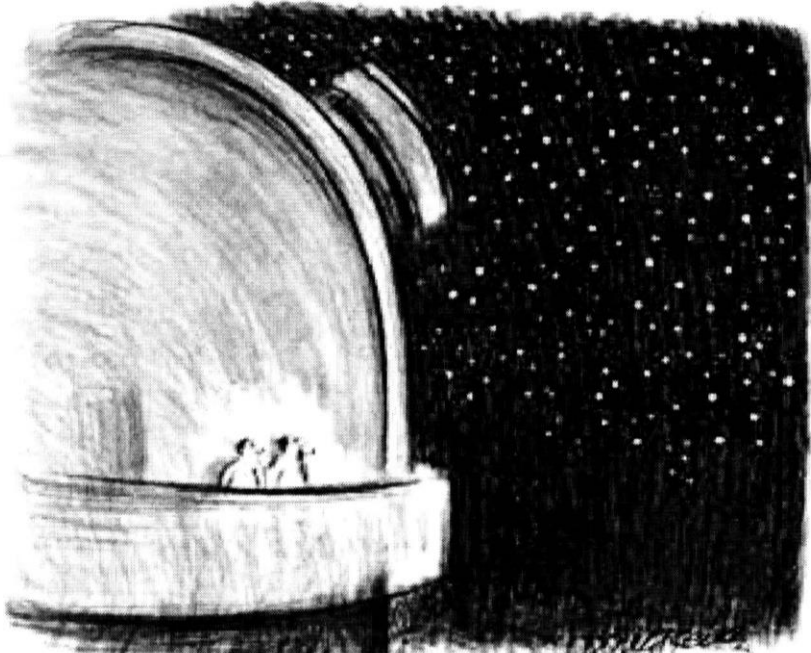
"I seem to be eyeball to eyeball with a Canada goose."

18



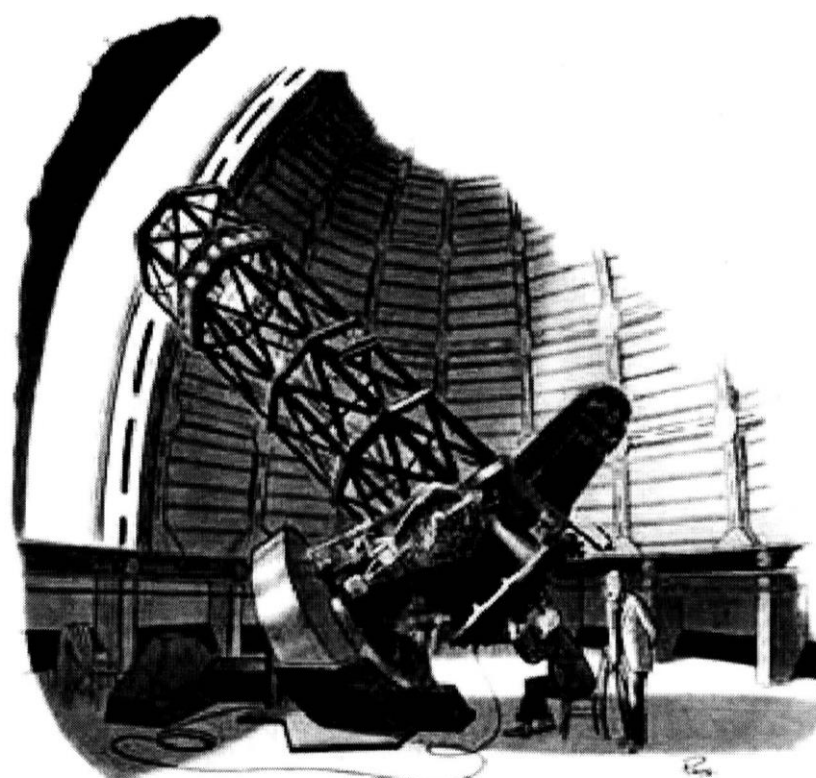
"Not good!"

19



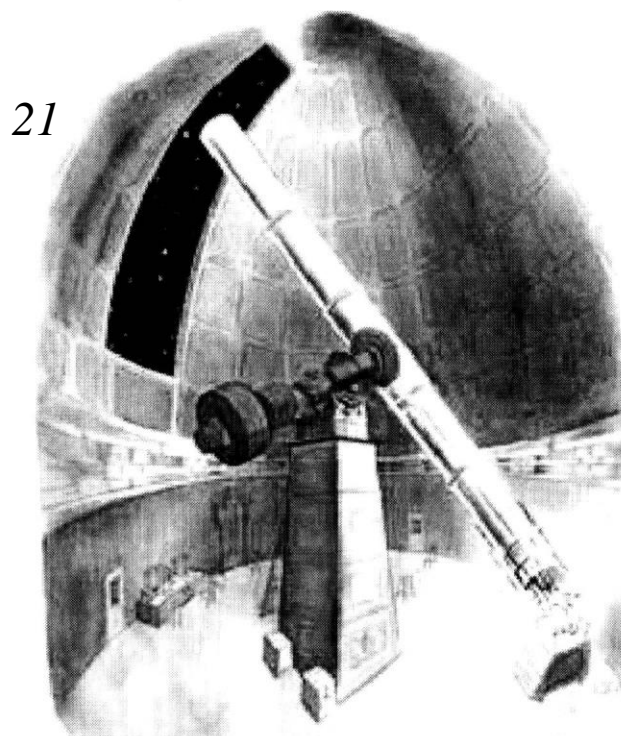
"I do wonder, sometimes, what other galaxies have done about tenure."

20



"Asteroid number 278 crossing Jupiter's orbit on a vector of 37.5 degrees? Good Lord, that means I'm late for my luncheon appointment!"

21



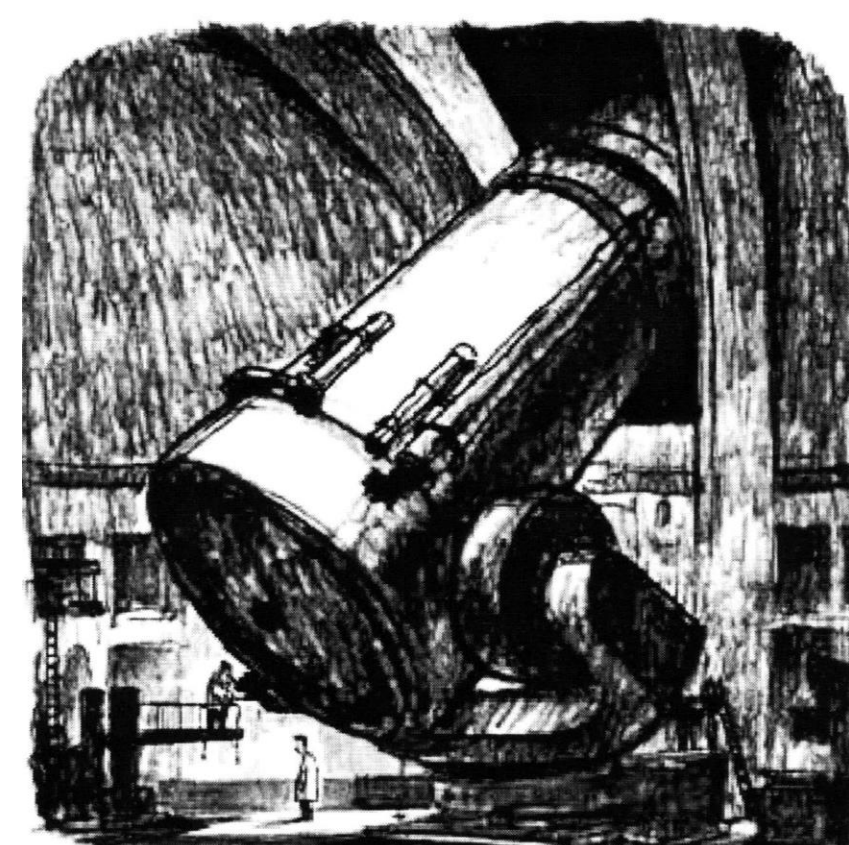
"What I like is the way they twinkle."

22



"My wife doesn't understand the theory of the expanding universe."

23



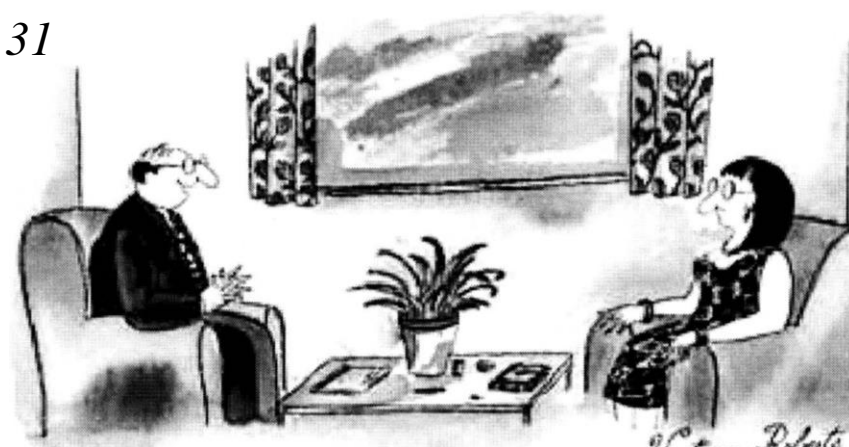
"See anything?"

30



"That's not what Carl Sagan said."

31



"Astronomy did so start out as a guy thing."

In over eighty years of publishing, the only astronomer to be mentioned by name in a *New Yorker* cartoon was, not surprisingly, the late Carl Sagan (30). And sadly, especially given the current constituency of the AAS, astronomy continues to be portrayed as a male pursuit (31). A woman astronomer has yet to be portrayed!

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- 31) 1995 May 22, drawn by Victoria Roberts

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