

Science Fiction QUARTERLY

TWO NEW COMPLETE NOVELS

Science Fiction

THE GREAT MIRROR **Arthur J. Burks** 4

Out of the heart of Tibet came the summons to an American archaeologist, a call that was to plunge him into fantastic conflict with another world. For the people of the High Lama had stolen a thing valuable beyond price to Mars and the Martians were determined to punish Earth and its inhabitants!

Fantasy Fiction

STARSTONE WORLD **Hannes Bok** 88

The science of this far land was so strange as to border upon witchcraft, even though the man, trapped in an alien body, knew that all that happened was due to natural laws, weird as they may be in this world. And his quest to find a way back to the Earth he could not forget led through the grim fire-tunnels to—Sula, mistress of the starstone!

THREE OUTSTANDING NEW SHORT TALES

UP THERE **Martin Pearson** 85

Which is more fantastic: the theory that the stars are incredibly distant, or that they are very close to a stationary Earth?

BOOMERANG **Bowen Conway** 138

He thought he could influence the future by shooting this man in, to him, the far past. It worked—he did influence the future!

STROKE **John L. Chapman** 142

Something about that pitiful body on the beach looked familiar. . . .

SPECIAL DEPARTMENT

PRIME BASE **The Editor** 144

*Cover by John B. Mussachia from a scene in "Starstone World"
By Hannes Bok.*

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UP THERE

by MARTIN PEARSON

I DON'T think I ever knew what a rugged individualist could be until I came to my Uncle Ephraim's farm to recuperate after my escape at sea. I had been torpedoed aboard one of the convoy freighters to England, had been rescued after a long swim in the icy sea, had come out of the hospital in Boston after two weeks under instructions to rest up for a month or so before I could report again for sea service. So I had come to my Uncle's farm down in New Hampshire.

I last remembered my uncle as a cantankerous cuss when I had visited his place as a boy. I found that my childhood recollections did not send me astray. He was cantankerous, he was an old cuss, and he had the darnedest attitudes and ideas I ever heard of. But I won't say he was crazy—no I won't say it. I don't dare after what I saw last night around Polaris.

When I walked up to the old farmhouse from the road with my satchel in my hand, I saw no one. The old but well-built house, the prosperous looking grounds impressed me; they looked solid and substantial. But there was no one in sight. From somewhere there came the sound of hammering and I walked around behind the farmhouse to see. Sure enough, Uncle Eph was there standing atop a stepladder leaning against a gleaming silvery airplane, tacking weather-stripping across the edges of the glass-enclosed cabin. It was when I noticed that the ship was marked with the swastika and maltese cross of the German Luftwaffe and was in fact a big Nazi bomber, that I dropped my grip and stood staring.

"Close yer mouth, yer catching flies," snapped my uncle's sharp voice, "ain't yer never seen an airyplane before?"

"But it's a Nazi airplane," I protested, "and what are you doing with it?"

Uncle stopped his hammering for an instant and gave me a glance of disapproval. He shot a stream of tobacco juice towards the ground, shifted his quid and snapped:

"No, it ain't a Nazi plane—it used to be and that's a difference for a fact. It's my plane now and I'll do what I dang-well please with it, no thanks to you."

I walked over to it and looked at it. It was in very good condition, seemed perfectly in order. My uncle finished his hammering and got down. He came up to me wiping his hands on a piece of rag.

"Purty, ain't she?" he said. "One of the planes that bombed New York t'other week. Run out of gas and come down neat as a whistle right here on my land where you see her."

"What happened to the crew?" I asked.

Uncle's eyes twinkled and he spat another stream of tobacco.

"Shot 'em," he said. "Ain't nobody can trespass on my land without permission." He chewed some more and then went on: "Waited for 'em all to step out; it was early morning and they scared hell out of my chickens. I plugged 'em from the back window with my old bear-rifle. Didn't waste a shot, one, two, three, four, just like that." He spat four times in succession.

The old codger's eyes were perfect. Damn it, I could well believe he had done that. "What did you do with the bodies?"

"What did yer think I'd do with 'em?" he snapped peevishly. "I buried 'em behind the barn; I ain't no cannibal I ain't."

Before I could say more, he started walking briskly towards the house. "Come on in and get a bite to eat. Reckon you must be hungry."

I FOLLOWED him into the house. His house-keeper, a deaf old maid probably as odd as he was, nodded once at me and showed me to a room. I washed up and came down. Uncle hadn't waited for he was already shovelling up his fare with gusto. The man was in great shape for one his age.

After eating a bit, I asked another question that had come to me. "Didn't anyone object to your keeping the plane?"

"Some did," he said; "didn't do 'em no good though."

He took another mouthful and then went on. "What comes out of the sky or is found on my land belongs to me. That's the law. The sheriff tried to get me to give the plane to the government. Heck no, not me. I pay my taxes, I don't owe the government nothin' and the government never gave me no presents and I don't aim to give the government any. Besides I intend to use that plane myself."

"You can't fly," I said, "you never flew a plane in your life."

He finished his plate before answering that. Then he leaned back and pulled out his corn-cob pipe.

"Who taught Wilbur Wright to fly?" he said. "Answer me that?"

I couldn't and he went on: "I ain't no dumber than young Wright. I got books, I can read and I can see and I can think better than most. Heck, of course I can fly that contraption. Lessons is for niddle-noodles."

"Where are you going to fly it?" I asked.

"Gol darn, you're the most inquisitive askinest young cuss, ain't yer? But I suppose you would be being as how you're one of my own kinfolk. Well, I'll tell yer since yer ask. I'm agoing to fly it up to the sky and see what's going on up there."

I gasped and nearly choked on my food. "Wha—what! What do you mean 'the sky'? You can't, it isn't possible."

Uncle's eyes twinkled and he shook his head sadly. "Yer just as befuddled as all the rest, ain't yer? Never used yer head fer anything but a hat rack. I suppose yer believe I can't fly up as far as I plumb like?"

I finished my food before replying. Then I pushed my seat away determined to find out what the old goat had in his head.

"No, you can't," I shot at him. "After about 20 miles you won't find enough air to support the plane. There isn't any air a thousand miles up and there isn't anything to fly to nearer than two hundred thousand miles."

That didn't phase him a bit. "Rubbish," he snapped. "Fiddle-faddle! Have you ever been twenty miles up?"

"No," I snapped, "and neither were you!"

"Nor either was anyone else, young man!" he barked back. "So don't you believe all that some smart aleck tells you. And there ain't been no one a thousand miles up either to say there wasn't any air,

and no one ever measured anything up in the sky."

"Yes, they have," I shouted. "Astronomers have measured everything."

"Astronomers!" he snapped. "Do you know any? No, you don't. And I don't either. And none of 'em has been up there to find out and none of 'em intends to go up there to find out. Astronomers! Bah! Humbugs!"

THEY PROVED it by telescopes and cameras and mathematics," I retorted in defense of astronomy.

"They proved the earth was flat five hundred years ago and it didn't prove nothing. Don't talk mathematics to me, youngster. Figgers is something that scallywags think up to fool honest folks. Can you figger an orbit or reckon the distance of a star?"

"No, I'm not that educated," I said.

"And neither is anyone else because it can't be done. There ain't no orbits and stars is all the same distance."

"What!" I shouted, "how can that be?"

"Why can't it be?" Uncle Eph came back. "They taught you all yer life a pack of lies until you can't see the forest for the trees. Why should the stars be different distances away? Why shouldn't they all be the same distance only different sizes? For years those smart alecks has been hoodwinking the public with fantastic nonsense just to get the yokels to keep 'em in food and clothing. Every time folks begin to get to thinking about why they should keep on endowing colleges and observatories, the old buzzards get together and come out with some new planet or dizzy idea or maybe they stretch the universe a few trillion miles or squeeze it in a bit—or maybe the, think up a fourth dimension and befuddle the people that way. Poppycock! Stuff and nonsense! They got the people so befuddled and fooled they can't think straight worth a shucks. But they ain't got me fooled, not for one minute they ain't."

"But it's logical and scientific," I answered weakly.

"Fiddle-faddle," he barked. He took a puff on his pipe. "That plane out there. That's logical and scientific. But this astronomy—why it don't make sense. Every hundred years they admit that what they thought was so last century ain't so this century. That right, young feller?"

"Yes, but science improves and they discard old ideas."

"Improves! Now that's a laugh! You mean they think up wilder ideas to keep the people fooled. Looky here—what's less fantastic? To think the universe is a finite infinity bent around in a fourth dimension no one can figure out, all full of billions of suns busting up atomically, whatever that means, and dozens of planets all whirling around criss-crossing each other while the whole shebang goes rushing through a lot of empty nothingness at crazy speeds like a hundred miles a second maybe? Or to think that the sky is just a land surface like a common-sense ceiling a few hundred miles up and the stars are just volcanoes or maybe the lights of towns and cities and farms. And the sun a blazing bonfire rolling across it along with the planets which are no more than three or four feet across? Now I ask you, think it over. Which is more fantastic? Which sounds more like plain horse-sense?"

I THOUGHT it over. Well, how can you answer that? Which is the more fantastic? Obviously the astronomers' ideas were. But did I dare admit it? I tried another angle.

"There are photographs of the stars and planets."

"Ain't seen any photograph yet that couldn't be faked," Uncle Eph demolished that line of reasoning.

"But it just couldn't be!" I exclaimed in desperation.

"Oh yes it could, and it is." Uncle Eph crowed triumphantly. "The whole world is being taken in by a handful of these fakers with their fancy stories and crazy pictures. How these smart alecks don't dare admit that meteors can keep coming down in the same place night after night if they don't come down from a ceiling just overhead?"

"They don't," I gasped.

"Yes they do," my uncle snapped. "And if the star-humbuggers' ideas were right that couldn't happen. But meteors often fall one after another night after night in the same township. Happened here once and there's lots of evidence. Feller named Charles Fort collected piles of evidence the astronomers wouldn't admit."

He got up. "I've talked enough about this. I'm going out. Got more work to do on my airplane."

I followed him out, my head in a whirl.

What was I to think? Was the whole world being fooled by a handful of men? It wasn't possible. It just *couldn't* be possible.

I watched Uncle working about the plane. He was carrying stocks of food and stuff into it as if for a long trip. Finally I couldn't contain my questions.

"The whole world believes the way the astronomers believe—they couldn't be wrong," I ventured.

Uncle shifted his pipe and stowed away a smoked ham. "Wrong again," he finally stated emphatically. "Do the peasants of China believe it? No," he didn't wait for an answer, "they don't believe. That's a quarter of the world. Do the peasants of India and the black men in Africa and the red men in South America and the poor people in Europe know about it or believe it? No, and that's half the world that don't believe it. So don't be so smart with that word world. Most of the world don't believe any such nonsense. Most of 'em would agree with me and other common-sense down-to-earth folks."

That set me back on my heels for a while. I wandered around thinking while Uncle finished the packing of the plane. He had already stowed away a large supply of gasoline and oil tins. It was obvious he was going to take off very soon.

He went into the house again and when he came out I asked him when he planned to leave.

"Tonight, soon's the stars come out so I can get my bearings. Waited for you to come so you could keep the farm in order till I get back."

I saw that he was carrying a couple of books with him and when I got a closer look at them, I was amazed to note they were Chinese dictionaries and grammars.

"Why the Chinese guides?" I asked. "You don't expect to meet any Chinamen up there, do you?"

"Why not?" he chuckled. "The Chinese call themselves Celestials and I guess they ought to know if nobody does. Reckon the people up in the towns up there in the sky are Chinese. Four hundred million clever people can't all be wrong about their own origin. I reckon I'll get along up there."

I think that floored me finally. I went about the rest of the afternoon silently, puzzled and confused. Uncle Eph finished his preparations on the airplane and then con-

(Continued On Page 137)

(Continued From Page 87)

ducted me around the farm, giving me instructions on what was to be done.

Supper came, night came, the stars came out.

Uncle came down in his heavy winter clothes with a fur cap pulled down over his ears. I went with him to the airplane.

He pointed up towards the North Star.

"I never thought that all-fired important star was pointed out clear enough and I'm fixing to do something about it. Keep yer eye on it," he said. "Well, time to be going. Don't forget to pick up the mail regularly."

"Hey," I yelled at the last minute, "you got a parachute?"

"What fer?" he snapped from the door of his plane. "Ain't nothing going to go wrong with me. Parachutes is for bunglers. Now if you'll just step up and turn that crank by the propeller we'll get started."

Dumbly I stepped up and started the propeller turning over. It caught on with a roar. Uncle slammed the door of the cabin shut, waved a hand and gunned the engine.

The plane jerked forward, started fast, swung wildly and jumped into the air as Uncle Eph threw the throttle on full. It soared at a steep angle and I expected it to crash momentarily or turn over.

But it straightened out a bit, turned to-

wards the north and started upwards in a steady steep rise towards the Pole Star. I watched it as it disappeared into the darkness among the myriad stars of the night.

I expected uncle to come back that night as soon as he found his airplane would not rise any farther than the stratosphere. I also waited in dread of hearing the phone ring and being told he had crashed somewhere. But nothing happened that night. He didn't come back and there was no crash.

All next day I thought about it and I convinced myself that I should have called in a doctor and had the old man restrained. There were too many scientists backing up the regular theories of the sky.

Yet all that day there were no reports of my uncle's plane. And that night and the next two days after.

I DON'T know what to think now. Uncle Eph never 'cid come back and he hasn't been heard from unless . . . but I don't like to admit that possibility. It's two weeks now and the only thing I can't account for is that there are now five more stars in the handle of The Big Dipper stretching in an exactly straight line directly to the Pole Star. They were first noticed last night. According to the papers this morning, sailors hail them as an aid to navigation, but the astronomers have refused to discuss them.