

LIGHTER THAN YOU THINK
by Nelson Bond

Words: 977

"I," he announced modestly, "am Pat Pending -- the greatest inventulator of all time."

Miss Thomas stared at me goggle-eyed.

"Is he?" she demanded. "I mean -- *did* he?"

I nodded solemnly.

"Not only those, but a host of other marvels. The bacular clock, the transmarter, the predictograph --"

Miss Thomas turned on Pat a gaze of fawning admiration. "How wonderful!" she breathed.

"Oh, nothing, really," said Pat, wriggling.

"But it is! Most of the things brought here are so absurd. Automatic hat-tippers, self-defrosting galoshes, punching bags that defend themselves --" Disdainfully she indicated the display collection of screwball items we call our Chamber of Horrors. "It's simply marvelous to meet a man who has invented things really worth while."

Honestly, the look in her eyes was sickening. But was Pat nauseated? Not he! The big goon was lapping it up like a famished feline. His simpering smirk stretched from ear to there as he murmured, "Now, Miss Thomas --"

"Sandra, Mr. Pending," she sighed softly. "To you just plain ... Sandy. Please?"

"Well, Sandy--" Pat gulped.

I said disgustedly, "Look, you two -- break it up! Love at first sight is wonderful in books, but in a Federal office I'm pretty sure it's

unconstitutional, and it *may* be subversive. Would you mind coming down to earth? Pat, you barged in here squalling about some new invention. Is that correct?"

With an effort Pat wrenched his gaze from his new-found admirer and nodded soberly.

"That's right, Mr. Mallory. And a great one, too. One that will revolutionate the world. Will you give me an application form, please? I want to file it immediately."

"Not so fast, Pat. You know the routine. What's the nature of this remarkable discovery?"

"You may write it down," said Pat grandiloquently, "as Pat Pending's lightening rod."

I glanced at Joyce, and she at me, then both of us at Pending.

"But, Pat," I exclaimed, "that's ridiculous! Ben Franklin invented the lightning rod two hundred years ago."

"I said *lightening*," retorted my redheaded friend, "not *lightning*. My invention doesn't conduct electricity *to* the ground, but *from* it." He brandished a slim baton which until then I had assumed to be an ordinary walking-stick. "With this," he claimed, "I can make things weigh as much or as little as I please!"

The eyes of Sandy Thomas needed only jet propulsion to become flying saucers.

"Isn't he wonderful, Mr. Mallory?" she gasped.

But her enthusiasm wasn't contagious. I glowered at Pending coldly.

"Oh, come now, Pat!" I scoffed. "You can't really believe that yourself. After all, there *are* such things as basic principles. Weight is not a variable factor. And so far as I know, Congress hasn't repealed the Law of Gravity."

Pat sighed regretfully.

"You're always so hard to convince, Mr. Mallory," he complained. "But – oh, well! Take this."

He handed me the baton. I stared at it curiously. It looked rather like a British swagger stick: slim, dainty, well balanced. But the ornamental gadget at its top was not commonplace. It seemed to be a knob or a dial of some kind, divided into segments scored with vernier markings. I gazed at Pending askance.

"Well, Pat? What now?"

"How much do you weigh, Mr. Mallory?"

"One sixty-five," I answered.

"You're sure of that?"

"I'm not. But my bathroom scales appeared to be. This morning. Why?"

"Do you think Miss Joyce could lift you?"

I said thoughtfully, "Well, that's an idea. But I doubt it. She won't even let me try to support *her*."

"I'm serious, Mr. Mallory. Do you think she could lift you with one hand?"

"Don't be silly! Of course not. Nor could you."

"There's where you're wrong," said Pending firmly. "She can – and will."

He reached forward suddenly and twisted the metal cap on the stick in my hands. As he did so, I loosed a cry of alarm and almost dropped the baton. For instantaneously I experienced a startling, flighty giddiness, a sudden loss of weight that made me feel as if my soles were treading on sponge rubber, my shoulders sprouting wings.

"Hold on to it!" cried Pat. Then to Joyce, "Lift him, Miss Joyce."

Joyce faltered, "How? Like th-this?" and touched a finger to my midriff. Immediately my feet left the floor. I started flailing futilely to trample six inches of ozone back to the solid floorboards. To no avail. With no effort whatever Joyce raised me high above her head until my dazed dome was shedding dandruff on the ceiling!

"Well, Mr. Mallory," said Pat, "do you believe me now?"

"Get me down out of here!" I howled. "You *know* I can't stand high places!"

"You now weigh less than ten pounds--"

"Never mind the statistics. I feel like a circus balloon. How do I get down again?"

"Turn the knob on the cane," advised Pat, "to your normal weight. Careful, now! *Not so fast!*"

His warning came too late. I hit the deck with a resounding thud, and the cane came clattering after. Pat retrieved it hurriedly, inspected it to make sure it was not damaged. I glared at him as I picked myself off the floor.