

Visibility: Zero

By NELSON S.
BOND



He was a professor. He was also a large chunk of nothing, in the middle of Zero, surrounded by vacancy ...

EVERYTHING happens to me. I had just lifted my size twelves to the surface of my cigarette-scalloped desk, leaned back in my swivel and settled down for forty restful winks on *Times-Star* time when trouble, masquerading under the guise of Joe Muldoon, punctured my privacy.

"Sam," fussed the demon cameraman of our daily news-views-and-scandal sheet, "there's *things* goin' on around here this mornin'."

I said, "Look, useless, let's you and me play games? You let on you're a Fuller Brush man and I'll play like I'm a housewife. You go out and knock on the door and I'll say I'm not home. Things? Of course things are happening. All over

the world. That's how extras are born."

"Not," persisted Muldoon fretfully, "odd things like these. My toe got stepped on in the elevator, only I was all alone there. Somebody asked Bob Branyan where was the office of the editor, and when he looked up he didn't see nobody. I seen a newspaper pick itself up and turn a couple of pages by itself—"

"A bromo," I told him, "and a glass of tomato juice. That's what you need. You shouldn't drink that stuff, sonny. You'll be seeing purple kangaroos next. Yes? What is it?"

A timid, fluttering rap had sounded on my door. Now the door slipped open a few inches, hesitantly, wavered there as if uncertain whether to open or close, then

shut again. I looked at Muldoon questioningly; he shook his head.

"See what I mean, Sam? Screwey things!"

I went to the door, flung it open. There was no one in sight. The City Room was as empty as a schoolmarm's hope-chest. I slammed the door again angrily. I said, "Now, look here, Muldoon—if this is your idea of a joke—"

"It—er—it isn't a joke, Mr. Gordon," said a soft little voice, almost at my ear. "Oh, not at all! It's very, very serious!"

I spun wildly. "Who said that?" I demanded.

Joe Muldoon had collapsed weakly into my chair.

"N—not me!" he croaked. "Don't look at me. I heard it too. But I didn't do it."

"That's right," said the quiet voice at my shoulder. "It wasn't your friend who spoke, Mr. Gordon. It was I."

THIS time as I swung around I grabbed.

For a moment my fingers brushed—or I thought they did—cloth. Then the sensation faded, and I was clutching a handful of ozone. In a reproachful tone the voice piped, "Oh, now, *really!* Do you think that was nice, Mr. Gordon?"

"The—the Shadow!" bleated Joe, wilting like a leaf of yesterday's lettuce. "He's cast a hypnotic spell over our minds, blindin' us—"

"Stuff," snapped our unseen guest, "and nonsense! I am Dr. Willoughby T. Smerk, professor of abstract mathematics at Eastern University. I have come here solely and simply to offer you a practical demonstration of my latest discovery—achievement of that long-sought phenomenon: invisibility!"

"Invis—" I gasped. "Invis—!"

"Apparently," snapped the unseeable Professor Smerk, "it confuses you to converse with an optical illusion? Here! Put these on!"

BEFORE me, out of thin air, dangling on nothingness, emerged a pair of spectacles. Ordinary looking things. In a daze, I hooked them over my ears. And instantly I was gazing at the solid figure of my visitor.

He was a strange little guy, Dr. Smerk. Hardly more than five-foot-four; a colorless drab of a man with pale eyes and straw-hued tufts of hair surrounding a central plateau of baldness like downy mountains overlooking a desert. But nervous! You never saw such a fidgety-widget in your life! His long, slim hands and tiny feet were constantly in motion; his feet shuffled from side to side like those of a hepcat on hot nails; his hands forever fretfully fingered his lapels, pawed his thatch of hair, darted from pocket to pocket like anxious hummingbirds.

I removed the glasses. Immediately Dr. Smerk disappeared. All I could see was a large chunk of nothing, in the middle of zero, surrounded by vacancy.

Joe was staring at me, his eyeballs on stalks. "Did you—did you see him, Sam?" he whispered hoarsely. I nodded and handed him the glasses. As he adjusted them on his nose, to Dr. Smerk I said:

"I don't understand, sir, and I won't pretend I can. But you *are* invisible. How did you do it?"

What expression overspread the little man's features I wouldn't know, since Joe had the spectacles. But there was pleasure and gratification in his voice as he answered.

"Absorption, of course. The 'taking into myself' of all light-waves. You understand, naturally, that objects are visible because of their color, which, in turn, is the result of light-wave reflection? For example, when you see a yellow leaf, what color is that leaf?"

"Why—why, yellow," I stammered.

"Ah, no! Quite the opposite! It is every color *but* yellow! The leaf, through

some photokinetic quality inherent to its nature, has absorbed the blues, the reds, the violets, all the light-wave radiations impinging on it save that which causes the color we know as 'yellow.'

"This yellow is rejected, not absorbed, reflected to us—and we see it as the leaf's 'natural' color. As you can plainly see, the poet spoke more truly than even he knew when he wrote, 'Things are not what they seem'."

Joe took the glasses off to mop his brow, stared incredulously for a moment at talking space, and replaced them. "You mean whatever color a thing is, it *ain't*?"

"An unscientific," nodded Dr. Smerk, "but completely accurate way of putting it. From that starting point I began my experiments. I shall not bore you with a tale of my years of labor. Nor would you understand the chain of reasoning on which my efforts depended.

"Suffice it to say that a few days ago my toil found its reward. A certain compound—a mixture in the form of an unguent—which renders invisible to the human eye all things upon which it has been spread. Thus neither I, having bathed in the solution, nor my garments, which have been dipped, can be seen by you."

I LICKED my lips which needed more moisture than my kapok-coated tongue could supply them. I said, "But how come you came *here*, Professor?"

"This is a newspaper office, is it not? Surely this discovery should interest your readers?"

"It," I told him frankly, "would wow em! This yarn is worth a million bucks, plus sales tax. And as a newspaper man, maybe I'm crazy to even gaze a gift nag in the larynx—but aren't you forgetting something, Doc? This country is at war. And this invention of yours presents a war weapon every nation on earth would give its broken treaties to possess! I think the

proper place for you to project your spectral image is the office of Uncle Sam, c/o Washington, D. C."

A wistful sigh, the more melancholy because it was a ghostly one, answered me.

"I *did* go to Washington, Mr. Gordon. I—I couldn't get anyone to pay any attention to me. I fear I'm not a very aggressive man; at any rate, I couldn't make my listeners understand the nature of my discovery. Invisible, I could capture no one's attention; they thought I was speaking over the public-address system. When I approached them in the flesh I was shunted from the War Department to the Patent Office, the Patent Office to the Federal Communications Board, from there to—"

Well, I didn't need a blueprint to understand how it was. Even in peacetime you need a mowing machine to cut your way through the Washington red-tape-worms. I said, "But we've got to convince 'em somehow, Doc. This is too big a thing—Oh, hello, Boss!"

MY CHIEF, the City Editor of ye dear old *Times-Star*, had bumbled in with a scowl on his pan which looked as though it had been tattooed there in infancy. Now he glowered at me like Joe Louis eyeing another Bum-of-the-Month.

"Well, Gordon!" he rasped, "what's ailing *you*? Been sopping up all the local tap-rooms again? Who're you talking to?"

I said, "Listen, Boss, this is terrific! Dr. Smerk, here—"

"Dr. Who, *where*?" He glared around the room, then at me savagely. "So I was right, eh? Well, hangover or not, this is a newspaper. We have work to do. I want you to take Muldoon and light out for Westchester. There's big doings up there this afternoon. The army is exhibiting some new gadget for defense, and—"

"Who, me?" I gasped. "Hey, now, wait a minute! I'm supposed to be the Assistant City Editor of this rag!"

The Great Stone Heart skewered me with a glance.

"Meaning," he demanded, "which?"

"Meaning," I squawked, "you can't assign me to a job like this. It's bad enough I should get underpaid every week for doing my regular work, without I should also carry on for the leg men. I'm no reporter, I'm a—"

"You're a dead duck," informed the boss, "unless you get going on this assignment—and fast! I've taken all I'll stand from you, Gordon. We're short-handed, sweetheart. And now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their newspaper—or else! Here!" He took a scrap of paper out of his pocket, hurled it in my general direction. "This pass'll admit you and Muldoon to Fort Slocum. Get the inside on this new thingamajigger, whatever it is. And play it up big. The public is simply swooning for bigger and better war news."

I didn't like it a bit. I was just getting ready to stick my neck out for the axe when a soft whisper close to my ear silenced me.

"Mr. Gordon—you said you'd help me. Maybe this is the chance we've been looking for."

I calmed like a Firster on M-Day. Of course the wee man was right. If we could let him demonstrate his discovery to actual, practical, hard-headed army officers of the staff, rather than waffle-tailed theoreticians, something might come of it. Still, I wasn't sure how long Dr. Smerk's invisibility might last. It was best to be prepared.

I said, "We-e-ell, all right, Chief. But I've got a friend—a Dr. Smerk—who'd like to come along with us. Can you fix the pass up for three instead of two?"

The boss glared at me disgustedly. "I cannot! This is important stuff, Gordon; you can't finagle any more passes for your crackpot pals. That pass admits two, and

two of you is all that will get into Fort Slocum this afternoon!"

Joe Muldoon, grinning like a gargoyle, silently took off the Doc's glasses.

"You wouldn't," he asked interestedly, "like to make book on that, would you, Chief?"

WELL, the boss was right about one thing. The shindig out at Fort Slocum that afternoon *was* big. In fact, they were being so frightfully hush-hush about everything that the gates were stuffed like a Christmas turkey with newspapermen, all wearing looks of baffled desperation on their pans.

We started to shoulder through the mob, and I bumped into Bunny O'Doul, one of the keenest newshawks who ever rang up a beat. Bunny gave me a glance that would sour butter.

"Hyah, Sam. So *you* wasted the afternoon, too?"

"Come again?" I queried.

He shook his head discouragedly. "You might as well come on back to New York with the rest of us. This camp's as hard to crash as an autogyro."

I slipped him my Grade AA superior smile. "For some of you jerks, maybe. But I've got a pass."

"Swell!" snorted Bunny. "And what did you think the rest of us were trying to force our way in with: old hatcheck stubs? Passes are dime a dozen around here, chum? There are enough of them in this crowd to paper a wall. And that's all they are good for."

I saw what he meant. Everybody was gathered outside the gate; no one was getting through. I spotted the *Life* man and Bob Downey from the *Herald-Trib*, guys from the INS, NANA, AP—all the big syndicates.

There were radio men there from all the major networks, loaded to the Plimsoll mark with pack transmitters, but

they weren't getting in, either. It looked like a hopeless case.

Still, we couldn't go back without making a try. So I pushed my way forward to the sentry, and handed him my slip of paper. He shook his head.

"Sorry, friend. This ticket's no good today."

I said, "You mean *nobody* can get in?"

"Not without the password. This is a sneak preview. The public pre-meer ain't for a couple of months yet, or till Mr. Shicklgruber sees it. You ain't got the word, eh? Well, in that case—"

His bayonet tickled the third button of my vest, and I gave ground. But just as I was about to sound the retreat, there came a tiny, familiar whisper in my ear.

"*'Remember Pearl Harbor!'*, Mr. Gordon!"

I said, "Huh? What's that got to do with—" Then, as the sentry looked at me suspiciously, I caught on. I bent forward and relayed the rallying-cry. The guard straightened suddenly, squared his rifle to respectful present arms.

"Very good, sir! You'll forgive my caution, I know. We must be very careful. You may enter."

Muldoon looked bewildered. "W-what's going on, Sam? Where in hell did *you* get the pass—?"

But I drowned out his query with a hearty bellow:

"Ah, yes, soldier! I quite understand. Thank you!" Then, as we strode through the gate, followed by green-irised glares from our thwarted colleagues, "Nice going, Smerky, old boy! And you, Joe, shove a clamp on that trap of yours. The Doc got the word for us."

SO THAT'S how we got into Fort Slocum. And, boy, we were really into something when we got in there, what I mean! We found our way down to the proving ground where the new and secret

gadget was to be unveiled. We didn't need a guide; we located the spot by its glitter. A glance advised us who the guests of the government were on this special occasion. They were high military representatives from the U. S. A.'s sister American republics. From Mexico, the Argentine, Brazil, Peru and Chile — from all over Central and South America, and from the independent islands, the Latins had come to Manhattan.

And what a sight they were, all dolled up in martial finery! There hasn't been such a sartorial splendiferousness since Earl Carroll designed uniforms for the New Jersey state cops. White uniforms and blue, bright green and ultramarine, gold medals glinting and flashing in the sunlight. Every man present seemed to be at least a brigadier-general. Shoulders were festooned with more stars than Hennessey. In that crowd I felt as drab as a wren in a garden of peacocks. Of the entire assemblage, only one other beside ourselves wore civilian clothes: the official interpreter. Through him the U. S. Army spokesman addressed the group.

It was a rather tedious business. Everything had to be given the once-over-lightly in three languages—English, Spanish and Portuguese. But to clip a long story trim, what the army ordnance officer told them was this:

They had been called together to witness a test of a new concoction called *pyrodine*. This was the most destructive explosive so far discovered by science. For the present, the United States intended to keep its formula a secret. But all present were assured that in case of need, supplies would be made available instantly to all Western Hemisphere friends and allies.

The speaker then whipped the cover from a small rack beside him, exposing, in a tiny, well-padded container, about a dozen vials the size of a test-tube, filled with a grayish-blue powder. These vials,

he said, contained pyrodine. Now, to demonstrate its efficiency as contrasted with TNT—

Two sweating soldiers lugged a box of trinitrotoluene out into the center of the cleared proving ground. There it was detonated. The blast, of course, was deafening. Dirt mushroomed skyward and everyone nodded gravely. Into my ear, Dr. Smerk whispered nervously, "Oh, gracious, isn't it awful, Mr. Gordon?"

But I was watching with great interest Act II of the little drama. For now, at the U. S. Army officer's command, one soldier was gingerly carrying out onto the field a single container of the new compound. Then we were all requested to withdraw to a spot more than twice as far from the pyrodine as we had been from the TNT. A sharpshooter was selected; he drew bead on the distant vial, pressed the trigger.

EVEN though we had been warned, it came like the blow of a sledgehammer. A terrific explosion that gouged a crater violently out of the face of Mama Earth. Dirt, rocks, shale, splashed heavenward in a crash of ear-splitting thunder. The ground trembled and shook. I made a one-point landing on my puss, and I wasn't the only nose-diving witness. Olive faces emitted gasps of incredulity. Snapping black eyes stared at the tremendous chasm yawning before us.

Then all bedlam broke loose. The envoys from south-of-the-border had come, had seen, and were conquered. Latins are an emotional lot. They burst into a voluble frenzy of excitement. Through the sprinkle of dust still swirling down upon us they rushed to the army officer's side, shook his hand and pounded his shoulders, embraced him, gesticulated. It was a veritable love-feast of hemisphere solidarity. Muldoon, in his element at last, was happily grabbing shots of the *agapo*

for tomorrow's front page. And then—

And then an invisible hand was plucking anxiously at my sleeve. And Dr. Smerk was piping, "Mr. Gordon! I—"

"Go 'way!" I snapped at him. "Let me alone, Smerk. This is tremendous! I'll take care of you later. Right now, I've got to talk to that officer."

"But, Mr. Gordon—"

"Amscray, will you?"

"But, Mr. Gordon, this is important! I saw—"

"Sure," I told him annoyedly. "You saw fireworks—I saw fireworks. All God's chillun saw fireworks. Please go somewhere and bag your unseeable head for a minute, huh?"

A small, tense, invisible hand twisted me around. A shrill voice cried in pure exasperation, "Mr. Gordon! You've got to listen! This is *terrible*. In the excitement just now a spy of a hostile power stole one of the vials of pyrodine!"

"Okay," I said. "Okay. That's very nice, isn't it? Now, go 'way and—" Then the double-take struck me; my eyes bulged like a lady bowler in slacks. "*Wha-a-at!* Did you say somebody stole—?"

"Oh, hush, Mr. Gordon!" warned Smerk nervously. "Be careful! Someone may hear you!"

"Damn!" said Joe Muldoon suddenly. "Oh, damn me for a clumsy lunk. Look what I just went and done, Sam—"

"Later!" I cried. I grabbed at Smerk's shoulder and miraculously caught it. I hustled him feverishly to one side and said, "Now, give me that again, in words of one syllable. And quick!"

"Of—of course, Mr. Gordon," quavered the small man obediently. "I—I just happened to see him. One of the men is not what he pretends to be. He's a fraud, a spy! He came here today to learn what this new American weapon is. And he took advantage of the confusion to steal a vial of pyrodine."

I gasped, "Oh, golly! I wonder if the officers have discovered it yet?"

Evidently they had. There was tremendous suppressed excitement amongst the American staff officers. A lieutenant scurried to the side of the officer surrounded by foreigners, whispered something to him. The general's face paled beneath its tan. He muttered a swift apology, then raced to join his confreres. I said, "Great balls of fire, what a story! Doc, you saw the guy? Which one was it? *Doc!*"

He didn't answer. My reply came from a less welcome source. Uniformed figures appeared at my side, and a soldier demanded, "You, Mister—what are *you* doing here? Come along with me. The general wants to see you! And you, too!" This last to a badly frightened Muldoon. Needless to say, we went!

THE next few minutes were definitely not happy. Joe and I were led to a tent beyond earshot of the invited guests. We were asked—but grimly!—who we were, what we were doing there, and how, above all, we had gained admission.

Our answers must have sounded pretty wan, but a call to the *Times-Star* office at least substantiated our claims.

Then came the embarrassing part. A couple of khaki-clad huskies grabbed us, and we were given a thorough casing from pate to paddies. Only when they were positive the missing pyrodine was not on us were we released. But the sword of military wrath still dangled over our heads. The C. O. said, "Apparently you gentlemen are not guilty of the—er—of the crime we are investigating. But you have committed a serious offense in effecting entrance to government property under false pretenses. You will be held for military trial. Take them away, Sergeant!"

I pleaded, "Wait a minute, General! I admit we had no right to come here. But we had a reason, a good one. And I

swear we had nothing to do with the theft of the pyrodine."

"So!" The commandant's eyes lighted savagely. "You *did* know a vial of pyrodine had been stolen!"

"I didn't," I denied, "but *he* did!"

"He? Who is 'he'?"

"Dr. Smerk. Doc—" I begged—"speak up, man! For goodness sakes!" There came no answer. But a sudden thought struck me. The little man must be *somewhere* around. "Joe—the glasses!" I said. "Give 'em to me, quick!"

Muldoon looked like an accident seeking somewhere to happen. "That—that's what I was tryin' to tell you, Sam," he quavered. "The glasses got bust durin' the explosion!"

"Glasses? Dr. Smerk?" The general's confusion left him abruptly. "I don't understand your nonsense, sirrah! Nor shall I attempt to! Let us have no more of this—"

But I wasn't listening to him. For at the eleventh hour had returned that quiet little voice for which I'd called in vain. Dr. Smerk was whispering swift queries into my ear. The first of these I relayed to the general.

"Excuse me, sir, but would it not be possible to seize each of your visitors individually, search each man before the guilty one has a chance to get rid of the pyrodine?"

The general stared at me as if I were a madman.

"Absolutely impossible, Mr. Gordon! Gad, man, don't you realize these gentlemen are guests of our government? We have been the chief exponent of Western Hemisphere solidarity. If we were to violate our 'good neighbor' policy in this hour of need, the repercussions would shake the very structure on which our foreign relations are based!

"Furthermore—" He shook his head grimly—"should we attempt to lay vio-

lent hands on the culprit, he might sacrifice himself to our cost. Hurl the explosive to the ground and destroy not only us, but all our guests, as well. No, Mr. Gordon, your suggestion is valueless. Now, I am inclined to believe you are simply stalling for time. You and your photographer friend—"

Doc Smerk had been whispering some more. I broke in desperately. "General, we—I—think there is a way out. Do you have a bomber on this field? One large enough to contain all the foreign visitors?"

"Why—yes," said the C.O. "But I don't see—"

"Then won't you please give us a chance to clear ourselves?" I begged. "This sounds crazy, I know. But we didn't steal the pyrodine; you, yourself, are convinced of that. We must try to find the one who did. I think I know a way. If you will just cooperate with me—"

The general stared at me thoughtfully for a moment.

"This is all *most* irregular," he hesitated. "But—there is some merit in what you say. This is a critical *impasse*; we have nothing to lose by giving you a chance. Well, what is it you want?"

"A large bomber—" I said breathlessly, repeating the instructions Dr. Smerk was pouring into my ear. "Then a man with a portable radio transmitter to be set up on the parade grounds. A pilot with a— a parachute, did you say, Doc? Oh, yes, I see—a pilot equipped with a parachute—and—"

Swiftly I outlined my requirements. They were wild, bizarre, fantastic. But the general, having agreed to cooperate, did not now retract his promise. He issued the necessary orders, delegated to me the authority I requested. And a few minutes later, apparently free men, though in truth we were still under closest surveillance, Joe and I were stepping forward to mingle

DICTATORS WANTED!



● Out of the past they came, out of their many graves in many times and lands. . . . These blood-stained bigshots of history!

Caesar, Frederick the Great, Attila the Hun—Chaka the Zulu, Hannibal, Napoleon . . . there were twenty of them all told; wild, ruthless men wearing swords and armor, gnashing their teeth and muttering strange oaths—and each with a look in his eyes to turn a tiger pale!

But they were carefully guarded, for the greatest dictator of all time had them working for *him* (or so he thought!). ●

Ancient conquerors fight again in

THE VICTORY of the VITA RAY

By Stanton Coblentz

IN THE NOVEMBER ISSUE

again with the envoys from the Latin nations.

THE American commandant performed most superbly the role allotted him in Dr. Smerk's mysterious drama. His bluff smile, his hearty manner, offered no hint that there was anything amiss. Through the interpreter he addressed his guests.

"Gentlemen, you have seen but the first of the United States' new defense weapons. Now I have another surprise for you. The gentleman beside me is Mr. Samuel Gordon, one of our nation's foremost scientists. To his genius we are indebted for an invention so spectacular that I shall not spoil the surprise by describing it beforehand.

"One of our army's finest Flying Fortresses awaits us. If you will all step into the plane, Mr. Gordon will now demonstrate his new invention."

They herded in, wide-eyed and eager. Had I the time to do so, I would go into a few rhapsodies over that bomber. What a job! There were more than forty of us, but it was so huge that we simply rattled around in it. A pilot warmed the motors. In the hubbub I sneaked a moment to whisper, "You're all set, Doc? You sure you can swing it?"

A small voice breathed back, "I—I believe so, Mr. Gordon. Oh, mercy me, I hope so!" And finally, as my nerves were about to erupt like a supercharged volcano, those mighty engines roared, we rumbled across the field into the wind and took off.

It was then I assumed my share of the burden. With a pretense of assurance and aplomb I certainly did not feel, I stepped forward and addressed the group.

"Gentlemen," I said, "you are about to witness an exhibition of the United States' newest and greatest military device. A thing science has dreamed of for years, but never before been able to perfect." I paused a moment dramatically; then: "The

automatic, robot-controlled airplane!" I announced.

A moment of dead silence followed the interpreter's relay of this message. Then a score of voices broke into wild speech. I stilled them with a wave of the hand.

"If you will look to the field below," I suggested, "you will notice a single operator sitting before what appears to be a portable radio transmitter. Actually, those controls govern the flight of this ship.

"The pilot now seated in our cockpit serves only one function: to lift the ship off the ground. That accomplished he drops from the bomber. The radio operator takes over the controls, guiding the ship and its deadly cargo to its objective. Captain, if you will demonstrate—?"

The pilot, a trifle dubious, but still gamely obedient to orders, rose, saluted, and flung himself out of the ship. Seconds later his chute opened like a great, silvery mushroom, lazily drifted to the field below. And the cockpit was absolutely empty!

Or to all intents and purposes empty. Of the forty souls aboard, only I guessed the meaning of Muldoon's cryptic whisper. "Careful, Doc! Leapin' snakes—careful!" But that remark went by unnoticed. For after a momentary shrug, the huge machine regained its power, wheeled in a wide arc to the east, and soared oceanward.

Successful exhibition? Pal, you don't know! Those South and Central Americans were simply staggered. They peered into the vacant cockpit, stared awestruck out of windows, whipped up a veritable storm of syllables in their admiration of this marvel. The funny thing is, it never seemed to occur to any of them to be scared at being thus designated guinea pigs on a robot-controlled flight. The only ones who looked at all apprehensive were Muldoon and yours truly. Joe sidled over to me anxiously.

"Sam," he husked, "do you reckon that little squirt knows what he's doing?"

"He seems to," I whispered back. "It was his idea."

"Well, he'd better," gulped Joe, "or it's goin' to be just too bad. With—*Omi-gawd!*"

His prediction broke off in a startled yelp. I imagine I hollered, too. Because at that moment one of the huge motors spluttered into silence. Then another cut off. The ship lurched, wobbled, jerked like a one-winged duck in a cyclone. Then with what seemed to be horrible ease, it winged over and swung into a slow, narrowing, spiral glide!

Muldoon's face turned fourteen shades of green. "I knew it!" he howled. "We're falling! We're out of control!"

I'LL say one thing for hemisphere solidarity. Uncle Sam picked himself a game bunch of neighbors. It was a moment for panic, but that outfit of army officers didn't panic any more than an equal number of wooden Indians. To a man, they held their positions, looked for orders to the representative of the United States Army.

Nor did he fail them. He stepped forward briskly, divided them into two groups, pointed to the exits. "Everyone have his parachute? All right, easy does it, now. One at a time. Tell them, interpreter."

The word-mangler babbled his instructions. He made heavy weather of it, for he—a civilian like ourselves—was none too gleesome about the affair.

"Everything's going to be all right," proclaimed the general. "We have a lot of elevation, plenty of time. And fortunately we're over the water."

I looked down. He was right. Our journey eastward had carried us out over the Sound. Its wavelets flashed and rippled in the sunlight.

"Plenty of ships down there," continued the army officer. "They'll pick us up as fast as we drop." He permitted himself a thin smile. "Too bad this accident had to happen, gentlemen. But I'm mighty glad of *one* thing. That we didn't have any of that pyrodine aboard. I didn't mention it before, but that new explosive acts with doubled violence when it is exposed to a liquid element. If we ever struck water carrying that stuff there wouldn't be enough left of us to—*There he is! Grab him, Gordon!*"

Me? Me grab anything? I was too dazed to move. For everything happened at once, and I didn't understand any of it.

At the general's words, a figure had sprung into sudden action. A gray-lipped figure in civilian clothes leaped to the window, flung it open, hurled something drawn from his pocket far out into the Sound!

Then, realizing that he had betrayed himself, the interpreter tried to throw himself out the window after the pyrodine he had stolen.

So it was Muldoon who got credit for the tackle. I only got an assist. But it was a very satisfying assist, because maybe I'm not as young as I used to be, but I'm still enough of an American to know what to do when an enemy jaw sticks up invitingly six inches away.

And in the background of my consciousness I was aware that the "falling" ship had once again settled to an even motion, that the passengers were returning to their places, and that from a supposedly empty cockpit a happy little voice was chirruping, "Oh, well done, Mr. Gordon! Oh, goodness me, you caught him *beautifully*."

SO THAT was that. And of course after capturing the real spy, the C. O. couldn't very well shove us in the clink. So we were released with a pat on the back and a faceful of genial smiles and a cam-

erafull of exclusive pix worth a bonus on any man's newspaper. Not to mention the general's promise that one Sam Gordon of the *Times-Star* should henceforth be granted priority on any hot news items to emanate from Fort Slocum.

More important, we got a chance to explain how it was we had kept a pilotless Flying Fortress in the air for more than twenty minutes. Our explanation was the biggest blow an army has sustained since Hitler's army tumbled down the icy steppes of Russia. The C. O. had to take our words on faith. With Dr. Smerk's polarized glasses broken, he couldn't play peep-show. But he talked, and he moved things, and he proved his claims beyond a shadow of a doubt. And the general said:

"Very well. I've seen enough, Dr. Smerk. You have my solemn assurance that the United States government *will* accept this invention of yours, immediately if not sooner! Go home and collect your formulae. You and I will fly to Washington tomorrow."

Which wound up matters pretty well. All but for one thing. As we were driving back to New York I asked the Doc:

"Listen—I don't get it! You knew who the spy was all the time, Doc?"

"Why—er—yes," admitted the meek little voice at my right shoulder.

"Then why didn't you tell us, so we could grab him?"

"Oh, mercy, that would have been too dangerous! He might have thrown down the pyrodine and killed us all—"

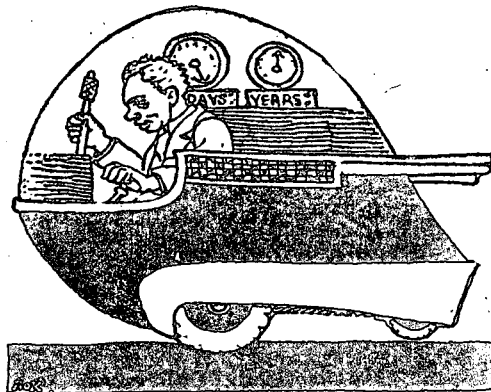
"Nuts!" I stormed, "and nonsense! You are invisible, Smerk. You could have sneaked up to him and swiped it from his pocket. Now, come clean! Why did you make us go through all that fol-de-rol about the bomber?"

"Well," confessed Smerk, "for one thing, I thought it the best way to prove my invisibility—"

"And—?" I prodded him grimly.

"And for another," he said in a wistful little voice, "I always have wanted to pilot a bomber. I *love* bombers, Mr. Gordon."

So, there you are! What are you going to do with a guy who's not only a *genius*, but a whacky-pot as well? Anyhow, I should have realized he'd get us into trouble, I guess. You know the old adage. Where there's Smerk—there's fireworks.



Eyes of the Panther

By **KUKE NICHOLS**

"I have made a superb delirium
with only a lizard to start on."
— *James Branch Cabell*

THOSE last weeks in the city exhausted my endurance and tore even at my reason, but when at last I sped away from the bitterness and humiliation through the gray hills of New England, I felt my troubles slip away behind. I knew the mad whirlpool of my mind would slow toward placidity in the house my family had held for generations, the beautiful house on the high hill that looked eastward to the shining of the ocean.

I would be alone there, alone among the memories of a carefree childhood, in the home where I should have stayed, instead of allowing myself to be lured away into the strain of life and competition in the city, to which I was so ill suited. And now that I had failed, fearfully and perhaps shamefully, lost all my dizzy towering fortune save the old house and a little money that would permit me to live there unmolested for a year or two, now perhaps I could be at peace and happy once again.

I stopped in the village, to make sure my letters had been received and my instructions obeyed. Coal and firewood were needed, great stores of them, for the last withered leaves were drifting softly on the chill autumn wind; and provisions of every kind, for I did not intend to bother myself with frequent trips to the village, in which there were too many half-remembered faces, and too many friendly, curious,

pitying eyes probing gently at the raw wounds of my self-esteem. It was good to get away from them, and I remember now that I sang as the car toiled up the steep gravel road.

The house was smaller, and its setting gloomier than I recalled. Its paint, refreshed at my whim the year before, gleamed whitely from the casements and the pillared porch, the brown of the old shingles was golden in the afternoon light, and the drive curved in among the giant, friendly elms I remembered so well. But the pine forest behind towered like a wall of emerald night, and the house seemed to shrink back into its long shadow guiltily, huddling under the slopes of its own dark shingled roof.

But the darkness in my mind which retouched even this familiar scene soon left me, and my life fell into a pleasant pattern there on the high and lonely hill. For long hours I would doze or read, looking now and then with infinite comfort on the patchwork of field and orchard and woodland that dropped away past the distant village to the sparkling edge of the sea. And I would walk on pleasant meadows rimmed by the shining white of birches and the occasional bulk of some rugged, hoary tree that had somehow escaped the axe of the pioneer and the long malice of the wind.

And of course I cooked and washed, and split and carried wood, and each night I slept with a dreamless depth I had never known before. Day followed after shining day, while my mind and body healed.

So passed a week, and then came rain,