



Lighter Than You Think

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About Bond:

Nelson Slade Bond (November 23, 1908, Scranton, Pennsylvania - November 4, 2006, Roanoke, Virginia) was an American author who wrote extensively for books, magazines, radio, television and the stage. The 1998 recipient of the Nebula Author Emeritus award for lifetime achievement, Bond was a pioneer in early science fiction and fantasy. His published fiction is mainly short stories, most of which appeared in pulp magazines in the 1930s and 1940s. Many were published in Blue Book magazine. He is noted for his "Lancelot Biggs" series of stories and for his "Meg the Priestess" tales, which introduced one of the first powerful female characters in science fiction.

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SOME JOKER in the dear, dead days now virtually beyond recall won two-bit immortality by declaring that, "What this country needs is a good five-cent cigar."

Which is, of course, Victorian malarkey. What this country *really* needs is a good five-cent nickel. Or perhaps a good cigar-shaped spaceship. There's a fortune waiting somewhere out in space for the man who can go out there and claim it. A fortune! And if you think I'm just talking through my hat, lend an ear ...

Joyce started the whole thing. Or maybe I did when for the umpteenth time I suggested she should marry me. She smiled in a way that showed she didn't disapprove of my persistence, but loosed a salvo of devastating negatives.

"No deal," she crisped decisively. "Know why? No dough!"

"But, sugar," I pleaded, "two can live as cheaply as one—"

"This is true," replied Joyce, "only of guppies. Understand, Don, I don't mind changing my name from Carter to Mallory. In fact, I'd rather like to. But I have no desire whatever to be known to the neighbors as 'that poor little Mrs. Mallory in last year's coat.'

"I'll marry you," she continued firmly, "when, as and if you get a promotion."

Her answer was by no stretch of the imagination a reason for loud cheers, handsprings and cartwheels. Because I'm a Federal employee. The United States Patent Office is my beat. There's one nice thing to be said about working for the bewhiskered old gentleman in the star-spangled stovepipe and striped britches: it's permanent. Once you get your name inscribed on the list of Civil Service employees it takes an act of Congress to blast it off again. And of course I don't have to remind you how long it takes *that* body of vote-happy windbags to act. Terrapins in treacle are greased lightning by comparison.

But advancement is painfully slow in a department where discharges are unheard of and resignations rare. When I started clerking for this madhouse I was assistant to the assistant Chief Clerk's assistant. Now, ten years later, by dint of mighty effort and a cultivated facility for avoiding Senatorial investigations, I've succeeded in losing only one of those redundant adjectives.

Being my secretary, Joyce certainly realized this. But women have a remarkable ability to separate business and pleasure. So:

"A promotion," she insisted. "Or at least a good, substantial raise."

"In case you don't know it," I told her gloomily, "you are displaying a lamentably vulgar interest in one of life's lesser values. Happiness, not money, should be man's chief goal."

"What good is happiness," demanded Joyce, "if you can't buy money with it?"

"Why hoard lucre?" I sniffed. "You can't take it with you."

"In that case," said Joyce flatly, "I'm not going. There's no use arguing, Don. I've made up my mind—"

At this moment our dreary little impasse was ended by a sudden tumult outside my office. There was a squealing shriek, the shuffle of footsteps, the pounding of fists upon my door. And over all the shrill tones of an old, familiar voice high-pitched in triumph.

"Let me in! I've got to see him instantaneously. This time I've got it; I've absolutely *got* it!"

Joyce and I gasped, then broke simultaneously for the door as it flew open to reveal a tableau resembling the Laocoon group sans snake and party of the third part. Back to the door and struggling valiantly to defend it stood the receptionist, Miss Thomas. Held briefly but volubly at bay was a red-thatched, buck-toothed individual—and I *do* mean individual!—with a face like the map of Eire, who stopped wrestling as he saw us, and grinned delightedly.

"Hello, Mr. Mallory," he said. "Hi, Miss Joyce."

"Pat!" we both cried at once. "Pat Pending!"

Miss Thomas, a relative newcomer to our bailiwick, seemed baffled by the warmth of our greeting. She entered the office with our visitor, and as Joyce and I pumphanded him enthusiastically she asked, "You—you *know* this gentleman, Mr. Mallory?"

"I should say we do!" I chortled. "Pat, you old naughty word! Where on earth have you been hiding lately?"

"Surely you've heard of the great Patrick Pending, Miss Thomas?" asked Joyce.

"Pending?" faltered Miss Thomas. "I seem to have heard the name. Or seen it somewhere—"

Pat beamed upon her companionably. Stepping to my desk, he up-ended the typewriter and pointed to a legend in tiny letters stamped into the frame: *Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.—Pat. Pending.*

"Here, perhaps?" he suggested. "I invented this. And the airplane, and the automobile, and—oh, ever so many things. You'll find my name inscribed on every one."

"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 transmutter, 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 applicaceous 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 lightning 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.

"You might show some interest in *me*," I grumbled. "I doubt if that stick will need a liniment rubdown tonight. Okay, Pat. You're right and I'm wrong, as you usually are. That modern variation of a witch's broomstick *does* operate. Only—how?"

"That dial at the top governs weight," explained Pat. "When you turn it—"

"Skip that. I know how it is operated. I want to know what makes it work?"

"Well," explained Pat, "I'm not certain I can make it clear, but it's all tied in with the elemental scientific problems of mass, weight, gravity and electric energy. What *is* electricity, for example—"

"I used to know," I frowned. "But I forget."

Joyce shook her head sorrowfully.

"Friends," she intoned, "let us all bow our heads. This is a moment of great tragedy. The only man in the world who ever knew what electricity is—and he has forgotten!"

"That's the whole point," agreed Pending. "No one knows what electricity really is. All we know is how to use it. Einstein has demonstrated that the force of gravity and electrical energy are kindred; perhaps different aspects of a common phenomenon. That was my starting point."

"So this rod, which enables you to defy the law of gravity, is electrical?"

"Electricaceous," corrected Pat. "You see, I have transmogrified the polarifity of certain ingredular cellulations. A series of disentrigrulated helicocities, activated by hypermagnetation, set up a disruptular wave motion which results in—counter-gravity!"

And there you are! Ninety-nine percent of the time Pat Pending talks like a normal human being. But ask him to explain the mechanism of one of his inventions and linguistic hell breaks loose. He begins jabbering like a schizophrenic parrot reading a Sanskrit dictionary backward! I sighed and surrendered all hope of ever actually learning *how* his great new discovery worked. I turned my thoughts to more important matters.

"Okay, Pat. We'll dismiss the details as trivial and get down to brass tacks. What is your invention used for?"

"Eh?" said the redhead.

"It's not enough that an idea is practicable," I pointed out. "It must also be practical to be of any value in this frenzied modern era. What good is your invention?"

"What good," demanded Joyce, "is a newborn baby?"

"Don't change the subject," I suggested. "Or come to think of it, maybe you should. At the diaper level, life is just one damp thing after another. But how to turn Pat's brainchild into cold, hard cash—that's the question before the board now.

"Individual flight *a la* Superman? No dice. I can testify from personal experience that once you get up there you're completely out of control. And I can't see any sense in humans trying to fly with jet flames scorching their base of operations.

"Elevators? Derricks? Building cranes? Possible. But lifting a couple hundred pounds is one thing. Lifting a few tons is a horse of a different color.

"No, Pat," I continued, "I don't see just how—"

Sandy Thomas squeaked suddenly and grasped my arm.

"That's it, Mr. Mallory!" she cried. "That's it!"

"Huh? What's what?"

"You wanted to know how Pat could make money from his invention. You've just answered your own question."

"I have?"

"Horses! Horse racing, to be exact. You've heard of handicaps, haven't you?"

"I'm overwhelmed with them," I nodded wearily. "A secretary who repulses my honorable advances, a receptionist who squeals in my ear—"

"Listen, Mr. Mallory, what's the last thing horses do before they go to the post?"

"Check the tote board," I said promptly, "to find out if I've got any money on them. Horses hate me. They've formed an equine conspiracy to prove to me the ancient adage that a fool and his money are soon parted."

"Wait a minute!" chimed in Joyce thoughtfully. "I know what Sandy means. They weigh in. Is that right?"

"Exactly! The more weight a horse is bearing, the slower it runs. That's the purpose of handicapping. But if a horse that was supposed to be carrying more than a hundred pounds was actually only carrying *ten*—Well, you see?"

Sandy paused, breathless. I stared at her with a gathering respect.

"Never underestimate the power of a woman," I said, "when it comes to devising new and ingenious methods of perpetrating petty larceny. There's only one small fly in the ointment, so far as I can see. How do we convince some racehorse owner he should become a party to this gentle felony?"

"Oh, you don't have to," smiled Sandy cheerfully. "I'm already convinced."

"You? You own a horse?"

"Yes. Haven't you ever heard of Tapwater?"

"Oh, sure! That drip's running all the time!"

Joyce tossed me a reproving glance.

"This is a matter of gravity, Donald," she stated, "and you keep treating it with levity. Sandy, do you *really* own Tapwater? He's the colt who won the Monmouth Futurity, isn't he?"

"That's right. And four other starts this season. That's been our big trouble. He shows such promise that the judges have placed him under a terrific weight handicap. To run in next week's Gold Stakes, for instance, he would have to carry 124 pounds. I was hesitant to enter him because of that. But with Pat's new invention—" She turned to Pat, eyes glowing—"he could enter and win!"

Pat said uncertainly, "I don't know. I don't like gambling. And it doesn't seem quite ethical, somehow—"

I asked Sandy, "Suppose he ran carrying 124. What would be the probable odds?"

"High," she replied, "*Very* high. Perhaps as high as forty to one."

"In that case," I decided, "it's not only ethical, it's a moral obligation. If you're opposed to gambling, Pat, what better way can you think of to put the parimutuels out of business?"

"And besides," Sandy pointed out, "this would be a wonderful opportunity to display your new discovery before an audience of thousands. Well, Pat? What do you say?"

Pat hesitated, caught a glimpse of Sandy's pleading eyes, and was lost.

"Very well," he said. "We'll do it. Mr. Mallory, enter Tapwater in the Gold Stakes. We'll put on the most spectaceous exhibition in the history of gambilizing!"

Thus it was that approximately one week later our piratical little crew was assembled once again, this time in the paddock at Laurel. In case you're an inland aborigine, let me explain that Laurel race track (from the township of the same name) is where horse fanciers from the District of Columbia go to abandon their Capitol and capital on weekends.

We were briefing our jockey—a scrawny youth with a pair of oversized ears—on the use of Pat's lightening rod. Being short on gray matter as well as on stature, he wasn't getting it at all.

"You mean," he said for the third or thirty-third time, "you don't want I should *hit* the nag with this bat?"

"Heavens, no!" gasped Pat, blanching. "It's much too delicate for that."

"Don't fool yourself, mister. Horses can stand a lot of leather."

"Not the horse, stupid," I said. "The bat. This is the only riding crop of its kind in the world. We don't want it damaged. All you have to do is *carry* it. We'll do the rest."

"How about setting the dial, Don?" asked Joyce.

"Pat will do that just before the horses move onto the track. Now let's get going. It's weigh-in time."

We moved to the scales with our rider. He stepped aboard the platform, complete with silks and saddle, and the spinner leaped to a staggering 102, whereupon the officials started gravely handing him little leather sacks.

"What's this?" I whispered to Sandy. "Prizes for malnutrition? He must have won all the blackjacks east of the Mississippi."

"The handicap," she whispered back. "Lead weights at one pound each."

"If he starts to lose," I ruminated, "they'd make wonderful ammunition—"

"One hundred and twenty-four," announced the chief weigher-inner. "Next entry!"

We returned to Tapwater. The jockey fastened the weights to his gear, saddled up and mounted. From the track came the traditional bugle call. Sandy nodded to Pat.

"All right, Pat. Now!"

Pending twisted the knob on his lightning rod and handed the stick to the jockey. The little horseman gasped, rose three inches in his stirrups, and almost let go of the baton.

"H-hey!" he exclaimed. "I feel funny. I feel—"

"Never mind that," I told him. "Just you hold on to that rod until the race is over. And when you come back, give it to Pat immediately. Understand?"

"Yes. But I feel so—so lightheaded—"

"That's because you're featherbrained," I advised him. "Now, get going. Giddyap, Dobbin!"

I patted Tapwater's flank, and so help me Newton, I think that one gentle tap pushed the colt half way to the starting gate! He pattered across the turf with a curious bouncing gait as if he were running on tip-toe. We hastened to our seats in the grandstand.

"Did you get all the bets down?" asked Joyce.

I nodded and displayed a deck of ducats. "It may not have occurred to you, my sweet," I announced gleefully, "but these pasteboards are transferrable on demand to rice and old shoes, the sweet strains of *Oh, Promise Me!* and the scent of orange blossoms. You insisted I should have a nest egg before you would murmur, 'I do'? Well, after this race these tickets will be worth—" I cast a swift last glance at the tote board's closing odds, quoting Tapwater at 35 to 1—"approximately seventy thousand dollars!"

"Donald!" gasped Joyce. "You didn't bet all your savings?"

"Every cent," I told her cheerfully. "Why not?"

"But if something should go wrong! If Tapwater should lose!"

"He won't. See what I mean?"

For even as we were talking, the bell jangled, the crowd roared, and the horses were off. Eight entries surged from the starting gate. And already one full length out in front pranced the weight-free, lightfoot Tapwater!

At the quarter post our colt had stretched his lead to three lengths, and I shouted in Pending's ear, "How much does that jockey weigh, anyway?"

"About six pounds," said Pat. "I turned the knob to cancel one eighteen."

At the half, all the other horses could glimpse of Tapwater was heels. At the three-quarter post he was so far ahead that the jockey must have been lonely. As he rounded into the stretch I caught a binocular view of his face, and he looked dazed and a little frightened. He wasn't actually *riding* Tapwater. The colt was simply skimming home, and he was holding on for dear life to make sure he didn't blow off the horse's back. The result was a foregone conclusion, of course. Tapwater crossed the finish line nine lengths ahead, setting a new track record.

The crowd went wild. Over the hubbub I clutched Pat's arm and bawled, "I'll go collect our winnings. Hurry down to the track and swap that lightening rod for the real bat we brought along. He'll have to weigh out again, you know. Scoot!"

The others vanished paddockward as I went for the big payoff. It was dreary at the totalizer windows. I was one of a scant handful who had bet on Tapwater, so it took no time at all to scoop into the valise I had brought along the seventy thousand bucks in crisp, green lettuce which an awed teller passed across the counter. Then I hurried back to join the others in the winner's circle, where bedlam was not only reigning but pouring. Flashbulbs were popping all over the place, cameramen were screaming for just one more of the jockey, the owner, the fabulous Tapwater. The officials were vainly striving to quiet the tumult so they could award the prize. I found Pending worming his way out of the heart of the crowd.

"Did you get it?" I demanded.

He nodded, thrust the knobbed baton into my hand.

"You substituted the normal one?"

Again he nodded. Hastily I thrust the lightening rod out of sight into my valise, and we elbowed forward to share the triumphant moment. It was a great experience. I felt giddy with joy; I was walking on little pink clouds of happiness. Security was mine at last. And Joyce, as well.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" cried the chief official. "Your attention, please! Today we have witnessed a truly spectacular feat: the setting of a new track record by a champion racing under a tremendous handicap. I give you a magnificent racehorse—*Tapwater!*"

"That's right, folks!" I bawled, carried away by the excitement. "Give this little horse a great big hand!"

Setting the example, I laid down the bag, started clapping vigorously. From a distance I heard Pat Pending's agonized scream.

"Mr. Mallory—the suitcase! Grab it!"

I glanced down, belatedly aware of the danger of theft. But too late. The bag had disappeared.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Who swiped my bag? Police!"

"Up there, Mr. Mallory!" bawled Pat. "Jump!"

I glanced skyward. Three feet above my head and rising swiftly was the valise in which I had cached not only our winnings but Pat's gravity-defying rod! I leaped—but in vain. I was *still* making feeble, futile efforts to make like the moon-hurdling nursery rhyme cow when quite a while later two strong young men in white jackets came and jabbed me with a sedative ...

Later, when time and barbiturates had dulled the biting edge of my despair, we assembled once again in my office and I made my apologies to my friends.

"It was all my fault," I acknowledged. "I should have realized Pat hadn't readjusted the rod when I placed it in my bag. It felt lighter. But I was so excited—"

"It was *my* fault," mourned Pat, "for not changing it immediately. But I was afraid someone might see me."

"Perhaps if we hired an airplane—?" I suggested.

Pat shook his head.

"No, Mr. Mallory. The rod was set to cancel 118 pounds. The bag weighed less than twenty. It will go miles beyond the reach of any airplane before it settles into an orbit around earth."

"Well, there goes my dreamed-of fortune," I said sadly. "Accompanied by the fading strains of an unplayed wedding march. I'm sorry, Joyce."

"Isn't there one thing you folks are overlooking?" asked Sandy Thomas. "My goodness, you'd think we had lost our last cent just because that little old bag flew away!"

"For your information," I told her, "that is precisely what happened to me. My entire bank account vanished into the wild blue yonder. And some of Pat's money, too."

"But have you forgotten," she insisted, "that we *won* the race? Of course the track officials were a wee bit suspicious when your suitcase took off. But they couldn't prove anything. So they paid me the Gold Stakes prize. If we split it four ways, we all make a nice little profit.

"Or," she added, "if you and Joyce want to make yours a double share, we could split it three ways.

"Or," she continued hopefully, "if Pat wants to, we could make *two* double shares, and split it fifty-fifty?"

From the look in Pat's eyes I knew he was stunned by this possibility. And from the look in hers, I felt she was going to make every effort to take advantage of his bewilderment.

So, as I said before, what this country needs is a good cigar-shaped spaceship. There's a fortune waiting somewhere out in space for the man who can go out there and claim it. Seventy thousand bucks in cold, hard cash.

Indubitably!

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Right Ho, Jeeves is a novel by P. G. Wodehouse, the second full-length novel featuring the popular characters Jeeves and Bertie Wooster, after Thank You, Jeeves. It also features a host of other recurring Wodehouse characters, and is mostly set at Brinkley Court, the home of Bertie's Aunt Dahlia. It was first published in the United Kingdom on October 5, 1934 by Herbert Jenkins, London, and in the United States on October 15, 1934 by Little, Brown and Company, Boston, under the title Brinkley Manor. Before being published as a book, it had been sold to the Saturday Evening Post, in which it appeared in serial form from December 23, 1933 to January 27, 1934, and in England in Grand Magazine from April to September 1934. Wodehouse had already started planning this sequel while working on Thank You, Jeeves.

(Wikipedia)

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