

THE LITTLE MAN  
WHO WASN'T  
THERE

ARTHUR K. BARNES

## \* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \*

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

*Title:* The Little Man Who Wasn't There

*Date of first publication:* 1941

*Author:* Barnes, Arthur K. (1909-1969)

*Date first posted:* Feb. 22, 2023

*Date last updated:* Feb. 22, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230235

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

This file was produced from images generously made available by The Unz Review.

[Source: Thrilling Wonder Stories, March 1941]

James Littleman Thought His Powers of Invisibility Were a Visible Asset—but They Made His Profits Disappear!

# THE LITTLE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

By ARTHUR K. BARNES

*Author of "Trouble on Titan,"  
"Waters of Wrath," etc.*

Get the picture, folks.

I was just home from a tough week-end with the ponies at Caliente, with a flock of worthless pari-mutuel stubs and a Chinese lottery ticket. The effect of a pint of high-class brandy was beginning to wear off, and I was just beginning to feel sorry for myself in a big way.

Right then there was a high-pitched *whoosh* somewhere in the sky over the house, a lot of popping and roaring, and a

terrific thump in the backyard. I could feel a blast of heat clear in the front room.

So I ran out, and there was this—this thing smack in the middle of my petunia bed. The petunias were burned to a crisp, and so was I! At first I thought the Nazis had come, and this was a time bomb or a dud shell. But then I seen it wasn't either of those. It was reddish-colored, and shaped like an egg.

But what an egg! It was about four feet high and nearly five feet from end to end. And what made me sure it wasn't a bomb was the fact that there were windows in it. Also, a door.

The whole thing was so hot I couldn't approach it at first, but pretty soon it cooled off. Then the door opened, and a little green man came out. All right, all right; never mind the cracks. It was a little man, all dressed in green. He was about two feet tall.

I shut my eyes and shook my head vigorously, which I've found to be excellent treatment for little men who come out of bottles. But he didn't go away. Just stood there looking up at me. Pretty soon six more little men came out. Aha, I figured, it's the seven dwarfs. But where's Snow White?

Pretty soon a whole lot of jumbled thoughts just popped into my head from nowhere, as if somebody was talking inside my brain. I began to have doubts about whether that brandy had been so high class after all. I looked around,

hoping someone would come along and tell me I wasn't having the deetees. But no soap.

I live in one of them broken-down southern California subdivisions that petered out before it really got started. My cottage is alone at the end of a beautifully paved street, with lightless lamp posts and grass pushing through the cracked sidewalk. There was nobody inside a city block to see what was going on.

All of a sudden I caught on. The little guy was talking, in a queer, piping gabble. The syllables didn't sound like anything I ever heard, but somehow I understood every word. Sure; it was mental telepathy!

He told me a weird story about how the egg-shaped thing was a space ship, and how they'd come from billions of miles away through interstellar space. He pointed out a star in the southeast and said that was his home. Then he said they were getting low on fuel, and chose to land on Earth because its physical conditions were pretty much like those on their home planet. They were friendly, and didn't want to stay much longer than it would take to replenish their fuel supply, and would I please happen to have some of the stuff, which was very rare where they come from, on hand?

I was dumfounded, naturally. But being very intelligent, I soon grasped the situation. Science, see? Super-science of a great civilization of little, green folk, conquering space. I catch on quick because I have always believed in science. I read about it sometimes. It's the nuts.

And believe it or not, all they needed was a little copper. I searched my small change and found two pennies. The green men gathered around, and promptly went wild with excitement. Thoughts of gratitude crowded my mind till I was dizzy.

Then I remembered something. A few months back I'd had one of those penny boards to fill out with samples of Lincoln head cents, one of each year's mint. I hadn't been able to find all the required ones and had dropped the whole thing. But I had a lot of copper pennies left.

I ran in and collected about three dozen and offered them to the space travelers. They were overwhelmed, bowing and grinning and patting me on the leg affectionately. They lugged my pennies into the space ship, and then popped out again to form a solemn semi-circle around me. The leader raised his hand and began to spiel a lot of nice things. The main idea seemed to be that they were grateful no end, and wanted to do something for me. Just about anything within their power to bestow—and that took in plenty of territory.

I thought: it's just like the old fairy tale where the guy helps the little wood sprite and gets three wishes in return. Except that I only got one. So it had better be good.

I pondered, and a lot of wild nonsense went through my head. Finally I realized that here was the chance of a lifetime

to be a big shot, or pile up a quick fortune and live the life of Riley happily ever after. So I suggested:

"Could you give me the secret of how to make gold?"

No soap. They didn't know what gold was. So sorry.

"Well, then, how about some scientific jigger to make me invulnerable to all weapons?"

The leader of the little men looked me over and went into a huddle with his mob. The verdict again was no dice. They figured this was too great a power to hand out to any one person, especially to one whose character might not be the most noble. Nothing nasty about this remark, just a statement of fact.

The same remark was my answer to a delicate hint about a super weapon that might make me, quite by coincidence of course, all-powerful.

It began to look as though I wouldn't make any fortune after all. Then I thought of a slick one.

"Say, d'you happen to know how to make yourself invisible? That'd be an interesting power to have. For entertainment purposes, and stuff like that there." I looked innocent, so as not to let the little wise guy know what I was thinking.

He looked at me again as if he knew darn well what I had in mind, and then smiled a bit. One of the others went into the space ship and brought out a funny looking gadget. There



was a circle of metal, just big enough to fit around the head of a green man. This was braced inside with a criss-cross of thin bars. And rising from this, on a short stem, was a squat cone.

"This," came the little man's thoughts, "is an apparatus to induce invisibility of its wearer. This ring is placed upon the head—normally it fits our heads but has been crudely adjusted to fit yours;—and this tiny switch at the base of the cone is pressed." Fortunately, I am not very big—in fact, as James Littleman, I am well named—though somewhat on the stocky side. "A ray-screen is produced shooting down from the cone, completely enveloping the wearer, which bends light rays around him. For a period of four hours, no more and no less, he is invisible; then the power is exhausted."

The green man handed up a pair of small spectacles, the bows of which had been extended and bent so I could wear 'em. More thoughts came.

"These will permit the invisible one to see electronically, despite the fact that no true light rays penetrate the ray-screen. And mark well this warning, sir. The invisibility rays must never be allowed to touch the head, else the delicate neurons of the brain will be irremediably damaged, resulting in madness or death. Other parts of the body can withstand this force for very limited periods, but not the brain. This means that once this apparatus is adjusted and operating, it cannot be removed until the power has exhausted itself. Once invisible, the wearer must remain invisible for his allotted four hours."

I rubbed my hands in glee and told the little men I savvied everything. There were more demonstrations of affection and gratitude, worse than a reunion of tipsy fraternity brothers at homecoming day, and then they all piled into their space ship. I backed off. There was a terrific *swish*, a roaring, and there were my petunias, completely wrecked. But no space ship.

I grinned, hugging the invisibility device. For forty cents I had invested in something that would make me a fortune well inside of four hours. All over town there were places where money lies around loose, just waiting for me to come in and pick it up. They call 'em banks.

I always did say science is the nuts.

Next ayem I had my plans laid out. I drove downtown by ten o'clock, parked in a lot, and ducked into the rest room in the subway. There, where nobody could see, I fixed the invisibility unit on my dome, put on the goggles, and snapped the switch. Right away everything around me got dim and reddish.

I could see pretty well, though, except when I looked down and tried to see myself inside the cone of rays. That tilted the outfit on my head and made my feet and legs visible. Just for a second they felt cold and numb, as if ready to drop off from frostbite. So I didn't try that again.

Instead, I piled out of the subway building and headed for the Third National Bank. Once a woman shopper barged out of a store and ran into me before I could dodge. She went down in a spray of bundles, staring wildly around.

"Lady," I said with my customary patience, "whyn't you look where you're going?"

Courteously I picked up one of her fallen packages. She stared at the thing as if it would bite her, her eyes rolled up at sound of my disembodied voice, and pretty soon she passed out. I got away from there fast.

In the Third National the set-up was perfect. It was Monday, and lots of depositors were checking in their long green. I waited till one of the tellers left his cage. Then I just walked in and gathered up about six hundred bucks and stowed it away in my pocket. It was that easy. I shrank aside as the teller came hurrying back and carefully picked my way toward the front door.

Just then the teller let out a terrific squawk.

"Robbery!" he yelped. "Bank robbers!"

Alarm bells began to hammer; people ran about aimlessly. The big doors automatically slammed tight and locked. Police appeared magically waving their guns. And there I was, dodging and dancing about like a lightweight contender, trying to keep out of everybody's way, stuck with that six centuries and no way to get out.

At first it was a laugh. A sergeant began snapping questions at the scared teller.

"How long was you out of your cage?" he barked.

"Not more than thirty seconds."

"You sure the dough was there when you stepped out?"

"P-positive."

The officer barked at the bank guard, an old gink who hangs around the door doing nothing much in particular.

"D'you remember if anybody went out in the las' few minutes, before the teller yelled?"

The guard was positive. Four people had come in, but no one had left the bank for at least five minutes before the uproar.

"That means," thundered the sergeant, "the robber is still in this here bank!" Very portentous. Drawing his gun ominously. That kind of stuff. "Line up, everybody! Against the wall!"

I had to snicker. It sounded like a raspberry. The copper looked straight through me and growled, "Who said that?"

The search began, in spite of a lot of beefing from the customers. Naturally it was a flop. But what caught me with my—well, unawares—was that the people, after being searched, weren't allowed to go. Those bank doors stayed

shut, and were going to stay shut, evidently, till the money turned up. Then it dawned on me that I was in trouble. If this business went on four hours, then I would be visible. Also sunk. I began to sweat. Besides, I had other plans of what to do with them four hours.

Finally I had to admit it. My first skirmish was a defeat. Or, rather, I would have to make a strategic withdrawal. In order to get away I had to give up the six hundred. Of course a man of my intelligence is never at a loss in an emergency. So I went over to the manager's desk—he was a sour-puss I had never liked, which was why I knocked off his bank in the first place—and tossed the sheaf of bills right into his lap.

"My Gawd!" he yammered, eyes popping and gazing around in all directions. "Here's the money!"

The sergeant strode over.

"Where'd you find it?"

Right there the manager made his mistake. He told the truth.

"It just dropped from nowhere into my lap. It materialized out of the air!"

The copper narrowed his eyes.

"Wise guy, huh? Now quit kiddin' an' let's have the facts."

"I'm telling you, Officer, it just appeared out of nothing. One minute I was sitting here worrying about it, and the next minute it flew into my lap."

"Well, I wouldn't quit worryin' if I was you. You're gonna have plenty to worry about if you stick to that story!"

The argument went on merrily, with the sweating manager getting in deeper and deeper every time he opened his mouth. I enjoyed it so much I forgot what I was doing, and it was after eleven when I realized that time was slipping by.

So I slipped in between two of the fidgeting customers and said, "Well, they've found the money. It's about time they let us out of here, don't you think?"

The two men turned to one another and said, "You're darn right!" simultaneously, and looked kind of foolishly at each other. But the idea stayed with 'em, and they began to put up a big fuss. Before very long the doors were opened, and I slipped outside.

My plans were all in a mess, of course; bank robbery, after my harrowing experience, was out, but definitely. From now on I was allergic to banks. I cudgeled my brains for a means of using my temporary invisibility to pile up some quick money. I had thought the bank idea so foolproof that I hadn't bothered to dope out any alternative plans.

The more I cudgeled, the less I could think of. Offhand I couldn't bring to mind a single place where there'd likely be

any quantity of money on hand easily available. If you think it'd be so easy, try it yourself. Stores? Penny-ante stuff. Besides, it's quite a trick, even if a guy is invisible, to open a cash register and lift the money right under the vigilant nose of the clerk. Jewelry shop? No, again. Their displays are all paste gems; the real stuff is in a vault.

Besides, I'd still have the difficulty of finding a fence to market the stuff. This would be true of any business which has window displays; the best goods aren't stuck in the windows. Race-track? Yes, there's plenty of loose dough in the betting booths, but by the time the track opened, it would be too late in the afternoon. I would be visible again.

But the race-track idea brought me true inspiration. Bookies! They were illegal anyway. It would be a sort of public service to put one of 'em out of business, if you look at it the right way. And I knew one, "Odds-On" Ottomeyer, so called because he was the tightest odds chiseler in town. Many's the time he had wrecked a sure thing for me by offering odds that turned out even worse than track prices.

I found Ottomeyer in the Elite Pool Hall, where he does his business in the back room with the connivance of the slightly enriched cop on the beat. Odds-On was all alone in the joint, practicing on a snooker table in the rear. I walked up to him and stopped. He turned at the sound of footsteps and goggled when he didn't see anybody.

He turned back to play the pink ball in the corner pocket. I leaned up close so, as the pink ball rolled straight for its target, the pocket suddenly vanished from Ottomeyer's view. The ball also disappeared, as I caught it with an invisible hand and took it off the table entirely. Ottomeyer staggered around the table making funny noises, desperately fumbled with the strangely behaving corner pocket. No pink ball.

"Strike me dead!" muttered the bookie hoarsely. "Strike me dead!"

That was my cue. In sepulchral tones I said:

"So happy to oblige. You see before you the hand of retribution."

I stuck one hand out into the air before his nose, just for a second before it got too numbed.

That was plenty. Ottomeyer passed out in a dead faint without me laying a finger on him. Nobody was around to see how the middle of Ottomeyer's body became invisible as I straddled him. Inside the ray screen I couldn't see what I was doing, of course, but in his wallet I found two packages of crisp paper bound round once with another thin strip, the way all currency comes direct from the bank. They rustled comfortingly.

I judged there must be at least two or three grand. Leaving the 6-ball in Ottomeyer's coat pocket to give him something else to think about, I beat it back to the parking lot and climbed in my car. Science, I always say, is the nuts.



It was twelve-thirty by then. I had an hour and a half of invisibility left but, think as I might, I couldn't figure out anywhere I could pick up any more heavy sugar without risk. Especially as I was still allergic to banks, after my experience at the Third National.

So I decided to call it a day and go on home. After all, I was sure I had a pretty fair return on my investment, and in spite of me being a pretty smart guy, there was no use pushing my luck. So I tooled my jalopy, sitting with my head tilted back a bit so as not to allow the ray screen to affect my feet or legs, toward the street.

Right there I ran into some unexpected trouble. The parking lot attendant happened to be standing near the driveway, talking to a woman, when I wheeled by. The two of 'em stared like hydrophobiacs at the apparently driverless car. The boy thought at first the car was just coasting down the gentle incline, having slipped a faulty brake.

He jumped on the running-board and opened the door to slide in. I gave him a shove. He sat down hard in the dirt. I tossed the parking ticket stub at him, accelerated sharply, and turned into Hill Street. A quick gander back showed me the dame had collapsed in a gibbering heap, while the attendant was gnawing one thumb and having a tough time keeping his eyeballs from dropping out.

I never saw traffic so crazy as it was that day. Horns blasted at me all through the business district, and cars swerved like jitterbugs getting out of my way. Dozens of near accidents littered the trail of my passing. It was when I

was well into the residential section that the inevitable happened. There was a wail of a siren, and a radio patrol car pulled alongside.

"Pull over, you!" came the familiar yell, bull-headed and arrogant.

Then I saw a policeman's face lean out the window, and the official jaw dropped six inches.

"My Gawd!" he croaked. "They ain't nobody in it!"

Obediently, I drew up to the curb with the engine idling, cussing silently. Fate was sure making it tough for me to be a super-criminal. I couldn't outrun a radio car, and a sensation was the last thing I wanted to create at the moment. Instead, I decided to outwit the law with my superior intelligence. The two wondering officers stalked up to my car and flung open the door with a dramatic gesture. Two silly grins wavered uncertainly.

"It just ain't possible," one cop said. "Or maybe it's a ghost."

"I can see the captain's face when he reads our report on this," the second one said. "D'ya think maybe we oughta ignore the whole thing?"

"We can't. We got the call over the radio to investigate. I better drive it in to the station, I guess."

He started to climb in. The situation was desperate, when I got an inspiration. Making my voice metallic as possible, I chanted:

"Please do not touch anything in this automobile. It is an experimental machine, operated by remote radio control. Please do not touch anything in this automobile. It is an experimental machine, operated by remote radio control."

The two cops nodded together as though they were tied to the same string.

"Aah-h, so that's it," one said with relief.

They looked around comically to see where the remote control apparatus could be broadcasting from, and decided it must be one of the few parked cars visible. They never thought it odd that there was no radio nor aerial in my heap. They were dopes, sure enough. While they stood there debating the situation, I shifted quietly and drove away. Once again science was my ally. I figured it was a good omen.

Finally I got home safe a little after one o'clock and carried the Ottomeyer loot into the house. Careful not to expose my hands to the screen of rays, I tossed the two bundles onto the table to examine my haul.

The first was a sheaf of canceled checks. The other was a stack of betting markers. Can you beat it?

I couldn't tear my hair or even bury my head in my hands; that would have wrecked my fingers in the rays. All I could do was sit there like a dummy and groan and swear.

Then the telephone rang. I bellied up to it till it was invisible and unracked the receiver.

"Is this University 2841?" a voice sounding kind of Oriental asked. "Mr. James Littleman?"

"It is. But Mr. Littleman can't be seen right now." Pretty good, huh?

"Our information," come back the other guy very bland, "is that Mr. Littleman is possessor of Chinese lottery ticket number 3X4049. Is this true?"

"Sure. So what? Y' mean to say I'm a winner?"

"Precisely. 3X4049 pays to its holder one thousand dollars. To collect, you must appear in person before two o'clock this afternoon, at the lottery headquarters. The address on Main Street is printed on your ticket. Congratulations, Mr. Littleman."

My jubilance was short-lived. "Two p.m.!" I yelled. "That's impossible! You gotta give me more time!"

"So sorry," came the imperturbable voice. "It is the rule. So printed upon the back of your ticket. We have been trying to get you by telephone all morning."

"But I can't appear personally till after two. I'm invisible till then!"

There was a shocked silence at the other end of the wire, then the connection was quietly broken. I think my reason tottered. I would have committed suicide right then, only I couldn't see where to shoot myself.

What was it I always said about science? Aw, nuts!

[The end of *The Little Man Who Wasn't There* by author]