



**BEYOND THE
VANISHING
POINT**

Ray Cummings

**BEYOND THE
VANISHING POINT**

by
RAY CUMMINGS

THEY OPENED THE PANDORA'S BOX OF ATOMIC TRAVEL

When George Randolph first caught sight of Orena, he was astounded by its gleaming perfection. Here were hills and valleys, lakes and streams, glowing with the light of the most precious of metals. And, more astonishing than that, it was a world of *miniature* perfection—an infinitely tiny universe within a golden atom!

But for Randolph it was also a world aglow with danger. Somewhere in its tiny vastness were the friends he had to rescue. Captives of a madman, they had been reduced to native Orena size; to return to Earth they needed the growth capsules Randolph was bringing them. It was up to Randolph to find them—and quickly—for the longer they stayed tiny, the closer they came to passing BEYOND THE VANISHING POINT!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Franz Polter

He found a gold mine in a land where there was no gold.

Dr. Kent

His scientific studies could mean life or death to an entire universe!

George Randolph

He crossed the border into Canada, and found himself in another world.

Alan Kent

Twenty feet tall, or two inches high—which should he be?

Gloria

She was only as large as a thumbnail, but she carried a gigantic secret.

Babs Kent

Did she live in a golden cage or a magnificent palace?

CHAPTER I

It was shortly after noon of December 31, 1970, when the series of weird and startling events began which took me into the tiny world of an atom of gold, beyond the vanishing point, beyond the range of even the highest-powered electric-microscope. My name is George Randolph. I was, that momentous afternoon, assistant chemist for the Ajax International Dye Company, with main offices in New York City.

It was twelve-twenty when the local exchange call-sorter announced Alan's connection from Quebec.

"Hello, George? Look here, you've got to come up here at once. Chateau Frontenac, Quebec. Will you come?"

I could see his face imaged in the little mirror on my desk; the anxiety, tenseness in his voice, was duplicated in his expression.

"Well—" I began.

"You must, George. Babs and I need you. See here...."

He tried at first to make it sound like an invitation for a New Year's Eve holiday. But I knew it was not that. Alan and Barbara were my best friends. They were twins, eighteen years old. I felt that Alan would always be my best friend; but for Babs, my hopes, longings, went far deeper, though as yet I had never brought myself to the point of telling her so.

"I'd like to come, Alan. But—"

"You've got to George! I can't tell you everything over the public air. But I've seen *him*: He's diabolical. I know it now!"

Him! It could only mean, of all the world, one person!

"He's here!" he went on. "Near here. We saw him today! I didn't want to tell you, but that's why we came. It seemed a long chance, but it's he, I'm positive!"

I was staring at the image of Alan's eyes; there was horror in them. And his voice too. "God, George, it's weird! Weird, I tell you. His looks—he—oh I can't tell you now! Only, come!"

I was busy at the office in spite of the holiday season, but I dropped everything and went. By one o'clock that afternoon I was wheeling my little sport Midge from its cage on the roof of the Metropole building, and went into the air.

It was a cold gray afternoon with the feel of coming snow. I made a good two hundred and fifty miles at first, taking the northbound through-traffic lane which today the meteorological conditions had placed at an altitude of 6,200 feet.

Flying is largely automatic. There was not enough traffic to bother me. The details of leaving the office so hastily had been too engrossing for thought of Alan and Babs. But now, in my little pit at the controls, my mind flung ahead. They had located him. That meant Franz Polter, for whom we had been searching nearly four years. And my memory went back into the past with vivid vision....

The Kents, four years ago, were living on Long Island. Alan and Babs were fourteen at the time, and I was seventeen. Even then Babs was something kind of special to me. I lived in a neighboring house that summer and saw them every day.

To my adolescent mind a thrilling mystery hung upon the Kent family. The mother was dead. Dr. Kent, father of Alan and Babs, maintained a luxurious home, with only a housekeeper and no other servant. Dr. Kent was a retired chemist. He had, in his home, a laboratory in which he was working upon some mysterious problem. His children did not know what it was, nor, of course, did I. And none of us had ever been in the laboratory, except that when occasion offered we stole surreptitious peeps.

I recall Dr. Kent as a kindly, iron-gray haired gentleman. He was stern with the discipline of his children; but he loved them, and was indulgent in many ways. They loved him; and I, an orphan, began looking upon him almost as a father. I was interested in chemistry. He knew it, and did his best to help and

encourage me in my studies.

There came an afternoon in the summer of 1966, when arriving at the Kent home, I ran upon a startling scene. The only other member of the household was a young fellow of twenty-five, named Franz Polter. He was a foreigner, born, I understood, in one of the Balkan Protectorates; he was here, employed by Dr. Kent as laboratory assistant.

He had been with the Kents, at this time, two years. Alan and Babs didn't like him, nor did I. He must have been a clever, skillful chemist. No doubt he was. But he was, to us, repulsive. A hunchback, with a short, thick body; dangling arms that suggested a gorilla; barrel chest; a lump set askew on his left shoulder, and his massive head planted down with almost no neck. His face was rugged in feature; a wide mouth, a high-bridged heavy nose; and above the face a great shock of wavy black hair. It was an intelligent face; in itself, not repulsive.

But I think we all three feared Franz Polter. There was always something sinister about him, that had nothing to do with his deformity.

When I came, that afternoon, Babs and Polter were under a tree on the Kent lawn. Babs, at fourteen, with long black braids down her back, bare-legged and short-skirted in a summer sport costume, was standing against the tree with Polter facing her. They were about the same height. To my youthful imaginative mind rose the fleeting picture of a young girl in a forest menaced by a gorilla.

I came upon them suddenly. I heard Polter say:

"But I lof you. And you are almos' a woman. Some day you lof me."

He put out his thick hand and gripped her shoulder. She tried to twist away. She was frightened, but she laughed.

"You—you're crazy!"

He was suddenly holding her in his arms, and she was fighting him. I dashed forward. Babs was always a spunky sort of girl. In spite of her fear now, she kept on struggling, and she shouted:

"You—let me go, you—you hunchback!"

He did let her go; but in a frenzy of rage he hauled back his hand and struck

her in the face. I was upon him the next second. I had him down on the lawn, punching him; but though at seventeen I was a reasonably husky lad, the hunchback with his thick, hairy gorilla arms proved much stronger. He heaved me off. The commotion had brought Alan and without waiting to find out what the trouble was, he jumped on Polter. Between us, I think we would have beaten him pretty badly. But the housekeeper summoned Dr. Kent and the fight was over.

Polter left for good within an hour. He did not speak to any of us. But I saw him as he put his luggage into the taxi which Dr. Kent had summoned. I was standing silently nearby with Babs and Alan. The look he flung us as he drove away carried an unmistakable menace—the promise of vengeance. And I think now that in his warped and twisted mind he was telling himself that he would some day make Babs regret that she had repulsed his love.

What happened that night none of us ever knew. Dr. Kent worked late in his laboratory; he was there when Alan and Babs and the housekeeper went to bed. He had written a note to Alan; it was found on his desk in a corner of the laboratory next morning, addressed in care of the family lawyer to be given Alan in the event of his death. It said very little. Described a tiny fragment of gold quartz rock the size of a walnut which would be found under the giant microscope in the laboratory; and told Alan to give it to the American Scientific Society to be guarded and watched very carefully.

This note was found, but Dr. Kent had vanished! There had been a midnight marauder. The laboratory was on the lower floor of the house. Through one of its open windows, so the police said, an intruder had entered. There was evidence of a struggle, but it must have been short, because neither Babs, Alan, the housekeeper, nor any of the neighbors had heard anything. And the fragment of golden quartz was gone!

The police investigation came to nothing. Polter was found in New York. He withstood the police questions. There was nothing except suspicion upon which he could be held, and he was finally released. Immediately thereafter, he disappeared.

Neither Alan, Babs nor I saw Polter again. Dr. Kent had never been heard from to this day, four years later when I flew to join the twins in Quebec. And now Alan told me that Polter was up there! We had never ceased to

believe that Dr. Kent was alive, and that Polter was the midnight marauder. As we grew older, we began to search for Polter. It seemed to us, that if we could once get our hands on him, we could drag from him the truth which the police had failed to get.

The call of a traffic director in mid-Vermont brought me back from these memories. My buzzer was clanging; a peremptory halting signal day-beam came darting up at me from below. It caught me and clung. I shouted down at it.

"What's the matter?" I gave my name and number and all the details in one breath. Above everything I had no wish to be halted now. "What's the matter? I haven't done anything wrong."

"The hell you haven't," the director roared. "Come down to three thousand. That lane's barred."

I dove obediently and his beam followed me. "Once more, like that, young fellow—" But he went busy with somebody else and I didn't hear the end of his threat.

I crossed into Maine in mid-afternoon. It was already twilight. The sky was solid lead and the landscape all up through here was gray-white with snow in the gathering darkness. I passed the City of Jackman, crossing full over it to take no chances of annoying the border officials; and a few miles further, I dropped to the glaring lights of International Inspection Field. The formalities were soon finished. I was ready to take-off when Alan rushed at me.

"George! I thought I could connect here." He gripped me. He was wild-eyed, incoherent. He waved his taxiplane away. "I'm going with you, George. I'm almost out of my mind. I can't—I don't know what's happened to her. She's gone, now—"

"Who's gone? Babs?"

"Yes." He pushed me into my plane and climbed in after me. "Don't talk. Get us up! I'll tell you then. I shouldn't have left."

When we were up in the air, I swung on him. "What are you talking about? Babs gone?"

I could feel myself shuddering with a nameless horror.

"I don't know what I'm talking about, George. I'm about crazy. The Quebec police think I am, anyway. I've been raising hell with them for an hour. Babs is gone! I can't find her. I don't know where she is."

He finally calmed down enough to tell me what happened. Shortly after his radiophone to me in New York, he had missed Babs. They had had lunch in the huge hotel and then walked on the Dufferin Terrace—the famous promenade outside looking down over the Lower City, the great sweep of the St. Lawrence River and the gray-white distant Laurentian mountains.

"I was to meet her inside. I went in ahead of her. But she didn't come. I went back to the Terrace but she was gone. She wasn't in our rooms. Nor the library, the lobby—anywhere."

But it was afternoon, in the public place of a civilized city. In the daylight of the Dufferin Terrace, beside the long ice toboggan slide, under the gaze of skaters on the ice-rink and several hundred holiday merrymakers, a young girl could hardly be murdered, or kidnapped, without attracting attention! The Quebec police thought the young American unduly excited about his sister, who was missing only an hour. They would do what they could, if by dark she had not rejoined him. They suggested that doubtless the young lady had gone shopping.

"Maybe she did," I agreed. But in my heart, I felt differently. "She'll be waiting for us in the Hotel when we get there, Alan."

"But I'm telling you we saw Polter this morning. He lives here—not thirty miles from Quebec. We saw him on the Terrace after breakfast. Recognized him immediately of course."

"Did he see you?"

"I don't know. He was lost in the crowd in a minute. But I asked a young French fellow if he knew him. He did know him, as Frank Rascor. That must be the name he wears now. He's a famous man up here—well known, immensely rich. I didn't know if he saw us or not. What a fool I was to leave Babs alone, even for a minute."

We were speeding over a white-clad valley with a little frozen river winding down its middle. Night had almost come. The leaden sky was low above us. It began snowing. The lights of the small villages along the river were barely

visible.

"Can you land us, Alan?"

"Yes, surely. At the Municipal Field just beyond the Citadel. We can get to the Hotel in five minutes."

It was a flight of only half an hour. During it, Alan told me about Polter. The hunchback, known now as Frank Rascor, owned a mine in the Laurentians, some thirty miles from Quebec City—a fabulously productive mine of gold. It was an anomaly that gold should be produced in this region. No vein of gold-bearing rock had been found, except the one on Polter's property. Alan had seen a newspaper account of the strangeness of it; and on a hunch had come to Quebec, being intrigued by the description of the mine owner. He had seen Frank Rascor on the Dufferin Terrace, and recognized him as Polter.

Again my thoughts went back into the past. Had Polter stolen that missing fragment of golden quartz the size of a walnut which had been beneath Dr. Kent's microscope? We always thought so. Dr. Kent had some secret, some great problem upon which he was working. Polter, his assistant, had evidently known, or partially known, its details. And now, four years later, Polter was immensely rich, with a "gold mine" in mountains where there was no other evidence of gold!

I seemed to see some connection. Alan, I knew, was groping with a dim idea, so strange he hardly dared voice it.

"I tell you, it's weird, George. The sight of him. Polter—heavens, one couldn't mistake that build—and his face, his features, just the same as when we knew him."

"Then what's so weird?" I demanded.

"His age." There was a queer solemn hush in Alan's voice. "George, when we knew Polter, he was about twenty-five, wasn't he? Well, that was four years ago. But he isn't twenty-nine now. I swear it is the same man, but he isn't around thirty. Don't ask me what I'm talking about. I don't know. But he isn't thirty. He's nearer fifty! Unnatural! Weird! I felt it, and so did Babs, just that brief look we had of him."

I didn't answer. My attention was on managing the plane. The lights of Levis

were under us. Beyond the City cliffs, the St. Lawrence lay in its deep valley; the Quebec lights, the light-dotted ramparts with the Terrace and the great fortresslike Hotel showed across the river.

"Better take the stick, Alan. I don't know where the field is. And don't you worry about Babs. She'll be back by now."

But she was not. We went to the two connecting rooms in the tower of the Hotel which Alan and Babs had engaged. We inquired with half a dozen phone calls. No one had seen or heard from her. The Quebec police were sending a man up to talk with Alan.

"Well, we won't be here," Alan called to me. He was standing by the window in Babs' room; he was trembling too much to use the phone. I hung up the receiver and went through the connecting door to join him.

Babs' room! It sent a pang through me. A few of her garments were lying around. A negligee was laid out on the large bed. A velvet boudoir doll—she had always loved them—stood on the dresser. Upon this Hotel room, in one day, she had impressed her personality. Her perfume was in the air. And now she was gone.

"We won't be here," Alan was repeating. He gripped me at the window.

"Look." In his hand was an ugly-looking, smokeless, soundless automatic of the Essen type. "And I've got another one for you. Brought them with me."

His face was white and drawn, but his hands had steadied. The tremble was gone out of his voice.

"I'm going after him, George! Now! Understand that? Now? His place is only thirty miles from here, out there in the mountains. You can see it in the daylight—a wall around his property and a stone castle which he built in the middle of it. A gold mine? Hell!"

There was nothing to be seen now out of the window but the snow-filled darkness, the blurred lights of Lower Quebec and the line of dock lights five hundred feet below us.

"Will you fly me, George?"

"Of course."

I was the one trembling now; the cool feel of the automatic which Alan thrust into my hand seemed suddenly to crystallize Babs' peril. I was here in her room, with the scent of her perfume around me, and this deadly weapon was needed! But the trembling was gone in a moment.

"Yes, of course, Alan. No use talking to the police. I gave them all the information—a description of her, what you said she was wearing. No sense dragging Polter's name into it, with nothing tangible to go on. The police won't ransack the castle of a rich man just because you can't find your sister. Come on. You can tell me what this place is like as we go."

Bundled in our flying suits we hurried from the Hotel, climbed the Citadel slope and in ten minutes were in the air. The wind sucked at us. The snow now was falling with thick, huge flakes. Directed by Alan, I headed out over this ice-filled St. Lawrence, past the frozen Ile d'Orleans, toward Polter's mysterious mountain castle.

Suddenly Alan burst out, "I know what father's secret was! I can piece it together now, from little things that were meaningless when I was a kid. He invented the electro-microscope. You know that. The infinitely small fascinated him. I remember he once said that if we could see far enough down into smallness, we would come upon human life!"

Alan's low, tense voice was more vehement than I had ever heard it before. "It's clear to me now, George. That little fragment of golden quartz which he wanted me to be so careful of contained a world with human inhabitants! Father knew it, or suspected it. And I think the chemical problem on which he was working aimed for some drug. I know it was a drug they were compounding, Polter said so once, a radioactive drug; I remember listening at the door. A drug, George, capable of making a human being infinitely small!"

I did not answer when momentarily Alan paused. So strange a thing. My mind whirled with it; struggled to encompass it. And like the meaningless individual pieces of a puzzle, dropping so easily into place when the key piece is fitted, I saw Polter stealing that fragment of gold; abducting Dr. Kent—perhaps because Polter himself was not fully acquainted with the secret. And now, Polter up here with a fabulously rich "gold mine." And Babs, abducted by him, to be taken—where?

It set me shuddering.

"That's what it was," Alan reiterated. "And Polter, here now with what he calls a 'mine.' It isn't a mine, it's a laboratory! He's got father too, hidden God knows where! And now Babs. We've got to get them, George! The police can't help us! It's just you and me, to fight this thing. And it's diabolical!"