

APRIL 2007
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THE
*mysterious
traveler*

MAGAZINE

APRIL
FOOL!

*Five New
Fiendish
Follies!*

BOBBY EVERS

DAVID BAUMANN

ANDREW FELL

DARRELL PITT

WILLIAM A. HALL

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, TERROR AND SUSPENSE

THIS is The Mysterious Traveler, inviting you to join me on another expedition into the shadowy realm of the strange and the macabre. This evening's journey is to be made with some old friends of mine that I dug up just for this occasion.

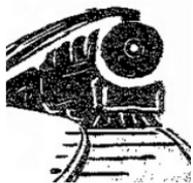
For readers looking for an hour or more of the odd and the strange, this very magazine is for you. The sensational stories within were crafted by some of the most talented purveyors of mystery, suspense, and the weird that the world has to offer.

As always, the assortment of tales within this fifth issue of THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER MAGAZINE are of the highest quality I can gather for your reading enjoyment. They each have the potential to 'thrill and chill' – and, as always, they make for good reading.

I do hope that you will enjoy this special edition of our online magazine. For if this should be the last time that we share the pleasure of each other's company, I would like to think that we parted ways on a high note, and remained fast friends until the end.

Without further ado, I beg of you to join me as we begin our trip this evening with one of the most electrifying tales in my collection by my lifelong friend Andrew Fell, which commences on page 4. I bid you good reading, and a heartfelt goodbye.

Sincerely,
The Mysterious Traveler



SPRING 2007

THE *mysterious traveler*

MAGAZINE

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, DETECTION, AND SUSPENSE

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SETH T. SMOLINSKE, Publisher

MARK ZAHN, Managing Editor

Dedicated to Robert Arthur & David P. Kogan

The world of espionage is a dangerous, deadly place. Secret agent Geno Solis knows this all too well. Bound to a chair in a madman's lair, death lurks in every corner. In fact, sometimes death can be right on the tip of your tongue...

BITTER PILL

By ANDREW FELL

Geno Solis sat calmly; no longer struggling with the binding that secured his arms behind the elegant chair's carved mahogany back. He had expected torture – at the very least a severe beating at the hands of The Monk's seductive dominatrix: Ava Lash. He braced himself for the worst, mentally shutting down the receptors that delivered messages of pain and suffering to a brain that had seen its fair share of both. But the beating never came. The Monk had to restrain Ava more than once – she looked truly disappointed at being denied the opportunity to embellish upon Geno's hardened looks with her own brand of sinister therapy.

Still he waited; watching Ava pace back and forth in venomous impatience while The Monk kept up a steady stream of hymns and other religious ramblings from his huge mouth and rubbery lips that never seemed to close. All Geno could do was reflect

back on the extraordinary events that had put him in such dire straights, meanwhile keeping his mind sharp for the singular opportunity that might provide his freedom.

The Monk was mad—of that he had no doubt. Geno had come across the corrupt minds of power-hungry zealots on more than one occasion. It was an area he thought, with wry amusement, that he was particularly well versed and seemed to gravitate toward as a natural hazard of his chosen profession. For every ninety-nine red folders that came across his desk—there was always the hundredth that bore a stamped 'X' indicating madness, greed, and lunacy. On this day The Monk was the red 'X' of insanity.

The initial assignment from Geno's superior had been straightforward and seemed to require the pedestrian skills of local law enforcement and not that of a ruthless, highly trained assassin on Uncle Sam's bankroll. Geno Solis said so and was gruffly rebuked for being a bit too high on his horse, and something about the old days when you took assignments with no questions asked. Geno was careful not to roll his eyes or sigh audibly, instead nodding a 'yes sir' and dismissing himself from the office before his superiors could muster up a damning lecture on Geno's swelled ego and tiresome self-importance.

Of course, his superior was right. Once he had immersed himself in The Monk's file, Geno quickly recognized the need to crush the madman's empire before devastation fell onto the streets of Los Angeles—and perhaps the world—like the fire and brimstone he preached from his pulpit. A self-made millionaire, The Monk had evaded taxes by organizing his own church of doomsday prophecies and fear mongering disciples. His outlandish speeches and colorful personality made him a darling of the media, while his congregation of apocalyptic brethren filled the pews in a massive complex that sprawled out upon the hills of his compound in southern California.

The seduction of The Monk's right hand, the stunningly beautiful, and yet devilishly deranged Miss Lash, had been strictly by the book. Geno went at it with such straightforward pomposity and vigor – the result of years of training and scores of sexual conquests – the normally shrewd woman was left with her guard down. It was a lapse that intensified her seething need for punishment once she realized she had easily been used as Geno's pawn.

Geno did not know how his cover had been exposed—The Monk claimed it came to him in a vision delivered by one of the 'Supreme Beings.' It made no difference, for the

reality was he was still strapped to a chair, helpless, as The Monk outlined his grand, diabolical scheme. A scheme that, in its scope and daring, illustrated just what a lunatic the man really was.

"It will be glorious, Mr. Solis!" The Monk raved. "The culmination of a plan five years in the making. When the White House is handed over to the new President at noon precisely, we shall make our boldest proclamation to America—and to the world. The country will be shamed and my name will live on for eternity. Forever debated by scholars as they contemplate my master stroke!"

"You're mad," Geno said simply.

The Monk seemed to ignore Geno's observation. He turned to a huge stained glass window overlooking his compound and began singing a song with unintelligible lyrics. Geno was fluent in several languages, but to his ears it sounded like melodic gibberish. And then, as suddenly as the song began, The Monk abruptly stopped. He turned away from the window and brought himself face to face with his prisoner.

"Perhaps I *am* mad, Mr. Solis. But the same has been said of many great leaders. And just think—you get to take part in reshaping history! For as the new President is crowned, my followers, ten thousand strong, will have filled my own personal coliseum. We

shall take part in mass; and as the chalice is passed to each member, tasting the sweet elixir of salvation upon their lips, they shall see the revelation of the Supreme Beings as they breathe their last!”

“You’re going to poison ten thousand people just to make a point?” Geno blinked in amazement. “They can’t *all* be brainwashed by you—it’s murder!”

The Monk shook his head and chuckled, his huge mouth and bulbous lips parting in a gruesome gash of a smile. “I didn’t expect you to understand, Mr. Solis. But you see it’s not murder if the chosen are going to a better place—to a wondrous paradise beyond their comprehension! A thousand of my disciples will be guiding the flock on their journey. Omega awaits, Geno Solis, for *you* as well.”

The Monk opened his giant mouth and began singing the cryptic song again—his foul breath just inches away from Geno’s face. And then, with the sinister reminder of Omega hanging in the air, The Monk marched out of the room in a swirl of robes, singing his song of praise at top volume.

Ten minutes passed before the door was opened once more. Geno’s jaw set and he breathed deeply, willing his heart to steady as Ava Lash slinked into the room.

“Hello, darling,” she hissed, strad-

dling his lap. “Miss me?”

“Always,” Geno said.

“The mouse is away,” she purred into his ear, “maybe now the kitty can play?”

Geno’s mind raced, looking for a way to plant a seed of doubt in her mind. As her cruel, black fingernails traced the contours of Geno’s clean-shaven face, a plan began to formulate in his mind.

“You’ve sworn allegiance to The Monk?” he asked.

“I’d die for him,” she shrugged, as if this should be quite obvious.

“You will. You know what he’s planning to do. . .”

“Of course, my love. It was partly my idea.”

“It won’t happen,” he said grimly.

Ava kissed him tenderly and then dug her nails into the flesh of his forearms, a look of intense hatred clouding her visage.

“Nothing can stop the Omega!”

“What if I told you The Monk will be dead within the hour?” Geno said casually; the indifference in his voice calculated for the right effect.

Ava Lash clamped a hand around Geno’s throat and breathed heavily into his ear. “I’d say you’re mistaken, Mr. Solis. In two hours time the flock will all be dead—and you with us!”

“If what I say is true, will you help me?”

Ava suddenly stood and delivered a sharp blow across Geno's cheek.

"Blasphemy!" she spat, raising her hand to strike again.

"I guarantee it," Geno said calmly – his gray eyes locking directly into hers. Ava's hand stopped at the height of its motion as she surveyed him intently. Sensing an opening, Geno quickly continued. "If The Monk lies dead at my feet within the hour, you'll be free. All I ask is for you to release me once the deed is done. I won't follow you – in fact I can get you to a government safe house. You can disappear."

Hand still raised, Ava Lash paused – Geno thought for a moment that she was seriously considering his proposal. But her hand resumed flight and delivered another fiery slap across his face. Her hand then curled into a fist. Before she could strike, The Monk's voice purred from the doorway.

"Miss Lash! Is that anyway to treat our guest?"

Like a frightened animal, the woman leapt back from Geno. She retreated to the far side of the vestibule where she seemed to cower under The Monk's looming shadow.

"There, there, Ava," The Monk beamed, "be of good cheer, for I bring glad tidings. The flock has begun gathering and final preparations are being made. The glorious revelation of The Omega has been set in motion, and we

want our esteemed guest to look his finest for the Supreme One."

Geno Solis watched carefully as The Monk raised his arms to the heavens, parted his huge lips, and began singing his cryptic hymn—his giant mouth booming the song like a natural amplifier. The moment in which Geno could make his move was fast approaching. Senses fine-tuned and deadly sharp, he let his uncanny instinct for survival take over. Keeping his breathing steady, Geno watched with satisfaction as The Monk once more leaned over in front of him and, eyes closed in passion, sang directly into his face—the giant orifice of his mouth yawning wide, providing the perfect target. It was now or never.

With one lightning quick motion, Geno tilted his head down so that his chin touched his collarbone. His gums were exposed for a split second in an animal snarl as his teeth snared the top button from the collar of his shirt. By order of his superior, all agents were required to carry a poison pill—a lethal dose of cyanide—on their body when on assignment. Geno had directed the agency's armourer to sew his in place of the top button of his shirt for occasions just such as this. He had to be quick – for the pill dissolved upon contact with human saliva—delivering its deadly dose directly into the bloodstream. The toxic button tore away, and

with a forceful blow, Geno spit the bitter pill directly into The Monk's gaping mouth where it lodged in the back of his throat.

The Monk's mouth clamped shut and his ice blue eyes bugged from their sockets. He made a hacking sound and dropped to his knees as his hands clawed at his throat—his eyes fearfully locking with the secret agent's.

From her place directly behind The Monk, Ava Lash had not seen Geno's deadly act. She rushed forward and tried to help her master stand, tearing away his robes as his hacking turned to a deathly, gruesome gurgling.

"What have you done?" she wailed.

Geno watched with interest as the demented evangelist sagged back to his knees and then pitched forward onto the tiles, a last breath rasping from his malformed lips. He couldn't help but wonder if he might meet his own destiny in the same horrible manner one day. As witness to such an ignoble death, Geno considered throwing the pill away for good. Better to take his chances under torture or threat of death than to exit that way.

Now Geno's attention turned to the girl. She had rolled The Monk's corpse over and began praying over it in the same strange tongue that Geno had heard earlier. When her prayer was complete, she looked up at him in anger.

"You killed him!"

Geno shrugged. "I told you he'd be dead within the hour."

"I'll kill you!"

"You need me," Geno replied sharply. "Come to your senses. When The Monk doesn't appear at the gathering, the flock will scatter. Word of his plans will spread—you'll be wanted for attempted murder. I can get you out of Los Angeles—out of America. But we have to move quickly, darling. His disciples will be coming soon."

Ava Lash hesitated, and then began to undo the binds from Geno's wrists. The poor girl, he thought. So impressionable, so easily manipulated by a stern father figure. He only had to be forceful to get her to do his bidding. When his hands were released, Geno's fist connected beneath her chin—a blow designed to bring instant unconsciousness to the victim. Her head snapped back and she dropped to the floor in a heavy slump, her breath coming in shallow intakes as she lay supine on the tiles.

Geno gave no pause for regret. Within the boundaries of his work, in which decisions were made based on instinct as often as they were on careful thought, hitting a woman was no different than striking a man. That Ava had once been his lover was a sentiment he turned off as easily as a light switch.

Stepping over the sprawled outline of the girl, and then the wretched corpse of The Monk, Geno made his way to the single massive window.

A small bar, extravagantly stocked for a man of the cloth, he mused, was situated in a nook to one side of the towering stained glass. Geno helped himself to three fingers of bourbon, downed the drink in one pull, and stood idly before the rainbow of colors, rubbing his aching wrists and pondering his next move.

Spied through the majestic pane, Geno could see The Monk's personal coliseum—the thrum of the crowd, ten thousand strong, floated eerily to his place a hundred meters away. Geno's glance fell upon an oversized microphone on the desk beside the bar. A metal box with several switches was attached to the microphone, each switch carefully labeled: LIVING QUARTERS, ATRIUM, TEMPLE, COLISEUM, CAFÉ, GROUNDS. He ran his fingers through his hair, and, acting once more on instinct, flipped on the power to the switch indicating COLISEUM.

He cleared his throat and then depressed the red button that activated the microphone. Across the distance, Geno could hear a faint squelch of feedback as the speakers in the coliseum registered the open line.

“Now here this,” Geno Solis said —

his voice bouncing back in a faint echo. “This is the Supreme One speaking. The Alpha has come. The Monk, your leader, has been found unworthy. He has paid for his sins. He has met his Omega. Upon my decree, you are to disperse—go each your own direction. Live life as you would, upon your own faiths and beliefs. Don't let others do your thinking for you. Today is truly the Alpha for each of you. Take it while you can.”

Geno paused, satisfied with his speech, and then added. “The Supreme One has spoken. That is all.”

He clicked off the microphone and poured himself a second glass of bourbon, this time on the rocks, and sat back in The Monk's chair. Within a desk drawer, Geno found a packet of cigarettes among a stack of girlie magazines and a wide assortment of narcotics. Lighting a cigarette, he placed a brief call to the police directing them to The Monk's compound. With that task completed, secret agent Geno Solis rested his heels upon the desk, sipped his drink with genuine satisfaction, and thumbed through the stack of magazines as he waited for the authorities to arrive.



Arnell and June are as close as two old women can be. Two harmless spinsters relying on each other to make it through life. Why, they could be the two old women sharing a house right next door to you. Now wouldn't that be nice?

ALMOST LIKE SISTERS

By WILLIAM A. HALL

I know now how lucky we are to have found this beautiful old house to live in. Actually, Arnell was the one who found the advertisement in the classified ads of the newspaper, but we both made the final decision. We do positively everything together, have for years in fact, and we are so close we can almost know what the other is thinking before it's even spoken. My goodness, some people say we even look alike. I've always thought we were most definitely closer than any married couple could have ever been and, although we aren't really related, I think of her as family. We are so completely attached that I can't imagine what life would be like without her and we have both said, more times than we can count, that we are almost like sisters.

We had been forced to move from the place we had lived for almost thirty years and it was such a shock to be

forced out into the "real world" so to speak and find a new place to call home. There were so many new things that we suddenly had to deal with, things neither of us even knew existed. All of the potential landlords we approached about rental property all demanded the most complicated paperwork. Before signing a lease they all wanted credit reports, character references, proof of income, and God knows what else they might have asked us for. I suppose you could say that Arnell and I had lived somewhat sheltered lives and to suddenly be forced into making all these complicated decisions, well, it almost seemed too much to deal with. Thank the Lord, when we inquired about this house we met dear, dear Mrs. Belmont and as it turned out she became not only our landlord but our good friend as well.

Lettie Belmont was up in years herself, actually a few years older than ourselves, and perhaps that's one reason she seemed to sympathize with us. She had become a widow only a year earlier and had chosen to move into a small apartment in order to avoid the upkeep of her house. Still, she couldn't bear the thought of selling it altogether and had chosen instead to rent it out for the income. She had interviewed several young couples who had expressed an inter-

est but somehow none of them really seemed what she considered the “right kind of people.” The younger generation always seemed so insensitive to the character of such a fine old house and when she met Arnell and I the three of us seemed to bond with one another almost immediately. We both assured her we would certainly treat the house as though it were our very own. In addition we gave her our sincerest assurances that collectively the two of us had both the time and resources to maintain the place to the high standards it was accustomed to receiving. After spending the better part of a summer afternoon with us she completely pushed aside the very idea of any formal references or credit reports, instead relying on our sincere, straight-forward, and good-natured manner. And so, we signed a lease for a full year, paid her the entire amount in advance, and moved in within the same week.

Now, let me say this. I can’t really say that Arnell was what one might call “man crazy” but she did at times have what I considered a roving eye. The reason I bring it up at all is that we had only been settled in the house for a little over a month when she had begun mentioning Mr. Stevens by name. Harold Matthew Stevens was his full name and Arnell had met him one day while she was shopping at

one of the local stores in the downtown area of the little town in which we had settled.

I’m not much of a shopper myself, although I do venture out from time to time, but Arnell loves to get out and hobnob with almost anyone that will pass the time of day. She tends to stay away from all those big chain stores that are positively everywhere these days and prefers instead to give her money to the local merchants. Mr. Stevens, or Harold I should say, owned a little general merchandise store in the town square and it reminded us both of the places we use to go when we were younger, something like the old five-and-dimes. At first I thought it was the long candy counter occupying the front of the store that drew Arnell to the place, she does have quite a sweet tooth, but it wasn’t long before I realized it was Harold Stevens that was the big attraction.

He was a sprightly man in his late 60’s and the first thing I noticed about him was his dapper appearance. He always wore a freshly pressed three piece suit, looking more like a banker than a shop keeper, with shoes that were so highly polished I swear you could have seen your reflection in the tops of them. He still had a full head of hair, snowy white and cut short, with a smooth complexion and deep

blue eyes that sparkled like fresh rain. There was an almost dignified air about him and yet he was full of foolishness, always quick with a joke, pulling them out at will like a magician with a bag of tricks. On any of our visits he was attentive to me as well but still I could tell it was Arnell that he was smitten with.

In that first summer after we had moved into the house he began to call on Arnell in a sporadic fashion and then it came to be that he was always at our house on Sunday. Just to be honest about it Arnell couldn't cook worth a darn, I imagine being hard pressed to boil water if the truth were known, and so she turned to me for help. I really didn't mind as over the years I had become quite capable in the kitchen. It was always better to cook for more people anyway and so we would have Harold over for dinner and I took to asking Mrs. Belmont, Lettie, to join us as well and so the four of us became regular partners for each Sunday meal.

Now, Arnell and I weren't what you would call church-goers. We had both grown up in tough neighborhoods when we were girls and in the last few years of our lives we had seen more than our share of trouble. But Harold seemed to be in the church every time the door was open and Arnell began to follow along on

Sundays to appease him and so as not to give him the impression she might have more than a few heathen qualities. As it turned out Mrs. Belmont was quite a religious woman herself and so the three of them often attended the services together. As a consequence I spent all of my Sunday mornings alone preparing lunch which was just as well. I had spent a lot of time alone in the preceding years and in many ways preferred it because it gave me time to think things out and, to be totally honest, I was also able to nurse along a glass or two of muscadine wine without enduring the sanctimonious glares of our new found friends. It always seems quiet times with a bit of wine is the best time for making plans.

After lunch Harold and Arnell would most times "disappear" for the remainder of the afternoon often going on long drives in his fancy Cadillac or sometimes if the weather was nice they would go for walks in the park. Lettie and I being left to ourselves began using these afternoons to attend an afternoon movie matinee. There was an old movie theatre downtown called The Black and White which, appropriately enough showed nothing but old black and white movies from the so-called Golden Age of Hollywood. The two of us spent those afternoons watching

Cary Grant, Clark Gable, Alan Ladd, or William Powell. Lettie and I always talked about these as the last of the real men who drank liquor, smoked cigarettes, fought the villain and always wound up with the girl which was, of course, the way things should have been. Afterward on the walk home we would often put our heads together while we discussed the movie, giggling like school girls, and secretly making fun of Arnell for spending time with Harold Stevens. I mean he was a nice enough man but my goodness he was such a milquetoast of a fellow that he paled in comparison to all those movie stars.

Since coming to our new home Arnell and I had taken to being night owls and it seemed we would stay up later and later each night. We would sit on the front porch, she in an overstuffed chair and I in the old porch swing, and talk about the day. Sunday was the day we stayed up the latest because we both seemed to have so much to talk about, she telling me about her afternoon with Harold, while I would go into detail about the movie I had seen that afternoon with Lettie Belmont. But in spite of these shared relationships Arnell and I maintained our closeness. One Sunday night we were both locked in conversation when I made a wistful comment about

Arnell's relationship with Harold, wondering out loud in a plaintive tone if it would ever lead to something more permanent between the two of them. She suddenly stood from her chair and came to sit beside me in the swing. She reached over and took both of my hands in hers and pulled me around to face her while looking deeply into my eyes.

"Oh, June. Think of all that we have been through over all these many years. No one, and especially no man, would ever or could ever replace what you and I have had and will have together. You must never, never forget that."

Her words were such a comfort to me and that night for the first time in several weeks I slept better than ever.

The time seemed to spin itself out in a meandering yet pleasant fashion. But of course, when one grows older such as Arnell and me, time seems to almost disappear without restraint. The months passed and I was reminded everyday of how much time Arnell and I had spent together in our lives already. Before long it was once again summer and being the more business minded I took Arnell aside one night to remind her of the situation we now found ourselves. Summer not only brought longer days and hot lazy afternoons but it was also the end of our first years lease.

We were also faced with the need for an immediate amount of money to continue our stay in this grand old house.

It was late again and the two of us had retired to the front porch in our respective seating. I had made a large pitcher of lemonade and we drank from tall cool glasses while listening to the ice cubes tinkle as we sipped. Twilight had passed and an iridescent half moon hung like the imprint of a boot heel surrounded by a smattering of stars. Arnell finished her lemonade. She carefully sat aside the glass, closing her eyes, and giving an audible sigh of deep contentment. I carefully cleared my throat before glancing, somewhat nervously, over in her direction.

“Arnell, there is something I need to discuss with you.” I hesitated, as she opened her eyes and turned in my direction, and I then plunged forward. “I’m not sure if you realize a situation that we will soon be faced with or perhaps you haven’t given any thought to our immediate future and what might---.”

I stopped talking as Arnell abruptly gave a quick laugh and waved a dismissive hand in my direction.

“My dear, dear, June, I already know what’s on your mind and please don’t give it a second thought.” She reached out to touch my arm. “I’ve

been to visit Lettie Belmont and day before yesterday gave her a cashier’s check to renew our lease for another full year.” She smiled and settled back. “I was going to surprise you later with the news but as usual you are always on top of these things. I just hope you haven’t spent a lot of time worrying unnecessarily.”

I was flabbergasted. “But, Arnell! Where...I mean the money we brought from our last residence was...well, it wasn’t enough to last for a very long time. After paying last years lease and with all of our living expenses there wasn’t enough left in the account at the bank to, well, I’ve been worried sick about what was to become of us. I mean I even gave some thought to the possibility of having to, well, seek employment, for God’s sakes. I mean I was frankly terrified at the idea of---.”

She held up her hand speaking to me in a low cooing voice as though she were comforting a small child. “June, darling, it’s all right. I’ve made some arrangements for now and in the future we’ll simply make...an additional arrangement as the need arises.” She crossed her arms across her chest and when she next spoke her voice was full of the vim and confidence I knew so well. “After all I haven’t lived for 64 years without learning a few tricks on my

own. Now, it's such a nice evening, why don't you go inside and bring us a few more ice cubes for the lemonade."

Obediently and almost without thinking I rose from my chair then stopped. "Oh, of course. It was Harold wasn't it?" I clapped my hands together. "Why, Arnell, you old seducer. You used your womanly charms and silk-tongued that old man in to paying our way for a while longer, now haven't you?"

She gave me a sly look, her eyes half-closed as they appraised me. "Now, June, honey, don't tell me you haven't been spending some extra time of your own priming up that Lettie Belmont. Something tells me you've had something on your mind besides movies all those Sunday afternoons."

I reached out to pat her shoulder. "Let me get us a bit more ice and we'll just talk about all of that."

She nodded and gave me a quick smile. "All right and June honey? Would you mind bringing a few of those oatmeal cookies that you made yesterday? I suddenly have an appetite and my sweet tooth is positively begging for some attention."

And so, the financial burden I had dreaded passed away as did the days of summer. The seasons melted from one to the other and in late autumn

Arnell announced her engagement and impending marriage to Harold Stevens an event planned for the following spring. As they intended to reside in the home that Harold now occupied, Mrs. Belmont, who had become my close friend, suggested that after the wedding she would join me back in her old house and the two of us would live together providing one another companionship. All of this seemed well and good and even as it should be. It was, as Arnell became fond of saying, an almost symmetrical solution to everyone's life situation. It only remained for the two of us to make a series of what one might call minor adjustments.

On Christmas Eve it was unseasonably cold outside. Earlier in the evening I had gone with Mrs. Belmont to deliver several dozen homemade cookies to share with her Sunday school class while Arnell had gone to some sort of holiday dinner in the company of Harold Stevens. But now it was late and the two of us were alone in the house sitting in front of a roaring fire in a cozy front room we always referred to as our parlor. I had brought in a pot of very strong coffee and after we had taken our places Arnell had pulled from her purse a pint of whiskey she had managed to appropriate from Harold's liquor cabinet. With a twinkle in her

eye she leaned forward pouring a generous dollop into each of our coffee mugs before sitting back down. She gave an appreciable sip and glanced over in my direction.

“I thought the two of us deserved a little something special for the holidays.”

I sipped my coffee and smiled. “Oh, yes indeed, that does take the chill off on such a cold night.”

We sat without speaking for a few minutes more before I leaned back and once again took up the conversation.

“Are things progressing in the right...direction with you and Harold? I mean is everything falling into place so to speak?”

Arnell nodded and smiled. “Oh, yes but you know how men are. Good Lord, a few days ago he began hinting around about wondering if he really knew me as if questioning my identity.”

My eyes widened a bit. “My goodness, how did you handle that?”

She sat up straighter. “First, I acted hurt and crestfallen even shedding a few tears in the process. I went on and on about how I felt our love should be enough and how I could never live with a man who didn’t trust me completely and then I stood up as if preparing to rush from the room.”

I slapped my free hand across my knee. “Arnell! You are such the actress and when you tell it I swear I can see the whole thing like I was there. But was that enough?”

I could tell she was getting excited. “It might have been but I wanted to end it all with a flourish.” She stopped long enough for another sip of the coffee. “He has a computer set up in his office at the back of the house and I marched him back there and made him sit down. He is always using the internet and I made him go in and pull up my social security number on one of those investigative web sites.”

“But Arnell, wasn’t that risky? I mean did you really know how that was going to work?”

She gave me a smug look. “Well, it’s like our lawyer always said, June, never ask a question you don’t already know the answer to. I used the number from the identifications we...borrowed from the two sisters we met on the way here, God rest their souls. The whole thing worked like a charm. After some time and effort he pulled up an entire lifetime report on me; where I went to school, places I used to work and live, positively everything.” She stopped and giggled. “Did you know I was a retired school teacher from Ames, Iowa?”

“Why, Arnell, that’s positively amazing.” I paused while giving her a quizzical look. “You know, any time Lettie has asked me questions about myself I’ve always answered in the most general terms, not really giving anything away, because I didn’t want to say something that might come back to haunt me later. Maybe we should---.”

Arnell nodded. “Yes, and I don’t know why I haven’t done it before now. There are some computers down at the library and we’ll stop in there first thing tomorrow to find out everything we need to know. I stopped in last week to run a check on my own new self so I was somewhat prepared for Harold’s questions.”

I sat back a moment to digest all of this. “So...what’s next?”

Arnell stood to pour more coffee for us. I was feeling the slightest bit woozy from the liquor but didn’t resist when she added more to the mugs and sat back down.

“On Tuesday, the day after Christmas, Harold is taking me over to his attorney’s office to change his will making me the new sole beneficiary.” She giggled again. “In fact, after our little argument he practically insisted on it. He wants to have it all changed and finalized even before we are married and that suits me just fine. In fact, the sooner the better, but

of course I don’t want to appear too anxious.”

“So...what does that do? In regards to the wedding, that is.”

She looked away slowly calculating. “Let’s see...this is December and the wedding is scheduled for the first week in April. I feel sure that some sort of...accident can be arranged before than. I mean I do want to make sure the new will is finalized and just as proper as it can possibly be.” She let out a long sigh. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to give some meager thought to his future funeral but...” She stopped and waved a hand. “Oh, well, I can deal with all that when the time comes.”

For a short time we resumed our silence before Arnell cleared her throat in a very tentative way.

“Well, June, is there any update you might like to share with me on Lettie Belmont? Anything...at all?”

I’m not sure if it was because of the liquor but I suddenly felt very relaxed as I looked over at Arnell and smiled.

“After discussing our future...cohabitation I have managed to convince her it would be wise for me to have certain access to her bank accounts. Just in the case of emergencies you understand.”

“Of course. I mean one can’t be too careful.”

"I'm now an equal signer on both her checking and savings account along with a brokerage account that I found out about just this past week." I gave a slight belch. "Just to be on the safe side we are also having me added as the beneficiary and future recipient to this wonderful house. Just, well, in the event something unforeseen might occur."

"Arnell slowly nodded. "Well, I think that's a very wise decision on her part. After all, a person can't be too careful, can one?"

Once again we lapsed back into silence until at last I spoke.

"Arnell? You don't think there is any chance that anyone will ever find out about our time in the penitentiary do you? Or... about those other deaths? I mean what we once did so long ago was---."

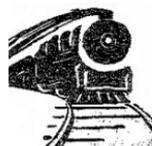
She reached out and tenderly patted my cheek. "June honey those two people are gone now and everything they did in the past is long forgotten. The only two people who exist now are Arnell Phillips and June Mason, two older ladies who are simply trying to live out their lives in peace and contentment. After things are arranged in the springtime that's exactly what we intend to do. Just think of it as finally being able to retire after all those years of work. Most people spend 30 or 40 years in

some kind of job that feels like confinement. We just happened to do our time...in a more literal way. As for Harold and Lettie just think of them as two people, well, passing the torch. You and I will simply take up where they left off."

She stared into my eyes for a long moment until I gave her a loving smile and reached up to kiss the back of her hand. Then, she stood a little unsteadily before carefully walking over to pick up the half full liquor bottle then turned back in my direction.

"It's getting late, June, so why don't we have one more drink apiece." I didn't mention it but I thought she was slurring her words just the tiniest bit. "This time we'll skip the coffee so as not to unsettle our sleep."

I smiled up at her and realized all over again how much I truly loved and depended on her. Inside of me I felt the warm softness of calm and peaceful contentment. As she walked in my direction I held out my mug for a refill.



Jim Edwards was a lightweight fighter who got a raw deal in life. His trainer and best friend, Irish Bob, died in the same accident that cost Jim his legs. With his fighting days long gone, Jim suddenly finds himself in the fight of his life. But now it's a life or death fight with just one winner... Does he have what it takes to go one last round?

THE FIGHTER

By DARRELL PITT

Jim Edwards had almost stepped right past the book by the time he noticed it lying at the side of the footpath. Struggling to kneel – even with the walking stick, he still found it difficult to bend his right leg - he finally snatched up the book in one smooth motion and rose quickly to his feet. He read the title.

Dracula.

The paperback was worn. The lower part of the front cover had been ripped off, the remaining portion revealing a caped figure with fangs drawn.

Jim clenched the book tightly. Six months ago, he would have passed the novel without a second glance. He was not a reader. He remembered when he would have run past, punching the air, because one day he was going to be the lightweight champion

of the world – but that was before the accident.

Now he simply struggled to walk down the street without stumbling. He flicked through the novel. The tale of the vampire had been loved, read and reread until the spine had broken. Some of the pages were missing. Now the tome was only good for the rubbish bin. His fingers stroked the back cover.

Something was written on it. He flipped it over and struggled to read the words. They were written with a shaking hand.

Help me. I am being held in the attic of a building. A man is going to kill me at six p.m.

Jim's throat constricted as he read the sentences again. He studied the lines until his right thigh began to ache and he had to shift his weight to the other leg. He looked up at the street. Stuart Avenue was lined with terrace houses on both sides. Crepe myrtle trees festooned the uneven footpath. Above the trees, Jim saw that the sky was already fading to cobalt blue, the warm spring day growing colder by the minute. A car revved its engine down on the next block. The sound of canned laughter erupted from someone's television.

He re-read the lines several times. It was a joke. A prank by some kid. But there was something disturbing in

the way the message was written. This was not a child's hand. Despite the scrawl of the hand, the handwriting was obviously that of an adult.

He looked up at the house before him and saw a two-storey terrace, identical to all the others on the block, but where the others were immaculate, this once proud mansion now lay derelict. Paint peeling, the windows boarded up, the small garden overgrown, the front iron fence grew cancerous with rust. His eyes moved upwards. The attic window was broken, the interior dim. This was where the book would have landed if someone had thrown it through the gap in the glass.

He felt a sudden surge of energy. He could race up the stairs in a minute. All he had to do—

Jim Edwards looked down at his legs. The old Jim would have raced up the stairs and been in and out of the building in a minute. But that man no longer existed. A surge of emotion erupted in his chest. His whole damn life was ahead of him.

He was only twenty-one. Twenty-one! Why did —

Stop it!

His old trainer, old 'Irish Bob' Cleary, spoke to him.

Champions don't whine, boyo. They get on with der job.

I'm not a champion, he protested.

I'm a damn cripple.

Yer legs might be gone, boyo, but what about your heart? It's yer heart what counts.

Jim looked down at the ground and realised he had dropped the book. Now it lay before him with the back cover face up, the urgent words searing themselves into his eyes. He shook his head. Best to leave the book where it lay and continue on up the street, and how he would have loved to do just that, but —

But inaction had been the cause of Bob's death, and had cost him his boxing career.

Don't you think you've had enough, Bob?

I'll be der judge of that, my boy. You jus worry 'bout Friday's fight.

But if you're driving —

The Irish are born wit beer in their blood. I can drink any man under—

Maybe Bob could outdrink any man, but he was incapable of driving afterwards. Jim knew he should have dragged Bob out of that pub, but instead he had feebly stood by and let his trainer drink himself blind. Then he had let Bob drive them home. If he had stopped him —

Fergit it, Jim. Don't dwell on der past. Focus on der future.

Jim glanced down at his watch. It was a quarter to six. Time to head home before it got cold. He had

moved back in with his parents since the accident. His mum would have dinner on the table. Time to move on.

Time to go.

His eyes focused on the book.

A man is going to kill me at six p.m.

What the hell are yer, boyo? A mammy's boy? Yer so busy yer can't check out an old house to see if someone needs help?

"All right," he said, immediately surprised that he had spoken the words aloud. "Just shut up, you old fool."

He swung himself around on the footpath and propelled himself towards the front steps of the house. It seemed ridiculous that he could expect to simply enter via the front door. It was shut. Obviously the house was abandoned – the boards covering the windows were not a fashion accessory. Maybe he could force the door open. He checked the street for passers by. Empty.

He pushed at the door. It did not budge. There was a hole in it about half way down. On impulse, he reached through the gap and reached up towards the lock. His hand closed on metal. He gripped it and turned.

Bingo.

The door opened.

He pushed it wide, leaned on the walking stick and peered into the hall-

way beyond. An old carpet lay buried in dust. Wallpaper hung peeling on both sides of the hallway. An open doorway led off to the right. Ahead lay a staircase and a window in the far wall half way up the stairs. He stepped into the hallway. Closed the door behind him.

The silence of the house enveloped him.

Jim glanced at his watch. Ten to six. Not much time.

Time for what? he asked himself. He would mount the stairs and find an empty room, most likely. Or a bunch of teenagers laughing their heads off.

Walk, he commanded.

He propelled himself down the hallway, peered into the room on his right, saw shattered plaster walls and mould covered carpet. Empty. He continued forward. Arrived at the bottom of the stairs. Glanced under the staircase and saw a small door under the stairwell, leading presumably to the basement.

Every board seemed to creak underfoot as he ascended the stairs. Anyone at the top would hear him coming.

A thought suddenly occurred to him. What if this was a trap; a ploy to draw in some good Samaritan so they could be beaten and robbed?

That was a possibility. Well, he was Jolting Jim Edwards.

The man who had won sixteen fights straight, twelve by technical knock out. That man could handle anything he came up against.

But you're not that man anymore. You're a cripple.

Shut up. Shut up. Shut...

He paused at the first floor landing. Two doors led from the landing, but these did not interest him. The note had specifically indicated the writer was being held in the attic, so he rounded the stairs and continued up the final stretch of stairs.

To his right he looked through the window that ran up the side of the building and saw the city scape stretch into the distance. Only a tiny crest of the sun creased the horizon. Sunset was only moments away. Jim turned from the window and climbed the final stretch of stairs. A door stood at the top.

He glanced at his watch.

Five minutes to six.

Hell.

He gripped the handle, and pushed the door open.

The attic was divided into two rooms. The ceiling slanted down at a forty-five degree angle, meeting walls at waist height. A small kitchenette lay to his left. Jim closed the door behind him.

The floor was covered in a carpet so bare that it was impossible to make

out the original pattern. Littering the floor were sheets of paper.

Pages from the Dracula novel.

Another door lay ahead of him. Gripping the walking stick, Jim propelled himself forward and pushed the door open. The interior lay in gloom. Piles of books littered the floor. Jim lingered in the doorway, his eyes searching the gloom.

A sound came from his left.

Oh, God. No...

An old fireplace jutted up against the dividing wall. A girl lay in a heap at the base of the metalwork, her hands handcuffed behind her. She was gagged and so could not speak her relief, but Jim could read the desperate emotion in her eyes.

He looked at his watch. One minute to six.

He had to hurry. Jack staggered across the room, almost tumbling over in his desperation to get to her. He removed the tape from her mouth.

"Oh God." She began to gasp in great heaving sobs. "Thank God. Thank -"

"Are you all right?" Jim asked. "Are you -?"

"What time is it?" The girl asked desperately. "The sun hasn't set, has it?"

Jim glanced at his watch. "It's just after six."

The girl's eyes filled with terror as

her mouth sagged with dread. "Oh no. Oh no."

"I'm going to get you out of here."

"But he said he'd come at sunset. He said..." She stopped. Her head jerked to one side. Listened. "Oh my God. He's coming."

Jim listened. At first he heard nothing, then slowly a faraway, creaking sound came from the stairs. Someone was ascending the staircase.

"Where is the key to the handcuffs?" Jim whispered.

"He has it on his belt," the girl's face creased with terror. Tears spilled down her cheeks. "Oh no. Oh no."

"Don't worry," Jim with a confidence he did not feel. "We'll get out of here. I promise."

Jim crossed to the doorway as quickly as his legs allowed. He closed the door dividing the rooms. Positioning himself on the other side of the doorway, he pressed himself against the plaster and waited.

His plan was simple. He would launch himself at the guy when he entered the room. Land a few good punches. Take him down fast. Simple. He felt his heart pounding like an unruly piston. A heady dizziness assailed him. He used to be Jolting Jim Landry, winner of sixteen fights, twelve of those by technical knock out, but now he was a cripple with a walking stick.

I can do it, he told himself. *I can do it.*

His whole body shook. Jim struggled against the fear. He looked at the books scattered across the floor. They were all copies of the same book. *Dracula*. Most of them lay in the vicinity of the window. Somehow the girl must have gotten hold of a pen and scribbled her desperate message on the books and then used her feet to propel the books through the window. Most of them had bounced off the sill and back into the room. Only one had made its way to the footpath.

He heard the door to the attic open. Footsteps came from the room beyond. Silence. The handle of the door slowly turned. The door creaked open and a man stepped into the room.

Jesus, Jim thought. *The guy's enormous. He's a bloody monster.*

In his prime, Jim had been a light weight, and this guy was well and truly in the heavy weight league - and muscular. That was not fat on him. Even in the dim light he could see it was muscle. All muscle. Sweat trickled down Jim's face.

Bob, he thought desperately. *What the hell do I do?*

The stranger had his back to Jim. He started to shut the door and Jim let go of the walking stick, took a stance as natural to him as breathing, and

slammed a series of punches into the man's kidneys. The man let out a cry of surprise and fell down. Jim staggered forward, almost fell because of the sudden pain in his right leg, but somehow stayed on his feet.

Now Jim got his first good look at the guy, and it was as if he had taken a bath in ice water. As the guy struggled to stand, gripping his side, he bared his teeth and Jim saw –

Holy hell.

The guys incisor teeth were sharpened to points. Like a vampire.

Something clicked in Jim's mind. The guy thought he was Dracula. Hence, the many copies of the book. Hence, the sunset deadline. So the guy probably slept in the basement during the day –

The man's arm snaked out and Jim dodged under the blow. It whizzed past him, crashed into the wall, broke plaster and Jim retaliated with a barrage of punches at the guy's head. But his aim was off. He no longer had the steadiness in his legs to direct the blows. Only one connected, glancing off the stranger's cheek.

The chin, Bob reminded him. The chin is the turn off switch for the brain. A solid blow to der chin will knock out most guys.

The assailant bent over and dived at him. Jim would have easily sidestepped such an attack six months

before, but now his legs would not move, so he took the full brunt of the attack. He fell back, hitting the floor – hard. The man straddled him.

The man started to slam punches into Jim's face, and the back of his head connected against the floor with each blow. Jim's left arm lay trapped under the man's body, but his right was free. He brought it back and put as much of his body behind the punch as he could, aiming it directly at the man's throat.

The man grunted, choked and fell back. Jim slammed another punch into the side of his head, and pushed the man off him. Standing up, Jim hovered unsteadily on his legs.

Suddenly the man's left leg shot out and connected with Jim's right. Jim felt the strap just above his knee snap and then his leg below the knee flew off and clattered across the floor. Just for an instant – a very short instant – Jim could almost have laughed at the expression on the pseudo-vampire's face. The man could not have possibly known about the prosthetic legs beneath his knees. It must have appeared that he had knocked the leg off with sheer force.

The man recovered from his surprise, threw himself forward and Jim fell back. He found himself wedged into a corner of the room as the assailant started an unremitting bar-

rage of punches into his face and body.

Jim weaved and dodged on his one plastic leg, struggling to keep his arms up to defend himself, but the situation was hopeless. This madman was twice his size, and although he was clearly not a fighter, he obviously had the strength to keep up this barrage for some time. It was only a matter of time before he knocked Jim to the ground and beat him to death.

Jim struggled to keep his guard up. A punch slammed into Jim's ribs and he felt something crack. He felt faint. Terror sapped him of his strength. No-one could take a beating like this and survive.

Heart is what makes a bloody champion.

Jim heard Bob's voice in his mind.

Heart. Have yer got it, Jim? Have yer got what it takes? Have yer got the bloody heart to take everything this monkey has to offer?

Well?

The man continued to throw punches. One after another, he propelled punches into Jim's body and face. Jim dodged. Ducked. Another connected with his ribs. Pain speared up and down his side.

Gotta wait, Jim thought. Let the bastard tire himself.

The man's guard dropped. He threw both hands at Jim's throat and

started to choke the fighter.

Position myself, Jim thought, twisting his body against the wall. Brace myself. Get ready. Now. He's open. Now.

Now!

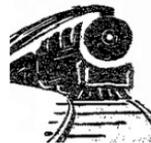
Jim shot two jabs at the man's face, drew back his right and slammed it as hard as possible into his chin. The assailant's head snapped back, he staggered, reeled and hit the floor like an anvil.

Fighting for breath, Jim looked down at the pseudo-vampire in disbelief. Jim let out a sob. He had won! The guy was down for the count! Jim slid to the ground, searched the man's belt until found a key ring, and then dragged himself across the floor to the girl.

A moment later she was running down the stairs. Jim retrieved his leg, his walking stick and began navigating down the stairwell after her. He was laughing with a kind of euphoria, almost a sense of hysterical gladness.

I'm not just Jim Edwards, he thought. I'm Jolting Jim Edwards.

The fighter.



Alger is a member of the Time Guardians, a technologically advanced society from the future charged with keeping order in the universe. But what happens when a Guardian goes bad? And what ramifications are there for the spacetime continuum should a traveler alter the fabric of time? Perhaps it would only make...

A STITCH IN TIME

By DAVID BAUMANN

Every time Alger sailed time back to the twelfth century, the smells were the first thing that took him. As soon as he arrived, it seemed that he couldn't breathe deeply enough to get all the luscious smells in. The twenty-sixth century had nothing like this—at least nowhere that most people could get to. The knowledge that air had once been like this all the time everywhere on earth stirred him. He was used to clean but antiseptic air, artificially cleansed. But this—this was air as it was supposed to be.

His errand was urgent, but even so he paused for a moment. The musk of the River Aire lay all around him and the spring night was alive. Things moved in the grass. Rabbits maybe. The pungence of rich loam under his feet

rose around him. From the river came gentle splashing sounds which might have been raccoon fishing. From far down the bottoms came the barking of a fox, and from not far away the loud calling of a whippoorwill that kept moving from place to place, skirling and singing. It flew right past the silent man, making no noise, just disturbing the air a little bit.

Alger shook his head to clear his mind, and focused his gaze forward. He had a task to perform. Assuredly disagreeable and maybe even dangerous. Just a hundred yards or so ahead of him, visible through the dark boles of the two or three trees that marked the edge of the woods before the cleared land, was the main gate of Kirkstall Abbey, a Cistercian monastic community near Leeds in Yorkshire. He hoped that the monks' rule of keeping nearly complete silence would make his task easier. Alger knew that his impressive skills and achievements as a Time Guardian did not include facility with languages. He had learned that affecting a speech impediment was much more successful than his attempts to speak the English of the Middle Ages convincingly.

Under the light of a moon a little past new, he checked the read-

ing on his timewand and confirmed that he was when he was supposed to be: April 14, 1192. Kirkstall Abbey was barely forty years old.

Alger replaced the timewand into the folds of his Benedictine monastic habit, artfully reproduced in the twenty-sixth century and stored in the cavernous wardrobe of the Time Ward for the legitimate use of the Time Guardians in their errands throughout the ages of the past.

It was in 1192 that the precious Maria Emerald had been stolen, and thereafter puzzlingly lost to history without a trace. At twelve carats and an inch high by an inch and a quarter long, by all accounts it had been breathtakingly beautiful.

The origin of the emerald was unclear. Its recorded history began in the late seventh century, and its ownership could be traced up to the time Guillaume de Marchand had donated it to the Cistercians—from whom it promptly disappeared and had never been heard about since.

Alger was near certain he knew what had happened to the jewel. Jamel Grimes, his workmate in the Time Ward, had read about the Maria Emerald and shared his enthusiasm over it with Alger. Gradually Grimes had become

obsessed with it. And then he had disappeared.

Alger was as convinced as he could be that Grimes had made an unauthorized trip back to twelfth century England to steal the emerald. A Time Guardian going bad was extremely unusual but not unheard of. Candidates were thoroughly screened and tested before being given their responsibility. They all knew that even the slightest alteration of the past could prove devastating to the future.

It was more than three centuries before Alger's time that topological physics had made possible the protective membrane that covered time travelers and prevented them from making any changes to the past. The membrane wrapped the time traveler like a hand wearing a skin-tight glove dipped into a pool—it could enter the water and, for a moment, change its shape, but when it withdrew, both pool and hand returned to what they had been. Time flowed around the Time Guardians within the membrane and, although they could speak and take simple actions, the consequences of their presence had no lasting effect—just so long as they left nothing in the past nor took anything from it.

It was theoretically possible to

break the membrane but the potential ramifications were so alarmingly horrendous that no one had ever tried it. However, the temptation to theft—to bring something back from the past—could be overwhelming to those uncommon individuals who somehow made it through the screening process that licensed the Time Guardians. There had been only two violations since time travel to the past had become feasible, and both had been discovered and corrected.

Grimes had probably seen his chance when he considered the history of the Maria Emerald. He knew that it had disappeared that April night in 1192. He must have reasoned that if he sailed time back to the twelfth century and stole the emerald, he would be fulfilling history and not changing it. Alger pressed his lips together in an expression of his distaste at such criminal rationalization.

He and Grimes had just worked together. They'd never been particularly friendly, but Alger had never suspected that Grimes could be capable of breaking the exacting policies of the Time Ward. He hoped he was wrong about what he now suspected; he would soon find out whether he was or not.

Alger stepped onto the meadow.

To one side lay the river, with water shining in the moonlight. The deep banks of fruit trees along the far border of the meadow cast heavy shadows, and a light mist overhung the fields and hedges in the distance. Gloomy and mysterious, the heavy bulk of the monastery rose from beside the shimmering silver roll of the River Aire.

Alger swiftly crossed the meadow and approached the abbey foregate. He knocked. A moment later the porter slid open the small iron grate that was set at eye level in the portal.

“Greetings, Brother Porter. The Lord be with you,” said Alger in raspy English, his words twisting around in the grip of his faux speech impediment. “I am Brother Oswald, a lay Benedictine from Shrewsbury, and beg a night’s hospitality from the brothers of Kirkstall. I’ve walked twenty miles or more today and must continue my journey tomorrow.”

The porter said nothing. He peered through the grate, looked his caller up and down with rheumy eyes, twitched his nose in apparent distaste, and then shut the grate with a snap. But then he opened the gate and allowed Alger to enter.

“Thank you, thank you,

Brother,” said Alger deferentially, bowing as he passed through the opening.

“Refectory’s over there,” rumbled the porter’s voice, jerking his thumb in the right direction.

“Thank you again, Brother,” said Alger. Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, “Have there been any other visitors today, Brother? I’m looking for someone. He’s, uh, about thirty-five years old, blond hair, clean shaven, uh...”

The porter stared at Alger for a moment. Then he said, “How could I know what color his hair was? He kept his hood up. Just handed me a note, said he was mute.”

Alger flushed with satisfaction. His guess had been right. Then he felt a deep sorrow that his workmate had succumbed to the temptation. Alger had really hoped that he’d been wrong.

He bowed again. “Thank you, Brother,” he said soberly. Then he whirled and stepped rapidly toward the refectory. The porter shook his head, swung the gate closed, and returned to his stool in the gatekeeper’s shelter. He didn’t have much respect for Benedictines. All too easy a life, he thought. Not like a Cistercian. He sniffed.

Alger stepped briskly through the courtyard. Since both he and

Jamel were in possession of time-wands, he had to catch the other before he had the opportunity to steal the emerald. If Jamel could lay his hands on the jewel, he could be gone before Alger could prevent the theft. Then the chase would become immensely complex, its outcome uncertain. Alger increased his pace even more.

He knew he wouldn’t find Jamel in the refectory. The Maria Emerald would either be in the sacristy or, more likely, in a treasury under the abbot’s safekeeping. The sacristy would be the easiest place to check, however. It would be deserted at this time of night, so he’d start there.

Alger entered the church. It was swathed in shadows. Dim moonlight came through the high stained-glass windows, showing the shapes of the chairs and illuminating the great stone slabs in the floor. There were also a few lamps glowing evenly before shrines, and a number of votive candles. And ah—the smells, again. He closed his eyes with pleasure and inhaled. High quality incense, candle wax, olive oil, cut stone. Such a rich, sensuous blend of scents. Quickly his mind took over again. He hurried down the aisle, his Benedictine habit swirling around his legs.

He paused in front of the great altar with its red oil lamp hanging in front of it. Anxiously he swiveled his head from side to side, looking for the entrance to the sacristy. Probably through the archway to the left. The clergy must enter from there for the liturgies, and beyond must be the sacristy where they vested and where the sacred vessels would be kept. And maybe the jewel, too.

He dashed through the archway into a passageway that was markedly darker than the church. Down the passage on the left was a wooden doorway. The door had been locked but showed signs that it had been forced open.

Alger gasped and his eyes opened with alarm. He reached into the folds of his habit, put his hand onto his timewand, and strode through the door. Inside it was nearly pitch black. There were no lamps or candles lit, and only two small windows high up.

"Too late," grunted the Time Guardian, and exhaled in frustration. He relinquished the timewand and was reaching for his flashlight when he heard someone stumping down the passageway outside. He whirled. Candlelight flickered on stone walls and shadows leaped. Someone was in a hurry. Before

Alger could think what to do, a stout monk dressed in black heaved through the open door into the sacristy. He carried a thick yellow candle in a pottery dish.

He glared at Alger, his face red with anger. "You thievin' Benedictine!" he shouted. "Taking advantage of our hospitality to break into this holy space and steal! Sacrilege!" he sputtered. "You..."

A shadow stepped from behind the door and slammed a long iron candlestick down onto the monk's head. He dropped without even a groan. His candle fell, its pottery holder smashing on the floor into hundreds of slivers. The light went out. Alger heard the candle rolling off into the darkness. Momentarily blinded by the candlelight, he could now see nothing.

"Jamel..." he whispered even as he started backward out of the reach of his fellow Time Guardian.

"Quite a little crowd gathering here tonight, Alger," sneered the hulking black figure. "First you and then this shouting oaf. You fool. I've got the emerald. I found it seconds before you came through the door. If not for that, I wouldn't have to kill you. But it's too late now. You shouldn't have come after me. It wasn't worth your life!"

"You know you can't take any-

thing from the past into our time! You don't know what..."

Grimes lunged forward and swung viciously at Alger's head with the candlestick. In shocked desperation to preserve his life, Alger ducked, and felt a surge of adrenalin fill his system. He could only see muted shapes inside the gloomy chamber, but he knew that Jamel's bulk loomed over him, bent upon violence. Frantically, Alger dropped to the floor and scuttled away from his pursuer. He could feel Grimes stomping close after him, and abruptly suffered an awful blow on his back.

He cried out in pain, and then groaned. A second blow followed, this time on his left shoulder. Fired to panic, Alger rolled under a heavy wooden table that was set in the middle of the room. He knew that his adrenalin rush would give him about thirty seconds to act before his injuries took their toll and made him easy prey for his attacker. He reached into his habit for the timewand. It was missing! But he found his flashlight. He turned it on.

Its cone of light pierced the darkness under the great table and illuminated Grimes' visage, distorted with rage, peering under the board. When the light burst into his eyes, Grimes blinked and drew

back as if he'd been struck in the face. As his assailant moved away, Alger saw his timewand on the floor beneath the table. He snatched it up. He had preset it for the function he thought he might need most.

He rolled back to the side of the table opposite Grimes and got to his feet. His back and shoulder were beginning to throb unmercifully now. "Jamel Grimes," Alger said through gritted teeth, "I arrest you..."

Grimes roared and hurled the candlestick hard directly at Alger. The instant he saw Grimes begin the throw, Alger triggered his timewand. A split second later, the candlestick struck him lengthwise across the face. With a cry, he slammed backwards into a row of cabinets, dropped his timewand, and fell to the floor, unconscious.

A few minutes later, he swam gradually into awareness. His back and shoulder hurt terribly. His left cheek stung and the forehead over his nose pulsed painfully as blood pumped into it. He moaned, blinked, and then opened his eyes. He could only see little floating specks of light in a field of blackness, with a dull glow somewhere to one side.

Alger groaned again. He lay

still, and listened. There was no sound. "Grimes is gone," he thought bitterly. Alger rolled over, grasped his flashlight, which was the source of the glow, and then found his timewand a half dozen feet away on the floor. He scrambled painfully to his feet and picked up the timewand. Then he stood erect.

Across the table, he saw Grimes standing frozen in a timenet. Alger heaved a sigh of relief. His reckless defense had struck true, but he knew that he had only a short time to take final action. Timenets stopped the passing of time in a small volume of space like a cocoon, but couldn't last very long. They were too unstable, too unnatural to last. The net would deteriorate and time catch up. Grimes could be released at any second.

Moaning with the pain of his injuries, Alger set the timewand down on the great table so he could work it with one hand. His left arm was too painful now, and he couldn't move his fingers. Blinking his eyes to clear the cold sweat that ran into them, Alger rapidly adjusted the settings on his timewand.

When he was ready, he aimed it at Grimes. He activated the function that would drain his opponent's timewand of all power, ren-

dering it useless. Then he readjusted his timewand and pointed it at Grimes once more. He pressed the button. The renegade Time Guardian leaped forward with the momentum of his throw of the candlestick, exhibited a look of shock and terror, and then disappeared.

Alger's shoulders sagged with exhaustion. He had cast Grimes into a closed timeloop, putting a stitch into the topological membrane so that the erstwhile thief would go back in time for ten minutes and continually replay the last events over and over throughout eternity, seeing and being seen by no one who lives in the normal flow of time. Jamel Grimes would possess the Maria Emerald till time ends, but in his quarantine would derive no benefit from it.

Alger reset his timewand. He lifted his head and smiled wistfully. He could smell the incense even now. With the press of a button, he returned to the twenty-sixth century. He knew he would find it as he had left it.



Sit back, dear subscriber, for you are in for a treat! My old friend and associate Bob Evers has very kindly contributed a unique tale unlike anything seen before within the pages of The Mysterious Traveler Magazine. What follows is a gripping narrative of two young friends raised in a harsh world, and a decision that is made on...

A NIGHT OF PURPOSE

By **BOBBY EVERS**

The black crept over the boys and between every blade of grass they sat on at the top of that hill overlooking the busy highway. Buicks and pick-ups of every variety darted by at speeds upwards of fifty miles an hour. The only thing between the boys and the highway was about sixty yards of drop-off and a rusty chain-link fence.

"It could be any one of those cars," Randy said to Justin. It was the first word spat by either of the boys in almost an hour.

"I know," Justin said with a sobriety that chilled Randy.

Flanking them was each boy's respective Schwinn, both hand-me-downs from older brothers who outgrew them. The torn, white rubber around Randy's front wheel was covered in dew. The humidity was

dropping.

Traffic continued in the dark, cars eventually clicking on their headlights as the purple light turned to black, completely unaware of the eyes watching them from on the hill, knowing what they knew. The motel behind them flipped on its sign, bathing Randy and Justin in seedy red light. From the motel bar came loud country music.

"Or any of the cars behind us," Randy said, referring to the cars of the patrons who parked at the motel.

"No," Justin said. "I already tried all those."

Randy's admiration for Justin was built upon the knowledge that in the school yard if a Mikey Henderson or a Jack Shark came up behind him, Justin could take on both boys with one arm behind his back. He was lean and could fight. He was bigger and tougher than Randy and Randy needed him around. The truth was that Randy wanted nothing more than to find the car they were looking for. But if some unseen force prevented this, Randy had already accepted the disappointment and moved on, whereas Justin's determination didn't even allow that option. Randy liked to imagine what the car smelled like inside. If it was anything like his mother's car (cheap liquor and ciga-

rettes) then he might feel right at home there. His mother didn't drive anymore.

For the first time in thirty minutes, Randy looked at his friend.

"What are we going to do, Justin?"

"I don't know. We have to find it."

"How do we do that?"

"I don't know. I guess we just keep trying."

Randy tried to think of different places where a lot of cars might be parked. The places they'd tried already included Justin's mother's hairdresser, the hospital, and the parking lot of Fred's Butcher Shop. They could bike over to the race track, where Randy's dad went to bet on horses, but that would mean crossing the highway, a feat Randy did not look forward to. Maybe another tavern. Randy brought the idea up to Justin.

"Just not Pitchers," he said. "That's where my step dad is right now, no doubt getting ready to pop someone in the eye. I stay away from that place."

"Maybe he's just listening to the game on the radio with his friends."

"What game?"

It was true. That night was the night of the baseball game of the local boys against the Medford Mules. Assuredly there'd be plenty

of cars there. Randy and Justin had been to the park hundreds of times and knew the way from pretty much anywhere in town. They pulled up their bikes, dragged them off the mound of dirt they'd been sitting on, and climbed atop them on the curve of street outside the motel.

Justin led the way with new conviction, resolute in his idea, pedaling

faster than he'd pedaled all day. He had a newfound investment in their plan where before he'd found surrender. He led Randy down Truman Street, past the school, between the fueling station and the shelter house to the edge of the park. The sounds of the game were audible; the din of the announcer, the roar of the crowd, the clack of a bat. Randy and Justin stood next to their bikes at the mouth of the white gravel parking lot, showered in the bright white lights of the field.

"Let me see them again," Randy said. Justin handed him the keys. There were two keys and two key chains on one silver ring. The first key was smaller, obviously meant to open

the doors of the car and the trunk. The second key was bigger and meant to start the ignition. The first keychain was of a Hawaiian hula girl in a grass skirt. The second keychain was a weathered yellow tag

reading "RKO 117." Justin had found it outside the motel that day in the parking lot. He assumed it must be a spare set because of the license plate number, and the fact that no car in the parking lot had a match. Every set of keys Justin had ever found he'd turned in to the Lost and Found. But never had a set of keys had the license plate number on it.

"Who do you think it belongs to?" Randy asked, curiously.

"I don't know."

"Do you think it could be a mobster? Like Al Capone?"

"Could be," he said. "A lot of people come through the motel for all kinds of reasons."

"Maybe it was a getaway car and they were ditching it en route to Mexico."

"Probably."

The boys walked through the rows of cars, car after car, looking at each license plate. Then, just when the two had figured it fruitless, looking beneath the shadows of a tall leafy tree, they saw a newer green auto at the very end of the last row.

Sure enough, the tag and license plate matched. Without looking at each other, the boys could only marvel at it as the full impact of their discovery hit them. They felt like Christopher Columbus, observ-

ing the eagle sticker on the rear bumper of America. Justin slid his finger along the piece of shiny metal attached to the driver's side spanning its two doors.

It was his now. This was to be his Nina, his Pinta, and his Santa Maria. He opened the driver's side, slid in, and unlocked the passenger's side for his friend. The headlights pierced the darkness as the engine roared to life.

Randy looked at Justin and smiled nervously as the car rolled from its spot, but the smile faltered when a heavy thump came from the trunk. It was the kind of thump that set the hairs on the back of your neck on edge—a thump like dead weight.

"What was that?" Randy asked, trying to keep his voice neutral—to keep it from trembling.

"Probably just a sack of potatoes," Justin grinned. "Don't worry about it. We'll check later. Right now it's time to set sail."

Randy clicked on the radio and pressed his forehead against the passenger window, as the big green auto disappeared into the darkness.



A recent trip by train brought me in contact with a very unique individual. She said she was from the future and had a very interesting tale to tell. As you know, dear friend, I love a good story. I asked her to relate it to me so that I might share it with you. What she had to say about the future of our planet was terrifying, even to me...

PROGRESS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

By THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER

A tattered poster read: *Progress Through Technology!*

Beta looked around at the crumbling decay of Outer San Francisco and could only smile.

Progress.

It seemed that progression happened too quickly on Earth. When cloning could be done by anyone with a big enough bank account, reactors became chess pieces instead of power sources, and science fiction became obsolete when it was understood that anything could be done or undone, progress had reached a point of no return.

The only thing that mattered now was Atom Tan.

Beta didn't know why she felt such a devotion to this godforsaken planet. But that wasn't entirely true.

She felt devotion because that was how she was programmed to feel. Her Creator had felt some kind of attachment to Earth, some sense of appreciation for what it could have been had its inhabitants not squandered its resources. It was a smoking wasteland now—even its moon had been polluted (they thought they had found the perfect place to store spent fuel rods. That was until it became too toxic for manned flights to land, of course). Earth had its own problems with Topes—people who had changed from the intense radioactivity emitted from the blown reactors.

Crippled from a brutal attack by the changelings, Beta staggered True North to the Last Reactor.

To Atom Tan.

“Don't move!”

Beta had been hiding from the Topes inside the smashed shell of a huge mainframe that had been pushed out of a window. She had remained perfectly still for six hours until she felt it safe to venture outside. The voice startled her, and despite the warning, she dropped heavily to her knees.

“Hands on your head!”

The voice processed as female. Beta turned her head to the right. The heat of charge whistled past her ear.

“I said don't move, friend.”

The female came into view. She

looked worse than Beta, dirty and beaten, but somehow still beautiful.

Beta offered a smile. "I am armed with a charger. It is on my right hip,"

The female circled around slowly and disarmed Beta, then came back into her line of sight, the gun trained on her head. The female looked Beta over for a long while before speaking.

"Do you have food?"

Beta shook her head. "I am a Puter."

"What's a Puter doing out here?"

"I seek the Atom Tan."

Beta was pleased to see these words held meaning for the female. Her captor lowered her weapon slightly and erupted into hoarse laughter, and then fits of coughing that ended with the female spitting out a huge wad of green phlegm. She gargled and swallowed from a small canteen.

"Aren't we all?"

Beta thought the vicious beating she had endured at the hands of the Topes must have scrambled her cerebral wiring. She was not sure if the female's last comment was to be taken seriously. The female sat down on a smashed computer monitor and studied the Puter carefully.

"Aren't we?" Beta asked.

The female raised her eyebrows and smiled savagely. "After the Atom Tan? Sure, honey. And while we're at it, let's try and find the Egg Bunny

and Santy Claws, too."

"But they are fictional characters."

"Bingo."

"Atom Tan is real."

"Atom Tan is a fairy tale. A myth. An urban legend. It's something we tell each other at night around campfires. It gives the weak-minded something to believe in. A religion like GodHeaven or Nirvana. Well, believe me, there is no Nirvana and Atom Tan is no more real than the Egg Bunny."

The female seemed to have relaxed slightly. She rubbed her chin and spat another wad of phlegm. "Where you headin'?"

Beta nodded toward True North. "The Last Reactor."

The female frowned as if debating whether the Puter was having a joke at her expense.

"What do you want there?"

"I've already told you."

Again the female studied Beta's face. A minute passed, and then the female sat up straight, looking off into the distance. Beta heard it too—the whoops and hollers of the Topes. They were coming back. The female stood up quickly, her right hand instinctively dropping to her charger.

"Can I trust you?"

"Yes. But we must go True North."

"We can go North for now. But you can forget about the Last Reactor. The Atom Tan ain't there. There's nothing there except Topes and

death.”

Beta smiled and dropped her hands. “My name is Beta.”

The female smirked and helped the Puter up, handing her back her charger. “That’s funny. *Bait* is more like it. Come on, we have to hurry.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Can you walk?”

Beta nodded. “Yes. But I was injured when a band of Topes attacked me this morning. My left leg is corrupt, and my balance parameters are not aligned. I’m afraid I won’t be a very good shot. What did you mean by *bait*?”

They began picking their way through the rubble of The Presidio. Plastic, glass, and a rainbow of wires crunched under their boots. In the distance, they heard the sound of drums join into the war cries of the Topes. The female put an arm around Beta to help her move faster.

“We have to hurry.”

“What did you mean by *bait*?”

The female laughed. “Don’t worry. I ain’t gonna kill ya. Just a plan I used on the Arizona Ocean when I met one of your kind down there on the coast. I would hide out in a building, see, and then send the Puter out in the street. When the Topes sniffed him out, I would pick ‘em off like fish in a barrel. An easy way to get food and supplies. ‘Course the food would make you sick, but at least it’s some-

thing in your belly.”

“What happened to the Puter?”

The female coughed and quickened her pace. “Oh...well, we were ambushed by some Yuppies who wanted a woman for their slave trade. Johnny got his plug pulled trying to save me.”

Beta had another question, but before it could leave her lips a shot rang out and her body was thrown violently forward into the dirt. The female raced to her side and dragged the dead weight of the Puter into a doorway. Warm lubricant spread across Beta’s shirt and her head filled with a static cacophony. The picture from her eye sensors grew faint and scrambled. She read a sign that said *ucks Coffee*, and then saw the female’s face come into view.

“I’ve been shot.”

“No kidding. Can you hold on until I chase off the Topes?”

A bubble of lubricant rose out of Beta’s mouth and popped. She gurgled out two words.

“Atom...Tan.”

The female scowled and fired her charger. The Puter was worth saving if she could. Puters made good traveling companions. They were like pack mules—they could carry heavy loads of equipment for miles and never complain. They generally never spoke unless spoken to (although this one seemed to have gotten around that),

and they weren't afraid to die.

"Fantasy time is over. Listen, I need to know if you can stay awake for a few minutes. I don't know how to fix you. You'll have to walk me through it."

Beta smiled. "What's your name?"

The female fired off two more shots. "Gabe."

"Gabe. That's a pretty. Gabe, look inside my chest cavity. The button to open it is on my neck."

Three shots. "Your repairs are gonna have to wait, Beta." The female named Gabe lunged forward, ready to leap into battle, but was pulled back into the doorway by Beta's powerful grip.

"What are you doing?"

Beta shrugged her jacket off one shoulder and undid her shirt. Yellow lubricant oozed from a small hole below where a human heart would normally be. She touched an unseen button on her neck and her entire chest rose up an inch, and then slid down to her abdomen, revealing a complex grid of circuits and wiring. Gabe watched in awe as Beta pointed a finger at a large golden cylinder just above where the charge had torn through.

The cylinder seemed to pulse and ebb with a life of its own.

"Atom Tan," Beta said again.

Mouth open, Gabe shook her head. Tears cut through the grime on her

cheeks and fell inside Beta's chest.

"You're...Atom...Tan?" she whispered.

Beta nodded and smiled lovingly. "Gabe... You must take me True North to the Last Reactor. I have reserve power to last a fortnight. We can restart Earth, Gabe. It'll be just like the dinosaurs."

Gabe laughed suddenly, choked on phlegm, spit, and laughed again. "My God—it's like a dream. You're the Egg Bunny, Beta." She pointed at the gold cylinder. "And there's the egg!"

"Progress through technology," Beta smiled.

Gabe was out the doorway, laughing and shooting her charger uncontrollably. She picked off the last of the Topes, her joyous voice carrying down the wreckage of The Presidio.

In the doorway, Beta surveyed the wreckage of her own body. Could she get that far True North in a fortnight? She did not know for certain. She could only hope that they reached the Last Reactor before her own plug was pulled. And how beautiful it would be to pull the plug on Earth.

To restart it.

Just like the dinosaurs.



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