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THE BUTTONED SKY
by Geoff St. Reynard



The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Prophetic Camera, by John McGreevey

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THE PROPHETIC CAMERA

By John McGreevey

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Joey knew the old man had somehow faked his pictures; after all, nobody could photograph the future. But then the future began to happen!

Joey Barrett set his camera carefully to one side and swung onto the edge of the desk. He knew this annoyed Nugent, and, at the moment, nothing gave him greater satisfaction than his ability to irritate the editor.

His heels thumped against the highly polished sides of the desk, and he shook his head very deliberately, in rhythm with the heel-hammering.

"No," he said. "I don't think so, Nugent." He decided the drumming had lost its impact, so, he crossed his legs and turned to face the balding man behind the desk. "Why should I? This assignment's out of my line and you know it."

Nugent nodded. "I know. But this is an unusual story, Joey, and I'd like to get a photographer's slant on it."

"Want to find out how the other half thinks, huh?"

Nugent referred to a memo. "This is the address." He pushed the slip of paper toward Joey. "I think you'll find this Jason Ewing most cooperative."

"He's a crackpot." Joey shied away from the memo and slid off the desk. "That's why none of your brainy reporters will touch the assignment."

"He's eccentric." Nugent didn't bother to hide his impatience. "What inventor isn't?"

"He's an inventor?"

"New kind of camera. That's where you come in, Joey." Nugent leaned back in

his swivel chair. "I want a photographer's reactions to it."

"What's so special about his camera?"

Nugent didn't look at Joey. "It photographs another dimension."

There was a moment's silence. Nugent was abruptly preoccupied with his hands. Joey moved slowly toward the desk.

"Another dimension! You mean stereoptican stuff? With depth?"

Nugent stood. "No. I don't think that's what Ewing means." He moved from his desk to the window. "I want you to find out what it is. Get all the information you can."

"Are you sure this doesn't belong on the comic page, Nugent?"

Dusk was settling over the city. Nugent stared out at the darkening skyline. "I admit it sounds crazy. But, it'll make a good human interest yarn." He turned back to Joey. "Just bring in the facts and one of the re-write boys will put them in shape."

Joey Barrett's chin set doggedly. "You've got no right to ask me to...."

But he didn't finish. His editor had abruptly moved in very close. "You're in no position to quibble, Joey."

"What does that mean?"

Nugent's thin lips were tightly compressed. "The management's not happy with you." Joey's laugh was brittle. Nugent walked slowly back to his desk. "I've had more and more complaints about your work."

Joey was close behind him. "I take the assignments you hand me. And there's no one on the staff gets a sharper shot."

Nugent waved this aside. "It's your manner." He pushed a glossy eight by ten print toward the photographer. "You play up the grisly, the macabre."

Joey stared down at the picture. A slow smile narrowed his eyes. "I photograph what I see. I figure it's what your readers want to see, too."

Nugent sat heavily. "We had a hundred phone calls about that picture. Brutal ... sadistic ... morbid."

The print fell face up before Nugent. He turned it over. Joey laughed. "Sure. It's all those things. And they loved it." He leaned very close to Nugent. "You didn't have to print it."

"It was the only shot I had. It was print it or be scooped on one of the big stories of the year."

Joey's outward nonchalance failed to mask entirely his inner tension. "When I take a picture, they remember it."

"There's a difference between memorable photography and cheap sensationalism." The editor picked up the memo with Ewing's address. "All things considered," he said, "I think you'd better get this interview for me."

Joey stared at Nugent for an insolent second. Then, he took the memo. He checked the address, jammed the paper into his pocket, and moved quickly to the door. Hand on the knob, he paused.

"Oh, Nugent," he called, "if you can't see the story I bring back, just remember: it's in another dimension."

He slammed the door on Nugent's anger.



Early evening traffic was heavy as he pulled into the quiet, old-fashioned street where Ewing lived.

Sober brownstone houses, their front steps rising steeply to stain-glass paneled doors; heavily curtained bay windows; weather-stained and rotting gingerbread; an atmosphere of reluctant decay and genteel senescence. Ewing's house was like a dozen others in the same block.

Joey was not a man given to hunches, and yet, as he climbed out of his car and stood staring up at the silent house, he could not repress a shiver of apprehension.

He looked up the street. Nothing marred the quiet. A middle-aged woman hurried home with her armload of groceries. A man paraded an ancient dog on a leash.

Slowly, Joey climbed the steps. His apprehension was no more than the resentment he felt for the assignment. He yanked the old-fashioned bell and listened for its echoes dying deep in the house.

He fidgeted impatiently. Perhaps old Ewing wasn't at home. Or, maybe he was so eccentric he no longer answered the bell. Joey jerked it again.

On the traffic-noisy boulevard a block away, he heard a raw squealing of brakes.

Joey sighed and turned away. He'd wasted an hour. He started down the steps. And the door opened.

Jason Ewing was very old. His incredibly blue eyes seemed alien in the yellow parchment face. His clothing, his manner, even his speech were archaic.

As Joey shook the bony hand, Ewing was apologizing for the delay.

"I was in my dark-room," he said—the voice strangely resonant to come from so frail a chest—"and I had to get the developer off my hands."

Joey nodded and stepped inside. The atmosphere of the house was a curious mixture of chemical and decay. There was a layer of dust on the bric-a-brac, and as Joey followed the stooped figure from the entry-hall into the living-room, he saw Ewing as a kind of insubstantial ghost, moving through the deserted rooms so carefully that the dust was not disturbed.

Ewing gestured to a chair which looked prim and uncomfortable in its yellowed antimacassars. "Sit down, please, Mr. Barrett." He switched on an ornate table lamp. "It's most kind of you to be interested in my work."

Joey gave him the automatic smile. The room was a combination studio and parlor. A bulky, antique camera lorded it over the conventional furnishings. Its unblinking eye regarded Joey coldly.

There was a fireplace, with massive brass andirons cast to resemble griffon-heads; purple draperies at the window were faded by sun and time; the heavy furniture was defiantly shabby; even the antique photograph album with its plush cover and gold-plated clasp and lock was right for the room. This was Jason Ewing's world and Joey felt himself to be an alien.



Ewing hovered nervously, white fingers clenching and unclenching, reaching out, now and then, to touch the album on the dusty table-top. "I know you are a busy man, Mr. Barrett," he said, "so I'll come at once to the point."

Joey relaxed as much as he could in the old chair. "I should tell you first, Mr. Ewing, that I'm not a writer. I'm a photographer. My editor thought maybe you and me would talk the same language."

Ewing bobbed his head up and down. "Excellent. Excellent." He pulled up a small chair. "Believe me, Mr. Barrett, I hesitated a very long while before I decided to make my discovery public."

Joey disguised a grin. "What finally decided you?"

Ewing closed his eyes. "I'm not well. Heart. Most unreliable. Doctor tells me I may ... may die ... at any time."

"I see."

"But, before I die," the old man said, leaning forward again, "I must share my secret." He seemed to have difficulty in finding the words he sought. "It's ... it's so extraordinary, Mr. Barrett, that I've been afraid to divulge it." He gave a sad shake of his head. "People today are so unwilling to accept the unusual."

Joey writhed inwardly. This was worse than he had thought. He would make Nugent pay. "Mr. Nugent said something about your photographing another dimension," he prompted.

The old man pushed himself to his feet. "It was accidental. I've dabbled in amateur photography for years." He limped over to his camera. "Not only took pictures—developed my own." He paused and looked very directly at Joey. "About six years ago, I began experimenting with a new developer."

Ewing's eyes were disturbing. Joey looked away. "You had used commercial developers before?"

"Yes." Ewing gripped the camera. "I wanted a developer that would give a more sharply defined image. I tried fifty different formulae—never quite achieving what I had in mind."

Joey lit a cigarette. "You must have spent a lot of time on it."

"I had retired. I live alone here. No other interests." The phrases came in little

gasps, as if Ewing had to force the words between his lips. "Made no progress. And then, I tried Formula #53."

The pause indicated Joey was expected to react. "Formula #53?"

Ewing moved back to the light. "My fifty-third experiment. Radical departure from commercial developers."

"It succeeded?"

"It succeeded, Mr. Barrett, but not in the way I had imagined." The fish-white hands rested on the photo album. "I developed some film in Formula #53 and received the shock of my life." His voice was a whisper. "The pictures on the negative were NOT the pictures I had taken."

He paused to watch the effect on Barrett. Joey scratched his ear. "You took one set of pictures and the negatives you got were of another set?"

"I know what you're thinking," Ewing said. "What I thought at first: that I'd gotten hold of the wrong film. But that wasn't the answer. The same thing happened again and again. Whenever I used Formula #53 as my developer, I produced a strange set of pictures."

Joey stood up nervously. The old boy was crazier than he had first guessed. Humoring him seemed the only answer. "That's incredible."

Ewing nodded excitedly. "I thought I was losing my mind. But, slowly, I began to realize what had happened."

"What?"

The old man sank into the chair by the table. "School of modern philosophers ... teaches all time is co-existent."

Joey felt almost sorry for the old boy. He was so much in earnest about his crack-brained discovery. "Time ... co-existent?"

"Past, present, future—all simultaneous. Running along in parallel dimensions."



Joey tried a laugh. "Little rough for me, Mr. Ewing," he apologized. "Look," he

went on quickly, "I've been thinking...."

But Ewing wasn't listening. "Simplify it. At this moment, Caesar crossing the Rubicon; Columbus is discovering America; you and I are talking; a man in the twenty-fifth century is rocketing toward Mars."

"I see what you mean."

Ewing was holding the old fashioned photo album in his lap. "Well, I know now that what I've stumbled into with Formula #53 is another dimension in time."

"You mean that ... that you can take a picture of what's happening in another time?"

Ewing nodded. "I know it's difficult to grasp, Mr. Barrett." He held out the plush-covered album. "But I have proof."

Joey stepped toward the old man. "You've got pictures in there—pictures of this other dimension?"

"Yes." He fumbled in his vest pocket, found a small key, and with trembling hand inserted it in the album lock. "I've never shown anyone these pictures before," he said.

Despite himself, Joey felt excited. Even as he dismissed Ewing as a hopeless crackpot, he was disturbingly eager to see the pictures in the old album.

Ewing gestured for him to be seated. Joey sat in the chair near the table and the old man handed him the open album.

"So far," Ewing said, "I haven't been able to control the process. I photograph a subject and the picture may be projected ten years into the future or a hundred years into the past. There must be an infinite number of dimensions registered on the film, but my developer varies."

Joey's initial eagerness was quickly dissipated. The photographs in the album were disappointingly ordinary. True, there were some that seemed to be trickshots and a few in which the costuming was unfamiliar, but certainly nothing to document the old boy's claim. Aside from a few shots that were interesting because of their violence, there was nothing in the album.

Ewing waited for Joey's reaction—the parchment face even more deeply wrinkled by excitement—the blue eyes blazing.

"Well, Mr. Barrett?"

Joey left the album open at the picture of a gruesome accident. Apparently, two cars had met head-on. The one had been a sleek convertible. The other was an old sedan. Both were terribly crumpled. Glass littered the street. Steam spewed from the twisted radiator of the old wreck.

A man sprawled from the front seat of the sedan—an elderly man, with a white beard—a beard spattered with blood. His sightless eyes stared accusingly at the small cluster of onlookers who surrounded the wreck. Nearby, thrown from the crushed convertible by the impact, lay a woman. She wore an extreme evening dress, and a fur cape had fallen not far from her body. All around her were pearls ... spilled from the broken strand at her throat.

Joey looked up at Ewing. He shook his head. "You've got some interesting pictures, but I can't see that they prove your theory. They could have been taken any time." He pointed to the photo of the wreck. "This one, for instance." He smiled up at the old man. "That looks like a shot I might have made."

Ewing's entire body seemed shaken by his eagerness to prove his point. "Mr. Barrett ... that picture is of an accident that hasn't occurred. One evening, I took a picture of the street out there ... at the corner ... where our street joins the Boulevard." His voice was low, urgent. "When I snapped that photo, the street was deserted. There were no cars—no people."



Joey took another look at the wreck. He closed the album with finality. "Mr. Ewing," he said, "I'm not questioning your sincerity. I can see that you're convinced your developer has extraordinary powers."

"But you don't believe me." There was despair in the old man's voice. "What can I say to make you believe that you've just looked at the picture of an accident that's yet to happen."

Joey laid the album on the table. "It's an interesting theory."

Ewing moved to his camera. "It's more than a theory. I can prove it." He ducked behind the camera. "Let me take your picture, Mr. Barrett, and I'll prove it."

"Wait a minute!" Joey half rose from the chair in protest, and then, with a shrug

subsided. "Sure," he said. "Why not?"

"Thank you," Ewing answered. He focused the camera, cut on extra lights, posed Joey, took his picture.

The ordeal over, Joey moved toward the door.

"You'll see, Mr. Barrett. This picture will convince you."

Joey nodded. "Sure, sure. You give me a call."

They were in the entry-hall. "As I said," Ewing continued, "I haven't much time. That's why I'm very anxious to pass on my discovery. It could do great good—in the right hands."

Joey opened the door. "I understand," he said. "You give me a call."

"I will."

Joey was outside—the door between him and Ewing's pathetic eagerness. As he bounded down the steps, he was devising a revenge extreme enough for Nugent.

He slipped in behind the wheel. It was surprising that anyone as near psycho as Ewing should be loose. The old boy had lived too long alone in the empty house.

Just as he drew away from the curb, Joey heard the crash. Squealing rubber, splintering glass, rending metal, perhaps a human scream ... compounded into an awful discord that ricocheted against the quiet brownstone fronts, building to a crescendo of metallic anguish.

After the first moment of surprise, Joey experienced the curious exaltation he always felt at a scene of violence. The trip wasn't a waste after all. He'd get a picture, and from the sound of the crash, it would be a good one.

As he clambered out of his car, camera ready, people were running down steps, cars were swinging off the boulevard—the first cluster of the curious was collecting.

With professional assurance, Joey brushed people aside and moved in. One car had been stopped at the intersection and the other had careened off the boulevard and smashed head-on into it.

Joey stopped on the crowd's inner edge and stared.

It was impossible. One car was an old sedan. The other, a sleek convertible. An old man with blood-spattered white beard half-spilled from the sedan and on the glistening pavement lay a woman in evening dress, surrounded by dozens of pearls.



From habit, Joey took the picture of the accident and delivered it to Nugent. By the time he had developed his picture, he was beginning to enjoy the knowledge that it was an exact duplicate of the photograph in Ewing's album.

Only he and Ewing realized the power of Formula #53. It couldn't be coincidence. The details were too exact. Ewing's explanation was the only one possible. And that meant the old boy wasn't crazy. The formula was all he insisted.

Such a formula could be a great force for good, the old man had said. In the right hands. In the hands of Joey Barrett.

Joey decided to keep his secret. This was not a power to be shared with Leslie Nugent or anyone else. So, when he faced his editor again, he was careful to dismiss the Ewing interview with just the proper degree of casualness.

"There's no doubt about it," he said. "Ewing's a crackpot."

Nugent scowled impatiently. "Even so...."

"I tell you, if we run the story he gave me, we'll be laughed out of business." Joey watched Nugent closely.

"But surely as a human interest yarn," the editor protested, "we'd be justified."

Joey shook his head. "He's an old crank, trying to build up his ego with these phony claims."

Nugent leaned back. "There was absolutely no basis for his theory?"

"None." Joey laughed easily. "You should have seen the obvious trick photos he tried to pass off as evidence. My advice is: forget Jason Ewing."

There was a long pause. Then, Nugent nodded. "All right. Thanks, Joey." He picked up a glossy of the accident. "You outdid yourself on this one."

Joey sauntered to the door. "The master's touch," he called. "I'll hit you for a raise later."

Satisfied that Nugent considered the Ewing story dead, Joey left the paper and hurried to a pay-phone.

When Jason Ewing answered, there was a note of near-hysteria in his voice. He seemed frightened by Joey's interest and was extremely reluctant to give him another interview.

"I don't blame you for being irritated," Joey said. "I was very rude. But look, Mr. Ewing, now I see I was wrong. We can't talk about it on the phone. All I want is a chance to see you again. Maybe tomorrow?"

There was such a long pause that Joey thought Ewing had broken the connection. Then, he heard the old man sigh.

"I ... I don't know what to say," Ewing faltered. "In the light of ... of recent developments, I think it would be unwise to involve you, Mr. Barrett."

Joey laughed. "Listen, this is the break of a lifetime for me. How about tomorrow morning at nine?"

"Tomorrow." The one word was neither affirmation nor question.

But Joey chose to interpret it as agreement. "See you in the morning at nine, Mr. Ewing," he said, and hung up quickly.



Joey slept little that night. He was up early, gulped a hasty breakfast, and stood on the steps at Ewing's house at five minutes to nine.

Again, as on the day before, he had to ring the bell twice before the door opened and the wrinkled face showed itself. He was shocked by the change in Ewing. The man seemed much older and there was a haunting fear in the blue eyes.

"It would have been wiser," the old man whispered, "if you had not come here again—for us not to have met."

Joey was determined to be charming. He put his hand on the thin old arm and gently pushed Ewing into the entry hall. "I don't blame you for being bitter," he

said, closing the door. "I was a fool yesterday."

Ewing pulled free and moved agitatedly into the living-room. Even the morning sun made no impression on the shadows there.

The old man didn't look at Joey. "You were right," he said. "It would be better to forget the formula."

Joey fought down his impatience. He tried to move smoothly, keep his voice calm. "No. You mustn't think that. You can't be selfish. You said yourself, Mr. Ewing, that this knowledge could do great good."

The quiet persuasiveness of Joey's approach seemed cause for further alarm. "I said that, but since then ... I ... I see that it might also do great harm."

He tottered away from Joey and slumped tiredly into the chair by the table.

"Mr. Ewing," Joey said, following him, "yesterday I saw one of your pictures come to life."

Ewing did not look up. "I know. The accident at the corner. I was afraid you had seen it."

"Afraid!" Joey laughed. "That was the clincher." He leaned over the old man. "Listen, Mr. Ewing, the second I saw that wreck, I realized what we have in Formula #53. I want to help you make use of it—the proper use."

The old man shook his head. "I'm afraid," he whimpered.

Joey ignored the interruption. "We'll work this together. If we play it smart, the sky's the limit. We can be millionaires. Name our own prices." He laughed in his excitement. "They'll meet our demands when they see what we've got to offer."

Ewing had slowly pushed himself to his feet. He regarded Joey with mixed apprehension and disgust. "You ... you can't commercialize my discovery," he protested. "I wouldn't permit the formula to be used for personal gain."

"Not just MY gain. You and me together." Joey looked at the red-plush photo album and rubbed his hands. "I'll bet we got pictures in that album worth a hundred grand."

Abruptly, Ewing stepped past Joey and seized the album. He cradled it in his arms. "That's out of the question." He tottered toward the fireplace. "Mr.

Barrett," he pleaded, "I beg you to go now."

Anger simmered in Joey—anger and frustration. "All right," he said, forcing himself to be reasonable. "Those are your pictures." He faced Ewing at the fireplace. "But if I take some, will you give me the formula so I can develop them?"

Stubbornly, the old man shook his head.

"What IS the formula?" Joey demanded.

"I've never written it down." Ewing clutched the red-plush photo album with one hand and gestured imploringly with the other. "Mr. Barrett, every moment you stay here, you jeopardize us both. Leave now. Please. Forget we ever met ... that you ever heard of Formula #53."

"Forget!" Joey's hands clenched and unclenched in mounting desperation. "You can't start a guy on a thing like this, Ewing, and then tell him to forget it!" For a long second, they stared at each other. Ewing was breathing heavily and perspiration beaded the parchment face.



Joey tried another tactic: "Look ... if you don't want to give me the formula, at least let me have a few of the pictures in that album. Whatever I get out of them, I'll split with you." He reached out tentatively.

Ewing shrank back. "Go away. Let me alone. There's nothing in the album. I burned the pictures."

"You're lying!" The thought of the money the old fool had thrown away cut into Joey like a knife. "You wouldn't do a crazy thing like that."

"Only two left. Should have burned them."

Panic seized Joey. He grabbed at the red-plush album. "I don't believe you. Let me see."

Ewing held onto the book with the tenacity of an aged crab. "You mustn't," he croaked. "You're destroying yourself. Don't."

But the old man's stubborn and futile resistance stoked the smouldering fires of

Joey's anger. He gripped one corner of the coveted trophy with his left hand, and with his right, gave Ewing a vicious shove.

With a rattling cry, the old man staggered back and fell with a clatter into the fireplace.

The book was in Joey's hand. He didn't look at Ewing. The clasp was not locked. Feverishly, he opened the heavy cover. The truth took his breath away. Ewing hadn't lied. The pages were empty. He had burned the pictures. The crazy old fool!

But he had said there were two pictures left. Joey thumbed hastily through the empty album till he reached the first of the remaining pictures.

He cried out.

It was a self-portrait of Ewing. He lay sprawled on the floor before the fireplace, blue eyes staring up at the ceiling, blood smearing his temple and one of the massive brass andirons.

Joey dropped the album on the table and slowly turned. He closed his eyes. "Oh, God!" he whispered. "No! No!"

Like a sleep-walker, he moved to the silent figure, knelt, searched in vain for pulse or heart-beat. There was none. Jason Ewing was dead.

Joey stared at the andiron with its tell-tale stain. He pulled himself up to a half-crouch and looked wildly around the dark living-room. The camera was an accusing eye. "It was an accident," he murmured. "His heart. He was an old man."

The photo album still lay open on the table.

Ewing had saved two pictures. One of himself. The other....

There was a heavy knocking at the front door.

Joey went shakily to the album. Gripping the table's edge, he turned to the second picture:

Joey Barrett sat in a chair. His trousers were slit. His head was shaved and there were straps and electrodes.

It was the kind of picture that would sell a thousand extra copies.

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