

## **Armageddon Now**

**by H. W. Moss**

Darlene had a scowl on her face as she dropped the curtain and stepped back from the living room window.

"It's that pint-sized preacher again, honey," she said emphasizing the term of endearment the way she did when she was piqued.

The sports section of the Sunday paper fell from in front of Dennis' face as he exhaled a resigned sigh. He squirmed in his recliner chair.

"Jeeez. Again? What's with that kid? This is the fourth time in a row. Didn't he do enough bible thumping last week?"

"Don't answer the door. Maybe he doesn't know we're here."

"Darlene, dear," becoming aware of the programmed response his own tone carried but powerless to withhold the irony which precipitated their arguments, "of course he knows we're home. We just walked in from brunch. He probably hides out in the bushes until we drive up."

The doorbell chimed once more.

"All right, all right. I'll handle it."

Beginning his stairway descent, Dennis heard Darlene call out, "Don't let him in! Talk to him on the stoop but do not let him in the goddam house. You hear me, Dennis?"

Muttering a reply as he cracked the Levolors, a dead give away to anyone on the other side they were being scrutinized, Dennis recognized the small stern face staring up at him. He pulled the door open.

A child of perhaps seven wearing a white shirt and miniature black polyester suit and thin black tie stood on the porch with his arms crossed. An incongruously large black book dangled from his tiny right fist.

“Armageddon is imminent, Mithter Dierly. The final battle between good and evil is about to take place,” the familiar and occasionally lisping voice intoned.

Dennis decided to take the psychological initiative: “Jason, how nice to see you again. And how was your week?”

Unfazed, the boy launched into his spiel: “Isn't it just terrible the Iraq war going the way it is? This is an excellent example that the end is near.”

“You take that tack every time, Jason. Last time you cited Afghanistan and before that it was the Crime Bill in Congress. You always pose world events in a pessimistic way, preaching doom and destruction and how this relates to the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecies. I've heard it all before, kid.”

The child remained unaffected by this response as well.

“But the best part is, Mithter Dierly, Jesus said those who follow His Word will live forever in paradise on earth. Let me quote you from the bible. Let's turn to Matthew 6:9 and 10.”

Dennis quickly put a hand out to stay the boy. “No. Not this time, Jason,” he said sternly. A horrified expression spread across the child's face as if he had been unjustly spanked which made Dennis feel immediately uncomfortable.

The sad countenance melted Dierly. He attempted some straight talk: “Jason, what do you want?”

“To save your mortal soul.”

“But why me? Why us? Can't you choose someone else to save?”

As if by rote, the boy asked, "Do you mind if I come in for a moment and share a scripture with you?"

“No. You cannot. I'm sorry. You're going to have to leave.”

“Well, I would but,” Jason began dancing from one foot to the other like he was in a rumba line, "I have to go to the bathroom.”

As they trooped up the carpeted stairs to the second story, Darlene poked her head around the corner. She made a face Dennis hoped Jason did not see and heard her whisper, "I told you not to let the little turd into this house.”

“He has to use the toilet,” was his whispered curt reply.

But Jason seemed in no particular hurry once they reached the landing. He began a slow saunter around the ample foyer and stopped to admire a still life in its arabesque frame. Dennis and Darlene were so astounded that the boy seemed to take a personal pride in observing the decor and interior furnishings of their dwelling they at first failed to press him to go do his business.

Although the boy knew his way around the house from having been invited up on several previous occasions ("Isn't he just the cutest little thing?" Darlene gushed the first time Jason had come to their door) he did not make a direct approach to the bathroom. Instead, he traipsed past Darlene, who was still trying to make herself look small, and wandered into the parlor.

The room was light and cheery and, like the rest of the home, had been refurbished to capture all the Victorian charm its builder initially invested in it. The building had a spacious interior, nearly 3,000 square feet, with a separate entrance to what had once

been the maid's quarters. It occupied two lots and Dennis was responsible for the well-manicured outside grounds.

Smiling cherub plaster heads protruded from the cornices of the archways in many rooms and half a dozen miniature angelic faces surrounded each ceiling rosette which had once harbored a gas flame, but were converted to electricity some time early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Dennis was certain he saw the boy wink at one of the angels. While they watched with some consternation, Jason proceeded into the living room and stood beneath an alabaster figurine, an elaborate ceiling-to-wall ornament that had been one of many reasons the Dierly's made an offer on the property almost immediately after their real estate agent showed it to them.

"The bathroom's thataway," Darlene said pointing.

Still Jason delayed. He wandered into the room adjoining the parlor where Dennis' most prized possession, a regulation sized snooker table, squatted. There he stood oblivious to the Dierlys' silent pleas for him to get moving and held his breath for a moment.

Then he back-tracked through the parlor into the dining room and stood beside the massive oak dinner table as if imagining he had partaken of many elegant meals served there. He did not seem inclined to either relieve himself or start preaching although in the past he had exhorted them to begin a bible study class while standing on that very spot.

Dennis finally had to get behind the child and guide him. Ushered toward the facilities, Jason had no choice but to take them up on their hospitality.

The door closed behind him. He remained in the privacy of the bathroom for what seemed an inordinately long time.

After five minutes, Darlene repeatedly pointing at her wrist watch, Dennis went up and knocked briskly. "What did you do, kid, fall in?"

When at last they heard a flush and several long minutes later he came out, they gave Jason no chance to either talk or take his leisurely time getting to the front door. They walked in tight formation right behind him the entire way.

As soon as he was gone, Darlene got off one of her cattiest remarks. "Christ, you'd almost expect him to have tattoos on his knuckles saying LOVE and HATE."

Jason looked back several times as he marched the half block down the street where he found his parents and younger sister standing in front of a corner grocery holding copies of *The Watcher* and *Rude Awakenings* waist high in front of them. His father barely seemed to notice his arrival although his mother peacefully took his hand in hers, then pressed a pamphlet into it for him to offer passers by.

"Where have you been all this time, son?" his father eventually asked.

"Out in service, father, fulfilling my duty to the Lord."

Nothing more was said as the family stood with smiles on their faces and attempted to give away their publications.

"Forget not The Lord's promise, children," his father said some moments later as he began packing his briefcase. "The meek shall inherit. When the New Order comes, if these people haven't accepted God's word they're gonna die and they're not going to be here any more and we can come back and live in that beautiful house."

He pointed to one of the many Victorians that lined the block and asked them all to admire it. "Or that one over there. Or that one."

But Jason was silent. He knew there was really only one worth occupying when the New Order arrived and he already had it picked out.

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