

# FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 34

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a  
gun  
for  
grandfather

by F. M. Busby

Barney had a very  
sound reason for his  
proposed crime!

"I'M NOT KIDDING you at all, Phil" Barney insisted. "I have produced a workable Time Machine, and I am going to use it to go back and kill my grandfather." His pale, determined face certainly showed no sign of concealed humor. He hadn't sounded mirthful on the phone either, asking me to come over to his lab right away.

"But, Barney—what on earth for?" I protested. "In the first place..."

"Oh, don't bother telling me about the paradox. If I kill grandpa before papa is launched, I won't be born; so I can't go kill grandpa, and so forth. I don't know how that will work out."

"Then what's the point?" I asked. "Is this just another go-to-hell Barney Feldman gesture, or what?" Barney had made plenty of those: leaving school a week before graduation to enlist in the Air Force; getting court-martialed for refusing to shoot down an unarmed enemy transport plane; leaving

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When the first time-travel stories appeared, a controversy started up at once. Time-travel is impossible, claimed the anti's, because if I could go back in time and shoot my grandfather before he procreated, then I wouldn't have been born. The pro's countered with: The fact that you were born proves that you didn't; it doesn't prove time-travelling impossible, but only that you can't change the past. Then came the alternate time-track stories. But through all this, a few people would ask, "But *why* shoot grandfather?"

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a highly-paid job in government atomics for highly quixotic reasons. But this didn't fit.

"I just had a physical checkup, Phil. Seems I have about three years to live—the last two mostly under sedation."

"Barney, I..." There isn't much you can say. If I looked as shocked as I felt, it probably got across all right.

"I don't like that, Phil; I don't like it at all. The doctor gave me a lot of talk about faulty genes and linked characteristics; seems if I had brown eyes instead of blue, I wouldn't be having this particular form of dry-rot." He lit one of his midget cigars and blew smoke.

"Have you checked with other doctors yet? Some of them are a lot less willing to write off a patient, you know."

"Three independent reports," he nodded. "There isn't much leeway between them. Finally, I checked back home with our old family doctor—you remember Evans?"

"Sure," I confirmed, "but he must be ninety years old by now."

"About seventy-five, I think," Barney corrected. "Mostly retired, but he keeps his office open for visiting purposes, and he hands out a few pills now and then. I

asked him about my father and grandfather. He scowled, his blue eyes slitting under black brows. "Phil, my grandfather died slowly and painfully. My father died slowly and painfully. Now it's come up to me, and I don't like it."

"But Barney—you can't seriously plan to wipe out three generations to vent your spite. I don't doubt you can do it if you want to, but it's a horrible thought."

"OH, COME off it, Phil," he growled. "It's not spite; I'm merely going to erase a mistake and clear up a lot of suffering, all down the line. My grandmother, my mother, my wife..." he winced... "she's pregnant, you know—they'll all marry other people with sound genes." He snarled at me, "I can take it, and my forbears already have. What I can't take is the thought of my unborn child growing up to the same damn thing."

"Well, it might not be passed on, you know," I argued. "Isn't it a fifty-fifty chance? And mightn't they find a cure before your child grows up?"

"You don't know much about genetics, I guess," he answered. "To show up in three straight generations, the faulty gene has to be a dominant even though it's linked with recessive blue eyes. Not only that, it's getting worse every time. Grandpa was hurt-

ing for more than twenty years, but he could still get around. The thing took eight years to kill dad from the time it started bothering him. With me it's three years, they say. And it's striking earlier each time."

He leaned back in his chair. "I suppose, in the ordinary way, I'd just go through with it. Certainly I couldn't kill myself and the child when it's born. I couldn't do that to Wanda."

"Then how can you..."

"But this way," he overrode me, "with this Time Machine that I was going to get a Nobel prize for, it won't hurt Wanda in the least. She won't ever have met me, and she'll probably marry that bone-headed fullback I rescued her from. Can't knock off *his* grandpa, though—I'd be doing the school out of the only All-American it ever had."

"Barney, why bother to tell me all this?" I asked. He looked hurt. "What I mean is—if you're successful, you won't exist; so I won't ever have met you, and won't remember this because it won't have happened."

"Because I don't know what will happen, Phil. If this were somebody else trying such a thing, I'd want to know about it beforehand, so as to be able to check on the results if it were possible. You and I have been friends a long time, and I want you to have the data if there is any data."

He opened a desk drawer and began sorting papers. "I want you to take all this stuff home with you," he said. "I don't know how wide-spread any changes will be. This lab of mine is a building I had constructed for my own use; it may or may not still be here." He started to hand me a piece of paper, then put it back.

"NO, USE YOUR own notebook." I pulled out an address pad. "Now write in there for you to come to this address—no, make it just the block—1400 block on West Fremont Street—to see if there is a brick building at 1425. Write down that you're to look for a man named Bernard Feldman at that address, if it exists. Got it?" I nodded. "That may be general and detached enough to survive the collapse of causation leading to it, being as you wrote it yourself in your own notebook. Put tomorrow's date on it—yes, I'm going tonight—and staple it on your desk calendar when you get back to your office. Then tomorrow, well, see what happens—if you can."

"Sure, Barney," I agreed, uncomfortably. How do you say goodbye to a man who is going to pull himself out by the roots? Do you wish him good luck or just stand silent a moment with your hat held over your heart, as when the

flag passes? And blow Taps, maybe?

I thought of a question to stall the evil moment. "Barney, how come you're only going back to your grandfather? I mean..."

"Good question Phil. Several answers. One is, I don't know that the bad genes existed before his time. His father was killed in the Civil War and *his* father lived to be ninety-three—obviously the gene pattern was pretty good in his generation."

"How about their wives? Could the bad gene have come in that way?"

"It might; I just don't have enough information. I gathered that it can be passed through either the male or female line, but only shows up in the males—but this is pretty theoretical. None of the medics knew for sure."

"You said there were several reasons for picking on your grandfather. What else?"

He grinned, the first sign of honest amusement since I'd arrived. "Mainly on account of because that's about as far back as the Machine will take me," he chuckled. "The past is pretty darn solid, Phil. It's a little like a compost pile—fairly soft near the surface, but hard packed further down, with all that Time piled on top of it. Don't work too close with that analogy, though—it's rough enough to draw blood if it slips in your hand."

"You're beginning to sound more like Barney, Barney," I commented, which was a mistake; he went serious again.

"Yes, I always shape up when I have work to do. You'll have to be running along, because I have work to do right now, Phil, if I'm going to be ready to step off the way I've planned it."

"What difference does it make when you get into your gadget?" I queried.

"**Q**UITE A bit," he answered. "I've done a certain amount of experimenting—not enough to present a paper to the Physical Society but enough to find out that there are a lot of factors involved in setting up to get to a specific time. For a while, I thought I was coming up with a scientific basis for some form of astrology, but that didn't pan out. Luckily. The PS would have excommunicated me."

"What will they do with you now, Barney?" I asked quietly. His gaze flickered.

"Damn you, Phil; I might have known you'd try to pull a few stops. Sure, I can melt out of my personal life with a bearable amount of struggle, because that's going to be a net plus in human happiness. But I've glossed over, in my own mind, that I'm losing the chance to present Time Travel to the Society as an accomplished fact."

His knuckles were white on

the arms of his chair. "Phil, I would go through my personal torture gladly to be able to hand them that. But I will not put my kid through it." He lit another midget cigar, and his hands were shaking. "OK, you had to try. Now so-long, Phil. Beat it back to your knickknack shop and thanks for listening." I peddle turbine-generators to power companies; to Barney that's selling knick-knacks.

"OK, Barney." We shook hands. "I'll be by here tomorrow, unless the notes and memory both evaporate." A golf ball was in my throat. "And good luck, boy, good luck whatever happens." Barney just grunted something, and I was halfway down the block before it struck me that I'd never know what the last thing was that Barney Feldman would every say to me.

I wasn't much good for business the rest of the day, or at home either. Dorene became quite irritated by the way I'd stare at her and then have no idea of what she'd been saying. When I wasn't bending a fixed gaze on her, it was at one of the kids, Laura or Timmy.

Finally Dorene waved her hand back and forth in front of my face. "Come out of it, Phil," she urged. "What's eating on you tonight, anyway?"

I couldn't tell her; it wouldn't have made sense and would have made her feel badly. The whole thing was too

esoteric to throw at her all at once; and without the background I couldn't explain why I was compulsively absorbing the sights and sounds of my wife and children as if I'd never see them again.

I made a quiet resolution to try my best never again to be "too busy" for them, and said, "It's nothing to worry you about, honey. An unfortunate deal happened to a fellow I know. I think it's going to be all right, but it was a little bit of a shock to me, and I've been mulling it over." We went on to discuss something else. It was a safe bet that I would never have to explain Barney's problem, not if his plans worked out.

We went to bed early, shortly after the kids were down for the night, but I didn't sleep too well. I'd lie awake, doze, dream weirdly, get up for a cigaret (which is not a usual nightly practice with me), and lie awake some more. In the morning, a hang-over would have been an improvement.

**B**REAKFAST was a mess. The toaster burned out its element, and blew a fuse. We were out of spare fuses and I will not strap across them, having written too many safety pamphlets. The coffeelator is on the same outlet so the coffee was rare; we didn't think of this until Dorene poured it. The station wagon had a flat; the children and I

left home in a cab to be late to school and office.

The Crow River turbine had seized a bearing on its test run. It took me all morning to expedite a repair crew, and ensure rapid shipment of replacement parts. That was due to the obstructionist tactics of our warehouse superintendent, a man dedicated to keeping his stock in the warehouse superintendent, a man dedicated where it won't get worn-out and weather-beaten. I'd been promising myself a try at having him transferred for a long time; it took just one phone call to the head office but there was quite a wait until the right man was out of conference. I celebrated by taking my secretary to lunch, with Martinis. It was 1:30 when we returned, a late start on the day's normal business.

I took a look at my desk calendar to see what was current. That was the first time all day that I'd had time to think of Barney Feldman.

*I remembered Barney Feldman!* I was out the door without a word to anyone, walking much too fast for my legs and wind.

The building was there at 1425 West Fremont and it had Barney's sign on it. I didn't bother to knock, but went through the front of the building back to Barney's sanctum. There, I knocked.

"Come in, come in."

The blinds were closed.

With only a desk lamp on, the room was dim. Barney, I saw in the light from the hall before I closed the door, was slouched back in his chair, eyes closed, with a half-filled glass in his hand matching the half-emptied bottle on the desk.

"Barney!"

"THE SAME," he drawled. He sat up and looked at me. "No, not the same, Phil. Not exactly." He wasn't drunk, just a little high.

"What happened, Barney?" I gasped. "Did you change your mind?"

"Did I change my..." He broke off, laughing. Laughing until he choked a little and coughed it out. "Yes, you might say I changed my mind. Yes, you might." He started to laugh again and I got sore.

"Damn it, Feldman!" I blurted. "I don't know what you think is so funny. I've been sweating you out ever since you told me that sob story. Is that what's so funny? Was this a rib? If it was, I think I'll just..." I had him by the shirt-front and was taking aim when he recovered his voice.

"No, Phil," he gulped, "no rib. Wait a minute now, I'll tell you. It's a little hazy—yesterday, I mean—*your* yesterday."

"My yesterday?" It still came up blank.

"Yes, your old yesterday; it's getting kind of hazy now

alongside my new one. The change seems to propagate slowly; I don't have it figured out at all."

"What *happened*?" I yelled. "Did you go back and kill your grandfather?"

"I went back and shook his hand," Barney said, seriously. I just stared.

"Last night I was looking through a lot of old papers," Barney continued. "It seemed to me that I ought to put things in order a little. Don't ask me why; it seemed the thing to do. Among other things, I found grandpa's diary."

He held up the bottle and an empty glass; I nodded and he poured me one. A taste of it helped.

"When my grandfather was thirty years old, he came down out of the logging country with a stake. He came down to farming territory, right around where we grew up—it's city now—to buy himself a farm and find himself a wife. He bought the farm, fixed up the house, and got engaged to a little French-Canadian girl with eyes as dark as his own."

"But two brown-eyed people..." I began.

"They were going to be married in June," Barney went on firmly. "But one day, a young stranger walked up to my grandfather and put a bullet in him." He waved me to silence. "Grandpa was a sick man for a long time, and

it didn't look as if he would ever recover. His bride-to-be's father moved away and took the girl along with the rest of the family. It's a wonder the man ever did get well in what passed for a hospital then, but he had devoted nursing from a comely blue-eyed blonde."

"A blue-eyed blonde," I repeated.

"SHE NEEDED a husband pretty badly, Phil. She was supporting an invalid father, who was dying in a slow and painful fashion. She married my grandfather and bore him a blue-eyed son who was my father." He smiled broadly at my blank stare. "I assure you, I won't wind this up into: I'm my own grandpa."

"My grandfather worked hard on his farm to support his wife and son. He never did recover completely from that bullet wound; it pained him the rest of his life. At the age of fifty-one it killed him."

"I read most of that in my grandfather's diary, Phil," he said. "I guess it's been around here for years but I'd never looked into it before. The rest was in family letters."

"So you went back and..."

"Phil. I read about somebody shooting my grandfather, somebody who appeared, fired a gun, and disappeared before he could be found. That was me, that I read about. Another me."

"But why?"



He shrugged. "Maybe a variation of this same misunderstanding," he hazarded.

"I got into the Machine and went back to the date when my grandfather was shot. I went up to that farm and saw him. Passing by in a neighborly way, I introduced myself and shook his hand. We both thought it was quite a coincidence that we were both named Feldman, of course. Then I went back to the Machine and came home.

"Things started to shake and whirl when I got back into the Machine. I passed out somewhere along the line, and woke up here about two hours ago. I broke out this bottle and have been quietly celebrating and waiting for you to show up. I'll be a little drunk,

getting home, but I guess I can square it with Wanda. Yes, I think I can."

He shook the bottle. "There isn't much left of this, Phil. Why don't we have one more to finish it, and then I'll be going home."

I nodded. He poured and we lifted our glasses. "Here's to grandpa," he toasted, "and to my new brunette grandma."

"Well, that's that." Barney rose and snapped on the overhead lights. He took his coat from the hallrack, put it on, and stuffed some papers into the side pockets. Turning to me, he said, "Let's go, Phil."

There wasn't the sign of a shadow in his clear brown eyes.

