

The book cover features a stylized illustration of a child with dark, curly hair, wearing a dark jacket and holding a book. The child is positioned in the lower center, looking upwards. The background is a complex, abstract composition of overlapping geometric shapes in shades of orange, teal, and black, set against a muted olive-green background. A thick black diagonal line runs from the top right corner towards the center. The overall style is reminiscent of mid-century modern graphic design.

RANDALL
GARRETT

UNWISE
CHILD

UNWISE CHILD

by Randall Garrett

With sincere appreciation,
this book is dedicated
to
TIM and NATALIE
who waited ...
and waited ...
and waited ...
and waited for it.

1

The kids who tried to jump Mike the Angel were bright enough in a lot of ways, but they made a bad mistake when they tangled with Mike the Angel.

They'd done their preliminary work well enough. They had cased the job thoroughly, and they had built the equipment to take care of it. Their mistake was not in their planning; it was in not taking Mike the Angel into account.

There is a section of New York's Manhattan Island, down on the lower West Side, that has been known, for over a century, as "Radio Row." All through this section are stores, large and small, where every kind of electronic and sub-electronic device can be bought, ordered, or designed to order. There is even an old antique shop, known as Ye Quainte Olde Elecktronicks Shoppe, where you can buy such oddities as vacuum-tube FM radios and twenty-four-inch cathode-ray television sets. And, if you want them, transmitters to match, so you can watch the antiques work.

Mike the Angel had an uptown office in the heart of the business district, near West 112th Street—a very posh suite of rooms on the fiftieth floor of the half-mile-high Timmins Building, overlooking the two-hundred-year-old Gothic edifice of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The glowing sign on the door of the suite said, very simply:

**M. R. GABRIEL
POWER DESIGN**

But, once or twice a week, Mike the Angel liked to take off and prowl around Radio Row, just shopping around. Usually, he didn't work too late, but, on this particular afternoon, he'd been in his office until after six o'clock, working on some papers for the Interstellar Commission. So, by the time he got down to Radio Row, the only shop left open was Harry MacDougal's.

That didn't matter much to Mike the Angel, since Harry's was the place he had intended to go, anyway. Harry MacDougal's establishment was hardly more than a hole in the wall—a narrow, long hallway between two larger

stores. Although not a specialist, like the proprietor of Ye Quainte Olde Elecktronicks Shoppe, Harry did carry equipment of every vintage and every make. If you wanted something that hadn't been manufactured in decades, and perhaps never made in quantity, Harry's was the place to go. The walls were lined with bins, all unlabeled, filled helter-skelter with every imaginable kind of gadget, most of which would have been hard to recognize unless you were both an expert and a historian.

Old Harry didn't need labels or a system. He was a small, lean, bony, sharp-nosed Scot who had fled Scotland during the Panic of '37, landed in New York, and stopped. He solemnly declared that he had never been west of the Hudson River nor north of 181st Street in the more than fifty years he had been in the country. He had a mind like that of a robot filing cabinet. Ask him for a particular piece of equipment, and he'd squint one eye closed, stare at the end of his nose with the other, and say:

“An M-1993 thermodyne hexode, eh? Ah. Um. Aye, I got one. Picked it up a couple years back. Put it— Let ma see, now....”

And he'd go to his wall ladder, push it along that narrow hallway, moving boxes aside as he went, and stop somewhere along the wall. Then he'd scramble up the ladder, pull out a bin, fumble around in it, and come out with the article in question. He'd blow the dust off it, polish it with a rag, scramble down the ladder, and say: “Here 'tis. Thought I had one. Let's go back in the back and give her a test.”

On the other hand, if he didn't have what you wanted, he'd shake his head just a trifle, then squint up at you and say: “What d'ye want it for?” And if you could tell him what you planned to do with the piece you wanted, nine times out of ten he could come up with something else that would do the job as well or better.

In either case, he always insisted that the piece be tested. He refused either to buy or sell something that didn't work. So you'd follow him down that long hallway to the lab in the rear, where all the testing equipment was. The lab, too, was cluttered, but in a different way. Out front, the stuff was dead; back here, there was power coursing through the ionic veins and metallic nerves of the half-living machines. Things were labeled in neat, accurate script—not for Old Harry's benefit, but for the edification of his customers, so they

wouldn't put their fingers in the wrong places. He never had to worry about whether his customers knew enough to fend for themselves; a few minutes spent in talking was enough to tell Harry whether a man knew enough about the science and art of electronics and sub-electronics to be trusted in the lab. If you didn't measure up, you didn't get invited to the lab, even to watch a test.

But he had very few people like that; nobody came into Harry MacDougal's place unless he was pretty sure of what he wanted and how he wanted to use it.

On the other hand, there were very few men whom Harry would allow into the lab unescorted. Mike the Angel was one of them.

Meet Mike the Angel. Full name: Michael Raphael Gabriel. (His mother had tagged that on him at the time of his baptism, which had made his father wince in anticipated compassion, but there had been nothing for him to say—not in the middle of the ceremony.)

Naturally, he had been tagged "Mike the Angel." Six feet seven. Two hundred sixty pounds. Thirty-four years of age. Hair: golden yellow. Eyes: deep blue. Cash value of holdings: well into eight figures. Credit: almost unlimited. Marital status: highly eligible, if the right woman could tackle him.

Mike the Angel pushed open the door to Harry MacDougal's shop and took off his hat to brush the raindrops from it. Farther uptown, the streets were covered with clear plastic roofing, but that kind of comfort stopped at Fifty-third Street.

There was no one in sight in the long, narrow store, so Mike the Angel looked up at the ceiling, where he knew the eye was hidden.

"Harry?" he said.

"I see you, lad," said a voice from the air. "You got here just in time. I'm closin' up. Lock the door, would ye?"

"Sure, Harry." Mike turned around, pressed the locking switch, and heard it snap satisfactorily.

"Okay, Mike," said Harry MacDougal's voice. "Come on back. I hope ye

brought that bottle of scotch I asked for.”

Mike the Angel made his way back between the towering tiers of bins as he answered. “Sure did, Harry. When did I ever forget you?”

And, as he moved toward the rear of the store, Mike the Angel casually reached into his coat pocket and triggered the switch of a small but fantastically powerful mechanism that he always carried when he walked the streets of New York at night.

He was headed straight into trouble, and he knew it. And he hoped he was ready for it.

2

Mike the Angel kept his hand in his pocket, his thumb on a little plate that was set in the side of the small mechanism that was concealed therein. As he neared the door, the little plate began to vibrate, making a buzz which could only be felt, not heard. Mike sighed to himself. Vibroblades were all the rage this season.

He pushed open the rear door rapidly and stepped inside. It was just what he'd expected. His eyes saw and his brain recorded the whole scene in the fraction of a second before he moved. In that fraction of a second, he took in the situation, appraised it, planned his strategy, and launched into his plan of action.

Harry MacDougal was sitting at his workbench, near the controls of the eye that watched the shop when he was in the lab. He was hunched over a little, his small, bright eyes peering steadily at Mike the Angel from beneath shaggy, silvered brows. There was no pleading in those eyes—only confidence.

Next to Old Harry was a kid—sixteen, maybe seventeen. He had the JD stamp on his face: a look of cold, hard arrogance that barely concealed the uncertainty and fear beneath. One hand was at Harry's back, and Mike knew that the kid was holding a vibroblade at the old man's spine.

At the same time, the buzzing against his thumb told Mike the Angel something else. There was a vibroblade much nearer his body than the one in the kid's hand.

That meant that there was another young punk behind him.

All this took Mike the Angel about one quarter of a second to assimilate. Then he jumped.

Had the intruders been adults, Mike would have handled the entire situation

in a completely different way. Adults, unless they are mentally or emotionally retarded, do not usually react or behave like children. Adolescents can, do, and *must*—for the very simple reason that they have not yet had time to learn to react as adults.

Had the intruders been adults, and had Mike the Angel behaved the way he did, he might conceivably have died that night. As it was, the kids never had a chance.

Mike didn't even bother to acknowledge the existence of the punk behind him. He leaped, instead, straight for the kid in the dead-black suede zipsuit who was holding the vibroblade against Harry MacDougal's spine. And the kid reacted exactly as Mike the Angel had hoped, prayed, and predicted he would.

The kid defended himself.

An adult, in a situation where he has one known enemy at his mercy and is being attacked by a second, will quickly put the first out of the way in order to leave himself free to deal with the second. There is no sense in leaving your flank wide open just to oppose a frontal attack.

If the kid had been an adult, Harry MacDougal would have died there and then. An adult would simply have slashed his vibroblade through the old man's spine and brought it to bear on Mike the Angel.

But not the kid. He jumped back, eyes widening, to face his oncoming opponent in an open space. He was no coward, that kid, and he knew how to handle a vibroblade. In his own unwise, suicidal way, he was perfectly capable of proving himself. He held out the point of that shimmering metal shaft, ready to parry any offensive thrust that Mike the Angel might make.

If Mike had had a vibroblade himself, and if there hadn't been another punk at his back, Mike might have taken care of the kid that way. As it was, he had no choice but to use another way.

He threw himself full on the point of the scintillating vibroblade.

A vibroblade is a nasty weapon. Originally designed as a surgeon's tool, its special steel blade moves in and out of the heavy hilt at speeds from two hundred to two thousand vibrations per second, depending on the size and the use to which it is to be put. Make it eight inches long, add serrated, diamond-

pointed teeth, and you have the man-killing vibroblade. Its danger is in its power; that shivering blade can cut through flesh, cartilage, and bone with almost no effort. It's a knife with power steering.

But that kind of power can be a weakness as well as a strength.

The little gadget that Mike the Angel carried did more than just detect the nearby operation of a vibroblade. It was also a defense. The gadget focused a high-density magnetic field on any vibroblade that came anywhere within six inches of Mike's body.

In that field, the steel blade simply couldn't move. It was as though it had been caught in a vise. The blade no longer vibrated; it had become nothing more than an overly fancy bread knife.

The trouble was that the power unit in the heavy hilt simply wouldn't accept the fact that the blade was immovable. That power unit was in there to move something, and by heaven, *something* had to move.

The hilt jerked and bucked in the kid's hand, taking skin with it. Then it began to smoke and burn under the overload. The plastic shell cracked and hot copper and silver splattered out of it. The kid screamed as the molten metal burned his hand.

Mike the Angel put a hand against the kid's chest and shoved. As the boy toppled backward, Mike turned to face the other boy.

Only it wasn't a boy.

She was wearing gold lip paint and had sprayed her hair blue, but she knew how to handle a vibroblade at least as well as her boy friend had. Just as Mike the Angel turned, she lunged forward, aiming for the small of his back.

And she, too, screamed as she lost her blade in a flash of heat.

Then she grabbed for something in her pocket. Regretfully, Mike the Angel brought the edge of his hand down against the side of her neck in a paralyzing, but not deadly, rabbit punch. She dropped, senseless, and a small gun spilled out of the waist pocket of her zipsuit and skittered across the floor. Mike paused only long enough to make sure she was out, then he turned back to his first opponent.

As he had anticipated, Harry MacDougal had taken charge. The kid was

sprawled flat on the floor, and Old Harry was holding a shock gun in his hand.

Mike the Angel took a deep breath.

“Yer trousers are on fire,” said Harry.

Mike yelped as he felt the heat, and he began slapping at the smoldering spots where the molten metal from the vibroblades had hit his clothing. He wasn’t afire; modern clothing doesn’t flame up—but it can get pretty hot when you splash liquid copper on it.

“Damn!” said Mike the Angel. “New suit, too.”

“You’re a fast thinker, laddie,” said Old Harry.

“You don’t need to flatter me, Harry,” said Mike the Angel. “When an old teetotaler like you asks a man if he’s brought some scotch, the man’s a fool if he doesn’t know there’s trouble afoot.” He gave his leg a final slap and said: “What happened? Are there any more of them?”

“Don’t know. Might be.” The old man waved at his control panel. “My instruments are workin’ again!” He gestured at the floor. “I’m nae sure how they did it, but somehow they managed to blank out ma instruments just long enough to get inside. Their mistake was in not lockin’ the front door.”

Mike the Angel was busy searching the two unconscious kids. He looked up. “Neither of them is carrying any equipment in their clothing—at least, not anything that’s self-powered. If they’ve got pickup circuits built into the cloth, there must be more of them outside.”

“Aye. Likely. We’ll see.”

Suddenly, there was a soft *ping! ping! ping!* from an instrument on the bench.

Harry glanced quickly at the receiving screen that was connected with the multitude of eyes that were hidden around the area of his shop. Then a smile came over his small brown face.

“Cops,” he said. “Time they got here.”