

# **Turpentine 6**

**by**

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## Of That Which Is Written

*Tourists, tourists everywhere  
Yet not a thought between them.  
Ice-cream cones and hotdog buns.  
What must the Lord be thinking?*

Today I'm feeling decidedly cynical, uncharitable even. A good day, methinks, to propel yet another of Satan's ill-begotten sons down to endure his Father's wrath...

And yes, here they come again, right on cue. Those same irritating words of Monsignor Augustus W. Bellingmire – history don, zealot, careers officer diabolique – popping up to wreak havoc on my concentration.

'Damon Nazareth,' they accuse, my name all but shredded as it whistles past his jagged array of splintered teeth, 'you trouble me, sir; you trouble me greatly. Secretive, taciturn, blatantly setting yourself apart from the group. Heed me well now, heed me well. Society has no call for one such as you. Mend your ways, embrace your fellow man... Or face a life of misery, failure and, most terrible of all, one without God.'

Disconcerting, yes, even though I've heard them a thousand times before. Inconvenient undoubtedly – especially when peering down the telescopic sights of an automatic rifle. But, then again, it's no greater a trial than the countless others a professional assassin must overcome to warrant the title, I suppose.

Christ, what a load of pompous claptrap! Growling Father A, a strict Catholic upbringing and too many nights watching Sister Agatha play with herself have definitely scarred me more than I thought. Time, I think, to focus in on the business at hand...

Target plus escort obligingly moving into position; Mademoiselle de Liberté the backdrop. Weather excellent. What bright and crisp weather we have gracing the Big Apple this late-autumn day. The azure-blue sky affords the Manhattan skyline striking definition, giving the impression of a giant holographic circuit board. Office blocks as capacitors, houses and apartments as solder spots... But I digress. On a more practical note, the rather strong breeze that threatened to aggravate the relative calm of the Bay waters during my outward journey has courteously scuttled out to sea. So, all in all, a remarkable set of conditions for an assignment.

A good omen? Yes, why not. Some may say – and with just cause – that today's mission merits a certain degree of divine backing...

Ah, spoke too soon! A battalion of Oriental visitors is waddling on board. Should I place a modest wager? No, perhaps not. The odds are definitely *not* in my favour. Could be as high as 20-to-1 that the entire hoard will head straight for the upper deck and set-up the world's largest pool of latex-necked, camera-clicking zombies ever assembled... Right next to me!

A cigar for the gent by the rail!

Now then, what have we here?

Ah good, all Japanese. I've not been nudged into the quagmire quite yet, then.

*If you have to kill someone in the presence of others then escape to collect your pay cheque, you can't do better than have a Japanese audience.*

That's a pearl of wisdom from my dear departed mentor, James Fabian McTierney: teacher, marksmen second-to-none, ladies-of-the-night aficionado, and the best friend a man could ever wish for.

Why, you ask.

It's simple, really. You could trust the old reprobate with your life.

You're not impressed? Sounds clichéd?

Think carefully then. In the world of ordinary folk, one apple plus one gives two apples, but in the shadow-lands of the assassin, one assassin plus one equals... One assassin. There's only ever the singular.

But what of the sage's words?

Hmm, on reflection no explanation is necessary. All you have to do is wait a short while and all will be revealed.

Now there's an intriguing thought! I wonder if the Monsignor would find this an interesting topic? Perhaps if I call him, my voice will penetrate deep enough into the astral plane to attract his attention. I'll give it a try.

'Bellingmire!'

The volume of my cry surprises even me and certainly mutes the half-dozen Japanese schoolgirls off to my right.

No, I don't think he's heard me. Again then!

'Bellingmire, it's me, your godless failure. Come see what you've created.'

'A Brit, eh!'

A gravel-filled voice from behind galvanises my attention, and every muscle, every nerve in my body jumps to full alert, poised to strike as I casually turn to face the speaker. And there, wedged between two seriously distressed Japanese grannies and a wannabe-sumo type, stands a decidedly scruffy individual: diminutive to say the least. Interestingly he elects not to follow up on his initial question or, as some Americans seem compelled to do, introduce himself. '*Hi, I'm Harvey from West Virginia. You from London, know Prince Charles?*' No, not this guy... Which leaves me no choice. Alert-status-three notches up a point.

The trouble is there's nothing about him – absolutely nothing – to indicate he's a threat. Barely five feet tall, rotund, essentially bald with a congenial smile, he looks more like a benevolent Uncle Guiseppe than any spawn of the Jackal. His large brown eyes are fixed on me as if he's waiting for a response, and I suddenly realise why the two old ladies are so uncomfortable. It's the smell! A nauseating mix of stale perspiration battling a cheap and completely inadequate scented deodorant. A puzzle, but then I have a penchant for the unusual...

The ferry is still loading, so I have time. Yes I'll accept the challenge and roll the dice.

'Quite right,' I reply. 'Coincidentally from York.'

'Thought so,' he nods, breaking off his stare and, much to the grannies' relief, edging closer to the rails. 'Not the York part o' course. Just that you're from across the pond... Lost yer friend?' Then in response to my blank expression, 'Bellingmire.'

I force a smile. 'Sort of.'

'Ya know I really like a cultured English accent,' he continues, turning to survey the sea of jet-black heads milling around us. 'Not always so keen on the people. But hey, nobody's perfect.'

We're still well and truly in no-man's-land, with introductions on hold, perhaps bypassed altogether, in favour of statements of likes, dislikes and general philosophy.

'Any special reason?' I prompt, trying to fathom out the little man's objective.

'Mainly the tone,' he volunteers thoughtfully. 'Swearing... Now there's the ace in the pack.' Suddenly he stands to attention. 'Bloody hell, how ruddy awful. Bugger orf, you ba-a-stard.' He laughs. 'Big improvement on "shit", "fuckin' crap", "piss off ya mother-fuckin' cock-sucker".'

Needless to say, the hapless grannies are caught in a tsunami of distress.

I make to comment, but his sickly odour smacks me full in the face. 'Mr Congeniality', however, realising he has offended the sensitivities of the ladies, bows to them and

apologises. All very proper, all very gentlemanly... And surprising, to say the least, since his declaration is delivered in seemingly flawless Japanese. Further exchanges in that most complex of languages follow, concluding in a round of repetitive bowing that leaves me dizzy. A final remark and he directs the now smiling ladies off into the body of the crowd, reason and destination unknown.

‘Very impressive,’ I remark. ‘You’ve lived in Japan, then?’

The little man shakes his head slowly then again fixes me with a stare.

‘No, never been there. Let’s just say I’ve had plenty of time for study.’

At last a clue! An ex-convict, a serviceman, or perhaps he’s in my line of work after all. The handful of muscles that had begun to relax instantly recoil. This distraction, entertaining though it is, has gone far enough. With the ferry about to depart, it’s time to resolve this issue and move on...

Before I can act, it’s as if the little man has read my thoughts.

‘Guess I’ll be on my way,’ he says almost in a whisper. ‘Good to meet ya, Englishman. Ya watch yer back now and, as we Yanks say, “don’t go takin’ no wooden nickels”. Be seen’ ya. And don’t fret none. That buddy o’ yers – Bellingmire? Well, I think he’ll be along real soon. Au revoir!’

‘Au revoir!’ I repeat under my breath. ‘Not on this side of the veil, though.’

Nevertheless I nod and watch as the multitude envelopes him like quicksand swamping an overstuffed sack of grain.

It takes me ten seconds to decide it must be the local asylum’s annual excursion, dismiss the episode and prepare to fulfil my contract of the day... Then another five to revise my decision.

‘Rule number two,’ McTierney’s thick Scottish accent demands my attention. ‘Never ever forget, laddie. *Nothing happens by chance, nothing without a reason. If it seems odd, duck; if it feels odd, shoot.*’

A little theatrical, I know, but then this and the other 16 McT rules for the professional assassin have served me well over the years. So, after a short internal debate I elect to maintain the ‘lunatic’ theory but allow a 20 per cent margin for the unexpected, the unpredictable and the unknown.

This afternoon’s task is actually a welcome relief. My two previous assignments involved the elimination of women: even in these days of equal opportunity still something of a rarity. It’s not that I suffer any qualms about dealing with the fairer sex; it’s the reason given for the terminations. Different countries, different cultures, but basically the same one. Women taking key positions would rapidly discover what bad boys their co-workers had been and would want to expose them.

A developing market? It’s sad really. I prefer the good old days when Mafia bosses, corrupt politicians and mad dictators represented the lion’s share of my work. At this rate I’ll be knocking off neighbours for letting their pets foul the lawn.

Sheik Maktoum bin Rashid al-Sharqi, fortunately, is a creature on a par with cockroach excrement but without the charm. This bundle-of-fun likes nothing more than garrotting family members, torturing children and mutilating young girls.

The reason, I hear you ask. Again, simple enough. It’s an easy way to goad his flaccid pecker into some semblance of life.

Why can’t people be satisfied with magazines and videos? It’s not like the Sixties when you actually needed ‘polished brass tackle’ to buy such things over-the-counter. Mail order, the Internet: it’s all so easy now. But, then, perhaps therein lies the problem. Easy equates with boring. What a mess we’re all in!

Of course Sheik Sharqi's appointment with the underworld wasn't arranged because he's a cruel, sadistic psychopath. No, he's been sentenced instead for playing the Arabs off against the Israelis while trying to make fools of the Americans – all in his capacity as self-styled peacemaker. Silly boy! What *was* he thinking? The answer to which, fairly shortly, will be 'not enough'.

Which is all well and good, but then I'd almost forgotten – the two little girls. His file indicated he'd be visiting the Statue of Liberty alone. Bodyguards there'd be aplenty – that went without saying – and probably the odd CIA agent lurking on the side-lines for the sake of courtesy/international protocol – but no kiddies. Doubtless the cunning bastard regards them as the ultimate protection. Let's face it, who with half a conscience would take pot shots when he's holding them so close?

A cacophony of men shouting, gates clanging and chains rattling effectively triggers my inner countdown mechanism. Time to weigh anchor and for the show to begin! Back, then, to the advantages of my crush of Japanese tourists and another of McT's priceless gems.

Rule number eight: *often the least obvious way to affect a clean hit and depart at leisure is to put on a public performance.*

As for the Japanese, they make a simply splendid audience: cooperative, obedient, unquestioning and, most important of all, appreciative.

Now, which leader and holder of the guiding flag have I the greatest chance of impressing with my thespian talents?

Ah yes, the lady in black. Attractive, probably no more than 25, or 35 without make-up, I've already caught her glancing in my direction. Ideal!

Much to her visible embarrassment, I approach, introduce myself and précis my request.

Success! She speaks excellent English and, brimming with excitement, is only too willing to assist. So, with eager translator at hand, I turn to address my unsuspecting audience.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' I begin expansively, 'good afternoon and welcome to Hollywood.'

I pause, she promptly translates, and suddenly I have the attention of all those bewildered and spellbound faces.

It then takes a little time to explain the plot.

I'm a movie actor/director and they have been drafted in as extras. Hidden cameras and crew are waiting to capture the action: a daring assassination, by me, of an evil Arab dignitary visiting the S of L...

As the ferry pulls away, ready to circle the rock before heading on to Ellis Island, 'my team' receive their final instructions and are primed, ready to go. Lights, camera, action...

With the crowd directed to return to a state of casual chatter, I wait for the target to come into range. And yes, there he is exactly as promised. Alone for the moment, but... Oh dear, what a surprise. He's spotted the boat and, calling to the girls, lifts them up to wave as it passes by.

'Go'/'no go', that's the question. 'Go', of course, the answer.

I check the extras. Not too bad. Still tightly packed, effectively blocking the way to the uninvited. A few are surreptitiously looking around, trying to locate the hidden cameras, but the majority seem ready to respond to my signal. I give it.

In my best Arnold Schwarzenegger impersonation I suddenly turn, thrust aside my trusty, Driza-Bone raincoat and withdraw a custom-made rifle. The multitude gasp, shrink back and, with the aid of Ms Black's remarkably skilful off-camera gesticulations, create the space I need. Enter Mr Sumo. Given the 'chance of a lifetime' to play my terrifying accomplice, he lumbers my way brandishing an empty '38.

Satisfied that all is in place, I turn to set up the shot. Sumo rattles off his lines in suitably gruff Japanese while those ‘under threat’ quake – or at least so they’ve been instructed. I cannot see, I cannot hear. This is my moment. All distractions have been expelled. Ready. Just a few more seconds...

Then it happens – a unique experience. My concentration wavers as two thoughts cloud my vision; petrify the finger that gently caresses the trigger.

Bellingmire. What did the little man mean, ‘He’ll be along real soon’? He doesn’t know the old codger’s been dead for nigh on 20 years. But then he seemed so certain.

I mentally shake my head to dislodge the intruding thought, but the second refuses to budge.

The bullet. My instructions said to use a charged dumdum and aim for the head. *Very* messy. The explosion on impact would pulverise the skull not to mention the neck and shoulders. The image of two screaming girls clawing liquefied brains from their faces barely forms in my mind when my hands begin involuntary acrobatics with the weapon. Clang! The dumdum falls from the breach. Click! A substitute of my own design replaces it. Bang! Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid al-Sharqi crumples to his knees, setting his charges gently to the ground.

‘Cut!’

My cry echoes through the crowd. A brief hesitation, a signal from Ms Black and the troupe of extras burst into applause. Then the stampede. Fragmented groups jostle for a position at the rail, everyone trying to catch a glimpse of the victim’s death scene. Cameras click, binoculars glint. Meanwhile a man clutching two empty firearms beneath an ankle-length raincoat glides through their midst and disappears.

As toilet facilities go, these below decks are more than adequate for the task at hand. This, the escape, I find the most tedious part of the job. On this occasion, however, the task is a little more challenging. After all, I’m essentially captive aboard ship and, since I’m not inclined to take a swim, the chances of being apprehended during the next 20 minutes or so are unappealingly high. Nevertheless you’ve got to take the rough with the smooth. So, as always, let’s follow the SOP, starting with the obligatory disguise. Since we’re feeling distinctly queer today, that seems as good a choice as any. Tight leather pants, black T-shirt, a rather nicely-tailored silk jacket then a little make-up, a little mousse, and voila! Marvellous what you can hide inside these Aussie coats if you have a mind to. We just need to pack away the hardware, don the old shades, ditto iPod, and we’re ready to assess the lay of the land...

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As I re-emerged on deck Mr Jagger and Co had just begun blasting out *Satisfaction*, which, if nothing else, seemed appropriate. I was gratified... No, actually relieved that I’d been able to complete my assignment without subjecting the children to a real horror show, even though I’d sustain a penalty apropos the dumdum. On the other hand, since Sharqi had done away with their mother a couple of years earlier I was responsible for making them orphans. Not really something to be proud of; but then again if recent stories of abuse have any basis in fact perhaps I’d done them a favour. Anyway they’d definitely take pride of place on my special list for future care and attention. Not much, granted, but something.

True to form, the fevered excitement instilled into the Japanese tourist community had already blown away in the wind. Everything was as I’d hoped, with people meandering this way and that, apparently unaware of my heinous deed. In fact the situation was looking remarkably stable and secure, causing the adage ‘calm before the storm’ to nag at me. Probably I was still a touch knocked off-course by my earlier uncharacteristic mental

aberration. Yes, more than likely. Two tell-tale signs that my nerves weren't emulating steel a hundred per cent supported the supposition. One: I'd lapsed into adopting the royal 'we' while cogitating over my disguise, and two: I was humming along with Mr Jagger.

I completed my tour of the decks without incident, and by the time I reached the stern I'd decided there was a fair chance I'd have no need of elaborate antics to disembark unhampered.

But wrong again! A group of Japanese suddenly gravitated to the side rail and began pointing towards Ellis Island. Nothing particularly unusual, you might think, except instead of preparing to dock there, we were gradually altering course back to the mainland. It seemed, therefore, that the proverbial cat was out of the bag.

What a nuisance! Based on long experience, the alert – if that's what it was – had come rather too late and after-the-fact to be spontaneous. It was more akin to a tip-off, in which case the need for elaborate antics which I'd just stowed away would have to be hastily unpacked.

Like a shadow sweeping across the length and breadth of the ferry, news of our unscheduled change in course injected passenger after passenger with consternation and concern. The latter seemed borne out of fear for hidden dangers while the former sprouted from indignation at being deprived of the visit to Ellis Island: an integral part of the ticket price in many cases. Neither was of special interest to me. My course was clear. First, the rucksack had to go and second, I needed to assess the extent of the law-enforcement presence on board.

'Hey, Englishman, over here.'

The voice was familiar enough: its implication, however, unknown and of considerable moment. I pretended not to have heard, nonchalantly surveying my surroundings until I caught sight of the little man. To my relief he was alone, leaning against the stern guardrail. He made no move to approach but, as before, stared directly at me, his lips parted in the faintest of smiles. There was obviously no point in playing, 'what sir, who sir, me sir,' any longer.

Rule eleven: *better to know your adversary right from the start.*

I joined him.

'Your handiwork?' I accused.

The American raised an eyebrow, but his response, except for a wisecrack about my disguise, was drowned out by an announcement echoing from the Tannoy system.

'Trouble with docking facilities on Ellis Island,' I paraphrased the reason given for our detour.

'Man, you English crack me up,' the little man began, still smiling. 'Real cool. Up to yer neck in shit but still holdin' yer water.'

'Thank you,' I replied flatly. 'I'll take that as a compliment. Now then, pleasantries over with, you presumably have a proposal, or perhaps "deal" would suit you better.'

His confirmation was prompt.

'Deal's good. And what's more, it's a peach. I'll see ya leaves this tub free as a bird if ya'll agree to a brief "chat" after.'

This was definitely a game I didn't relish. The rules were obscure and the objective unclear. Natural instinct was in no doubt about what my objective should be. Give my cuddly chum a brotherly hug, snap his neck in the process and move on. There was, however, definitely something weird about this whole business – verging on the surreal. Going against basic instinct meant going against McT's first and most sacred rule, yet despite the unfavourable odds or even the slightest idea who the little man was working for I felt compelled to accept his offer.

By now several men in ill-fitting suits were only a stone's throw from our position.

The salesman at my side, having apparently tired of waiting for a reply, turned his attention to munching the chocolate coating off a Mars Bar. Comical perhaps, vaudevillian without question.

'Accepted,' I said curtly, a confirmation which pole-axed my natural instincts and no doubt had poor old McTierney banging his head against the nearest block of brimstone.

In response the little man tossed his Mars Bar into the sea and, in a move that impressed even me, deftly slipped a handcuff around my wrist.

Scarcely had a tidal wave of adrenalin time to crash through me when New York's finest were upon us. I coiled, ready to strike but, with half a second to spare the little man edged forward – just enough to allow our cuffed wrists to show. He winked, re-closed the gap between us and smiled as the officers nodded and veered off towards the starboard section.

'Bet that put a kink in yer stiff-upper-lip,' he chortled.

Yes, it most certainly did, but I wasn't about to admit it. I had a thousand questions, but now just didn't seem the right time to ask them. More to the point, I was reasonably certain, based on my captor's demeanour, that he wasn't ready to answer them anyway.

The next five minutes as the boat slowly moved into docking position were perhaps the most confounding I can remember. Instead of feverishly developing escape scenarios, trying to double-guess the little man's next move or fathom out topics likely to constitute the 'chat', I felt a deep sense of calm: confidence almost. I watched the buildings looming before us, contemplated the antics of some squabbling sea gulls and, in general, enjoyed the late afternoon sunshine. Perhaps I'd been shot and was in a coma. Not a bad theory. It was certainly a far more plausible explanation for my recent experiences than reality.

Finally we docked and, for good or ill, the 'dream' continued. Once the off-ramp was in position, passengers were encouraged to disembark and run the rather poorly disguised gauntlet of officialdom.

'Time to go, old bean,' my custodian announced flamboyantly. 'Just remember, stay tight, no holdin' hands, and keep yer trap shut.'

'Charming,' I muttered. But then what could you expect from a colonial?

We were about five metres from the ramp when the hypnotic malaise blanketing my mind exploded in a shower of powdered crystal. My brain tingled as blood rushed from capillary to capillary in some wild attempt to wash away all remaining traces of sorcery. I was still satisfied the little man had no intention of handing me over to the authorities. The problem for me now was fairly straightforward. The handcuff ruse wouldn't work a second time.

Nor did it. No sooner had we set foot on terra firma than I sensed a dozen pairs of eyes locking onto us like missile-tracking devices. Another step and we were encircled; another and the circle was closing. Then... Well, then, to my amazement, a loud buzzing from some nearby trees riveted everyone's attention.

'Hornets!'

That single word – the cry of a lone voice – unleashed such terror that it engulfed the crowd in an instant. Bodies scattered in all directions. Many sought refuge back on the ferry only to realise they'd effectively become a captive target. Others, more fortunate, fled through Battery Park, while the police did what you'd expect them to do: drew their weapons. Pandemonium was having the time of its life. The swarm of hornets arrived, leaving fear-stricken folk unable to decide which was more terrifying: insects with stings or men with guns. No doubt filled with confusion and an over-zealous desire to serve and protect, two of the police officers actually began firing at the airborne attackers.



Who wouldn't be impressed? Certainly not I, for in the midst of the chaos I was led slowly but deliberately away unchallenged. Insects there were aplenty. They were everywhere, but none came within spitting distance of our position. Whether it was the little man's pungent odour or something more mystical, who could say? Bottom line – the promise he'd given was honoured, and I, or more accurately, we, were home free.

With cries of distress fading in the distance, we jogged across the road and on towards a line of moving taxis. As far as I could tell all were occupied, but the instant my captor raised his chubby little arm one drew to a halt and an extraordinarily large gentleman, his eyes mesmerised, got out. Installing ourselves in his stead took no time at all, and without receiving directions the driver promptly skidded away at speed.

Making himself comfortable, my saviour let out a long sigh.

'Man, am I glad that's over. Sorry 'bout the bracelets, but it was the only way I could be sure ya wouldn't skip off. So ya ready to keep yer end o' the bargain?'

Curiouser and curiouser. There's nothing like pretending the past half hour didn't happen.

'Oh come on, don't go all gooey on me just cos I saved yer ass. I know ya didn't think I could do it. That's always been the way. No one ever had any faith in me. And as for respect – forget it.'

My go, I decided, before the pounding in my head caused an internal rupture.

'Yes, I'm ready for our chat,' I stated positively. 'And, whoever you are, that was a fine performance. You have my faith and a debt of gratitude.'

The little man beamed. 'That's mighty big o' ya. Spoken like a true English gent. Ya know I'm beginnin' to like ya. Just as well, mind. Gettin' a tad fed up o' puttin' on this dark-mysterious-stranger act. I used to be a fun guy. Everybody liked me. No trust, no respect, but... Aww, forget it.'

Suddenly the taxi swerved down a narrow back street, a manoeuvre which caused me to look more closely at the driver.

'Don't mind him,' the little man instructed. 'He knows where to go. Just gone deaf, temporary like. Anyways, let's start over. How can I put it? Okay... Ya've heard o' TV shows like, *I Dream of Genie* or... Let's see now... More recent... *The X-Files*? Well, ya're in luck. Ya get to join the club.' The diminutive figure puffed himself up theatrically. 'Greetings and felicitations! Allow me to introduce myself. Roderick B. Fink at your service. Currently on secondment from the 51st state of the Union – a.k.a. Gehenna. Assigned to you, my friend. Smile for the camera. Ya just got yer very own demon, Damon. Welcome to hell on Earth.'