

# March of the Damned

*By James A. Kirch*



**T**HE BOSS WINDJAMMER waved his baton and the band gave Jarvis a roll on the drums. He was perched sixty feet in the air on his loft, like a hawk in the webbing of the Top. The razorbacks ran out to haul in his net

and Jarvis waved his hand to the crowd. The Flying Devil was ready for the big one.

It was a neat end, all right. A triple somersault and a half turn, with no net to catch him if he fell. The band broke off the roll with a

flourish and Jarvis got ready for the swing.

It was then, while he was poised that way, ready to swing, that the horn came in. Lord knows where it came from. It gave out with only a few bars, high-pitched and wavering, but a few bars were enough. The damage was done. It wasn't the noise of the horn—it was what it was playing.

Suppe's "Light Cavalry March."

Just another band march to you. Just a nice bit of music that doesn't mean a thing. You can play it any place and enjoy it. Any place, that is, except at a circus. Under the Big Top, it's taboo.

On the Lot, it means sudden death.

The crowd didn't get it, of course. To them, it was part of the act. But to the performers, every last "kinker," stood frozen like statues. They'd have given six-two-and-even that Jarvis would fall. And nobody would have covered the bet.

I tried to stop it. I came out of my seat at the last wavering notes of the horn and headed down the aisle at a trot, signalling the windjammers. Collins caught it, all right. He raised his baton, and the band swung into a waltz. That was the sign to Jarvis to let the trick go. He could have faked a whirl, or done a sure-thing flip and come down the webbing like a cat.

But Jarvis wouldn't quit. He had guts, I'll say that for him. He swung out tentatively, twice, judging his distance, and then he let go and went into the rolls.

He had guts, all right—but he also had nerves. He came out of the rolls with jerks, instead of a smooth, easy flow, and he went into the twist with a lunge that carried him off-side the trapeze.

His hand missed the bar by less than an inch.

One of the kinkers let go the scream she'd been smothering, and half a dozen razorbacks ran out with a net. It was like catching a fly. They didn't have a chance.

His body slammed off the ring, into the sawdust. It bounced once, like a rag doll, in thick clouds of shavings, and then it ploughed through the sawdust to my feet. It spun dizzily for a second and then stopped.

There was life in him still. That was the crazy part. With his bones shattered like glass, he was still able to move. His hand caught my trouser cuff, tugging, and I dropped to the ground.

"Steve," he said. "Twelve. It comes on at

twelve."

"Easy," I said. "Easy, Jarvis. We'll have you out in a minute." I knelt there beside him, not touching him. I was afraid if I touched him his body would come all apart. "Easy," I said. "Easy Jarvis."

He shook his head, and his eyes: clouded with pain. "Twelve," he repeated. His mouth opened wide and his body writhed like a snake. His teeth dug into his lips, biting down on the pain, and his head fell to the side. He was dead before they came with the stretcher . . .

WHEN it was over, after the sheriff had gone, I cut through the Big Top to the Back Yard, to talk it over with the Boss. Her tent was fourth from the end, next to the cook house. Claire had it fixed like an office.

Claire Feyman was too young and too smooth to handle a show. But she owned it, and, with my help, she ran it. If a kinker—a performer—got a sick, she filled in the breach if the trick was one she could do. She was like the rest of us, I guess. Sawdust in her nose. When you've had one whiff, you can't live without it.

"Well," I said heavily, "that's that. The sheriff says 'death due to accident.'"

Claire looked up from her desk, her soft green eyes studying me closely. "And Steve Martin says?"

I growled. "Whoever tooted that horn knew what it meant. Suppe's Cavalry March has been on the black list for years. It's supposed to have caused train wrecks, blow-downs, and riots. It's bad luck, that's all, and everyone knows it. To rub Jarvis' nerves with that when he was readying for a leap—" I shook my head. "But try to tell any gillie, much less a dumb sheriff, that. No outsider would get it."

Claire said again, "So Steve Martin says?"

"Murder," I said evenly. "Dress it up as you want to, it comes out the same. Murder."

Claire's eyes darkened. "Why, Steve?" she said. "Why would anyone kill Jarvis? He had no enemies that we know of. He didn't play around with the girls. He spent most of his time in his tent, fiddling with a radio. There's no reason for anyone to have killed him."

"He's dead," I reminded her. "He's dead because someone wanted him killed. So there

must be a reason.”

A voice from the doorway said, “Fate.”

I jumped. Yeah, I jumped. Madam Zelda always put too much in her voice. I was in no mood for phony dramatics.

I got them, though. I got a load of it. Madam Zelda came on into the tent, moving with the ease of a cat. She went on talking, in the same hollow tones.

“It is written in the stars. *Three* shall die.”

She had a way of saying things that gave you the creeps. I turned to look at her, scowling. Her face, under the dark red bandanna, was smooth and expressionless. Her star-studded skirt made her look like a Bavarian gypsy, but I’d have bet she was raised on Tenth Avenue. “Stow it,” I said.

Claire said, “Madam Zelda, that sort of talk, among the performers—”

Zelda cut her off with a toss of her head. “It is written, Miss Feyman.

Words do not matter.”

She had something there. The kinkers didn’t need talk. They’d been born and bred in the circus, and their minds crawled with superstitious taboos. They hadn’t needed Zelda to tell them what Suppe’s March meant; and they wouldn’t need Zelda to tell them accidents ran in threes. It’s a simple, unalterable fact. If we didn’t break this somehow, and show it up as a frame, Claire could kiss her circus. Claire and her manager, Steve Martin.

I said, “See you later,” to Claire, and walked out through the Back Yard to Jarvis’ tent. Two men in overcoats, with clown-white like chalk on their necks, wrangled over a chessboard at the end of Clown Alley. Madge Filers, the knife-thrower’s wife, was bent over a wash-board in front of her tent. The show was going on, all right. It would keep going on, with the kinkers’ nerves straining like wire—until one of them cracked. It might be Lester, working the lions, letting it get him when the big cats were rough. It might be Marlo, the dare-devil who slid down the wire in a “death dive,” It might be Filers, throwing gleaming knives at his wife. I didn’t know who, and I couldn’t guess who, but I knew it was coming.

The jinx was on.

That’s why I had to break it. That’s why I went over Jarvis’ tent from the ground to the top of the canvas, looking for clues.

JARVIS had been a queer one. We knew he was out of Albany, and that he’d had some big time stands—and that’s all we knew. He’d been a quiet, non-gabbing man, who’d spent most of his time in his tent, fiddling with his radio, listening to broadcasts. He’d followed the war like a chessman, tuning in China, Russia, Germany—anyone who gave out with the news. He had six hundred dollars worth of radio at the rear of his tent that practically brought the world to his cot.

That was okay with us. Claire had even made him Chief Raid Warden, with a red, white and blue switch at the end of his cot, to sound the alarm and cut off the power. It had been handy, having a guy like that, who was pretty sure to be in one place.

I made a mental note to appoint a new warden and have the switch moved, and then I went to work on the tent. I went over it—and I mean went over it. I even took his radio almost apart. When I was finished, I chalked up my score.

Zero. There was nothing, not a line, to tie Jarvis to murder. No pictures, no letters to girls, no bank balance grown suddenly fat. I stood there in the middle of the tent, trying to make something fit, and I got a flash of the fat sheriff shaking his head.

“An accident,” he’d said. “Clearly an accident.”

The kinkers had stared at each other, their eyes tight and cold. I could feel their nerves jabbing at them. They knew what it meant.

Suppe’s March and an accident. That meant there’d be three; there had to be three.

Superstitious? Not me. No more than the next guy. But I know circus folk. Their hands would grow damp, and their knees would grow weak, when they needed every ounce of their timing.

Someone would be off-balance and someone would die.

“Murder,” I said, softly. “It *had* to be murder.” I shook my head wearily and gave up the search. Professor Leferve stopped me on my way back through the Yard. He was small and dark, with flat dull eyes like a barn owl’s. He had a head on his shoulders, though—a head, you might say for two. His trick was “Professor Leferve and Charlu, *The Headless Woman*.”

He caught my arm at the flap to his tent. "Mr. Martin," he said, "There are rumors. One hears that tomorrow the band plays 'Home Sweet Home.'"

I stopped with a jolt. "Home Sweet Home" meant finis, the end of the show. It's played closing night, and never before that.

"Hokum," I said flatly. "We've a two months' tour, and we're touring it. Unless anyone wants to walk out."

The Professor tugged at his beard, shaking his head. I wasn't worried about his walking out. He wouldn't fall for a jinx and pack up his bags. He was what the kinkers called a "hall act," not born to the circus. He was with us for the dough, and he made it.

Charlu was a natural, the hit of the sideshow. She was close to ten thousand dollars worth of machinery and wires, built like a dynamo. The woman was there all right—a girl with the build of a Venus and a head made of test tubes and wiring.

Mirrors? Yeah, so he did it with mirrors. But he never admitted it. He worked "The Head" on the lot's Delco battery, and he kept it going full time. He wheeled Charlu back and forth en from the side-show in a specially built car. She might have been Mrs. Leferve, for all I knew. She ate and slept in their tent, and the Professor babied "The Head" as if it were really alive.

Hokum? Sure, but beautiful hokum. Leferve had a gold mine and he mined it for all it was worth. No one could hate him for that.

He drew me into his tent, and I stole a look at Charlu. She was stretched out on a cot at the rear, her body d. sheathed in shimmering black. It gave me a chill—it always gave me a chill. Where the head should have been, there was nothing. Beyond was a silver-like boiler, half the size of a wash boiler. The Professor called it "The Brain." Red liquid flowed through tubes at the side. There was a low, steady hum of machinery in the tent—Charlu's breathing.

I sucked in my lips and looked at a Leferve. "Neat," I told him. "Kind of gruesome, but neat."

He nodded solemnly. "A tragedy," he said. "But a scientific marvel. A wonder of the age."

"Yeah," I said. "It's a wonder, all right." If he wanted to keep playing it straight, that was his business. I had worries enough of my own.

"Professor," I said, "who started this talk? The show closing, I mean?"

"Started It?" he repeated. His thin shoulders shrugged. "Such talk grows. Someone asked Mr. Collins what he was playing tomorrow."

Collins was the bandmaster, the Boss Windjammer, we called him.

"So it just grew," I said, thoughtfully. He could be right about that. I'd been wondering, though, if maybe Zelda hadn't fed it some vitamins. I started doing my thinking aloud.

"It was murder, all right—if I could just see it. If I could just figure what comes on at twelve."

"Twelve?" the Professor said. "Midnight?"

That was an angle I'd missed. "It could be," I admitted. "It could be something will happen at midnight." I nodded to the Professor, threw a scowl at Charlu, and went back to Claire's tent to consider.

WE SAT UP until long after midnight, waiting for something to happen. A dog howled wearily and the big cats growled in their sleep, but when the sun threw crimson streamers on the tent canvas, the score was still zero. . . .

Claire was showing the strain. She was circus, from her toes to her flaming red hair, and the idea of quitting never occurred to her. But the air was thick with tension, a needling, nerve-jarring uncertainty. It was in the eyes of every performer.

*One. Who will be next?*

It was getting to Claire. Her soft green eyes were clouded with shadows and there were tight lines of worry at the edge of her lips. At lunch, her eyes clung to me hungrily, like a kid who expects her pop to solve all. "Steve," she said, "haven't you any idea?"

"Yeah," I lied. "I've got an idea, kid. I think we can—" I never finished the lie; I didn't have to. While I was hesitating, dreaming it up, the horn came in again. It was shriller this time, sharper and more wavering. It cut through the air like a siren, wailed, and died out. There were four bars this time; the opening flourish. But the piece was the same.

*Suppe's Light Cavalry March.*

Claire said, "Steve—" and then I was gone, running through the alley to the rear of the lot. Professor Leferve came dashing out of his tent,

his beard trailing in the wind. Filers, his knives still in his hand, opened his tent flap, then fell in behind. We made the rear tent, where the music had come from, in almost a dead heat, with half the lot on our heels.

Only two of us went inside—the Professor and I. The rest took one look from the entrance and then dropped the tent flap, turning aside. It was something to turn from.

The boy was seated in the middle of the tent, a trumpet clutched in his hand. His body was bent forward, leaning on the horn, using it as a brace to hold him erect. It was the only use he'd ever have for a horn.

The blade of a long-handled knife was lost in his side.

His right hand was doubled in front of him, as if he'd started to draw the knife out and then changed his mind. It would have been wasted trouble. The blade must have shattered his heart.

The tent flap opened and Collins came bustling in. "Clyster," he said, heavily. "I should have guessed it."

I spun to stare at the band leader. "Guessed it?" I said. "How the hell could you guess it?"

He spread his fat hands in front of him. "He was always begging for a chance in the band. He was one of the razorbacks who think they're big time. He said all he needed was a chance."

I scowled. "So you figure he picked a spot for himself and played anyhow?"

Collins shrugged. "He may have been practicing. He may not have realized what he was doing. He played Suppe's March when Jarvis was on the trapeze—when he realized what he'd caused—" he waved his hand at the body.

I was beginning to follow him now. I said, "You mean he played without thinking—and when Jarvis was killed he knew he was the cause of it. It preyed on his mind till he stabbed himself? That's what you mean?"

Collins said, "That's how I see it."

"And playing it now," I went on. "How do you figure his playing it now?"

"A confession," the Professor cut in. "That would be what you call a confession of guilt."

I said. "Well. . . ." and Zelda came in, holding her star-studded skirt close to her body. She poised for a second, looking down at the corpse, then nodded her head slowly. She looked

up at me and her eyes glowed like a cat's.

"Two," she said darkly. "Two. It is written; there shall be three."

Somebody gasped, and at the entrance to the tent there was a quick movement, as Filer's knives fell to the ground. The jinx was still on us.

It was Claire who broke it—or tried to. She came forward into the tent, her small body tense, her hands stiff at her sides. She said, "Shut up, Zelda," and then she turned, facing the crowd.

"You're afraid of a jinx," she said. "You're afraid, the crowd of you, of a jinx and an accident. You think accidents happen in threes, and you're each afraid you'll be next." She swung towards Filer, her green eyes flashing. "You dropped your knives just a minute ago. And yet tonight you'll be throwing knives at your wife. You'll do it because of your pride, because the 'Show must go on.' And your hand will shake while you're throwing them." She turned to Therese, who toe-danced on the trapeze. "You'll hear Fate blowing a horn for you. You'll be dancing the wire, and your knees will give way, and you'll fall, like Jarvis fell. And all because of a jinx. A jinx that doesn't exist."

SHE dropped to the ground suddenly, next to the corpse. "Look at his hands. Does that look like a man who'd been holding a knife?" Clyster's fingers were curved in, like I'd noticed, but Claire had something there. It looked like he'd been holding the horn, blowing the few notes of the march, when he'd been stabbed.

"His lips," Claire said tightly. "There's blood on his lips. The trumpet was in his mouth when he fell. This couldn't have been suicide." She got up slowly, studying the crowd. She chose her words carefully, spacing them so no one would miss it.

"This was murder," she said. "Like the first death, this one was murder. And I know the name of the killer." She swung on me suddenly. "Hold the fort, Steve," she said. "I'll go get the sheriff."

I knew what it was, all right. A shot in the arm to the crowd. A ray of hope, to keep them from falling apart on their jobs. She couldn't know the killer, any more than I did.

I let her go—yeah, that was a dumb one. I thought she was bluffing, and it wasn't my business to ruin her bluff. So I stood there like a dope and let her walk out, and I didn't even know

what it meant.

It meant she was third on the list.

"Three," Zelda had said, "There shall be three." And Zelda was right. Accidents or murders, there had to be three.

And Claire was tagged for the third.

I didn't know that then. I even had an idea, a crazy idea, that if I'd let it lay, the killings were over. Call Clyster's death suicide, and the case would be closed. That's if you could call murder a suicide.

I left two of Clyster's pals, roustabouts, on guard in the tent, and crossed the Back Yard to the juice joint, where they serve hamburgs and coffee between meals. I swilled sugarless coffee and leaned on the counter, trying to make my mind work for me.

"Twelve," Jarvis had said. "It comes on at twelve." But nothing had happened at twelve. "He could have been screwy," I decided. A guy like that, practically dead, could have been out of his mind." I said aloud, "Yeah, that might have been it," and I felt a hand on my arm.

It was Lester, *Tamer of Lions*. He was a slim, blond little man, with a body built like a whip. But the whip was beginning to snap.

"Mr. Martin," he said, "Tonight I won't be working the cats."

This was it. The show falling apart. That was all right with me. If the guy was on edge, I didn't want him handling his lions.

"That's all right, Lester," I told him. "We'll fill in with a spot show. Take the evening off and relax."

"It's not me," he said quickly—too quickly. "It's the cats. They sense things, I guess. These killings—the excitement—it gets in their blood. It puts them on edge. It's not me; it's the cats."

"Sure," I said. "Sure, Lester. I understand." I didn't even grin as I said it. And I didn't feel like grinning as I watched the man scurry across the Yard to his tent. There's nothing funny in seeing a man like that scared as a rabbit.

Nerves'll do it. Nerves rubbed ragged will scream at you until you want to run from the pain. I learned more of that later.

I WAS still at the juice joint when the fat little sheriff bobbed out the death tent. I hadn't even seen him come in. I wandered down to talk

to him, but I knew what he'd say, before he opened his mouth. The case was open and shut.

"Mr. Martin," he said, "well, Martin, this winds up your 'murders.'"

"You figure it was an accident," I suggested. "You figure like Collins, that he played without thinking, then killed himself when he knew what he'd done? That's how you figure it?"

His fat face quivered, like a horse shaking off flies. "I don't like the word 'figure,'" he said. He used the phrase I'd known he would use. "This is Open and shut."

"Yeah," I said wearily. "Did Miss Feyman tell you—"

The sheriff looked around vaguely. "Miss Feyman?"

"Claire Feyman. The Boss." I felt a chill of uneasiness. "Didn't she pick you up?"

"Somebody phoned," he said. "They said there'd been a suicide out at the circus. I came out alone."

I just stood there staring at him. "Did Miss Feyman phone?" I said it carefully, slowly, so the words wouldn't choke in my throat, I knew the answer to that. Claire wouldn't have phoned. Not when she'd said she was going. And Claire wouldn't have said "suicide."

The sheriff shook his head. "I didn't get the name. One of the deputies answered the call." He shoved his fat hands in his coat pockets and rocked on his heels, getting ready to leave. "I wouldn't worry, Martin. She'll likely turn up."

"Yeah," I said tightly. "She'll turn up, all right." Like Jarvis turned up and like Clyster. I spun on my heel and ran for the office, cursing myself for a fool.

I put the boys on it. The ushers and roustabouts. "I checked with the gates," I told them. "Miss Feyman didn't leave the grounds. I want this place torn apart, tent by tent, till you find her."

Jim Fury, boss of the laborers, nodded grimly. "We'll find her, Steve," he promised. "If the Boss is on the lot, we'll find her. You don't need to worry about that."

The hell I didn't need to worry. I sat at her desk, checking the reports flowing in. *Not in the Big Top. Not in Clown Alley. Not in the Sideshow. Not in the Animal Section.* At the end three hours, I'd have bet they wouldn't find her alive.

I'd have won.

They never did find her. Jim Fury brought the verdict himself. He stood in the doorway, crushing his cap in his hands. "She must have slipped out, Steve," he said. "We covered the lot. She ain't here." He said again, lamely, "She must have slipped out."

We both knew better than that.

Claire hadn't missed a Spec in three years, and she wouldn't start missing one now. If she'd gone for the sheriff, she'd have left by the gate, and been back in time for the show. I went to the door of the tent, watching the kinkers scurrying to their posts. The Professor passed, wheeling Charlu, sheathed in shimmering black, a red shawl thrown over The Head. Madam Zelda crept from her tent, cat-walking down the alley. She paused when she neared me and her burning eyes were like black, threatening stars. I closed the tent flap in her face. I'd had enough of her warnings.

"Tell Collins," I said, "that we're closing tonight. Tell him to play 'Home, Sweet Home.' I sank back in a chair, my head burning. I heard Fury leave and then I heard the chant "Doors!" passed back from the Big Top to the Yard. That meant the gillies were being admitted.

The show was getting ready to go on. A death show.

THERE was something here, something I'd missed. There was something in Jarvis' whispered "Twelve. It comes on at twelve." Or in Zelda's warning, "It is written." I was sure of that and I knew if I could see it, I'd have a chance to find Claire. It was there, all right, if I could just lay my hands on it.

I couldn't.

I could see Claire's body hurtling through space, to land a twisted corpse on the sawdust. I could see a thrown knife slipping an inch and burying itself in her heart. I could picture all sorts of horrible ways she might die, so the fat sheriff could nod again and say "Accident."

But I could never have dreamed up the true one.

Accident," I said aloud. "It could have been an accident. It could be Claire slipped off the lot, and met with an accident on the way to the sheriff's." I snapped on the radio on her desk and spun the dial wildly, hunting for news. I just

missed the news.

The announcer's voice was crisp.

"Listen to Hebe Gater tomorrow night at this hour. Keep tuned to this station for up-to-the-minute news. Six hundred on your dial."

*Twelve. It comes on at twelve.*

I said it aloud. "Twelve. It comes on at twelve." I sat there a minute, the words burning into my brain, and then I came up from my chair with a jerk.

I had it. Now that it was probably too late, I had it.

*On the dial at twelve.*

That was it. That had to be it. The log that broke up the jam. If the jam had only been broken in time.

I didn't think of that on my way through the Yard to Jarvis' tent. I didn't let myself think of it. I kept thinking, "Steve, you've got it. You've got it, old man."

I had it, all right. But not quite like I thought. It almost had me. I knelt at the edge of Jarvis' cot, spinning the radio dials. I snapped it to short wave, and set it for twelve. That's all I did—set it for twelve, and waited. I didn't have to wait long.

The words cut like a knife. "Steve," they said. "Steve, I'm afraid."

That was Claire. Claire's voice on the radio, crying for help. "Where?" I said crazily. "Where have they got you?"

"Steve," her voice cried. "Steve, can you hear me? Steve, I'm afraid. They caught me, Steve, when I went to check up. When I started for the sheriff, I stopped to make sure. They claim she never goes out. But I saw her, Steve. I saw her slip into the tent, right after Clyster was stabbed. When I went back to see more, they caught me. They've got me tied in her place. There's a metal hood over my head. Steve—I'm afraid!"

It hit me. Like that, it hit me. Tied in her place, with a metal hood over her head! "Charlu," I said, tightly. "Charlu and Leferve."

A voice said from the tent flap behind me, "Charlu, the Headless—in person."

That wasn't Claire's voice—it was a new one. A brittle, cold voice that cut its words out like ice. The voice of Charlu. In the tent, behind me.

I sat still on the cot. I could see her in the mirror at the rear of the tent—all but her head.

She was dressed in green, a loose fitting skirt that trailed to the ground. That meant Claire would be wearing the black. It meant Claire had been strapped in her place, a metal hood fitted over her head.

"Steve," Claire's voice said. "*Steve, can you hear me?*"

I could hear her, all right. I could hear her and feel her words burning under my skin. And I had to sit there and listen. Charlu had a gun. I didn't make a move. I sat still while the sweat burned down my back. I spoke, without even knowing it.

"It was neat," I said heavily. "A neat system you had. But it's over."

Charlu's laugh was like steel knives clashing. "Over?" she repeated.

"Sure," I said dully. "The act's done. The Headless Woman gag is a washout. The idea was neat—a hideout for spies, and a short-wave sending set built into the Head, with a microphone in your hood. When Jarvis caught on to it, it spoiled your game, but you hired Clyster to play Suppe's March, with Jarvis on the swing, figuring his nerves would collapse. And then you killed Clyster, like you'd planned, to close up the case. A tragic accident, and suicide—you had it all planned. But your party is over. From now on, Charlu is dead."

"Not quite," she said coolly. "Not quite, but soon. In just a few moments."

**I** DIDN'T get it at first. I said, "Neat, all right. The set built into the Head. Getting your power from the circus, so you could broadcast without anyone knowing. With a set like that, you could reach submarines."

"Further," the woman said gloatingly. "Our reports went where they did the most good."

"Yeah," I said. "Well, the party is over. You'd better throw in the sponge, and take your chance on the chair. Maybe no one can prove you were killers." I said it as if I meant it, drawing it out. I didn't mean it. There was no chance that they'd call off the game. But I played it for all it was worth. "When the police go over that set—even a dumb sheriff will know something is wrong."

Claire's voice came in again, softly. "*Steve, can you hear me! Steve, I'm afraid.*" My hands

were like hot coals at my sides.

"The set," Charlu repeated. "But no one will go over the set. In just a few minutes, there won't be any set."

I got it, then. In just a few minutes, she'd said, Charlu would be dead. Charlu—the set—and Claire.

"You can't—" I said tightly.

Her laugh echoed again. "You can't stop it, Martin. Even if you were free, you couldn't stop it now. There's no longer time. In a moment, the Head will be shorted—there'll be one quick burst of flame—and that's all."

*One quick burst of flame—over Claire!*

"You can't," I said wildly. "You can't get away with it."

"An accident," she said lightly. "A most unfortunate accident. Miss Feyman had taken my place in the Head. She'd often replaced actors before. A most unfortunate accident." She went on gloatingly, getting a lift out of it, telling me how clever they were.

"And Steve Martin found dead. The lover, killing himself in his grief. And the story is over."

"Over," I said, "Yeah, the story is over." My nerves were like hot wires twisting under the flesh.

"Say your prayers," Charlu said, evenly. "You might even kneel for your prayers."

I knelt, but I didn't say my prayers. I moved slowly, edging off the cot, until my right knee touched the ground. After that, I moved fast.

My hand snapped out to the red, white and blue switch. The air raid alarm. Jarvis' signal, that I'd meant to have moved.

The woman behind me said, "Stop!" and then the siren came in like a banshee, wailing over the grounds. It screamed twice, like a banshee trapped in a net and then the lights flickered once and went out.

I didn't wait for the blackout. I was back off the cot before Charlu had triggered her gun. I heard the blast of her shot and felt flame lash at my cheek, and then my arms were around her and I had her raised in the air.

The gun slapped at my side, the barrel hunting the flesh like a snake, and I twisted, swinging the woman above. I didn't hold her there long.

*Charlu the Headless—but she had a head. I*

heard it thud on the ground.

I didn't wait to look at it. She couldn't have been dead, but she wouldn't move for a while—and Claire was still in a jam. That's if the power had gone off in time, Claire was still in a jam. If I'd muffed it—I grabbed Charlu's gun from her hand and dove into the dark.

A warden tried to stop me, swinging a searchlight. He didn't know what hit him. One minute he was there, and the next he was bowled out of the way, and I had his searchlight clutched in my hand. I plunged into the sideshow like a mad-man and the crowd fell back from my path.

The Professor's booth was at the end, near the exit. I threw the searchlight's rays on it, and my breath came out in a gasp. The Head was intact. That meant the power had gone off before it was shorted. I hulled my way down the aisle, playing the torch, and a figure darted out from the edge of the booth to Claire's side, one hand raised

high in the air.

"Professor!" I yelled. "*Herr* Professor!"

His arm stopped in mid-air, and he swung, facing me, crouching near the Head, his eyes blazing with hate, the knife ready to throw.

I shot him three times before he fell over. . . .

I broke the machine, I guess, taking it apart. I know one mirror cracked, and the metal case over Claire's head seemed to rip when I tugged it. But I didn't stop ripping until she was free.

Her face was dead white, but she had what it takes. Her lips trembled to a grin. "So you heard me, Steve. You've got ears like a cat."

I said, "Yeah, I heard you," and then the lights went on, and I came out of it with a start. I had to see Collins. In a hurry, I had to see Collins. I'd given him orders, but now we weren't closing the show. If he played "Home Sweet Home" now, he'd jinx us. And that's all we needed.

A jinx.