

**“CRIMSON DEVIL, BRONZE DRAGON”**  
by Mike Hall

**I.**

*“His twin .45s cracking like thunder, the scarlet-clad avenger leapt through the warehouse window in a hail of broken glass. Several of Mr. Mojo’s thugs didn’t survive the first onslaught of burning lead, falling to the concrete floor clutching their perforated chests in agony...the others ran for cover behind stacks of crates, barking epithets back and forth in guttural Japanese.*

*“Crimson Devil’s feet hit the floor just in time for the return fire to commence, a snarl of submachine gun fire that filled the air with angry hornets of metal. The Devil did a quick shoulder roll, snapping off rounds all the while, to take refuge behind a cement roof support. Fragments of the post chipped away under the hail of bullets, but the Crimson Devil remained unflappable. A determined grimace on his masked face, the Devil reloaded his smoking guns.*

*“The saboteurs had been planning this operation for weeks...massive shipments of electrically-activated bombs concealed in innocent-looking lamps with American flag-styled lampshades sat in the crates, ready to ship out to patriotic American consumers. When plugged in, the lamps became deadly firebombs. Not since Pearl Harbor had such a dastardly sneak attack been planned against the American people.*

*“The Crimson Devil was not planning on letting the sabotage take place. He was stopping those lamps right there. Leaping out from behind the rapidly-disintegrating support column, the Devil’s guns roared to life again, death spewing forth from their muzzles.*

*“He was the Crimson Devil, and he would send these saboteurs straight to Hell.”*

The Crimson Devil sat with a stunned expression on his masked face, his fingers numbly gripping the latest issue of *Two-Fisted Fiction Tales*. ‘Who the heck is writing this stuff? I don’t carry a pair of .45s!’

American Star, super-heroine and star of a series of very popular serials, smiled at him from across the room, where she leafed casually through reams of fan mail. “The Shadow carries .45s, CD.”

“But I *don’t!*”

American Star rolled her pretty blue eyes. “The Shadow carries them, and people like the Shadow, so in that magazine, you carry them too. They have a circulation to keep up, you know.”

Crimson Devil rose to his feet. He was clad all in red, wearing a uniform cut vaguely like that of a limousine driver’s, with a bold yellow symbol of some arcane significance emblazoned on the breast. The ensemble was rounded out with flare-cuff gloves, lace-up boots, and topped with CD’s trademark wide-brim hat with its tiny horns on the band.

“I never authorized this stuff! It’s horrible! Kids are reading this nonsense!” In disgust, he threw the pulp magazine to the floor of the rec room.

“CD,” American Star soothed, “you have to understand...just imagine how miserable America would be if it didn’t *have* any real heroes to idolize right now...the whole world is at war. This stuff is what the public needs right now...they need us as symbols, if

nothing else. Those pulps may not be any good, but they make those kids reading them feel safe, because it reminds them that you're out there doing some good."

CD paced back and forth in agitation. "I can understand that, sure, but why couldn't they have asked my permission? I would have been happy to..."

American Star interrupted him, tossing a sheaf of fan mail back onto the pile she had taken it from. "Happy to what? Tell them all about alien time machines, Nazi super-scientists, rampaging dinosaurs, and jungle cat women? I'm sure the Bureau of the Unknown would be just *thrilled* if you spilled the beans on our *real* adventures, CD." She got up from her chair and crossed the room to put a consoling hand on his shoulder. "We work for the government, my friend. That means we have to keep some secrets."

The Devil sighed. "Maybe people won't actually think these stories are meant to be true. I mean, just look at the name of the magazine: *Two-Fisted Fiction Tales*."

American Star laughed out loud. "Oh, I'm sure they'll notice the word 'fiction' in tiny letters crammed between TWO-FISTED and TALES," she said, making broad gestures with her arms and booming her voice to accentuate the key words.

"I thought you were trying to make me feel better."

The blonde heroine's laughter stopped. "Oh yeah, I was, wasn't I? Sorry."

A moment of uncomfortable silence passed. Crimson Devil then pounded his fist into his palm and announced, "I've got it. I'll track down whoever's writing this stuff. Maybe he can't write about the real stories, but at least I can maybe exert a little editorial control. Keep the stories less lurid. They can keep the sales from slumping by advertising the magazine as having my endorsement!"

American Star strolled back across the rec room to her waiting stack of fan mail, her skirt twirling and cape flowing behind her. "Not a bad idea, CD. I guess you can handle this one on your own, so I'll get back to my mail. If there's an emergency, I'll call you off the trail." Glancing back over her shoulder to deliver a gently mocking smile, American Star stopped short in her tracks.

The Crimson Devil was already gone. She hadn't even heard him leave.

## II.

*"No man escapes the Crimson Devil! Words meant nothing anymore...the guns blazed again..."*

He couldn't get that nonsense out of his head. It was driving him crazy.

As Crimson Devil drove down the crowded New York streets in an anonymous gray sedan, looking for the building that matched the address of Jones Avenue Publications (publishers of the offending magazine, who, by the way, were located nowhere *near* Jones Avenue), his thoughts wandered. What exactly was it about these stories that bothered him? That his likeness was being sullied in lurid, violent purple prose...or that he wasn't getting a cut of it? He was already wealthy, true, but his family's money had come from publishing ventures. He almost felt as if he had been kidnapped by the competition!

However, once CD found the offices of Jones Avenue Publications, he realized that this small company was probably not the competition. The building was a crumbling brick-faced affair, with grimy cracked windows and a below-sidewalk entrance; it appeared to be just one step away from being condemned.

It occurred to him then...the company's name: Jones Avenue Publications...a thinly-veiled knock-off of Street and Smith, publishers of the popular *Doc Savage* and *The Shadow* magazines. Fans inclined to buy the entire Street & Smith line of pulps might be duped into buying this one as well, thinking it was somehow affiliated due to the similarity in names. CD wondered how many people actually fell for that sort of marketing, and then decided it must be quite a few...the circulation figures on *Two-Fisted Fiction Tales* were obviously high enough that a fan was able to easily get a hold of the magazine and send it to his hero in hopes of getting an autograph. If the magazine had been hard to get, it would be unlikely that such an avid fan would be willing to risk never seeing it again by dropping it in the post.

The circulation of the book having dawned on him, CD found himself even more steamed. Again, he was uncertain as to exactly why it bothered him so.

Wearing a gray trench coat over his costume and hiding the mask and hat in his large pockets, CD stomped down the stairwell to the building's entrance. Glancing up towards the sidewalk to make certain no one had seen him enter the stairwell, he donned the mask and hat, shed the coat, and threw open the door.

"Just who the heck do you think you are?" shouted the Devil.

A rotund, curly-haired man sitting behind a cluttered desk paused just short of cramming a meatball hoagie in his mouth to stare at the costumed figure in his office. Then he shrugged, took a bite, and said with his mouth full, "Barney Glick, publisher. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm the Crimson Devil!"

"Yeah, and my Aunt Petunia is American Star. Get outta here, pal...we don't need no mascot or anything like that." Glick reached for the telephone, but a scarlet-gloved hand grabbed his wrist before he could grasp the earpiece. "Hey!"

Crimson Devil leaned into the man's unshaven face with an intense glare. "Look, 'pal,' I *am* the Crimson Devil and I want to talk about this magazine of yours. Now."

Fifteen minutes and the threat of several lawsuits later, Barney Glick was either convinced, or too distressed to care. He was talking. "Look, I just publish these things. I never even really planned on getting into this business, but I've got the press in the building upstairs, so I figured why not, you know? Nobody wants any stationery printing done what with the war on, so I gotta make a buck somehow."

"Pretty expensive undertaking to just jump into."

"I got lucky...the right investor came along at the right time, and he had most of the creative people pulled together already. He brought a stable of writers with him, and even a cover artist! All I do is print and distribute."

Crimson Devil thoughtfully scratched his chin. "That seems awfully convenient. I can't say I've ever heard a story remotely similar to that one."

"Me neither," Barney responded. "This guy who bankrolls me, though, I think he's a book publisher. He knew all these writers, and this cover artist...I think he's just slumming and using the pulp racket to groom some new writers, you know? Gettin' the jump on the other editors in his publishing house. Not a bad trick."

CD was honestly surprised at the man's theory...it had genuine merit. "No, not a bad idea at all. But it doesn't change the fact that I find these pulp stories unacceptable." CD

leaned back over Barney, who was by this point sweating profusely. “I want the names of your backer, the cover artist, and the hack who writes the Crimson Devil stories.”