

## “THE VENGEFUL GHOST”

A Crimson Devil adventure

By Mike Hall

### I.

Her cape whirling behind her, American Star threw a wicked haymaker that sent the three Nazi agents sprawling, their weapons flying into the air from the concussive force of her punch. A lovely young figure with long blonde tresses, a red miniskirt and unitard and a blue cape, American Star’s pleasant appearance belied the evil-smashing machine that dwelled within this powerhouse of a girl. She glanced to one side of the underground cavern, and there, on a steel platform, sat the V3 Rocket Prototype, the deadliest weapon Nazi Germany had yet conceived, its timer inexorably ticking down to zero. She glanced to the other side, and there, through the giant blast doors, came another cluster of Nazi troops, their Schmeisser submachine guns at the ready.

In his bulletproof cubicle, set high into the walls of the cavern, Baron Hades flailed his arms wildly and bellowed into a microphone. “Stop zat voman! Ze V3 launch must not be interfered vit!”

American Star set her jaw and readied for the fight of her life. She had less than four minutes to save Allied Command.

The Nazi soldiers fired their guns...

“*CUT!*” cried Randolph Quail, director of the production. “It’s all *wrong*. Where’s the writer?”

The soldiers’ shoulders slumped as they lowered their weapons, grumbling discontentedly as their “fallen” compatriots rose to their feet and dusted themselves off. American Star threw up her arms in exasperation. “Aw geez, Mr. Quail, what was wrong with that take? The guys took their falls perfectly!”

Quail stood up from the director’s chair and stepped towards the star of his latest serial. As he walked out onto the floor of the set and past his camera crew, they cringed noticeably. Bald, heavy-set, and monocled, Quail cut a figure that was cast straight out of one of his serials: that of the Imperious Leader. “I will tell you what is wrong, Miss Star...there is no energy, that is what’s wrong! There is no passion! There is no drama! *Now where is that writer?*”

Lurking silently near a spotlight tripod stood another costumed figure: the red-clad Crimson Devil. A wide-brimmed hat with horns on its headband and a yellow symbol of arcane significance on his chest identified him plainly as the world-famous crime fighter, but he was doing an admirable job of blending into obscurity on the crowded set. Although he was rue to admit it, he found the filming of motion pictures fascinating, and always made an effort to visit the set once or twice every time American Star, his frequent partner in evil-bashing, filmed one of her wildly popular serials. He had visited the sets of her three previous efforts, and had enjoyed them all, but this time he had to admit:

“That director is a *jerk!*”

“Tell me about it,” came a voice from behind him. A small, balding man in his early forties, J. Elliot Fields was the unlucky screenwriter that was at the moment commanding such fury from director Randolph Quail. During the two weeks of the shoot up to this point, Fields had managed to make himself as invisible as possible, but as Quail turned

his head to survey the crew and fixed his gaze upon the writer peeking out from behind the Crimson Devil, Elliot knew that his number was up. “Um, something the matter, Mr. Quail?”

CD cringed on Elliot’s behalf. He genuinely liked the man, having met him about a month ago in the midst of a peculiar case involving a publishing scheme funded by Japanese saboteurs. It seemed a shame that such a nice fellow was going to meet his end at the hands of this tyrannical movie despot.

“Ah, Mr. Fields!” bellowed Quail. “I realize that your background in pulp fiction makes you vulnerable to moments of literary excess, but I’m afraid this entire scene is terrible beyond even your usual standards.” The simmering director stomped back through the crowd of crew members to stand right in front of Elliot and the Crimson Devil. “Do not think, for one moment, that your prior association with these...super heroes...holds as much value with me as it does with the money men behind Dynamite Studios! I expect a higher standard, Mr. Fields.”

Elliot tugged at his tie. “Er, yes sir. Just tell me what you want and we’ll do some rewrites on the scene.”

Crimson Devil glanced at Elliot, then at Quail. He noticed American Star standing some distance behind Quail, making desperate throat-slashing gestures meant to catch CD’s attention. He ignored her. “Now just a minute, pal,” said the Devil. “There wasn’t anything wrong with that scene as far as I could tell!”

Quail puffed up in indignation as American Star, still within the Crimson Devil’s line of sight, smacked a hand to her forehead and mouthed the words, ‘Oh, no.’

“Is that so, Mr. Devil? Well perhaps you could regale us with your interpretation of what it is that makes grand cinema, yes?” Quail, seemingly unimpressed with the Devil’s reputation as a deadly hand-to-hand combatant, was leaning directly into the hero’s masked face. “I assume you have some opinion you think is more important than that of a two-time Oscar winner?”

CD rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. You haven’t won an Oscar since the silent movie days, and this is a serial, buddy. It’s supposed to be fun, not ‘art.’”

The entire cast and crew was dead silent, their mouths agape in stunned silence.

Quail’s face was turning an unhealthy shade of red. Had he been any angrier, he quite possibly would have blown his top...literally. “How *dare* you—“

But CD’s attention was no longer on the fuming director. A strange noise overhead had caught the attention of his keen sense of hearing: a hiss, following by a twisting of metal. As the masked man looked directly up, he caught a glimpse of a strange glowing light on a walkway crossing the artificial cavern; a strange glowing light that bore a familiar shape.

It looked like a *man*.

Suddenly, a massive floodlight broke loose from the rigging next to the glowing figure, and plummeted towards the still-screaming Randolph Quail. Without a moment’s hesitation, CD shoved Quail hard, sending the man reeling back into the arms of a stunned crew. “*Scatter!*” he shouted. The director and his crew dispersed instantly, but CD’s selflessness had put him directly in harm’s way: the floodlight, easily 300 lbs, was headed straight for him. He froze, knowing that at last his vaunted skills and luck had failed him, and that his number was indeed up. He braced for impact, even as he realized that this was a rotten way for a super hero to die.

The floodlight stopped mere inches from his head. American Star floated in the air overhead, the frame of the floodlight clutched tightly in her super-strong hands. Sure, she was Lila Monroe, a serial star. That made it easy for people to forget that unlike other serial stars, she was also American Star, a *real* super hero. Rather than float back down to the ground, she continued to hold the floodlight in mid-air while scowling down at her compatriot.

“CD,” she said, “this is the *last* time I let you visit the set of one of my pictures.”

## II.

Roughly 20 minutes later, Randolph Quail was packed into an ambulance and whisked off for x-rays. CD knew he had probably broken a few of the man’s ribs when he shoved him out of the floodlight’s path, but the director’s attitude, even after having had his life saved, had put the scarlet-attired mystery man in a foul enough mood to not feel to guilty about it. The police had all kinds of questions they wanted to ask the cast and crew, but the Crimson Devil was more interested in conducting his own investigation than contributing to one conducted by the police. Besides, he knew he couldn’t tell them about the glowing human shape he had seen on the walkway and be taken seriously. As an agent for the US government’s clandestine Bureau of the Unknown, CD and American Star were prepared to believe in ghostly luminous forms bent on mayhem; the police were not.

The set was virtually devoid of activity, production having shut down for the day, giving CD the perfect opportunity to climb up to the catwalk and do a little snooping around. What he found there left him with more questions than answers.

The spot where he had seen the shimmering figure was exactly where he had guessed it to be: about halfway down the length of a twenty-yard span of narrow catwalk, and nowhere near any of the four auxiliary catwalks that spidered out from the main structure. How the glowing figure escaped so quickly, without being noticed by a group of people whose eyes had turned towards the ceiling, was merely part of the deepening mystery, however. Upon the surface were some unusual pock marks, as if the metal had been eaten away, and the rigging that had originally suspended the floodlight had been eaten most of the way through, before the light twisted free of its clamp under its own weight.

“Acid,” the Devil whispered to himself.

That explained the hissing sound and the twisting of metal that had caught his attention, but now the Crimson Devil was left with a much more complex question. He knew the “*How?*” at least partially, but figuring out the “*Why?*” was going to be a whole other matter.

## III.

In front of her trailer, American Star was fuming. “CD, what were you thinking? You can’t talk to a director like that!”

“I’m sorry, Lila...but c’mon, the guy was really letting poor Elliot have it.” The Crimson Devil shrugged and smiled sheepishly. “Besides, I think we have more important things to worry about than Mr. Quail’s bruised ego.”

She tapped him solidly on the chest. “Oh sure, like maybe...his broken ribs?”

“Hey, I saved his *life*, didn’t I?” CD countered. Then, under his breath: “Probably shouldn’t have...”

J. Elliot Fields peeked around the corner of the trailer. “Is this a bad time, guys?”

The pair of costumed crime fighters relaxed noticeably. Over their years of working together, they had yelled at one another frequently, but it was never anything more than blowing off a little steam. Elliot’s appearance was their cue to let it go and move on.

“No, now is fine, Elliot,” answered CD. “How’d your talk with the police go?”

“They just finished with me,” the bookish little fellow replied, lighting up a Camel. “I think they’re going to write it off as an accident.”

Crimson Devil pounded his fist into his palm. “Of *course* they are. I tell you, they just don’t bother to do anything anymore.”

American Star smiled and put a reassuring hand on her partner’s shoulder. “I guess they figure with us around, they don’t have to.” She then turned and walked up the steps to her trailer. “But, you’re going to have to handle this on your own for a few days.”

“What?” replied CD and Elliot in unison.

She shrugged and smiled casually. “While you were up on the catwalk, I got a message from the assistant director. Part of the crew is headed south to shoot some of the bigger scenes, and they need me to smash some stuff up for the camera. Can’t stop production just for this, you know; shooting budgets are tight these days. I won’t be back until Monday.”

“OK, I guess it’s just you and me, Elliot.”

Elliot tugged at his collar uncomfortably. “Er, sorry CD, but I’ve got to get up to the offices and get to work on some rewrites before Mr. Quail comes back to the set.

Besides, I’m no detective. I was the one who was unwittingly passing coded sabotage messages for a Japanese crime boss, remember?”

The Crimson Devil straightened the brim of his hat with a flourish. “All right then,” he declared, his jaw setting determinedly. “I’ll track down our ghostly killer on my own.” He then took off at a brisk pace, back towards the soundstage.

“I think he’s steamed,” American Star whispered to Elliot.

Elliot nodded silently. Then, after a moment’s pause, he shouted at the Devil’s back, “CD? Um, do you really think it was a *ghost*?”