



Beppo tumbled back and reached for the hammer

## MURDER COMES IN THREES

By H. C. BUTLER

*When animal trainer Jerry Blade loses his life, it's just the beginning of a grim reign of terror under the Big Top!*

IT WAS a crazy case right from the start. It began in a cage full of wild animals and ended on top of a fifty-foot pole. That gives you an idea how nutty it was.

Me, I'm publicity man for the Burns Three-Ring Circus. It's my job to see that the show gets advance billing, and that the top acts catch the public's fancy. We have three big acts around which we've built a pretty good show.

One is Jerry Blade's mixed tiger and

lion act, another is the Great Waldo who does things that aren't possible on the high wire, and the last is Val Janis, a lad who does all kinds of meandering on top of a fifty-foot, swaying pole. The rest is routine, but good.

Like I say, it started in a cage of cats. I was watching Jerry Blade put his snarling charges through their routine, with my heart bouncing around in my mouth like it always does. To me, there's something hair-raising about a man surrounded by

jungle cats. I get as nervous as a bride—maybe because of what Jerry told me once, in confidence.

“There’s one thing to always remember,” he had said. “Never fall down in a cage of cats. They’re used to seeing man upright and in authority. A reclining man looks helpless to them, and it’s their nature to maul the helpless. If you fall in the big cage, start counting your minutes.”

Well, Jerry was young—twenty-eight to be exact—and as sure-footed as the cats themselves. But at the end of his act, when he had the cats all perched on their pedestals, he had a habit of leaping to the top of a stool and posing dramatically with his bull whip high in the air. It wasn’t much of a stunt, really, but I kept thinking, what if he should slip—

Well, he finally did.

We were doing the matinee, and Jerry’s cats had gone through their routine without too much back talk. Finally he got them all up on their mounts, and as the windjammers gave him a roll on the drums, Jerry leaped to the stool. What happened then I never want to see again.

His shining boot hit the top of the stool—then slipped from under him. With a thump he went down on his back in the sawdust. He rolled over quickly and started to get up. But the cat nearest him—a huge lion that had once killed a trainer—acted with an instinct that was both quick and devastating.

In a flash his great jaws closed around Jerry’s head, and was dragging him along the ground. Tigers won’t mix in a thing like that, but lions will. It wasn’t long before all the other lions were in on the kill.

**WE** FINALLY managed to drive the beasts off by sticking the feeding forks through the cage. But when we pulled Jerry’s body out, he was dead.

What had once been a handsome young head was now a crushed, bloody pulp.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as a couple of roustabouts carried Jerry to his tent. As we left the Big Top the band struck up a fast, furious number, and the clowns went on to ease the tension in the crowd. The show, of course, had to go on.

We collected quite a following on the way to Jerry’s tent. Val Janis, the pole man, Waldo, the high wire artist, and Beppo, the clown. Beppo was all made up for his act, which would go on in a few minutes.

His face was done in clown-white, with his thick lips done in heavy black. The black lips, turned down at the ends, gave him the lugubrious expression which had made him famous. But right now he didn’t need the white stuff to make him sad. He’d been a good friend of Jerry’s and I could see he was badly shaken.

“It’s terrible,” he kept saying. “Terrible.”

Val Janis, a thin, wiry man with dark hair and a trim mustache, said:

“I’ll take my fifty foot pole to a cageful of lions any day.”

Waldo, the high-wire performer, nodded a thick, bullet-like head and hunched his broad shoulders.

“Cats are funny,” he said. “You never know what they’ll do.”

With me, all this went in one ear and out the other—but not for the reason you think. It was just that I couldn’t think of anything except that Jerry Blade, who had been so alive a moment ago, was dead.

Then, something about Beppo caught my attention. It was difficult to say what his expression was under his ludicrous makeup, but I thought I saw a sudden, unreasonable terror there.

“This is just the beginning,” he said in a voice that sounded like doom. “It always happens in threes.”

That snapped my head up, but quick. Threes! That was the old circus superstition. But everything happened in threes. Everyone knew that. When tragedy once struck the circus, the superstition said it would strike twice more.

I call it superstition. I guess that's the word for it, but sometimes I wonder if there isn't more to it than that. With circus folk, it's more than a superstition. It's a deadly fear. A dreaded reality.

After Jerry's accident, you could almost predict what would happen. Jack Jay, Blade's assistant, would have to work the cats in the next show. He'd be thinking of what happened to Jerry. Maybe he'd slip somewhere, make the wrong move at the wrong time.

Or maybe Waldo on the high wire, whose very life depended on his mental and physical alertness, might get jittery, make a misstep. Or Janis on the pole, wondering if he would be the next in the series of threes, might overbalance himself, do just one thing wrong. That's the way it happened in circuses. After one accident, you could expect a series of them, until the jinx was off:

I decided to try and snap the boys out of it.

"Look, fellows, forget this silly three business. Go out there and do your acts. You'll get through all right. There doesn't *have* to be three."

My words must have sounded hollow, unconvincing to them. Beppo shook his head slowly.

"There'll be two more," he said dismally, and walked out.

I watched him go, thinking what a grand trouper he was. In a moment he'd be out there making the kids in the audience howl with laughter. And he'd be trying to forget Jerry Blade and the grief that tugged at his heart.

I looked back at Blade again. At the

crushed head, the uniform which the cats had clawed to ribbons. Only his shiny, black boots were untouched. Only the black boots which, in a way, had caused his death. Only the boots. . . .

My heart did a sudden flipflop and dropped into the pit of my stomach. The boots! I knelt down, looked at them closely. I ran my finger along the sole of one of the boots, gathered a white substance under my fingernail. The blood went out of my face, leaving me cold, clammy.

"What's the matter, Ken?" Waldo said.

I stared at him a long time, and tried to grasp the significance of what I'd found.

"Jerry—didn't have an accident," I managed to say;

Everyone looked at me then, as though I'd lost my mind. I had to tell it to them straight, to make them understand.

"He was murdered!" I said.

One of the girls in the crowd, a trapeze performer, muffled a little cry. Janis fingered his tiny mustache nervously. Waldo's stocky body seemed to pull together into a tight ball.

I pointed at Jerry's boots.

"The soles of his boots are—are *waxed!*"

"Waxed!" I nodded. It was all as plain as the nose on Durante's face. Hideously, fantastically plain.

"Somebody murdered Jerry Blade," I repeated. "Somebody put wax on the soles of his boots, hoping he'd slip in the cage. If he hadn't, they'd have tried it again—tried it until he did slip."

I saw wild, incredulous expressions around me. I saw Waldo stoop down to look at the boots.

"That means—" he began, and broke off lamely.

"That means there's a murderer among us," I said. "A murderer who knows something about cats."

I LEFT Jerry's body in the care of a couple of razorbacks and headed for the boss's tent. The boss, Myron Burns, was the owner of the show. He was thin, middle-aged, with a tan, weather-creased face—an easy-going, phlegmatic sort of man who never got excited about anything.

He'd been in the circus business so long—as a tight rope walker in the early days—that he had sawdust in his blood. That's the way you get. Once you've lived with a circus, you can't live any other way.

He was sitting behind a small desk with Brick Redmond, the business manager, when I entered. Redmond was called Brick because his complexion matched the side of a brick house. High blood pressure caused his redness, and also caused his nervous, jittery disposition. He hadn't been with the show very long—about two years—so he didn't have as much sawdust in his veins as the rest of us.

Both men looked at me sharply as I came in, and from the sour expressions on their mugs I knew they'd already heard about Jerry.

"You heard about it, eh?" I said, just to make sure.

They nodded in unison. Burns' thin lips moved slightly as he shook his head dolefully.

"Darn shame. A good trouper, going like that."

I nodded. Redmond shifted nervously in his chair. His feet scraped the wood floor of the tent.

"Accidents will happen," he said, trying to be fatalistic about it.

I just stared at him. Then I looked at Burns. It would be tough telling them, but it had to be done.

"It wasn't an accident."

Burns' gray eyebrows arched in surprise. Redmond's crimson face wore a

puzzled scowl. Burns found his voice first.

"What do you mean, Ken?"

"It was murder," I told them.

"Murder!"

"Yes—deliberate and premeditated."

Then I told them how someone had waxed Jerry's boots.

It was like dropping a blockbuster in their laps. It shattered even Burns' lackadaisical demeanor. Redmond started to fidget like an old woman with the palsy. Then Burns asked me if I was sure. I told him I was. He looked at me as though he still couldn't believe it.

"But who would want to kill Jerry?" he asked.

He should ask me! I shrugged.

"No fair starting with the sixty-four-dollar question. Let's begin with the two-dollar one. Did he have any enemies that you know of?"

Burns wagged his head. The creases in his thick skin seemed to have grown deeper since I'd spilled the news.

"He was popular with all the kinkers," he said.

Redmond suddenly jerked up his head. That's the way he did things—in jerks. You could see he'd been smitten by a sudden inspiration, the way he acted.

"Maybe the motive was jealousy. Jack Jay's been hanging around a long time, wanting to work the cats."

When he said it that way, it made me want to sock him. Jack Jay was a good boy. Every kinker—performer—in the show liked him. True, he'd been understudying Jerry a long time, and I guess he did want a chance to handle the cats, but so what? He didn't want it bad enough to commit murder.

"It doesn't sound right," I said. "Jack wouldn't kill Jerry for a chance at the animal act. You know that, Brick."

Redmond shrugged broad shoulders, said it was just an idea and for me not to

get sore about it. Burns' wrinkled face took on a troubled look.

"It'll be tough on the kinkers," he said. "You know what they'll be thinking."

I knew what he meant. Burns was an old trouper himself, and he was thinking how tragedy always hits the circus in threes. Not that he was superstitious. It was just in his blood, like the sawdust was.

"They're thinking it already," I said. "The jinx is on."

Burns' tan face went a little white.

"You know what that means, Ken. It means there will be two more tragedies."

**R**EDMOND drummed nervously on the desk with his fingers, his red face agitated.

"Nonsense!" he blurted, as though trying to bolster his own lack of conviction. "Most stupid thing I ever heard. No reason at all to expect two more accidents. Besides," he smiled contemptuously, "there'd only be one more anyway. Jerry's mishap is really the second. You seem to forget that Mike Lazotti died a month ago."

Burns gave him a quick glance.

"Mike was just a roustabout, not a performer. Roustabouts are always getting into scraps, and Lazotti took a beating that killed him. But his death wasn't a major tragedy, like Jerry's. The kinkers will figure Jerry's death is the first one—with two more coming. And they will come, Brick, they always do."

Right then, I got sore. I gave Burns a good going over about being too superstitious. But it was an act. Deep down, I knew how serious it was. I'd seen shows actually break up, when the jinx was on. The kinkers would get jittery, everyone thinking he was going to be next.

There'd be more accidents. They'd miss cues, gum up the acts. The show would fall apart. It had happened before. It

could happen again.

Anyway, I walked out of the office, acting like I was plenty burned up, hoping to snap them out of it. When I got outside I ran into Waldo. He stopped me.

"Listen, Ken," he said. "If anything should happen to me on the wire tonight—" He stopped, stared at me helplessly.

This looked like it. The show was going to blaze. Waldo was trying to edge out of the act.

"Okay, Waldo," I said. "If you're jittery, don't go up tonight. We can fill it in with something else."

I wasn't being sarcastic. I meant it. There's no point in making a man go through a dangerous act if he's on edge. But I found out I had Waldo all wrong.

"I'm not quitting," he snapped, and his voice was angry. "I've been a trouper too long to walk out on an act. I'm going up tonight. But I want you to know that if something *does* happen to me, it'll be murder again—not an accident."

And he left it that way. He wouldn't say another word.

By the time the evening performance went on, the cops had been called in on the case and were doing some fancy snooping around. But it all added up to zero. They couldn't figure out any more angles than we could. Jerry Blade had been killed by person or persons unknown, and that was the end of it.

Myron Burns, Brick Redmond and I decided to view the evening show from a box seat, opposite the cat cage. As a prelude to the start of the show proper, a few clowns were slapsticking it for the amusement of the kids in the audience, and some of the grown-ups too.

Beppo, with his white and black make-up, was one of them. After a few minutes, he paused in his clowning and came over to our box. His sober make-up, plus the fact that Jerry's death had got him down

anyway, made him a sorry looking spectacle.

He stood there a minute, saying nothing, then finally dropped words out of the corner of his painted mouth.

"It's a death show tonight," he said. "It's in the air."

I felt like slugging him. He wasn't doing anybody any good, making such remarks. Yet, I couldn't blame him. It was traditional—this business of threes.

"Take it easy, Beppo," I said. "Everything'll be all right."

He shook his head doubtfully and went back to his clowning. A few minutes later the show started. There was the usual parade around the track—a very colorful affair—and then came the first ring act. Jack Jay and the cats.

I'll be honest with you. I was plenty nervous during the animal act. I was sitting on a pin-cushion, just waiting for one of those cats to knock Jay for a loop. But, thank heaven, it didn't happen. Jay handled the act like a veteran, although I did notice the cats were a little noisier than usual. I breathed for the first time when it was over.

There was a lot of routine stuff then—tumblers, equestrians, the elephant act, jugglers, and the like. Then, about halfway through the show, came Val Janis on the swaying pole.

It was really a lulu of an act. The wiry Janis, on top of the fifty-foot pole, would do hand-stands, head-stands, and a lot of assorted acrobatics, while the pole swayed gently back and forth from the movement of his body. During this time, the windjammers played "Don't Fence Me In", which is a heck of a number for a lad with as much space around him as Janis has on the pole. But that was the idea. Grim humor.

As a closing sequence, he'd put on a stunt that would keep the audience in a

nervous sweat until it was over. Beppo, the clown, would stand at the foot of the pole. Janis, on top, would do a head stand. Then Beppo—or so it looked to the spectators—would start pushing and pulling the pole, causing it to sway wildly.

Actually, Beppo didn't do a thing, although he put on a good act of make-believe. The sway of the pole was controlled by Janis, himself, who knew just how far he could go without falling off and breaking his neck.

It was a nerve-wracking act, at any time, but with the jinx on, it just about knocked us all out. I felt a lot better when Janis hit the sawdust, safely.

Some more routine stuff followed—trained seals, clowns, dog acts, trapeze performers. Then the finale. The Great Waldo on the high wire.

**W**ALDO was the only tight-wire performer we had, and he was plenty good. He went through his act on a wire about forty feet from the sawdust, and without a net. He could do more stunts on that wire than I could do on a sidewalk. But, like Janis, it was his closing stunt that caused general heart failure in the audience.

Waldo was the only high-wire performer I've ever known who had so perfected the frontward flip that he could do it without a net.

He'd get himself braced, balanced just right, and then, very suddenly, he'd do a somersault in the air—coming down on his feet on the high wire. No matter how you looked at it, I always figured it was a tough way to make a living. One slip—and curtains.

Well, this night he was all ready to do the flip. The P.A. system had requested the audience to remain quiet until Waldo had completed the act in safety. He stood there, high above the ring, balancing

himself perfectly in the center of the almost invisible wire. An expectant hush lay over the, vast throng of people; the Big Top was as silent as though it was empty.

Then, very quickly, he did the flip.

He came down on the wire all right, with both feet perfectly balanced. I breathed a sigh of relief. Then I heard a *ping*—and Waldo was falling through space! The crowd, stunned, watched him hit the sawdust, bounce, roll over. As somebody screamed, the crowd roared to its feet, and the place was a madhouse.

It all happened so suddenly that we were glued to our seats for a moment. Then I leaped over the rail of the box, with Burns and Brick Redmond after me.

By the time I reached Waldo, a razorback and a clown were bending over the crumpled, broken form that had once been the Great Waldo. I felt ants crawling along my scalp and down my spine as I looked at him.

The Great Waldo had done his last act.

I glanced up at the wire and saw why Waldo had fallen. The wire had snapped, near the center. It had apparently been able to withstand Waldo's other tricks, but the jarring force with which he'd come down on the wire after his flip had been too much.

Tensely, I watched them carry Waldo's body from the Big Top. I saw Burns' face, wrinkled in an agony of horror. Redmond's red face twisted as though in pain. Then, the black and white face of Beppo, the clown.

I heard something rattle in Beppo's throat, like he was trying to say something and couldn't. Finally, words tumbled out.

"This is the second," he said dully. "There'll be another. Death comes in threes."

I decided to ignore him. I looked up at the wire again; then at Burns.

"Have somebody bring that wire into the office," I said. "I'll bet money somebody cut it part way to weaken it." I turned to Beppo. "Maybe you ought to change the way you say that. Maybe it's murder that comes in threes."

A few minutes later we were back in Burns' office. Redmond was pacing the floor like a lion in a cage. Burns was silent, his face a sort of ash gray. For a long time, nobody said anything. Then Burns broke the silence.

"Look here, Ken," he said. "I want to tell you something—before I tell the cops."

"Shoot," I said, not knowing what to expect.

Burns lit a cigarette.

"When Jerry Blade was killed, I thought it was the work of some one who had a personal grudge against Blade. Now that Waldo's gone too, I'm beginning to think something else. I think somebody's trying to sabotage the circus!"

"Sabotage, eh?"

Burns nodded.

"Somebody's trying to wreck the show. I'm convinced of it."

I thought it over a minute. It sounded logical enough. In two successive performances, we'd lost two of our key acts. It certainly looked like somebody wanted to do the show harm.

"Who'd want to pull a stunt like that?" I asked, wondering if Burns had any ideas.

He shrugged.

"I'm not sure. But I have an idea."

"Let's have it."

Burns settled back in his chair. Redmond stopped pacing the floor, stood tensely still.

"I may be all wrong," Burns said, "but at least it's something to work on. It goes back twenty years, to a small town in the South. I was engaged to be married to a

nice kid, but there was another man in town who couldn't see it our way.

"He was tough—plenty. One day, in a jealous fit, he murdered that girl. The cops couldn't prove a thing, and it looked for a time like he'd get off scot free. But I managed to dig up enough evidence to convict him. His name was Ed Morgan. He was sent up for life."

I DIDN'T say anything, just let him go on.

"You know how those life terms are," he said. "He was released a couple months ago after serving twenty years. He'd threatened me when they jailed him, said if he ever got out he'd get revenge. And now he's out."

I looked Burns over. I was beginning to get a glimpse of what he was leading up to, but I didn't quite see it yet. I told him to go on.

"Of course, "I haven't any proof," Burns continued. "But I'm wondering if Morgan has set out on a plan to sabotage the circus, take away its top acts, and ruin me financially."

"If he's so hot after you, why doesn't he just knock you off, instead of these others?" I asked.

A crooked smile twisted Burns' fine lips.

"He might do that eventually. But it would be like him to try to ruin me financially first—make me suffer awhile before finishing me."

"Would you recognize this Morgan?"

"I don't know, Ken." Burns' face clouded. "He was thirty when he went to jail. He'd be fifty now. If he grew a mustache to change his appearance—something like that—I probably wouldn't know him."

"So that he might be employed with the circus right now, as a roustabout?"

"That's what I was thinking," Burns

said.

I wasn't too enthusiastic about the idea. But I acknowledged it was something to work on.

Just then Beppo came in, dragging the wire which had been taken from Waldo's act. He showed me the severed ends, where they'd snapped apart. I couldn't be positive, but it looked to me like they might have been cut part way through, and had snapped the rest of the way.

"It always comes up murder," I said, and walked out.

That night I got very little sleep. There were too many wild thoughts fighting for dominance in my brain. I kept thinking about Jerry and the lions. About Waldo, hurtling to his death from the high wire. About Beppo and his continued references to tragedy coming in threes. About Burns' story of Ed Morgan, who might be behind a plot to wreck the show.

Then I thought of Val Janis. The only top performer left. His swaying pole act was the only drawing card on the bill. If there was a plot to wreck the show—if this plot did take the form of repeating itself in threes—then Janis would be the next logical victim!

I decided to have a talk with Janis in the morning, tell him he didn't have to do the pole act for awhile—in fact, urge him not to.

It was about three in the morning that I got up, slipped on shoes and trousers, and went for a stroll around the lot. The night was sticky hot, and I had too much in my noodle to sleep anyway. I strolled down Clown Alley, around the back yard behind the Big Top, and along the front of the sideshow. There was no one up. The whole circus was dark and silent.

Whatever made me go into the Big Top I don't know. But I did, sort of aimlessly. It was pitch dark inside, like the rest of the circus. Pitch dark, that is, except

in one spot. As I entered the main entrance I saw a small light near the ground at the far end!

I had been around circuses long enough to know that the light didn't belong there so I walked forward softly, coming closer and closer to the little light as I cut across the empty rings. I saw the form of a man in the circle of light—a man stooped over. In his hand was a small saw!

My breath really caught in my throat then. The man was crouched at the foot of Val Janis' swaying pole! And he was using a saw to cut a wide notch out of the pole! Weakening the pole so that it, like Waldo's wire, would collapse at the next performance!

In a glance I saw that the notch had already been cut out, and that the man was now re-inserting the notch. I saw a can of putty, a few small nails and a hammer, a can of white paint, near him. Material to hide his deadly work.

Then, in a sudden wild fury, I went for him.

He must have heard me as I came forward, because he jumped up quickly. In a brief instant before I hit him I saw his face—a ludicrous white face with black, drooping lips. The face of Beppo, the clown!

He tumbled back with a little cry as I crashed into him, rolled over on the sawdust. But he had a weapon, and I didn't. He'd grabbed the hammer as he went down, and before I could stop him he brought it down on the side of my head.

I saw stars, pretty lights, blinding flashes, all at the same time. Then my whole body went rubbery, and I slipped off into black nothingness.

Coming out of it slowly, I opened my eyes to daylight. I was lying on a cot in my own tent and there was an incessant pounding in my brain, like somebody was hitting the back of my head with a mallet.

There was a strong, sweet odor in the room that I couldn't place at first and then, as my senses returned, recognized.

Chloroform!

I SWUNG my legs down, sat on the edge of the cot. With an effort, I tried to make my sagging memory work. It came slowly at first, then all in a rush. Beppo, weakening the pole on which Janis would perform today!

I shook my head, trying to rid it of the cobwebs. Fuzzily, my mind started working. I'd have to warn Janis. I'd have to cancel his act. I'd have to—

My thoughts came to a sudden, crashing halt. For the first time it made sense to me. Beppo! It was Beppo who was trying to wreck the show! Beppo who had killed Jerry Blade and Waldo! Beppo who would try to kill Janis too!

My mind whirled, spun dizzily. My head was going around in circles, and logical thinking wouldn't come. Then, all at once, a crazy thought came into my mind. Why had Beppo been wearing his make-up at three o'clock in the morning?

Faintly, I heard music. The windjammers playing in the Big Top! Playing music that was discordant, that carried no melody for me at first. Music that suddenly melted into "Don't Fence Me In"!

A quick chill raced through me as I recognized the song. My body was paralyzed for a moment, then horror drove me to my feet. "Don't Fence Me In" meant that Janis was on the swaying pole!

I staggered from my tent into the sunlight, picked up speed as I raced across the back yard. There were kinkers all around—those whose acts had gone on, those who were waiting to take their cues. But I didn't pay any attention to them. I was racing like a crazy man toward the Big Top.

I burst into the arena just as Janis was getting ready for his final head-stand. Just as Beppo—with murder at his finger tips—was getting ready to sway the pole! The pole whose base would this time crack and crumble, pitching Janis to his death!

I don't know what the audience thought; I didn't care. I just raced across the rings, stumblingly, until I reached the base of the big pole. And before Beppo knew what had happened, I landed on him.

In an instant I had him on his back, beating his clown-face, getting black grease paint and clown-white on my knuckles. I kept pounding him in a mad fury until he lay still. And then quite suddenly it made sense. Everything that had been confused in my mind straightened out—this wasn't Beppo after all.

I took out a handkerchief, rubbed away enough of the paint to make sure. It was Myron Burns!

Janis had come down the pole. Brick Redmond was there. Jack Jay, a host of kinkers, a big cop from Headquarters. Burns came out of it and scrambled to his feet, but by this time the big cop had him covered.

"I figured it was you all the time, Burns," I said. "The Beppo angle confused me for awhile, but it had to be you. You left yourself wide open on two counts."

He just glared at me, a twisted, half-smile on his lips.

"I suspected you," I continued, "when you told me the story about Ed Morgan trying to ruin you by wrecking the show. It sounded fishy. I figured if someone wanted to sabotage the circus there were easier ways to do it.

"He could have fired the Big Top, poisoned the cats, wrecked the train we travel on—almost anything. He didn't have to pick the hard way of killing off individual kinkers. I doubt if Ed Morgan

ever existed."

Burns said nothing, but stood there stolidly, sneering.

"But," I said "there was something else that more definitely pointed to you. That was the way Waldo was murdered. His high wire was cut *in the middle*.

"That meant that whoever did the job had to be very much at home on a tight wire. He had to be able to walk out on the wire, kneel down, and cut that wire part way through—a dangerous trick in itself."

"Well, Waldo was the only tight-wire performer in the show. The only one, Burns. That made it tough to figure out until I remembered that you were a tight-rope walker in your early days. In other words, outside of Waldo himself, you were the only one in the show who could have cut that wire!"

Burns' lips curled more. His eyes blazed out of his creased face.

"You killed Jerry Blade by waxing his shoes, and you killed Waldo by weakening the high wire. You would have killed Janis, too, by weakening the pole and then swaying it far enough to make it break."

I turned to the cop, told him how I'd encountered a man—presumably Beppo—weakening the pole last night.

"I thought," I said. "It was funny that Beppo would be wearing his make-up at three o'clock in the morning, and while doing a dangerous job like that. But now it's clear.

"Burns knew there was a chance he might be discovered in the act of weakening the pole, so he figured it best to disguise himself. What better way than to make himself up as Beppo and thus throw suspicion on the clown if he was seen?"

**B**RICK REDMOND was nodding, looking at Burns in something akin to horror. He turned to me.

"Why didn't Burns kill you, after you

discovered him?” Redmond said.

“He didn’t want to kill me. I was worth more alive. He figured I would cement his case against Beppo by testifying that I’d seen Beppo weakening the pole. So he gave me a dose of chloroform, thinking it would keep me knocked out until Janis’ act was over. Luckily, it didn’t.”

“But the motive!” exploded Redmond.

“I can supply that,” cut in Janis. His face was drawn, pale. “You remember that roustabout that was killed a month ago—Mike Lazotti? Well, it was Burns who killed him. He’d have been in the clear and never even suspected, if it hadn’t been for Jerry Blade, Waldo, and myself. We witnessed it.”

“We made it clear to Burns that we knew he’d done the job, so he paid us off in higher salaries, bonuses, to keep our mouths shut. We were wrong to accept it, I know—but it looked like a good deal to us. Then Burns must have got jittery, decided to get rid of all three of us.”

A bright idea bounced into my head. I look at Burns.

“Things start to make sense,” I said. “Mike Lazotti must have been Ed Morgan. He’d joined the circus with the purpose of either sabotaging it or killing you. So you beat him to it.”

Burns didn’t say anything, but I knew by his expression that I was right. There was only one thing more to clear up. I snapped a question at Burns.

“Where’s Beppo? The real Beppo?”

He just glared at me, but there was a guilty look in his eyes. I knew, then, what had happened. It made me feel sick.

“You dirty dog!” I roared at him. “You killed Beppo too. You probably made it look like suicide. After dumping Janis from the pole, you figured you could slip away in the confusion, take off the make-up, come back as Myron Burns. Then, later, we’d find Beppo dead, and the conclusion would be that it Beppo had done all three killings and then committed suicide in remorse.”

He just looked away. It was right. We found Beppo’s body in his own tent in Clown Alley. He’d been shot, and there was a gun with a silencer attached in his hand. Beside him was a typewritten note—a suicide note which Burns had manufactured, to throw the guilt on Beppo.

I shook my head. “Beppo always said tragedy hit the circus in threes. But I guess he never figured he’d be the third victim.”

Redmond was staring out of misted eyes. He didn’t seem able to grasp it yet.

“The show’s finished, with our top acts gone,” he muttered.

“No,” I said. “Not finished. We still have Janis. And we’ll build up Jack Jay and the cats. And, somewhere, we’ll find a new high-wire man—maybe not as good as Waldo, but we’ll find one. As for Beppo, I guess there’ll never be another quite like him. But there’ll be others that are plenty good. You know what they say, Brick. The show must go on.”