

# STARTLING 15¢ MYSTERY

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# Death Stocks His Harem

By Francis James

*The hunchbacked Sons of Hell carried the girls they stole to the highest rooftop . . . then threw their hideously mangled corpses mockingly down to the horrified crowds. As, with bleeding fingernails, I climbed the sheer cathedral walls behind the monster who had my wife, I prayed only for enough strength to save her with my own death!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Ripped-Out Heart

THE thing seemed to jump at me. Its needle-like teeth snarled and its macabre grin leered up out of the tangle of Stella's pink underwear in the bureau drawer.

"Heavenly God!" Reedy and strangled my yell spurted. I leaped back from the bureau, hurled the thing out of my hand as though it were red hot. And then I stood with fists clenched at my sides, staring at it as it lay on the floor.

Some one with hell's own skill at modeling had fashioned the four-inch figurine of wax—a woman, stark nude, with beautifully tapering little legs and arms, breasts like twin pearls against her sleek torso. It was the most exquisite thing I had ever seen.

The face of that tiny statue was that of Stella, my wife! Caricatured, lips snarling, features contorted into a gnome-like incarnation of all that was ghastly and hideous. And midway in her bosom, between the little ivory breasts was a hole



through which her heart had been pulled to lie like a drop of blood against her flesh.

I gaped at the thing, desperately trying to suppress the wave of horror that was surging over me. It was just a practical joke planted among my wife's clothes by someone with a crazed sense of humor, I



***A Pulse-Chilling Novelette of Raw Horror!***

tried to convince myself. But the memory of what had been happening in the city entered my mind and swept my reasoning aside.

Dark, terrible deeds often take place after nightfall in the hidden dens of every great city. But the outrages that were

going on here in the Italian quarter were horrors unparalleled. One after another, girls had been snatched out of busy life into the world of the missing. Some of them had come back—that is, what was left of their bodies came back. They returned mindless idiots, gibbering wildly

of unspeakable evils and hellish tortures.

The ignorant people believed in the power of these wax figures to bewitch, sicken and kill. I was a doctor practicing here. An educated man, I had scoffed at those wild ideas.

But now the sweat of a fear that was unreasoning, primitive, gushed on me. My hands were icy cold as I grabbed up my hat and rushed out of the house.

I knew that Stella would be somewhere down in the square. She was going to meet me there.

To a casual observer, old Fleet Street seemed just a riotous carnival that night of St. Anthony's festival. Arches of colored lights curved over the street, candles glowed in the windows of homes and little shops. Concertinas wheezed wild melodies for the dancing crowds that jammed the narrow way from wall to wall.

Fleet Street is the wrist from which the fingers of the Italian quarter radiate like a sprawled hand into the slums. A strange little community, self-contained and self-sufficient amid the metropolis, where are to be found today the old-world customs of Sicily and Naples, the gay light-heartedness — the black crawling fears.

Though outward joy held sway here tonight, I could sense an unnaturalness, a tension, vibrating under the gaiety. The same terror that had clutched me at sight of the figurine, inundated the streets—an invisible river of dread that choked the carollers' voices. Under the blaze of red and yellow lights around the wooden stand where a band blazed out anthems, strained, pinched faces were uplifted, beseeching St. Anthony, imploring all the saints for a miracle to free them from the shadow of death.

For maybe five minutes I wormed my way through the crowd searching for Stella. I'd been half running—and then I halted suddenly to see the crowd in front

of me blown apart as though a bomb had gone off in its midst. A wave of figures spilled backward from the black gash where the mouth of an alley cut into the wall of house fronts.

I froze in my tracks. My mouth opened to yell, but horror twisted my throat in a knot.

A golden haired figure stood there at the end of the alley. It was Stella. . . .

**H**ER body was bent forward, curved in a bow, struggling madly, arms straining, fingernails clawing on bricks—against something behind her that was holding her, dragging her! Sweat stood on her face, damp under matted hair. Lips wrenched apart, eyes awful with terror. "God! Oh, God!" her choked gaggings sobbed.

In the shadows back there something only half visible boiled with hideous motion—as though hell had opened and vomited one of its monsters up to earth. Huge twisted hands shot into sight, clutching her shoulders. She screamed insanely, scratched at the hands, tore them with her sharp fingernails, bit them.

They whipped down over her bosom, wound into the front of her dress, and then yanked. Thin rippings sounded and she was nude to the waist. And then those talons dropped to sink their fangs into the flesh over her heart. Gripped and set themselves to jerk apart.

I hurled myself across the street. The ten yards to her was a million miles. Something was cracking inside me, blasting and blowing up, and those tortured wailings of hers, like the screeching of frenzied violins, tore like talons at my agonized mind.

The thing let her go and jumped back as I got there. In the dark something shouldered against the wall with the scouring rasp of a serpent.

I grabbed Stella and pushed her behind me. And then, for no reason at all, he

thing was gone. Nothing was there, only pitch darkness and a stench that twisted my stomach—a reek of fetor as though from the sink of perdition.

My legs were weaker than water as I stumbled back to her. She flung herself into my arms, fingers tearing at my shoulders. Her slim figure throbbed with the racking tremors of hysteria that swept it.

"God in heaven, what was it? What had you?" I gagged half incoherently.

"Oh, I don't know!" she whimpered. "I just *smelled* it in there, something horrible. And then it had me. It . . ."

My eyes fell to her body, her soft, voluptuous form whose sight never failed to set my heart racing. God, what I saw! Up and down over her heart were parallel rows of deep pittings where the thing had dug in its grappling hooks to rend her wide open and rip out her heart as it had been done in the figurine!

Something uncanny and damnable had sprung out of the warm summer night, the crowds, the yellow lights. Better than any outsider I knew the currents of superstition that ran turgid and deep here. Stella and I had worked to uproot ignorance and banish fear. But now I knew that these people here were right; that their beliefs in the powers of sorcery and evil had a factual basis in horrors such as I had witnessed.

I slid my arm around Stella and started to draw her out of the alley.

"Let's get out of this, let's hurry home," I muttered.

And then suddenly I felt her lithe form snap rigid. I looked down to see her staring over my shoulder, jaws gaping, eyes dreadfully dilated.

Out beyond in the street a woman had shrieked. The musicians in the stand flung down their instruments and leaped to their feet. And then silence expanded to a void of horror in which not a voice was raised, not a breath drawn. Every one was staring at a man who stood

rigid as stone, outthrust arm pointing upward.

"*Gobbo! Jettatore! Diabolo!*" he screamed.

ON the low slanting roof of a little shop scarcely ten feet over our heads, two figures had appeared, whence no one could guess.

One was a girl with a soft, pretty face and streaming yellow hair. Stark naked she lay prone on her back on the roof. And over her stooped a form that might have been hatched from a demon's egg incubated in primordial ooze.

I saw a short, malformed body with grotesquely swollen shoulders atop a squat torso. The knotted, purple face was that of a monster from hell. It's huge triangular head bristled with red hair; a single crimson eye glared in demonic ferocity.

The thing whooped and flung himself on the girl. He stood straddled over her body, raking, slashing, tearing with flying hands. Cat-like, he was ripping her flesh from her body! In an instant her white form was covered with blood; between her white breasts, her heart was torn into the open, still throbbing.

Suddenly he straightened to snatch the girl up by the middle. As though she was a child he swung her white limpness over his head. And then with a heave of superhuman strength, he sent her flying through the air.

The throng split apart. Men cursing, women fleeing, children clinging to hands and skirts, they grovelled back from the sight of that spinning form. She came down in their midst in a little clear space—came down with a horrible slapping thud and lay motionless.

For another instant there was silence, stark and breathless and frozen. Then a great wail swept through the throng. There was sudden hysterical motion, a surge of white-eyed and yammering forms.

Clubs waved, heavy stones started to fly.

The fiend whirled around to escape. He fled—but not as any mortal man would have done. He seized projections on the side of the building which rose behind the roof of the shop and went climbing up the sheer facade. He scaled the vertical wall with the speed of an ape. He gained the roof and turned to glare defiantly down at us. Then he vanished.

"It is the evil one!" an old woman moaned. "We have seen him before, running over our roofs and looking in through our windows, putting spells on us!"

"He screams and tears up the shingles trying to make holes to get down to us!" another one yammered.

"He takes our girls from their beds and flies away with them over the house tops!" sobbed a third.

I fought back the chills of eerie fear that lifted the hair on my neck, trying to keep sane in this farrago of horrors. I had heard this before. I knew of the malign figure that the people declared was seen at night skipping over their house tops, hiding behind chimneys, making obscene signs through their windows.

This killer had been a hunchback. Several cripples lived in the quarter, and the people believed that they were at the root of the awfulness that was going on. But this hunchback had climbed like something half human, half animal!

My eyes turned again to the dead girl—the flesh was hacked from the skeleton, the face was a crimson ruin with rows of white teeth grinning amid jutting skeleton bones. And then, despite the noisome surge of my horror, I was moving over there where she lay.

Suddenly Stella snatched my hand and sobbed: "Rosa! It's Rosa Feretti—"

Her words sent yet another flood of terror into my brain. Rosa was Stella's best friend, her pal in the social service work that the two girls had been doing

among the poor. The attempt that had failed on Stella, had left her partner brutally mangled! I licked lips that had become parched as though roasted in fire.

In the crowd some one yelled, pointed upward.

"Look there! There on the church . . ."

My gaze followed his motion. Up on the roof of the cathedral across the square, under whose holy shadow the people had sought protection while they prayed for a miracle, it seemed as though the devil was running! As though one of the stone gargoyles around its caves had come to life to go prancing in mockery over the cornices.

That was a thought of sacrilege! Yet something *was* there . . . And if I could have guessed then how hideously true that fantasy of mine was to become, bringing madness to Stella and me. . . .

I wrapped my coat around her and we ran for home, shunning the dark corners, veering back from low roofs off which fiends could jump. We fled like damned souls while fear pursued us with every step.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Terror In The Sky

IT wasn't far to the house of Alberto Nicolini, the retired merchant, where Stella and I lived.

I was a young doctor not long in practice. The train of events that had led me to settle down in this quarter had begun when I was serving my stretch as interne in the little branch hospital only a few blocks away.

My early life had been upholstered with money, private schools, college, vacations in Europe. Then had come the depression, financial chaos—and the cold shoulders of erstwhile pals.

I had salvaged some funds from the wreck, enough to go on with my medical course. Disillusioned and bitter, hating

the world that had bilked me, I had come to the poverty of the Italian quarter asking only a hole into which I could crawl to stew in my own juice and become bitterer yet. The most insidious of vices—self-pity. And one that was swept away from me as though by a cool tingling wind when I met Stella.

She herself was a child of the district. Born and brought up here, an orphan ward of Nicolini, she had improved and educated herself through self-denial and endless brave persistence. She had taken courses in nursing and social service to prepare herself to work among these people, her friends.

She had come to the hospital to finish her training. I watched her, talked with her, grew mightily ashamed of the pin-hole philosophy of life to which my pampered ego had brought me—and then snapped out of it as her brave example showed me ways of happiness of whose existence I hadn't dreamed; of the satisfactions to be had from service to others.

I took my life in my two hands and started out to make it what I wanted it to be—what we both wanted it, for by this time we were engaged. I slaved like the devil, and at the end of my term we were married and I hung out my modest shingle in the little office that I rented from Nicolini.

I was big and Nordic and blond, more than six feet tall, with muscles like cables. I had paid my way through the last year of college as a professional wrestler.

Stella was short and petite, all live-wire vivacity and delicious, alluring curves. Her small oval face was pale as old ivory in the frame of sleek black hair drawn back demurely around her ears. She had dark eyes that grew melting and wistful as she looked at me. She was an adorable thing! All through the quarter they smiled at us, loving us and our love, called us *i grande e la cara piccola*—the big and the dear little one.

I worshipped her so much that my throat went tight and my hands tensened when I thought of her. I dedicated all my young strength, my loyalty, and whatever brains I had, to making myself worthy of her.

And what that love of mine did to her at the end! May God save me from hell. . . .

WANDER along Fleet Street during the day as a stranger and you will see nothing but squalor and poverty in grubby dwellings and fetid warrens where the sun never shines. But live among these people, share their miserably happy lives, experience the warmth of their gratitude, and you will learn to love them as I had done.

Stella came and went among them, an angel of ministering kindness. But physical care was only half of what she was trying to give them. The dark, awful things, never uttered aloud, seldom whispered, that were going on—she believed were caused by some secret society to terrorize the ignorant and superstitious, committing these horrors to keep its grip on them—and for months she had been working to expose this organization and free the people from the clutch of its cruel hand. Her efforts were in vain—had even made matters worse, it seemed. For during the past weeks that unknown evil power had brought ghastliness striking thick and fast. Rosa, Stella's helper, was only one sample of many unutterable outrages.

And tonight I had seen it striking at Stella. . . .

AT Nicolini's we found a number of his friends—Rossi the banker, and Charlie Fodale, the gambler who knew everyone. Guiseppe Mormeno, the lawyer—and Pietro Giglio. I'll tell you more about Giglio later.

Nicolini sat in his wheel chair, his

wasted legs covered by a knitted robe, eyes fixed on the image of St. Anthony in its wall shrine. Bitter years he had waited, almost fanatical in his faith that the saint would send a miracle to restore the use of his limbs which were crushed years before in a dreadful accident. The deep brown eyes in his suffering-lined face held frantic supplication of prayer. Held, it seemed to me, almost a mad light.

There was a moment of horrified silence after Stella and I had poured out our story.

"Holy Mother of God save us!" the cripple's wife moaned. She hurried to sweep Stella into her motherly arms. I knew that she loved my wife—she and her husband both loved her—as though she was their own.

"I have just heard from the police on my way here," one of the men whispered thickly, "that the girl who was thrown from the roof had been made by force the bride of some one—of *something*—before she was killed. The marks of claws were deep in her back as well as her bosom. They had been dug in there while . . ."

A moaning sound, stifled, fear-strangled, swept around the room at his words. My eyes lifted and I saw something that clamped an iron hand around the back of my neck. For an instant my heart didn't beat. I saw Giglio over there. . . .

Giglio had been Nicolini's life-long friend and bosom comrade. He was a strange man—student, scholar, mystic He and the cripple spent hours discussing the dark and hidden, supernatural things toward which Nicolini's mind turned more and more as his malady worsened.

But now as I saw him there, his great figure crowding the little room, I felt something cold and nerve-twisting in the pit of my stomach.

For Giglio was a hunchback, too. He had a huge triangular head set on a short neck between plough-shaped shoulders. A

great flat nose spread itself over his face. One fiercely red eye blazed at us, its mate obscured by a swollen wart. Such a lone orb as had glared down from the blood-dripping creature on the roof of the shop! And those spindling bowed legs under thickset torso possessed strength to climb like an ape!

I got out my handkerchief and mopped my face till the thing was a wet snowball. It was just a bizarre coincidence. For Giglio's nature was gentle and kindly as his appearance was horrifying. Stella had known him all her life—he was her godfather. As a little girl she had loved to spend hours in his laboratory where he showed her prettily colored liquids in his test tubes, and trotted out his models of animals that would move about on springs as though alive.

She had become accustomed to his ugliness and no longer thought of it. But now, as she caught the look on my face, she turned to me whitening, eyes dreadful with horror. She clutched my hand and sobbed: "Oh, Phil, let's go—let's go upstairs!"

UP in our room, we stood for an instant staring at one another without uttering a word. That sight of Giglio, so identical in appearance to the thing on the roof, left us appalled with an awe that we couldn't put into speech—that was too dreadful to whisper, yet that we couldn't drive out of our minds. This couldn't be possible!

Wan and trembling, Stella at last removed what was left of her ribboned waist. I got water from the bath room and dressed the ragged pits in her bosom.

Stella was a modest, dutiful girl, self-denying, devoted to me and our work. I felt her loyalty and her courage as something steadfast as heaven. She was my heaven . . . She couldn't help it if God had given her the loveliest body that was ever made, Circe-like in its exotic allure.



Married more than a year though we had been, the sight of her body still made my mouth go dry and my heart begin pounding. I strode there to snatch her yielding figure into my arms.

For an instant I held her tight, her palpitating softness nestled against my hard muscles. She twined her arms around my neck and answered the embrace with her whole quivering soul. And then I felt her start as though a whiplash had flogged her. She whirled to look up at me and her scream panted: "Phil! Dear God, what was that?"

In the room next to ours something was happening. There was a scraping of feet on the floor; a frenzied clattering; a ripping sound—whether of cloth or human flesh, I couldn't tell. And then a shriek, spurring, exploding up over the octaves of agony. It was the most ghastly thing I had ever heard in my life.

"Ah—eeow! Virgin help me! Oh, Mother of God!"

The next instant Stella had torn herself loose from me and was rushing over to the communicating door that led from our room into the room of Nicolini's maid Elena. She had got hold of the key when I grabbed it out of her hand. God, she wasn't going in there first—where Elena was making noises like a cat trying to laugh!

She fell back and I got the door open. I pushed past her and over the threshold.

Then I stopped as I tripped over something on the floor. Clothes—but they didn't have anyone in them. A blue dress. . . . For a second I had a crazy thought that red snakes were crawling around inside of the ribboned fragments. Then I knew that it was blood running all over them.

I stood there staring around and I wanted to vomit. Elena was gone out of that open window. Nothing was here, only that stench that I'd smelled in the alley, like an incarnation of all ghastliness since the world's time.

Stella flung herself onto me and those hysterical rackings flogged her anew.

"That was my dress! I gave it to Elena yesterday!" she gibbered. She pounded my back with her little fists. "They didn't mean to kill her! They thought she was me. . . ."

We didn't say anything more, either of us. I rushed her back into our room and she flung on some clothes. We raced downstairs.

The first thing I noticed was that Giglio wasn't there. . . . I gasped out what had happened. "I'm getting out of here!" I croaked. "I'm taking Stella to a hotel!"

Nicolini's face was the color of cheese. He pushed himself up from his wheel chair to stand propped on his cane. Thin lips jerking, he panted: "*Mio bambino!* Yes, take her away—away from death!" His twisted limbs shook horribly.

Then I saw Di Forta get up and come toward us. Angelo Di Forta, another old pal of Nicolini's.

"My house is nearer," he husked. "It is not safe to go through the streets. I have iron bars over the windows. I will take care of you."

"I nodded. Steel bars to hide behind was just what I wanted!

"We'll go with you." Stella and I would both feel better, I thought, to be with someone we knew.

**T**HE streets were again full now, haggared faced men and women came out of their homes to seek comfort in numbers. But even surrounded by friends there was no comfort! There was no safety for anyone—here!

The hunchbacks were out in force like an invasion of demons spewed up from hell on to earth. Never before had I realized how many of them there were in this quarter. I met three or four whom I recognized and encountered others whose faces I didn't remember.

"Gobbo! Diablo!" voices screamed at them. Men cursed and flung stones, women swept their children into their arms while all scattered in flight.

Another girl had been found dead, they told us. Up and down her back had been those rows of claw marks, stigmata of unspeakable marriage. And in her body was a ragged tear where iron hooks might have grasped and then wrenched apart hideously.

Then I saw that all around us people were crowding, pallid faces and hysterical eyes slanting up at the church.

"There he is!" a woman squaled. Her gnarled hands danced on her bosom, crossing herself. "The devil is roosting on the church of God!"

I strained my eyes into the misty glow of the city lights. Scuttling across pinnacles and tracery of Gothic arabesques was a swart, spider-like something, all

legs and hairy arms. The hunchback who had just killed Elena, blaspheming the holy structure with macabre caperings! It ducked behind a parapet and then its face jabbed into sight.

Stella's hands pawed at me. I just stood there and stared while snakes of damnation crawled along my spine.

And then my eyes turned toward the knot of people around us. I saw their hands fumbling at the open necks of their blouses and shirts, feverishly telling their beads. Little silver figures like talismans hung by slender chains around the throats of some. Diminutive statues of St. Anthony, protector and worker of miracles.

And while they clutched at them with sweating hands, I heard husking from lip to lip a name so far unknown to me—the name of Bova.

"Bova . . . Bova. . . Go to see Bova if you wish to live!" They were all muttering.

I yanked at Di Forta's arm. "Who is Bova?" I muttered.

The fat man shook his head.

"I do not know, doctor. I have never heard of him," he wheezed back.

**D**I FORTA unlocked his heavy iron-faced door and ushered us into his house. In his parlor he brought us wine and cakes.

We sat for a moment relaxing, getting our breaths. Finally I said:

"What do you think about this, Angelo? Who in the name of God is behind it? We can't let it go on. The police seem powerless. We've got to do something ourselves."

The man wrung his hands over his heavy paunch. Sweat stood on his eyelids. His voice came in a tortured groan.

"God forgive me, there is one man—he has been my friend for twenty years. But there are many things about him that are strange, that are terrible. He is dreadfully strong, he studies the ancient black

arts. . . . Mercy of Christ, my friend, you saw what I did just now, on the church?"

I nodded. I pushed back my chair and got up. My soul was cold with a chill that no summer's warmth could dispel. I muttered:

"I'm going to see Giglio. Will you take care of Stella for me?"

"As though she were my own, my friend," the man promised.

I left his house and out in the street I paused a moment to get a grip on my nerves before going on; halted there long enough to witness a curious thing.

A short alley led to Di Forta's back door. And down that alley was gliding a tall form, lithe and oily in movement as a coiling snake. He half turned and I got a glimpse of a wet, yellow face and beadly glittering eyes under tangled black hair, a countenance venomous and forbidding as that of an adder.

He scratched on the back door and was swiftly admitted.

I got no chance to talk with Giglio, for he wasn't at home. His gray frightened-looking wife, knowing that I was his friend, showed me without hesitation into his study and left me to wait.

Dim glow from a skylight filled the room with shadows—fell upon the laboratory tables and benches cluttered with retorts, alembics, weird looking shapes of chemical glassware. Chart of the zodiac and other cabalistic symbols were against the walls—piles of dog-eared and dusty tomes were heaped in corners. Giglio had harked back centuries for his subjects of study. This was the den of an old-time necromancer, an alchemist.

There was a queer tight sensation around the back of my neck. Curiosity sent me poking about, ferreting into closets and cabinets.

In one of the drawers of his work bench I discovered a heap of little lead images—more of the statuettes of St. Anthony that the people had been wearing

around their necks. And a mold in which he had stamped them. I wondered why he should have been making those things.

I shoved shut the drawer and moved on. I pulled aside a curtain hanging before a row of shelves—and the jangling croak of my yell reverberated in the hush.

Some one had made a toy gallows scaled down to a tiny size. A slender thread hung from the cross arm. And dangling from the end of the noose was the wax figure of a naked girl with exquisitely molded shoulders and arms and tiny shimmering breasts.

But the face of the image was a twisted mask of agony with tongue jutting between horribly gaping jaws, puffed purple lips and bulging glassy eyes! A girl strangled to death on a gallows!

I got myself out of that house and started running back to Di Forta's.

A FEW yards outside the house I turned a corner—and ran into Stella, breathless, hair flying. She gripped my hands to pant out: "A telephone call came to Di Forta's just now. From uncle Pietro. He said that he had just been to Martha Traniello's. She is dying. We must go there, now, quickly!"

I stared at her while the cold spot on my back leaped to my scalp. I knew the old woman. She was one of my patients. But now, with hell riding the very air—"No! God, no!" I heard myself husking. "We've got to get back—"

Stella was whiter than death, her breath came choked, tightened. But she clutched my hand, pulling me after her.

"We've got to go—even if there is only a remote chance! We can't leave her there to die alone!"

That was like Stella, never to think of herself when human need called for help.

I slid my arm around her. Thickly I heard myself muttering: "Come on, then."

Black maggots crawled on my brain. I didn't know whether I was taking her

on an errand of mercy—or to her death. . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Window in Hell

THE house stood half way down a narrow street that crooked into stinking blackness. We pushed open the unlocked door. A wave of foul odors assaulted us and then worm-eaten stairs creaked under our feet.

Four flights we toiled up through stygian darkness—to see at last a narrow thread of light shining under a closed door. I twisted the knob and slid in front of Stella to see what was in there.

The low-ceilinged room was a rat's nest of squalor. Twin candles on a table waved ghostly hands—shone down to disclose an old body lying stark naked on a bed of unspeakable foulness.

I bent to examine her briefly while my stomach crawled at the loathsomeness of her withered carcass matted with sores.

"She's almost gone," I said, turning back. "There's nothing we can do for her. . . ."

It was just then that I heard Stella's scream, an insane sound, utterly devoid of human meaning. I whirled to see her staring at something behind me, her eyes bulging to marbles. Her lips spread apart and then she flung her arm up over her face as though to protect herself from some awful vision.

At first I thought that dreadful sight must be a hallucination born of my terror-fraught nerves. The next instant I knew it was real. Beyond the dust-grimed window pane a form was outlined against the night's glow—great beetling form with jutting shoulders and dangling arms.

I gaped at it transfixed, my blood curdling. And then my yell spurted, for he was trying to get in where we were! He pounded the window frame, clawed at the

glass. Rickety wood creaked as he strained to force the sash upward.

The window was locked, it wouldn't stir. He roared in fury. He shot up his arms to hook fingers in the gutter over his head. He swung himself up and his legs rose out of sight.

Stella's gasps came inane with terror. Her eyes whipped up to stare at the ceiling.

"Listen! Oh God, up there!"

The people had told of the devil running over their roofs. And there over our heads sounded pattering footfalls. Rotting boards groaned under a heavy weight. Noises of rending and tearing. It was ripping the shingles away! It dug like a dog, trying to claw its way down to us!

I knew that we ought to run, flee for our lives while we still had a chance. But I couldn't move. My body was melting with terror.

And then suddenly came the squeal of a hinge.

"He's getting in!" Stella cried. "He's opening the skylight over the hall!"

I moved then, jumped for the door, pulling her after me. As I yanked it wide, there came from above a rush of air, a waft of carrion foulness and then a dark outline whizzed past us to hit the floor with a jar that shook the house.

Stella's weight came reeling backward against me. Her shrieks retched through bared grinning teeth, and peal after peal of hysterical gagging shook her body.

Over in the corner something moved, shuffling slowly like a beast of the jungle. I saw a swart, octopus outline with slowly waving arms, a single cyclopean eye. A feral cry mewed.

Sheer animal terror rotted my brain. Jellied my blood so that I just stood there, grovelling, shaking.

AND the next instant the thing came in a rush. I saw hooked talons sweep downward and catch in the front of

Stella's dress—sink deep and tear while she caterwauled like a tortured cat.

I don't know how I managed to beat the thing back long enough to get between him and her. He jumped again and his charge beat me against the wall. His claws leaped to clamp around my throat. Fire-hooked talons dug into my gullet, gripped it to tear it out by the roots.

Stark terror gripped me then and I fought like a madman. Strong as I was, a hardened athlete, I might as well have tried to throw a gorilla. That one red-shot eye glared fearfully into mine. Nausea surged in me at the reek of effluvium from its gaping jaws. I screamed in frenzy as I knew myself helpless against his hellish strength. I mustn't die! God couldn't let him kill me and get Stella next. . . .

But he was killing me. His claws had their grip now. They sank deep, bringing blood spurting. My flesh started to part in a ripping tear.

And then in a last agonized outlashing I drove my thumb into the pit of his single eye. Jabbed it home with all the force of my frenzy behind it.

He squealed like a stuck pig. He dropped me and staggered away, foaming curses and pawing his face.

I halted long enough to shoot my foot into his vitals and then I wrapped my arm around Stella and we ran from that house. God, we had been in the valley of hell!

During the time while we had been at Traniello's, the panic in the streets had redoubled. The hunchbacks were everywhere. They lurked in doorways, thrust their goblin-like faces out of alley mouths. Sweating, white-eyed, the people shrank back from them. They whispered that still another girl had been found torn to pieces. And up there on the church the figure of Satan that had just tried to kill Stella capered over the gables.

Giglio? I still wasn't sure. Was he

at the bottom of this, loosing a flood of his hideous replicas to drown the people in terror? God, I couldn't let myself think what my reason was driving me to believe! There was some mistake—there had to be a mistake about this.

I turned to see the leathery face of an old woman who had glided up to pluck at my sleeve. "Alms! For the love of God, charity to us who are about to die! Doctor, give me money! Money that I may live!"

I stared at her. "Money—to keep you from dying?" I echoed. "What do you mean?"

The crone stabbed a grimy forefinger toward a leaden image hanging from the neck of another woman beside her.

"The charm of St. Anthony to save us from death!" she whispered. Her face was green, her foam-spattered lips jerked. "Those who have money to buy them from Bova are safe. But the others—if we do not pay the money to Bova, we die!"

Something clicked for me then. I began to see a motive behind this farrago of horrors. Some one was victimizing these ignorant people, playing on their superstitions to make them buy these worthless trinkets in the belief that wearing them would ward off death!

I jammed a greenback into the woman's paw. "Who is this Bova?" I muttered. "Where does one find him?"

She stared up at me. "I do not dare to tell you, doctor," she husked. "No one will tell you. If we tell, we burn alive—"

I left her yammering there, clutching her money, and drew Stella away.

**D**I FORTA heard our story gray faced. "Then that call was only a trap, to kill you!" he gasped.

There was a closet upstairs with clothes that had belonged to his daughter, now married. He gave Stella directions and I went up with her.

I left her dressing and after a moment

tiptoed back downstairs. I told myself that I was a fool—but I kept thinking about the repulsive figure that I had seen him admit through his back door. And just now while we had been talking, I had kept thinking that I heard soft footsteps somewhere in the back of the house.

I went downstairs softly so that no one could hear me. And then I knew that someone was talking to Di Forta in a little back room that Di Forta used for a den.

The door stood a hair's breadth ajar. I could just get an eye and then an ear to the crack.

The man whom I'd seen in the alley was there—and I knew now that he was Bova! Tall and incredibly thin, with dank black hair framing a long oval face the color of wax and a mouth crooked and evil as a writhing, black snake. I thought of a scorpion that I had once seen crawling out from under a stone.

He handel a sheaf of bills to Di Forta. He hissed:

"It is nearly the end. The people are gathering against us. There has been an accident. Two who paid have been killed—"

He lifted his hand. "Listen. They have followed me here. They suspect that you are the one—"

And now I could hear angry voices out in the street. A tidal wave of mob fury—the most awful sound upon earth—was washing against the walls of the house.

My brain was numb, palsied with horror. Through Bova, Di Forta was selling the images! And that phone call which brought Stella and me to Traniello's—had there ever been any such call? Had he himself faked it? In God's name why had he brought Stella and me to his house?

While I stood there trying to think, bewildered by the labyrinth of tangled horror-threads, Bova glided across the floor and disappeared through a back door.

And then, before I could move, another door swung stealthily ajar and into the study stepped—Giglio! He had been there all the time, hiding while Bova and Di Forta were talking.

He stalked up to the fat man and stood towering over him, whispering swiftly. I saw Di Forta's thin lips jerk in fury—and then blanch pasty with fear. He snarled something, leaped to his feet, his hand whipping toward the drawer of his desk.

Giglio's hand whirled over his head, a clubbed mace that could have smashed the other man like an egg. As Di Forta shrank back, slaving, he swept the money up from the desk and passed swiftly out of the room and out of the house.

For still another instant I stood there, my body robbed of all motion, my soul sickened. I couldn't doubt any more, hope against hope. For I had seen him in bright light and I knew. And I had found the images in his den. Di Forta was the brains of the business and Giglio was his killer! The two of them had been quarreling about a division of spoils.

**I**N there, terror was eating Di Forta. He paced the floor in nervous strides, jerking his fear-whitened eyes and pale, sweating face toward the uproar outside the house.

Then suddenly he turned and was coming toward the door where I stood eaves-dropping. I had just time to shrink back swiftly and duck into a nearby closet. He passed without guessing my nearness—so I thought then.

On soft soled shoes he moved rapidly toward the front of the house. I waited an instant and then cat-footed after him. The next moment I heard Stella coming downstairs.

Di Forta halted her and started talking swiftly, pouring out a wild story of terror—that the mob outside wrongly suspected

him of being the villain. The man who had just left the house was really the one. Nicolini, too, knew his identity and the monster was on his way there to kill him. He himself didn't dare to go out because of the crowd. But she could do so safely, no one would hurt her. He wanted her to hurry to Nicolini's, tell him that his life was in danger and try to get him here through back streets.

She stared at him, blanching, bosom heaving.

"Papa Alberto in danger—they're going to kill him! Yes, of course I will go! But Phil—my husband—"

"Your husband has gone to follow the other man," Di Forta told her. He is going to notify the police."

"You lie! I'm right here!"

The yell burst in my lungs but the words never got to my lips. For as I opened my mouth I was gripped from behind by two powerful figures.

They dragged me back into the other room and all three of us tangled in a heap. Over the banging of feet and panting voices I heard Di Forta screaming to Stella: "That is some one who has got in here to kill us! My two men will take care of him." He gripped her arm, rushed her along the hall. "The back door!" he gasped. "And hurry to Nicolini's!"

The two hired thugs of Di Forta's were powerful men but even together they were no match for my fury. I ripped myself out of their grip and hurled myself on them and I muttered grim thanks to God for my hours of brutal toil on the wrestling mat.

One after the other I gripped them by their heads and sent them heaving over my shoulder. I came down on them flying, knees first, and I snarled with animal exultation as I heard them squeal like rats when their stomach walls ruptured.

When at last I could breathe, I picked up a chair and started to find Di Forta. I was going to back that monster into a

corner and bludgeon him till he told the truth or I spread his brains over the rug.

But he wasn't there. Save for the two groaning things in the front room there wasn't a soul in the house.

I knocked the back and sides off the chair till I had a club, and then I stormed through the rooms till I found the door that opened into a deserted side street. I went down the steps at a jump and I started running as no man ever ran in this world, following the way that Stella would have taken to Nicolini's.

Every alley mouth and dark doorway that I passed I looked into—to see if she crawled there to die—yellow hair streaming, her heart a throbbing crimson jewel against her white bosom. I had a vision of that other girl in the arms of the thing on the house top and ice flowed in my veins instead of blood.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Hell in the Sky

I CAME to Nicolini's house—and I knew a clutching of something horrendous and strangling around my heart. For not a light burned in the place, pitch darkness enveloped it from bottom to top. The front door hung wide open. It slanted back and forth with dead, banging noises.

I dashed up the steps and into the hall. I froze there, holding my breath, trying to listen. But all I could hear was the dingdong of my heart in my ears, the castanet jittering of my teeth.

Then out of the darkness of the parlor across the passage came a strident querulous sound—Nicolini's shrillings of terror. And suddenly quivering above it, came a thin wailing—Stella's voice!

"Father Alberto! Some one, help!"

Over at the window, something came from the lunched, thronging shadows. It went gliding across where Nicolini grovelled back in his wheel chair. Those

beetling shoulders, simian long arms, wedge-shaped head between triangular shoulders. . . .

Nicolini saw Giglio coming. He gibbered and shook, his palsied bones dancing like those of a skeleton. Spindling arms lashed upward. His stick clattered over the knobby skull of the giant.

The hunchback snatched the cane from his hand and flung it across the room. He stooped over the cripple and tucked a steel-cable arm around his waist.

Still clutching the little man, Giglio shuffled across the room to a closet door. He twisted a key to unlock it—and out of it Stella came stumbling, to fall into the grip of his other hand.

A black light burst in my brain. Club whizzing, I went into the room like a catamount.

"Giglio," I yelled. "Let her go or I'll brain you!"

At the sound of my voice he stopped short in his tracks and spun around at me. He shifted his grip from Stella's arm to her neck. With one gigantic hand he encircled her whole little white throat! Through grinding teeth his snarls came: "Keep away, doctor! One step nearer and I will kill her!"

My club wilted from numb fingers, rang on the floor. Everything inside me dropped into a bottomless void. Stella's "Uncle Pietro," whom she had loved as a baby, who had read her stories and dressed up his performing animals to make her squeal with childish delight—was the fiend who had sent her the figurine of her fate, who was taking her away to make of her such a ghastly thing as I had seen him, two hours before, fling from the shop roof!

**M**Y MOUTH opened to shriek out my madness, but through my knotted throat only husked shrillings could wheeze. I couldn't move, I just stood there freezing.

Still clutching Nicolini under one enormous arm and dragging Stella along at his side, Giglio passed out of the room and through the house. I heard him open the back door and descend the steps.

I stole out and followed him. What use that would be—what I or any man could do for Stella now—when at the first sign of attack those gigantic fingers would vise out her life—I didn't know. Numb despair drove me on.

I trailed them for a short distance and then lost them in a maze of back yards and dark twisting streets. Pressing on blindly, I came to the head of an alley. No one was in sight.

I glanced into it, halted, stood peering. Down in those shadows, something white lay sagging against a wall. It was Stella. Stella lying there, fainted, but alive and unhurt!

One lunging stride I took, then froze in my tracks. Something was on the ground, something motionless and sodden and limp.

It was Giglio—dead!

I jerked my gaze back toward Stella. But before I could collect myself to run to her, a figure came hobbling out of the shadows. And that man was—Nicolini! His eyes blazed with fanatical lust. He danced around Stella with insect-like scuttlings. Thin lips working, he muttered a gibberish of weird incantations.

He swept her into his arms. Avid, lips drooling, he crooned tonelessly while his lips tore at her.

I stood there stunned by the hideousness of what I saw. Nicolini, himself—heavenly God. . . .

"Nicolini—" I started to yell. My tongue stuck to my jaws. For beyond them in the blackness something stirred with thin rustlings.

Then swifter than flame came hideous motion. Out of the corner hurtled something with rows of gleaming white teeth, ape-long arms and a lashing club. And



then as the cripple heard him and started to swing around, it leaped like some gigantic insect.

The hideousness of that picture sent me sagging against the wall. Nicolini's pipe-stem thrashing form was swallowed up in that monster's arm. Then there was a noise of crushing and ripping—of snicking bones.

The hunchback snarled feral glee. He pitched down the bundle of clothing and pulped gory flesh that had been Nicolini.

The instant before that I had dashed there to where Stella lay. She was conscious now. With a shriek she flung herself into my arms.

And then I whirled to see that thing coming—a monster who bore a ghastly resemblance to Giglio, but was not he. This was a different man, a drooling maniac.

With my free hand I beat at him, desperately. His great fist crashed on my skull like a battle axe, sending me reeling backward, stunned, knees buckling. And while I sagged, he whipped Stella into his clutch and went bounding out of sight.

Still only half conscious from that terrific blow, I went staggering after them. What the meaning of what I had seen was—what Nicolini's part in it was—I couldn't stop to think then. I only knew that I had to catch up with them. Some way, anyway, with God's help I had to overtake that beast and kill him with my bare hands.

**I**HAD lost sight of them. It was only the sound of scratching feet and Stella's crazed shrilling that enabled me to keep on their trail along the dark alleys.

And then all at once I turned a corner and found myself facing a closed wooden door. Beyond was a sort of alcove, stone-floored and stone-walled, with a winding staircase running upward.

I started up over the cement treads. And soon I realized that I was inside of the church. The labyrinth of cellar pas-

sages communicated with this stairway, built in by the architects and known probably to only a few.

Flight after flight I toiled upward. And then suddenly I came out in the open air.

And against the grey flank of one of the towers high overhead I saw something that wrenched my soul in a cry of near-madness. A huge black spider was climbing the sheer ascent, clinging asprawl to bosses and projecting stones. With one great arm he was drawing himself upward while in the crook of the other he clutched something white.

A hysterical nervous storm overtook me then, and that in the same breath I sobbed, cursed and prayed. He was taking her up there to rend as he had the girl on the roof of the shop!

I must have gone berserk then, utterly crazy. For suddenly I found myself lurching over to grip the stones of the tower.

How I made my way up the face of that giddy facade I'll never know—it was a thing that couldn't be done again! I clung to corners and angles, crevices and inch-wide stone ledges. I dug my fingernails into hair-line cracks. I clawed at the rocks till my fingers slimed them with snail-tracks of blood.

Up above, the monster had reached a perch on a yard-wide shelf near the top of the tower. He drew Stella beside him. He stooped to slide his hands over her bosom and then throw himself on her, pawing, kissing and fondling. . . .

My blood was a whirlpool of fire as I panted on. My strength was all gone, arms and legs nerveless clods that in some desperate way climbed and kept climbing. Miles beneath me, it seemed, was the little square in front of the church. From wall to wall it was packed solid with figures.

Police were there, too, a huddle of futilely milling uniforms. They had sent for a fire truck and an aerial ladder was unfolding its jointed leg into the air. A

frothy laugh spewed on my lips. That puny spindling thing to reach up here, where the devil had climbed to perch!

**T**HE hunchback was still holding Stella, still fondling her. But his hunger was flaming hotter. His talons pounced to close around her throat, to grip, to loosen again. To swoop again even more cruelly—fingernails biting into her flesh.

I was almost there now. Mad with excitement over Stella, the maniac hadn't noticed my approach. A moment later I was up to the floor of the ledge, only a yard underneath him.

But what I could do now, I didn't know. Suppose that I *did* manage to get up there beside him? He was three times stronger than I. . . .

For an instant I clung there, panting, sweating—a tortured insect suspended between heaven and hell. God, what should I do? What could anyone do?

And then suddenly the answer came. I must die, but in dying I could perhaps save Stella. In the fight that would ensue when he spied me, I could grip him and jump, carry him over the edge with me.

My arrival was an utter surprise to the hunchback. He shot a glare over his shoulder, snarled and dropped Stella to whirl at me.

I gripped him by both knotted arms and we hung there, face jammed to mad face, muscles ripping, bones cracking.

I wasn't trying to fight him, I was just straining to throw him off balance, to carry him with me into that misty void.

He realized what I was doing and snarled horribly. Yet he didn't dare try to throw me over for he knew that with my grip on him, he would go, too.

With a guttering snarl he whirled me around to fling me against the flank of the tower. His hands leaped at my throat.

I gagged and shrielled in that strangling clutch. I sobbed in despair. After all this,

was I going to fail? Couldn't I save Stella even by giving my own life?

But one thing was changed now and in a sudden incredulous stabbing I realized my opportunity. I was backed against the roof while he was on the outside!

All my last frantic strength exploded in the upward drive of my knee to his belly.

I heard his animal screeching—howls of primitive terror. Saw his arms fly up, hands clutching the stars. Then like a fly brushed from a wall he separated from the stones and pivoted backward. Paused for a split second on the brink, lurching insanely, and then went floating downward with a strange gentleness, turning over and over. . . .

**I**HAD climbed up there, but I couldn't get down again. With Stella crushed in my arms, I crouched against the stones till, somehow and some time, the firemen managed to get up there and lower us at the ends of ropes.

Hours later I came back from unconsciousness in the hospital to be told that Nicolini hadn't died. Miraculous as it seemed, he had survived that terrible mauling to recover—and confess.

It had started with the studies of black arts that he and Giglio had been delving in for years. They had read in the tomes of the alchemists about the secrets of Æsculapius, first of physicians. He had said that if a broken man like Nicolini mingled his soul, his blood and his body with those of a perfect woman, her strength and wholeness would pass into him and he would be sound again.

A mad idea, born of old time ignorance and necromancy. But, tortured by his physical ruin—he had once been a fine athlete—and disappointed time after time in his prayers to St. Anthony for a miracle, the cripple had brooded over it till he had gone insane.

He needed girls upon whom he could

practice the blood transfusions—whom he could make his brides there in that cellar. They found his apparatus, all the horrible bloody proofs. . . . From another city he had imported Lopo, the mad hunchback. As for the creature's resemblance to Giglio—Nicolini had hunted a long time to find a man who looked enough like his old friend so that Giglio would be blamed!

The attempts all failed, of course. Nicolini attributed that to the fact that he hadn't found the right girl. At last he had fixed his maniac purpose on Stella. The others he gave Lopo to play with, as he put it, when he was through with them. . . . Lopo loved to climb.

Giglio, too, had actually climbed over the houses and the roof of the church. He knew what horrible use Nicolini had made of studies that to him were just innocent hobbies. Appalled by what was going on, he was trying to find Lopo and kill him. He had not told the police about Nicolini, for he himself had introduced his old friend to the ideas that had driven him mad and he felt a dreadful responsibility.

When he took Nicolini and Stella out of the house, it was his last desperate effort. He felt that he must try to get Nicolini to his own home and try to cure him of his obsession. He knew that Lopo was nearby, trying to get Stella. He had to get her away quickly, there had been no time to explain to me. With both me and the mob after him, the only way he could think of to get clear was by threatening to kill her.

In the alley, Lopo had caught up with him. . . . The sight of Nicolini and Stella had touched off a spark in his mad brain. He had killed his master to take her.

As for the figurine and the images at Giglio's, Nicolini had had them planted there, to wind his friend deeper in apparent guilt.

Di Forta had nothing to do with Nicolini's work. He was in money troubles,

had stolen from trust funds and was facing prison. He saw a chance to get money out of the killings. He had told the people that St. Anthony's image would save their lives. Bova collected for him.

He knew that Nicolini was behind the killings and when the mob threatened him, he thought that he could save himself by getting him to his house and handing him over to them. That was why he had sent Stella. Of course it was Nicolini who had telephoned to him, giving Giglio's name, to get Stella and me to Traniello's. When I had seen Giglio with Di Forta, he had been telling him to give up his racket or he would tell the police. He had taken the money to return it to the dupes who had paid it.

**I** GUESS that is about all. . . . Stella wasn't injured so badly—not physically. A week in a hospital cured her physical wounds. But her mind was gone—that quarter-hour on the church top had driven her mad. Her dear gallant soul that had never thought of herself. . . .

And that is why I live now like a ghost wandering the shores of the Styx, my profession forgotten, my practice gone. Why I hide in my barren attic room by day, venturing out only at night to take my mad way to the grey stone buildings where sometimes I can catch a fleeting glimpse of her face moving behind the bars.

My friends, what few I have left—the doctors, the psychiatrists, reason with me, tell me that some time she will be cured.

But I cannot be sure. And time is so horribly long without Stella! So that is why, leaving her, I go to stand on the bridge where the river glides past underneath me, so dark, so cool, so comforting—like the bosom of a siren of death who calls and keeps calling. . . .

I hope Stella is not too long in the madhouse—I cannot wait forever. . . .

**THE END**