

SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

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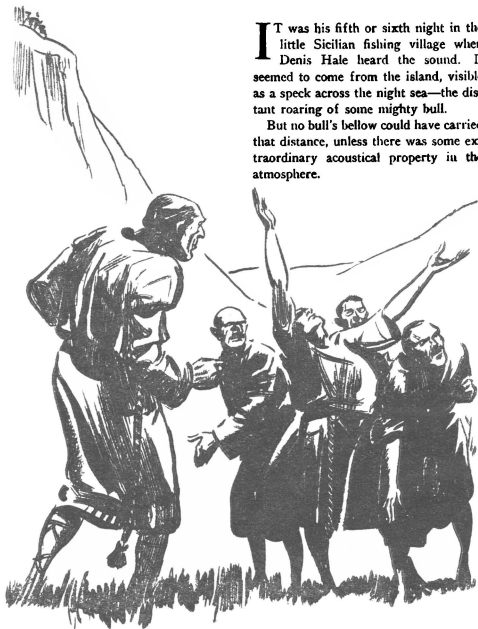


THE BRAZEN

Hale was welcomed to Sicily by a weirdly lovely girl who haunted him by night, and the Count who invited him to investigate the mysteries of bull worship

IT was his fifth or sixth night in the little Sicilian fishing village when Denis Hale heard the sound. It seemed to come from the island, visible as a speck across the night sea—the distant roaring of some mighty bull.

But no bull's bellow could have carried that distance, unless there was some extraordinary acoustical property in the atmosphere.



BULL

By
CLIVE TRENT

It rose and fell, that sound, in long, eerie notes, rending the silence like some brazen voice from the skies. And simultaneously Denis heard a commotion downstairs in the tiny inn, a woman sobbing, a man cursing. And all up and down the village street, cries, sobs, and

As Denis menaced them they prayed feverishly: "You will not shoot us, Signore? We are guiltless!"



oaths, from behind the shuttered windows.

Denis sat up in bed. The sound was incomprehensible to him. He wondered whether it was the rumbling of some volcano. Could it be Etna, miles away, preparing to go on the rampage again?

He listened. It came again, the bellow of a bull in agony. He shuddered as those gruesome notes rose high, and once more died away into silence. And now there was silence everywhere about him. Silence in the inn, and in the village.

The mad thought came to him that heaven was lamenting his own sorrow and stupefaction. For before he sailed for Sicily, to study the archeology of that ancient island, with the five thousand dollar scholarship he had won from the Beddington Foundation, Elise had promised to come to him as soon as her teaching year was ended.

That morning Denis had received an inexplicable cable from her, from Boston. She hadn't sailed, and couldn't come. "All plans are off," the message said.

Denis had thereupon proceeded to get as drunk as he could on Sicilian wine. The bitterness of the betrayal had cracked his morale completely, for he was only twenty-five, and Elise and he had loved each other madly.

He had vowed to enlist with the new battalions forming for service in the Ethiopian War. He would go to Syracuse and offer his services next day. But in the end, he had just gone to bed drunk, and decided nothing.

Once more, now seeming infinitely far away, that faint sound rose and fell.

And then Denis saw the face of the woman pressed against the glass of the French window of his room, on the ground floor, and, as he looked, stupe-

fied, a white hand rose and beckoned to him.

HE got up, swaying a little from the wine that still befuddled his brain. He stared at her through the glass. A girl of wild, unearthly beauty, nude save for some wispy, filmy stuff draped about her from breast to hips. White limbs and shoulders, and long strands of raven hair falling almost to her waist. Twin breasts sweetly molded that Denis drew in a shuddering breath as he looked at her.

The racing of his blood began to impart its heat to his skin, scorching his throat and face and temples with a tingling flush. So he had loved Elise, had he? Elise!—who had never appeared before him like this . . . whose coolness of nature, even in the fervor of their love, had restrained their caresses to kisses and decorous embraces.

Fool that he had been! For Elise's sake, for two years past Denis had never known the sight or warmth or sweetness of another woman.

He looked at the girl on the other side of the glass, saw her beckon to him peremptorily, and softly slid back the bolt.

She stepped inside, came up to him, stood there looking into his face fixedly. Little feet planted on the rug, the insteps arched like bows. Splendor of tapering limbs, white legs meeting each other as softly as lovers' lips. Wide curving hips, only half obscured by those wispy filaments. And a fever-inspiring challenge blazingly somberly out of those great black eyes.

Denis felt under a hypnotic spell. Race memories seemed to stir in him, faint, dim echoes of ancestral faiths. He parted the long strands of hair hanging over the gossamer sheathed, white purity of her boldly lifted breasts. He buried his

face in the pulsing warmth of her throat and felt her white arms tighten about his neck.

Shudders ran through her, moans came from her lips, to be stifled by their clinging suction upon his own. Suddenly she was crushed savagely to him, every warm, lithe curve of her undulant form shaped to his. Her breasts, pushed sidewise, were resilient against his ribs. Denis's hands moved over the satin smoothness of her back, caressing through the silken, rustling drapery, the warm sweetness of her skin. Then all consciousness went out in a destroying, torturing, ecstatic madness . . .

“WHAT was that noise I heard last night, like a bull roaring?” Denis asked old Maddalena the next morning.

He had awakened this morning to find her gone, his mysterious, lovely visitor of the night. But for the unbolted window, he might have thought her a dream, brought about by the heady Sicilian wine—but for that and a languorous happiness, a sense of destiny fulfilled.

Poor, treacherous Elise already was only a memory to him. He knew he would find her again, this other woman whose love had been a consecration.

“I do not understand, signore,” the old woman answered, eyes averted and lips compressed. “One hears strange sounds from the sea at night. They say,” she whispered, “that last night the witch-woman walked, she whose appearance means death.”

Suddenly she shot him a slumberous, accusing glance. Denis was sure, then, that she knew. Her next words confirmed this belief.

“The signore should take his departure,” she faltered. “There are strange

things happening in Sicily today. They say that the spirits of the old dead have risen to guide our nation in its war against the treacherous Ethiopians.”

She came up to him. “He of the island has come to Sicily in his motor-boat,” she whispered. “He, Count Annibale Silami, the accursed one, with the evil eye. Signor, death stalks abroad. Be wise. Go! Ah!”

That last exclamation was a suppressed scream, as a very modern-looking man, wearing a suit of white flannel, appeared at the open window.

A man of about forty years, handsome and dignified, with a short, trim mustache, and an air of obvious breeding.

“Mr. Denis Hale?” he asked, in excellent English. “You will forgive the informality, but the front door of the inn appears to be locked and bolted.” He smiled. “Mr. Hale, I am Count Annibale Silami, of Sireni Island, and I came over to my motor-boat last night especially to bid you welcome to Sicily.

“I have heard that you are here to study archeology. Believe me, I can show you more wonders on Sireni Island than you will find in Sicily itself in a lifetime. I have come to ask that you will be my guest.”

“MR. Hale, my daughter, Europa.” There was no recognition in the girl's eyes, though Denis's pulses beat fiercely as he bowed to her on the deck of the little-craft. She was wearing a simple frock that revealed her lovely contours. Only, as the Count turned aside to give orders to the mechanic, did there come a sudden convulsive grip of hands, a glance that told Denis that what was past was not to be the last of their love.

A VOYAGE of an hour brought them to Sireni Island, which looked no more than a square mile in extent. High on a plateau Denis saw Count Annibale's abode, an extensive, modern-looking house, not very differently from the residence of a Long Island millionaire.

A motor-car, with a liveried chauffeur at the wheel, conveyed the three up to the entrance, ascending incredible grades with ease.

Then Denis saw that the rear of the house faced on a steep declivity, beyond which there was a massive wall of rock. And in between the two acclivities was a little, stony valley, where not a blade of grass grew.

In the middle of it, standing out stark among the stones, was the monstrous, brazen effigy of a bull.

Five times as large as any bull that ever lived, three times as large as the aurochs, the wild bull of Europe, it stood, with lowered head and paws seeming to scrape the ground. The perfect workmanship, and the patina of ages that covered it, showed Denis that this was the master piece of some pre-historic moulder.

Not of the classic age of Greece. Earlier than Greece, earlier than recorded history, perhaps a relic of Cretan or Mycenaean art.

Denis saw Count Annibale looking at him with a quizzical smile. "The bull, Mr. Hale?" he asked softly. "Ah, I was reserving that for you. I thought I should awaken your interest with the bull.

"My daughter will show you to your room, and then we shall have lunch together, and a pleasant talk about antiquities. I have some house guests, but they will not appear till dinner. But they, of course, a cocktail."

DENIS was drunk. Was it the cocktail, or those mad moments with Europa in the sumptuously furnished room to which she had showed him?

For, the instant that she closed the door, she had become wild, ungovernable. With a sweep of her hands, she had torn the frock from her, revealing herself in wispy underthings, and they had rushed into each other's arms, like long separated lovers.

IN the midst of that frenzy of her locked arms, moistly warm lips, and quivering breasts. Denis was trying to conquer the madness that swept him . . . was trying to recall his reeling senses, while Europa slipped away from him with a little laugh, and blew him a kiss.

"My father waits for you," she whispered. "If he guessed, he would kill me. He is old-fashioned, and so — so I must deceive him."

"I'm going to tell him I want to marry you," mumbled Denis. "We'll be together all our lives, won't we?"

The look she gave him was incomprehensible. She bowed her head as if in affirmation, and left the room. Denis wondered. But he was drunk with love as he went down the marble stairway, to find Count Annibale pacing the hall.

The Count locked his arm in his. "Well, I hope you are hungry, my friend," he said. "A cocktail first, then lunch. And then I shall tell you about the bull."

Two Maltese boys served the meal, which would have done justice to a royal chef. The only wine was champagne. The two men drank steadily. Count Annibale was growing as drunk as Denis.

"The bull," he laughed, as they sat back in their chairs, smoking their cigars. "I thought that bull would captivate you, my friend."

Dazed, he stared at the girl on the other side of the glass, saw her beckon to him.



"You are aware, of course, that the bull mythology is wide-spread through the Mediterranean. It was introduced by the Atlantensia, when they invaded

Europe thousands of years before recorded history begins, fleeing from their own sinking continent.

"You have the story of the Minotaur, the bull monster of ancient Crete, and the young men and maidens who were sent from Athens every year to be sacrificed to it. You have the cult of the bullfight in modern Spain.

"We Sicilians, Mr. Hale, are a people of immemorial antiquity. We are not Italians. We are Arab and Saracen, Carthaginian and Atlantean, and we preserve dark traditions that are supposed to have been lost in the mists of time.

"What is my name, for instance, but that of Hannibal, the Carthaginian hero? And my surname, Islami, a follower of Islam, of which my grandfather transposed the two first letters, so as not to give offense to the church. My daughter I named Europa, because of the classic legend of Europa and the bull.

"That bull you saw was fashioned by some unknown artist in the days when the bull-worship was supreme. It was used by the tyrant, Dionysius of Syracuse, four centuries before the Christian era, for sacrificial rites. It was flung up from the depths by an earthquake some years ago, on this island, which appears to have been a religious center once. And I set it up.

"There is an ingenious trick mechanism concealed in it whereby it can be made to roar, due to the rush of air through the inner pipes. And, I admit, I have used this device to strike terror into the superstitious folk of the mainland, who might otherwise object to our worship."

"Your worship?" queried Denis, through the haze of alcohol. "You mean you—you believe in it?"

Count Annibale leaned forward and

patted him on the shoulder. "My dear friend, my dear lad," he answered, "the old bull worship still survives in Italy. And, with our country struggling for victory over Ethiopia—well, when you see some of my guests tonight, you may recognize them—though their names will be unrevealed. You may realize then that some of the greatest men in Italy have come here to pay worship to the bull, rather than offend the old Black Gods who still have charge of the destinies of Italy.

"No, that is enough for now," he added, smiling. "You shall be privileged tonight to witness these ancient ceremonies, that have come down to us from the remotest period."

IT was night. It had been day, and it was now night, but how the hours had passed, Denis was hardly aware. He had a dim memory of Count Annibale laughingly guiding him to his room, and, later of his appearing to escort him to the dinner-table.

There were four guests, men in middle life, and the sight of them brought Denis back to himself with a shock of incredulity. For two, at least, of these men, were of the highest rank in the land, whose faces had looked out at him many times from the pages of illustrated papers in America.

They were dressed informally; they laughed and drank and sang and jested. Europa was not present. It was strictly a stag affair, and the illustrious personages condescended to much affability toward Denis.

He didn't know what he ate, or how much he drank. In a dream he found himself upon his feet, with Count Annibale's arm linked through his.

"Our friend, *signori*, who is so much

interested in antiquities, must certainly see the passages of the labyrinth," said Annibale. "They are beneath my bouse, Mr. Hale, originally a maze, patterned after that of Crete, and above the ground. The ages, which have buried them beneath the soil, have preserved them almost perfectly."

"Yes, he must certainly see the labyrinth," said a sardonic, grim-faced man. "Can you walk steadily, my friend?"

"I certainly can," said Denis, with drunken dignity.

"Good, let us go, then!" said Count Annibale.

They passed down three flights of steps, the last wet with the moisture that dripped from the walls. At the bottom, an infinite maze of passages ran here and there, divided by walls of unmortared stone, from ten to twelve feet high. For long minutes Denis threaded this maze, with the Count at his side, and the guests behind.

There was something a little eerie in this pilgrimage. They seemed to be going round and round in a kind of spiral, with no set purpose in view. Denis had the uncanny feeling that the purpose was to perplex him, and certainly he had not the faintest sense of direction.

Nothing but those endless passages, in the dim light which filtered in from crevices in the containing walls of the building, winding round and round, crossing and recrossing one another.

Then, just when he was about to protest, the journey ended. In front of him Denis saw an oblong building of stone, with two entrances, one barred by a heavy wooden door, the other with a similar door swinging open.

He peered inside, but could see nothing. The stone roof cut off what little light there was in the labyrinth outside.

"The end," said Count Annibale. "Once, my dear young friend, this building was above ground. The legendary Minotaur, probably a bull of monstrous size, really inhabited it. One of these entrances was for the Athenian youths, the other for the maidens. The worship of the bull, as you are aware, required that the girls offered to him should be maidens. Consequently the two sexes were separated by a wall of stone."

The most illustrious of the guests uttered a short laugh. Denis grew suddenly wary.

"The bull, of course, roamed his labyrinth and destroyed men and maidens impartially. But at least they were victims of State. They were all gloriously intoxicated before they met their death, probably drugged too."

"Very interesting," said Denis.

"Very," agreed the Count. "But you, my young friend, do not seem allergic to the drugs that have been so liberally administered to you. And so—"

Suddenly, swiftly something hard dropped upon Denis's head. The dim light faded out. He heard himself shouting, and it seemed to him that it was Elise's voice that answered him. That was the last he knew for a long time.

"DENIS! Denis! Denis! Denis!" That was Elise's voice crying to him, muffled and distant, but unmistakably hers. And that was what recalled Denis from the depths of blank unconsciousness.

"Elise!" Her name burst from his lips. He sat up, got on his knees, heard her sobbing somewhere, moved toward the place from which her voice came, and felt wall of stone.

"Elise, where are you?"

"Here! Here! Behind the wall. There are openings in it, but too small to pass

through. Oh God, how did you come here, Denis?"

"Elise, how did you get here? That cable dispatch—"

"What cable? What cable? I never sent you one. I wired you from Naples, and again from Syracuse. I hired a motor-boat there, and I was brought here, drugged, imprisoned—how long ago? I don't know how long ago!"

A dim light, perhaps of the moon, was beginning to filter into the stone structure through an opening in the roof. Denis saw three or four spaces, a few inches wide, in the wall that separated him from Elise. He laid his forehead against one of them. And he could see her.

He saw her faintly, as she crouched on the stone floor. She had been stripped, and only a brief, revealing cloth had been tied about her. Its inadequate folds had almost allowed the plump little contours of her breasts to escape. He could see her face through her short, tousled yellow hair, the lips that he had kissed, the face that he had loved; and he groaned as he remembered that witch, Europa.

"Elise!" he called.

She rose, and a beam of moonlight played upon her, caressing in gleams and shadows the soft breasts that trembled as she moved, the chiseled curves of flaring hips and sleek thighs. She whispered his name and laid her face against the crevice.

"Oh Denis, they told me I should see you before I died, but—but—"

"What is it?" Denis almost screamed. "The Count is a madman, but those men—why, I know them—"

"I'll tell you, I'll tell you, Denis. He explained it to me when I was drugged and helpless. They want a man and a

maiden to sacrifice to that hideous bull. They think the sacrifice will win them the Ethiopian War. They're pagans, all of them. That man"—she whispered a name—"came from Rome to take part in the hideous rites.

"They were afraid to sacrifice another girl from Sicily, because the country-folks threatened a revolt. So they got me—and you—darling, my own Denis!"

He tried to stretch his arm through the crevice, but could not reach her.

SUDDENLY the hideous roaring of the brazen bull broke forth immediately above them. A frightful noise as loud as the discharge of fifty heavy guns, but infinitely prolonged, rising and falling like the cries of some fiend in torture. It beat upon Denis's ear-drums, as if it would crack them, and he plugged them with his fingers, in the effort to shut out that sound.

Yet he could still hear it, rolling and reverberating, rising into a high, shrill, agonizing shriek, and dropping to the deep bass of a bull's bellow. Endlessly, on and on . . . then Elise's scream, as it died away, and the sound of her cell door being opened.

Denis heard the Count's voice, and he went mad. Hurling curses at him through the crevice, flung himself uselessly against his door. Beat on it with his fists, hearing Elise's screams, and knowing that she was going to her death, and that he must follow her. And he was not even allowed to share that death with her.

At last he dropped back, exhausted; and, when the door of his cell opened, he looked up vacantly, ready—eager for the death that would reunite him to the woman he loved.

But it was Europa who came gliding in.

"They were afraid to sacrifice another girl from Sicily," she said. "So they got me—and you, my darling Denis!"



In place of the frock, she wore a sort of toga, draping her amply. She flung it back and swayed closer to Denis, a supple length, slim and white, with pale, gleaming skin interrupted only by a sheer, dainty garment that whispered against her flesh with each movement.

Denis looked at her in terror. "You devil!" he whispered hoarsely.

"No devil, my love," she answered, and put her hand and closed the door.

"What do you want?"

"You know the truth now?"

"I know you and your father are fiends out of hell. So that is your job,

enticing men to this island, to become victims of your accursed rites?"

"*Si, si, caro mio.* But Count Annibale is not my father. He brought me here when I was a child. He made me play that part. And always I said, when I met the man I loved, I should kill Count Annibale. *Dio!*" she whispered, "how can

I let him touch me again ever, after—after you?"

"So I have come to save you—yes, and perhaps that woman, your sister, too. But there is time. Time for me to feel your lips upon mine once more."

Denis stood facing her, looking at her incredulously. That expression, "your sister," told him that, for some reason of his own, Count Annibale had deceived her as to his relationship toward Elise.

He looked upon her, thinking of the night before, when she had stirred that hellish and insatiable madness in him, and of the past morning, too, in his room in the Count's house. Now he felt utterly cold and unstirred by the sight of her sleek body and plump breasts.

He hated her—and yet he knew that he must pretend that he loved her, on the faint chance of saving Elise.

She thrust an automatic into his hands. "I stole this for you," she whispered. "Hide it. And fight. Fight like a man to save your sister. But—but do not go yet!"

She flung herself upon him, in a fresh frenzy of her new-found love. "Kiss me! Hold me! she pleaded.

Cold-bloodedly Denis pulled her close. And, because hate and love are so alike, he felt anew that delirious madness, drawn from the depths of loathing that she inspired in him. Her strangling grip about him forced the breath from his lungs, and her own sharp-drawn breaths quickened into gasps, her quivering breasts were crushed savagely against him; and he hated her, hated her.

"You love me no more, she moaned. "I can tell . . ."

"But I do! I do!" Denis assured her, but it was with horror and loathing. His kisses became more demanding, his embraces more compelling.

HE couldn't tell whether he had persuaded her of his love, for she still stared inscrutably into his face by the faint moonlight.

"Come with me," she said calmly. "I shall show you the other entrance into the bull."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, do you not know?" It is the bull of Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, for whom an artificer made the bull. Inside the bull they place the victims, and light a fire beneath, to roast them alive. When the bull grows hot, and the victims shriek, the sound comes from the bull's mouth as a bull's bellow. They say that Dionysius made the artificer his first victim."

"God! They're going to burn my—my sister—alive?"

"They are planning to burn her. They heat the bull with an electric cable. But there is a secret entrance into the bull, and you shall save her. Then kill him, that devil—"

Suddenly, hideously raucous, the bull's bellow sounded overhead. Elise's shrieks, transmuted through the accursed cunning of the long dead artificer!

Europa sprang to the cell door and opened it. Denis leaped out in her wake. — In the labyrinth, into another passage, and another, then up a steep, ladder-like flight of stone steps. A trap-door, which the girl flung open. A gust of heat came down. Overhead was darkness.

Then a slab of metal dropped, grazing Denis's face. The bull bellowed again, but now the bellow was mingled with a human scream. Dimly Denis could see the monstrous belly of the bull as he scrambled inside.

The metal was growing hot. A glare of heat enveloped him in the pitch darkness of the bull's interior. He trod on

ashes and bones. He shouted, and again the shouts were transmuted into that hideous bell^{ow} that seemed to shake the earth and heaven. He plunged on through the calcined ash, shrieking Elise's name, found her, grasped her to him, half-conscious.

She wailed, and the high-pitched note reverberated in a hideous roar. Denis turned, and Europa plunged against him.

"Not that way! This way!" she screamed, and another roar from the infernal mechanism answered her.

She turned a handle in the flank of the bull. Denis, with Elise in his arms, stumbled down, slipped, went sprawling on the ground.

He leaped to his feet. Bright moonlight played all about him. In front of him he saw Count Annibale and the four guests, robed in the togas of antiquity, arms raised to the heavens in invocation of the Black Gods of ancient Greece.

The four illustrious ones, whose photographs daily adorned many newspapers throughout the world, shouted, and sprang backward. Count Annibale retained more presence of mind. For an instant he stood, staring, unable to realize just what had happened.

Then he understood, quick-witted Italian that he was, and he drew a revolver from beneath his robes and sprang.

Denis's finger pressed the trigger a moment earlier. Once, twice, three times, and Count Annibale, his revolver belching flame, came on.

He staggered, stopped in front of Denis. The weapon dropped from his hand.

"The—Black Gods—are dead," he whispered. He tottered and swayed; he dropped upon his knees, and a bloody foam surged up about his lips. "But she

—she whom I trusted—"

Count Annibale rolled upon his side, quivered, and died. The heat from the brazen bull was growing insufferable. Denis picked up Elise's unconscious body, and carried her a few feet away.

HIS automatic menaced the four paralyzed men in front of him. He stepped forward and frisked them quickly. None of them was armed. And the biggest shot of the four was trembling, quaking in terror.

"Signore, you will not shoot us? We are guiltless of all this. It was a local superstition—you understand. We did not know, when we came, that an American would be involved. Bah, I never believed in it!

"It will pay you not to believe in it," said Denis. "Get out! You are free, do you understand!" he shouted violently. "I was never one of those who believed that modern civilization had anything on that of the classic age. Go your way. Massacre the Ethiopians. But don't let me see your faces again, or I'll blow them in!"

They vanished with extraordinary alacrity. Denis turned to pick up Elise. And then he saw Europa.

She was lying upon the ground beside the body of Count Annibale, and blood was oozing from her lips, and there was a red, widening stain upon her toga. Denis went to her side.

"I die," she gasped. "I am glad that I die, since he is dead also. My love—if I had lived, you would have made me your wife, and we should have gone far away together. Is it not so?"

"Yes," lied Denis.

"Now I have freed her, that little sister of yours. You will return to your own country. But it may be that, in the

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The Brazen Bull

[Continued from page 77]

years to come, you will remember Europa, who saved you both, because—because of our love.”

“Yes,” Denis lied again.

“Then kiss me. Because, when I entrapped those others, I did not care. I did not love them. But I loved you. And we would have been happy, my lover.”

“Yes,” Denis lied once more.

“Then hold me until I die.”

Denis held her. And he pressed his lips to those of the dying girl, who had loved him. For now he could no longer hate her . . .

HE waited till she quivered and was still. Then he gathered Elsie into his arms. He clothed her in the toga that he had taken from the body of the dead Count Annibale, and he carried her down to the seashore.

Far in the distance a motorboat was speeding, carrying the four newspaper headliners back to Italy. But Count Annibale's motorboat was drawn up on the beach.

Denis placed Elise in the bottom of it. He dragged it down to the water. He stepped inside, pushed off. He started the engine, and in a little while was speeding back toward Sicily.

The stars were fading overhead in the light of the gathering dawn. Elise moaned, and Denis took her in his arms. She clung to him.

