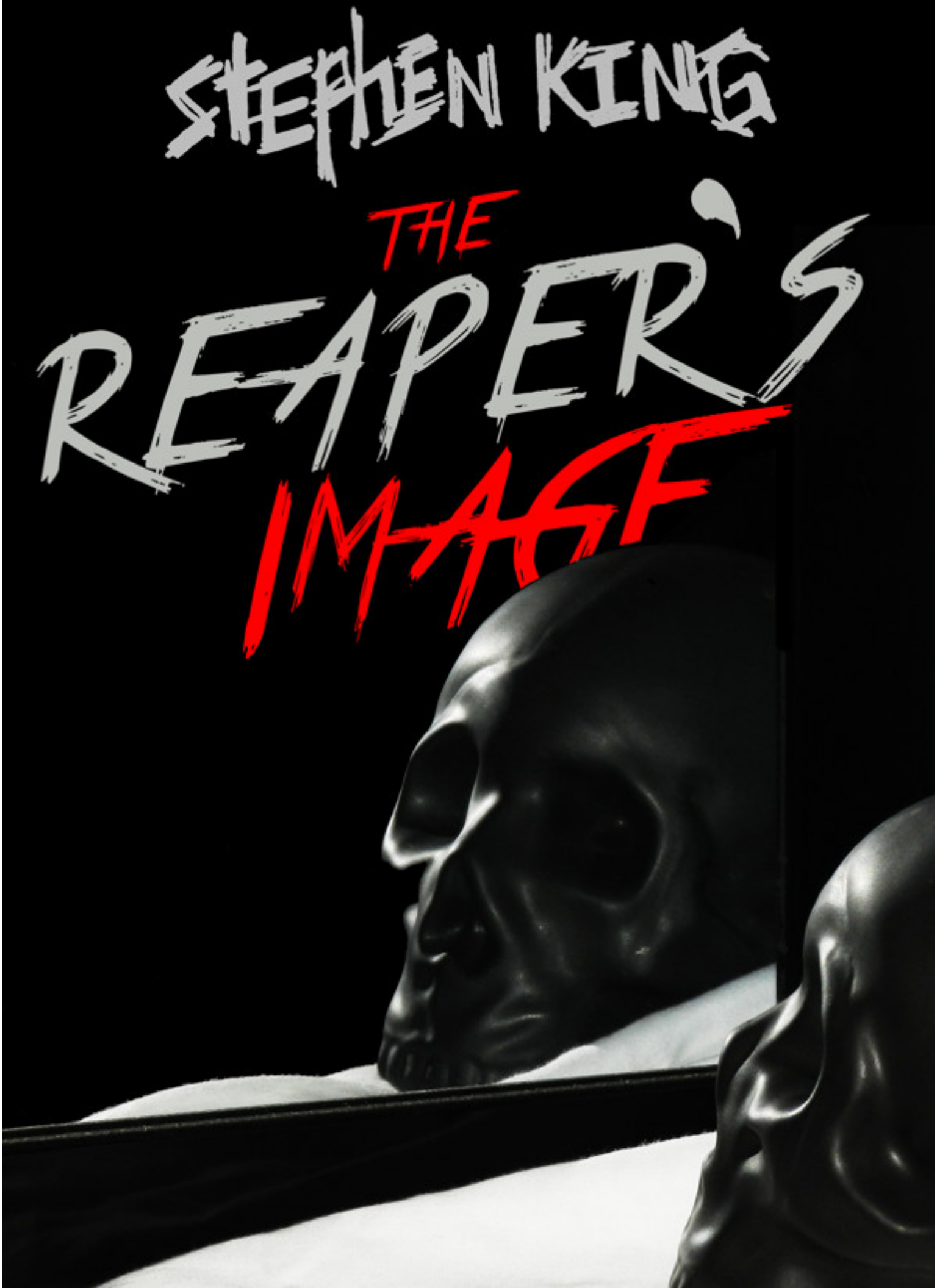
STEPHEN KING

THE REAPER'S IMAGE



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“We moved it last year, and quite an operation it was, too,” Mr. Carlin said as they mounted the stairs. “Had to move it by hand, of course. No other way. We insured it against accident with Lloyd’s before we even took it out of the case in the drawing room. Only firm that would insure for the sum we had in mind.”

Spangler said nothing. The man was a fool. Johnson Spangler had learned a long time ago that the only way to talk to a fool was to ignore him.

“Insured it for a quarter of a million dollars,” Mr. Carlin resumed when they reached the second-floor landing. His mouth quirked in a half-bitter, half-humorous line. “And a pretty penny it cost, too.” He was a little man, not quite fat, with rimless glasses and a tanned bald head that shone like a varnished volleyball. A suit of armor, guarding the mahogany shadows of the second-floor corridor, stared at them impassively.

It was a long corridor, and Spangler eyed the walls and hangings with a cool professional eye. Samuel Claggert had bought in copious quantities, but he had not bought well. Like so many of the self-made industry emperors of the late 1800’s, he had been little more than a pawnshop rooter masquerading in collector’s clothing, a connoisseur of canvas monstrosities, trashy novels and poetry collections in expensive cowhide bindings, and atrocious pieces of sculpture, all of which he considered Art.

Up here the walls were hung—festooned was perhaps a better word—with imitation Moroccan drapes, numberless (and, no doubt, anonymous) madonnas holding numberless haloed babes while numberless angels flitted hither and thither in the background, grotesque scrolled candelabra, and one monstrous and obscenely ornate chandelier surmounted by a salaciously grinning nymphet.

Of course the old pirate had come up with a few interesting items; the law of averages demanded it. And if the Samuel Claggert Memorial Private Museum (Guided Tours on the Hour—Admission

$1.00 Adults, $.50 Children—nauseating) was 98 percent blatant junk, there was always that other two percent, things like the Coombs long rifle over the hearth in the kitchen, the strange little camera obscura in the parlor, and of course the—

“The Delver looking-glass was removed from downstairs after a rather unfortunate … incident,” Mr. Carlin said abruptly, motivated apparently by a ghastly glaring portrait of no one in particular at the base of the next staircase. “There had been others—harsh words, wild statements—but this was an attempt to actually destroy the mirror. The woman, a Miss Sandra Bates, came in with a rock in her pocket. Fortunately her aim was bad and she only cracked a corner of the case. The mirror was unharmed. The Bates girl had a brother —”

“No need to give me the dollar tour,” Spangler said quietly. “I’m conversant with the history of the Delver glass.”

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” Carlin cast him an odd, oblique look. “There was that English duchess in 1709 … and the Pennsylvania rug merchant in 1746 … not to mention—”

“I’m conversant with the history,” Spangler repeated quietly. “It’s the workmanship I’m interested in. And then, of course, there’s the question of authenticity—”

“Authenticity!” Mr. Carlin chuckled, a dry sound, as if bones had stirred in a cupboard below the stairs. “It’s been examined by experts, Mr. Spangler.”

“So was the Lemlier Stradivarius.”

“So true,” Mr. Carlin said with a sigh. “But no Stradivarius ever had quite the … the unsettling effect of the Delver glass.”

“Yes, quite,” Spangler said in his softly contemptuous voice. He understood now that there would be no stopping Carlin; he had a mind which was perfectly in tune with the age. “Quite.”

They climbed the third and fourth flights in silence. As they drew closer to the roof of the rambling structure, it became oppressively hot in the dark upper galleries. With the heat came a creeping stench that Spangler knew well, for he had spent all his adult life working in it—a smell of long-dead flies in shadowy corners, of wet rot and creeping wood lice behind the plaster. The smell of age. It was a smell common only to museums and mausoleums. He imagined much the same smell might arise from the grave of a virginal young girl, forty years dead.

Up here the relics were piled helter-skelter in true junk-shop profusion; Mr. Carlin led Spangler through a maze of statuary, frame-splintered portraits, pompous gold-plated birdcages, the dismembered skeleton of an ancient tandem bicycle. He led him to the far wall where a stepladder had been set up beneath a trapdoor in the ceiling. A dusty padlock hung from the trap.

Off to the left, an imitation Adonis stared at them pitilessly with blank pupilless eyes. One arm was outstretched, and a yellow sign hung on the wrist which read: ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE.

Mr. Carlin produced a key ring from his jacket pocket, selected a key, and mounted the stepladder. He paused on the third rung, his bald head gleaming faintly in the shadows. “I don’t like that mirror,” he said. “I never did. I’m afraid to look into it. I’m afraid I might look into it one day and see

… what the rest of them saw.”

“They saw nothing but themselves,” Spangler said.

Mr. Carlin began to speak, stopped, shook his head, and fumbled above him, craning his neck to fit the key properly into the lock. “Should be replaced,” he muttered. “It’s—damn!” The lock sprung suddenly and swung out of the hasp. Mr. Carlin made a fumbling grab for it and almost fell off the ladder. Spangler caught it deftly and looked up at him. He was clinging shakily to the top of the stepladder, face white in the brown semidarkness.

“You are nervous about it, aren’t you?” Spangler said in a mildly wondering tone.

Mr. Carlin said nothing. He seemed paralyzed.

“Come down,” Spangler said. “Please. Before you fall.” Carlin descended the ladder slowly, clinging to each rung like a man tottering over a bottomless chasm. When his feet touched the floor he began to babble, as if the floor contained some current that had turned him on, like an electric light.

“A quarter of a million,” he said. “A quarter of a million dollars’ worth of insurance to take that … thing from down there to up here. That goddam thing. They had to rig a special block and tackle to get it into the gable storeroom up there. And I was hoping—almost praying—that someone’s fingers would be slippery … that the rope would be the wrong test

… that the thing would fall and be shattered into a million pieces—”

“Facts,” Spangler said. “Facts, Carlin. Not cheap paperback novels, not cheap tabloid stories or equally cheap horror movies. Facts. Number one: John Delver was an English craftsman of Norman descent who made mirrors in what we call the Elizabethan period of England’s history. He lived and died uneventfully. No pentacles scrawled on the floor for the housekeeper to rub out, no sulfur-smelling documents with a splotch of blood on the dotted line. Number two: His mirrors have become collector’s items due principally to fine craftsmanship and to the fact that a form of crystal was used that has a mildly magnifying and distorting effect upon the eye of the beholder—a rather distinctive trademark. Number three: Only five Delvers remain in existence to our present knowledge—two of them in America. They are priceless. Number four: This Delver and one other that was destroyed in the London Blitz have gained a rather spurious reputation due largely to falsehood, exaggeration, and coincidence—” “Fact number five,” Mr. Carlin said. “You’re a supercilious bastard, aren’t you?”

Spangler looked with mild detestation at the blind-eyed Adonis.

“I was guiding the tour that Sandra Bates’s brother was a part of when he got his look into your precious Delver mirror, Spangler. He was perhaps sixteen, part of a high-school group. I was going through the history of the glass and had just got to the part you would appreciate—extolling the flawless craftsmanship, the perfection of the glass itself—when the boy raised his hand. ‘But what about that black splotch in the upper left-hand corner?’ he asked. ‘That looks like a mistake.’

“And one of his friends asked him what he meant, so the Bates boy started to tell him, then stopped. He looked at the mirror very closely, pushing right up to the red velvet guardrope around the case—then he looked behind him as if what he had seen had been the reflection of someone—of someone in black—standing at his shoulder. ‘It looked like a man,’ he said. ‘But I couldn’t see the face. It’s gone now.’ And that was all.”

“Go on,” Spangler said. “You’re itching to tell me it was the Reaper—I believe that is the common explanation, isn’t it? That occasional chosen people see the Reaper’s image in the glass? Get it out of your system, man. The National Enquirer would love it! Tell me about the horrific consequences and defy me to explain it. Was he later hit by a car? Did he jump out of a window? What?”

Mr. Carlin chuckled a forlorn little chuckle. “You should know better, Spangler. Haven’t you told me twice that you are … ah … conversant with the history of the Delver glass. There were no horrific consequences. There never have been. That’s why the Delver glass isn’t Sunday-supplementized like the Koh-i-noor Diamond or the curse on King Tut’s tomb. It’s mundane compared to those. You think I’m a fool, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Spangler said. “Can we go up now?”

“Certainly,” Mr. Carlin said passionately. He climbed the ladder and pushed the trapdoor. There was a clickety-clackety-bump as it was

drawn up into the shadows by a counterweight, and then Mr. Carlin disappeared into the shadows. Spangler followed. The blind Adonis stared unknowingly after them.

The gable room was explosively hot, lit only by one cobwebby, many-angled window that filtered the hard outside light into a dirty milky glow. The looking-glass was propped at an angle to the light, catching most of it and reflecting a pearly patch onto the far wall. It had been bolted securely into a wooden frame. Mr. Carlin was not looking at it. Quite studiously not looking at it.

“You haven’t even put a dustcloth over it,” Spangler said, visibly angered for the first time.

“I think of it as an eye,” Mr. Carlin said. His voice was still drained, perfectly empty. “If it’s left open, always open, perhaps it will go blind. “

Spangler paid no attention. He took off his jacket, folded the buttons carefully in, and with infinite gentleness he wiped the dust from the convex surface of the glass itself. Then he stood back and looked at it.

It was genuine. There was no doubt about it, never had been, really. It was a perfect example of Delver’s particular genius. The cluttered room behind him, his own reflection, Carlin’s half-turned figure—they were all clear, sharp, almost three-dimensional. The faint magnifying effect of the glass gave everything a slightly curved effect that added an almost fourth-dimensional distortion. It was—

His thought broke off, and he felt another wave of anger.

“Carlin.”

Carlin said nothing.

“Carlin, you damned fool, I thought you said that girl didn’t harm the mirror!”

No answer.

Spangler stared at him icily in the glass. “There is a piece of friction tape in the upper left-hand corner. Did she crack it? For God’s sake, man, speak up!”

“You’re seeing the Reaper,” Carlin said. His voice was deadly and without passion. “There’s no friction tape on the mirror. Put your hand over it … dear God.”

Spangler wrapped the upper sleeve of his coat carefully around his hand, reached out, and pressed it gently against the mirror. “You see? Nothing supernatural. It’s gone. My hand covers it.”

“Covers it? Can you feel the tape? Why don’t you pull it off?”

Spangler took his hand away carefully and looked into the glass. Everything in it seemed a little more distorted; the room’s odd angles seemed to yaw crazily as if on the verge of sliding off into some unseen eternity. There was no dark spot in the mirror. It was flawless. He felt a sudden unhealthy dread rise in him and despised himself for feeling it.

“It looked like him, didn’t it?” Mr. Carlin asked. His face was very pale, and he was looking directly at the floor. A muscle twitched spasmodically in his neck. “Admit it, Spangler. It looked like a hooded figure standing behind you, didn’t it?”

“It looked like friction tape masking a short crack,” Spangler said very firmly. “Nothing more, nothing less—”

“The Bates boy was very husky,” Carlin said rapidly. His words seemed to drop into the hot, still atmosphere like stones into dark water. “Like a football player. He was wearing a letter sweater and dark green chinos. We were halfway to the upper-half exhibits when —”

“The heat is making me feel ill,” Spangler said a little unsteadily. He had taken out a handkerchief and was wiping his neck. His eyes searched the convex surface of the mirror in small, jerky movements.

“When he said he wanted a drink of water … a drink of water, for God’s sake!”

Carlin turned and stared wildly at Spangler. “How was I to know? How was I to know?”

“Is there a lavatory? I think I’m going to—”

“His sweater … I just caught a glimpse of his sweater going down the stairs … then …”

“—be sick.”

Carlin shook his head, as if to clear it, and looked at the floor again. “Of course. Third door on your left, second floor, as you go toward the stairs.” He looked up appealingly. “How was I to know?”

But Spangler had already stepped down onto the ladder. It rocked under his weight and for a moment Carlin thought—hoped—that he would fall. He didn’t. Through the open square in the floor Carlin watched him descend, holding his mouth lightly with one hand.

“Spangler—?”

But he was gone.

Carlin listened to his footfalls fade to echoes, then die away. When they were gone, he shivered violently. He tried to move his own feet to the trapdoor, but they were frozen. Just that last, hurried glimpse of the boy’s sweater … God! …

It was as if huge invisible hands were pulling his head, forcing it up. Not wanting to look, Carlin stared into the glimmering depths of the Delver looking-glass.

There was nothing there.

The room was reflected back to him faithfully, its dusty confines transmuted into glimmering infinity. A snatch of a half-remembered Tennyson poem occurred to him, and he muttered it aloud: ” ‘ “I am half-sick of shadows,” said the Lady of Shalott …’ “

And still he could not look away, and the breathing stillness held him. From around one corner of the mirror a moth-eaten buffalo head peered at him with flat obsidian eyes.

The boy had wanted a drink of water and the fountain was in the first-floor lobby. He had gone downstairs and—

And had never come back.

Ever.

Anywhere.

Like the duchess who had paused after primping before her glass for a soiree and decided to go back into the sitting room for her pearls. Like the rug-merchant who had gone for a carriage ride and had left behind him only an empty carriage and two closemouthed horses.

And the Delver glass had been in New York from 1897 until 1920, had been there when Judge Crater—

Carlin stared as if hypnotized into the shallow depths of the mirror. Below, the blind-eyed Adonis kept watch.

He waited for Spangler much like the Bates family must have waited for their son, much like the duchess’s husband must have waited for his wife to return from the sitting room. He stared into the mirror and waited.

And waited.

And waited.