

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

Strange STORIES

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CONTENTS

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The Band of Death

A Gripping Complete Novelet

By **ELI COLTER**



*One of the Twins Must Die Under Dr. Rorbach's Knife--
but Cold Steel Cannot Change the Driving Urge to Live!* 14

ONE MORE RIVER

E. Hoffmann Price

Old Hank Tate Answers the Call of a Dying Enemy 33

ITHAQUA

August W. Derleth

The Snow-Thing, Whose Home is the White Silence, Caresses and Kills! . 40

APPOINTMENT WITH A LADY

Wyatt Blassingame

Maloney Ran from His Date with Doom—but Fate is a Jealous Jade! . . 48

THE SHADOW OF NIRVANA

Earl Peirce, Jr.

*Captain Crane Believed His Lost Love Dead Until He Found Her Helpless
in a Mystic Spell that Only Death Could Break! [A Complete Novelet]* . 54

SOME DAY I'LL KILL YOU

Seabury Quinn

Oaths May Burst into the Evil Bloom Whose End is Silence 71

DEATH, I WANT TO DANCE!

Arthur J. Burks

A Long-Dead Ghost Town Returns to Revelry 79

HATE'S HANDIWORK

Will Garth

Strange Enmity Severs a Life-Long Bond of Friendship 86

THE BLACK ARTS (A Department)

Lucifer

Join THE BLACK ARTS CLUB—Coupon on Page 95 8

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Hate's Handiwork

By WILL GARTH

Author of "Murder Trial," "The Last Death," etc.

I WAS an instrument of hate. Hate destroys the hater. Yes, I know that now. Am I not powerless, a thing of death instead of life? Are my veins not a stranger to the flow of blood that warms? Is my pulse not silent and still?

Whom can I harm now? No one. Whom can I befriend? Can I touch a child's fevered brow to cool it, or grasp a man's hand to give him strength in adversity?

A helping hand to a fellow human being? How wildly I dream! The meanest homeless dog could not expect respite from a single bothersome flea through me. Life, which I did so much to mar, has slipped out of my grasp.

It began when I was younger, not very much younger, yet too young—so Mother said—to put polish on my nails. Mother was deaf to pleadings and blind to sulks. Her prohibitions were final. In a tantrum, believing the action unobserved, I slapped Muggsy when he came to be petted. But Mother heard him yelp. And to Father, not caring in her distress if she was overheard, she said:

"Viola is a strange child, Frank. Sometimes she doesn't seem to be ours. Her tantrums, her sulks—they're not like me, and certainly not like you. I don't know what to do with her."

Perhaps Viola Mosely was not their child. Perhaps she was the child of the Devil. But why do I say perhaps? Viola Mosely was *not* their child. It came out shortly after the episode of the nail-polish.

A hospital nurse, whose conscience had been bothering her all these years,

spoke. She was a fool. She should have kept quiet. She was not even certain that a mix-up had taken place. But she had grown old and gossipy. In an unguarded moment, in the nurses' dormitory, she let her tongue wag to a young probationer she had taken



VIOLA MOSELY?

under her wing. Her dormant misgivings found ambiguous utterance.

Footprinting of babies had not come into practice at the time. So she was not sure. The sexes were the same—the name-tags— She bit her tongue, but it was too late. The probationer was flighty, talkative. She did not consider the consequences, nor the fact that fourteen years had passed. She talked.

Strange Enmity Severs a Life-Long Bond of Friendship!

In a wealthy suburb such as Parkhurst, where homes are few because grounds are spacious, news travels fast. Gossip is an important pleasure and servants understand the penchant of their mistresses for juicy morsels of information. By nightfall, Mother and Father were no longer certain that Viola Mosely was really their child.

If not, who was? No, they would not have to search the hospital records or hire detectives to scour the country in a frantic attempt to trace the movements of the other family. The other family had never moved from Parkhurst, had in fact never moved from its original home.

If Viola was not the Mosely's child, then Mona Whitman was. Mona, who had been born simultaneously with Viola, was—if a mix-up had actually taken place—the child of the Moselys. And the Whitmans lived next door.

MONA and Viola went to school together, were in the same class. I played catch with Mona in the tomboy stage. I threw the ball harder and faster than she did. I threw it once when she was not ready—it was a new tennis ball—and gave her a black eye. Had I done it on purpose? Was the malice in me even then?

The problem that confronted the respective parents in the days immediately following the nurse's tongue-wagging was a matter for tears and no laughter. For fourteen years they had each brought up a child who now, it turned out, might not be their own. Suppose Mona was the Mosely's and Viola the Whitman's. What should be done?

There were conferences. The parents strove for calm, made strenuous efforts to be reasonable in their progress toward a decision. They posed the problem to themselves first in this way: Suppose they were sure that a mistake had been made? They could not be sure, but suppose they were? What would they do then?

Would they switch children? They could not answer the question. Again and again they asked it, and again and again they recoiled from answering it. It soon became apparent that two schools of thought were at war within each of them. What Mona and Viola were to become familiar with in their courses at college as the Great Conflict of Philosophy, was expressed by the parents in ordinary human terms—how much of what we know and feel is instinct, and how much the product of one's individual living?

"A mother always knows her own child," said the mothers. But they said it without believing it—because they *didn't* know. They appealed to an abstraction, the maternal instinct, and that instinct was silent. It could not help them.

But there was a way of becoming, if not completely certain, at least more certain than they were. All of them thought of it, all of them hesitated to broach it. It was Mr. Whitman who finally gave it tongue. A blood test.

The blood test would be proof—not positive, because there was always the chance that the blood-types were similar—but a blood test offered the possibility of certainty. It might show that one of the men was *not* the father of one of the girls, and the definite conclusion would follow from that that the other was, hence untangling the whole twisted skein. A blood test, therefore, was indicated. Should it be made?

And they answered, collectively, in the negative.

"No," they said. "Our children have lived with us for fourteen years. For fourteen years we have reared and nurtured them, seen them through their childhood illnesses, watched them off for their first day at school, signed their report cards, praised and punished them. For fourteen years we have said, 'This child is mine.' What if we now, suddenly, knew otherwise, because of proof? What would we do?"

Let's avoid the necessity of having to answer that question. Let's say to ourselves now, and forever—"this child is ours, and that child is yours. So be it."

IF ALL this, the children were at first unaware. They sensed that their parents were troubled, but the nature of the trouble was a mystery in the beginning. But other parents talked, and other children overheard that talk. Children brought the talk to school with them, and Mona and Viola heard strange things—things that mystified them at first, then terrified them.

They came home with questions, and at last the parents had to answer. For it was obvious to them that even more harm might be done by their silence than by their tragic declaration: "We may not be your father and your mother."

The reaction of the two children was different. Mona's sobbing subsided. She grew calm, listened quietly. At the end, she kissed her "father" and her "mother."

I shook off my mother's hand. No, Viola "Mosely" was not like Mona "Whitman." The two girls were very different.

It was at this time, or shortly afterward, that their interest in the two Prentiss boys, George and William, became something more personal than childhood friendships. The four ceased to be playmates—they became two boys and two girls. The trouble was that both boys fell in love with Mona Whitman, not Viola Mosely.

I speak of Viola in this impersonal way because she is no longer one with me—we are apart, detached. And I say that Viola Mosely found nothing in the rivalry to please her, and much to make her hate.

There was no pairing off. Viola was simply out of it. She was never snubbed; she was tolerated, which was worse.

Shortly after her sixteenth birth-

day, Viola had an acute attack of appendicitis and was rushed to the hospital. Quick surgery saved her life. But her convalescence was slow, and during it she had time to brood.

Her nurse was the one-time probationer with the loose tongue. Viola's hate, diffused and undirected up to then, fastening at times upon Mona or George or Bill, flashing out for an instant upon the two people who might or might not be her parents, intensified temporarily upon the now graduate nurse.

Viola required sedatives. One night the nurse came in with a fresh bottle of pills. Recalling something she had forgotten, she left them on the bedside table, and left the room. Viola, brooding, suddenly saw in the nurse the malign cause of all her unhappiness. The nurse must be punished.

The dosage was one pill to be taken before lights out. I uncapped the bottle, spilled three pills into my palm. . . .

When the nurse returned Viola Mosely was asleep. She assumed that the patient, knowing the dose, had taken the medicine without waiting for her. Later that night, she observed that her patient's breathing was shallow and rapid. . . .

A stomach pump and an antidote revived the patient. In the morning, Viola Mosely said:

"Nurse gave me three pills when I told her one wasn't enough."

The nurse lost her cap, her job and her career.

HATRED grows with what it feeds on. The taste of vengeance whetted the appetite for it. I plucked at the sheet restlessly, unsatisfied, anxious to do more. The nurse was not the enemy. The enemy was Mona. She I had not yet reached. And I felt within me the impulse to grasp her white throat and not release it until the pulse of life no longer beat.

The hospital soon discharged Viola, and she went home. But Viola had no

(Continued on page 90)

(Continued from page 89)

home. Since the revelation of doubt as to her parentage, she had had no home. The fact that her parents went out of their way to bestow affection upon her only emphasized, in her own eyes, their doubts. They did not really love her. They did not believe she was their daughter. They believed Mona was their daughter, and loved her.

Mona was loved by all, Viola by none. Mona was loved by the Whitmans and the Moselys. Mona was loved by *both* Prentiss boys, Viola by neither. Since earliest childhood Mrs. Mosely had kissed Mona whenever she came to the house, as an aunt would kiss a niece, but now, each time it happened, a pang of hate shot through her "own" daughter—a pang so keen that it took Viola's breath away.

Such hate had to find a way into action. College years came and went, and marriage became the uppermost thought.

It was then that I took up the pen and wrote the first letter. With ink that was malice and a pen that was poisoned, I painfully disguised the handwriting that would tell George Prentiss things about Mona Whitman.

The first letter was followed by a second, and by a third. I wrote the letters that went to William Prentiss also. I shall not speak of their contents. They were clever—and ineffective. Yes, they were ineffective. The Prentiss boys disregarded them. Perhaps they guessed after a while who had written them. And if ever Viola Mosely had entertained hopes of arousing their love, she had to abandon those hopes now.

Eventually the time had to come for Mona to make her choice. She did not know of the letters, nor would she ever know. She chose a spring night to give the Prentisses their answer. They were to come to her house—her parents would be out—and she would

say yes to one of them and no to the other. She told Viola.

As the afternoon of that day waned, I grew restless. In room after room, I found myself opening and closing drawers, as though looking for something without knowing what. But at last, in Father's room, my fingers closed about and gripped the thing they had been seeking.

The Whitman living room had French windows opening on the porch. That was how I, and the thing I gripped, gained entrance. The three were there—Mona, Will and George. And Mona, at that moment, was making her choice. . . .

"I'll marry you, Will," she said.

Gladness broke upon the face of Will Prentiss. There was in George, as he looked in my direction, no slightest sign that now that Mona had rejected him, he would turn to Viola Mosely.

Hate, overmastering, ran through my veins and gave me strength to lift the automatic and aim at the heart of Mona Whitman.

The Prentisses knew the Whitman place as well as they knew their own home. Will Prentiss jerked the library table drawer open. His hand came up with Mr. Whitman's automatic, and he fired.

Blazing pain ran over me. . . .

THEY amputated me at the wrist—me, the hand—the hand that had thrown the tennis ball, that had rejected the soothing hand of my mother, that had filched the three pills, that had penned the poisoned notes, that had clutched and curled about a gun.

Viola Mosely died of blood-poisoning. I can speak of her impersonally because, you see, she is no longer part of me nor I of her.

As for me, I am a subject of study for the medical students attached to the hospital. The hand is a complicated bit of anatomy, and there is much to learn about it. . . .