

FEBRUARY

Strange

STORIES

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

NOW
10¢



FEATURING

THE BAND OF DEATH

A Complete Novelet

By ELI COLTER

THE SHADOW OF NIRVANA

By EARL PEIRCE JR.

ALSO:

SEABURY QUINN

E. HOFFMANN PRICE

AUGUST W. DERLETH

WYATT BLASSINGAME

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

Strange STORIES

VOL. V, NO. 1

CONTENTS

FEBRUARY, 1941



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

STRANGE STORIES published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. Entered as second class mailer November 2nd, 1935, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3rd, 1879. Copyright, 1940, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$2.00; single copies, \$1.00. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and serial-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.
PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

THE BAND OF



One Twin Must Die Under Dr. Rorbach's Knife—But Cold Steel Cannot Change the Driving Urge to Live!

CHAPTER I

Of Inhuman Bondage

THE Rorbach twins, Victor and Leonard, were as alike as two peas during the first twelve years of their life. No one except their father, Dr. Hans Rorbach, could have told them apart, if Victor had not always walked to Leonard's right, and Leonard to Victor's left. That order never varied because of the

caprice of nature which had joined the twins with a band of living flesh.

The first outward indication of their separate personalities began to manifest itself when Victor and Leonard turned twelve. Their father asked them what they would like for their birthday. Leonard named a translation of a philosophical work from the Hindu. Dr. Rorbach was surprised that a boy of Leonard's age should be

DEATH By ELI COLTER

Author of "The Crawling Corpse,"
"One Man's Hell," etc.



A Complete Novelet

interested in such serious studies, but he promised to get the book.

Victor desired several things, but most important was a chemistry outfit. He boasted boyishly that he "was going to invent some kind of medicine that would make him and Leonard like other boys." Hans Rorbach, being a surgeon, winced at these words from his unfortunate son. But he had always been indulgent with the twins, hoping that his generosity and love

might in some measure compensate for their physical handicap. So he promised to see that the desire was fulfilled.

On Victor's and Leonard's twelfth birthday, the gifts they had requested were delivered to the Rorbach lodge, far up in Joaquin Canyon.

While the twins sat at a long table in their play room, Victor began his chemical experiments. By his side Leonard sat quietly absorbed in the

leather-bound volume he had so badly wanted. Leonard seemed to have completely forgotten his brother's existence as his eager, groping mind grappled with the deep truths of the ancient philosophy. Victor continued to mix chemicals in the test-tubes on the table before him. In his own fashion, he was as eager as Leonard for knowledge, though he searched with less plan and caution.

The force of the explosion knocked both boys unconscious. When Hans Rorbach came rushing into the room, he saw that the skin of Victor's right cheek had been almost burned away by the blast. Victor's hair, as black and curly as Leonard's, had been singed to a brittle mass. All over his body there were small burns and wounds from the drops of spattered acid and shards of flying glass from the broken test-tubes.

Rorbach swept the boys into his arms and rushed to the upper floor of the house, where he maintained a small surgery for his private experiments. When the boys' clothing was removed and they lay side by side upon the surgery table, Dr. Rorbach felt a little relief to note that Leonard had been neither cut or burned. He had merely been shocked into insensibility.

AS THE surgeon went on with his hurried preparations, consciousness slowly began to return to his sons. They stirred uneasily upon the white-topped table, and from their lips Rorbach heard babbled, almost incoherent words.

Ordinarily the father would have been gratified by these signs of returning life. But now his broad brow furrowed, and a look of wonder and fear came into his kindly brown eyes. For in these minutes of unconsciousness, something strange had happened to his sons.

While their bodies lay in the half-death of insensibility, some vague transmutation of the spiritual forces

which dwelt within the flesh had superseded the individual personality of each.

As he lay unseeing and unfeeling upon the surgery table, Leonard was babbling jumbled snatches of chemical formulae. Prattling of acids and test-tubes, he seemed to be putting into words the thoughts Victor had been thinking only a few minutes before. And at Leonard's side, Victor, who had never cared at all for books, was muttering passages from the Hindu translation in a strangely serious and reverent voice.

It was difficult for Hans Rorbach to believe the evidence of his own eyes and ears. Even though no such confirmation was needed for him to identify his sons, his widened eyes checked the positions of the boys on the white-topped table. Victor lay on the right, Leonard on the left. Yet now each seemed like the other. It was as if some strange disruption of nerve fibers had thrown a switch in the channels of their thought, sending the words which one brain conceived to be spoken by the lips of the other.

As Rorbach forced the needle into Victor's arm to inject an anti-tetanus serum, an abrupt change came into the boys' delirious babbling. Now their talk was a jumble of chemical formulae and quotations of philosophy. But the thing that puzzled the surgeon was that their lips moved in unison. They spoke the same words in perfect time, as though expressing the thoughts of a single brain. But that phase passed quickly. As Rorbach's nurse rushed into the room, full consciousness returned to them.

With brisk efficiency the nurse laid out disinfectants, bandages and instruments upon a porcelain tray beside the surgery table. After one quick glance at the burned and peeling skin on Victor's right cheek, she asked:

"Will you have to graft, Doctor?"

Hans Rorbach moved his head in an uncertain gesture.

"If that charred flesh is not covered with good new skin, there will be a horrible scar. Yet Victor is almost completely covered with burns and cuts. There is hardly an uninjured patch of skin on his whole body large enough to repair that mangled face."

The nurse's look flicked to Leonard, lying quietly beside Victor. Leonard's eyes were open now, and he gazed silently up at the white ceiling. Dr. Rorbach caught the nurse's thought and a hurt look came into his eyes.

"It doesn't seem right to take from one to give to the other. Victor's carelessness has brought pain to them both. If I took skin from Leonard's body to cover Victor's wounds, it would be like—like making Leonard pay for Victor's folly."

From the operating table came Victor's pitiful whimpering of pain. By his side, Leonard stirred as he tried to turn his head to look at his father.

"I won't mind, Father," Leonard said in a low, unhesitant voice. "If there is anything I can do, anything I can give to help Victor, please let me give it."

VICTOR'S cries continued and Rorbach's sagging shoulders shrugged in resignation. He nodded to the nurse.

"There is no other way. Bring the anesthetizing masks, and stand by the gas valves at the tank."

Whatever pain the twins might have suffered as a result of that unfortunate accident, it was nothing to the mental agony their father endured. For the two hours he labored with scalpel, clamps and suture over the bodies of his sons.

* Remembering that weird interlude of half-consciousness, when the souls of Victor and Leonard seemed to have changed places in the two bodies, it took all of Hans Rorbach's iron will to keep his hand from trembling. For the unquestionable evidence of that strange transmutation confirmed Rorbach's own diagnosis and the opinion

of the other specialists he had previously called in to examine his cruelly joined children.

Leonard and Victor were doomed to live joined together just as they were now. How many years they might live if that band of flesh between them was left undisturbed, it was yet too soon to say. They were still too young, their bodies undeveloped. But of one thing the surgeon was sure—they could not be separated except at the price of the life of one. Though each body was complete in all its vital organs, somewhere in that joining band of flesh lay a strange nerve tangle. The rupture of that weird connection would mean death for one of his sons.

When Dr. Rorbach had finished caring for his sons after the chemical explosion at the lodge that day, all of the many cuts and burns on Victor's body had been disinfected and dressed. New, healthy skin covered the seared flesh on Victor's right cheek, held there by clamps and covered with pads of gauze saturated with healing analgesic.

There was also a large pad of bandage on Leonard's chest. Under that bandage, a spot of his bare flesh lay flayed and throbbing. Just before Dr. Rorbach pulled the cover up over his sons' bodies, his sad brown eyes paused for a moment on that cruel lesion which joined the boys. His mouth hardened at the grim jest of fate which made one the prisoner of the other.

"The band of life," Rorbach murmured, "or the band of death. God grant that I may never have to decide which it shall be."

When the Rorbach twins were well again, it was not necessary to remember that Victor was the one on the right, and Leonard the one on the left.

Though Victor's burned right cheek showed no scar, thanks to his father's expert surgery and Leonard's gift of living tissue, there was one physical difference which marked him. Before

the disastrous chemical experiment on the twins' twelfth birthday, his hair had been as black and curly as Leonard's. It was still black, save for one snow-white tuft like a dividing line thrust upward from the center of his forehead. But it was no longer curly.

Leonard had not changed, save for that puckered scar on his breast—a mark to which he gave little thought as long as it was hidden beneath his clothing. But as the years passed, a more sinister difference began to be apparent to those who were close to the Rorbach twins and knew them well. That difference was of the soul, rather than of the flesh.

CHAPTER II

Thou Shalt Not Love!

DURING their adolescent years, Dr. Rorbach watched his sons apprehensively. He dreaded the return of that strange transfer of individualities which had shocked him when they lay upon his surgery table on their twelfth birthday. But though he observed them closely, no hint of such a psychic phenomenon came to his notice. Instead, each of the boys followed a distinctly separate course of mental and spiritual development.

Leonard still loved books. He was an avid reader of those works which tended to give man an understanding of the deeper mysteries of life.

But on the other hand, Victor tended to more material things. With the transition from boyhood to manhood, he left his desire for chemical experiment behind him. But the idea of being separated from his brother still haunted him. It grew and became more persistent with the years. Eventually it became an obsession, all the more galling because it was a topic of which he had been forbidden to speak. With maturity, he began

to be attracted to the fair members of the opposite sex, especially to Nancy Moore, the daughter of Arthur Moore, a colleague of Dr. Hans Rorbach.

Blond, vivacious and sparkling, Nancy was a frequent visitor at the Rorbach home. She was aroused by a great compassion for the twins because of their physical bondage. She spent many week-ends with them at the Rorbach lodge, keeping them company through long afternoons and evenings which would have been unbearably dreary without her. She had a way of talking to them that made them forget their deformity, yet did not betray the fact that Nancy's sacrifice of time and energy arose from any emotion at all akin to sympathy.

And Victor, as his restless eyes lingered upon the girl's slender figure, discovered within himself a mounting unrest. It was an insistent and disturbing call, goaded and prodded to a nagging canker. Furiously he realized that in his present imprisoned state, a normal life would be forever denied him.

His unrest mounted to rebellion. After several stormy scenes, he finally persuaded his father to hold another consultation with the great specialists to determine once and for all whether that band of flesh between him and Leonard might be severed. In his wisdom, Hans Rorbach had long delayed that consultation. He thought he knew already what the answer would be. So great was his love for both his sons, he dreaded to hear the verdict in all its cruel finality.

But when that verdict came, it did not soothe Victor's resentment at being bound to Leonard, as Rorbach had hoped. Instead, it only added to his bitterness and dissatisfaction with his lot. It brought to light a new argument for Victor to use in his ceaseless campaign for freedom. X-ray and advanced surgical knowledge revealed something in this examination that had been hidden from the eyes

of the specialists ten years before.

If that life band which joined the twins were left unmolested, both Victor and Leonard might well expect to live for ten or fifteen more years. It would not be a normal span of existence, yet a fairly ripe age for people born as they had been.

But if that chain of flesh were cut, it would become the band of death. Hans Rorbach aged ten years when he heard that verdict. Joined as they were, his sons could hope for little enough in years or opportunity, and should they be separated, one of them must die.

In their maturing years, the differences between the twins had grown greater. Leonard had developed a kinder, more compassionate nature than his brother. In physique, Victor was robust and brimming with health, while Leonard seemed frail and less favored with vitality. As might be expected, the life which would be sacrificed if the other were to enjoy full freedom would be the spark that burned in the frail body at Victor's left.

Again suffering must be given to Leonard.

GRAY-HAIRED, sad-eyed and weary, Dr. Hans Rorbach faced his sons in the living room of the Rorbach home. He dreaded the words he knew were about to be spoken, but there was nothing he could do to prevent their utterance. His gentle, troubled eyes went from Victor's beligerently flushed face to Leonard's calm and reflective countenance. Resolutely he stifled a half-formed thought before it could take full form.

But if his love had let him think, he might have wondered which of his sons had the greater right to live. Which, through his own unselfishness in considering the life and happiness of others, might be deserving of a longer and better life for himself?

"I don't want to die so young!" Victor said bitterly. "I want to live

out the years that are rightfully mine, and to live them like a normal, healthy man. I want to marry and have children of my own. It—it's hideous to have to die so young just because he is attached to me!"

"You are thinking of love and marriage, my son?" Hans Rorbach asked patiently, though a new look of surprise and pain had come to his eyes.

"Why shouldn't I think of such things?" Victor demanded in anger. "I see no reason for me to bury my longings within me any longer. I love Nancy Moore. I want to marry her. But I can't even tell her I love her without him listening in! I can't hold her in my arms without having him watch. And when he meets someone he wants as badly as I want Nancy, he'll feel the same way about me. Why did nature impose such cruel torture upon us? What have we done?"

"I don't know, my son. My soul cries out in rebellion at the twist in the scheme of life which permits such things to be. In nature there are some cruel things, some brutal things, and man is left powerless and resentful."

Hans Rorbach bowed his head to hide the awful pity in his deep brown eyes.

"Forgive me, but at this moment I could wish I had died in my cradle. Far sooner would I have refused my own life than to have given to my loved ones a life so short and barren."

In his misery, Rorbach's sorrowful eyes sought the patient reassurance of Leonard's calm countenance. But the surgeon winced inwardly at what he thought he read in his son's gaze, and his look lowered again.

"I'm not afraid of dying, Father," Leonard said quietly. "I'm not complaining, but life doesn't hold much for us as it is. You had no need to consult the other specialists. You're not one of the world's greatest surgeons for nothing. You knew all the time what the verdict would be. But,

Father, is there no possible chance of error?"

"None. I carefully examined the X-ray plates myself. It is as sure—as sure as death."

Rorbach's big head lifted and his eyes revealed their weary sorrow to Leonard's intent gaze.

"Such an operation can't be done, Leonard. That band of flesh which connects you to Victor contains a nerve center such as medical science has never encountered before. It is a strange tangle of nerve fibers running from one body to the other. It would be so difficult to trace accurately, I couldn't dare to trust my judgment alone."

"It is certain then that my body could not continue to function independently of Victor's?" Leonard asked.

Rorbach could not help noting how the youth had considerably twisted his words to avoid again mentioning the grim, inevitable possibility of certain death.

"It is certain," the father said in a dull, dead voice. "I have told you many times. I tell you again. While that band remains untouched, it is for you the band of life. You both may live another fifteen years, possibly more. But should that band be severed, you might linger a few days, even a few weeks, but you would die, Leonard."

"But Victor would live! You said he would!"

"Yes, Victor would live. That also is certain. But what of it? Do you think he craves for a longer and more complete life at the expense of yours? You both know the verdict. You have hoped that perhaps I could do more than these great specialists? Impossible."

The great head moved from side to side.

"There is nothing any man can do. I could cut you apart, yes. But your life would pay for the act, Leonard. It would be murder!"

Leonard stared straight ahead, his thin face white, his sunken blue eyes haggard and hopeless.

"I have no more to say, Father. I am sorry if my questions have added to your hurt and sorrow. We did think perhaps that you might have some skill beyond the others. Perhaps our faith in you led us to believe that you would find a solution to this horrible dilemma where the others had failed. I will not distress you about it again. If that's the unalterable verdict, then that's the end of it. Victor and I will get the most we can out of what life is granted us. We'll be thankful for a father who is both kind and wise, and we will abide by your judgment."

"Thank you, my son," the old surgeon said gratefully. "There shall be much happiness for you both yet. You shall see. You are young, scarcely past twenty. Mere children."

"Mere children?" Victor echoed. There was something cold and searing in the look he bent upon the old man, as if he felt that by the same act which made this man his father, Rorbach was also deserving of blame for his deformity. "Mere children, with more than half of our lives gone. Oh, what's the use! I can't get used to the idea of this—this living death! Come along, Leonard. There's no point in prolonging the agony."

Dr. Rorbach stared after the Siamese twins as they went out the door, Victor's left arm over Leonard's shoulder and Leonard's right arm over Victor's. They moved in a peculiar marching step, a timed cadence which was their only convenient mode of locomotion. As the twins passed from the old surgeon's sight, Leonard's gaze clung to his father's face. That intent gaze seemed to say, cheerily, smilingly, almost as clearly as words:

"Don't let it trouble you any more, Father. Don't fret about Victor. He's shocked and disappointed. He'll get over it in a few days."

Hans smiled involuntarily in return, a somber, indulgent smile. Then the closing door blanked out Leonard's patient, gentle face, and his sons were gone.

For a long time after their departure, Rorbach sat motionless, thinking. It was truly strange that such diabolical cruelties of nature should be. How could Dr. Rorbach, renowned for his skill in healing mangled flesh and straightening twisted bodies for others, be so helpless in the face of his own tragedy? A vicious jest of fate had given him these strange twins to father. Why



should the sole offspring of his line be these two, whose lives were a burden to them and an ever-increasing sorrow himself?

Hans Rorbach had been crushed when he had lost the twins' mother, his beloved Rebecca, at their birth. Now he was a man who had aged beyond his years, prematurely gray and old. Day and night he had had to live with the certain knowledge that his sons would grow to manhood only to receive the verdict of an early death.

For a long time, Hans Rorbach sat in his chair and stared at his hands as he flexed his long, tapered fingers in futile practise. Those were the miraculously skilled fingers which had wielded scalpel, forceps and suture with uncanny dexterity to relieve the sorrow and suffering of other men's sons. Yet they were helpless to save the lives and happiness of his own children.

He sank more deeply in his chair, shaking his head. No skill on earth could cure the canker which threat-

ened the happiness and the lives of his loved ones. Nor was it strange that Victor should be rebellious. He was so filled with health and strength! Since he had learned that Leonard was dependent upon him for life, his resentment against his brother could be expected to increase. Even though his resentful feeling was based upon envy of Leonard's patience, it was made nonetheless bitter because of his lack of these same qualities.

IT WAS not odd that Leonard did not mind so much the denial of a long life. All through their adolescent years, the course of Leonard's development had been along spiritual lines. It would have been unpleasant for the twins to attend schools with normal children, so Rorbach had provided them with a tutor at home in their younger years. Leonard continued his studies in ancient philosophies, but Victor had not taken to reading or study. He spent most of his time in a restless and futile rebellion at his bondage.

Yes, the old surgeon could easily understand the attitude of both of his sons, even the added resentment in Victor at being denied Nancy Moore. But could he, Hans Rorbach, deliberately sever Leonard's feeble hold on existence in order that Victor should enjoy a longer and fuller life? They were both his sons. He loved one as much as the other. Forcefully he told himself that, as if he would persuade himself that it was quite true. But deep in his heart he suspected that it was not. He tried to convince himself that he only admired those qualities in Leonard which were not in Victor. That, he argued, was the only difference in his regard for his sons.

His great head sank on his chest. His sorrowful eyes closed. This was sad and bitter, but it was beyond human skill to remedy. His lips moved in an almost soundless whisper, and Dr. Hans Rorbach prayed.

CHAPTER III

Mind Over Flesh

VICTOR strode into the room the twins shared, almost dragging Leonard's lagging feet along with him. Anger still blazed in Victor's clear eyes. His healthy face was flushed with fury at all the gods who could ruthlessly precipitate this wanton injustice upon him.

As the twins entered the room, Victor's gaze flicked over the many volumes of esoteric writings upon which Leonard spent his time. An idea flashed full-formed into his cunning mind. For an instant the import of the thought startled him. He strove to stifle any outward show of emotion lest Leonard suspect the trend of his thinking. But Victor's shrewd brain went on plotting swiftly and coherently.

Leonard did not want so much to live. He had said plainly that he wouldn't mind dying. Well, then, Leonard should die. Why should Victor be cheated of a full life, hampered always by the burden of a frail twin who had been joined to him by a whim of a leering and sardonic fate? Why should he suffer the denial of those earthly joys he craved? Why should he forfeit all that life with Nancy would mean, merely that this annoying fragile brother might continue to hang on a few years longer? That would be neither just nor right. Therefore it should not be, he determined.

Victor felt an unholy thrill of exultance. Leonard should die! Not today, nor even tomorrow—but soon. The method was simple to achieve that end. By glancing over Leonard's shoulder while he was studying, Victor had become familiar with the trend of his brother's psychological pursuits. Those esoteric writings of the

ascetics taught a philosophy of mind over matter.

As the months went by, Leonard was filling his mind with knowledge which enabled him to enjoy earthly existence as an experience of the mind, almost completely ignoring the body. That was all the more reason, Victor thought, why death of the flesh would mean little to Leonard.

And if Leonard could give his mind this power over his own flesh, then Victor could also gain knowledge and twist it in his own cunning way to give him power over Leonard's mind and body! But here again fate stepped into the chaotic tangle.

Victor had long been aware that, through the strange nerve tangle which attached him to his brother, he exerted a subtle influence over Leonard. True, it was erratic and faint, but he was sure that had been the result of not making any particular effort consciously to develop it. It was a sly and elusive power, of which no one but himself was aware—not any of the specialists Hans Rorbach had called in for consultation, nor Rorbach himself.

Victor doubted that even Leonard himself suspected the cunning and inexorable dominance emanating from his brother's vigorous brain. Faintly Victor was aware that this subtle influence over Leonard dated from the day when they had lain side by side in half-consciousness on the surgery table up at the mountain lodge. Victor made no attempt to analyze that influence, but he was determined that it should be called into purposeful use now.

IN THE days that followed, Leonard was surprised to note that Victor spent all day and half the night eagerly poring over the books of philosophy which he had heretofore ignored and even ridiculed. Leonard welcomed his brother's interest. He even helped with suggestions and explanations of passages

whose deep and involved meaning totally escaped Victor's materialistic mind.

As soon as his determination drove him to cast off his mental laziness, Victor discovered that he had a brilliant brain. In a surprisingly brief period of time, he had absorbed more than an ordinary understanding of this doctrine of mental power.

But in the course of his grim studies, Victor hid his seriousness from Leonard under a mask of bantering raillery. During the moments the twins spent with Nancy Moore, Victor referred to his serious reading as just a way to kill time, something to amuse him through the hours he was not permitted to spend with her. And if Leonard noticed that Victor's manner toward Nancy became more possessive as the days went by, no word of his betrayed that knowledge.

The day arrived when Victor decided to test the power for which he had been groping. The twins were in their living room on the second floor of the Rorbach home. Victor gloated inwardly in anticipation of the assured success of the course he had determined to follow. He veiled his eyes and stared at the wall. All he needed to do was to set his will over Leonard's subconscious mind, inflexible and demanding, and drive Leonard to conceive the desire that the two of them should be separated from each other.

Should Leonard insist upon the operation strongly enough, the old surgeon would ultimately consent. Their father could never refuse the frail Leonard anything. He had always loved Leonard the better of the two. Victor's lip curled in contempt. Did the old man think he didn't know that?

Victor turned his head and addressed his brother in a petulant outburst.

"Len, I'm tired of just sitting here and thinking of this mess! I want to see Nancy. Let's go over to her place."

Leonard closed his eyes wearily, held them tightly shut for an instant. When he opened them and turned to look at Victor, hurt resignation was deep in his unsuspecting gaze.

"Of course, Vic, if you want to go. Do you mean now?"

"I don't mean next week," Victor snapped. "Let's get our hats and go."

Leonard made no reply. He was thinking that he could wish to see Nancy, too, if the seeing did not hurt so much. He accompanied Victor to the closet, got his hat and set it on his head. Victor went through the same movements.

The two of them proceeded like two prisoners chained together, marching precisely out of the room, down the stairs and out of the house. They went to the garage, where the chauffeur was idly polishing the spotless Rorbach sedan. Victor peremptorily ordered the driver to take them to the Moore home.

In less than a half hour, the twins were standing before the glass front door of Arthur Moore's residence. Then the door was swinging open, and Victor was saying tersely to the pert maid:

"Mr. Rorbach to see Miss Moore."

THE maid nodded silently and beckoned them in. She took their hats, led them to the cool, spacious living room.

Nancy was stretched on a deep divan, staring at a book without seeing it. She sprang to her feet with a little cry of surprise, unmistakable delight in her eyes. But her searching glance went to Leonard's face for a brief instant and then was hurriedly averted. The delight was almost drowned in pity. She advanced toward the twins, both hands outstretched.

"Leonard and Victor! I'd begun to think you'd forgotten me."

The two gripped her hands, and Victor spoke with an odd stiffness in his voice.

"You knew that your father had

been called into consultation over Leonard and me some time ago."

Nancy dropped their hands. She stood small, slim and straight, facing them. Under her winged black brows, her deep blue eyes searched their faces.

"Yes, Victor. I knew."

"And you heard the verdict?"

Nancy drew a sharp sigh, winced as if the air plunging into her lungs had been a keen-edged blade.

"Yes—I know. It's terrible and cruel, but there's nothing to be done. We'll have to face it. Sit down, please, won't you?"

She gestured toward the divan. The twins marched to it and lowered themselves, their movements made awkward by the necessity for perfect unison.

"There are things that have to be said," Victor stated. "I have kept them to myself because I hesitated to speak of such intimate things before Leonard. I have to end my silence now, and we'll have to make believe he isn't here. I have loved you for several years, Nancy. It is because I love you that I want to be free of this unjust bondage."

As Victor spoke, his compelling gaze pulled like magnets along the beam of Nancy's wide blue eyes. The same subtle influence, which he had determined to use as a lash on Leonard to whip him to his own desires, would work as well on Nancy. Like Leonard, Nancy's mind was unfortified by any suspicion. She would therefore be receptive and easily swayed.

"I want to marry you and live a normal life," Victor went on, sternly exerting every effort of his strong will to bridge the gap between his mind and the girl's. "You'd have married me if I could have been freed, wouldn't you? You could love me as I love you, couldn't you?"

Confusion clouded Nancy's eyes. Their questioning stare was held by the dominating power that was in Vic-

tor's gaze. Then her look wavered ever so little. From Victor's flushed face under the straight, black hair with the dividing tuft of white, it shifted to Leonard's pale cheeks and quietly passive eyes, framed by their crown of curly, black locks. Two faces were so alike in contour, yet made so different by the thoughts which impelled their expressions. One was smoothed to placid peace that was akin to beauty, lighted from within by an unselfish soul. The other was flushed and twisted by a restless, frantic urge that burned within.

"You could love me, couldn't you, Nancy?" Victor persisted.

"I—yes—you know I— Oh, we can't talk this way, Victor." Pain darkened Nancy's blue eyes. "We can't. It's so cruel to—to Leonard."

Leonard interposed quickly. His eyes were so unveiled and intent upon her face that she could not fail to read what was in them.

"No, Nancy. It isn't cruel. Don't you suppose I realize that I'm in the way, that I'm only a nuisance, that my life is worthless? Don't you know that I would give my life willingly, if in the doing I could bring happiness to you and Victor?"

"Don't say such things, Leonard!" Her face blanched. In her eyes there was a queerly startled look. "Don't! How can you even suggest it?"

"Don't you know?" Leonard asked softly. If Victor could have read Leonard's thoughts then, he would have learned to his disappointment that it was Leonard's innate unselfishness, his genuine devotion to Nancy, and not any coldly calculated influence of Victor's, which prompted those words. "Don't you know that all this time I have loved you, too? What is love worth if it cannot serve?"

"Stop it, Len!" Victor's voice was rough, but in it there was a note of veiled satisfaction. Masked triumph leaped into his eyes. The first seed

was planted. He had been shrewd in planning this, but he must pretend to be against it. He could afford to move with caution, for the rest would be so easy. He added curtly: "No one would think of allowing you to make such a sacrifice. I am surprised that your opinion of me is so low. Don't say anything like that again."

Nancy sighed in open relief.

"Victor, you are so—so fair and just. Let it go on that way, as it has been. And, Leonard, let's never talk that way again. Don't ever mention such an impossible way out of this unfortunate situation."

CHAPTER IV

You Have to Die!

THE subject was not mentioned again by any of them until the twins were on their way home. Victor was covertly watching Leonard's rapt eyes. They were staring at the roadway before them, past the chauffeur's erect head. Victor's cunning brain was relentlessly pursuing the course he had outlined and begun. Mentally he was shouting into Leonard's

unsuspecting and receptive mind.

"You have to die. You have to free me from this galling bondage. When I asked Nancy if she loved me, you heard her say yes. She wouldn't say more because of you, you poor weakling. But you have to give Nancy to the man she loves. You are of no other use in this world. The least you can do is to give her happiness. You are a drag upon me, a sorrow to our father. If you love Nancy, you will choose to die. You *must* die! You must beg Father to separate us."

Almost as if he were reciting a perfectly memorized lesson, Leonard spoke suddenly.

"No matter what you say, I insist that we be separated from each other. You must be freed from this unjust bondage, Victor. I should have known that if Nancy loved either of us, it would be you. What healthy, normal girl could care for anyone as lacking in vitality as I? I shall give Nancy the man she loves. Somehow I shall persuade Father to separate us."

Again Victor accepted Leonard's acquiescence as a tribute to his own subtle mental influence. But he could not know whether that determination was the result of his influence, or of the natural reaction of a nature as

[Turn Page]

understanding and unselfish as Leonard's.

Whatever power motivated Leonard's determination, though, his mind was made up. When the twins had reached home and sought their father in his study, Leonard repeated the words he had spoken to his brother. Dr. Rorbach was aghast at mention of the haunting specter which he had hoped had been forever locked within the secret closet of silence. His eyes dilated in horror to hear Leonard demand that he wield the scalpel upon the flesh of his own sons. The old surgeon held up both trembling hands in violent protest.

"Never, Leonard! I cannot do such a thing. I cannot even think of it. Not even for you, Leonard. Please do not ask it of me."

Leonard launched into a vehement, pleading argument. While Victor listened and decried the sacrifice with his cunning, lying lips, he strove to drive Leonard on with his scheming brain.

The argument did not end in that hour, nor in that day. Leonard persisted in his soft-spoken, patient plea. He did not cease to beseech his father to perform the operation. Repeating tirelessly that he was weary of life, he insisted that he was made miserable by the continual impossibility of his and Victor's existence as they were. What did it matter that he must die? He had already lost all desire to live. Anything was better than this mockery, this cramped and humiliating half-life!

Dr. Rorbach argued, but his only argument was founded upon love and not upon reason. Since there is no harmony between reason and love, the old surgeon knew he was waging a losing battle. There was no turning Leonard away from his determination. He was patient and sympathetic, but in his gentle, quiet way he was utterly dogged, once his will was set. Victor had been well aware of that fact.

As the discussion tensed and heightened, the old man's defenses advanced from frantic protest and determined opposition to frightened and desperate refusal. Panic-stricken, he sought for some homily that would defeat Leonard's monotonous insistence. But he was finally beaten to a despairing capitulation.

MINGLED with his despair was a realization that appalled him—the frank knowledge that he loved Leonard the better of his two sons. He was shocked that he could so depart from his ideal of fatherhood as to cherish one son above the other. But he did. Leonard's uncomplaining cheerfulness in the face of adversity, his forgetfulness of self, would have swayed a stronger man than Rorbach.

The tired old man made no further effort to hide the fact from himself. Leonard's own demand that his life be sacrificed for Victor's happiness had brought the sternly repressed secret into the light. It was the son he loved better that he must lose. Strange, Hans thought, that a man always loves best the one he is destined to part with. But, Rorbach admitted, one reason for his greater regard for Leonard was that his gentle son was so much like himself.

Perhaps it was God's judgment upon him, Hans concluded. Because he had allowed himself to love one son more than the other, it was Leonard he must lose through his son's own desperate demands. He had never been able to deny either any of their material wants. They had been denied so many things other boys and young men enjoyed. Their physical handicap had made that inevitable, and Hans Rorbach had tried to compensate by gratifying their least desire.

But during these later years, Leonard's material wants had become fewer and fewer. Rorbach realized suddenly that he could not deny Leonard now, even though his beloved son asked for death.

Again Victor told himself that he had been right. Leonard would get what he asked for. Dr. Rorbach was brought face to face with the stunning realization that he could not gaze into Leonard's deep pleading eyes and say no.

"I will do it for you, my son," he said instead. "But not here. Too much of what I do is always known here. We will go up to the lodge where we can have seclusion."

Leonard visioned the Rorbach lodge far up in Joaquin Canyon. He felt grateful that his father should have chosen that place to perform the operation. Leonard had always loved the lodge that Hans Rorbach had built far back in the rugged mountains for their retirement and recreation. He loved the steep, wooded slope, for no other human habitation was near it. It was a perfect refuge, the ideal setting of lonely grandeur in which to watch the light go out. Then his beloved Nancy could be happy.

"When do we go, Father?" Leonard asked breathlessly.

A resigned, indulgent smile brooded in old Hans' deep brown eyes.

"I have a few things to do before we can leave. We go a week from today."

"A week from today," Leonard echoed softly. "Thank you, Father."

Quickly the old man turned away from his son.

"He thanks me!" Hans muttered wildly, his words choking in his throat. "He thanks me though I shall end his life. May the good Lord forgive me!"

The day before the scheduled departure to the mountain lodge, Hans Rorbach sat at the desk in his study. His elbows were on the desk and his big, shaggy head was bowed forward against his palms. He had come here to be alone for a last hour of solitude and reflection, to steel himself for the dread crime he must perform.

He heard light footsteps outside the library, the sound of the door opening. He looked up to see Nancy Moore, pale and shaken, entering the room. Her frightened gaze sought his as she crossed to him in a little rush and gripped his arms with her slim, white hands.

DOCTOR HANS! Victor called me on the phone and told me. You—you mustn't! It's too terrible. You mustn't—"

Rorbach was immobile. For a long-drawn moment, he stared deeply into her frantic gaze. Then a glow of understanding light began to grow in his eyes.

"But what is this, Nancy? Is it that you, too, love Leonard best?"

She buried her face against his chest, and her voice dropped to a shuddering whisper.

"Yes. I think I have always loved Leonard. But there was something so forceful and dominating about Victor. He—he could make me say things I didn't mean. It seemed that he was all that Leonard might have been, if he were well and strong. It is for Leonard that I am asking this, Doctor Hans. You mustn't operate. The way things are, we can keep him for a few more years at least. Little as it is, it's much better than not having him at all. Promise me that you won't do it."

The color drained from Rorbach's lined face.

"But I cannot give you that promise. I have already given Leonard my word. I cannot take back one promise to give another."

The girl's racking sobs cut deep into the old surgeon's soul. She cried bitterly:

"You mustn't! You mustn't!"

Rorbach's long, slender hands came up to grip her shoulders gently.

"Nancy, there is something I must tell you," he breathed. "I hope it will make you understand why it is that I have no choice. It was not Leonard's pleading alone that made me give my

consent. It was a threat Victor made one night when he was upset, and he has repeated it since. He swears that if I do not operate, he will kill himself. He is so desperate that I believe he would do it. Then Leonard would die, too, and nothing would be left."

Rorbach dropped his arms, and his hands spread in a hopeless, beaten gesture. Nancy realized fully the mental torture he had suffered through the misfortune of his sons. She knew that he had already borne more than a man's spirit could stand.

He had fought against his son's arguments until he had no more strength or will to fight. Now that he had been forced to submission, he had to wage another battle to steel himself for the grim task. He was at the breaking point. If anything happened to cause further argument or delay, Hans Rorbach would crack, and a great surgeon would be lost to the world.

Nancy's voice smoothed to a controlled calm.

"Then let me go to the lodge, too. I promise not to be in the way. I—I want to be with him—at the last."

Rorbach's deep eyes glimmered through unshed tears.

"How could I refuse you? We will go tomorrow evening."

"I won't go with you in your car," the girl said quickly. "Leonard would try to stop me. I'll drive to the lodge and meet you there. Don't tell them I'm coming. It would only upset them. Then after—after the operation, I can be with Leonard to the end. Thank you, Doctor Hans. Thank you!"

SHE whirled and ran out of the room. Rorbach stood staring after her. His eyes were so blinded with tears of grief, he saw her as through rain.

"In Victor's strong body she sees all that Leonard might have been," he muttered brokenly. "When they were small, my two sons were so alike.

But now they are shockingly different."

Rorbach could not keep his thoughts from straying back to that day when the twins were twelve. He pictured them as they lay unconscious upon the surgery table, cut and hurt by Victor's careless mixing of chemicals. Remembering that weird mix-up of their identities, the queer crossing of their personalities during that brief interval of semi-consciousness, Rorbach shook his head in puzzled resignation. He felt numbed and weary. In his chest there was an intolerable ache.

Neither the weariness nor the ache had lessened by the next evening, when he and his sons started for the lodge, nor the day after, when they reached the lodge late in the afternoon. Rorbach stepped from the car and followed his sons into the tall, rugged, old building. It seemed frowning and sinister. A nameless dread brushed his face like a cold, sepulchral wind as he walked down the long, gray hall. It was dank and musty from being closed to the air and the clean sun for many months.

The surgery on the second floor of the lodge had been installed many years ago, when the twins were small. Rorbach had used it for experimental research. But its real purpose had been preparation against any chance emergency during those years when Victor and Leonard had spent most of their time at the lodge. Should one of them be attacked by a fatal sickness, Rorbach wanted to be prepared to amputate to save the life of the other.

In that little surgery the next morning, Hans Rorbach faced his sons. His deep brown eyes brooded upon them as they stood beside the operating table, their combined gaze fixed upon him. The father's look studied Leonard's thin, pale face, surmounted by the mass of curly, black hair. Then it went to Victor's healthy countenance, the straight, jet hair pushed back from

the forehead, and the snow-white tuft dividing it like a chalk line.

On Victor's features was a subdued excitement that the doctor could not quite read, though he thought he partly understood it. Victor had always longed to be free. In later years, the longing had grown to an unreasoning obsession.

On Leonard's drawn visage, in his too-bright, feverish eyes, burned consuming desire and a nerve-racking impatience for the deed to be done and finished.

"We have come to the end of our journey, my sons," Rorbach said slowly. "The end of a journey for Victor and me, Leonard. This is the beginning of a longer journey for you. I have tried to be a good father to you. For all wherein I have failed, I beg that you forgive me. Remember that I have loved you both." He drew his shoulders high with military rigidity, and his gaze searched deep into Leonard's burning eyes. "My beloved son, I bid you farewell."

Leonard's lips scarcely moved, and his thin white face was sternly set.

"Good-by, Father. Do not grieve for me. What you do for me is really kind."

The expression faded from old Hans' features. Neither of his sons—the one who was to live or the one who was to die—would know what this was costing him. But Rorbach's will was his greatest strength. He had steeled himself for this moment.

Now that the time had come, he was the surgeon confronted by a scientific, emotionless task. He laid his hand upon the anesthetic masks, gestured toward the tray containing sterilized instruments, sponges and artery clamps.

"All is ready. Lie down now."

As the anesthetizing gas began to hiss through the valves, neither of the twins heard their father mutter grimly to himself. His gaze was fixed in hatred upon the band of flesh which held them together.

"The cruel band of death!"

CHAPTER V

Victor or Leonard?

THE operation was not technically difficult in itself, nor was its performance a lengthy procedure. As a result of long hours of studying the many X-ray plates which had been exposed against that band of flesh, Hans Rorbach knew from memory the location of each vein, each artery, each nerve. After Victor's threat of suicide, he had caught himself several times planning just how he would proceed, should he ever be faced with the unavoidable necessity of cutting his sons apart. He had planned each stroke of the scalpel, each grip of the forceps.

[Turn Page]

Now it seemed he was doing what he had done over and over before—at least in his tortured mind.

But he stood on the right side of the surgery table, beside Victor, while the anesthetic flowed through the rubber tubes. A muffled murmuring came to his ears. They were gasped words, low-spoken, yet clear:

"I am glad to die—if my death—brings happiness to Nancy."

Rorbach started and his gaze sharpened on his sons. The masks all but covered their faces, so he could not see which lips moved. But Rorbach could have sworn that the voice belonged to Victor. The surgeon's jaw muscles hardened as he clenched his teeth and proceeded with hurried precision.

When it was finished, the twins were breathing stertorously under the influence of the anesthetic. Each was a separate body for the first time in their lives. Old Hans was weak and shaking, unnerved and white with nausea. He knew beyond all doubt that the knife he had wielded had taken the life of his son. There could be no appeal from that decree.

Like a man in a daze he walked out of the surgery, and went down the long hall to a small secluded room at the rear of that hall. He paused before the door and tapped on the casing.

"Nancy, it is all over. I will bring them to their rooms now. They will be awake soon. Let Leonard see you there when he opens his eyes."

The rooms which had been prepared for the twins were on opposite sides of the hall. Rorbach brought Leonard first, wheeled him into his room, laid him upon the bed and covered him gently. As Rorbach came into the hall again, Nancy passed him on her way to Leonard's side.

The doctor brought Victor and placed him in the bed in the room across the hall. He stood over him, watching his labored breathing. He stood there for what seemed a long

time, lifting Victor's lax wrist at intervals to check the strengthening pulse.

Then Rorbach jerked to sudden attention at the sound of a horrified scream from across the hall. He dropped Victor's wrist and ran outside.

Nancy stood in the opposite room, gazing with wide, terror-stricken eyes at Leonard. Rorbach's look followed Nancy's.

Leonard sat upright on the bed!

Being the weaker of the two, he might have been expected to remain under the effects of the anesthetic longer than Victor. But he was the first to recover.

Something was wrong. Rorbach read it in Nancy's dilated eyes, in her scream of a moment before. Leonard's arms reached out menacingly toward Nancy. His fingers clawed at her. His face twisted into a frantic mask of rage and hate as he shrieked invectives. But the voice which came from his throat was not the voice of Leonard Rorbach.

"You—you've tricked me! My own father, and the girl I wanted for my wife— You've done something—you've tricked me—to save him!"

NANCY'S startled look flashed to Hans Rorbach's ashen face. The old surgeon read the question in her frantic stare.

"Delirium," Rorbach muttered.

But he knew that he did not speak the truth. He moved toward the bed to soothe his son, to quiet his shrieking cries. But as he approached the bedside, the thin figure sagged backward to the pillows. Rorbach stood still for a hesitant moment.

"Leonard, Leonard," he murmured sadly. The wild eyes of his son rolled accusingly toward him. "Leonard," Rorbach murmured again, as if by mere repetition he would convince himself of what was no longer a fact.

Against the white pillows, the young man's hair gleamed jet with

sweat. But even as Nancy and the doctor watched, the waves and curls seemed to flatten, as an unseen hand might smooth wrinkles from a bit of crumpled paper. At the center of the forehead, a faint white line began to appear. The line seemed to lengthen into a tuft of snow white hair, as if an invisible and ghostly painter drew a brush backward from the perspiring brow!

Rorbach knew that his son was dying. While his gaze remained fast on the thin, sallow face, he saw that the expression had changed. Leonard's patient gentleness had gone from the eyes. The pupils were now hard and demanding. The tolerant, half-whimsical softness which Rorbach remembered in the curve of Leonard's lips had been replaced by a snarling curl. The fiend on the bed struggled up again and the hard, burning eyes glared at the surgeon.

"You killed me—to save Leonard," he panted venomously. "You have always loved him best! You—"

As abruptly as it had risen, the body was gripped in the spasm of death. It dropped lifelessly back upon the bed. Stunned, Rorbach drew the sheet up over the face and head. Involuntarily his eyes passed over the straight black hair, divided by a line of white. Shuddering, he turned to look at Nancy.

She was gone, and Hans knew she would be in the room across the hall. He moved sadly away from the bed and walked blindly out into the corridor. The door of the opposite room stood open. A little of the crushing weight seemed to lift from Rorbach's soul at the words which drifted to him.

"Nancy, how kind you are to come—to be here where I can look at you—hold your hand through the last moments of my life. I won't mind going—and I hope you and Victor will be—terribly happy."

The cool pressure of Nancy's lips prevented further words.

"Hush," she murmured. "You're not going to die."

Looking through the open doorway, Hans Rorbach saw Nancy Moore's eyes were brimming with tears. But now they were tears of joy. The surgeon's look shifted eagerly to the flushed, ruddy face of his son. Without realizing that he moved, he stepped into the room and stood by the side of the bed.

Nancy Moore bent over his son, and her small, delicate fingers were combing through the thick mass of curling, black hair. The eyes of the young man upon the bed were closed, but his breathing was deep and even. As the cool hands caressed the jet locks, a patient and gentle smile bent the grim lips of old into a tolerant, half-whimsical curve.

"Where is Father?" he muttered. "I would like to see him before—before I go."

RORBACH'S hand moved gently to pull down the sheet, exposing the strong chest of his son. The surgeon's lined face revealed no change of expression. His gaze fixed on the puckered scar which showed just above the bandage he had placed there a half hour before. His memory bridged back over the years to that day his sons had lain before him on the surgery table at the lodge. He recalled their twelfth birthday, when he had taken that patch of skin from Leonard's breast to mend Victor's mangled face.

"Father," the young man on the bed murmured again. "All of this has—hurt him so— Before I go—I want to tell him again—to tell him not to grieve."

"Leonard!" Hans Rorbach snapped. At the sound of his name, the young man's eyes fluttered open. The smile upon his lips broadened. "You're not going to die, my son. Don't ask me how I know, or why. But it is true."

The strange son made no answer, yet something in the compassionate

expression on his flushed face told his father that he understood. Nancy's fingers reveled in the curling locks. Reading the silent plea in the suddenly mournful eyes, she lowered her head to press her lips against his in answer.

Rorbach moved silently from the room. A minute later after his son had drifted off into a restful sleep, Nancy joined the surgeon in the hallway.

"My own son," Rorbach muttered, "and yet I cannot be sure!"

"I am sure," Nancy said firmly. "I saw that scar on his chest when you drew back the sheet. I ran my fingers through his curling hair. But I did not need those things to tell me. It was something in his eyes, on his lips. Leonard did not die! I know. I have the right to know, because I love him, and he loves me."

"No," Rorbach agreed, shaking his great, shaggy head slowly. "Leonard did not die. He is too kind and good to die. A soul like his cannot die. It will live on forever."

●