

The DESTROYING ANGEL

By Louis Joseph Vance

Fate plays strange tricks. Do you ever stop to consider that seemingly trivial incidents sometimes change the whole course of a person's life—missing a train at a junction point; suffering a slight injury that becomes infected and necessitates amputation of a limb; a few words of back-fence gossip; a stolen kiss; a misunderstood letter, etc. Fate continues to play strange tricks on Whitaker.

Previous installments of "The Destroying Angel" told how Hugh Whitaker, thinking he faced death, married an innocent girl to save her honor and left the country immediately. Five years later he reappeared in New York, robust and wealthy, and found an old friend, Drummond, engaged to marry his supposed widow, now a famous actress known as Sara Law. She disappeared. Drummond is thought to have committed suicide, as her previous lovers had done. Whitaker learned he was endangered by mysterious agents and went to the country place of Martin Ember, his friend. Drummond turned up, a raving morphomaniac, and tried to kill Whitaker, who was helped by a beautiful Miss Fiske.

CHAPTER XII—Continued.

"The most amiable person I know!" he cried, elated. "Greetings!"

She paused by the steps, looking up, a fascinating vision.

"You're able to stand without assistance?"

"As a matter of fact, I can move only at the cost of excruciating agony."

She considered him with a sober face and smiling eyes. "I don't believe you. You're a fraud. Besides, I didn't come to see you at all; I came to find out why Mr. Ember dares so to neglect me. Did you deliver my invitation?"

"I did, unwillingly. He was desolated, but he couldn't accept—had to run back to town immediately after dinner."

"He's as great a fraud as you are. But since he isn't here, I shall go."

"Please—I'm famished for human society. Have pity. Sit down. Tell me where you've been with the boat."

"Merely to the head of the bay to have the gasoline tanks filled. A most boring errand. If I promise to come over this evening and play you a rubber or two—will you permit me to go home now?"

"On such terms I'll do anything you can possibly suggest," he declared, enchanted. "But . . . how will you get here? Not alone, through the woods? I can't permit that."

"Elsie shall row me down the shore and then go back to keep cook company. Sum Fat can see me home—if you find it still necessary to keep up the invalid pose."

"I'm afraid," he laughed, "I shall call my own bluff. . . . Must you really go so soon?"

"Good afternoon," she returned demurely; and ran down the steps and off to her boat.

Smiling quietly to himself, Whitaker watched her cast the boat off, get under way, and swing it out of sight behind the trees. Then his smile wavered and faded and gave place to a look of acute discontent. Three mortal hours to fritter away in profitless anticipation . . .

At seven Whitaker was merely nervous.

By eight he was unable to sit still.

Half an hour later the house was too small to contain him. He found himself at the end of the dock, tingling with impatience, but finding some little consolation in the restless sweep of the wind against his face and body. He could see little—a mere suggestion of the shore line picked out with the dim, semiphenescent glow of breaking wavelets. Some minutes elapsed. The pallor of the east grew more marked. Whitaker fancied he could detect a figure moving on the Fiske dock.

Then, startled, he grew conscious of the thick drone of a heavily-powered motor boat near inshore. Turning quickly, he discovered a black, vague shape not twenty yards from where he stood, showing neither bow nor side-lights; a stealthy and mysterious apparition creeping toward the dock with something of the effect of an animal about to spring.

And immediately he heard a man's voice from the boat, abrupt with anger: "Not this place, you ass—the next."

"Shut up," another voice replied. "There's somebody on that dock."

At the same time the bows of the boat swung off and the shadow slipped away to westward—toward the Fiske place.

A wondering apprehension of some nameless and desperate enterprise, somehow involving the woman who obsessed his thoughts, crawled in Whitaker's mind. Automatically he turned back, let himself down to the beach, and began to pick his way toward the Fiske dock, half running despite his stiff ankle. But he had not gone half the way before he pulled up with a thumping heart, startled beyond expression by a cry in the night—a cry of wild appeal and protest ringing clear down the wind, a voice whose timbre was unmistakably that of a woman: "Aux secours! Aux secours!"

Twice it cried out, and then was hushed as grimly as the first incoherent screams. No need now to guess at what was towards: Whitaker was running, heedless of his injured foot—pitching, slipping, stumbling, leaping—somehow making progress.

By now the moon had lifted above the beach high enough to aid him somewhat with its waxing light; and, look-

ing ahead, he could distinguish dimly shapes about the dock and upon it that seemed to bear out his most cruel fears. The power boat was passably distinct, her white side showing plainly through the tempered darkness. Midway down the dock he made out struggling figures—two of them, he judged: a man at close grips with a frantic woman. And where the structure joined the land, a second pair, again a man and a woman, strove and swayed.

For all his haste, he was too slow; he was still a fair thirty yards away when the struggle on the dock ended abruptly with the collapse of the woman; it was as if, he thought, her strength had failed all in an instant—as if she had fainted. He saw the man catch her up in his arms, where she lay limp and unresisting, and with this burden step from the stage to the boat and disappear from sight beneath the coaming. An instant later he reappeared, standing at full height in the cockpit. Without warning his arm straightened out and a tongue of flame jetted from his hand; there was a report; in the same breath a bullet buried itself in the low earth bank on Whitaker's right. Heedless, he pelted on.

The shot seemed to signal the end of the other struggle at the landing stage. Scarcely had it rung out ere Whitaker saw the man lift a fist and dash it brutally into the woman's face. Without a sound audible at that distance she reeled and fell away; while the man turned, ran swiftly out to the end of the dock, cast off the headwarp and jumped aboard the boat.

She began to sheer off as Whitaker set foot upon the stage. She was twenty feet distant when he found himself both at its end and at the end of his resource. Frantic with despair, he thrashed the air with impotent arms; a fair mark, his white garments shining bright against the dark background of the land. Aboard the moving boat an automatic fluttered, spitting ten shots in as many seconds. The thud and splash of bullets all round him brought him to his senses. Choking with rage, he stumbled back to the land.

On the narrow beach, near the dock, a small flat-bottomed rowboat lay, its stern afloat, its bows aground—as it had been left by the women surprised in the act of launching it. Jumping down, Whitaker put his shoulder to the stem.

As he did so, the other woman roused, got unsteadily to her feet, screamed, then catching sight of him staggered to his side. It was—as he had assumed—the maid, Elsie.

"M'sieur!" she shrieked, thrusting a tragic face with bruised and blood-stained mouth close to his. "Ah, m'sieur—madame—ces canailles-la!"

"Yes, I know," he said brusquely. "Get out of the way—don't hinder me!"

The boat was now all afloat. He jumped in, dropped upon the middle thwart, and fitted the oars in the rowlocks.

"But, m'sieur, what mean you to do?"

"Don't know yet," he panted—"follow—keep them in sight—"

The blades dipped; he bent his back to them; the rowboat shot away.

A glance over his shoulder showed him the boat of the marauders already well away. She now wore running lights; the red lamp swung into view as he glanced, like an obscene and sardonic eye. They were, then, making eastwards. He wrought only the more lustily with the oars.

Happily the Fiske motor boat swung at a mooring not a great distance from the shore. Surprisingly soon he had the small boat alongside. Hastily he disengaged the mooring hook, located the switch and started the motor. Half a mile away the red light was slipping swiftly eastward over silvered waters. The Trouble leaped out like a live thing, settling to its course with the fleet precision of an arrow truly loosed.

Probably no more severe critic of his own chivalric foolishness ever set himself to succor a damsel in distress. Withal he entertained not the shadow of a thought of drawing back. As long as the other boat remained in sight; as long as the gasoline and his strength held out; as long as the Trouble held together and he retained the wit to guide her—so long Whitaker determined to stick to the wake of the kidnapers.

A little more than halfway between their starting point and the head of the bay, the leading boat swung sharply in

toward the shore, then shot into the mouth of a narrow indentation. For two or three minutes he could see nothing of the other. Then he emerged from a tortuous and constricted channel into a deep cut, perhaps fifty feet in width and spanned by a drawbridge and a railroad trestle. At the farther end of this tidewater canal connecting the Great West bay with the Great Peconic, the leading power boat was visible, heading out at full speed, the half-mile lead fully re-established.

Empty of all other craft, weird and desolate in moonlight, the Little Peconic waters widened and then narrowed about the flying vessels. Shore lights watched them, now dim and far, now bright and near at hand. Shelter Island sound received them, slapped their flanks encouragingly with its racing waves, sped them with an ebbing tide that tore seawards between constricted shores into the lonelier wastes of Gardiner's bay. Their relative positions were unchanged: still the Trouble retained her position.

When the chase rounded the buoy, instead of standing, as any reasonable beings might have been expected to, on to Fisher's Island or at a tangent north toward the Connecticut littoral, they swung off something south of east—a course that could lead them nowhere but to the immensities of the sea itself.

Whitaker's breath caught in his throat as he examined this startling prospect. He shook a dubious, vastly troubled head. But he held on grimly in the face of dire forebodings.

Once out from under the lee of Gardiner's Island, a heavier run of waves beset them, catching the boats almost squarely on the beam; fortunately a sea of long, smooth, slow shouldering rollers, as yet not angry. Now and again, for all that, one would favor the Trouble with a quartering slap that sent a shower of spray aboard her to drench Whitaker and swash noisily round the cockpit ere the self-bailing channels could carry it off. He was quickly wet to the skin and shivering. The hour was past midnight, and the strong air whipping in from the open sea had a bitter edge. They still had moonlight, but the wind was blowing with an insistent, unintermittent force it had not before developed. A haze, vaguely opalescent, encircled the horizon like a ghost of absinthe. By four-thirty, when the twilight was moderately bright, Whitaker was barely able to distinguish the leading boat. The two seemed as if suspended, struggling like impaled insects, the one in the midst, the other near the edge, of a watery pit walled in by vapors.

The end came just before dawn, with a swiftness that stunned the faculties—as though one saw the naked wrath of God leap like lightning from the sky.

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Heretofore Messages Could Not Be Received on Account of Noise—Difficulty Overcome.

Upon his return to London from Italy, Guglielmo Marconi, in an interview with British Journalists, gave the following information: "New developments will not only make wireless communication in this war more efficient than ever before, but will make it more difficult for the enemy to intercept messages. These improvements will apply to instruments in aeroplanes and airships. Hitherto aeroplanes have been at a disadvantage with airships in wireless work, for although they were able to transmit messages, they have not been able to receive them. This was because the receiving signal was too faint to be distinguished, being drowned by the noise of the aeroplane engine. Now we have been able to strengthen the receiving signal sufficiently to enable messages to be taken."

His Job.

"Please, mister, have you got any work for a poor man what ain't had nuthin' to eat for three days?"

"What kind of work can you do?"

"I'm a demonstrator, mister."

"A demonstrator? And what do you demonstrate?"

"My best hold is demonstratin' the superiority of teeth over victuals. Just lead me to a square meal and I'll show you a sample of my work."

They were precisely as they had been, within a certain distance of one another, tolling on and over on like strange misshapen spirits doomed to run an endless race. The harsh, shapeless light of imminent day alone manufactured a color of difference: Whitaker now was able to see as two dark shapes the men in the body of the leading boat. Now suddenly the man at the wheel cried out something in a terrible voice of fright, so high and vehement that it even carried back against the booming gale for Whitaker to hear. Simultaneously he put the wheel over, with all his might. The other jumped from his seat, only to be thrown back as the little vessel swung broadside to the sea, heeling until she lay almost on her beam ends. The next instant she ceased, incredibly, to move—hung motionless in that resistless surge, an amazing, stupefying spectacle. It seemed minutes before Whitaker could force his wits to comprehend that she had struck and lay transfixed upon some submerged rock or reef.

A long, gray roller swept upon and over her, brimming her cockpit with foaming water. As it passed he saw



Aboard the Moving Boat an Automatic Fluttered.

the half-drowned men release the coamings, to which they had clung on involuntary impulse to escape being swept away, scramble upon the cabin roof, and with one accord abandon themselves to the will of the next wave to follow. As it broke over the boat and passed, he caught an instantaneous glimpse of their heads and arms bobbing and beating frantically as they whirled off through the yeasty welter. But he saw this without pity or compassion. If he had been able to have his will with them, he would have sunk both ten fathoms deep without an instant's respite. His throat was choked with curses that welled up from a heart wrenched and raging at this discovery of cowardice unparalleled.

They had done what they could for themselves without even hesitating to release the woman imprisoned in the cabin.

Do you think that Miss Fiske is in any way connected with the Drummond - Law - Ember - Whitaker affair? If so, in what manner?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Lacquer Crop.

It is a popular notion that the valuable varnishes known as lacquers are vegetable products that exude from various trees of India and the East when their twigs are punctured by a cochineal insect.

One kind of gum is, however, actually produced by the insect itself. The minute larvae begin to secrete the gum as soon as they puncture the tender bark and begin to suck the plant juices. In favorable circumstances the red secretion gradually envelops the larva in a hard lump, which protects it from attack. Frequently, however, the larvae are so crowded that a mass of gum is formed, and then the unprotected larvae gradually die of starvation or exposure.

Experiments have shown that if the larvae were transferred at the proper season to bunches of straw fastened to twigs in favorable situations, the larvae would migrate to the tender branches under the best conditions. The discovery has greatly increased the production of lacquer in India.

Better Than He Hoped.

"I'm afraid you went to sleep during that learned discourse," said the woman with a strong sense of duty.

"Yes," replied her husband, "when it started I was afraid I wouldn't."—Dallas News.

Self Denial.

Great is self denial. Life goes all to ravel and tatters where that enters not.—Carlyle.

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