

THE DESTROYING ANGEL

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

CHAPTER XX—Continued.

Aside from him, the only other occupant of the stage was Sara Law. She sat on a stone bench with her profile to the audience, her back to the right of the proscenium arch; so that she could not, without turning, have noticed the entrance of Ember and her husband. A shy, light, deathlessly youthful figure in pale and flowing garments that molded themselves fleetly to her sweet and girlish body, in a posture of pensive meditation; she was nothing less than adorable. Whitaker could not take his eyes from her, for sheer wonder and delight.

He was only vaguely conscious that Max, at length satisfied, barked a word to that effect to an unseen electrician off to the left, and waving his hand with a gesture indelibly associated with his personality, dragged a light cane-seated chair to the left of the proscenium and sat himself down.

"All ready?" he demanded in a sharp and irritable voice.

The woman on the marble step nodded imperceptibly.

"Go ahead," snapped the manager. An actor advanced from the wings, paused and addressed the seated woman. His lines were brief. She lifted her head with a startled air, listening. He ceased to speak, and her voice of golden velvet filled the house with the flowing beauty of its unforgettably sweet modulations. Beyond the footlights a handful of sophisticated and skeptical habitués of the theater forgot for the moment their ingrained incredulity and thrilled in sympathy with the wonderful rapture of that voice of eternal Youth. Whitaker himself for the time forgot that he was the husband of this woman and her lover; she moved before his vision in the guise of some divine creature, divinely unattainable, a dream woman divorced utterly from any semblance of reality.

That opening scene was one perhaps unique in the history of the stage. Composed by Max in some mad, poetical moment of inspired plagiarism, it not only owned a poignant and entrancing beauty of imagery, but it moved with an almost Grecian certitude, with a significance extraordinarily direct and devoid of circumlocution, seeming to lay bare the living tissue of immortal drama.

But with the appearance of other characters there came a change; the rare atmosphere of the opening began to dissipate perceptibly. The action clouded and grew vague. The auditors began to feel the flutterings of uncertainty in the air. Something was falling to cross the footlights. The sweeping and assured gesture of the accomplished playwright faltered; a clumsy bit of construction was damningly exposed; faults of characterization multiplied depressingly. Sara Law herself lost an indefinable proportion of her rare and provoking charm; the strangeness of failing to hold her audience in an ineluctable grasp seemed at once to nettles and distress her. Max himself seemed suddenly to wake to the amazing fact that there was something enormously and irremediably wrong; he began with exasperating frequency to halt the action, to interrupt scenes with advice and demands for repetition. He found it impossible to be still, to keep his seat or control his rasping, irritable voice. Subordinate characters on the stage lost their heads and either forgot to act or overacted. And then—intolerable climax!—of a sudden somebody in the orchestra chairs laughed in outright derision in the middle of a passage meant to be tenderly emotional.

The voice of Sara Law broke and fell. She stood trembling and unstrung. Max, without a word, turned on his heel and swung out of sight into the wings. Four other actors on the stage, aside from Sara Law, hesitated and drew together in doubt and bewilderment. And then, abruptly, with no warning whatever, the illusion of gloom in the auditorium and moonlight in the postscenium was rent away by the glare of the full complement of electric lights installed in the house.

A thought later, while still all were blinking and gasping with surprise, Max strode into view just behind the footlights. Halting, he swept the array of auditors with an ominous and truculent stare.

So quickly was this startling change consummated that Whitaker had no more than time to realize the reappearance of the manager before he caught his wrathful and venomous glance fixed to his own bewildered face. And something in the light that flickered wildly behind Max's eyes reminded him so strongly of a similar expression he had remarked in the eyes of Drummond, the night the latter had been captured by Ember and Sum Fat, that in alarm he half rose from his seat.

Simultaneously he saw Max spring toward the box, with a distorted and snarling countenance. He was tugging at something in his pocket. It appeared in the shape of a heavy pistol.

Instantly Whitaker was caught and tripped by Ember and sent sprawling on the floor of the box. As this happened, he heard the voice of the firearm, sharp and vicious—a single report.

Unhurt, he picked himself up in time to catch a glimpse of Max, on the stage, momentarily helpless in the embrace of a desperate and frantic woman who had caught his arms from behind and, presumably, had so deflected his arm. In the same breath Ember, who had leaped to the railing round the box, threw himself across the footlights with the lithe certainty of a beast of prey and, seemingly in as many deft motions, knocked the pistol from the manager's hand, wrested him from the arms of the actress, laid him flat and knelt upon him.

With a single bound Whitaker followed him to the stage; in another he had his wife in his arms and was soothing her first transports of semi-hysterical terror.

It was possibly a quarter of an hour later when Ember paused before a door in the ground-floor dressing-room gangway of the Theater Max—a door distinguished by the initials "S. L." in the center of a golden star. With some hesitation with even a little diffidence, he lifted a hand and knocked.

At once the door was opened by the maid, Elise. Recognizing Ember, she



"I Want to See the End of It All."

smiled and stood aside, making way for him to enter the small, curtained lobby.

"Madam—and monsieur," she said with smiling significance, "told me to show you in at once, Monsieur Ember."

From behind the curtains, Whitaker's voice lifted up impatiently: "That you, old man? Come right in!" Nodding to the maid, Ember thrust aside the portieres and stepped into the brightly lighted dressing room, then paused, bowing and smiling his self-contained, tolerant smile; in appearance as imperturbable and well-groomed as though he had just escaped from the attentions of a valet.

Mary Whitaker, as yet a little pale and distraught, and still in costume, was reclining on a chaise-longue. Whitaker was standing close beside his wife; his face the theater of conflicting emotions; Ember, at least, thought with a shrewd glance to recognize a pulsating light of joy beneath a mask of interest and distress and a flash of embarrassment.

"I am intruding?" he suggested gravely, with a slight turn as if offering to withdraw.

"No."

The word faltering on the lips of Mary Whitaker was lost in an emphatic iteration by Whitaker.

"Sit down!" he insisted. "As if we'd let you escape now, after you'd kept us here in suspense!"

He offered a chair, but Ember first advanced to take the hand held out to him by the woman on the chaise-longue.

"You are feeling—more composed?" he inquired.

Her gaze met his bravely. "I am—

troubled, perhaps—but happy," she said.

"Then I am very glad," he said, smiling at the delicate color that enhanced her exquisite beauty as she made the confession. "I had hoped as much." He looked from the one to the other. "You have . . . made up your minds?"

The wife answered for both: "It is settled, dear friend: I can struggle no longer. I thought myself a strong woman; I have tried to believe myself a genius bound upon the wheel of an ill-starred destiny; but I find I am—the glorious voice trembled slightly—"only a woman in love and no stronger than her love."

"I am very glad," Ember repeated, "for both your sakes. It's a happy consummation of my dearest wishes."

"We owe you everything," Whitaker said with feeling, dropping an awkward hand on the other's shoulder. "It was you who threw us together, down there on the Great West bay, so that we learned to know one another . . ."

"I plead guilty to that little plot—yes," Ember laughed. "But, best of all, this comes at just the right time—the rightest time, when there can no longer be any doubts or questions or misunderstandings, no ground for further fears and apprehensions, when 'the destroying angel' of your 'ill-starred destiny' my dear—he turned to the woman—"is exorcised—banished—proscribed—"

"Max—" Whitaker struck in explosively.

"—is on his way to the police station, well guarded," Ember affirmed with a nod and a grim smile. "I have his confession, roughly jotted down, but signed, and attested by several witnesses. . . . I'm glad you were out of the way; it was rather a painful scene, and disorderly; it wouldn't have been pleasant for Mrs. Whitaker. . . . We had the deuce of a time clearing the theater: human curiosity is a tremendously persistent and resistant force. And then I had some trouble dealing with the misplaced loyalty of the staff of the house. . . . However, eventually I got Max to myself—alone, that is, with several men I could depend on. And then I heartlessly put him through the third degree—forestalling my friends, the police. By dint of asserting as truths and personal discoveries what I merely suspected, I broke down his denials. He owned up, doggedly enough, and yet with that singular pride which I have learned to associate with some phases of homicidal mania. . . . I won't distress you with details; the truth is that Max was quite mad on the subject of his luck; he considered it, as I suspected, ludicrously associated with Sara Law. When poor Custer committed suicide, he saved Max from ruin and innocently showed him the way to save himself thereafter, when he felt in peril, by assassinating Hamilton and, later, Thurston. Drummond only cheated a like fate, and you"—turning to Whitaker—"escaped by the narrow shave. Max hadn't meant to run the risk of putting you out of the way unless he thought it absolutely necessary, but the failure of his silly play in rehearsal tonight, coupled with the discovery that you were in the theater, drove him temporarily insane with hate, chagrin and jealousy."

Concluding, Ember rose. "I must follow him now to the police station. . . . I shall see you both soon again—?"

The woman gave him both her hands. "There's no way to thank you," she said—"our dear, dear friend!"

"No way," Whitaker echoed regretfully.

"No way?" Ember laughed quietly, holding her hands tightly clasped. "But I see you together—happy—Oh, believe me, I am fully thanked!"

Bowing, he touched his lips gently to both hands, released them with a little sigh that ended in a contented chuckle, exchanged a short, firm grasp with Whitaker, and left them. . . . Whitaker, following almost immediately to the gangway, found Ember had already left the theater.

For some minutes he wandered to and fro in the gangway, pausing now and again on the borders of the deserted stage. There were but few of the house staff visible, and those few were methodically busy with preparations to close up. Beyond the dismal gutter of the footlights the auditorium yawned cavernous and shadowy, peopled only by rows of chairs ghostly in their dust-cloths. The street entrances were already closed, locked and dark. On the stage a single cluster of electric bulbs made visible the vast, gloomy dome of the flies and the whitewashed walls against which sections of scenery were stacked like cards. An electrician in his street clothes lounged beside the doorkeeper's cubicle, at the stage entrance,

smoking a cigarette and conferring with the doorman while subjecting Whitaker to a curious and antagonistic stare. The muffled rumble of their voices was the only sound audible, aside from an occasional ratchet of bootheels in the gangways as one actor after another left his dressing room and hastened to the street, keen-set for the clash of gossiping tongues in theatrical clubs and restaurants.

Gradually the building grew more and more empty and silent, until at length Whitaker was left alone with the shadows and the two employees. These last betrayed signs of impatience. He himself felt a little sympathy for their temper. Women certainly did take an unconscionable time to dress! . . .

At length he heard them hurrying along the lower gangway, and turned to join his wife at the stage entrance. Elise passed on, burdened with two heavy handbags, and disappeared into the rain-washed alleyway. The electrician detached his shoulders from the wall, ground his cigarette under heel and lounged over to the switchboard.

Mary Whitaker turned her face, shadowy and mystical, touched with her faint and inscrutable smile, up to her husband's.

"Wait," she begged in a whisper. "I want to see"—her breath checked—"the end of it all."

They heard hissings and clickings at the switchboard. The gangway lights vanished in a breath. The single cluster stand on the stage disappeared—and the house was blotted out utterly with its extinguishment. There remained alight only the single dull bulb in the doorman's cubicle.

Whitaker slipped an arm round his wife. She trembled within his embrace.

"Black out," she said in a gentle and regretful voice: "the last exit; Curtain—End of the Play!"

"No," he said in a voice of sublime confidence—"no; it's only the prologue curtain. Now for the play, dear heart . . . the real play . . . life . . . love . . ."

THE END.

ORIGIN OF POTATO UNKNOWN

Strong Reasons, However, for Belief That It Is Native of Mountainous Districts of America.

The question of where the potato is indigenous and where introduced by man has never been strictly answered. It seems sure, however, that the potato is a native of the mountainous districts of tropical and subtropical America, from Chile to Mexico, and even as far north as the southern part of Colorado. Data concerning the known use of the potato for food are not very definite. It probably was first taken to Europe from Peru by Spaniards early in the sixteenth century, and spread from Spain to Holland, Burgundy and Italy, though cultivated only as a curiosity in a few gardens and little known or thought of. In the Complete Gardener, published in 1719, it is not mentioned. As a food it was first used for pigs and cattle; then, on account of its great yield, it was suggested that it might be useful for the poor and prevent famine, due to the failure of the grain crops. As early as 1693 the Royal society of London adopted measures to encourage its cultivation in England. It spread quickly in Ireland, but it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that it acquired any real importance on the continent of Europe. Of its first cultivation as a crop in North America even less is known.

Wrong Figure of Speech.

"In your sermon this morning you spoke of a baby as 'a new wave on the ocean of life,'" said the church warden, who had recently become a father, to the vicar in the vestry.

"I did," replied the vicar; "it was a poetic figure of speech."

"Don't you think 'a fresh squall' would have hit the mark better?"—Stray Stories.

Clean Record.

"What makes Jinks so proud of his ancestors? I never heard any of them did anything." "That's exactly the point. So many persons' ancestors did do things which got them into trouble with the police."—Richmond Times-Dispatch.

Typhoid Fever.

"Typhoid fever has been mastered," The inoculation for that one-time fatal disease is quite as effective as that for smallpox. Typhoid fever is no longer a menace where the wonderful serum is obtainable.

Florida's highest point is 300 feet above sea level.

Caw! Caw!

Peter Menkin Brown, Berlin correspondent, said in Baltimore in a lecture on the blockade:

"The Germans are suffering from our blockade more than they'd have us think. There's a real dearth of foodstuffs and there's a real pest of profiteers."

"Think of it—the Germans are now eating crows! More than that, the profiteers have cornered the crows of Germany, so that the government has had to fix crow prices, which range, I believe, from 60 to 85 cents, according to the weight and age of the bird."

"But imagine it. Cornering crows! That is no way to help your country's caws!"—Detroit Free Press.

Sure! High Heels Cause Corns But Who Cares Now

You reckless men and women who are pestered with corns and who have at least once a week invited an awful death from lockjaw or blood poison are now told by a Cincinnati authority to use a drug called freezone, which the moment a few drops are applied to any corn or callous the soreness is relieved and soon the entire corn or callous, root and all, lifts off with the fingers.

Freezone dries the moment it is applied, and simply shrivels the corn or callous without inflaming or even irritating the surrounding tissue or skin. A small bottle of freezone will cost very little at any of the drug stores, but will positively rid one's feet of every hard or soft corn or hardened callous. If your druggist hasn't any freezone he can get it at any wholesale drug house for you—Adv.

That's the Question.

She—Anything that is worth winning is worth working for.

He—Yes, but the question is, will your father loosen up, or will I have to keep on working for you after I've won you?—Boston Transcript.

Soothe Baby Rashes

That itch and burn with hot baths of Cuticura Soap followed by gentle anointings of Cuticura Ointment. Nothing better. For free samples address, "Cuticura, Dept. X, Boston." Sold by druggists and by mail. Soap 25, Ointment 25 and 50.—Adv.

High Visibility.

"Officer," said a lady much above the usual avoidupolis, "could you see me across the street?"

"Madame, I could see you half a block!"—Judge.

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Allen's Foot-Ease, the antiseptic powder. Makes tight or new shoes feel easy. Relieves Corns, Bunions, Hot, Swollen, Tender, Aching Feet. Sold everywhere, etc. Don't accept any substitute. Sample FREE. Address, Allen S. Olmsted, Le Roy, N. Y.

Judas Didn't Last.

Comparisons of profiteers to Judas are hardly fair, as the latter eventually developed symptoms of remorse and bumped off.—Washington Star.

THAT CHANGE IN WOMAN'S LIFE

Mrs. Godden Tells How It May be Passed in Safety and Comfort.

Fremont, O.—"I was passing through the critical period of life, being forty-six years of age and had all the symptoms incident to that change—heat flashes, nervousness, and was in a general run down condition, so it was hard for me to do my work. Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound was recommended to me as the best remedy for my troubles, which it



surely proved to be. I feel better and stronger in every way since taking it, and the annoying symptoms have disappeared."—Mrs. M. GODDEN, 925 Napoleon St., Fremont, Ohio.

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If any complications present themselves write the Pinkham Medicine Co., Lynn, Mass., for suggestions how to overcome them. The result of forty years experience is at your service and your letter held in strict confidence.

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