

THE DESTROYING ANGEL

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

TO OUR FEMINE READERS

Young ladies, if you were living in a secluded neighborhood and discovered a respectable, nice-looking young man on an adjoining place watching you daily, would you notify the police or would you encourage a bit of flirtation just for curiosity? What one young lady did in such circumstances is told entertainingly in this installment.

You remember, Hugh Whitaker, thinking he was about to die, married an innocent girl to save her honor and departed immediately for the Southern seas. Five years later he returns to New York, healthy and wealthy, and finds the wife, now a famous actress known as Sara Law, engaged to marry Drummond, his old friend and partner. She disappears suddenly. Drummond supposedly commits suicide, as her previous lovers had done. Whitaker is murderously assaulted in the dark and goes to the country home of his friend Martin Ember, near the sea. He discovers a mysterious spy there and thinks it is Drummond.

CHAPTER X.

—11— The Spy.

Already the sun was warm, the faint breeze bland. Standing at the window and shading his eyes against the glare, Whitaker surveyed a world new-washed and radiant; the landlocked bay dimpled with vagrant cutspaws and smitten with sunlight as with a scimitar of fire; the earth fresh and fragrant, steaming faintly in the ardent glow of the dawn.

In another moment he was at the kitchen door, interrupting Sum Fat's first matutinal attentions to his teeth with a demand for a bathing suit. Three minutes later, from the end of the small dock, he dived neatly, coming to the surface with his flesh tingling with delight of the cool water; then, with the deliberate and powerful movements of an experienced swimmer, struck away from the land. Two hundred yards out he paused, rolled over on his back, and hands clasped beneath his head, floated serenely, sunlight warming his upturned face, his body rejoicing in the snave, clean, fluid embrace.

Then something disturbed him—a dull fluttering, vibrant upon his submerged eardrums. Extending his arms and moving his hands gently to preserve his poise, he lifted his head from the water. From the landing stage was standing out. The churning of its propeller had aroused him. He could see but a single person for all its crew. Seated astern, dividing her attention between the side steering wheel and the engine, she was altogether ignorant of the onlooker. Only her head and shoulders showed above the coaming—her head with its shining crown, her shoulders cloaked with a light wrap gathered at the throat.

Whitaker, admiring, wondered . . . Sweeping in a wide arc as it gathered speed, the boat presently shot out smartly on a straight course for the barrier beach.

Why? What business had she there? And at an hour so early?

No affair of his—Whitaker admitted as much freely. And yet he was beginning his fourth day on the Great West bay without having set foot upon its Great South beach! Ridiculous oversight! And one to be remedied without another hour's delay.

Grinning with amused toleration of his own perverse sophistry, he turned over on his side and struck out in the wake of the motor boat. When at length he waded ashore he found the motor boat moored in shallow water at the end of a long and substantial dock. He patted the flanks of the vessel as he waded on.

"Good little boat!" said he.

Walking rapidly, very soon he stood at the head of a rude flight of wooden steps which ran down from the top of a wave-eaten sand bluff, some ten or twelve feet in height, to the broad and gently shelving ocean beach. Midway between the sand bluff and the breaking waters stood the woman Whitaker had followed. (There wasn't any use mincing terms—he had followed her in his confounded, fatuous curiosity!) Her face was to the sea, her hands clasped behind her. Now the wind modeled her cloak sweetly to her body, now whipped its skirts away, disclosing legs straight and slender and gra-

duously modeled. She was dressed, it seemed, for bathing.

Whitaker turned to go, and turning let his gaze sweep up from the beach and along the brow of the bluff. He paused, frowning. Some twenty feet or so distant the legs of a man, trousered and booted, protruded from a hollow between two hummocks of sand. And the toes of the boots were digging into the sand, indicating that the man was lying prone; and that meant (if he were neither dead nor sleeping) that he was watching the woman on the beach.

Indignation, righteous indignation, warmed Whitaker's bosom. It was all very well for him to catch sight of the woman through her cottage window, by night, and to swim over to the beach in her wake the next morning, but what right had anybody else to constitute himself her shadow? Besides, it was possible that the man was Drummond.

He strode forward and stood over the man, looking down at his back. It was true, as he had assumed—the fellow was watching the woman. And his back was very like Drummond's. A little quiver of excitement mingled with anticipative satisfaction ran through him. Now, at last, the mystery was to be cleared up, his future relations with the pseudo-suicide defined and established.

Deliberately he extended his bare foot and nudged the man's ribs.

"Drummond . . ." he said in a clear voice, decided but unaggressive.

With an oath and what seemed a single, quick motion, the man jumped to his feet and turned to Whitaker a startled and inflamed countenance.

"What the devil!" he cried angrily. "Who are you? What do you want? What d'you mean by coming round here and calling me Drummond?"

He was no more Drummond than he was Whitaker himself.

"For that matter"—something clicked in Whitaker's brain and subconsciously he knew that his temper was about to take the bridge—"what do you mean by spying on that lady yonder?"

It being indisputably none of his concern, the unfairness of the question only lent it offensive force. The man made this painfully clear through the medium of an intolerable epithet and an attempt to land his right fist on Whitaker's face.

The face, however, was elsewhere when the fist reached the point for which it had been aimed; and Whitaker closed in promptly as the fellow's body followed his arm, thrown off balance by the momentum of the unobstructed blow.

What followed had entered into the calculations of neither. Whitaker felt himself suddenly falling through air thick with a blinding, choking cloud of dust and sand. The body of the other was simultaneously wrenched violently from his grasp. Then he brought up against solidity with a bump that seemed to expel every cubic inch of air from his lungs. And he heard himself cry out sharply with the pain of his weak ankle newly twisted.

He sat up, gasping for breath, brushed the sand from his face and eyes, and as soon as his whirling wits settled a little, comprehended what had happened.

Half buried in the debris of a miniature landslide, he sat at the foot of the bluff. Immediately above his head a ragged break showed where the sand, held together solely by beach grass, had given way beneath the weight of the antagonists.

A little distance from him the other man was picking himself up, apparently unhurt but completely surfeited. Without delay, with not even so much as a glance at Whitaker, he staggered off for a few paces, then settled into a heavy, lumbering trot westward along the beach. He did not wish the woman to recognize him; therefore he was putting himself out of her way. For she was approaching.

When Whitaker caught sight of her, she was already close at hand. She had been running. Now as their glances met, hers keenly inquiring of Whitaker's still bewildered eyes, she pulled up abruptly and stood astare. He saw, or fancied, something closely akin to fright and consternation in her look. The flush in her cheeks gave way to a swift pallor. The hands trembled that drew her beach cloak close about her. She seemed to make an ineffectual effort to speak.

On his part, Whitaker tried to get up. A keen twinge in his ankle, however, wrung an involuntary grunt from him, and with a wry grimace he sank back.

"Oh!" cried the woman, impulsively. "You're hurt!" She advanced a pace, solicitous and sympathetic.

"Oh, not much," Whitaker replied in a tone more of hope than of assur-

ance. He felt tenderly of the injured member. "Only my ankle—twisted it a few days ago, and now again. It'll be all right in a moment or two."

Her gaze traveled from him to the edge of the bluff.

"I didn't see—I mean, I heard something, and turned, and saw you trying to sit up and the other man rising."

"Sorry we startled you," Whitaker mumbled, wondering how the deuce he was going to get home. His examination of the ankle hadn't proved greatly encouraging.

"But I—ah—how did it happen?"

"A mere misunderstanding," he said lightly. "I mistook the gentleman for someone I knew. He resented it, so we started to scrap like a couple of schoolboys. Then . . . I wish to heaven it had been his leg instead of mine!"

"But still I hardly understand . . ."

"Well, you see, I—ah—I'm visiting Ember—the cottage next to yours, I believe. That is, if I'm not mistaken, you have the Fiske place?"

She nodded.

"And so, this morning, it struck me as a fine young idea to swim over here and have a look at the beach. And then I found that chap watching you—"

That startled her. "How do you mean—watching me?"

"Why—ah—that's what he seemed to be doing."

She shook her head. "You must be mistaken."

"Daresay. I generally am when I jump at conclusions. Anyway, he didn't like it much when I called him out of his name. I gathered, in fact, that he was considerably put out. Silly, wasn't it?"

"Rather!" she agreed gravely.

For a moment or two they eyed one another in silence. Whitaker wondering just how much of a fool she was thinking him and dubiously considering various expedients to ingratiate himself.

"I don't seem to think of anything useful to say," he ventured. "Can you help me out? Unless you'd be interested to know my name's Whitaker—Hugh Whitaker—"

She acknowledged the information merely by a brief nod. "It seems to me," she said seriously, "that the pressing question is, what are you going to do about that ankle? Shall you be able to walk?"

"Hard to say," he grumbled, a trifle dashed. With infinite pains and the aid of both hands and his sound foot,



Whitaker Closed in Promptly.

he lifted himself and contrived to stand erect for an instant, then bore a little weight on the hurt ankle—and blanched, paling visibly beneath his ineradicable tan.

"I don't suppose," he said with effort—"they grow—crutches—on this neck of land?"

And he was about to collapse again upon the sands when, without warning, he found the woman had moved to his side and caught his hand, almost brusquely passing his arm across her shoulders, so that she received no little of his weight.

"Oh, I say—!" he protested feebly. "Don't say anything," she replied shortly. "I'm very strong—quite able to help you to the boat. Please don't consider me at all; just see if we can't manage this way."

He endeavored to withdraw his arm, an effort rendered futile by her cool, firm grasp on his fingers.

"Please!" she said—not altogether patiently.

He eyed her askance. There was in this incredible situation a certain piquancy, definitely provocative, transcending the claims his injury made upon his interest. Last night for the first time he had seen this woman, and from a distance had thought her desirable; now, within twelve hours, he found himself with an arm round her neck!

And then suddenly she turned her head and intercepted his whole-hearted stare. For a thought wonder glimmered in the violet eyes; then they flashed disconcertingly; finally they became utterly cold and disdainful.

"Well!" she demanded in a frigid voice.

He looked away in complete confusion, and felt his face burning to the temples.

"I beg your pardon," he mumbled unhappily.

He essayed to walk. Twenty feet and more of treacherous, dry, yielding sand separated them from the flight of steps that ascended the bluff. It proved no easy journey.

The stairway accomplished, he limped to a wooden seat and sat down with much grim decision in his manner. But he mustered a smile to meet her look of concern, and shook his head.

"Thus far and no farther."

"Oh, but you must not be stubborn!"

"I mean to be—horrid stubborn. In fact, I don't mind warning you that there's a famous strain of mule in the Whitaker make-up."

She was, however, not to be diverted; and her fugitive frown bespoke impatience, if he were any judge.

Who do you think this girl is? And what is the purpose of the unrecognized spy? Do you think the girl knows Whitaker?
(TO BE CONTINUED.)

GAVE AUDIENCE GOOD LAUGH

Humorous Situation When Man Once Imprisoned With Michael Davitt Called Him by Number.

The death of James Collins, the modern historian of Dublin, reminds one that Mr. Collins was engaged in completing a work of his friend, the late Michael Davitt, Irish nationalist and labor leader, once a mill lad in Haslingden. One of Davitt's stories intended for inclusion is the following:

The "Irish Tribune," as Davitt was called, having served many years in Chatham and other prisons as a political prisoner, had been a free man some six months, when he was addressing a huge meeting in the Rotunda, Dublin.

Davitt had worked his audience up to a tense pitch of enthusiasm and concluded a great speech amid a perfect storm of applause.

When he had resumed his seat and the applause was subsiding a voice from the gallery cried out:

"Bravo, X Twenty-nine!"

Davitt started and, looking up, beheld the grinning face of a well-known "cracksman" whom he had left finishing a five years' term in Chatham prison, and who had hailed Davitt by his prison number.

It did not take an Irish audience long to scent out the humor of the situation and the Rotunda rang with peals of laughter, in which both "her majesty's ex-guests" heartily joined.

Poison in Self-Defense.

While we very naturally dislike a plant that poisons us when we touch it, yet if we investigate the reason for its poison we discover that a vast number of plants develop poisons and near poisons, and when we look over the list we find that we would be rather badly off without them, the National Geographic Magazine states. It is true that most of them are poisonous only when eaten, and that few are poisonous to the touch, but they have all developed these qualities in self-defense.

Some of them store their poison in their seeds, others in their root stocks and others in their roots to protect their progeny from harm. They do not go about looking for trouble or seeking, like the devil, whom they may destroy; but they are prepared to resist invasion of the rights of their children. Nux vomica and aconite are two of this kind.

Others develop alkaloids, like the nicotine of tobacco, the quinine of the cinchona tree and the theine of tea, to protect themselves. Strychnine, digitalis and a hundred and one indispensable drugs that are poisonous in overdoses are the gifts of the plant world to man as a byproduct of plant preparations for self-defense.

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