

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 people 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, delicately beautiful figure in pale and flowing garments that molded themselves fitly to her sweet and girlish body, in a posture of pensive meditation; she was nothing less than adorable. Whittaker 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 on the left, and, hanging about with a posture indubitably associated with his profession, dragged a light cane-seated chair to the left of the proscenium and sat himself down.

"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, dressed in a suit of the "new" 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 auditorium with the sweetest and most 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. Whittaker himself for the time forgot that he was the husband of this woman, and her lover; he moved before him 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 potent and enthralling 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 human 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 drama began to feel the flutterings of uncertainty in the air. Something was failing to cross the footlights. The sweeping and assured gesture of the accomplished playwright failed; a clumsy and unconvincing construction was clumsily exposed; faults of characterization multiplied depressingly. Sara Law herself lost an inestimable proportion of her rare and peaking charm; the strangeness of failing to hold her audience in an inflexible grasp seemed at once to agitate and distress her. Max himself seemed suddenly to wake to the amazing fact that there was something seriously and irretrievably 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!—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 gasping on her feet and, without a word, turned on her 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 confusion. "I had hoped so much," he looked from the one to the other. "I had hoped so much."

"I want to see the end of it all!" With a shrewd glance to recognize a pulsating light of joy beneath a mask of interest and distress and a flash of embarrassment.

"It is fascinating!" 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 Whittaker.

"Sit down!" he insisted. "As if you'd let us 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 chair—longue."

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

"I feel more bravely," "I am—troubled, perhaps, but happy," she said.

"Then I am very glad," he said, smiling at the delicate countenance that enfolded her exquisite beauty as she made the confession. "I had hoped so much."

On the floor of the box. As this happened, he heard the voice of the fire-arm, sharp and vicious—a single report—prescribed—

Whittaker 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 of his arm. In the same breath Ember, who had leaped to the railing round the box, threw himself across the footlights with the little electrician of a habit of prep 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 kept upon him.

With a single bound Whittaker 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 gateway 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. Reminding Ember, she smiled and stood aside, making way for him to enter the small, curtained lobby.

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

From behind the curtained, Whittaker's voice lifted up, imperceptibly, "That you, did you? Come right in!"

Nodding to the maid, Ember, thrust aside the portieres and stepped into the brightly lighted dressing room, then passed, bowing and smiling his self-complacent, tolerant smile in appearance as imperceptible and well-groomed as though he had just stepped from the attentions of a valet, rather than from a furious handmaid tussled with a vicious monomaniac.

Mary Whitaker, as yet a little pale and distrustful, and still in costume, was reclining on a chaise-longue. Whittaker, standing by her side, with his face the theater of conflicting emotions, Ember, at least, thought

"I shall see that both soon again—"

The woman gave him both her hands, and in a way to thank you, she said—"your dear, dear friend!"

"No way," Whittaker echoed regretfully.

"No way?" Ember laughed quietly, holding his hands tightly clasped.

"But I see you together—happy—Oh, believe me, I am fully thankful!"

Bowing, he touched his lips gently to both hands, released them with a chuckle, exchanged a short, firm grasp with Whittaker, and left them.

Whittaker, following almost immediately to the gateway, found Ember had closed the door behind him.

For some minutes he wandered to and fro in the gateway, pausing now and again on the borders of the desert stage. There were but few of the house seats visible and these few were methodically busy, with preparations to close up. Beyond the dismal gateway of the footlights the auditorium yawned cavernous and shadowy.

Ember, seated by rows of chairs grouped in their dark-clubs. The street entrances were already closed, locked and dark. On the stage a single cluster stand of electric bulbs made visible the vast gloomy dome of the flies and the white-washed 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 Whittaker to a curious and antagonistic stare. The multiple nature of that stare was the only sound audible, aside from an occasional rattle of bootheels in the gangways as one actor after another left his dressing room and hastened to the street, keenest for the clash of gossiping tongues in theatrical clubs and restaurants.

Gradually the building grew more and more empty and silent, until at length Whittaker was left alone with the shadows and the two employees.

At these last betrayed signs of impatience. He himself felt a little sympathy for their temper. Women certainly did not have an unconscionable time to dress!

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

"What?" she begged in a whisper. "I want to see—her breath ceased—'the end of it all.'"

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

Whittaker 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—"

THE END.

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INTERNATIONAL SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

(By E. O. SELLERS, Acting Director of Sunday School Course of Moody Bible Institute.)
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LESSON FOR MARCH 4

JESUS FEELS FIVE THOUSAND.

LESSON TEXT—John 6:1-14.
GOLDEN TEXT—Give us this day our daily bread.—Matt. 6:11.

This parable marks the high level of the year of our Lord's popularity. It is such an important miracle as to be the only one recorded in all four gospels. Be sure to use a good harmony. The returning twelve (Matt. 11:1) are taken by their master to a desert place that they might find rest (Mk. 6:31) and that they might comfort their hearts over the death of John the Baptist (Matt. 14:1-12).

The multitude would not grant them the right use of their leisure, but flocked to this retreat in the desert. They followed that they might listen to his gracious words, and perhaps behold some new wonder (v. 2). "Cursus" he saw in Lazarus "four millions, rusty souls."

Jesus saw the multitude and was moved, not with sarcasm, but with compassion which took a tangible form of service. Mark tells us (6:34) that Jesus was first of all teaching the multitude. It is better to teach a man how to help himself than to help the man.

We should not be surprised at Philip's slowness of faith. He was in a like manner once compassed as to how to feed the multitude in the wilderness. (Num. 11:21-23). It is not so much how great the need nor how little we possess; rather, is that little revealed Jesus to God, discoverers as though in desperation a boy whose father had thoughtfully provided him with a lunch, consisting of five barley loaves and two small fishes (v. 9); at least that much remained. This is a great commentary upon the tale of interest at this time, that the boy should have even his own lunch.

For the boy's hunger is proverbial. It seems as though Jesus emphasizes the helplessness of the disciples in order that he may show his power. His command "Give ye them" (v. 10) teaches us that we are to give such as we have, and not look to others nor to our charity by proxy. (Prov. 11:24-25). Again the Savior sets his disciples as though he were to teach them the resources of his kingdom. Give what you have, and he will bless and increase it to the supplying of the needs of a multitude. The secret of success was when he took up the loaves, and "looking up," God also saw that day and blessed it. We need to observe the systematic procedure. The people are seated or reclining upon the ground in ranks or in companies. The master blessing and breaking the boy's cakes, giving first to the disciples. God works miracles through human agencies only. The result of this systematic procedure was that they were all satisfied, "filled" (v. 12). Luke adds that "all did eat" (Lk. 9:17). Not alone, however, was there divine order and lavishness, but there were economy and thrift as well, for Jesus gave careful direction as to the fragments. The lavishness is shown by the fact that the baskets into which the fragments were gathered were each probably large enough in which to sleep. This conservation process was a stinging rebuke to the improvident orators and to present-day prodigals of that wonderful bounty with which God has blessed our land. God gives to that we may use for joy. Joy dies unless it is shared. Jesus is the living bread (John 6:48) and will satisfy hunger and life even as bread generates in the human body heat, vitality and power; so he would still feed the hungry soul of mankind. "We have at hand the word, and it is for lack of it that men die in the deepest, truest sense of that word. The poverty and perplexity of the disciples in his presence and in the presence of this great need are being repeated over and over today, and yet it is absurd. We have not enough to feed the multitude. We have few leaders of unimpaired mental activities and social services will not feed them, but when we break into them the Living Bread, they have enough and to spare. The difficulty with the distribution of material bread for the needs of mankind is not that there is not enough, grain, but rather that in the process of distribution certain companies of men can control the fate of the earth, and withhold them from the consumer for their own profit. There is no parallel in this for the church in that it is so much concerned with its own joys, pleasures and profits that it is withholding from the mass of mankind, especially in the foreign field, the bread which alone can bring life and immortality to light."

Summary: (1) The hope of the world's salvation is in the wonderful power of God in multiplying the little we give to him in the way of service.

(2) If we bring no gift, how can God bless man? Compare this boy's service with the service of the little maid in Naggan's household.

(3) Conservation of the fragments, using well or wasting the fragments of time, of opportunity, etc., makes all the difference between success and failure.

(4) Let nothing be lost. The refuse of petroleum is today worth more than the oil product.

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