

The Destroying Angel

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE
AUTHOR OF
"THE POOL OF FLAME," "THE BRONZE BELL," "THE BLACK BAG," "THE BRASS BOWL."
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Suppose that you, aroused tonight by the stealthy presence of a masked prowler in your bedroom, covered him with your pistol just as he was about to plunge a long kiss between your ribs? You discovered he was an old friend. Would you turn him over to the police and prosecute him? Or would you assume he was crazy and have him sent to an asylum? Perhaps you will find an answer to such a problem in this installment.

Previous installments told how Hugh Whitaker, thinking he was about to die, married an innocent girl to save her honor, and left the country immediately. Five years later he returned to New York, healthy and wealthy, and found the wife, now a famous actress known as Sara Law, engaged to marry Drummond, his old friend. She disappeared. Drummond supposedly committed suicide, as her previous lovers had done. Whitaker was assaulted in the dark, and while recuperating at the country home of his friend, Martin Ember, discovered spies, fought them, and was helped by a charming and mysterious young lady living nearby.

CHAPTER XI—Continued.

Ember pushed back his chair and, rising, stroked his chin. "Mounain and fine, eh?" he said, staring through the wire mesh of the screen. "Wish you were well enough to go riding with me. However, you won't be laid up long. I fancy, And I'll be back day after tomorrow. Now, I must cut across."

And within ten minutes Whitaker heard the motor car rumble off on the woodland road. He wasn't altogether sorry to be left to his own devices, but in spite of his half-started perturbation and dissatisfaction, the weariness of a hard fall day was so heavy upon him that he went to sleep almost before Sun Fat had finished making him comfortable.

Extinguishing the candle, the Chinaman, moving with the silent assurance of a cat in the dark, closed and latched the shutters, then sat down just outside the living-room door, to wait and watch.

An hour passed in silence, and another, and still another. Sun Fat sat motionless in the shadow, which blended so perfectly with his dark blue silk garments as to render him almost indistinguishable—a figure as patient and imperious as any lland, stout, graven god of his religion. But in time there fell upon his ears another sound, to which he stirred. If imperceptibly—driving himself together, tensing and flexing his tired muscles, his eyes shifted quickly from one quarter to another of the darkened living room and the still darker bedchamber.

And yet apparently all that had roused him was the drowsy whistle of a whippoorwill.

Then, with no other preface, a shadow flitted past one of the side windows, and in another reappeared more substantially on the veranda. Sun Fat grew altogether tense, his gaze fixed and exclusively focused upon that apparition.

Cautiously, noiselessly, edging upon him inch across the veranda, the man approached the door. It was open. A full, long minute elapsed. Even Sun Fat held his breath through that interminable reconnaissance.

At length, reassured, the man slipped into the room. Another minute, no sound detectable more than that of the veranda, the bed-room, with a movement as swift and sinewy as the swoop of a vulture, the man sprang toward the bedroom door.

Leaping from a sitting position, with a bound that was little less than a flight through the air, the Chinaman caught him halfway. There followed the bungalow, the report of revolver, sounds of scuffling.

Whitaker, half dazed, found himself standing in the doorway, regardless of his injuries.

"I saw, as one who dreams and yet is conscious that he does but dream, Ember lighting candles—calmly applying the flame of a taper to one after another as he made a round of the scenes. Sun Fat was kneeling on all fours, over something that breathed heavily and struggled without avail.

Whitaker's sleep-number faculties cleared.

"Ember," he cried. "What in the name of all things strange—"

Ember threw him a flickering smile. "Oh, there you are," he said cheerfully. "I've got something interesting to show you. Sun Fat"—he stooped and picked up a revolver—"you may let him up now, if you think he's safe."

"Safe enough." Sun Fat rose, grinning. "Had plenty."

He measured guard beside the door.

For an instant his captive seemed to relax. Ember moved to his side and stood over him, balancing the revolver in his palm.

"Come," he said impatiently. "Up with you!"

The man sat up as if galvanized by fear, got more slowly to his knees, then, grasping the edge of the table, dragged himself laboriously to a standing position.

Whitaker's jaw dropped and his eyes widened with wonder and pity. He wouldn't deny the man, yet he found it

"It explains a lot," Ember readjusted the sleeve and turned away. "And it shows us our duty of duty, clear," he continued, despite interruptions from the addled drug fiend. "I think a nice little sojourn in a sanatorium—what?"

"Right," Whitaker agreed, relieved.

"Well see what a cure does for him before we indulge in criminal proceedings—shall we?"

"By all means."

"Good," Ember glanced at his watch. "I'll have to hurry along now—must be in town not later than nine o'clock this morning. I'll take him along. No, not now—I can handle him easily."

"It'll be a bit of a walk to the village, but that will only help to quiet him down. I'll be back tomorrow; meanwhile, you'll be able to sleep soundly unless—"

He checked, frowning thoughtfully.

"Unless what?"

Ember jerked his head to indicate the prisoner. "Of course, this isn't by any chance the fellow you mixed it up with over on the beach—and so forth?"

"Nothing," Whitaker said.

"Queen, I can't find any trace of him or the other one—or can I account for him. He doesn't seem to fit in anywhere. However—" his expression lightened. "I dare say you were right; he's probably only some idle, light-fingered prowler. I'd keep my eyes open for him, but I don't really believe you need worry much."

Within ten minutes he was off on his lonely tramp through two miles of woodland and as many more of little-traveled country, at dead of night, with a madman in handcuffs for sole company.

CHAPTER XII.

Offshore.

"You ask me, I think very excellent quick cure."

Sun Fat tenderly adjusted the canvas brace, and thus with infinite care inserted the foot in a high-cut canvas tennis shoe.

He stood up, bending with boneless interest. "You take it easy one day or two—no bulk mud just loaf—no see pretty ladies—"

"Go 'way, you heathen—go clean your teeth!" cried Whitaker, indignantly.

"—and I think he'll be all well and sound," concluded Sun Fat.

He waddled away, chuckling. Whitaker got up, and with the aid of a cane made a number of tentative experiments in short-distance pedestrianism.

"I had a notion he'd be hanging around," Ember went on. "I thought I saw somebody hiding in the woods this afternoon; and Sun Fat was sure I saw him skulking near the edges of the clearing after Ember. So I set Sun Fat to watch, drove back to the village to mislead him, left my cane and walked back. And I was enough!"

With a comment, Whitaker, unable to stand any longer without discomfort, hobbled to a chair and sat down.

"Well?" Drummond demanded harshly in a quavering snarl. "Now that you've got me, what are you going to do with me?"

There was a high, hysterical accent in his voice that struck unpleasingly on Ember's ear. He cocked his head to one side, studying the man intently.

Drummond flung himself a step away from the table, paused, and again faced his captors with bravado.

"Well?" he called again. "Well?"

Ember looked toward Whitaker.

"Ask him," he said briefly.

Whitaker shook his head. It was difficult to think how to deal with this trapped animal, so wildly different from the cultivated gentleman he always had in mind when he thought of Drummond.

The futility of attempting to deal with him according to any code recognized by men of honor was wretchedly apparent.

"Drummond," he said slowly, "I wish God you had done this thing."

Drummond laughed discordantly.

"For your mouth—your mouth," he retorted, sneering.

Whitaker gave a gesture of despair. "If you only had content to keep out of the way . . . I If only you'd let me alone—"

"Then you let Sara Law alone, d'you hear?"

The interruption was little short of a shriek. Ember motioned to Sun Fat, who quietly drew nearer.

"I swear I don't know what to do or say."

"Then shut up."

"That'll be about all," Ember interposed quietly. At a glance from him, Sun Fat closed in swiftly and caught and pinioned Drummond's arms from behind.

A disengaging change took place in Drummond. In an instant he was screaming, screaming, slavering; his face congested, eyes staring, features working wildly as though he had indeed been granted a flash of insight into the true significance of companionship between a man and a woman who had something in common aside from community in their generation. Not two hours altogether of such intercourse had he been, but he had been enough to infect him with it. And he had been enough to have held his consciousness with a vague but striking discontent.

He had lashed himself into a very remarkable transport of resentful rage when, chancing to lift his eyes from their absorbed study of the planks composing the veranda floor, he discovered a motor boat at the landing stage. At once a smile of triumph disengaged the scowl.

The woman made the little vessel

drift toward the veranda, ease

and strength and joy of living inherent

within him.

He had been about to have a bar

to knock him out. This turban divided

him with a bag of plain gray

and figured silk; cut in an approved shape

and fastened with a silk strap. It is

exquisitely made and its chief glory

is in its finish—for there hangs

another glorious tassel.

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