

THE  
DESTROYING  
ANGEL

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

# **THE DESTROYING ANGEL**

**BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE**

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"The Bandbox," "Cynthia of the Minute," Etc.

**WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY ARTHUR I. KELLER**

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**TO**  
**ROBERT HOBART DAVIS**

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Whitaker's jaw dropped and his eyes widened with wonder and pity

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

Whitaker's jaw dropped and his eyes widened with wonder and pity

Her eyes fastened dilating, upon his. The scene faltered perceptibly

Whitaker felt land beneath his feet

"I do not love you. You are mad to think it"

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## I

### DOOM

"Then I'm to understand there's no hope for me?"

"I'm afraid not...." Greyerson said reluctantly, sympathy in his eyes.

"None whatever." The verdict was thus brusquely emphasized by Hartt, one of the two consulting specialists.

Having spoken, he glanced at his watch, then at the face of his colleague, Bushnell, who contented himself with a tolerant waggle of his head, apparently meant to imply that the subject of their deliberations really must be reasonable: anybody who willfully insists on footing the measures of life with a defective constitution for a partner has no logical excuse for being reluctant to pay the Piper.

Whitaker looked quickly from one to the other of his three judges, acutely sensitive to the dread significance to be detected in the expression of each. He found only one kind and pitiful: no more than might have been expected of Greyerson, who was his friend. Of the others, Hartt had assumed a stony glare to mask the nervousness so plainly betrayed by his staccato accents; it hurt him to inflict pain, and he was horribly afraid lest the patient break down and "make a scene." Bushnell, on the other hand, was imperturbable by nature: a man to whom all men were simply "cases"; he sat stroking his long chin and hoping that Whitaker would have the decency soon to go and leave them free to talk shop—his pet dissipation.

Failing to extract the least glimmering of hope from the attitude of any one of them, Whitaker drew a long breath, unconsciously bracing himself in his chair.

"It's funny," he said with his nervous smile—"hard to realize, I mean. You see, I *feel* so fit—"

"Between attacks," Hartt interjected quickly.

"Yes," Whitaker had to admit, dashed.

"Attacks," said Bushnell, heavily, "recurrent at intervals constantly more brief, each a trifle more severe than its predecessor."

He shut his thin lips tight, as one who has consciously pronounced the last word.

Greyerson sighed.

"But I don't understand," argued the prisoner at the bar, plaintively bewildered. "Why, I rowed with the Crew three years hand-running—not a sign of anything wrong with me!"

"If you had then had proper professional advice, you would have spared yourself such strains. But it's too late now; the mischief can't be undone."

Evidently Bushnell considered the last word his prerogative. Whitaker turned from him impatiently.

"What about an operation?" he demanded of Greyerson.

The latter looked away, making only a slight negative motion with his head.

"The knife?" observed Hartt. "That would merely hasten matters."

"Yes," Bushnell affirmed....

There was a brief uneasy silence in the gloomy consulting room. Then Whitaker rose.

"Well, how long will you give me?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Six months," said Greyerson, miserably avoiding his eye.

"Three," Hartt corrected jerkily.

"Perhaps...." The proprietor of the last word stroked his chin with a contemplative air.

"Thanks," said Whitaker, without irony. He stood for an instant with his head bowed in thought. "What a damned outrage," he observed thoughtfully. And suddenly he turned and flung out of the room.



Greyerson jumped to follow him, but paused as he heard the crash of the street door. He turned back with a twitching, apologetic smile.

"Poor devil!" he said, sitting down at his desk and fishing a box of cigars from one of the drawers.

"Takes it hard," commented Hartt.

"You would, too, at his age; he's barely twenty-five."

"Must feel more or less like a fellow whose wife has run off with his best friend."

"No comparison," said Bushnell bluntly. "Go out, get yourself arrested for a brutal murder you didn't commit, get tried and sentenced to death within six months, the precise date being left to the discretion of the executioner—*then* you'll know how he feels."

"If you ask me"—Greyerson handed round the box—"he feels pretty shaky and abused, and he wants a drink badly—the same as me."

He unlocked a cellaret.

"Married?" Hartt inquired.

"No. That's the only mitigating circumstance," said Greyerson, distributing glasses. "He's quite alone in the world, as far as I know—no near relatives, at least."

"Well off?"

"Tolerably. Comes of good people. Believe his family had a lot of money at one time. Don't know how much of it there was left for Whitaker. He's junior partner in a young law firm down-town—senior a friend or classmate of his, I understand: Drummond & Whitaker. Moves with the right sort of people. Young Stark—Peter Stark—is his closest friend.... Well.... Say when."

## II

### THE LAST STRAW

Greyerson was right in his surmise as to Hugh Whitaker's emotions. His soul still numb with shock, his mind was altogether preoccupied with petulant resentment of the unfairness of it all; on the surface of the stunning knowledge that he might count on no more than six months of life, floated this thin film of sensation of personal grievance. He had done nothing to deserve this. The sheer brutality of it....

He felt very shaky indeed.

He stood for a long time—how long he never knew—bareheaded on a corner, just as he had left Greyerson's office: scowling at nothing, considering the enormity of the wrong that had been put upon him. Later, realizing that people were staring, he clapped on his hat to satisfy them and strode aimlessly down Sixth Avenue. It was five o'clock in the afternoon of a day late in April—a raw, chilly, dark, unseasonable brute of a day. He found himself walking fast, instinctively, to keep his blood in warm circulation, and this struck him as so inconsistent that presently he stopped short and snarled at himself:

"You blithering fool, what difference does it make whether you're warm or cold? Don't you understand you're going to die within half a year?"

He strove manfully to grapple with this hideous fact. He felt so well, so strong and efficient; and yet he walked in the black shadow of death, a shadow from which there was for him no escape.

He thought it the damnedest sensation imaginable!

On top of this reflection came the third clause of Greyerson's analysis: he made the discovery that he wanted a drink—a lot of drinks: in point of fact, more than he had ever had before, enough to make him forget.

He turned across-town toward Fifth Avenue, came to his club, and went in.

Passing through the office, force of habit swung his gaze to the letter-rack. There was a square white envelope in the W pigeonhole, and it proved to be addressed to him. He knew the handwriting very well—too well; his heart gave a great jump as he recognized it, and then sank like a stone; for not only must he die, but he must give up the girl he loved and had planned to marry. The first thing he meant to do (after getting that drink) was to write to her and explain and release her from her promise. The next thing....

He refused to let the idea of the next step form in his mind. But he knew very well what it would be. In the backwards of his understanding it lurked—a gray, grisly, shameful shadow.

"Anyhow," he muttered, "I'm not going to stick round here, dying by inches, wearing the sympathy of my friends to tatters."

But as yet he dared not name the alternative.

He stuffed the letter into his pocket, and passed on to the elevator gates, meaning to go up to the library and there have his drink and read his letter and write the answer, in peace and quiet. The problem of that answer obsessed his thoughts. It would be hard—hard to write—that letter that meant the breaking of a woman's faithful heart.

The elevator kept him waiting a moment or two, just round the corner from the grill-room door, whence came a sound of voices talking and laughing. One was Billy Hamilton's unmistakable semi-jocular drawl. Whitaker knew it without thinking of it, even as he heard what was being said without, at first, comprehending—heard and afterwards remembered in vivid detail.

"Seems to be the open season for runaways," Hamilton was saying. "It's only a few days since Thurlow Ladislas's daughter—what's her name?—Mary—took the bit between her teeth and bolted with the old man's chauffeur."

Somebody asked: "How far did they get before old Ladislas caught up?"

"He didn't give chase. He's not that kind. If he was put to it, old Thurlow could play the unforgiving parent in a melodrama without any make-up whatever."

"That's right," little Fiske's voice put in. "Chap I know on the *Herald*—reporter—was sent to interview him, but old Ladislas told him quite civilly that he'd been misinformed—he hadn't any daughter named Mary. Meaning,

of course, that the girl had defied him, and that his doors were thenceforth barred to her."

"He's just like that," said Hamilton. "Remember his other daughter, Grace, eloping with young Pettit a few years ago? Old Ladislas had a down on Pettit—who's a decent enough kid, notwithstanding—so Grace was promptly disowned and cast into the outer darkness, where there's weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, because Pettit's only something-on-a-small-salary in the diplomatic service, and they've no hope of ever touching a penny of the Ladislas coin."

"But what became of them—Mary and the stoker-person?"

"Nobody knows, except possibly themselves. They're laying low and—probably—getting first-hand information as to the quantity of cheese and kisses they can afford on chauffeur's pay."

"What's she like, this Mary-quite-contrary?" inquired George Brenton's voice. "Anybody ever see her?"

"Oh, nothing but a kid," said little Fiske. "I used to see her often, last summer, kiting round Southampton on a bike. The old man's so mean he wouldn't let her use the car alone.... Weedy little beggar, all legs and eyes—skirts to her shoe-tops and hair to her waist."

"Not over eighteen, I gather?"

"Oh, not a day," little Fiske affirmed.

The elevator was waiting by this time, but Whitaker paused an instant before taking it, chiefly because the sound of his own name, uttered by Hamilton, had roused him out of the abstraction in which he had overheard the preceding conversation.

"Anyhow, I'm sorry for Hugh Whitaker. He's going to take this hard, mighty hard."

George Brenton asked, as if surprised: "What? I didn't know he was interested in that quarter."

"You must be blind. Alice Carstairs has had him going for a year. Everybody thought she was only waiting for him to make some big money—he as much as anybody, I fancy."

Brenton added the last straw. "That's tough," he said soberly. "Whitaker's a white man, and Alice Carstairs didn't deserve him. But I wouldn't blame any man for feeling cut-up to be thrown over for an out-and-out rotter like Percy Grimshaw...."

Whitaker heard no more. At the first mention of the name of Alice Carstairs he had snatched her letter from his pocket and thrust his thumb beneath the flap. Now he had withdrawn the enclosure and was reading.

When a mean-spirited, selfish woman starts in to justify herself (especially, on paper) for doing something thoroughly contemptible, the result is apt to be bitterly unfair to everybody involved—except herself. Nobody will ever know just what Alice Carstairs saw fit to write to Hugh Whitaker when she made up her mind to run away with another man; but there can be little doubt that they were venomous words he read, standing there under the curious eyes of the elevator boy and the pages. The blood ebbed from his face and left it ghastly, and when he had torn the paper to shreds and let them flutter about his feet, he swayed perceptibly—so much so that one of the pages took alarm and jumped to his side.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Whitaker—did you call me?"

Whitaker steadied himself and stared until he recognized the boy. "No," he said thickly, "but I want you. Give me a bar order."

The boy produced the printed form and Whitaker hastily scribbled his order on it. "Bring that up to the library," he said, "and be quick about it."

He stumbled into the elevator, and presently found himself in the library. There was no one else about, and Whitaker was as glad of that as it was in him to be glad of anything just then. He dropped heavily into a big arm-chair and waited, his brain whirling and seething, his nerves on edge and screeching. In this state Peter Stark found him.

Peter sauntered into the room with a manner elaborately careless. Beneath that mask he was anything but indifferent, just as his appearance was anything but fortuitous. It happened that the page who had taken Whitaker's order, knowing that Peter and Hugh were close friends, and suspecting that something was wrong with the latter, had sought out Peter before going to get the order filled. Moreover, Peter had already heard about Alice Carstairs and

Percy Grimshaw.

"Hel-lo!" he said, contriving by mere accident to catch sight of Whitaker, who was almost invisible in the big chair with its back to the body of the room. "What you doing up here, Hugh? What's up?"

"It's all up," said Whitaker, trying to pull himself together. "Everything's up!"

"Don't believe it," said Stark, coolly. "My feet are on the ground; but you look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I have—my own," said Whitaker. The page now stood beside him with a tray. "Open it," he told the boy, indicating a half-bottle of champagne; and then to Peter: "I'm having a bath. Won't you jump in?"

Peter whistled, watching the wine cream over the brandy in the long glass. "King's peg, eh?" he said, with a lift of disapproving eyebrows. "Here, boy, bring me some Scotch and plain water for common people."

The boy disappeared as Whitaker lifted his glass.

"I'm not waiting," he said bluntly. "I need this now."

"That's a question, in my mind, at least. Don't you think you've had about enough for one day?"

"I leave it to your superior knowledge of my capacity," said Whitaker, putting aside the empty glass. "That's my first to-day."

Peter saw that he was telling the truth, but the edge of his disapproval remained keen.

"I hope," he said thoughtfully, "that the man who started that lie about drink making a fellow forget died the death of a dog. He deserved to, anyway, because it's one of the cruellest practical jokes ever perpetrated on the human race. I know, because I've tried it on, hard—and waked up sick to my marrow to remember what a disgusting ass I'd made of myself for all to behold." He stopped at Whitaker's side and dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Hugh," he said, "you're one of the best. Don't...."

Whatever he had meant to say, he left unfinished because of the return of the page with his Scotch; but he had said enough to let Whitaker understand that he knew about the Carstairs affair.

"That's all right," said Whitaker; "I'm not going to make a damn' fool of myself, but I am in a pretty bad way. Boy—"

"Hold on!" Peter interrupted. "You're not going to order another? What you've had is enough to galvanize a corpse."

"Barring the negligible difference of a few minutes or months, that's me," returned Whitaker. "But never mind, boy—run along."

"I'd like to know what you mean by that," Peter remarked, obviously worried.

"I mean that I'm practically a dead man—so near it that it makes no difference."

"The devil you say! What's the matter with you?"

"Ask Greyerson. I can't remember the name—it's too long—and I couldn't pronounce it if I did."

Peter's eyes narrowed. "What foolishness has Greyerson been putting into your head?" he demanded. "I've a good mind to go punch his—"

"It isn't his fault," Whitaker asserted. "It's my own—or rather, it's something in the nature of a posthumous gift from my progenitors; several of 'em died of it, and now it seems I must. Greyerson says so, at least, and when I didn't believe him he called in Hartt and Bushnell to hold my ante-mortem. They made it unanimous. If I'm uncommonly lucky I may live to see next Thanksgiving."

"Oh, shut up!" Peter exploded viciously. "You make me tired—you and your bone-headed M.D.'s!"

He worked himself into a comforting rage, damning the medical fraternity liberally for a gang of bloodthirsty assassins and threatening to commit assault and battery upon the person of Greyerson, though Whitaker did his best to make him understand that matters were what they were—irremediable.

"You won't find any higher authorities than Hartt and Bushnell," he said. "They are the court of last resort in such cases. When they hand down a decision, there's no come-back."

"You can't make me believe that," Peter insisted. "It just can't be so. A man like you, who's always lived clean.... Why, look at your athletic record! Do

you mean to tell me a fellow could hold a job as undisputed best all-round man in his class for four years, and all the time handicapped by a constitutional...? Oh, get out! Don't talk to me. I'm far more likely to be doing my bit beneath the daisies six months from now.... I won't believe it!"

His big, red, generous fist described a large and inconclusive gesture of violence.

"Well," he growled finally, "grant all this—which I don't, not for one little minute—what do you mean to do?"

"I don't mind telling you," said Whitaker: "I don't know. Wish I did. Up to within the last few minutes I fully intended to cut the knot with my own knife. It's not reasonable to ask a man to sit still and watch himself go slowly to pieces...."

"No," said Stark, sitting down. "No," he admitted grudgingly; "but I'm glad you've given that up, because I'm right and all these fool doctors are wrong. You'll see. But...." He couldn't help being curious. "But why?"

"Well," Whitaker considered slowly—"it's Alice Carstairs. You know what she's done."

"You don't mean to say you're going—that you think there's any consideration due her?"

"Don't you?" Whitaker smiled wearily. "Perhaps you're right. I don't know. We won't discuss the ethics of the situation; right or wrong, I don't mean to shadow whatever happiness she has in store for her by ostentatiously snuffing myself out just now."

Peter gulped and succeeded in saying nothing. But he stared.

"At the same time," Whitaker resumed, "I don't think I can stand this sort of thing. I can't go round with my flesh creeping to hear the whisperings behind my back. I've got to do something—get away somewhere."

Abrupt inspiration sparked the imagination of Peter Stark, and he began to sputter with enthusiasm.

"I've got it!" he cried, jumping to his feet. "A sea trip's just the thing. Chances are, it'll turn the trick—bring you round all right-O, and prove what asses doctors are. What d'you say? Are you game for a sail? The *Adventuress* is



laid up at New Bedford now, but I can have her put in commission within three days. We'll do it—we'll just light out, old man! We'll try that South Seas thing we've talked about so long. What d'you say?"

A warm light glowed in Whitaker's sunken eyes. He nodded slowly.