

The DESTROYING ANGEL

By Louis Joseph Vance

Can you imagine yourself dead for five years? Suppose at the end of that time you turned up suddenly among old friends in New York city, asked for an accounting of your estate and announced your intention of finding the girl you had married under pressure before you disappeared—much to their shocked surprise! That's the position in which we find Hugh Whitaker in this installment. How his plans ruin the important plans of others about him, how he creates a furore at a big theatrical performance and how he finds his wife, is told with dramatic effect.

CHAPTER V—Continued.

Whitaker laughed quietly and turned the conversation, accepting the manager's pseudo-confidences at their face value—that is, as pure bluff, quite consistent with the managerial pose.

They rose presently and made their way out into the crowded, blatan night of Broadway.

"We'll walk, if you don't mind," Max suggested. "It isn't far, and I'd like to get a line on the house as it goes in." He sighed affectingly. "Heaven knows when I'll see another swell audience mobbing one of my attractions!"

They pushed forward slowly through the eddying idea, elbowing by a matchless motley of humanity, deafened by its thousand tongues, dazzled to blindness by walls of living light. Whitaker experienced a sensation of participating in a royal progress; Max was plainly a man of mark; he left a wake of rippling interest. At every third step somebody hailed him, as a rule by his first name; generally he responded by a curt nod and a tightening of his teeth upon his cigar.

They turned east through Forty-sixth street, shouldered by a denser rabble whose faces, all turned in one direction, shone livid with the glare of a gigantic electric sign, midway down the block.

THEATER MAX

SARA LAW'S FAREWELL

It was nearly half-past eight; the house had been open since seven; and still a queue ran from the gallery doors to Broadway. The lobby itself was crowded to suffocation with an occasional durbur of barbaric magnificence, the city's supreme manifestation of its religion, the ultimate rite in the worship of the pomps of the flesh.

"Look at that," Max grumbled through his cigar. "Ain't it a shame?"

"What?" Whitaker had to lift his voice to make it carry above the buzzing of the throng.

"The money I'm losing," returned the manager, vividly disgusted. "I could've filled the Metropolitan opera house three times over!"

He swung on his heel and began to push his way out of the lobby. "Come along—no use trying to get in this way."

Whitaker followed, to be led down a blind alley between the theater and the adjoining hotel. An illuminated sign advertised the stage door, through which, via a brief hallway, they entered the postcortical—and Max dragging him by the arm—passed through a small door into the gangway behind the boxes.

"Curtain's just up," Max told him; "Sara doesn't come on till near the middle of the act. Make yourself comfortable; I'll be back before long."

He drew aside a curtain and ushered his guest into the right-hand stage-box, then vanished. The few empty stalls were rapidly filling up. There was a fluent movement through the aisles. A subdued hum and rustle rose from that portion of the audience which was already seated. The business going on upon the stage was receiving little attention—from Whitaker as little as from anyone. The opening scene in the development of the drama interested the gathering little or not at all; it was hanging in suspense upon the unfolding of some extraordinary development, something unprecedented and extraneous, foreign to the play.

Max slipped quietly into the box and handed his guest a program. "Better get over here," he suggested in a hoarse whisper, indicating a chair near the rail. "You may never have another chance to see the greatest living actress. Wonderful house," he whispered, sitting down behind Whitaker. "Drummond hasn't shown up yet, though."

"That so?" Whitaker returned over his shoulder.

"Yes; it's funny; never knew him to be so late. He always has the aisle seat, fourth row, center. But he'll be along presently."

He glanced idly at his program, indifferently absorbing the information that "Jules Max has the honor to present Miss Sara Law in her first and greatest success entitled Joan Thursday—a play in three acts."

The audience stirred expectantly; a movement ran through it like the movement of waters murmurous, upon a shore. Whitaker's gaze was drawn to the stage as if by an imperious force. Max shifted on the chair behind him and said something indistinguishable, in an unnatural tone.

A woman had come upon the stage, suddenly and tempestuously, banging a door behind her. The audience got the barest glimpse of her profile as, pausing momentarily, she eyed the other actors. Then, without speaking, she turned and walked up-stage, her back to the footlights.

Applause broke out like a thunder-clap, pealing hoarsely through the big auditorium, but the actress showed no consciousness of it. She was standing before a cheap mirror, removing her hat, grinning her hair with the typical, unconscious gestures of a weary shopgirl; she was acting—living the scene, with no time to waste in pandering to her popularity by bows and set smiles; she remained before the glass, prolonging the business, until the applause subsided.

Whitaker received an impression as of a tremendous force at work across the footlights. The woman diffused an effect as of a terrible and boundless energy under positive control. She was not merely an actress, not even merely a great actress; she was the very soul of the drama of today.

Beyond this he knew in his heart that she was his wife. Sara Law was the woman he had married in that sleepy Connecticut town, six years before that night. He had not yet seen her face clearly, but he knew. To find himself mistaken would have shaken the foundations of his understanding.

Under cover of the applause, he turned to Max.

"Who is that? What is her name?"

"The divine Sara," Max answered, his eyes shining.

"I mean, what is her name of the stage, in private life?"

"The same," Max nodded with conviction; "Sara Law's the only name she's ever worn in my acquaintance with her."

At that moment, the applause having subsided to such an extent that it was possible for her to make herself heard, the actress swung round from the mirror and addressed one of the other players. Her voice was clear, strong and vibrant, yet sweet; but Whitaker paid no heed to the lines she spoke. He was staring, fascinated, at her face.

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Abruptly, pausing with her hands on the back of the chair, there came a change. The actress had glanced across the footlights; Whitaker could not but follow the direction of her gaze; the

eyes of both focused for a brief instant on the empty aisle-seat in the fourth row. A shade of additional pallor showed on the woman's face. She looked quickly, questioningly, toward the box of her manager.

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The Late Extra.

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