

# The AUCTION BLOCK

## REX BEACH



SYNOPSIS.

Peter Knight, defeated for political office in his town, decides to venture New York in order that the family fortunes might benefit by the expected rise of his hazing daughter, Lorelei. A well-known critic interviews Lorelei Knight, now a stage beauty with Bergman's Revue, for a special article. Her costuming mother outlines Lorelei's ambitions, but she meets Merkle, a wealthy dyspeptic. Bob Wharton comes uninvited. Lorelei discovers a blackmail plot against Hammon, in which her mother is involved. Merkle and Lorelei have an auto wreck. The blackmailers besmirch her good name. Lorelei learns her mother is an unscrupulous plotter. She finds in Adoree Demorest a real friend, and finds Bob Wharton is likable. Lorelei leaves her family and goes to live alone. Lorelei and Merkle Bob Wharton are tricked into marriage. Lila shoots and wounds Hammon seriously.

Adoree Demorest, the dancer, and Campbell Pope, the critic, once more. He is the man who told all New York through his dramatic column that she was the most shameless woman on the stage. Really a good girl, she naturally despises him for thus besmirching her. Well, they meet at dinner. How the barrier between them is broken and how they begin a friendship is told in delightful manner in this installment.

Hammon has been shot. The problem is to get him home unscathed. Bob Wharton rents a hack and drives it himself.

CHAPTER XV—Continued.

Bob reined in and leaped from his box. Merkle had the cab door open and was holding Hammon from his seat.

"Have you got the key?" Bob asked, swiftly.

"Yes. Help me! He's fainted, I think."

They lifted the half-conscious man out, then with him between them struggled up the steps; but Hammon's feet dragged; he hung very heavy in their arms.

Merkle was not a strong man; he was panting, and his hands shook as he fumbled with the lock. The key escaped him and tinkled upon the stone.

"Hurry! Here comes the watchman." Bob was gazing over his shoulder at the slowly approaching figure.

A second but briefer delay, and they stood in the gloom of the marble foyer hall. Then they shuffled across the floor to the great, curving stairway.

Hammon had assured them that there would be no one in the house except Orson, his man, and the some of the kitchen servants, the others having followed their mistress to the country; nevertheless the rescuers' nerves were painfully raw, and they tried to go as silently as burglars; when they finally gained the library, they were drenched with perspiration. Merkle switched on the lights; they deposited the wounded man on a couch and bent over him.

Hammon was not dead. Merkle felt his way into the darkened regions at the rear and returned with a glass of spirits. Under his and Bob's ministrations the unconscious man opened his eyes.

"You got me here, didn't you?" he whispered, as he took in his surroundings. "Now go—everything is all right."

"We're not going to leave you," Merkle said, positively.

"No!" echoed Bob. "I'll wake up Orson while John telephones the doctor."

But Hammon forbade Bob's movement with a frown. It was plain that despite his weakness his mind remained clear.

"Listen to me," he ordered. "Prop me up—put me in that chair. I'm choking." They did as he directed.

"That's better. Now, you mustn't be seen here—either of you. We can't explain." He checked Merkle. "I know best. Go home; it's only two blocks—I'll telephone."

"You'll ring for Orson quick?" Hammon nodded.

"Rotten way to leave a man," Bob mumbled. "I'd rather stick it out and face the music."

"Go, go! You're wasting time." Hammon's brow was wrinkled with pain and anger. "You've been good; now hurry."

Merkle's thin face was marked with deep feeling. "Yes," he agreed. "There's nothing else for us to do; but tell Orson to phone me quick. I'll be back here in five minutes." Then he and Bob stole out of the house as quietly as they had stolen in.

They got into the cab and drove away without exciting suspicion. Merkle alighted two blocks up the avenue and sped to his own house; Bob turned his jaded nag westward through the sunken road that led toward the Elegancia and Lorelei.

The owner of the equipage was waiting patiently, and there still lacked something of the allotted hour when the exchanged garments had been transferred to their respective owners. Bob walked toward the Elegancia with a feeling of extreme fatigue in his limbs, for the effort to conquer his intoxication had left him weak; he dimly realized also that he was still far from sober.

There was no answer when he rang at Lila's Lynn's apartment; the hall-boy volunteered the information that the occupant had just gone out with a gentleman. Miss Knight? Yes, she was upstairs, he supposed. Bob was surprised at his wife's apparent self-control when she let him in. Except for the slim hand pressed to her bosom

and the anxiety lurking in her deep blue eyes, she might have just come from the theater. Those eyes, he noted, were very dark, almost black, under this emotional stress; they questioned Lorelei, mutely.

"We got him home all right," he told her, when they stood facing each other in the tiny living room.

"Will he live?"

"Oh, yes. He says he's not badly hurt, and Merkle agrees. Lord! We'd never left him alone if we'd thought—"

"It was glad. When you rang I thought—it was the police."

"There, there!" he said, comfortingly, seeing her tremble. "I won't let anybody hurt you. I was terribly drunk—things are swimming yet—but all the way across town I couldn't think of anything, anybody except you and what it would mean to you if it got out."

"It will get out, I'm sure. Such things always do."

He eyed her gravely, kindly, with an expression she had never seen upon his face.

"Then—we'll face it together," he said.

After a moment her glance drooped, a faint color tinged her cheeks. "I wouldn't dare face it alone. I couldn't, but you're tired—sick." He nodded.

"You must lie down and sleep, and get to be yourself again—we can't tell what may happen now at any moment."

"It's the reaction, I suppose. I'm all in. And you?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't sleep if I tried. I feel as if I'd never be able to sleep again. I—I'll sit and watch and—wait."

CHAPTER XVI.

That afternoon Mrs. Knight, in a great flutter of excitement, arrived with Jim at the Elegancia. Embracing her daughter in tremendous, almost tearful delight, she burst forth:

"You dear! You darling! Jim came home not an hour ago and told me everything. I thought I should swoon."

"Told you—everything?" Lorelei flashed a glance at her brother, who made a quick sign of reassurance.

What with Lorelei's good fortune and Lila's catastrophe Mrs. Knight was well-nigh delirious. She was still rejoicing garrulously when Lorelei burst into one of her rare passions of weeping and buried her face in her hands.

"Child alive!" cried her astonished mother. "What ails you?"

Instantly Jim's suspicions caught fire.

"Say! Has Bob welched?" he demanded, harshly.

The amber head shook in negation.

"Isn't he nice to you?" quavered Mrs. Knight.

"Yes. But—I'm sorry I did it. He was drinking; he didn't know what he was doing—"

"Hush!" Mrs. Knight cast a fearful glance over her shoulder. "It was all straight and aboveboard, and he knew perfectly well what he was about. Jim would swear to it."

Lorelei lifted a tragic, tear-stained face. "I ought to be hanged," she said. Jim laughed with relief. "There's gratitude for you! If I had your share of the Wharton coin I'd let 'em hang me—for a while."

As mother and son were leaving, Jim managed to get a word in private with his sister.

"Don't weaken," he cautioned her. "Lynn's gone, and it's all over. We've got the whip-hand on all of 'em—Hammon, Merkle, Bob, Lila—everybody. We've got 'em all, understand? We've landed big!"

When she was alone Lorelei gave a sigh of relief, which changed to a sob as the sense of her helplessness surged over her again. She had deliberately sold herself; she wearily wondered where the new road led—surely not to happiness.

Toward evening Adoree Demorest telephoned, and with many anticipatory exclamations of pleasure invited Lorelei to dine.

"I can't," answered Lorelei, faintly. "Other your engagements?" Miss Demorest's disappointment was keen.

"I can't even explain, unless—you'll come here."

"To dinner?"

Lorelei decided swiftly. She dreaded to be alone with Bob; her constraint in his presence was painful, and he also, before going out, had appeared very ill at ease. He had not even made plans for the evening meal. In view of all this she answered:

"Yes, to dinner. Please, please come."

Lorelei was not quite sure that Bob would consent to dine in the modest little home, but under the circumstances idleness was maddening, so she fell to work. This was very different from what she had expected, but—everything was different. Once the marriage had become known to Bob's people and he had thoroughly sobered down, once she had withdrawn from the east of the Revue, their real life would begin.

Bob was pale and a bit unsteady when he arrived, but Lorelei said that he suffered only from the effects of his previous debauch. He was extremely self-conscious and uneasy in her presence, though he kissed her with a brave show of confidence.

"I galloped into the bank just as they slammed the doors," he explained, "but my bookkeeping is rotten."

"Are you trying to tell me that you have overdrawn?"

"Exactly. But I drew against the old gentleman, as usual, so on with the dance. What's the—er—idea of the apron?"

"It's nearly dinner time."

Bob's eyes opened with surprise. "Why, we're going to Delmonico's."

"I'd—rather do this if you don't mind." She eyed him appealingly. "I don't feel equal to going out tonight. I'm—afraid."

His glance brightened with admiration. "Well, you look stunning in that get-up, and I'd hate to see you change it. Do you mean to say you can cook?"

"Not well, but I can fry almost anything. Mother has a maid. I couldn't afford two."

"I love fried things," he assured her, with a twinkle. "And to think you're going to cook for me! That's an experience for both of us. Let's have some fried roast beef and fried corn on the cob with fried salad and cheese."

"Don't tease," she begged, uncertainly. "I hardly know what I'm doing, and I thought this would keep me busy until theater time."

He extended a hand timidly and patted her arm, saying with unexpected gentleness:

"Please don't worry. It was a terrible night for all of us. When I think of it I'm sure it must have been a dream. I saw Merkle. He got back to Hammon's house ahead of the doctor, and nobody suspects the truth. But the Street is in chaos, and all of Hammon's companies are feeling the strain."

"Shouldn't you have been at business on such a day?"

Bob shrugged carelessly. "I'm only a 'joke' broker. The governor thinks a firm name looks well on my cards. I hope he doesn't lose more than a million in this hurry—it won't improve his disposition. But—wait till he learns I've married a girl who can fry things—By the way—"

"I invited a friend to dine with us tonight."

Lorelei was less dismayed than he had expected. "So have I," she said.

"I thought it might be pleasanter for you," he explained, a bit awkwardly. "Inasmuch as we're not very well-acquainted. I saw before I went out



"Don't Weaken," He Cautioned Her.

that you were—er—embarrassed—and—"

Bob grinned and then laughed with her. "Fine!" he cried. "Both members of this club. Really, this ought to make the best finish light seen in New York for many a day."

Adoree's surprise at finding Robert Wharton in her friend's apartment was intense, and when she learned the truth she was for once in her life speechless. She could only stare from one to the other, wavering between consternation and delight. Finally she sat down limply.

"I—I'd have brought a present if I'd known," she managed to say.

"Are you going to wish us luck?" Bob inquired.

"Luck! You've both got it. She's the best girl in the world, and you're—"

Adoree hesitated, and continued to stare, round-eyed. "I didn't think you'd—I didn't think she'd—I don't know what I thought or didn't think. But—Jimminy! Married! When Lorelei led her into the bedroom to lay off her wraps the thunderstruck young woman had more nearly recovered herself."

"Why, he's worth millions," she exclaimed, in a whisper—"billions! I don't know how to talk to him—or you, for that matter. Shall I call you 'my lady' or 'your honor,' or—I didn't dress for dinner either; I suppose I should have worn the crown jewels."

"You're going to wear an apron and help me scorch the dinner," Lorelei laughed.

As Lorelei explained the reasons for tonight's program, Adoree saw for the first time the weariness in her friend's eyes, the pallor of her cheeks, the tremulous droop of her lower lip. Seizing Lorelei by the shoulders, she held her off as the target for a searching gaze.

"Tell me, did they make you marry him?" she inquired, fiercely. It was plain to whom she referred.

"No."

"Whew! I'm glad to hear that. You love him, don't you?"

The answer came readily enough, and the blue eyes did not flinch, but the smile was a trifle fixed and the cheeks remained colorless.

"Why, of course. He's very nice."

"Lorelei!" Miss Demorest's fingers tightened; her voice was tragic, but she had no chance to say more, for Bob called just then from the living room:

"Hurry back, girls. There's something burning, and I can't find the emergency brake."

When Adoree finally came forth in one of Lorelei's aprons—really a fetching garment, more like a house dress than an apron—Bob told her whom

they were expecting as the other guest. She paused with a bread-knife upraised.

"That—viper?" she cried.

"Campbell isn't a viper; he's a cricket—a dramatic cricket," declared Bob.

Adoree began to undo the buttons at her back, but Bob seized her hands.

"Let go. I'll blow up if I see that creature," she exclaimed, in a kind of subdued shout.

Argument proved vain until Lorelei told her firmly: "You owe it to yourself, dear. And we won't let you go."

The dancer ceased her struggles, her brows puckered.

"Seriously, now, Lorelei has told me everything, and I want Campbell to acknowledge his mistake," said Bob.

"The public has swallowed that royalty hoax, but there's no use deceiving him."

Despite her show of bravery Adoree was panic-stricken when the bell rang and Bob went to the door to explain the change of plan and invite Pope in.

He entered the living room with a hand extended and a smile upon his lips, then halted as if frozen. By the time he had been introduced to Adoree he had burst into a gentle perspiration.

As for Miss Demorest, she took a grim delight in his discomfort, and prepared to blast him with sarcasm, to wither him with her contempt when the moment came. Meanwhile she listened as the two men talked, turning up her nose when Pope scored Broadway with his usual bitterness.

"He thinks that's smart," she reflected; but she, too, detested the Great Trite Way, and his words expressed her own distaste so aptly that she could think of no argument sufficiently biting to confound him. She deliberately framed a stinging reference to his pose in the matter of dress, though in frankness she had to admit that he wore his gray sweater vest with an air of genuine comfort and unconsciousness.

Pope was noticeably ill at ease. He was conscious of Miss Demorest's hostile eyes, and the pointed manner in which she ignored his presence was disquieting. Bob appeared to enjoy his lack of repose, and offered no relief. At last Pope turned to the piano and fluttered through the stack of sheet music he found there.

"Do you play?" inquired Bob.

"Yes. Why?"

"You look as if you did—you're kind of—badly nourished. Know any rag-time?"

The musician groaned. After a moment he murmured, "I improvise a good deal." The instrument, perhaps for the first time in its life, began to vibrate and ring to something besides the clapping music of the day. Once he had found a means of occupying himself, Pope surrendered to his impulse and in a measure forgot his surroundings.

A short time later Lorelei turned from the kitchenette to find Adoree Demorest poised, a salad-bowl in one hand, a wooden spoon gripped in the other, on her face a rapt expression of beatitude.

"Have you rubbed the dish with garlic?" inquired L. elei.

Adoree roused herself slowly. "Lordy!" she whispered. "I'd give both legs to the knee and one eye if I could play like that. The mean little shrimp!"

The embers of her resentment were still glowing when the four finally seated themselves at the table. A furtive glance in Pope's direction showed that he was studiously avoiding her eyes; she prepared once more to begin the process of flaying him.

"You've been away for some time, haven't you?" Bob was asking.

Pope nodded. "I hate New York. I went as far away as I could get, and—I managed to return just two jumps ahead of the sheriff. It will take me six months to pay my debts. I'm a grand little business man."

"What was it this time? Mining?"

"No. Poultry." Adoree pricked up her ears.

"You went West, eh?" pursued Bob.

"No. East—Long Island. I saw a great opportunity to make money; so I found a farm on a lake, bought it, and went to raising ducks."

"Ducks!" breathlessly exclaimed Miss Demorest; but her interruption went unnoticed.

Campbell Pope's features shone with the gentle light of a pleasurable remembrance. "It was lovely and quiet



"That—Viper?" She Cried.

out there. The local inhabitants were shy but friendly; they did me no harm. But—it was no place for ducks; they swam all their fat off, and I had the pond dredged and never found an egg."

Miss Demorest giggled audibly; she had lost all interest in her food; she was tingling with excitement.

"Why didn't you fence them in?" she asked.

Pope eyed her for a fleeting instant, then his gaze wavered.

"I fenced in the whole pond to begin with. It nearly broke me."

"A duck shouldn't have much water. What kind were they?"

"Plymouth Rocks, or Holsteins, or

Jersey Lillies—anyhow they were white."

"White Pekins?"

The critic frowned argumentatively. "What is a duck for if he isn't to swim? What is his object? We had six on my father's farm, and they swam all the time. Of course, six isn't many, but—"

"Naturally they didn't do well—"

Bob Wharton signaled frantically to his wife, but there was no stopping the discussion that had begun to rage back and forth. It lasted until the conclusion of the meal, and it was only with an effort that Adoree tore herself away. She was in her element, and in a little time had won the critic's undivided attention; he listened with absorption; he even made occasional notes.

As the two girls dressed hurriedly for the theater, Adoree confessed:

"Golly! I'm glad I stayed. He's not bright; he's perfectly silly about some things, and yet he's the most interesting talker I ever heard. And—can't he play a piano?"

CHAPTER XVII.

Hannibal Wharton arrived in New York at five o'clock and went directly to Merkle's bank. At eight o'clock Jarvis Hammon died. During the afternoon and evening other financiers, summoned hurriedly from New England shores and Adirondack camps, were busied in preparations for the struggle they expected on the morrow. During the closing hours of the market prices had slumped to an alarming degree; a terrific raid on metal stocks had begun, and conditions were ripe for a panic.

Hammon had bulked large in the steel world, and his position in circles of high finance had become prominent; but alive he could never have worked one-half the havoc caused by his sudden death. That persistent rumor of suicide argued, in the public mind, the existence of serious money troubles, and gave significance to the rumor that for some time past had disturbed the Street. Hammon's enemies summoned their forces for a crushing assault.

In this emergency Bob's father found himself the real head of those vast enterprises in which he had been an associate, and until a late hour that night he was forced to remain in consultation with men who came and went with consternation written upon their faces.

The amazing transformation which followed the birth of the giant steel trust had raised many men from well-to-do obscurity into prominence and undreamed-of wealth. Since then the older members of the original clique had withdrawn one by one from active affairs, and of the younger men only Wharton and Hammon had remained. Equally these two had figured in what was perhaps the most remarkable chapter of American financial history. Both had been vigorous, self-made, practical men. But the outcome had affected them quite differently.

Riches had turned Jarvis Hammon's mind into new channels; he had opened strange pathways and projected him into a life that was in every way foreign to his early teachings. His duties kept him in New York, while Wharton's had held him in his old home. Hammon had become a great financier; Wharton had remained the practical operating expert, and, owing to the exactness of his position, he had become linked more closely than ever to business detail. At the same time he had become more and more unapproachable. Unlimited power had forced him into the peculiar isolation of a chief executive; he had grown hard, suspicious, arbitrary. Even to his son he had been for years a remote being.

It was not until the last conference had broken up, not until the last forces had been disposed for the coming battle, that he spoke to Merkle of Bob's marriage. Merkle told him what he knew, and the old man listened silently. Then he drove to the Elegancia.

Bob and Lorelei had just returned from the theater, much, he said, against the bridegroom's wishes. Bob had been eager to begin the celebration of his marriage in a fitting manner, and it had required the shock of Hammon's death added to Lorelei's entreaties to dissuade him from a night of hilarity. He was flushed with drink, and in consequence more than a little resentful when she insisted upon spending another night in the modest little home.

"Say! I'm not used to this kind of a place," he argued. "I'm not a cave-dweller. It's a lovely flat—for a murderer—but it's no place to live."

"Don't be silly," she told him. "We acted on impulse; we can't change everything at a moment's notice."

"But—people take trips when they get married."

"I can't quit the show without two weeks' notice."

"Two weeks?" He was aghast. "Two minutes. Two seconds. I won't have you dodging around stage doors."

"Bergman won't let me go; it wouldn't be right to ask him."

But Bob was insistent. "I intend to cure you of the work habit. You must learn to scorn it. Look at me. I'm an example of the unearned increment. We'll kiss this dinky flat a fond farewell—it's impossible, really—I refuse to share such a dark secret with you. Tomorrow we leave it for the third and last time. What if you say to the sunny side of the Ritz until we decide where we want to travel?"

Just then the apartment bell rang. Bob went to the door. He returned with his father at his heels. Mr. Wharton tramped in grimly, nodded at his daughter-in-law, who had risen at the first sound of his voice, then ran his eyes swiftly over the surroundings.

"I hear you've made a fool of yourself again," he began, showing his teeth in a faint smile. "Have you given up your apartment at the Charlevoix?"

"Not yet," said Bob. "We're considering a suite at the Ritz for a few days."

"Indeed. You're going back to the Charlevoix tonight."

Lorelei started. She had expected opposition, but was unprepared for anything so blunt and businesslike. "I think you and Bob can talk more freely if I leave you alone," she said.

Hannibal Wharton replied shortly: "No, don't leave. I'll talk Freer with you here."

It appeared, however, that Robert

stood in no awe of his father's anger; he said lightly:

"They never come back, dad. I'm a regular married man. Lorelei is my royal consort, my yoz-mate, my ribb. We'll have to scratch the Charlevoix."

This levity left the caller unmoved, to Lorelei he explained:

"I want no notoriety, so all we need talk about is terms. You'll fare better



"You're Going Back to the Charlevoix Tonight."

by dealing directly with me than through lawyers—I'll fight a lawsuit—so let's get down to business. You should realize, however, that these settlements are never as large as they're advertised. I'll pay you ten thousand dollars and stand the costs of the divorce proceedings."

"You are making a mistake," she told him, quietly.

"Not at all! Not at all!" Mr. Wharton exclaimed, irritably. "I know real settlement when I see it, and I'll foot the bill for this counterfeit, but I'm too tired to argue."

Do you believe that Lorelei can be bought off for any sum of money? Would she consent to a divorce? Has Bob won her regard?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

ONLY NEED MAKE UP MIND

"Where There's a Will There's a Way" Is True When It Comes to Owning a Home.

When a city is crowded by increasing population and when property valuations and taxation rates are rising, rents advance, not gradually, not always proportionately to either demand or to increasing expenses of the landlord, comments the Detroit Free Press.

Presently the renter finds himself paying a sum in monthly rent entirely disproportionate to his total income. Usually this brings a domestic financial stringency, all the more felt when necessities in food and clothing are also advancing in price.

The renter in such circumstances finds himself on a three-pronged dilemma: He can go on paying high rents and expenses, thus using up his income and falling to lay anything for emergencies, sickness or old age. Or he can buy a home on the popular contract plan if he possesses enough in savings to make the first payment of 10 or 20 per cent of the purchase price. Or he can buy a cheap lot out and begin building his home piecemeal, a room or two at a time.

Most persons prefer to buy the ready-made home. Building one's own home is labor and tribulation and expenses, seen and unforeseen. And modern folk are content to avoid tribulation by as wide a margin as may be possible. But the person without available funds to make a first payment of 10 or 20 per cent must be content to see income consumed by outgo or turn to the task of creating a home a bit at a time.

And this can be done. It is being done. Success is more frequent than failure in these attempts, too. The man without a nest-egg of money can get a lot, can build a kitchen, then a bedroom, then another room, until he at last possesses a home of his own if he will endure hardships with patience, if he will arouse the spirit slumbering within, the spirit which led his forefathers to wilderness conquests. "Where there's a will there's a way"—even though it sometimes is a way beset with thorns. And he who conquers hardships has something real on which to congratulate himself