The AUCTION BLOCK

BY

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SYNOPSIS.

—6—

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 charming daughter, Lorelei. A well-known critic interviews Lorelei Knight, now stage beauty with Bergman's Revue, for a special article. Her coin-hunting mother outlines Lorelei's ambitions, but Slosson, the press agent, later adds his information. Lorelei attends Millionaire Hammon's gorgeous entertainment. She meets Merkle, a wealthy dyspeptic. Bob Wharton comes uninvited. Lorelei discovers a blackmail plot against Hammon in which her brother is involved. Merkle and Lorelei have an auto wreck. The blackmailers besmirch her good name. Lorelei supects her mother is an unscrupulous plotter. She finds in Adoree Demorest a real friend.

Most mothers deserve all the love and kindness their children can bestow on them, but occasionally a mother is a heartless beast. Would a young woman be justified in seeing her mother go to the poorhouse if she discovered that the mother had plotted literally to sell her to a wealthy, drunken profligate?

CHAPTER IX—Continued.

"Maybe Mr. Merkle—"

"We'll leave him out of this," declared Lorelei; "he's too decent to have a person like me foisted upon him—and there's no reason whatever why he should be held responsible for my notoriety." She turned away from the dining room with a shudder of distaste. "I don't want any breakfast. I think I'll get some air."

As soon as she was out in the street she turned southward involuntarily, and set off toward the establishment of Adoree Demorest.

Mrs. Knight dried her eyes and began to dress herself carefully, preparatory to a journey into the Wall street section of the city, for the hour was drawing on toward three o'clock.

Meanwhile Jim, having transacted his business at Goldberg's office, sought a more familiar haunt on one of the side streets among the forties. Here, just off Broadway, was a famous barber shop—a spotless place, with white interior and tiled walls. Six Italians in stiff duck coats practiced their arts at a row of well-equipped chairs. A wasp-waisted girl sat at the manicure table next the front windows. As Jim entered she was holding the hand of a jaded person in a light-gray suit, and murmuring over it with an occasional upward glance from a pair of bold, dark eyes. "Tony the Barber," engaged in administering a shampoo, nodded at Jim, and from force of habit murmured politely: "Next!" Then, with a meaning glance, he indicated a door at the rear of the shop. In the third chair Jim recognized Max Melcher, although the face of the sporting man was swathed in steaming cloths.

Jim passed on and into a rear room, where he found three men seated at a felt-covered table. They were well dressed, quiet persons—one a bookmaker whom the racing laws had reduced from affluence to comparative penury; another, a tall, pallid youth with bulging eyes. The third occupant of the room was an ex-lightweight champion of the ring, Young Sullivan by name. His trim waist and powerful shoulders betokened his trade. His jaw was firm, and a cauliflower ear overhung his collar like a fungus.

"Hush! It's Campbell Pope, the Critic."

Jim drew up a chair and chatted idly until the bookmaker yawned, rose, and went out. Then Jim and the others relaxed.

"Gee, he's a sticker!" exclaimed the pugilist. "I thought he'd broke his back."

"Max is getting his map greased," the pop-eyed youth explained. Taking a pasteboard box from his pocket, he removed a heroin tablet therefrom and crushed it; the powder he held in the indentation between the base of his closed thumb and first finger, known as "the thimble;" then, with a quick inhalation, he drew the drug up his nostrils. "Have an angel?" he inquired, offering the box.

Jim accepted, but Young Sullivan declined.

"What's the news?" the latter inquired.

"I've seen Goldy," replied Jim. "Mother and I will call on Merkle at three. I finally got her to consent."

Sullivan shook his head. "He might fall, but I doubt it. How does your sister feel?"

"That's the trouble. She's square, and we can't use her," Jim explained.

"Some doll!" admiringly commented Armistead, the third member of the group. Armistead had once been famed in vaudeville for dancing, but the drug habit had destroyed his endurance, and with it his career. "She's a perfect thirty-six, all right. She could rip a lot of coin loose if she tried."

At this moment Mr. Melcher, freshly perfumed and talcumed, entered the room. His white hair was arranged with scrupulous nicety; his pink face, as unwrinkled as his immaculate attire, was beaming with good-humor.

"Well, boys, I'm the pay-car," he smiled.

"Hammon came through, eh?" Sullivan inquired eagerly.

"Not exactly; we compromised. Quick sales and small profits; that's business."

"How strong did he go?" queried Armistead.

"Now, what's the difference, so long as you get yours? Photography is a paying business." Melcher laughed agreeably.

"Sure! I'll bet Sarony is rich." Young Sullivan carelessly accepted the roll of currency which Melcher tossed him, and the others did likewise.

"I suppose that's curtain for us," Jim said, regretfully.

"It is. The rest is Lilas' affair."

"Say, will the old man fall again?" queried Armistead.

"He's going to marry her!" The three others stared at him in amazement. "Right!" confirmed Melcher. "She's got a strangle hold on him."

"Hm-m! Maybe we haven't lost the last car yet," Sullivan ventured.

Jim seconded the thought. "She's got an ace buried somewhere. There's a lot more in her head than hairpins. I wish Merkle would marry my sister."

"Not a chance," Melcher declared. "You'll be lucky to shake him down for a few thousand. How about Wharton? Will she stand for him?"

Jim frowned, and his voice was rough as he replied:

"I'll make her stand for him—if it's a marry."

"He's a lush; if you got him stewed he might go that far. It has been done; but, of course, it's all up to the girl. Anyhow, if he balks at the altar we might get him for something else."

"I'm not sure I'll need any help in this." Jim looked up coldly. "If he marries her, that ends it; if we have to frame him, of course I'll split."

"How are you going to frame him, with a square dame like Lorelei?" asked Armistead.

"Frame both of them," Melcher said, shortly. "By the way, he's a gambler, too, isn't he? Bring him in some night, Jim, and I'll turn for him myself."

"Save his cuff buttons for me," laughed Young Sullivan, idly riffling the cards. "Gee! Money comes easy to some folks. Don't you guys never expect to do any honest work?"

CHAPTER X.

Jim's appearance when he entered the dressing room that night was a surprise; he was clad in faultless evening attire.

"Why the barbaric splendor?" inquired Lorelei. "Do you want me to dress, too?"

"Sure thing. Look your best, and make me think I'm a regular John."

"Bergman dropped in to see me tonight," she told him, after they had gossiped for a moment. "I don't like the way he talked. He thinks he owns the girls who work for him."

Jim replied, carelessly: "Blow him and his job. You can get on at the Palace Garden."

"There's my contract: he can discharge me, you know, but I can't quit—that's one of the peculiarities of a theatrical contract. Well—he insisted on taking me to supper."

"A brother is a handy thing, once in a while, but for every-day use you need a 'steady' with a kick in each mitt," suggested Jim.

"I wish you would punch him."

"Who? Me? And go joy-riding with a square-toe? Nix. I'm too refined. Did you see tonight's papers?"

"There wasn't much in them."

Jim smiled wisely. "There would have been if things hadn't gone right. I'm glad for your sake."

"Oh, the harm's done, I suppose. But there's one good thing about it—Bob Wharton hasn't bothered me this evening."

Jim, with an expressionless face, tried to speak to Lilas Lynn, who had just come in. When his sister came down after the last act, he was waiting at the door and helped her into a cab, despite her protestations that she would much prefer to walk.

"What are you going to do with all the coin you save? Slip it to the shoemakers?" he laughed. "I don't go out often; you'd better spring me good."

As they seated themselves in the main room at Proctor's, he appraised her with admiring eyes. "You're the candy, sis. There's class to that layout."

"It's part of the game to look well in public, but I'd have enjoyed myself more if we had gone to Billy the Oysterman's and dressed the part." She surveyed the gaudy dining room, with its towering marble columns, its tremendous crystal festoons, showering a brilliant but becoming light upon the throngs below, then nodded here and there to casual greetings.

Proctor's was a show place, built upon the site of a former resort the fame of which had been nation-wide; but the crowds that frequented it now were of a different type to those that had gathered in "the old Proctor's." Prices were higher here than elsewhere; the coatrooms were robbers' dens, infested by Italian mafiosi; tips were extravagant and amounted in effect to ransom. But New York dearly loves to be pillaged. Nothing speeds the Manhattan sleep hater more swiftly to a change of scene than the knowledge that he is getting his money's worth.

"Speaking of clothes," Jim continued, staring past his sister to another table, "there seems to be a strike breaker in the room. Pipe the gink with the nightshirt under his coat and the shoestring tie. There must be a masquerade— Say! He's bowing to you."

"Hush! It's Campbell Pope, the critic."

Mr. Pope had risen and was slouching toward them. He took Lorelei's hand, then shot a sharp glance at her escort as the girl introduced them. Accepting Jim's mumbled invitation, he seated himself and instructed a waiter to bring his coffee. Jim watched the nearest entrance with some anxiety, for the reviewer's presence did not fit well with his plans. As he finished ordering he heard Pope say:

"I was sorry the story got out, Miss Knight; but it was pretty well smothered in this evening's papers. Of course you were dragged in by the hair to afford a Roman spectacle; we all saw what it meant when it came to us."

"What did it mean?" queried Jim, with brotherly interest.

"Blackmail. The word was written all over it. Melcher's connection with the affair was proof of that; then—the way it was handled! Nobody touched it except the Dispatch, and, of course, it got its price."

"I thought newspapers paid for copy," innocently commented Jim.

"Yes, real newspapers; but the gang had to publish the stuff somewhere. It is reported that Hammon paid fifty thousand dollars to prevent Melcher from filing suit. I dare say things will be quiet around Tony the Barber's now."

"You press people certainly have got a lot up your sleeves." James' involuntary start of dismay did not pass unnoticed. He did not relish the gleam in Pope's eyes, and he hastily sought refuge in a goblet of water, notwithstanding his distaste for the liquid.

"We sometimes know as much as the police, and we invariably tell more," continued Pope. "Yes, a business man can get a haircut in Tony's without fear of family complications now. I suppose Armistead is smoking hop; Young Sullivan is probably laying an alcoholic foundation for a wife-beating, and—the others are spending Hammon's money in the cafes."

Jimmy Knight paled, for behind Pope's genial smile were both mockery and contempt; a panic swept him lest this fellow should acquaint Lorelei with the truth. Jim lost interest in his clams and thereafter avoided conversation with the wariness of a fox.

He was still glowing with resentment when Robert Wharton paused at the table and greeted its occupants cheerily. In response to Jim's invitation Bob drew up a fourth chair, seated himself, and began to beam upon Lorelei. Noting the faint line of annoyance between her brows, he laughed.

"Retreat is cut off," he announced, complacently. "Escape is hopeless. I've left orders to have the windows barred and the doors walled up."

"Eh? What's the idea?" inquired Pope.

Wharton answered sadly: "My vanity has suffered the rudest jolt of its young career; I mourn the death of a perfectly normal and healthy self-conceit, age twenty-nine. Services at noon; friends and relatives only."

"Oho! You've heard the seductive song of the Rhine maiden?" Pope's eyes were twinkling.

"Eh?—I'm tangled up like a basket of ticker tape. You see, Campbell, I drink; candor compels me to acknowledge that much. In a moment of folly I was indiscreet, and ever since I have been trying to apologize. In short, I'm in Dutch, and there sits the adorable cause of my sorrows."

In spite of Wharton's reproachful tone, the gaze he bent upon Lorelei was good-humored, and she saw that he was in a mood different to any she had ever seen him in. Strange to say, he was sober, or nearly so, and he was plainly determined to make her like him.

"Has he annoyed you, Miss Knight?" asked Pope.

"Dreadfully."

Wharton explained further. "The first time we met I deserved to be slapped, and I was. You see, I was ruder than usual. But I have sobered up purposely to apologize; I have repented, and—well, here we are, thanks to brother James."

"Thanks to—Jim?" Lorelei raised her brows.

Pope turned to young Knight and said, politely, "That is my foot you are stamping on."

Ignoring Jim's mute appeal, Wharton ran on, smilingly: "He promised to shackle you to a table until I could stammer out my halting apologies, and now that I've done so in the presence of press and public won't you forgive me and help me to bury the hatchet in a Welsh rabbit?" He was speaking directly to her with a genuine appeal

"Are You Stuck on the Boob?"

in his handsome eyes. Now that she saw him in his right mind, it was unexpectedly hard to resist him, for he was very boyish and friendly—quite unlike the person who had so grievously offended her.

When she and Jim had first entered the restaurant they had received a polite but casual recognition from the head waiter, but there attentions had ceased. With Wharton as a member of the party, however, there came a change. Mr. Proctor himself paused momentarily at the table and rested a hand upon Wharton's shoulder while he voiced a few platitudes. Then in some inexplicable manner Robert found himself not only ordering for himself but supplementing Jim's menu with rare and expensive viands. As a great favor, he was advised of a newly imported vintage wine which the proprietor had secured for his own use.

Of course Mr. Wharton wished to sample such a vintage, any vintage, in fact, since a thousand fires were consuming him, and his nerves were on edge from the night before. The first draft electrified him, his spirits rose, and he swept his companions along with his enthusiasm. From surrounding tables people accosted him; men paused in passing to exchange a word about stocks, polo, scandal, Newport, tennis, Tuxedo; none were in the least stiff or formal, and all expressed in one way or another their admiration for Lorelei. Women who she knew were not of her world beamed and smiled at the young millionaire. It was a new experience for the girl, who felt herself, as the supper progressed, becoming conspicuous without the usual disagreeable accompaniments. Men no longer openly ogled her; women did not nudge each other and whisper; her presence in company with a member of the idolized rich was causing gossip, but gossip of a flattering kind.

All this attention, however, had quite the contrary effect upon Campbell Pope. Much to Jim's relief, he excused himself shortly, whereupon the former, after allowing Wharton to pay the score, suggested a dance, breezily sweeping aside his sister's mild objection. Of course Bob was delighted, and soon the trio had set out upon a round of the dancing cafes.

Bob Wharton had drunk heavily, but up to this time he had shown little effect from his potations beyond a growing exhilaration; now, however, the wine was taking toll, and Lorelei felt a certain pity for him. With Robert Wharton liquor intensified a natural agreeableness until it cloyed. His amenities were monstrously magnified; he became convivial to the point of offensiveness. In the course of this metamorphosis he was many things, and through such a cycle he worked tonight while the girl looked on.

Overcoming his niggardly instincts, Jimmy Knight, as the evening progressed, assumed the burden of entertainment. He, too, adopted a spendthrift gayety and encouraged Wharton's libations, although he drank little himself.

There came a time when Bob could no longer dance—when, in fact, he could barely walk—and then it was that Jim proposed leaving. Bob readily agreed—having reached a condition of mellowness where he agreed enthusiastically to anything—and Lorelei was only too glad to depart. She had witnessed the pitiful breaking down of Bob's faculties with a curious blending of concern and dismay, but her protests had gone unheeded. Having had a glimpse of his real self earlier in the evening, and being wise in the ways of intemperance, she felt only pity for him now as the three made their way downstairs.

While Jim went in search of their belongings, Bob propped himself against the wall and regarded her admiringly through eyes that were filmed and unfocusable.

"Fairy princess, you are more adorable every minute," he said, thickly. "Yes! A thousand yeses. And I'm your little friend, eh? No more slaps, no more mysterious exits, what?"

"That depends upon you."

"I'm behaving finely," he vaunted. "I usually act much worse than I have tonight, but I like you. I like you differently—understand? Not like the other girls. You're so beautiful! Makes me dizzy. You forgive my little joke eh?"

"What joke?"

"Meeting you the way I did tonight. Jim's nice boy—obliged to him."

"I see. Then it was all planned?"

He nodded vehemently and nearly lost his balance.

"How much—did you pay him?" Lorelei queried, with difficulty.

Mr. Wharton waved his hand in a magnificent gesture. "What's money, anyhow? Somebody's bound to get it."

"Fifty dollars?"

He looked at her reproachfully. "That's an insult to Jim—he's a business man, he is. More than that— Oh, yes, and I'll take care of him again—this very night. I'll stake him. He knows a place."

"Will you do me a favor?" she asked, after a pause.

Wharton assured her with abnormal emphasis that her lightest wish was law.

"Then go straight home from here," she pleaded.

"I say, that's not fair." Bob looked ludicrously shocked. "I promised Jim—Wouldn't have me break a sacred promise, would you? We're expected—a little game all arranged where we can bust it quick. If you hear a loud noise—that'll be Melcher going broke."

"Melcher!" Lorelei looked sharply at her brother, who was approaching with her wraps, and noted that he was perfectly sober. A moment later she checked Bob in the act of giving directions to the cab driver:

"Wait. Where do you live, Mr. Wharton?"

"The Charlevoix." It was the most expensive bachelor apartment building in the city.

"Drive to the Charlevoix," she told the chauffeur.

"Hold on, sis," cried Jim. "We're going to take you home first."

"No."

"But—" Jim saw in his sister's face something that brought a smothered oath to his lips. Drawing her out of hearing, he muttered, angrily, "Mind your own business; I've got something on."

"I know you have." She met his eyes unflinchingly. "But you shan't rob him."

Jim thrust his thin face close to hers, and she saw that it was distorted with rage. "If you don't want to go home, stay here. He's going with me."

"We'll see."

She turned, but he seized her roughly. "What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"I'm going to tell him he's being taken to a crooked gambling house, and that you're working for Max Melcher. He isn't too drunk to understand that."

Her brother clenched his fist menacingly, but she did not recoil, and he thought better of his impulse.

"Are you grand-standing?" he queried, brutally. "Are you stuck on the boob? or do you want your bit?"

Without reply she walked back to the cab, redirected the driver to the Charlevoix, then seated herself beside Wharton, who was already sinking into a stupor. Jim slunk in behind her, and they were whirled southward.

It was a silent ride, for the besotted young millionaire slept, and Jim dared not trust himself to speak. Lorelei closed her eyes, nauseated, disillusioned, miserable, seeing more clearly than ever the depths into which she had unwittingly sunk, and the infamy to which Jim had descended.

At his hotel Wharton roused himself, and Lorelei sent him reeling into the vestibule. Then she and Jim turned homeward through the deserted streets.

CHAPTER XI.

During the last act of the matinee on the day following Lorelei was surprised to receive a call from John Merkle. "The Judge" led him to her dressing room, then shuffled away, leaving him alone with her and Mrs. Croft.

"I hope I haven't broken any rules by dropping in during your office hours," he began.

"Theatrical rules are made to be broken; but I do think that you are indiscreet. Don't you?"

The banker had been using his eyes with an interest that betrayed his unfamiliarity with these surroundings. "I was on my way uptown and preferred not to telephone." He looked meaningly at Croft; and Lorelei, interpreting his glance, sent the dresser from the room on some errand. "Well, the game worked," said Merkle. "Mrs. Hammon has left home and commenced suit for divorce. If our friend Miss Lynn had set out to ruin Jarvis socially—and perhaps financially—she couldn't have played her cards better."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

Merkle hesitated. "No," he admitted, "it isn't; but I'm a bit embarrassed now that I'm here. I suppose your mother told about seeing me?"

"My mother?" Lorelei's amazement was convincing, and his keen eyes softened. "When did you see mother? Where?"

"Yesterday, at my office. Didn't you know that she and your brother had called?"

Lorelei shook her head; she felt sick with dread of his next words.

"It was very—unpleasant, I fear, for all of us."

"What did they—want?" The girl was still smiling, but her lips beneath the paint were dry.

"They felt that I had—er—involved you in a great deal of notoriety. From what they said I judged that you shared their feelings." He paused awkwardly once more, and she motioned him to continue. "We didn't get on very well, especially your brother and I; for he presumed to—criticize my relations with you and—er—my motive in taking you to ride the other night. I believe I was quite rude to him; in fact, I had the watchman eject him, not daring to trust myself."

"They asked for—money?" Lorelei averted her face, for she could not bear to meet his frank eyes.

"Yes—what I considered a great deal of money. I understood they represented you. They didn't insist, however; they offered me a choice."

"Choice! Of what?"

"Well—I inferred that marriage would undo the wrong I had—"

"Oh-h!" Lorelei rose with a gasp. Bravely she stilled the tremor of her lips. "Tell me—the rest."

"There isn't much more. Your mother was quite hysterical and—noisy. Today a lawyer came to see me. He offers to settle the whole matter, but I prefer dealing directly with you."

"Do you think I knew anything about it?" she cried, indignantly.

"No, I do not think so now. Yesterday I was too much surprised and too angry to know just what I did think. It's perfectly true, however, that I was to blame for the unfortunate outcome of the ride, and I want to make amends for any injury—"

"Weren't you injured, too, by the publicity?"

Merkle showed his teeth in a mirthless smile.

"That's neither here nor there."

"Please—leave me, and—let me think this over. I must do something quickly, or—I'll smother."

"I'm glad I came," said he, rising. "I'm glad I made sure."

"So am I. What you have told me has made a great difference in—everything. Don't allow them to—" She hesitated and her voice broke. "I can't say it. You must think I'm—unspeakable."

He shook his head gravely. "No, I merely think you are very unfortunate. I think you need help more than any girl I ever knew."

"I do. I do."

"But I am not the one to give it—at least not the kind of help you need."

"I'll need help more than ever—after tonight."

"Yes? Why?"

"Because I'm going to leave home." Lorelei's head was up, and she spoke with a note of defiance.

"Then perhaps I can do something." He seated himself again. "You will need money."

"Oh, no. I have my salary and the other revenues you know about. I have kept my family for two years."

"Work won't hurt you, but why force yourself to go on with those other things? They're not to your liking, I'm sure."

"My mother and father must live. There isn't enough—don't you see?

"Make an End of It. I'll Finance You."

There just isn't enough for all of us unless I— graft like the other girls."

Merkle broke out impatiently: "Make an end of it. I'll finance you." She laughed a little harshly. "Don't think for an instant that I'd venture to expect anything in return. I won't trouble you; I won't even see you. Nobody will ever know. I wouldn't miss the money, and I'd really love to do it. You tried to do me a favor—"

"There's no use arguing."

"Well, don't be stubborn or hasty. You could use—say, ten thousand dollars. It would keep you going very nicely, and really it's only the price of a new auto."

Do you believe that Merkle is perfectly truthful and decent in his offer to give Lorelei financial aid? Is she doing the right thing in deserting her people, even though they are using her simply as a tool?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)