

THE AUCTION BLOCK

A Novel of New York Life

By REX BEACH

CHAPTER XXII—Continued.

"Your brother—forced his way into my room."

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Fennell drew her guest swiftly inside. "Hush! Don't make a show of yourself."

"Who's all this?" came from Harden Fennell, who was sprawled in a chintz-covered easy chair.

"Be still!" his wife cried, sharply. "Will you send someone for Bob?" Lorelei asked, more quietly. "I want to—leave."

But her hostess protested. "Now, why stir up trouble? Bob is drunk; he and Bertie are old friends. Bertie will apologize in the morning, and—after all, it was nothing."

"Will you send for my husband?" Mrs. Fennell's gaze hardened; she stiffened herself, saying coldly:

"Why, certainly, if you insist upon rousing the whole household; but he's in no condition to understand this silly affair. You might have some consideration for us."

Bright disks of color were burning in Lorelei's cheeks; she was smiling peculiarly.

"Rest easy," she said. "I've no wish to embarrass you nor drag my husband into this rotten business. It seems he's as modern as the rest of you, but I'm—old-fashioned."

There came a knock at the door, and Hayman's voice, calling:

"Betty! Let me in!"

His sister opened the door an inch or two. "You mustn't come in now," she expostulated, then cried sharply: "Why, you're badly hurt. You're all bloody!" As Hayman agreed in a burst of profanity, she exclaimed fretfully: "Oh, this is dreadful! Go to your room, for heaven's sake! I'll see what I can do with this—with Mrs. Wharton."

Lorelei broke out sharply: "If you'll permit me to thank you for your hospitality, I'll leave at once."

"Leave? At this hour?"

Lorelei's forced smile bared her even, white teeth. "Of course, if it's too much trouble I can walk—"

"No trouble at all." Mrs. Fennell showed some relief. "I—I'm dreadfully sorry. Still, I can't permit you—"

"In ten minutes, then. If there's no train I may ask your chauffeur to drive me into the city."

"Why, to be sure! Er—what shall I tell Bob when he asks for you?"

"Use your own judgment, please. You can handle drunken men better than I. And don't trouble to send a maid to my room. I'll be downstairs when the car comes."

She was pacing the gloom of the porte-cochere when an automobile swung out from among the trees and swept the shadows flying with its brushes of flame. As she directed the driver, from an open window behind her came a drunken shout; a burst of men's laughter followed the car as it rolled away.

So that was the charmed circle to which she had aspired, those the people she had envied; behind her was that life to which she had sold herself, and this was the end of her dream of fine ladies and gallant gentlemen! Lorelei scarcely knew whether to laugh or cry. She reached the little apartment in the hushed hours before the dawn, and straightway began her packing. Since Bob was doubtless in a drunken stupor which would last for hours, she did not hurry.

Only once did she halt in her labors, and then only from surprise. In a bureau drawer she uncovered a bundle of letters and documents addressed to her husband, which in some way aroused her curiosity. Swallowing her qualms, she examined the contents. They proved to be, in the main, letters from Bob's mother and father urging him to break off his marriage. Those from Mr. Wharton were characteristically intolerant and dictatorial; those from Bob's mother were plaintive and indignantly sad. Both parents, she perceived, had exhausted every effort to win their son from his infatuation, both believed Lorelei to be an infamous woman bent upon his destruction, and, judging from the typewritten reports inclosed with some of the father's letters, there was ample reason for such a belief. These reports covered Lorelei's every movement, they bared every bit of ancient scandal connected with her, they recounted salacious stage gossip as fact and falsely construed those actions which were capable of more than one interpretation. It gave the girl a peculiar sensation of unreality to see her life laid out before her eyes in so distorted a shape, and when she read the business-like biographies of herself and the members of her family she could only marvel at Bob's faith. For evidently he had not answered a single letter. Nevertheless, after preparing an early breakfast, she sent her trunks downstairs and 'phoned for a taxicab.

CHAPTER XXIII.

On Tuesday afternoon a badly shaken, exceedingly frightened young man called at Campbell Pope's boarding house.

"Bob! Been on another bat?" cried

Pope, at sight of his caller. Wharton took a fleeting glance at himself in a mirror and nodded, noting for the first time the sacks beneath his eyes, the haggard lines from nostrils to lip corners.

"I'm all in. Lorelei's quit me," he said, dully.

"Quit you?" Pope frowned. "Tell me about it."

"Well, I climbed the vine again and fell off. She packed up—disappeared—been gone since Saturday night, and I can't find her. Nobody seems to know where she is. I—I'm hard hit, Pope. . . . God! I keep thinking that maybe she took the river. You see, I'm all gone." He sank into a chair, twitching and trembling in a nervous collapse.

"Better have a drink," Pope suggested; but Bob returned roughly:

"That's what broke up the sketch. I got stowed at Fennellcourt—high-hat week-end party—fast crowd, and the usual trimmings. Never again! That is, if I find my wife."

"Fennellcourt! Suppose you tell me all about it. If there's a chance that it's suicide—" Pope's reportorial instinct brought the last word into juxtaposition with "Fennellcourt," and he saw black headlines.

"Judge for yourself. Maybe you can help me; nobody else can." Bob recounted the story of the house party. He could remember little of Sunday's occurrences; not until late that evening had he fully grasped the fact that Lorelei had gone. Even then he was too befuddled to act. Nellie Mrs. Fennell nor her husband could give him any help, and Bert Hayman had been confined to his room all day Sunday as the result of a fall or an accident of some sort. Monday morning, while still suffering from the effects of his spree, Bob had returned to the city to find his home deserted, and he could find no trace of Lorelei in any quarter. So, as a last resort before calling in the police, he had come to Pope. When he had finished his somewhat muddled tale he stared at the critic with a look of dumb appeal.

Campbell began in a matter-of-fact, positive tone. "She's altogether too healthy to think of suicide; rest easy on that score. You're weak enough emotionally to do such a thing, but not she. Besides, why should she? I can't imagine that any act of yours could very deeply offend anybody, even your wife. However—" He studied briefly. "Have you been to see Miss Demorest?"

"Sure! Adoree hasn't seen her."

"Possibly." Pope eyed his caller speculatively. "So you decided to jimmy her into society, eh? Who was at the party? Oh, heavens!" he exclaimed, as Bob muttered over the list of names. "How did she compare with those sacred cows?"

"Oh, great! The men went crazy over her—I knew they would."

"But how did the women treat her?"

"Why, all right. I didn't notice anything."

"What? No, of course you didn't. You were probably too drunk to notice much." Bob flushed. "Well, something must have happened to alarm her, and, since you were too maudlin to be of any assistance, she evidently took the bit in her teeth. I can't blame her. For heaven's sake, why did you set her in with that crowd? If you wanted to take her stumping, why didn't you hire a guide and go into the red-light district?"

Bob defended himself listlessly. "That's the only crowd I know; it's the only set that's open to a Pittsburgh furnace man's son. Those people aren't so bad; I guess they're no worse than the rest. If a person goes looking for nastiness he can find it nearly anywhere, I never did—and I never saw anything very scandalous around that bunch."

"One's observations are never very keen when they're made through the bottom of a glass," observed Pope.

Bob exploded irritably. "All right, Lieutenant! Play 'Jerusalem' on the cornet while I pass the tumbler. I want my wife, not a 'Ballington Booth' on the terrors of intemperance. She's the only person who can straighten me up. . . . I was doing fine. Had a job. . . . I'll go straight to hell again if I don't find her." There was no doubt of the man's sincerity; his mental and his physical condition were obvious.

Pope did his best to repair the wreckage in some degree, and, having quieted the sufferer, he set out for Miss Demorest's home.

Adoree, clad in slightly soiled negligee, answered his ring, then, recognizing him, blocked the door hastily, exposing a face overcast with defiance and contempt.

"Aha!" she exclaimed. "Aha!" and Pope's sensitive ego recoiled before the fierce challenge of her tone. Invariably she greeted him with contumely; invariably he arose to the challenge and overcame her attack; invariably she fought him on every subject. And yet all the time he vaguely suspected that they were really in complete accord and growing to like each other.

"I've come to see Lorelei," he explained, affably.

"She's not here."

"Then I'd like to talk with you." The

door opened slightly, and Pope smiled, whereupon the opening narrowed. "No. You can't come in. I've just cleaned house."

In desperation the man exclaimed: "I won't sit down, but I must talk to you. Really, I must, but—ducks, if nothing else."

"Ducks!" Adoree's expression altered.

"Let's be sensible. I want you to like me." Pope tried to appear amiable, but the effort resulted in a painful smirk.

"Huh!"

"We like the same things—let's be friends. You needn't tell me anything about Lorelei, but I do want your advice about Bob."

"I suppose there's no reason why you shouldn't come in. You'll probably wriggle in somehow, even if you have to steal a key. If you don't know the truth you'll probably make up something about Lorelei, as you did about me—buzzard!" Pope began to persevere, as he always did when deeply embarrassed. But the door swung wide, and he entered with a strained, unnatural smile upon his face.

"You see I'm not concealing her anywhere," Miss Demorest challenged.

"Of course not. We never suspected you, but we're afraid something has happened to her."

"I should say there has! You want scandal? I'll give you some." Adoree's eyes were flashing now. Have you any idea what that girl went through out there on Long Island? Listen." She plumped herself down beside Pope and began to talk swiftly with an intensity of indignation that made her forgetful of her dishabille.

When she had finished her story her shocked blue eyes interrogated his, and the critic roused himself with an effort. He found that he was tightly holding the fingers of her right hand, but dropped them and cleared his throat.

"You say she's staying here with you?"

"I didn't say so, but she is."

"Doesn't she care for Bob any more?"

"Yes! At first she was furious, but we've talked a good deal, and I think she does care—away down underneath. She may not know it herself, but she does. But she won't go back. She declares she won't spoll her whole life for a drunken wretch like him, and she's quite right, of course."

"She's quite wrong, of course! Bob's done pretty well for a man of his type, and he's had a hard lesson. After all, it's a woman's part to sacrifice—she's not happy unless she gives more than she gets. You and I must bring them together."

"How?"

Pope had been thinking while he talked, and now he sketched his plan eagerly.

"You are perfectly detestable and horrid," she told him, when he had finished, "but I suppose there must be some good in you." She laid her hand upon his arm again, and Pope's sallow cheeks were glowing and his eyes as bright as hers.

"Geel! You're all right!" he said. "I'll call for you after the show."

Adoree's smile was uncertain as she demurred. "Perhaps you'd better meet me here. What will people say?" But Pope was insistent.

They were accustomed to resent the efforts of our friends to arrange our affairs for us, and we pray for deliverance from their mistakes, yet without

their assistance we would often make miserable failures of our lives. Lorelei was surprised when Adoree brought Campbell Pope home with her that night, and she was somewhat diverted by the complete change in their mutual attitude. Now that the first clash was

over, now that they had expressed their dislike and disapproval of each other, they no longer quarreled. Pope was frankly admiring, and Adoree could not conceal her awe at Campbell's literary and musical ability. She explained to Lorelei: "I asked him in for the sake of the piano. I knew you were blue, and there's nothing so cheering as music."

But when Pope finally got around to play, the result was not altogether happy. Adoree, to be sure, seemed delighted, but Lorelei felt herself gripped by a greater loneliness than usual. Pope's music was far from lively, and he had cunningly chosen the hour when it exerts its greatest emotional appeal. He was artist enough, moreover, to work his effects with length.

Lorelei sought relief at length in the seclusion of Adoree's rear room, and there, in the midst of a "crying spell," Bob found her.

Her first quick resentment at the deception practiced upon her melted at sight of him, for he had suffered, and he was evidently suffering now. He was not the Bob she had known, but chastened, repentant, speechless with a tremulous delight at seeing her again.

In the next room Campbell played on, soothing the way for a reconciliation.

Lorelei found herself in her husband's arms, listening dazedly to his passionate protestations and his earnest self-denunciation. Bob had received the fright of his life, his lesson had been seared into him, and he lost no time in telling his wife about it.

At last Lorelei laid her fingers upon his lips, her eyes misty and luminous with the light of a new and wondrous certainty.

"Wait! Let me speak," she said. "I've done a lifetime of thinking in these few days. I'm not sorry that I left you, for it has enabled me to see clearly. But I'll never leave you again, Bob, no matter what you do; I can't—"

He crushed her to him, then held her away at the hint of something unsaid. "You mean you've begun to love me?" he inquired, gladly.

"Perhaps. I don't know. Something has changed—tremendously." Under his bewildered gaze the blood rose, warming her cheeks; her eyes swam, but not with tears; her bosom was tremulous with the knowledge that clamored for freedom, and yet refused to come.

"Don't you understand, stupid?" she said, seeing him still mystified. She hid her face, then whispered in his ear, whereupon he fell to trembling, and the fervor of his embrace relaxed. He held her gently, tenderly, as if he suddenly found her to be a fragile thing.

"My dear!—my—dear!" And then he, too, hid his face as if blinded by a pitiless light. When he raised it tears glistened on his lashes, and a happiness that was like pain pierced him. "Oh! If I had only known—" he choked.

"What a fool I've been, never to think that this might come! I—can't believe it."

"It's true," she smiled, and her cheeks were still dyed with that virginal flush. "Perhaps that's why I've changed toward you—something has happened, Bob, and you mustn't leave me now. I couldn't bear to do without you."

"You may forgive me," he cried, "but I'll never forgive myself. To think that I should learn of this right now—after what I did. Well, I'm through making new promises; I'm going to keep some of the old ones."

"I think it's about time we both came to earth."

"No need for you—you're the sensible one. If I can't straighten up on my own account and on yours, surely I can and will for this."

An hour later Adoree tipped back to the piano after a surreptitious peek into the back room, whence nothing but the faintest murmurs issued. Her face was radiant.

"You played some high-priced divorce lawyer out of a good case, Mr. Cricket," she beamed on Campbell. "She's in his lap." Pope's rippling fingers paused, his hands dropped, and he sighed.

"I could have set them quarreling just as well, but the role of cupid suits me tonight." His shoulders drooped wearily; the feverish brightness of his eyes and the pallor of his thin face indicated that he had indeed spent all his nervous force.

"Cupid in a sweater!" Adoree exclaimed. "Well, I believe it, for your playing made me positively mushy. I've been hugging a sofa cushion and dreaming of heroes for ever so long. Why, at this moment I'd marry the janitor."

With the eager shyness of a boy, he inquired: "Do you really like to hear me play? Can I come and play for you again?"

"Not without a chaperon," she told him, positively. "Wool tickles my cheek."

Pope rose hastily and in some embarrassment. He could write about love with a cynic's pen, but he could not bear to talk about it even in a joking way. He eyed the speaker with the frightened fascination of a charmed rabbit, until she laughed in mischievous enjoyment of his perturbation.

"Oh, never fear! It will take more

than music to make me forget what you are. Say!" She yawned, doubled up her little fists, and stretched. "Won't you play something to make those lovers go home, so I can go to bed?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

Bob's work as a salesman continued to be so effective that Kurtz finally offered him a salaried position. But instead of accepting, Bob made a counter-proposition that caused the little man to gasp. Briefly, it was to extend the scope of the present business by laying in a stock of extravagant, high-priced shirt and necktie materials, with Bob as partner in the new venture.

Kurtz protested that he was not a haberdasher, but he was constrained to admit that Bob had the right idea of smart business, and after some discussion accepted his employee's nonchalant offer to go halves on the new venture and share in its profits. The fact that Bob had no money with which to carry through his part of the deal troubled that youth not in the least—Kurtz' credit was ample. Bob's theory of securing the Fifth avenue trade was to double existing prices, and if this did not bring the business, to double them a second time; and this theory was correct, as he demonstrated when the new department was organized.

But despite the excellent income he now began to make there was never anything left in the Wharton bank account, for Bob moved his wife to a more pretentious apartment on Riverside drive and managed to increase their expenses so as to balance his earnings very nicely. It was quite a feat to adjust a fixed outlay to a varying income so that nothing whatever should remain, and he considered it a strong proof of his capacities that he succeeded.

By Christmas the haberdashery venture had shown such a profit that he began to pile up a small bank account in spite of himself; so he bought an automobile, which served to eat up any monthly profits and guarantee a deficit under the most favorable circumstances. Being thus relieved of financial uncertainty, he laid plans to wrest from Kurtz a full partnership in the tailoring business itself.

The Whartons' new home was charming, and Bob provided his wife with every luxury. Lorelei did not regret that she was prevented from going out as much as formerly—her experience at Fennellcourt had cured her of any desire to get into her husband's social set—and unconsciously she and Bob began to develop a real home life.

As time went on and evidences of prosperity showed themselves Lorelei's family forgot some of their dislike of Bob and became more companionable. Strangely enough, too, their cost of living increased in proportion to their friendliness; but Bob never questioned any amount they asked him for, and he swelled their allowance with characteristic prodigality.

Lorelei was proud of him, as she had reason to be, but she had occasion for sorrow as well. His generosity was really big, his pagan joyousness banished shadows, but he was intensely human in his failings, and in spite of his determination to stop drinking, in spite of all his earnest promises, the old appetite periodically betrayed him. For a month, for two months at a time, he would manfully fight his desires, then without excuse, without cause, just when he was boasting loudest of his victory, he would fall. And yet drinking did not brutalize him as it does most men; he never became disgusting; liquor intoxicated him, but less in body than in spirit. His repentance followed promptly, his chagrin was intense, and his fear of Lorelei almost ludicrous. But the girl had acquired a wider charity, a gentler patience; she grieved, she tried to help him, and his frailty endeared him to her. Love had been slow to awaken; in fact, she had not been definitely aware of its birth; but suddenly she had found it flowering in her soul, and now it flourished the more as that other interest intensified and began to dominate her.

Bob responded to all her efforts save one: she could not make him serious. On the whole, however, they were more happy than they had ever been.

One day, during the slack holiday season, Hannibal Wharton appeared at the Kurtz establishment. He appraised the elaborate surroundings with a hostile eye and stared at his son impassively.

"So! You're a seamstress now," he began, and Bob grinned. "Merkle told me you repaid his loan and had an automobile."

"That's true."

"Second-hand car?"

"No."

"How much do you owe?"

"Nothing, except for stock."

"Stock! What do you mean?"

"Kurtz and I are partners in one end of this business."

"I'll be damned!" breathed Mr. Wharton. Then he inquired, curiously, "Do you like this work?"

"It's not what I prefer, still there is a margin of profit."

"Huh! I should think so, at ninety

dollars a suit. Well, this town is full of fools."

Bob agreed. "But we dress 'em better than they do in Pittsburgh."

After a moment's consideration Hannibal said slowly: "Mother's at the Waldorf; she wants to see you. You've just about broken her heart, Bob."

"We're not going out much, but perhaps we could call on her—"

"We!" I said she wants to see you."

"And not my wife?"

"Certainly not. Neither do I. You don't seem to understand—"

Bob answered smoothly: "Certainly I understand; you think ninety dollars is too much for a suit. Perhaps I can show you something in scarfs of an exclusive design?"

"Don't be funny!" growled his father.

"Really, dad, you'd better go. That suit of yours is a sight. Somebody may think we made it for you."

Mr. Wharton remained silent for a moment. "The situation is impossible,

and anybody but you would see it. We can't accept that woman, and we won't. She's notorious."

"No more so than I am—or you, for that matter."

"She's a grafter. She'd quit you if I paid her enough."

"How do you know?"

"Her mother has been to see me half a dozen times. I've offered to pay her anything within reason, but they're holding out for something big. You come back, Bob. Let her go to her own people."

"And what's to become of the other one?" Bob was smiling faintly.

"The other one? What do you mean?"

"I mean there will be three in the family soon, dad; you're going to be a grandfather."

The effect of this announcement was unexpected. Hannibal Wharton was momentarily stricken dumb; for once he was utterly at a loss. Then, instead of raising his voice, he spoke with a sharp, stammering incisiveness:

"So that's her game, eh? I suppose she thinks she'll breed her way into the family. Well, she won't. It won't work. I was willing to compromise before—so long as there was no tangible bond between that family and mine—but they've got their blood mixed with mine; they've got a finger-hold in spite of hell, and I suppose they'll hold on. But I won't acknowledge a grandchild with scum like that in his veins. Good God! Now listen—you! Wharton's jaw was out-thrust, his gaze hard and unwavering. "No child tainted with that blood will share in one penny of my money, now or at any other time. Understand!"

"Perfectly." Bob's color had receded, but in no other way did he show his struggle for self-mastery. "My wife isn't bearing a child to spite you, and if it ever needs a grandfather we'll adopt one."

"They've pulled you down into the mud; now they've tied you there. Heredity's stronger than you or I; watch your child grow up, and watch its mother's blood tell. Then remember that I tried to free you before it was too late. Well, I'm through. This settles me. Good-by, and God help you with that rotten gang." Hannibal Wharton turned and strode out of the room shaking his head and mumbling.

CHAPTER XXV.

Bob had seldom been conscious of a deliberate effort to please himself, for to want a thing had always meant to have it almost before the desire had been recognized. The gratification of his impulses had become a sort of second nature to him, and one day, feeling that he owed a debt of friendliness to the world, he was impelled to liquidate it.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



"So That's Her Game, Eh?"



"Don't You Understand, Stupid?" She Said.