

The AUCTION BLOCK

A NOVEL OF NEW YORK LIFE

By REX BEACH

ILLUSTRATIONS by F. PARKER

Author of
"The Iron Trail"
"The Spoilers"
"The Silver Horde" Etc.
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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 charming daughter, Lorelei. A well-known critic interviews Lorelei Knight, a new 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.

There is a lesson here for the small town girl who thinks she has a call to go on the stage. Too many pretty lasses from the country meet a bad fate in the sordid life of the city and too often success is bought at the price of sorrow.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

"His mother's son. Need we say more? He's a great help to the family, for he keeps 'em from getting too proud over Lorelei." He sells introductions to his sister.

Campbell Pope's exclamation was lost in a babble of voices as a bevy of "Swimming Girls" descended from the enchanted regions above and scurried out upon the stage. Through the double curtains the orchestra could be faintly heard; a voice was crying, "Places."

"Some Soul Kissers with this troupe," remarked Slosson, when the scampering figures had disappeared.

"Yes, Bergman has made a fortune out of this kind of show. He's a friend to the 'Tired Business Man.'"

"Speaking of the weary Wall street workers, there will be a dozen of our ribbon winners at the Hammon supper tonight."

"Tell me, is Lorelei Knight a regular—or frequent—of these affairs?"

"Sure. It's part of the graft."

"I see."

"She has to give out her salary like the other girls. Why, her whole family is around her—mother, brother and father. Of course, the man who runs over by a taxi cab last summer. It didn't hurt the machine, but he's got a broken back or something. Too bad it wasn't brother Jimmy. You must meet him, by the way. I never heard of Lorelei's doing anything really—bad."

For the moment Campbell Pope made no reply. Meanwhile a great wave of singing flooded the regions at the back of the theater as the curtain rose and the chorus broke into sudden sound. When it did speak it was with unusual bitterness.

"It's the rottenest business in the world, Slosson. Two years ago she was a country girl; now she's a Broadway belle. How long will she last, d'you think?"

"She's too beautiful to last long," agreed the press agent, soberly, "especially now that the wolves are on her trail. But be danger isn't so much from the people she meets with as the people she sets with. That family of hers would drive any girl to the limit. They intend to cash in on her; the mother says so."

"And they will, too. She can have her choice of the wealthy rounders."

"Don't get me wrong," Slosson hastened to qualify. "She's square; understand?"

"Of course; object matrimony." It's the old story, and her mother will see to the ring and the orange blossoms. But what's the difference, after all, Slosson? It'll be hell for her, and a sale to the highest bidder, either way."

"You'll Pardon Us for Whispering, Won't You?"

"How—beautiful!" gasped Lorelei, when she had taken in the whole scene. "But—the poor little things are frightened." She looked up to find her companion staring in Hammon's

direction with an expression of peculiar, derisive amusement.

Hammon was the center of an admiring group; congratulations were being hurled at him from every quarter. At his side was Lillas Lynn, very dark, very striking, very expensively gowned and elaborately bejeweled. The room was filling with the strains of an invisible orchestra and the vocal uproar. Becoming conscious of Lorelei's gaze, her escort looked down, showing his teeth in a grin that was not of pleasure.

"You like it?" he asked.

"It's beautiful, but—the extravagance is almost criminal."

"Don't tell me how many starving newsboys or how many poor families the cost of this supper would support for a year. I hate poor people. Now for the orchestra and the humming-bird tongues. No doubt there's a pearl in every winecup. Prepare to have your palate tickled with a feather when your appetite flags."

"That's what the Romans did, isn't it?"

"Are you a student as well as an artist, Miss Knight?"

"I thought you were going to be pleasant, but you're not, are you? Lorelei was smilingly fixedly. "I'm afraid you don't intend to have a good time, Mr.—"

"They had found their places at the table, and Lorelei's escort was seating her. "I didn't catch your name when we were introduced."

"No, I," said he, taking his place beside her. "It sounded like Rice Curry or some other dish, but it's really Merkle—John T. Merkle."

"Ah! You're a banker. Aren't you pretty—reckless confessing your rank, as it were?"

"I'm a bachelor; also an invalid and an insomniac. You couldn't bring me any more trouble than I have." Again he looked toward Hammon, and this time he frowned. "From indications I'll soon have company, however."

"Indeed, is there talk of a divorce here?" She inclined her head in the host's direction.

Merkle retorted acridly: "My dear child, don't try to act the ingenue. You're in the same show as Miss Lynn, and you must know what's going on. This sort of thing can't continue indefinitely, for Mrs. Hammon is very much alive, to say nothing of her daughters. Let's be natural, at least. I haven't slept lately, and I'm not patient enough to be polite."

"It's a bargain. I'll try to be as disagreeable as you are," said Lorelei; and Merkle signified his prompt acquiescence. He lit a huge monogrammed cigarette, pushed aside his hors d'oeuvres, and reluctantly turned down his array of wineglasses one by one.

"Can't eat, can't drink, can't sleep," he grumbled. "Stewed prunes and rice for my portion. Waiter, bring me a bottle of vichy, and when it's gone bring me another."

The diners had arranged themselves by now; the supper had begun. A bohemian spirit prevailed; the ardor of the men, lashed on by laughter, coquetry and smiles, rose quickly; wine flowed, and a general intemperance began. Introductions were no longer necessary; the talk flew back and forth along the rim of the rose-strewn semicircle.

Lorelei turned from the man on her left, who had regaled her with an endless story, the point of which had sent the teller in hiccupps of laughter, and said to John Merkle:

"I'm glad I'm with you tonight. I don't like drinking men."

Lorelei had arrived at the point where further advancement depended upon study and hard work; but, since these formed no part of the family program, she remained idle. Proficiency in stagecraft of any sort comes only at the expense of penance, and this girl was being groomed solely for matrimony.

With the support of the family entirely upon her shoulders, she had been driven to many shifts in order to stretch her salary to livable proportions. Peter was a total burden, and Jim either refused or was unable to contribute toward the common fund, while the mother devoted her time almost solely to managing Lorelei's affairs. Presents were showered upon the girl, and these Mrs. Knight converted into cash. Conspicuous stage characters are always welcome at the prominent cafes; hence Lorelei never had to pay for food or drink when alone, and when escorted she received a commission on the money spent. She was well paid for posing; advertisements of toilet articles, face creams, dentifrices, yielded something. In the commercial exploitation of her daughter Mrs. Knight developed something like genius. But of all the so-called "grafts" open to handsome girls in her business the quickest and best returns came from prodigal entertainers like Jarvis Hammon.

As Lorelei and her companion left their taxicabs and entered Proctor's hotel, shortly before midnight, they were met by a head waiter and shown into an ornate ivory-and-gold elevator, which lifted them noiselessly to an upper floor. They made their exit into a deep-carpeted hall, at the end of which two splendid creatures in the panoply of German field marshals stood guard over one of the smaller banquet rooms.

Hammon himself greeted the girls when they had surrendered their wraps, and, after his introduction to Lorelei, engaged Lillas in earnest conversation.

Lorelei watched him curiously. She saw a powerfully built gray-haired man, whose vigor age had not impaired. In face he was perhaps fifty years old, in body he was much less. He had a bold, incisive manner that was compelling and stamped him as a big man in more ways than one. Playfully he pinched Lillas' cheek, then turned with a smile to say:

"You'll pardon us for whispering, won't you, Miss Knight? You see, Lillas got up this little party, and I've been waiting to consult her about some of the details. Awfully good of you to come. I hope you'll find my friends agreeable and enjoy yourself."

Perhaps twenty men in evening dress and as many elaborately gowned young women were gossiping and smoking as the last comers appeared. Someone raised a vigorous complaint at the host's tardiness, but Hammon laughed a rejoinder, then gave a signal, whereupon folding doors at the end of the room were thrown back, and those nearest the banquet hall moved toward it.

Hammon was introducing two of his friends—one a languid, middle-aged man, the other a large-featured person with a rumbling voice. The former dropped his cigarette and bowed courteously. His appearance as he faced Lorelei was prepossessing, and she breathed a thanksgiving as she took his arm.

Hammon clapped the other gentleman upon the shoulder, crying: "Hannibal, I saw your supper partner flirting with 'Handsome Dan' Avery. Better find her quick."

Lorelei recognized the deep-voiced man as Hannibal C. Wharton, one of the dominant figures in the Steel syndicate; she knew him instantly from his newspaper pictures. The man beside her, however, was a stranger, and she raised her eyes to his with some curiosity. He was studying her with manifest admiration, despite the fact that his lean features were cast in a sardonic mold.

"It is a pleasure to meet a celebrity like you, Miss Knight," he murmured.

As they entered the banquet hall she gave a little cry of pleasure, for it was evident that Hammon, noted as he was for lavish expenditure, had outdone himself this time. The whole room had been transformed into a bower of roses, great climbing bushes, heavy with blooms. The table, a horseshoe of silver and white, of glittering plate and sparkling cut glass, faced a rustic stage which occupied one end of the room; occupying the inner arc of the half-circle was a wide but shallow stone fountain, upon the surface of which floated large-leaved Egyptian pond lilies. Fat-bellied goldfish with filmy fins, and tails like iridescent wedding trains, propelled themselves indolently about.

But the surprising feature of the decorating scheme was not apparent at first glance. Through the bewildering riot of greenery had been woven an almost invisible netting, and the space behind formed a prison for birds and butterflies. Disturbed by the commotion, the feathered creatures twittered and fluttered against the netting in a panic. As for the butterflies, no artificial light could deceive them, and they clung with closed wings to leaves and branches, only now and then displaying their full glory in a sleepy protest.

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"That's what the Romans did, isn't it?"

"I suppose you know she's making a fool of him? I suppose you realize what it means when a woman of her stamp gets a man with money in her power? You must know all there is to know from the outside; it occurred ago, and Bob hasn't changed a whit. I think he's a menace to society."

Wharton laughed, but his reply was lost in the clamorous demand for an encore by Miss Lynn.

"No, why did you say that?" Lorelei asked, quickly. "and why did you say it in that peculiar tone if she and I were friends?"

The man leaned closer, saying in a voice that did not carry above the clamor:

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The man leaned closer, saying in a voice that did not carry above the clamor:

"A gold safety razor—evidently a warning not to play with edged tools. I wonder if Miss Lynn bought one for Jarvis?"

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