

# 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 charming daughter, Lorelei. A well-known critic interviews Lorelei, Knight, now stage beauty with Bergman's Revue for a special article. Her coin-tossing mother outlines Lorelei's ambitions, but Blossom, 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.

A few years ago New York city—the whole country in fact—was deeply stirred by a series of sensational murders and a consequent shaking up in the police department. For one of these murders four gunmen and a police officer went to the electric chair. Here is related the details of the kind of dirty work some of the gangsters and their political friends accomplish in the metropolis.

### CHAPTER VI—Continued.

The Judge had enjoyed the scene. He chuckled; he clicked his loose front teeth like castanets. Bob turned at the sound and regarded him with benign interest, his attention riveted upon the old man's dental infirmity. "You're quite a comedian," Regan wheezed.

"Click 'em again," said Bob, pleasantly. "Wonderful! Age has its compensations. Play 'Home, Sweet Home' when you get 'em tuned up. Or perhaps they are for sale?" Lorelei secured her number and was surprised to recognize her brother's voice. She made herself known, to Jim's equal amazement, and then inquired:

"Is Max there?" "Sure. He's outside in the automobile."

"Call him, please." "What do you want of him? How'd you know I was here?"

"Never mind. Call him quickly." At last Melcher's voice came over the wire, and Lorelei recited the message. There was a moment of silence, then she explained how she came to be talking instead of Lillas.

He thanked her, and she heard him muttering as he hung up. She turned to find her annoyances nodding with satisfaction.

"Splendid! I thank you; my father thanks you; my family thanks you. Now where would you like to dine?"

"How can a person get rid of you?" she inquired stiffly.

"I'm sure I don't know—it isn't being done. But I'll try to think. Wear your prettiest gown, won't you? For I intend to entangle all the other fellows."

She turned with a shrug of mingled annoyance and amusement, and he called after her:

"The Judge's teeth will entertain me till you come. I'll be waiting." Miss Lynn, as she dressed after the performance, was still in an evil temper; but she thanked her roommate for aiding her; then, as if some explanation were due, she added, "That note was from Jarvis."

"You puzzle me, Lillas," Lorelei told her, slowly. "I don't think you care for him at all."

Lillas laughed. "Why do you think that? I adore him, but we had an engagement and he broke it. Men are all selfish; the bigger they are the more selfish they become. They never do anything you don't make them."

"He can't sacrifice his business for you."

"Sacrifice! It's women who sacrifice themselves. Do you suppose any of those men we met last night would sacrifice himself for anything or anybody? Not much. They are the strong and the mighty. They got rich through robbery, and they're in the habit of taking whatever they want. They made their money out of the blood and suffering of thousands of poor people. That's what it is—blood money."

"Is that why you're planning to blackmail it out of him?"

Lillas paused in her dressing and turned slowly, brows lifted. Her dark eyes met the blue ones unwaveringly.

"Blackmail? What are you talking about?" Mrs. Croft went pale, and retired swiftly but noiselessly into the lavatory, closing the door behind her.

"What did Max tell you over the 'phone?" asked Lillas, sharply.

"Nothing."

"Then where did you get—that? From Jim?"

"Jim's pretty bad, I imagine, but he keeps his badness to himself. No, I've overheard you and Max talking."

"Nonsense. We've never mentioned such a thing. The idea is absurd. I get mad at Jarvis—he's enough to madden anybody—perhaps I'm jealous, but blackmail! Why, you're out of your head."

Lorelei delayed her toilet purposely, and finally dismissed Croft. When quiet had finally descended she opened her door cautiously and peered out. Robert Wharton sat on the top step of the stairway near at hand, but his head rested against the wall, and he slept. Beside him were his high hat, his gloves and his stick. As Lorelei, with skirts carefully gathered, tiptoed past him she saw suspended upon his gleaming white shirt bosom what at first glance resembled a foreign decoration of some sort, but proved to be Mr. Regan's false teeth. They were suspended by a ribbon that had once done duty in the costume of a cory-

phoe; they rose and fell to the young man's gentle breath's.

Lorelei toyed with Merkle on the following day, and about the close of the show that night his card was brought up to her dressing room. A moment later Robert Wharton's followed, together with a tremendous box of long-stemmed roses. She went down a trifle apprehensively, for by this time the current tales of Bob's drunken freaks had given her cause to think somewhat seriously, and she feared an unpleasant encounter. More than once she had witnessed quarrels in the alleyway behind the Circuit, where piteous youths of Wharton's caliber were frequent visitors.

But Mr. Merkle relieved her mind by saying, "I sent Bob away on a pretext, although he swore you had an engagement with him."

"I'm glad you did. I left him asleep outside my dressing room last night, and I almost hoped he'd caught pneumonia."

Beside the curb a heavy touring car was purring, and into this Merkle helped his companion. "I'm not up on the etiquette of this sort of thing," he explained, "but I presume the proper procedure is supper. Where shall it be—Sherry's?"

Lorelei laughed. "You are inexperienced. The Johns never eat on Fifth avenue, the lights are too dim. But why supper? You can't eat."

"A Welsh rabbit would be the death of me; lobsters are poison," she confessed; "but I've read that chorus girls are omnivorous animals and seek their prey at midnight."

"Most of them would prefer bread and milk; anyhow, I would. But I'm not hungry, so let's ride—we can talk better, and you're not the sort of man to be seen in public with one of Bergman's show-girls."

The banker acquiesced with alacrity. To his driver he said, "Take the Long Island road."

The machine glided into noiseless motion.

"Why do you choose the Long Island road?" asked Lorelei.

"It's pleasant," responded Merkle. "I ride nearly every night, and I like the country. You see, I can't sleep unless I'm in motion. I get most of my rest in a car; there's something about the movement that soothes me."

"How funny!" "Peculiar, perhaps, but scarcely humorous. I'd be dead or insane without it."

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"You said over the 'phone that you had learned something."

"I have. I believe there is an effort on foot to get some of Mr. Hammon's money dishonestly. I have a reason for wishing to prevent it."

"I knew I wasn't mistaken in you," smiled Merkle.

"Oh, don't attribute my actions to any high moral motives! I'm getting a little rusty on right and wrong. Personally, I have no sympathy with Mr. Hammon, and I don't imagine he acquired all of his tremendous fortune in a perfectly honorable way. Besides, he's a married man."

"It isn't alone Jarvis or his family or their money that is concerned," Merkle said, gravely. "Great financial institutions sometimes rest on foundations as slight as one man's personality—one man's reputation for moral integrity. A breath of suspicion of any sort at the wrong time may bring on a crash involving innocent people."

"Hammon at this moment carries a tremendous top-heavy burden of responsibilities; his death would be no more disastrous than a scandal that would tend to destroy public confidence in him as a man."

"Doesn't he know that himself?" "Perhaps. But his infatuation overtook him at an age when a man is a fool. Young men are always objects of suspicion in the financial world, for their emotions are unruly; but when old men fall in love they are superlatively heedless of the consequences. I promised to tell you something about Jarvis, and I will, since you spoke of his married life. From the time he could walk he never knew anything, never heard anything except steel. He became a rolling-mill superintendent almost before he was of age. They say he never did less than two men's work, and often more; but he could make others work too, and there lay the secret of his success. His mill held the tonnage record for years."

"When the corporation was formed he played a big part in the deal and got a big slice of the profits. He went into other things than steel, and he prospered. He never failed at anything. Jarvis had no vices and but one hobby—at least his vices were neutral, for he had never taken time to acquire the positive kind. His hobby was Napoleon Bonaparte. He read everything there was to read about Napoleon; he studied his life and patterned his own on similar lines. Do I bore you, Miss Knight?"

"No; go on. I'm tremendously interested."

"Well, naturally, Hammon began to consider himself another Napoleon, and his accomplishments were in a way quite as wonderful. He even confided to me once that his idol surpassed him in only one respect—namely, the power to relax. Jarvis had never taken time for relaxation, and he was beginning to wear out; and as he deliberately set about learning to play. The emperor of France, so history tells us, took his greatest pleasure in the company of women; therefore Hammon sought women. He doesn't know the taste of defeat, so the result was foredoomed."

"But surely he thought something of his family," protested Lorelei. "Didn't he consider them?"

"I fancy he wasn't well acquainted with his family. I'm sure he never came to any home life, as we understand it. He lived with a rich old woman who bore his name but scarcely knew him; his daughters were grown women whom he saw on rare occasions and whose extravagant whims he gratified without question. But there was little real intimacy, little sympathy. This was his first taste of youth. But—he was not Napoleon. As you've noticed, he's quite mad on the Lynn woman. He's no longer himself. He has been drugged by her charms, and—now he's paying the price. I wanted you to know the story before we went any further. Now tell me what you have learned."

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Knight; but I'll have to send for another car," apologized Merkle.

"Is this splendid machine ruined?" He shrugged. "That's the curse of these roads. Somebody is always driving recklessly. Lorelei smiled at memory of the miles they had covered so swiftly; but she saw that he was serious and in a sour temper. "One risks his life on the whim of some drunken idiot the moment he enters a motor car. Now for a telephone."

A terse question to his man served to fix their location.

"We're not far from the Chateau," Merkle interpreted the answer. "That place is always open, so if you don't mind the walk we'll go ahead. It will take an hour to get one of my other machines, but meanwhile we can have a bite to eat." At her cheerful acceptance his tone changed.

"You're all right. Some women would be hysterical after such a shake-up. I swear, I think I feel more than you. If you were a man I'd like to have you for a chum."

The Chateau was a quasi-roadhouse, unsurpassed by any city restaurant, and, being within an hour's run by motor, it received a liberal patronage. Tips were large at the Chateau; its hospitality was famous among those who could afford the extravagance of midnight entertainment; and yet it was a quiet place. No echo of what occurred within its walls ever reached the outside world. Sea-food, waffles, and discretion were its recognized specialties, and people came for miles—mainly in pairs—to enjoy them.

As the pedestrians neared the avenue of maples leading up to the house they espied in the road ahead of them first the dull red glow of a tail light, then a dusty license plate.

"They got us into a private room, then took a flashlight."

the waiting automobile. One of Jim's companions called his name sharply. "Will you take me home?" his sister implored.

"Can't do it. I'll see you later, and you, too, Merkle." His last words, delivered as he swung himself upon the running board of the car, sounded like a threat; a moment later, and the machine had disappeared into the night.

"Jim—m! Your brother has a suspicious mind," Merkle said. "I hope he won't make you any trouble."

"He can't make trouble for me," Lorelei's emphasis on the last word made her meaning clear; her companion shrugged.

"Then there's no harm done, I assure you."

They turned in upon the driveway, walking silently, then as they neared the Chateau they became aware of an unusual commotion in progress there. Men were running from stable to garage, others were scouring the grounds; from the open door came a voice pitched high in anger. The speaker was evidently beside himself with wrath. He was shouting orders to scurrying attendants, and abusing the manager, who hovered near him in a frantic but futile effort at pacification.

The enraged person proved to be Jarvis Hammon. He was hatless, purple-faced, shaken with combative fury. At first the two newcomers thought he was dangerously drunk, but, as they mounted to the tiled terrace which served as an outdoor eating place they saw their mistake. Recognizing Merkle, Hammon's manner changed instantly.

"John!" he cried. "By God! you're just in time."

"What's happened?" "Blackmail, or worse, I hardly know, myself. These ruffians put up something on me—they're all in it, even the manager."

The latter, a sleek Frenchman with ferocious mustaches and frightened eyes, wrung his hands in supplication.

"M'sieu 'Ammon," he bleated, "you ruin me. Such accusation is terrible. But wait. Calmness. The man will be caught."

"Caught!" roared the steel magnate. "You know who he is. Give him to me." A uniformed doorman appeared with a smoking lantern in his hand, and Hammon wheeled upon him.

"Well? Did you find him?" "We can't find nobody. There was a car outside the grounds, but it's gone now."

"Will you tell Merkle interposed?" "me what has happened?" "It is terrible, incredible, M'sieu," wailed the manager.

"Same old story, John. I came out here for a quiet supper with a lady. I've been coming here regularly. They got us into a private room, then took a flashlight, and—there you are. I realized what had occurred, but he'd

quickly. I dare say Miss Lynn herself doesn't know who is behind him."

"Why don't you warn Mr. Hammon at once?" Merkle rolled his head loosely. "You don't know the man. He would laugh at the idea of a plot against him."

Merkle dozed again, half buried in the cushions. They had passed Jamaica, but it was not until it had swept into the Motor parkway that the chauffeur let the machine out. Over the deserted plains it tore, cometlike, a meteor preceded by a streamer of light. The causeway leaped into view and vanished beneath the wheels, like a tremendous ribbon whirling upon spoils. Merkle lay back inertly, looting and swaying to the side-thrust of the cushions, but Lorelei found her fists clenched and her muscles hard with the nervous strain. Finally she pushed the shield forward, and, leaning over the front seat, stared at the tiny dash-light. The finger of the speedometer oscillated gaily over the figure "60," and she dropped back with a long tinge. They had been running thus for a long time.

Merkle roused to say, "Is this too fast for you, Miss Knight?" She laughed nervously. "N-no. I'm sorry I woke you."

Merkle inquired the time of his chauffeur, then directed him to turn homeward along the North shore.

"I shan't be selfish and keep you out any longer, Miss Knight," he said. "If you don't mind, I'll doze on the way in, and try to figure out the next move in this Hammon affair."

The return trip was another hurtling rush through the night. In a silence broken only by Merkle's demand for more speed whenever the machine slackened its labor. The miles wheeled past; the Sound lay to the right.

They were sweeping over a rolling North shore road when suddenly out of blackness ahead blazed two blinding headlights. With startling abruptness they appeared over the crest of a rise; Merkle's driver swung to the right. The strange car held to its course: there was a blast of horns, a dazzling instant of intense illumination, then a crash as the instant mid-guards met.

Merkle's car seemed to leap into the air; there was a report of an exploding tire; the automobile was bucking and bumping, as if the pavement had been turned into a corduroy road; then it came to a pause, half in the ditch. The other car held to its course, and whizzed onward, leaving in its wake a drunken shout of mockery and defiance.

"Narrow shave, that. I wonder we weren't all killed," Merkle eyed the car's crumpled mud-guard and running board, then directed his driver to ascertain the extent of the damage. The motor was still throbbing, but a brief examination disclosed a broken steering knuckle and a bent axle in addition to the injured wheel.

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"There's luck," Merkle ejaculated. "I'll rent this car."

In the gloom several figures were standing, facing in the direction of the Chateau, and when Merkle spoke they wheeled as if startled.

"No, you can't hire this machine. What do you think this is, a cabstand?" answered a gruff voice.

"Jim?" cried Lorelei, and ran forward. Her breathless amazement at the meeting was no greater than her brother's. "Sis! What the devil are you doing here?" he managed to say. One of the men who had been kneeling over a case of some sort, dimly outlined in the radiance of a side light, rose and placed his burden in the tonneau.

"I'm ready," he announced. Young Knight showed some nervousness and apprehension—emotions which his companion, judging by their alert watchfulness, fully shared. Jim seized his sister by the arm and led her aside.

"How the deuce did you get here—and who is this guy?" He jerked his head toward Merkle.

Lorelei introduced her companion and made known the cause of their present plight.

"Humph!" grunted Jim. "What d'you suppose ma'll say to this—you out all night with a man?"

"What are you doing? Who are those people?" she retorted. "Never mind. But say—I don't like the looks of this affair."

For a second time Merkle appealed to Jim. "If you can't take your sister home I'll have to telephone for another car."

Jim's tone was disagreeable as he replied. "You two don't look as if you'd been wrecked. Where's your driver?" Merkle's fist clenched; he muttered something, at which Jim laughed harshly.

"Now don't get sore," said the latter; "I'm not going to make trouble, only I want to know where you've been."

A bareheaded man came running across the lawn and dung himself into a crash as the instant mid-guards met.

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skipped. Everybody's skipped, photographer and all. Nobody knows anything. Blameless bunch of idiots I ever saw." He ground his teeth.

Lorelei, who had remained in the background, turned suddenly sick at memory of that mysterious party at the gate; she understood now the significance of the man with the box and of the fleeing figure that had come through the darkness.

The terrified manager continued his heartbroken lament, and Hammon seemed about to destroy him when Merkle drew the latter aside, speaking in an undertone.

Hammon listened briefly, then broke out: "Nonsense. I'd stake my life on her. Why, she's prostrated. It's either pure blackmail, or it's my wife's work. She's had detectives on her for some time," Merkle murmured something more. "Oh, come now! I know what I'm talking about, and I won't stand for that," cried Hammon.

Merkle shrugged; his next words were audible, and they were both sharp and incisive.

"The harm's done. They got away clean. Now we've got to kill the story and kill it quick in case they intend it for the papers."

"My God! Newspapers—at this time," groaned the other. "It couldn't be worse."

"Right. We must move fast. Is your car here?"

"Yes." "Set it. We'll go in with you. I had an accident to mine."

"You'll see for yourself you're wrong—about the other." Hammon jerked his head meaningfully toward the house, then strode away to order his motor.

Merkle favored his young companion with a wintry smile.

"It seems we're too late." Lorelei nodded silently. "Don't tell him who spoke to us there. Not yet, at least. I—can't