

# 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.

### CHAPTER XXV—Continued.

He did struggle half-heartedly against his first drink, but after he had taken it and after other drinks had gone the way of the first, he met a number of people whom he liked and to whom he was inspired to show his liking, and, strange to say, the more he drank the more of such friends he discovered. By late afternoon he was in a fantastically jubilant mood, and, seizing Kurtz, he bore him across the way to Delmonico's.

Now, Kurtz was worried and therefore tolerant. He had grown to like and to understand his young associate very well indeed, and something about Bob's riotous disposition to gladness awoke a response in the little tailor.

It was that expansive and expensive hour of the afternoon when business worries are dropped and before social cares are shouldered. It was cocktail time along the avenue, the hour when spears are born and engagements broken, and as it lengthened Wharton celebrated it as in days gone by. His last regret had vanished—he was having a splendid time, when a page called him to a telephone booth.

Adoree's voice greeted him; she was speaking from his own home, and her first words almost sobered him. Something was wrong; Bob was needed quickly; Lorelei was asking for him. For more than an hour they had been vainly trying to locate him. They had succeeded in reaching the doctor, and he was there with a nurse. Adoree's voice broke—Lorelei was frightened and so was the speaker. Bob had better waste no time.

When Bob lurched out of the booth he was white; the noisy group he had left rose in alarm at sight of his stricken face. His legs led him a crooked course out of the cafe, bringing him into collision with chairs and tables and causing him to realize for the first time how far he had allowed himself to go. In a shaking voice he called for a taxi, meanwhile allowing the raw air of the street to cool his head.

The terror of the unknown was upon him. But regrets were unavailing. "Something had gone wrong, and Lorelei needed him. She was calling for him and he was drunk. He would reel up to her bed of pain with bleared eyes, with poisoned lips. How could he kiss her? How could he explain?

The cab swung into the curb, and he scrambled out, then stumbled blindly up the steps and into the building where he lived.

Adoree met him at his own door. Wharton's impression was vague; he saw little more than the tragic widening of the girl's eyes as she recognized his condition.

"Am I as bad as that?" he stammered. "Do you think she'll notice it?" "Oh, Bob!" Adoree cried, in a stricken voice. "How could you—at this time?"

"You said she wanted me. I couldn't take time."

"Yes! She has been calling for you, but I'm sorry I found you."

A silent-footed figure in a nurse's uniform emerged from the dining room, and her first expression of relief at sight of Bob changed swiftly to a stare of startled wonderment. Bob was not too drunk to read the half-spoken protest on her lips. Then he heard his wife calling him, and realized that somehow she knew of his coming. At the sound of her voice, strangely throaty and hoarse from pain, the strength ran out of his body. The doctor heard him fumbling at the bedroom door and admitted him; then a low, aching cry of disappointment sounded, and Adoree Demorest bowed her head upon her arms.

When Bob groped his way back into the living room his look was ghastly; his face was damp; his eyes were desperate.

"She sent me away," he whispered. "Poor thing!" He winced at Adoree's tone. "God! I heard her when she saw you. I wonder if you realize—"

"Oh, yes," he nodded, slowly. "I don't get drunk all over, like most men. I'm afraid I'll never forget that cry."

He was trembling, and his terror was so pitiful that Adoree laid a compassionate hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't let go, Bob. Hold your thoughts steady and sober up. We must all help."

Darkness found Bob huddled in his chair, fighting for his senses, but as the liquor died in him terrible fancies came to life. A frightened maid began preparations for his dinner, but he ordered her away. Then when she brought him a tray, anger at the thought that his own comfort should be considered of consequence made him refuse to touch it.

At length his inactivity became unbearable, and, feeling the desperate need of some counsel, he telephoned John Merkle. Bob was too deeply agitated to more than note the banker's statement that Mr. and Mrs. Hannibal Wharton were in the city, but, recalling that he had experienced a stab of regret that his mother was not here to comfort Lorelei in the first great crisis of her womanhood. It had been Lorelei's wish that her own mother be kept in ignorance of the truth, and now, therefore, the girl had no one to lean upon except an unpractical stage woman—and the play of it grew as the time crept on.

But Adoree Demorest was wonderful. Despite her inexperience, she was calm, capable, sympathetic, and best of all, her normality afforded a support upon which both the husband and the wife could rest. When she finally made herself ready for the street Bob looked at her with a new respect.

"You're not going to leave us?"

"I must. It's nearly theater-time,"

she told him. "It's one of the penalties of this business that nothing must hold the curtain; but I'll be back the minute the show is over."

"Lorelei needs you."

Adoree nodded; her eyes met Bob's squarely, and he saw that they were wet. Her face was tender, and she appeared very simple and womanly at this moment. Her absurd theatricalism was gone; she was a natural, unaffected young woman.

"I wish I could do something to help," wearily continued Bob, but Adoree shook her head so violently that the barbaric beaded festoon beneath her chin clicked and rattled.

"She knows you're close by; that's enough. This is a poor time to preach, but—it seems to me if you've got a bit of real manhood in you, Bob, you'll never drink again. The shock of seeing you like this—when she needed you—didn't help her any."

"I know! I know!" The words were wrung from him like a groan. "But the thing is bigger and stronger than I am. It takes both of us together to fight it. If she should—leave me, I'd never pull through and—I wouldn't want to."

Never until she left Lorelei's house and turned toward the white lights of Broadway did Adoree Demorest fully realize whether her theatrical career had carried her. Adoree knew herself to be pure. But the world considered her evil, and evil in its eyes she would remain. At this moment she would gladly have changed places with that other girl whose life hung in the scales.

John Merkle had never lost interest in Lorelei, nor forgotten her refusal of his well-meant offer of assistance. It pleased him to read into her character beauties and nobilities of which she was utterly unconscious if not actually devoid. Soon after his talk with Bob he telephoned Hannibal Wharton, making known the situation in the most disagreeable and biting manner of which he was capable. Strange to say, Wharton heard him through, then thanked him before ringing off.

When Hannibal had repeated the news to his wife, she moved slowly to a window and stood there staring down into the glittering chasm of Fifth avenue. Bob's mother was a frail, erect, impassive woman, weary and saddened with the weight of her husband's millions. There had been a time when society knew her, but of late years she saw few people, and her name was seldom mentioned except in connection with her benefactions. Hannibal Wharton was serenely conscious of her complete accord with his every action, and in reporting Merkle's conversation he spoke musingly, as a man speaks to himself.

"John loves to be caustic; he likes to vocalize his dyspepsia," the old man muttered. Mrs. Wharton did not stir, there was something uncompromising in the rigid lines of her back and in her stiffly poised head. "People of her kind always have children," he continued, "and that's what I told Bob. I told him he was laying up trouble for himself."

"Bob had more to him than we thought," irrelevantly murmured the mother.

"More than we thought?" Hannibal shook his head. "Not more than I thought. I knew he had it in him; you were the one."

"No, no! We both doubted. Perhaps this girl read him."

"Sure she read him!" snorted the father. "She read his bank book. But I fooled her."

"Do you remember when Bob was born?" The doctors thought—

"Of course I remember!" her husband broke in. "Those doctors said you'd never come through it."

"Yes! I wasn't strong."

"But you did. I was with you. I fought for you. I wouldn't let you die."

"She sent me away," he whispered. "Poor thing!" He winced at Adoree's tone. "God! I heard her when she saw you. I wonder if you realize—"

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There was a silence, then Hannibal looked up to find his wife standing over him, with face strangely humble. Her eyes were appealing, her frail figure was shaking wretchedly.

"My dear!" he cried, rising.

"I can't keep it up, Hannibal. I can't pretend any longer. It's Bob's baby and it's ours—"

Disregarding his denial, she ran on, swiftly: "You can't understand, but I'm lonely. Hannibal, terribly lonely and sad. Bob grew up and went away, and all we had left was money. The dollars piled up; year by year they grew heavier and heavier until they squeezed our lives dry and crowded out everything. They even crowded out our son—and spoiled him. They made you into a stony man; they came between me and the people and the things I loved; they walled me off from the world. My life is empty—empty. I want to mother something."

"How can you say—"

"Oh, you know it as well as I do. A flush wavered in the speaker's cheeks, then fled, leaving her white and weary. "You, of all men, must understand. I'm notorious. I'm a painted woman, a wicked woman—the wickedest woman in the land—and that reputation will live in spite of anything I can do." She began to cry now in a way strange to Pope's experience.

Pope's habitual restraint all at once gave way. "Nonsense!" he exploded. "The thing that counts is what you are, not what you seem to be. I know the truth."

Now there was nothing sufficiently significant about these words to bring a light of wonderment and gladness to the girl's face, but her tears ceased as abruptly as they had commenced, and noting the slowly growing radiance of her expression, Campbell was stricken dumb with fright at the possible consequences of temerity. The knowledge of his shortcomings robbed him of confidence and helped to confuse him.

Adoree rose. For a moment she stood looking at him with a peculiar, tender smile, then took him by the lapels of his shapeless coat and drew his thin face down to hers.

"I'm not going to let you back out," she declared, firmly. "You asked me, didn't you?"

"Adoree! No, no! Think what you are doing!" he cried, sharply.

But she continued to smile up into his eyes with a gladness that intoxicated him.

She snuggled closer to him, murmuring, cooily: "I don't want to think when we're too old to talk. Now, I just want to love you as hard as you have been loving me for the last six months."

To all young fathers there comes a certain readjustment of values. To Bob, who had always led a selfish, thoughtless existence, it was at first bewildering to discover that his place at the head of his household had been usurped by another. Heretofore he had always been of supreme domestic importance, but now the order of things was completely reversed, if not hopelessly jumbled. First in consequence came this new person, tiny and vastly tyrannical because of his helplessness, then the nurse, an awesome person—a sort of oracle and regent combined—who ruled in the name and stead of the new heir. Lorelei herself occupied no mean station in the new scheme, for at least she shared the confidence of the nurse and the doctor, and ranked above the cook and the housemaid, but not so Bob. Somewhere at the foot of the list he found his own true place.

Now, strange to say, this novel arrangement was extremely agreeable to the deposed ruler. Bob took a shameless delight in doing menial service; to fetch and to carry for all hands filled him with joy. But once outside of the premises he reassessed himself, and his importance grew as gas expands. Before long his intimate friends began to avoid him like a plague. It was his partner, Kurtz, who finally dubbed him "The pestilence that talketh in darkness and the destruction that wasteth out no soundings."

One day, after Bob had acquired sufficient confidence in himself and in the baby to handle it without anxiety to the nurse, he begged permission to show it to the hallman downstairs. He returned greatly elated, explaining that the attendant, who had some impossible number of babies of his own and might therefore be considered an authority, declared this one to be the finest he had ever beheld. Oddly enough, this praise delighted Bob out of all reason. He remained in a state of suppressed excitement all that day, and on the following afternoon he again kidnaped the child for a second exhibition. It seemed that the infant's fame spread rapidly, for soon the tenants of neighboring apartments began to clamor for a sight of it, and Bob was only too eager to gratify them.

Every afternoon he took his son downstairs with him, until finally Lorelei checked him as he was going out.

"Bob, dear," she said, with the faintest shadow of a smile. "I don't think it's good for him to go out so often. Why don't you ask your father and mother to come up?"

Wharton flushed, then he stammered, "I—what makes you—er—think—"

"Why, I guessed it the very first day!" Lorelei's smile saddened. "They needn't see me, you know."

Bob laid the child back in its bed. "But that's just what they want. They want to see you, only I wouldn't let you be bothered. They're perfectly foolish over the kid; mother cries, and father—but just wait." He rushed out of the room, and in a few moments returned with his parents.

Hannibal Wharton was deeply embarrassed, but his wife went straight to Lorelei and, bending over her chair, placed a kiss upon her lips. "There," she said. "When you are stronger I'm going to apologize for the way we've treated you. We're old people. We're selfish and suspicious and unreasonable, but we're not entirely inhuman."

Pope saw the shining eyes suddenly fill and threaten to overflow; instead of the grotesquely overressed and artificial stage favorite he beheld only a yearning woman whose face was softened and glorified as by a vision.

"I didn't know you cared for children."

Adoree shrugged; the heads at her throat clicked barbarously. "Neither did I, but I suppose every woman does if she only knew it. Tonight I began to understand what this ache inside of me means." Her gaze came back and centered upon his face, but it was frightened and panic-stricken. "I've sacrificed my right to children."

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You won't be too hard on us, will you?"

The old lady's eyes were shining, the palms which were clasped over Lorelei's hand were hot and tremulous. The look of hungry yearning that greeted the elder woman's words was ample answer, and with a little choking cry she gathered the weak figure into her arms and thrilled as she felt the amber head upon her breast.

Hannibal trumpeted into his handkerchiefs, then cleared his throat prominently, but Bob forestalled him with a happy laugh. "Don't hold any post-mortems, dad. Lorelei knows everything you intend to say."

"I'm blamed if she does," rumbled the old man, "because I don't know myself. I'm not much on apologies; I can take 'em, but I can't make 'em." His voice rose sternly: "Young lady, the night that baby was born I stood outside this house for hours because I was afraid to come in. And my feet hurt like the devil, too. I wouldn't lose that much sleep for the whole steel trust; but I didn't dare go back to the hotel, for mother was waiting, and I was afraid of her, too. I don't intend to go through another night like that."

Bob's mother turned to her son, saying: "She is benefited, and she is good, too. Anybody can see that. We could love her for what she has done for you, if for nothing else."

"Well, I should say so," proudly vaunted the son. "She took a chance when she didn't care for me, and she made me into a regular fellow. Why, she reformed me from the ground up. I've sworn off every blessed thing I used to do."

"Including drinking?" gruffly queried the father.

"Yes."

Lorelei smiled her slow, reluctant smile at the visitors, and her voice was gentle as she said: "He thinks he has, but it's hard to stop entirely, and you mustn't blame him if he forgets himself occasionally. You see, drinking is mostly a matter of temperament, after all. Some he is doing splendidly, and some day he is—"

They nodded understandingly.

"You'll try to like us, won't you, for Bob's sake?" pleaded the old lady, timidly.

"I intend to love you both very dearly," shyly returned the girl, and, noting the light in Lorelei's face, Bob Wharton was satisfied.

Restraint vanished swiftly under the old couple's evident determination to make amends, but after they had done Lorelei became so pensive that Bob said, anxiously, "I hope you weren't polite to them merely for my sake."

Lorelei shook her head. "No. I was only thinking—Do you realize that none of my own people have been to see me? That I haven't had a single word from any of them?"

Bob stirred uncomfortably; he started to speak, then checked himself as she went on, not without some effort: "I'm going to say something unpleasant, but I think you ought to know it. When they learn that your parents have taken me in and made up with us, they're going to ask me for money. It's a terrible thing to say, but it's true."

"Do you want to see them? Do you want them to see the baby?"

"No!" Lorelei was pale as she made answer. "Not after all that has passed."

Bob heaved a grateful sigh. "I'm glad. They won't trouble you any more."

"Why? What—"

"I've been waiting until you were strong to tell you. I've noticed how their silence hurt you, but—it's my fault that they haven't been here. I sent them away."

"You sent them away?"

"Yes. I fixed them with money and—they're happy at last. There's considerable to tell. Jim got into trouble with the police and finally sent for me. He told me everything and—it wasn't pretty; I'd rather not repeat all he said, but it opened my eyes and showed me why they brought you here, how they put you on the auction block, and how they cried for bids. He told me things you know nothing about and could never guess. When he had finished I thanked God that they had flung you into my arms instead of some other man's. It's a miracle that you weren't sacrificed utterly."

"Where is Jim now?"

"Somewhere in the boundless West. He gave me his promise to reform."

"He never will."

"Of course not, and I don't expect it of him. You see, I know how hard it is to reform."

"But mother and father?"

"No, silly. He's only hungry."

There in the gathering dusk Bob Wharton looked on at a sight that never failed to thrill him strangely. In her wife's face was a beautiful content, and it seemed to him fitting indeed that this country girl who had come to the city in quest of life should end her search thus, with a baby at her breast.

(THE END.)

SMOKERS IN DICKENS' WORKS

Great Novelist Had Many of His Characters Use Tobacco in One Form or Another.

The "cigarettes" mentioned by Dickens in 1857 were "brown paper cigars," an informant writes to the London Chronicle, and were evidently rolled by hand in the fashion not unknown today, though rapidly being superseded by the machine-made article.

In the first chapter of "Little Dorrit," written in 1855, the villain Rigaud in his jail at Marsailles has tobacco brought to him with his rations, and he rolls it "into cigarettes by the aid of little squares of paper which had been brought in with it." The scene, by the way, is dated by Dickens "thirty years ago." Whether the paper was white or brown does not appear, but it seems clear enough that the smokes in question, thus rolled in a prison cell, had more likeness to the modern cigarette than to a cigar, although the novelist sometimes calls them little paper cigars.

"Little Dorrit," I think, adds the correspondent, is the first of the novels in which the word "cigarette" appears, although pipes and cigars are frequently mentioned, usually in the mouths of the morally less admirable characters. Montague Tigg and Chevy Chase both move in an atmosphere in which tobacco is added to frowniness. Rogue Riderhood's rascality is heightened by his use of a pipe, and the depth of Quilp's inhumanity is emphasized by his habit of smoking in the way of what is now called "chain smoking" with cigars, while he swallows boiling rum from a pannikin kept on the fire. Eugene Wrayburn's languid idleness is soiced by cigars, but correct characters, such

"I'm coming to them. My dad came around the day after our baby was born and shook hands. He wanted to stamp right in here and tell you what a fool he had made of himself, but I wouldn't stand for it. Finally, when he saw the kid, he blew up entirely, and right away proposed breaking ground for a jasper palace for the youngster. He wanted to build it in Pittsburgh where he could run in, going to and from business. Mother was just as foolish, too. Well, when I had my little understanding with Jim and learned the whole truth about your people I realized that no matter where we went they would be a constant menace to our happiness unless they were provided for. It struck me that you had made a game fight for happiness, and I couldn't stand for anything to spoil it at the last minute. I went to mother and told her the facts, and she seemed to understand as well as I how you must feel in spite of all they had done, so we shook down the governor for an endowment."

"Bob! What do you mean?" Lorelei faltered in bewilderment.

"We asked him for a hundred thousand dollars and got it."

Lorelei gasped.

"He bellowed like a bull, he spat poison like a cobra, he writhed like a bucket of eels, but we put it over."

"A hundred thousand dollars?" whispered the wife.

"To a penny. And it's in the bank to your credit. But I didn't stop there. Bob's voice hardened. "I went to your

mother and in your name I promised her the income from it so long, and only so long, as she and Peter stayed away from you. She accepted—rather greedily, I thought—and they have gone back to Vale. They have your old house, and I have their promise never to see you except upon your invitation. Of course you can go to them whenever you wish, but—they're happy and I think we will be happier with them in Vale than in New York. I hope you don't object to my arrangement."

There was a long silence, then Lorelei sighed. "You are a very good man, Bob. It was my dream to do something of this sort, but I could never have done it so well."

Her husband bent and kissed her tenderly. "It wasn't all my doings; I had help. And you mustn't feel sad, for something tells me you're going to learn finally the meaning of a real mother's love."

"Yes—yes!" The answer came dreamily, then as a fretful complaint issued from the crib at her side Lorelei leaned forward and swiftly gathered the baby into her arms.

"Is he sick?" Bob questioned, in alarm.

"No, silly. He's only hungry."

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