

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, now stage beauty with Bergman's Revue, for a special article. Her coin-hunting 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. Merkle and Lorelei have an auto wreck. The blackmailers besmirch her good name.

Do you believe that a young girl, just out of her teens, is justified in leaving home and casting off her parents if they intrigue to get her married to any man, no matter how much of a rouser he is, if only he has wealth to support them?

CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

Looking back upon last night's homeward ride, she was wholly at a loss. In view of Jim's words and of what she had gathered at the theater she had felt sure of Lillas' complete knowledge of the blackmail plot, but Hammon's unwavering faith in the girl and Lillas' own story of her relations with Max Melcher had awakened a doubt. What concerned her far more than the moral complexion of the liaison was her brother's connection with the unlawful scheme of extortion. Jim, she saw, had gone wrong with a vengeance, and the consequences to him troubled her, for in spite of all that he might be or do she cherished a sisterly affection for him. Family ties were very real and very strong to her—strong enough to keep her loyal to her kin even after the demoralizing change in her whole mode of life. The firmest, in fact, the only bond that she had ever known, was that of blood; obedience, faithfulness and affection had been born in her, and she never thought to question their sacredness.

Idling down Fifth avenue, she found herself in front of a fashionable department store. A knot of curious people were gazing at a unique automobile which stood in the line of vehicles along the curb, and she paused to look. The equipage was snow white in color; the chauffeur and a stiff-backed footman were in blood red with white facings on their livery. A tiny mop of a lapdog, imprisoned within the closed body of the car, was barking frenziedly at the throng. Across the doors, in gold letters an inch high, was the name "Adoree Demorest."

As she entered the store Lorelei reflected with some disgust that no visiting rajah, no barbaric potentate—no one, in fact, except a self-advertised musical comedy queen—would so flagrantly defy good taste as to ride in such a vehicle.

She was engaged in her final purchase when a dazzling creature in red and white descended upon her with exclamations of surprise and delight. It was Mademoiselle Demorest herself, and her greeting was so effusive that the stream of shoppers halted in the aisle. She carried the mate to the excitable poodle that defied the curiosity seekers outside.

"Miss Knight! I'm so glad to see you again," she bubbled. "How sweet you look! I hoped we'd meet again; but where have you been? Have you finished your shopping? Then do come and help me match some rose du Barry."

Lorelei felt herself flushing uncomfortably under the stares of the on-lookers, and, glad to escape, she moved away beside the undisturbed cause of all the furore.

Miss Demorest seemed genuinely delighted at this encounter. She clung to her companion, chattering vivaciously; then, when the rose du Barry had been matched, she suggested tea.

"We'll run right over to the Waldorf—my car is outside." But Lorelei declined, explaining lamely that she did not care for public places.

The dancer's expression and tone changed abruptly. "I supposed you were like all the others."

"Well, I'm not. When I'm away from the theater I try to forget it. I—hate the business."

The reply, which came with sincere feeling, widened Lorelei's eyes with uncontrollable surprise.

"Here, too," said Adoree Demorest, quietly. "But I'm not allowed to forget it. Our first meeting made me think you were—out with banners. I was hired on that occasion to be naughty. What do you say to some real tea at my house? Just you and I?"

Lorelei's heart sank at the thought of that gaudy machine outside, but there was an honest appeal in the speaker's eyes, and, moreover, the memory of her obligation rose to prevent her from appearing ungrateful. "I'd be delighted," she faltered, and, gurgling with appreciation, Miss Demorest hurried her toward the nearest exit. In the street, however, Adoree passed, and her next words showed that she was not wanting in womanly intuition.

"I shan't inflict you with a ride in that circus wagon. It's all right for me, but—you're one of the decent kind. If you have a reputation it won't do to parade it in a show case. We'll take a taxi." Lorelei's relief must have been obvious, for Adoree sped swiftly to the corner, then was back again without the dog. "If there's anything more conspicuous than a blonde with a white poodle," she explained, "it's two blondes with two poodles." Then she flung herself into the cab and slammed the door.

"You must think I'm very rude," her guest ventured.

"Nothing of the sort. I know just how you feel." Miss Demorest's smile was a trifle strained. "Only—I'm awfully lonesome, and—I'll take care that nobody sees us."

"Now I know I've been nasty." Lorelei felt her embarrassment growing, for this woman differed entirely from what she had expected. Underneath the dancer's extravagant theatricalism she appeared natural and unaffected. Adoree changed the current of the conversation by saying:

"I hope those bloodhounds get to fighting."

"How—funny!" Lorelei was eying the speaker with undisguised curiosity.

"You're not a Frenchwoman?"

"Agnes Smith is the name. Decent by descent, but an actress by advertising. What's your game?"

"Um—My nose is straight; I don't limp; so I'm an actress by force of feature."

Both girls laughed unaffectedly.

"I like you," said the dancer. "Do you mind if I get out of this cast-iron corset and into a kimono when we get home?"

"Have you a spare one?"

"Dozens; but they're not very clean."

"That's lovely. And let's make the tea weak."

"Oh, I can't drink anything strong! I'm an awful counterfeiter."

"I'm beginning to think so. I—wonder if I'm dreaming."

The girls had much in common; they chattered continuously through the short ride, and when they alighted from the taxicab they disputed over the right to pay for it. When the guest was ushered into Adoree's apartment she received another surprise, for the place was neither elaborate nor showy. It consisted merely of two large, comfortable rooms overlooking a side street lined with monotonous brownstone boarding houses.

A bittered teakettle was set to boil over an absurd alcohol stove that required expert assistance to maintain its equilibrium. Adoree flung out of her finery and donned a Japanese robe, offering another to Lorelei. A plate of limber crackers was unearthed from somewhere, also the disreputable remains of a box of marshmallows;



"You Never Really Believed That King Stuff, Did You?"

and these latter Mademoiselle Demorest toasted on a hatpin.

"You're the most extraordinary person," her guest at length remarked.

"Aren't you going to show me your jewels or—anything like that?"

"You probably have better jewels of your own," earnestly replied Adoree; then she voiced a very tame and womanly oath as a marshmallow dripped into the flames. "Pickles! I spoiled that one."

"But the cabochon rubies are real."

"Sure. So is the 'square toe' who brings 'em and takes 'em away; so is the bond that covers 'em. Lordy, but they are pretty!"

"Then the king didn't give them to you?"

"My dear, I never saw a king—outside of a pinocchio deck. If I lost one of those rubies the Maiden Lane Ely-lack-oo owns them would they?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't know."

fill a mattress. You never really believed that king stuff, did you?"

"Why, yes."

"I had no idea it worked so well." Again Miss Demorest smiled crookedly.

"No wonder you didn't want to go to the Waldorf with me; I wonder you consented to come here."

"Your advance work is great—"

"I knew the public swallowed it; but I supposed the profession knew press stuff when they saw it. I sang and danced for ten years in this country and never got better time than the schmetzen parks and airdomes. I was Agnes Smith then. Somehow I got the price of a ticket to England, and I pulled the air dome stuff that had scored in Little Rock and Michigan City, and it got by somehow. My mother was a Canuck, so I knew some French, and eventually I reached the continent. There I met the Old Nick. You may think the devil is what he looks like on the ham cans; but, in reality he's a little, fat, bald man with a tenor voice, and he eats cloves. His name is Aubrey Lane. He was in Paris selling patent garters at the time. He saw me work at a cabaret and told me I was good, but not good enough. I'd known that for years, so he didn't hurt my feelings. He confessed that he was tired of working and intended to have me make a lot of money for him, but warned me that he had expensive tastes and I'd have to pay well for the privilege. He was right; I did. But here I am in electric lights on Broadway while he is exercising a wheeled chair at Atlantic City."

"He's your manager?"

"He's that very little thing. He offered to make me a star if I'd allow him to hitch his chariot to me—on a share of the gross. There was one trifling sacrifice I had to make in the nature of my personal reputation—so he told me. He began by tying a can to the 'Agnes Smith' and handed me 'Adoree Demorest' instead; then he went to work. He really did work, too, although it nearly killed him, and he's never done anything since. The king fable is a joke on the other side, but New York swallowed it clear up to the sinker, and Aubrey gaffed the Palace Garden management for a three years' contract. Of course, my advertised salary is phony, just like the rubies and the wrecked throne and that gilded bandwagon with the poodles and the stuffed supees on the box. Aubrey owns them all except the rubies, which he rents. I'm billed as the most notorious woman in America, and the shred of reputation I have left wouldn't make a necktie for a goat, whereas in reality I love marshmallows and tea much more than men. But I'm a star, at the head of my own company, and playing to sidewalk prices. Do you think it was a good bargain?"

Lorelei had listened with breathless interest. Now she burst out impulsively:

"You poor dear."

Miss Smith smiled, but her eyes were tragic.

"Sometimes I cry when I think about it. I—cry a good deal," said she. "I didn't realize until too late what it meant, but, you see, I was tired of working, tired of ambition, and I wanted to come home. Thank God, I have no people! I save all the money I can, and when I get enough I'm going to take Agnes Smith out of the moth-balls, dust her off tenderly, and go to raising ducks."

"Ducks? What do you mean?"

"What I say. That has always been my ambition."

"Why not quit now?"

"What's the use? I'm half way through the swamp; the mud is as deep behind as it is in front. But I'm deathly afraid all the time I'll be found out—I'd—rather be notorious than ridiculous. Of course, Aubrey sees to that."

"Are you fond of him?"

Adoree turned up her nose. "He's a little plink rabbit. I don't like any man, and I never have. There's only one I'd really care to meet; his name is Campbell Pope."

"The critic. He is nice."

"The beast. Did you read what he said about me? I'll never rest until I have a lock of his hair that I've plucked myself. I'd love to have his whole scalp—with, say, one ear attached—hanging on my bureau where I could see it every morning when I wake up. Somehow I don't seem to mind the press stuff that Aubrey puts out, but Pope—actually believes what he wrote. And other people will believe it, too. I—I—Gosh! I'm going to cry again."

Lorelei nodded in perfect sympathy; she did not laugh. "I haven't any girl chum; let's be friends," said she.

Adoree had been nibbling at marshmallows as she talked; as she wiped her eyes now she left a smear of powdered sugar on her cheek.

"I'd love to—I'm simply bursting to confide in somebody—but we couldn't go around together."

"Why? I don't care what people think."

"You can't afford to be reckless. We're each playing our own game and chasing the dollar in our own way. The men you met would make life un-

bearable for you if they knew we were pals. Aubrey was right; a girl must either be mighty good or mighty bad in this business—or make people think she is, which amounts to the same thing. You have had easy going because you're known to be straight; but if you ever get into the papers watch what will happen. You'll have to fight. You wouldn't like that kind of fighting."



"What Is—This?"

either, and—I'm not sure you could stand it."

As Lorelei walked homeward that afternoon she felt an unaccustomed warmth in her breast, and realized that she, too, had been very lonely in the city. The certainty that she had made a friend gladdened her heart. She looked forward with a thrill to the morrow when she could see Adoree again.

During her absence Jim had returned and departed; but a note was waiting for her. It had been brought by a messenger, and read:

"Things look bad. I'm afraid we'll be implicated, too. Better see your brother quickly. M."

CHAPTER IX.

Lorelei was not a little mystified by Merkle's cryptic message, for she could imagine no possible way in which she or the writer himself could be connected discreditably with Jarvis Hammon's affair. She gained some light, however, when that evening she read the note to Lillas.

"Why, they're going to blackmail Merkle, too," Lillas exclaimed. "Well, they'd be foolish to let him off, wouldn't they?"

"So they think he'll pay to keep his name out of the papers?"

"Exactly. And he will—for your sake."

"I won't let him."

Lillas was surprised. "Why? He's rich. He wouldn't miss a few thousand."

"You wouldn't allow Mr. Hammon to be robbed, would you?"

"Oh, wouldn't I? If he didn't care enough for me to protect me from scandal I'd want to know it."

"Lillas, you puzzle me," confessed Lorelei, doubtfully. "You say things that make me think you don't care for him at all; then again you seem to be crazy about him. How do you feel? How far would you go with him?"

Lillas laughed airily. "Perhaps I'd go farther with him than for him. He asked me to marry him if his wife gets a divorce; and I agreed. Now that he has come to the point, I'm sorry things happened just as they did. A woman must look out for herself—no man will ever help her. It's worth some notoriety to become Mrs. Jarvis Hammon."

Something in the speaker's words rang false; but just what that something was, Lorelei could not decide.

"Then you'd like to see the story made public?" she queried.

"Naturally."

"I dare say if I loved a man I'd want him at any price, but I—hope I'm not going to be dragged into this matter."

"My dear, you have a family; they can make Merkle do the right thing by you. He could be made to pay, at least, and you'll be sorry if you don't get something out of him. Just wait and see what a difference the story makes with your other men friends."

During the ensuing performance Lorelei pondered her friend's disquieting prophecy; yet she could see no reason for grave apprehension. Publicity of the kind threatened would, of course, be disagreeable; but how it could seriously affect her was not apparent.

Later in the evening Robert Wharton appeared, as usual, and so resentful was he at the deceptions previously practiced upon him that Lorelei with difficulty escaped a scene. At last he

planted himself in the hallway, where he remained throughout the performance—a gloomy, watchful figure. Lorelei came down boldly, dressed for the street, and, since she could not pass the besieger, crossed under the stage, made her way into the orchestra pit, and managed to leave the theater by the front door.

She was waiting when Jim came home, and followed him into his room, where they could talk without disturbing their father. Lorelei made her accusation boldly, prepared for the usual burst of anger, but Jim listened patiently until she paused.

"I knew you had to spill this, so I let you rave," said he. "But it's too late; somebody has been after Hammon for a long time, and he's been got—yes, and got good. Take a flash at the 'Chorus Girl's Bible.' We tossed his sister a copy of a prominent theatrical paper. 'I waited until it came out.'"

Lorelei gasped, for on the front page glared black-typed headlines of the Hammon scandal. John Merkle's name was there, too, and linked with it, her own.

"What is—this?" She ran her eye swiftly down the column.

"Sure. Melcher commenced suit against Hammon this afternoon. Fifty thousand dollars for alienation of Lillas' affections. Joke, eh? He claims there was a common-law marriage and he'll get the coin."

"But Mrs. Hammon?"

"The evidence is in her hands already—dates, places, photographs, everything. She'll win her suit, too."

"Were you by any chance working for Mrs. Hammon?"

Divining his sister's prejudice, Jim lied promptly and convincingly. "Why, Mrs. Hammon, of course. I had a chance to turn a few dollars, and I took it."

"But why did you drag me in? Couldn't you keep me out of it? This is dreadful." As she ran her eye over the article she saw that it was quite in harmony with the general tone and policy of the paper, which catered to the jaded throngs of the Tenderloin. Truth had been cunningly distorted; flippancy, sensationalism and, a salacious double meaning ran through it all.

"What's dreadful about it?" inquired her brother. "That sort of advertising does a show-girl good. You've got to make people talk about you, sis, and this'll bring a gang of high rollers your way. You've been so blamed proper that nobody's interested in you any more."

For a moment Lorelei scrutinized her brother in silence, taken aback at his outrageous philosophy. Jim had changed greatly, she mused; not until very lately had she observed the full measure of the change in him. He was no longer the country boy, the playmate and confidant of her youth, but a man, sophisticated, hard, secretive. He had been thoroughly Manhattanized, she perceived, and he was as foreign to her as a stranger. She shook her head hopelessly.

"You're a strange brother," she said. "I hardly know what to make of you. Has the city killed every decent instinct in you, Jim?"

"Now, don't begin on the Old Home stuff," he replied, testily. "Do you really intend to marry a bunch of coin?"

"That's the program, isn't it? I've been raised for that and nothing else."

"Well, ma can't put it over, so I guess it's up to me." After a moment he added, "Would you accept Merkle?"

Lorelei shivered. "Oh—no! Not Mr. Merkle."

"Humph! You ought to consider the rest of us a little bit. Pa could be cured, ma'd be happy. I could get on my feet. How about Bob Wharton?"

"Let's not talk about it, please. Mr. Wharton is getting nasty, and—I'm beginning to be afraid of him."

"I'll bet you could land him—"

"Please. I—don't want to think about it. I dare say I'll bring myself to marry some rich man some day; but—Merkle—Wharton—"

She shuddered for a second time. "If Mr. Wharton is serious this scandal will scare him off, or else he'll become—just like the others. I could cry. He threatened me tonight; I don't know how I'll manage to avoid him tomorrow night."

"Hm—! He's coming that strong, eh?" was Jim's interested query; but on hearing his sister's account of the young millionaire's determined pursuit he volunteered in his offhand way to assist her.

"I'll come for you myself, and we'll whip over to a cafe for supper."

"You'll save me from him," said Lorelei, with a wan smile, "and I'll know that you are in good company for one evening at least."

"Don't lose any sleep over my habits," he told her, lightly.

As Jim and his mother breakfasted together on the following morning he broached the subject of his recent conversation with Lorelei.

"She's sore about the story," he said. "We had a long talk last night."

"I knew she would be, and I'm not sure it was a good thing."

"We'll drag something out of it if you do your part. Merkle will pay. Don't mention money—nothing but marriage—understand? Outraged motherhood, ruined daughter, blasted career—that's yours. I'll be the brother who's in the position of a father to her. I can threaten, but you mustn't. Goldberg will close for us."

"I don't see why we have to divide with a lawyer, when it's our affair and we can handle it ourselves," his mother complained.

"I tell you it's got to go through the regular channels. This was Melcher's idea, and since I'm in on the Hammon money, Max is entitled to his bit of this. Gee! If she'd only told us she was going out with Merkle we

might have framed something worth while—I don't mind telling you this is a pretty weak case."

"Wouldn't he marry her?"

"Not a chance. In the first place, she wouldn't have him. Bob Wharton is the white hope."

"She hates him, too. Goodness knows what we're going to do with her."

"I think she'll stand for Wharton if we work her right; it's him or nobody. She's getting harder to handle every day, though, and one of these times she'll fall for some rummy. If she ever does lose her head she'll skid for the ditch, and we can kiss ourselves goodby. She'll be as easy to steer as a wild boar by the tail. I guess you're sorry now that you didn't listen to me and let Max handle her before she got wise."

"I wouldn't feel safe with any of that crowd. I'd be terribly afraid." Mrs. Knight shook her head doubtfully.

"Say! She's got you doing it, too. Why, they don't take a chance Goldberg handles the legal end, and his brother is in the legislature. But that's not all; Melcher's partner in his gambling house is Inspector Snell. You can't beat that."

"Just the same, I'm frightened—and this isn't honest. I wish she would listen to Robert Wharton."

James winked meaningfully. "Leave that to me. She's got to Proctor's with me tonight. Maybe he'll join us. But meanwhile we've got Merkle for some quick money if we work him right. I'm off for Goldy's office now. I'll meet you at three."

When Jim appeared, dressed for the street, he gave a bit of parting advice: "Better lay on the hysterics when she wakes up. It'll make it easier for me tonight."

Lorelei found her mother visibly upset by the story in the morning's newspaper.

"You told me you only went to supper with that man," Mrs. Knight cried, tragically. "Instead of that you two were off in the country together all night. Here's the whole thing." She brandished the paper dramatically.

"Well, I told you a fib. But there's no harm done."

"Harm, indeed? You're ruined. I never read anything more disgraceful! I aren't show it to Peter—it would kill him. What ever possessed you, after the way we've watched over you, after the care we've taken of you? It's terrible."

"Why, mother! You're more insulting than that newspaper. The career of a show-girl is something of a joke." Lorelei undertook to laugh, but the attempt failed rather dully.

"Indeed. What will the other men say? You had a character; nobody could say a word against you until now. Do you think any decent man would marry a girl who did a thing like this? Of course, I know you're a good girl, but they don't, and they'll believe absolutely the worst. You've spoiled everything, my dear; I'm completely discouraged." Mrs. Knight began to weep in a weak, heart-broken manner, expecting Lorelei to melt, as usual; but, seeing something in her daughter's expression that warned her not to carry her reproaches too far, she broke out: "You're so hard, so unreasonable. Don't you see I'm frantic with worry? You're all we have, and—the thought of an injury to your prospects nearly kills me. You misunderstand everything I say. I—wish you were safely married and out of danger. I think I could die happy then."

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