

# The AUCTION BLOCK

BY 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 Knight, 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 Melcher, a wealthy dyspeptic. Bob Wharton comes uninvited. Lorelei discovers a blackmail plot against Hammon, in which her brother is involved. Melcher and Lorelei have an auto wreck. The blackmailers besmirch her good name. Lorelei learns her mother is an unscrupulous plotter. She finds in Adeore Demorest a real friend, and finds Bob Wharton is likable. Lorelei leaves her family and goes to live alone.

Greater tragedy stalks into Lorelei's life. She is besmirched by vile men and women urged on by her mother and brother. The memory of one night's experience was a horror burned into her mind for life. Her only friend in this crisis is a drunken profligate, and he makes her ill with his attempted caresses. How she solved one problem, how she was trapped into taking the biggest step of her life is described with vivid detail in this installment.

Lorelei has been taken to a "swift" restaurant by her employer who has designs on the girl. She is badly frightened—and helpless. At this point Bob Wharton appears. She sees in him a protector.

### CHAPTER XII—Continued.

Miss Wyeth tittered; the sophomore with the bristling pompadour uttered a bark of amusement. Meeting Bob's questioning glance, Lorelei seconded the invitation with a nod and a quick look of appeal, whereupon his demeanor changed and he drew a chair between her and Nobel Bergman, forcing the latter to move. His action was pointed, almost rude, but the girl felt a surge of gratitude sweep over her.

There was an interlude of idle chatter, then the orchestra burst into full clamor once more. Much to the chagrin of her escort, Lorelei rose and danced away with the newcomer.

"Why the distress signal?" queried Bob.

"Mr. Bergman has—been drinking." "Rum is poison," he told her, with mock indignation. "He must be a low person."

"He's getting unpleasant." "Shall I take him by the nose and run around the block?"

"You can do me a favor."

He was serious in an instant. "You were nice to me the other night. I'm sorry to see you with this fellow."

"He forced—deceived me into coming, and he's taking advantage of conditions to—be nasty."

Bob missed a step, then apologized. His next words were facetious, but his tone was ugly: "Where do you want the remains sent?"

"Will you wait and see that mine are safely sent home?" She leaned back and her troubled twilight eyes sought him.

"I'll wait, never fear. I've been looking everywhere for you. I wanted to find you, and I didn't want to. I've been to every cafe in town. How in the world did you fall in with the old bell-cow and her calf?"

When Lorelei had explained, he nodded his complete understanding. "She's just the sort to do a thing like that." Wharton ignored Bergman's scowls; he proceeded to monopolize the manager's favorite with an arrogance that secretly delighted her; he displayed the assurance of one reared to selfish exactions, and his rival writhed under it. But Bergman was slow to admit defeat. Dawn was near when the crowd separated and the hostess was driven away, leaving Lorelei at the door of a taxicab in company with two or her admirers. The girl bade them each good night, but Bergman ignored her words, and, stepping boldly in after her, spoke to the driver.

Bob had imbibed with a magnificent disregard of consequences, and as a result he was unsteady on his feet. His hat was tilted back from his brow, his slender stick bent beneath the weight he put upon it.

"Naughty, naughty Nobel!" he chided. "Come out of that cab; you and I journey arm and arm into the purpling east."

"Drive on," cried Bergman, forcing Lorelei back into her seat, as she half rose.

Bob leaned through the open cab window, murmuring thickly: "Nobel, you are drunk. Shocked—nay, grieved—as I am at seeing you thus, I shall take you home."

"Get out, will you?" snapped the manager, undertaking to slam the door. "I'm tired of your insolence. I'll—"

Bergman never finished his sentence, for in his rage he committed a grave blunder—he struck wildly at the flushed face so close to his, and the

next instant was jerked bodily out of his seat. Lorelei uttered a cry of fright, for the whole side of the cab seemed to go with her employer.

There was a brief scuffle, a whirl of flying arms, then Bergman's voice rose in a strangely muffled howl, followed by nasal curses. With a bellow of anguish he suddenly ceased his struggles, and Lorelei saw that Bob was holding him by the nose. It happened to be a large, unhandsome and fleshy member, and, securely grasping it, Bergman's conqueror held him at a painful and humiliating disadvantage.

Bob was panting, but he managed to say, "Come! We will dance for the lady."

A muffled shriek of pain was the answer, but the street was empty save for some grinning chauffeurs, who offered no assistance.

"Be a good fellow. I insist, my dear Nobel."

"Drive on, quickly," Lorelei implored, but the chauffeur cranked his motor reluctantly. A moment passed, then another; he cranked once more. Bergman was sobbing now like a woman.

Bob paused and wheezed: "Bravo! You done noble, Nobel. We've learned some new steps, too, eh? All power of resistance had left the victim, who seemed upon the verge of collapse. 'I say we've learned some new steps; haven't we, Bergy?' He tweaked the distorted member in his grasp, and Bergman's head wagged loosely.

"Oh, please—please—" Lorelei cried, tremulously. "Don't—"

"Canter for the kind lady," Wharton insisted. Bergman capered awkwardly.

"Mr. Wharton! Bob—" Lorelei's agonized entreaty brought her admirer to the cab door, but he fetched his prisoner in tow. "Let him go or—we'll be arrested."

"I'll let go if you insist. But it's a grand nose. I—love it. Never was there such a nose."

Bergman, with a desperate wench, regained his freedom and staggered away with his face in his hands.

"It—actually stretched," said Bob, as he regretfully watched his victim. "I dare say I'll never find another nose like it."

Lorelei's cab got under way at last, but barely in time, for a crowd was assembling. Not until she was safely inside her little apartment, with the chain on the door, did she surrender; then she burst into a trembling, choking fit of laughter. But her estimate of Wharton had risen, and for the first time he seemed not entirely bad.

### CHAPTER XIII.

Jimmy Knight felt his sister's desertion quite as keenly as did his mother and father, for his schemes, though inchoate, were ambitious, and his heart was set upon them. Lorelei's obstinacy was exasperating—a woman's unaccountable freakishness.

He confided his disappointment to Max Melcher. "It's pretty tough," complained Jimmy. "I had Melcher going, but she crabbed it. Then just as



"Canter for the Kind Lady."

that boob Wharton was getting daffier over her every day she gets her back up and the whole thing is cold."

"You mean it's cold so far as you're concerned," Melcher judiciously amended.

"Sure. She's sore on me, and the whole family."

"Then this is just the time to marry her off. New York is a mighty lonesome place for a girl like her. Suppose I take a hand."

"All right."

"Will you declare me in?"

"Certainly."

chance. But you can't throw me, understand? You try a cross and—the cold-meat wagon for yours. I'll have you slugged at the morgue."

Jimmy's reply left no doubt of the genuineness of his fears, if not of his intentions. Strange stories were told in the Tenderloin—tales of treachery punished and ingratitude revenged. Jimmy knew several young men who appeared out of the East side at Melcher's signal. They were inconspicuous fellows, who bore fanciful dime-novel names—and no rustler's stronghold of the old-time western cattle country ever boasted more formidable outlaws than they. Jim knew these men well; he had no wish to know them worse.

"I can't promise anything definite when she's sore on me," he declared. "He's about ready to ask her—she's the one to fix. She hates men, though, and that Melker story made her crazy."

Melcher pondered for several moments. "I think I know Lorelei better than you do," he stated, deliberately, "and I believe we can pull this off, provided Wharton really wants to marry her. Anyhow, he's so rich it's worth the odds, and she's just the sort to fall for it. Meanwhile I want it understood with your mother that I share in what comes her way."

"I'll fix that," promised Jim.

He found it, in fact, no very difficult task to regain at least a part of his sister's lost esteem, though the process took time. He went about it with the lazy, catlike patience of his kind, behaved himself, kept his mouth shut, and assumed just enough of an injured air to be plausible. He enlisted the aid of his mother and of Lillas Lynn, and meanwhile made himself as agreeable as possible to Robert Wharton.

Melcher was as good as his word, and there shortly appeared in the Dispatch an unpleasant rehash of the former story. It was published in connection with the Hammon divorce proceedings, news of which was exciting comment, and it further smirched Lorelei's reputation. Jim was appropriately indignant, but helpless, and Mrs. Knight unwearily blamed everything upon her daughter's desertion of the family circle, predicting more evil to follow unless Lorelei came home at once. She also dwelt upon the fact that Peter was steadily failing and was in immediate need of both medical and surgical attention. The doctor had pronounced sentence, prescribing a total change of living and a treatment by foreign specialists.

In some unaccountable way the story of Nobel Bergman's humiliation became public and afforded the basis for a newspaper article that brought him to Lorelei's dressing room in a fine fury. Even after she had convinced him of her innocence his resentment was so bitter that she expected her dismissal at any time.

Other press stories followed; the girl suddenly found herself notorious; scarcely a day passed without some disagreeable mention of her. Adeore Demorest, as indignant as Lorelei herself, declared finally that her friend must be the object of a premeditated attack directed by some strong hand, and once this suspicion had entered Lorelei's mind it took root in spite of its seeming extravagance. Her good sense argued that she was of too little consequence to warrant such an assault, but her relatives seized the suggestion so avidly as to more than half convince her.

Mrs. Knight attributed this injustice first to Bergman, then to Melker, whom she hated bitterly since her unfortunate attempt at blackmail; Jim was inclined to agree with her. Mrs. Knight, as always, ended her sympathetic reassurances by saying, "If you were only married, my dear, that would end all our troubles."

The climax of these annoyances came one night after a party at which Lorelei had been presented to an old friend of Miss Lynn's. Lillas had introduced the man as one of her girlhood chums, and Lorelei had tried to be nice to him; then in some way he arranged to take her home. The memory of that ride was a horror. She knew now that she was hunted; the man had told her so. She felt like a deer cowering in a brake with the hounds working close. This first attack left her trembling and wary. Her cover seemed pitifully insecure.

Thus far Max Melcher's campaign had worked even better than he had expected; and meanwhile he had employed Jim in assiduously cultivating Bob Wharton and arranging as many meetings as possible between Bob and Lorelei. A short experience had taught Jim to avoid his victim in daylight, for in Bob's sober hours the two did not agree; but once mellowed by intoxication, Wharton became imbued with a carnival spirit and welcomed Jim as freely as he welcomed everyone. Incidentally the latter managed to reap a considerable harvest from the association, for Bob was a habitual gambler, and the courteous treatment he received at Melcher's place seemed to reconcile him to the loss of his money.

When, on the morning after her distressing adventure, Lorelei sent for her brother and demanded vengeance upon her assailant he decided that it was time to test the issue. He pretended, of course, to be ferociously enraged, but on learning over the telephone that the wretch had left the city he declared that there was nothing to be done except perhaps exact an explanation from Lillas.

Miss Lynn, however, could offer no excuse. She was heartbroken at the occurrence, but she was too full of her own troubles to give way to her sympathy for others. Jarvis Hammon, it seemed, had heard about the party, and was furious with her.

"You must expect to meet such nuckers in this business," she remarked philosophically.

Jim agreed. "I guess you'll have to forget it, sis. Just don't think about it. I'll bring Wharton around tonight, and we four will have supper, eh?"

Lillas' hesitation in accepting this invitation seemed genuine, but she acquiesced finally, saying with a short laugh: "All right. Maybe a little jealousy won't hurt my lord and master. He's getting too bossy, anyhow."

When the four set out that night Wharton was in exceptional spirits, and, as usual, devoted himself to Lorelei. For him life was a joyous adventure; he took things as they came, and now that he knew the girl for what she was he did not allow himself the slightest liberty. He was a fervent suitor, to be sure, yet he courted her with jests and concealed his ardor behind a playful raillery.

Jim had ordered supper at a popular Washington Heights Inn, and thither the quartet were driven in an open car which he hired in the square before the theater.

It was a charming place for a supper. Contrary to her custom, Lillas Lynn allowed herself free rein, and for once drank more than was good for her, rejoicing openly in the liberty she had snatched.

It is a peculiar liberty to sit soberly through a meal and see one's companions become intoxicated. Lorelei watched Lillas and Bob respond to the effect of the wine. The whole procedure struck her, like her present life as a whole, as both insane and wicked, and she longed desperately to lay hold of something really decent, true and permanent.

Jimmy Knight's admirable hospitality continued; he devoted his entire attention to his guests, he made conversation, and he led it into the channels he desired it to follow. Then, when the psychological moment had come, he



"She's Stalling, Bob. Make Her Answer."

acted with the skill of a Talleyrand. No one but he knew precisely how Bob's proposal was couched, whence it originated, or by what subtlety the victim had been induced to make it. As a matter of fact, it was no proposal, and not even Bob himself suspected how his words had been twisted. He was just dimly aware of some turn in the conversation, when he heard Jim exclaim:

"By Jove, sis, Bob asks you to marry him!"

In prize-ring parlance, Jimmy had "felnet" his opponent into a lead, then taken prompt advantage to "counter."

Lorelei awoke to her surroundings with a start, sensing the sudden gravity that had fallen upon her three companions.

"What—?"

Lillas nodded and smiled at the bewildered lover. "That's the way to put it over, Bob—before witnesses."

"Don't joke about such things," cried Lorelei sharply.

"Joke? Who's joking?" Jim was indignant and glanced appealingly at Bob. "You meant it, didn't you?"

"Sure. No joking matter," Bob declared vaguely. "I was just saying that this is no life for a fellow to lead—batting 'round the way I do; then Jim said—I mean I said—I needed a wife, a beautiful wife. I never saw a girl beautiful enough to suit me before, and he said—"

Jim's relief came as an explosion. "There! That's English. You spoke a mouthful that time, Bob, for she certainly is a beauty bright. But I didn't think you had the nerve to ask her. If she says yes, you'll be the luckiest man in New York—the whole town's crazy about her."

"We'll make her say yes," Lillas added, with drunken decision. "Come, dear, say it!" She bent a flushed face toward Lorelei and laid a loose hand upon her arm. "Well? What's your answer?"

Bob fixed heavy eyes upon his heart's desire and echoed: "Yes, what do you say?" More than once in his sober moments he had pondered such a query, and now that it appeared to have taken shape without conscious effort, he was not displeased with himself.

"I say, you don't know what you're doing," Lorelei responded, curtly.

Now, Bob, like all men in his condition, was quite certain that he was in perfect possession of his faculties, and therefore he very naturally resented such an absurd assertion. "Don't you believe it," he protested.

"I know what I'm doing, all right, all right."

"A man never speaks his mind until he's ginned," Lillas giggled.

"Right! I'm not half drunk yet." Jim urged the suitor on with a nervous laugh, at the same time avoiding his sister's eyes. "She's stalling, Bob. Make her answer."

"Yes or no?" forcefully insisted the wooer, determined, now, to show his complete sobriety.

"No."

Jim seized Wharton's hand and shook it lustily. "Congratulations, old man; that means yes. I'm her brother, and I know. Why, she told father that you were her ideal, and pa said he'd die happy if you two were married. He meant it, too; he's a mighty sick man."

Lorelei stirred uncomfortably, and the faint color in her cheeks faded slowly. "We'll talk about it some other time—tomorrow. Please don't tease the poor man any more. He didn't know what he was saying, and—now, for heaven's sake, talk about something else."

Jim leaped to his feet with a grin and a chuckle, then drew Lillas from her chair, saying: "The lovers are embarrassed, and they're dying to be alone. Let's leave 'em to talk it over."

"She's a dear, Bob, and I wish you both joy. But don't kiss her here," said Lillas, warningly; then, with a wave of her hand, she turned toward the dancing room with Jim.

"Call us when you've fixed the date," laughed the latter, over his shoulder.

When he and Lillas had danced the encore and returned to the table Bob rose unsteadily, glass in hand, and nodded at them.

"Thanks, noble comrades," he proclaimed; "she's mine!"

"Hurrah!" Lillas kissed Lorelei effusively. Jim seized Bob's hand, crying:

"Brother! He waded to a waiter and ordered a magnum of champagne. 'Bring me a wreath of orange blossoms and a wedding cake, too.' His jubilation attracted the attention of the other diners; the occupants of a nearby table began to applaud, whereupon Bob beamed with delight.

Lorelei was very white now. She had decided swiftly, recklessly, reasoning that this proffered marriage was merely a bargain by which she got more than she gave. She had accepted without allowing her better self an opportunity to marshal his protests, and, having closed her eyes and leaped into the dark, it now seemed easier to meet new consequences than to heed those higher feelings that were tardily struggling for expression. She did pity Wharton, however, for it seemed to her that he was the injured party. But she was in a wanton mood tonight, and of late a voice had been desperately urging her to grasp at what she could, that she might, as long as possible, delay her descent into worse conditions.

She heard Lillas inquiring: "When does the marriage come off? Right away?"

Bob, who appeared somewhat dazed by the suddenness and the completeness of his good fortune, smiled vacantly. "Any time suits me," he said. "I'm a happy man—little joys are capering all over the place, and old Doctor Gloom has packed his grip."

Jim started them all by saying, crisply: "Let's make it tonight. I know Bob—he's not the sort to wait."

"Fine! Never thought of that. But—I say—where do they keep these wedding rings?" he inquired. "Everything's closed now, and there's nobody dancing at the city hall, is there?" He appealed helplessly to Jim.

Jim rose to the occasion with the same promptitude he had displayed throughout. "Marriages aren't made in heaven any more—that's old stuff. They're made in Hoboken, while the cab waits. Get your things on, everybody, while I telephone." He allowed no loitering; he waved the girls away, sent the waiter scurrying with his bill, helped Robert secure hat and stick, and then dived into a telephone booth as a woodchuck enters its hole. When he had disposed his three charges inside a taxicab he disappeared briefly, to return with a basket of champagne upon his arm. It is a wise general who provides himself in advance with ammunition.

The smooth celerity with which this whole adventure ran its course argued a thorough preparation on James' part, but Lorelei was in no condition to analyze. Even at the journey's end there was a suspicious lack of delay. The vehicle stopped in a narrow business street, now dark and dismal; its occupants were hurried up a stairway and into a room filled with law-books, where a sleepy justice of the peace was nodding in a cloud of cigar smoke. There followed a noisy shuffling of chairs, some mumbled questions and answers, the crackle of papers, a deal of unintelligible rigmarole, then a man's heavy seal-ring was slipped upon Lorelei's finger, and she knew herself to be Mrs. Robert Wharton. It was all confused, unimpressive, unreal. She was never able fully to recall the picture of that room or the events that occurred there. They formed but a part of the kaleidoscopic jumble of the night's occurrences.

The wedding party was in the cab once more, and it was under way. It was all so like a nightmare that Lorelei began to doubt her own sanity. Once at rest in the dim-lit tunnel of the ferry boat, however, she was brought sharply to herself by hearing her brother exclaim: "Say! He hasn't kissed her yet."

Lillas shrieked, and Bob stiffened himself, then slipped an arm around his bride. As she shrank away he mumbled angrily: "Here! I won't stand for that," and crushed her to him. "You are beautiful—beautiful.

And you're mine. She's mine, eh? No foolishness about that, is there?" he appealed to Jim.

As they drew in toward the New York side the chauffeur inquired, "Where to, now?"

"Why, drive us—" Jim hesitated. There was a silence which Lillas broke with a titter.

"Never thought of that," Bob turned again to Jim, who solved the difficulty with a word.

"Why, you're both going to Lorelei's place, of course; then you can make your plans tomorrow."

The bride's half-strangled protest was lost in a burst of enthusiasm from Lillas.

"Surest thing you know," she cried; "and we'll stop in my flat for a farewell bottle; I've got a whole case. We'll end the night with another party at Jarvis' expense. He's crazy about marriages, anyhow. Ha! But you needn't tell him I was—full, understand?" She fell silent suddenly, then burst into a loud laugh. "Ba! I should worry!"

The ferry drew into its slip, the cab motor shivered, the metallic rattle of windlass and chain proclaimed the return to Manhattan. Up the deserted avenues the vehicle sped, while inside the white-faced bride covered with fingers locked and heart sick with dread.

### CHAPTER XIV.

Hitchy Koo had gone home. When Lillas ushered her friends in and snapped on the lights, the apartment, save for the delirious spaniel, was unoccupied. She flung down her hat, coat and gloves, then, with the help of Jim, prepared glasses and a cooler. Lorelei was restless; the thought of more wine, more ribaldry, revolted her, and yet she was grateful for this delay, brief though it promised to be. Any interruption, trivial or tragic, would be welcome. She was forced to pledge her own happiness in a glass, then in a wild moment of desperation longed to deaden herself with liquor as the others had done.

Jim and Lillas were talking loudly when a key grated in the lock, the door of the little apartment opened, and Jarvis Hammon paused on the threshold, glowering.

Lillas' wineglass shattered upon the floor.

"Jarvis! You frightened me," she cried.

"Evening, Mr. Hammon." Bob lurched to his feet, upsetting his chair. "This is a s'prise."

Jim had risen likewise, but Hammon had eyes for no one except Lillas. "Ah! You're home again, finally. Where have you been?" he demanded, in a voice heavy with anger. His hostile tone, his threatening attitude brought an uncomfortable silence upon the hearers.

"Now, Jarvis," said the bridegroom, placatingly, steadying himself meanwhile with the aid of the table, "don't be a grouch. Everything's all right."

Lillas remained motionless, staring defiantly. Her face had slowly whitened, and now its unpleasantness matched that of her elderly admirer. Hammon dropped his smoldering gaze to the half-empty glasses, then raised it, scowling at Jim.

"Humph! Who is this?"

Lillas made her guest known. "Mr. Knight, Mr. Hammon. I believe you know Miss Knight."

"So you're the one," Hammon showed his teeth in a sardonic smile.

"I'm the one what?" inquired Jim, with a sickly attempt at pleasantry.

"What does she see in you?" Hammon measured the young man with contemptuous curiosity.

"Don't be an ass, Jarvis," began Lillas. "I—"

She was interrupted roughly. "That's precisely what I don't intend to be; and I don't intend that Bob shall be one, either." He turned to young Wharton. "What are you doing here, my boy? I'm sorry to see you with these grafters." Hammon indicated Jim and Lorelei with a nod.

"Eh? What's that?" Bob stiffened. "Lorelei's my wife. 'S true, Jarvis." "Wife?" Hammon took a heavy step forward. "Wife? You're drunk, Bob!"

"Praps. But we're mar—"

"So! You landed him, did you?" Hammon glared at the brother and sister. "You got him drunk and married him, eh? And Lillas helped you, I suppose. Fine! They're crooks, Bob, and they've made a fool of you."

Bob checked the speech on Lorelei's lips with an upraised hand, then said slowly, with a painful effort to sober himself: "We've been good friends, Jarvis; you're a kind of an uncle to me, but—you're a liar. You've lied 'bout my wife, so I s'pose I've got to lick you." With a backward kick he sent his overturned chair flying, then made for Hammon. But Jim seized him by the arm; Lorelei sprang in front of him.

"Mr. Whar—Bob," she cried. "You mustn't—for my sake." The three scuffed for an instant until Hammon said, more quietly:

"I couldn't fight with you, Bob—you're like my own son. But you've been sold out, and—and it looks as if I'd been sold out, too. Now go home and sleep. I didn't come here to quarrel with you; I have a matter of my own to settle." He laid a hand on Bob's shoulder in an effort to pacify him, but the young man's indignation flared into life with drunken persistence. It was Lorelei who at last prevailed upon her husband to leave peacefully, and she was about to accompany him when Lillas Lynn checked her.

"Do you feel that a more frightful experience still is impending for Lorelei? And does she, in your opinion, feel it too?"