

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 Siesson, 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. Lorelei learns her mother is an unscrupulous plotter. She finds in Adoree Demorest a real friend, and finds Bob Wharton is likable. Lorelei leaves her family and goes to live alone. Lorelei and drunken Bob Wharton are tricked into marriage.

Wondering how she can possibly escape the drunken carresses of her new husband the first night of their marriage, Lorelei finds the problem suddenly solved for her—but in a ghastly manner. The demons of blackmail and intrigue which have followed her give way to devils of bloodshed and murder. How she acts in a tragic crisis is told in Rex Beach's best style in this installment.

Bob Wharton and his bride and Lilas and Jimmy Knight are in Lilas' apartment celebrating the wedding when Hammon enters. He and Lilas are quarreling.

CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

During this angry scene Lilas had not risen nor spoken. Her eyes were very black and very brilliant against her pallor, and she was smiling deviously. "Wait!" she interposed. "I'm not going to stay here with this old-fool," Hammon growled; he ground his teeth. "You shall stay. We're going to have a talk and settle things once for all." Lilas rose swiftly with a complete change of manner; she was smiling no longer; her face was sinister. "Very well," she agreed. "Tonight. Why not? But I want Lorelei to stay and—hear. Yes." "No, I don't want her." "I do." Lilas' face tempered flared up promptly from the hot coals of spiteful, drunken stubbornness. "She'll stay till you go, or else I'll put you out too. I don't trust you," she laughed disagreeably. "Then have your way. It's you I want to talk with, anyhow, drunk as you are. Now, Bob—will you say goodnight?" He waved the two men from the room, and the outer door closed behind them. Lorelei had little desire to remain as the witness to a distressing scene, but she seized upon the delay, for even a sordid lovers' quarrel was preferable to the carresses of a sodden bridegroom. But daylight seemed a long way off—she feared Bob would not fall asleep during this brief respite. "Now come with me, if you please." Hammon turned in the direction of the library, and Lilas followed, pausing to light a cigarette with a studied indifference that added fuel to his rage. Lorelei seated herself at the disordered dining table and stared miserably at the wall. "Well?" said Hammon, when he and Lilas were alone. "Is this how you live up to your promises?" "How did you know I went out tonight?" she inquired in her turn. "I had you watched. After what happened last night I was suspicious."



"Are You Just Drunk?" He Said. I've been waiting for hours—while you were out with that grafter, drinking, carousing—"

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. Copyright, by Harper & Brothers

you're not yourself, Lilas. He ran his eyes over the luxurious little room; he wiped his face with a shaky hand, feeling that it was he who had lost his senses. "The wine is talking. When I asked you to marry me I never dreamed—"

"Not quite, perhaps; but what I've lost, what I've sacrificed, would have ruined most men. My home is gone, and my family—as you know—yes, and a good many other things you don't know about. Financially I'm not done for—"

"There were four thousand men—" "He was killed when the converter dumped. You were rushing the work. Do you remember now?" Her words came swift and shrill.

"I was waiting outside with his dinner bucket, along with the other women. I saw him go. I saw you kill him—" "Lilas! Good God, are you crazy?" he burst forth. "It was murder."

"You took my money—you let me support you!" cried Hammon, in bitter accusation. "Oh, I did more than that, I planned everything that has happened to you, even that blackmail!"

"Blackmail!" he shouted. Did you—was that your—? He grew suddenly apoplectic; his eyes distended and reddened with rage.

Your wife will read them and your daughters—" Jarvis Hammon roused himself at last. Surprise, incredulity, dismay gave place to fury, and, as in all primitive natures, his wrath took shape as an impulse to destroy.



Its Report Echoed Loudly.

the growl of a hungry beast. His eyes roved over the table for a weapon, and, reading his insane purpose, she cried again: "Don't do that. I warn you—" The nearest object chanced to be a crystal globe in which was set a tiny French clock—one of those library ornaments serving as timepiece and paperweight—over this his hand closed; he moved toward her.

"Put that down," she cried. He did not pause. "Put it—" She wrenched at the table drawer and fumbled for something. Hammon uttered a bellow and leaped at her. It was a tiny revolver, small enough to fit into a man's vest pocket or a woman's purse, but its report echoed loudly. The noise came like a cannon shot to the girl in the hall outside, and brought a cry to her lips. Lorelei flung herself against the library door.

"Where's Bob?" he said, faintly. "Call him, please." "You're hurt. I'll telephone for a doctor; there's one in the house, and—the police, too." Lorelei voiced her first impulse, then shrilly appealed to Lilas to do something. But Lilas remained petrified in her attitude of retreat; from the pallor that was whitening her cheeks now it might have been she who was in danger of death.

voice inside, raised in the best of humor. Evidently he was telephoning. "Yes. Two hours ago, I tell you. With book, bell and candle." Jim's footsteps sounded, his hand opened the door, then his arm flew out to his sister's support as she staggered in.

"Hello! Yes. Is that you?" came Merkle's steady voice. "Come quick—quick." "What's wrong?" he demanded, with a sharp change of tone. "Has Bob—?" "No, no. It's Mr. Hammon. He's downstairs with—Lilas, and he's hurt—shot. I—I'm frightened."

Merkle found his chauffeur just closing the garage door, and three minutes later his car was sweeping westward through the park like the shadow of some flying bird. The vagueness, the brevity of the message that had come to him out of the night made it terribly alarming. Jarvis Hammon's financial interests were in no condition to withstand a shock; for a long time many of them had been under fire. He had committed his associates to a program of commercial expansion, never too secure even under favorable conditions, and one, moreover, which had provoked a tremendous assault from rival steel manufacturers. Now, with Hammon himself stricken at the crisis of the struggle, there was no telling what results might follow.

"The thing is in here somewhere," Hammon took his hand away from his breast, and Merkle saw that the fingers were bloody. "Can you get me out of here quietly?" John Merkle rose to his full height, his lips whitened back from his teeth. Harshly he inquired: "Where is that woman?"

"She's back yonder in her room," Bob told him. "She's ill." Merkle turned, but, reading his intent, Hammon checked him, crying in a strong voice: "None of that, John. I did it myself. It was an—accident." "I don't believe it."

The effort of this long speech told on the sufferer. Sweat beaded his face; nevertheless, his jaws remained firmly set; his glance was purposeful, his big hands were gripped tightly over the arms of the chair. There was something sur-

perb, something terrible about his unchanging grimace.

"Get a cab," Jim offered, in a panic. "The cab driver would be sure to—" "I'll drive," Bob volunteered. "I'm drunk, but I've done it before when I was drunker. It's an old trick of mine—sort of a joke, see? Give me some money—a cabby'll do anything for money at this time o' night."

Merkle eyed the speaker in momentary doubt, then handed him a roll of bank-notes. "It's a serious business, Bob, but Jarvis can't stay here. There's somebody else to consider besides us and—Miss Lynn. I'm thinking about Mrs. Hammon and the girls." He followed Bob to the door and let him out, stepped swiftly down the hall, then, without knocking, opened the door to Lilas Lynn's bedroom and entered.

Lilas was seated at her dressing. At his entrance she uttered a frightened cry and a silver spoon slipped from her nerveless fingers. Merkle saw a little open box, a glass of water, the cap of a pearl-and-gold fountain pen, but took scant notice of them, being too deeply stirred and too much surprised at her appearance. She was no longer the vital, dashing girl he had known, but a pallid, cringing wreck of a woman. She shrank back at sight of him, babbling unintelligible words and cowering as if expecting a blow.

Merkle returned to the library, sent Lorelei in to her brother's assistance, then scanned his friend's face anxiously. But Hammon had not moved; the sweat still stood upon his lips and forehead, his jaws were still set like stone. Several months before, Bob Wharton, during one of his hilarious moments, had conceived the brilliant notion of hiring a four-wheeler and driving a convivial party of friends from place to place. The success of his exploit had been so gratifying that he had repeated the performance, but he was in a far different mood now as he left the Elegancia. The shock of Lorelei's announcement, the sight of his stricken friend, had sobered him considerably, yet he was not himself by any means. At one moment he saw and reasoned clearly, at the next his intoxication benumbed his senses and distorted his mental vision. For once in his life he wished himself sober.

Bob lurched forward and laid a hand upon the driver's knee. "Very man I'm lookin' for." The hiccup that followed was by no means intentional. "Yes, sir. Where to, sir?" But Bob shook his head vigorously and waved a comprehensive gesture toward the west. "Got a party of my own back yonder—everybody soused but me—understand? I'm the only sober one, so I'm goin' to drive 'em home, see? How much?" "How much for what?" demanded the cabman. "For the cab—one hour. I'll bring it back."

swearing except Bob's personal appearance prevented the driver from whipping up without more ado. The night was old—and these jokers sometimes pay well, the man reflected.

"Matter of honor with me. I'll be back in no time. Will ten dollars be right? I'll make it fifteen, and you can lend me your coat and hat. We'll exchange—have to, or no joke. Is it a go?"

The offer was tempting, but the driver cannily demanded Wharton's name and address before committing himself. The card that Bob handed him put an end to the parley; he wheeled into the side street and removed his long, nickel-buttoned coat and his battered tile, taking Bob's broadcloth and well-blocked hat in return.

Bob Wharton mounted the box and drove to Central Park West. At Sixty-seventh street he wheeled into the sunken causeway that links the East and West sides. Once in the shadows, Merkle leaned from the door, crying softly, "Faster! Faster!"

Bob whipped up, the horse cantered, the cab reeled and bounced over the cobblestones, rocking the wounded man pitifully. To John Merkle the ride was terrible, with a drunkard at the reins and in his arms a perhaps fatally injured man, who, despite the tortures of that bumping carriage, interspersed his groans with cries of "Hurry, hurry!" When he felt the grateful smoothness of Fifth avenue beneath the wheels he



"Did You Shoot Him?" He Asked Grimly.

Do you believe Lilas is really guilty—was she justified? And do you think that Jimmy Knight will use this occasion to collect blackmail money? (TO BE CONTINUED.)