

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.

At last Lorelei shows her fine character to those who would use her as a dupe and to those who misjudge the girl.

Old Man Wharton is accusing Lorelei and trying to persuade his son to leave her.

CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

Lorelei was standing very white and still; now she said, "Don't you think you'd better go?"

The elder man laid aside his hat and gloves, then spoke with snarling deliberation. "I'll go when I choose.

"I flattered myself—" Bob began, stiffly.

"Bah! You're drunk." "Moderately, perhaps—or let us say that I am in an unnaturally argumentative mood.

"To be sure, that's quite natural. But why in hell did you marry her? That wasn't necessary, was it?"

Lorelei uttered a sharp cry. Bob rose; his eyes were bright and hard. Mr. Wharton merely arched his shaggy brows, inquiring quickly of the bride:

"What's the matter? I state the case correctly, do I not?" "No!" gasped Lorelei. "Let's talk plainly—"

"That's a bit too plain, even from you, dad," Bob cried, angrily.

"It's time for plain speaking. You got drunk, and she trapped you. I'm here to get you out of the trap."

"Merkle? What are you talking about?" Bob demanded.

"Did Mr. Merkle tell you how why he came to make that asked Lorelei, indignantly.

"No. But he offered it, did he?" "Yes, and I refused it, why?"

"We don't seem to be getting very well," Bob interposed, "my wife and your daughter."

"What's more, I love her; that ends the Reno chatter."

crossed to Lorelei's side and encircled her with his arm. "There's no pricing tag on this marriage, dad, and you'll regret what you've said."

Wharton senior shrugged wearily. "You tell him, miss; maybe he'll believe you."

The AUCTION BLOCK A NOVEL OF NEW YORK LIFE by REX BEACH ILLUSTRATIONS by F. PARKER

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she smirks at you out of every catch-penny advertisement along Broadway. She's "The Chewing-Gum Girl" and "The Petticoat Girl" and "The Bathtub Girl!"

"There's nothing dishonest in that." "Just a minute. I won't have my daughter's face grinning at me every time I get into a street car.

"Not by any means. She's notorious—" "Newspaper talk!" "Is it? She's made her living by bleeding men, by taking gifts and renting herself out the way she did at Hammon's supper.

"No!" Lorelei gulped. "No police record as yet—'Broker living at the Charlevoix apartments—'Injured by a taxicab while intoxicated," quoted Wharton.

"No!" Lorelei checked him. "It's quite true." "Merkle said you had nothing to do with it personally," conscientiously explained Mr. Wharton.

"Merkle said you had nothing to do with it personally," conscientiously explained Mr. Wharton.

"That's a lie!" Lorelei's voice was like a whip.

Mr. Wharton eyed her grimly. "That's something for Bob to determine—I have only the indications to go on. I don't blame him for losing his wits—you're very good looking—but the affair must end. You're not a girl I'd care to have in my family—pardon my bluntness."

She met his eyes fairly. At no time had she flinched before him, although inwardly she had cringed and her flesh had quivered at his merciless attack.

"You have told Bob the truth," she began, slowly, "in the worst possible way; you have put me in the most unfavorable light. I dare say I never would have had the courage to tell him myself, although he deserves to know. I've been pretty—commercial—because I had to be, but I never sold myself, and I sha'n't begin now. Bob isn't a child; he's nearly thirty years old—old enough to make up his own mind—and he must make this decision, not I."

Bob opened his lips, but his father forestalled him.

"What do you mean by that?" "I have no price. If he's sick of the match we'll end it, and it won't cost you a cent."

Bob looked inscrutable; his father smiled for the first time during the interview.

"That's very decent of you," he said, "but of course I sha'n't put the good faith of your offer to the test. I don't want something for nothing. I'll take care of you nicely."

Thus far Bob had yielded precedence to his father, but he could no longer restrain himself. "Now let me take the chair," he commanded, easily. "My mind is made up. You see, I didn't marry Peter Knight, residence Vale, nor James Knight, reputation bad, nor even Mathilda Knight, wife of Peter. I married this kid, and the books are closed. You say the Knights are a bad lot, and Lorelei's reputation is a trifle discolored; maybe you're right, but mine has some ink blots on it, too, and I guess the cleanest part of it would just about match the darkest that hers can show. I seem to have all the best of the deal."

"Don't be an ass," growled his father.

"I've always been one—I may as well be consistent." Bob felt the slender form at his side begin to tremble, and smiled down into the troubled blue eyes upturned to his. "Maybe we'll both have to do some forgiving and forgetting. I believe that's usual nowadays."

"Oh, I'm not whitewashing you," Hannibal snapped. "She probably knows what you are."

"I do," agreed Lorelei. "He's a drunkard, and everything that means. But you taught him to drink before he could choose for himself."

Mr. Wharton smiled sneeringly. "Admirable! I begin to see that you're more than a pretty woman. Get his sympathy; it's good business. Now he'll think he must act the man. But that will wear off. And understand this: You can't graft off me. You and your family are deep for a great disap-

pointment. Bob hasn't anything, and he won't have until I die, but I'm good for thirty years yet. I'm not going to disinherit him. I'm merely going to wait until you both get tired. Take my word for it, poverty is the most troublesome thing in the world."

"We can manage," said Lorelei. "You speak for yourself, but he can't make a living—unless he has something in him that I never discovered. I fear you'll find him rather a heavy burden."

Throughout the interview Mr. Wharton had kept his temper quite perfectly, and his coolness at this moment argued a greater fixity of purpose than might have been inferred from a dis-



"I Divorce the Demon Rum."

play of rage. He made a final appeal to his son: "Can't you see that it won't do at all, Bob? I won't stand parasites, unless they're my own. Either have done with the matter and let me pay the charges or—go through to the bitter finish on your own feet. She's supporting three loafers; I dare say she can take care of another, but it isn't quite right to put it upon her—she's sure to weary of it some time. You'll notice I've said nothing about your mother so far, but—she's with me in this. I'll be in the city for several days, and I'd like to have you return to Pittsburgh with me when I go. Mother is expecting you. If you decide to stick it out—Wharton's face showed more than a trace of feeling, his deep voice lowered a tone—"you may go to hell, with my compliments, and I'll sit on the lid to keep you there."

He rose, took his hat, and stalked out of the apartment without so much as a backward glance.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Whew! That was a knockout. But who got licked?" Bob went to the little sideboard and helped himself to a stiff drink.

"Did he mean it?" "My dear, time wears away mountains, and rivers dry up, and the whole solar system is gradually running down, I believe; but dad isn't governed by any natural laws whatsoever. He's built of reinforced concrete, and time hardens him. He's impervious to rust or decay, and gravity exerts no power over him."

"Then I think you'd better make your choice tonight." Bob's eyes opened. "I have. Don't you understand? I'm going to stand pat—that is, unless—"

She ignored his demand, with her shadowy smile. "I deliberately traded on my looks; I put myself up for a price, and you paid that price regardless of everything except your desires. We muddled things dreadfully and got our deserts. I didn't love you, I don't love you now any more than you love me; but I think we're coming to respect each other, and that is a beginning. You have longings to be something different and better; so have I. Let's try together. I have it in me to succeed, but I'm not sure about you."

"Thanks for the good cheer." "You're afraid you can't make a living for us—I know you can. I'm merely afraid you won't."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I don't believe the liquor will let you."

"Nonsense. Any man can cut down." "Cutting down" won't do for us, Bob. He thrilled anew at her intimate use of his name. "The chemistry of your body demands the stuff—you couldn't be temperate in anything. You'll have to quit."

"All right. I'll quit. I divorce the demon rum; lovers once, but strangers now. I'll quit gambling, too."

Lorelei laughed. "That won't strain your will-power in the least, for half my salary goes up Amsterdam avenue, and the rest will about run this flat."

I married you. But it seems that you've been cheated, and—I'm ready to do the square thing. I'll step aside and give you another chance, if you say so."

During this little declaration Lorelei had watched him keenly; she appeared to be seriously weighing his offer.

"I was getting pretty tired of things," he added, "and I s'pose I'd have wound up in the D. T. parlors of some highly exclusive institution or behind a bathroom door with a gas tube in my teeth. But—I met you, and you went to my head. I wanted you worse than I ever wanted anything—worse even than I ever wanted liquor. And now I have you. I've had you for one day, and that's something. I suppose it's silly to talk about starting over—I don't want to reform if I don't have to; moderation strikes me as an awful cold proposition; but it looks as if reform were indicated if I'm to keep you. I'm just an album of expensive habits, and—we're broke. Maybe I could—do something with myself if you took a hand. It's a good deal to ask of a girl like you, but—"

he regarded her timidly, then averted his eyes—"if you cared to try it we might make it go for a while. And you might get to care for me a little—if I improve." Again he paused hopefully. "I've been as honest as I know how. Now, won't you be the same?"

Lorelei roused herself, and spoke with quiet decision.

"I'll go through to the end, Bob." Bob started and uttered an inarticulate word or two; in his face was a light of gladness that went to the girl's heart. His name had risen freely to her lips; he felt as if she had laid her hand in his with a declaration of absolute trust.

"You mean that?" She nodded. He took her in his arms and kissed her gently; then, feeling her warm against his breast, he burst the bonds that had restrained him up to this moment and covered her face, her neck, her hair with passionate caresses. For the first time since his delirium of the night before he abandoned himself to the hunger her beauty excited, and she offered him no resistance.

At last she freed herself, and, straightening the disorder of her hair, smiled at him mistily.

"Wait. Please—" "Beautiful!" His eyes were aflame. "You're my wife. Nothing can change that."

"Nothing except—yourself. Now, you must listen to me." She forced him reluctantly into his chair and seated herself opposite. He leaned forward and kissed her once more, then seized her hand and held it. At intervals he crushed his lips into its pink palm. "We must start honestly," she began. "Do you mind if I hurt you?"

"You can't hurt me so long as you don't—leave me. Your eyes have haunted me every night. I've seen the curve of your neck—your lips. No woman was ever so perfect, so maddening."

"Always that. You're not a husband at this moment; you're only a man." He frowned slightly.

"That's what makes this whole matter so difficult," she went on. "Don't you see?"

He shook his head. "You don't love me, you're drunk with—something altogether different to love. . . . It's true," she insisted. "You show it. You don't even know the real me."

"Beauty may be only a skin disease," Bob laughed, "but ugliness goes clear to the bone."

"I married you for your money, and you married me because—I seemed physically perfect—because my face and my body roused fires in you. I think we are both pretty rotten at heart, don't you?"

"No. Anyhow, I don't care to think about it. I never won anything by thinking. Kiss me again."

She ignored his demand, with her shadowy smile. "I deliberately traded on my looks; I put myself up for a price, and you paid that price regardless of everything except your desires. We muddled things dreadfully and got our deserts. I didn't love you, I don't love you now any more than you love me; but I think we're coming to respect each other, and that is a beginning. You have longings to be something different and better; so have I. Let's try together. I have it in me to succeed, but I'm not sure about you."

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Her listener frowned. "Forget that salary talk," he said, shortly. "D'you think I'd let you—support me? D'you think I'm that kind of a nosegay? When I get so I can't pay the bills I'll walk out. Tomorrow you quit work, and we move to the Ritz—they know me there, and—this delightful, home-like groto of yours gives me the collywabbles."

"Who will pay the hotel?" Lorelei smiled.

"Mr. George W. Bridegroom, of course. I'll get the money, never fear. I know everybody, and I've borrowed thousands of dollars when I didn't need it. My rooms at the Charlevoix are full of expensive junk; I'll sell it, and that will help. As soon as we're decently settled I'll look for a salaried job. Then watch my smoke. To quote from the press of a few months hence: 'The meteoric rise of Robert Wharton has startled the financial world, surpassing as it does the sensational success of his father. Young Mr. Wharton was seen yesterday at his Wall street office and took time from his many duties to modestly assure our representative that his ability was inherited, and merely illustrates anew the maxim that 'a chip of the old block will return after many days.'" That will please dad. He'll relent when I attribute my success to him."

"You must quit drinking before you begin work," said Lorelei.

"I have quit."

With a person of such resilient temperament, one who gambled through life like a fawn, argument was difficult. Bob Wharton was pagan in his joyous inconsequence; his romping spirits could not be damped; he bubbled with the optimism of a Robin Goodfellow. Ahead of him he saw nothing but dancing sunshine, heard nothing but the Pandean pipes. The girl-wife watched him curiously.

"I wonder if you can," she mused. "Before we begin our new life we're going to make a bargain, binding on both of us. You'll have to stop drinking. I won't live with a drunkard. I'll work until you've mastered the craving."

"No!" Bob declared, firmly. "I'll take the river before I'll let you—keep me. Why, if I—"

Lorelei rose and laid her hand over his lips, saying quietly:

"I'm planning our happiness, don't you understand? and it's a big stake. You must pocket your pride for a while. Nobody will know. We've made a batch of things so far, and there is only one way for us to win out."

"A man who'd let his wife—"

"A man who wouldn't let his wife have her way at first is a brute."

"You shouldn't ask it," he cried, sullenly.

"I don't ask it: I insist upon it. If you refuse we can't go on."

"Surely you don't mean that?" He looked up at her with grave, troubled eyes.

"I do. I'm entirely in earnest. You haven't strength to go out among your friends and restrain yourself. No man as far gone as you could do it."

"I've a simpler way than that," he told her, after a moment's thought. "There are institutions where they straighten fellows up. I'll go to one of those."

"No." She rejected this suggestion positively. "They only relieve; they don't cure. The appetite comes back. This is something you must do yourself, once and for all. You must fight this out in secret; this city is no place for men with appetites they can't control. Do this for me, Bob, and—I'll let you do anything after that. I'll let you—beat me." Getting no response from him, she added gravely, "It is that or—nothing."

"I can't let you go," Bob said finally. "Good! We'll keep this apartment and I'll go on working—"

He hid his face in his hands and groaned. "Gee! I'm a rotter."

"You can sell your belongings at the Charlevoix, and we'll use the money. We'll need everything, for I can't piece out my salary the way I've been doing. There can't be any more supper parties and gifts—"

acquiescence seemed unmanly and weak. He rose and paced the little room to relieve his feelings. Days and weeks of almost constant dissipation had affected his mental poise quite disastrously as the strain of the past twenty-four hours had told upon his physical control, and he was shaking nervously. He paused at the sideboard finally and poured himself a steady drink.

Lorelei watched his trembling fingers fill the glass before she spoke. "You mustn't touch that," she said, positively.

"Eh?" He turned, still frowning absent-mindedly. "Oh, this?" He held the glass to the light. "You mean you want me to begin—now? A fellow has to sober up gradually, my dear. I really need a jolt—I'm all unstrung."

"I sealed the bargain."

"But, Lorelei—" He set the glass down with a mirthless laugh. "Of course, I won't, if you insist. I intended to taper off—a chap can't turn teetotaler the way he turns a handspring." He eyed the glass with a sudden intensity of longing. "Let's begin tomorrow. Nobody starts a new life at 2 a. m. And—it's all poured out."

She answered by taking the glass and flinging its contents from the open window. This done, she gathered the bottles from the sideboard—there were not many—and, opening the folding doors that masked the kitchenette, she upended them over the sink. When the last gurgler had died away she went to her husband and put her arms around his neck.

"You must," she said, gently. "If you'll only let me have my way we'll win. But, Bob, dear, it's going to be a bitter fight."

Lorelei's family spent most of the night in discussing their great good fortune. Even Jim, worn out as he was by his part in the events connected with the marriage, sat until a late hour planning his sister's future, and incidentally his own. After he had gone to bed mother and father remained in a glow of exhilaration that made sleep impossible, and it was nearly dawn when they retired to dreams of hopes achieved and ambitions realized.

About nine-thirty on the following morning, just when the rival Wall Street forces were gathering, Hannibal Wharton called up the Knight establishment.

CHAPTER XIX.

On the way to the Elegancia Mrs. Knight recounted to Jim in great detail and with numerous digressions and comments what Hannibal Wharton had said to her. Mrs. Knight herself he had called a blood-sucker, it seemed—the good woman shook with rage at the memory—and he had threatened her with the direst retribution if she persisted in attempting to fasten herself upon him. Bob, he had explained, was a loafer whom he had supported out of a sense of duty; if the idiot was ungrateful he would simply have to suffer the consequences. But Bob's mother felt the disgrace keenly, and on her account Hannibal had expressed himself as willing to ransom the young fool for, say, ten thousand dollars.

"I never was so insulted in my life," stormed Mrs. Knight. "You should have heard him!"

With a show of confidence not entirely real Jim rejoined: "Now, ma, don't heat up. Everybody forgets me, but I'm going to draw cards in this game."

The interview that followed their arrival at Lorelei's home was far from



"You Mustn't Touch That," She Said, Positively.

pleasant. At his first opportunity Bob explained rather briefly:

"I offered Lorelei her freedom last night when my income was amputated."

"You've had time to think it over," his wife interposed. "Do you still want me?"

"Why, of course. And you?" She shrugged. "I don't change in one night. Now—I wish you and Jim would leave mother and me—"

Do you believe that Lorelei now can shake her bloodsucking relatives for good, and can prove to Old Man Wharton that she is well worth a place in his family circle? (TO BE CONTINUED.)