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The AUCTION BLOCK

BY REX BEACH



"Tell me everything, Croft—quickly."
"I have. Only you better warn your brother."

The assistant stage manager thrust his head through the curtains, shouting: "Your cue, Miss Knight. What the devil—"

With a gasp, Lorelei leaped to her feet and fled from the room.

CHAPTER VI.

Lorelei did not secure another word alone with the dresser until the middle of the second act, by which time Mrs. Croft was her own colorless, work-worn self once more.

"I don't know no more than I told you," she informed Lorelei. "Mr. Melcher has been coming here for a long time, and he always talks about Mr.

Lorelei secured her number and was surprised to recognize her brother's voice. She made herself known, to Jim's equal amazement, and then inquired:

"Is Max there?"

"Sure. He's outside in the automobile."

"Call him, please."

"What do you want of him? How'd you know I was here?"

"Never mind. Call him quickly."

At last Melcher's voice came over the wire, and Lorelei recited the message. There was a moment of silence, then she explained how she came to be talking instead of Lilas.

He thanked her, and she heard him muttering as he hung up. She turned to find her annoyed nodding with satisfaction.

"Splendid! I thank you; my father thanks you; my family thanks you. Now where would you like to dine?"

"How can a person get rid of you?" she inquired stiffly.

"I'm sure I don't know—it isn't being done. But I'll try to think. Wear your prettiest gown, won't you? for I intend to engage all the other fellows."

She turned with a shrug of mingled annoyance and amusement, and he called after her:

"The Judge's teeth will entertain me till you come. I'll be waiting."

Miss Lynn, as she dressed after the performance, was still in an evil temper; but she thanked her roommate for aiding her; then, as if some explanation were due, she added, "That note was from Jarvis."

"You puzzle me, Lilas," Lorelei told her, slowly. "I don't think you care for him at all."

Lilas laughed. "Why do you think that? I adore him, but we had an engagement and he broke it. Men are all selfish; the bigger they are the more selfish they become. They never do anything you don't make them."

"He can't sacrifice his business for you."

"Sacrifice! It's women who sacrifice themselves. If you suppose any of those men we met last night would sacrifice himself for anything or anybody? Not much. They are the strength and the might. They go rich through robbery, and they're in the habit of talking whatever they want. They made their money out of the blood and suffering of thousands of poor people. That's what it is—blood money."

"Is that why you're planning to blackmail it out of him?"

Lilas paused in her dressing and turned slowly, brows lifted. Her dark eyes met the blue ones unwaveringly.

"Blackmail? What are you talking about?" Mrs. Croft went pale, and retired swiftly but noiselessly into the lavatory, closing the door behind her.

"What did Max tell you over the phone?" asked Lilas, sharply.

"Nothing."

"Then where did you get—that? From Jim?"

"Jim's pretty bad, I imagine, but he keeps his badness to himself. No, I've overheard you and Max talking."

"Nonsense. We've never mentioned such a thing. The idea is absurd. I get mad at Jarvis—he's enough to madden anybody—perhaps I'm jealous, but blackmail! Why, you're out of your head."

Lorelei delayed her toilet purposely, and finally dismissed Croft. When quiet had finally descended she opened her door cautiously and peered out. Robert Wharton sat on the top step of the stairway near at hand, but his head rested against the wall, and he slept. Beside him were his high hat, his gloves and his stick. As Lorelei, with skirts carefully gathered, tiptoed past him she saw suspended upon his gleaming white shirt bosom what at first glance resembled a foreign decoration of some sort, but proved to be Mr. Rogan's false teeth. They were suspended by a ribbon that had once done duty in the costume of a copy-press; they rose and fell to the young man's gentle breathing.

Lorelei telephoned to Merkle on the following day, and about the close of the show that night his card was brought up to her dressing room. A moment later Robert Wharton's followed, together with a tremendous box of long-stemmed roses. She went down a trifle apprehensively, for by this time the current tales of Bob's drunken freaks had given her cause to think somewhat seriously, and she feared an unpleasant encounter. More than once she had witnessed quarrels in the alleyway behind the Circuit, where pestiferous youths of Wharton's caliber were frequent visitors.

But Mr. Merkle relieved her mind by saying, "I sent Bob away on a pretext, although he swore you had an

"I'm glad you did. I left him asleep outside my dressing room last night, and I almost hoped he'd caught pneumonia."

Beside the curb a heavy touring car was purring, and into this Merkle helped his companion. "I'm not up on the etiquette of this sort of thing," he explained, "but I presume the proper procedure is supper. Where shall it be—Sherry's?"

Lorelei laughed. "You are inexperienced. The Johns never eat on Fifth avenue, the lights are too dim. But why supper? You can't eat."

"A Welsh rabbit would be the death of me; lobsters are poison," he confessed; "but I've read that chorus girls are omnivorous animals and seek their prey at midnight."

"Most of them would prefer bread and milk; anyhow, I would. But I'm not hungry, so let's ride—we can talk better, and you're not the sort of man to be seen in public with one of Bergman's show-girls."

The banker acquiesced with alacrity. To his driver he said, "Take the Long Island road."

The machine glided into noiseless motion.

"Why do you choose the Long Island road?" asked Lorelei.

"It's pleasant," responded Merkle. "I ride nearly every night, and I like the country. You see, I can't sleep unless I'm in motion. I get most of my rest in a car; there's something about the movement that soothes me."

"How funny?"

"Peculiar, perhaps, but scarcely humorous. I'd be dead or insane without an automobile. I keep four French cars in my garage, all specially built as to springs, suspension and upholstery, and I spend nearly every night in one or the other of them. So long as I'm moving fast I manage to snatch a miserable sort of repose, but the instant we go slow I wake up. I used to sleep at twenty miles an hour; now I can't relax under thirty. Forty is fine—sixty means dreamless peace."

"It does, indeed. If one happens to have a blowout," laughed the girl.

The car was now darting through unfrequented side streets, where the asphalt lay in the shadows like dark pools. Up the approach to the Greensborough bridge it swept, and took the long incline like a soaring bird. Blackwell's Island slipped under them, an inky, bottomless pit of despair. The breath of the overheated city changed as by magic, and the thin-faced sufferer at Lorelei's side drank it in eagerly. Even in the dim flash of the passing illuminations she noted how tired and worn he was, and a sudden pity smote her.

"Won't you pretend I'm not here, and drive just as you always do? I won't mind," she said.

"My dear, it's late. You'll need to go home."

"No, no."

"Really?" His eagerness was genuine. "Won't your people worry?"

Her answer was a short, breathless laugh that made him glance at her curiously. "They know I'm perfectly safe. It's the other way round: a man of your standing takes chances by being alone with a woman of—mine."

"Which reminds me of Miss Lynn and Mr. Hammon. You've decided to accept my offer?"

"No. I can't be a hired spy."

"You said over the phone that you had learned something."

"I have. I believe there is an effort on foot to get some of Mr. Hammon's money dishonestly. I have a reason for wishing to prevent it."

"I knew I wasn't mistaken in you," smiled Merkle.

"Oh, don't attribute my actions to any high moral motives! I'm getting a little rusty on right and wrong. Personally, I have no sympathy with Mr. Hammon, and I don't imagine he acquired all of his tremendous fortune in a perfectly honorable way. Besides, he's a married man."

"It isn't alone Jarvis or his family or their money that is concerned," Merkle said, gravely. "Great financial institutions sometimes rest on foundations as slight as one man's personality—one man's reputation for moral integrity. A breath of suspicion of any sort at the wrong time may bring on a crash involving innocent people."

"Hammon at this moment carries a tremendous top-heavy burden of responsibilities; his death would be no more disastrous than a scandal that would tend to destroy public confidence in him as a man."

"Doesn't he know that himself?"

"Perhaps. But his infatuation overtook him at an age when a man is a fool. Young men are always objects of suspicion in the financial world, for their emotions are unruly; but when old men fall in love they are superbly heedless of the consequences. I promised to tell you something about Jarvis, and I will, since you spoke of his married life. From the time he could walk he never knew anything, never heard anything except steel. He became a rolling-mill superintendent at almost before he was of age. They say he never did less than two men's work, and often more; but he could make others work, too, and there lay the secret of his success. His mill held the tonnage record for years."

"When the corporation was formed he played a big part in the deal and got a big slice of the profits. He went into other things than steel, and he prospered. He never failed at anything. Jarvis had no vices and but one hobby—at least his vices were neutral, for he had never taken time to acquire the positive kind. His hobby was Napoleon Bonaparte. He read everything there was to read about Napoleon; he studied his life and patterned his own on similar lines. Do I bore you, Miss Knight?"

"So go on. I'm tremendously interested."

"Well, naturally, Hammon began to consider himself another Napoleon, and his accomplishments were in a way quite as wonderful. He even con-

tinued Next Week

The hour which gives us life begins to take it away.—Seneca.

A wise man loses nothing if he but save himself.—Montaigne

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