

# The AUCTION BLOCK



By REX BEACH

He was trembling, and his terror was so pitiful that Adoree laid a compassionate hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't let go, Bob. Hold your thoughts steady and sober up. We must all help."

Darkness found Bob huddled in his chair, fighting for his senses, but as the liquor died in him terrible fancies came to life. A frightened maid began preparations for his dinner, but she ordered her away. Then when she brought him a tray, eager at the thought that his own comfort should be considered of consequence made him refuse to touch it.

At length his inactivity became unbearable, and, feeling the desperate need of some comfort, he telephoned John Merkle. It was a relief to be admitted to mere human life, the tender statement that Mr. and Mrs. Hannibal Wharton were in the city, but, realizing it later, he expressed a state of regret that his own was not here to comfort Lorelei in the great recent crisis of her wretchedness. It had been Lorelei's wish that her own mother be kept in ignorance of the truth, and now, therefore, she had to go to her own home upon a very important errand. In Bob's mind the play of it grew as the time crept on.

But Adoree Demorest was wonderful. Despite her inexperience, she was calm, capable, sympathetic, and best of all, her normality afforded a support upon which both the husband and the wife could rest. When she finally cried herself ready for the street Bob asked pitifully:

"You're not going to leave us?"

"I must. It's nearly theater-time," she told him. "It's one of the penalties of this business that nothing must hold the curtain; but I'll be back the minute the show is over."

"Lorelei needs you."

Adoree nodded; her eyes met Bob's squarely, and he saw that they were wet. Her face was tender, and she appeared very simple and womanly at this moment. Her absurd theatricalism was gone; she was a natural, unaffected young woman.

"I wish I could do something to help," wearily continued Bob, but Adoree shook her head so violently that the barbaric beaded festoon beneath her chin clicked and rattled.

"She knows you're close by; that's enough. This is a poor time to reach, but—It seems to me if you've got a bit of real manhood in you, Bob, you'll never drink again. The shock of seeing you like this—when she needed you—didn't help her any."

"I know! I know!" The words were wrung from him like a groan.

"But the thing is bigger and stronger than I am. It takes both of us together to fight it. If she should—leave me, I'd never pull through and I wouldn't last long."

"Never until she left Lorelei's house and turned toward the white lights of Broadway did Adoree Demorest fully realize whether her theatrical career had carried her. Adoree knew herself to be pure. But the world considered her evil, and evil in its eyes she would remain. At this moment she would gladly have changed places with that other girl whose life hung in the scales.

John Merkle had never lost interest in Lorelei, nor forgotten her refusal of his well-meant offer of assistance. It pleased him to read into her character beauties and nobilities of which she was utterly unconscious if not actually devoid. Soon after his talk with Bob he telephoned Hannibal Wharton, making known the situation in the most discreet and fitting manner of which he was capable. Strange to say, Wharton burst into a struggle, then thanked him before hanging up.

When Hannibal had accepted the news to his wife, she rushed down to a window and stood there for some time. Her eyes were fixed on the street, impassive, but her mind was evidently busy with the thought of her husband's millions. There had been a time when society knew him, but of late years she saw few people, and her name was seldom mentioned except in connection with her brother-in-law, Hannibal Wharton, who was secretly a suspicion of her complete accord with his every action, and in reporting Merkle's conversation he spoke unobscurely, as a man speaks to his friends.

"John loves to be caustic; he likes to vent his dyspepsia," the old man muttered. Mrs. Wharton did not stir; there was something uncompromising in the rigid lines of her back and in her stilly poised head. "People of her kind always have children," he continued, "and that's what I told Bob. I told him he was laying up trouble for himself."

"Bob had more to him than we thought," irrelevantly murmured the mother.

"More than we thought?" Hannibal shook his head. "Not more than I thought. I know he had it in him; you were the one."

"No, not. We both doubted. Perhaps this girl read him."

"Sure she read him!" snorted the father. "She read his bank book. But I fooled her."

"Do you remember when Bob was born? The doctors thought—"

"Of course I remember! Her husband broke in. "Those doctors said you'd never come through it."

"Yes; I wasn't strong."

"But you did. I was with you. I fought for you. I wouldn't let you die. Remember it?" The speaker moistened his lips. "Why, I never forgot."

"Bob is experiencing something like that tonight."

Hannibal started, then he fumbled

was a moment of silence. "Did you ever see a brackish baby?"

"Murder, no!"

Mrs. Demorest's gaze remained bent upon Bob, but it was focused upon great distances; her voice when she spoke was husky and awe-stricken.

"Neither did I until this one. I bet if I held it in my arms, Bob—I was frightened, and yet I seemed to know just what to do and—everything. It was strange. It hurt me terribly, for you see, I didn't know what babies meant until tonight. Now I know."

Pope saw the shining eyes suddenly fill and threaten to overflow; instead of the grotesquely overdressed and artificial stage favorite he beheld only a yearning woman whose face was softened and glorified as by a vision.

"I didn't know you cared for children."

Adoree shrugged; the words at her throat choked barbarously. "Neither did I, but I suppose every woman does if she only knew it. Tonight I began to understand what this ache inside of me means." Her gaze came back and centered upon his face, but it was frightened and panic-stricken. "I've sacrificed my right to children."

"How can you say—"

"Oh, you know it as well as I do!" A flush watered in the speaker's cheeks, then fled, leaving her white and weary. "You, of all men, must understand. I'm notorious. I'm a named woman, a wicked woman—the wickedest woman in the land—and that reputation will live in spite of anything I can do." She began to cry now in a way strange to Pope's experience.

Pope's habitual restraint all at once gave way. "Senseless!" he exploded. "The thing that counts is what you are, not what you seem to be. I know the truth."

Now there was nothing sufficiently significant about those words to bring a light of wonderment and gladness to the girl's face, but her tears ceased as abruptly as they had commenced, and nothing the slowly growing radiance of her expression. Campbell was stricken dumb with fright at the possible consequences of temerity. The knowledge of his shortcomings robbed him of confidence and helped to confuse him.

Adoree rose. For a moment she stood looking at him with a peculiar, tender smile, then took him by the lapels of his shapeless coat and drew his thin face down to hers.

"I'm not going to let you look out," she declared firmly. "You asked me didn't you?"

"Adoree! No, no! Think what you are doing!" he cried, sharply.

But she continued to smile up into his eyes with a gladness that intoxicated him.

She shrugged closer to him, murmuring, cooily, "I don't want to think we'll have plenty of time to think when we're too old to talk. Now, I just want to love you as hard as you have been loving me for the last six months."

To all young fathers there comes a certain readjustment of values. To Bob, who had always led a selfish, thoughtless existence, it was at that bewildering moment that his place at the head of his household had been usurped by another. Heretofore he had always been of supreme domestic importance, but now the order of things was completely reversed, if not hopelessly jumbled. First in consequence came this new person, tiny and vastly tyrannical because of his helplessness. Then the nurse, an awesome person—a sort of oracle and regent combined—who ruled in the name and stead of the new heir. Lorelei herself occupied no mean station in the new scheme, for at least she shared the confidence of the nurse and the doctor, and ranked above the cook and the housemaid, but not so Bob. Somewhere at the foot of the list he found his own true place.

Now, strange to say, this new arrangement was extremely agreeable to the devoted ruler. Bob had a shameless delight in doing menial service; to fetch and to carry for all hands filled him with joy. But once outside of the premises he reasserted himself, and his importance grew as gas expands. Before long his intimate friends began to avoid him like a plague. It was his partner, Kurtz, who finally dubbed him "The pestilence that stalks in darkness and the destruction that wasteth out noontides."

One day, after Bob had acquired sufficient confidence in himself and in the baby to handle it without anxiety to the nurse, he begged permission to show it to the ballroom downstairs. He returned greatly elated, explaining that the attendant, who had some impossible number of babies of his own and might therefore be considered an authority, declared this one to be the finest he had ever beheld. Oddly enough, this praise delighted Bob out of all reason. He remained in a state of suppressed excitement all that day, and on the following afternoon he again kidnapped the child for a second exhibition. It seemed that the infant's fame spread rapidly, for soon the beauts of neighboring apartments began to clamor for a sight of it, and Bob was only too eager to gratify them. Every afternoon he took his son down stairs with him, until finally Lorelei checked him as he was going out.

"Bob, dear," she said, with the faintest shadow of a smile. "I don't think it's good for him to go out so often. Why don't you ask your father and mother to come up?"

Wharton flushed, then he stammered, "I—what makes you say that—"

"Why, I guessed it the very first day." Lorelei's smile widened. "They needn't see me, you know."

Bob laid the child back in its bed "But that's just what they want. They want to see you, only I wouldn't let you be bothered. They're perfectly foolish over the kid; mother cries and father—but just wait." He rushed out of the room, and in a few moments returned with his parents.

Hannibal Wharton was deeply embarrassed, but his wife went straight to Lorelei and bending over her chair placed a kiss upon her lips. "There, said he. "When you are stronger I'm going to apologize for the way we've treated you. We're old people. We're selfish and suspicious and unreasonable, but we're not entirely inhuman. You won't be too hard on us, will you?"



"You Won't Be Too Hard on Us, Will You?"

can take 'em, but I can't make 'em." His voice rose shrilly. "Young lady, the night that baby was born I stood outside this house for hours because I was afraid to come in. And my feet hurt like the devil, too. I wouldn't lose that much sleep for the whole steel trust; but I didn't dare go back to the hotel, for mother was waiting, and I was afraid of her, too. I don't intend to go through another night like that."

Bob's mother turned to her son, saying: "She is beautiful, and she is good, too. Anybody can see that. We could love her for what she has done for you, if for nothing else."

"Well, I should say so," proudly vaunted the son. "She took a chance when she didn't care for me, and she made me into a regular fellow. Why she reformed me from the ground up I've sworn off every blessed thing I used to do."

"Including drinking?" gruffly queried the father.

"Yes."

Lorelei smiled her slow, reluctant smile at the visitors, and her voice was gentle as she said: "He thinks he has but it's hard to stop entirely, and you mustn't blame him if he forgets himself occasionally. You see, drinking is mostly a matter of temperament, after all. But he is doing splendidly, and some day perhaps—"

They nodded understandingly.

"You'd try to like us, won't you, for Bob's sake?" pleaded the old lady, timidly.

"I intend to love you both very dearly," shyly returned the girl, and noting the light in Lorelei's face, Bob Wharton was satisfied.

Restraint vanished swiftly under the old couple's evident determination to make amends, but after they had gone Lorelei became so positive that Bob said, anxiously, "I hope you weren't polite to them merely for my sake."

Lorelei shook her head. "No, I was only thinking— Do you realize that none of my own people have been to see me? That I haven't had a single word from any of them?"

Bob stirred uncomfortably; he started to speak, then checked himself as she went on, not without some effort. "I'm going to say something unpleasant, but I think you ought to know it. When they learn that your parents have taken me in and made up with us they're going to ask me for money. It's a terrible thing to say, but it's true."

"Do you want to see them? Do you want them to see the baby?"

"No!" Lorelei was pale as she made answer. "Not after all that has passed."

Bob heaved a grateful sigh. "I'm glad. They won't trouble you any more."

"Why? What?"

"I've been waiting until you were strong to tell you. I've noticed how their silence hurt you, but—it's my fault that they haven't been here. I sent them away."

"You sent them away?"

"Yes. I liked them with money and—they're happy at last. There's considerable to tell. Jim got into trouble with the police and finally sent for me. He told me everything, and—it wasn't pretty. I'd rather not repeat all he said, but it opened my eyes and showed me why they brought you here, how they put you on the auction block, and how they cried for bids. He told me things you know nothing about and could never guess. When he had finished I thanked God that they had flung you into my arms instead of—some other man's. It's a miracle that you weren't sacrificed utterly."

"Where is Jim now?"

"Somewhere in the boundless West. He gave me his promise to reform."

"Of course will."

"Of course not, and I don't expect it of him. You see, I know how hard it is to reform."

"But mother and father?"

"I'm coming to them. My dad came around the day after our baby was born and shook hands. He wanted to stamp right in here and tell you what a fool he had made of himself, but I wouldn't stand for it. Finally, when he saw the kid, he blew up entirely, and right away proposed breaking ground for a Jasper palace for the youngster. He wanted to build it in Pittsburgh where he could run in, going to and from business. Mother was

just as foolish, too. Well, when I had had my little understanding with Jim and learned the whole truth about your people I realized that no matter where we went they would be a constant nuisance to our happiness unless they were provided for. It struck me that you had made a game fight for happiness, and I couldn't stand for anything to spoil it at the last minute. I went to mother and told her the facts, and she seemed to understand as well as I how you must feel in spite of all they had done, so we shook down the governor for an endorsement."

"Bob, what do you mean?" Lorelei faltered to bewilderment.

"We asked him for a hundred thousand dollars and got it."

Lorelei gasped.

"He believed like a bull, he spat poison like a cobra, he writhed like a bucket of cats, but we put it over."

"A hundred thousand dollars!" whispered the wife.

"In a penny. And it's in the bank to your credit. But I didn't stop there. Bob's voice hardened. "I went to your mother and to your name I promised her the income from it so long, and only so long, as she and Peter stayed away from you. She accepted—rather grudgingly. I thought—and they have gone back to Yale. They have your old house, and I have their promise never to see you except upon your invitation. Of course you can go to them whenever you wish, but—they're happy, and I think we will be happier with them in Yale than in New York. I hope you don't object to my arrangement."

There was a long silence, then Lorelei sighed. "You are a very good man, Bob. It was my dream to do something of this sort, but I could never have done it so well."

Her husband bent and kissed her tenderly. "It wasn't all my doing; I had help. And you mustn't feel sad, for something tells me you're going to learn finally the meaning of a real mother's love."

"Yes—yes!" The answer came dreamily, then as a fretful complaint issued from the crib at her side Lorelei leaned forward and swiftly gathered the baby into her arms.

"Is he sick?" Bob questioned, in alarm.

"No, silly. He's only hungry."

There in the gathering dusk Bob Wharton looked on at a sight that never failed to thrill him strangely. In his wife's face was a beautiful content, and it seemed to him fitting indeed that this country girl who had come to the city in quest of life should end her search thus, with a baby at her breast.

(THE END.)

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