

The AUCTION BLOCK

A NOVEL OF NEW YORK LIFE

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"The Silver Horde" Etc.
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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 Slosson, 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.

A decent young woman in public life is forced to leave her parents because they have no regard for her reputation. She needs money and needs it badly. A rich man offers her ten thousand dollars. He says there are no strings to the gift—that he merely wants to be kind. Dare she take it? Lorelei's dilemma is set forth in interesting detail in this installment.

Lorelei finds she cannot live longer with her rascally parents. Merkle, the banker, has just offered to give her ten thousand dollars. They are discussing the proposition.

CHAPTER XI—Continued.

"Why do you offer me so much?" she asked, curiously.

"Because I like you— Oh, I mean like, not love! Because I think you're good and will need money to remain good. You're not an ordinary woman, Miss Knight; you can't live as ordinary women live, now that you're famous. New York won't let you."

"You're very kind and generous after all that has occurred and after knowing my reason for being here."

"My dear child, you didn't choose your family, and as for the other, the women of my set marry for money, just as you plan to do. So do women everywhere, for that matter, and many of them make excellent wives—yes, far better than if they had married poor men. Few girls as beautiful as you in any walk of life are allowed to marry for love. Trust me, a woman like you, if she lives up to the obligations of wifehood, deserves better than one who takes a man for love and then perhaps goes back on her bargain. Will you accept my offer?"

"No. But I thank you."

"Think it over; there is no hurry, and remember I want to help." With one of his infrequent, warm smiles, he extended his hand, and Lorelei grasped it warmly, though her face was set and strained.

She was far too well balanced for hasty resolutions, but her mind, once made up, was seldom changed. It distressed her grievously to leave her people, but at the thought of remaining longer with them every instinct rebelled. Her own kin, urged by greed, had not hesitated to cheapen and degrade her; their last offense, coupled with all that had gone before, was more than could be borne. Yet she was less resentful than sad, for it seemed to her that this was the beginning of the end. First the father had been crippled, then the moral fiber of the whole family had disintegrated until the mother had become a harpy, the brother a scamp, and she, Lorelei, a shameless hunter of men. Now the home tie, that last bond of respectability, was to be broken.

Her first impulse was to take up her abode with Adoree Demorest, but a little thought showed the inadvisability of that. In her doubt she appealed to Lllas, broaching the subject as the two girls were dressing after the performance.

When Lorelei had made known her decision, the other girl nodded her approval.

"I don't blame you a bit; a girl needs liberty. I have five rooms, and a Jap to take care of them; they're lovely."

"I can't afford an expensive place."

"Well, there are some three-room flats in the rear, and—I have it! Gertrude Moore kept one, but she's gone on the road. It's all furnished, too. If it hasn't been subtlety you can get it at your own terms. The building is respectable, too; it's as proper as the Ritz. I'm dining alone tonight. Come to dinner with me and we'll find out all about it."

Lorelei would have preferred a different location, not particularly desiring to be near Lllas; but there was no time in which to look about, and the necessity that faced her made any assistance welcome. Without more discussions she agreed, and the two girls rode uptown together.

The Elegancia, where Lllas lived, was a painfully new, overelaborate building, with a Gothic front and a Gotham rear—half its windows pasted with rental signs. Six potted palms, a Turkish rug and a jaundiced Jamaican elevator boy gave an air of welcome to the ornate marble entrance hall.

the right as they went in, explaining, "I'm on the ground floor, and find it very convenient."

"This place is too grand for me," Lorelei objected.

"Oh, offer your own price for Gertrude's flat if you like it. They're crazy for tenants. It's cheaper than hotels—if you want to save money."

Lorelei was surprised to find her friend's quarters not only richly but lavishly furnished. The decorations were harmonious and bespoke a reckless disregard of cost. A fluffy Japanese spangle with protruding eyes and distorted visage capered deliriously at its mistress's feet.

But the objects that intrigued the visitor most strongly were several paintings. They were of a kind she had seldom seen, and in the afternoon light one stood out with particularly startling effect. It was a dusky landscape; there was a stream, a meadow edge, trees just growing black against a dying sunset, a herd of cattle coming out of the west. Before this picture Lorelei paused, staring with wide eyes of wonder.

Lllas flung her hat carelessly into a chair, lit a cigarette from a Tiffany humidor, then turned with the spangle in her arms and, beholding her guest with rapt, upturned face, remarked, with a laugh:

"Looks like the real thing, doesn't it?"

"Oh—it's wonderful—so clean and cool and quiet! I've seen cattle in Vaile that looked just like those, when I went barefoot in the grass."

"Some Dutchman painted it—his name's on the corner. He's dead now, I believe. It used to hang in some museum—I forget where. I like pictures of women best, but—" She shrugged and left the sentence unfinished. "There's a dandy in my bedroom, although it didn't cost half as much as that barnyard thing. The frame's a foot wide and covered with solid gold."

"I had no idea you lived like this," Lorelei peered through a pair of French doors and into a perfectly appointed library, with a massive mahogany table, deep lounging chairs, a writing desk, and a dome-crowned reading lamp.

"My study," Lllas laughed, shortly. "That's where I improve my mind—not. The books are dead. Now come; Hitchy Koo must have dinner ready. His name isn't Hitchy Koo, but it sounds like it, and he's the cutest little thing; got the cutest little swing." She moved down the hall, humming the chorus of the senseless popular song from which she had quoted.

Everywhere was the same evidence of good taste in decoration and luxury of equipment, but a suspicion had entered Lorelei's mind, and she availed comment. Hitchy Koo was cook, butler and house-boy, and in view of Miss Lynn's disorderly habits it was evident that he had all he could do to keep the place presentable. His mistress ate without appetite and in a hypercritical mood that took no account of the wasteful attempts to please her. Quite regardless of the patient little Jap, she found fault with him savagely, so that Lorelei was often painfully embarrassed.

"So you like my home, do you?" she queried, after a time.

"I've never seen one so beautiful."

Lllas nodded. "Hitchy sleeps out, and that leaves me the whole place. Jarvis furnished it, even to the books, and I'm studying to be a lady." Again she laughed mockingly. "I make a bluff at reading, but so long as I talk about Napoleon he never thinks to question me. I know that French gink backward."

"I wish I had a hobby—something to interest me, something to live for," said Lorelei, lamely.

"Yes. It gives you something to think about when you're alone. It helps you to—stand things." For the first time Lllas showed a trace of feeling in her voice; she dropped her chin into her palm and, leaning upon the table, stared as if at a vision. Her dark eyes were somber, her brows were lowered and drawn together.

The slipshod informality of the meal, the constant faultfinding of the hostess, made it something of a trial. Lorelei was not sorry when it was over and Lllas took her to look at the vacant flat.

Miss Moore's apartment offered a wide contrast to the one they had just quitted, being very small and very modestly furnished; but it was on the second floor, convenient to both elevator and stairway. It boasted a piano, and the superintendent allowed his prospective tenant to name her own terms. She descended with relief, feeling that she had made not a bad bargain.

his money out of the steel business—the business into which I was born. Have you ever been through a mill?"

"No."

"It's wonderful, terrible. I can smell the hot slag, the scorching cinders, the smoke, to this day. Some nights I wake up—screaming, it's so vivid. I see the glare of the furnaces, the belching flames, the showers of sparks from the converters, the streams of white-hot metal, and they seem to pour over me. I have the same dream always; I've had it ever since the night after my father was killed."

"You told me he was killed in a steel mill."

"Yes, before my eyes. I saw it." Lllas shuddered. "I was a little girl then, but I've never forgotten. We were poor, dreadfully poor, like all the Jews— Oh, yes; didn't you know I'm a Jew?"

"Then 'Lllas Lynn'—?"

"Stage name. It's really Lily Levinski. We were Polish. I was dragged up, along with the other workmen's children, in the soot and grime of the Pennsylvania mills. 'Hell must be like those mills—it couldn't be worse.'"

Lorelei had never heard her roommate speak with such feeling nor in such a strain. But Lllas seemed quite unconscious of her little burst of eloquence. She was seated, leaning forward now with hands locked between her knees; her eyes were brilliant in the gathering dusk. Her memories seemed to affect her with a kind of horror, yet to hold her fascinated and to demand expression.

"I was an imaginative kid," she continued. "It's a trait of our people, like—well, like their distrust of authority and their fear of law. Father worked in the Bessemer plant, like any hunkie, and the women used to bring the men's lunches to them. Mother wasn't strong, and that duty fell to me."

"It was one of the biggest mills in Pennsylvania, and its tonnage was always heavy because the superintendent was a slave driver. He was one of those men who are born without a soul or feelings, and he had no interest in anything except rails and plates."

"One day I took my stand just outside the Bessemer plant. It was a big shell of steel girders and corrugated iron, and the side where we were was open. Father saw me and waved his hand—he always waved at me—then I saw the superintendent coming through—a big, square-faced man whom everybody feared. Wherever he went the hunkies danced; he could put life into a dead man's limbs, that man. It was because of their great fear of him and his furious urging that—something happened."

Lllas had begun her recital slowly, without apparent object, but once into it she seemed unable to stop; and now, although her words came haltingly, it was plain that she had worked herself into a sort of hysteria in which she gave little heed to her hearer. It was characteristic of her that she could so excite herself by the power of visualization as to be completely transported.

"Something went wrong overhead; anyhow, the converter dumped too soon. Men were working directly un-



"I Was an Imaginative Kid," She Continued.

derneath, father among the rest. I saw him go down under a stream of liquid steel—"

Lorelei's horrified exclamation went unnoticed; Lllas's voice was shrill.

"Yes. He was blotted out, right before my eyes, in an instant. In the time it takes to snap your finger, he—and the others—were gone, changed into smoke, into absolute nothingness. There was no insurance, and nobody took the blame. Another Jew family, a few more widowed and fatherless

foreigners, among that army, meant nothing. I've never forgotten that day, nor the figure of that shouting, swearing man who came through the Bessemer mill crying for more speed, more speed, more speed."

"I suppose I was too little to make any foolish vows of vengeance, for I was only a ragged mite of a child among a horde of slaves, but when I grew older I often dreamed of having that man in my power, and—making him suffer. Who would—who could have imagined that I'd ever be living on money wrung from the labor of men like my father, and be in a position to meet that man on an equal footing? I never did—not in my wildest moments, and yet—here I am—and the day of reckoning gets closer all the time."

She ended with an abruptness that evidenced her agitation. Rising, she jerked a beaded chain that depended from the center lamp, and the room was flooded with mellow light; then she drew out the table drawer at her guest's elbow, and with shaking hands selected a small box from the confusion within. Lorelei recoiled at the sight of a revolver hidden among the disorder.

"Goodness! I hope it isn't loaded," the latter exclaimed. "Your story gives me the creeps and that thing—seems to fit in."

"It's loaded, all right. I keep it for protection. I don't know why I told you all this," she half apologized to Lorelei. "It has upset me, as it always does."

"How did you ever grow up and—educate yourself?"

"I hardly know. I filled out when I began to get something to eat, and I developed a good figure. Finally I got to be a model. I was quick to learn, and when rich dames came in I watched them. I became good-looking, too, although not so pretty as I am now, for I couldn't put the time or money on it. Then I came to New York. The rest isn't a pretty story."

Miss Lynn made this declaration calmly as she bustled herself with the glass her servant had fetched. She dissolved a portion of the powder she had taken from the box in the spoon, then carefully transferred the liquid into the cap of a pearl-and-gold fountain pen. Inserting the open end of the receptacle into first one, then the other nostril, she inhaled the contents.

"What are you doing?" asked Lorelei curiously.

"Something to quiet my nerves. I wonder why I told you all this?" She eyed her guest speculatively, then shrugged. "Well, since we're to be neighbors, we must be friends, and there's no harm done. Now that Jarvis and I are engaged, he's awfully particular about the company I keep, but he likes you. How different they act when they're in earnest! He even wants me to quit work now, but I like the excitement—it's better than waiting." She glanced at her wrist-watch and drew herself together. "Our time is up, dear; we must get back to the show-shop."

CHAPTER XII.

Lorelei exploded her bomb at breakfast Sunday morning, and the effect was all she had dreaded. Fortunately Jim had gone out. The girl's humiliation at Merkle's disclosure and her merciless accusations left little to be said in self-defense. Of course, the usual tears followed, likewise repetitions of the time-worn plea that it had all been done for Lorelei's own good and had been prompted by unselfish love for her.

"I'm beginning to doubt that," Lorelei said, slowly. "I think you all look upon me as a piece of property to do with as you please. Perhaps I'm disloyal and ungrateful, but—I can't help it. And I can't forgive you yet. When I can I'll come home again, but it's impossible for me to live here now, feeling as I do. I want to love you—so I'm—going to run away."

Tragically, through her tears, Mrs. Knight inquired: "What will become of us? We can't live—Jim never does anything for us."

In Peter's watery stare was abject fright. "Lorelei wouldn't let us suffer," he ventured, tremulously. "I'm sick. I may die any time, so the doctor says." He was indeed a changed man; that easy good-humor that had been his most likable trait had been lost in habitual peevishness.

"I'll keep the house running as before," his daughter assured him, "and I'll manage to get along on what's left. But you mustn't be quite so extravagant, that's all. I sha'n't be—and you wouldn't force me to do anything I'd regret, I'm sure." She choked down her pity at the sight of the invalid's pasty face and flabby form, then turned to the window. Her emotion prevented her from observing the relief that greeted her words.

The moment was painful; Lorelei's eyes were dim, and she hardly saw the dreary prospect of fire escapes, of whitewashed brick, of bare, gaping back yards overhung with clotheslines, like nerves exposed in the process of dissection.

"Yes, things will go on just the

same," she repeated, then clenched her hands and burst forth miserably: "Oh, I know how badly you need money! I know what the doctor says, and—I'll get it somehow. It seems to me I'd pay any price just to see dad walking around again and to know that you were both provided for. Money, money! You both worship it, and—I'm getting so I can't think of anything else. Nothing else seems worth while."

Two hours later a dray called for her trunks and took them across town. The Elegancia apartments looked down on her with chill disapproval as she entered; the elevator man stared at her with black, hostile eyes until she had made herself known; and even the superintendent—in a less pretentious structure than the Elegancia he would have been the janitor—now that "No. 6" was rented, did not extend even a perfunctory welcome as he delivered the keys. On the contrary, he



"Money, Money! You Both Worship It."

made known the exclusive character of the house in such a pointed manner as to offend her.

Lllas was out, she learned, which probably meant that she was still asleep. Lorelei ascended to her new home in low spirits. Now that she saw the place in strong daylight, she was vaguely disappointed. She was very lonely, very friendless, and very much discouraged. Then she noticed the telephone and sprang toward it.

Adoree was at home; her voice answered cheerily, and her interruptions of amazement and delight caused Lorelei's message to spin itself out unduly. Without waiting for an invitation Adoree cried:

"Let me come and help. Please! We'll use both the poodles for mops, and I'll be there in ten minutes. You're a perfect dear to say yes, for I know you want to do it all yourself."

"Come now—quickly. I'm scared—"

Lorelei begged, in tearful tones. "I'll drive right up in my chariot of flame; I was going out, and it's waiting while I kalsomine my face. Are you sure everything is good and dirty? Goody! We'll do it ourselves. Good-by."

Side by side the girls worked; they forgot their luncheon, then sent the sad-faced footman in search of a delicatessen store, and ate ravenously with a newspaper for tablecloth. By evening the place found itself for once in its life clean and orderly, and the two occupants dressed and went out to a nearby hotel for dinner. Returning, they put the final touches to their task.

When Adoree left, late that night, she kissed her friend, saying:

"Thank you for the loveliest Sunday I ever had. It was splendid, and I'll come again tomorrow."

The theatrical profession is full of women whose lives are flawless; hence it had not been difficult for Lorelei to build up a reputation that insured respect, although her connection with a Bergman show made the task more difficult than it would otherwise have been. During the two years of her stage experience no scandal had attached to her name, and she had therefore begun to feel secure. In that period she had met many men of the usual types that are attracted by footlight favorites, and they had pressed attentions upon her, but so long as she had been recognized as the Lady Unobtainable they had not forced their unwelcome advances. Now, however, that a scurrilous newspaper story had associated her name with that of a wealthy man, she began to note a change. Bergman's advances had been only another disquieting symptom of what she had to expect—an indication of the new color her reputation had assumed.

Nobel Bergman's commercial caution steered him wide of the moral women in his employ, but the other kind, and especially the innocent or the inexperienced, had cause to know and to fear him. In appearance he was slender and foppish; he affected a pronounced waist line in his coats, his eyes were large and dark and brilliant, his mouth was sensual. He never raised his voice, he never appeared to see plain women; such girls as accepted his attentions were sure of advancement, but paid for it in other ways.

On Monday evening Mr. Slosson, the press agent, thrust his head through the dressing-room door and announced to Lorelei:

"Bergman says Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire is giving a box party, and she told him to fetch you around for supper. She owns a piece of this show, and the theater belongs to the estate, so you'll just have to go."

"Mercy! Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire, the college boy's giddy godmother," Lllas mocked. "I suppose she's out slumming, with her kindergarten class."

Slosson frowned at this levity. "Will you go?" he inquired. "Yes or no?"

"Um—m—I'll have to say 'yes,' it seems."

"Good. I'll phone Bergman."

When the press agent had gone Lllas regarded her companion with open compassion. "Gee! But you're going to have a grand time. That bunch thinks it's smart to be seen with show people, and of course they'll dance all night."

"And I did so want to go straight back to my new home." When she joined her employer after the show she was in no very agreeable frame of mind.

Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire was a vermillion-haired widow with a chest like a blacksmith, who had become famous for her jewels and her social eccentricities. She and her party were established at one of the uptown "Trottoires," when Nobel Bergman and Lorelei arrived. Three examples of blushing boyhood devoted themselves to a languid blonde girl of thirty-five, and the hostess herself was dancing with another tender youth, but she came forward, panting.

"So good of you to come, dear," she cried. "This is Miss Wyeth, and these are my boys, Mr.—" She spoke four meaningless names, and four meaningless smiles responded; four wet-combed heads were bowed. She turned to her blonde companion, saying "She is pretty, isn't she, Alice?"

"Very," Alice agreed, without removing her eyes from the youth at her left. Bergman invited Lorelei to finish the dance; then he inquired, "What do you think of her?"

"Her hair fascinates me; she looks as if she had just burst out of a thicket of henna leaves," Bergman laughed, silently. "But why did she invite me?"

"I told her to."

"You?"

"I knew you'd refuse if I asked you."

"So? Then I'm really your guest instead of hers."

"We'll leave whenever you say."

Throughout the rest of the dance Lorelei was silent, offended at Bergman's deception and uncomfortable at her own situation; but the hostess had ordered a supper of the unsatisfactory kind usual in such places; little as she liked the prospect, she could not leave at once.

The meal was interrupted regularly each time the music played, for dancing was more than a fad in this set—it was a serious business with which nothing was allowed to interfere. There was considerable drinking. Bergman, who devoted himself assiduously to his employee, showing more effect from it than the others. As the night wore on he became more and more offensive; he grew coarse in a sly, tentative manner, as if feeling his ground. He changed the manner of his dancing, also, until Lorelei could no longer tolerate him.

"Getting tired, my dear?" he queried, when she declined to join the whirling throng.

"Yes. I want to go."

"Still on Amsterdam avenue?"

"No, I'm living alone—now."

Bergman started, his eyes brightened. "Ah! Then you've come to your senses finally. Merkle fixed it—eh? I can do more for you than Merkle can." "Merkle?" She eyed him coolly.

"Oh, play your game with strangers, but don't put me off. Weren't you caught with him at the Chateau? Well, then—"

"You needn't finish. I'm going home now."

He laid a detaining hand upon her arm. "You never learned that speech in one of my shows," he said, "and you're not going to say good night to me. Understand?" He grinned at her with disgusting confidence, and she flung off his touch. The returning dancers offered a welcome diversion.

Lorelei dreaded an open clash with the manager, knowing that the place, the hour and the conditions were ill suited to a scene. She had learned to smile and to consider swiftly, to cross the thin ice of an embarrassing situation with light steps. Quickly she turned to Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire, who was bowing effusively to a newcomer.

"My word! What is Bob Wharton doing here?" exclaimed the widow.

"Bob Wharton? Where?" Miss Wyeth's languor vanished electrically; she wrenched her attention from the wire-haired fraternity man at her side. Lorelei felt a sense of great thanksgiving.

Mrs. Thompson-Bellaire beckoned, and Wharton came forward, his eyes fixed gloomily upon Lorelei.

"You rascal! So this is how you waste your evenings. I am surprised, but, now that we've caught you, won't you join us?"

Wharton glanced at the four pawns and hesitated. "It's long past nine; I'm afraid the boys will be late for school."

Will Bob Wharton rescue her from Bergman only to force his own drunken attentions on the unfortunate Lorelei?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Humanity's Falling.

"Some men," said Uncle Eben, "pears to enjoy buyin' gold bricks for de sake of showin' how much money dey has to waste."