

***REX
BEACH***

An aerial photograph of the New York City skyline at sunset. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a vibrant orange and red near the horizon. The Empire State Building is the central focus, illuminated with warm lights. Other skyscrapers and the city's dense urban landscape are visible in the foreground and middle ground. The water of the harbor is visible on the right side.

***THE AUCTION
BLOCK***

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Rex Beach

The Auction Block

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CHAPTER I

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Peter Knight flung himself into the decrepit arm-chair beside the center-table and growled:

"Isn't that just my luck? And me a Democrat for twenty years. There's nothing in politics, Jimmy."

His son James smiled crookedly, with a languid tolerance bespeaking amusement and contempt. James prided himself upon his forbearance, and it was rarely indeed that he betrayed more than a hint of the superiority which he felt toward his parent.

"Politics is all right, provided you're a good picker," he said, with all the assurance of twenty-two, "but you fell off the wrong side of the fence, and you're sore."

"Of course I am. Wouldn't anybody be sore?"

"These country towns always go in for the reform stuff, every so often.

If you'd listen to me and—"

His father interrupted harshly: "Now, cut that out. I don't want to go to New York, and I won't." Peter Knight tried to look forceful, but the expression did not fit his weak, complacent features. He was a plump man with red cheeks rounded by habitual good humor; his chin was short, and beneath it were other chins, distended and sagging as if from the weight of chuckles within. When he had succeeded

in fixing a look of determination upon his countenance the result was an artificial scowl and a palpably false pout. Wearing such a front, he continued: "When I say 'no' I mean it, and the subject is closed. I like Vale, I know everybody here, and everybody knows me."

"That's why it's time to move," said Jim, with another unpleasant curl of his lip. "As long as they didn't know you you got past. But you'll never hold another office."

"Indeed! My record's open to inspection. I made the best sheriff in—"

"Two years. Don't kid yourself, pa. Your foot slipped when the trolley line went through."

"What do you know about the trolley line?" angrily demanded Mr. Knight.

"Well, I know as much as the county knows. And I know something about the big dam, too. You got into the mud, pa, but you didn't go deep enough to find the frogs. Fogarty got his, didn't he?"

Mr. Knight breathed deep with indignation.

"Senator Fogarty is my good friend. I won't let you question his honor, although you do presume to question mine."

"Of course he's your friend; that's why he's fixed you for this New York job. He's not like these Reubs; he remembers a good turn and blows back with another. He's a real politician."

"'Department of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity,'" sneered Peter. "It sounds good, but the salary is fifteen hundred a year. A clerk—at my age!"

"Say, d'you suppose Tammany men live on their salaries?" Jimmy inquired. "Wake up! This is your chance to horn into the real herd. In New York politics is a vocation; up here it's a vacation—everybody tries it once, like music lessons. If you'd been hooked up with Tammany instead of the state machine you'd have been taken care of."

"I tell you I don't like cities. It's no place to raise kids."

At this James betrayed some irritation. "I'm of age, and Lorelei's a grown woman. If we don't get out of Vale I'll still be a brakeman on a soda-fountain when I'm your age."

"If you'd worked hard you'd have had an interest in the drug store now."

"Rats!"

At this juncture Mrs. Knight, having finished the supper dishes and set her bread to rise, entered the shoddy parlor. Jim turned to her, shrugging his shoulders with an air of washing his hands of a disagreeable subject. "Pa's weakened again," he explained. "He won't go."

"Me, a clerk—at my age!" mumbled Peter.

"I've been trying to tell him that he'd get a half-Nelson on Tammany inside of a year. He squeezed the sheriff's office till it squealed, and if he can pinch a dollar out of this burg he can—"

"You shut up! I don't like your way of saying things," snarled Mr. Knight.

His wife spoke for the first time, with brief conclusiveness.

"I wrote and thanked Senator Fogarty for his offer and told him you'd accept."

"You—what?" Peter was dumfounded.

"Yes"—Mrs. Knight seemed oblivious of his wrath—"we're going to make a change."

Mrs. Knight was a large woman well advanced beyond that indefinite turning-point of middle age; in her unattractive face was none of the easy good nature so unmistakably stamped upon her husband's. Peter J. was inherently optimistic; his head was forever hidden in a roseate aura of hopefulness and expectation. Under easy living he had grayed and fattened; his eyes were small and colorless, his cheeks full and veined with tiny sprays of purple, his hands soft and limber. What had once been a measure of good looks was hidden now behind a flabby, indefinite mediocrity which an unusual carefulness in dress could not disguise. He was big-hearted in little things; in big things he was small. He told an excellent story, but never imagined one, and his laugh was hearty though insincere. Men who knew him well laughed with him, but did not indorse his notes.

His wife was of a totally different stamp, showing evidence of unusual force. Her thin lips, her clean-cut nose betokened purpose; a pair of alert, unpleasant eyes spoke of a mental activity that was entirely lacking in her mate, and she was generally recognized as the source of what little prominence he had attained.

"Yes, we're going to make a change," she repeated. "I'm glad, too, for I'm tired of housework."

"You don't have to do your own work. There's Lorelei to help."

"You know I wouldn't let her do it."

"Afraid it would spoil her hands, eh?" Mr. Knight snorted, disdainfully. "What are hands made for, anyhow? Honest work never hurt mine."

Jim stirred and smiled; the retort upon his lips was only too obvious.

"She's too pretty," said the mother. "You don't realize it; none of us do, but—she's beautiful. Where she gets her good looks from I don't know."

"What's the difference? It won't hurt her to wash dishes. She wouldn't have to keep it up forever, anyhow; she can have any fellow in the county."

"Yes, and she'll marry, sure, if we stay here."

Knight's colorless eyes opened. "Then what are you talking about going away to a strange place for? It ain't every girl that can have her pick."

Mrs. Knight began slowly, musingly: "You need some plain talk, Peter. I don't often tell you just what I think, but I'm going to now. You're past fifty; you've spent twenty years puttering around at politics, with business as a side issue, and what have you got to show for it? Nothing. The reformers are in at last, and you're out for good. You had your chance and you missed it. You were always expecting something big, some fat office with big profits, but it never came. Do you know why? Because YOU aren't big, that's why. You're little, Peter; you know it, and so does the party."

The object of this address swelled pompously; his cheeks deepened in hue and distended; but while he was summoning words for a defense his wife ran on evenly:

"The party used you just as long as you could deliver something, but you're down and out now, and they've thrown you over. Fogarty offers to pay his debt, and I'm not going to refuse his help."

"I suppose you think you could have done better if you'd been in my place," Peter grumbled. He was angry, yet the undeniable truth of his wife's words struck home. "That's the woman of it. You kick because we're poor, and then want me to take a fifteen-hundred-dollar job."

"Bother the salary! It will keep us going as long as necessary"

"Eh?" Mr. Knight looked blank.

"I'm thinking of Lorelei. She's going to give us our chance."

"Lorelei?"

"Yes. You wonder why I've never let her spoil her hands—why I've scrimped to give her pretty clothes, and taught her to take care of her figure, and made her go out with young people. Well, I knew what I was doing; it was part of her schooling. She's old enough now; and she has everything that any girl ever had, so far as looks go. She's going to do for us what you never have been and never will be able to do, Peter Knight. She's going to make us rich. But she can't do it in Vale."

"Ma's right," declared James. "New York's the place for pretty women; the town is full of them."

"If it's full of pretty women what chance has she got?" queried Peter.

"She can't break into society on my fifteen hundred—"

"She won't need to. She can go on the stage."

"Good Lord! What makes you think she can act?"

"Do you remember that Miss Donald who stopped at Myrtle Lodge last summer? She's an actress."

"No!" Mr. Knight was amazed.

"She told me a good deal about the show business. She said Lorelei wouldn't have the least bit of trouble getting a position. She gave me a note to a manager, too, and I sent him Lorelei's photograph. He wrote right back that he'd give her a place."

"Really?"

"Yes; he's looking for pretty girls with good figures. His name is Bergman."

Jim broke in eagerly. "You've heard of Bergman's Revues, pa. We saw one last summer, remember? Bergman's a big fellow."

"THAT show? Why, that was—rotten. It isn't a very decent life, either."

"Don't worry about Sis," advised Jim. "She can take care of herself, and she'll grab a millionaire sure—with her looks. Other girls are doing it every day—why not her? Ma's got the right idea."

Impassively Mrs. Knight resumed her argument. "New York is where the money is—and the women that go with money. It's the market-place. The stage advertises a pretty girl and gives her chances to meet rich men. Here in Vale there's nobody with money, and, besides, people know us. The Stevens girls have been nasty to Lorelei all winter, and she's never invited to the golf-club dances any more."

At this intelligence Mr. Knight burst forth indignantly:

"They're putting on a lot of airs since the Interurban went through; but Ben Stevens forgets who helped him get the franchise. I could tell a lot of things—"

"Bergman writes," continued Mrs. Knight, "that Lorelei wouldn't have to go on the road at all if she didn't care to. The real pretty show-girls stay right in New York."

Jim added another word. "She's the best asset we've got, pa, and if we all work together we'll land her in the money, sure."

Peter Knight pinched his full red lips into a pucker and stared speculatively at his wife. It was not often that she openly showed her hand to him.

"It seems like an awful long chance," he said.

"Not so long, perhaps, as you think," his wife assured him. "Anyhow, it's our ONLY chance, and we're not popular in Vale."

"Have you talked to her about it?"

"A little. She'll do anything we ask. She's a good girl that way."

The three were still buried in discussion when Lorelei appeared at the door.

"I'm going over to Mabel's," she paused a moment to say. "I'll be back early, mother."

In Peter Knight's eyes, as he gazed at his daughter, there was something akin to shame; but Jim evinced only a hard, calculating appraisal. Both men inwardly acknowledged that the mother had spoken less than half the truth, for the girl was extravagantly, bewitchingly attractive. Her face and form would have been noticeable anywhere and under any circumstances; but now in contrast with the unmodified

homeliness of her parents and brother her comeliness was almost startling. The others seemed to harmonize with their drab surroundings, with the dull, unattractive house and its furnishings, but Lorelei was in violent opposition to everything about her. She wore her beauty unconsciously, too, as a princess wears the purple of her rank. Neither in speech nor in look did she show a trace of her father's fatuous commonplaceness, and she gave no sign of her mother's coldly calculating disposition. Equally the girl differed from her brother, for Jim was anemic, underdeveloped, sallow; his only mark of distinction being his bright and impudent eye, while she was full-blooded, healthy, and clean. Splendidly distinctive, from her crown of warm amber hair to her shapely, slender feet, it seemed that all the hopes, all the aspirations, all the longings of bygone generations of Knights had flowered in her. As muddy waters purify themselves in running, so had the Knight blood, coming through unpleasant channels, finally clarified and sweetened itself in this girl. In the color of her eyes she resembled neither parent; Mrs. Knight's were close-set and hard; Peter's shallow, indefinite, weak. Lorelei's were limpid and of a twilight blue. Her single paternal inheritance was a smile perhaps a trifle too ready and too meaningless. Yet it was a pleasant smile, indicative of a disposition toward courtesy, if not self-depreciation.

But there all resemblance ceased. Lorelei Knight was mysteriously different from her kin; she might almost have sprung from a different strain, and except as one of those "throwbacks" which sometimes occur in a mediocre family, when an exotic offspring blooms like a delicate blossom in a

bed of weeds, she was inexplicable. Simple living had made her strong, yet she remained exquisite; behind a natural and a deep reserve she was vibrant with youth and spirits.

In the doorway she hesitated an instant, favoring the group with her shadowy, impersonal smile. In her gaze there was a faint inquiry, for it was plain that she had interrupted a serious discussion. She came forward and rested a hand upon her father's thinly haired bullet-head. Peter reached up and took it in his own moist palm.

"We were just talking about you," he said.

"Yes?" The smile remained as the girl's touch lingered.

"Your ma thinks I'd better accept that New York offer on your account."

"On mine? I don't understand."

Peter stroked the hand in his clasp, and his weak, upturned face was wrinkled with apprehension. "She thinks you should see the world and—make something of yourself."

"That would be nice." Lorelei's lips were still parted as she turned toward her mother in some bewilderment.

"You'd like the city, wouldn't you?" Mrs. Knight inquired.

"Why, yes; I suppose so."

"We're poor—poorer than we've ever been. Jim will have to work, and so will you."

"I'll do what I can, of course; but—I don't know how to do anything.

I'm afraid I won't be much help at first."

"We'll see to that. Now, run along, dearie."

When she had gone Peter gave a grunt of conviction.

"She IS pretty," he acknowledged; "pretty as a picture, and you certainly dress her well. She'd ought to make a

good actress."

Jim echoed him enthusiastically. "Pretty? I'll bet Bernhardt's got nothing on her for looks. She'll have a brownstone hut on Fifth Avenue and an air-tight limousine one of these days, see if she don't."

"When do you plan to leave?" faltered the father.

Mrs. Knight answered with some satisfaction: "Rehearsals commence in May."

CHAPTER II

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Mr. Campbell Pope was a cynic. He had cultivated a superb contempt for those beliefs which other people cherish; he rejoiced in an open rebellion against convention, and manifested this hostility in an exaggerated carelessness of dress and manner. It was perhaps his habit of thought as much as anything else that had made him a dramatic critic; but it was a knack for keen analysis and a natural, caustic wit that had raised him to eminence in his field. Outwardly he was a sloven and a misanthrope; inwardly he was simple and rather boyish, but years of experience in a box-office, then as advance man and publicity agent for a circus, and finally as a Metropolitan reviewer, had destroyed his illusions and soured his taste for theatrical life. His column was widely read; his name was known; as a prophet he was uncanny, hence managers treated him with a gingerly courtesy not always quite sincere.

Most men attain success through love of their work; Mr. Pope had become an eminent critic because of his hatred for the drama and all things dramatic. Nor was he any more enamoured of journalism, being in truth by nature bucolic, but after trying many occupations and failing in all of them he had returned to his desk after each excursion into other fields. First-night audiences knew him now, and had come to

look for his thin, sharp features. His shapeless, wrinkled suit that resembled a sleeping-bag; his flannel shirt, always tieless and frequently collarless, were considered attributes of genius; and, finding New York to be amazingly gullible, he took a certain delight in accentuating his eccentricities. At especially prominent premieres he affected a sweater underneath his coat, but that was his nearest approach to formal evening dress. Further concession to fashion he made none.

Owing to the dearth of new productions this summer, Pope had undertaken a series of magazine articles descriptive of the reigning theatrical beauties, and, while he detested women in general and the painted favorites of Broadway in particular, he had forced himself to write the common laudatory stuff which the public demanded. Only once had he given free rein to his inclinations and written with a poisoned pen. To-night, however, as he entered the stage door of Bergman's Circuit Theater, it was with a different intent.

Regan, the stage-door tender, better known since his vaudeville days as "The Judge," answered his greeting with a lugubrious shake of a bald head.

"I'm a sick man, Mr. Pope. Same old trouble."

"M-m-m. Kidneys, isn't it?"

"No. Rheumatism. I'm a beehive swarmin' with pains."

"To be sure. It's Hemphill, the door-man at the Columbus, who has the floating kidney. I paid for his operation."

"Hemphill. Operation! Ha!" The Judge cackled in a voice hoarse from alcoholic excesses. "He bilked you, Mr. Pope. He's the guy that put the kid in kidney. There's nothing

wrong with him. He could do his old acrobatic turn if he wanted to."

"I remember the act."

"Me an' Greenberg played the same bill with him twenty years ago." The Judge leaned forward, and a strong odor of whisky enveloped the caller.

"Could you slip me four bits for some liniment?"

The critic smiled. "There's a dollar, Regan. Try Scotch for a change. It's better for you than these cheap blends. And don't breathe toward a lamp, or you'll ignite."

The Judge laughed wheezingly. "I do take a drop now and then."

"A drop? You'd better take a tumble, or Bergman will let you out."

"See here, you know all the managers, Mr. Pope. Can't you find a job for a swell dame?" the Judge inquired, anxiously.

"Who is she?"

"Lottie Devine. She's out with the 'Peach Blossom Girls.'"

"Lottie Devine. Why, she's your wife, isn't she?"

"Sure, and playing the 'Wheel' when she belongs in musical comedy. She dances as good as she did when we worked together—after she gets warmed up—and she looks great in tights—swellest legs in burlesque, Mr. Pope. Can't you place her?"

"She's a trifle old, I'm afraid."

"Huh! She wigs up a lot better'n some of the squabs in this troupe.

Believe me, she'd fit any chorus."

"Why don't you ask Bergman?"

Mr. Regan shook his hairless head. "He's dippy on 'types.' This show's full of 'em: real blondes, real brunettes, bold and dashin' ones, tall and statelies, blushers, shrinkers, laughers, and sadlings. He won't stand for make-up; he wants 'em with the dew on. They've got to look natural for Bergman. That's some of 'em now." He nodded toward a group of young, fresh-cheeked girls who had entered the stage door and were hurrying down the hall. "There ain't a Hepnerized ensemble in the whole first act, and they wear talcum powder instead of tights. It's dimples he wants, not 'fats.' How them girls stand the draught I don't know. It would kill an old-timer."

"I've come to interview one of Bergman's 'types'; that new beauty, Miss Knight. Is she here yet?"

"Sure; her and the back-drop, too. She carries the old woman for scenery." Mr. Regan took the caller's card and shuffled away, leaving Pope to watch the stream of performers as they entered and made for their quarters. There were many women in the number, and all of them were pretty. Most of them were overdressed in the extremes of fashion; a few quietly garbed ladies and gentlemen entered the lower dressing-rooms reserved for the principals.

It was no novel sight to the reviewer, whose theatrical apprenticeship had been thorough, yet it never failed to awaken his deepest cynicism. Somewhere within him was a puritanical streak, and he still cherished youthful memories. He reflected now that it was he who had laid the foundation

for the popularity of the girl he had come to interview; for he had picked her out of the chorus of the preceding Revue and commented so enthusiastically upon her beauty that this season had witnessed her advancement to a speaking part. Through Pope's column attention had been focused upon Bergman's latest acquisition; and once New York had paused to look carefully at this fresh young new-comer, her fame had spread. But he had never met the girl herself, and he wondered idly what effect success had had upon her. A total absence of scandal had argued against any previous theatrical experience.

Meanwhile he exchanged greetings with the star—a clear-eyed man with the face of a scholar and the limbs of an athlete. The latter had studied for the law; he had the drollest legs in the business, and his salary exceeded that of Supreme Court Justice. They were talking when Mr. Regan returned to tell the interviewer that he would be received.

Pope followed to the next floor and entered a brightly lighted, overheated dressing-room, where Lorelei and her mother were waiting. It was a glaring, stuffy cubbyhole ventilated by means of the hall door and a tiny window opening from the lavatory at the rear. Along the sides ran mirrors, beneath which was fixed a wide make-up shelf. From the ceiling depended several unshaded incandescent globes which flooded the place with a desert heat and radiance. An attempt had been made to give the room at least a semblance of coolness by hanging an attractively figured cretonne over the entrance and over the wardrobe hooks fixed in the rear wall; but the result was hardly successful. The same material had been utilized to cover

the shelves which were littered with a bewildering assortment of make-up tins, cold-cream cans, rouge and powder boxes, whitening bottles, wig-blocks, and the multifarious disordered accumulations of a dressing-room. The walls were half hidden behind photographs, impaled upon pins, like entomological specimens; photographs were thrust into the mirror frames, they were propped against the heaps of tins and boxes or hidden beneath the confusion of toilet articles. But the collection was not limited to this variety of specimen. One section of the wall was devoted to telegraph and cable forms, bearing messages of felicitation at the opening of "The Revue of 1913." A zoologist would have found the display uninteresting; but a society reporter would have reveled in the names—and especially in the sentiments—inscribed upon the yellow sheets. Some were addressed to Lorelei Knight, others to Lilas Lynn, her roommate.

Pope found Lorelei completely dressed, in expectation of his arrival. She wore the white and silver first-act costume of the Fairy Princess. Both she and her mother were plainly nonplussed at the appearance of their caller; but Mrs. Knight recovered quickly from the shock and said agreeably:

"Lorelei was frightened to death at your message yesterday. She was almost afraid to let you interview her after what you wrote about Adoree Demorest."

Pope shrugged. "Your daughter is altogether different to the star of the Palace Garden, Mrs. Knight. Demorest trades openly upon her notoriety and—I don't like bad women. New York never would have taken her up if she hadn't been advertised as the wickedest woman in Europe, for she can

neither act, sing, nor dance. However, she's become the rage, so I had to include her in my series of articles. Now, Miss Knight has made a legitimate success as far as she has gone."

He turned to the girl herself, who was smiling at him as she had smiled since his entrance. He did not wonder at the prominence her beauty had brought her, for even at this close range her make-up could not disguise her loveliness. The lily had been painted, to be sure, but the sacrilege was not too noticeable; and he knew that the cheeks beneath their rouge were faintly colored, that the lashes under the heavy beading were long and dark and sweeping. As for her other features, no paint could conceal their perfection. Her forehead was linelessly serene, her brows were straight and too well-defined to need the pencil. As for her eyes, too much had been written about them already; they had proven the despair of many men, or so rumor had it. He saw that they had depths and shadows and glints of color that he could not readily define. Her nose, pronounced perfect by experts on noses, seemed faultless indeed. Her mouth was no tiny cupid's bow, but generous enough for character. Of course, the lips were glaringly red now, but the expression was none the less sweet and friendly.

"There's nothing 'legitimate' about musical shows," she told him, in reply to his last remark, "and I can't act or sing or dance as well as Miss Demorest."

"You don't need to; just let the public rest its eyes on you and it will be satisfied—anyhow, it should be. Of course, everybody flatters you. Has success turned your head?"

Mrs. Knight answered for her daughter. "Lorelei has too much sense for that. She succeeded easily, but she isn't spoiled."

Then, in response to a question by Pope, Lorelei told him something of her experience. "We're up-state people, you know. Mr. Bergman was looking for types, and I seemed to suit, so I got an engagement at once. The newspapers began to mention me, and when he produced this show he had the part of the Fairy Princess written in for me. It's really very easy, and I don't do much except wear the gowns and speak a few lines."

"You're one of the principals," her mother said, chidingly.

"I suppose you're ambitious?" Pope put in.

Again the mother answered. "Indeed she is, and she's bound to succeed. Of course, she hasn't had any experience to speak of, but there's more than one manager that's got his eye on her." The listener inwardly cringed. "She could be starred easy, and she will be, too, in another season."

"Then you must be studying hard, Miss Knight?"

Lorelei shook her head.

"Not even voice culture?"

"No."

"Nor dancing? Nor acting?"

"No."

"She has so little time. You've no idea how popular she is," twittered

Mrs. Knight.

Pope fancied the girl herself flushed under his inquiring eye; at any rate, her gaze wavered and she seemed vexed by her mother's explanation. He, too, resented Mrs. Knight's

share in the conversation. He did not like the elder woman's face, nor her voice, nor her manner. She impressed him as another theatrical type with which he was familiar—the stage mama. He found himself marveling at the dissimilarity of the two women.

"Of course, a famous beauty does meet a lot of people," he said. "Tell me what you think of our nourishing little city and our New York men."

But Lorelei raised a slender hand.

"Not for worlds. Besides, you're making fun of me now. I was afraid to see you, and I'd feel terribly if you printed anything I really told you. Good interviewers never do that. They come and talk about nothing, then go away and put the most brilliant things into your mouth. You are considered a very dangerous person, Mr. Pope."

"You're thinking of my story about that Demorest woman again," he laughed.

"Is she really as bad as you described her?"

"I don't know, never having met the lady. I wouldn't humiliate myself by a personal interview, so I built a story on the Broadway gossip. Inasmuch as she goes in for notoriety, I gave her some of the best I had in stock. Her photographer did the rest."

The door curtains parted, and Lilas Lynn, a slim, black-eyed young woman, entered. She greeted Pope cordially as she removed her hat and handed it to the woman who acted as dresser for the two occupants of the room.

"I'm late, as usual," she said. "But don't leave on my account." She disappeared into the lavatory, and emerged a moment later in a combing-jacket; seating herself before

her own mirrors, she dove into a cosmetic can and vigorously applied a priming coat to her features, while the dresser drew her hair back and secured it tightly with a wig-band. "Lorelei's got her nerve to talk to you after the panning you gave Demorest," she continued. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself to strike a defenseless star?"

Pope nodded. "I am, and I'm ashamed of my entire sex when I hear of them flocking to the Palace Garden just to see a woman who has nothing to distinguish her but a reputation for vileness."

"Did you see the crown jewels—the King's Cabachon rubies?" Lorelei asked.

"Only from the front. I dare say they're as counterfeit as she is."

Miss Lynn turned, revealing a countenance as shiny as that of an Eskimo belle. With her war-paint only half applied and her hair secured closely to her small head, she did not in the least resemble the dashing "Countess" of the program.

"Oh, they're real enough. I got that straight."

Campbell Pope scoffed.

"Isn't it true about the King of Seldovia? Didn't she wreck his throne?" eagerly queried Mrs. Knight.

"I never met the King, and I haven't examined his throne. But, you know, kings can do no wrong, and thrones are easily mended."

But Mrs. Knight was insistent; her eyes glittered, her sharp nose was thrust forward inquisitively. "They say she draws two thousand a week, and won't go to supper with a man for less than five hundred dollars. She says if fellows

want to be seen in public with her they'll have to pay for it, and she's right. Of course, she's terribly bad, but you must admit she's done mighty well for herself."

"We'll have a chance to see her to-night," announced Lilas. "Mr. Hammon is giving a big supper to some of his friends and we're going—Lorelei and I. Demorest is down for her 'Danse de Nuit.' They say it's the limit."

"Hammon, the steel man?" queried the critic, curiously.

"Sure. There's only one Hammon. But nix on the newspaper story; this is a private affair."

"Never let us speak ill of a poor Pittsburgh millionaire," laughed Pope. "Scandal must never darken the soot of that village." He turned as Slosson, the press-agent of the show, entered with a bundle of photographs.

"Here are the new pictures of Lorelei for your story, old man," Mr. Slosson said. "Bergman will appreciate the boost for one of his girls. Help yourself to those you want. If you need any more stuff I'll supply it. Blushing country lass just out of the alfalfa belt—first appearance on any stage—instantaneous hit, and a record for pulchritude in an aggregation where the homeliest member is a Helen of Troy. Every appearance a riot; stage-door Johns standing on their heads; members of our best families dying to lead her to the altar; under five-year contract with Bergman, and refuses to marry until the time's up. Delancey Page, the artist, wants to paint her, and says she's the perfect American type at last. Say, Bergman can certainly pick 'em, can't he? I'll frame it for a special cop at the back door, detailed to hold off the matrimony squad of society youths, if you can use it."

"Don't go to the trouble," Pope hastily deprecated. "I know the story.

Now I'm going to leave and let Miss Lynn dress."

"Don't go on my account," urged Lilas. "This room is like a subway station, and I've got so I could 'change' in Bryant Park at noon and never shock a policeman."

"You won't say anything mean about us, will you?" Mrs. Knight implored.

"In this business a girl's reputation is all she has."

"I promise." Pope held out his hand to Lorelei, and as she took it her lips parted in her ever-ready smile. "Nice girl, that," the critic remarked, as he and Slosson descended the stairs.

"Which one—Lorelei, Lilas, or the female gorilla?"

"How did she come to choose THAT for a mother?" muttered Pope.

"One of Nature's inscrutable mysteries. But wait. Have you seen brother Jim?"

"No. Who's he?"

"His mother's son. Need we say more? He's a great help to the family, for he keeps 'em from getting too proud over Lorelei. He sells introductions to his sister."

Campbell Pope's exclamation was lost in a babble of voices as a bevy of "Swimming Girls" descended from the enchanted regions above and scurried out upon the stage. Through the double curtain the orchestra could be faintly heard; a voice was crying, "Places."

"Some Soul Kissers with this troupe, eh?" remarked Slosson, when the scampering figures had disappeared.

"Yes. Bergman has made a fortune out of this kind of show. He's a friend to the 'Tired Business Man.'"

"Speaking of the weary Wall Street workers, there will be a dozen of our ribbon-winners at that Hammon supper tonight. Twelve 'Bergman Beauties.' Twelve; count 'em! Any time you want to pull off a classy party for some of your bachelor friends let me know, and I'll supply the dames—at one hundred dollars a head—and guarantee their manners. They're all trained to terrapin, and know how to pick the proper forks."

"One hundred? Last season a girl was lucky to get fifty dollars as a banquet favor; but the cost of living rises nightly. No wonder Hammon's against the income tax."

"Yes, and that's exclusive of the regulation favors. There's a good story in this party if you could get the men's names."

Pope's thin lip curled, and he shook his head.

"I write theatrical stuff," he said, shortly, "because I have to, not because I like to. I try to keep it reasonably clean."

Slosson was instantly apologetic. "Oh, I don't mean there's anything wrong about this affair. Hammon is entertaining a crowd of other steel men, and a stag supper is either dull or devilish, so he has invited a good-looking partner for each male guest. It 'll be thoroughly refined, and it's being done every night."

"I know it is. Tell me, is Lorelei Knight a regular—er—frequenter of these affairs?"

"Sure. It's part of the graft."

"I see."

"She has to piece out her salary like the other girls. Why, her whole family is around her neck—mother, brother, and father. Old man Knight was run over by a taxi-cab last summer. It didn't hurt the machine, but he's got a broken back, or something. Too bad it wasn't brother Jimmy. You must meet him, by the way. I never heard of Lorelei's doing anything really—bad."

For the moment Campbell Pope made no reply. Meanwhile a great wave of singing flooded the regions at the back of the theater as the curtain rose and the chorus broke into sudden sound. When he did speak it was with unusual bitterness.

"It's the rottenest business in the world, Slosson. Two years ago she was a country girl; now she's a Broadway belle. How long will she last, d'you think?"

"She's too beautiful to last long," agreed the press-agent, soberly, "especially now that the wolves are on her trail. But her danger isn't so much from the people she meets with as the people she eats with. That family of hers would drive any girl to the limit. They intend to cash in on her; the mother says so."

"And they will, too. She can have her choice of the wealthy rounders."

"Don't get me wrong," Slosson hastened to qualify. "She's square; understand?"

"Of course; 'object, matrimony.' It's the old story, and her mother will see to the ring and the orange blossoms. But what's the difference, after all, Slosson? It 'll be hell for her, and a sale to the highest bidder, either way."