

The Auctioneer

By WADE MOUNTFORT

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THE last bony horse had been led from the auction block, and Mart Roberts was about to step down from his stand when a ragged man with a yellow face and sunken eyes touched him on the arm. The ragged man pulled an old silver watch from his pocket and handed it to the auctioneer. Roberts straightened up, took off his hat and faced the crowd, which had begun to melt away.

"Gentlemen," he shouted, "let me have your attention again for a few moments.

"Now, gentlemen," said Roberts, "I have here in my hand a solid silver, full jeweled, stem winding hunting case chronometer. It belongs to the yaller faced gent immediately there on my left. He is traveling an' is sick an' broke. He has a wife an' four children in a wagon down here on Salt creek, an' they've all got the ager. So he desires to barter, sell an' dispose of at public vendue to the highest bidder this full jeweled, solid sterling silver hunting case watch. How much am I offered to start it?"

"Five dollars," piped a farmer.

Roberts grew poetic over the mother and children who were "weepin' in the valley," but \$5 was all he could get for the watch. Then, with a great show of magnanimity, he waved the ragged man away, refusing to accept a fee for the sale.

There was a sudden commotion in the crowd. Old Hiram Brumfield pushed his way to where the ragged man was folding up the five dollar bill.

Brumfield caught the stranger by the throat and growled, "Whar did y' git that watch?"

The ragged man tried to speak, but Brumfield was choking him. There was fury in the old man's face.

"Men," shrieked Brumfield, "I've got a murderer here! That watch belonged to my murdered boy! Git the watch, men; git it! I'll hold this snake till some of you git the watch!"

Two score men pressed close to where Brumfield stood holding the trembling stranger. A roar of oaths swept over the crowd. The town marshal pushed his way into the jam and found a dozen men holding the lean and ashen faced man.

"Jeff," shouted Brumfield as the marshal caught the prisoner by the collar, "here's the viper that killed my boy! That's my poor Henry's watch!"

Brumfield snatched the watch from the man who had bought it and pressed it to his lips.

"Men, you all know how my poor boy was shot an' killed by a burglar two months ago. Oh, I have prayed for the time to come when I could git these old hands on the viper's throat!"

"Stand back, everybody!" yelled Jeff Williams, the marshal. "Gimme room to get out with this feller!"

"Hang the murderer! Hang him!" bawled a half drunken man.

Mark Roberts turned upon the vociferous one and roughly pushed him aside. But the drunken man's cry did its work. Instantly there were shouts of "Lynch him! Hang him!" from dozens of throats. As Williams reached the courthouse door he made a lunge and pushed the prisoner inside. Mart Roberts stopped on the stone step and faced the mob. One man, closer than the others, carried a halter and was fighting to enter the door. Roberts planted himself in front of the man.

"Where did y' git that watch?"

The old auctioneer's eyes were ablaze. From under his long black coat a shining revolver leaped like a flash of lightning.

"Stan' back!" he yelled. "I'll kill the first man that sets a foot on this here step!"

The mob stopped as though it had collided with a stone wall.

"Get out of this yard, every one of you!" shouted the auctioneer, and as he spoke he advanced upon the foremost of the mob, striking viciously with his revolver. In twenty seconds the courthouse yard was cleared.

After the marshal had locked his prisoner in the dungeon under the courthouse Mart Roberts went into the cellar to talk to the man. The sur-

clated one was holding to the wooden bars and peering out.

"They was hot after you," said Roberts by way of opening up a conversation.

"They never give me any show," said the man. "I ain't afeared of 'em; I ain't done nothin'."

"Where did you get that watch?" Roberts asked.

"I bought it in St. Louis," said the man. "Do you hang people in this town for havin' watches?"

"Well, Colonel Brumfield says that watch belonged to his boy, who was killed by a thief."

"Good heavens!" moaned the prisoner. "Here, listen to me. I'm a stranger, an' I don't know a soul in the town. I'm travelin' from Illinois to Kansas. My wife an' children are down thar on the creek bank in a wagon shakin' to death with the ager. This here's all a mistake, friend."

"Where is your wife an' children at?" asked the auctioneer.

"Down thar by the ford on the creek—down thar starvin' to death, man. An' their pappy locked up in this hole for a murderer! Great goodness! I don't keer for myself, but poor Lizy an' the babies!"

"Don't worry about your folks," he said. "Don't you want a drink of water?"

Roberts handed a tin cup through the bars, and the prisoner drank as though he were famished.

"What's your name?" the auctioneer asked.

"Jim Darrow."

"You'll need a lawyer."

"I ain't done nothin'—thank you," said Darrow, handing back the cup.

"An', besides, I ain't got a cent in the world except this \$5, an' the man that bought my watch will want that."

"Man to man, now," said Roberts— "no lying—did you kill Brumfield's boy?"

The prisoner drew himself up, looking the auctioneer in the eyes, and replied: "As God is my judge, no! I never heard of Brumfield or his boy or anything about any of this till ten minutes ago."

"I believe you, an' I'll stand by you," said Roberts.

"An' my wife an' babies!"

"Never mind, now," said Roberts. "We will take care of them. You keep a stiff upper lip."

Roberts rode to the ford with a farmer who went that way. Twilight had settled down when he reached the place where the mover's family was camped. Near the roadside the auctioneer saw a flickering light and heard the fretful cries of an infant. Coming closer, he saw an old wagon covered with a ragged piece of canvas. Nearby an animal that might once have been a horse was tethered to a sapling. A woman sat near the campfire holding the fretting baby in her arms. Lying on the ground and on strips of bedclothing were the three other children. The woman was trying to quiet the infant, and occasionally she glanced toward the road.

"Good evenin', mum," said Roberts.

"Are you Mrs. Darrow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your husband?"

"My gracious, what's happened to him?" cried the woman, now standing erect and holding the child close to her breast.

Roberts stammered at first and then blurted out, "He's been arrested!"

"Arrested?" She repeated the word in a bewildered tone.

"Yes; he's been accused of stealin' a watch."

"Where is he?" she exclaimed, putting the baby on the ground.

"Well, don't get frightened now, mum; don't get frightened," said Roberts. "He's locked up, but"

"Locked up!" she gasped. "Locked up! Why, man, locked up, you say! Don't they know he's pretty nigh dead with the ager?"

The woman caught up her apron and held it to her eyes. The babies clung to her torn skirts, whining piteously. "Locked up!" she moaned over and over again. "An' tomorrow's his child day!"

Roberts put the woman and the children into the wagon, hitched up the bony horse and started for the village. On the way he tried hard to urge the miserable horse out of a snail-like gait. The mother continued to sob and moan, and the children all cried at once, while the horse crept along as though every step would be its last.

Roberts saw men hurrying along, and once a party of horsemen, uttering loud curses, passed him at a gallop. Finally when the outlandish rig had turned a corner into the main thoroughfare of the village Roberts saw the glare of a fire on the public square and heard volleys of cheers and yells.

As the vehicle passed a group of men Roberts heard one say, "We can't do anything till after midnight; the sheriff's on the lookout."

To this another replied, "We'll get him as soon as the crowd gets worked up right."

Roberts pounded the old horse and drove into the throng of men that had gathered near the auction stand. The county attorney and the mayor were on the box side by side. The mayor was haranguing the crowd and begging the people to go to their homes and let the law take its course. Some of the listeners cheered for the mayor; others jeered at him. Roberts drove the staggering horse close to the speaker's stand, and, leaping from the seat, he tore off the tattered wagon cover that hid the woman and her children from view. Mrs. Darrow's face was as pale as a corpse; her little ones were huddled close about her, and the baby was still crying.

The auctioneer mounted his stand. The red light of the bonfire lit up his familiar face.

"Hoorsy for Mart Roberts!" yelled half of the crowd.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed the auction-

eer, assuming his characteristic pose, "you have listened to the mayor an' the county attorney, an' now I want to ask you to listen to me for a few brief seconds."

The crowd was moving closer and massing around the wagon where the woman and her children were huddled. Stern faced men gazed curiously at the woeful spectacle.

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"Men, I don't know that man over there in the jail no more'n Adam; I never saw him in my life till he came up here today. I never saw his wife an' children till two hours ago, when I found 'em down by the creek bank cryin' an' waitin' for their pappy to come home an' bring 'em something to eat. I brought 'em here, an' I'm goin' to take care of 'em! I'll tell you something else I'm goin' to do; I'm goin' to see that their pappy gets a square deal! There ain't goin' to be no lynchin' in Martinsburg tonight!"

Roberts' voice reverberated in the narrow streets and rang out upon the night air as keen as the notes of a bugle. As he stopped talking to catch a short breath a yell of approval went up that echoed in the remotest parts of the village.

The auctioneer saw the moment of his triumph, and his quick wit turned it to account.

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"Hurrah for Mart Roberts! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The din of shouting was so loud that for once in his career Mart Roberts could not hear himself talk, but he talked on just the same. When the noise had died away and the two officials were passing the hat, Roberts' voice rang out again, louder, shriller, sweeter than ever. Now he pleaded with his audience, now he joked them, now he threatened and now he exhorted.

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There were volleys of frenzied applause as Mart rattled on. He was hoarse and almost exhausted. The mayor and the county attorney dumped double hands full of silver in the woman's lap. The wagon was driven away, while Roberts urged the crowd to disperse. His crude eloquence had its effect, and in half an hour Martinsburg had gone to sleep.

When Squire Riley opened court next morning the halls and the stuffy little courtroom were packed with people. James Darrow, the prisoner, was brought in to be arraigned. Mart Roberts, smiling and bowing triumphantly, was at the ragged man's side. Mrs. Darrow and her children were on a bench in a corner.

The county attorney arose, looking very solemn, and addressed the justice of the peace. He said: "If it please the court we desire to withdraw the complaint against this defendant. On examining the books of a watchmaker here we find that this watch found in the possession of this defendant was never the property of the late Henry Brumfield. There being not the slightest evidence against the defendant, the state asks that the case be dismissed."

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"How much am I offered to start it?"

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"I'll give the moon," he cried, and he grabbed up the ball and tried to run with it. When he reached the hen house door, the rain had stopped and the wind had swept the clouds from the sky, and Mr. Rooster looked up and saw the moon smiling sweetly at him.

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Then the wind began to blow and the thunder to roll and the lightning to flash, and the first thing Mr. Rooster knew it was raining in torrents and he was soaked to the skin and most fright'ened out of his wits.

"I'll give the moon," he cried, and he grabbed up the ball and tried to run with it. When he reached the hen house door, the rain had stopped and the wind had swept the clouds from the sky, and Mr. Rooster looked up and saw the moon smiling sweetly at him.

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Then the wind began to blow and the thunder to roll and the lightning to flash, and the first thing Mr. Rooster knew it was raining in torrents and he was soaked to the skin and most fright'ened out of his wits.

"I'll give the moon," he cried, and he grabbed up the ball and tried to run with it. When he reached the hen house door, the rain had stopped and the wind had swept the clouds from the sky, and Mr. Rooster looked up and saw the moon smiling sweetly at him.

"So this isn't the moon after all," said Mr. Rooster, looking down at the ball. "Well, I guess it must be one of the stars."—Atlanta Constitution.

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