

MY FIRST AUCTION

GERALDINE P. DILLA

SIXTY minutes to wait for my train! This unprecedented situation was due to the fact that New York City used daylight time, while the conservative railroads used standard time. I had arrived at my station, not on time, but an hour early. In spite of a strenuous summer devoted only in part to study, I had failed to see quite everything in New York. So I did not hesitate to leave the station and start down the street. Shops displaying unbelievable bargains in left-over clothing could not attract me; nor did oriental tea-sets, when I recalled that my bags were already full. Suddenly I noticed a sign that read "Auction Inside To-day". I had always wanted to try my luck at an auction. Here was my chance.

I ventured inside, and saw three dapper youths up at a high bench. About a dozen subdued-appearing men stood below, around a shaggy man who held up one article after another. The first attraction of this place was the auctioneer—the freshest of the three youths. Surely his voice was not uttering speech; it was making a swiftly moving succession of sounds, with definite and varied pitch; logically, it must be music. Though his melody showed much repetition of themes, it was not a song, for it lacked a coherent poem or text. Only occasionally could I catch a word or two, and those not such as would serve as a descriptive title. But preferring absolute to program music, I enjoyed this auctioneer's performance. I did not trouble to examine the old silver, that instead of "going for a mere song" was serving to inspire this unique vocal—dare I call it a sonata? It was, indeed, nearly all the *allegro*, with no *adagio*, with only a fragment of a *scherzo*, and no *finale* during the forty minutes I listened.

Just when the auctioneer's *viva voce* lost its charm for me, I saw a book-case half full of books. Promptly I edged myself over near enough to read the titles. A fairly insipid collection of harmless volumes, I thought, when lo! among them were Shaw's *Getting Married* and Robert Frost's *North of Boston*. Now, I am one of those discerning few who actually read books and covet first editions. So I immediately decided to bid for those books. I looked around.

Tucked up on a table, an old man with a shrewd Jewish profile was watching the whole auction much as if he were the

proprietor of the place. Since courage never fails me where books are concerned, I bravely accosted him. "When will these books be put up?"

"Tomorrow perhaps. . . Perhaps never. Books are a bad thing with us. They take up so much room, and nobody ever wants them." He saw my incredulous amazement, and he continued. "Sometimes we sell whole cases full of books for three or four dollars, just to get them out of our way."

"There are two books here which I think I might like." How meek I felt!

"Well, point them out." He slid down from his high perch on the table, wedged his way through the furniture to the book-case, and took out the volumes of Shaw and Frost as I pointed to them. I saw that they were as new, and first editions. While I handled them, he said, "Now if you are sure you really want them. . ." I guessed his keen eyes were judging me as one who was too ignorant even to assume the proper tone in the august presence of an auctioneer.

"If they are fairly cheap, yes." I drawled it nonchalantly, while my eager eyes belied my voice.

"Then take them home and read them."

My spontaneous honesty broke out then. "But I have already read them, and I am to leave New York in less than fifteen minutes."

"Why, take them along. For nothing." As he saw my eyes and mouth both open wide in surprise too great for speech, he added, "That's better than 'fairly cheap'—the price you offered, isn't it?"

My effusive but sincere thanks were cut short by the thought of my train. Hurrying back to the station, I crowded the two precious volumes into my bags, and caught my train.

I was mightily pleased with myself, as I reflected that no experienced frequenter of auctions could ever have secured his coveted treasures at a lower price than I did mine at my very first auction. I am sure my generous New Yorker was a Jew; but I am still in doubt as to just what I was—to him.

If any reader can question my veracity—for this story is true in every detail, he may look at these two books, which are much more pertinent and weighty evidence than the fish teeth that the ancient Saxon showed to prove that he had caught a whale off the North Cape. (See King Alfred's *Orosius* or Longfellow's *The Discoverer of the North Cape*.)