

SETTING UP THE AUCTION: A PREQUEL to THREAD HERRINGS

by Lea Wait

“Everything in this week’s auction is from those two families?”

Jessica Winter nodded, and then realized whoever was on the telephone couldn’t see her.

“Right. Estates from two old Maine families. I could send you a catalog but it might not arrive before the auction. Previews are this Tuesday and Wednesday.”

The voice on the phone – an older woman, Jessica guessed, as she reached across her desk to find an empty sheet of paper. “We have an on-line listing, too. Check www.AugustaAuctionHouse.com.”

“Is everything in the sale pictured there?”

Jessica hesitated. “Almost everything. Sometimes we have last minute adds, or drops. But almost everything.” She opened a piece of chewing gum and put it in her mouth. This was the fifth caller in the past half hour. Being nice to customers was important, the auctioneer kept reminding her. But they could really be a pain, too. Plus, she had catalogs to collate and bills to send out, and the auctioneer’s wife was glaring at her from across the room. That woman drove her crazy. She’d told Jessica to clean the silver in the auction, but never lifted a finger herself. And how was Jessica supposed to clean silver and talk to customers at the same time? She hadn’t been able to leave her all-too-cluttered desk this morning.

“I don’t think I can get to the preview. Or to the auction. But I’d love to be able to bid.”

“You can bid by telephone or you can leave a bid with me. With a credit card number,” Jessica added quickly. “Some of our auctions are on-line, but not this one.”

“And there’s furniture? And china? And carpets?”

“And taxidermied animal heads and paintings and jewelry and all sorts of other stuff. Someone else called this morning about embroideries. There are a couple of samplers and some needlepointed pictures. All sorts of things.”

“All old?”

“Most old.” What did this unknown woman define as “old”? In the antiques business it meant over a hundred years. But some people thought Beatles posters qualified as “old.” “Some newer items too. It’s an *estate* sale. That means everything in the estate. Why don’t you look on-line? If you want to place a bid, you can call me back. With your credit card number. Then we’ll bid for you the day of the auction.”

“I’ll think about it. And look on-line.”

“Great,” Jessica agreed. “I hope you find some interesting items. Thank you for calling the Augusta Auction House.”

“Jessica, when are you going to get that silver cleaned? The preview opens tomorrow,” the auctioneer’s wife leaned over her desk.

“I was talking to customers,” Jessica answered. “I can’t do two things at once.”

The older woman shook her head. “Then you’d better learn. Auctions don’t run themselves.”

Jessica nodded as the phone rang again. Her nemeses threw up her hands as Jessica used her most charming voice. “Good afternoon, Augusta Auction House. How may I help you?”