

A LYNCH MOB FOILED

A Monologue by Donald E. Baker

Adapted from "Reminiscences of an Indianian" by J.A. Lemcke

5-6 Minutes

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SYNOPSIS

A besieged jail. A frightened Black prisoner. An angry White mob. A sheriff determined to uphold the rule of law. A daring escape in the dead of night. Julius August “Gus” Lemcke (pronounced “LEM-key”) was sheriff of Vanderburgh County, Indiana, in 1880 when a clash between overheated political partisans resulted in a Black Republican and a White Democrat shooting each other. The White man was cared for by his friends. The Black man ended up in the county jail, surrounded by armed and angry citizens determined to lynch him from the nearest tree. This monologue is adapted from Lemcke’s own account of this episode in his 1905 published memoir.

CONTENT WARNING

The “N word” appears twice in this monologue. Lemcke himself disapproved of the term and makes clear, through his use of quote marks, that it was the mob that was using it to refer to the prisoner.

CHARACTER

JULIUS AUGUSTUS (“GUS”) LEMCKE, age 50. A German immigrant who made good as a steamboat captain, politician, and businessman.

SETTING

Vanderburgh County Sheriff’s Residence and Jail, Evansville, Indiana. However, the monologue requires no particular props or set pieces.

TIME

1880.

LEMCKE

In 1878, I ran on the Republican ticket for sheriff of Vanderburgh County, Indiana. The people gratified me with their votes and I was then required to move my wife and two children into the official sheriff's residence in Evansville. That put my family under the same roof as the convicts who inhabited the jail itself. When our third child was born there, we naturally referred to him ever afterwards as "the jailbird."

One Saturday night during the highly contested political campaign of 1880, Democrats and Republicans turned out at the same hour in separate torchlight parades. As you might imagine, a certain amount of unpleasantness ensued. At the windup, a shooting scrape occurred between a Republican colored man and a Kentucky Democrat who had come across the river to make mischief. The white Kentuckian, badly wounded, was cared for by his friends. The Negro, with a bullet in his head, was taken to the city lockup.

By midnight a howling mob of "law-abiding American citizens" had gathered to hang "the nigger." The chief of police woke me at two o'clock in the morning to ask me to take the prisoner off his hands because he couldn't guarantee the man's safety. The wounded colored man himself begged for sanctuary within the strong walls of the county jail. The chief sent a squad of the city police force to assist me during the remainder of the night, while I provided myself with a stock of guns and ammunition from a nearby store.

Meanwhile, the large and noisy crowd, in their blind frenzy, threatened to storm the jail and take my prisoner from me. Their leaders wanted a lynching and they were determined to have it.

Sadly, lynchings were not unknown in this pocket of Indiana. The previous year a mob in the nearby town of Mt. Vernon had hung five Negroes on the same tree. Now I found out a large company of men from that place were on the road to Evansville, determined to reinforce the mob already assembled. In response I prepared to enforce the law by assembling a *posse comitatus*. Fifty citizens readily put themselves under my authority.

While I busied myself with the strategic distribution and direction of my forces, I pictured to myself the moment when the mob might rush the jail. If they did, I would be compelled to give the command to fire on men I had known all my life.

My vivid imagination was picturing their blood-stained faces when I spied an acquaintance coming around the corner in a buggy pulled by a fast horse. I bolted through the crowd, followed him into another street, and demanded use of his rig. He finally surrendered it, but only after I gave him my personal guarantee of a thousand dollars in case of loss or damage.

With the help of the jailor I slipped the prisoner out the back of the jail and through a narrow alley to the waiting buggy. They then drove at full speed through the backstreets out of town and down country roads until they reached a flag-stop station and boarded a northbound train for Terre Haute. There, one hundred miles removed from the danger, the prisoner was given over to the safekeeping of the sheriff of Vigo¹ County.

As soon as I knew my bird was out of reach, I announced to the mob that he had safely escaped their clutches. To convince them, I invited three of them to accompany me into the jail and see for themselves. Finally satisfied that the game had flown, the crowd cursed me long and deep but eventually dispersed.

The colored man thus rescued had always been known as an industrious, submissive, and orderly citizen. But in the eyes of that white mob he was guilty of the unpardonable sin of being a “nigger.” For that, if for no other reason, he deserved to be hung on a lamppost. Such is held to be just and logical in our great republic, our nation that prides itself on standing before all other countries of the world as the splendid exemplar of equal rights.

The Kentuckian at the time of the shooting was supposed to have been mortally wounded. But nevertheless, he recovered his health in a short time. He afterwards confessed that the Negro had shot him only in self-defense. The prisoner was released in due course. But he carried in his skull, to the day of his death long years later, the bullet he received from the white man’s pistol.

END

¹VEE-go