



The vicar had the bemused expression of a man who had seen
a vision. And the curious tale he told showed that he had

The Mimosa Blight

By FRANCES GRAY PATTON

EARLY last June as I was driving up to Washington, I made a short detour to stay overnight with my old friend, Caro Graham, who lives in a pleasant, hilly part of southern Virginia. I didn't let her know I was coming and I hadn't seen her in a long time, but I was confident of my welcome. I found Caro just setting out to a cocktail party at the country club; she told me to slick myself up fast, put on a pair of white gloves, and come along. The road to the club ran through nice country. The gentle, unspectacular contours of the landscape were glossy and green, and everywhere—in low, grassy meadows and in rolling woodlands—there were masses of mimosa trees in full, feathery bloom.

I remarked upon those trees—I had never seen so many of them, gone wild like that—and Caro said she was passionately fond of mimosas and doubly so that season when their beauty was a kind of swan song. There was a new disease attacking them, she said, striking first at their roots in a mysterious way, and within a year or two, perhaps by next year, they would all be skeletons like the ghostly chestnut forests in the mountains. That melancholy prediction didn't chill my pleasure in the scenery and I'd have been content to idle away the whole afternoon, just looking at things we passed. However, we arrived, in due course, at the party, and there I heard a curious tale.

The tale was so very curious, so palpably improbable, that it wouldn't have impressed me as it did except for the quality of the man who told it. He was a little old gentleman in clericals, with an Oxford accent and a delicate build, who reminded me of one of the saintlier parsons in a Barchester chronicle. He had a pink, almost translucent complexion and white hair that curled up at the temples giving his general appearance an effect of thistledown lightness so that his small, elegant boots seemed merely paying their respects to the ground, not fixed there, willy-nilly, by the force of central gravity.

His eyes held a perfect tranquillity; not the limpid tranquillity of a child's eyes, but something that seemed reflected from the outer world, like a peaceful upland pasture mirrored on the surface of sky-blue valley water. He looked like a man who had seen a vision. And, as it presently turned out, he had.

The party was one of those milling affairs that give me, once my first impulse toward panic flight has subsided, a sense of anonymity. I had a Manhattan and a whirligig thing of pastry and fish paste and then, while Caro's back was turned, I drifted off into the crowd. Weaving my way between knots of jovial guests, I progressed the length of the big lounge room.

Now and then some friend of Caro's put out a hand to detain me, but never for long. Floating wisps of conversation didn't engage my interest. "Scratch a

liberal," a florid, horsy-looking gentleman declared, "and you'll—" but I didn't tarry to learn what one would find. "Can't we ever be alone together?" a thin girl in a picture hat inquired plaintively of a man who was gazing over her head at another girl with a lot of meat on her bones and the air of wearing vine leaves in her hair.

Going out into the foyer, I saw a group of well-corseted matrons dropping coins in a slot machine. How refreshing my situation was, I thought. Like most family women, I am generally surrounded by people who have every right to my attention. Clean socks, they demand of me, home permanents, moral example, and omelets for breakfast; but here I was among two hundred souls brought together through no fault of mine. I was neither their mother nor their hostess, and whatever they might desire—love, money, or a Republican in the White House—I couldn't fairly be expected to provide it. I didn't owe them so much as a salted almond. In this flouncy frame of mind I stepped through the French doors that opened on the terrace.

THE party hadn't reached the stage at which everyone would feel a sudden need for air; the terrace was all but deserted. There was only this one man—the clergyman—in sight. He was standing at the balustrade, rising rhythmically on his toes like a person doing breathing exercises. I was about to retreat, not wishing to intrude upon his calisthenics or his reveries, when he turned to me with a smile. We exchanged comments upon the weather and fell into conversation. He told me he was vicar in an English village with a name I didn't quite catch. It was something like Plumsby-over-Duff, but I thought it couldn't have been that.

He said that he was "out here" in the States visiting his daughter who had married an American. His physician, he explained, had thought him rather knocked up by the war and the peace and had prescribed a change of scene. That was great nonsense of course—he was fitter than the doctor—but medical men were apt to be prigs at heart, seeking to reduce natural pleasures, like digestion and travel, to the low estate of therapeutics. The vicar chuckled to himself, drummed his long, ecclesiastical fingers on the stone railing, and seemed lost in contemplation of the view.

The view, on that clear afternoon, was charming. The clubhouse was built on a hillside overlooking a golf course, and from the terrace we saw a long stretch of fairway bordered along the rough with mimosas, like a hedgerow of rosy cumulus cloud.

"Jolly trees," the vicar said. "Natives of the tropics, I believe."

I said yes, I believed they (Continued on page 94)





ROBERT BUGG

His eyes were fixed on the audience and his mouth worked valiantly. But nothing came out

Big Moment

By CHARLES EINSTEIN

MY FATHER was a tremendous, if reluctant, advertising man back in the days when advertising was a tentative and mildly renegade art. He preferred to spend most of his time dreaming up jokes and vaudeville routines to satisfy his innate desire to become a comedian. But back in Boston, where we lived, they still talk about the ad campaigns my old man whipped up.

He worked for a chain of furniture stores, and I believe he was the first ad man who realized that a firm profitably can enjoy more than one birthday a year. He ran a birthday sale in February, an anniversary sale in March, a silver-wedding sale in June, a midsummer birthday sale in August and an anniversary sale in November. He ran a special three-day sale in which he urged all customers to stay away the first day, "so you don't get trampled to death," a technique that usually provided an extra three thousand customers the first day. He had a thing called a George Washington Sale, where the copy ran: "We cannot tell a lie. We thought these brooms would sell at \$1.49. They didn't. Somebody will get a bargain at 69¢." And so forth. Tremendous.

But he wanted to be a comedian. He used to attend all of the vaudeville shows in Boston and memorize the routines. Then he would come home and practice on my mother and me in the dining room of our two-family house on Orkney Road. He used my Uncle Leon for a stooge.

My Uncle Leon did not particularly love vaudeville, but my father overwhelmed him. Uncle Leon wanted to be a saxophone player, and he owned a fine saxophone and about twenty pounds of sheet music. But he did not like to take lessons and practiced only rarely. The only thing he could play was Dardanella, in two sharps, slowly.

What happened was that my father and Uncle Leon would push the dining-room table against the wall and seat me and my mother in chairs on either side of the table. Then they would go out of the room through opposite doors.

At this point, it was my job to clap furiously, as for a preceding act, and then sing several notes of fanfare.

"And now," I would cry, "that bright new team of a hundred laughs—Harvey and Leon!"

Then I clapped some more while my father and Uncle Leon came racing through the doors from opposite sides, the way all the comedy teams ran out from the wings at Keith's.

My father would punch my Uncle Leon two times and cry, "Hello, Paleface!"

"Paleface?" Uncle Leon croaked.

"Yeah," my father told him. "You got a face like a pail!"

"Wasn't that funny?" my father would ask my mother, panting as he held on to Uncle Leon's vest. "Scream," she would say.

"You got to give in to the humor of it," my father would say. "Here—" he turned and punched Uncle Leon two times—"how do you spell cat?"

"I don't know," Uncle Leon said in the unnaturally loud voice my father made him practice. "How do you spell cat?"

"Cat," my father said. "P-u-s-s-y. Kitten. Chicken," my father said. "H-e-n. Rooster."

My mother hid her face in her hands. Uncle Leon giggled. My father looked sharply at him and punched him again.

"Tell me something," he said. "Is that a face, or did you just block a punt?" He reached out and massaged Uncle Leon's lapels. "Nice suit you got here. Too bad they didn't have it in your size. Is this what the well-dressed man will throw away this year?"

"Lord shield us," my mother said.

There was also the topical joke, based upon current happenings. If there had been a political uprising in South America, my Uncle Leon would say, "I hear the people are revolting."

"I don't care if they're disgusting," my father would say.

That was how the routines went.

Sooner or later it had to get on the stage. Thursday nights at Keith's were amateur nights, and one day my father announced that Harvey and Leon were scheduled to go on that Thursday at Keith's, right behind a unicyclist. No audition. . . .

We all went, my mother and myself and my grandfather. My grandfather had never seen one of the practice routines at home, not so much because he disliked vaudeville as because he dreaded being home when Uncle Leon was home. One time

he gave Uncle Leon a flat ultimatum: Either sell the saxophone or go live at the Y.

So we were in the audience at Keith's. The guy on the unicycle was pretty good. Once he skidded and nearly fell off, and went through a lot of business to make it look like it had been part of the act, but nobody laughed.

Then he went off and we all clapped, and the M.C. came hurtling out in his tuxedo. "And now," he cried, "that bright new team of a hundred laughs—Harvey and Leon!"

It was just like being in the dining room at home, except this time they wore identical brown suits. They came racing out, stopped in front of each other, and then took the three-quarters stance you take when you are talking to somebody on the stage and facing the audience at the same time.

My father punched my Uncle Leon three times and cried, "Hello, Paleface!"

Uncle Leon opened his mouth to cry, "Paleface?" in return. But nothing came out. His mouth was working valiantly, but his eyes were fixed on the audience in the winking darkness, and he was terrified.

My father socked Uncle Leon again. Desperately. "I said, Hello, Paleface!"

Nothing. My Uncle Leon looked like a petrified fish. The audience held its breath.

Then, all at once, I heard somebody begin to laugh. It was my grandfather. The laughs started slowly and then began building up. He bent over and shook. Somebody behind him took it up. The next thing, the whole joint was collapsing with mirth.

Up on the stage, my father had only a dim idea of what was happening. He kept socking my Uncle Leon.

Sock. "Hello, Paleface!" *Sock sock sock.* "Hello, Paleface!" *Sock.* "Hello, Paleface!" Every time it got funnier.

Finally, after three or four minutes of this, the orchestra leader caught my father's frantic eye. He struck two brassy chords, and my father took a deep bow. The audience clapped very hard. Uncle Leon still stood there. My father grabbed his hand and towed him off.

We met them at the stage door directly afterward. My Uncle Leon was rubbing his arm glassily, and my father looked ready to commit fratricide.

"I never laugh so much in my days," Grandfather said, and gave Uncle Leon a hug.

"Let's get out of here," my father said. "Where's a cab?"

Nobody said anything in the cab going home, until we were almost there. Then my father spoke, looking straight ahead.

"Leon, I will never forgive you for this. I don't want to talk to you any more. Between us, vaudeville is dead."

Uncle Leon bowed his head.

Ten minutes after we got home, the phone rang. My father answered, and when he hung up he looked more savage than ever. We were all in the room, but he talked to nobody in particular.

"It was the manager at Keith's," he said softly, looking at the ceiling. "We won third prize. Fifteen dollars. If we'd stayed to take a bow with the other acts, he thinks we would have won first prize." His eyes glazed over. "I'm going to bed."

THE next day he came home late from the office, with folded advertising proofs tucked under his arm. Usually he showed the proofs around, but this time he stuck them in the desk drawer.

"Here," he said, reaching in his pocket and turning to Uncle Leon. "I brought you something."

It was three new reeds for Uncle Leon's saxophone.

The ad was in the papers the following Monday. It was spread over a full page, but all it gave was the firm's name and the addresses of the different branch stores, like always. Then it said, in a big black heading:

"STAGEFRIGHT SALE."

Underneath, the copy ran:

"We were going to describe these articles in all the customary glowing terms. At the last minute, we forgot our lines. You'll have to come and see for yourself."

The rest of the page was just pictures of different pieces of furniture.

It was a good sale, one of the best Father ever had.

THE END

Collier's SHORT SHORT