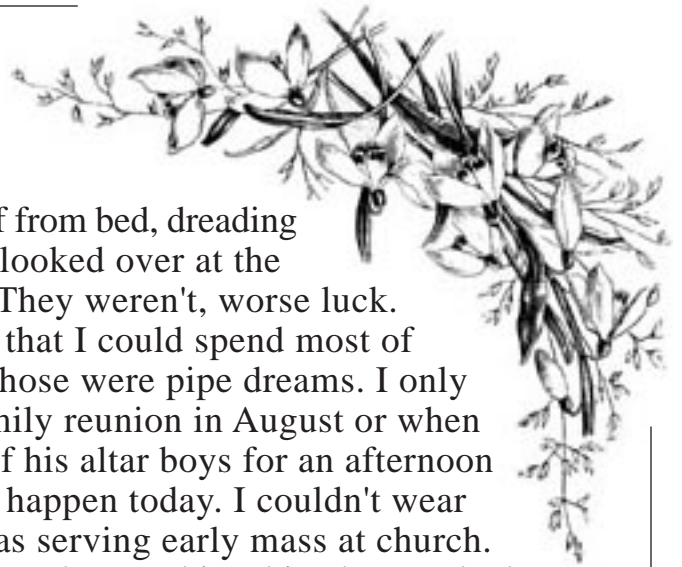


Mrs. Ida Grobe

North Street Tales



It was a hot, steamy morning. I dragged myself from bed, dreading to face another day of trying to keep cool. I looked over at the window to see if the curtains were moving. They weren't, worse luck. How I wished that we lived near the lake so that I could spend most of the day in that wonderful cool water. Well, those were pipe dreams. I only got a chance to go to the lake during our family reunion in August or when Father Hank from the church took a bunch of his altar boys for an afternoon swim. Neither of those things were going to happen today. I couldn't wear my shorts or tee shirt because this week I was serving early mass at church. Therefore, I pulled on long pants and the short sleeve white shirt that Ma had ironed last night. Already I felt trapped inside my clothes. They stuck to me like glue.

I couldn't be late so I skipped breakfast and began my ten-minute walk down the street to the church. Father Hank was already there putting on his vestments when I arrived. I put on my black cassock and white surplice, dreading to think how warm I would get during the service. I performed my altar boy duties, lighting the candles and making sure that everything was ready. I wondered if God would forgive us if we had not lit the candles on such a warm day, then decided that perhaps we shouldn't take that chance. I didn't think Father Hank would be pleased with that suggestion.

Mass began promptly at 7:30. As we left the vestry, I glanced out to see how many were in church. There were two ladies out there, both were dressed in black and were wearing hats. Mrs. Grobe was sitting in a front pew; Mrs. Burke was sitting towards the back. I knew that if I made a mistake in my Latin responses to Father Hank, I would hear about it from both of those ladies. They were neighbors of ours so my parents would hear about it this very day.

Things went smoothly for a while. Then I began to feel the sweat dripping off my face. My back itched from the tickle of the sweat there. I couldn't help it but I began to squirm around to see if I could get rid of that itch. No such luck. I wanted to reach under my robe to get my handkerchief to wipe my face. Father Hank kept his handkerchief tucked in the sleeve of his cassock. Periodically he pulled it out and wiped his face. I decided that since Father was doing it then I could to. The only problem was that I was kneeling on the bottom step of the three that rose up to the altar. I couldn't pull up my robe because I was kneeling on it. Now what was I to do? The salty sweat on my face was dripping into my eyes. My eyes started smarting. I couldn't take it anymore so I stood up, pulled up my robe, pulled my hanky out, wiped my face, and knelt back down. From one of the ladies out in the church came a gasp. I thought what a miserable day this was turning out to be. First, it is this awful heat, then I am going to hear from whoever gasped and from my parents about standing up when I should have been kneeling.

Mass was finished at 8: 30. It took me about another ten minutes to put out the candles and do the other tasks that altar boys had to do. I said goodbye to Father Hank, left church by the back door. I didn't want to run into either lady. I was sure that I hadn't done anything very wrong because Father Hank hadn't said anything to me after mass.



I was feeling somewhat better as I went round the church out to the sidewalk. There standing on the walk was Mrs. Grobe. I hesitated, then went forward to face the music.

Now, Mrs. Grobe was a tall woman, with wide shoulders. She always appeared in public with her hat on. In summertime she always wore dressed with what looked like a silk scarf around her shoulders. In the winter she wore a long, black coat that almost reached to her ankles. She lived in a little bungalow just down the street from where we lived. She went to church every morning. Nothing, it seemed, could keep her from daily mass.

She loved to garden. Her flowers were admired by all who passed her home. Mrs. Grobe smiled as I came up to her. She said, "Come on Edward. Walk up the hill with me." "OK, I replied." and our walk began.

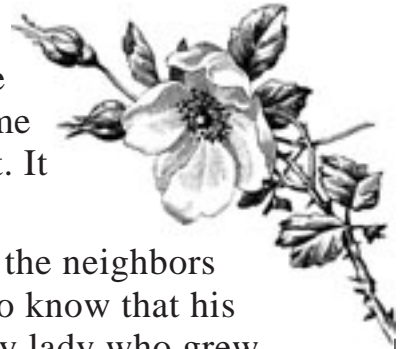
At first she just said that it was a very warm day. I agreed with her. Then she remarked that it would be nice to get under the maple trees that shaded the sidewalk a little further up the hill. I said that that would be nice.

So far things were going along just fine and I wanted to keep them that way. We had just reached the shade of the old sugar maples when Mrs. Grobe stopped and said, "Edward, I want to talk with you about what happened this morning." I said nothing and prepared myself for what was to come. To my surprise, Mrs. Grobe smiled. "Edward," she said, "I don't want you to go home feeling bad about what you did. You didn't do anything wrong. Now, if you hadn't gotten to your hanky, you would have been miserable all through the rest of the service. Then you wouldn't have been able to think about God and how good He is to all of us. I know that there are rules for altar boys. They are there so us folks can pay attention to the mass and not be disturbed by boys not following the rules. You are a good altar boy. Now don't be upset."

Wow, that made me feel a lot better. This nice lady made me feel so good that even the hot weather didn't bother me as we walked toward her house. As she turned to go into her house, she looked at me again, "Smile,"

"Edward, Let me see the pearls." I knew what she was talking about. The pearls were my teeth. I wasn't the only one she said that to. She told most of the children on our street the same thing. Then she followed with a little talk about how we should brush our teeth twice each day. "Once you lose your pearls, you will never find them again," was a favorite saying of hers.

I said that I would brush my teeth and keep them shining. She smiled and waved goodbye to me. I ran the rest of the way home eager to get my summer shorts and shirt on and eat breakfast. It was a perfect day.



Mrs. Grobe had a son. He rarely came to see her because, as the neighbors knew, he had passed himself as white. He didn't want folks to know that his mother was black. I always thought of Mrs. Grobe as a lovely lady who grew beautiful flowers, loved to see shining teeth in youngsters, and gave a young boy one of the best days he had ever had.



Edward Barkley