

Judging

GORDON GRAVES

Old Dance Cameron looked over the rude plywood and the 2x4 structure that held the floral exhibits. He had walked the two miles from his home to do the judging at the community fair. He had walked even when he still had his old truck on the road. He had joined a horticulture group when he worked on the estates, learned the judging, and been stuck with the fair ever since.

When nine o'clock Sunday morning rolled around, the administrators of the fair turned him loose, as usual. Old Dance started his judging: first he did the vegetables, then he started on the flowers. It didn't take him long. Fewer and fewer exhibited every year, and the quality seemed to suffer as time went on. He moved quickly through the adult classes.

Half couldn't count to six, too many flowers in the vase. Dance had to go by the rules. Few had any foliage; others were past their prime. Annuals were in the perennial classes, and nothing, nothing was clean. His helper struggled along behind him hanging red, white, and blue ribbons, and an occasional green, in his wake. He arrived at the children's classes; his duties would soon be over. "Collection of Wildflowers in a vase," open to children 14 and under, two entries.

As had been the case with all the other exhibits, the cards identifying the exhibits were securely attached, with the names of the exhibitors folded inside, only to be opened up after the judging.

Of course Old Dance recognized the vase. Often he had held it in

his hands up on the Vanderstruct estate. An artist's creation, worth hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars. Melissa Vanderstruct, tall and thin, like her father's three sisters, would be back after the judging in the limousine. It would wait, blocking the road, while she picked up her prize. The vase's blue grey color perfectly complemented the phlox and the cornflowers. Class C82 is one of only four classes where the judge takes the container into consideration. The phlox, the showiest blossoms in her collection, were in surprisingly good condition. Phlox is not a wildflower, but it has escaped in many areas, especially around estates. "How could the child know?"

The other exhibit sprouted from an old canning jar. Virginia Oak had offered him a cool drink of water from it just a few weeks ago. Her great-great-great-grandmother had brought it up with her from Alabama when her husband and brother-in-law had decided to farm side by side.

The old lady told Dance years ago, in her soft southern syllables, "I was warned I wouldn't be able to get anything like these jars up in Yankee land."

It has lost its bails and has been pressed into alternative services.

Virginia has braved the leaches with her bare feet to wrest a tough cattail, perfectly shaped for her collection, from its stalk. She has risked her fingers in the thorns to gather magnificent thistles to rest on a bed of Queen Ann's lace.

Virginia has probably had to help her mother's sister out with her florist business, carrying in and setting up for weddings, funerals and such. Aunt Mary is a rather close-mouthed person, but an observant person could learn a lot just watching. Mary's precise detailed work is

reflected in the fruit jar arrangement. Virginia's uncle Henry is a knowing exhibitor of vegetables, and a person with the patience and desire to teach. The clean material in Virginia's collection could indicate that Henry has given some advice or demonstrated how to present material to the judges.

The Vanderstruct estate lies along the west side of the high road for nearly a mile. More than ten acres of manicured lawn and walls front the mansion. A lot of what was maintained in the old days has been left to go wild out back. Melissa has foraged well in the abandoned fields. Old Dance remembers the little grove of sumac struggling on an outcropping of ledge.

Melissa used sumac for shape and interest, bringing out the best in the colored blooms. She left a gap in her arrangement, very tastefully, in the Japanese style. Possibly she had taken a course or read a book. Melissa bedded her creation using cascading wild hops.

Her stems are neatly cut by expensive professional shears, unlike Virginia's, which have been trimmed the best one can do with a sharp paring knife.

Virginia Oak arrived with the very first workers. She helped out at many of the attractions and the kitchen. The excitement of the fair sparkled in her blue eyes, and the smile that always graced her pretty face bloomed magnificently all morning. She took a break from volunteering to watch the judging from the sidelines. Scrubbed up for her big day at the fair, she had grown to where she could no longer really get by with the children's clothing she wore. Her parents didn't seem to notice.

Virginia's mother sat in the shade, her dull eyes seeing no more than those of the rag dolls, which she resembled, perched on a shelf around the corner of the building. Her bruised arms and legs hung out of her worn disheveled summer dress. Jack Oak, Virginia's father, heartily engaged anyone he could in conversation. No doubt, Jack would appropriate any money his daughter might win. The seven other Oaks were into everything.

Old Dance used to mow the grass and weeds along the town roads with his tractor, but the town bought its own machine and they do it themselves now, except for Aunt Judy's Lane. After several breakdowns and a prolonged annoying siege over Artemisia Murphy's mowed lilies, they turned the lane back over to Dance. While the town dallied, Dance sold his tractor, so he did the fraction of a mile with his scythe.

He had worked his way down from his place, on the corner, to the end and had just started back. When he passed the Oak's place, Virginia came running, blond pigtail flying, knobby knees flashing out of the dirty rag (hardly any kind of garment at all) she wore. She had a jar of water for him, with her muddy hand prints on the cool, clear, dripping glass. They sat on the wall while he drank the water. Dance wanted to see the freckled little girl, but before his eyes she seemed to be fading away, being replaced by a little woman.

Oldest child of eight, of Jack Oak and his feeble-minded wife; Virginia had been doing most of the housework for years. Jack never seemed to stick at anything he tried, nor did he go out of his way to try too often. Jack could do the cutting along the lane if he wanted

to. Dance would give it up in a minute, but Jack didn't have a scythe or rifle or know or want to know how to use them.

The girl and Dance had a nice chat about moles, voles, crickets and katydids; neighbors, school, weather signs and local history. When he finished the water, Dance told her he had to get back to work before he stiffened up. She showed her heels as she dashed back to the house where her siblings were causing more disturbing noises all the while.

Virginia's creation before him reflected the wet nature of the remains of the Oak farms. The tips of loosestrife spikes were still in season, and the interesting seed heads of rushes and sedges were used to good advantage.

When the limousines of the Vanderstruct family swept by, Dance, as all the non-Vanderstructs, would stop what they were doing and look. Mostly the mighty cars would carry the adults or servants, but sometimes Melissa, frail and pale, would be framed in the rear window. She had been but a baby the last time Dance set foot on the estate.

In spite of the alcohol and rumors about other substances, her mother and three aunts remained handsome women but by all accounts unbearable in any society. They bowed down only when the wealth required it. The four could only see their worth in terms of their physical beauty and money. Not one of them had an accomplishment or developed talent to help them define themselves. "Such a waste," Dance pitied them.

Melissa's father, Nowland Vanderstruct, Dance knew, had that

egregious blighting facility to make anyone feel worthless, unless such worth should trickle down from him.

It was up to him. Dance looked over the two almost perfect entries one last time. One would get a blue ribbon, best in show and fifteen dollars; the other a red ribbon and two dollars. Old old.....old man Cameron made his decision. □