

# Old clowns never die

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## PETITES CHOSES QUI FONT PLAISIR.

“ *Semaine Suisse* ” (Service de Presse).

Les deux îles de Brissago (Lac Majeur) ont été rachetées pour Fr.600,000.— par le canton du Tessin, les communes de Brissago, Ascona, Ronco et Bellinzona et par la Ligue pour la protection de la Nature.

Un veveysan fixé en Allemagne, M. Henri Dumur, a reçu de l'Université de Griessen le titre de Docteur honoris causa en reconnaissance des services rendus à l'industrie optique allemande.

En mémoire du dramaturge et poète patoisant Rodolphe Tavel, quelques familles suisses de New Berne (U.S.A.) ont fait une donation en faveur du théâtre suisse de chambre.

M. Ed. A. Hegi de Villmergen et Lausanne vient de fêter le 45<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire de sa collaboration avec le “New York Times.” Depuis 1943, il est caissier principal de cette puissante société journalistique.

L'Union internationale de tir a adopté le règlement suisse de tir au petit calibre, conçu dans un esprit strictement sportif. A cette occasion, l'association fédérale des tireurs au petit calibre a fait don d'un challenge pour les concours internationaux par équipes. Cette splendide “coupe helvétique” d'une valeur de Fr.15,000.— a été dessinée par le zuricois A. W. Diggelmann; elle exprime allégoriquement l'idée: notre arme ne sert pas à la destruction et à la séparation en deux camps; elle est consacrée à la lutte paisible et amicale.

Le ministre suisse au Canada, M. Victor Nef, a obtenu la levée des restrictions d'importation qui frappaient les montres suisses depuis 1947. Dès le 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 1949, l'importation au Canada des montres, mouvements d'horlogerie, boîtes, horloges et pendulettes sera libre.

La Confédération européenne de l'agriculture tient ses assises à Innsbruck. Elle a appelé le professeur Howald au poste de président suppléant et lui a confié la direction des travaux de l'assemblée générale. M. André Borel a été désigné comme secrétaire général et chef du secrétariat permanent.

## CITY SWISS CLUB

Will Members kindly note that the next

## MONTHLY MEETING

will take place on **Thursday, 10th November, 1949, at 6.30 p.m. for 7 p.m., at the Dorchester Hotel, Park Lane, W.1.**

Our guest of honour, The Hon. Josiah Wedgwood, will speak on “Britain's Economic Problems.”

Members wishing to attend should send their cards to the Manager, Dorchester Hotel, Park Lane, London, W.1, to reach him not later than the 7th November, 1949.

C. E. SEINET,

Hon. Secretary.

## OLD CLOWNS NEVER DIE.

By BILL STRUTTON.

**Why did Grock, acclaimed as the world's greatest clown, refuse to perform in Britain? Behind his quarrel with impresario Sir Oswald Stoll there is the story of a strange and unforgiving artist. Now aged 69, the man who made millions laugh is starting a new life on the screen.**

(We reproduce the following article from the October issue of the LEADER MAGAZINE by courtesy of the Editor)

The door opens, letting in a blast of applause, and shuts again. The old clown patters into his dressing room, a technicolor grin painted on from ear to ear. Wearily he hangs up his oversize bowler, eases off his huge flabber-dabber boots, stretches in a chair, twiddles his stocking toes.

The grin subsides into a few heavy wrinkles. Grock, the great Grock, is himself again, a solid, sober Swiss, an old man.

This is the Pigalle Theatre, Paris, a plush-and-mahogany luxury playhouse built by the Rothschilds in a Montmartre side street. Out on the stage a movie camera attended by all the paraphernalia of film-making is set up. On a sign from the director it pans into the semi-gloom of the auditorium. The audience bursts into handclaps and wild cheering. The French are making a film of the life of Grock.

In his room Grock stares through me into the distance of his clown-painted face translates what might be a mere thoughtfulness into a gigantic squint. “Ah, yes,” he says. His voice is a reminiscent, trembly bass, like a cello in unsteady hands. “I said I would never go back to England. And I didn't.”

He puts a cigarette into a long holder. “They said it was because I had separated from my partner. They said I was in trouble with the income tax. Those weren't the reasons.”

## The Tiff With England.

His clown's mask contorts into another caricature — all wistfulness and regret. He leans forward. “But — the English!” he says. “They are wonderful to play to. They are quick. They are subtle. They catch the slightest point. Ah, I've never had such a public since!”

He sighed, The truth is that Grock, the world's greatest clown, was separated from his greatest public by a tiff.

It all happened so long ago that for anyone less sentimentally able than to hark back to the good things, the fact that Grock is now filming his own life story would be deeply and sadly insignificant.

The tiff existed almost wordlessly between Grock and the late Sir Oswald Stoll, the impresario. But memories of it, then the war, and finally a somewhat tetchy old age have kept Grock out of England for the past twenty-five years and robbed us of some of his most exquisite drolleries.

In the twelve years during which his baggy-trouser buffoonery shone like a great light in British music-hall, Grock came to nurse such a passionate dislike of Sir Oswald that in the end, after brooding the matter carefully, he played on him one of the most humourless jokes of his career.

The two hardly ever met, but managed to convey a marked indifference to each other either through Grock's agent or in scraps of haughty correspondence. These notes were mainly confined to arguing how much each thought that Grock the clown was worth. Their estimates differed alarmingly.

Sir Oswald valued Grock a little querulously at £250 a week, not a penny more. He was not to be shaken from this figure, at least until too late. Grock, wounded and astonished that one could think so lowly of his talent, retorted that he must be worth at least £500; this was what Sir Oswald was paying the Marx Brothers at the time for, he alleged a little unkindly, drawing empty houses.

Sir Oswald's other defections were that, prim in his high wingless collar and wintry moustache, he often visited the Coliseum with friends or members of his family and departed as sedately without ever paying a call on Grock; that nevertheless he permitted himself the boast that he had made Grock a star; that — and most hurtful was this — Grock, he said, was nobody outside England.

All these ranklings, big and little, came to a head one night in 1924 when the curtain went up before a vast house already wooed into an easy hilarity by the circumstances that it was Easter Monday, and a holiday.

#### *A Weighty Oath.*

A holiday — and who was there in the whole world of merry men who was more than a shadow in the brilliance of Grock? This shambling tramp flip-flopped on to the stage in his absurd boots and to a roar from the crowd opened his huge case and took out his tiny violin. He held hysteria at his beck with a simper or the mere lifting of an eyebrow. Here, in the tatters of a divinely foolish foil, the world had surprised the capering spirit and essence of holiday.

But Grock's deep voice did not answer the call boy on that noisy April night. His dressing room was empty. A few hours before the attendants hung out the "House Full" signs, Grock had slipped out of his hotel, carrying only his musical instruments, and left the country.

On the boat for France he looked back, sketched a sign of the cross in the Channel breeze, and addressed to our receding shores this weighty oath:

"As long as Stoll lives, I shall never set foot again in England!"

Thus did he take his leave of us, his subtlest and most appreciative public. Apart from a short non-professional sojourn here in 1939, Grock has kept his word.

As soon as he had left England, Grock accepted an engagement at the Scala, Berlin, and almost doubled his salary. He became the highest paid comedian in Europe. And he had his revenge on Sir Oswald, some years later, when the director of the Coliseum presented his card at the box-office of the Scala and asked for two seats. He was told that the whole house had been booked out. But, Sir Oswald asked, wasn't the director's own box available?

"Sorry — that's gone, too. When Grock is here you have to book weeks in advance."

When the cashier told Grock this story, he danced round the foyer for joy.

His first taste of circus was as conventionally romantic as the soggiest film script. You can see the sequence, can you not? The circus has come to town;

the wide-eyed, tow-haired boy, dragging his young sister by the hand, skirts the huge marquee till he finds a space where the canvas is not so tightly pegged. He lifts the flap and scrambles under; sister after him. And the spangles and the brilliance, the tumblers, the jogging, patient horses, the dizzying trapeze, the wandering mischief of the clowns, they sit entranced.

#### *Musician, Juggler, Clown.*

That is exactly what happened to Charles Adrian Wettach, who thereafter spent hours every day juggling with bottles, perfecting tumbling tricks, endeavouring the supple contortions of the "human serpent," and practising on a menagerie of the weirdest musical instruments a fond father could be persuaded to buy him; a xylophone, a set of bottles filled at different levels, a set of bells, a tinkling glass carillon, trick whistling gloves, a wooden harp from Germany, a mandolin, a guitar, an accordion, even a home-built set of musical flower pots.

He was born in Reconvilier, a watchmaking village in the Jura of Switzerland. His father worked at the local factory. Before he was in his 'teens, Wettach was a versatile entertainer and an accomplished musician. When he had entered his 'teens, an exploit decided him forever that he was destined for the circus, for he tasted the first wine of crowd idolatry.

#### *On the Tight Rope.*

A celebrated Swiss tight-rope walker, Bourquin, swung a rope between the Schweizerhof Hotel and the Café Jura in Bienne and proposed to walk on it from a third floor window of the hotel to the café across the square; he had hired young Charles as general assistant. Just before the display Bourquin had a sudden attack of funk; he was so unnerved that he began to tremble all over and appealed to the fourteen-year-old boy to help him. Charles took the heavy balance pole and climbed out of the window.

Before the dizzy vista of people and sky and houses, he felt completely calm. Slowly he inched out along the tight-rope, then slid his feet along with increasing confidence. He reached the middle of the rope.

This was, Grock says, the most supremely happy moment of his life. Below him a packed square of gaping faces was turned upward. For a moment, as he balanced with the poise and assurance of an expert,

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there was no sound. Above him, the starry evening. The thing he remembers most was the smell of jasmine as it rose to him from the nearby gardens. It was then that an exhilarated other self, a madcap self he was to come to know so well, took hold of him, and he attempted the impossible; he tried to turn round on the rope, pole in hand, and retrace his steps. At the same time, the rope began to give. He lost his balance.

The pole clattered down into the crowd. As he fell, he clutched and found the rope, and hung on. Below, the crowd screamed and stampeded; hand over hand, slowly, he swung himself back to the hotel.

He was chaired through Bienne that night. Thereafter he belonged completely to the circus. First he joined the troupe of Franz Wetzel, a friend of his father. At fourteen he was already famous in the Jura district. In addition to his musical turns he was a conjuror, tight-rope juggler, a success with his comic songs, and in great demand for his balancing-on-one-leg-of-a-chair stunt. For years young Charles Wettach wandered Europe with travelling shows, fought his rivals, slept on straw, quarrelled with a succession of partners, starved, triumphed, kept working his acts — innovating, experimenting, rehearsing new tricks, and overhauling old ones. He often practised on his instruments for fifteen hours a day, till his arms nearly dropped off.

Grock's London début was at the Palace Theatre in 1912, where Gaby Deslys was starring and where bioscope newsreels had made their appearance on the programme. Neither he nor Antonet, who was one of his greatest partners, was billed. So wildly did the English salute their first performance, however, that not only was this changed with all haste, but the manager was waiting for them when they came off with an offer to prolong their contract.

#### *Birth of a Gag.*

During one of his disagreements with his partner, Antonet sneered an aside at one of Grock's impromptu gags. "I suppose you think that's funny!" Then he fled. For Grock, flying into a rage, wrenched the lid off the piano and, oblivious of the audience, chased him round the stage and halfway into the wings.

The crowd roared. Grock came back to them, but trembling and distracted, leaned the lid against the side of the piano and sat down. Then the imp which is, as the core of his genius came to whisper that here was a fine joke. He placed his bowler on the lid and watched it with puzzled indignation as it slid down the

incline. There was a certain magnificent logic in the way he climbed on to the piano and slid down after it.

Much of this was not funny without Grock. He had his imitators, but many gave up copying his acts, complaining that when they tried them out, nobody laughed. And there were some Grock tricks that nobody with less agility than a monkey could imitate. One of his favourite effects came when he fell through the seat of his chair. On the inspiration of the moment he extricated himself with a great bound which landed him halfway across the stage and left him sitting, rather to his surprise, cross-legged on the floor. Here was a discovery. The next time he tried this out he nearly broke both legs. But he perfected the trick and claims he can do it as well to-day as he first did it thirty years ago.

One of the most prodigious results of his clowning occurred in Madrid in 1908, in the Parish Circus, where he and the great Antonet were trying out a whole sparkling new series of clown entrances which have now become text-book material in the circus. The King and Queen of Spain were present.

Teetering on his chair with terror at the menaces of Antonet, Grock fell into a large drum. When he stuck a plaintive nose out through the rent he had caused, he made the Queen laugh so much that she was taken ill and had to be borne hurriedly away. Twenty-four hours later the world learned of the somewhat premature birth of the Infante Jaime, second son to be born to King Alfonso XIII.

#### *When Grock Meets Charlie Chaplin.*

He met Chaplin once: "Charlie entered my dressing room and shaking me by the hand, said to me, 'I am the best clown on the screen and you are the greatest on the stage! The only difference is that I am richer than you.' 'That may well be,' I replied, 'But perhaps I am happier than you!'"

This contented reportage is Grock's, and is taken from his autobiography which is entitled, with some accuracy, *No Fooling*.

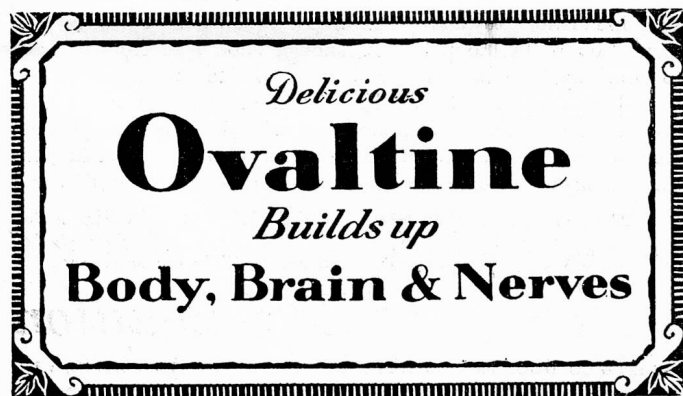
Now a healthy 69, Grock is invading Charlie's domain. His clown-painted jowls quiver a little as he sings, his gnarled fingers running, as nimbly as ever, over the keys of his accordion such Grock triumphs as "Abie, My Boy."

For Grock was a song-writer as well as a clown. He was a man of many parts. One of these roles was a song-publishing business, Grock and Silbermann, at 32 Charing Cross Road. They published a whole string of hit tunes in the 'teens and early 'twenties. "Abie, My Boy" went round the world.

The film is being made by a French company, Trident Films. Its title, *Au Revoir, Monsieur Grock* could scarcely be more apt, implying as it does that this is not the last, one may expect to see of him. For nearly twenty years Grock has been retiring with solemn regularity to his villa on the Italian Riviera, only to reappear at gradually less frequent intervals like an actor snatched back with growing reluctance from the wings for yet another curtain.

An incident during the making of this film illuminates the great clown's character. When he saw the first "rushes" of this film he gaped chuckled, and was suddenly convulsed with laughter.

"Why," he said afterwards, "I was really funny! I can understand it now!"



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