

Flower Arrangement

By ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

*If I was willing to get to the
root of this problem, why were
they so up in the air over it?*

Illustrated by DILLON

LATER on, I couldn't remember quite why I did it. I was sitting there in my usual condition of vague awareness, wishing Barbara's voice would

stop grating away because there was a man who was going to talk to us about St. Augustine grass, and I was hoping he'd say what to do for the brown spots in my lawn.

"Oh, come on, girls," Barbara was saying. "We *ought* to enter the Federated Gardens show. Last year we won third prize."

What Barbara wanted, of course, was for us to urge her to do the Arrangement. She was the only one of us with any talent, and to be fair, Barbara is a real maestro.

Every year we each make a Dried Arrangement and Barbara comes along and says, "Um!" and presses her lips together and waves her hand over your weedy-looking mess and pokes sticks in and out of the starfoam and, *presto*, you have a beautiful Arrangement to keep in your living room until the next Dried Arrangements meeting.

Every year I take it home and everyone says, "Oh, isn't that beautiful! Did you make it?" And of course I had been rather pretending I had made it, only if somebody asked me about it directly, I had to say, "No, Barbara James made it." I frequently wished I had the courage to rush out of the Dried Arrangements meeting before she got to me and set my weedy, wispy Arrangement on the buffet and leave it there.

Needless to say, I do not have this kind of courage.

Only as Barbara got to the part where she says, "O.K. Any volunteers?" something popped inside of me and I shot my hand up and said, "I'd be glad to have a try at it."

Barbara's mouth quirked a little, because she knew perfectly well what kind of Arrangements I make, and because she had probably already decided exactly what sort of Arrangement the Eastbank Garden Group was going to enter in the Federated Gardens show.

But she said, "That's fine, Sally Jo. You're to use camellias in it somewhere. I think you'd do best with a simple fan Arrangement. I'll mail you their rules book, and if you'd like any — er — advice, why, I'd be glad to help."

That was it, of course. She wasn't going to let it be my Arrangement at all.

I didn't even hear what the man said about St. Augustine grass. All the time I was thinking, thinking, thinking. Was there *any* kind of Arrangement I could make that Barbara couldn't do better? Something really different, so that when I looked at it, I wouldn't have to picture Barbara pressing her lips together?

IT was about eleven o'clock at night when I got home, and of course Ronald was asleep, but I just couldn't bear this by myself.

"Ronald!" I cried in a loud whisper so as not to wake Tommy. "Do you *know* what I've done!"

Ronald snuffled irritably, then sat up with a jerk and grabbed me by the shoulders.

"You ran over somebody!"

"No. I volunteered to make the flower Arrangement for the Federated Gardens show!"

Ronald mumbled blasphemies and sank back into his pillow.

"Darling, please stay awake. You see, the thing is, I'm actually going to do this. Only there's the matter of Barbara. Now, if I can only find something—come to think of it, there's the Hogarth Curve. Barbara can do fans or Japanese things or crescents, but the one thing Barbara has never won a prize on is the Hogarth Curve. It tends to droop, you see. Darling..."

But he was asleep.

For a wild moment I even considered waking up Tommy, just to have someone to talk to.

The wild moment passed and I eyed the telephone. But there isn't anyone you can call up at eleven o'clock at night and say, "About the Hogarth Curve—"

I crossed my arms over my chest and slipped my feet out of my shoes so I could stride up and down the house quietly. Naturally I couldn't think of anything. I never can when I try.

But it hit me the next day. I was putting some appliqué on a pot holder for the bazaar in January — I loathe appliqué — and there it was!

The Hogarth Curve wouldn't do, because while Barbara wasn't really successful with that kind of Arrangement, she could look at it and

immediately see what was wrong. But the Hogarth Curve isn't the only line in the world. Lines reminded me of math, and math reminded me of that *Mathematics for Morons* book Ronald brought home in one of his numerous unsuccessful attempts to improve my thinking ability.

I stuck my finger with a needle, hissed at the stab, held the pot holder carefully away so as not to get blood on it. Appliqué, ha!

There was *something* in that book I wanted to remember. Some really interesting line. I grabbed the book and started down the index. B. I was sure it began with a B. No. Moebius Strip. That was it.

Feverishly, I flipped the pages back to find out what it was that was so interesting about the Moebius Strip, and whether it could be done with an aspidistra leaf soaked in glycerin.

"Brring!" went the alarm clock, which I always reset in the morning to tell me to go get Tommy.

"Damn, damn, damn," I said, glancing hastily around at the part on Moebius Strips. There were other interesting-looking lines, but I just had a feeling the Moebius one was right.

WALKING into the kindergarten, I peered around for Tommy.

"Everything all right?" Miss Potter asked.

"Um? Oh." I guess I had a glazed look in my eyes. "Come to think of it, I've been pondering it all morning and I haven't told anybody yet. I'm going to make the Arrangement for the Federated Gardens show."

"How nice! You could make a real family project out of it!" Miss Potter said with her usual misplaced enthusiasm. "Tommy loves to make things!"

"I know."

Tommy talked all the way home, but I didn't hear a word he said.

"Make yourself a peanut butter sandwich," I said when I pushed open the back door.

"Boys my age need a good hot lunch."

"My mother used to have to force me to eat a good hot lunch. I'd have liked nothing better than to come home and make myself a peanut butter sandwich."

Tommy gave me his accusatory look.

"Oh, all *right*," I said.

AFTER lunch, we went out in the garage where I have my lab—ferns being pressed between newspapers, cattails hanging up to dry, my bucket of things in glycerin.

"What I need," I mused, "is the biggest aspidistra in the world."

I found a really nice one. Brownish, of course, but with a reddish streak and hints of deep green in

it. And best of all, a light stripe right down the middle.

"This," I said, "is going to be the very soul of our flower arrangement."

"What's a soul?"

"A soul . . ." The telephone rang. I am not always this fortunate.

"I wanted to let you know," Barbara said, "that I've got the perfect container for your Arrangement. A pale blue cloisonné bowl. Oval. Just the thing for a fan Arrangement."

"I'm not making a fan Arrangement."

"No? Well, I think it would do very nicely for one of the Japanese Arrangements."

"I'm not using Japanese lines," I said.

There was a silence. Then, "You're *not* going to try a Hogarth Curve!"

"No. It's not the sort of thing you can describe, Barbara. You'll just have to see it. When I'm ready."

"I can come by any evening." Fortunately, Barbara works. "Suppose I come by this evening and bring you the bowl?"

"I already have a base," I lied. "I'll call you when I have the Arrangement in shape."

"I didn't mean to interfere."

"It isn't that. It's that the thing is — gestating. I need to *feel* it for a while."

"Of course," Barbara said, as though I had just told her I was calling in a medium.

A BASE. Really, I didn't want any base at all. I needed something that was nothing.

The pastry board was too big.

But I have a lovely chopping board, oblong, just the right size. I scrubbed the onion and garlic smell out of it as best I could and stuck on a piece of starfoam with floral clay.

Now the Moebius Strip.

"Tommy!"

His eyes were wide and puzzled. He didn't know what he'd done.

"Why did you tear Mama's aspidistra leaf into strips?" A whole bunch of them, meeting at the stem.

"It's prettier that way."

I could see what he meant. There was something festive-looking about it. Like streamers tied to a stick.

"Let's try it like it is," Tommy said.

He picks up these insidious co-operative suggestions from Miss Potter, and he has me in the midst of family projects before I'm aware of what's going on.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to try. Hand me a piece of that green wire."

I gathered the ends of the streamers together, carefully half-looped them and wired them to the bottom of the stem, so that the stem was part of the curve, too. They were pliable, but not limp or crackly, from the glycerin. My idea was to make a Dried Arrangement and

then wire in some camellias at the last minute.

If I had been a purist, I would have left the Arrangement the way it was, with just the one leaf. Tommy and I, however, are not purists.

"Go out into the garage and get me six dried okra pods off the shelf," I said. "I am a fairy godmother."

"Which ones is the okra?" Tommy asked.

"The stripy ones."

Tommy was back in a flash. "What are you going to turn them into?"

"A handsome young Dried Arrangement."

"Can I stick some in?"

"One."

I wired them all and put in five, their slight crescents all curving in the same direction. Tommy put the sixth one in, curving, of course, in the wrong direction.

Still, you know, it didn't look bad.

"Now," I said, "we need something behind it. For a background. Something pale. Go into the garage," I commanded, waving my magic floral wire, "and get me four ferns. They're between the sheets of newspaper."

It's obvious what's wrong with all this. You should *never* use an even number of things in a flower arrangement. It's gauche and bourgeois and almost as bad as serving iced sherry.

JUST as I was really getting started, Ronald came in demanding dinner.

"How am I ever going to get my Arrangement made if people keep interrupting?" I said, because I was knee-deep in weeds and it was infuriating to have to stop. "Don't you and Tommy ever think of anything but food?"

"Sally Jo!"

I opened cans of this and that, like the ladies on television. Ronald and Tommy ate morosely and of course the Tylers dropped by after dinner and Marcelle said, "What is *that*?" And I said, "Oh, it isn't finished yet," and Tommy said, "I helped," and Marcelle said, "That's awfully clever of Tommy to help make something. But tell me, dear, have you ever wondered about his subconscious?"

No, I hadn't, but it was *my* subconscious, and after that I kept wondering, Why is my subconscious like a Moebius Strip? The best answer I could come up with was that it's because it has a half-twist in it.

But the next morning I got the fern in exactly right, balancing the five okra pods with three large ferns and the wrong-way one with a small fern. The aspidistra showed up beautifully against the fragile dried road fern.

Then, of course, Tommy and Ronald revolted against my Creative Period, each in his own way.

Tommy fell down and split his lip wide open, requiring stitches, and Ronald came down with the flu, requiring continuous bed care.

I'd rather be locked up with two live octopi.

And then Marcelle called and said the pot holders *had* to be done by the next week, so every time I had an odd moment I had to sit down and work on that wretched appliqué.

"I'll resign!" I screamed one day, hurling a half-appliquéd pot holder across the room. "Do you know that I still have the bias binding to sew on? And, Ronald, they're *round*."

"For God's sake, resign! I've never heard of making pot holders for a garden club, anyway."

"It's for our bazaar. And I can't resign before the show. I wouldn't be able to make the Arrangement."

"Which would suit me just fine," Ronald said. "Where's my pipe?"

"Did you look on your pipe rack?"

"There's a tube of toothpaste on my pipe rack."

"Then your pipe's in the medicine cabinet."

By the time Tommy was back in school and Ronald was back at work, I had *one* day to finish my Arrangement in.

BARBARA, of course, had been calling every night "to find out how everybody is," and hinting for me to let her take over.



Somewhere, probably out of sheer irritation, I found the strength of mind to refuse her.

"But you'll need my Pink Perfections," Barbara said. "After all, it's a camellia show."

"Couldn't you meet me before the show? I'm going over at eight o'clock and Ronald's going to drop Tommy off at school for me. The show doesn't start until nine. You could stop by on the way to work."

"I'll be there at eight o'clock," Barbara said. "How many Pink Perfections do you want me to bring? Three? Five?"

"Four," I said, and hung up before she could even gasp.

I worked most of the night. I filled in the curve of the Moebius Strip with some soft, sort of thistle down things. I covered the star-foam with curly moss and left the rest of the chopping board bare. I worked in the mindless way that produces the best effect.

The alarm went off at six. I hopped out of bed and darted about the chilly house to get my family clothed and fed and out. I was more excited than I ought to have been over a flower show. I'd stuck my neck out too far, refusing to let Barbara help. And using a totally unorthodox Arrangement. And furthermore — you don't ordinarily think of Flower Arranging as a vice, but it was something nasty in me that made me volunteer to do it, and to exclude Bar-

bara, who after all needs to make Flower Arrangements because she doesn't have any children. And if one is going to have a vice at all, and neglect home and family and friends, one ought to be able to say, "There, at least I got a prize."

I broke the eggs into a bowl and got the bacon started. Then I popped into the living room and turned the light on for a quick look at my Moebius Strip. There was something not quite right about it. For one thing, it no longer looked like a Moebius Strip. On the other hand, it didn't look *not* like a Moebius Strip.

The bacon started complaining and I went to separate the pieces and at this point Tommy woke up and informed me that he was wet, as is his tendency on cold mornings. Then Ron said he couldn't find his cuff links and the cat started yowling to come in and I didn't have time to think about anything at all.

Until I started in to get my flower Arrangement to bring to the John D. Ransom auditorium, where the show was going to be. Then Tommy said, "I fixed it for you." And so he had. It looked Moebius, only more so.

Barbara was waiting for me just inside the door, her arms wrapped around herself, doing a little two-step to warm up. The auditorium was like a vault and the heating system was just getting started, with random, thunderous shrieks.

"Why, Sally Jo!" Barbara cried, stopping in mid-two-step. "It's *interesting*."

I CARRIED the Arrangement over to the niche marked EAST-BANK GARDEN GROUP. ARRANGEMENT BY SALLY JO WARNER. I set it down carefully, though Barbara says an Arrangement should always be so tight you can turn it upside down and shake it.

Interesting! I had a moment of wild triumph and then I was a little ashamed of myself. Barbara was generous enough to like it.

"However," Barbara said, pressing her lips together and making me feel normal again, "where are we going to put the Pink Perfections?"

Barbara opened the shallow box with four camellias in it. They were, of course, perfect and spotless and exactly alike. I can understand how Barbara manages to discipline her house and her dog and her husband, but I have never figured out how anyone can discipline flowers.

"The camellias? Oh, yes, the camellias . . ."

There was a baffled bellow from Ronald. He was trying to get Tommy's snowsuit off. I ran over before the zipper or Tommy could get jammed. The instant I had the snowsuit off, there was a wail from Tommy. "She ruined my Flower Arrangement!"

My heart sank. "No, no, dear," I said, hurrying after him to where Barbara was, but he was right. There were bits of weed and fluff piled up on the floor and a gleam of joy in Barbara's eyes, and there was nothing left of the fascinating shape Tommy and I had made. "See?" I went on. "It's beautiful. It's a perfect Hogarth Curve." It was. It didn't droop at all. And Barbara had made the Arrangement.

"There was something funny in there," Barbara said. "I thought it must be Tommy's, so I saved it."

"It's my inside-out balloon," Tommy said, his chin quivering, "and she turned it back right-side in!"

It was Tommy's multi-colored balloon, and it really didn't look much like a balloon any more, though it was still blown up. "How did your balloon get in there?"

"I put it in," Tommy said, "to make the Arrangement more rounder. It's the roundest thing I ever made." Tears were gathering in his eyes.

"Now, dear, I don't know why I didn't see it."

"I put it in after you made it. Then I blew it up and tied it and poked in the end. It was the roundest thing in the whole world!"

"But it's still tied! See? So nobody could have turned it right-side out. It looks the same on both sides."

"No, it don't. The other side got

magnetic paint on it. That's why the balloon got ripples in it."

Ron had been standing around looking impatient and he said, "Tommy, there's no such thing as magnetic paint."

"There is, too," Tommy said. "I made it."

"How did you make it?"

"You mix up silver paint like you use for Christmas Arrangements and you add that silver glitter that you sprinkle and then you add all the old magnets you have around and you stir it good."

"How many old magnets?" I asked.

"Lots and lots and lots."

"Then what?"

"Then you turn the balloon inside out and blow it up and pinch the end with a clothes pin and paint it and then when it's dry you let the air out."

"And just why do you do all this?" Ron asked.

THAT was a silly question and Tommy didn't bother to answer it.

"What about the magnets?" I asked.

"You bury them in the back yard."

"Oh. And do metal things stick on the magnetic paint?"

"Well — hair does, if you brush it first."

"*Metal* things."

"I *think* they do. A teeny bit. But

now it's all on the wrong side and it's ruined."

"I have to get to work," Ron said.

"Here, catch." I tossed the balloon to Tommy.

It stayed up in the middle of the air.

"See?" Tommy said. "It's no good no more."

We all stood staring, in a state of shock.

"It's a funny shape," Ron said finally. "Those puckers sort of go *in* and if you follow that striated band . . . if you follow . . ."

I was trying to follow it with my eyes, too.

". . . you get vertigo," Ron finished, looking off in another direction.

"Yes, you do," I said. "Well, we can't just leave it here. Tommy, would you like to take it to show Miss Potter?"

"Miss Potter, hell!" Ron exclaimed. "There's something extraordinary about this. I'm going to take it down to work with me and let the boys at the lab have a look at it. I've never seen anything that just stayed in mid-air like that. You notice it doesn't seem to float, as it would if it contained a gas, and . . ."

But I was busy apologizing to Barbara for Tommy's manners and assuring her the Hogarth Curve was beautiful.

I pinned the left-over camellia in my hair, because I felt I deserved something, and Ron said

he'd drop Tommy and me off at kindergarten.

"Isn't it marvelous," I asked Ron as I wiped off the windshield, because Tommy kept huffing on it, "to have a son who's an important scientist before the age of six?"

"Now don't be getting delusions of grandeur about him," Ron said. "Whatever you and he made was purely accidental."

"That goes to show what you know about the scientific method. I was making a Moebius Arrangement and Tommy was making the roundest thing in the whole world, and when you're working on something and something else happens, something scientifically important, it's called — I can't remember what it's called, but it's a perfectly good word beginning with R. Or maybe L."

"Serendipity. But you and Tommy . . . Never mind."

LATER on in the morning, Ron called to tell me to go see a man named Craddock over at the lab, and I'd have to go by myself because Ron was busy, and I said, "All right," but it wasn't all right. The thought of going to that strange place to talk to important men was terrifying.

I opened my closet and looked unhappily through my inappropriate house dresses and equally inappropriate party dresses. I finally decided on my black skirt, dark

gray sweater and white cotton blouse, which I hoped would give the impression of a businesslike outfit.

On the way down on the streetcar, I found a woman staring at me and I realized I had been practicing my facial expression. It was the one where I hang a cigarette out of the side of my mouth, narrow my eyes to a slit, and say, "I'm Warner. You Craddock?"

What actually happened was that an office boy said, "What are you so nervous about, lady?" and brought me through a maze of forbidding-looking chambers and deposited me on a bench facing a back that was, presumably, Craddock's.

I sat there trying to decide whether to address him or just wait, when he turned, looked at me, and jumped two feet.

"I didn't know anyone was there," he explained, and since he was the one who had acted a little silly, I felt much better about him immediately.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was just sitting here trying to decide . . ." That wouldn't do. "My name's Warner," I said, omitting the facial expression.

"Dr. Warner?"

"Sally Jo Warner."

"And you discovered this new-force field?"

"If you mean the right-side-inside-out balloon," I answered, "yes.

With my son. Thomas." I decided that if he was going to be a scientist, we should stop calling him Tommy.

CRADDOCK was one of those thin, pale, freckled-all-over people with eyes the color of the rims of his horn-rimmed glasses and he wore the same general expression of stubborn intentness that Tommy has. And I could sense in his expression the same scorn for me that Tommy so frequently has.

"I'd like to discuss this with your son," he said.

Of course. *I* couldn't be expected to say anything sensible.

"Thomas has school in the mornings," I said.

"Ah? Um. Which school?"

"Miss Nicholls."

"Miss—"

"It's a small private school. Kindergarten through third grade."

"A third-grade child did this!"

"No. Kindergarten. And I was not without influence in this discovery. I went to Grey Rock Junior College."

"Um. Sciences?"

"Yes."

"I mean what sciences?"

"We learned all the sciences in one course. Chemistry, biology, physics and—well, I'd have to look in the book to remember the others."

"Never mind," Craddock said, a

shudder going through his slight, clattery frame. "Just tell me how you did this." He nodded at the balloon, which was encased in a glass box with a tube sort of thing leading into it.

"Well, first you take an aspidistra leaf . . ." I began, and went on from there. Craddock wrote it all down, though he kept saying, "I just don't see how the balloon fits into all this," and finally I said, "Now we get to the balloon. And the magnetic paint."

"Where did you get the magnetic paint?"

"My colleague made it."

Craddock was awfully picayunish about details. "How *much* silver paint? How much is 'the rest of a pack of glitter'?" Then he was disturbed because lots and lots and lots of magnets is eight.

When I got to the part where Barbara made a Hogarth Curve out of my Moebius Strip, I asked him for a cigarette because I was still upset over it.

"I know how you feel," Craddock said, being agreeable for the first time. "I don't think it's right to make a Hogarth Curve out of a Moebius Strip, either. I wouldn't even think it was possible."

"Well, that's all," I said, and Craddock grabbed my cigarette before I dropped it into what looked like an empty dish. "I have to rush off and pick up my colleague at kindergarten."

ON the way to Miss Nicholls, my mind was afire with ambition. Tommy would appear on TV. Everyone would forget about the time Tommy smeared Miss Potter's chair with mucilage right before she sat down. He'd be offered scholarships to MIT. He'd dictate articles for scientific journals and I'd write them up.

And if anyone ever made remarks about my thinking ability again, I'd just say, "My method produces results."

About two o'clock that afternoon, Craddock called and bawled, "The force field is leaking! Another hour and it'll all be gone!"

"Stop sounding as though it's my fault," I said.

"Sorry. I'm just anxious."

"Why don't you catch the drippings in a pot or something?"

"We tried to. But you should see the cloud chamber."

I said, "I'm sure the cloud chamber is very interesting," because it was none of his business if I didn't know what a cloud chamber was.

"The lines just wiggle and disappear into another dimension. I don't know how else to describe it."

"What's making it leak?"

"There's something unusual in the nuclei of the atoms. They're decaying."

"Tommy blew up the balloon," I said, and wondered if he had cavities, though of course it was a different kind of decay. Still the

thought made me a little nervous.

"We're getting photographs of everything," Craddock went on, "but what's worrying us is that we haven't been able to duplicate the — uh — experiment."

"I'll bet you didn't soak the aspidistra in glycerin. You couldn't have. There hasn't been time."

"Glycerin wouldn't have anything to do with it. For that matter, neither would the aspidistra."

"Plants," I informed him, "even dried ones, have all sorts of influence. If you put a bouquet of roses in a room, the whole room and all the furniture is a different shape."

"That's your subjective reaction. It's because you like roses."

"There! That proves my point! Why does the lamb love Mary so?"

CRADDOCK choked a little. "Mrs. Warner . . . all right, why does the lamb love Mary so?"

"They learn things like this at Miss Nicholls," I pointed out. "The answer is, 'Mary loves the lamb, you know.' People like roses because roses like people. Which means roses have something you don't know about."

"All right, there are things I don't know. The first thing I don't know is how to carry on an intelligible conversation with you. But let's skip everything except what I called you for. Will you and your colleague please make another of those balloon affairs?"

"I doubt if it can be done."

"Why? If there are any materials you need, I can certainly—"

"It isn't that. It's — well, whatever we do, it's going to be a little bit different. And I don't know if Tommy can find where he buried the magnets. But I'll try."

But before I went shouting around for Tommy, I called Barbara, because something had occurred to me while I was talking to Craddock and it was only decent to tell Barbara.

"What time," I asked, "do the judges come around tonight?"

"About seven-thirty," Barbara said.

"I'm sorry, but you ought to know. We're not going to win."

"What?"

"Your Hogarth Curve," I said, thinking of the leaking balloon, "is going to droop at three o'clock," and left the explanation for later.

I found Tommy in the back yard, deeply involved with sticks and bits of string and old nails.

I knew immediately and sadly what he was doing.

It was too bad Tommy wasn't going to be a famous scientist before the age of six, but that was mostly just a joke. And it was too bad the Eastbank Garden Group wasn't going to win a prize in the Federated Gardens Show, but it was no longer my Arrangement,

anyway, and Barbara's always winning other prizes for us. And it was too bad Craddock wasn't going to have his force field, but he hadn't been very nice about the whole thing.

No, the real tragedy was that Tommy was going to be bitterly unhappy about something I had absolutely no control over.

I CALLED Craddock and tried to explain to him why Tommy would never in the world get interested in making another Moebius Strip thing. And there's no way to *make* a child create something, any more than you can make him eat.

"You see," I told Craddock, who was sputtering helplessly on the other end of the line, "he's already made the roundest thing in the whole world. It's not really hard to make the roundest thing in the whole world. I mean, things *tend* to be round, and all you have to do is follow a tendency. But now he's working on something else and he'll keep at it and won't think about anything else and it's going to be tragic when he finds out it just can't be done."

"And what is he trying to do?" Craddock managed to say.

"He's trying to make the squarest thing in the whole world."

— ROSEL GEORGE BROWN