

BROTHER VICTOR CLITHEROE. SDB.

He died just a year ago. There is an old picture of him, a long shot of an informal group of staff and boys at the Salesian Institute, Cape Town, taken before the First Great War; there he stands, a laughing boy facing the camera, facing the audience, front stage, in front of the others, with all the panache, the gusto and the bravado of a hundred years of show business flowing through his veins. He has been there ever since, a little man with a perpetual grin on stage.

Show business is a world of its own, of the men and women who show the world to the world, with its tears and its laughter. But you truly belong to it only if it flows in your blood. It was deep in Vickie's blood on both sides.

Some vision of ambition decided his parents to move their show to India, at the turn of the century; but alarmed perhaps by tales of Bengal tigers or snake charmers, they interrupted their journey at Cape Town, entrusting Vickie and his sister, Norah, as befitting good Yorkshire Catholics, to the care of the Sisters of Nazareth; in his heart Vickie never left that home of practical loving kindness. Indeed he stayed with the Sisters until he was old enough to be found a job as an errand boy. His packets and his parcels brought him in touch with the Salesians nearby and when their new home opened in 1910, in Somerset Road, he moved in with them. He whole-heartedly gave himself to his new vocation in life as he passed through the periods of early training, then the novitiate in England, followed by his professional training as a printer in Italy.

Later an accident gave him a permanent stiff leg but that became just another stage prop as he continued to work up new tricks and new songs in order to keep the boys amused and happy. For all of sixty years he lived in the one house in the one city teaching and tending and amusing the boys. This and his spiritual life, in chapel before six every morning, taking his turn at serving Mass and often, with his life-long companion, Bro. Paul Clarke, the last out of chapel at night, after their many rosaries.

Now and then he would pack his bags – usually two of them. One for his change of linen and toiletry, the other larger and stronger for his box of tricks and all the magic and make-up. He would make a sort of tour to Port Elizabeth and Johannesburg and Durban, rounding up past pupils of the school and giving shows in every Nazareth House to young and old. As he grew older in years himself they got to know his routine as well as he did – the tricks he did so often that at the end he was missing out the punch-line before going on to the next one. His Father Christmas he kept going to the end, at children's parties even in hotels, and of course at the Nazareth house and at the Salesian Sisters school for poor coloured children at Paarl, forty miles away.

At seventy-five he was released from the printing shop. But to his infirmary, he now added another infirmary, one for wounded statues. Broken arms and holy heads all askew and battered after some dreadful mishap, he would remould and restore and repaint. While, of course, not disdaining the Teresas and the Anthonys, he loved to do the broken Madonnas. The repairs effected, there would always be a complete repainting, gowns in blue and silver, the bluest of eyes, especially for the Bambino.

In his seventy-ninth year he had to go to hospital on two occasions. The third time they decided to operate. Right down the long open ward they wheeled him on his way to the theatre, another theatre; but it was show-business all the way with him singing and waving, "Wish me luck as you wave me good-bye....", and they wished him luck, singing with him.

He came back – but he had made his last public performance. It was soon evident that God wanted him back for Himself and so he went back to where, in Africa, it had all begun, back to Nazareth House. Here he spent the last weeks, saying his prayers, laughing with visitors, joining in everything he could; until the day when he could probably hear but was too tired to join in the

prayers they were saying for the dying. It was a crisp sunny day in June 1974, a happy day to die on.

The Cardinal, no less, claimed the privilege of presiding over the Requiem Mass and the farewell, a Prince of the Church, Bro. Victor had loved and served for so long. No one could feel sad as we took him to the Salesian plot under the shade of Table Mountain, we, the priests, Salesians and others, the Sisters, the Brothers, the Co-operators, friends, old and young.

When the prayers had all been said and the coffin lowered into the grave, a Salesian Sister brought a group of small coloured children to the graveside. They could just read the name on the coffin – BROTHER VICTOR CLITHEROE, SALESIAN OF DON BOSCO.

and they sang two happy little songs.

May he now be at peace with God – and with Saint John Bosco in heaven.