

There is Only One Gracie

LAST month Gracie Fields spent a week in her native North of England. She came up this time, she said, 'to do a bit of knittin' for the BBC.' In fact, the 'bit of knittin'' consisted of two television appearances and the recording of four sound programmes—a tall order for any artist. But for Gracie any visit to the North means more than just doing a job of work; it means facing up to a continuous welcome, a welcome of staggering proportions—a welcome which, as the years go by, remains undiminished in excitement and enthusiasm, and grows in warmth and sincerity.

I have been privileged to enjoy Gracie's friendship for many years. I have had many opportunities to see at close quarters the extent and the essence of the tremendous affection in which she is held. Sometimes it has been demonstrated by the mass reaction of a cheering crowd; sometimes by a fleeting expression in the eyes of a single listener to a gramophone record. Either way, it is a devotion richly deserved.

The range and timbre of her famous voice, and the application of her supreme professional artistry are qualities which speak for themselves; but it is something more than all this which seals the bond between Gracie and those who love her. The answer lies in her 'personality,' of course, but as a mere word this conveys little. To me, the elusive factor is related to the intense force of Gracie's inherent sincerity, the sheer truth and integrity of her own character. Frank, outspoken, absolutely unspoiled, she is incapable of deception. Despite the influence of fame and fortune, the travels around the world, the sojourns in Hollywood, London, New York, Capri, Gracie outwardly and inwardly remains essentially her true self, the lass from Rochdale; famous but unchanged.

In Her Home Town

One of my earliest meetings with her was at Rochdale. It was on one of her 'official' visits—and what a reception she got! I think all the ninety thousand inhabitants of her home town turned out to greet her. Gracie sang to them in a local theatre, sang to them from the balcony of the town hall, and sang to them again from the running-board of her car as she was about to go. Yet on another occasion—'Not a posh affair this time,' she said—Gracie, her staunch friend Mary Davey and I strolled through the busy streets of the town, recognised of course, but challenged only by an occasional 'Ow do, Gracie,' from a jaunty passer-by. When I marvelled at this, Gracie just grinned at me and said, 'Eeh lad, when they can see you're just out doin' a bit of shopping, people always know how to behave.' And on this latest visit to the North, despite a schedule which seemed not to allow a spare minute in the whole of six days, Gracie still managed to fit in one of these 'unofficial' visits to her beloved Rochdale, her only 'disguise' being a brightly coloured scarf tied shawl-like over her hair and under her chin.

Yet at Leeds the following night, after she had appeared in the television variety show at



Lord and Lady Simon greeting Gracie at the opening of the Holme Moss transmitter in the Town Hall, Manchester last month. Mr. Donald Stephenson, BBC Controller, North Region, is on the left; in the background are the Lord Mayor of Manchester, Councillor William Collingson, and the Lady Mayoress

the Theatre Royal, mounted police were needed to control the vast crowd which waited in the street outside the stage door. It was my intention to escort Gracie from the stage door to the car a few yards away, but after three steps I was swept off my feet by a good-natured but overwhelming surge forward by the crowd. Not so Gracie. She streaked to the car in a flash and, standing high on the mudguard, gave one typical, unmistakable whistle which in a single instant transformed turmoil into tranquillity. (Surely she is the only woman in the world who can start her own riot and with one piercing whistle, stop it!) Then she began to sing. Unaccompanied, her voice rose and lingered over the people tightly huddled together in the dark misty street. Otherwise there was complete silence. As so often when Gracie sings, the occasion became suddenly charged with emotion; in many a throat an unbidden sob was suppressed—the sort of sob which rises involuntarily when, off-stage, Gracie is heard singing the last bars of 'Sally' . . . and in the street, even the horses remained motionless, listening. . . . Then, just as suddenly, sentiment was switched to laughter by a quick 'Shurrup!' by Gracie to a solitary interrupter who was demanding 'The biggest aspidistra.'

Some of the favourite old songs are included in the four programmes which Gracie has just recorded in Manchester. In the first of these, which will be broadcast at eight o'clock on Friday in the Home Service, Gracie revives the old music-hall hit, 'The bird in Nellie's hat.' She

Gracie signing autographs for girls of the St. Cecilia's School choir during rehearsals for 'Television Music-Hall' in Leeds—one of the gala programmes arranged for the opening of Holme Moss

also sings 'The loveliest night of the year,' several other popular numbers, and medleys from George Gershwin shows and *Zip Goes a Million*. Each of the programmes in this series presents practically a whole half-hour of Gracie, singing with an accompaniment by the Northern Variety Orchestra or by Bert Waller at the piano. One of the programmes was recorded at the Hulme Hippodrome. I asked Gracie if she had ever played there before. 'Not 'arf,' she said, 'when I was about fifteen I was doing me act there as a mimic. After the first night the management must have thought I wasn't bad, and they pushed me up to the top of the bill. But I still had to share a dressin' room with the girl I'd displaced. . . . Eeh, it was proper embarrassin'!'

I have many and varied memories of Gracie. Anxious to leave a formal function because she knew that crowds of people were waiting outside in the rain—waiting just to get a glimpse of her as she left. Standing in the wings at a charity performance, as absorbed in the singing of a local amateur as if he were an opera star—and giving him careful advice when he had finished his act. Riding on a fire engine through the streets of Rochdale—with a fireman's shining brass helmet perched on her head at a most saucy angle. Shattering formality into a thousand fragments at the recently televised Holme Moss opening ceremony with an unrehearsed entrance—wearing a chrysanthemum in place of a hat. Relaxing quietly in our garden at home, the dogs—usually so reserved—lying on either side, doting on her. Accepting her portrait in oils from the people of her home town with the remark 'By gum! He's made me look proper nice-lookin'.' Running her fingers through her hair during her stage appearance in the Leeds television variety show—a gesture devoid of affectation and one which only she could accomplish so naturally. Diligently counting sixpences, collected in aid of her orphanage by the sale of autographed programmes at a concert. Scrambling over a wall together in the centre of a big city to escape a crowd which was getting a bit too big—with Gracie in front, helping me over. . . . And, just over a couple of weeks ago, our last glimpse of her on this trip, curled up in an hotel armchair, very late at night, with a strenuous week behind her and a long journey ahead the next morning . . . but still signing autograph books, so that no single person should be disappointed.

Yes, there is only one Gracie. Here's looking forward to hearing her on the air on Friday, and to seeing her in the North again soon.