

GODFREY WINN AT HOME

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the fish and chip shop—and still proud of it, I am, and of dear Bob Brierley who made my clogs when I first went out to work, and later always sent me a pair of shoes as a present on each opening night. Dear Bob . . .”

And I felt she was thinking of all the others, too.

After a pause, she went on softly:

‘When I was married to Archie Pitt, it was different digs each week. I used to take my own teapot and china round with me in a special basket on the tours to try and make things a bit more homely. But, of course, it wasn’t home.

“And now I’ve bought this house in Capri, because of Monty being Italian, meaning to retire there, or at least semi-retire . . . and what am I to do with it?”

How vividly some conversations stay in one’s mind.

Ten years later when we met once more, this time in my own home, she was able to tell me, with a note of thankfulness and rejoicing in her voice, what she had done with the Capri property. She had made it her anchor—and Boris’, too—for the rest of her life.

MIND you, she wasn’t thinking of the swimming pool they’ve built, and the open-air restaurant that attracts a host of customers, fans and admirers, tourists and newcomers to the island from all over the world, during the spring and summer months. She is delighted, of course, that this venture has turned out such a success (and Boris has worked very hard to make it so), but it isn’t *that* knowledge which makes her face light up when she talks of her life today.

No, it’s something quite different. It is having come to terms with reality at last.

She is Mrs. Boris Alperovici. He is not—I repeat *not*—Mr. Gracie Fields. Make no mistake about that.

“A Russian married to a Rochdalian . . . it wasn’t easy at first,” she admits, with her instinctive candour. “There were lots of storms, I can tell you, ‘luv, the first two or three years.

“He wanted to keep me always at his side, on the island. Whereas I wanted to be off to New York and Canada and England for part of the year, doing my concert tours, cutting new gramophone records.

“After all, the contracts were still being offered—very tempting ones. But most of all I couldn’t get rid of the longing for the audience out there in the darkness. But I have now. Oh yes, I promise you, I have now.”

I didn’t break in because I understood. Everything. Even what she was about to say . . . because I had been to their home in Capri and had long talks with Boris quite early in their marriage.

“You know, Godfrey, Boris is a good man. I am a very lucky woman. To be so lucky the third time, too. Real bounty, I call it. That’s why I have always done my best to help, whenever I’ve been asked.

“God has been very kind to me. My first two husbands, being in show business themselves, never understood my longing to be a housewife, like the lasses in the audience. Cooking my own supper, instead of one more meal

exile himself, far from where he was born, he has always had a similar longing to put down roots. But you have to have two people, in partnership, to do that properly.”

She got up to go, breaking the spell that she creates by her complete and utter naturalness. It is the same simplicity of manner that Dora Bryan possesses; and when on a sudden impulse I made the observation, Gracie picked it up with delight.

“Funny you should say that, because I think Dora’s a great performer, a great trouper. I often think to myself, when I am watching her on the stage, *I would have loved a daughter like you. And a son like Tommy Steele.*”

The children she has never had; the children she always longed to have. The children, in the Home at Peacehaven, Sussex, that will always be safe now thanks to the generosity of Gracie Fields . . .

As she put on her mink coat again, standing for a moment in front of the Georgian mirror, making such a handsome picture, she said, almost to herself:

“In the old days, I was always giving everything away. On my wedding day to Boris, I took the coat I had meant to wear and gave it to one of Monty’s sisters. Someone only had to admire something of mine, and I’d say: ‘Take it, luv. It’s yours.’

“Now I’m a bit more careful. Or rather, Boris—bless him—is for me. He reminds me: ‘That was a present.’ And it *was* a present, from me to me. But the best present I have ever had was Boris to me, and me to Boris. And now all I want is to stay put with him—always.

“That’s why I really like Capri even more in winter than in the summer. It can be very cold sometimes,” she admitted, putting the collar of her coat up round her throat, “but there are few visitors, so we have each other all to ourselves.”

I put on the lights of the landing for her, and that was my last memory of my visitor, going down the stairs, singing softly to herself.

*And the days grow short, when
you reach September,
And the autumn weather turns
the leaves to flame . . .*

But the flame is still there. Burning so brightly, warming everyone with whom she makes contact.

Dear Gracie. Thank you for coming . . .

**NEXT WEEK: Godfrey Winn asks
“Do you pay your debts . . . ?”**

GRACIE

RAISE a glass to another remarkable woman—Gracie Fields. She

is 67 to-day.

Sixty years ago, this Rochdale-born performer went on to a stage to sing her first song, “What Makes Me Love You Like I Do?”

Many thought when she went to settle in Capri, that her career was over.

But, as we saw last autumn, not only in the Royal Variety Show, but at the many concerts she gave, her voice is as effective as ever.

Thousands turned out to greet her, to packed halls all over the country.