

I 'M not sure who felt the most important, my mumma or me, when I left Rochdale at fourteen to go touring with a juvenile theatrical troupe.

Mumma, who from childhood had worked in a cotton mill till she married at nineteen, had always wanted to go on the stage.

When she was thirty-two she went back to the mill herself rather than let me go there.

Though we were very poor she was determined that *all* her children were going to be actors, and as I was the eldest of the four of us, I had to get there first.

My mumma, Jenny, had scrubbed the stage of the Rochdale theatre, taken in actors' washing, scrimped and fought to get me into the theatre.

Twice, when I was eleven, she'd managed to send me touring with juvenile troupes. Twice I'd had to come home.

Once because the older girls and boys who were jealous of the child I was, had half crippled me; once because, in the bad conditions of touring in those days, I'd had to go into a convalescent home for six months.

But the third chance, of travelling with a big troupe called "Cherburn's Young Stars" had worked out, and I travelled all over the country with them.

It gave Mumma great satisfaction to say to the neighbours: "Our Grace is away, on t'stage."

**By now Jenny had changed my name to Gracie Fields because someone had told her I'd never be a star with a name as long as Grace Stansfield.**

So, as Gracie Fields, I toured with Cherburn's Young Stars for nearly two years.

I didn't want to leave them but Mumma had made me send her the theatrical notices from each town.

I'd been singled out for mention in every one, and I was getting only eight shillings a week.

This wasn't enough. I was to come home to

Rochdale and launch out on my own. We were still "going oop."

But it didn't work out like that for a while.

**Months went by and I got no work. My dad and the neighbours began their usual chant: "Shove her back in t'mill."**

I got one week's work at the Palace Theatre of Varieties, Oldham, then nothing. A summer season with Cousin Freddy's Concert Party, then nothing. A pantomime, then nothing at all.

My dad had a bad accident at work and was in hospital. There were no wages coming in.

We crouched around the kitchen fire. We were burning old boxes. It was an aching cold winter. Old Fred the lodger began to cough.

I took the only photograph I had of myself and sent it to an agent. It came back cracked and folded. On it was scrawled: "Hardly suitable."

The whole of that day Jenny and I avoided each other's eyes. At last I said: "Mumma, ah'll go back to mill."

She thumped her iron hard on the table. "Nay," she said, "tha'll not! Ah'll go back again meself."

The weather was bad next day. Old Fred went out in it. He returned, soaked to the skin, eyes bright with fever, and coughing badly.

We had to send him to hospital. In delirium he called every nurse "Our Gracie." He died a few days later.

When they went through his belongings they found an envelope addressed to Jenny.

It was his will. He had left her his insurance money—one hundred pounds—and in his shaky, illiterate scrawl had written: "Tha' nos best ho to spend it."

She did indeed. After she had paid our family debts she took me daily to Manchester to learn tap-dancing.

We went to call on all the theatrical agents.

One, Mr. Percy Hall, asked me to see him the following week.

Jenny and I descended on Percy Hall's

office. I was dressed in a tight new costume and an enormous hat. I even carried a cane.

Mr. Percy Hall winced, passed his hand across his eyes and said: "For heaven's sake, girl, take off that dreadful hat."

But he offered me six weeks' immediate engagement at five pounds a week.

"We'll make a little agreement," he said. It was an agreement for *ten* years.

I was to get no less than five pounds a week. If I earned more it was to be equally divided between Gracie Fields and Mr. Percy Hall.

**Jenny and I had been warned about such contracts, but we were desperate. We signed.**

We did not dream, nor did Mr. Hall, that in ten years the gawky girl in the silly hat would have played over four thousand unbroken performances of *Mr. Tower of London*, which grossed £400,000—and would go on to play two London theatres at once, one at £100 a week, another at £200, and a night club at £300.