

ually taken wherever one happened to be sitting, was replaced by the more thin and formal English tea, served punctually in the drawing room. Worst of all was Graciosa's painful adoption of English mannerisms and expressions.

The baby titles of "mamma" and "papa" were dropped. Her bewildered parents became "mater" and "pater," at which cold and ungenial appellation Natalia dissolved into tears.

"It is terrible," she wept to her husband, who, amused, told her to let the child have her way.

"But our life is spoiled," the little wife complained, "always now she watches me—I must take care—I must not speak of you to her as 'papa' or there is trouble. I like it not. And Vanni—Vanni!"

"Vanni!" her husband echoed sharply.

"Yes. He loves her and she would love him but for this English lord. It is her head that has been turned, not her heart."

"Vanni!" Reynolds repeated. "A boy of nineteen—a clerk—"

"He is a good boy and he will rise."

"Why, your funny little unworried thing." He cupped her face in his hands and smiled down into the amber eyes. "Don't you realize what this marriage will mean for Graciosa? England—a position—"

"But we will lose her, Billee!"

"Ah! God knows we will, Natalia. That is understood. But for her sake we could do more than that, I hope. It is her chance, my dearest."

But Natalia, with a curious stubbornness, set her soft mouth.

"I will lose my babe. I like it not."

At the end of a brief, bright month Lord Venture's regiment was ordered home.

"You will hear from my mother now," he said to Graciosa on the last evening. "I have not written because I wanted to tell her myself." Graciosa, stary eyed, enraptured, and terrified at once, faltered in reply, "Your mother! Alistair, I am afraid. She will not like it."

"She'll adore you as much as I do," he declared, stifling some natural qualms on that head. "You'll see. She will be delighted."

But Lady Venture, when her son arrived and told her his great news, was not delighted. On the contrary, she was completely appalled. She was not unprepared for the confidence, for she had friends in Egypt who had written her concerning the boy's unfortunate infatuation for a Levantine beauty and had spared neither Graciosa nor her family.

But Lady Venture knew her son. Knew his weakness and its complementary obstinacy; knew the futility of opposition. To Alistair's secret amazement and extreme relief, her answer to his communication was in an invitation, most kindly worded, to Graciosa to come to England and make them a visit.

The letter also suggested a chaperon in a Mrs. Seton, who was going home on leave and would gladly see the girl to her destination. Mrs. Seton, indeed, was anything but glad, confiding to her friends that the charge of a "dago" child on board would be an intolerable nuisance; but her fears proved unfounded.

Graciosa, who had not been on the sea before, spent the whole of a rough voyage prone upon her berth, turning in sick distaste from every approach save that of the fat Greek stewardess, to whom she clung as to her only rock, weeping upon the broad bosom and pouring out, in the woman's own tongue, her symptoms, sensations, and immediate anticipations with a frankness and wealth of detail that would have sent Mrs. Seton shuddering from the cabin could she have understood a word of it.

They arrived at Venture Abbey at the close of a gray and drizzling day. Graciosa was conscious only of an interminable drive along an avenue of dripping oaks, between whose trunks the blue mist hung heavily. Reaching the house at last, they were ushered into a huge hall with a high, vaulted roof and deep, narrow windows.

The floor was covered with the skins of various beasts; high upon the walls hung several dim and tattered banners which the child, confused, supposed hung in her honor, wondering at the same time why they had not put up flags that were new and clean. The entire room was lighted by lamps and candles, and a fire of great logs burned in the enormous chimney at one end.

The leaping flames and the tiny flames of the candles were reflected in bits of old armor, in the leaded window panes, in the silver service on the polished tea table drawn beside the hearth. But despite the gleam of lights and fire, Graciosa's first impression was that it was very cold.

In a moment, however, Alistair was at her side; he had taken her hand, kissed her, and then, still holding her, turned to present her to the tall woman who had detached herself from the group of people about the tea table.

Alistair's mother! Janice! The name, signed at the end of her letter, had already captured Graciosa's imagination. Janice, O, and she looked it! She was as beautiful as her name, with that type of commanding beauty, pale, high nosed, hawk eyed, that must appeal to the child nourished on the color and the soft contours of her own people.

The girl raised her face, wistful, eager—that lovely face—and for an instant something stirred in the heart of the woman who bent to kiss her. She, who had never had a daughter, knew in that instant that she could have for her own that loyal, passionate heart, that simple, unswerving devotion that revealed itself in the shining, uplifted eyes. And she knew in that fleeting instant that Graciosa's love would be a sweet thing to possess; a warm and heartening thing.

Then her glance swept the overtrimmed hat with its long blue veil, the elaborate, light colored traveling cloak, the pale tan shoes, high heeled and laced with silk ribbons that ran incongruously from top to bottom, the large bow resting upon the short round toe. Her face hardened and her gray eyes were like frosty lakes as she kissed her son's betrothed and welcomed her to Venture.

Then, taking her hand, she led her up to the group by the fire. Graciosa caught a name here and there, saw a number of young women with sleek heads and very red mouths who all seemed to be smoking cigarettes in very long, bright holders, saw two or three men who all, in some indefinable way, looked like Alistair and not at all like papa or Vanni—dear Vanni—and found her hand taken and her glance most kindly held by an elderly man with merry blue eyes.

Then Lady Venture said, "You are cold and tired, my dear. Will you have a cup of tea now, or would you like to go to your room first?"

Graciosa was indeed tired and she was very cold, but she knew what must be done.

"O, upstairs first," she faltered. "I—could I have my dressing bag?"

"You'll find it in your room. Moira," to one of the girls, "go with Miss Reynolds and see that she has everything she wants." The girl got up reluctantly and led the way to the wide staircase that rose at one end of the great hall. She did not speak to Graciosa, but she stared at her as they traversed two long passages and came finally to a high and chilly bedroom furnished magnificently but not cheerfully in old carved oak. Then she spoke.

"Anything I can do?" she asked, her light, insolent gaze never swerving from the other girl's amazing eyelashes.

"(But I can't help having them," thought Graciosa who, if shy, was not stupid.) Aloud she said, "O, no. Nothing, thank you."

"Right. Ring if you want a maid. They'll come and unpack you presently. Come down when you're ready; I expect you can find your way."

Ten minutes later Graciosa descended into the midst of a highly startled company. She had changed into what she conceived as the correct apparel for tea in an English country house; a soft, loose gown of lace and silk bedizened with ribbons. Her neck and arms were bare; her hair like a flame about her little head. She came into the tweed-skirted, rough-stockinged, brogue-shoed group of women like the alien that she was. There was a moment of appalled silence; some one sniggered; Alistair's narrow eyes contracted sharply; but Lady Venture watched her prospective daughter with satisfaction.

"A month," thought Lady Venture to herself, "O, yes, a month will certainly do it."

She smiled and spoke with intention. "Come to the fire, Grace," she said. "I am afraid you will feel the cold."

Graciosa, who during that moment's silence had flushed an agonized crimson, looked at Alistair's mother. The tide of color receded, leaving her face very white under her bright crown.

"My name is not Grace," she said in her gentle, direct fashion. "It is Graciosa. Did not Alistair tell you?"

The blue eyed man in the corner looked

sharply up. Beastly of Janice to start in at once on the poor little thing, but the child was no fool.

"I think," Janice said, still with that cold smile of hers, "that as you are marrying an Englishman we must give your name its English form, my dear."

Alistair spoke quickly. "Nonsense, mother. Grace does not suit her in the least. Come here beside me, Graciosa."

She hurried to him like a small hurt animal to its mate and Lord Lovegrove, the man with the blue eyes, got up deliberately and seated himself beside them. Alistair, who had been honestly horrified by her appearance, had recovered from his dismay; once again the exquisite beauty of the girl made its sure appeal. The two men talked to her and presently Graciosa's soft laugh rang out, but she did not regain her color.

AND now for Graciosa—and indeed, in all justice be it said, for Alistair as well—began a time which should have been a renewal of that enchanted month of courtship but which, instead, resolved itself into something resembling a nightmare.

The weather was damp and cold and the great draughty house had a tomblike chill that seemed to strike to the girl's heart. And the chill was not only physical. It emanated quite as surely from the critical eyes that watched her, the cool, polite but unfriendly voices that addressed her, the silences that received her solecisms. And there were many of these last!

It was her clothes, she thought, that were most in fault. The very first morning after the disastrous episode of the tea gown she had erred again. She came down to breakfast in what she again supposed to be correct—the dress that was almost a morning uniform in Egypt, the white silk skirt and little silken jumper and small white shoes. She had been

very early—so afraid was she of being late—and had sat in her high-backed chair blushing and speechless while the others trooped in, the women again in their rough tweeds and ugly clumping shoes. No one had made any comment, of course, but she caught the glances of amusement and, in Alistair's eyes, that expression of concern and distaste which she had seen the evening before.

And then, that very afternoon, a truly dreadful thing had happened. It was after tea when, the drizzling having temporarily ceased, she had gone with Alistair and the others for a turn in the woods. The men carried guns; the woods were full of game.

It was a most beautiful place, beautiful even under those leaden skies, and Graciosa, walking close to her lover, warmed and comforted by his obvious devotion—she was all in squirrel gray furs and lovelier than ever to look upon—had been thrilled with rapture at sight of the deep green glades and the noble old trees.

At a turn of the path she had suddenly caught sight of a tiny brown animal sitting upright, ears cocked, bright eyes glancing. O, the darling! She touched Alistair's arm to draw his attention and instantly his gun was raised, a report rang out, there was a whisk of white tail, the spring of a furry body, and the rabbit lay motionless before them.

Graciosa screamed. She rushed forward and caught the little bleeding body to her breast.

"Graciosa—good Lord, you little fool—what are you doing?" Alistair's voice was thin and sharp; it did not sound like Alistair. The others came up and surrounded them, amazed and profoundly shocked at this frightful breach. Really, this was beyond everything!

Graciosa stood in the path, the tiny body still clasped tight, her hands and her pretty coat stained with blood.

"You killed it—you killed it—the little, little thing!" She broke into loud, hysterical sobs. Lovegrove stepped forward.

"Take her back to the house," he said to Alistair. "She's badly upset."

But Alistair, furious and humiliated, refused.

"She can go back by herself," he replied curtly, and without a backward glance strode away, followed by his friends.

Lovegrove went up to Graciosa and drew one little hand through his arm. "I will take you back," he said, gently.

Graciosa cast a despairing look after her lover. "How could he speak to me like that? What did I do?"

"Well, you couldn't have done anything worse," Lovegrove replied. (Poor, tawny-headed baby—but she must learn.) He took the rabbit from her and laid it on a drift of withered leaves.

"There. Now, come along. And remember, Graciosa, that there is one thing more sacred to an Englishman even than his sweetheart, and that is his sport. Venture was quite right to be annoyed. You must never come between."

At which Graciosa, direct even in despair, lifted wide, brimming eyes to his and asked, simply:

"Was that—sport?"

THAT cruel and clever woman, Janice Kerr-Owen, had given her son and his fiancée a month in which to find out their mutual mistake. She knew the power of environment, did Janice. She knew to the full the spell which a perfect setting can cast upon an individual, and that Venture Abbey was not a setting for Graciosa. She was right, save in her estimate as to time. It did not take a month. It took, to be exact, one week, though Graciosa remained a fortnight at the home of her betrothed. The end came with what seemed a theatrical gesture on the part of the girl but what was, in reality, merely the inevitable act of a simple and undeviating nature.

The two weeks had been fraught with increasing pain. The child, nervous, bewildered, shy, always in the wrong and utterly unconscious of the manner of her sinning, had felt like one who is slowly freezing to death. There was nothing tangible, nothing definite. Janice and her friends were uniformly courteous. She was one of themselves to the extent of being "Grace" on every tongue; her future position as mistress of the abbey was an apparently accepted fact. Yet there was something deadly under it all, as there seemed to be something deadly in the gray skies, the dripping lawns, the chill and somber mist.

They did not want her! They had never wanted her! Then why, why had they asked her to come there? She struggled against the increasing disillusion. Valiantly, her flaming head high, she walked among them, wearing her despised dresses—she knew now just what they thought of her dresses—her pitiful eyes seeking Alistair's, whose eyes were more and more turned from her in distaste; a forlorn, unfinching little figure; a gallant figure had they but had the eyes to see it.

And Alistair? He, too, was honestly miserable. More and more he realized that Graciosa at the abbey was an incongruity. Every evening, indeed, the sheer beauty of her captured his senses afresh and he felt that she was worth everything, anything; but in the day—that unromantic time—she distressed him hourly.

Sensitive, as a young man in love must ever be, he saw her effect upon his people with all that dismay which his mother had complacently foreseen. Her overelaborate clothes, her frightful heels that cut the turf of the ancient lawns, her habit of drenching herself in scent—he had not noticed that in the garden, where every breath was scented—even, at last, her brilliant eyes and her shining hair became offenses. One did not want a wife who was like a flame!

He knew that he had made a mistake, and he wondered how the devil, with any possible credit, he was going to get out of it. And Graciosa read his trouble in his narrow gray eyes and saved him the initiative.

They found, one morning, her empty room; her trunks strapped and labeled, and a note—a heartbroken but characteristically firm and final little note—pinned to a cushion.

"Just the sort of thing a girl of that class would do," said Janice to Lord Lovegrove, smiling her thin smile.

He looked at her thoughtfully. "You know, my dear," he said slowly, "you've lost something rather precious today."

She gave him an odd glance in reply. "Do you think I need you to tell me that? But it would not have done, Lovegrove."

"O, I quite agree," the other returned quickly.

Graciosa had sent no word of her return and entered her home at the close of a blazing day softly and unannounced. A chatter of voices led her to the kitchen veranda, where her mother, surrounded by a cheerful tribe of relations, old Fatma in attendance, was sitting upon a pile of cushions drinking sweet, thick coffee.

"Babee! Babee!" Natalia sprang up and caught the little figure to her heart, trying at the same time to conceal her guilty bare feet. The others clamored about them.

"O, my! Why are you here? We did not expect—"

"I wanted to come," said Graciosa simply.

"Littlest and most dear," crooned Natalia in the liquid tongue of her youth, softly kissing her. "Fatma, bring a chair—"

"No," said Graciosa. "I want no chair. I will sit here on the cushions."

Her mother was unpinning the big hat with its long blue veil.

"And Alistair?" she questioned nervously. "Is he here? I—I will dress at once. Today was so hot—"

"No, no," cried Graciosa. "do not dress. I want you like this!" A long, long look passed between Natalia and old Fatma, who now came forward and asked tentatively: "Will the sitt baby have tea? I will make it."

Graciosa broke into laughter, loud and hysterical. "No tea, Fatma. Coffee, your coffee. Ah, that is good," as the old woman put a steaming cup into her shivering hands. Her mother crouched beside her on the cushions, stroking the lovely hair.

"My babee! It has been death without you. O, now I can be happy, and pa—pater—he will be—"

"Papa," cried Graciosa, hysterical, but logical to the last. "Papa now and for always. I—I've come home."

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The girl raised her face, wistful, eager—that lovely face.