

Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

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1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 CHAPTER 4

THE MORALS OF THE GIPSIES

Perhaps this is a fit place to say a few words about the morals of the gipsies. I want to say at once that the character of my people stands very high. I never knew of a gipsy girl who went astray. I do not say that that never happened, but that I never knew a fallen woman in a gipsy-tent. The gipsy boy is told from his earliest days that he must honor and protect women. He drinks in this teaching, so to say, with his mother's milk, and he grows up to be very courteous and very chivalrous. The gipsy sweethearts do their courting in the daytime, and where they can be seen by their parents. The "gorgio" sweethearts would probably find these conditions rather trying. Gipsy sweethearts do not go out for walks by the light of the moon, neither do they betake themselves to nooks and comers out of sight and out of reach of everybody. All the sweet things the gipsy man says to the gipsy maid must be uttered, if not in the hearing of their parents, at least in their sight.

My brother Ezekiel and his wife were sweethearts from childhood. One day, when they were approaching the estate of manhood and womanhood, Ezekiel was sitting talking to his girl in the presence of her mother. "I know," said Ezekiel's prospective mother-in-law, "that you young people want a walk. You shall have one. I will go with you." And this is the kind of thing which occurs invariably during gipsy courtships. Sweethearts would never think of going off alone for a little walk, yet the gipsies find this no bar to pleasant and successful courting. The result of these customs is that gipsy courtships are not marred by untoward and unpleasant incidents. The hearts of the young men and young women are pure, and this purity is guarded by their parents like gold. The gipsy men, indeed, pride themselves on the purity of their women, and that says a great deal for the men. Practically all gipsies get married. There are very few old maids and old bachelors. The gipsy husband and wife live on the most intimate terms. The wife knows all that her husband knows. I would not say

that a gipsy husband knows all that his wife knows, any more than a "gorgio" husband knows all that his wife knows. They usually have large families. There is no more groundless slander than the statement that gipsies steal children. They have every reason for not so doing. They have plenty of their own. My great-uncle was the father of thirty-one children, and a brother of my father's was the father of twenty-four, I think. I have never heard that they sought to add to their number by theft.

The young gipsy couple start their married life by purchasing a wagon. This costs anywhere from 40 to 150, and is obtained from a "gorgio" wagon-builder. Oddly enough, the gipsies never learn the trade of making their own wagons. The wagons are very warm and very strong, and last a great many years. The young husband is, of course, the manufacturer of the goods, and his wife the seller. When she leaves the wagon in the morning to go her rounds she arranges with her husband where the wagon shall be placed at night, and thither she betakes herself when her day's toil is over. In the course of the day she may have walked from fifteen to twenty miles. Gipsies have plenty of exercise and a sufficiency of food. This explains their very good health. If the husband has been refused permission to stand his wagon on the arranged spot and has had to move on, he lets his wife know where he is going by leaving behind him a track of grass.

Gipsies are very lovable and very loyal to one another. They are respectful, and even reverential, to old age. I never knew of a gipsy who ended his or her days in the workhouse. The gipsy young man would rather work the flesh off his fingers than tolerate any such thing. They would feel ashamed to abandon those who had done so much for them.

The gipsies do not hate the "gorgios," but they feel that they are suspected and mistrusted, and that everybody is afraid of them. They feel that all "gorgios" are against them, and therefore they are against the "gorgios." If a kindness is done them by a "gorgio" they never cease to talk about it. They remember it all their days and their children are told of it too. Quite recently a curious illustration of this trait came to my knowledge. I was travelling from Cambridge to Thetford, and had as my companion a clergyman of the Church of England. "Some years ago," he said to me, "a gipsy family came to my parish. The father was ill, and I went to see him. I read to him, I prayed with him, and my wife brought him some nourishing soup. This poor man became a sincere seeker after Christ, and I have every reason to believe he was converted. I followed up my friendship with him. When he left the parish and went a few miles farther away I kept in touch with him, and wrote to a brother clergyman and arranged with him to follow up what I had tried to do for this dying man. This he gladly did, and the man passed away happy in the knowledge of sins forgiven. Two or three years after I was driving out of Norwich when I met two young gipsy fellows with a donkey which they were going into Norwich to sell. I was in need of a donkey, so I got down and began to talk to them. I questioned them about the donkey. They said it was a very good one, and from its appearance I thought so too. Then we went on to discuss the price. I finally decided to purchase the donkey. I had some further conversation with them, telling them where to take

the donkey, and when I would be home to pay for the same. In the mean time I observed with somewhat of alarm that these two young fellows were exchanging curious glances. We were about to fix up the bargain when one of them said to me, 'Are you Mr. So-and-so?' Yes, I am.' Oh, well, sir, we have heard of your great kindness to poor So-and-so when he was dying, and we cannot sell you this donkey: it is a bad one; we could not take you in; but if you will let us we will give you a good donkey, a genuine, good article.' And they got me a fine animal, which has done a good deal of work, which I still have, and have been delighted with."

The gipsies are naturally musical. In fact, I believe that the only naturally musical people in the world are the Jews and gipsies, and this is another point of affinity between the two races. The gipsies love to dance in the lanes to the music of the harp, the dulcimer, and violin. They do not object to the "gorgios" looking on, but they would rather they did not join in the merriment. They like to live their own life with absolute freedom and without interference.

But, alas! there is a debit side to this moral balance account. The gipsies drink a good deal. Beer is their beverage. Spirits as a rule they take sparingly. They do not drink for the mere sake of drinking, but only when they meet friends. Their drinking is an unfortunate outcome of their highly social dispositions. They may be abstemious for days, weeks, and even months, but when they begin to drink they go in for it thoroughly. Cans and bottles do not satisfy them. Buckets are what they need; and the spree sometimes lasts for nearly a week. Gipsy women, however, are abstemious I have only known one who was really a drunkard. And then gipsies swear, some of them, indeed, fearfully. They do not lie to each other, but to the "gorgios." They are paid to lie, to tell fortunes. This vile business, which has really been forced upon them by the "gorgios," utterly debauches the consciences of the gipsies. And I should like all our educated women to know that every time they pay a gipsy woman to tell their fortune they make it the more difficult for that woman to become a Christian. The gipsies, too, are pilferers. They do not commit big robberies. They do not steal horses or break into banks, nor do they commit highway robberies, or find a few thousands, or fail for a few. But they take potatoes from a field or fruit from an orchard—only what is sufficient for their immediate needs. The potatoes they take from a field are only those they need until they get to the next potato field. Sometimes, too, late at night, they will put five or six horses into a field to feed, and take them out early in the morning. They are also in the habit of finding young undergrowth stuff that they use for their clothes-pegs and baskets. Most of them never dream that there is any sin or wrong in such actions. They regard them merely as natural, ordinary, commonplace events in their daily lives.