

# **A Stranger in Bohemia**

## **A Gipsy Tale**

**by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935**

Illustrations by Charles J. Crombie

**Published: 1915**  
in »The Windsor Magazine«, Vol. XLI



THE little man with the snaky hair and deep-set eyes, sitting in the corner of the canteen, was known to all and sundry as „Gipsy“. To the uninitiated this title, of course, had no geographical significance. To the casual, Gipsy was no more than a foreman ganger employed upon the great new water system at Penguilt; but there were men working there who could have told you that, in the freemasonry of the craft, the name of Gipsy carried from the Golden Gate to the Yukon Valley, and

from the Nile to the Amazon. The little man sitting there, drinking his beer and smoking something particularly painful in the way of a cigarette, was Bohemian to his blunt finger-tips. He would have resented the suggestion that he was anything but an Englishman, though his looks belied him, and the Zingari in his blood drifted him from time to time all over the world. He was a master of argot in many languages; he had its slang and its illusive profanities on the tip of his tongue. Wherever the spade and the drill and the dynamite cartridge carried in the making of the world's highways, you could have put Gipsy down over a gang of men, be they white or black, orange or copper-coloured, and he would have handled them, too, and they would have known that they had a man over them from the word „Go!“

Gipsy, therefore, was a celebrity in his way. Great captains of industry knew him by name; they encountered him from China to Peru, so that he formed the link between East and West, and in a way was proud of it. Gipsy might have made money had he been less generous and not quite so romantic. For there was a strong vein of sentiment in the little man, who, had he been blessed with the advantage of education, would most assuredly have made a name for himself as a dramatist. He was a Sardou without power of expression, a Shakespeare in embryo, lacking the gift of the written word. As a matter of fact, he could hardly write his own name; but he could plot and plan, and many a comedy had been played in the Settlement which had not been rehearsed from the written scrip.

There was nothing that Gipsy liked better than the weaving of romances in which he played the leading part. And to his credit, be it said, most of them were founded upon fact. There were those amongst the tough brotherhood of the pick and shovel who implicitly believed all that Gipsy said, and on the other hand were ranged the cynical, who spoke of him frankly and luridly as a liar. But this is essentially a penalty of greatness, and touched Gipsy not at all. In one respect, however, even the most doubting regarded Gipsy with veneration: he was by far the most gifted and accomplished poacher amongst the ten thousand odd gathered together there amongst the mighty reservoirs carved out of the hillsides of Penguilt. Everybody knew this, and Gipsy was flattered accordingly. There were trout and salmon there, partridges and pheasants, and grouse, too, on the upper moors. Gipsy looked after himself all right, and the mess-mates in his hut, but to the rest of them he was profoundly and almost eccentrically modest.

He talked fast enough—in fact, he was always talking—but not about the best way to circumvent the wily salmon or the elusive trout, and the more silent Gipsy was on these points, the more sure were his satellites when he was planning some wily campaign on his lordship's preserves. He was talking now, telling one of his stories in which he was playing the hero, as usual. It was hard on the time when Gipsy usually embarked upon his third pint of beer, and his mood had reached the softened and sentimental stage.

„I am tellin' you no word of a lie, mates,“ he said. „There is a poet as I once 'eard on as said somethin' about flowers what was meant to blush unseen. I read that bit in a paper as come my way about fifteen year ago, when we was makin' that dam for the Russian Government out in Manchuria. Remember it, Joe?“

The man addressed as Joe nodded over his pipe. One of the beauties of Gipsy's stories was their verisimilitude. He rarely embarked upon a romance without the presence of some witness who could speak geographically. Therefore Joe nodded.

„I made a tidy bit o' money them times,“ Gipsy went on. „I couldn't well spend it, and it began to pile up, till I'd sent 'ome nigh on seven 'undred quid in about three year. And then I begins to ask myself what I should do with it. Not but what I'd got an idea in me 'ead. Fust-rate idea for a play it were, too. It was all about a gel—a little gel as I picked up on them plains of Manchuria. She wasn't nothin' more than a peasant's kid as 'ad been abandoned by 'er father and mother in consequence of a bit of a scrap what 'ad taken place between some Manchus and a tribe of Chinese pirates. Found 'er in a burnin' 'ut, I did, wrapped up in a bit o' blanket. Funny thing, but that kid took to me from the first. And blowed if I 'adn't got my 'eroine' fust 'and!“

„Lor, what a liar it is!“ an admiring voice came from the background. „But go on, Gipsy, cough it up.“

„I was about to do so,“ Gipsy said, with some dignity. „And if you don't believe as that scrap took place, ask ole Joe 'ere.“

Joe gave the desired assurance, and Gipsy resumed.

„As I was a-sayin',“ he went on, „there was my 'eroine' all ready-made. What did I do with 'er? Why, adopted 'er, of course! I 'ad to put off the play, but that didn't matter. Now, mind, I'd got a tidy bit o' money put by, which I was pretty certain to do in fust time we got back to England. So I goes to one of our engineers what 'ad got a missus and kids out yonder, and I puts it afore 'im plain. I tells 'im as that little nipper, what might 'ave been about four year old, was goin' to be my heiress.“

A burst of laughter followed, but Gipsy went on gravely.

„I wanted that kid sent over to England to eddicate. And our engineer 'e says: *Good iron!* Says that I should only make a fool of meself if I kept the money. So I passes it all over to 'im, and 'e agrees to spend it at the rate of about a 'undred quid a year on the kiddie's eddication, and, what's more, 'e does it. Now she is a lady, a real proper lady, as swanks about in 'er silks and satins, and mixes regular with the nobs. Fit to go into any 'ouse in the kingdom, she is. They tells me at the present time as she's governess to the daughters of a bloomin' earl. Lives in the 'ouse with them, and is regular one of the family. She's dark and she's beautiful and she's 'aughty, and I ain't sure as a lot more earls ain't on their bended knees askin' 'er to marry them.“

„Ain't 'e a knock-out?“ a voice in the tobacco fog said, appealing. „Ain't 'e better than a Sunday piper? Ever stay with 'er, Gipsy? Ever put in a week-end at one of them castles?“

„We 'ave never met,“ Gipsy said loftily. „My adopted daughter 'as not seen 'er toil-worn parent. Probably she never will. Who am I that I should stand in the girl's way? Why should I drag 'er down to my sordid level? It's what some newspapers call a perlite fiction that I am dead, and that in future the beautiful orphan will 'ave to rely upon 'erself for 'er daily bread.“

„She might be able to lend yer a bit,“ a practical member of the audience suggested. „If she gets spliced to one o' them dooks you spoke of, she ought to be good for a couple o' quid a week. But it's all lies! We are a set o' fools to listen to it

all. And yet, when you begins to tell one o' these 'ere stories o' yours, I am never quite sure whether you are a blithering liar or not!"

Gipsy smiled with the air of a man who is the recipient of some graceful and well-chosen compliment. He knew that he was holding his audience in spite of themselves, and these cynical lapses into common-sense were really attributes to his powers. One man, a little less easily moved than the rest, jeered openly.

"Wery good," he said. "But yer story don't go far enough, mate. There's few chaps in this camp what knows the Surrey Theatre and the old Britannia better'n me. I've seen that 'eroine' o' yours 'undreds o' times. Why, you're the bloke as she finds dying in a work'ouse, or drags into the marble 'alls by the scruff o' the neck on a snowy Christmas Eve! She calls you 'er benefactor, and 'er husband, the dook, shakes you by the 'and and fills you up with port wine and roast goose. So far it's all right, Gipsy. But you've got to 'ave somethin' as proves your indemnity."

"That proves my what?" Gipsy asked. "Lor, what an ignorant set o' blokes you are! Meanin' my identity, I suppose?"

"Well, that's just wot I said," replied the other man diplomatically. "You've got to 'ave a mark o' some sort—a wound as you got when you rescued 'er from the fire, or perhaps a photograph."

Gipsy smiled in a superior fashion.

"I thanks the right honorable gentleman for makin' the remark," he said. "He's been good enough to call me a liar. Well, I can't show no wounds—that's wot they calls scars in the play—but the photograph's all right. 'Ere, wot price this?"

From a capacious inner pocket Gipsy produced a stiff leather case, from which he took a framed photograph. It represented a girl on the eve of womanhood, a tall dark girl in evening-dress, with a face serenely beautiful and faintly smiling. She seemed typically one of the upper classes, essentially to the manner born, with that elusive suggestion of superiority that makes the thing which, for want of a better word, they call a lady. For a moment Gipsy regarded it with a certain reverent affection. Grudgingly he released it from his horny thumb and forefinger and passed it round amongst his mates.

"There yer are," he said defiantly, "that's the lidy. And if anybody 'ere calls 'er anythin' else, I'll push his fice in!"

There was no occasion for the threat, for the spirit of cynicism had vanished the moment that Gipsy had crowned his story with this startling piece of circumstantial evidence. Even the man in the far corner was silent and almost inclined to believe.

"Where's the lidy now?" a respectful voice asked.

"I dunno," Gipsy said shortly. "I got this photograph about two years ago, and I ain't made no inquiries since. I ain't goin' to stand in the girl's way. Some of these days there'll be a duchess or a countess as'll never know as she owes 'er 'appiness to a common ole bloke named Gipsy."

With these dignified words, Gipsy collected his photograph and walked slowly and sorrowfully out into the darkness. He conveyed a subtle impression that deep and tender chords had been touched, that he was a strong, silent man who wished to hide the full measure of his grief from the eyes of a cold and unsympathetic world.

As a matter of fact, this dramatic exit was a skilful ruse, born of the knowledge that Gipsy was going up over the far side of his lordship's preserves in search of a casual pheasant for the benefit of a sick friend. His gun was concealed in the leg of his corduroy trousers, and he carried half a dozen cartridges in his waistcoat pocket. He was not out to-night on a grand scale—he merely wanted a brace of pheasants for the pot, and an odd bird or two for the wife of a ganger down at Coomlyn. Therefore it behoved him to be careful. He knew that the keepers were out in force, and the fact that they had marked him down as a dangerous poacher added zest to the expedition. Gipsy had poached game of all sorts in many lands, but never yet had that wily Bohemian been laid by the heels.

It was the one thing he dreaded, the thing he was horribly afraid of. For the sun on the hillside, the breeze in the trees, and the smell of the mouldy woods, were just the breath of life to this son of Zingari. He was as strong as a bull and as tough as leather, and impervious to pain, and yet three months in gaol would have been the death of him. He would have pined and died, as an eagle droops in a cage. The mere thought of captivity gripped him by the heart and caused his footsteps to falter; but the call of the wild was too strong, and the unseen force dragged him on till he stood ankle-deep in the fallen leaves and saw the pheasants roosting overhead.

All his prudence had gone to the winds now; he raised his gun, and two of the birds dropped like gorgeous stones at his feet. And at once the dank and dripping wood became alive with men. Gipsy asked no questions—he was hardly taken by surprise. He dropped to his knees and hid his gun cunningly. Then he was on his feet again, flying headlong downhill for dear life. It was not for him to show fight, for Gipsy was no lover of violence. He was a poacher pure and simple, and all he wanted now was to obliterate his tracks and make his way to freedom. He knew every inch of the ground—no woodman born on the estate knew the covers better than he—for to him woodcraft was an instinct, and it had come to him with the first breath of life.

He saw the enemy spread out like a fan, he saw the long-legged head-keeper working round to the right to cut off his retreat. There was only one thing for it, therefore, and that was to break through the big spinny, through a wide belt of shrubs, and thence make a bold dash across the lawns in front of Lord Llanwye's house. It was a counsel of despair, a forlorn hope, but Gipsy did not hesitate. He ran on and on until his legs began to fail him and his heart beat like a muffled drum. He was in sight of the house now, the long, low house all in darkness save for the light glowing in the drawing-room windows. Self-consciously, Gipsy could see that one of the drawing-room windows was open to the lawn, though the blind was drawn down, and almost at the same moment he could make out the lean form of the head-keeper lurking in the shadows at the far end of the terrace.

For once in his life Gipsy knew the meaning of the word „fear“. It was not that he was physically afraid. But his imagination was at work, and he could see himself within the four walls of a prison cell, pining for the open fields and the smell of the good red earth. He was utterly spent for the moment, he knew that he would be like ripe corn for the sickle of the long-legged keeper, and a certain sense of desperation seized him. He did not even stop to think; he crept across the

terrace and, lifting the blind, walked straight into the drawing-room of Llanwye Castle. Here was melodrama all ready and glowing to Gipsy's hand.

He dropped the blind and looked around him with an admiring contemplation of the finest stage-setting he had ever seen. Here was a magnificent room filled with pictures and flowers and gleaming statuary, here were thick, luxurious carpets, and everything blended into one harmonious whole under the half-dim light of the shaded electrics. Never in his life had Gipsy imagined anything like this, never in his wildest flights of imagination had he conjured up so fair a scene. He had got himself in hand now; he was ready for the part that Fate had thrown in his way.

For the moment, at any rate, he was the leading character on this bewildering stage. He was the actor-manager who cannot sustain a whole drama by himself, and Gipsy began to look round vaguely for something in the way of a heroine. Therefore there was no surprise in his mind as he saw her arise from a big ingle-nook and come slowly and majestically in his direction. She was young and tall and willowy, as every properly constituted heroine should be; she was serene and haughty and absolutely self-possessed. She seemed part and parcel of that room, she was one to the manner born, a true patrician who had evidently drifted down the primrose path of life in silk attire and with the world for slave at her dainty feet. She was not in the least annoyed or angry or even surprised. She was just a specimen of glorious womanhood, as far above Gipsy as the star is above the moth. He stood there open-mouthed, drinking in her glorious beauty, as yet unable to grasp the situation and fumbling for his cue. It was up to her to speak first, of course; she had possession of the stage, and he waited for her to begin.

She looked at him as if he had been some strange animal, some annoying insect, a kind of human wasp to be driven out unmercifully. And then it came to Gipsy like a flash.

„What are you doing here?“ the girl asked.

„Well, I was out poachin', miss,“ he explained. „They got me into a tight place, and so I just run in 'ere like a frightened rabbit. After 'is lordship's pheasants, I was. You won't give me away, miss. I couldn't go to gaol, miss; it 'ud be the death of me. And I never did no real 'arm to anybody. Besides, if I don't make a mistake, I am an old friend of yours.“

The tall, slim figure standing there stiffened, a look of cold displeasure came into the dark eyes.

„I think you are mistaken,“ the girl said. „My name is Trevelyan—Hilda Trevelyan. I am governess to Lord Llanwye's children, and for the moment am in charge of the house. And I am quite sure that I have never seen you before.“

By way of reply, Gipsy dived into his pocket and produced his precious photograph. Without a word he handed it over to his companion, who looked at it long and narrowly. It seemed to Gipsy that she was breathing a little faster, and that the full red of her lips had lost a little of their colour. But she gave no outward sign save that her dark eyes were fixed steadily on Gipsy's face as if she were trying to read his story.

„Where did you get this?“ she said. „Tell me the truth.“

„Would I tell a lidy like you a lie?“ Gipsy retorted. „I've been all over the world, and I don't deny as I made a good bit o' money now and again. But I never could keep it, 'cause I ain't that sort. And that's why I've got nothing in the world as I

values except the photo in that lily-white 'and of yours. It was give to me by a gentleman what was called Mr. Masters. An engineer, 'e was—one of my bosses in a job we 'ad years ago in Manchuria. Now I dare say you may 'ave 'eard of this?"

„You are speaking of my guardian," the girl said coldly. „To all practical purposes, Mr. Masters was my father."

„You don't mean to say 'e is dead, miss?" Gipsy said.

„He died a few years ago. Both he and his family were killed in China during the revolution there. It seems a very strange thing that I should be standing here discussing my most intimate affairs with a common poacher and a man I have never heard of before. If you have any intention of blackmailing me—"

Gipsy thrilled. The drama was going splendidly, for here he was in the centre of a most glorious stage, playing lead to the most exquisite of heroines, and she was actually accusing him of blackmail. The woods and the pheasants were forgotten now; the lurking foe outside ceased to exist.

„You touched me on me tenderest point," Gipsy said. „A woman in distress—leastwise, I don't mean that. Look 'ere, miss, I knew you as a kiddie. I've 'ad you in me arms many a time. And it was me as found you in a burnin' 'ut, and me as 'ands you over to Mrs. Masters. An' a sweet pretty little thing you was. And she takes yer to 'er 'eart, and they brings you up as one of their family. For three years you lived with them out there. Many a time 'ave I come and watched you playin' together with the other children, afore you was all sent over to school. Ah, 'e was a good friend to you, Mr. Masters was! Few men would 'ave done as much. You might 'ave been one of 'is own kids, for the way 'e behaved."

Gipsy pulled up suddenly, surprised and rendered a little uneasy by the change that had come over the girl's face. It was no longer cold and haughty, but the red lips were quivering and the dark eyes were swimming with unshed tears.

„There is something wrong here," the girl said unsteadily. „Mr. and Mrs. Masters were exceedingly good to me, but they were in no position to bring me up and pay my education. They always told me that my benefactor had placed me in their hands, with a sufficient sum of money to keep and educate me and equip me for my struggle with the world. To that unknown benefactor I owe everything. I was told that I was not to ask his name, and that he would make himself known to me in good time. And all that I have done in return for so much kindness was to send this photograph to Mr. Masters to forward to my best friend. Shortly before he died he wrote and told me he had done so. And, well, I don't think I need tell you any more. Is my benefactor dead, and did he ask you to bring that photograph back to me? What was he like? You must have known him well, or he would never have trusted you with my photograph. Describe him to me."

Gipsy drew a long, deep breath. The drama was proceeding apace, reeling off beautifully and in accordance with the best traditions. It was the great hour of Gipsy's life, the golden hour marred only by the reflection that it was played without an audience. If some of the gang down at the canteen could only see him now!

And yet there could be no curtain on the rigid lines laid down for the nice conduct of conventional melodrama. Gipsy was too fine an artist for that; his sense of the theatre amounted to genius. He could not take this fair creature in his arms and let her sob her gratitude out upon his homely shoulder. For here was a

creature who, sooner or later, would take her pick of Britain's belted earls and hand down those glorious features to future generations.

„Well, I'll tell you, miss,“ Gipsy said. „Not as I'm goin' to mention no names. The chap as found you in a burnin' 'ut was no more than a common navy. But he took a fancy to you, and as he 'ad saved a bit o' money, he asked 'is boss to 'elp 'im. And 'e did. And 'e didn't ask nothin' in return; you never saw a chap so surprised in 'is life as 'e was when Mr. Masters sent 'im this 'ere photograph. Whatever 'e'd done, that photograph paid 'im for. 'E told me that when 'e—'e lay dyin' with 'is 'and in mine.“

„Are you quite sure he is dead?“ the girl asked unsteadily.

„Dead as doornails,“ Gipsy said solemnly. „Dead as a cartload of 'em. Buried miles and miles away from 'ere at the bottom of a valley wot's now the centre of a lake. You couldn't get at 'im not if you'd got a million o' money. The last thing 'e told me, I was to find you out and give you back this photograph. 'E forgot to give me the address, but I knew I should find it somewhere. So if you'll take it, miss, and let me go while it's safe—“

One of the unshed tears dropped from one of the dark eyes and splashed on the face of the photograph.

„You may go, if you like,“ the girl said; „but I should prefer that you retained the photograph for the present. There are a great many questions I should like to ask you, but the servants may come in for the keys at any moment now, and your presence here might be misunderstood. After you have finished your work tomorrow, you will please come up here and ask for Miss Trevelyan. I want you to come and have tea with me, because I'm not at all satisfied that I have seen the last of my noble benefactor.“

Gipsy stooped and lifted the slim fingers to his lips. He was anxious enough to get away now, and anxious to leave with a most efficient curtain falling on his exit. He knew that he had played his part properly—his correct instinct told him that.

#### Illustration:

Gipsy stooped and lifted the slim fingers to his lips

He kissed the slim fingers, then he thrust the window-blind on one side and walked out into the night. In all his crowded life this was the greatest hour that his star had ever shone upon. It was the play that had occupied his waking dreams for many a year. For he, the hero, knew, and she, the heroine, knew, too, though no word of explanation had passed between them. And to go back on the morrow would be to spoil everything; it would be no more than a cheap and tawdry anti-climax, a lurid tag torn from a penny novelette. To be sure, Gipsy's mates down at the canteen would never know how fine a hero they had nourished in their breasts, but that was a small matter by comparison.

„It can't be done,“ Gipsy told himself, as he turned his face homewards. „Now, most people would go back and 'ave it out alone with a lot o' tears. Then they'd drop into the canteen and discuss it over a gallon or two of beer—and spoil everything. But that ain't the way of a man wot understands the real value of the drama. So I think I'll take that job wot's offered me out Cairo way.“



So the girl waited in vain for the man, who trudged along the highways on the morrow with his face to the East.

