

Puri Rómani Dyes

By LOUISE RICE

I HAVE often wished that I could draw, even ever so little, that I might have made the noble profiles of real Gypsy women whom I have met into a little gallery of pictures, for memory's sake.

These profiles are mostly old. Of the younger generation there are few like Georgina Boswell, that dainty bit of Romani royalty, but hers is, of all the profiles, the most extraordinary. If you will go to any museum where the mummies of Egypt's long dead princesses lie, and will observe the profiles there, you will see Georgina, to the life; proud, high arched nose, short jaw, large, slanting eyes, square shoulders, small, compact thighs, and slender, fine hands and feet of distinction. We once had her photograph taken with her own Gypsy handkerchief drawn about her brows and the effect was startling.

They live in my inner sight with extraordinary vividness—these portraits. One of the most unusual is that of a Stanley who for many years has roamed through the southern states with her husband. They own a number of farms in Kentucky and are very well to do, but have never for a moment considered “kairin” (housing) as possible. A tall old woman, lean and brown, usually dressed in bright calico, although her head scarf is always silk, for which she pays as much as seven dollars a yard. The big green brooch in antique gold which clasps her dress can be bought for a dollar in a great many places where imitations of old jewelry are now found. The only difference between such dollar ornaments and hers, is that hers is real. As it is one of the largest emeralds that I ever saw and is at least two hundred years old, I fear to give it a value. A jeweler whom I once took to her wagon almost fainted away when he happened to look closely at it.

Mrs. Stanley knows the Bible almost by heart and can quote Shakespeare by the page. She knows Dickens and Trollope and Eliot and Byron, has never seen a motion picture, has ridden on a train twice in her life, never slept under any roof save that of her *wardo*, and has the manners of a Grand Duchess. I have seen her, in the space of half an hour, reduce a dangerous tramp and a high brow college professor each to cringing submission.

Then there is Grace Hearn, who is about thirty, belongs to the Ladies Aid Society of the Baptist church in the town where she winters, and is pretty as a bit of a *gypsy*. All she needs is the scraps of costume which made up the popular style of 7000, B.C. Grace speaks Romani with fluency, reads French, likes the motion pictures and loves a joke. But when she stalks into the tent which she lives in for five months of the year, near an amusement park in Ohio, she prepares to “dukker”—something odd and arresting falls upon her, a veil, a shadow—a mantle of authority and power. Old Egypt stirs!

In my hall of memory I keep the picture of Mrs. Young, the mother of Georgina, a gay and laughing girl at seventy, waggish, fearless, apt at any time to frighten her grandchildren half to death by leaping, bareback, onto a horse,

and sending it flying with her drumming heels. But in red silk from head to heels, with her massive head covered with the rare old lace which was her handkerchief—a puro Romani rawny, indeed!

Mostly the women, of the generation past Georgina, were a thought more hearty. They were a little more surely of the open spaces, but they were also great ladies, no more daunted by beggar or king than a king himself, and twice as disdainful of many things as any king I ever heard of; the *puri Romani dyes* or real Gypsy mothers, prouder than Lucifer, and so sure of their places in the world that they possessed the power of impressing even dull clods with something of awe.

Once, in the downtown districts of New York, I came on a red faced Irish policeman “moving on” a Gypsy woman of rather advanced age. She slowly drew her arm from his touch with a movement of supreme disdain and said:

“*Gajo!*”

That word, in a real Gypsy mouth, can be a tender yet half apologetic caress, as to an inferior but beloved friend, and it can have a snarl in it that has just the quality of a jungle snarl. Well, this old Gypsy woman snarled and the policeman moved back as if she had given him a blow. I walked up to her and said:

“*Tacho, miri Dye!*”

She dropped her deep, brooding eye at me and without a word accepted my arm, on which she swam away with the peculiar swinging gait of the Gypsy woman, which is proud, disdainful and triumphantly sensuous. There is not another walk like it among all the daughters of men.

There is a reason for this.

The hook nosed, beautiful eyed, chiselled profile women are not only proud of being Romanies, against which they count the rest of the world as little better than cattle, but of being “*Romani rawnies and dyes.*”

I DO not think that even the few people who have written understandingly of the Romani have quite penetrated to the inmost heart of Romani womanhood. In this, as in everything, what the Romani says and what he means are very, very different.

The subjection of the Romani woman, as appearing in even tales which do the race a fair amount of justice and which show its peculiar psychology, is due to the fact that the Romani hardly ever speaks what is in his heart and that he usually, and as a matter of course, and even among his own, will say the thing which is not.

There is no talk among any men of any race which is so swaggeringly masculine as that of the genuine Gypsy. He is very much the master. He likes his own good looks. He dresses the part. He is always talking about his love affairs. He accepts the attention of his wife and her open expression of passionate love for him with a lordly air. The Gypsy woman yields to his whims, pets him, admires him, is not backward about declaring how much she loves him. The average American man and woman of even some under-

standing of the Gypsy finds this a bit revolting. I have had many say to me that it was a thing which offended them, despite the charm and attraction which they found in real Gypsies.

Well! If there was ever a situation in human affairs which would cause a person "in the know" to hum that refrain of *Things are seldom what they seem*, it is this.

The Gypsy woman makes this gesture of absolute surrender to her husband and to males in general, for the same reason that men are most excessively polite to ladies in countries where ladies have practically no rights, at all. Yes, that is exactly the reason.

The swashbuckling and assertive males, if you will notice, do not consort with women of the Gajo races. If you go to the Gypsy, in either camp or the house where he is *kairin*, does he come forward and greet you and deal with you? Does he, as a rule, come forward, at all? He does not. He does not, even when he is of the generations which have been on American soil since ever the Indian trails gave place to the white man's roads.

Ask this fine gentleman to spend money. He will have about a dollar in his romantic looking red sash or in the Sweet and Orr overalls in which he is frequently found. His jewelry is modest. Usually a massive ring or two and, with the Hungarians and other Balkans Gypsies, the precious buttons of solid gold for his coat, and the gold tipped walking stick which he proudly displays as his badge that he is married.

ON the other hand, take the most educated and cultured of the English Gypsies, who are, of them all, the finest and most royal. Be at home with them, as I have been privileged to be, so far that their incessant talk, jesting and song flows on as if you were not there.

You will sit about the fire, after the day is done and the evening meal is over, and hear the comedy played (with endless variations) as follows:

"Woman, have you made money today?"

This is thundered from a stern mouth and accented by fiercely beetling brows.

"N-n-n-o-o—" she stammers, rolling her lovely eyes piteously.

He reaches either for one of the horse whips or for anything else which is handy and ominously weighs it.

"Woman, I shall beat you," he declares.

She shivers and looks down. She reaches across and slyly caresses his fingers.

"Take your foolish hands from me, woman," he adjures her. "I have no truck with women's nonsense. Understand that unless you do better I shall surely beat you tomorrow night."

She murmurs that he is too hard and in eloquent pantomime and with supreme artistry appeals to the others to say whether the lot of such a man's wife is not a hard one. We all nod compassionately and pity her and ten minutes afterward she is holding his hand again.

There is not a hint that this is delicious fooling and I do not wonder that many and many a person, even those who knew a good deal of the *chib*, and who have been admitted to a lot of intimacy with either *puro kaulli ratti* or the good *posh* and *posh* or even with wretched *didikai* like myself, who have only a little pinch of the black blood, should have been deceived.

The truth of the matter is that all this talk is gallantly

graceful nonsense, just as there used to be that kind of nonsense in the Middle Ages, used by gentlemen to ladies, who had no place in the sun at all, save as their menfolk gave it to them. Well, the Gypsy man is in about the same position. Heaven alone knows what will happen to me, who thus let loose on a Gajo world a secret which is never even mentioned in *wardo* or *tan!*

IT is really the Gypsy woman who is boss. She owns the property, when there is any, and she is the unquestioned owner of the real wealth of the family, which is always in jewelry. How wonderful the jewelry is, of genuine Romani families, there are few anywhere who really know. Years ago, when one of the English Romani families were conducting a sort of marriage discussion with a half-English, half-Hungarian family, there was a bit of a shindy one night and the police came and arrested some of the English family.

They were aghast. Despite a lot of fiction written about the Romanies and the police, it has been rare, indeed, that any genuine Romanies have been taken in tow by the law. This family instantly gathered its wealth from the secret places in the wagons and poured into the Harlem Police Court with it. They also sent for me, which was a sensible thing to do, for they could not succeed in getting the polite but incredulous desk sergeant to do anything but smile at what was heaped before him.

As for me, even though I knew that they had wealth, I had never seen so much of it before, at one time, and I confess that I looked with apprehension around the room, where several ordinary policemen were standing.

The sergeant, being introduced to me as "a writing woman" and happening to know that I really was, invited my attention to the pile that lay before him.

"They want to put up that Five and Ten collection for bail," he said.

I stepped up close to him and said: "Sergeant—listen—for I don't want to say it out loud. That 'Five and Ten collection' is worth about a hundred thousand dollars, at the very lowest estimation, and some of those pieces are hundreds of years old. Get it out of sight before anybody realizes that it's real."

He goggled at me, unbelievably.

"Why—that old woman, there, says that it's hers!"

It was. And there was a lot of it that she hadn't brought around. It would be her daughter's afterward. It would be the possession of the women and not of the men.

The marriage that was under contemplation was the arrangement of the two families, because one of the daughters of the English family had fallen in love with one of the boys of the *posh* and *posh* and made no bones about showing it. No reason why she should. When married, *he* would be the one to be proud of being married and she would go her free way in the world of the Romani and the Gajo, *except* for that beautiful self-surrender which publicly abdicated the real power possessed.

Even with the families where the real blood is down to almost nothing, and where the rest of it is adulterated with mongrel strains of all Slavokia and Latinum, this tradition persists. The good looking rascal who treats his wife and daughter with all the airs of an overlord is quite a different gentleman the moment that there is a real decision to be made.

The real Romani man is a (Continued on page 58)



Merry-go-round

The Merry-Go-Round of Gypsy Life

Five water colors by ESTHER PECK

IN these drawings we have almost the seven ages of the Gypsy woman: the models were glimpsed on New York's East Side, the doll-like babies; the six-year-old, round-eyed with wonder; a quizzical and distrustful older sister who already has sensed the pitfalls of the world and is alertly defensive; the young married woman with her baby; and the old grandmother ablaze in purple and magenta—all these are sought in gypsy homes on Pitt and Broome Streets and persuaded to serve as models by Esther Peck.

"What for?" they asked.

"To make pictures—that's my business."

"How much money?"

The bargain was struck, and then baby sister, mother and the other children were brought to the studio to sit in turn.

The skeptical little girl came back the second day to say—

"That's a very good drawing. You will get a lot of money for it. I think you should pay more for me."

Reminded of her bargain, she turned on her heel and went quickly to inspect the portraits of the rest of the family while the artist struggled to set down the pictures, and silently vanished—on each picture the eyes had been smudged out!

These drawings represent members of one family—all were drawn from life except the grandmother who would have no traffic with such works. But old and leathery of face, stepping along the city street as lithely as a girl, she created an impression more vivid in the memory than many patient models who "sit" for hours.