

The Occupant of the Caravan

By LANGHAM COUCH

The caravan had halted in a shady wood, a few miles from the village. Its occupants had kindled a fire, and were now preparing the evening meal. They made a lovely picture, these true children of nature, with their apple-brown faces, dark eyes, and jet black hair. Full of laughter and song, as can only be found in true sons and daughters of sunny Italy.

Now, alas! that laughter and song was suddenly flushed and silent. Death was near them, and, with her keen sickle, was about to gather one of their little band. Poor Mother Therese; it was hard to lose her, who had been a mother to them all. Even Francisco, their leader, could not save her. On his broad shoulders he carried all their troubles and cares, but this was beyond him, and now he was as helpless as they.

As he leant gracefully against a tree, striking now and again idly a chord from the violin which hung loosely from his shoulder, one could hardly believe that this was only a travelling gipsy. He was a true Italian, tall, dark, and finely built, with raven hair slightly curling upon the broad low brow and dark, melancholy eyes. He was dressed in a velvet suit, which had seen its best days, and was now covered with a thick powdering of dust from the road.

His companions were vastly different to him, and seemed to show to better advantage his refined and noble bearing. One was a woman small and stoutly built, with a plain yet homely face, and the other a young lad, with the eyes of a dreamer. Both were talking in a subdued whisper.

The violin twanged out a chord, dismal and out of tune. It quivered for a moment upon the summer air, seeming to utter a strange and heartbreaking cry. The little woman stopped abruptly in her conversation with her companion, and put her little brown hands to her ears to shut out the sound.

"Francisco, why will you play those dreadful chords? I am so sad and you make me more miserable," she cried petulantly.

Francisco laughed harshly.

"When my heart is sad, Marie, the violin feels so, too."

He slipped the violin round to its place on his shoulder as he spoke.

"I will go and see how Therese is," he said.

He moved towards one of the caravans, and, knocking softly on the door, entered.

On the bed lay the dying woman, and by her side knelt a young girl. The last rays of the sun shone through the little window upon her amber curls, the lovely face with its large sad eyes—dark as a blue as the ever changing blue of the sea—the small curved mouth now drooping pitifully.

"Well! Therese, how do you feel now?" he said gently to the dying woman.

She shook her head wearily.

"They are a long time coming back, Francisco," she said.

"Merino has not yet returned. They will be here soon now," he replied.

The girl burst into a fresh flood of weeping.

"You have told Naomi all, Therese?" Francisco queried.

"Yes, I have told her," she smiled pitifully, and drew the girl closer to her, "and you have forgiven me. Carina mia."

"I love you all the more, Mother Therese," Naomi sobbed.

Beppo here entered with a drink for the sick woman. Francisco bent over the girl, and gently lifted her to her feet. The old man nodded her assent, and the two left the caravan together. For a moment they walked on in silence. Naomi's head rested lightly on Francisco's shoulder, and he held her tightly so. Why could he not, was he not her own dear brother, who had been so good and kind to them in their time of need.

They had wandered away from the caravans, and stood looking down upon the broad valley which lay at their feet, with a glimpse of the sea in the distance. Naomi drew in a deep breath as she fell upon this scene of loveliness.

She was sad—yes, very sad, but after all the word was very lovely, and she was going to be rich. Never in her wildest dreams, which she so often weaved for herself, had she imagined that one day she would leave the caravan and become a great lady, but it was so.

The thought took her breath away—yesterday she had thought that she was only a poor gipsy girl, the daughter of Mother Therese, wandering about the country singing and playing for a living. To-day Mother Therese had confessed that she was the daughter of a nobleman, and fate had brought her to die almost on the doorstep of the people she had so much wronged.

Years ago the Conte Phillippo had travelled to the south of Italy for his wife's health. They had taken with them their children, amongst which was Naomi, then a child of a few years. The Countess was a proud, haughty woman, who cared little for her children; pleasure and gaiety appealed to her more than her own name or family.

Therese, who was passionately fond of children, often saw the lovely golden haired child, sometimes playing in the castle garden, accompanied by her nurses going for her afternoon walk. She was so beautiful, this loving, winning child, so like one of the angels over the painting of the Madonna, that she often thought that she was one of them stepped out of the canvas. Many an afternoon she hid in the castle grounds watching the child. How the dark gipsy face would soften, the eyes shine lovingly, as the child played innocently with her toys.

She heard that the family were about to return to their northern home, she could not bear the thought of her life without the child, who she had stolen her. She took refuge in the hills until the hue and cry had died down. But fate had not treated Mother Therese well, and it seemed as though the child she had risked so much for must die of starvation.

One day, weary and footsore, she sat, sick and weary at heart, on the roadside, torturing herself with the thought that she had taken this child from every luxury, only to see her fade away before her eyes. It was the good God punishing her for her wickedness. She had meant no harm, the grand Contessa did not love her child more passionately than she, the gipsy Therese.

When her hopes were at the lowest, a caravan had come around the bend of the road, and with it Francisco. He had helped them, given them food and money, and ever since they had remained part of his little band. She had kept her secret, and not until today had they thought that Naomi was other than the rightful daughter of Mother Therese.

"Well, Naomi, you are silent." Francisco brogke in upon her thoughts. She turned her eager, lovely eyes upon him, bright with the thoughts of the coming meeting between herself and her parents. The welcome she would receive, she, the long-lost daughter, who was now to return. "Oh, Francisco! Who would have thought that I, the little gipsy, would one day become a great lady?"