

# A LIBERAL EDUCATION

The Story of How Gipsy Made Good

By FRED. M. WHITE



GIPSY removed his cigarette and glanced at the stranger. He was a small man, with garb reminiscent of towns—a frock-coat struggling with adversity, a glossy top-hat, owing its refulgent rays to benzoline. For the rest, the man was red, and had sanguine eyes behind glasses. He carried a big portfolio under his arm.

"If it ain't a rude question," Gipsy said blandly, "what the dickens are you after, mate?"

This was the dinner interlude. The clink of pick and the rattle of drill had ceased, and gang B 14 were feeding, for the most part, out of red bandana handkerchiefs. Gipsy's cigarettes gained flavour from curiosity. Antiquarians and archaeologists he knew, but the specimen before him was quite new. He had never seen a book-agent before.

The small man, wandering into the big engineering camp high up the Valley of Sweet Waters, needed no more cordial greeting. The tiniest spark of curiosity blew up the floodgates of his loquacity. The glib words flowed on.

"Arf time," Gipsy cut in. "The mate what shares my 'ut 'as got a parrot. Maybe as you might teach him to say a few words."

The little man smiled, nothing abashed. He spread out before Gipsy's admiring eyes a series of illustrations, views of the world at large, maps, sections of the human form divine, models of more or less up-to-date steam-engines—the whole pictorial art as applied to the "Universal Compendium Encyclopædia," complete in twelve monthly parts at seventeen and sixpence per volume, first instalment down, the balance on faith. The book-agent is childlike and trusting, possibly because the seventeen and six down covers any predatory leaning on the part of the thirsty knowledge-seeker.

"That's what you want," said the little man, with fine insight. "This dictionary in itself, sir, is a liberal education. There's nothing—*nothing* that you won't find in it."

"Think so?" Gipsy asked doubtfully. "Anything about prize fights, mister?"

The little man pointed to a full-page drawing of a Roman gladiator, obviously pirated from one of the late Lord Leighton's drawings. He would like very much to know what Gipsy thought of that. The navy was properly impressed. He regarded the gladiator's biceps critically. With a fund of knowledge like that, he would be uplifted over his fellows. Seventeen and sixpence was not much whereby he might be placed intellectually on a level with the resident engineers at Cwm House. Besides, when the thirst for knowledge played subordinate to thirst of a more commonplace character, and the exchequer was low, the volume would pawn in Rhayader for the requisite silver.

Gipsy rattled some money in his pocket. They were a sporting lot up the valley, and Gipsy's second in the Derby "sweep" had brought in a matter of over six pounds. He hesitated; seventeen and sixpence was not so much to a bachelor sharing a hut and drawing thirty-two shillings a week.

"I'll take it," he said. "And 'ere's the first money down."

"Then I'll book your order, sir," the little man said. Gipsy swelled with pride. His vivid imagination was running ahead of the present; there were reminiscences of the Industrious Apprentice in his mind.

"Perhaps your other volumes may come a little under the month, in which case—"

"Oh, I shan't mind that," Gipsy said largely. "You make out the paper."

"Certainly, sir. In that case, Form B is the one for you to sign. Your name, sir, please? Gipsy? Very good. And your Christian name, sir?"

All this with a humility that filled Gipsy with a pleased sense of importance. But as to the Christian name, there was a hitch. Did he possess one, it was lost in the backwash of boyish memories. He had never been called anything but Gipsy. At his feet lay a fine, florid drawing of Hercules. Gipsy spelt out the word slowly—his infinite resource came back to him.

"Rum thing," he said. "My Christian name's the same as that knobby bloke with the belt round his waist. H-e-r-c-u-l-e-s. Call it Herkules Gipsy, and you've got it first pop. What yer laughin' at?"

The little man explained that he wasn't laughing at all, it was merely a chronic catarrh, from which he had been a victim from boyhood. Gipsy scratched a pleasing hieroglyphic at the foot of a long, blue form, the benzoline-glossy hat was lifted with a flourish, and Gipsy was alone with the key of knowledge in his grasp—cheap at seventeen and sixpence.

The publishers of the "Universal Compendium Encyclopædia" were less trustful than a first casual glance would have disclosed. But then Gipsy knew nothing about "remainders" or the fact that many old works of this nature—fruits of failure and bankruptcy of bygone publishers—are sold as so much wastepaper, the body or corpse being subsequently clothed in new outer garments and peddled to a confiding public through the medium of many little men with dilapidated frock-coats and hats resplendent of benzoline. As a matter of fact, had no further payment been made, the Universal Compendium Publishing Company would have lost nothing—which fact Gipsy did not grasp, as also he had no idea that he had signed a form consenting to receive the balance of the volumes monthly, or more frequently should the publisher deem the latter course expedient. Within a month the rest of the volumes did arrive, carriage paid, in a neat box, plus an invoice for something over £10, with a footnote to the effect that if the balance were not paid within fourteen days, proceedings for its recovery would be taken without further notice.

All this, however, escaped the usually sharp eye of the seeker after knowledge. It was very good of these people to send on the books which need not be paid for yet. Meanwhile, Gipsy was progressing with his liberal education. He knew something about Adam, who seemed to be mixed up in some way with a peculiar kind of fireplace; he gained some new information about Africa; of Agriculture he hoped presently to speak with authority; Algebra he was forced to ignore altogether. But the greatest delight lay in the pictures—twenty in each volume, harnessed to the text in the most indiscriminate fashion, but there they were.

It was not to be supposed that so fine a sportsman as Gipsy could have kept his new possessions a secret. There were those who scoffed, but others who firmly believed. Mothers came to know if the big book had any hints as to the teething of children, or the proper treatment of warts, whilst a third desired information as to the best way to boil cabbages; young navvies, with an eye to a hut of their own, asked Gipsy quietly if the book had any hints as to good, plain furniture, and the best way to get it on the instalment plan.

"I'm doing my best for the settlement," Gipsy replied. "It's a tough job, this 'ere liberal education, and apt to get confusing. I can't quite make out where I am sometimes. There's Anatomy. Now, is it a new kind of metal or a colony in South Africa. But it'll all come right in time. Only I ain't found anything about warts or furniture in the book as yet."

"Look the warts up under 'Antibilious,'" Mitchell the painter, suggested. Mitchell was a man who had bid fair for fame as an artist at one time, only he could never keep sober for more than a week at a time. He had a fine, cynical humour of his own, a keen eye for character-study, and Gipsy, with his dramatic instincts, fairly fascinated him. "You've got the chance of becoming a great force here, old man."

Gipsy growled uneasily. He had a vague feeling that Mitchell had once been a gentleman. He was a master of phrases, too. But amongst the ten thousand navvies working there, were many who could have told lurid life-stories besides Mitchell, the painter. Dandy, standing by, sneered openly.

"What's the good on it," he asked, "when you can get Reynolds's every week for a brown? There ain't a good rattlin' bloomin' murder in all this volume what Gipsy's so set up about."

Gipsy smiled in a superior manner. Dandy eyed him with disfavour—he seemed to be on a different plane to his old mate now.

"Canteen's open," Mitchell suggested. "Come along. In the full flush of newly acquired knowledge, Gipsy ought to be able to tell us something about beer. Letter B, all in Volume I of the Compendium."

"If you only knew what it was made of," Gipsy said in his most superior manner. All the same, he was moving towards the canteen with the rest. "There's a thing called quashyer—"

"If it was made o' mud flavoured with rotten

eggs an' ditch-water," Dandy said vehemently, "it 'ud be all the same to me. Beer's beer. Been fond of it all my life, and ain't going to turn from it for all the Compendiums as was ever wrote."

A murmur of applause followed. Gipsy so far bent to popular opinion as to take a pint of the amber fluid himself. Sooth to say, he was a little tired of the Compendium. It was beginning to dawn before him that he could not live up to it. For the last month he and Dandy and Gammon had not had one poaching excursion together.

"I don't want to keep that book to myself," he said. "I'm all for public spirit. I'm going to turn it into a free library—one volume a week, turn and turn about. The subscription's a bob, limited to a 'undred. I'll collect that bob from a 'undred of you, and—"

"Bet you a tanner you don't collect five of 'em," a sportsman in the background suggested.

"Them as likes to jine, 'old up your hands," Gipsy said loftily.

There was no headstrong desire to comply with the request. The Higher Education found no favour in the camp. Two shillings only were proffered, both coupled with the suggestion that the coin should be promptly disbursed by Gipsy in the universal liquid. But even more enlightened communities have shown themselves averse to the blessings of the Free Libraries Act. Gipsy made a few scornful remarks, passed in tolerating silence.

Comparatively early the seeker after knowledge left his hut. Mitchell, the painter, accompanied him at his request. Dandy openly flouted his old ally and companion. Once the Compendium was a thing of the past, they might join forces again; meanwhile Dandy avowedly preferred the company of Gammon. It was a blow to Gipsy's pride, but he swallowed it.

Mitchell, the painter, was enjoying the comedy in his grave fashion. He had forgotten many things in his fall, but the dry humour of the born cynic had never failed him. He was laughing at Gipsy consumedly; but the latter was in bland ignorance of the fact. He jerked his thumb hospitably towards the spare chair in the hut and passed the tobacco.

"Wishing you hadn't gone in for the higher classics?" Mitchell suggested.

"Got it first time," Gipsy said moodily. "It didn't sound much at first; but when I comes to think serious like over that seventeen bob a month . . . besides, I got all the books. And now they've sent me three papers that I can't make head or tail of. Like to see 'em?"

Mitchell nodded, and Gipsy produced three oblong sheets of dingy paper with the Royal Arms on the top. They were vague and depressing documents to the uninitiated, but Mitchell had had long experience in such matters during his careless days.

"What are they all about, mate?" Gipsy asked anxiously.

"County-court summons, to begin with," Mitchell explained. "According to the particulars attached to the summons, you signed an order for these books to be delivered as the publishers deemed fit. As you didn't pay on delivery, they have issued this summons—with costs, £13 9s. 4d."

Gipsy exploded into a genial laugh. The faith in his purse amused him.

"Go on!" he cried. "Me pay £13 and nine bob and fourpence. Hope they'll get it."

"Hope they will," Mitchell proceeded genially. "You took no notice, and judgment went by default."

"Sounds like a bit from the Compendium," Gipsy muttered. "Go on."

"So they issued a judgment summons, which costs you another ten shillings. As you ignored that, a committal order was made against you, as this third notice tells. Order suspended for fourteen days, but up to-morrow. You don't seem to understand, my friend. You ought to have appeared at Rhayader and explained matters to the judge. If this money isn't paid to-morrow, you will have to go to Brecon Gaol for six weeks. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"What!" Gipsy roared. "An' this a free country an' all! Lord! what a fool I've been! If I only 'ad the little cove with the slimy 'at 'ere now! Comin' along and takin' advantage of a poor, ignorant bloke like myself. An' thirteen pound nine an'—"

Gipsy paused, utterly overcome with the weight of this startling discovery. He sat in a dazed kind of way whilst Mitchell expounded the pro-