The Gipsy's Pledge

by Colonel Prentiss Ingraham

"I'm but a poor child of the forest, lady, a wandering gipsy, but I pledge myself to serve you if ever I can."

The speaker was a large, dark-faced, black-haired man, attired in velvet coat, blue shirt, black pants stuck in high boots, and a slouch hat that nearly concealed his face.

His costume was a picturesque one, and his bearing graceful, and yet a trifle reckless and defiant.

The one he addressed was a maiden of seventeen, attired in a dark-green riding-habit, now clinging close to her elegant form, for it was dripping wet.

Her head was bare, and her face was beautiful in the extreme, while adown her back hung masses of golden hair, also wet, and by her side stood a bay mare showing signs of having just come out of the water.

In his arms the gipsy held a little girl of six years, upon whose sun-burnt, pretty face still rested a startled look.

"I feel repaid for what I did in having saved the child, so please do not thank me any more, but aid me to mount my horse," replied the maiden, quietly.

"Lady, you risked your life to save my child. I saw you spring your horse off of yonder twenty foot bank into the river, and believed you mad, until I head my Iola scream, and beheld you bringing her ashore in your arms. Lady, I will never forget you."

"I saw your little girl fall from yonder overhanging tree into the river, and the quick current bore her swiftly away, so I went to her rescue. Now I must return home."

The gipsy hesitated a moment, then thrusting his hand into his bosom he drew forth a gold ring set with a stone of peculiar color, into which was cut a "death's head and cross-bones."

"Lady, take this and wear it as a reminder of the life you have saved. There is but one other stone like it in the world, and should you see that one, do not trust the wearer. Nay, do not refuse my gift because I am a poor gispy," and the man drew back hurt, as the maiden did not offer to take the ring.

But seeing his manner, she said, quickly:

"I will take it, and Iola, you shall wear this as a souvenir of the one who saved your life."

As she spoke she drew off her glove, took a handsome ruby ring from her finger and slipped it on the brown hand of the little girl.

“Now, kiss me good-by,” and she stooped over and kissed the child’s red lips, and the next instant was raised to the saddle by the strong arms of the gipsy king, and with a wave of her hand, rode rapidly away.

The man gazed after her a moment, and then, taking his child in his arms, strode rapidly through the forest for the distance of a quarter of a mile, when he came upon a picturesque encampment, upon the bank of a small stream flowing into a river near by.

There were two acres of tents, and nearly a hundred wild-looking children of the forest were visible in the encampment, while wagons and horses were arranged in a semi-circle not far distant.

It was growing late and a number of fires were blazing brightly, and the savory odor of cooking meats floated on the air, while groups of eager children stood around anxiously waiting for the call to supper.

Passing silently through the camp the gipsy entered a large tent, formed of gay colored cloth, and handed the child to an old woman with bowed form and wrinkled face.

“Iola strayed from my side, mother, as I fished on the river bank, and fell into the water; but she was saved by a noble lady. Give the child a warm drink and put her to bed,” said the gipsy; and he placed the little Iola in the arms of the old woman, and leaving the tent, joined a group of men at a fire near by.

After telling them of the adventure, he turned and abruptly strode from the camp, and turned into a broad highway.

It was now dark, but he walked rapidly on for several miles and then halted in front of a massive gateway leading into extensive and beautifully ornamented grounds.

“This is her home, for I saw her ride forth from here a few days ago. She is rich and beautiful, and I but a poor wanderer—a child of the forest. Yet I am not ill-looking, and I am not ignorant—still I am a gipsy and she will never look upon me except with pity.

“Bah! Morretto, the gipsy king, is making a fool of himself; yet—it is pleasant to be a fool at times, and as I find pleasure in it I will continue so to be.”

Laying his hand upon the fence, and disregarding the gate, he bounded nimbly over into the inclosure, and took his way along the gravel drive towards glimmering lights seen through the trees beyond.

A walk of five minutes brought him in sight of a large mansion, from the windows of which gleamed a dozen lights, and several faces were visible within.

As he drew nearer a huge dog bounded from the piazza with a savage yell and growl, and rushing towards him, sprang at the man's throat; but the brute was clutched in a grasp of iron; a short struggle followed, and with a muttered curse the gipsy let go his hold, for he had driven his knife into the hairy side of the animal.

Seeing that no one had been alarmed by the bark of the dog he started on towards the mansion once more, when the sound of wheels broke upon his ear, and he crouched down behind some shrubbery as a carriage rolled up to the doorway.

From it descended an elderly gentleman, who was met at the door by a young girl, who greeted him warmly, while the vehicle was driven around the stable.

"Yes, it is she; and no angel is more beautiful," muttered the gipsy, as he again crept nearer to the house, and after awhile gained a position where he could look into the supper room.

The mansion was superbly furnished, and about it was every indication that its master was a man of great wealth.

Half a dozen servants were visible here and there, and at the supper-table were seated the elderly gentleman who had just arrived, and the maiden who had so bravely rescued the gipsy girl from drowning.

For a long time the gipsy king stood feasting his eyes upon the beautiful maiden, and then he turned away with a sigh.

As he did so he discovered two dark forms approaching, and quickly he shrank down into the shadow of a rose-bush.

Nearer they came, each walking most cautiously, and they halted within six feet of him, and stood looking at the mansion, while the light from the windows streamed full in their faces, showing every feature distinctly.

"Curse the old man, he always did keep late hours; but we can do nothing until Red Fred comes, so might as well be patient," said one of the men.

"And you are certain he brought the tin with him—you seed it, you say?" asked the other.

"Yes, I saw it paid into his hands—a cool thirty thousand dollars in gold and notes; and you noticed when he got on the train his satchel was heavy; besides, I know he intended purchasing the estate adjoining his this week—he has the money with him."

"Good! Yonder comes Red Fred"; and as the second speaker spoke, another form approached cautiously and gave a low whistle.

"Here, Fred," cried the leader. "Did you get a team at the village?"

“Yes; it’s hitched just inside the gateway, and the horses is good ones,” answered the newcomer.

“Then all is ready; but mind you, no bloodletting, unless to save our own lives or escape; the safe is in the library, and I have a duplicate key. I wonder where that accursed dog is; if he comes upon us we must silence him, for he is a terror. Now let us go yonder in the shadow of that arbor and wait.”

The three men glided quietly away, yet halted at a spot that rendered it impossible for the gipsy king, who had heard all they said, to move from his hiding place, as he had hoped to do, and give warning to the inmates of the house.

So he remained crouching down silently, until one by one the lights in the house were put out, and then the three robbers crept from their place of concealment and softly approached the mansion.

Ascending to the broad piazza they skillfully cut a pane of glass out of one of the windows, drew back the fastening, raised the sash and entered.

Then the gipsy king stole softly upon the piazza and fearlessly entered the open window.

A moment of silence followed, and then came a pistol shot, a cry, curses, and a tremendous uproar, while one man bounded from the window and fled like a deer across the grounds.

In an instant lights flashed in the mansion, and Judge Henry Vermyle rushed into his library, followed by his frightened servants, lights in hand.

There a startling scene presented itself, for the gispy king stood upright and calm, while upon the floor lay two men, one dead and the other dying.

“The gipsy king!” cried several of the servants, appearing to recognize him.

“Yes, I am Morretto the gipsy king, and I am not here, as you seem to believe, to rob, but to save; for, Judge Vermyle, I heard three men plotting to rob you of thirty thousand dollars you drew from bank to-day; they followed you here on the train, and while one of them went to get a vehicle at the village two came here.

“I had not a chance to warn you, so followed the men in here. One escaped and here are the other two. Ask the dying man if I speak the truth.”

“God forgive me, he does! Oh, do not let me die!” cried the wretch, rolling over in agony.

Stepping forward, Judge Vermyle extended his hand to the gipsy king and said, earnestly:

“My man, from my heart I thank you—you have saved me a large sum, and perhaps my life, for I was about to return alone and in the dark to this room to get yonder satchel, for I forgot it upon going up stairs. In it are thirty thousand dollars, and you can help yourself to one third of it.”

“Judge Vermyle”—and the gipsy king drew himself up proudly—“I served you not for gold, sir, but for love, as it was your daughter who saved the life of my little girl this afternoon. Farewell, sir.” And ere any one could detain him he strode from the room, and making his exit by the window, disappeared in the darkness.

The following morning Nina Vermyle arose at an early hour, and her father having gone to the village with the bodies of the two robbers—for the other had died shortly after making his confession, yet without betraying who was their leader in the bold robbery—she ate breakfast alone, and then mounted her horse and rode rapidly toward the gipsy king’s camp, and anxious to thank him in person for the service he had rendered.

To her surprise and regret the encampment was deserted; for ere the break of day the wandering children of the forest had gone on their way, their chief seeming desirous of avoiding any recognition for what he had done.

In the afternoon Judge Vermyle returned from the village, accompanied by his nephew, who had just come out from the city, his uncle having telegraphed for him.

Nina greeted her cousin—who was a dashing, handsome fellow of thirty—rather coldly, considering that she was his promised wife; but then she was, though engaged to him, really “heart-whole and fancy free,” and only had consented to marry Raymond Field, as she knew it was the earnest desire of her father for her to do so.

“Nina, I wish you would consent to be married as soon as you can get ready, for I will be often away from home, and dislike to leave you here alone. Let me see, you will be eighteen in three months, so appoint that for your wedding day, if that will suit Raymond,” said Judge Vermyle, as they sat at the table that day after dinner.

“I will only be too happy, uncle,” said the young man, with a glance at Nina.

“If it must be, I am willing, sir. By the way, Raymond, were you not at one time captured by gipsies?” said Nina, with provoking indifference of the subject in question.

“Yes, when I was five years of age, and I was with them until my father found me in their camp in my seventeenth year, and, because the chief’s son had twice saved my life, he took the boy and sent him to college for four years with myself.”

“And what became of him?”

“He went back to his old life again, though he was the best scholar in the university. You can never tame a gipsy any more than you can an Indian, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know; but what was his name?” quietly asked Nina.

“Eugene Morretto—he is now king of his band, and married a young girl who ran away from her home to join him in his wild life. She died some years ago, and since then I have not heard of him.”

Nina made no reply, and the subject was dropped; but as she left the room she muttered:

“He is far the nobler man of the two, I verily believe, cousin mine, gipsy though he be.”

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The day rolled around for the marriage between Nina Vermyle and Raymond Field, and though not very unhappy at the prospect, the maiden was far from happy.

Presently her maid entered the room and said:

“Miss Nina, that gipsy king is down in the parlor and wishes to see you.”

Nina started, her face flushed, and rising she descended to the parlor, where the gipsy king met her.

“Pardon me, lady, but I would beg you to call your father and Mr. Field also,” said Eugene Morretto, calmly, after greeting the maiden; and, surprised at his manner, she obeyed, and the three entered together.

“Ah, Eugene, you here?” said Raymond Field, with a slight tremor in his voice.

“Yes, I am here, and Judge Vermyle, I have come to prevent you giving your daughter in marriage to a common thief and housebreaker—a man who would rob his old uncle.”

Nina gave a startled cry, and drew away from Raymond Field, who stood now like a marble statue, while Judge Vermyle said, sternly:

“Be careful, gipsy, unless you can prove your words.”

“I have proof, sir: this cravat I tore from the neck of the man who escaped that night the attempt was made to rob this house, and, see, the silk is encircled by this ring of peculiar design; these rings—for the other, and only other one, is on your daughter’s hand—were given to Raymond Field and myself, by my father, when he was one of our band; and more, that night he stood where the light fell on his face and I saw every feature distinctly, while the team he made his escape with that night he sold in the second town from here to one of my men who happened to be there, and who knows Raymond Field well. The horses and light wagon I have now in my camp, and the stableman who hired them to one of the robbers whom I killed will identify them. I always knew Raymond Field to have a wicked heart, yet did not believe him to be as bad as he has shown himself to be.”

“Does this man tell the truth, Raymond Field?” and Judge Vermyle turned to his nephew, who bowed his head in silence.

“Go! and if you ever cross my path again, I will send you to prison!”

The guilty man walked from the room and the house, and Judge Vermyle said fervently:

“Nina, thank God you have escaped the fate I would have bound you to; and to you, sir, I owe more than my life.”

“You owe me nothing, sir”; and without another word the gipsy king turned and left the mansion.

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Two years passed away, and Nina Vermyle sat alone in her room, clad in deep mourning, for six months before her father had been taken from her by death.

“A gentleman to see you, Miss,” said a servant.

Entering the parlor, a tall, splendid-looking man, elegantly dressed, advanced towards her. It was Eugene Morretto, the gipsy king.

“Miss Vermyle, two years ago I gave up my wild life, and for your sweet sake tried to become worthy of you, for I love you with all my heart. Must I return once more and become a gipsy king?”

“No. Stay here, for I love you, and will become your wife.” And Nina redeemed her pledge, as the gipsy had his.

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