

GIPSIES, O!

by

Sydney Eddison

For Nell

Sydney Eddison
Box 385
Newtown, CT. 06470
(203) 426-2800

"Gipsies, O!" is a self-contained story. It is intended, however, to be the first of several tales about the Brown family, chiefly about Biddy Brown and the scrapes she gets into because she's always looking for excitement or going against the grain in some way. The date is pre-World War II when little girls wore white gloves to church and hats with long ribbons hanging down at the back; when children had to create their own forms of entertainment and mischief without the aid of television.

In England, it was a time of families when everyone sat down to the same meal at the same time and if children didn't like vegetables, their ingenuity was taxed finding subtle ways of disposing of unwanted items. It was a time when obedience and good manners were the norm and Nannies held sway in the nursery.

It was a time when even in modest houses, there was usually a cook in the kitchen who churned butter and made scones for tea. There was probably a maid-of-all-work as well and outside, a local man who knew when to hill up celery and how to prune pear trees so that they stretched their branches flat against a sunny wall.

I remember when I was young that I very much wanted to know what life was like when my mother was a little girl. I hope perhaps there are still children who wonder the same thing, and that's what this story is all about.

Sydney Eddison

The Browns moved to the little market town of Thornton in 1927, the year Biddy was born. The older children had dim memories of a tall, narrow town house in Leeds, but the younger ones only knew the comfortable old brick house at the far end of the village. It was solid and handsome and had the nicest view in Thornton.

The back windows overlooked a garden of tidy flower beds surrounded by a wall and beyond that, meadows and a little stream lined with willow trees. In front, the windows looked out on the market square with its ancient cross and on either side, neat rows of old brick and plaster houses leaning contentedly against one another.

"I like it," Mrs. Brown had said when she first came to Thornton. "It's so peaceful." And ordinarily, it was, but this week, the cobbled space in the middle of the village had been alive with activity.

Black-haired strangers in ragged, brightly colored clothes milled about among the villagers who looked drab by comparison. The gypsies came through Thornton once a year. They appeared out of the blue. No one knew when they would come or how long they would stay. Suddenly, they would just be there going from house to house mending pots and sharpening knives. Then, they would set up their stalls and coconut shys and games of chance in the square.

Mrs. Brown disapproved of gypsies. She said their way of life was shiftless and irresponsible, but nine year old Biddy admired them extravagantly.

She thought they were the most exciting, beautiful people in the world, and she loved everything about them. Just the sight of their thin, dark faces gave her a thrill of pleasure. There were so few faces in Thornton that she didn't know already, except on market days. Even then, many were the same week after week - the same farmers and their wives and children with their ordinary English faces. It wasn't that Biddy didn't like them. She had many friends among the farm families, but she liked excitement, and she always looked forward to the arrival of the gypsies.

Sometimes, they came in the autumn and picked apples from the Brown's trees. It made Mrs. Brown rather cross.

"What cheek!" she would exclaim irritably, but Biddy always leapt to their defense.

"We have lots of apples, Mother. Why shouldn't they have some?"

"Silly child! It's stealing!"

"Oh, Mother, it's not! Really, really it's not!"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Just that the apples aren't in the garden, they're hanging over the wall."

"That doesn't make the slightest difference. The gypsies are taking them without permission."

"Would you give them permission if they asked?"

"I rather doubt it," Mrs. Brown would reply truthfully, and that would be the end of the conversation.

This year the exotic visitors arrived in May and instead of taking apples, they'd been helping themselves to lilac

from the front hedge. Naturally, Mrs. Brown was very much annoyed. She called them 'wretched creatures' and wouldn't let the children speak to them or even leave the garden while they were in town.

For Biddy, it had been torture to hear the calliope music and to watch the gypsy children running barefoot around their colorful wagon homes. All week, she had stood right here on the window seat in the nursery unable to tear herself away. Now, the gypsies were leaving. One after another, the caravans took their places in the line of those ready to start. Soon, the village would return to its sleepy, Sunday self, but in the meantime, laughter and shouting mingled with the sound of foreign voices and dogs barking.

Even the dogs looked different and romantic, quite unlike the Brown's plump, smug Norwich terriers. Gypsy dogs had narrow, clever faces like their masters and thin sides. Biddy could see one now sitting between two children in the back of a red caravan. The children were eating something with their fingers while the dog looked on hungrily. How lucky they all were to be so free! It made her feel like a prisoner to see the children carelessly swinging their legs over the edge of the wagon, and she sighed a sigh of pure envy.

In the room behind her, her five year old twin brother and sister stopped playing with their building blocks and looked up.

"What's the matter, Biddy?" they asked in chorus. Donald and Clare often spoke as one.

Biddy shook her head.

"Nothing," she said quickly, but the sigh had attracted the attention of her older sister, and Louisa joined her at the window.

There were five Brown children altogether. Nicholas was

thirteen and away at boarding school, then, came Louisa. These two were only a year apart and looked so much like each other that they also might have been twins. They took after their mother who was tall and slender with dark hair and brown eyes.

Clare and Donald were like Doctor Brown, sturdy, fair and blue-eyed, but Biddy didn't resemble either parent or her brothers and sisters. Her father said she was like an exclamation point in the middle of the family with her bright red hair and cinnamon colored freckles. She had eyes that changed color depending on her mood and were as clear as spring water. At the moment, they looked almost green and wore a dreamy, far-off expression that made Louisa uneasy.

In Nanny's absence, Louisa was responsible for the younger ones and she took her duties seriously. She was a naturally quiet, well-behaved girl who liked peace and shared her mother's disapproval of gypsies. She stared down at the procession of painted caravans leaving the square and frowned.

"I'm glad they're going," she said. "They're noisy and dirty and tiresome, and they've absolutely ruined the lilacs by the front gate."

Biddy said nothing, but she had to pinch her lips together in order not to smile. She'd actually seen the children on tip-toe breaking off heavy sprays of the purple and white flowers. One was a girl near her own age with black eyes as brilliant as a bird's and dark braids with little silver coins and red ribbons woven into them. Her dress was torn and not too clean, but the color was a beautiful, rich shade of red and there were tiny silver rings in her ears. The girl had seen her but instead of running away,

she had grinned up at her and continued picking the lilac. After that, Biddy rarely left her post at the window, always hoping the child would return, but now, it was too late.

The gypsies had finished packing up their stalls and the carousel. How Biddy had yearned to ride the painted horses and to feel the tug of the wind as they went round and round, but Mother had said they mustn't leave the garden. It really was unfair that some children should be born in gilded wagons on the open road while others were confined behind high brick walls! Another sigh almost escaped her, but she caught it in time.

The last caravan was already rumbling over the cobble stones toward the Tamworth road. In a minute, it would pass right by the garden gate. It was a particularly beautiful wagon with a curved roof and yellow trim. Even the spokes of the wheels were decorated and the folding steps had elaborate designs painted on them. The piebald pony between the yellow shafts had a plume of lilac tucked into his bridle, and the young man leading him had a sprig in his hat band.

"Look at that!" cried Louisa indignantly, but Biddy had already seen it.

"How beautiful!" she said in a low breathless voice.

Then, all of a sudden, she could bear it no longer. She leaned past Louisa and threw up the window sash.

"Wait! Please wait, just for a minute!"

The young man paused and cocked his head in her direction. A handsome dark girl in her twenties poked her head out of the caravan and said something to the man. Two curious faces peered

up at the girls in the window.

Louisa took her sister by the shoulder and shook her.

"Stop it, Biddy! You're making a fool of yourself!"

But the younger girl tore free and raced out of the room. She flew down the stairs and burst through the front door, crying out,

"Wait! Wait! I have something important to ask you!"

The young man at the pony's head grinned and Biddy thought she had never seen such perfect white teeth in her life! She noticed, however, that the girl in the caravan did not smile but withdrew into the shadows.

"I hope I haven't offended your wife," said Biddy impulsively. "But there are so many things I want to ask you!"

"What things, little sister? What is so important?"

Suddenly, she felt very foolish indeed. She was conscious of the expressionless gaze of the young man's wife, and she blushed, but the man repeated his question patiently.

"What is it that you want to know?"

She looked up and reassured by his humorous expression, burst out, "Everything! I'd like to know all about you and about your wife and your family! Your name and what you do and where you're going."

The gypsy laughed out loud which drew a cold stare from the girl in the caravan. When he spoke to her in their own language, she replied sharply, but he shrugged.

"My name is Andrei," he said looking down at Biddy with a tolerant smile. "My wife is Luludi which means 'flower' in our tongue, and we're on our way to Tamworth Grange for the horse fair next week."

"Oh, I wish I could come with you!" The childish words slipped out before Biddy could stop them and her face wore what Louisa called her "jack-o-lantern" look.

"Why not!" said the gypsy, laughing but the young woman raised her voice angrily, and he flapped the reins against the pony's neck. The yellow wheels began to turn.

"Come to the fair," he called over his shoulder. "It's not far."

"Oh, I will!" cried Biddy, though she didn't at all see how she could. Then, before she could say good-bye, Louisa arrived on the scene. She seized her sister's wrist and dragged her toward the house, but Biddy hung back waving until the caravan rolled out of sight.

When they were safely in the house, Louisa shut the front door with a bang.

"Really, Biddy! she said. "How could you make such a spectacle of yourself? Mother'd be furious if she ever found out! You know how angry she was about the lilac."

"I know, " murmured Biddy. "Just the same, it looked awfully nice in the man's hat."

"But it's stealing," said Louisa firmly.

"Oh, Luli, you're only saying that because Mother does!"

"Not at all. Daddy says so, too. He says gypsies are scallywags and dishonest to the core. Why only last year, they stole Mr. Royce-Wellington's white mare and painted her to look like a piebald!"

"They're clever, aren't they?"

"Honestly, Biddy! You are the limit! They're not clever!

They're dirty, lazy and wicked and don't you ever, ever talk to them again or I'll tell Mother."

"But Luli, don't you ever wish you were like them, not wicked, of course, but so wild and free, just traveling from town to town in their beautiful wagons, camping wherever they like, eating when they want to, staying up late and singing around the camp fire at night....." The words came in a rush, then, petered out, but her eyes remained bright with excitement. Louisa regarded her with dismay.

"Of course, I don't think such foolish things! And you're not to either. Biddy, are you listening to me?"

"Yes, Luli", she replied with a sweet, vague smile.

"Please come up stairs," begged Louisa. "You know what will happen if you get too excited. You'll do something silly, and then, Mother will be cross."

"I won't. Really, really I won't! It's just that I love the gypsies so much, and Mother won't even let us talk to them."

"Quite right, too!" said Louisa marching purposefully up the stairs, but Biddy's dreamy voice pursued her.

"I wish I could ride in a wagon with yellow wheels and copper buckets swinging from the roof, and play with the gypsy children and the dogs and the ponies and eat out of one big kettle..."

"Ugh!" said Louisa from the landing. "That's disgusting!"

"I don't think so," said Biddy mounting the stairs as slowly as possible. "I think it would be wonderful not to have to sit down at the table or wait for everyone to be served...." Her voice trailed off again ending in a wistful sigh. Then, she

brightened, remembering her encounter with the young man in the hat.

"Did you see the gypsy smile at me, Luli?"

"I certainly did! And I've already told you that Mother would be very angry if she knew."

"You won't tell her though, will you?"

Louisa put on her most severe expression. Secretly, she was more than a little envious of her spontaneous younger sister. At the same time, she didn't altogether approve. The combination made her wrinkle up her forehead and say, rather piously,

"No, I won't tell Mother because it would only upset her."

Biddy threw her arms around Louisa's neck and hugged her.

"Thank you, Luli!" she said.

Louisa disentangled herself and gave Biddy a gentle shove in the direction of their room, but the younger girl retreated toward the stairs.

"Where are you going?" demanded Louisa.

"No where. I mean, I'm just going to look for something to do."

"Why do you always have to do something? Why can't you read a book or write to Nicholas or play quietly?"

"I wasn't going to make any noise."

"You know perfectly well what I mean," said Louisa wearily. Sometimes, she didn't in the least enjoy being grown-up, but she felt it her duty to add,

"If only you'd be sensible, life would be so much easier!"

"I know," said Biddy. "I'll try. Really, really I will!"

But she had a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach, and just to be on the safe side, she crossed her fingers behind her back.

Louisa peered at her suspiciously.

"I want to know what you're thinking now," she said.

"Nothing," Biddy replied, returning her sister's stare with eyes as green and innocent as a kitten's.

"Well, I'm going to our room to read," said Louisa starting for the bedroom, but as she reached it, she turned to issue a final warning.

"Just remember what I told you, Biddy," she said.

"Yes, Luli."

The door closed quietly leaving Biddy alone in the hall. For a few minutes, she stood there lost in thought. Then, she ambled down the stairs trailing one hand along the banister as she went. Her mind was entirely taken up with the gypsies. She couldn't help it. There were so many things she wanted to know about them.

She wondered what it was like to be always on the move, camping at the edge of a beech wood one night, on top of an open moor the next? Did the children ever go to school or did they just learn how to shoe horses and whittle clothes pegs and tell fortunes by coffee grounds? Did their parents let them stay up with the adults around the camp fire at night or were they sent to bed like other children?

She wondered what the caravans were like on the inside. Were there beds and tables and chairs? She'd never seen gypsies sitting down except cross-legged on the ground or balancing on their heels. Perhaps they didn't have chairs at all, and what

did they have to eat? Did they really live on nettles and hedgehogs as Luli once said?

Were gypsies dirty and dishonest and all the horrid things that people said about them or were they, as she imagined, kind and gay and carefree and full of the joy of life? These questions and many more kept running through her head as she wandered aimlessly from room to room. How would she ever find out the answers if she wasn't allowed to speak to the gypsies themselves?

She paused at the drawing room window and gazed out. The cobbled square was deserted now, except for their neighbor, Mrs. Satterthwaite walking her brindle pug. There were no cars in front of the post office or bicycles leaning against the wall of The Rose and Crown, and metal gates covered the shop windows. Everything in Thornton was closed up tight as a drum.

Sunday was Biddy's least favorite day in the week. It began with getting dressed up for church and wearing a hat and white gloves and sitting still for hours while Canon Cooper went on and on in his soft, sleepy voice. Sometimes, she had to pinch her arms to keep awake.

The family always had the big meal at noon on Sunday so that Mildred, the cook could spend the rest of the day with her sister in Hillgate. Occasionally, Biddy and the twins were invited to accompany her to her sister's neat cottage where Mrs. Butterworth would give them a delicious tea of scones and homemade blackberry jam. Then, the children would take the five-thirty bus home while Mildred stayed on for supper, but today, no invitation had been forthcoming.

Biddy allowed herself a gusty sigh which made a little

patch of fog on the window pane. She had hinted rather broadly that morning in the kitchen, but Mother had said it was rude and that poor Mildred saw quite enough of the young Browns as it was. It was such a pity because at this very moment, Mildred's bus was probably passing the gypsy caravan on the Tamworth road. Hillgate was the next stop beyond Tamworth Grange.

Suddenly, Biddy's eyes widened and seemed to grow darker under their fringe of ginger lashes. Her expression remained vague and dreamy, but her mind was working at tremendous speed. No one had forbidden her to go to Tamworth, and now she couldn't even ask permission. Mother had gone to see Grandfather and wouldn't be back until evening. Father was making a house call and would be staying on for tea with old Mr. Coggin.

She could leave a note for Nanny saying she wouldn't be in for tea and not to worry, then, catch the three o'clock bus! She could see the hands of the church clock above the lilac hedge - almost two-thirty. Just time to write the note and borrow bus fare from the twins. She might even have to take them into her confidence, but they were very loyal allies and would never give her away.

Having made these important decisions, Biddy left the window and hurried to her Mother's desk where she dashed off the note for Nanny. Then, she raced up the stairs two at a time and arrived breathless at the nursery door.

In her absence, Donald had completed an elaborate castle out of blocks. He was a precise, thorough little boy and he liked building things, but Clare had lost interest in the project and was feeling restless.

Although the twins looked as alike as two peas, they were very different in temperament. While Donald was cautious and a bit solemn, Clare was bumptious and cheerful, but on the whole, they got along well together, and they both loved Biddy. At the moment, Clare was particularly pleased to catch sight of her older sister.

"Here's Biddy!" she exclaimed enthusiastically and started for the door. Biddy saw the danger at once, but before she could cry out, Clare's small sandaled foot collided with the castle wall.

"Now, look what you've done!" shouted Donald trying to prevent further damage by pushing Clare away, but he only succeeded in making matters worse. She lost her balance completely and crashed headlong to the floor scattering blocks in every direction.

"You pushed me!" shrieked Clare.

"My beautiful castle!" wailed Donald.

The noise brought Nanny hobbling from the next room where she'd been taking a nap.

"Oh, Miss Beatrice," she said dolefully. "These young ones'll be the death of me! Too old, I am for such carryings on! I told your mum that when she says, 'Please, Nanny, just one more year, until the twins are ready for school', but sometimes, I don't know if I can do it. What with my bad leg and all. Be a good girl, Miss Biddy and cope with your brother."

Biddy took in the situation with a sinking heart. All her wonderful plans ruined! She was so disappointed that she thought she might burst into tears herself as she crumpled up the note in her pocket. It wasn't any use now! With a sigh of resignation, she knelt down beside her brother and mopped at his face with the hem of her dress.

"Hush up, Donald!" she said. "Clare didn't do it on purpose, and she's very, very sorry, aren't you, Clare?"

Clare gave her brother a baleful glance, but she had stopped crying. She wiggled out of Nanny's arms and came to lean against Biddy's shoulder.

"Are you going to play with us?" she asked.

"It would be a real kindness, Miss Biddy. If you'd just take them off me hands until tea time, there's a dear."

Biddy longed to say "Must I?", but Nanny looked so pathetic and the children so eager, that she couldn't refuse.

"All right," she said finally.

Clare put a plump arm around her sister's neck and pressed her cheek against Biddy's.

"Will you blindfold us and lead us around the way you did the other day," she asked. "I liked that game!"

"So did I!" said Donald whose good humor had been restored. "I liked the part about the land of Gellagog and the dragon's cave. Will you take us there again?"

Suddenly, Biddy smiled, not so much at her brother as through him, and her face glowed with its jack-o-lantern look.

"No," she said slowly. "We won't play Gellagog today. I have a better idea. Nanny, don't bother about tea for us, we'll take a few biscuits from the sideboard and eat them in the garden."

"You're sure, Miss Biddy?" the old woman said hesitantly. "I don't know if your mum would like that idea."

"She wouldn't mind. Really, really she wouldn't. She said we weren't to be a nuisance."

"Very well, but don't let the twins spoil their supper."

"I won't," said Biddy serenely, but her heart was beating so loudly that she was afraid Nanny would hear it!

The old woman hovered over them for another moment or two before giving in.

"Well," she said finally. "If you're sure you can manage."

"Quite, quite sure," said Biddy who was barely able to conceal her impatience. She could hear the church clock chiming the quarter hour.

"Be good children, then," said Nanny. "And you little ones, do as your sister says."

Biddy stifled a nervous giggle, but the twins smiled reassuringly at their old nurse.

"We will," they promised in unison, and with a last anxious glance at the three children, Nanny departed.

The second she had gone, Biddy jumped up, keeping a hand on each twin's shoulder.

"Listen!" she said giving them each a brief squeeze.

"Do you want to do something terribly, terribly exciting?"

Clare said yes without hesitation, but Donald looked dubious.

"It depends," he said cautiously.

"Oh, Donald, don't be maddening!" said Biddy. "Of course you want to do something that's fun and exciting!"

"Then, why did you ask me?" inquired Donald plaintively.

"You're just being silly!" said his sister. "And wasting precious time! The bus leaves in less than fifteen minutes!"

"Where are we going?" said the twins both at once.

"To Tamworth Grange to visit the gypsies!"

"Oh, Biddy!" they gasped.

"Do you dare?" asked Donald.

"Why not!" said Biddy recklessly.

"But what would Mother say?"

"She never said not to go to Tamworth. Besides, I want to do this more than anything in the whole world!"

"Let's!" said Clare clapping her fat little hands in anticipation.

"Well," said her brother glumly. "Don't say I didn't warn you!"

"You're a sissy!" said Clare.

"I'm not!" he retorted.

"Don't squabble!" said Biddy quickly. "We'll have to hurry to catch that bus."

"Won't Luli be able to see us from her window?" asked Donald.

"We won't go to the bus stop, we'll walk up the road a little way and flag it down from there."

"But the bus conductor knows who we are and he'll ask where we're going."

"We can always say we're going to have tea with Mildred," said Clare.

"Wicked girl!" exclaimed Biddy, but she gave her little sister a conspiratorial wink. Then, she said,

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to borrow money from one of you. I can't go back to the bedroom because of Luli."

"I've only got sixpence," said Donald who was rather close with a penny, but Clare promptly produced a shilling from her jumper pocket and handed it to Biddy.

"You can have this," she said. "I forgot to put it in the collection plate this morning."

Donald looked scandalized, but Biddy laughed.

"That's a bit of luck!" she said. "Anyway, Nanny always says that God helps those who help themselves. Let's go."

When all three were aboard the bus, Biddy thought she would be able to relax. The twins were sharing the seat in front of her and chattering away companionably. The conductor hardly noticed them. He was a young man with a lively interest in pretty girls and May Fitton, the butcher's daughter was a passenger on the bus. After a friendly greeting, he ignored the children to concentrate on May.

Everything had gone perfectly smoothly, but as Biddy sat alone by the window watching the river bounding along beside the road, she began to have twinges of conscience. What she was doing really was naughty. Mother had been quite definite about not speaking to the gypsies or leaving the garden while they were in town. She had simply neglected to mention following them to Tamworth Grange!

Now, Biddy frowned and bit her lower lip. Oh, dear! I am being disobedient! she thought, but it would be worth it if she found out what gypsies were really like. Besides, it was a little late for second thoughts, the bus was drawing up beside the shelter on the village green. They had arrived.

Tamworth Grange wasn't a bit like Thornton. Instead of an enclosed square surrounded by houses and shops, the whole village was built in a semi-circle facing a spacious green.

Beyond it, the land sloped gently away to the river valley before rising again to form the blue mound of Pen Hill. It was one of the loveliest views in the Dales, but for Biddy, it paled by comparison to the sight on the village green!

The two dozen wagons that had recently occupied the square in Thornton had been joined by others, some of them open and piled high with tents and household goods that were now being unloaded. Biddy and the twins watched from the roadside where they'd dismounted from the bus. The gypsy women were graceful to watch and seemed to work quite as hard as the men, driving in tent pegs and building fires. Even the children helped by collecting sticks for kindling.

Suddenly, Clare pointed.

"Look!" she said in hushed tones. "Those little girls aren't wearing any clothes!"

Donald politely shut his eyes, but Biddy joined Clare in staring at the small dark figures running after an older girl who was carrying an arm load of wood.

"They must be so cold!" she said.

Long shadows of the spring afternoon made bars of shade in which the air felt much cooler. The three Browns shivered slightly at the thought of wearing no clothes.

Finally, Biddy tore her eyes away.

"We mustn't stare," she said reluctantly.

But Donald drew her attention to another extraordinary sight. In front of a nearby tent, a young mother was methodically examining the head of one child while two others awaited their turns. The woman's swift brown fingers roved over the black hair,

stopping now and then to pinch something between her thumb and forefinger.

"What's that lady doing?" whispered Donald, though he half feared the answer.

Biddy hesitated before replying. She remembered her father saying that a gypsy child he'd once treated had been infested with lice.

"I think she's picking lice," she said inaudibly.

The twins shuddered.

"Don't you think we'd better go home, now?" asked Donald.

"Not yet," said Biddy obstinately.

"What are we going to do, then?" he demanded.

"We're going to find my friend, Mr. Andrei," she said. "So follow me, and don't make people uncomfortable by looking at them."

The warning, however, was quite unnecessary. It was Biddy with her red hair and the tow-headed twins who attracted stares, and sometimes the metallic gleam in the black eyes that followed them was not friendly. Adult conversation would stop as they passed an open tent or caravan. Children also regarded them in silence. Biddy wondered what had become of the girl who picked the lilac from the front hedge. She'd seemed friendly enough then, but here on their own ground, the children were as wary and suspicious as their parents.

Only a very old woman smoking a pipe on the steps of a dilapidated caravan grinned and cackled at them as they went by, but the sound was more alarming than comforting. Biddy hurried on, her eyes straining for a glimpse of the yellow trimmed wagon and Mr. Andrei's smiling face.

The twins stumped along behind her, but out of the corner of her eye she noticed that Clare looked tired and Donald's round face was a mask of gloom. Her own confidence had been shaken by the gypsies' hostile looks and by the sights and smells that at a distance had seemed appealing, but at first hand, depressed her. Even the paint on some of the wagons seemed less bright than she had remembered. If only she could find Mr. Andrei....

She'd almost given up hope when at last she spotted the piebald pony grazing between its yellow shafts. Mr. Andrei was unbuckling the pony's harness. Biddy was disappointed to see that the spray of lilac had dried up and lay discarded on the ground. Mr. Andrei himself was now hatless. He had his back to them, but his wife who was raking ashes away from a loaf of bread in the fire, looked up and saw them.

For a moment, the young woman remained delicately poised on the balls of her feet, her body upright and resting lightly on her heels. Then, she rose in one quick graceful movement, and went to her husband's side. She spoke a few harsh, staccato sentences to him and vanished. The children didn't even see her go, but they were suddenly conscious of Mr. Andrei's fierce black eyes on them.

Biddy was the first to speak.

"You.....you did say to come....." she said haltingly.

Still, the gypsy said nothing, but his eyes never left her face.

"I'm sorry if I've made you angry," she faltered. "Perhaps, we shouldn't have come."

"Are you alone?" the gypsy said finally.

"Yes. I mean, there's just the three of us - my sister and brother and me."

"Do your parents know where you are?"

Biddy looked at the toe of her shoe while Clare and Donald gazed at Mr. Andrei.

He suddenly moved toward them with the speed and agility of a cat. The twins clung to each other and hid behind Biddy, but she stood her ground and looked earnestly into his face.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Andrei, if we've done something we shouldn't. We didn't mean any harm and we'll go away if you want us to."

The man's lean, dark face softened.

"I can't ask you to leave," he said. "No gypsy will ever ask a guest to leave, it is against gypsy law, but if anyone finds you here, there will be trouble, not just for me and my wife, but for us all."

"I wouldn't for the world cause you trouble," said Biddy fervently.

Just the trace of a smile passed over the gypsy's face, but his voice was low and urgent when he spoke again.

"Do you know what would happen if your parents found you missing and went to the police? The police would come here and arrest me. They believe that we steal children."

Clare who had been inching her way forward, now stood next to Biddy.

"Do you?" she asked.

Donald poked her from behind and Biddy said,

"Don't be silly, Clare!"

But the gypsy shook his head sadly, and spoke directly to her.

"No, little sister. We are very fond of children. Look about you and you will see that we have many of our own. We also have our own ways. We do not try to force others to live by them, and we respect theirs. Some 'Gorgios' do not understand that," he said bitterly.

"What are 'Gorgios'?" asked Donald curiously.

"People who are not of gypsy blood. There are many who would try to make us like themselves, but to change a gypsy would be like hitching an eagle to a plow!"

Donald and Clare looked confused, but Biddy nodded.

"I think I understand," she said. "Thank you for talking to us, Mr. Andrei. Please tell your wife that we're sorry to have disturbed you, and don't worry, we'll never tell anyone where we've been, will we?"

She turned to the twins for confirmation, but they were still looking at the gypsy whose face was transformed by a smile. Once again, Biddy thought she had never seen a finer smile in her whole life.

Suddenly, Donald did a most unexpected thing. He stepped forward and put out his hand.

"I've enjoyed meeting you, Mr. Andrei," he said civilly.

"Me, too!" echoed Clare.

"And don't forget," said Biddy. "You'll always have three friends in Thornton."

At that moment, she caught sight of the five-thirty bus trundling down the road from Hillgate.

"There's the bus!" she cried. "We'll have to run!"

Good-bye, Mr. Andrei!"

"Good-bye!" called the twins as they zig-zagged across the green after Biddy.

The gypsy smiled as he watched them jump aboard the bus and turn for a final wave.

"Long life!" he said softly returning their salute.