

Gypsy Lore

by Robert Andrew Scott Macfie (1908)

Records and historical traditions the Gypsies have none. On the stage of European history they were cast for a " thinking part." Nor did they generally court publicity, as Samuel Rowlands testified in *The Runnagates Race or the Originall of Regiment of Rogues*, being part of *Martin Mark-all*, published in 1610: "these kinde of people lived more quietly and out of harme in respect of the other sort, making themselves as strangers, and would never put forth themselves in any tumult or Commotion, as the other sort [the ' canting caterpillars ' under Cocke Lorrell] did; but what vice they exercised not one way, they were not inferior to them in the like, or rather worse another way." The chroniclers noticed them only when they became an intolerable nuisance ; at other times they were neglected as beneath contempt. They first attracted the attention of Western Europe in 1417 (the very year in which Alexander the Good had granted the Gypsies of Moldavia " the air and earth to wander, and fire and iron to forge "), by abandoning their ordinary avocation of smiths and invading the Hanseatic towns as pilgrims from Little Egypt.¹ Their choice of disguise, and the legend they offered as an explanation of their pilgrimage, showed great ingenuity and an intimate acquaintance with the customs and superstitions of the time and place. As pilgrims they could live the vagrant life they loved, avoid the labour they hated ; and claim the advantages of gentle or even noble birth, albeit they were, as Dekker described them, " beggerly in apparell, barbarous in condition, beastly in behauior; and bloody if they meet aduantage."

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¹ Not necessarily from the banks of the Nile, but possibly from districts named “Little Egypt” in Epirus or Asia Minor