

# GYPSY WANDERING LAI'D TO CALVARY

Sarah, Maid of Three Marys  
Who Fled Jerusalem, Is  
Romany's Patron Saint.

## ARCHIVES REVEAL LEGEND

Church in Provence Possessing  
Saintly Relics a Mecca for  
Tribes in Europe.

Of the two peoples who, deprived of their homelands, have wandered over the earth for nearly twenty centuries, the authentic gypsies have puzzled ethnologists far more than the Jews. Although some anthropologists have asserted that both are of Semitic origin, the Aryan words in the Romany language have suggested an origin for the gypsies further east—in Persia, if not in India.

In the archives of Saintes-Maries, in that part of the southeast coast of France known as Provence—the land of the troubadours, both medieval and modern—a correspondent of *The Times* of London has unearthed a legend which reveals the fact that not only the Jews but also the gypsies began their wanderings at the time of the tragedy on Calvary of 1,904 years ago. He writes:

"The story is that after Christ's death Lazarus, Martha, Mary Magdalene, Mary Salome and Mary Jacobe, with her hand-maiden Sarah, took flight and coming to the coast put to sea in a small boat. After a long voyage, in which the sea was miraculously becalmed, kindly winds directed the craft toward the southeast shores of France, near the mouth of the Rhone, and brought the refugees to La Camargue, the little vessel riding easily ashore upon one of the white strips of foam known today as *les chemins des Saintes Maries*.

"Here an altar was raised. Lazarus and Martha soon set off to spread the gospel, and the three Marys remained behind to convert the local pagans. Sarah devotedly provided the necessary sustenance by begging.

## Altar Became a Church

"The altar grew in time to be a church, but this was so often pillaged by Saracens and Arabs that by the eleventh century there was nothing left but a shrine; here a hermit jealously nursed the secret of the whereabouts of the sacred remains of the three Marys and the faithful Sarah.

"In the twelfth century a new church was built by the Count of Provence, and many were the times that its sacred well was called upon to give water to the inhabitants beleaguered by Moors and other pirates. The Saracens also pillaged the church several times for the relics, which were successfully hidden and finally discovered by King René of Provence, who rebuilt and enlarged the fortress church to its present size in 1448, and caused the supposed remains of the saints to be placed therein.

"The legend of the three Marys, which became one of those dearest to Provence, has of course been assailed by the higher criticism, and attempts have been made to prove it a superstitious adaptation of stories of the great Roman general Caius Marius, whose name is still a household word in Provence. To the Provençal it is the sainted Marys' bones which make the little church a particularly holy spot, but to the gypsy it is more than this. For Sarah, whose remains are supposed to be buried under the church, was chosen as their patron saint.

"Somehow the story of her simple devotion, and, dare one say, her success as a beggar, touched the gypsies' hearts, and now, as through the centuries, these nomad tribes hold it a duty that at least once in a lifetime every gypsy should visit the little fortress Church of Saintes Maries on the twenty-fourth day of May, when the sunshine and flowers of Provence beckon the wanderer and dreamer.

## Vague in Matter of Religion

"It cannot be said that the gypsies recognize any orthodoxy in such religion as they permit themselves. Their religious views are usually a nebulous conglomeration of the local faith and Old World superstitions extracted from the folklore of the countries through which they wander, or in which they have settled. One can find gypsies of the Greek Church, of the Rumanian National Church, Roman Catholics, and Mohammedans, but in few instances will any attempt be found to approach to orthodoxy, to recognize the obligation of the Ten Commandments, or the authority of the Koran. There is extreme laxity in the relation of the sexes, and, on the whole, they take life easily and are complete fatalists.

"Since they have neither religion, literature, nor common language, it is idle to approach the gypsies with high hopes of psychological or spiritual discoveries. There remains only the eternally inviting ethnological mystery of their origin.

"The gypsy of today is certainly no longer what his forefathers have been. Gradual assimilation with the peoples of the Near East, and the laws dealing with vagrancy in the West, tend to denationalize him and make 'Romany Chib' a thing of the past. To recapture some of that romantic past and see the purer types which survive, you must pitch your tent upon the reaches of La Camargue in the third week in May, and watch a spectacle unfold itself which is now unique in Europe.

"From Spain, Hungary, Rumania, Austria and the Balkans they come, and often from much further afield, until the lonely wastes of La Camargue are converted into as colorful and as animated a scene as may be found in any Oriental bazaar.

"The scene on the night before the festival, when hundreds of campfires will be alight and the passionate music of the Hungarian and Spanish gypsies holds their hordes in ecstasy in its sheer simplicity, causes one to ponder whether these people have not more of the real joy of life than the millions whose very existence trembles upon the lips of a politician.

#### Relics Lowered From Roof.

"The festival itself is touchingly sincere. The little church, ablaze with candles, is packed, the sick and the infirm being placed in the forefront nearest to the altar. The culmination of the service is a justifiably theatrical descent from the roof of a casket containing the

relics of the Sainted Ladies, which is lowered upon golden chains interwoven with wildflowers. To touch the casket is to insure the healing of the sick or the answering of prayers, and an extraordinary demonstration of mass emotionalism accompanies the scramble to reach it, which sweeps through the throng pressing outside the church.

"The next day an exceedingly picturesque procession, generally headed by the Archbishop of Aix-en-Provence, goes from the church to the sea, and a boat is carried and placed upon the waters, where the reception of the three Marys is acted over again. Then the sea is blessed and all the horses of the wanderers are individually blessed in turn.

"The religious ceremonies over, the little village and its surrounding camps are given over to an orgy of pleasure. Music, dancing of farandoles, bullfighting, and other sports continue throughout the day and night.

"And then, like a dream, the whole picture fades. The gypsy hordes break camp, scatter upon their journeys to the four corners of Europe, and almost before one is aware the outraged flamingo has returned to the marshes and the little village of Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer slumbers once more."

