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During the bad depression in the '30s, Gypsies camped every summer on the river that goes through Mertzon. They were dark-skinned, mysterious hombres, suspected of being infamous kidnapers and thieves.

I used to worry every time they'd hit town that the Gypsies might kidnap myself or a valuable fox terrier dog that trailed along on my trips to the creek. In those innocent days, I didn't realize that freckled faced, redheaded boys and ring eyed, bob tailed dogs had universal passage across the whole world.

Much later, after my hair had begun to fade into sort of a red roan. I was to learn that kidnapping was a selective trade centered on curly headed blondes and neat lapdogs. Rusty heads and cool bred mutts, I discovered, were exempt from ransoms and bounties.

And you know, once I gained that useful piece of street knowledge, I don't think I ever shared it with a red headed woman that it didn't make furious. As high as the crime rate has grown and as insecure as life has become, you'd have thought they'd have been comforted knowing they were safe, but without exception they acted offended. I never have understood women much less the models that had fiery hair.

But in spite of the Gypsies' reputation as kidnapers, Mertzon kids were allowed unlimited privileges to visit their camp, including the days that they left town. To my knowledge, not one boy was snatched during the period. However, don't quote me on that because missing person bulletins in the 1930s bordered on being skimpy reports at best. I don't think the police in San Angelo found over four head in the heart of the depression, and half of those strays showed up at headquarters or they'd never have been tabulated.

Once I did discover the immunity that red hair provided, my mane was so streaked in grey and brown that the insurance was reduced. I tried to recapture its former sheen, using a potent hair dye. I'd dab a big dose on one sideburn, but by the time I'd get back around from the other side, enough re-growth of grey hairs had sprouted to ruin the effect.

Specialists in cosmetic surgery will hardly take a herder for a patient for that reason. They claim that our business is so hectic and unpredictable that we're apt to go through a chin overhaul and high rise forehead lift in the course of a week. Our game is too rough for the normal sutures to hold under the spasms and jerking nerves. The best chance we have is to stay at the ranch and hope we won't be judged on our looks.

I don't know why I didn't catch on that I belonged to a privileged group. At various times I wandered down alleys darker than a cannon barrel, and up streets so ill lighted that the chimney sweeps were carrying flashlights, without the slightest threat to my person or purse. All the while I thought it was because I was a friendly soul, but I know now that it was from my looks and it sure doesn't make me mad.

One day or one month, or maybe it was one summer, the Gypsies must have been absorbed by the sophisticated change in the world. Scissors became dull; story telling and fortune telling did, too. I think my dog was run over by a car going through town. It really doesn't matter as we'd already had more fun than we deserved.