

Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

1902

1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 CHAPTER 1

BIRTH AND ANCESTRY

WITH SOME NOTES OF GIPSY CUSTOMS

I was born on the 31st of March, 1860, in a gipsy tent, the son of gipsies, Cornelius Smith and his wife, Mary Welch. The place was the parish of Wanstead, near Epping Forest, a mile and a half from the "Green Man," Leytonstone. When I got old enough to ask questions about my birth my mother was dead, but my father told me the place, though not the date. It was only quite recently that I knew the date for certain. A good aunt of mine took the trouble to get some one to examine the register of Wanstead Church, and there found an entry giving the date of the birth and christening of Rodney Smith. I discovered that I was a year younger than I took myself to be. The gipsies care little for religion and know nothing really of God and the Bible, yet they always take care to get their babies christened, because it is a matter of business. The clergyman of the nearest parish church is invited to come to the encampment and perform the ceremony. To the "gorgios" (people who are not gipsies) the event is one of rare and curious interest. Some of the ladies of the congregation are sure to accompany the parson to see the gipsy baby, and they cannot very well do this without bringing presents for the gipsy mother and more often for the baby. The gipsies believe in christenings for the profit they can make out of them. They have, besides, some sort of notion that it is the right thing to do.

I was the fourth child of my parents. Two girls and a boy came before me and two girls came after me. All my brothers and sisters, except the last born, are alive. My eldest sister is Mrs. Ball, wife of Councillor Ball, of Hanley, the first gipsy in the history of the country to occupy a seat in a town council. And he is always returned at the head of the poll. Councillor Ball, who is an auctioneer, has given up his tent and lives in a house. My brother Ezekiel works on the railway at Cambridge, and is a leading spirit of the Railway Mission there. He was the last of the family to leave the gipsy tent, and he did it after

a deal of persuasion and with great reluctance. My father and I, on visiting Cambridge, got him to take up his quarters in a nice little cottage there. When I returned to the town some months later and sought him in his cottage, I found that he was not there and that he had gone back to his tent. "Whatever made you leave the cottage, Ezekiel?" I asked. "It was so cold," he replied. Gipsy wagons and tents are very comfortable—"gorgios" should make no mistake about that. My second sister, Lovinia, is Mrs. Oakley, and lives at Luton, a widow. I had a mission at Luton last year, and she was one of those who came to Christ. My father, myself, and others of us had offered thousands of prayers for her, and at that mission, she, a backslider for over twenty-five years, was restored. God gave me this honor—the joy of bringing my beloved sister back to the fold. I need not say that I think of that mission with a special warmth of gratitude to God. Mrs. Evens—Matilda, the baby of the family—helped me a great deal in my early evangelistic labors, and together with her husband has done and is doing good work for the Liverpool Wesleyan Mission.

Eighty out of every hundred gipsies have Bible names. My father was called Cornelius, my brother Ezekiel. My uncle Bartholomew was the father of twelve children, to every one of whom he gave a scriptural name—Naomi, Samson, Delilah, Elijah, Simeon, and the like. Fancy having a Samson and a Delilah in the same family! Yet the gipsies have no Bibles, and if they had they could not read them. Whence, then, these scriptural names? Do they not come down to us from tradition? May it not be that we are one of the lost tribes? We ourselves believe that we are akin to the Jews, and when one regards the gipsies from the point of view of an outsider one is able to discover some striking resemblance's between the gipsies and the Jews. In the first place, many gipsies bear a striking facial resemblance to the Jews. Our noses are not usually quite so prominent, but we often have the eyes and hair of Jews. Nature asserts herself. And although, as far as the knowledge of religion is concerned, gipsies dwell in the deepest heathen darkness, in the days when I was a boy they scrupulously observed the law of the Sabbath except when the "gorgios" visited them and tempted them with money to tell their fortunes. It was a great trouble to my father—I am speaking of him in his unregenerate days—to have to pull up his tent on the Sabbath day. And I have known him go a mile on Saturday to get a bucket of water, so that he should not have to travel for it on the Sunday. And the bundles of sticks for the fire on Sunday were all gathered the day before. Even whistling a song tune was not allowed on the Sunday. When I was a boy I have been knocked over more than once for so far forgetting myself as to engage in this simple diversion on the Sunday. Sunday to the gipsies is a real rest-day. And at the same time it is the only day on which they get a properly cooked midday meal! Then, again, the ancient Jewish law and custom of marriage is the same as that which is in vogue, or was in vogue, until quite recently among the gipsies. Sixty years ago a marriage according to the law of the land was unknown among the gipsies. The sweethearting of a gipsy young man and maiden usually extends over a long period, or, as "gorgios" would say, the rule is long engagements. Very often they have grown up sweethearts from boy and girl. It was so with my brother Ezekiel and his wife. There is never such a

thing as a gipsy breach of promise case, and if there were the evidence would probably be scanty, for gipsy sweethearts do not write to each other—because they cannot. Ninety-nine out of every hundred of them have never held a pen in their hands. When the young people are able to set up for themselves they make a covenant with each other. Beyond this there is no marriage ceremony. There is nothing of jumping over tongs or broomsticks, or any other of the tomfooleries that outsiders attribute to gipsies. The ceremonial is the same as that which was observed at the nuptials of Rebekah and Isaac. Isaac brought Rebekah into his tent, and she became his wife, and he lived with her. The gipsies are the most faithful and devoted of husbands. I ought to add that the making of the marriage covenant is usually followed by a spree.

When a gipsy becomes converted, one of the first things about which he gets anxious is this defective marriage ceremonial. At one of my missions an old gipsy man of seventy-four sought and found his Saviour. He went away happy. Some days after he came back to see me. I perceived that something was oppressing his mind. "Well uncle, what's the matter?" I asked. By the way, I should say that gipsies have great reverence for old age. We should never think of addressing an old man or woman by his or her name—not Mr. Smith or Mrs. Smith, John or Sally, but always uncle or aunt, terms of affection and respect among us. Uncle looked at me gloomily and said: "The truth is, my dear, my wife and I have never been legally married." They had been married according to the only fashion known among the gipsies, and I told him that in the eyes of God they were true husband and wife. But he would not be persuaded. "No," he said, "I am converted now; I want everything to be straight. We must get legally married." And they did, and were satisfied.

Like the Jews, the gipsies have in a wonderful way preserved their identity as a race. Their separate existence can be traced back for centuries. Throughout these long years they have kept their language, habits, customs, and eccentricities untouched. The history of gipsies and of their tongue has baffled the most laborious and erudite scholars. We can be traced back until we are lost on the plains of India, but even in these far-off days we were a distinct race. Like the Jews, the gipsies are very clean. A man who does not keep his person or belongings clean is called "chickly" (dirty), and is despised. They have hand-towels for washing themselves, and these are used for nothing else. They are scrupulously careful about their food. They would not think of washing their tablecloth with the other linen. Cups and saucers are never washed in soapy water. I saw my uncle trample on and destroy a copper kettle-lid because one of his children by mistake had dropped it in the wash-tub. It had become unclean." A sick person has a spoon, plate, and basin all to himself. When he has recovered or if he dies they are all destroyed. It is customary at death to destroy the possessions of the dead person or to bury them with him. When an uncle of mine died, my aunt bought a coffin large enough for all his possessions—including his fiddle, cup and saucer, plate, knife, etc.—except, of course, his wagon. My wife and my sister pleaded hard for the cup and saucer as a keepsake, but she was resolute. Nobody should ever use them again.

To return to my father. He earned his living by making baskets, clothes-pegs,

all sorts of tinware, and recaning cane-chairs. Of course in his unconverted days he "found" the willows for the baskets and the wood for the clothes-pegs. Gipsies only buy what they cannot "find." My father had inherited his occupation from many generations of ancestors. He also pursued the trade of horse dealer, a business in which gipsies are thoroughly expert. What a gipsy does not know about horses is not worth knowing. The trade is one in which tricks and dodges are frequently practiced. A Dr. Chinnery, whom I met on one of my visits to America, told me of a gipsy horse-dealer for whose conversion he had been particularly anxious and with whom he had frequently talked. Said this gipsy, "Can I be a Christian and sell horses?" Dr. Chinnery urged him to try, and he did. The poor gipsy found the conjunction of callings very difficult, but he managed to make it work. After two or three years, Dr. Chinnery asked him how he was getting on. He answered that when he had a good horse to sell he told those with whom he was dealing that it was a good horse. Since he had become a Christian they believed him. If it was a horse about which he knew little, or a horse of which he had doubts, he said: "My friends this (naming the sum) is my price. I do not know anything about the horse; you must examine him yourselves, and assure yourselves of his fitness. Use your judgment; you buy him at your own risk." It will be seen from this anecdote that the gipsies are not wanting in finesse. This gipsy had also not a little of the Yankee cuteness which is breathed in with the American air. His Christianity did not in the least hinder, but rather helped, his horse-dealing.

The gipsy women sell what their husbands make, and of course when we were all little my mother did the selling for us. The women are the travellers for the concern; the men are the manufacturers. This old trade of making baskets is passing out of the hands of the gipsies; they can buy these goods for less than it costs to make them, and consequently they confine themselves to selling them. Recaning chairs and mending baskets is still done by some. Most of the men deal in horses and in anything else which is possible to their manner of life, and out of which they can make money. I estimate that there are from 20,000 to 25,000 gipsies in the British Isles. The women-folk among them still do most of the selling, but I am afraid that too frequently they carry their wares about with them merely as a blind. The occupation of most of them is fortune-telling. It is the fashion and the folly of the "gorgios" that have to a large extent forced this disgraceful profession upon gipsy women. Soothsaying is an Eastern custom, a gift that Westerners have attributed to Orientals. The gipsies are an Eastern race, and the idea has in course of generations grown up among outsiders that they, too, can reveal the secrets of the hidden future. The gipsies do not themselves believe this; they know that fortune-telling is a mere cheat, but they are not averse to making profit out of the folly and superstition of the "gorgios." I know some of my people may be very angry with me for this statement, but the truth must be told.

We traveled in the counties of Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridge, Bedford, and Hertford. In my young days I knew these parts of England well, but since I left my gipsy tent, nearly a quarter of a century ago, I have not seen much of them. I had no education and no knowledge of "gorgio" civilization and I

grew up as wild as the birds, frolicsome as the lambs, and as difficult to catch as the rabbits. All the grasses and flowers and trees of the field and all living things were my friends and companions. Some of them, indeed, got almost too familiar with me. The rabbits, for instance, were so fond of me that they sometimes followed me home. I think I learned then to have a sympathetic nature, even if I learned nothing else. My earliest clear impression of these days, which have now retreated so far into the past, is that of falling from the front of my father's wagon. I had given the horse a stroke, as boys will do. He made a sudden leap and jerked me off onto the road. What followed has passed from my mind, but my father tells me I was run over by his wagon, and if my loud screams had not attracted his attention I should have been run over also by his brother's wagon, which followed his.

It was my mother's death, however, which woke me to full consciousness, if I may so put it. This event made a wound in my heart which has never to this day been really healed, and even at this moment, though I am now in middle life, I often feel my hungry soul pining and yearning for my mother. "Rodney, you have no mother!"—that was really the first and the ineffaceable impression of my boy's life.