

Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

1902

1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 CHAPTER 2

MY MOTHER

We were travelling in Hertfordshire. The eldest of the family, a girl, was taken ill. The nearest town was Baldock, and my father at once made for it, so that he might get a doctor for his child. I remember as if it were yesterday that the gipsy wagon stood outside the door of the doctor's house. My father told him he had a sick daughter. The doctor mounted the steps of the wagon and, leaning over the door, called my sick sister to him and examined her. He did not enter our poor wagon. We were only gipsies. "Your daughter has the small-pox," he said to my father; "you must get out of the town at once." He sent us to a by-lane about one and a half miles away—it is called Norton Lane. In a little bend of this lane, on the left-hand side, between a huge overhanging hawthorn and a wood on the right-hand side, making a natural arch, father erected our tent. There he left mother and four children. He took the wagon two hundred yards farther down the lane, and stood it on the right-hand side near an old chalk-pit. From the door he could see the tent clearly and be within call. The wagon was the sickroom and my father was the nurse. In a few days the doctor, coming to the tent, discovered that my brother Ezekiel also had the small-pox, and he, too, was sent to the wagon, so that my father had now two invalids to nurse. Poor mother used to wander up and down the lane in an almost distracted condition, and my father heard her cry again and again: "My poor children will die, and I am not allowed to go to them!" Mother had to go into Baldock to buy food, and, after preparing it in the tent, carried it half-way from there to the wagon. Then she put it on the ground and waited till my father came for it. She shouted or waved her silk handkerchief to attract his attention. Sometimes he came at once, but at other times he would be busy with the invalids and unable to leave them just at the moment. And then mother went back, leaving the food on the ground, and sometimes before father had reached it, it was covered with snow, for it was the month of March and the weather was severe. And mother, in the anxiety of her loving heart, got every day, I think, a little nearer and nearer to the wagon, until one day she went

too near, and then she also fell sick. When the doctor came he said it was the smallpox.

My father was in the uttermost distress. His worst fears were realized. He had hoped to save mother, for he loved her as only a gipsy can love. She was the wife of his youth and the mother of his children. They were both very young when they married, not much over twenty, and they were still very young. He would have died to save her. He had struggled with his calamities bravely for a whole month, nursing his two first-born with whole-hearted love and devotion, and had never had his clothes off, day or night. And this he had done in order to save her from the terrible disease. And now she, too, was smitten. He felt that all hope was gone, and knowing he could not keep us separate any longer, he brought the wagon back to the tent. And there lay mother and sister and brother, all three sick with smallpox. In two or three days a little baby was born. Mother knew she was dying. Our hands were stretched out to hold her, but they were not strong enough. Other hands, omnipotent and eternal, were taking her from us. Father seemed to realize, too, that she was going. He sat beside her one day and asked her if she thought of God. For the poor gipsies believe in God, and believe that he is good and merciful. And she said, "Yes."

"Do you try to pray, my dear?"

"Yes, I am trying, and while I am trying to pray it seems as though a black hand comes before me and shows me all that I have done, and something whispers, "There is no mercy for you!"

But my father had great assurance that God would forgive her, and told her about Christ and asked her to look to Him. He died for sinners. He was her Saviour. My father had some time before been in prison for three months on a false charge, and it was there that he had been told what now he tried to teach my mother. After my father had told her all he knew of the gospel she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. Then he went outside, stood behind the wagon, and wept bitterly. When he went back again to see her she looked calmly into his face, and said, with a smile: "I want you to promise me one thing. Will you be a good father to my children?" He promised her that he would; at that moment he would have promised her anything. Again he went outside and wept, and while he was weeping he heard her sing:

"I have a Father in the promised land. My God calls me, I must go To meet Him in the promised land."

My father went back to her and said: "Polly, my dear, where did you learn that song?"

She said: "Cornelius, I heard it when I was a little girl. One Sunday my father's tents were pitched on a village green, and seeing the young people and others going into a little school or church or chapel—I do not know which it was—I followed them in and they sang those words."

It must have been twenty years or so since my mother had heard the lines. Although she had forgotten them all these years, they came back to her in her moments of intense seeking after God and His salvation. She could not read the Bible; she had never been taught about God and His Son; but these words came back to her in her dying moments and she sang them again and again.

Turning to my father, she said: "I am not afraid to die now. I feel that it will be all right. I feel assured that God will take care of my children."

Father watched her all that Sunday night, and knew she was sinking fast. When Monday morning dawned it found her deep in prayer. I shall never forget that morning. I was only a little fellow, but even now I can close my eyes and see the gipsy tent and wagon in the lane. The fire is burning outside on the ground, and the kettle is hanging over it in true gipsy fashion and a bucket of water is standing near by. Some clothes that my father has been washing are hanging on the hedge. I can see the old horse grazing along the lane. I can see the boughs bending in the breeze, and I can almost hear the singing of the birds, and yet when I try to call back the appearance of my dear mother I am baffled. That dear face that bent over my gipsy cradle and sang lullabies to me, that mother who if she had lived would have been more to me than any other in God's world—her face has faded clean from my memory. I wandered up the lane that morning with the hand of my sister Tilly in mine. We two little things were inseparable. We could not go to father, for he was too full of his grief. The others were sick. We two had gone off together, when suddenly I heard my name called: "Rodney!" and running to see what I was wanted for, I encountered my sister Emily. She had got out of bed, for bed could not hold her that morning. and she said to me, "Rodney, mother's dead!" I remember falling on my face in the lane as though I had been shot, and weeping my heart out and saying to myself) "I shall never be like other boys, for I have no mother!" And somehow that feeling has never quite left me) and even now, in my man's life, there are moments when mother is longed for.

My mother's death caused a gloom indescribable to settle down upon the tent life. The day of the funeral came. My mother was to be buried at the dead of night. We were only gipsies, and the authorities would not permit the funeral to take place in the day-time. In the afternoon the coffin was placed on two chairs outside the wagon, waiting for the darkness. Sister and brother were so much better that the wagon had been emptied. My father had been trying to cleanse it, and the clothes, such as we had for wearing and sleeping in, had been put into the tent. While we were watching and weeping round the coffin—father and his five children—the tent caught fire, and all our little stock of worthy possessions were burned to ashes. The sparks flew around us on all sides of the coffin, and we expected every moment that that, too, would be set on fire. We poor little things were terrified nearly to death. "Mother will be burned up!" we wept. "Mother will be burned up!" Father fell upon his face on the grass crying like a child. The flames were so strong that he could do nothing to stop their progress; and, indeed, he had to take great care to avoid harm to himself. Our agonies while we were witnessing this, to us, terrible conflagration, helpless to battle against it, may easily be imagined, but, strange to relate, while the sparks fell all around the coffin, the coffin itself was untouched.

And now darkness fell and with it came to us an old farmer's cart. Mother's coffin was placed in the vehicle, and between ten and eleven o'clock my father, the only mourner, followed her to the grave by a lantern light. She lies resting in Norton church-yard, near Baldock. When my father came back to us it was

midnight, and his grief was very great. He went into a plantation behind his van, and throwing himself upon his face, promised God to be good, to take care of his children, and to keep the promise that he had made to his wife. A fortnight after the little baby died and was placed at her mother's side. If you go to Norton church-yard now and inquire for the gipsies' graves they will be pointed out to you. My mother and her last born lie side by side in that portion of the graveyard where are interred the remains of the poor, the unknown, and the forsaken.

We remained in that fatal lane a few weeks longer then the doctor gave us leave to move on, all danger being over. So we took farewell of the place where we had seen so much sorrow.

I venture to think that there are some points of deep spiritual significance in this narrative. First of all, there is the sweet and touching beauty of my father's endeavor to show my mother, in the midst of his and her ignorance, the way of salvation as far as he was able. My dear father tried to teach her of God. Looking back on that hour he can see clearly in it the hand of God. When he was in prison as a lad, many years before, he heard the gospel faithfully preached by the chaplain. The sermon had been on the text, "I am the good Shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine." My father was deeply distressed and cried to God to save him, and had there been any one to show him the way of salvation he would assuredly have found peace then.

At the time of my mother's death, too, my father was under deep conviction, but there was no light. He could not read, none of his friends could read, and there was no one to whom he could go for instruction and guidance. The actual date of his conversion was some time after this, but my father is convinced that if he had been shown the way of salvation he would have there and then surrendered his life to God.

Another significant point was this: what was it that brought back to my mother's mind in her last hour the lines:

"I have a Father in the promised land. My God calls me, I must go To meet Him in the promised land"?

Was it not the Holy Ghost, of whom Christ said, "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you"? (John xiv. 26). My mother had lived in a religious darkness that was all but unbroken during her whole life, but a ray of light had crept into her soul when she was a little girl, by the singing of this hymn. That was a part of the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. No minister ever looked near our gipsy tent, no missionary, no Christian worker. To me it is plain that it was the Holy Ghost who brought these things to her remembrances plain as the sun that shines, or the flowers that bloom, or the birds that sing. That little child's song, heard by my mother as she wandered into that little chapel that Sunday afternoon, was brought back to her by the Spirit of God and became a ladder by which she climbed from her ignorance and superstition to the light of God and the many mansions. And my mother is there, and although I cannot recall her face, I shall know it some day.

I became conscious after my mother's death that I was a real boy, and that I had lost something which I should never find. Many a day when I have seen my aunts making a great deal of their children, giving them advice and even thrashing them, I have cried for my mother—if it were only to thrash me! It tore my hungry little heart with anguish to stand by and see my cousins made a fuss of. At such times I have had hard work to hide my bitter tears. I have gone up the lane round the corner, or into the field or wood to weep my heart out. In these days, my dreams, longings, and passions frightened me. I would lie awake all night exploring depths in my own being that I but faintly understood, and thinking of my mother. I knew that she had gone beyond the clouds, because my father told me so, and I believed everything that my father told me. I knew he spoke the truth. I used to try to pierce the clouds, and often-times I fancied I succeeded, and used to have long talks with my mother, and I often told her that some day I was coming up to her.

One day I went to visit her grave in Norton churchyard. As may be imagined, that quiet spot in the lonely church-yard was sacred to my father and to us, and we came more often to that place than we should have done had it not been that there in the cold earth lay hidden from us a treasure that gold could not buy back. I shall never forget my first visit to that hallowed spot. Our tent was pitched three miles off. My sister Tilly and I—very little things we were—wandered off one day in search of mother's grave. It was early in the morning when we started. We wandered through fields, jumped two or three ditches, and those we could not jump we waded through. The spire of Norton church was our guiding star. We set our course by it. When we reached the church-yard we went to some little cottages that stood beside it, knocked at the doors and asked the people if they could tell us which was mother's grave. We did not think it necessary to say who mother was or who we were. There was but one mother in the world for us. The good people were very kind to us. They wept quiet, gentle tears for the poor gipsy children, because they knew at once from our faces and our clothes that we were gipsies, and they knew what manner of death our mother had died. The grave was pointed out to us. When we found it, Tilly and I stood over it weeping for a long time, and then we gathered primrose and violet roots and planted them on the top. And we stood there long into the afternoon. The women from the cottages gave us food, and then it started to our memory that it was late, and that father would be wondering where we were. So I said, "Tilly, we must go home," and we both got on our knees beside the grave and kissed it. Then we turned our backs upon it and walked away. When we reached the gates that led out of the church-yard we looked back again, and I said to Tilly, "I wonder whether we can do anything for mother?" I suddenly remembered that I had with me a goldheaded scarf-pin which some one had given me. It was the only thing of any value that I ever had as a child. Rushing back to the grave, upon the impulse and inspiration of the moment, I stuck the scarf-pin into the ground as far as I could, and hurrying back to Tilly, I said, "There, I have given my gold pin to my mother!" It was all I had to give. Then we went home to the tents and wagons. Father had missed us and had become very anxious. When he saw us he was glad and also very

angry, intending, no doubt, to punish us for going away without telling him, and for staying away too long. He asked us where we had been. We said we had gone to mother's grave. Without a word he turned away and wept bitterly.