

# Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

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## 1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

### 1.1 CHAPTER 3

A MISCHIEVOUS LITTLE BOY  
WITH SOMETHING ABOUT PLUMS,  
TROUSERS, RABBITS,  
EGGS, AND A CIRCUS

The wild man in my father was broken forever. My mother's death had wrought a moral revolution in him. As he had promised to her, he drank much less, he swore much less, and he was a good father to us. When my mother died he had made up his mind to be a different man, and as far as was possible in his own strength he had succeeded. But his soul was hungry for he knew not what, and a gnawing dissatisfaction that nothing could appease or gratify was eating out his life.

The worldly position of our household, in the mean time, was comfortable. My father made clothes-pegs and all manner of tinware, and we children sold them. If I may say so, I was the best seller in the family. Sometimes I would get rid of five or six gross of clothes-pegs in a day. I was not at all bashful or backward, and I think I may say I was a good business man in those days. I used so to keep on at the good women till they bought my pegs just to get rid of me. "Bother the boy," they would say, "there is no getting rid of him!" And I would say, "Come, now, madame, here you have the best pegs in the market. They will not eat and will not wear clothes out; they will not cry, and they will not wake you up in the middle of the night!" Then they would laugh, and I used to tell them who I was, and that I had no mother. This softened their hearts. Sometimes I sold my pegs wholesale to the retail sellers. I was a wholesale and a retail merchant.

I got into trouble, however, at Cambridge. I was trying to sell my goods at a house there. It chanced to be a policeman's house. I was ten or eleven years of age, too young to have a selling license, and the policeman marched me off to the police-court. I was tried for selling goods without a license. I was called upon

to address the court in my defense. And I said something like this: "Gentlemen, it is true I have no license. You will not let me have a license; I am too young. I am engaged in an honest trade. I do not steal. I sell my clothes-pegs to help my father to make an honest living for himself and us children. If you will give me a license my father is quite willing to pay for it, but if you will not, I do not see why I should be prevented from doing honest work for my living." This argument carried weight. My ingenuousness impressed the court, and I was let off with a small fine.

I think I can tell some amusing things about these days. My dress consisted of an overall (and an underall too), a smock-frock of the sort that is still worn in the Eastern counties. When I took this off, I was ready for bed. The frock had some advantages. It had pockets which it took a great deal to fill. They were out of sight, and no one could very well know what was in them. One day I was up a tree, a tree that bore delicious Victoria plums. I had filled my pockets with them, and I had one in my mouth. I was in a very happy frame of mind, when, lo! at the foot of the tree appears the owner of the land. He gave me a very pressing invitation to come down. At once I swallowed the plum in my mouth, in case he should think that I was after his plums. He repeated his pressing invitation to come down.

"What do you want, sir?" I asked, in the most bland and innocent tones, as if I had never known the taste of plums.

"If you come down," he said, "I will tell you.

I am not used to climbing up or climbing down, but I had to come down because I could not stay even up a plum-tree for ever, and my friend showed no disposition to go. He said, "I will wait until you are ready," and I did not thank him for his courtesy. I did not make haste to come down, neither did I do it very joyfully. When I got to the foot of the tree my friend got me by the right ear. There was a great deal of congratulation in his grip. He pulled me over rapidly and unceremoniously to another tree.

"Do you see that tree?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you see that board?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you read it?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I will read it for you: 'Whosoever is found trespassing on this ground will be prosecuted according to law.'"

Since that day I have never wanted anybody to explain to me what "whosoever" means. This memorable occasion fixed the meaning of the word on my mind forever. The irate owner shook me hard. And I tried to cry, but I could not. Then I told him that I had no mother, and I thought that touched him, although he knew it, for he knew my father. Indeed, that saved me. He looked at me again and shook me hard. "If it were not for your father," he said, "I would send you to prison." For wherever my father was known in his unconverted days, by farmer, policeman, or gamekeeper, he was held in universal respect. At last he let me off with a caution. He threw an old boot at me, but he forgot to take

his foot out of it. But I was quite happy, for my pockets were full of plums. I dared not say anything about it to my father. My father would have been very angry with me, because, even in his wild days, he would not allow this sort of thing in his children if he knew. Then there were farmers who were kind to us—very; and we had to be especially careful what we did and where we went. If our tent was pitched near their places, my father would say to us, "I do not want you to go far from the wagons today," and we knew at once what that meant.

My father was a very fatherly man. He did not believe in sparing the rod or spoiling the child. He was fond of taking me on his knees with my face downward. When he made an engagement with me he kept it. He never broke one. He sometimes almost broke me. If a thrashing was due, one might keep out of father's reach all day, but this merely deferred the punishment; there was no escaping him at bed-time, because we all slept on one floor, the first. Sometimes he would send me for a stick to be thrashed with. In that case I always brought either the smallest or the biggest—the smallest because I knew that it could not do much harm, or the largest because I knew my father would lay it on very lightly. Once or twice I managed to get out of a thrashing in this way: One was due to me in the evening. In the afternoon I would say to him, "Daddy, shall I go and gather a bundle of sticks for your fire?" and he would say, "Yes, Rodney." Then when I brought them to him I would hand him one, and he would say, "What is this for?" "Why, that is for my thrashing," I would answer. And sometimes he would let me off, and sometimes he would not. Occasionally, too, I used to plead, "I know mother is not far behind the clouds, and she is looking down on you, and she will see you if you hit me very hard." Sometimes that helped me to escape, sometimes it did not. But this I will say for my father: he never thrashed me in a temper, and I am quite sure now that I deserved my thrashings, and that they all did me good.

As I grew older I became ambitious of some thing better and greater than a smock-frock, namely—a pair of trousers. My father did not give an enthusiastic encouragement to that ambition, but he told me that if I was a good boy I should have a pair of his. And I was a good boy. My father in those days stood nearly six feet high, was broad in proportion, and weighed fifteen stones. I was very small and very thin as a child, but I was bent on having a pair of trousers. My father took an old pair of his and cut them off at the knees; but even then, of course, they had to be tucked up. I was a proud boy that day. I took my trousers behind the hedge, so that I might put them on in strict privacy. My father and brother, enjoying the fun, although I did not see it, waited for me on the other side of the hedge. When I emerged they both began to chaff me. "Rodney," said my brother, "are you going or coming?" He brought me a piece of string and said, "What time does the balloon go up?" And, in truth, when the wind blew, I wanted to be pegged down. I did not like the fun, but I kept my trousers. I saw my father's dodge. He wanted me to get disgusted with them and to go back to the smock-frock; but I knew that if I went on wearing them he would soon get tired of seeing me in these extraordinary garments and would buy me a proper pair.

A day came when we were the guests of the Prince of Wales at Sandringham—that is, we pitched our tents on his estate. One day I helped to catch some rabbits, and these trousers turned out to be very useful. In fact, immediately the rabbits were caught, the trousers became a pair of fur-lined garments for I carried them home inside the trousers.

At length my father bought me a pair of brand-new corduroys that just fitted me, but I was soon doomed to trouble with these trousers. One day I found a hen camping out in the ditch, and there was quite a nestful of eggs there. I was very indignant with that hen for straying so far from the farmyard. I considered that her proceedings were irregular and unauthorized. As to the eggs, the position to me was quite clear. I had found them. I had not gone into the farm-yard and pilfered them. On the other hand, they had put themselves in my way, and I naturally thought they were mine, and so I filled my pockets with them. I was sorry that I had to leave some of these eggs, but I could not help it. The capacity of my pockets in my new trousers was less generous than in the old ones. My next difficulty was how to get out of the ditch without breaking any of the eggs. But I was a youngster of resource and managed it. And now I had to take my way across a ploughed field. This meant some very delicate pedestrian work. Then I heard a man shout, and I thought that he wanted me, but I did not desire to give him an interview. So I ran, and as I ran I fell; and when I fell the eggs all cracked. I got up, and, looking round, saw nobody. The man who I thought was pursuing me was only shouting to a man in another field. It is truly written, "The wicked flee when no man pursueth." I thought I had found these eggs, but my conscience found me. I have never found eggs again from that day to this.

One other episode of my childish days will I inflict upon my readers. It was the time of the Cambridge Fair, and our wagons were standing on the fair-ground. The fun of the fair included a huge circus—Sanger's, I think it was. In front of the door stood the clown, whom it was the custom among us to call "Pinafore Billy." This is the man who comes out and dilates on the wonders and merits of the performance, tells the people that the show is just about to begin, and invites them to step in. My highest ambition as a boy was to become a Pinafore Billy. I thought that that position was the very height of human glory, and I would have done anything and taken any trouble to get it. Now I wanted to get into the circus, and I had no money. A man was walking round the show with a long whip in his hand driving boys off, in case they should attempt to slip in under the canvas. I went up to this whipman and offered to help him. He was very scornful, and said, "What can you do?" I said, "I will do what I can; I will help to keep the boys off." So he said, "Very well; what will you do?" I answered, "You go round one way and I will go the other." It was agreed, but as soon as he started to do his half of the round and turned his back on me, and had got round the tent, I slipped under the canvas. I thought by doing so I should at once be in the right part of the circus for seeing the show, but instead of that I found myself in a sort of dark, dismal part underneath the raised seats of the circus. This was where the horses were kept. I saw at once I was in a fix, and to my horror I perceived a policeman walking round inside and coming

towards me. I was at my wits' end; but luckily I perceived some harness lying about, and seizing a loose cloth close at hand, I began to polish the harness vigorously. When the policeman did come up to me he said, "My boy, that is a curious job they have given you to do in such a place as this." "It is very hard work," I said, and went on polishing as vigorously as ever, never looking up at the policeman's face. I was afraid to, for I knew that my looks would betray my guilt. Then the policeman went on. I really do not know how I made my way into the circus. However, I found myself sitting among the best seats of the house, and I am sure that I attracted great attention, for here was I, a poor little gipsy boy, dressed in corduroys and velvets, sitting among all the swells. I was not long in peace. My conscience at once began to say to me, "How will you get out? You dare not go out by the door in case you meet the whipman that you offered to help." I felt myself to be a thief and a robber. I had not come in at the door, but I had climbed up some other way. I do not remember quite how I got out of this terrible dilemma, but I know that I escaped without suffering, and was very glad, indeed, to find myself outside again with a whole skin.

These are the worst of the sins that I have to confess. My boyhood's days were, on the whole, very innocent. I did not drink or swear. I am afraid, however, that I told lies many a time. I had no opportunity for cultivating bad habits, for all the companions I had were my sisters and my brother, and so I was kept from serious sin by the narrowness and the limitations of my circumstances.