

Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

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1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 CHAPTER 5

MY FATHER, AND HOW HE FOUND THE LORD

To return to the story of my own life. I have said that the gipsies are very musical, and my father was a good illustration of this statement. He was a very good fiddler—by ear, of course. He tells a story of the days when he was learning to play in his mother's tent. Dear old lady, she got tired of the noise the boy was making, and she told him to stop. As he did not stop, she said, "If you don't I will blow out the candle." This she did. That, of course, made no difference to the young musician; he went on playing, and granny said, "I never saw such a boy; he can play in the dark!" For years my father had greatly added to his ordinary earnings by fiddling to the dancers in the public-houses at Baldock, Cambridge, Ashwell, Royston, Bury St. Edmunds, and elsewhere. Even after my mother's death, though his fiddling led him into great temptations, my father continued this practice, and he sometimes took me with him. When he fiddled I danced. I was a very good dancer, and at a certain point in the evening's proceedings my father would say, "Now, Rodney, make the collection," and I went round with the hat. That is where I graduated for the ministry. If ever my father took more drink than was good for him, with the result that he did not know whether he was drawing the bow across the first string or the second, I went round again with my cap. What I collected that time I regarded as my share of the profits, for I was a member of the firm of Smith and Son, and not a sleeping partner either. How delighted I was if I got a few coppers to show to my sisters! These visits with my father to the beer-shop were very frequent, and as I think of those days, when I was forced to listen to the vile jokes and vulgar expressions of the common laborers, I marvel at the grace which shielded me and prevented me from understanding what was being said.

All this time, while my father was living this life of fiddling and drinking and sinning, he was under the deepest conviction. He always said his prayers night and morning and asked God to give him power over drink, but every

time temptation came in his way he fell before it. He was like the chaff driven before the wind. He hated himself afterwards because he had been so easily overcome. He was so concerned about his soul that he could rest nowhere. If he had been able to read the word of God, I feel sure, and he, looking back on those days, feels sure, that he would have found the way of life. His sister and her husband, who had no children, came to travel with us. She could struggle her way through a little of the New Testament, and used to read to my father about the sufferings of Christ and His death upon the tree for sinful men. She told my father it was the sins of the people which nailed Him there, and he often felt in his heart that he was one of them. She was deeply moved when he wept and said, "Oh, how cruel to serve Him so!" I have seen father when we children were in bed at night, and supposed to be asleep, sitting over the fire, the flame from which was the only light. As it leaped up into the darkness it showed us a sad picture. There was father, with tears falling like bubbles on mountain streams as he talked to himself about mother and his promise to her to be good. He would say to himself aloud, "I do not know how to be good," and laying his hand upon his heart he would say, "I wonder when I shall get this want satisfied, this burden removed." When father was in this condition there was no sleep for us children. We lay awake listening, not daring to speak, and shedding bitter tears. Many a time I have said the next morning to my sisters and my brother, "We have no mother, and we shall soon have no father." We thought he was going out of his mind. We did not understand the want or the burden. It was all quite foreign to us. My father remained in this sleepless, convicted condition for a long time, but the hour of his deliverance was at hand.

"Long in darkness we had waited For the shining of the light: Long have felt the things we hated Sink us into deeper night."

One morning we had left Luton behind us. My eldest sister was in the town selling her goods, and my father had arranged to wait for her on the roadside with our wagon. When our wagon stopped my father sat on the steps, wistfully looking towards the town against the time of his daughter's return, and thinking, no doubt, as he always was, of my mother and his unrest. Presently he saw two gipsy wagons coming towards him, and when they got near he discovered to his great delight that they belonged to his brothers Woodlock and Bartholomew. Well do I remember that meeting. My father was the eldest of the three, and although he was such a big man, he was the least in stature. The brothers were as surprised and delighted to meet my father as he was to meet them. They fell on each other's necks and wept. My father told them of his great loss, and they tried to sympathize with him, and the wives of the two brothers did their best to comfort us motherless children. The two wagons of my uncles faced my father's, but on the opposite side of the road. The three men sat on the bank holding sweet fellowship together, and the two wives and the children of the three families gathered around them. Soon my father was talking about the condition of his soul. Said he to Woodlock and Bartholomew: "Brothers, I have a great burden that I must get removed. A hunger is gnawing at my heart. I can neither eat, drink, nor sleep. If I do not get this want satisfied I shall die!" And then the brothers said: "Cornelius, we feel just the same. We have talked

about this to each other for weeks.”

Though these three men had been far apart, God had been dealing with them at the same time and in the same way. Among the arvelous dispensations of Providence which have come within my own wonderful. These men were all hungry for the truth. They could not read, and so knew nothing of the Bible. They had never been taught, and they knew very little of Jesus Christ. The light that had crept into their souls was ”the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” ”He, the Spirit, will reprove the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.”

As the brothers talked they felt how sweet it would be to go to God’s house and learn of Him, for they had all got tired of their roaming life. My father was on the way to London, and fully resolved to go to a church and find out what it was his soul needed. The three brothers agreed to go together, and arranged to take in Cambridge by the way. They drove their wagon to the Barnwell end of the town, where there was a beer-shop. The three great big simple men went in and told the landlady how they felt. It is not often, I feel sure, that part of a work of grace is carried on in a beer-shop, and with the landlady thereof as an instrument in this divine work. But God had been dealing with the landlady of this beer-house. When the brothers spoke to her she began to weep, and said, ”I am somewhat in your case, and I have a book upstairs that will just suit you, for it makes me cry every time I read it.” She brought the book down and lent it to the brothers to read. They went into the road to look after their horses. A young man who came out of the public house offered to read from the book to them. It was *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. When he got to the point where Pilgrim’s burden drops off as he looks at the cross, Bartholomew rose from his seat by the way-side and excitedly walking up and down, cried: ”That is what I want, my burden removed. If God does not save me I shall die!” All the brothers at that moment felt the smart of sin, and wept like little children.

On the Sunday the three brothers went to the Primitive Methodist Chapel, Fitzroy Street, Cambridge, three times. In the evening a certain Mr. Gunns preached. Speaking of that service, my father says:

”His points were very cutting to my soul. He seemed to aim directly at me. I tried to hide myself behind a pillar in the chapel, but he, looking and pointing in that direction, said, ’He died for thee!’ The anxious ones were asked to come forward, and in the prayer meeting the preacher came to where I was sitting and asked me if I was saved. I cried out, ’No; that is what I want.’ He tried to show me that Christ had paid my debt, but the enemy of souls had blinded my eyes and made me believe that I must feel it and then believe it, instead of receiving Christ by faith first. I went from that house of prayer still a convicted sinner, but not a converted one.”

We now resumed our way to London, and had reached Epping Forest when darkness came on. My father put his horse in somebody’s field, intending, of course, to avoid detection of this wrongdoing by coming for it early in the morning. That night he dreamed a dream. In the dream he was travelling through a rugged country over rocks and boulders, thorns and briars. His hands were bleeding and his feet torn. Utterly exhausted and worn out, he fell to the

ground. A person in white raiment appeared to him, and as this person lifted up his hands my father saw the mark of the nails, and then he knew it was the Lord. The figure in white said to my father, showing him His hands, "I suffered this for you, and when you give up all and trust Me I will save you." Then my father awoke. This dream shows how much the reading of *The Pilgrim's Progress* had impressed him. He narrated the dream at the breakfast-table on the following morning. When he went to fetch his horses his tender conscience told him very clearly and very pointedly that he had done wrong. As he removed the horses from the field and closed the gate he placed his hand on it and, summoning up all his resolution, said, "That shall be the last known sin I will ever willfully commit."

My father was now terribly in earnest. There were a great many gipsies encamped in the forest at the time, including his father and mother, brothers and sisters. My father told them that he had done with the roaming and wrongdoing, and that he meant to turn to God. They looked at him and wept. Then my father and his brothers moved their vans to Shepherd's Bush, and placed them on a piece of building land close to Mr. Henry Varley's chapel. My father sold his horse, being determined not to move from that place until he had found the way to God. Says my father: "I meant to find Christ if He was to be found. I could think of nothing else but Him. I believed His blood was shed for me. Then my father prayed that God would direct him to some place where he might learn the way to heaven, and his prayer was answered. One morning he went out searching as usual for the way to God. He met a man mending the road, and began to talk with him—about the weather, the neighborhood, and suchlike things. The man was kindly and sympathetic, and my father became more communicative. The man, as the good providence of God would have it, was a Christian, and said to my father, "I know what you want; you want to be converted." "I do not know anything about that," said my father, "but I want Christ, and I am resolved to find Him." "Well," said the workingman, "there is a meeting tonight in a mission-hall in Latimer Road, and I shall come for you and take you there." In the evening the road-mender came and carried off my father and his brother Bartholomew to the mission hall. Before leaving, my father said to us, "Children, I shall not come home again until I am converted," and I shouted to him, "Daddy, who is he?" I did not know who this Converted was. I thought my father was going off his head, and resolved to follow him. The mission hall was crowded. My father marched right up to the front. I never knew him look so determined. The people were singing the well-known hymn:

"There is a fountain filled with blood Drawn from Emmanuel's veins, And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, Lose all their guilty stains."

The refrain was, "I do believe, I will believe, that Jesus died for me." As they were singing, my father's mind seemed to be taken away from everybody and everything. "It seemed," he said, "as if I was bound in a chain and they were drawing me up to the ceiling." In the agony of his soul he fell on the floor unconscious, and lay there wallowing and foaming for half an hour. I was in great distress, and thought my father was dead, and shouted out, "Oh dear, our father is dead!" But presently he came to himself, stood up and, leaping

joyfully, exclaimed, "I am converted!" He has often spoken of that great change since. He walked about the hall looking at his flesh. It did not seem to be all quite the same color to him. His burden was gone, and he told the people that he felt so light that if the room had been full of eggs he could have walked through and not have broken one of them.

I did not stay to witness the rest of the proceedings. As soon as I heard my father say, "I am converted," I muttered to myself, "Father is converted; I am off home." I was still in utter ignorance of what the great transaction might mean.

When my father got home to the wagon that night he gathered us all around him. I saw at once that the old haggard look that his face had worn for years was now gone, and, indeed, it was gone forever. His noble countenance was lit up with something of that light that breaks over the clifftops of eternity. I said to myself in wonderment, "What marvelous words these are I do believe, I will believe, that Jesus died for me." My father's brother Bartholomew was also converted that evening, and the two stopped long enough to learn the chorus, and they sang it all the way home through the streets. Father sat down in the wagon, as tender and gentle as a little child. He called his motherless children to him one by one, beginning with the youngest, my sister Tilly. "Do not be afraid of me, my dears. God has sent home your father a new creature and a new man." He put his arms as far round the five of us as they would go, kissing us all, and before we could understand what had happened he fell on his knees and began to pray. Never will my brother, sisters, and I forget that first prayer. I still feel its sacred influence on my heart and soul; in storm and sunshine, life and death, I expect to feel the benediction of that first prayer. There was no sleep for any of us that night. Father was singing, "I do believe, I will believe, that Jesus died for me," and we soon learned it too.

Morning, when it dawned, found my father full of this new life and this new joy. He again prayed with his children, asking God to save them, and while he was praying God told him he must go to the other gipsies that were encamped on the same piece of land, in all about twenty families. Forthwith he began to sing in the midst of them, and told them what God had done for him. Many of them wept. Turning towards his brother Bartholomew's van, he saw him and his wife on their knees. The wife was praying to God for mercy, and God saved her then and there. The two brothers, Bartholomew and my father, then commenced a prayer meeting in one of the tents, and my brother and eldest sister were brought to God. In all, thirteen gipsies professed to find Christ that morning.