

# Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

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## 1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

### 1.1 CHAPTER 8

#### THE DAWNING OF THE LIGHT

BUT, although I was a mischievous boy, I was not a really bad boy. I knew in my heart what religion meant. I had seen it in the new lives of my father, sisters, and brother. I had seen the wonderful change in the gipsy home—the transformation that had taken place there. I had seen the transformation-scene if I had not felt it, and in my heart there was a deep longing for the strange experiences that I knew to be my father's. I remember well a visit that my father paid to Bedford about this time. I shall never forget my thoughts and feelings while I listened to the people as they spoke of John Bunyan. They took us to see the church where he used to preach, and showed us his monument. During our stay in the town, I spent some portion of every day near the monument. I had heard the people say he had been a tinker and a great sinner, but had been converted, and that through his goodness he became great. And, oh! how I looked up as he stood on that pedestal, and longed to be good like him. And I wondered if I should always live in the "wagon" and spend a life of uselessness. I walked to the village where John Bunyan was born, and went into the house he had lived in. I stood and wept and longed to find the same Jesus Christ that had made Bunyan what he was. I never lost sight in my mind's eye of the bright visions that visited me while I was in Bedford. I had got it into my mind that religion was a thing, which first took hold of the head of the house, and then stepped down in the order of ages. My heart was heavy because I felt that I was standing in the way of my sister Tilly, who was younger than I. I remember one evening sitting on the trunk of an old tree not far from my father's tent and wagon. Around the fallen trunk grass had grown about as tall as myself. I had gone there to think, because I was under the deepest conviction and had an earnest longing to love the Saviour and to be a good lad. I thought of my mother in heaven, and I thought of the beautiful life my father, brother, and sisters were living, and I said to myself, "Rodney, are you going to wander

about as a gipsy boy and a gipsy man without hope, or will you be a Christian and have some definite object to live for?" Everything was still, and I could almost hear the beating of my heart. For answer to my question, I found myself startling myself by my own voice: "By the grace of God, I will be a Christian and I will meet my mother in heaven!" My decision was made. I believe I was as much accepted by the Lord Jesus that day as I am now, for with all my heart I had decided to live for Him. My choice was made forever, and had I at once confessed Christ, I believe that the witness of the Spirit would have been mine, the witness which gives one the assurance of acceptance. I knew I had said "I will" to God. I made the mistake of not declaring my decision publicly, and I believe that thousands do likewise. The devil tells them to keep it quiet. This is a cunning device by which he shuts hundreds out of the light and joy of God's salvation.

Still I was not satisfied. A few days afterwards I wandered one evening into a little Primitive Methodist Chapel in Fitzroy Street, Cambridge, where I heard a sermon by the Rev. George Warner. Oddly enough, I cannot remember a word of what Mr. Warner said, but I made up my mind in that service that if there was a chance I would publicly give myself to Christ. After the sermon a prayer meeting was held, and Mr. Warner invited all those who desired to give themselves to the Lord to come forward and kneel at the communion-rail. I was the first to go forward. I do not know whether anybody else was there or not. I think not. While I prayed the congregation sang:

"I can but perish if I go, I am resolved to try, For if I stay away I know I must for ever die." And: "I do believe, I will believe, That Jesus died for me, That on the cross He shed His blood From sin to set me free."

Soon there was a dear old man beside me, an old man with great flowing locks, who put his arm round me and began to pray with me and for me. I did not know his name. I do not know it even now. I told him that I had given myself to Jesus for time and eternity—to be His boy forever. He said:

"You must believe that He has saved you. 'To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to be the sons of God; even to them that believed on His name.'"

"Well" I said to my dear old friend, "I cannot trust myself, for I am nothing; and I cannot trust in what I have, for I have nothing; and I cannot trust in what I know, for I know nothing; and so far as I can see my friends are as badly off as I am."

So there and then I placed myself by simple trust and committal to Jesus Christ. I knew He died for me; I knew He was able to save me, and I just believed Him to be as good as His word. And thus the light broke and assurance came. I knew that if I was not what I ought to be, I never should be again what I had been. I went home and told my father that his prayers were answered, and he wept tears of joy with me. Turning to me, he said, "'Tell me how you know you are converted?' That was a poser for a young convert. I hardly knew what to say, but placing my hand on my heart, I said, 'Daddy, I feel so warm here.' I had got a little of the feeling that the disciples had when they had been talking with Jesus on the way to Emmaus: 'Did not our heart burn within us?' The

date of my conversion was the 17th of November, 1876.

How my father rejoiced at my turning to the Lord. He said to me: "I knew you were such a whole-souled boy that, before the devil spoiled you, I coveted you for Jesus Christ. I knew that you would be out-and-out one way or the other. I seemed to see that there were in you great possibilities for Jesus Christ."

Next morning I had, of course, as usual to go out and sell my goods. My first desire was to see again the little place where I had kneeled the night before ere I commenced my work for the day. There I stood for some minutes gazing at the little chapel, almost worshipping the place. As I stood, I heard a shuffling of feet, and turning round I saw the dear old man who had knelt by my side. I said to myself, "Now that I have my goods—clothes—pegs and tinware—with me, he will see that I am a gipsy, and will not take any notice of me. He will not speak to the gipsy boy. Nobody cares for me but my father." But I was quite wrong. Seeing me, he remembered me at once, and came over to speak to me, though he walked with great difficulty and with the aid of two sticks. Taking my hands in his, he seemed to look right down into my innermost soul. Then he said to me: "The Lord bless you, my boy. The Lord keep you, my boy." I wanted to thank him, but the words would not come. There was a lump in my throat, and my thoughts were deep beyond the power of utterance. My tears contained in their silver cells the words my tongue could not utter.

The dear old man passed on, and I watched him turning the corner out of sight forever. I never saw him again. But when I reach the gloryland, I will find out that dear old man, and while angels shout and applaud, and the multitudes who have been brought to Christ through the gipsy boy sing for joy, I will thank that grand old saint for his shake of the hand and for his "God bless you!" For he made me feel that somebody outside the tent really cared for a gipsy boy's soul. His kindness did me more good than a thousand sermons would have done just then. It was an inspiration that has never left me, and has done more for me than I can describe. Many a young convert has been lost to the Church of God, who would have been preserved and kept for it, and made useful in it, all for the want of some such kindness as that which fell to my lot that day.