

Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

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1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 CHAPTER 9

LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE
PREACHING TO THE TURNIP-FIELD
SINGING THE GOSPEL IN THE COTTAGES

I BELIEVE that with my conversion came the awakening of my intellect, for I saw things and understood them as I had not done before. Everything had a new meaning to me. I had already begun to spell out a little, but now my desire for reading was tremendously intensified. I now had something to learn for, and I seemed to have, I did not know how, a settled assurance that I should one day preach the gospel. At the time of my conversion I could only spell and understand words of one syllable. I used to get my Bible down and begin to read it, alas! sometimes the wrong way up, in my father's tent or in the corner of a field, away from everybody. Many a time have I wept and prayed over that Bible. I wanted my heart filled with the spirit of it.

One day I was passing a huge signboard with a red ground and gilt letters. As a matter of fact I believe now, if my memory serves me right, that it was a brewer's signboard. I stared at it in wonder and distress. I was so anxious to know what it said. A lady passed, going to market, and I asked her if she would read the signboard for me. "Why do you want to read that?" she said. "Oh," I answered, "I really am anxious to know what it says." Then she read the words, and I thanked her. She asked me if I knew my letters, and I said, "Yes, I can go over them both backwards and forwards." She patted my black head and said, "You will get on some day." Her kind words were deeply stamped on my memory.

My first books were the Bible, an English Dictionary; and Professor Eadie's Biblical Dictionary. That last volume was given to me by a lady. I expect my father had told her that I desired to preach. These three mighty volumes—for they were mighty to me—I used to carry about under my arm. My sisters and brothers laughed at me, but I did not mind. "I am going to read them some

day," I said, "and to preach, too." I lost no opportunity of self-improvement and was always asking questions. I still believe in continually asking questions. If I came across anything I did not understand, I asked what it meant—I did not mind. If I heard a new word I used to flee to my dictionary. I always kept it beside me when I read or tried to read. Then I began to practice preaching. One Sunday I entered a turnip-field and preached most eloquently to the turnips. I had a very large and most attentive congregation. Not one of them made an attempt to move away. While walking along the road with my basket under my arm I used to go on preaching. I knew a great many passages of Scripture and hymns, and my discourses consisted of these all woven together. My father, too, began to see that this was no mere boyish ambition, and encouraged it. A Mr. Goodman, in Brandon, Norfolk, advised my father to send me to Mr. Spurgeon's Pastors' College, and I was greatly excited over the idea. But events so shaped themselves that this project was never carried out.

At this time, too, I did my first bit of real Christian work. One day I was hawking my wares, and, as usual, ever anxious to get a chance of telling people about Jesus. I went to a large house, and two maids came to the door to see me. I began to preach to them about the Saviour, and I discovered that they were both of them Christian girls. They took me into the kitchen, and we had a nice little conversation together. On the table was a collecting-box, which they told me was one of the British and Foreign Bible Society's boxes. I asked them for a box. Their master was the secretary of the Bible society for Cambridge, and when they told him, he gave me a box. I carried this in my basket for many weeks, collecting halfpennies and pennies for the Society. When I took the box back to the man who gave it me I had collected from 15S. to 1. I never felt so proud in my life.

I was on very good terms with the women in the villages. After I had done my best to get them to buy my goods I would say to them, "Would you like me to sing for you?" And they usually said, "Yes." Sometimes quite a number of them would gather in a neighbor's kitchen to hear me) and I would sing to them hymn after hymn, and then perhaps tell them about myself, how I had no mother, how I loved Jesus, and how I meant to be His boy all my life. Sometimes the poor souls would weep at my simple story. I came to be known as "the singing gipsy boy." One day one of these women was speaking to my eldest sister about her brother, and my sister said, "Which brother?" "Oh," she answered, "the one who sings and stretches out his neck like a young gosling." I could sing then with great force, though I was very small in those days and very thin. My favorite hymn was:

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

There is an old lady still living in West Ratton who bought a reel of cotton from me when I was a boy and allowed me to conduct a service in her kitchen. She will not part with that reel of cotton for love or money. I believe that these little singing sermons were made a great blessing. I was sought after particularly by the young folks in the houses. As my ability to read grew, I learned off by heart the fifty-third and fifty-fifth chapters of Isaiah, and the

fifteenth of St. Luke. I occasionally went through one of these chapters for the lesson in father's meetings. My father and his two brothers were, of course, always engaged in evangelistic work, and I used to sing with them. My father says he still frequently meets old people who talk about those days.

In the spring of 1877 we removed from Cambridge to London, travelling in our wagons. We did the journey in easy stages, which took us five or six days. The Gipsy Brothers held open-air services in the villages as they passed through them. Their coming was hailed with delight and enthusiasm. It was a fine spectacle these three big, full-blooded, consecrated men, standing in the open air, with their children around them, singing and preaching the gospel. One poor man came to hear us. The hymn they sang and that my father played on his violin was called, "Will you go?" This man came and tapped the fiddle on the back and said, "Didn't that old fiddle say, 'Will you go?'" The fiddle won great fame as the "hallelujah fiddle," and the people used to come long distances to the meetings sometimes merely to see it.

During the summer we stood our tents on a piece of building land at Forest Gate. One day I was out selling my goods, or trying to. My luck varied considerably. A good day would mean that I made a clear profit of perhaps 2S. 6d. That implied about 7S. 6d. worth of sales. On a bad day, I might make only a shilling profit or even a good deal less. But on the whole, a father with his wife and children, if they were all helping, would do pretty well. Our expenses, of course, were small, but my father's conversion increased them, because now he invariably paid for the land on which he stood his wagon and tents. If I remember rightly, the rent was about 1s. 6d. or 2S. 6d. a week. There were no taxes to pay and no appearances to keep up. There was no money spent on luxuries or on drink, and we lived in a very plain style. Gipsies have just two good meals a day—breakfast at 7.30 or 8 A.M. and supper about 5 P.M. Breakfast consisted of bacon or ham, or boiled meat with bread and potatoes, and supper was the same. The gipsies are great tea-drinkers. Throughout the day we had to beg or buy something to keep us going. Most of the gipsy food is either boiled or fried, for they have no ovens. They go to bed early and they rise early, about five or six o'clock. They live on plain food and not too much of it, and consequently they are very healthy.

I remember one incident of this time vividly. It was a very wet day, and I had taken shelter in an unfinished building. The rain was coming down in torrents, and there seemed no immediate prospect of its stopping. I felt I could not do better than spend the time in prayer. I knelt down in the kitchen among the shavings, sawdust, and sand, with my cap on one side of me and my basket on the other, and began to speak to my Lord. I do not know how long I continued in supplication. It was a sweet and gracious time passing very quickly. I was startled by hearing something like a sob or a sniff, and, looking through the unfinished kitchen window, I saw on the wall which separated the two gardens three men with their caps off. They had been listening to my petitions, and had been deeply affected thereby. Their tears fell with the raindrops. If I had been a little older, or had possessed a little more courage, I should there and then have begun to preach the gospel to them; but I was shy, nervous, and frightened,

and, taking up my basket and cap, bolted out like a wild deer into the rain.