

# Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

1902

## 1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

### 1.1 CHAPTER 10

#### I BECOME AN EVANGELIST

THE CHRISTIAN MISSION AND REV. WILLIAM BOOTH  
MY FIRST FROCK-COAT AND MY FIRST APARTMENTS

I NOW approached my seventeenth birthday. My desire to become a preacher grew stronger as the days passed by. One Sunday morning I rose with the determination to undertake something in that line. I arrayed myself in my Sunday best, consisting of a small brown beaver hat, a velvet jacket with white pearl buttons, a vest with the same adornments, a pair of corduroys, and a yellow hand-kerchief with a dash of red in it round my neck. If gipsies have a weakness in the love of clothing, it is for silk handkerchiefs. I sallied forth in this attire. The people were just starting off for church and chapel. I stood in a little corner some way from the wagons. I knew the people must pass that way. I took off my hat and I began to sing, and after singing I prayed, and after prayer there was another hymn. By this time a few people had stopped to see what was going to happen. I dare say a good many persons about knew me by sight, for I took care that I was never long in a place before the people knew me. I had a way of introducing myself. I was a child of nature, and I introduced myself as naturally as the flowers do. I told the people how I had found the Saviour, what my life and desires were, and that I loved Jesus and wanted everybody else to love Him, too. They listened and wept. When I had said this I began to get very anxious as to how I should end. I desired to finish off beautifully, but I did not know how. Happily, when I had finished what I had to say, I told the people that I hoped to do better next time, and then I crept back to the wagons, certainly not feeling over exultant about my first meeting. I found that my father and some of my friends had been listening to me. They applauded my zeal, but I do not remember what they said about my sermon.

In the spring of this year I got into touch with the Christian Mission, of which the Rev. William Booth, now General Booth, was superintendent. The

headquarters of the mission were at 272 Whitechapel Road. It had twenty-seven mission stations and thirty-five missionaries. They were under the control of Mr. Booth, who was popularly referred to by the Christian workers as the Bishop. They had an annual conference at which speeches were made and resolutions were put and voted upon, but what amount of directing or legislative power this conference possessed I do not know. It is certain that Mr. Booth was as absolute in his control of the Christian Mission as he now is—nominally at least—of the Salvation Army. While attending some meetings at the mission station in Plaistow, we heard of an all-day gathering that was to be held at the mission's headquarters in Whitechapel Road on Whit-Monday. Uncle Bartholomew and sister Emily arranged to go and take me with them. At the evening meeting there must have been about a thousand people present.

The Rev. William Booth presided. He "spotted" my uncle, my sister, and myself, for he knew the Gipsy Brothers well, and availed himself of their services. Further, he knew a little about me particularly. Some time previously my father had been conducting a mission at Leicester with the late Mr. William Corbridge, and he had told Mr. Corbridge that he had a boy who wanted to be a preacher, and whom he thought of sending to the Pastors' College. Mr. Corbridge, as I got to know years later, thereupon wrote to Mr. Booth, saying, "Cornelius Smith, the gipsy, has a boy, Rodney, whom he thinks of sending to the pastors' College. He has a great desire to preach. Get hold of him. He might be very useful in the mission." My appearance at this Whit-Monday service no doubt brought this letter back to Mr. Booth's mind. After several persons had addressed the meeting, he said, "The next speaker will be the gipsy boy." There was only one gipsy boy in the meeting, and I was he. My first inclination was to run away, but immediately the thought came to me that that would never do. Said I to myself, "Have I not promised the Lord to do whatever He commands me? and, as I did not seek this, I feel it is from Him." Trembling, I took my way to the platform, which, luckily, was only five or six steps off. When I reached it I shook in every limb. Mr. Booth, with that quick eye of his, saw that I was in something of a predicament, and at once he said, "Will you sing us a solo?" I said, "I will try, sir": and that night I sang my first solo at a big public meeting. It was as follows:

"HAPPY, EVER HAPPY"

"Jesus died upon the tree, That from sin we might be free, And forever happy be, Happy in His love.

"He has paid the debt we owe; If with trusting hearts we go, He will wash us white as snow In His blood.

"Then with joy and gladness sing; Happy, ever happy be; Praises to our heavenly King- Happy in the Lord.

"Lord, we bring our hearts to Thee; Dying love is all our plea; Thine forever we would be- Jesus, ever Thine.

"Jesus smiles and bids us come, In His loving arms there's room, He will bear us safely home- Home above.

"When we reach that shining shore All our sufferings will be o'er, And we'll sigh and weep no more In that land of love;

"But in robes of spotless white, And with crowns of glory bright, We will range the fields of light Evermore."

The people listened with interest and attention. I felt I had done pretty well, that I had made a good introduction, and that now I should have a chance. I was clearing my throat with a preliminary nervous cough—every preacher knows quite well what I mean—when a great tall man (afterwards Commissioner Dowdle, of the Salvation Army) shouted,

"Keep your heart up, youngster!"

I said, "My heart is in my mouth; where do you want it?"

I did not mean the people to hear this, but they did, and they laughed, and I was not sorry that they laughed, for while they laughed I had a bit of time to pull myself together. As far as I can remember, this is how my address proceeded: "I am only a gipsy boy. I do not know what you know about many things, but I know Jesus. I know that He has saved me. I cannot read as you can. I do not live in a house as you do; I live in a tent. But I have got a great house up yonder, and some day I am going to live in it. My great desire is to live for Christ and the whole of my life to be useful in His service." My discourse was very brief, and I was very glad when it was done. I had sense enough to sit down immediately I had finished what I had to say. I do not know that I have been equally wise on every occasion since then. As I resumed my seat there came from many quarters of the meeting the exclamation, "God bless the boy!"

Mr. Booth kept me beside him until the meeting was over. Then he took my arm in his and led me aside from the people and said, "Will you leave your gipsy home, your father, sisters and brother, and come to me to be an evangelist in the Christian Mission?" I asked him what an evangelist was, and he told me. Then I said, "Sir, do you think I shall make a good evangelist?" He said, "Yes, I do." I replied, "Well, you know more about this than I do, and if you think I am of any use, it is an answer to my prayer and I will come." The date was fixed, 25th of June, 1877.

When I got home to our wagon, I woke them all up and told them I was going to be a preacher. They had laughed a good deal at my youthful ambition—but now it was my turn to laugh. When the morning came, I secured my three books and, putting them under my arm, walked swaggeringly up and down in front of the wagon, full of innocent joy and pride. "Rodney is going to be a preacher!" They could not quite realize it, and they talked of nothing else for days. After breakfast that morning, I looked at my gipsy clothes and said to myself, "If I am going to be a preacher, I shall have to dress like a preacher." I had saved a little money. I went to a clothier and outfitter's shop and bought a frock-coat, a vest, and a pair of striped trousers, all ready made. I paid for them and the assistant parceled them up and pushed them over the counter to me. I drew myself up to my full height, and putting on all the dignity I could command, said, "Send them. Do you know I am going to be a preacher?" So these clothes were sent to the gipsy tent. Next I went off to purchase some linen. A young lady came to serve me and asked me what my size was. I said, "I do not know, miss, but if you give me a bit of string I will measure myself." These articles, too, I had sent home to the tents. I further reflected that when folks

went travelling it was proper that they should have a box. So I bought a box for half a crown, and a piece of clothesline to cord it up with.

At last the morning of the fateful 25th dawned. I was up early and dressed myself with much care. I know that I burst several buttons in the operation. I will not say that I felt comfortable in these clothes, because the very reverse was the truth. I felt as if I had been dipped in starch and hung up by the hair of my head to dry. My sisters were whispering to each other in the most eager and excited tones. "What a swell he looks! Look at his collar! And, I say—I declare—look at his cuffs!" They called me a Romany Rye (gipsy gentleman), and Boro Rashie, that is to say, a great preacher. I did not leave the dear tent without many tears. I was only seventeen years and three months old, and my father's tent was as dear to me as Windsor Castle is to a prince of the blood royal. I was leaving people who loved me and understood me, and I was going to people who certainly would not understand me. It was like tearing my heart out to leave them. I kissed them all and started off, then ran back again many times; and they ran after me. Finally I tore myself away. I had two cousins to carry my box to Forest Gate Station, on the Great Eastern Railway. I could have carried all that I had in a brown paper parcel, but the dignity of the occasion demanded a box, and forbade me to carry it myself. I booked to Aldgate Station, and I told the guard to put my box in the van. He knew me, or at least he knew my father, and I found it difficult to impress him sufficiently with the dignity of my new position. He lifted the box and said with a laugh, "What is in it?" I said: "Never you mind, sir. You are paid to be civil and to look after passengers." Yet even that did not greatly awe him. "All right, old man," he answered, laughing; "good luck to you."

At my destination I was met by one of the missionaries, a Mr. Bennett, who took me to a good Christian family with whom Mr. Booth had arranged that I should stay. I think their name was Langston, and the house was in a side street not far from the mission's headquarters, at 272 Whitechapel Road. I remember the situation exactly. I arrived just in time for a meal in the evening, and for the first time in my life I had to sit up to table, and also to use a knife and fork. I began to entertain some feelings of gratitude towards the starch in which I was encased, because, at least, it helped me to sit up straight. I had resolved to watch what my neighbors did, but they served me first and told me not to wait. At the side of my plate was a piece of linen, beautifully glazed and neatly folded. I did not know what it was, nor what I had to do with it. I thought, perhaps, it was a pocket-handkerchief, and I said so to my hosts. Immediately, I felt that I had introduced a discord into the harmony of the dinner party. I was sensitive enough to feel and know I had blundered, but my hosts were kind enough not to laugh. I said to them: "Please forgive me. I do not know any better. I am only a gipsy boy. I have never been taught what these things are. I know I shall make lots of blunders, but if you correct me whenever I make a mistake, I will be very grateful. I will never be angry, and never cross." I felt this was the right course for me to take. I knew that airs would not have fitted me at all.

After supper and prayers, they told me they would show me to my apart-

ment. My apartment! I made a mental note of the word and resolved to look it up in my dictionary at the first opportunity, for I still carried about my library of three books with me. When they shut the door of my room upon me, I felt I was in jail—a prisoner within four walls and a ceiling! I fancied there was not room enough to breathe. It was the 25th of June, and the East End of London! I felt homesick and longed for my tent. Had I not often woke up in the morning with my head, or my arms, or my legs, outside the tent, on the grass, under the ample dome of heaven? Here in this small room I felt suffocated. I looked at the bedstead and wondered if it would hold me, and when, by experiment, I found that it was strong enough, I turned down the bedclothes and examined them, for I had heard of the London "company," and I strongly objected to the way they made their living. I got into bed with a run, as long as I could have it, and a leap. It was a feather bed. I had been accustomed to sleep in feathers as long as myself, that kind which grows in a wheat-field, and very often I had to make a hole with my fist for my ear to lie in. I could not sleep. For hours I lay awake thinking of my home, for I realized acutely that I was in a land of strangers. Such sleep as I had was only in snatches, and I was dreaming all the time of my father's tent and wagon.

I rose very early in the morning, and at once knelt in prayer. I told God that He knew that I was among strangers—people who could not understand my wildness and my romantic nature; that He had brought me there; and if He would only give me grace I would try to do my best. Then I had to attend to my toilet. There was, of course, a wash-hand basin and a towel. I was almost afraid to use them, in case I should soil them. I had never seen such things in use before. It had been my custom to run to a brook of a morning and to wash in that or a pool near by. I took my bath with the birds. At other times I dipped my hand in the grass laden with dew and washed myself with it. I was up and dressed long before there was any stir or movement in the house, but of course I kept to my bedroom until I made sure that somebody else was up. I spent the time over my Bible.

I felt easier at the breakfast table, because I had had some experience and at any rate I knew what a napkin was. However, I made many blunders and broke the laws of grammar, etiquette, and propriety again and again. But my hosts were kind. They did not expect too much from me. They told me when I was wrong, and I was grateful; encouraged me when I was right, and I was equally grateful: it was an inspiration to try again. You see, I was born at the bottom of the ladder, and there is no disgrace in being born at the bottom. There are thousands of people who owe everything to their father and mother, and yet walk about the earth and swagger as if they had made creation. I knew I had tremendous odds to strive against, and I strove to face them as they came one by one. I did not face them all at once, I could not: they would have swamped me. Each day brought its own difficulties, its own work, and there was strength for the day also. I received no educational training whatever from the Christian Mission. My schooling and discipline was work—visiting the people and taking part in meetings. I was the thirty-sixth missionary. I was stationed at Whitechapel Road, the headquarters of the mission, along with

a Mr. Thomas, a very able preacher, who is now dead, Mr. Bennett (before mentioned), and Mrs. Reynolds. I owe a great deal to Mrs. Reynolds. She was as a mother to me. The other workers took most of the in-door services. I helped in visiting, in open-air work, and occasionally I spoke at an indoor service, but not often. Much was made of the fact that I was a real live gipsy, and I was always announced as "Rodney Smith, the converted gipsy boy." Mr. Booth found a home for me, and my father kept me supplied with clothes. What little money I had was soon spent. I worked in the Christian Mission six months without receiving any salary at all.

When I was called upon to conduct a service alone I had to face a very serious difficulty—how to deal with the lessons. I had spent as much time as I could find in learning to read, but my leisure and my opportunities were very severely limited, and I was still far from perfection in this art. I certainly could not read a chapter from Scripture right through. What was I to do with the big words? First of all, I thought I would ask a good brother to read the lessons for me. "No," I said, "that would never do. I think that the people would prefer me to read them myself." Then I thought I should get over the difficulty by spelling out to them any word that was too difficult for me. But I felt this would be like an open surrender. The plan I adopted was this—I went on reading slowly and carefully until I saw a long word coming into sight. Then I stopped and made some comments, after the comments I began to read again, but took care to begin on the other side of the long word. I used to struggle night after night in my lodgings over the hard words and names in the Bible.

But in the meetings I did, I think, pretty well. God gave me utterance, and I found myself saying things I had never thought about or read about. They were simply borne in upon me and I had to say them. In spite of mistakes—and I made many of these—I was most happy in my work, and always had a good congregation. At the headquarters in Whitechapel Road I sometimes spoke to well over a thousand people, and when I went to the mission centers at Plaistow, Canning Town, Poplar, and Barking, I always had crowded congregations, and I never had a meeting without conversions. These four happy months passed away very quickly, as in a dream. The most memorable incident of my work in Whitechapel was the conversion of my sister Tilly at one of my own meetings. Some members of the family had come with my father one Sunday to see me and hear me preach. I have already said that I came to Christ myself partly because I felt I was keeping Tilly from Him. I was immediately above her in age, and the members of our family had been converted in order of age. It was while I was singing one of my simple gospel songs that my dear sister was won for the Lord. Speaking from the human side, I may say that my love for her led me to decision for Christ, and God repaid me more than abundantly by making me a blessing to her.