

Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

1902

1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 Chapter 19

MY SECOND VISIT TO AMERICA

BEFORE I became connected with the Manchester Mission I had made an engagement with friends on the other side of the Atlantic that I would soon visit them again) and accordingly in August, 1891, I set sail on board the Etruria for my second trip to the great continent. I was again furnished with many valuable letters of introduction. Most of them were from friends who had helped me in this way when first I crossed the Atlantic, but some were from new friends, such as Dr. Bowman Stephenson, Rev. Hugh Price Hughes, M.A., Rev. W. L. Watkinson, and Rev. Dr. Moulton, who was president of the Wesleyan Conference for 1890-91. Mr. Watkinson's letter was particularly characteristic.

"I earnestly hope," he said, "that your visit to America may be made a great blessing to you, and that you may prove a great blessing to the American people. Your work with us has been deep and genuine, and I am persuaded that it will remain. Much evangelistic work here of late has been very superficial, but you appeal to the conscience and intelligence of the people, which renders your ministry specially valuable. Nothing will tempt you, I feel sure, to forsake this path. Allow me to say how much I appreciate the purity of your style and your instinctive taste, and nothing is to be gained by compromising this. I feel sure that the American churches will be greatly edified by you, and I only hope they may not like you too well."

I went straight to the camp meetings at Ocean Grove, which are held from August 21st to 31st, inclusive. I had timed my departure from England so as to be present at these great gatherings. My intention was merely to be a witness of them. Ocean Grove is a city with a population of from five thousand to ten thousand people, managed entirely by a Methodist association. The banks, post-office, and all the institutions of local government are in the hands of this society. There is not a beer-shop in the town, and if one buys a building-site one is obliged to subscribe to a clause providing for the forfeiture of the property

if the owner is detected selling spirits. The gates of the town are closed on Saturday night. Neither postman nor milkman is allowed to go his rounds on a Sunday, and I believe that while the association cannot prevent trains from passing through the town on that day, they at least prevent them from stopping there. I did not observe a single policeman in the place during my visit, and only one uniformed official was employed to keep the great crowds in order.

The town was founded by a few Methodist preachers who years ago went there for their holidays and camped in the woods. Their idea of making Ocean Grove a great camp-meeting ground became so popular that now it is the largest camp-meeting place in the world. In the auditorium, which seats nearly ten thousand people, three gatherings are held each day during the camp-meetings. Just across the road is a building called Ocean Grove Temple, seated for about 2,000 people, and here two meetings for young people are held daily. The young people are of all ages, from thirteen or fourteen up to anywhere under ninety! In the height of the camp season, the hotels, cottages, and tents of the town are crowded with a population of from seventy thousand to eighty thousand people, from all parts of America. I have seen sometimes as many as two hundred and fifty ministers on the platform. Indeed, Ocean Grove is a favorite holiday resort for American pastors. People from most cities of America at some time or other attend these meetings, and take home with them a zeal and an evangelical spirit that spread throughout all the churches. The enthusiasm and the fire of Ocean Grove live all over the continent, maintaining alert the revival spirit. Ministers have told me that but for Ocean Grove many a church in America would have been closed.

To me the most interesting feature of the meetings were the testimonies. Brief, bright, crisp, and clear statements they were from Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, for though Ocean Grove is a Methodist institution, the meetings are attended by members of all the Churches. The Americans, rich and poor, old and young, male and female, are more ready than we are to state publicly the reasons for the hope that is in them. The Ocean Grove audiences consist for the most part of well-off people, people who can afford a holiday of from a month to six weeks. In 1891, the president of the meetings was the Rev. Dr. Stokes, whom I had met once before and who had shown me much kindness. He introduced me to many of the ministers present whom I did not know, explaining who I was and why I had come to the States. In this way, before I left Ocean Grove I had practically completed the program of my autumn and winter's work. I had made a good impression on the ministers by two addresses I had given at the Young People's Meetings.

My first mission was in Old Jane Street Methodist Episcopal Church, New York, of which the Rev. Stephen Merritt was the pastor. Mr. Merritt was a truly wonderful man. He carried on his pastorate and the business of an undertaker at the same time. His work in the latter capacity was very extensive. He stood high in the trade, and to him had been entrusted the obsequies of General Grant. While still a layman, he preached with so much success that the bishop of the diocese gave him the charge of Old Jane Street. When I was in New York, Mr. Merritt was one of the best-known men in that city. He had turned the

old church into what was described as a tremendous converting furnace. My mission there was held during the month of September, a very hot month in New York, and yet the crowds came and hundreds were turned into the Lord.

One Sunday evening, while the people were gathering, a couple came into the vestry to the pastor and asked him to marry them. When the ceremony was over, the bridegroom said to the minister, "You seem to have a large congregation?" "Yes, we have the evangelist Gipsy Smith from England here taking a mission for us." "Oh, we have heard of him, and I should like to hear him." The upshot was that the bride and bridegroom, having no friends with them, decided to stay for the service. The marriage ceremony took place at 7.30, and within two hours the newly married couple knelt with a number of others at the communion-rail, and gave themselves to Jesus Christ. And so they commenced their new life under the very best of all bonds.

At Washington I attended the ecumenical Conference, and for the sake of the venerable William Arthur, who introduced me, and who was the most revered man in the conference, I was allowed to sit in the body of the hall, was treated as an honored guest, and was invited to a great reception at the Arlington House. That night I was introduced to Frederick Douglas, the great negro orator, who, in that assembly, seemed to tower above everybody else. I told Mr. Douglas that I had read the story of his life and was charmed by it. He was greatly pleased, congratulated me on my success as an evangelist, and wished me God-speed.

My readers may remember that my first mission in America was held in Nostrand Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, then under the pastorate of Dr. Prince. I worked at this church again during my second visit, when the reins of government were in the hands of Rev. Arthur Goodenough. I was told that many of those who had been converted during my former mission were now splendid workers in the church and in the Sunday school.

One night, as soon as I got into the pulpit, my eyes fell upon a gipsy and his wife. At the close of the service I went to speak to them. gipsies are always delighted to meet one another. We had never met before, but we were tachino romany chals (true gipsy men), and that was enough. I found that they had pitched their tents a little outside Brooklyn, and I made an appointment to visit them. They were a fairly well-to-do couple. Six ladies of the church begged to be allowed to accompany me, and I had great pleasure in taking them to the gipsy camp. The gipsy wife had prepared for us a nice little tea in the tent. There were only three cups and three saucers in the "house," and some of us had to drink our tea from cups and some from saucers. My ladyfriends were fascinated and charmed with the novelty of the experience, and with their handsome host and hostess, for they were a handsome pair indeed. The gipsies were more than delighted to have as guests in their tent a romany rashi (a gipsy preacher) and his friends. It marked a red-letter day in the experience of the ladies and of the gipsies. I have made it a practice whenever I am in the neighborhood of a gipsy encampment to pay it a visit. One reason for this is that I never know whether I may not discover some of my relatives there.

The greatest mission I conducted in New York was at Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church, Harlem, of which the Rev. James Roscoe Day, D.D., was the

pastor. The church was seated for two thousand three hundred people. All the seats were let, and Dr. Day was accustomed to preach to crowded congregations every Sunday. The pastor and his officers had thoroughly prepared my way, and the members of the church seemed to rally round me almost to a man. Night after night for a whole month the building was crowded. There were many conversions, including whole families. Little children and old men knelt side by side seeking the same Saviour. Sunday scholars for whom their teachers and parents had sent up many prayers to heaven were brought to the saving knowledge of the truth, and were led to confess their Lord. This month passed away all too quickly. I would gladly have prolonged the mission, but I had made other engagements that I was bound to fulfil. On leaving this church a set of embossed resolutions, signed by Dr. Day and all the twenty-four members of the official board, was presented to me. "We believe Gipsy Smith," wrote the signatories, "to be an evangelist particularly called by God to his work, the possessor of rare gifts as an expounder of the truth and as a winner of men. We believe our membership has been greatly quickened spiritually, and through our brother's instrumentality many souls have been added to the church." I was handsomely remunerated for my services here, and the ladies sent a gift of 20 to my wife, in England—the wife who had so generously allowed me to cross the Atlantic to help and bless them.

My work in New York was not at first looked upon with friendly eyes by all the Methodist Episcopal ministers of the city. During my mission in the Harlem church I attended the usual Monday meeting of the New York Methodist ministers in company with Dr. Day. Dr. Day told his brethren something of the revival at his church, saying that it was a revival on old-fashioned Methodist lines. Whereupon a certain Dr. Hamilton rose and said: "I do not believe in evangelists. I have been in the ministry many years, and I have never had an evangelist in my church, and I never shall have. When the wind blows the dust blows, and when the wind settles the dust settles. I believe in handpicked fruit, in conversions which result from the ordinary work of the ministry. But I am glad to see Gipsy Smith present this morning, and I shall be glad to hear him."

The brethren called out loudly for "Gipsy Smith! Gipsy Smith!" I had no desire to address the ministers, and unless called upon by the president I had no right to do so, but the cries for me were persistent, and I was invited to have my say. I began: "Mr. Chairman, gentlemen, and brethren—If I were at home in England, among my brethren and the ministers who know me, who have watched me, and who know my manner of work, I would venture to reply to Dr. Hamilton. But as I am a stranger in a strange land, and your guest, I prefer to be silent. If I am only a gipsy boy, I know what belongs to good breeding." Then I sat down.

The brethren present shouted in American fashion, "Good, Brother Smith! Good, good, good!" and urged me to go on. "Very well," I said, "very well, if you will hear me, you shall. It may be a very smart thing to say that when the wind blows the dust blows, and when the wind settles the dust settles, but it is not a Christ-like thing to say of a brother and his work," and, turning to Dr. Hamilton, "if God has given to the church evangelists it is because you need

them. What God has called clean, do not you call common." There was a cry of, "Good, good, that's so, Brother Smith!" "Well," I added, "you say you believe in hand-picked fruit; so do I. It fetches the highest price in the market; but what are you to do when the fruit is too high for you to reach it, and you have no ladder? Everybody knows, too, that some of the best fruit is on the top of the tree. Are you going to lose that fruit because you are not tall enough or strong enough to get it? I won't! I will ask the first godly brother who comes along to help me to shake that tree, and we will get the fruit though we bruise it in the getting. I would rather not have said this. I do not believe in defending myself, or setting myself against my brethren in the ministry. I have tried always to be the pastor's help, and I never allow myself in public or in private to say one disparaging word of my brethren. It hurts and grieves me when I hear a pastor speaking disdainfully of the work of the evangelist, remembering as I do that God has given to the church some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, as well as pastors and teachers." It was plain that the ministers were with me and not with Dr. Hamilton. On the following Sunday afternoon Dr. Hamilton was a member of my congregation. In due course we both appeared together at the ministers' meeting on Monday. He told me that he had greatly profited by my sermon of the day before, and said he liked it so much that were he going to preach from the same text, he would incorporate some of my sermon into his own discourse.

To me the most memorable incident of my two weeks' mission at Old Bedford Street, New York, was the conversion of a Roman Catholic priest. As I was speaking one night to the penitents at the communion-rail a man with a handsome, clean-shaven face looked up to me through the tears that were streaming down his face, and said, "Do you know who I am?" I said, "No, sir." He answered, "I am a Roman Catholic priest. My church has failed to give me what I am hungry for." My theme that night had been "Jesus, the only Cure." The priest said to me, "I am seeking the Cure, the only Cure!" I remembered that I had seen in the audience the Rev. Father O'Connor, an ex-priest, well known in New York for his work among Catholics. I called him to my help, feeling that he would be better able to deal with this man than I could, and when I told him what I had just heard at the communion-rail, he said: "Yes, I know all about it. I brought him here." The priest had been ignorant of the plan of salvation, but there and then, renouncing his church and his old religion, he gave himself to Jesus Christ. The next day I dined with him at the Rev. Father O'Connor's. I discovered that the priest, having become dissatisfied with his church and his profession, had gone to Father O'Connor and sought his aid. Father O'Connor said to him, "Come and live with me, and see how my wife and children live, and what simple faith in Christ has done for us." The priest went to stay at Father O'Connor's house, and at his suggestion came to my meeting. He sent in his resignation to the bishop, and soon was preaching Christ as the only way of salvation. Not a few Roman Catholics have been converted at my missions, but this man was the only priest, as far as I know, who came to God under my ministry. This was the last mission of this visit.

I called on Mrs. Bella Cook, the author of *Rifted Clouds*, at New York,

and each time I visited America I have gone to see her. Mrs. Cook has been bedridden for thirty-five years. She lives in a humble little cottage. When she first rented it, it stood in the fields, and the cattle were grazing about the doors, Now it stands in the backyard of a large store. Mrs. Cook, though she suffers much pain, is always active. Hundreds of people come to see her, and there have been the greatest and most sacred transactions in her room. She lives by faith. She has no money, except what the Lord sends her, and she wants for nothing. Many rich people make Mrs. Cook the dispenser of their charity. The last time I called upon her was on the eve of Thanksgiving Day, and she was sending out the last of two hundred turkeys to make the Thanksgiving dinner of some poor family. I asked her if she had peace in the midst of all this loneliness and suffering. "Peace!" she said, "peace! I have the Author of Peace."

How do you live?" I asked. "How do the angels live?" she answered; "my Father knows my needs, and supplies them." Her face was one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. Although she is advanced in years she has no wrinkles or blemish of any sort. The peace of Heaven plainly rests upon her. She lives in the cloud that over-shadowed the disciples and their Lord on the Mount of transfiguration.

The more I knew of America, the more I came to love her and her people. I was greatly struck during this visit by the entire absence of drink from the tables of the houses where I stayed or visited. Writing now, after five trips, I can say that I have never seen drink in any shape or form on any private table in America. The home life of America has a great charm for me. I should think that the Americans are the most hospitable people under the sun. There is no touch of reserve or suspicion in their kindness. They are eager to serve others, and they are also eager to acknowledge the services of others. It is quite a common thing for a member of a congregation to go to the minister at the close of the service and say, "Thank you for that sermon; it has done me good." I am sure that this helps the American ministers to do their work better, and I am equally sure that if English preachers got more of this encouragement their people would save them many heart pangs, and would help them to preach better.

About five hundred friends and converts came down to the steamer to see me off. As the stately ship sailed away they sang, "God be with you till we meet again!" I was never more eager to get home in my life. I had been parted from my wife and children for seven months—it seemed more like seven years to me. As we sailed up the Mersey I thought to myself that no city ever looked so grand as Liverpool did that day. Very soon I was in the midst of my friends in the dear homeland, glad to have been away, more glad to have got back.