Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

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1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 Chapter 20

WITH THE CHILDREN

I HAD been away from my wife and three bairns for the long period of seven months. How sweet and merry their faces seemed to me on my return! Naturally they interest me more than another man, but still I hope some of their quaint sayings and doings may amuse my readers. That is my excuse for a few anecdotes about them.

Mr. Collier was having a great bazaar in connection with his mission work. My wife and I took our children to the function, and there I encountered my good friend Mr. Byrom–a bachelor he then was. My daughter Zillah was hanging around me, and I was delighted with her love and sweet attentions. But I was afraid that she might worry my bachelor friend, unaccustomed to children; so I took some money out of my pocket, and displaying it in the palm of my hand said to my little girl, "Zillah, take what you like and go and spend it!" Her big, dark eyes filled with tears. She looked up wistfully at me, and said, "Daddy, I don't want your old money; I want you! You have been away from us for seven months; do you know it?" I felt that my little girl had justly rebuked me, and I felt at that moment how different she was from many people in the world who are willing to have the gifts of God, and yet do not recognize Him as the Father. I also called to mind these lines:

"Thy gifts, alas! cannot suffice, Unless thyself be given: Thy presence makes my paradise, And where Thou art is heaven."

One day, when we were living in Hanley, my two boys came home for dinner at half-past eleven instead of half-past twelve. I asked them what they had been doing.

"Oh, we have been playing."

"Yes, you have been playing truant. I never played truant in my life."

"No," said Albany, the elder, "because you never went to school!"

"My boys, you will have to be punished."

I loved my boys, and I was a very young father, and I did not well know how to begin, so I said: "Albany, you go to one room, and Hanley, you go to another. You will have to stay there all day and have bread and water for dinner." The youngsters marched off, Albany singing, "We'll work and wait till Jesus comes." Hanley followed in silence. He was too deeply ashamed of himself to speak or sing. When dinnertime came, some bread and water was taken up to them. Albany ate his eagerly and asked for more. Poor Hanley did not touch it. He could not bear to look at it, and his dinner stood on the table beside him all day. Presently Albany fell asleep, and began to snore loudly. Hanley could not sleep. As darkness came on he heard my step along the landing and called me to him. For I had quietly climbed the stairs a good many times that afternoon to see what my boys were doing. The punishment was more to me than to them. When I reached him I made a grab at him and lifted him up, bedclothes and all; for my young father's heart was full of tenderness towards my boy. Weeping bitterly, he said to me:

"If you will forgive me this once, I will never play truant any more."

"Forgive you?" I said, at the same time trying to keep back his tears as they fell. "Yes, I forgive you fully."

Then he said, "Do you really love me?"

"Yes, you know I do."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, I am quite sure."

"Well, then," said Hanley, "take me down to supper."

The boy naturally expected that I should show my love by my deeds. This is what our God expects from us. "If ye love Me, keep My commandments."

Albany and his mother on one occasion were among my congregation at a mission service. That night I sang, "Throw Out the Lifeline." Albany and I went home hand in hand. He stopped me underneath a lamp. He said,

"Father, I believe that I am converted."

"How do you know, my son?"

"Well, while you were singing 'Throw Out the Life line,' I seemed to get hold of it."

The boy had been deeply impressed, and for a time he really tried to be a good boy. When the day came for our going home he was full of his conversion. When the cab pulled up outside the door of our house he jumped out in hot haste, rang the bell, and when the maid came to the door at once asked to see his sister and his brother. "Hanley," he said, "I am converted!" Hanley was always a bit of a philosopher. He looked at his brother quietly for a moment and said, "Are you? I think I shall tell your schoolmaster; for he has had a lot of trouble with you." Then plunging his little hands deep down into his pockets he meditated in silence for a few seconds. "No, I won't; I will leave him to find out, because if you are really converted the schoolmaster will know it, and so shall we."

Albany, at another mission service, was sitting beside his aunt, Mrs. Evens, and seeing some people going forward to seek the Lord, he said:

"Aunt Tilly, can I be saved?"

"Oh yes, of course you can."

"Shall I go and kneel down there?"

"Yes, my boy, if you are in earnest and really mean what you say."

Forthwith he marched boldly forward and knelt down at the penitent-form. He came back to his aunt and said:

"I have been down there. I have knelt and it is all right now. Of course it is; I am saved."

A few days later entering the house, I found a great commotion was proceeding. Albany and the maid had fallen out, and he was giving her a very lively time. His brother said to me, "Albany says he was converted a few days ago; see him now!" I called the little rebel to me and said,

"Albany, what is the matter?"

"I am in a fearful temper."

"So it seems, but you must not get into a temper. They tell me you went forward to the penitent-form the other night: were you saved?"

"Yes."

"I am afraid, then, you are a backslider today."

"No, I am not; I am not a slider at all."

"But when people are converted their temper gets converted, too. Come, let us consider the matter. How do you know you were converted? Where were you converted?"

The poor little fellow looked at me for a long time in deep puzzlement, casting his eyes up to the roof, then down to the floor, and round the room, racking his little brain to discover in what part of him conversion took place. At last an inspiration visited him.

"Daddy, I am saved all round my head!"

I am afraid that Albany's case is the case of a great many people; their religion is in their heads; and that means that it is too high.

My children were always holding meetings in our home, the audience consisting of tables and chairs. One night I had come home from a service as the children were being sent to bed. They came to bid me goodnight. But they had arranged a little ruse for getting to stay up longer. I was reading in my room, and as they approached me I heard Albany say to his brother,

"Hanley, let us have a meeting."

"All right," says Hanley.

The meeting started as soon as they came into my room. Albany gave out the hymn;

"Jesus loves me, this I know," saying, "Brother Gipsy Smith will play the accompaniment."

After the hymn was sung, he said,

"Brother Gipsy Smith will pray."

Glad was I of this opportunity given to me by my children to pray with them and for them. I knelt down and besought God to take them into His keeping, and to make them His. After that we sang a hymn. Albany then said,

"We shall now have Brother Hanley Smith's experience."

Hanley at once rose and said,

"I am only a little sparrow, A bird of low degree, My life's of little value, But there's One who cares for me."

When Hanley sat down Albany called upon me, saying,

"Now we shall have Brother Gipsy Smith's experiences."

I spoke a few words to my children, and I can truthfully say I never spoke more earnest words in my life. I told them what God had done for me, how he had taken me out of the gipsy tent and made me a herald of His own gracious Gospel. And I added that these and even greater things He would do for them if they surrendered their lives to Him. Zillah was not present at this meeting, and the only person who yet remained to speak was Albany. After my little sermon Albany stood up, and with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, said:

"Friends, the meeting is over!"

Zillah usually took part in these meetings as the soloist, but she would never sing unless she was properly and ceremoniously introduced to the chairs and tables as Miss Zillah Smith:

"Miss Zillah Smith will now oblige with a solo!"

On one occasion Albany, sitting beside his mother at a mission meeting, saw a man kneeling at the penitent-form, but only on one knee. "That man won't be saved," said Albany; "he is not earnest enough, or he'd get down on both knees."

Albany and Hanley one night were preparing their lessons for school, and were engaged in a parsing exercise. The word to be parsed was "Oh!" Hanley said it was an interjection, Albany said it was an "indigestion." I interfered in the controversy, and asked Hanley if he knew the difference between interjection and indigestion. "Of course I do," in tones of indignation; "a pain in the stomach!"

I always have on the mantelpiece of my study a spray for the throat and nose. One night Hanley came into my room, and picking up the bottle, said, "I think I will have some of this to-night." "What is the matter with you," said Albany, "have you got banjo or guitar?" The boy had heard me speak of catarrh.

We had observed that Albany, on taking his seat in church, always bowed his head, like his elders, and seemed to be engaged in prayer. One day we persuaded him, after much coaxing, to tell us the words of his prayer: "For what we are about to receive, O Lord, make us truly thankful!"

My two boys went to school at Tettenhall College, Wolverhampton, and attended, as all the boys of the college did, Dr. Berry's church on Sunday. I once conducted a ten-days' mission in that town, and my sons were allowed by the headmaster to spend the two Sundays with me. They sat beside me on the platform during an afternoon meeting, and in telling some simple little story about my home life I referred to the fact that my boys were beside me and that they attended a school in Wolverhampton. On the way home Albany said to me, "Look here, if you are going to make me conspicuous like that, I'm not coming any more. I don't like to be made conspicuous in public." While we were drinking tea Albany kept nudging me, asking me what I was going to preach about at Queen Street that night. "Our chapel, you know"; and saying, "remember it must be one of your best sermons to-night." My stem monitor was

about fifteen years of age at this time. The boys said "good-night" to me before they entered the church, because they had to return to school immediately the service was over. When I had finished my sermon Albany leaned over the pew in front of him and was heard to say to one of his school chums–Dr. Berry's son or nephew it was–:" I think he has made a good impression!" And presently the boy who did not want to be made conspicuous walked up the pulpit steps before the whole congregation to kiss his daddy "good-night." I said, "Hallo, who's making me conspicuous now? You must not make me conspicuous!" But the boy was too proud of his father to take any notice of my little sally.

It is the sweetest joy to me that my children have a great love for my people. They are never happier than when visiting the gipsies. A meal in the tent has a great charm and delight for them. This love for the gipsies is a natural growth in their lives. I have never sought to drill it into them. The natural outcome of love for their father has been love for their father's folk. Zillah was recently chosen to recite Tennyson's "Revenge" at the Exhibition Day of the Manchester Girls' High School. She was asked to appear in costume, and, as her own idea, chose the garb of a gipsy girl. Zillah was not always fond of this character. When she was a little thing I sometimes called her "little gipsy girl," and she would answer quite hotly and fiercely, "No, Zillah not gipsy girl; gipsy daddy!"

Nor was Albany, in his earliest school days, proud of being the son of a gipsy. One afternoon he brought home from school a boy whose nose was bleeding profusely. The following conversation ensued:

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"I've been fighting."

"So I see. I'm ashamed of you."

"I'm ashamed of myself."

"What were you fighting about?"

"That thing called me 'gipsy kid!"'

"But, my son," I said, earnestly, "it is quite true you are the son of a gipsy. Your father is a real live gipsy and you ought to be proud of it. It is not every boy who has a gipsy for his father."

"Oh, that's all right, I know all that, but I was not going to have that thing call me 'gipsy kid '–not likely!"

One day, when Zillah was about nine years of age, she was walking with me to church. I found two little lambs straying upon the road. I knew where they came from, and I put them back into the field, saying as I did so, almost to myself, "All we, like sheep, have gone astray."

"I think," said Zillah, "that will be a good text to preach from."

"How would you treat it?" I asked.

"I think I would begin by saying God was the Shepherd and we were the sheep, and that He has a fold, and we have got out of it. Then I should try to make it very plain that Jesus comes to find the sheep and bring them back again to the right place, just as you did just now."

I think that was a very beautiful speech for a girl of nine.

At a certain church where I was conducting a mission there was a very sour-looking office bearer, so sour that he kept everybody away from him. The church

was crowded at every service, but the aisle of which he had charge was always the last one to be filled up. The people went to him as a last resort. Zillah, who attended the services, noticed the man, and said to me one night:

"Daddy, is Jesus like that man?"

"No, my dear," I said, for I could not libel my Lord to please an official. "Why do you ask?"

"Because if He is, I shall run away; but if He is like somebody I know, I shall put my arms round His neck and kiss Him."

Children know when Jesus is about. They seldom make a mistake.

My sister, Mrs. Evens, has a boy who was accustomed when he was little to go to meetings. He thought the world of his uncle, and the greatest punishment that could be inflicted upon him when he had done wrong was to tell me about it. By-and-by he got into the habit of saying to his parents, when they did anything to displease him, "I will tell my uncle about you." On one occasion his mother and he were waiting for Mr. Evens in the vestry of a church in which he was taking a mission. Bramwell, as he is called, had been naughty, and his mother said to him:

"Your uncle must know, and you are not far from him now."

"Oh, mother," said little Bramwell, "will you really tell him?"

"You know very well, Bramwell, if you are a naughty boy he must be told."

"Mother, can I be saved?"

"Yes, my son, certainly you can if you are in earnest."

"Will you kneel down and pray for me?"

"Yes, I will."

Just as she got on her knees the vestry door opened, and a little boy, with whom Bramwell had not been able to get on well, entered. At once he rose, and pushing his little fist in the face of his enemy, said, "Go away; can't you see I am getting saved?"

Bramwell was like not a few; he wanted to be saved on the sly. But the whole object of his maneuver was to gain time, and by contriving to be converted, as he thought, to induce his mother not to tell me of his naughtiness. For children have more sense than we give them credit. One night I observed a little girl walking up and down the inquiry-room as if in search of some body, but her search seemed fruitless. I asked her who she was looking for. "I am looking for nobody," she answered. "I have come in to see how you convert them."

A little girl, eight years of age, attended my mission at Bacup. She was deeply impressed, and rose to go towards the inquiry-room, but was dissuaded therefrom by her parents. I was their guest, and in the morning the little maiden told me that she was trusting Jesus as her Saviour, but she had not gone into the inquiry-room. I said, "Never mind that. It is all right if you are trusting." But I saw she was uneasy. When I addressed the converts at the close of the mission she was present. I told them that they would never regret the step they had taken, by which they had definitely and publicly committed themselves to God. The little girl told her schoolmistress that she had become a Christian, but she had not entered the inquiry-room.

"That does not matter," said the teacher.

"Oh, yes, it does," persisted my sweet maiden; "I should like to have come out publicly!"

Several months later I was conducting a mission at Rawtenstall, in the same Rossendale Valley. If the impression on that little girl's spirit had been merely superficial, it would have passed away during that period. But when she heard that Gipsy Smith was conducting a mission at Rawtenstall, she persuaded her parents to allow her to attend, accompanied by a maid. When I invited the penitents to come forward, she at once walked into the inquiry-room. It was for this purpose that she had come to Rawtenstall. Her soul was not satisfied until she had made a public confession of her Lord. The thoughts of children are often much deeper than we imagine. Their hearts and spirits are often exercised in a way we know not of.

A mother coming home from one of my meetings went in to see her little girl of six or seven.

"Where have you been, mother?"

"I have been to hear Gipsy Smith, my dear."

"Who is he?"

"Gipsy Smith is an evangelist."

"Oh," said the little girl, her eyes lighting up with joy, "I know; that is the man who led Pilgrim to the Cross, where he lost his burden."

The answer was so beautiful, and in the deepest sense so correct, that the mother said: "Yes, my child, that is right."

Children are often told very wild and foolish things about the gipsies. The little son of a house where I was going to stay heard about it and said:

"Is Gipsy Smith going to live here, mother?"

"Yes."

"Is he a real gipsy?"

"Yes."

"I mean, is he one of them real live gipsies that have tents and wagons and live in them?"

"Well, he used to be."

"Oh, well, I am not going to stay here; I'm off to my granny's!"

And I never saw him.

Accompanied by a lady, I was one day walking up a street in a provincial town where I was conducting a mission. A little boy on the other side of the road shouted, "Aunty, aunty!" The lady did not hear, and the boy, though he kept calling, remained at a safe distance. At length I asked her if that boy was calling to her. She looked round and said, "Oh, yes; that is Sydney," and beckoned Sydney towards her.

Sydney approached shyly, keeping as far from me as possible and clinging tenaciously to his aunt.

"Sidney," she said, "this is Gipsy Smith."

"How do you do, Sydney?" I said.

Sydney looked up at me with some wonder and more fear in his eyes. I expect he was astonished to find me so well dressed.

"Sydney," I said, "are you afraid of me?"

"O-h, no; but it isn't true, is it?"

"What isn't true?" I asked.

"That you are one of them gipsies that get hold of little boys and takes away all their clothes?"

"No, I am not; no, certainly not," I said.

"I thought it was not true," said Sydney, drawing a deep sigh of relief.

"Who told you that story?" I asked.

"Nurse."

Nurses should be instructed never to tell children fables of that sort, or anything that frightens the little ones. Prejudices poison.