

Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

1902

1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 Chapter 21

MY MISSION TO THE GIPSIES

MY readers may remember that Mr. B. F. Byrom had met Dr. Simeon Macphail in Palestine and had spoken to him about my work. This, later on, led to an intimate friendship between me and Dr. Macphail, who has been very kind and helpful to me; indeed, it was to Dr. Macphail that I owed an invitation to conduct a fortnight's mission in Edinburgh in May, 1892. The place of meeting was Fountain Bridge Free Church (now United Free Church), of which the minister was the Rev. George D. Low, M.A. This was my first visit to Edinburgh and to Scotland. The church was too small for the crowds who came to hear me, and on the last night of the mission, when I gave the story of my life, the meeting was held in St. George's, of which the renowned Dr. Alexander Whyte is the minister. Dr. Whyte was good enough to preside at the lecture, and at the close he said to me: "I have heard many great men in that pulpit, but I have never felt my heart so moved as it was tonight by your story. I do not envy the man who listened to it with dry eyes. I can never forget Dr. Whyte's smile. It is so obviously the effluence of a rich, noble, generous soul. It suggests a quarter of an acre of sunshine.

Mr. Low contributed an account of the mission to the British Weekly of June 23d. He said:

"My friend, the Rev. Simeon R. Macphail, M.A., of Canning Street, Liverpool, when visiting me in March spoke of Gipsy Smith, but when he proposed a fortnight's mission to be conducted by him in my church at the end of May and the beginning of June, the proposition did not commend itself to me. Evangelistic services in summer, and just as the sittings of the General Assemblies were concluding, were not likely to prove a success. Mr. Macphail urged me to close with the offer, saying that once Gipsy Smith was on the spot he would speedily make his way among us. And so we arranged to invite him.

"From the outset the attendance was encouraging, and it soon became manifest that a man of no ordinary power had come. The numbers speedily increased until the church was full, a large proportion of the audience being young men. On the evening of the second Sabbath, every inch of available space was occupied and many failed to get admission. So far as I know, nothing like it has been seen in Edinburgh for many years.

"Gipsy Smith is a born orator with great dramatic fire, of singular intensity of spirit. His voice is tuneful and flexible, and lends itself readily to the expression of every mood of mind and every form of discourse. He is specially effective when he illustrates and illuminates some point, or some Gospel truth, by an incident simple, tender, pathetic, from his old gipsy life, to which he frequently alludes as one proud of his origin. His addresses are Scriptural, as might be expected from one who is an unwearied and resolute student of the Bible. In manner he is simple, unaffected, gentlemanly, and I can speak the more confidently regarding this as he lived under my roof while in Edinburgh, and gained the esteem and affection of every member of my household by his sunny, gracious personality. His singing, which is of great purity and excellence, adds greatly to his power. From first to last no fewer than one hundred and fifty professed their faith in Jesus Christ.

"Gipsy Smith has agreed to come back again to Edinburgh, and we shall hail his return. Meantime we rejoice that his first visit has been so signally owned of God. Many in my own congregation and beyond it will never cease to thank God for his fortnight's mission at Fountain Bridge."

Out of this visit to Edinburgh grew my mission to the gipsies. I had long had it in my heart to do something for my people, but the opportunity had never come to me. I could not myself undertake the responsibility of the work, nor could I very well lead the way. Still, I had always hoped to see the time when some missionary would live among my people in a parsonage on wheels, teaching the children, and preaching the Gospel to them and their parents. My last service was on Monday night. I was to leave Edinburgh early on Tuesday morning. I remember it was a miserably wet day, raining in the determined and pitiless way that rain has in Edinburgh. In the midst of the rain, a lady drove up to Mr. Low's manse and asked to see me. I should like very much to give her name, but I am not permitted to do so. She had heard me in Dr. Whyte's church the night before. Owing to illness, that was the only service that she had been able to attend. For some years she had been deeply interested in the gipsies, and God had been continually urging her to do something for them. I asked her how she first came to be interested in my people. "Some years ago," she said, "I was living near a great Lancashire town, and I devoted all my leisure to visiting the homes of the poor. I was one day summoned to a gipsy wagon where a poor woman lay very ill. I read the Bible to her, I prayed with her, and she seemed grateful." The name of the spot where the gipsy encampment which the lady visited was situated was familiar to my ears. I asked the lady some further questions. I discovered that the poor woman was no other than my aunt, my mother's brother's wife. The distinguishing mark by which I recognized her was the big scar on her forehead that had been observed by the lady, and the

way in which she dressed her hair to hide it. I felt my heart open in love and gratitude to one who had so kindly served one of my own folk. The upshot of the conversation was that the noble Scotch lady said to me: "If you will take charge of a mission to the gipsies, I will give you the first wagon, the parsonage on wheels for which you asked in your lecture last night." And so was formed the Gipsy Gospel Wagon Mission.

Dr. Alexander Whyte was good enough to become one of the directors, so also was Dr. Simeon Macphail, of Liverpool. The Rev. S. R. Collier, among all his multitudinous activities, finds time to manage the mission, and my friend, Mr. B. F. Byrom, is the honorary treasurer. The principal support of the mission has been the collections that are taken at the close of my lecture on the story of my life. We also get a few subscriptions and a few donations. Our first wagon missionary, who is still with us, was Mr. Wesley Baker, an excellent man and a good evangelist. He generally has an assistant for company and fellowship. A lonely life in a wagon would become almost unbearable. The wagon has traveled all over the country and has been especially useful in the New Forest and at Blackpool. Evangelistic work among the gipsies is slow and hard. My people have quick eyes, quick ears, and ready tongues. But for years—nay, for centuries—their hearts have been blinded to the things of God. There is hardly a race on the face of this globe to whom religion is so utterly foreign a thing. The gipsies are slow to comprehend the plan of salvation, and even when they have understood they are slow to use it, because, for one thing, their trade is declining; they are depending more and more on the fortune-telling, and they know very well that if they become Christians that lying practice must cease. Despite these difficulties, Mr. Baker and his assistants have done good work. They have been cheered by not a few conversions, and they have done not a little to give the children some smattering of an education. The manner of their life makes anything more than this impossible. However, I am fully confident that the Gipsy Gospel Wagon Mission is the leaven that will, in course of time, leaven the whole lump.

I have only just received a report from Mr. Wesley Baker concerning some work at Blackpool which may give my readers an idea of what the Gipsy Mission is doing.

"Some five or six weeks ago," writes Mr. Baker, "Algar Boswell came down to our tent and signed the pledge. Since then he has been most happy, and he has made up his mind to take Christ as his Saviour, intending to make a public confession last night. But in consequence of the sudden death of a relative, who left Blackpool last Tuesday intending to winter at Sheffield, he was called away yesterday morning, and, of course, could not be with us. Before he left home he said to his wife: 'Now, Athalia, you go down to the tent today and tell Mr. Baker how sorry I am not to be able to attend the last services. Tell him not to be discouraged, as their faithful work is not without results, as I mean to give up this kind of life and serve God.' Some of the gypsies stayed last night until near ten o'clock, but Athalia did not get the blessing. She came down this morning in great distress. We had prayer with her, and she herself prayed most earnestly, and just before twelve the Lord saved her. We are expecting Algar

back this afternoon, and he and his wife are coming down tonight, when we hope to have a prayer-meeting with them.

”Algar has had a most remarkable dream. He dreamt that he was falling into a deep pit, and after struggling for some time, he saw our wagon coming along. It stopped close to where he was, and making a great effort, he succeeded in getting hold of it at the back. Just then Mr. Zebedee and I went to him, took him by the hand, and lifted him out of his misery. We placed him on a rock and told him to stay there. At this point he woke up. It was two o’clock in the morning. He roused his wife and children and related his dream to them.”