

Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

1902

1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 Chapter 22

AMERICA AGAIN

ACCOMPANIED by my wife, I sailed for the United States again in August, 1892, arriving in time for the Ocean Grove camp meetings, August 21st to 31st. We crossed the Atlantic in the midst of a dreadful storm. I spent a good many hours of the time in the music-room singing hymns to the passengers, who were most attentive.

I was heartily welcomed at Ocean Grove, for now I was no stranger, but a brother beloved. Just as I was about to address the people a minister said to me: "Now, Brother Smith, you have got a crowded meeting. You have a bigger congregation than the bishop had. Go and spread yourself!" I looked at this man hard for a moment and said, "I am not going to spread myself at all. I am going to lift up my Lord!" and I began my address by telling the people what this minister had said to me. We are only too apt to draw too much attention to ourselves. We do not sufficiently hide behind the Cross. At the close of the sermon about three hundred people were on their knees—some seeking to be filled with the Spirit, some offering thanks to God for victory over besetting sin, some backsliders begging to be restored, and many sinners seeking God for the first time.

When I reached the house at which I was a guest, I saw a lady and her husband seated on the veranda waiting for me. Said the lady:

"I wish to speak to you about my soul. I am very anxious. I have been seeking Christ for ten years.

"Well," I said, "there is something wrong, surely. It does not take a seeking Saviour and a seeking sinner ten years to find one another if the sinner is in earnest."

She replied: "I have heard all the best preachers in America. I have traveled from city to city with all the leading evangelists, until I almost know their sermons by heart: but I cannot find what I want. I have read all the best books

I can get hold of, and sometimes at the bottom of a page my hopes have been high, and I have thought I shall find what my soul desires when I turn over this leaf, but I have not found it yet."

I showed her where she had failed. The best preachers, the best evangelists, and the best books could not give her what she was seeking. She must take her eyes away from these completely.

"Were I you," I said to her, "I would refuse to hear another sermon or read another book, or even another chapter. I would go home now and shut myself up alone with God and settle the matter there, for it is not men nor meetings nor methods that you need, but an interview with the Son of God. And like the woman who touched the hem of His garment, when you pass through the crowds and get to Jesus your present troubles will be all over, and rest and peace will come."

She went away and did as I advised her. The next day I saw her with beaming face. I asked her how it was with her, and she replied:

"I struggled and wrestled to win it, The blessing that setteth me free, But when I had ceased from my struggles, His peace Jesus gave unto me."

I was well known to many of the ministers at the Ocean Grove camp meetings, and before they were over I had practically completed my program for this visit. Among my audience at Ocean Grove was a famous negress preacher, Amanda Smith. Once or twice she called out in the midst of my address,

"That's hit the bull's eye, Brother Smith; hit it again!"

Her face the while was shining like ebony. There was another colored sister in whose heart I had won a place. She sat next to my wife on the platform, not knowing that she was my wife. Turning to Mrs. Smith, she said:

"I like that young man. I've taken quite a fancy to him. I think he promises very well. I think I will get him to come along with me conducting missions among my people. We should make a very good team."

"Oh, indeed," said Mrs. Smith, much amused; "do you know he is my husband?"

"Oh, if he is, he is all right for that, and you are all right, too."

At one of the meetings, the Rev. Charles Yatman, the evangelist, and a well-known character in America, came up to the platform while I was on my feet, and sat down on my chair. When I had finished reading the lesson there was no chair for me. Mr. Yatman pulled me on to his knee, where I sat in full view of the audience while the notices were given out and the collection was taken. Presently I began to preach, and while in the heat of my discourse I heard a crashing noise behind me, and observed that the congregation was chuckling. Mr. Yatman had fallen through the chair, and lay all of a heap on the platform. The people laughed loudly when I turned round to look at him. I said, "It is very remarkable that that chair did not collapse when both of us were on it; but now that you alone occupy it, you crash through it!" Turning to the audience, who were convulsed with merriment, I said, "A good many more of you will fall before I am through. He is the first one. Who is the next?"

I need not give a detailed account of all the missions I conducted during this tour. But there are some striking incidents still strong and clear in my

mind which will probably be of interest to my readers. I conducted a mission at Lynn, Massachusetts, about twenty miles from Boston, at the church of Dr. Whittaker, an able, kindly, scholarly man. At the close of one of the services, when I had come down from the pulpit, a mother walked up the aisle towards me, leading her little boy.

"Will you shake hands with my boy, sir?"

"Yes, certainly, but why do you want me to do so?"

"I think if the Lord spares him to grow up to be a man it will be nice for him to say, 'I shook hands with a gipsy whom God had saved, and taken out of his tent to be a preacher. That gipsy led my mother to Christ.' I think that by shaking hands with you the incident will be fastened on his mind forever.

So I held out my hand to the little fellow, and he pushed his left hand to me.

"My boy, is there anything the matter with your right hand? Is it well and strong like this one?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then, I will not shake hands with the left. I must have the right one."

Still he kept his right hand behind his back, and the only thing which moved in his face were his eyes, which seemed to grow bigger and bigger. He seemed firm, and I had to be firmer. Pointing to a group of people, I said:

"You see those people? They are waiting for me, and unless you are quick I shall go to them before we have shaken hands."

When he thought I was really going he pulled his little right hand from behind his back and pushed it towards me. But now it was shut. I said,

"Open your hand."

He seemed very loath indeed to do so, but after much coaxing the tight, obstinate little fingers gave way and his hand opened. There in the palm lay three or four marbles. The little fellow could not take my hand because of his playthings. And many a man misses the hand that was pierced because of his playthings. "Little children, keep yourselves from idols," or, as the Scot said, "Wee bairnies, keep yersels frae dolls."

A Lynn newspaper gave the following description of my personal appearance. As it is a characteristic piece of American journalism I quote it:

GIPSY SMITH.

"A short, wiry, thick-set gentleman, with an elastic, springy step, dressed in common everyday suiting, sans style, sans shimmer, sans everything save the stamp of store trade goods; a head well rounded and finely formed; a face of fair finish and clear countenance, brown as the berries of the autumn bush; a heavy, dark moustache, backed by half-cut, well-trimmed English whiskers; dark eyes that glisten like diamonds with the zeal of religious enthusiasm; a magnificent head of hair, black as the raven's wing, and strikingly suggestive of the nomadic race that gave him birth—all this paints a fair pen-picture of the man who, for over two hours and a half, riveted the attention of fifteen hundred people in the Lynn Common Church on Thursday evening."

I conducted a most successful mission at Wharton Street Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, of which Dr. Vernon was pastor. My work was

easy there, because all the people were in sympathy with it. Not infrequently an evangelist finds that a section of the church members, while not definitely opposing, hold aloof, and do not countenance the work. Only those who have experienced it can realize the hindering power of this. But at Old Wharton Street it seemed as though every man, woman, and child in the church had resolved on having what Americans call a good time. The presidential election took place during this mission, and it was thought at first that meetings would be useless on that day. On the night of the election America, at least in the big cities, goes wild. Huge canvases are stretched outside the newspaper offices blazing forth the returns every few minutes. The people are all in the streets that night. However, we decided to meet as usual, and to everybody's astonishment we had a larger crowd than at any other meeting during the mission.

When I think of Old Wharton Street my mind at once recalls a beautiful story of a young girl there. She was a bright creature, fond of society, fond of pleasure. The story begins some weeks before my mission. A dance was to be held at a friend's house, and the girl was anxious to go to it. Her mother said, "Lilly, if you get converted and join the Church you may go to the dance." Shortly after this Lilly joined the Church, and she said to her mother, "Now that I have joined the Church, mother, I may go to the dance, may I not?" "Oh, but, my dear, you have joined the Church, it is true; but you are not converted. You know very well that you are not, and we can see very well that you are not." Nothing more was said on that occasion. Presently I came to the church to conduct a mission, and Lilly was persuaded to attend. One night her proud, wayward heart was subdued and broken in penitence, and she gave herself to God. There was still a week or two before the dance. Her mother knew of the great change in her daughter's life, and she noticed also that Lilly had ceased to speak about the dance. One day she said, "Lilly, what about this dance; it comes off next week. Are you going?" "Oh, mother dear," said the sweet girl, throwing her arms round her mother's neck and shedding tears of joy, "I have given my heart to the Lord, and I have no longer any desire to go to the dance." Mother and daughter both shed happy tears of gratitude to God.

Most of my missions in America were under the auspices of Methodist Episcopal Churches, but at Yonkers, on the Hudson, I held a really united campaign. All the ministers of the place, except the incumbent of the Episcopal Church, joined to invite me. I was altogether nearly a month in Yonkers, and this mission is among the greenest spots in my life. My wife and I spent one of the happiest months of our lives—away from home, that is—in Yonkers. Hundreds passed through the inquiry-room, rich and poor. An amusing little incident occurred one night. Three ladies rose from their places near the pulpit and asked for prayer. They did not come into the inquiry-room at the close of the meeting, and I stepped down to ask them the reason why.

"Oh no, we could not go there; we could not think of it," said one of them.

"Are you a Christian?" I asked.

"No, sir; I'm an Episcopalian."

One night, a boy of ten came into the inquiry room; the next night he brought his mother, and the night after they two brought the grandfather.

I made some very valuable friends at Yonkers, including Dr. Hobart and Dr. Cole. When I left, the ministers presented me with an address, inscribed "To the 'Rev.' Rodney Smith." "We love you," they said, "with the love of brothers, and we are sure we shall meet when our work and yours is done, and love you through eternal years in heaven." Dr. Hobart wrote to me some time after the mission that he had on his books the names and addresses of sixty people who had joined the church as the result of the mission, and that he could account for every one of them.

The Yonkers' Gleaner published an interesting article on this mission, from which I may quote:

GIPSY SMITH.

"Gipsy Smith is a notable evangelist, notable for what he is, as a warm-hearted, frank, honest, effective preacher. He knows how to persuade men. He deals with great truths. His views of truth are in accord with the best thoughts of those who have had advantages far greater than his. He is an instance of what great wisdom can be gotten from the Scripture by a man who is truly converted. It tells us again by example that in the Scriptures 'the man of God is thoroughly furnished unto every good work.' We honor him as a man sent of God to gather harvests.

"But he is notable for what he will not do. He did not condemn the ministry nor the churches, though he spared not the sins that were found in them. He did not get mad when inquirers were slow to make themselves known. He did not assume to decide who were saved and who were not. He did not put a drop of vitriol on the end of his sentences concerning the wicked or the unfaithful, as if he rather enjoyed the opportunity to say 'hell.' He did not spend a whole evening discanting on the sex or gender of the Holy Spirit, though he holds no uncertain opinion about it.

"He did not preach a sermon on the unpardonable sin (!!), as a flaming sword to drive people into the inquiry-room. He did not for once make an effort to be funny; he is too much in earnest. He did not appeal for money, and did not hurt his cause by telling stories that slurred sacred things. He came in love; he spoke in earnest. He was full of sanctified common sense. He won our hearts, he did us all good. May choice blessings follow his efforts!"

I paid a second visit to Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church, New York, and had again the pleasure of working under my friend, Dr. Day. The church seated two thousand three hundred people, and it was crowded every night during the best part of a month. I was incapable of work for a few days by reason of a throat affection. This visit is always associated in my mind with a certain splendid young fellow whom I encountered there. He was an intelligent and lovable man, popular with everybody, but he was not on the Lord's side. He was too good to be on the other side, but still he was there; and there are many like him. Nobody can tell what the Church loses, and what such men themselves lose, because they do not declare themselves publicly for God and take up their stand boldly. This young fellow came to many of the services. One day I met him on Broadway.

"Will you be at church to-night?"

"No, I have a long-standing engagement to keep."

"Well, then, will you pray for me?"

He looked at me aghast, staring hard for a few moments.

"Do you know what you are asking? You are asking a man to pray for you—a man who has not prayed for himself for years!"

"Never mind; will you pray for me to-night?"

"Oh well, you know I would do anything for you, anything I could, but to pray for you—to pray for you—!"

"Yes, that is what I want. That is the service I want you to do for me."

"I wish you would ask me something else. You know, of course, that if I promise to do it, I will."

"Yes, that is why I am so eager to get you to promise. I know you will fulfil it."

"But you know, as I say, I have not prayed for years. I should not know what to say."

"Oh, I will tell you what to say," and I took out a scrap of paper and wrote,

"O God, bless Gipsy Smith tonight, and help him to preach Thy gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that sinners may be converted. For Christ's sake." Then I said, "Will you kneel down and say these words for me tonight?"

He stood as still as a rock for a minute or two, and as silent as the grave. Then suddenly gripping my hand, he said passionately, "I will!" and turning round abruptly went away.

On the following night, naturally, I kept a sharp lookout for this fellow, and great was my joy when I saw him come into church. He walked straight up to me, with a gracious smile on his fine face.

"You knew what you were up to. You knew what you were doing, you did."

"Well," I said, "did you fulfil your promise?"

"Yes, but when I knelt down to pray for you I felt that I was the meanest man in America. I had neglected my God and Father for years. In the distress of my heart I could not utter the words of the prayer that you wrote for me. I cried, 'God be merciful to me a sinner,' and He was merciful, and He saved me. And then I prayed for you."

We ministers and evangelists must cultivate the greatest skill in throwing the gospel net. In the work of saving men we need to use all the brains we have, and think for God as earnestly and as thoroughly as we think for our business.

Among the congregation at Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church was an intelligent, educated man, who several times asked for prayers on his behalf, but he did not seem to get any further forward. He was earnest, he was sincere, but no light, no joy, came into his soul. I was grieved to the heart to witness his distress. I had a talk with him, and discovered that he had been a backslider for years. He said:

"I have given myself fully to Christ as far as I know, and I have cut myself off from every sinful thing. I have asked Christ in sincerity and in truth to restore to me the joy of His salvation, but still there is no happiness in my heart. I do not understand myself."

"What were you doing in the church when you turned your back on God?"

"I was at the head of a large class of Sunday-school children, and I gave it up in a temper."

"Ah, that explains everything. You wickedly threw up your duty. You must begin work again at once and start where you left off."

After some persuasion he said he would. I lost sight of him for a few days, but when he returned he said to me:

"I did as you told me, and all the old joy has come back."

I believe there is a great lesson in this incident for many Christians who have been disappointed in the spiritual life. They sing:

"Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?"

My answer is, "It is where you left it. You have been dropping some of your Christian work. Go back to it, and you will find the blessing there. God is the same. It is you who have changed."

I had been a guest of General Macalpine and Mrs. Macalpine at Sing Sing for a few weeks. This was just before the General became a member of the Cleveland Cabinet. His wife was a Brandreth, a member of the well-known family of manufacturing chemists. Mrs. Macalpine suggested that I should hold drawing-room meetings at Fifth Avenue, New York. I gladly consented. These meetings were held in one of the largest mansions of the city. There was no advertising, but personal letters were sent to the aristocratic ladies of New York, inviting their attendance. At the first meeting one hundred and seventy-five ladies, including many of the exclusive four hundred, gathered at eleven o'clock to hear a gospel address by a converted gipsy. Mrs. Rockefeller and her daughter, Mrs. Russell Sage, and many other well-known ladies, were present.

My first sermon was on "Repentance." I did not try to adapt myself in any way to the rank of my congregation. I only remembered that they were sinners needing a Saviour. It was just an ordinary service, lasting for an hour and a quarter. At the close one of my congregation said to me, "If what you say is religion, I know nothing about it." Another lady, who was weeping bitterly, sought my counsel. "God has spoken to you," I said, "obey Him; follow the light."

A lady, who had quite recently lost her husband and her child, thanked me at the close of one of the services, and said, "Remember that in every congregation, however small, there is always somebody with a broken heart."

The original plan was for six meetings, but a seventh was held at the request of the ladies, at which the men were invited to join their wives, mothers, and sisters. I remember that Mr. Rockefeller himself was among the congregation. I have had many communications from America regarding these drawing-room meetings, giving conclusive testimony to the lasting good that was wrought by them.

During my mission at Tarrytown, on the Hudson, I was helped by my sister, Mrs. Evens, and her husband. We had splendid gatherings for a month in the church of Dr. McAnny, a beautiful preacher, not perhaps of the most popular type, but winning, poetical, and eloquent. I should almost say that there were too many nose-gays in his sermons, but in the midst of all the beauty of his discourse there was a strong evangelical note.

One night we had a curious and rather trying experience. The service had been powerful until the end, but when the penitents were invited to come forward to the communion-rail, no one moved. This has happened several times in the course of my ministry. It means, I think, that God desires first of all to test our faith, and in the second place to humble us, to make us realize keenly that the power is in His hands. However, when the benediction was pronounced the people still sat in their seats. They would neither go away nor come forward. I concluded that God was working in their hearts, and that His Spirit was striving against their hardness and obstinacy. I began to sign a hymn, "The Saviour is calling thee, sinner," with the refrain, "Jesus will help if you try." I do not think I had concluded the first verse before a young man, seated in a back pew, arose and walked up the aisle to the communion rail. While I was still singing, thirty or forty more followed him. The fact was, that many of the people had been eager to come, and that each was looking to the other to lead the way. The people were calling out in their hearts, as they are always doing, for a leader. I often wonder, in the midst of such experiences, how far it is safe to go in constraining people, and I have come to the conclusion that we may legitimately go a long way farther than any of us have yet gone. Our duty is to bring the people to Christ, and to do so we must use every expedient.

The Tarrytown mission deeply stirred the little town. All the stores, and even the saloons, were closed one night, in order that those employed in them might have an opportunity of attending the meetings. I write in October, 1901, and only a few weeks ago I met at Truro, a lady who was converted in this mission at Tarrytown.

My visit to Denver, Colorado, will live in my memory forever. It meant a journey of two thousand miles across the continent, occupying three nights and two days. American travelling is a luxury, but you have to pay for it. The railway journey over this great territory impressed me just as much as did my voyage across the Atlantic, and I enjoyed it vastly more, because I am a poor sailor. One cannot take such a journey without being impressed by the enormous and almost exhaustless possibilities of the country. It is easy to use the words "exhaustless possibilities," but to realize it, to have it, so to speak, burned into one's mind, one has only to undertake a long journey in the States. Some of the country was flat and dull, but other parts of it were richly wooded. We passed through miles and miles of magnificent forests. Colorado is very high, and is often for months without rain, but it is irrigated from the Rockies, and so great is the natural fertility, that people say, "You tickle the earth, and it smiles into a harvest."

Forty years ago Denver was inhabited by Red Indians, and overrun by buffaloes and other wild animals. It has now a population of about two hundred thousand, with magnificent residences, stores, and churches, and is called the Queen City of the West. The town lies on a plateau five thousand feet above the sea-level. The air is dry, bracing, and wholesome. Mrs. Smith, who was suffering somewhat from bronchitis, was cured at once when we entered Denver. On the other hand, the air had such an effect on my voice that I could speak all right, but I could not sing. However, the people told me that they could not

get good singers to visit Denver on account of this peculiarity of the air. It was very flattering to me to be told that I was suffering from the same disability as affected eminent sopranos, baritones, etc.

I owed my invitation to Denver to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, English people from Torquay, who had settled in the Far West. During my stay in the town they were kindness itself to me. The mission was held in a church which had cost 50,000 to build, and which possessed an organ worth 6,000. The pastor was the Rev. Dr. McIntyre, and he was accustomed to address a congregation of two thousand. I preached every night for a month to daily increasing crowds. Five hundred people knelt at the communion-rail as penitents, one of whom was a China-man. Only the other day he sent me his photograph and a five-dollar bill as a thank-offering for the blessing he had received from the gipsy preacher. The church at Denver was very generous to me, more generous than any other church in America. Our travelling expenses, amounting to 50, were paid for us, and our services during the month were handsomely recognized. If one serves the American churches well, they treat you well. I have been five times to America, and I have never once made a fixed arrangement with regard to the financial side of my missions. I have trusted entirely to the generosity of those for whom I have worked, and only in one instance have I been disappointed.

The sheriff of Denver sat near the platform at one of the services. He pointed out to me a young man who had risen to ask for prayer, but whom I had not seen. "Get that man out while he feels like it!" he said. Of course, I took that to be the act of a Christian man. The morning after, I called on the sheriff and began to talk with him about the man. There was another man in the room who had been at the meeting and had sat next to the sheriff. Presently I observed that they were exchanging significant glances, and I asked what it meant.

"Oh," said the sheriff, "you are talking to me as if I were a Christian man, and I am not."

"I am amazed," I said. "Did you not the other night urge me to get hold of a man who seemed anxious to come out. If you are not a Christian, why did you do that?"

He answered thus: "When I was a boy I attended some revival meetings in our town. My father was a Methodist local preacher for thirty years. During the service my boyish heart was moved, and I wanted so much to be a Christian. I left my father's pew and began to walk to the communion-rail. He saw me on the way and came to meet me.

"What do you want, my son?"

"I am going to the Communion-rail to seek religion."

"Wait till you get home and I will talk to you about it."

"My young desire was crushed. Obedient to my father I went back to my seat. When we reached home he talked to me and prayed with me, but I did not get religion, and I have not got it yet. It has been my firm conviction that if I had been allowed to go to the altar that night I should not only have found Christ as my Saviour, but I should have been in the ministry. And so, whenever I have seen a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, showing a desire to seek God I have given all the encouragement I could."

Mr. Andrew C. Fields was my host at Dobbs Ferry, where I conducted a short mission. At one of the services, as I was telling the story of Zaccheus, and had got to the words, "Zaccheus, come down," Mr. Fields, who sat on a campstool at the back of the church, collapsed on the ground in a heap. In that position he remained until the end of the discourse.

At Dobbs Ferry I had the weird experience of hearing my own voice through the phonograph. I do not want to hear it again. It gives me an uncomfortable feeling—that years after my body is moldering in the grave my voice may be alive, speaking through this dread instrument. Mr. Fields took me to Albany, the capital of New York State, where I was received by the Governor. I was introduced to the legislative assembly of the State, and was requested by the president to open the session with prayer. I expect I shall have a long time to wait before a similar invitation is extended to me from Westminster.