

Autobiography

GIPSY SMITH

1902

1 HIS LIFE AND WORK

1.1 Chapter 27

MY FIFTH VISIT TO AMERICA

I SAILED for New York on New Year's Day, 1896. I had arranged to go straight to Boston and conduct a mission there. This was the only fixed item on my program. I felt that this would be an important mission, and that I ought not to entangle myself with promises of other work until I saw what God was going to do by our hands in that city.

The mission was held in the People's Temple, at the time the largest Protestant church in the city, seating two thousand five hundred people, and possessing school premises which could be added to the church, bringing up the accommodation to three thousand. Mr. James Boyd Brady was the pastor. As I was driving to the house of my host I passed the People's Temple, and I observed a great placard on the building, announcing me as "Gipsy Smith, the greatest evangelist in the world." My first words to the congregation that greeted me at my first service were to disclaim any responsibility for the announcement in front of the church: "I do not feel that I am the greatest evangelist in the world, and you do not believe it. That being so, we will have it taken down." I believe in advertising, but the placard in question was a ridiculous and undignified extravagance of statement. I felt hurt and annoyed as soon as I saw it. My repudiation of it did not a little to win my way into the esteem and affection of the Bostonians. It soon became manifest that a blessed work of grace was being done. The mission was the talk of the city. Those who had known Boston the longest said they had never seen anything like it. The Boston papers wrote about our work in their best style. I was described as the greatest of my kind on earth, "a spiritual phenomenon, an intellectual prodigy, and a musical and oratorical paragon." It seems that in appearance I at once suggested an Italian impresario, that in costume I would have made a good double to Jean de Reske, and that my language might serve as a model for a high churchman!

Several incidents of this mission are, I think, worthy of record. On the morning after the first meeting I was aroused from sleep very early. I was told that there was at the door a man in a very excited state who wished to see me. I requested that he should be brought to my room. He rushed in, waving wildly a copy of the Protestant Standard, which had devoted half a page to our meeting. What have you come to Boston for?" he demanded, angrily. "Can you not leave me alone?" I perceived that my visitor was an old Pottery man, who years before had heard me preach many times. He had deserted his wife and children, and was now living a very sinful life. In the interval, during moments of acute shame and remorse, he had written to his wife in the hope of finding her, but his efforts had been unsuccessful. Either he received no reply or his letters were returned, and he did not know whether she was dead or alive. His conscience seemed to tell him that I had come to Boston to discover and accuse him. "Why can you not leave me alone?" he asked. "Can you not stay at home?" This man had not been at the meeting. But as he was returning from night duty at a large restaurant, he had come across a copy of the Protestant Standard, and had learned that I was in the city. I spoke to him faithfully about the old days, his present condition, his sin and want, and he promised to come to the next meeting. To my joy I observed him among the first who came forward to give themselves to Christ. It was a sincere, absolute surrender, a real conversion. He gave me the name of his wife's parents and the address of the house where he knew her to be living last. I wrote to my brother-in-law, Councillor Ball, of Hanley, giving him all the particulars I could gather. He published an announcement in the local papers and set the police at work, with the result that the wife and family were found. After years of separation she and her children crossed the Atlantic to find the husband and father. She was welcomed with all the old love and the new love that had come to him from the Lord. They are now living happily together, doing a noble work for the Christ who saved them.

One night, going to church, I jumped into a car. Sitting beside me was a lady with a pair of opera-glasses in her hand. She was not going to church. People do not take opera-glasses to church. I suppose they think that they see enough of the parson without them. Presently a lady on her way to my meeting entered the car and said to me, "What are you going to preach about to-night, Mr. Smith?" "Wait and see," I answered. If you tell the people what you are going to talk about, they can fortify themselves. Glorious surprises are what we need in our preaching more and more. Some men will never be saved unless they are taken off their guard. However, I said to my questioner, "We shall have nearly three thousand people to-night, and whether we preach or not we shall certainly pray. And the burden of our prayer will be, 'O Lord, send down upon us the Holy Ghost.'" "Sir, sir," said the lady with the opera-glasses, "are you not afraid something will happen if you pray like that?" "Oh, not at all," I said, "not afraid; we hope something will happen. We are going to church because we expect something will happen."

When the month was finished it was evident that we could not stop the work. It would have been a sin so to do. Fortunately, having a presentiment

that this was going to be a great and noble mission, I had kept myself free from other engagements. The four weeks extended into seven. On the fifth Sunday morning I preached to a crowded congregation on "Be filled with the Spirit," and at the close of the sermon a memorable, and indeed indescribable, scene was witnessed. Dr. Brady rose, and, in tones of deep emotion, said, "The sermon this morning has been for my own soul. I feel my need of the experience of which our brother has been speaking, and I am going down to that communion-rail for myself. I am going there to seek my Pentecost. I shall never be able to rear the young souls that have been brought to God during this mission unless I am filled with the Spirit." Presently between two hundred and three hundred people from all parts of the church were kneeling at the communion-rail on both sides of their pastor. When we dispersed we all felt that we had seen strange things that day. During this week I addressed the divinity students of the Methodist College on "Soul-winning." I had also the distinction of being invited to speak to the students of Harvard University, an invitation which is only given on very rare occasions. The one hour of the day I was free was from 6.30 to 7.30, the dinner hour of the students, but they were willing to set that aside in order to hear me, and we had a happy meeting.

As a result of the mission eight hundred persons were received into the church on probation. I was three times asked to become pastor in succession to Dr. Brady when his term of the pastorate was fulfilled. The people were willing to free me during three or four months every year for evangelistic work, to give me an assistant and a handsome salary. But I did not see my way to accept their offer.

My next mission was held in the Metropolitan Episcopal Church at Washington, of which Dr. Hugh Johnstone was then pastor. When the President of the United States is a Methodist he attends this church, as do also almost all the Methodist Congressmen. Dr. Milburn, the blind man eloquent, and chaplain to the Senate, is also a member of the Metropolitan congregation. Dr. Milburn and I became good friends. I chanced to mention in the course of an address that I was not ordained. At once the old man rose, and, placing his hands upon my shoulders, said, "I will ordain you—without a question."

Dr. Milburn told me the interesting story of how he became chaplain to the Senate. As a young man he had been preaching in the far West, and was returning to the East on one of the river steamers. Among the passengers were a number of Senators and members of the House of Representatives who spent their time in gambling and in fearful swearing. Dr. Milburn (Mr. Milburn he then was) was invited to conduct a religious service in the saloon on Sunday morning, and the Congressmen were among his congregation. He rebuked them sternly and faithfully for their gambling and swearing, and asked if their conduct was such as became men who were the representatives and the lawmakers of the nation. After the service Dr. Milburn retreated to his cabin. The men whom he had rebuked were wild fellows from the South and West. He expected every moment to receive a visit from some of them, bearing a challenge. He had reckoned on this likelihood before he had preached his sermon. Presently there was a knock at the door. "Here it is," said Dr. Milburn to himself; "sure enough,

what I expected. They have come to challenge me. I expect I shall get a severe handling. May God help me to be faithful." Several tall, awkward, fierce looking men stalked in. But there was no fight in them. They ranged themselves up before the doctor, meekly confessed that they had deserved his rebuke, thanked him for his sermon, and asked him if he would allow them to nominate him as chaplain to the Senate. Dr. Milburn was as delighted as he was surprised, and readily consented to be nominated. Thus he was elected to the post which he has filled with such conspicuous ability and dignity for nearly sixty years.

Dr. Johnstone entered into the work most heartily. He sank himself entirely in order that I might have the best possible chance. The church, which holds fifteen hundred people, was crowded at the very first service. An amusing and somewhat awkward incident occurred. I was preaching on "Lifting the lame man at the gate of the Temple." The church has no pulpit, only an open rostrum, with not even a rail in front. "If," I said, "you want to lift anybody, you must stand on solid ground yourself," and thereupon I stepped off the platform, falling a distance of three or four feet. I flatter myself that I have always been rather quick in extricating myself from an awkward situation, so after I had risen I said to the people, "That was not as solid as I thought. You are witness to this, that I fall sometimes, but"—marching quietly back to the rostrum—"I get up again." Next day a Washington paper stated that Gipsy Smith illustrated his own sermons. The mission lasted for three weeks. Every night the communion-rail was crowded. It was a very pleasant thing to see eminent doctors, business men, and Congressmen kneeling by the side of the anxious inquirers, encouraging and directing them.

Dr. Milburn presented me to President Cleveland at the White House, told him about me and my work, and invited him to my lecture on my life story. The President said that if they had known sooner, he and his wife would gladly have come, but that their present arrangements made it impossible.

I was taken by my friends, Mr. and Mrs. Washburn, to Mount Vernon to see the room in which Washington died, and the tomb in which he is laid. At the sepulchre we came across an old colored man who had formerly been a slave. Mr. Washburn asked him if he had read about Gipsy Smith, the evangelist.

"Oh yes!"

"Well," said Mr. Washburn, pointing to me, "that is the man."

"Oh, is that the man?" inquired the old Negro. Whereupon he came up to me and said, "My young brudder, I loves de Lord, too!"

"That is right!"

"I preaches, too."

"Good!"

"I preaches nearly every Sunday to my people."

"I hope you have a good time?"

"Oh yes, I have, and let me tell you this—when next you preaches just you give the people what they need, not what they axes for."

For the second time I took a journey across the continent to Denver and preached to great crowds in the Coliseum, a building seated for between three and four thousand people. Everywhere I found striking and enduring results of

my former mission there. Converts were standing well, and many were good workers in the churches. I was the guest of my dear friends, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas.

The feature of the mission was the restoration of a large number of backsliders. Many persons had come out to Denver from the Eastern States with their certificate of church membership in their pockets, but they had never produced them and had gradually drifted away from church connection.

Twelve years ago Denver was growing at the rate of two thousand people a month. The Rocky Mountains, twenty miles off, are rich in minerals—gold, silver, copper, and lead. The climate is most delightful and most healthful. The doctors in the Eastern States send their consumptive patients to Denver, where they are often restored to health. Many fortunes have been made in Denver and many lost. On the occasion of my first visit a rich man in the town offered to pay me a handsome salary, to provide me with a permanent railway car sumptuously fitted up in which I might travel across the country, accompanied by a troupe of singers, conducting evangelistic meetings in the great towns.

When I returned to Denver ill fortune had overtaken him, and he was earning his living by keeping a restaurant in New York. The decline in the value of silver has seriously diminished the prosperity of Denver, but I believe that in years to come it will be one of the great cities of the world.

The physical peculiarity of the place is the remarkable clearness of the air. With the naked eye you can see a two-hundred-mile stretch of the Rocky Mountains. A good story is told to illustrate the trick that this clarity of the atmosphere plays with one's estimates of distance. A tourist living in a hotel at Denver rose early in the morning and told the waiter he would take a walk to the Rockies and back before breakfast.

"You will never do it," said the waiter; "it is twenty miles to the Rockies."

"Nonsense," said the tourist, "don't you try to fool me; they are just across the fields there."

"All right," said the waiter; "you know best. But I tell you it is too far for you."

The tourist set out, crossed the fields, walked on, and on, and on, and still he did not come to the Rockies. A party was sent out in search of him. They discovered him standing on this side of a stream, stripping off his clothes in order that he might swim over it.

"Why," said the leader, "what are you doing? You can step across that stream."

"Oh," said the tourist, with a knowing wink, "you won't take me in again. I know how deceptive your distances are in this darned State; I know I shall have to swim over this."

I can tell one or two good little stories about this American tour. At Boston I lived with a couple whose only child was a little boy who slept in a cot in his parents' bedroom. In the night he fell out of bed, and at once his two loving parents, hearing his cry, jumped up to place him in his cot again, and met over his prostrate form. At breakfast his father teased him about this accident. He said, "Johnnie, do you know why you fell out of bed last night?"

"No, father, I don't."

"Well, the reason is this: you slept too near to where you get out."

The youngster received this explanation in silence. Pondering deeply for a few minutes, he suddenly exclaimed, "Father, the reason you gave for my falling out of bed last night was not the right one. I know why I fell out."

"Well, my son, why did you?"

"Because I slept too near where I got in."

When addressing young converts I always draw a moral from this story. If they desire to remain in their Christian life let them get well in.

Mrs. Margaret Bottome, the founder of the King's Daughters, during this visit told me a story which illustrates the same point. She was walking along the front at a seaside place. A young friend enjoying himself in a small boat beckoned to her and asked if she would like a sail. Mrs. Bottome said, "Yes," and the boat was brought in to the side. Mrs. Bottome, in essaying to step in, touched the boat with her left foot and at once it skidded off some distance into the water. Back again the young fellow rowed. This time Mrs. Bottome touched the boat with her right foot and again it sped off some distance. When the youth brought his boat alongside the third time, he exclaimed to Mrs. Bottome, "Why don't you come in, all of you?"

If young converts wish to maintain their religious life strong, fresh, and secure, they must throw the whole of themselves into it they must hold nothing back.

I met Miss Fanny Crosby, the well-known hymn-writer, at New York. Many of her compositions appear in the Free-Church Mission Hymnal, but her identity is there disguised by her married name, Mrs. F. J. Van Alstyne. Miss Crosby is seventy years of age, a very tiny woman, and quite blind.

At one of my meetings, sitting on the platform beside me, she heard me sing a hymn of hers:

"Like a bird on the deep, far away from its nest, I wandered, my Saviour, from Thee, But Thy dear loving voice called me home to Thy breast, And I knew there was welcome for me."

When I had finished Miss Crosby said: "Brother Smith, I did not know there was as much in that song. You have broken me all up." Speaking about her blindness, she said, "I would not see with these natural eyes if I might, because I should miss much that I already see."