

Lives that Lift

C L Paddock 1935



From Gypsy Tent to Pulpit

On March 31, 1860, there was born in a gypsy tent, near Epping Forest in England, a little boy, who was to become one of the world's greatest preachers. No one who looked on the little dark-eyed fellow in his humble tent-home that March day would have prophesied that the child would ever become a preacher, for gypsies, as a rule, know little about God or religion. But during one of Ira D. Sankey's visits to England, he drove to Epping Forest and visited a gypsy encampment. As he talked to the boys he picked out one from the rest, and placing his hand upon his head, said, "The Lord make a preacher of you, my boy!" That boy was Rodney Smith.

Rodney's father made baskets, clothes-pegs, and tinware and it was the work of the mother and children to sell these wares. The gypsy women also spent much time in telling fortunes for the "gorgios," or white people.

The gypsies were always on the move, traveling about in wagons, pitching their tents for a few days at a time by the roadside near some village or city and then moving on to a new locality.

Speaking of his boyhood, Rodney Smith says, "I had no education, and no knowledge of 'gorgio' civilization, and I grew up as wild as the birds, and frolicsome as the lambs, and as difficult to catch as the rabbits. All the grasses and flowers and trees of the field and all living things were my friends and companions. Some of them, indeed got almost too familiar with me. The rabbits, for instance, were so fond of me that they sometimes followed me home. I think I learned then to have a sympathetic nature if I learned nothing else."

When Rodney was just a little fellow as the gypsy wagon traveled through Hertfordshire, the mother contracted smallpox and died. The whole family was overwhelmed with grief. Speaking of this experience, he says, "Even now I can close my eyes and see that gypsy tent and wagon in the lane. The fire is burning outside on the ground, and the kettle is hanging over it in true gypsy fashion, and a bucket of water is standing near by. Some clothes my father has been washing are hanging on the hedge. Suddenly I heard my name called: 'Rodney!' and running to see what I was wanted for, I encountered my sister Emily. She said to me, 'Rodney, mother's dead!' I remember

falling on my face in the lane as though I had been shot, and weeping my heart out and saying to myself, 'I shall never be like other boys, for I have no mother!' "

In the afternoon the coffin was placed outside the tent on two chairs, waiting for darkness to fall, for she was only a gypsy and must be buried in the dead of night. While the father and his five motherless children were waiting and weeping around the coffin, their tent caught fire and all their earthly possessions were burned to ashes. That night between ten and eleven o'clock the mother was quietly laid to rest in Norton churchyard, near Baldock.

When the mother was dying she was heard to sing,

"I have a Father in the promised land.
My God calls me, I must go
To meet Him in the Promised Land."

On being asked where she had heard this song she said as a little girl she had followed some children into Sunday school and heard the words. Her death brought a change in the life of the father, and not long afterwards he accepted Christianity.

The tender regard the children had for their mother is shown in a touching little incident connected with a visit to her grave. It was Rodney and his sister Tilly who were involved. They wandered away from the camp -one day determined to find their mother's grave. After a long journey up the lane and across the fields, they located Norton churchyard and the grave was pointed out to them.

"When we found it," says Gypsy Smith, "Tilly and I stood over it weeping for a long time, and then we gathered primrose and violet roots and planted them on the top. And we stood there long into the afternoon. The women from the cottages gave us food, and then it started to our memory that it was late, and that father would be wondering where we were. So I said, 'Tilly, we must go home,' and we both got on our knees beside the grave and kissed it. Then we turned our backs upon it and walked away.

"When we reached the gates that led out of the churchyard, we looked back again, and I said to Tilly, 'I wonder whether we can do anything for mother?' I suddenly remembered that I had with me a gold-headed scarf-pin which someone had given me. It was the only thing that I ever had of any value. Rushing back to the grave, upon the impulse and inspiration of the moment, I stuck the scarf-pin into the ground as far as I could, and hurrying back to Tilly, I said, 'There, I have given my gold pin to my mother.' It was all I had to give."

One morning two gypsy wagons were seen approaching the Smith encampment. They were driven by Mr. Smith's two brothers, whom he had not seen for a long time. It was a happy, joyous meeting. Before long the three brothers were working together for God.

A visit which Rodney made with his father to Bedford, the home of John Bunyan, had a telling influence on the boy's life. He was deeply impressed as he heard the people speak of Bunyan, the tinker, who had been a great sinner, but who had been converted, and through his goodness had become great. Each day, while in Bedford, he visited Bunyan's monument, gazing with worshipful admiration at the statue. As he stood and gazed he thought, "Shall I always live in my gypsy tent and spend a life of uselessness?"

In the house of Bunyan, he "stood and wept," and longed to find the same Jesus that had made Bunyan the good man he was. In his autobiography he says, "I never lost sight in my mind's eye of the bright visions that visited me while I was in Bedford."

One evening as Rodney sat alone on an old stump near his father's wagon, God spoke to him in a definite way. As he sat there in the deepening twilight, under conviction, he asked himself the question, "Rodney, are you going to wander about as a gypsy boy and a gypsy man without hope, or will you be a Christian and have some definite object to live for?"

There was stillness for a moment as he pondered the question, and then he replied, aloud, "By the grace of God I will be a Christian and I will meet my mother in heaven!" There alone, in the stillness of eventide, with no excitement or emotion, he made a decision that molded his life and made him one of the great preachers of his time.

With his conversion came an intense desire to learn to read and write. He had not had the privilege of attending school and could only spell and understand words of one syllable. One day he stood on the sidewalk staring at a brewer's sign board, wondering what its glittering letters said. He asked a lady who was passing by if she would read the sign for him. She read the words for him and encouraged him with a pat on the head and the words, "You will get on some day!"

His ambition now was to become a minister, and he carried under his arm wherever he went a Bible, a Bible dictionary, and an ordinary dictionary, even though he could not read them. When his brother and sisters laughed at him his reply was, "I'm going to read them some day, and to preach, too."

Determined to learn to preach, he entered a turnip patch one Sunday morning and preached long and eloquently to the turnip congregation. Not one of his audience left while he talked! He often preached as he walked along the road.

This desire to be a preacher grew with each passing day. One Sunday morning when he was about seventeen, he arose early, resolved that he would preach to someone during the day. Dressing himself in his Sunday best he stationed himself by the roadside and preached to the "gorgios" or white people as they went by to church. The gist of his talk was that he had found the Saviour and loved Him, and wanted everyone else to love Him too.

A little later General Booth recognized the latent possibilities of the Gypsy boy and asked him if he would leave his gypsy home, father, sisters, and brother, and be an evangelist. He had never heard that word before, but when the General had explained what it meant, he accepted the offer without hesitation, feeling it was the opportunity he had been praying for.

If he was to be a minister, he must dress accordingly, so he went to the clothier's and bought a frock coat, a vest, and a pair of striped trousers. The first time he put them on he said he felt as if he had been "dipped in starch and hung up by the hair of the head to dry."

There were tears shed as he left his father's tent, for that lowly tent was as dear to him as a castle would have been to a prince of royal blood.

Arriving at his new home in the city just at the time of the evening meal, new difficulties had to be met. Never before had he eaten from a table nor used a knife and fork. A neatly folded napkin by his plate was taken to be a handkerchief. But his host and hostess were kind and patient. After supper and prayers, more lessons were to be learned. His friends offered to show him to his apartment. That was another new word and he wondered what it might mean. They showed him to his room, and when he was inside closed the door. He felt as if he were in a jail, a prisoner, and knew he would suffocate before morning. Surely he could never stay in there all night. It was so different from his gypsy tent in the open air, with only a blue sky for the ceiling.

Many young people would have lost heart, but not Rodney. He conquered each new difficulty as it arose, determined that he would succeed.

When left alone in his room, he looked at the bed and its spotless white coverings, and for the life of him he could not decide the best way to get into it.

Finally he backed off just as far as he could until his back was against the farthest wall and then took a run and jump, landing in the middle of the bed. He slept only a few snatches during the night. Each time he did fall asleep he dreamt of his father's tent and wagon.

In his work he was called upon to conduct services alone, and here a new obstacle confronted him. He was studying every moment he could spare, but could not yet read a chapter through because of the big words. He thought at first of asking someone to read the Scriptures for him. Then he thought of spelling out the difficult words and letting his audience pronounce them for him, but came to the conclusion these plans would not be the best. So he finally decided upon the plan of reading carefully and deliberately until he saw a long word looming in sight. He would then stop just before reaching the word and make some comment on the text, and when he began reading again, would start on the other side of the big word. In this way he saved himself much embarrassment until he had learned to read.

Calls began to come from various parts of England asking him to come to this or that place to labor. From many of his meetings he was carried home a distance of one or two miles on the shoulders of some of his hearers.

He visited America a number of times. He went to France, and to Australia. In some places he was introduced as "the world's greatest preacher." Through his ministry thousands were won to Christ and lived a new life.

In looking back over his life he says, "As I look back over my forty years of evangelistic service, my amazement grows at the thought of what Christ can do with the poorest instrument. I cannot explain it. I can only say with Paul, 'When I am weak, then am I strong.'"

Two of his dearest treasures, he says, "are two pictures on the wall of my bedroom. One is the picture of the wagon in which my mother died, and the other a picture of a group of Gypsies. I never sleep in that room without saying to myself: 'Rodney, you would have been there today but for the grace of God. Glory be to His name for ever. "

Few men have had less advantages, and few have met, or will meet, with more hindrances and obstacles.

