

A Y.M.C.A. Founder.

THE LATE MR. WILLIAM CREESE.

By REV. RICHARD GLOVER, M.A.

In his Epistle to the Philippians (ch. 4. 3) St. Paul sends his affectionate greetings to certain unnamed "women who laboured with him and with Clement in the Gospel," "to other of his fellow labourers whose names were in the Book of Life." They were "ministers" in the ecclesiastical sense of the term, nor are their names known, nor are there any biographies extant recording their lives. Nevertheless, they did most useful service for the Church by their uncelebrated ministries, and it was recorded with their names "in the Book of Life."

Such a minister of Christ and of His Word, though the title "Rev." was not affixed to his name, was the subject of this sketch, the late Mr. William Creese, of Teddington. At that peaceful little village, nestled at the foot of the Cotswold Hills, and within view of the beautiful range of the Malvern Hills, was he born, on Nov. 10, 1821. In the same house, for the greater part of his life, he lived as the farmer of about 1,000 acres; and in it he also died, in his eighty-ninth year.

As I was his school-fellow (though I was his junior by six years) and intimate friend throughout his life, I have been requested to write some account of him for the readers of THE CHRISTIAN, and I now do so with great pleasure. The chief point of interest connected with him is that he was one of the founders of that noble institution, the Young Men's Christian Association, in conjunction with the late Sir George Williams.

In the interesting "Life of Sir George Williams" there appears, together with his portrait, a facsimile of the first Members' Ticket bearing his signature "William Creese," as its first honorary secretary. It is wonderful to think that he should have lived to see the day when that little Association had expanded into an Institution that "hath gone into all the world," with branches in nearly every city and town in Great Britain, her Colonies and America; and numbering its membership by millions.

My acquaintance with Mr. Creese began in boyhood, for, as I have said, we were co-scholars at a boarding-school in the village of Cleve. After leaving school he was apprenticed to the drapery business, at the large establishment of Messrs. Shier, Debenham and Co. in the Promenade, Cheltenham. During this time he was a regular attendant at the Parish Church, under the faithful and able Evangelical ministry of Rev. Francis Close, late Dean of Carlisle, which was blessed to his conversion. He used often in after-years to point friends to the very pew and seat in which he gave his heart to God.

At the same period my home was in Cheltenham, and I, too, had the privilege of attending the same faithful ministry, and of being prepared by Mr. Close for my confirmation. I thank God that his ministry was also blessed to my own salvation, in my boyhood. And within the limited circle of my own acquaintance, I knew several other young men to whose conversion Mr. Close's ministry was instrumental—and among them some who afterwards became clergymen and able preachers of the Gospel themselves. One was, as he

himself informed me, the eloquent Rev. John Hutton Crowder, who succeeded the late Archbishop Magee as the minister of the Octagon Chapel, Bath.

After my friend's apprenticeship, he entered the large establishment of Hitchcock & Co., in St. Paul's-churchyard, in London, and it was in a small "upper room" in that house that the Y.M.C.A. was born.

Our mighty river Thames, that bears our ships of commerce on their way to the uttermost parts of the earth, has its source in the "Seven Springs" that trickle up in the Cotswold Hills, a few miles from Teddington; and as I have stood in that "upper room" I have felt that it was not unlike them, for out of it have sprung the Y.M.C.A.'s of many lands. And it is worthy of note, as illustrating how great results may come out of very humble beginnings, that the movement did not originate with bishops, or clergy, or ministers of any denomination, but with a few pious young drapers' assistants, who felt an anxiety for the souls of young men in their own position. For Sir George Williams himself,



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Photo: Bennett Clarke, Wolverhampton.

who was the leading spirit of the movement, was not at that time a partner in the firm, but only an assistant like the rest.

Soon after the formation of the Association, Mr. Creese's father died, and he had to return to Teddington to succeed to the management of the large farm, and there he continued for the rest of his life. He had not long settled there when his anxiety for the souls around him was as manifest as it was in London, and his home became a centre of Christian influence to the village and to the neighbourhood.

He conducted family prayer every morning and evening, and at the evening service a hymn was always sung, in which the servants joined. He held a Sunday-school for the village children, in the conduct of which he was assisted by the ladies of the family, including his good wife, who died many years before him. As there was only one service each Sunday at the parish church, which he and the family attended—he being its churchwarden—and at which he usually read the Lessons, he held an evening service for the

cottagers in his farm kitchen, which he conducted himself, and always preached a sermon. There was quite "an unction from the Holy One" in his manner; and his sermons, plain in language, were full of the marrow of the Word. The manner was quiet, but very impressive, from the felt reality and known goodness of the speaker. I have myself preached at that service; but on more than one occasion have I attended while he conducted it and preached, and the experience brought to my mind on such occasions these beautiful words of his favourite Cowper:—

When one that holds communion with the skies
Hath filled his urn where those proud waters rise
And once more mingles with us meaner things,
'Tis e'en as if an angel shook his wings;
Immortal fragrance fills the circuit wide,
That tells us whence his treasures are supplied.

Mr. Creese used also sometimes to preach in the neighbouring villages. Once, when I was vicar of the large parish of St. Luke's, West Holloway, he came and conducted a week's mission in my parochial hall for the poor people of the Metropolitan Cattle Market, and he did so with much acceptance. But it was his beautiful, consistent Christian character that told, even more than his labours in these ways. It was testified to by the whole neighbourhood, even in the adjacent town of Tewkesbury, where he was well known. He was not only the president of its branch of the Y.M.C.A., but also an influential Guardian of the poor, and District Councillor, while his younger brother, who recently predeceased him, was for many years the manager of one of its principal banks.

His death was in beautiful accord with his peaceful life, for he passed away in his sleep. And he had his wish, to die in harness, for he took his usual kitchen service the Sunday evening before he died—a service that he had conducted for over half a century.

He left no child; so the farmhouse in which it was held may pass out of the family. But it is hoped that it may continue to be a radiator of Christian influence. It always seemed to me an ideal Christian home. It always had a succession of nephews, nieces, and friends, and peace and love seemed to be its atmosphere. The niece who managed the household after his wife's death for many years said: "I never felt I had lost my mother while he was here; and truly he was

father, mother, sister, and brother all in one."

Such homes are, after all, among the best of the "Evidences of Christianity." They show that the Gospel can produce quite little heavens upon earth, and that its *bonds* result in that only true *liberty* wherewith Christ makes His people free.

Space fails, but it is important to add that he attributed his good health and longevity to the fact that he was a life-long abstainer and non-smoker. Such a life of godliness and usefulness is also a striking instance of the blessedness of early piety. "Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God."

One Thing Needful.—A ship may be built of the strongest oak, with masts of the stoutest pine, and manned by the best of officers and crew; but I sail not in her if she lacks one thing—that trembling needle which the child running about the deck might fancy to be a toy; on that plaything, as it looks, the safety of all on board depends. Lacking that one thing the ship will be a coffin, and the deep sea a grave. It is thus with true piety, with living faith.—*Thomas Guthrie.*