

The Passionate Few

By F.W. Boreham

How can we win the wide, wide world for Christ? There is a question for you! In my quest for an answer, I may seem to have forgotten my starting point and to be whole infinities from my goal; but I fancy I shall return from my gipsyings laden with clues that will make the solution of this stately problem less difficult.

As a small boy I once lost an India-rubber ball. In searching the hedges and ditches in quest of my toy, I found, in the long rank grass by the side of the road, a valuable necklace. This kind of thing happens very frequently. Just such an experience befell me yesterday. I had bought Mr. Arnold Bennett's *Literary Taste*. Just as, in the old day, I sought for a ball in the grass, so, in this volume, I was hoping for something that would equip me with a nicer discrimination in the choice of books, with a keener insight into, and enjoyment of, their salient qualities. But just as, in the old lane, I found the necklace instead of the ball, so, in Mr. Bennett's book, I came upon a store of much more precious treasure. It is my eagerness to share my newly discovered hoard that has driven me to my desk.

For the 3rd chapter of Mr. Arnold Bennett's book is entitled 'Why a Classic is a Classic'. Why, that is to say, do certain names—Milton, Dickens, Wordsworth, Macaulay and the like—stand out so majestically on the literary horizon? Obviously, they are in a class by themselves; but how did they get there? How was their commanding eminence obtained? And how is it maintained? To simplify the issue, Mr. Arnold Bennett takes, by way of example, a concrete and clear-cut case. How, he asks, does Shakespeare hold his supremacy year after year?

The supremacy of Shakespeare! The question interests me, not merely as a student of literature, but as a minister of the everlasting gospel. As I have implied in my opening question, the dominant ambition of the Church is to make Christ as supreme in the life of the world as Shakespeare is in the literature of the world. And as I peruse Mr. Arnold Bennett's arresting and suggestive pages, I find that he has much to teach me.

Mr. Bennett begins by dividing humanity sharply into two classes. There is the crowd. The splendor of Shakespeare's fame does not rest, Mr. Bennett insists, on the attitude of the populace. The average man—the man in the street—cares little or nothing of Shakespeare at school; the ordeal has left no pleasant memories: and, as a result, the very name of Shakespeare now fills him with a sense of tedium and boredom. It is not by the unthinking multitude that the luster of Shakespeare's name is maintained.

It is maintained, Mr. Bennett insists, by the passionate few. The phrase is his own, and he repeats it in sentence after sentence. 'The fame of classical authors is made and maintained by a passionate few.' 'It is by the passionate few that the renown of genius is kept alive from one generation to another.' And so on: Mr. Bennett's pages are peppered with the phrase. Everything depends on the passionate few.

Now in the loftier realm with which I, as a minister, am concerned, I find this philosophy strangely impressive and wonderfully comforting. I am not to be too much alarmed by the stony indifference of the crowd. I am not to become too much discouraged or dismayed by the apathy of the multitude. On the contrary, I am to regard that vast and seething mass as the raw material on which I am to operate: it represents the new world that I am called to conquer.

The really important thing is the creation of a passionate few, and, the more the numbers of that nucleus multiply, and the more passionate those passionate souls become, the greater will grow the glory of that Name that must eventually cause every other name to pale.

A passionate few! Everything depends, then, on intensity of emotion. Mr. Bennett shows that the small body of Shakespearean admirers who secure the permanence of his fame and the triumph of his name owe their success to the fact that, although relatively few, they are a passionate few. All really great literature, Mr. Bennett says, is the agreeable articulation of deep and profound feeling. He takes two such unlikely books as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Dr. Johnson's famous *Dictionary*, and reveals the wealth of rich and poignant sentiment that both authors poured into their works. If that is true of histories and lexicons, how much more must it be true of romances and lyrics?

It follows that those who read intelligently and sympathetically the works that have been born of an author's passion will feel, as they turn his pages, the glow of that spiritual flame. They will be infected by the subtle agitation of the writers, and every reader thus infected represents an addition to the ranks of the passionate few. The best reader is the man who best catches the spirit of the writer. That being so, the true Wordsworthian will catch the contagion of Wordsworth's intensity; the Miltonian will weep with Milton over the loss of *Paradise*; the true Shakespearean will feel as Shakespeare felt when he rose, swept by a hurricane of emotion, from the drama that he had just penned. Professor A. W. Ward says that, after describing the death of little Nell, Dickens walked about for days like a man bereft and distraught: nobody can claim to have really read *The Old Curiosity Shop* unless he has shared that grief with the author. It is thus that the passion of the passionate few is generated.

Now if that passion, caught from the hot heart of the author, explains the enthusiasm of Shakespeareans for Shakespeare and of Wordsworthians for Wordsworth, and how much more convincingly is the devotion of Christians to Christ explained! In a sense much more vital than the sense in which the Shakespearean has been in touch with Shakespeare, the Christian is in touch with Christ. For, when all is said and done, the fact remains that Shakespeare slumbers in his honored grave at Stratford, whilst Christ is radiantly and victoriously alive! There is, it is true, a passion in the soul of Shakespeare that communicates itself to Shakespeareans through his works; but what is this to the divine passion in the soul of Jesus—the celestial flame in which they are caught who enter into immediate communion with Him?

But we have not yet approached the sternly practical aspect of the matter—the aspect that may conceivably lead us to an answer to our opening question. Mr. Bennett says that the fame of Shakespeare is kept alive by the passionate few. But how? The answer is that they do it in three ways.

1. They do it by means of their own blissful enjoyment of Shakespeare. Their enjoyment, I repeat. They not only study Shakespeare: they revel in him, luxuriate in him, glory in him. They are never more happy than when they are reading in one of his dramas or seeing it played. They chuckle in solitude over the delicious drolleries of Shakespeare's clowns: they shudder in secret at the tremendous and gripping horror of Shakespeare's tragedies: they find their eyes moistening as they recall Shakespeare's touches of exquisite pathos. They daily become more quick in their discernment of Shakespearean beauty; more rapturous in their appreciation of Shakespearean grandeur; more retentive in their memory of Shakespearean music. Shakespeare becomes the light of their eyes and the breath of their nostrils. In a word, they really love Shakespeare, and the deepening of their knowledge only intensifies their devotion.

2. But passion is ever articulate. These passionate people, being passionate about the same things, naturally become gregarious. How can they help talking to one another of those qualities that they adore in common? They feel the magnetism of each other's presence; they seek each other's society; and they delight in the luxury of pouring into each other's ears the passages of which they themselves are most enamored. If one sees another in a tramcar or a railway train, he straightway takes a seat by his side and, before they know where they are, they are gossiping about Juliet or Rosalind or Jessica or Lady Macbeth.

3. Nor do they talk merely to one another. They talk Shakespeare to those who have no affection for Shakespeare. At first, such casual listeners are frigidly unimpressed. But, when first one and then another of the passionate few tell them of the ceaseless pleasure and the enormous profit that they derive from their Shakespearean researches, they are startled out of their carelessness, pull themselves together, and resolve to make the acquaintance of the bard for themselves. No man, Mr. Bennett confesses, can prove to his fellowman that Shakespeare is a great artist. But he can speak of Shakespeare in so winsome and persuasive a way that he piques the curiosity and whets the appetite of his indifferent companion. 'If this man,' that companion reasons with himself, 'if this man finds such a fountain of felicity in the dramas of Shakespeare, I must surely be missing something!' And so, on his way home from business, he buys a copy of Antony and Cleopatra or King Lear or, after the evening meal, takes his wife to see The Merchant of Venice or Hamlet, and so, for the rest of his life, he becomes an ardent Shakespearean. Thus the passionate few is augmented. Moreover, he cannot keep his newly-found enjoyment to himself. He talks of it at the office, at the club, and at the fireside. His friends and cronies contract the contagion of his enthusiasm. And thus the passionate few becomes less few; the apathetic multitude become less multitudinous; and Shakespeare comes to his own.

In point of fact, therefore, a classic is a classic because of its inherent ability to win for its author the passive respect of the great unmoved multitude and the active and profound affection of a passionate few—a passionate few who, though small relatively to the entire community, are yet considerable in number. And Shakespeare stands supreme among the classics because, possessing these qualities in a superlative degree, his own claims upon the admiration of the ages make it more easy in his case than in any other for the passionate few to elicit the enthusiasm of the crowd.

Here, then, are the three secrets that may help me to a solution of the problem with which we set out! Along these lines the world may be won for Milton, for Dickens, for Shakespeare—or for Christ!

1. If I would win the world for Christ I must really love Christ and enjoy Him. I must out-distance in my devotion to Him the affection of the most ardent Shakespearean for Shakespeare. I must revel and luxuriate in the very thought of Him as Shakespeare's passionate few exult in meditating about Shakespeare. The man who would win the world for Christ—one of Christ's passionate few—must walk the city streets secretly exulting in the thought of his Savior: he will repeat to himself the name of his Lord as a lover repeats to himself the lovely name of his lady.

*O Jesus, Jesus, dearest Lord,
Forgive me if I say,
For very love, Thy precious Name
A thousand times a day.*

Each separate member of the passionate few will find his faith so enjoyable, so delectable, so exciting that the very mention of his Savior's name will awaken all his enthusiasm, stir all his

devotion, inflame all the faculties of his soul, and shine out lustroously from his very countenance.

2. Enjoying Christ to this extent, the passionate few will naturally and instinctively gravitate toward each other. The herd instinct will be sublimated by spirituality. The relish with which Shakespeareans discuss Shakespeare will be pale and spectral gratification compared with the burning zest with which these happy people will speak to each other of their Lord. The house in which they meet will be a heavenly banquet. Nothing will be more delightful to each than to tell the others of his own joyous experience of the Savior's grace and to hear, in return, of the sublime satisfaction that those others have found in drinking at the same celestial streams.

3. And what more natural, what more inevitable, than that each of those so infected should seize any opportunity of communicating the secret of his gladness to those whose enthusiasm has never been kindled. To them, as yet, Christ is a root out of a dry ground, having neither form nor comeliness, nor any beauty that they should desire Him. But when a dear and trusted friend tells with shining face and glowing tongue of all that Christ has meant to him, the surprised listener is profoundly impressed. As a natural consequence, he seeks the Savior for himself, and, through years of happy pilgrimage, finds Him the chiefest among ten thousand and the altogether lovely.

Somebody has said that the fame of Charles Lamb and of Doctor Johnson rests on the singular fact that those who knew them love to talk about them. A subtle secret lies there. It was when John Bunyan, with the pots and pans in one hand and his basket of tools in the other, stood leaning against the wall, drinking in the conversation of the four poor women sitting in the sun, that his great moment came. They told one another with ecstasy, and even excitement, of all that Christ had done for their regenerated souls, and of the transfiguration that He had wrought in their lives. Bunyan was astonished beyond measure: he could not shake off the impression created by their joyous enthusiasm: and, as a result, he turned his own face to the Cross and found salvation. It is thus, and thus alone, that the luster of the Savior's renown can be established: it is thus, and thus alone, that the final triumph can be won.

Discussion Questions:

1. Boreham says the first step to spreading the name of Christ is to fall madly in love with Him. What can we do to deepen our love for Jesus?
2. The second step is revel in that love with our brothers and sisters in Christ. How can we share this passion with our brothers and sisters? What are some conversation starters we can use often to spark that level of conversation?
3. What topics are we tempted to talk about with more enthusiasm than our love for Christ?
4. The final step, according to Boreham, is to share this passion with the passionless. How can we live curiously, so as to whet the appetite of those who don't know Jesus?
5. Who are you going to share your enthusiasm for Christ with this week? How will you do it?