

THE EXPERIENCES OF A CHURCH PLATE.

BY THE REV. P. B. POWER, M.A.*



FOR thoroughly enjoyable and artistic humour, commend us to Mr. Power. He is one of the raciest writers we know. The pamphlet of which we intend to give the substance is a very good specimen of Mr. Power's style, and we would gladly give it in full, but space will not permit.

The Church Plate is supposed to be writing its autobiography, and introduces us to a wealthy merchant, Mr. Oilstone, who readily gives £500 for a silver statuette, but grudges £3 10s. which his fair-haired daughter wishes him to expend on the collecting-plate as a present to the church.

We are told how the plate is taken to the church, and put into a green baize-box with several other plates, when an imaginary conversation ensues, the oldest of the plates saying:—We never stir out of these green bags, except to make collections at the church doors; still, we know everything about the people who contribute; but we only know *what* they give, but *what they ought to give*; and very often *why* they give. As soon as you emerge from your bag on Sunday, and are taken into the church, you will see what at first appears a sunbeam here and there in the building; but, on looking more closely, you will discover that each beam takes the appearance of an angel. You will perceive that each figure has a scroll in his hand and a pen; and a golden inkhorn at his girdle. Further: you will observe that one seems attached to each of certain seats; those are the seats in which we plates are put, with the persons who use us for collecting; and when the collection begins, you will see a bright figure walk side by side with each collector, and stand by him at the door. You also will have an angel attached to you; and as each person passes out, you will observe the figure at your side make an entry on the scroll; and you will feel a curious kind of pulsation pass all round you; and with it you will feel that you know all about the person that has just given.

The plate then gives its own opinion of the sermon, and goes on to say:—

Our collection was to be made at the door; and as soon as over the sermon was ended, the churchwarden caught me up, and moved thither with all speed. That churchwarden was a shrewd man of business; and I soon saw that he had good reason for making such haste, for already half a-dozen people had managed to slip off, without contributing anything to the good cause. They were lost to me beyond any hope of recovery; I wonder if they ever thought that they were losers

themselves. They had escaped from me, but had they escaped from the Eye which sees everyone?

On reaching the door I found, according to the old plate's words, that what had looked so like a sunbeam was in reality a figure, and that it now stood beside me. The pen was dipped in the golden inkhorn, the scroll was unrolled, and the recording angel prepared to write.

They were principally poor people near the door, so I at first received very little. Some rushed out rudely; a few gave pence and halfpence; and one old man gave a three-penny-piece. Far the greatest number appeared to think that they had no concern with the collection whatsoever, although many of them were the parents of the children on whose behalf the sermon was preached. Well, I thought to myself, here's a strange thing—the minister troubling himself a great deal more about these people's children than they trouble them themselves. Just to think how that good man has been working for these young ones, and their own parents don't put a farthing on the plate; and I looked at one side to see whether the scribe that was attached to me had taken any notice of the matter. Indeed he had. The names of all who passed were written down, and there was something put opposite the parents' names, that evidently meant something particular. It was just such a crooked kind of mark as one would make if one had to describe an ungrateful person by a mark. I can't tell what it was like in words, but it looked an ugly, suspicious kind of thing, such as would not bear favour in heaven or earth.

Do not think, however, that all was dark. No, no; there was a penny that was saved during the week by blowing out the candle, and rocking the baby by the light of the few embers on the hearth; and, there was another that came from overtime at work; and another, that had been specially earned for this occasion by making an extra cabbage-net. And that threepenny-piece! I saw the figure by my side look hard at the threadbare man that put it in; and the pen flew rapidly over the scroll; and I could see that the writing was more as if it had been written with a sunbeam than anything else. Well it might; for that threadbare man had pinched himself hard to make up that little coin; and had offered it before the throne in heaven, ere he cast it into the plate on earth. The old man's granddaughter was at the school; and now that he was losing his sight, she read to him out of the Bible—out of the Bible that she was taught at school; and as she read with the voice of her dead mother—the old man's only child—he thought the sweet words were whispered to him from another world; and then he saw far, far away beyond stars, and clouds, and all that meets the mortal eye—far, far away into the golden city where friends separate no more—and how could he receive all this blessing through the school, and not give all he could to shew his gratitude in deeds? But the poor people were soon gone. I ought to have had at least sixty coins, for sixty of them passed me by: but when the last went out, I had only collected one shilling and threepence; and the threepenny-piece was a fifth of this sum.

I was next approached by a gentleman who looked comfortable, and who was comfortable; as far, at least, as his body was concerned. I expected a sovereign from him. If the churchwarden had not held me so tightly in his hand, I almost felt as though I should have gone half-way to meet him. He was a man right well to do; he had no family to support; he had more than he knew what to do with. He approached me; he put out his hand, and dropped a shilling into my lap. I heard the churchwarden mutter in the very inmost recesses of his heart, "Selfish man; and you'll go home, and drink a seven-and-sixpenny bottle of port at your dinner; 'one shilling' only to help to bring up all these poor children; and 'seven-and-sixpence' on your own throat." I saw the white figure calmly make its note upon the scroll, and the selfish man passed out. "Is it possible," said I to myself, "that a man can be found to spend seven times as much upon his own throat at one meal, as he gives, after such an appeal, to the cause of God?" The figure by my side could evidently read my thoughts, for it said in a low voice, "'Self' is a mocker of the Lord."

That was an awful sentence, short as it was; and I should probably have pondered long upon its fearfulness, but there was no time, for on came, almost treading on this man's heels, another gentleman. This man I also scanned closely as he approached me; and from the brief survey which I was able to

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