

General



But ye are come unto the General Assembly and church of the first born, and to spirits of just men made perfect.

One doesn't mean to be irreverent,—but the text fits altogether too well to put aside. Indeed, as we look down upon this company of grave and reverend seigneurs, we are

sure that St. Paul had this especial conference in prophetic view when he spoke,—and shaped his words to duly rebuke the irresponsibles in the gallery,—although, I believe, the Anglicans claim 'first-born' rights, and still relegate grave Presbyterian conferences into the fine obscurity of 'dissent-

ing societies.' While, if I remember aright, this General Assembly ruthlessly put by the claims to perfection, made several years ago by some of its members, and decided that 'just men,' even Presbyterians, are not 'made perfect' in this world.

Yet, I should think, this solemn annual gathering ought to baptise the reverend fathers into one perfection,—that of patience.

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We chose to be 'irresponsibles' during those past days of the Assembly,—to watch from the gallery, think our own thoughts, and study the faces of this body of men, who represent so much of the solid strength of Canada; mayhap to gather strength by contact, and go out from among them armed with sufficient fragments of Calvinistic theology, not only to resist all onslaughts upon our faith, but to bristle with bits of the Shorter Catechism and Westminster Confession.

Scottish-Canadian divines, in session assembled, generally delight themselves in three topics,—church statistics, theology, and politics, with an occasional bit of humour thrown in as a piquance,—and we usually know where to find them in any one of these.

In statistics they favour economy, and revel in finely-tabulated details. The various reports of the Presbyterian Church are fearfully and wonderfully wrought.

In theology they stand strong guard over the sterner doctrines, even while delighting in an occasional metaphysical lance tilting.

In politics,—well, after their endorsement of Principal Cavan's fine pronouncement upon the Manitoba school question, we may consider them about right; albeit, unfortunately, Presbyterian divines are not all Principal Cavan's.

As for humour,—did ever an outsider sound the full depth at which the real Scotch humour may be found? The well wherein it lies is deep indeed, which, possibly, accounts for its brackishness.

But aye, it is worth while when it does come, as Barrie and Ian Maclaren have testified.

We began as 'irresponsibles' when we stood for a preliminary moment in the church vestibule, one fair June afternoon, with sketch book and note-book. The artist was delaying a moment to sharpen a pencil; the writer was glancing out into the cool rustling tree depths. Groups of ministerial delegates chatted in the corridor or passed in and out; while the opened crimson inner doors gave view of the sober session scene.

"Can I do anything for you?" inquired a courteous ministerial usher, coming forward, as he noticed our delay.

"No, thank you. We have just come to get a few minister's heads," answered the writer, pleasantly.

The funny lifting of the usher's face and widening of his eyes, and the pause and surprised turn of the nearest group, brought a realisation of the Blue-Beardish nature of the reply, and the laughter of the irresponsibles was contagious enough to affect their proposed victims, so that the sound of it rippled through the open doors and down the aisles, causing even the mask-like face of the moderator to lift in inquiry.

After such a beginning, it was nothing to discover that a pencil, borrowed, somewhat timidly, of an unusually saintly-looking delegate seated near, was redolent with the odour of stale tobacco. And it was equally in place for the artist to comment naively about a well-known and prominent divine—"that's a handsome man, but isn't he wicked-looking."

"Wicked-looking," gasped her companion. "Why, he's very holy. Indeed, he makes a sort of—specialty—of sanctification..."

"I don't think we are in a proper frame of mind," commented the artist severely; "we had better come for their heads another day."

And the writer meekly followed her out, protesting that the June unshine was to blame.

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Because of that splendid sketch in the *Westminster*, the gallery took especial interest in Dr. Robertson, the retiring moderator. He resembles Principal Grant not a little in appearance, there is the same shrewdness, equal diplomatic skill, also a similar force and persistency of determination,—which in a man of the world might be called obstinacy.

Oddly enough also, a glance at his face suggests General Booth, while he certainly carries many of the qualities of this man of organisation,—even to that of the fighter.

It is to men of this stamp,—muscular, abstemious, determined, tireless, devoted,—one realises it all at a glance,—that the Presbyterian Church of Canada owes its stability and its firm advance to-day.

And there are many of them within its bounds. Dr. Robertson is but a type. Products of oatmeal, the Psalm, and the Shorter Catechism, we are wont to assert; but also descendants of the Covenanters and inheritants of cave and hill-side housings. Is it much to marvel that the qualities endure?

What a perfection of organisation belongs to the Presbyterian Church! Scotchmen are not given to wasting—even energy; and so they organise. Elderships, managing boards, committees, sessions, synods, presbyteries, assemblies, pan-presbyteries,—and somewhere away back of these exists the individual member.

It does sound rather formidable;—and gives one a sense of being crushed between the mighty wheels of a vast officialism.

We drew a deep breath of relief at the thought of being only gallery onlookers—and out of it.

We lifted our eyes to the half opened, yellow stained window,—we forgot to listen to the sober reports of committees and presbyteries; we threw off the oppression of organisation

and sent our spirits out to rest amid the fluttering leaves, that played with careless joyousness against the yellow glass; while a bird swung airily upon one slender spray, and all the bit of framed outer world was bathed in the opalescent light of a June twilight.

In the perfection of organisation may lie the perfection of individual freedom; and yet, methinks the bird and the fluttering leaves have the best of it.

And, sometimes, it is given to the gallery onlooker to wonder whether the danger to this great, grand Presbyterianism in Canada is not just in this:—the fulness of organisation at the possible sacrifice of the individual—the advance of officialism to the detriment of spiritual life.

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But being irresponsibles, we turned from the grave problem to lighter things. We recorded the 'Macs' in the roll call, until our breaths and pencils gave out. They began with the Halifax delegates and came thick and fast all along the line, until at Winnipeg the supply came to an end, and the clerk had to ring the changes all over again, from that city on to the Pacific coast. True, an occasional 'Hugh Gourlie,' 'Douglas Graham,' or 'Archibald Fife' crept in by way of variety, but they did not interfere materially with the bonnie procession of Macs.

We tried to say 'sederunt' with the true and correct accent of one to Presbyterianism born. It is the shibboleth of the Scotch theologian, as 'diocesan,' correctly intoned, is of the Anglican.

We searched for all Drumtochty, and found every one, *Drumseugh*, that 'shacklin' cratur; *Jamie Souiar*, several *Burnbraes*, and not a few *Carmichaels* and *Dr. Davidsons*. But we chose no *William Maclure*. There were none sufficient to compare with our conception of this ungainly, magnificent doctor of the old school. And anyway, he would be incomplete without *Jess*,—and although we might have discerned more than one resemblance to a four-footed equine,—it is too long-eared to typify faithful, intelligent *Jess*.

We lifted our eyes to the gallery level and found *Mrs. McFayden*—the 'sermon-taster'—bending keenly over and taking in not merely the debates, but the debaters; not one detail of the dry statistics failed her blessed economical spirit; not one point in the theological tilt escaped her.

Wholesome *Jean Burnbrae* was there also, with air of one not understanding, yet duly respectful; practical *Leesbeth* and fresh-faced *Lily Grant*.

Margel Howe, the sweetest of all Drumtochty women, we searched for many times; but found her type at last—in the late afternoon of one fairest June day. She had 'slippit in' quietly, and bent over the gallery—her grey eyes seriously intent; her sweet lips curving in a tender smile.

She was simply gowned in black, with an old-fashioned brooch, holding a lock of dark hair, fastened at her throat.

The yellow light from the stained window haloed the grey hair and glorified the lined face, yet the grey eyes never lifted; and we knew that this was an unbereaved *Margel Howe*, and that somewhere down among those black-coated delegates sat her *Geordie*.

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Ah, blessedly strong Scotch folk,—what would Canada do without you, who are its savour—pungent, of a truth, but wholesome! Abide by your doctrines, we pray you; hold close to your Shorter Catechism and Westminster Confession; abate not one jot of your stern belief; uphold the call of conscience; stand firm, as the hills that sheltered your covenanting ancestors; that in you at least the spiritually perplexed shall find a rock of faith—and be at peace.

FAITH FENTON.