

THE FATE OF BRATTLE-SQUARE CHURCH.

Among the many handsome edifices on the Back Bay is one that has attracted much attention, both by the beauty of its architectural proportions and the uncertainty attending its fate. In 1873 the Brattle-square Church, at the corner of Commonwealth avenue and Clarendon street, was dedicated. It was built of Roxbury stone, at a cost of about \$300,000, and was intended for the use of the society which had worshipped in one location since its organization in 1699, and in the same building in Brattle square for nearly a century. For a time religious services were held in the church, but the society, which had dwindled in numbers, finally disbanded, and the property was offered for sale.

A writer in a paper devoted to architectural matters says of the structure, "The most striking feature consisted in the tower, which was carried out nearly as designed, and has long formed one of the most interesting architectural objects in the city. In itself it is a plain, square mass, with well-studied openings, and treated in a style of subdued polychromy by the use of different shades in the stone, but it is surmounted by a frieze of colossal bass-reliefs, which not only give an extraordinary value to the design as a whole, but are themselves made more imposing and conspicuous by the height to which they are raised from the ground."

When it was rumored that the church was to be sold, and perhaps taken down, much desire was expressed that the beautiful tower might be spared. A circular, signed by Kidder, Peabody & Co., was issued, suggesting that the building might be preserved for musical, literary and social purposes, and stating that it was probable that the building and land upon which it stands could be bought for \$150,000—one-half the original cost. About \$30,000 was subscribed for the purpose, Messrs. H. P. Kidder and J. M. Sears becoming trustees of the fund; but as the required amount was not obtained, the property was finally advertised to be sold by auction. The sale was largely attended by the real-estate owners and residents of the Back Bay, and among those present was Mr. J. M. Sears, who went to the sale, however, without the slightest intention of buying the property. The bids were so low that he made an offer, and finally became the possessor of the estate, the price paid for the church and organ being about \$85,000.

As soon as Mr. Sears was in possession of the church—in fact, before the deeds had been recorded—a dozen persons stood ready to take it off his hands. But having taken the property, he was determined not to part with it until he could find the right kind of purchaser, and it is said that in one instance he refused to consider an offer of \$120,000—an advance of \$35,000 above the price he paid. The first offer made was by one who desired to transform the place into a concert garden; then advances were made by representatives of the Baptist and Methodist denominations and by several individuals; and it is understood that many of these propositions were accompanied by a liberal offer to allow the owner to subscribe a trifle—anywhere from \$30,000 to \$50,000—toward the object in view. But none of these offers were accepted, and finally the property was put into the hands of a broker with instructions to sell it before the first of January. No sale was effected, however, and early in the year a gentleman obtained a refusal of the property until Feb. 1. After a time he said that he would retire in favor of religious organizations. Then a refusal for a week was obtained for the Boston University, and it was thought that that institution would come into possession of the property. But at the end of the prescribed time the amount of subscriptions had not reached the required point, and the scheme was abandoned. By this time the Baptists had begun to renew their interest in the matter, and, after considerable deliberation, decided to buy the property, and the sale was effected, the First Baptist Society, which now occupy the church at the corner of Shawmut avenue and Rutland street, becoming the owners. It is understood that the price paid for the church and organ was \$100,000, being about what the property and the improvements since made upon it cost Mr. Sears. Of this amount not far from \$30,000 was subscribed by residents of the Back Bay who are interested in the preservation of the tower; and by the terms of the sale the tower and a plot thirty-five feet square, including the land upon which the tower stands, will be held in perpetual trust by the Boston Memorial Association; so that in the event of the sale of the church by the society which now owns it, that magnificent example of architectural art—the tower—would still remain to adorn the beautiful section of the city which environs it; and those who

have feared the destruction of the tower can now rejoice over the announcement that its fate is decided and that it is to remain intact. It is to the liberality of Mr. Sears that the edifice owes its preservation. He bought the property, not as a speculation, but rather than see it sacrificed; and having obtained possession, he had no desire to speculate with it, but was willing to dispose of the church to the right parties for about what it cost him.

Since it has been in his possession innumerable suggestions as to its disposal have been made, and the newspapers have been flooded with communications upon the subject. Of course, some good plans were presented, but also many wild, impracticable schemes. One suggestion was to the effect that Mr. Sears, by giving the building to an educational institution, would be enabled to become one of its founders; and a further inducement offered was that it should be called Sears Hall. This proposition was at once dismissed. One individual wanted to establish a coffee room at the top of the tower, access to it being had by means of an elevator. The estimated cost of a cup of coffee was not stated, but in consideration of the expense of running the elevator, and the limited accommodation for visitors at the top of the structure, the price would probably have corresponded with the height of the tower. Another individual wanted the church made into a museum of Christian art; while still another suggested that it be made a repository for monumental sculpture, like Westminster Abbey. But these plans were not adopted.

Then an enthusiastic lover of art came forward with the brilliant suggestion that the interior walls of the tower be divided into panels which should be treated by the best artists in the country. The details of this novel idea of a perpendicular art gallery were not given, but it has both advantages and disadvantages. The four walls might be devoted to Europe, Asia, Africa and America respectively, a panoramic history of each being given. This would give splendid facilities for a comparative study of the several countries at different epochs, and would be of inestimable value to the historian and student alike. Special terms could, of course, be made for schools and charitable institutions. Or the panels might be used for a complete pictorial sketch of the theory of evolution; the panels at the base of the tower being devoted to the lowest order of life, shown by vague pictures of almost nothing—a "symphony in black;" the succeeding panels occupied by studies of the

various members of the animal kingdom from designs furnished by those "old masters" who create the gorgeous masterpieces that herald the approach of "the greatest show on earth;" and the various stages of progress illustrated with the rise from the ground until the highest civilization was reached, the panels at the top containing portraits of representative Bostonians. This valuable series of sketches could be enlivened by the introduction at intervals of belts or zones of pictures of miscellaneous subjects. The catalogue might be made very instructive. The opening pages should contain selections from the work of Darwin, the following pages could be prepared by the authors of those wonderful pamphlets without which no first-class menagerie is complete, and which contain "a description of all the animals and a history of their capture;" and possibly some of the contributors to the Memorial History of Boston might be persuaded to prepare the concluding portions of the work.

There are objections to the scheme, however. Some persons would dislike to spend several hours in an elevator, but if the trip were made in less time a visitor would get but a vague idea of the beauties of the collection; some would desire to spend an hour in front of a picture, while others would soon tire of it; just as a visitor had begun to see the charms of some work of art he would glide up or down, to be confronted with an entirely different subject. Think of the shock to an aesthete who, while gazing fondly upon a sunflower, should be suddenly dropped into the presence of a grinning counterfeit of the "missing link"! No, it would not do; and so the project was abandoned.

Among the more practical suggestions was one to save the tower and land extending twenty feet from it, and sell the remainder of the land and the body of the church, the proceeds of the sale being added to the fund raised for the purchase of the tower. It was also suggested that the tower be moved to the vacant lot in front of Trinity Church and christened "Garfield Tower." The acoustic properties of the church are defective, and various devices have been tried to remedy this imperfection. One correspondent wrote at great length to explain a system which he was confident would remove the difficulty. The principal feature of this plan was the introduction behind the pulpit of a sound reflector in the form of a grand chair with high back, giving an effect like that of an altar in a Roman church. The expense of the experiment was to be borne by the owner of the property, the one who suggested it modestly saying that if the results

obtained were unsatisfactory, he would ask no notice whatever; but if the experiment was beneficial, he should desire the same consideration which any expert in acoustics would expect in the case. A "heads I win, tails you lose," kind of a game.

It is said that since Mr. Sears took possession of the property he has received innumerable offers from ministers and divinity students who desired to occupy the pulpit; from organists who were prepared to assist in the musical exercises, and from lecturers, one of the latter, after congratulating Mr. Sears upon gaining the "coveted prize," stating that he was prepared to deliver a series of lectures "suitable for Sunday or week-day meetings, temperance gatherings or Sunday schools, the lectures being high-toned, moral and instructive." The communication closed with the expressed wish that the property might prove a source of pleasure and profit. If Mr. Sears had intended to profit by his investment he would undoubtedly have accepted some of the liberal offers which he has received for the property, and probably the pleasure given by the possession of the estate has not proved burdensome.