THE WIDOW'S MITE.

DR. I. K. FUNK'S PRACTICAL JOKE.

BY THADDEUS E. WAKEMAN.

As a people we are measured by the books we read and what we think of them. Dr. I. K. Funk's big book of over 500 pages, on "The Widow's Mite" and the "Spirit" of Henry Ward Beecher, has measured a great mass of readers to be far back of this age of science—which is not wonderful; but has it not done the same for a large part of our leading university professors and educators?—a fact, if it be one, of the greatest importance.

The book tells of two little ancient coins, one black and genuine, and the other light and dubious, supposed to have been like those of the widow's "mites" mentioned in Mark and Luke. They were borrowed by Funk and Wagnalls to be used in the Standard Dictionary and then returned. The spurious one was used by mistake, but both were then put in the safe in an envelope. Dr. Funk ordered the genuine one to be returned to its owner, Professor West, a neighbor and friend of Henry Ward Beecher, and principal of a young ladies' seminary on "The Heights." Nine years after this, and after the death of Professor West and Mr. Beecher, Dr. Funk was attending spiritualistic séances in Brooklyn. At one of them the mediumess suddenly gave a message to the Doctor, purporting to be from the "spirit" of Henry Ward Beecher, requiring of him the immediate return of this borrowed genuine black coin to its owner. The Doctor answered that it had been returned years ago. The spirit replied that it had not; but the medium could not learn to whom or where it should be returned. Upon search the envelope with both coins in it was found in the safe where they had been placed, presumably, nine years before.

Result: General surprise! Was this at last one genuine, decisive "spirit test"? Every one at the Doctor's office who knew of the
coin supposed that it had been returned. The medium and all connected with the séance swore that they never knew or heard of any such occurrence before this Beecher message. Professor West's son and executor certified that he is as certain as he can be of any thing that passed in his father's mind, "that he, too, supposed that the coin had been returned." The coin was rare and of great value—some say worth $2,500.00.

Spiritualists claimed that the facts proved this message to be indubitable, and that Mr. Beecher's personal, living continuous consciousness, or spirit, was a fact. They even obtained another message, purporting to be from him, to the effect that he had sent this message about a trivial matter, because, from the nature of the facts, he saw that "the test" must be conclusive, and that he wished to open the portals to the earth from the spirit realm, from which he had most important matters to communicate. But notwithstanding the persistent efforts of Dr. Funk and of very many mediums all over the earth, those "most important matters" have wholly failed to appear. Finally even the mediums seemed to tire of their efforts, and this message was "received" from Mr. Beecher, who was bothered beyond celestial endurance: viz., "The widow's mite bother Dr. Funk to their heart's content for aught I care. I will have nothing more to do with the affair." Thus the Beecher wit came to his protection and relief; which, as Dr. Funk adds: "has at least something of the old Beecher ring in it."

Thus this "spirit" incident ends in nothing, as they all do, when it comes to anything of value or use. But far otherwise is the revelation of the consequences and moral of the story to those who think. Dr. Funk was at first under a great variety of doubts and puzzlement. This big book is his thrifty way of obtaining relief therefrom, and also fame, a good "ad.," and then too, "shelkels"—worth far more than mites. Two of his experts intimate that it is also his "jest" and "practical joke," whereby his wit and humor also came to his relief—a view in which many a reader may concur, and to which finally the good Doctor may contribute a smile.

The gist of the book consists of a statement of the case, which was submitted to forty-two experts, chiefly professors of physics and psychics in our leading universities and colleges, commencing with the voluminous Professor James of Harvard. Then follow their answers, mostly in the Appendix. With all this we have an epitome of the best spiritualistic literature—trying to make this revelation and test seem probable, if not certain, as the work of the continuous Mr. Beecher.
The Doctor might have consulted others with other results: For instance, many an impartial counsellor-at-law would have given him the maxim of old Horace: *Nec Deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus*—”Don’t call in a God (or even a Beecher), unless the knot is worthy of such an untier.” That is, the supernatural is never in order until the natural, relevant to the case, is all known and exhausted in vain. Thus, it was not natural or probable for a coin of that interest and value to be unreturned and lost without being talked over by West and Beecher in the circle of their curious friends, some of whom were largely spiritualistic. Some of the friends or visitors of this resident medium would almost certainly hear of the story, and the medium consciously or unconsciously get it from them. Then—she may have forgotten it during the nine years, and recalled it unconsciously in trance; as is well attested in similar cases, even of languages heard and afterwards repeated in trance, by those at other times ignorant of them. Then comes in explanation the possible fraud or collusion of some of the parties including the medium. Indeed all of the natural solutions suggested by Dr. Funk and others in the book are to be taken as—more probable than any “spirit” from another state of existence. This much the counsellor would say—resting upon the common rules of evidence and experience.

But Dr. Funk says, in effect, that all such supposing does not negative the possibility of “spirit” existence and communication. Well on this point he might and should have consulted an up-to-date biologist, as well as professors of physics and psychics. And since he wandered all over the world (including Japan) to find experts, why did he not include Professor Ernest Haeckel of Jena, or some like scientist, without reserve in behalf of scientific truth?

Professor Haeckel is by many regarded as the first scientist of our age in his department—the one in which this question properly comes. In his *Theses* sent to the Congress of Liberals held at St. Louis in October last, he gives, not his verdict, but that of up-to-date science on this very point in these words, viz.: “The soul of man has been recognised as the totality of brain functions. * * * This activity, of course, becomes extinct in death; and in our days it appears to be perfectly absurd to expect, nevertheless, a personal immortality of the soul.” That is, the scientific and social immortality have become one, and they take the place of the “personal.” Thus science says: “Not possible”! And this not as the opinion of one man or set of men, but the result of the facts of biology—commencing with the simplest protoplasm, and rising with all of its cellular
combinations through all vegetative and animal forms and convolutions to the brain of man, and the co-operation of human societies.

This induction from all of the facts is clinched, he would say, by the two bottom laws of science, that is, of the universe, viz.: The laws of "substance" or "correlation," and the law of "economy." By the first law, all mental activities and processes, including the "soul," are the consequent or concomitant correlates which are found to be the results and equivalents of preceding correlative changes occurring in protoplasmic organisms, and in those only! By the law of economy, the fact that these "activities" are the results of protoplasmic changes and actions is conclusive that they are not and cannot be, produced or exist in any other place or way. For every such activity is the result of equivalent correlations only; which cannot be changed without a different result; and which cannot cease without a ceasing of their activity at the same time.

After the death of Mr. Beecher there was, therefore, no possible spirit, soul, or consciousness of him extant, to bother or be bothered about this "widow's mite," or anything else. Any other supposition is not only untrue but "absurd." This "recognised" fact, as Professor Haeckel styles it, is now "the commonplace of science." Thus, for instance, it underlies all medical treatment of mental ailments, except by frauds, quacks and the uninformed. In one or the other of those unenviable classes must not those stand, who by words, silence or otherwise, admit or imply that Mr. Beecher's conscious spirit or soul was not existent, so as to have possibly made this pretended communication?

Now, Dr. Funk's book reveals this astonishing fact, viz.: Not a single one of the said jury of forty-two experts does other than to directly or implicitly or tacitly admit the then existence of Mr. Beecher's soul, and its consequent ability to communicate as claimed! But this fact is not only astonishing; it is exceedingly important. Do our universities and colleges exist for the purpose of "raying out darkness?" Was there not one great professor who knew enough and dared enough to tell Dr. Funk the plain truth—the commonplace and bedrock of science?

What kind of leaders and teachers are we to have for the next generation, when those who are "liberally educated" in this, accept only a practical suppression of the truth as to the most important matter that science has made known to a human being—the nature, origin, duty and future of himself? Let us all have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. For "in that only is there wisdom and safety," as old Goethe told us long ago.
Aside from their bearing upon the substance of Dr. Funk's book those arguments of "induction," "correlation" and "economy" are just now of extraordinary importance, for Professor Haeckel has seriously proposed to make them an important part of the basis upon which the freethinkers of every country should organize. I have never been able to answer those arguments, and never could find any one who could. If any such person exists, the occasion calls for him, and I believe *The Open Court* will be open to him.