

THE MIRROR

A REFLEX OF THE LIGHT AND LEADING OF THE WEEK;

CONTAINING ARTICLES, ORIGINAL AND SELECTED, ON

Politics, Social Questions, Literature, Science, Art, Music, and the Drama.

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[ONE PENNY.]

NO. IV.—VERY REV. PRINCIPAL PIRIE.

"I THINK a Principal is in about as awkward a situation as any man could be. He has nothing in the world to do, and the result is that he seeks something to do *ab extra* of the College. He employs himself in some other work, and he must be apt to make a fuss about trifles. Make him a Professor, and give him something or other to do!" This by no means inaccurate description of the Principal of a University was actually given by the academical head of the University of Aberdeen before the Universities' Commission in July, 1876. Dr Pirie was not Principal then, and it is possible that he has since changed his views, for the greater part of his life has been spent in demolishing the idols he formerly worshipped. But, as a matter of fact, Principal Pirie, as Principal, does nothing. The Principals of the other Universities are occasionally heard of delivering introductory lectures or valedictory addresses; but he of Aberdeen remains silent—possibly for the best of reasons. The post, was conferred upon him by the last Conservative Government for services in connection with the Abolition of Patronage Act. What can be thought of a Principal who declares that he is not aware that there are any Professorships or Lectureships wanted in the Arts or Divinity Faculties, that a chair of English Language and Literature is not of much use, that a chair of Education is useless, that a chair of Rhetoric is perfectly useless, and that a chair of Moral Philosophy is very useless and indeed may be mischievous? One can hardly accept this as serious, yet it is the gist of Dr Pirie's evidence before the Commission, barring the famous encounter with Professor Huxley, who naively asked, "Had Cato any sense of moral obligation, or Plato?" The reverend Doctor could hardly resile from his position that there can be no morality apart from religion, and drew from Professor Huxley the crushing rejoinder—"In fact, they had a sense of moral obligation, but they ought not to have had it?"

One substantive proposal Dr Pirie did make. He would have the patronage of all the Divinity chairs placed in the hands of the Established Church. This is just like the man. Dr Pirie believes that Voluntaryism is the unpardonable sin, and is credited with participation in more than one movement aiming at a rupture in the Free Church.

The abolition of Patronage, which he advocated so long and so ably, undoubtedly had this end in view; fortunately a generation of independence has placed the Free Church far beyond the original patronage question, and immensely far on the road to Disestablishment. Dr Pirie should be the last man to complain of this change of attitude. In the pre-Disruption days he made a name for himself by the advocacy of Patronage and Moderation. "Pirie of Dyce," in fact, was looked upon as a sort of Heaven-born genius sent to earth to defend the National Auld Kirk of Scotland. We are not disposed to charge him with inconsistency because he was mainly instrumental in getting "pop'lar election" (as he called it) substituted for the patron's nomination. It is only regrettable that he has not shown himself progressive in other directions. Such questions, for instance, as the proposed relaxation of formula to be subscribed by elders tend to show how thoroughly Conservative and orthodox is the Principal. They also exhibit, to perfection, his happy but hap-hazard style of speaking, which consists chiefly of describing, in semi-quizzical terms, the proposals and opinions to which he is opposed as "nonsense," and of arguing his own case so lamely as to be utterly unable to resist the sledge-hammer blows of Dr Wallace or Dr Story.

William Robinson Pirie was born at Slains on 26th July, 1804, his father, Rev. George Pirie, D.D.—being then minister of that parish. He was appointed minister of Dyce in 1830, and became Professor of Divinity at Marischal College in 1843, the College in the following year, conferring upon him the degree of D.D. Dr Pirie was appointed to the ministry of Greyfriars Church in 1846, but had soon to abandon it in deference to the Scotch feeling against "pluralities." On the fusion of the Colleges, Dr Pirie became Professor of Divinity and Church History, and was also appointed Assessor for the Senatus in the University Court. He was appointed Principal in May, 1877. Many years ago he published a ponderous tome, entitled "The Philosophy of the Human Mind," some copies of which rescued from oblivion, were recently selling at the ignominious rate of eighteen-pence a-piece. Dr Pirie was moderator of the Established Church in 1864. There is no more to be said of him except that he is married to a half-sister of Archibald Forbes, the war correspondent, and that *Men of the Time* has given an estimate of his career which provoked considerable merriment in Aberdeen,—"Dr Pirie has been connected with every important political measure which has been agitated in Scotland during the last forty years. In some of them he took a very active share, especially in those of an ecclesiastical or academical character."