

# THE LIFE AND DEATH OF SIR WILLIAM WALLACE.

SIR WILLIAM WALLACE of Elderslie, the champion and guardian of Scotland amid the invasions and oppressions of the English which preceded the accession and victories of Robert Bruce, is the best known and most famous of all the Scottish patriots of the olden time.

“ At Wallace’ name what Scottish blood  
But boils up in a spring tide flood!

Aft have our fearless fathers strode  
By Wallace' side,  
Still pressing onward red-wat-shod  
Or glorious died."

His history is known through tradition to almost every Scotsman; and, though scanty and doubtful on the pages of record, contributes more numerous and more stirring incidents to the old world stories of our Lowland peasantry than that of any man who figures at full length and in gayest attire in the works of our most authentic historians. Wallace's name has been a household word in every age from his own to ours; and such torrents of mighty matter has he sent down the channels of tradition, and so scanty sprinklings given to the neat, trim, formal surfaces of regular history, that his very existence looks at times as if it had been all poetry and romance. Most of the exploits popularly ascribed to him belong far more to the marvellous than the real, and very many are manifestly either fictions or enormous exaggerations; yet all have a powerful charm for the national mind, partly on account of their very wildness, but much more on account of their flattering the Scottish pride, and breathing a romantic bravery against the English. The Wallace of tradition, in fact, is a gorgeous compound of reality and fiction, of passions and imaginings, addressed to the prejudices of our country,—an impersonation of the ancient national animosities and prowess and patriotism of the Scottish people, in the times of their severest struggles for independence; and the sympathies of all classes with this gorgeous phantasy closely resemble those of all old nations with the bardic heroes and mythic achievements of the most primitive times. The real Wallace is, in comparison, a very sober personage, of neither very many nor very great exploits; and an outline of his history can be sketched in small space, and possesses interest

not more on its own account than for the sake of exposing the prurience of the national day-dream.

Wallace's public career lasted only eight years, — from 1297 till 1305; it commenced in the year following England's usurpation of the Scottish throne, and was all spent in struggles against the English power; and it was aided throughout by general anarchy, by popular contempt of government, and by a dislocated and weltering condition of society. Bands of robbers infested the highways; assassins stalked about in the guise of gentlemen; life and property were as insecure as among savages; and gangs of desperadoes or bands of armed patriots were perfectly competent to baffle the small bodies of military by which the English usurper endeavoured to maintain his abhorred and feeble authority.

Wallace was the younger son of a gentleman in the neighbourhood of Paisley. He was strong, courageous, and active, calm, intrepid, and indomitable, adventurous, firm, and warlike, fond of skirmishes and inventive of stratagems; and he behaved so frankly and courteously to his friends and so sternly and relentlessly to his foes, that he readily won and easily maintained the entire confidence of the companions of his exploits. Yet he began his public life as an outlaw, — most probably for killing an Englishman; he associated with himself from the very first some persons of desperate character; and he probably was actuated all along, as much by the necessity of his circumstances and by revenge and wrath against the English, as by any true patriotism or very enlightened regard to the best interests of his country.

In May 1297, Wallace, at the head of a resolute band, commenced a guerillo war against the English; and he soon agitated their garrisons, impoverished their stores, drew many partisans to his standard, and made himself a general talk and terror. Sir William Douglas and some other persons of rank and influence joined him, or followed his example; and

the Scots first struck a good blow at the root of the usurper's government at Scone, and then roved over the country, assaulted fortalices, and slew all Englishmen who came within their power. A strong force, with many barons among them, took post near Irvine, and there defied an approaching English army; but they disagreed among themselves, and fell into dissensions, and would neither fight the English nor break up their encampment nor treat by common consent; and eventually most of their leaders, influenced variously by disgust and policy and fear, opened negotiations with the enemy and made submission to his authority. Wallace scorned this poltroonery; and, collecting a few of the most resolute or desperate in the camp, he retired with them indignantly, and marched away to the north. In the first heat of resentment, he flew to the house of the Bishop of Glasgow, one of the principal negociators, and pillaged it, and led its inmates captive; and he afterwards overran the middle districts of Scotland, and drew together there as many followers as made a considerable army, and laid siege to the castle of Dundee.

At this juncture, Wallace received intelligence that an English army was advancing to Stirling; and, charging the citizens of Dundee, under pain of death, to continue the blockade of their castle, he set promptly out with all his troops to guard the passage of the Forth, and encamped behind a rising ground near the abbey of Cambuskenneth. Warrenne, Earl of Surrey, and Cressingham, the high treasurer of Scotland, commanded the English army; and the former was averse to risk a general action, and imagined that Wallace might be induced by fair conditions to surrender, and sent two friars to him to offer terms. "Return," said Wallace, "and tell your masters that we came hither, not to treat with them, but to assert our right, and to set Scotland free. Let them advance; we send them defiance." The English were enraged at this answer, and craved impatiently

to be led on to battle. Sir Richard Lundin, a renegade Scottish baron, who had been conspicuous among the negotiators at Irvine, and who now held a high place in the English army, explained how foolish it would be to make the whole force defile by the long narrow wooden bridge of Stirling in presence of the Scots, and showed them that they would probably be attacked and overwhelmed before they could form on the plain at the other end, and offered to conduct five hundred horse and a select body of infantry across a ford which he knew; and to go round with them upon the rear of the Scots, and make such a diversion as should afford time and scope for the efficient movements of the main body. Warrenne himself also was still averse to fight, and did all he could to curb his people's impetuosity. But Cressingham, who was an ecclesiastic and fiery and headstrong, exclaimed, "Why do we thus protract the war, and waste the king's treasures? Let us fight, as is our bounden duty." And he was so well seconded by the impetuous feeling of the army that he prevailed over Warrenne, and the wiser counsellors; and he himself led the van to battle. As soon as the foremost of them debouched from the bridge, Wallace rushed down upon them with overwhelming fury; and put an instant extinguisher upon all their hopes of even forming an array. Those who had crossed were either slain or driven back into the river; those who were crossing either trampled one another down in confusion, or were precipitated into the water, some by accident and others in an effort to save themselves by swimming; and those who had not begun to cross set fire to the bridge, and abandoned all their baggage, and took to their heels with the utmost hurry and speed of flight. The wretched Cressingham and many thousands of the English perished; and the survivors went off in a general rout, and did not stop till they reached the Tweed. The Scots lost very few of their number, and speedily found themselves masters, not

only of the battle-field and its spoils, but of all the military strengths of the kingdom.

Wallace and his whole army—partly perhaps in the spirit of retaliation and foray, but mainly under the pressure of a great famine which afflicted Scotland, the consequence of warlike disorders and unproductive harvests—marched into the north of England, and spread reprisals and desolation through all the champaign tracts between Newcastle and Carlisle. But spoliage rose into rapacity, license into oppression, and revenge into truculency; and so wild became the indecencies and outrages that Wallace struggled in vain to repress them, and felt obliged in self-defence speedily to draw his army back to Scotland. He was now supreme and dominant in the kingdom; and assumed the title—whether spontaneously or by some public request is not known—of Guardian of Scotland; but, through either envy or jealousy or fear or timid policy, he about the same time lost the confidence of many of the nobility; so that, at the very juncture of the practical restoration of national independence, the great powers of the kingdom became divided, and began to lay the country once more open to the insults and inflictions of the English arms. In the next year occurred the disastrous battle of Falkirk; but this, together with some special incidents which are alleged to have followed it, has already been fully narrated on pp. 299—316 of the second volume of these historiettes. Some previous exploits of Wallace also are noticed in the article “Conflicts in Glasgow” in the first volume, and in the articles “Troubles of Carrick” and “Barns of Ayr” in the present volume.

A short time after the battle of Falkirk, Wallace renounced the title of Guardian of Scotland, and passed into the condition of a private man; and never again does he appear to have had any command in his country's armies or any place in her public councils. Yet he devoted himself as resolutely

as ever to her interests, and did many a thing to promote them in his capacity of a captain of guerillos. And, in 1303, when the Scottish functionaries and military leaders made their ignominious surrender to the English King at Stirling bridge, a stipulation was made by the latter that "as for William Wallace he shall render himself up at the will and mercy of our Sovereign Lord the King, if it shall seem good to him." Wallace, however, scorned the whole transaction, and despaired not yet of liberating Scotland, and resolved rather to court death in freedom than accept life in bondage; and when at last he perceived all hope extinct, he sought out a place of concealment, where he might elude Edward's vengeance, and mourn in silence over his prostrate country. But Edward could not think Scotland subdued so long as Wallace lived; and with a mean anxiety, he sought to discover his retreat, and offered high rewards to any man who should find and take him. The story of the great hero's capture and trial and execution forms one of the most thrilling chapters in the whole cyclopedia of historic tragedy; and is well told as follows, by Mr. John D. Carrick, in his *Life of Sir William Wallace* :—

"Wallace, who, as he conceived, among other friends, had secured the co-operation of Sir John Menteith to the measures then in agitation, for the purpose, it is supposed, of giving as early notice as possible of the arrival of Bruce, had retained near his person a young man related to Menteith, who was to have been dispatched with the news to Dumbarton as soon as their future monarch should arrive, when that important fortress was to have declared in his favour. Confiding in the arrangements thus made, Wallace, as the time appointed by Bruce drew near, collected his followers round Glasgow, and disposed of them in such a manner as to be able to bring them together on the shortest notice. For the better concealment of his design, he retired to a small lonely house at Robroyston, about three miles north-west of Glas-

gow; and here he waited with impatience for the night on which Bruce had appointed to meet him.

“On the night of the 5th of August 1305, Sir William, and his faithful friend Kerlé, accompanied by the youth before mentioned, had betaken themselves to their lonely retreat at Robroyston, to which place their steps had been watched by a spy, who as soon as he had observed them enter, returned to his employers. At the dead hour of midnight, while the two friends lay fast asleep, the youth, whose turn it was to watch, cautiously removed the bugle from the neck of Wallace, and conveyed it, along with his arms, through an aperture in the wall; then slowly opening the door, two men-at-arms silently entered, and, seizing upon Kerlé, hurried him from the apartment, and instantly put him to death. Wallace, awakened by the noise, started to his feet, and, missing his weapons, became sensible of his danger; but grasping a large piece of oak which had been used for a seat, he struck two of his assailants dead on the spot, and drove the rest headlong before him. Seeing the fury to which he was roused, and the difficulty they would have in taking him alive, Menteith now advanced to the aperture and represented to him the folly of resistance, as the English, he said, having heard of his place of resort, and of the plans he had in contemplation, were collected in too large a force to be withstood,—that if he would accompany him a prisoner to Dumbarton, he would undertake for the safety of his person,—that all the English wished, was to secure the peace of the country, and to be free from his molestation,—adding, that if he consented to go with him, he should live in his own house in the castle, and he, Menteith, alone should be his keeper,—that even now, he would willingly sacrifice his life in his defence, but that his attendants were too few, and too ill-appointed, to have any chance of success in contending with the English. He concluded by assuring Wallace, that he had followed in order to use his in-

fluence with his enemies on his behalf, and that they had listened to him on condition of an immediate surrender; but that if he did not instantly comply, the house would soon be in flames about him. These and other arguments were urged with all the seeming sincerity of friendship; and our patriot, confiding in early recollections, and the private understanding that subsisted between them, allowed himself to be conducted to Dumbarton Castle. On the morrow, however, no Menteith appeared to exert his influence, in order to prevent the unfortunate hero from being carried from the fortress; and strongly fettered, and guarded by a powerful escort, under the command of Robert de Clifford and Aymer de Vallance, he was hurried to the south, by the line of road least exposed to the chance of a rescue.

“As the capture of Wallace was an event wholly unexpected by the English, the news of it, which spread with the rapidity of lightning, produced in every part of the kingdom a deep and universal sensation. Labour of every kind was abandoned, and people of all ranks flocked to those points of the road where it was expected the illustrious captive would pass. At Carlisle the escort halted for a night; and the tower in which he was secured long afterwards retained his name. As the *cortegé* approached London, the crowds became more numerous; and on entering the capital, his conductors found their progress retarded by the multitudes that were collected,—while every elevation or projection, however perilous, from which he could be seen, was occupied with, or clung to, by anxious spectators, eager to behold a man who had filled England with terror, and the fame of whose achievements had resounded through every country in Europe. After much exertion, the cavalcade at length reached the house of William Delect, a citizen in Fenchurch Street, where their prisoner was lodged for the night.

“The thirst for revenge existed too keenly in the ruthless mind of Edward, to admit of much delay in the sacrifice of

his victim. Though consideration for the opinion of the more enlightened of his subjects, and the manner in which his conduct might be viewed at foreign courts, obliged him to have recourse at least to the formality of a trial, the indecent haste with which it was brought on made the mockery of judicial procedure but too apparent. The day after his arrival, he was conducted on horseback, from the house which his brief residence had made the scene of universal attraction, to take his trial in Westminster Hall. His progress from Fenchurch Street, according to Stowe, appears to have been a sort of procession. Lord John de Segrave, the fugitive of Roslin, acting as Grand Marshal of England, and armed cap-à-pè, rode on one side, while Geoffrey de Hartlepool, Recorder of London, equipped in a similar manner, rode on the other. The Mayor, Sheriffs, and Aldermen followed, attended by a number of official characters on horseback and on foot, arranged according to their respective grades.

“On reaching the spot where the solemn farce was to be performed, he was placed on the south bench of the great hall; and, in consequence of an absurd report, which had been circulated in England, of his having said that he deserved to wear a crown in that place,—a crown of laurel was put upon his head. The noble appearance of the man joined to his calm and unruffled demeanour, entirely disarmed the silly attempt at ridicule of its intended effect. Sir Peter Malory the King’s Justice, then rose, and read the indictment, wherein the prisoner was charged with treason against the King of England, burning of towns, and slaying of the subjects of his Majesty. To the first of these counts Wallace answered, that, as he had never been the subject of the King of England, he owed him no allegiance, and consequently could be no traitor. As to the other offences he frankly admitted, that, in the discharge of his duty to his country, he had done all that was stated. On this admission, the following atrocious sentence was pronounced:—For treason, he

was to be first dragged to the place of execution; for murder and robbery, he was to be then hung a certain time by the neck,—and, because he had burned abbeys and religious houses, he was to be taken down alive from the gibbet, his entrails torn out and burnt before him, his body to be quartered, and the parts afterwards to be disposed of as the clemency of Majesty might suggest.

“ When the necessary preparations were made for carrying the sentence into execution, the late champion of Scottish independence was brought forth from the place where he had been kept in confinement, heavily ironed, and chained to a bench of oak. He was then placed on a hurdle, and, surrounded by a strong guard of soldiers, ignominiously dragged to the Elms in Smithfield. That self-possession and undaunted demeanour, which he evinced during the trial, appeared equally conspicuous on the scaffold. Looking round with undisturbed composure on the assembled multitude, he addressed himself to a person near him, and asked for a priest to whom he might make confession. This request on being made known to Edward, he is said to have sternly refused; and the rancorous old man forbade *any clergyman to retard the execution* for such a purpose. On hearing this signified command of his sovereign, Winchelsea, Archbishop of Canterbury, the same individual who so faithfully discharged his duty at Carlaverock, stepped boldly forward, and after earnestly remonstrating with Edward, declared his determination to officiate himself. When the ceremony usual on such occasions was finished, Wallace rose from his knees, and the Archbishop having taken leave of him, instantly departed for Westminster, thus declining to witness the sequel of an act so revolting to humanity and which he no doubt considered as fixing a deep stain on the character of his country.

“ The spectacle which was now exhibited to the gaze of the inhabitants of the metropolis of England, was such as

perhaps had never before been presented to the populace of any land. The last freeman of an ancient people, not less renowned for their bravery, than for their love of independence, stood a calm and unshrinking victim, ready to be immolated at the shrine of despotism. That powerful arm which had long contended for liberty was now to be unstrung beneath the knife of the executioner; and that heart, replete with every enobling virtue, which never quailed in the sternest hour of danger, was doomed to quiver in the purifying flames of martyrdom. During the pause which preceded the unhallowed operations, Wallace turned to Lord Clifford, and requested that a psalter, which had been taken from his person, might be returned. His desire being complied with, he asked a priest to hold it open before him. This book had been his constant companion from his early years, and was perhaps the gift of his mother or his uncle, the parson of Dunipace. After hanging for a certain time, the sufferer was taken down, while yet in an evident state of sensibility. He was then disembowelled; and the heart, wrung from its place, was committed to the flames in his presence. During the dreadful process, his eyes still continued to linger on the psalter, till, overpowered by his sufferings, he expired among their hands with all that passive heroism which may be supposed to belong to so elevated a character. The body was afterwards dismembered; the head fixed on London bridge, the right arm on the bridge of Newcastle upon-Tyne, the left at Berwick, the right leg at Perth, and the left at Aberdeen. Thus fell this great and exemplary patriot, a martyr to the rights and independence of his country, than whom, if we consider his extraordinary personal and mental endowments, joined to his inextinguishable and disinterested love of liberty, a greater hero is not to be found in the annals of any people."

How intensely symphonious with this story of pathos and horror is the following dirge from the pen of the poet Camp-

bell! And though it is well known to all Campbell's admirers and to many general readers of poetry, yet as it is not included in some editions of his works, and must be still a novelty to multitudes of young persons, we may transcribe it in full.

“ They lighted a taper, at the dead of night,  
And chaunted their holiest hymn ;  
But her brow and her bosom were damp with affright,  
Her eye was all sleepless and dim!  
And the lady of Elderslie wept for her lord,  
When a death-watch beat in her lonely room,  
When her curtain had shook of its own accord,  
And the raven had flapped at her window board,  
To tell of her warrior's doom!

‘ Now sing you the death-song, and loudly pray  
For the soul of my knight so dear,  
And call me a widow this wretched day,  
Since the warning of God is here!  
For night-mare rides on my strangled sleep ;  
The lord of my bosom is doomed to die ;  
His valorous heart they have wounded deep,  
And the blood-red tears shall his country weep  
For Wallace of Elderslie!’

Yet knew not his country that ominous hour,  
Ere the loud matin bell was rung,  
That a trumpet of death, on an English tower,  
Had the dirge of her champion sung!  
When his dungeon light looked dim and red  
On the high born blood of a martyr slain ;  
No anthem was sung at his holy death bed,  
No weeping there was where his bosom bled,  
And his heart was rent in twain.

Oh! it was not thus when his oaken spear  
Was true to that knight forlorn;  
And hosts of a thousand were scattered like deer  
At the blast of the hunter's horn;  
When he strode on the wreck of each well fought field,  
With the yellow-haired chiefs of his native land,  
For his lance was not shivered on helmet or shield,  
And the sword that seemed fit for archangel to wield,  
Was light in his terrible hand!

Yet bleeding and bound, though her Wallace wight  
For his long-loved country die,  
The bugle ne'er sung to a braver knight  
Then Wallace of Elderslie.  
But the day of his glory shall never depart,—  
His head unentombed shall with glory be balmed,—  
From his blood-streaming altar his spirit shall start;—  
Though the raven has fed on his mouldering heart,  
A nobler was never embalmed!"