



LAKE OF MENTRITH

THE LAKE OF MENTEITH.

BY STEWART A. ROBERTSON, M.A



MENTEITH has been called a land of shadows, and its lake, set in fair woods, is magical with the charm of soft shadows and passing gleams. In its loveliness of calm, its serenity of seclusion, it seems to speak the last word of peace to those who press beyond its quiescent shores to the stormy beauties of the Highlands. Yet the thrill of historic action has penetrated not rarely to this home of ancient peace, and its islands of Talla and Inchmahome have touched the destinies of the nation. The larger island, Inchmahome, "the Isle of Rest," was from early times occupied by Augustinian monks, but it was in 1238 that Walter Comyn, Earl of Menteith, founded and endowed a Priory upon the island. From the style of the architecture, the church evidently belongs to the middle of the thirteenth century, and many of its details, its lofty lancet windows without tracery, the north aisle of its choir, perhaps used as a sacristy, display features similar to those of the Cathedral of Dunblane. The nave is 75 feet in length, and has a north aisle connected with it by four arches, two of which are still standing, and reveal early pointed work of an exquisite symmetry. The west doorway is also very fine, and is in fair preservation. Two ambries and an arch of the sedilia are to be seen in the south wall of the choir, beyond which is the chapter-house, vaulted with a semi-circular tunnel-vault, over which there is a room in the roof. The chapter-house has a good east window, and there is the usual stone seat all round. The cloisters and cloister garth were situated to the south of the nave, where the corbels for the cloister roof still remain. The refectory probably ran along the south side of the cloisters, but most of the monastic buildings are destroyed save the kitchen, whose fire-place and windows are well preserved. Near the kitchen a stair-case which led to the dormitory may be traced. But the buildings seem strangely confused, owing to the chapter-house having been used as a mausoleum by the Earls of Menteith and Airth, and an approach towards it, constructed between two high walls, erected from the materials of the demolished monastic buildings. In this enclosure was laid the body of Lord Kilpont, son of the Earl of Menteith and Airth, who was assassinated by Stewart of Ardvoirlich in the camp of Montrose at Collace in 1644. On this tale of sudden onslaught, whose premeditation is still uncertain, Scott founded

the "Legend of Montrose." Lord Kilpont's father, the Earl of Menteith and Airth, was then a state prisoner in his own castle on Inch Talla, where his life of long struggle, in which seekers for romance may find realities stranger than their dreams, soon afterwards came to an end. They were a luckless race those Earls of Menteith who built their castle of Talla with the stones of the priory of Inchmahome, and the eighth Earl carried their fortunes still further down the steep slope of adversity. Yet the power of other restraints than the waters that girdle Inch Talla is surely suggested by the legally-drawn contract which he executed with his wife that "he shall have full freedom and libertie to goe about his affairs to Edinburgh, or any place elsewhere thereanent." In the choir are the indistinguishable graves of Drummonds, Grahams, Stewarts, and Comyns. The finest monument is that of Walter Stewart, fifth Earl of Menteith, and his Countess. He is said to have fought in 1263 at the battle of Largs, to have been one of the witnesses at the marriage of the Princess Margaret with Eric of Norway, and to have followed the banner of Louis of France to the Crusade. But the most moving historical association of the Priory is with the childhood of Mary Stewart. To the security of its remoteness the child-queen was transferred from Stirling in 1547, that she might be beyond the clutches of Henry VIII. of England, then prosecuting his plans for her marriage with his son by the rough wooing of a burnt Edinburgh and the shattered aisles of Melrose. Poet and painter alike have delighted to set in vision before us the peaceful days in Inchmahome of that life thereafter so stormy. To those whom these "old, unhappy, far-off things" touch, the sense of pathos will be quick as they walk by the stag-headed chestnuts that shadowed the playing of the child-queen and her Maries. There shall they seem still to hear the resonance of such storms as lay prostrate in the place of their power, alike the monarchs of the soil and the supremacies of man. Such thoughts are stirred more deeply by the sight of the little Queen's garden, or, as it is sometimes called, Queen Mary's Bower, an oval space enclosed by a double row of boxwood, the plants being about 14 feet high. Here, as children will do, the little queen and her Maries planted a garden, and their innocent hands fondled the short greenery of the box-plants that are now so tall. At the north side of the island is an artificial mound on which was probably built an early stronghold. Tradition, however, enwrapping it as the ivy veils the ruins, calls it the nun's walk, and tells a tragic tale of forgotten vows and broken faith. For even the Isle of Rest soothes not the restless heart, and the calm of the lake of shadows is less deep than the calm of despair.