

BATTLE OF ATHELSTANEFORD.*

A.D. 800.

THE parish of Athelstaneford, in the county of Haddington, distinguished as the scene of the ministerial labours of Robert Blair, author of "The Grave," and John Home, author of the Tragedy of "Douglas," received its name, according to Buchanan, from a battle fought in it during the reign of Achaius, King of Scotland. Athelstane, whom the historian supposes was a Danish chief to whom Northumberland was ceded by Alfred the Great, but who was in reality a Saxon leader, entered Scotland, and ravaged the territories of Hungus, King of the Picts—the Pictish monarchy being then in existence. Hungus applied to Achaius for assistance to repel the Saxon invader, and as that King was already incensed against the English, he readily furnished his Pictish contemporary with 10,000 men, under the command of his son Alpin, who was also the nephew of Hungus. The Scots entered Northumberland, which they ravaged, and carried off considerable plunder. Athelstane followed them on their return, and overtook the Scots near the town of Haddington.

Both parties prepared for battle at a rivulet in the immediate neighbourhood of the village of Athelstaneford

* Buchanan's History; Statistical Account of Scotland.

called *Lug Down Burn*, supposed to be a corruption of *Rug Down*, which separates the parish from that of Haddington. It is not agreed whether Achaius was also present, and it is of no importance to inquire, as the whole story is obscured by uncertain tradition. The affair, however, was in after times deemed of sufficient importance by the monks to engraft upon it, or connect it with, a miraculous appearance, which has not even the claims to originality, as it is evidently borrowed from the celebrated story connected with the conversion of Constantine the Great. Hungus, who was much inferior in every respect to Athelstane, after disposing his watches for the night, very piously considered that without Divine assistance all human efforts would be of little avail, and devoted himself to prayer. Exhausted by bodily and mental fatigue he fell into a slumber, and there appeared to him in a vision St Andrew the Apostle, who exhorted him to courage and promised him a glorious victory. Hungus, like a prudent leader, lost no time in communicating this vision to his soldiers, which inspired them with hope, and induced them to prepare with alacrity for the contest.

The following day was spent in skirmishing, and on the third day after this pretended vision both armies came to an engagement. The action had scarcely commenced when there appeared in the sky an irradiated St Andrew's cross. This very convenient miracle so terrified the Saxons that they were defeated by the first attack of the Picts, and Athelstane was pulled from his horse and slain at the ford of the rivulet called *Lug Down Burn*, a circumstance which gave his name to the parish. The village over which this miraculous intimation was given is still called *Martle*, supposed to be a contraction of *miracle*. The Saxons were completely defeated, and were compelled to retire with great loss.

It is farther pretended that the appearance of this cross

induced Achaius to institute an order of knighthood in honour of St Andrew, who was now viewed as the tutelary saint of Scotland, and that this was the origin of the Order of Knighthood called the *Thistle*. There are other accounts of the origin of this Order, which are probably as authentic as the traditionary one now related. The legend of the vision of St Andrew is contained in a "History of the Blessed Regulus, and the Foundation of the Church of St Andrew," in the Register of St Andrews, written about the year 1140. There can be little doubt that it served the purposes of its inventors, who made little distinction between the marvellous and the probable, and who appear to have acted on the principle, that when they proposed any thing to be believed by the people, it was as well to come out with a good bouncer at once, after the manner of the hero of modern times called Baron Munchausen.

It is proper to notice that several historians deny the existence of Athelstane, or at least they maintain that no king so called lived at that time, and he is not mentioned by Fordun or in the Saxon Chronicle. This, however, does not invalidate the tradition, as it is not necessary to prove that Athelstane was more than a Saxon chief or leader.
