

SIEGE OF THE CASTLE OF ABERCORN.*

A.D. 1454-5.

THE beautiful parish of Abercorn, lying on the south bank of the Forth, above the Queensferry, and distinguished for the magnificent mansion called Hopetoun House, the residence of the Earls of Hopetoun, and for the rich and varied scenery of woods, plantations, and fertile fields, once contained several establishments, scarcely a wreck of which remain at the present day. If the reader is inclined to enjoy a summer-day's ramble in this parish, the centre of which is only about twelve miles from Edinburgh and about six from Linlithgow, he will look in vain for those sites and localities which are distinguished in Scottish history as the scenes of remarkable events. Here, according to some historians, the wall built by the Romans in the time of Antoninus between the Friths of Forth and Clyde, often designated the *Wall of Abercorn*, terminated, though it is more probable that Blackness Castle, a little farther up the Forth, is the proper extremity or point to which it extended. Here there was a monastery, one of the most ancient in Scotland, of which no record remains, and no memorial except the designations of several places in the parish, such as *Priest Inch*, *St Serf's Law*, *Priest's Folly*, and other names of ecclesiastical origin. And here was a strong castle, one of the most tenable fortresses which belonged to the powerful House of Douglas.

The Castle of Abercorn was situated on a point to the north-east of the present parish church, and must have

* Hume of Godscroft's History of the House of Douglas and Angus; Pinkerton's History of Scotland; Anderson's History of the House of Hamilton; Statistical Account of Scotland.

been of difficult access on all sides except the east. It probably occupied the site of one of the Roman stations or forts which occurred at equal distances between the Wall of Antoninus and Cramond, the port which the Romans chiefly frequented in the Frith of Forth, to preserve the communication, and to prevent the inroads of the Caledonians from the opposite shore. But whatever may have been its origin, it was a fortress of great strength in the reign of James II., when in 1454 it was besieged by that prince—its proprietor, the Earl of Douglas, being then in rebellion, and a war was raging in Scotland between the King and that nobleman. The rebellion of Douglas seemed in reality to endanger the stability of the Scottish throne, which was fomented by the English to prevent the interference of James in the affairs of England. But there were other causes in the hostility of Douglas, such as the deep enmity excited by the destruction of two chiefs of that House during the reign of James, and by other injuries and mortifications; to which may be added the conviction that no monarch would sincerely pardon a family who despised the laws and invaded the throne.

James discovered the treasonable correspondence carried on by Douglas in England, and sent a herald to summon him to appear either before the Privy Council or the Parliament. Instead of showing obedience, or even alarm, the Earl sent secret messengers to affix during the night placards upon the doors of the religious edifices in Edinburgh, charging the King with the murder of two chiefs of the House of Douglas, and containing many exulting expressions. The King instantly levied a number of troops, and ravaged some of the possessions of the Earl of Douglas. It was the season of harvest, and James felt reluctant to destroy the growing crops. He therefore returned, and dismissing a part of his followers, he ordered the others to besiege the Castle of Abercorn.

The King's sudden attack on his domains had induced Douglas to retire to the Borders, whence he sent Lord Hamilton, his intimate friend, whose lands in Avondale and Clydesdale had been also ravaged, to England for assistance against James. A sum of money was obtained, but no men, as Henry VI. would not grant a subsidy of troops unless Douglas renounced his allegiance to the Scottish King, which the Earl positively refused. Lord Hamilton also obtained some pecuniary assistance, by which he was enabled to equip a body of three hundred horse and as many foot soldiers. It was now resolved by Douglas and his supporters to take the field against the King, and hazard a battle. The armed force which the potent Earl could summon was estimated at forty thousand men, most of whom, from their situation near the Borders, were inured to all the hardships of war, and were justly considered superior, from their constant exercise in fighting, to any other soldiers in Scotland.

The Castle of Abercorn was besieged by the Earls of Orkney and Angus at the head of six thousand men. Douglas, concluding that the King was conducting the siege in person, summoned all his forces to meet him at his town or village of Douglas with provisions for twenty days, to march to Abercorn and rescue the castle, or give the King battle. Alarmed at this threatening aspect of affairs, and distrusting the south of Scotland, which was solely under the influence of the Earl, the King embarked in a vessel for St Andrews, where he landed in such perplexity and despair as to entertain serious thoughts of leaving the kingdom. The distinguished James Kennedy, nephew of Robert III. was then bishop of the see, and the King betook himself to that virtuous and illustrious prelate for advice, disclosing to him the hostile proceedings of Douglas, and desiring his counsel. The interview, as given by Lindsay of Pitscottie, is characteristic. "Sir," said the Bishop,

“ I beseech your Majesty to take a little food to refresh you, while I pass to my oratory, and pray to God for you and the commonwealth of this realm.” The prelate accordingly proceeded to his oratory, where he continued a short time in devotional exercises, while the King was partaking of his repast. When the Bishop returned, he took the King by the hand and led him into the oratory, exhorting him to earnest prayer that he might be enabled to triumph over the insurgents. James performed his devotions, but the offices of religion failed to inspire him with confidence and hope. The Bishop then had recourse to an expedient, and took the King into a private apartment where several bows and arrows were lying among some valuable articles. Pulling out a number of the arrows, he bound them closely together with thongs, and desired the King to attempt to break them over his knee. James answered it was impossible, on account of there being so many of them, and so firmly tied by the leather. “ True,” replied the Bishop, “ but I will let your Grace see that I can break them.” He pulled them out, sometimes one, and sometimes two, and in this manner he broke them all. “ Sir,” said the Bishop, “ you must even so do with your barons who have risen against you, who are so numerous and so closely confederated together, that you cannot break them in a body. It is no use to oppose them all at once, but take and deal with each individually, as I have shown you in the simile of the arrows. Farther, issue a proclamation to all persons who have offended against the law, granting them free pardons if they promise to be peaceable in future, and come to the assistance of your Majesty on the present urgent occasion. By so doing you will succeed much better than you anticipate.”

James took courage at this prudent advice, and acted according to the directions of Bishop Kennedy. He erected his standard at St Andrews, and ordered all his faithful

subjects north of the Forth to meet him at Stirling on a stated day. Proceeding thither, accompanied by Bishop Kennedy, and the nobility and gentlemen of Fife, Angus, and Strathearn, he soon found himself at the head of thirty thousand men, and remaining at Stirling till the more northern chiefs and their followers arrived, he was joined by ten thousand more. This immense array immediately marched against Douglas, whose army, including Lord Hamilton's six hundred cavalry and foot soldiers, was not inferior in number, had encamped on the south side of the Carron, on the march to relieve the Castle of Abercorn.

A battle, which would decide whether James II. or the Earl of Douglas was to have the dominion of the kingdom, seemed inevitable. It was at this crisis that the Bishop of St Andrews, anxious to prevent the effusion of blood which would ensue, sent privately to Lord Hamilton who was his nephew, assuring that nobleman not only of pardon, but of high reward and favour, if he would withdraw from supporting the Earl of Douglas, and assist the King. The offers were tempting after what had passed, and, considering the peculiar situation in which he was placed, were more than Lord Hamilton could reasonably expect. He returned rather a favourable answer, but being determined to act honourably towards the Earl, he repaired to him, and represented that he would never have a more favourable opportunity to fight the King to advantage, as it was not likely he would ever again be at the head of such a numerous and well appointed force; adding, that his Lordship would find it extremely difficult to keep his numerous forces much longer together. A haughty or impatient answer of Douglas decided Hamilton, who was told by the proud Earl that if he was afraid or tired he might begone. While they were speaking a herald advanced from the King's army, and ordered them to disperse with their followers under pain of treason. Douglas treated the herald with

derision, drowning his voice by the clamour of horns and trumpets, and immediately put his forces in marching array against the royal army. But when his troops discovered the strength and good order of the latter, Douglas saw by their dejected countenances that it would be madness to hazard a battle, and he conducted them back to the camp in the hope that he would be able to revive their courage, and lead them to battle in the morning. Meanwhile the reply of Douglas had greatly irritated Lord Hamilton, who seeing the folly of hazarding his own ruin, convened his friends and followers, and passed over to the royal camp, where they were received by the King with open arms. It was considered necessary, however, that Hamilton should not immediately appear as a deserter from the standard of his former friend, and he was sent to Roslin Castle for a few days. His defection from Douglas was imitated to an astonishing extent, for out of all the host which the Earl had collected, and which he then commanded, there remained on the following morning attached to him only two hundred horsemen, and these were his own relations and immediate dependants. In this reduced condition the Earl hastily retired to the Borders, where he lurked with his brothers till the ensuing spring.

The siege of the Castle of Abercorn had been raised by the King, who withdrew the six thousand men before it under the Earls of Orkney and Angus, to strengthen his army in the expectation of a battle with Douglas, and had not been continued during the winter. As soon as the season of 1455 permitted, James recommenced the siege, and his forces encamped before it during Easter week. The place was either so strong, or the art of attack was so imperfectly known, that the siege occupied four weeks. While thus employed before the Castle of Abercorn, where the King was in person, Douglas, who had collected a number of his vassals, outlaws, and Border marauders, com-

menced depredations on the property of those who adhered to the loyal party. He was met by a body of troops under the Earl of Angus and Lord Hamilton at Ardkinholm, near the junction of the River Esk with the Ewes, in the parish of Langholm, and defeated with great slaughter. His brother the Earl of Moray was killed, and his head sent to James at Abercorn. Two other brothers of Douglas, the Earl of Ormond and Lord Balveny, were taken prisoners, but the latter contrived to escape into England. Ormond was condemned and executed. Thus fell the enormous power of the House of Douglas, which, in the opinion of an historian, "had arisen from patriotic heroism, and was conducted to perdition by aristocratic tyranny, and the most ungrateful rebellion."

Few particulars are preserved of what took place at the siege of the Castle of Abercorn in 1455. Its massive towers were shaken, and at length the fortress was taken by a general assault in the month of May that year. The chief defenders were hanged, their inferiors were dismissed, and the fortress itself was dismantled and reduced to ruin. It was never repaired, and its materials were subsequently carried away to build houses, walls, and dikes, till every vestige of it disappeared, and its existence is now a matter of history. James proceeded against other castles belonging to Douglas and his friends, and returned to Edinburgh to meet his Parliament held in the month of June, in which the forfeiture of the Earl, his mother Beatrix, and his brothers, was solemnly decreed.

Impressed with the value of the great service rendered by Lord Hamilton at Carron, James II. continued to treat that nobleman and his family with the greatest distinction. He even resolved to give him his daughter the Princess Mary in marriage, but his untimely death at Roxburgh Castle prevented the fulfilment of his intentions, and the Princess was united to Thomas Boyd, son of Lord Boyd,

created Earl of Arran, who acted as Regent after the King's death. The Princess, however, became the second wife of Lord Hamilton in 1474. The issue of this marriage were James, second Lord Hamilton, and first Earl of Arrtn of that family and the Lady Elizabeth, married to Matthew Stuart, Earl of Lennox.