

SURPRISE OF EDINBURGH CASTLE.*

A.D. 1312.

THE reign of King Robert Bruce is a remarkable era in the history of the Castle of Edinburgh. In the course of the war carried on by Edward I. to assert his claim of superiority over Scotland, this fortress was besieged and taken by the English in 1296. It remained in their possession till it was recovered in the manner now related.

The celebrated Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, and nephew of King Robert, distinguished himself as one of the most devoted supporters of his uncle. He was the same Earl of Moray who died at Musselburgh when Regent of Scotland. The Castle of Edinburgh was then commanded by Sir Piers Leland, a knight of Gascony, in the service of the King of England, and the garrison was strong, well disciplined, and resolute. Earl Randolph blockaded the fortress so closely, that all communication with the surrounding district was cut off, and if not relieved the garrison must have been compelled to capitulate by famine, but the delay was precarious on the part of the Earl, whose great object was to get possession of it as soon as possible. A communication was opened by the Earl with Leland, the nature of which is not recorded, but it was such as to induce the garrison to suspect his fidelity. They in consequence thrust him into a dungeon in the Castle, and chose another commander to defend their almost impregnable station—for so the Castle of Edinburgh was before the invention of artillery—whose name is not transmitted.

* The Bruce, or the History of Robert I., written in Scottish verse, by John Barbour, Pinkerton's edition; Lord Hailes' Annals of Scotland; Arnot's History of Edinburgh.

The unfortunate knight of Lombardy being thus thrown into prison, the siege presented the same aspect as at the commencement. Day after day Earl Randolph surveyed the strength of the place with hopeless eyes, yet he could not persuade himself to relinquish the enterprize. The haughty English defied him from the battlements, and expressed themselves in the most insulting and ironical manner. While engaged in surveying the lofty and for the most part precipitous rock on which the fortress stands, the Earl was accosted by one of his own soldiers named William Frank, or Francis, whom Barbour designates "wicht, and apert, wyss, and curyuss," namely, strong, active, prudent, and skilful, who was intimately acquainted with the castle rock, which he had often scaled in his youth to carry on an amour in the city below—an exploit which has been often hazarded since the days of the said "wicht William Frank," and, as too many have fatally known, not always with the same success. "Methinks, my Lord," said this individual, "you would rejoice if some one were to devise some means of putting this fortress into your possession, or show you how the walls could be scaled."—"Thou sayest truly," replied Earl Randolph, "and could such a man be found, I pledge myself that his services shall be amply rewarded, not only by me, but by my royal uncle."—"The generosity of the King and of thyself, noble Randolph," said the soldier, "is well known, but the love of country should be above such a consideration. Know that I can enable you to enter the castle with no greater aid than what a twelve feet ladder affords, and I offer myself as your guide and the foremost in the attempt. If, my Lord, you wish to know how this can be done, I shall explain it in a few words. Know, then, that my father in my youth was keeper of yonder fortress, and that I, then a wild gallant, loved a certain maid in the town beneath. That I might obtain access to her when I pleased, I was

wont to lower myself from yonder wall by night with the help of a ladder of ropes which I procured for the purpose, and by secret steps I descended these precipitous cliffs, returning by the same access undiscovered by the garrison. I practised this so often both in going and returning, and became so familiar with the cliffs, that the darkest night was no obstacle to my adventure. If, therefore, you are pleased to assail the castle in this manner, there can be little doubt of success. I will be the leader, and be the first in the attempt."

Such is the substance of the soldier's address to Earl Randolph, as given by Barbour in the following manner:—

He said—"Methink ye wald blythly,
 That man fand you sum jupartly,
 How ye mycht o'er the walls wyn:
 And certes if ye will begyn,
 For till assay on sic advice
 I'll undertake for my service
 To show you how to climb to the wall,
 And I shall foremost be of all:
 Where with a short ladder may we,
 I trow of twelve feet it may be,
 Climb to the wall up all quietly.
 And if that ye will know how I
 Do this, I shall you blythly say:
 When I was young in former day,
 My father was keeper of yon house,
 And I was some deill walgeouss. (gallant,)
 And loved a wench down in the town,
 And that I without suspicioun,
 Might repair to her privily,
 Of ropes a ladder to me made I;
 And therewith over the wall I slaid,
 A strait road that I speryt (discovered) had
 Intil the crag, syne down I went,
 And often come till myn intent.
 And when it near drew to the day,
 I returned again by that same way.
 I aye came in without perceiving,
 And used lang that travelling;
 So that I can that road go right.
 Though it be ever sa mirk the night;

And if ye think ye will essay
To pass up after me that way,
Up to the wall I shall you bring.
If God us saves from the perceiving
Of them that watch upon the wall ;
And if that we so fair may fall,
That we our ladders up may set.
If one man on the wall may get,
He can defend if it be need,
Until the others up them speed."

Earl Randolph was overjoyed at this intelligence, and resolved to hazard the attempt under the guidance of the soldier. Associating Sir Andrew Gray with himself in the enterprise, he selected thirty men, and during a dark night on the 14th of March they proceeded to scale the rocks. Tradition has not preserved the side on which they ascended the cliffs, but from sundry intimations in the old poet's narrative it appears to have been somewhere about the north-east side overhanging the ruins of the Well-House Tower, above which there is a part of the rock, of extremely difficult access, formerly well known to the boys of Edinburgh, popularly called *Wallace's Cradle*, and from which the curious old burgh force of Edinburgh now extinct, called the Town Guard, have received many a pelting, when besieging juvenile delinquents in this strong retreat, after dispersing those famous battles known by the name of *bickers*. The night was extremely dark, the precipice was steep and dangerous, the chance of discovery by the sentinels was great, and the slender support which Randolph and his brave companions could expect while groping their way in silence from crag to crag rendered the enterprise most appalling. When they were half way up, they found a flat spot covered by a projecting rock large enough to accommodate them, and there they sat down to recover their breath, and prepare for the more dangerous and perilous part of the adventure. An incident occurred at this stage of the attempt which is worthy of notice. While standing under the pro-

jecting rock, and arranging their scaling ladder, they distinctly heard the *rounds*, or *check-watches*, as Barbour calls them, passing along the walls above them. It chanced that one of the English soldiers, in mere wantonness and levity, and without the slightest suspicion that there was any one beneath, took up a stone, and threw it from the battlements down on the cliffs, exclaiming at the same time—"Away! I see you well!"

Bot wondrous mirk was the night,
 So that they [the English] of them had no sight.
 And yet there was ane
 Of them that swapp'd down a stane,
 And said—' Away! I see you weil.'
 Although he saw not them a deil.
 Ower their heads flew the stane,
 And they sat still lurking ilk ane.

It is probable, however, that the garrison, fearing a surprise, were nightly in the habit of doing something like this, to show the besiegers that they were on the alert, for Barbour adds—

The watches, when they heard nought stir,
 Fra that ward samyn all pass'd o'er.

The stone rattled among the cliffs, and passed over the heads of Earl Randolph and his companions, as they cowered under the projecting rock from which it bounded. They had presence of mind to remain, and immediately the sentinels continued their usual rounds, with less vigilance on account of the darkness of the night, which apparently rendered any attempt at a surprise impossible. Meanwhile the adventurers resumed the ascent, and arrived in safety at the foot of the wall. They fixed their ladder, and Frank their guide ascended first, followed by Sir Andrew Gray, Earl Randolph being the third.

But before they had all mounted, the sentinels caught

the alarm, and raised the cry of *Treason* throughout the unsuspecting garrison.

Treason! Treason! they cried fast,
Then some of them wero so aghast,
That they fled, and lap o'er the wall,
But sooth to say they fled not all.

The garrison ran to arms, and the new governor of the Castle and others rushed to the spot. A desperate combat, sword in hand, ensued, in which Earl Randolph was for some time in great personal danger; for

The constable and his company
Met him and his right hardily.

The swords of the assailants were steeped to the hilts in blood, and numbers of the garrison fell, while not one of the adventurers appears to have been killed. The governor or constable was at length slain, and his surviving followers fled. Earl Randolph by this bold exploit obtained possession of the fortress, and released Sir Piers Leland from his dungeon. He entered into the service of the Scots, and his namesake, Leland the antiquarian, gives him the appellation of *Petrus Lelandius, Viscount of Edinburgh*, but this dignity of *Viscount* must refer to his former office of governor of the Castle for Edward II. He adds, that "Bruce after surmised treason upon him, because he thought that he had an English heart, and made him to be hanged and drawn." From this and other instances it appears that Bruce often acted in the most summary and despotic manner towards those whom he suspected of treason, an intimation of which is perhaps given in a stanza of the fine Scottish song—

"In the days when our King Robert rang,
His trews they cost but half-a-crown;
He said they were a groat ower dear,
And ca'd the tailour thief and loon."

Barbour compares this achievement of Earl Randolph to one of Alexander the Great, who "leaped headlong among his foemen from the wall of the town which he was beleaguering." He adds a legend remarkably characteristic of the times. The holy St Margaret, Queen of Malcolm Canmore, who died in Edinburgh Castle upwards of two centuries before, and to whom a chapel was erected in the fortress, which Bruce liberally endowed with a grant from the revenues of the city, had prophetically announced, by causing to be painted in her chapel the representation of a man scaling a fortress by means of a ladder, with the inscription, *Gardez vous de Francois*. This was long thought to predict the taking of the Castle by the French; but it was conveniently and satisfactorily discovered that it was fulfilled in the achievement of William Frank or Francis, the brave guide of Earl Randolph. There is no reason assigned for Queen Margaret, who has still a festival in the Roman Catholic calendar, choosing to prophesy in the French language.

The Castle of Edinburgh was after this exploit dismantled, to prevent it falling again into the hands of the English; and in this condition it lay until it was rebuilt by Edward III. of England, in one of his expeditions into Scotland to support the pretensions of Edward Balliol to the crown, and his own to the superiority of the kingdom. He put a strong garrison in it, but it remained only a short time in possession of the English. In 1341 it was recovered by a stratagem narrated in a previous part of the present work, in which William Douglas and three other gentlemen were concerned, a pretended merchant being the agent employed, and the fortress by a bold adventure was recovered by the Scots. About that time the English were entirely driven out of Scotland.