

SOMERLED THE THANE OF ARGYLE.

SOMERLED is well known in tradition and history and song as the founder of the great family of Macdonald, Lords of the Isles. His grandfather held considerable possessions in the Western Highlands, but was expelled from them by the Norsemen, and took refuge in Ireland; and though he persuaded the Macquarries and the MacMahons of that country to espouse his cause, and made an expedition with their assistance against his enemies, he had no success and was obliged to sit down in permanent poverty. Somerled's father and Somerled himself long remained in the poverty bequeathed to them; but sought an obscure retreat within the limits of their patrimonial territory, and lived in a cave, which is till pointed out as theirs, on the shores of Loch Linnhe. Somerled lived in great retirement, musing on the ruined fortunes of his house, and seemingly more inclined to indulge

in melancholy than to watch an opportunity for enterprise or adventure; but, in the course of time, he was roused by an incitement from without, and suddenly proved himself to be a master of expedients and of intrigues and stratagems.

The clan MacInnes were at this time—the early part of the twelfth century—occupants of a large portion of Morvern, and had suffered great disasters in withstanding repeated invasions of the marauding Norsemen, and were menaced with another attack, and felt at their wit's end for competent skill and resources to repel the foe. They held an assembly, and resolved to fight as one man, and to invite Somerled to organise them and lead them to battle. Their messengers found him angling in the Gear-Abhain. He heard them in silence; and remained silent and thoughtful for some time after they had ceased to speak; and at last observed that he was in pursuit of a sportive salmon, and that if he could succeed in landing him, he would consider it a good omen. He hooked the fish, and, after following it through some bold plunges and struggles, brought it safely to the bank. But he angled not for mere amusement; and before going to the MacInneses, he proceeded to his father's cave, there to present the food which he had obtained for his sustenance, and to make a due discharge of other filial home duties. Yet on parting with the messengers, he gave directions respecting a suitable place of muster, and commanded that a great number of fires—a number so great as to appear to the clansmen wonderful and mysterious—should be lighted round their encampment during the following night, and added that, by the time of the completion of the arrangements, he should be amongst them to assume the generalship, and render them the best efforts of his skill.

Somerled surveyed from a distance the host of invaders, and, concluding them to be vastly superior to the greatest force which he could oppose to them, he invented a stratagem for deceiving them respecting his own numbers. A herd

of cattle lay depasturing in the neighbouring valley; and all these he ordered to be killed and skinned. He occupied a position which commanded a full view of the enemy's movements; and as soon as he saw them commence their march, he caused his small force to descend the eminence into a small glen at its base which opened toward the shore,—to make a circuit thence round the further side of the hill, over its summit, and back again to the glen,—and to repeat this movement several times continuously, so as to produce the appearance to the enemy of a numerous battalion. And then, ordering every man to wrap himself in an ox's hide, with the smooth side outward, he made the force repeat the same deceptive march, so as to produce the appearance of a second numerous battalion; and afterwards ordering them to reverse the hides, turning the hairy side outward, he made them once more repeat the movement, so as to produce the appearance of a third and very savage-looking battalion. The stratagem succeeded. The Norsemen, supposing that a large and formidable army was descending upon them, fell into disorder, hesitated to stand, and gave way to panic; and Somerled and his associates rushed suddenly against them, and cut down their advanced body with great slaughter. Two of the Norse leaders, Borradill and Lundy, were slain in corries which still bear their name; and a third, Stangadill, was so hotly pursued and so dreadfully terror-struck, that, in order to escape the sword, he leaped into a boiling linn, which is still called Eass Stangadill.

Somerled followed up his first exploit with others of similar daring and success; and, after struggling long with the Norsemen, he expelled them from a great extent of the Western Highlands, and made himself master of all Morvern, Lochaber, and northern Argyle; and not long afterwards, added to his other possessions the southern districts of that country. In the year 1035, when David I. expelled the Norwegians from Man, Arran, and Bute, Somerled appears

to have obtained a grant of those islands from the King. But finding himself still unable to contend with the Norwegians of the Isles, whose power remained unbroken, he resolved to recover by policy, what he despaired of acquiring by force of arms; and, with this view, he succeeded in obtaining by stratagem, the hand of the daughter of Olave, surnamed the Red, who was then the Norwegian King of the Isles. The lady thus fraudulently seized and forcibly married, brought him three sons, namely, Dugall, Reginald, and Angus; and, by a previous marriage, he had one named Gil-lecallum.

The prosperous fortunes of Somerled at length inflamed his ambition. He had already attained great power in the Highlands; and success inspired him with the desire of extending it. His grandsons having formerly claimed the earldom of Moray, their pretensions were now renewed; and this was followed by an attempt to put them in actual possession of their alleged inheritance. This attempt brought the Thane of Argyle into open rebellion against the King, and appears to have excited great alarm amongst the inhabitants of Scotland; but Somerled encountering a more vigorous opposition than he had anticipated, found it necessary to return to the west, where the tyrannical conduct of his brother-in-law, Godred, who then wore the Norwegian crown of the Isles, had irritated his vassals and thrown every thing into confusion. Somerled's presence gave confidence to the party opposed to the tyrant; and Thorfinn, one of the most powerful of the Norwegian nobles, resolved to depose Godred, and place another prince on the throne of the Isles. Somerled readily entered into the views of Thorfinn; and it was arranged that Dugall, the eldest son of the former, should occupy the throne from which his maternal uncle was to be displaced. But the result of the projected deposition did not answer the expectations of either party. Dugall was committed to the care of Thorfinn, who undertook to con-

duct him through the Isles, and compel the chiefs not only to acknowledge him as their sovereign, but also to give hostages for their fidelity and allegiance. The Lord of Skye, however, refused to comply with this demand, and, having fled to the Isle of Man, apprized Godred of the intended revolution. Somerled followed with a fleet of galleys; and Godred having commanded his ships to be got ready, a bloody but indecisive battle ensued. It was fought on the night of the Epiphany; and as neither party prevailed, the rival chiefs next morning entered into a sort of compromise or convention, by which the sovereignty of the Isles was divided, and two distinct principalities established. By this treaty Somerled acquired all the islands lying to the southward of the promontory of Ardnamurchan, whilst those to the northward remained in the possession of Godred.

But no sooner had he made this acquisition than he became involved in hostilities with the government. Having joined the powerful party in Scotland, which had resolved to depose Malcolm IV., and to place the boy of Egremont on the throne, he began to infest various parts of the coast, and for some time carried on a vexatious predatory warfare. The project, however, failed; and Malcolm, convinced that the existence of an independent chief was incompatible with the interests of his government and the maintenance of public tranquillity, required of Somerled to resign his lands into the hands of the sovereign, and to hold them in future as a vassal of the crown. Somerled, however, was little disposed to comply with this demand, although the King was now preparing to enforce it by means of a powerful army. Emboldened by his previous successes, he resolved to anticipate the attack; and having appeared in the Clyde with a considerable force, he landed at Renfrew, where being met by the royal army under the command of the High Steward of Scotland, a battle ensued which ended in his defeat and death.

This celebrated chief has been traditionally described, as

“a well tempered man, in body shapely, of a fair piercing eye, of middle stature, and of quick discernment.” He appears, indeed, to have been equally brave and sagacious, tempering courage with prudence, and, excepting in the last act of his life, distinguished for the happy talent, rare at any period, of profiting by circumstances, and making the most of success. In the battle of Renfrew his son Gillicallum perished by his side, leaving a son, Somerled, who succeeded to his grandfather's possessions.