

SIEGE OF BERWICK.*

A.D. 1296.

THE ancient town of Berwick, beautifully situated on the Scottish side of the River Tweed, near its mouth, has sustained many sieges, and has been the scene of numerous conflicts, when the Scots and English contended for the mastery. In the reign of Edward I. the fortifications consisted chiefly of a ditch and a rampart of earth, with a barricade of timber, but these defences were of sufficient strength to offer resistance to assailants. The town and castle had been in possession of the Scots more than two-thirds of a century, when John Baliol, King of Scotland, provoked by the haughtiness of Edward I., mustered courage to renounce his acknowledged dependence, and invaded England in 1295, where he committed many depredations. But his career was soon checked by the English monarch, who, in the spring of 1296, entered Scotland with his army, by fording the River Tweed below the nunnery at Coldstream. The river happened to be considerably swollen, yet all passed over in safety except a boy, who, by falling from a horse, was carried down by the current and drowned. On the same day, Anthony Beck, the warlike Bishop of Durham, led a body of English troops over the river at a ford near his own castle of Norham, and the whole army, marching along the Scottish side of the Tweed, came to Berwick, before which the English encamped, and summoned the garrison to surrender.

Edward fixed his quarters at a religious establishment of nuns situated in the fields of Berwick, about a mile from

* Fuller's History of Berwick; Hutchinson's View of Northumberland; Ridpath's Border History.

the town, where he waited nearly two days for the acceptance by the garrison of the conditions he offered. During this interval he drew up his army on an extensive field adjoining the nunnery, at the eastern foot of Halidon Hill, and conferred the honour of knighthood on Hugh Percy and other gentlemen of distinction, as was usual in those times on such occasions. This muster of the army, with a display of banners, was made by the English King in full view of his fleet, then lying in Berwick Bay, at the mouth of the Tweed. The crews, believing that Edward was preparing to assault the town, and anxious to sustain a part in the enterprise, boldly entered the mouth of the river, and, favoured by the tide, sailed towards the haven. This premature and mistaken movement caused the loss of three ships, which ran aground, and were immediately attacked by the garrison. Some of the crew were killed, others escaped in boats, or by swimming, the stranded vessels were burnt, and the rest of the fleet took advantage of the ebbing tide to retire.

Edward witnessed the burning of his ships from the field on which he had drawn up his army, and being desirous to save his fleet, he ordered an instant assault of the town on the land side, while the attention of the garrison was entirely directed towards the river and the sea in repelling the invading vessels. He commanded his soldiers to force their way sword in hand into the town. The Scottish writers relate that the King furnished his army with banners and ensigns similar to those of the Scots, and that some of the retainers of Robert Bruce, who was then in the English interest, had craftily procured admission into the town, and represented that most effectual aid would shortly be sent by Baliol, who with a considerable reinforcement was then only at a short distance. The English soldiers, advancing with Scottish banners, were mistaken for this pretended reinforcement, and were successful in passing the defences

already mentioned, consisting of the ditch, the earthen rampart, and the barricade of timber. But all the English historians take no notice of this alleged stratagem of Edward, and it probably originated partly from the national vanity of the Scotch writers, and partly from the proceedings of the King, who, after encamping *about* the town—or rather near the wall and ditch on its west and north sides, for the site of the place prevented its investment—moved his tents when it was intimated to him that his conditions were rejected by the garrison. It is, however, admitted that the circumstances related by the English authors, connected with the situation of Berwick, and its environs of land and water, give some authority to the Scotch account, that when Edward's army advanced with the well known ensigns of Scotch royalty those in the town readily admitted them, and the English poured into the place.

The only determined opposition to the English was made by thirty Flemish merchants, who held out a strong tower called the Red Hall till the evening, when it was destroyed by fire, and all within it perished. Those merchants are traditionally said to have received a gift of this place, on the condition that they were to defend it constantly against the King of England. In the attack on this tower the brother of the Earl of Cornwall was killed by a spear piercing his eye, while he was looking up to those who fought above. He is said to have been the only knight who fell in the assault.

If the Scotch writers are to be credited, the English, when they obtained possession of Berwick, massacred all whom they found in their progress without distinction of age or sex. Fordun says that 7500 were slain, and that the streets ran with blood for two days—the deluge of human gore being such as to *make mills go!* Boece gives the number of the slain at 7000, and also repeats the tale that

mills were actually set in motion with the blood, while Matthew of Westminster assures us that no fewer than 60,000 persons were put to the sword on this occasion—a statement utterly incredible. Another authority makes the slain amount to 17,407, but for such a place seven or eight thousand alone was a great number. Among those who fell were many gentlemen and fighting men belonging to Fife. Whatever credit may be attached to the alleged number of the slain, it is certain that the carnage was very great, for in the instructions given by the Regency and Council of Scotland to their procurators at Rome in 1301, five years after the event, it is said, that after taking Berwick the King of England and his army committed the most barbarous cruelties on the inhabitants, who were slain without distinction of rank, age, or sex—that the churches afforded no protection to those who fled into them—and that, after those sacred edifices were defiled by the blood of the slain, and plundered of all their ornaments, the King made stables of them for his horses. Edward, in his letter to Pope Boniface, in the same year, retaliates charges of cruelty against the Scots, whom he accuses of having “destroyed an innumerable multitude of his subjects, burnt monasteries, churches, and towns, with an un pitying and savage cruelty—slaying infants in their cradles, and women in childbirth—barbarously cut off some women’s breasts, and burnt in a school, the door of which they first built up, about two hundred young men who were learning their first lessons and grammar.”

It is stated that the carnage which followed the possession of Berwick by the English on this occasion, may be ascribed to a resentment for several cruelties committed the previous year by the inhabitants and others in attacking several English vessels which had entered the port, setting fire to the ships, and putting the crews to death: but it may also have been done with a view to strike terror

into the Scots, that they might be deterred from offering farther resistance, which was quite in accordance with the projects and policy of Edward I. for subjugating Scotland. He nevertheless acted with clemency towards the garrison in the castle, who surrendered on the day he took possession of the town. In number the troops composing it were two thousand, who were allowed to depart with their arms and all the honours of war, after swearing that they would never fight against the King of England. Sir William Douglas, their commander, was detained a prisoner in one of the towers of the Castle called *Hog's Tower*, where it is said he died. Edward continued some days at Berwick, and in order to fortify it against future attacks of the Scots caused a ditch to be dug through the neck of land between the Tweed and the sea, no less than eighty feet broad and forty feet deep. After this siege the town was filled with English inhabitants, and on the 24th of August Edward received in it the homage of the Scottish nobility, in the presence of an English parliament summoned for the purpose, after which he continued his career of conquest in Scotland.
