

THE SKIRMISH OF AIRSMOSS.

AFTER the defeat of the Covenanters at Bothwell Bridge in 1679, the extreme party known as Society People or Came-

ronians became completely separated, in both political opinion and religious communion, from the rest of the Presbyterians, both indulged and non-indulged; and on the 22d of June, 1680, a small number of them went in arms to the small burgh of Sanquhar, and affixed to the cross a copy of a declaration, which had been framed as the symbol or testimony of the party, and which renounced the authority of the King and his ministers, and asserted all the other Presbyterians to be in a state of sinful defection. Richard Cameron and all other persons concerned in framing and emitting this declaration were speedily denounced by a special governmental proclamation; and felt obliged to seek safety in concealment, military devices, and the constant carrying of defensive weapons. Seven troops of dragoons and a regiment of infantry marched to the south-western districts of Scotland, under Lord Linlithgow, Claverhouse, Strachan, Major Cockburn and others, to search out and apprehend Cameron and his followers, to bring them to the civil authorities, dead or alive, and at the same time to seize and punish all other Presbyterian fugitives who had formerly been denounced for contumacious insubordination to the ecclesiastical dictates of the civil power. The soldiers had already, often and often, earned the full infamy of being cruel dogs of persecution, "greedy dogs that could never have enough;" and they acted, on the present occasion, in perfect harmony with their former character. "Great numbers of them," says Wodrow, "were quartered upon country families; and where they lodged one night they eat up as much provision as they could, and brought in sheep and cows, and killed them without paying anything; they put their horses into the meadows and the standing corn, and either eat them up, or trod them down; any horses they saw feeding, or found in houses, they seized, and made the owners pay their worth, or took them with them. All the houses in their route were perfectly spoiled; and one troop and company coming upon the heels of another,

anything left by the first was quite consumed by the after-comers. Dreadful were the ravages they made upon the Sabbath days throughout all the country round them. I have seen sums of almost incredible losses sustained in this way, in the parishes of Carsphairn, Dalry, Balmaclellan, Corsmichael, and many other places, whither the soldiers came."

Sixty-three of the staunchest adherents of the Sanquhar declaration, with Richard Cameron and Hackston of Rathillet at their head, when the soldiery's search for them became very hot and keen, lay ensconced in the moorland fastnesses of the upper district of Kyle; and there they soon and sorely came into military collision with a considerable body of their pursuers. The precise scene of the conflict was near the eastern extremity of a large and wild morass called Airmoss or Airdsmoss. This tract is about five miles in length and two in breadth, and lies principally in the parish of Auchinleck, and is nearly bounded on the east by the road from Cumnock to Muirkirk, and on the west by that from Cumnock to Catrine. A monument, popularly called Cameron's stone, about half a mile west of the road from Cumnock to Muirkirk, marks the spot where the deadliest of the strife occurred. The present erection is neat and quite modern; but the original monument was a large flat stone, laid down about fifty years after the event, and simply inscribed with the names of the Cameronians who fell in the skirmish. "The utter desolation of the spot gives it a melancholy interest. The world viewed from Cameron's stone seems a howling wilderness; and nothing fair is to be seen but that heaven above on which the hopes of the enthusiasts, withdrawn from all earthly objects, were so firmly fixed. The heath and long deer-grass bear no trace of the blood which must once have stained them; and the event is so remote, that all the more ostentatious ensigns and indications of death and woe, as well as all claims upon a sympathy with mere bodily suffering, are gone and obliterated."

On Wednesday evening, the 21st of July, the sixty-three Covenanters became aware that soldiers were advancing to their neighbourhood; and they sent out two of their number as scouts, and remained all night on the moor. On the following morning, they partook of some refreshment, and sent out other two of their number, in the same capacity as the previous two. Soon after, all the four scouts returned together with intelligence; and about four o'clock, a party of well-armed dragoons, amounting to at least 112, under the command of Bruce of Earlsall, appeared in sight, and came rapidly on. The Covenanters had no alternative but to surrender unconditionally, or to make a desperate fight for liberty and life; and all seem to have been sternly animated with the spirit of resistance. Richard Cameron, who was both their minister and their chief political leader, and in whom they reposed enthusiastic confidence, prayed thrice aloud, "Lord, spare the green and take the ripe;" and then said intrepidly to his brethren, "Come, let us fight it out to the last; for this is the day I have longed for, and the day that I have prayed for, to die fighting against our Lord's enemies; this is the day that we will get the crown. Be encouraged all of you to fight it out valiantly; for all of you that shall fall this day, I see heaven's gate open to receive you." Hackston of Rathillet took the military command; and rode off to seek an advantageous position, but could not find any; and returned to the margin of the morass, and there quickly arranged his little company in the order of eight horsemen on the right, fifteen horsemen on the left, and forty foot, many of them badly armed, in the centre. A detachment of the foot were sent off to meet about twenty dismounted dragoons, who advanced to turn the flank of the Covenanters; and the main body moved forward to confront the chief force of the enemy, who were coming on at a gallop. The Covenanters' horse rode right up to the very face of the dragoons, and were the first to fire, and broke in among

their ranks with desperation and fury. Hackston himself was foremost, and rode riotously amongst them, and sustained assaults from several troopers at a time, and pushed forward and recoiled by turns, and laid about him for many minutes like an Achilles; and, his horse at last sinking in the bog, he sprang to his feet, and was instantly assailed by a heroic dismounted dragoon, an old acquaintance of his own, of the name of David Ramsay, and combated him long and fiercely with the small sword, without either gaining or yielding any considerable advantage, and was at length struck down by three mounted dragoons behind him, and then surrendered himself on quarter to Ramsay. The other horsemen of the Covenanters fought almost as desperately as their leader, and neither asked nor gave quarter; but were soon cut down or captured. The foot did not adequately support the horse, but delivered their fire at some distance; and when Hackston fell, most of them fled far into wet and sinking parts of the bog, where the dragoons could not easily or at all follow them.

No fewer than twenty-eight of Earlshall's dragoons were either killed or mortally wounded in this skirmish; and the survivors readily acknowledged the great bravery of their antagonists. Only nine of the Covenanters were slain. Richard Cameron himself was among the first who fell, and was shot dead upon the spot where he stood. A number of others were made prisoners, and taken to Edinburgh, and were afterwards either tortured, banished, or executed. Cameron's head and hands were cut off by one of the dragoons, and were afterwards exhibited in a horrible procession through the streets of Edinburgh, and then barbarously shown to his father, who lay in prison as a Covenanter, and finally fixed upon the Netherbow port of Edinburgh, and left there as a hideous spectacle to the brutal mob. When old Cameron saw them, and was jeeringly asked if he knew them, he affectionately kissed them, and exclaimed, "I know them, I know them; they are my son's, my dear son's; it is the Lord,

good is the will of the Lord, who cannot wrong me nor mine, but has made goodness and mercy to follow us all our days." The headless body of Cameron, and the corpses of his eight followers who fell with him, were buried in one grave, on the scene of the battle, and were afterwards commemorated by "Cameron's stone." On the head of the stone was engraved the initials of Cameron's name, the form of an open bible, and the figure of a sword grasped by a hand; round the sides of the stone was the inscription, "Here lies the corpse of that famous and faithful preacher of the gospel, Richard Cameron, who with several others fell here, encountered with the bloody enemies of truth and godliness;" and on the face of the stone were inscribed the names of the other eight sufferers, Michael Cameron, John Fowler, John Hamilton, John Gemmel, James Gray, Robert Dick, Robert Paterson, and Thomas Watson, beneath the following lines:

"Halt, curious passenger, come here and read,
Our souls triumph with Christ, our glorious Head;
In self-defence we numbered here do lye
To witness against the nation's perjury."

The Cameronian skirmishers at Airsmoss were certainly all, or very nearly all, which these lines claim for the victims;—they believed in Christ, and hoped for heaven through his atonement, and contended for his rights as the glorious Head of the whole Christian community,—they stood on the defensive against the impositions and coercions of a most oppressive and persecuting government,—and they devotedly and disinterestedly struggled for the liberties and the religious well-being of their country, in a condition of forlorn hope, after they supposed the majority of their quondam brethren to have become faithless. Yet we question whether they did not do fully as much harm by their errors and extravagances as they did good by their excellencies. It was a horrible

thing for them to fight. What, upon even their own principles, could they do by killing the wretches opposed to them, except to cut them suddenly and eternally off from all hope of mercy? They could not expect either victory for themselves or benefit for their country from the skirmish; and they must have rushed to it either in the sheer desperation of maniacs or in the awful spirit of avengers,—determining to have blood for blood. They had been severely persecuted, it is true; but they had no warrant thence to do any thing but flee; for their Divine Master had said, “If they persecute you in one city, flee to another.” They could not possibly pretend to either a better cause or a worse plight at Airsmoss than their Blessed Lord at Gethsemane; and when they found that they could flee no further, they ought, like him, to have simply yielded themselves to those who “came out armed to take them.” How hideously mistaken, too, was it in Cameron to say to them, “For all of you that shall fall this day, I see heaven’s gates open to receive you!” Christ’s death, and not their own, he well knew was the only true key for the opening of heaven’s gates; and as to inspiring men to battle by the prospect of paradise for the slain, this was the master policy of the Crusaders, the Mahommedans, and even the heathen Scandinavians, and therefore awfully out of keeping with such a cause as that of Cameron. And in other circumstances, or with better men and better measures, the antagonist party might just as well have claimed the honours and the rewards of martyrdom as they. An honest Presbyterian, as such, has no higher right to speak of heaven as his exclusive destination than an honest Episcopalian. The Cameronians, also, in spite of the vast general rectitude of their conduct, and in spite of their possessing largely and fragrantly nearly all the elements of true Christian martyrliness, had actually gone to the den of the lion, and bearded him there, and provoked him to run at them, and were therefore, in a main degree, the victims of their

own rashness. Their overt renunciation of allegiance to the government unavoidably involved them in all the dangers and penalties of sedition. Yet, notwithstanding these remarks, we make large allowances for the times in which they lived, for the prejudices they had imbibed, and for the maddening tendency of the persecutions they had endured; and with nearly as much admiration of its spirit as of its poetry, we here transcribe a most beautiful and well-known piece upon the apotheosis of the Cameronian sufferers at Airmoss written by a young Ayrshire shepherd of the name of James Hislop:—

“ In a dream of the night I was wafted away,
To the muirland of mist where the martyrs lay;
Where Cameron’s sword, and his Bible are seen,
Engraved on the stone where the heather grows green.

’Twas a dream of those ages of darkness and blood,
When the minister’s home was the mountain and wood;
When in Wellwood’s dark valley the standard of Zion,
All bloody and torn ’mong the heather was lying.

’Twas morning, and summer’s young sun from the east,
Lay in loving repose on the green mountain’s breast;
On Wardlaw and Cairntable the clear shining dew [blue.
Glisten’d there ’mong the heath-bells and mountain-flowers

And far up in heaven, near the white sunny cloud,
The song of the lark was melodious and loud;
And in Glenmuir’s wild solitude, lengthen’d and deep,
Were the whistling of plovers and bleating of sheep.

And Wellwood’s sweet valleys breathed music and gladness,
The fresh meadow blooms hung in beauty and redness;
Its daughters were happy to hail the returning,
And drink the delights of July’s sweet morning.

But, oh! there were hearts cherish'd far other feelings,
Illumed by the light of prophetic revealings,
Who drank from the scenery of beauty but sorrow,
For they knew that their blood would bedew it to-morrow

'Twas the few faithful ones who with Cameron were lying
Conceal'd 'mong the mist where the heath-fowl was crying,
For the horsemen of Earlshall around them were hovering,
And their bridle-reins rung through the thin misty covering.

Their faces grew pale, and their swords were unsheath'd,
But the vengeance that darken'd their brow was unbreathed;
With eyes turn'd to heaven in calm resignation,
They sung their last song to the God of salvation.

The hills with the deep mournful music were ringing,
The curlew and plover in concert were singing;
But the melody died 'mid derision and laughter,
As the host of ungodly rush'd on to the slaughter.

Though in mist, and in darkness, and fire, they were shrouded,
Yet the souls of the righteous were calm and unclouded;
Their dark eyes flash'd lightning, as firm and unbending,
They stood like the rock which the thunder is rending.

The muskets were flashing, the bright swords were gleaming,
The helmets were cleft, and the red blood was streaming,
The heavens grew dark, and the thunder was rolling,
When in Wellwood's dark muirlands the mighty were falling.

When the righteous had fallen, and the combat was ended,
A chariot of fire through the dark cloud descended;
Its drivers were angels, on horses of whiteness,
And its burning wheels turn'd on axles of brightness.

A seraph unfolded its doors bright and shining,
All dazling like gold of the seventh refining,
And the souls that came forth out of great tribulation,
Have mounted the chariots and steeds of salvation.

On the arch of the rainbow the chariot is gliding,
Through the path of the thunder the horsemen are riding;
Glide swiftly, bright spirits! the prize is before ye,
A crown never fading, a kingdom of glory!"

Hackston of Rathillet was conveyed from Airsmoss to Edinburgh, and afterwards tried and executed, in a manner of shocking barbarity; for he had previously been rankly obnoxious to the government; and he was deemed a peculiarly fit subject for the utmost possible rigours of revenge and terror. "Next morning after the day of the skirmish," says he, "I was brought to Lanark and brought before Dalziel, Lord Ross, and some others, who asked many questions at me; but I not satisfying them with answers, Dalziel threatened to roast me; and carrying me to the tolbooth, caused me to be bound most barbarously, and cast me down, where I lay till Saturday morning, without any, except soldiers, admitted to speak to me, or dress my wounds, or give me any ease whatever. And next morning they brought John Pollock and me, and other two of us, near two miles on foot, I being without shoes; and here that party which had broken us at first, received us. They were commanded by Earlshall. We were horsed, civilly used by them on the way, and brought to Edinburgh, about four in the afternoon, and carried about the north side of the town to the foot of the Canongate, where the town magistrates were, who received us; and setting me on a horse, with my face backward, and other three bound on a goad of iron, and Mr. Cameron's head carried on a halbert before me, and another head which I knew not, in a sack, on a lad's back; and so we were carried up the street

to the Parliament-close, where I was taken down, and the rest loosed. All was done by the hangman." The following account of his execution is given in the Scots Worthies;—"He was carried from the bar on a hurdle, drawn backwards, to the place of execution at the cross of Edinburgh. None were suffered to be with him but two bailies, the executioner, and his servants. He was permitted to pray to God Almighty, but not to speak to the people. Being come upon the scaffold, his right hand was struck off, and a little after, his left; which he endured with great firmness and constancy. The hangman being long in cutting off the right hand, he desired him to strike on the joint of the left; which being done, he was drawn up to the top of the gallows with a pulley, and suffered to fall down again with his whole weight upon the lower scaffold three times, and then fixed at the top of the gallows. Then the executioner, with a large knife, cut open his breast, and pulled out his heart, before he was dead, for it moved when it fell on the scaffold. He then stuck his knife in it, and showed it on all sides to the people, crying, 'Here is the heart of a traitor.' At last he threw it into a fire prepared for that purpose; and having quartered his body, his head was fixed on the Netherbow, one of his quarters, with his hands, at Saint Andrews, another at Glasgow, a third at Leith, and a fourth at Burntisland." In the churchyard of Cupar-Fife is a plain upright monumental stone, having the following rude lines inscribed on one of its sides:—

" Our persecutors filled with rage,
Their brutish fury to assuage,
Took heads and hands of martyrs off,
That they might be the people's scoff;
They Hackston's body cut asunder,
And set it up a world's wonder
In several places, to proclaim,
These monsters gloried in their shame!"