

BATTLE OF LARGS.*

A. D. 1263.

THE parish of Largs, in Ayrshire, on the Frith of Clyde, is celebrated as the scene of a battle in the reign of Alexander III. between the Scots, under Alexander Stuart, the grandfather of the first sovereign of that name who occupied the Scottish throne, and the Norwegians or Danes, under Haco their king—a battle alluded to in the famous Poem of Hardiknute. Historians differ considerably in their accounts of this combat, and some assert that King Alexander commanded in person, although the prowess of Stuart is always mentioned. In this state of uncertainty, there-

* Johnstone's Translation of the Norwegian Account of Haco's Expedition against Scotland, A. D. 1263, from the original Islandic, 12mo, 1782; Robertson's Topographical Description of Ayrshire; Sir David Dalrymple's Annals of Scotland; Statistical Account of Scotland; Buchanan's History of Scotland; Fordun's Scotichronicon; Transactions of the Society of Scottish Antiquaries.

fore, it is perhaps impossible to separate the facts from questionable tradition, nevertheless the narratives, as transmitted to us, are worthy of notice.

The field of battle is still shown—a beautiful plain extending near a mile from the shore to the foot of the hills where the thriving village of Largs is situated near the shore, embosomed in trees. Numbers of cairns were in this plain, formed, it was traditionally said, over pits into which the bodies of the slain were thrown, and a coarse granite stone, about ten feet high, now fallen down, stood in the centre of the field, supposed to have marked the grave of some chieftain who fell in the battle. The names of various localities also preserve the recollection of the combat. In the adjoining parish of Dalry, on the south-east boundary of Largs, is a farm called *Camp Hill*, where the Scottish army is said to have encamped previous to the battle. Between that farm and the village of Largs is *Routdonburn*, (*don* being a contraction for *Dane*,) which is supposed to have derived its name from a detachment of Haco's army having been routed there. At this place, when removing a large cairn of stones, a stone coffin was found. Between the Routdonburn and the sea is *Burlygate*, and a little lower, in the plantations of the Earl of Glasgow, is *Killing Craig*. Southward is *Kipping Burn*, where it is said a number of flying Danes were intercepted by Sir Robert Boyd, ancestor of the Earls of Kilmarnock, and put to the sword. In 1772, a small hill, called Margaret's Law, on the property of Hailley—a word signifying *a grave*, was opened to procure stones for enclosures. This hill was found to be artificial, and contained upwards of fifteen thousand cart loads of stones, in the centre of which were discovered five stone coffins, two of them containing five skulls each, with other human bones, and several urns. The Earl of Glasgow, and Brisbane of Brisbane, were each presented with Danish battle-axes found in the field, and that in the

possession of the latter was sent by him to the Museum of the Antiquarian Society at Edinburgh. Various other memorials of this battle have been found from time to time.

It appears that Haco landed at Ayr 20,000 men from a fleet of 600 sail, and Buchanan informs us that the alleged cause of the war was some islands which he said had been promised by Macbeth to his ancestors, but never delivered up—Bute, Arran, and the two Cumbraes ; and that he took possession of Bute and Arran, reducing their castles before resistance could be offered. From these islands the victorious Norwegian returned to Ayrshire, and was met at Largs by the Scottish army. The Danes and Norwegians had for centuries ravaged the Scottish coasts, but this was the last occasion on which that ancient piratical people set foot on Scottish ground in a hostile manner. Boece has left an account of the battle of Largs, published in 1526, and translated by Bellenden in what is called “The Cronikilis.” As to the cause of the invasion, notwithstanding what Buchanan has advanced, the force landed, the circumstances of the battle, and the number of the slain, both the Scottish and Norwegian historians widely differ ; but they agree in the main particulars, that Haco, king of Norway, invaded Scotland with a mighty fleet—that the Norwegians were attacked and defeated by the Scots at Largs on the 2d of October 1263—that a tempest soon afterwards rose and shattered the Norwegian fleet—and that Haco sought a retreat in Orkney, where he died at Kirkwall of grief.

The narrative of Boece is short and comprehensive. He says that Alexander collected an army of 40,000 men to meet the Norwegian invader—a number which must be grossly exaggerated—and divided his army into three parties. The right wing was commanded by Alexander Stuart, and was composed of the men of Argyle, Lennox, Athol, and

Galloway; the left wing was headed by the Earl of Dunbar, who had under him the men of Lothian, Fife, Stirling, and Berwick; the King was in the centre, with the remainder of his forces, to support the wings. When Alexander saw his enemies in battle-array he ordered divine service to be celebrated, and afterwards made a speech to his soldiers, in which he exhorted them to courage, in the defence of their country against the foreign invaders. Haco commenced the combat by attacking the division in which King Alexander was arrayed, trusting that if it was broken the others would soon be vanquished. The battle was carried on with great courage on both sides, and especially in those divisions under the two kings. At length Haco rushed from his forces with a band of forty warriors, and fiercely assailed the King of Scotland: but this attack was unsuccessful, and the Danes and Norwegians were finally put to flight, after a long and very doubtful contest. The Scots pursued their enemies throughout the whole district of Cunningham, and made a great slaughter, which the darkness alone terminated. Haco fled to the castle of Ayr, where he was informed that his fleet was destroyed by a tempest, and only four small vessels remained. With these vessels he reached Orkney, where he died.

It is farther said by Boece, who does not mention the number of Haco's army, that in this battle were slain 24,000 Danes and 5000 Scots, but no dependence can be placed on this statement. Others assert that of the 20,000 men composing the Norwegian army there fell 16,000, and of their fleet of one hundred and sixty vessels so few escaped the violence of the storm, that Haco could scarcely find one to carry him and a few friends to Orkney.

A translation of the Norwegian account of this battle was published in 1782 by the Rev. James Johnston, Chaplain to the British Embassy at Copenhagen. The original is supposed to have been written in the fourteenth century, and

in all probability the Norwegian author obtained his information from some of those who were in the battle, or from their immediate descendants. The following extract, which is inserted in Robertson's "Description of Ayrshire," refers solely to the battle and to the transactions of the Norwegians in the Frith of Clyde, but some strange blunders occur in the account of the localities.

"The King Haco," says the Norwegian writer, "sent sixty ships into Loch Long. When they came into the inlet they took their boats, and drew them into a great lake, which is called Lochlomond. In the lake were a great many islands, well inhabited, which the Norwegians wasted with fire. They also burnt the buildings about the lake, and made great devastation. Alan, the brother of Dugald, (an Hebridean chief,) marched far into Scotland, and killed many of the inhabitants; he also took some hundred head of cattle, and made vast havoc. The Norwegians afterwards retired to their fleet, and encountered a violent storm, in which ten of their vessels were dashed in pieces in Loch Long.

"King Haco lay in the Hebrides"—meaning the islands in the Frith of Clyde. "Michaelmas fell on a Saturday, and on the Monday night (Oct. 1) there came a great tempest, with hailstones and rain. The fleet was forced up the channel, and the tempest, on the following day, was so furious, that the masts of some vessels were cut away, and others ran aground. Five vessels were cast on shore, and so great was the storm that the people said it was raised by the power of magic. The quantity of rain was prodigious.

"When the Scots saw that the vessels had run aground, they advanced against the Norwegians, and attacked them with missile weapons, but the Norwegians gallantly defended themselves under cover of their ships. The Scots made several attempts at different times, and many were

wounded, though few were killed. The wind somewhat abated, and Haco sent a reinforcement in boats. Afterwards the King himself set sail, attended by Thorlaug Bosi, in a barge belonging to the Master of the Lights.

“ As soon as the King’s men approached the land the Scots retired, and the Norwegians continued on shore all night, while the Scots during the darkness entered the transports, and carried away as much of the lading as they could. On the morning (October 3) the King with a numerous reinforcement came on shore, and ordered the transports to be lightened and towed to the ships. In a little time they descried the Scottish army, and it was so numerous that they supposed the King of Scotland was present. Ogmund Krakidauts, with his company, was stationed on a hill. The Scottish van skirmished with his men, and their main body coming on, the Norwegians entreated the King, as they were anxious for his safety, to row to his fleet and send them help. The King insisted to remain on shore, but as they would not assent to his continuing exposed any longer, he sailed in his barge to the Cumbraes. The whole number of soldiers who remained on land were eight or nine hundred. Two hundred men were upon the rising ground with Ogmund Krakidauts, and the rest of the troops were posted down upon the beach.

“ The Scottish army now advanced. It was conjectured to consist of nearly 1500 knights; all their horses had breastplates, and there were many Spanish steeds in complete armour. The Scottish King had besides a numerous army of foot soldiers, well accoutred, and for the most part with bows and spears. The Norwegians on the hill, apprehensive of being surrounded, began to retire in scattered parties towards the sea. Andrew Nicolson observing this came up to the rising ground, and desired Ogmund to draw off his men toward the beach, but not to retreat so perceptibly as if he fled. The Scots at this time attacked them furi-

ously with darts and stones. Showers of missile weapons were poured upon the Norwegians, who defended themselves, and retired in good order; but when they approached the sea, each one hurrying faster than another, those on the beach supposed they had been routed. Some, therefore, leaped into their boats, and pushed off from the land; others jumped into the transports. Their companions called on them to return, but only a few came back. Andrew Pott leaped over two boats into a third, and escaped from land; but many boats went down, and some men were lost; the rest of the Norwegians wheeled about at last to the sea. Here Haco of Skeine, one of King Haco's household, fell. A part of the Norwegians were driven south from the transport, and were headed by Andrew Nicolson, Ogmund Krakidauts, Thorlaug Bosi, and Paul Soor. There soon began a severe though unequal contest, as ten Scots fought against each Norwegian. Among the Scots there was a young knight called Ferash, equally distinguished for his birth and fortune. He wore a helmet plated with gold, and set with precious stones, and the rest of his armour was of a piece with it. He rode gallantly up to the Norwegians, but no other ventured; he galloped frequently along the Norwegian line, and then back to his followers. Andrew Nicolson had now reached the Scottish van. He encountered this illustrious knight, and struck at his thigh with such force that he cut it through the armour with his sword, which penetrated to the saddle. The Norwegians stripped him of his beautiful belt. The hardest contest then commenced, and many fell on both sides, but more of the Scots.

“ During the battle there was so great a tempest, that King Haco saw no possibility of bringing the army ashore. Ronald and Eilif of Naustadale, with some men, rowed to land, and greatly distinguished themselves, as did those troops that had before gone out in their boats. Ronald

was at last repulsed to his ships, but Eilif behaved in the most heroic manner. The Norwegians now began to form themselves anew, and the Scots took possession of the rising ground. There were continual skirmishes with stones and missile weapons, but towards evening the Norwegians made a desperate charge against the Scots on the hill. The Scots then left the eminence, and fled where they could away to their mountains. The Norwegians, perceiving this, retired to their boats, and, rowing out to their ships, luckily escaped the storm. On the morning they came back in search of the bodies of those who had fallen. Among the dead were Haco of Steine, and Thor-gisi Eloppe, both of King Haco's household. There fell also a worthy vassal, called Karlhoved from Drontheim, and another called Kalkel of Fiorde. Besides, there died three Masters of the Lights. It is impossible for the Norwegians to tell how many of the Scots were killed, because those who fell were taken up and removed to the woods. King Haco ordered his dead to be carried to a church."

Such is the Norwegian account of the Battle of Largs—a battle which Dr Macpherson, in his "Critical Dissertations," says, "it is hardly possible to believe ever was fought." Lord Hailes properly remarks—"This is a high strain of scepticism indeed." It must, however, be admitted that the numbers ascribed to each army are utterly incredible, and the loss on the part of the Norwegians is grossly exaggerated. It has been well asked—"Where was the shipping that could have brought such an army, which, after leaving 24,000 slain on the field of Largs, was yet so numerous as to be able to retreat thirty miles o' land (from Largs to Ayr) in the face of 35,000 men, left of the victorious army, as stated by Boece? Fifty sail of British ships of the line in the present times could not have transported such an army, far less could such vessels as were in use in those days." As for King Haco, we are

farther told that he weighed anchor with the remnant of his fleet under the Cumbræes, where he was joined by the squadron which had been in Loch Long. He sent some retainers on shore to burn the stranded vessels, and afterwards sailed to Melansey, which is supposed to be Lam-lash Bay, where there was a cell dedicated to St Melance. He afterwards sailed past Sanda, Gigha, the Calf of Mull, Rum, and Cape Wrath, to the Orkneys. Fordun, who asserts that the Scots were commanded by Alexander Stuart, uncle of Walter Stuart, who married Marjory, daughter of Robert the Bruce, and absurdly allows Haco one hundred and sixty ships and 20,000 men, says, that, "by the will of God, and the exertions of the Queen St Margaret, protectrix of the kingdom of Scotland, there arose on the very day of the battle a most violent tempest in the sea, which, tossing the ships, tore up their anchors, made their masts go overboard and all their tackle give way, from the immense billows and rage of the winds; so that the ships being dashed against one another, and wrecked on the land and on rocks, thousands of the people were drowned, and became the prey of the sea; and those who did reach the land were immediately met by our people and killed, or put to flight and drowned. Among the many thousands that perished, the King of Norway had to lament one noble Norwegian, his grandson, a man of great strength and activity. The King himself effected his escape with difficulty. Grieved, and, with no small confusion, he reached the Orkneys, where, passing the winter in the expectation of a more powerful force for the subjugation of Scotland, he died." Fordun's account bears a striking resemblance to the Norwegian, and the great storm, which both parties considered at the time as preternatural, is imputed by the one to the influence of the tutelary guardian of the kingdom, and by the other to the agency of evil spirits.