

THE WAILS OF YARROW.

THE Yarrow is a river of Selkirkshire, more celebrated in song than any other stream in Scotland. An idea of lugubrious sadness is associated with much of its scenery, and with its early and chief historical reminiscence. What that reminiscence precisely is cannot be ascertained beyond the general tradition of a deadly feud, which terminated in the death of two antagonist lords or leaders, and in the rude inhumation of the bodies of their slain followers in a marshy pool called the Dead-lake. Yet some have identified it with a duel fought between John Scott of Tushielaw and his brother-in-law Walter Scott of Thirlestane,—a duel which was fatal to the latter, but is ascertained to have been fought on Deuchar-swire, at a considerable distance; others suppose it to have been a fray at a hunting-match in Ettrick-forest, which issued in the slaughter of a son of Scott of Harden, residing at Kirkhope, by his kinsman Scott of Gilman-scleuch; and a few, including two or three of eminent celebrity, refer it to the murder of some distinguished gentleman or other by a person of the name of Annan. “In a spot called Annan’s Treat,” says Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, “a huge monumental stone, with an eligible inscription, was discovered, which is supposed to record the event of a combat, in

which the male ancestor of the present Lord Napier was slain. And then two tall unhewn stones are erected on Annan's Treat, about eighty yards distant from each other, which the smallest child tending a cow will tell you, mark the spot where lie the twa lords, who were slain in single fight. Scott tells us, that "Tradition affirms, that be the victim whom he may, he was murdered by the brother, either of his wife, or betrothed bride. The alleged cause of malice was the lady's father having proposed to endow her with the half of his property, upon her marriage with a warrior of such renown. The name of the murderer is said to have been Annan, and the place of the combat is still called Annan's Treat."

But whatever was the precise event which first or chiefly rendered the glen of the Yarrow famous ground, the tradition of the country around it, and above all a well known ancient ballad entitled "The Dowie Dens of Yarrow," have imparted to it a high tragic interest, and made it sacred in the eyes of all antiquaries and poets. The following is the song:—

" Late at e'en, drinking the wine,
 And e'er they paid the lawing,
 They set a combat them between,
 To fight it in the dawing.

' Oh stay at hame, my noble lord,
 Oh stay at hame, my marrow!
 My cruel brother will you betray,
 On the dowie houms of Yarrow.'

' Oh fare ye weel, my ladye gaye!
 Oh fare ye weel, my Sarah!
 For I maun gae, though I ne'er return
 Frae the dowie banks of Yarrow.'

She kissed his cheek, she kaimed his hair,
 As oft she had done before, O ;
 She belted him with his noble brand,
 And he's away to Yarrow.

As he gaed up the Tinnis bank,
 I wot he gaed wi' sorrow,
 Till down in a den, he spied nine armed men,
 On the dowie houms of Yarrow.

' Oh come ye here to part your land,
 The bonny forest thorough?
 Or come ye here to wield your brand,
 On the dowie houms of Yarrow?'

' I come not here to part my land
 And neither to beg nor borrow ;
 I come to wield my noble brand,
 On the bonny banks of Yarrow.

If I see all, ye're nine to ane ;
 And that's an unequal marrow ;
 Yet will I fight while lasts my brand
 On the bonny banks of Yarrow.'

Four has he hurt, and five has slain,
 On the bloody braes of Yarrow,
 Till that stubborn knight came him behind,
 And run his body thorough.

' Gae hame, gae hame, good-brother John,
 And tell your sister, Sarah,
 To come and lift her leafu' lord ;
 He's sleeping sound on Yarrow.'

‘ Yestreen, I dreamed a doleful dream,
I fear there will be sorrow ;
I dreamed I pou’d the heather green,
Wi’ my true love on Yarrow.

‘ O gentle wind, that bloweth south,
From where my love repaireth,
Convey a kiss from his dear mouth,
And tell me how he fareth!

‘ But in the glen strive armed men ;
They’ve wrought me dole and sorrow ;
They’ve slain—the comliest knight they’ve slain—
He bleeding lies on Yarrow.’

As she sped down yon high, high hill,
She gaed wi’ dole and sorrow,
And in the den, spied ten slain men,
On the dowie banks of Yarrow.

She kissed his cheek, she kaimed his hair,
She searched his wounds all thorough ;
She kissed them till her lips grew red,
On the dowie houms of Yarrow.

‘ Now, haud your tongue, my daughter dear!
For a’ this breeds but sorrow ;
I’ll wed you to a better lord
Than him ye lost on Yarrow.’

‘ O haud your tongue, my father dear!
Ye mind me but of sorrow ;
A fairer rose did never bloom,
Than now lies cropped on Yarrow.’”

A modern song by Mr. Hamilton of Bangour, beginning,

“ Busk ye, busk ye, my bonnie bonnie bride!
Busk ye, busk ye, my winsome marrow!”

was suggested by the same event, and has rivalled the ancient song in influence. The dejected loneliness of the Yarrow's vale, so well and so succinctly depicted in the phrase of ‘Dowie Dens,’ sadly harmonizes with the wailing tones of the ballads and the traditions, and powerfully appeals to the lachrymose sympathies of poets. The sound of the stream has not one note of the joyousness which would seem naturally to belong to the rate of its current; the aspect of the green hills which come down upon its margin possesses not one indication of the vocal and the vegetable animation which might be expected from their softness and their seeming fertility; and the whole landscape, in spite of objects which, in other circumstances, might arouse and gladden, looks to be in a condition of appalling repose, of unearthly stillness, of strength and beauty in the inertion of death. Hence, of the numerous poems which describe the stream or allude to it, the majority are deeply pathetic. An old fragment, “Willie's drowned in Yarrow,” is entirely plaintive. Logan's piece, “Thy braes were bonnie, Yarrow stream,” is also plaintive. And the “Douglas Tragedie,” the “Sang of the Outlaw Murray,” and the oldest verses of the “Yellow-haired Laddie,” are proved by their allusions to have borrowed both their scenery and much of their sadness from the Yarrow.

Among numerous pieces either descriptive of the stream or chiefly devoted to it, the principal are “the Braes of Yarrow,” by Allan Ramsay, and “Yarrow Vale,” by Mr. M'Donald. Two songs in praise of the distinguished female beauty so well-known as “the Flower of Yarrow,” bear the titles of “Mary Scott” and “the Rose in Yarrow,” and have been not a little popular. But the most distinguished verses

which have been written upon the stream, or those, at least, which have written it most into notice, are three pieces by Wordsworth, entitled respectively "Yarrow Unvisited," "Yarrow Visited," and "Yarrow Revisited." The first was composed eleven years before, and the latter immediately after the poet saw the vale; and though they entirely refer to the poetical charm thrown over the stream by the various ballads in its praise, they themselves produce an interest fully equal to the aggregate of all that had been previously accumulated. "And is this Yarrow?" exclaims the poet in the "Yarrow Visited,"—

" And is this Yarrow?—This the stream
 Of which my fancy cherished
 So faithfully a waking dream?
 An image that hath perished!
 O that some minstrel's harp were near
 To utter tones of gladness,
 And chase this silence from the air
 That fills my heart with sadness!
 Yet why? A silvery current flows
 With uncontrolled meanderings;
 Nor have these eyes, by greener hills,
 Been soothed in all my wanderings."

The fortified residence described in the famous old "Song of the Outlaw Murray"—"the fair castelle, biggit wi' lyme and stane," pleasantly situated, grandly decorated, and the frequent scene of crowds and carousals—was the romantic castle of Hangingshaw, on the left declivity of the lower and more picturesque part of the glen of the Yarrow, belonging for ages to the Murrays of Philiphaugh, and long a place of great strength and magnificence, but now the property of Johnstone of Alva, and reduced to a few low ruins and fragments. Here, says the ballad,

" Here an outlaw keepis five hundred men,
 He keepis a royale cumpanie!
 His merrymen are a' in ae liverye clad
 O' the Lincone grene sae gae to see;
 He and his ladye in purple clad,
 O! gin they lived not royallie!"

The outlaw was a bold and brave knight, and ruled over a tract of country in the style of a petty sovereign, and probably made raids and over-ran neighbouring territories in the marauding fashion of his age, and believed himself to be as truly king within his own mimic realm as James V. was king over the greater part of Scotland; but he does not appear to have acted tyrannically in his jurisdiction or to have entertained any designs against the Scottish crown or dynasty or government, and therefore was not, in any direct or truculent sense, an outlaw. Yet he was setting a perilous example to the fiery barons of Scotland, and perhaps did more mischief to the monarchy than if he had really defied its power. At any rate, James V. felt nettled to hear of the independent and princely life which Murray was leading, and got up an army to attack him, and bring him into subjugation.

" The King was coming through Cadon Ford
 And full five thousand men was he;
 They saw the derke foreste them before,
 They thought it awsome for so see."

And either from prudent apprehension of ambuscades and stratagems within the "awsome foreste," or from humane reluctance to drive so gallant and noble a knight to extremities, the King halted, made overtures for a treaty, entered into a long negotiation, and eventually conceded such pleasant terms as drew from "the outlaw" a promise to become

a faithful vassal of the crown. And while Murray was making terms for himself, he honourably made good ones also for his allies; and the King sweetened all with a spirit of conciliatoriness and generosity; so that the military demonstration which seemed inevitably to lead to a most sanguinary conflict, produced only a pacification, and a fast, useful, public friendship. Murray's chief stipulation and James's reply to it were the following:—

“ I'll give the keys of my castell,
 Wi' the blessing o' my gay ladye,
 Gin thou'lt make me sheriffe of this foreste,
 And a' my offspring after me.”

“ Wilt thou give me the keys of thy castell,
 Wi' the blessing of thy gay ladye?
 I'll make thee sheriffe of Ettricke Foreste,
 Snrely while upward grows the tree;
 If you do not traitour to the King
 Forfaulted sall thou nivir be.”

Part of the property concerned in the negotiation—a part which the tradition of the neighbourhood regards as more important than Hangingshaw itself, and even asserts to have been “the outlaw's” residence—is Newark Castle, still standing, on a peninsula of the lower part of the Yarrow, amid a fantastically wild scene of grandeur and beauty within the parish of Selkirk. This was the home of Anne, Duchess of Buccleuch and Monmouth, whose husband James, Duke of Monmouth, was beheaded for insurrection in the reign of James VII.; and is the well-known scene in which ‘the Last Minstrel’ is made to sing his ‘lay’ to the sad-hearted Duchess:—

“ He passed where Newark's stately tower
 Looks out from Yarrow's birchen bower:

The minstrel gazed with wistful eye,
No humbler resting-place was nigh.
With hesitating step at last,
The embattled portal-arch he passed,
Whose ponderous grate and massy bar
Had oft rolled back the tide of war;
But never closed the iron door
Against the desolate and poor.
The Duchess marked his weary pace,
His timid mien and reverend face,
And bade her page the menials tell,
That they should tend the old man well;
For she had known adversity,
Though born in such a high degree;
In pride of power, in beauty's bloom,
Had wept o'er Monmouth's bloody tomb."