

BATTLE OF HARLAW.*

A. D. 1411.

In the parish of Chapel of Garioch, in the county of Aberdeen, lies the scene of the battle of Harlaw, fought between Alexander Earl of Mar, who commanded the royal army, and Donald Lord of the Isles—a battle in which it is traditionally reported more men of rank and repute fell than in any foreign engagement for many preceding years, and which has rendered this remote village memorable to posterity. During the regency of Robert Duke of Albany, who administered the government of Scotland after the death of Robert III., and during part of the time in which James I., the son of that monarch, was detained a captive in England, the Lord of the Isles appeared in open insurrection. The cause of dispute was the earldom of Ross, to which the Lord of the Isles considered himself the rightful

* Early Metrical Tales; Sir James Balfour's Annals; Pinkerton's History of Scotland; Statistical Account of Scotland; Abercrombie's Martial Achievements of the Scottish Nation.

heir. It appears that the ancient line of the possessors of this earldom failed with Euphemia Ross, who married Walter Leslie, by whom she had a son, Alexander Earl of Ross, and a daughter married to Donald of the Isles. The Countess of Ross, at the death of her husband, married Alexander Earl of Buchan, fourth son of King Robert II. Her son by the first marriage, who succeeded her as Earl of Ross, married Lady Isabel Stuart, eldest daughter of the Regent Albany, and the offspring of this marriage was Euphemia, Countess of Ross at her father's death. This lady either chose or was compelled to become a nun, probably at the instigation of her mother's family, and, as it is conjectured, with the intention of resigning the earldom to John Earl of Buchan, second son of the Regent, though it appears that the act of resignation was not executed till four years afterwards. As the Countess Euphemia, by becoming a nun, was regarded as dead in law, her next heir was her aunt Margaret, the only sister of the deceased Alexander Earl of Ross, and wife of Donald Lord of the Isles, who asserted her right to the earldom, and to a certain extent took possession, for he held the castle of Dingwall, and seized the Island of Sky, contiguous to his own extensive territories. Resolved to defeat the projects of the family of Albany, to show his scorn of the Regent's authority, and to recommend himself to the alliance of Henry IV. of England, Donald raised an army of 10,000 men in the Hebrides and in the earldom of Ross, and advanced as far as the district of Mar, intending to plunder the city of Aberdeen, and to ravage the country as far as the Tay.

The Earl of Mar, nephew of the Regent, and the Sheriff of Angus or Forfarshire, hastily raised as many forces as they could collect in the counties north of the Tay. Those troops were composed of most of the retainers of the ancient families of those counties—the Lyons, Ogilvies,

Maules, Carnegies, Lindsays, Leslies, Arbuthnots, Leiths, Burnets, and others, led by their respective chiefs. Although inferior in numbers to the army of the Hebridean chief, the Earl of Mar advanced against him, and their march is thus commemorated in the old historical ballad called the "Battle of Harlaw," which, according to the opinion of competent judges, seems from its manner to have been written soon after the event, and is noticed by the author of the *Complaynt of Scotland* in 1549, one hundred and thirty-eight years after the battle, as one of the popular songs of the time. It may be also considered as the original of rather a numerous class of our historical ballads.

The ballad gives a very correct account of all the circumstances of this engagement. According to the author, Donald of the Isles encountered no opposition in his desolating career, and, after ravaging "fair Strathbogie land," he "longed at last to see the Burgh of Aberdeen."

" To hinder this proud enterprize,
 The stout and mighty Earl of Mar,
 With all his men, in arms did rise,
 Even frae Curgarf to Craigievar,
 And down the side of Don right far,
 Angus and Mearns did all convene
 To fecht, or Donald came sae near
 The royal burgh of Aberdeen.

" And thus the martial Earl of Mar
 Marcht with his men in richt array,
 Before the enemy was aware,
 His banner bauldly did display,
 For weel eneuch they knew the way,
 And all their semblance weel they saw,
 Without all danger or delay,
 Came hastily to the Harlaw "

The “ brave Lord Ogilvy, of Angus sheriff-principal,” and the “ Constable of gude Dundee,” are specially noticed as gallant leaders :—

“ And then the worthy Lord Salton,
 The strong undoubted Laird of Drum,
 The stalwart Laird of Laurieston,
 With ilk thair forces all and sum,
 Panmure with all his men did cum.
 The Provost of brave Aberdeen,
 With trumpets and with tuck of drum,
 Came shortly in their armour schene.”

And there, with other noblemen and gentlemen,—

“ Together vowit to live and die,
 Since they had marched many miles
 For to suppress the tyranny
 Of doubted Donald of the Isles.”

The two armies met at Harlaw, upwards of fifteen miles from Aberdeen, and here an obstinate and bloody battle was fought, the noblemen and gentlemen of Mar's army contending for their estates and honours against the unbounded ferocity of the invaders. It was in the month of July, and, after fighting the whole of the long summer day, the combatants were separated at night exhausted by fatigue; but so uncertain was the issue of the day that each side, on reckoning its loss, considered itself vanquished.

“ With doubtful victorie they dealt,
 The bluidy battle lastit lang,
 Each man his neighbour's force there felt,
 The weakest aft-times gat the wrang.

There was nae mowis there them amang.
 Naithing was heard but heavy nocks,
 That echo made a duleful sang,
 Thairto resounding frae the rocks."

At length victory, such as it was, declared in favour of the Earl of Mar. The Lord of the Isles felt himself so much weakened that he was compelled to give way. It is said that the victors lay all night on the field of battle, and that Donald, being rather wearied with the action than conquered by force of arms, retreated first to Ross and then to the Isles, which he effected without much molestation, knowing that his opponents were too much exhausted to follow him; but our historical poet, with a pardonable licence, gives us a somewhat different account.

" But Donald's men at last gave back,
 For they were all out of array,
 The Earl of Mar's men through them brak,
 Pursuing sharply in their way,
 Thair enemies to take or slay,
 By dint of force to make them yield,
 Who were richt blithe to win away,
 And sae for feirdness tint the field.

" Then Donald fled, and that full fast,
 To mountains high for all his might,
 For he and his were all aghast,
 And ran till they were out of sight.
 And sae of Ross he lost his right,
 Tho' many men with him he brought,
 Towards the Isles fled day and night,
 And all he won was dearly bought."

On the side of Donald there were slain nine hundred men, and the chiefs of Maclean and Macintosh—

With all their succour and relief,
Were dulefully dung to the deid."

The Earl of Mar lost five hundred men, among whom were several gentlemen of distinction. Ogilvy, sheriff of Angus, Scrimgeour, the constable of Dundee, Maule of Panmure, Abernethy of Salton, Straiton of Laurieston, Sir Robert Davidson, Provost of Aberdeen, and a gentleman named Leslie of Balquhain, whose residence is in the neighbourhood of the field of battle, with six or seven of his sons, were all among the slain. The loss on the side of Mar is thus enumerated by our historical poet, who expresses little sympathy for the numbers of Donald's men who fell, characterizing them as "loons who might well be spared:"—

" And on the other side were lost
 Into the field that dismal day,
Chief men of worth, of meikle cost,
 To be lamentit sair for ay.
 The Lord Saltoun of Rothiemay,
A man of might and meikle main,
 Great dolour was for his decay,
That sae unhappily was slain.

" Of the best amang them was
 The gracious gude Lord Ogilvy,
The Sheriff-Principal of Angus,
 Renownit for truth and equity—
 For faith and magnanimity
 He had few fellows in the field,
 Yet fell by fatal destiny,
For he nae ways wad grant to yield.

" Sir James Scrimgeour of Duddap, knight,
 Great Constable of fair Dundee,

Unto the duleful death was dicht.
The king's chief bannerman was he,
A valiant man of chivalry,
Whose predecessors won that place,
At Spey, with gude King William free,
'Gainst Murray and Macduncan's race.

“ Gude Sir Alexander Irvine,
The much-renowned Laird of Drum,
Nane in his days was better seen,
When they were semblit all and sum.
To praise him we should not be dumb
For valour, wit, and worthiness,
To end his days he there did come,
Whose ransom is remeidiless.

“ And there the Knight of Lauriston
Was slain into his armour schene,
And gude Sir Robert Davidson,
Who Provost was of Aberdeen.
The Knight of Panmure, as was sene,
A mortal man in armour bright,
Sir Thomas Murray, stout and keen,
Left to the world their last gude night.”

The Regent Albany collected an army after this battle, and marched to the Castle of Dingwall, which he took and garrisoned towards the end of autumn. In the following summer he sent three separate forces to invade the territories of Donald. The haughty Lord of the Isles was obliged to relinquish his claims to the earldom of Ross, to make a personal submission, and to give hostages for indemnification and for the future observance of peace.