

THE DECAY OF THE EARLDOM AND THE END OF THE WESTERN KINGDOM.



AFTER the death of Earl Rognvald, the islands were ruled for almost fifty years by Harald Maddadson. Harald's later days were full of troubles. With the decay of his powers the glory of the earldom also faded away. In 1194, when Sverrir was King of Norway, a rebellion took place, with the object of placing Sigurd Erlingson on the throne. Sigurd's party, known as the "Eyjarskeggjar" or "Island-beardies," had their headquarters in the Orkneys. There they collected their forces, and there the rebellion was organized. The rebels were completely overthrown in a great battle fought near Bergen. Sverrir summoned Earl Harald before him in 1196 to answer for his share in the matter. As a punishment for permitting plots against him to be hatched in Orkney—plots which the gray-haired old earl had been powerless to prevent—the king compelled him to surrender the government of Shetland. For nearly two centuries thereafter Orkney and Shetland were separate, the former ruled by the earl, the latter by a governor appointed by the Norwegian crown.

The result of this was twofold. In the first place it weakened the power of the Orkney earldom; in the second place it caused the earldom to draw nearer to Scotland, and to come more and more under Scottish influence. But the aged earl's cup of sorrow was not yet full. He quarrelled also with the Scottish king. As a consequence of this quarrel he was stripped of his Scottish possessions, and his son Thorfinn perished miserably, a prisoner in Roxburgh Castle. When Earl Harald died in 1206, full of years and of sorrows, the earldom was but the shadow of its former self.

After Harald's death, his two sons, John and David, succeeded to the earldom. David did not live long, and John was then left sole earl. This earl, the last of the old Norse jarls, was Earl of Orkney excluding Shetland, holding that earldom from the Norwegian king, and Earl of Caithness, including Sutherland, holding that from the King of Scotland. Matters continued in this state generally till the pledging of the islands in 1468, the only change being that Shetland was again added to the Orkney earldom in 1379, when Henry, the first of the St. Clairs, became earl.

The days of Earl John, like those of his father, were stormy, and disaster after disaster fell upon the isles. The burning of Bishop Adam at Halkirk in Caithness brought down on the earl the vengeance of King Alexander the Second of Scotland. The earl had no hand in the murder, but he was near by, and, in the opinion of King Alexander, might have prevented the tragedy. Then a feud arose between the earl and some of the leaders of a Norse expedition to

the Western Isles. The earl was attacked suddenly in Thurso, and there murdered. This took place in the year 1231. The murderers took refuge in the Castle of Weir, where they were besieged by the earl's friends and adherents. Ultimately both parties agreed that the case should be submitted to the Norwegian king.

The chief men of the islands embarked for Norway to be present at the trial of the murderers, which ended in their conviction and punishment. But a terrible disaster for the Orkney earldom followed. All the leading men of the islands left Norway in one ship, and set sail for Orkney late in autumn. Stormy weather set in shortly after their departure. Fears which were entertained for the safety of the ship proved to be only too well founded: the ship was never heard of again. With her went down nearly all the nobility of the earldom. This disaster, which happened in 1232, was irremediable. Well does the Saga of Hakon Hakonson say, "Many men have had to suffer for this later." The earldom never recovered from the loss of its best blood, and but for this loss the after course of events might have been very different. Henceforth the Orkney earldom plays but a subordinate part in the history of the North.

In 1232 King Alexander of Scotland granted the Earldom of Caithness to Magnus, son of Gilbride, Earl of Angus. Magnus was at the same time confirmed in the Earldom of Orkney by the King of Norway. But King Alexander made Sutherland a separate earldom, William Friskyn being created first earl. Thus within a period of forty years the

earldom, which had at one time rivalled the power of Scotland itself, and had been at once the centre and the defence of the Norse Empire in the west, was stripped of more than half its territories.

The Scottish king had a deep purpose to serve in thus weakening the northern earldom. He was already casting covetous eyes on the Hebrides, and every blow struck at the power of the Orkney earl was a step towards the conquest of the Western Isles. In the heyday of Norse ascendancy there was danger of the western Norse colonies swallowing up Scotland rather than of Scotland swallowing up these colonies. But Hakon of Norway was now too busy at home repressing internal disorders to give much thought to the ambitions of the Scottish king, and the Orkney earl was too weak to form a serious obstacle, besides which he was more than half Scottish himself.

For many years the chiefs of the Hebrides and the Western Isles had been wavering in their allegiance to the Norwegian crown. King Alexander was also doing his utmost to undermine Norse influence in the west. While he was carrying on intrigues with the western chiefs, he at the same time kept sending embassies to Norway to treat with Hakon for the purchase of these islands. Hakon's answer was brief and decided: He was not yet so much in want of money that he needed to sell his lands for it.

The next King of Scotland, Alexander the Third, had the same ambitions as his father, and as resolutely pursued his schemes for the subjugation of the Hebrides. He was, moreover, a young, energetic, and warlike king. He found the island chiefs very

troublesome neighbours. His father's policy of intrigue was too slow for him, and he determined to take by force what he could not obtain by treaty.

In 1262 the Scots invaded the Norse dominions in the west. Hakon, who had now pacified his own kingdom, was at last roused to make a serious effort to preserve his over-sea dominions. In the summer of 1263 he "let letters of summons be sent round all Norway, and called out the levies both of men and stores as he thought the land could bear it. He summoned all the host to meet him early in the summer at Bergen."

A mighty fleet assembled in obedience to the king's command, and, under the leadership of Hakon himself, set sail from Norway in the end of July 1263. After delaying through the summer in Shetland and Orkney, this ill-fated expedition reached the Firth of Clyde in late autumn. Alexander the Third, knowing well that he could not hope to meet the Norsemen at sea, prepared to give them as warm a reception as possible wherever they might land. In the meantime he pretended to be anxious for peace. Negotiations were opened between the two kings. Alexander temporized: winter was approaching.

Hakon's patience at last gave way, and breaking off negotiations, the Norsemen began to harry the country, receiving willing aid from the various half-Celtic chieftains, who enjoyed nothing so much as an opportunity of ravaging the fertile Lowlands. But that ally whose coming Alexander had been awaiting came at length; on the first of October a great storm from the south-west arose suddenly during the night. Hakon's ships began to drag their anchors. They

fouled each other in the darkness, and several were driven ashore on the Ayrshire coast. When morning dawned, Hakon found his own ship within bowshot of the shore, while the Scots were already plundering one which had stranded near by.

During a lull in the storm Hakon managed to land a detachment of his men to protect the stranded galley. But the storm increased in fury once more. The Norsemen on shore were outnumbered probably by ten to one, and no help could be sent from the ships. The Vikings threw themselves into a circle bristling with spear-points. Onset after onset of the Scots forced the ring of spears slowly back towards the shore, but they could not break it. All day long the battle raged—the Norsemen with the angry sea behind them, and no hope of succour from their fleet; the Scots determined to drive the invaders into the sea, or slay them where they stood.

As evening began to fall the storm moderated, and Hakon was able to send reinforcements on shore. The Scots were borne backwards by the onset of the fresh warriors. But night was falling, and the Norsemen were anxious to get back to their ships, for the storm was not yet over. They accordingly hastened to take advantage of the breathing-space which they had won, and retired to their ships.

Such was the famous battle of Largs, which both Scots and Norsemen claim as a victory. In itself it was little more than a skirmish; but the events of that night and day, the storm and the battle together, gave the deathblow to Norse dominion in the west. The heart of King Hakon failed him. His men also were discouraged. The shattered remains of the

once splendid fleet set sail for Orkney, and the great invasion of Scotland was over.

Broken in spirit and shattered in health, Hakon reached Orkney only to die. Part of his fleet was ordered to proceed to Norway, and part was laid up for the winter in Scapa Bay and Houton Cove. Scarcely had these matters been attended to when his fatal sickness seized the king. In the Bishop's Palace in Kirkwall he spent his last hours. Here at midnight, on Saturday, December 15, 1263, in the sixtieth year of his eventful life, died Hakon Hakonson, the last of the great sea-kings of Norway.

The remains of the king were carried to the cathedral, where they lay in state, and were afterwards temporarily interred in the choir near the shrine of St. Magnus. When spring came, Hakon's body was exhumed and taken to Bergen in Norway, where it was finally laid to rest in the choir of Christ Church.

After the death of Hakon, his son Magnus, now King of Norway, sent ambassadors to the Scottish king to treat for peace, and a treaty was signed at Perth in 1266. By this treaty Norway resigned her rights in the Hebrides, in consideration of Scotland's paying down four thousand marks, besides a tribute of one hundred marks to be paid annually in St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall. This tribute, called the Annual of Norway, was the direct cause of the troubles which preceded the marriage of James the Third of Scotland and Princess Margaret of Denmark.

A large proportion of King Hakon's forces had to be maintained in Orkney during the winter suc-

ceeding Largs. To provide for this, the lands of the earldom were divided into sections, and charged with the maintenance of the soldiers in proportion to the amount of "skatt" each section owed the king. The Skatt Book of the earldom was prepared—a list of the lands therein, and the amount of skatt which they paid. It was the Domesday Book of the Orkneys. On this Skatt Book were based the Scottish Rentals, which came into such prominence in the history of the Scottish oppressions during the sixteenth century.



Ruins of the Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall,