

ASSASSINATION OF THE EARL OF DOUGLAS.*

A.D. 1452.

IN the Castle of Stirling there is shown to strangers a small room, adorned with a rich and beautiful cornice cut in oak, which is said to have been that in which James II. stabbed the Earl of Douglas with his own hand. The closet where this murder was committed, which fixes an indelible stain on the memory of the King, still goes by the name of *Douglas' Room*. This nobleman was William eighth Earl of Douglas, who succeeded his father, James the Gross, seventh Earl, in 1443. He had been constituted Lieutenant-General of the kingdom, an office he was appointed to hold six years, which invested him with the sole military command, and he soon had an opportunity of distinguishing himself. In 1448 he twice defeated superior forces of the English, who invaded Scotland, and ravaged the north of England as far as Newcastle; but his victories afforded little compensation for his tyranny and oppression, which seemed to increase in proportion to the continuance of his power. Soon after the marriage of the King, however, in 1449, the dangerous authority with which he was invested as Lieutenant-General of the kingdom ceased, and he retired from the Court followed by the execrations of the people. The charms and good sense of the Queen, Mary, daughter of Arnold Duke of Gelderland, and near relative of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, roused James II.

* Lindsay's (of Pitscottie) History; Hume's Houses of Douglas and Angus; Anderson's History of the House of Hamilton; Tytler's History of Scotland; Drummond's Life of James II.; Pinkerton's History of Scotland; Statistical Account of Scotland; Sir James Balfour's Annals.

from his lethargy, and he was soon able to form a party capable of undermining the odious power of the Earl of Douglas.

All historians agree that the conduct of this imperious and haughty nobleman was intolerable. Contrasted with him the sovereign was scarcely superior to the ordinary barons. Douglas possessed a revenue from his estates in Scotland and France probably much superior to that of the King, and his power increased the anarchy which prevailed throughout the country. His adherents and dependants committed the most unwarrantable excesses. One of his partisans named Galbraith, having killed Semple, the Deputy-Governor of Dumbarton Castle in 1444, and seized the command of that fortress, Douglas procured admission to the presence of the young King, then in his fourteenth year, and made the most humble protestations of his fidelity. The result of this interview was highly favourable to Douglas, who used the influence he had acquired to procure the dismissal of the Lord Chancellor Crichton, who in 1440 had inveigled by plausible invitations and flatteries William eighth Earl of Douglas, his brother David, and Malcolm Fleming of Cumbernauld, into the Castle of Edinburgh, and after an insidious display of hospitality, they were impeached for high treason, and instantly beheaded. All the other responsible officers of the crown were dismissed. He procured his three brothers to be created peers. Archibald was made Earl of Moray, having married the youngest daughter of Dunbar Earl of Moray, and he thus acquired that title and estate at the death of his father-in-law, to the prejudice of Lord Chancellor Crichton's eldest son, who had married the eldest daughter. Hugh was created Earl of Ormond, and John was made Lord Balveny—an "accession of power," observes a historian, "to a family, already too potent, which could only be granted by a youth to a favourite."

The kingdom now fell into complete anarchy, and became one scene of violence and disorder under the lieutenant-generalship of Douglas. Another example may be given, out of the many, illustrative of his oppressive and tyrannical conduct. Sir Richard Colville, having suffered numerous injuries from one Auchinleck, a follower of Douglas, thought that in 1449 he might now venture on revenge, especially as the King's marriage had roused him to activity, and the power of the Earl was evidently on the decline. Colville killed Auchinleck, and this so enraged Douglas that he ravaged his lands, besieged and took his castle, and put every one in it to the sword.

When Douglas found his influence diminished at home, he resolved to change the scene, and display his pomp abroad. In 1450 he proceeded to a Jubilee at Rome with a train of six knights, fourteen gentlemen, and eighty attendants. This was the famous Jubilee, to witness which vast numbers of people crowded to Rome, when on one occasion ninety-seven persons were killed by the pressure of the crowd at the end of the Bridge of St Angelo. During the absence of Douglas many complaints were made concerning the violent and insolent conduct of his dependants, and the King, enraged at this open contempt of his authority, marched in person with a sufficient force, and took the castles of Lochmaben and Douglas.

The Earl, as soon as he returned from Rome, sent a submissive message to the King, who received him with great favour, and even in April 1451 granted a commission to him and other ambassadors to confer with those of England concerning any breaches of the truce existing between the two kingdoms. Douglas was totally undeserving of this confidence, for we find him in the following month obtaining a protection from the English court for himself, his three brothers, twenty-six gentlemen, and sixty-seven attendants. In addition to his treasonable correspondence,

he entered into a confederacy with Alexander Earl of Crawford, and John Earl of Ross, Lord of the Isles, two noblemen whose authority was as potent in the north as his own was in the south. His brothers, the Earl of Ormond and Lord Balveny, the Lord Hamilton, and other barons and gentlemen, connected themselves with this daring confederacy, the tenor of which was, that "they were never to desert each other during life; that injuries done to any one of them should be considered as done to all, and be a common quarrel; neither should they desist, to the utmost of their abilities, from revenging them; that they should concur and use force indifferently against whatever persons, within or without the realm, and spend their lives, goods, and fortunes, in defence of their debates and differences."

When James was informed of this formidable confederacy he trembled at such a defiance of the royal authority, but he resolved to dissemble for a season, resolving at the same time to punish those chiefly concerned in it in the most summary manner. In the meantime, the Earl of Douglas carried on his outrages. Some of his followers had ravaged the lands of John Herries, a gentleman of Dumfries-shire devoted to the royal cause. Herries complained of this outrage to the Earl, from whom he received no redress, and by way of retaliation he ravaged a part of Annandale which belonged to Douglas. He was unfortunately taken prisoner, and the Earl ordered him to be hanged, in defiance of the King's prohibitory mandate.

Another of the lawless exploits of Douglas was his attempt to waylay and assassinate the Lord Chancellor Crichton, who had been restored to his office, and who escaped only through the intrepidity of his son. He had also been permitted to undertake a pretended pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas à Becket at Canterbury, and on his return, when summoned by the King, at the alleged sug-

gestion of the Chancellor, to appear at the Court and clear himself from sundry treasonable imputations, the royal messenger was insulted. In short, there was no limit to the disorders of this restless nobleman, who aimed at the erection of a distinct and separate power, independent of the sovereign and of the laws. Some even accuse him of casting an ambitious eye to the crown, founding his pretensions on the same visionary claim which had already been preferred by one of his family.

But the most atrocious and execrable of the acts of the Earl of Douglas was the cruel and wanton slaughter of a gentleman, who was a nephew of Lord Gray, Sir Patrick MacLellan of Bombie in Kirkcudbrightshire, whose family was afterwards ennobled by the title of Lords Kirkcudbright. In 1452 he compelled the great majority of his dependants to enter into an engagement of service against the crown, especially those in Galloway, Ayrshire, and the adjacent districts. Some of the moderate and prudent refused, among whom was Sir Patrick MacLellan. Irritated at what he considered his obstinacy and boldness in resisting the authority of his chief, Douglas besieged him in his Castle of Raeberry, forced him to surrender, and carried him off to Douglas Castle in Lanarkshire, where he treated him as a strict prisoner.

When Lord Gray and his son Sir Patrick Gray were informed of this outrage committed on their relative, whose only crime in the estimation of Douglas was his refusal to connect himself with any illegal bond, they informed the King of the whole affair. Though James was greatly exasperated he deemed it prudent to conceal his resentment, and he wrote a conciliatory letter to the Earl, requesting him to deliver Sir Patrick MacLellan to his cousin Sir Patrick Gray, the bearer of the royal letter. Gray made all the haste he could exert in the distance between Stirling and Douglas Castle, and arrived at the latter place

at the hour when the Earl was at dinner. When informed that Sir Patrick Gray, captain of the King's guard, was at the gate, Douglas in some surprise rose to receive him, and courteously invited him to partake of the repast. "No business," he observed, "could be transacted between a man who has satisfied his hunger and one who is fasting, and therefore, as you have had a long ride, you must first dine, and then we shall talk together of the occasion of your visit."

Sir Patrick sat down to dinner, and the Earl treated him with the greatest hospitality and condescension, revolving with himself what could possibly be the nature of his guest's mission. Knowing the relationship between his prisoner and Sir Patrick, and suspecting that his visit was connected with the liberation of the former, he secretly issued an order that MacLellan should be led out to a grass-plot beside the Castle, and his head struck off and removed. This atrocious injunction was obeyed; the unfortunate prisoner was decapitated, the head taken away, and the body left on the ground covered with a cloth. Meanwhile the Earl and Sir Patrick continued conversing on general matters, the former apparently in uncommon good humour, until the dinner was ended, when the latter produced the King's letter requesting him to deliver up MacLellan. Douglas received it with hypocritical respect, and, after carefully perusing it, he said—"I am indebted to you for being the bearer to me of so gracious a letter from the King, especially considering how matters stand between us. The demand shall instantly be granted, and the more willingly for your sake."

He rose from the table, and taking Sir Patrick Gray by the hand, led him down the staircase of the castle to the grass-plot, where the headless body of MacLellan was still lying bleeding, and covered with the cloth. Removing the cloth, Douglas said with a significant smile, "Sir Patrick,

you are come a little too late. This is your father's sister's son, but he wants the head. You may take his body, and do with it what you please." Sir Patrick, in the deepest distress at the sight of this melancholy spectacle, and the atrocious circumstances connected with it, replied—"My Lord, since you have taken his head, you may dispose of his body as you please." He then summoned his attendants, and mounted his horse. Turning to Douglas, before starting, he said, "My Lord, if I live, you shall be rewarded for this day's work according to your deserts." This threat put the Earl into a towering passion, and calling for his horse he set off in pursuit of Sir Patrick, but the latter escaped by the fleetness of his steed, though it is said the chase extended nearly to Edinburgh.

The body of Sir Patrick MacLellan was conveyed to the Abbey Church of Dundrennan, where it was interred, and a monument erected to his memory, which is probably still to be seen. His death was subsequently revenged to such an extent by the MacLellans, that it was found necessary to restrain their depredations on the lands of the Earl of Douglas, by forfeiting the Laird of Bombie and many of his friends, in the reign of James II. According to Sir George Mackenzie, the forfeiture was removed and the barony recovered in the same reign in the following manner:—It happened that a band of gypsies from Ireland infested Galloway, and committed great depredations. The King issued a proclamation, promising as a reward the barony of Bombie to any one who should disperse them, and take their leader dead or alive. A young gentleman, son of the forfeited Laird of Bombie, was fortunate to kill this individual. He presented the head of the gypsy leader on the point of his sword to the King, and was immediately secured in the estate. To perpetuate the recollection of his brave action, he took for his crest a Moor's head on the point of a sword, and for his motto the words, *Think on.*

There is, however, another account, that the body of Sir Patrick was buried in the church of Kirkconnel, in the county of Dumfries, and it is said that this is proved by an inscription on a grave-stone there.

The historian of the House of Douglas and Angus differs from the ordinary accounts respecting the Earl's atrocious conduct to Sir Patrick MacLellan. Old Master David Hume of Godscroft represents the said Sir Patrick as having killed a retainer of the Earl of Douglas, and that he and his brother, who was connected with the slaughter, were apprehended and imprisoned in the stately Castle of Threave, in the parish of Balmaghie, and county of Kirkcudbright, at that time a residence of the chiefs of the House of Douglas—an ancient castle situated on an island formed by the river Dee. MacLellan's relatives, when they heard that Douglas had seized him, represented to James II. that he was so treated by the Earl not so much on account of the slaughter of his follower, as on account of his loyalty, and his refusal to join the Douglas standard of rebellion. Swayed by these statements, James sent to Sir Patrick Gray to bring his cousin before himself, where he would be tried for the crime he had committed in the regular way, and at the same time intimating to Douglas that if he had anything to urge against the prisoner he could appear as a witness in the prosecution. It appears from the whole of Godscroft's story, that the Earl was not at Douglas Castle in Lanarkshire, but at Threave Castle, which is in the neighbourhood of a village in the parish of Kelton, in Kirkcudbrightshire, situated at the north corner of Carlinwark Loch, anciently called Carlinwark, but now Castle-Douglas. On the west side, near the corner of the Loch, there is a small piece of rising ground in view of the Castle of Threave, and distant from it upwards of a mile, called to this day the *Gallows Lot*. On the top of this stood a

gibbet for the execution of those whom the Earls of Douglas thought proper to condemn in this quarter. When Sir Patrick Gray arrived at Threave he was courteously received by Douglas, who, suspecting his errand, gave private orders for the immediate execution of MacLellan at the *Gallows Lot*, near Carlinwark Loch. The rest of Godscroft's narrative agrees with Pitscottie, with this difference, that Gray did not see his cousin's dead body, and that when he heard his fate from Douglas, with the insulting intimation that he had come *too late*, and "saw himself so deluded, he presently in a great chafe and rage renounced all kindred and friendship, and whatever bond beside might seem to tie him to the Earl, vowing that from that time he would be his deadly enemy in every possible way and manner, which the other little regarding, dismissed him." Such is the account of this atrocious affair by the avowed defender of the House of Douglas, whose great object is to palliate the crime of the Earl, and in fact to show that he was more sinned against than sinning.

Irritated beyond measure at these repeated insults offered to the royal authority by Douglas, and inflamed by the recollection of the league formed by that nobleman with the Earls of Crawford, Ross, and others, James called a chosen council to deliberate on the state of affairs, and the measures to be adopted to restrain and humble these powerful subjects. It was resolved, to prevent the horrors of a civil war, that Douglas should be invited to an audience of the King, with the assurance that all his past offences would be forgiven if he would only reform his future conduct. It is impossible to discover whether these promises of James were sincere, but when it is recollected that the whole was projected by Lord Chancellor Crichton, whom Douglas had recently attempted to murder, there is some reason to infer a plot against him. Be this as it may, a letter of safe-

conduct was issued to Douglas, bearing the royal signature, and that of the councillors and officers of the King's household then about his person, and to which the privy seal was attached. Sir William Lauder of Hatton, a gentleman who had attended Douglas in his pilgrimage to Rome, was sent to him with the safe-conduct, and to invite him to a friendly conference at Stirling Castle, promising absolute security to his person, and declaring that upon expression of regret for his past conduct no farther notice would be taken of his misdemeanours.

The Earl was induced by the conciliatory expressions of the royal letter to proceed to Stirling in company with Sir William Lauder, attended by his usual retinue. He arrived on Shrove Tuesday, and whilst his friends and followers took up their residence in the town, he proceeded to the Castle, accompanied by Lord Hamilton. When they reached the gate Douglas was readily admitted, but Hamilton was rudely pushed back by the guard. He drew his sword to revenge the insult, and attempted to make a forcible entrance, when his relation Sir Alexander Livingstone, who was standing within the gate, little regarding his rage, held him back with a long halbert until the gate was secured. Lord Hamilton, viewing all this as a personal insult, returned to the town greatly exasperated and vowing revenge, but he had reason to view the matter in a different light when he knew the result.

The Earl was received by the King with every mark of friendship, and after some time spent in conversation, he was invited to dine with James on the following day. He obeyed, and not only dined but supped with the King, during all which time nothing occurred to interrupt the harmony of the intercourse. The supper hour was seven o'clock, and after it James intimated that he was anxious to have some private conversation with the Earl, who instantly declared his readiness to attend the monarch. The

King led him into an inner chamber, attended by Lord Chancellor Crichton, Lord Gray, Sir Patrick Gray, Sir Simon Glendinning, and a few more of his most intimate councillors. Standing apart from these attendants James began with as much calmness as he could command to remonstrate with Douglas on his long continued treasonable and violent proceedings, and in doing so it was impossible not to mention the execution of Herries, the murder of Sir Patrick MacLellan, and other outrages. The Earl endeavoured to excuse himself, and, if Hume of Godscroft is to be credited, answered submissively, craving pardon for what he had done to offend the King, alleging that his proceedings on these points were not directed against his sovereign, but against his own personal enemies. "Be it so," said James, "these are matters for after consideration, and they must be investigated for the sake of the relatives of those who have been so cruelly injured. My Lord, you know well the many favours you have received, notwithstanding all these outrages, and yet what say you to that treasonable confederation into which you have entered with the Earls of Crawford, Ross, and others? I pledge my royal word, that when I first heard it I scarcely could give it credit. That bond must be broken. No leagues or societies can be tolerated in a realm under one sovereign without his express sanction and command. By abandoning this confederacy you will remove all suspicions from my mind. I am unwilling to believe any evil of you, notwithstanding what has past, but you can expect no favour from me if you persist in continuing such practices as must show a bad example to the people, and cause them to live as if there were neither law nor justice in this kingdom."

Douglas heard this remonstrance with surprise, but recovering himself, he replied—"For your Grace's favours I ought and will most certainly strive with all earnestness to obtain them. Your Grace knows that as I have the

honour to command many who obey me, I know well how to render dutiful obedience to my sovereign. None of your subjects, Sir, enjoy more lands and honours than I do, and there is not one who would more willingly engage life and fortune in your defence and honour. Those who lay snares for my life are now your Grace's constant attendants, and I dare not trust myself in your presence without a letter of safe-conduct, and well attended by my friends. For the wrongs committed by my followers and vassals I am ready to give every requisite satisfaction. As to the bond of mutual friendship between sundry noblemen and myself, I can assure your Grace that we would have adhered together without any written obligation. We were driven to this bond for our own safety, not to offer violence to, but to defend ourselves from our enemies."

"Deeds, and not words," said the King, "make the affection and submission of a subject known, and there can be no greater security for him than to rely on the laws of the commonwealth and the country, especially in a country where the laws and not faction ought to predominate. Such men as you, my Lord, raise these factions to the subversion of all laws and authority. Is it to be tolerated for a moment that any subjects, of whatever rank and condition, are to make offensive and defensive leagues against all persons? This is to disclaim all government, to do what they please without control, to commit treason in the highest degree, to make your own swords influence and justify your proceedings, and to conceal the progress of your career until you openly demand the crown itself. I insist upon it, therefore, that this confederacy of yours be instantly broken, and thus you will receive wonted clemency instead of deserved justice."

"The bond," replied Douglas, "being drawn up by the common consent of certain noblemen and gentlemen, and subscribed, it cannot be renounced without mutual consent.

Your Grace must in consequence see that we must all meet and consult before it can be cancelled." "Nay," said James vehemently, "you shall begin first, to show a good example. No man shall in my presence disavow and disclaim my authority. You stir not from this room till you solemnly, sincerely, and deliberately, sign your withdrawal from this treasonable bond, of which these noble lords and gentlemen shall be witnesses." "Your Grace will recollect," replied Douglas, "that I came hither upon a public assurance of safe-conduct." "No public assurance," rejoined James, "can protect any man from the consequences of a private misdemeanour."

As this last reply of James implied a threat of personal violence, the pride of Douglas betrayed him into the most imprudent passion. He broke into an invective of reproaches, upbraiding the King for depriving him of the office of lieutenant-general of the kingdom, declared that he cared little for the name of treason, with which his conduct had been branded—that as to his confederacy with the Earls of Ross and Crawford he had it not in his own power to dissolve it, and that if he had, he would be sorry to offend his best friends to gratify the *boyish caprices* of the King. James, naturally fiery and impetuous, became furious with rage at this rude defiance uttered by one in his own palace whom he regarded as his enemy. In a state of ungovernable fury, he drew his dagger, exclaiming—"False traitor! if thou wilt not break the bond, this shall!" He then stabbed the Earl first in the throat and afterwards in the lower part of the body. Sir Patrick Gray, burning to revenge the murder of his cousin, seized a pole-axe and struck him a blow on the head, which felled him to the floor. The other personages present next gratified their resentment by assailing him with their knives and daggers, and he expired without uttering a word, covered with twenty-six wounds. The window of the apartment was

thrown open, and the mangled body of the proud Earl of Douglas, the rival of James in power, was thrown into the open court adjoining the royal apartments.

No justification can be offered for such a murder committed by James on the person of one for whose safety he had pledged his royal word, and it exhibited a most pernicious example to the country. But at the same time little sympathy can be felt for Douglas, whose career, as Mr Tytler observes, "from first to last had been that of a selfish, ambitious, and cruel tyrant, who at the moment when he was cut off was all but a convicted traitor, and whose death, if we except the mode by which it was brought about, was to be regarded as a public benefit."

The friends of Douglas prepared to revenge his death, and his retainers and vassals regarded his assassination with bitter indignation. As he left no children he was succeeded by his next brother James, who relinquished his clerical profession, and became the ninth Earl of Douglas. His younger brothers, the Earls of Moray, Ormond, and Lord Balveny, who had accompanied the murdered Earl to Stirling, proposed to storm the castle, and put all to the sword within it, but a little reflection convinced them that they were without resources for such an enterprise. As for Lord Hamilton, a friend in the castle conveyed to him a pair of spurs—an intimation to save himself as a friend of Douglas by flight.

On the 25th of March the vassals and followers of Douglas mustered at Stirling, dragging after them through all the towns and villages in their way the King's safe-conduct made fast to a wooden truncheon, tied to the tail of an old jaded horse. At the market cross, amid the sound of horns, they proclaimed the King and all who adhered to him to be false and perjured traitors. After bidding defiance to the castle, they concluded this exploit by plundering and setting fire to the town. They committed several

outrages in other parts of the country. But the battle of Brechin, fought between the Earl of Huntly, who had been promoted to the office of lieutenant-general of the kingdom, and the Earl of Crawford, who was known by the soubriquet of *the Tiger*, in which the latter was completely defeated, destroyed that league which had cost his associate so dear. The new Earl of Douglas was soon afterwards reconciled to the King, but both parties were insincere. Their mutual injuries were too recent and too important to be easily forgiven, and they were secretly preparing themselves to renew those contentions, which two years afterwards terminated in the final overthrow of the House of Douglas.