

THE HIGHLAND HOST.

In the year 1678, when the oppression of the Covenanters was at the highest, and the ruling powers had vainly fulminated their loudest thunders for overawing them, and had at last become wishful that some general insurrection might occur to afford pretext and opportunity for mowing down all their leaders, an armed multitude of caterans, known in history as the Highland Host, was congregated among the glens and straths of the Grampians, and invested with a commission to traverse some of the richest districts of the Lowlands, and to use their arts of freebooting and ferocity in aid of the regular soldiery of persecution.

The Highlanders and many of the northern Lowlanders took no part in the struggles or spirit of Presbyterianism, and had such notions and habits as made them eminently fit tools for working out the coarse and far-spread purposes of prelatical and persecuting despotism. The government of the day knew well their character; and, after having come almost to their wit's end in devices and efforts to put down Covenantanism, resolved to enlist the wild Highlanders against it, somewhat on the same principle on which the government of a subsequent period called in the Red Indians against the struggling colonists of America. The council first wrote to some of the chieftains, and obtained a ready offer of their services; and then applied to the King for his formal consent to employ them; and, as a matter of course, they gave "much satisfaction" to the profligate tyrant, and were duly

authorized by him to send the proposed forces to all districts where Covenantanism was most rife, and to commission them to live at free quarter among the frequenters of field preaching, to disarm the suspected, to seize and secure all prime or very good horses, to exact from householders a bond for the ecclesiastical conformity of their families,—and, in a word, to act vigorously and unsparingly as the dagger and claymore missionaries of compulsory prelacy.

On the 24th of January, 1678, the Highland Host rendezvoused and encamped at Stirling. Their colonels were noblemen, who received large pay, and did little work for the money; their active officers were thievish lairds, who thought only of booty, and felt no nicety about the means they might employ for obtaining it; and the general body were rude, savage clansmen or retainers, who knew no law except the will of their chiefs, and who generally yielded to it an unscrupulous obedience, but who, when secret spoil could be grasped and appropriated, were very prompt to assert a will of their own. About six thousand were real Highlanders; about two thousand were Lowlanders or militia of somewhat less ferocious and less plundering habits; and about two thousand more were regular troops or King's guards, who had become veterans in outrage, and were worse ruffians than even the most ruffianly Highlanders. The Host were thus about ten thousand strong; and they were armed with muskets and daggers, and had four pieces of artillery, and an ample provision of spades, shovels, mattocks, iron shackles, and thumb-screws; so that they stood well prepared, in both character and accoutrement, to do all the departments of their devastating and atrocious mission. A poet who wrote and published within twenty years after, describes them as follows:—

“ Those who were their chief commanders,
As such who bore the pirnie standarts,

Who led the van, and drove the rear,
 Were right weel mounted of their gear ;
 With brogues, and trews, and pirnie plaids,
 With good blue bonnets on their heads,
 Which, on the one side had a flipe,
 Adorn'd with a tobacco pipe.
 With durk, and snap-work, and snuff-mill,
 A bag which they with onions fill ;
 And as their strict observers say,
 A tup-horn filled with usquebay ;
 A slasht out coat beneath their plaids,
 A targe of timber, nails, and hides ;
 With a long two-handed sword,
 As good's the country can afford.
 Had they not need of bulk and bones,
 Who fought with all these arms at once ?
 Of moral honestie they're clean,
 Nought like religion they retain ;
 In nothing they're accounted sharp,
 Except in bagpipe and in harp ;
 For a misobliging word,
 She'll durk her neighbour o'er the board,
 And then she'll up like fire from flint,
 She'll scarcely ward the second dint.
 If any ask her of her thrift,
 Forsooth her nainsell lives by thift."

The Highlanders marched southward from Stirling, and for some time had their head-quarters at Glasgow, and afterwards spread through Clydesdale, Renfrewshire, and all the divisions of Ayrshire. Their approach was viewed with so much alarm by the Covenanters that a day of fasting and humiliation was held on account of it; and their presence and conduct proved so appalling as for a time to suppress field-preaching and give entire triumph to persecution. They

acted like victorious mercenaries in a conquered country seized and appropriated whatever they chose, took horses from the very ploughs to carry their baggage or draw away their plunder, extorted money and valuables by means of threats and cajolery, and beat and wounded without distinction all persons who tried to resist or elude their demands. "The Highland Host," says Mr. Aikman, in his *Annals of the Persecution*, "ravaged the devoted west without mercy. Free quarters were every where exacted by the militia and King's forces, although they received regular pay. But the Highlanders, not content with free quarters, would march in large bands to gentlemen's and heritors' houses, as well as their tenants, and take up their lodgings, and force the proprietors to furnish them with whatever they chose to demand, or they would take whatever struck their fancy; and, when some of their own officers interposed, would present their daggers to their breasts, and dare them to touch their plunder. They infested the high-roads in a most ferocious manner, not only robbing the passengers of their money or baggage, but even stripping them of their clothes, and sending them to travel naked for miles ere they could reach home. From the country-folks and cottars' houses they carried off pots, pans, wearing-apparel, bed-clothes, or whatever was portable; and, notwithstanding the government had taken care to order provisions, both officers and men carried off or wantonly killed the cattle, under pretence that they wanted food, unless they were bribed by money; yet that did not always avail, the plunderers often both pocketing the coin and driving the cattle. In some places, they proceeded the horrible length of scorching the people before large fires, in order to extort a confession, if they suspected they had any hidden valuables; and to these rapacious, needy hordes, the lowest necessary utensils of civilised life were precious. In other villages, the meanest soldiers exacted sixpence sterling a-day, and the guards a shilling or merk Scots; their captains and superior officers

half-crowns and crowns at their discretion, or as they thought the poor people could procure it, threatening to burn their houses about their ears if they did not produce sufficient to answer their demands. Besides money, the industrious, sober, religious peasantry were constrained to furnish brandy and tobacco; and, what was scarcely less painful, were obliged to witness their filthy, brutal excesses. Then, again, some of the ruffians would levy contributions in order, as they pretended, to secure the payers from plunder; yet, after they had filched them of their money, at their departure rifled them of all they could find the means of transporting. Their insolences to the females our historians have drawn a veil over as too abominable to admit of description.

After a very few weeks, however, the government began to see that the Highland Host was rendering them insufferably odious, and doing the very interests of tyranny and oppression incomparably more injury than service; and so early as about the end of February, they disbanded all the really Highland portions of it, and ordered them to return to their native glens and mountains,—and on the 24th of April, broke up and scattered also its two thousand Lowlanders. “When this goodly army retreated homeward,” says Kirkton, “you would have thought by their baggage they had been at the sack of a besieged city; and therefore, when they passed Stirling bridge, every man drew his sword to shew the world they had returned conquerors from their enemies’ land; but they might as well have shown the pots, pans, girdles, shoes taken off countrymen’s feet, and other bodily and household furniture with which they were loadened.” “A great many horses which they had stolen,” says Aikman, “were burdened with the merchandise swept from the dealers’ shops,—webs of linen and woollen cloth, silver-plate, bearing the names and arms of gentlemen, bundles of bed-clothes, carpets, men and women’s wearing-apparel, pots, pans, gridirons, and a great variety of promiscuous articles. Their wary leaders had trans-

mitted home large sums of money previously by safe hands ; but some of the retreating parties were not so fortunate with their bulky packages. The river Clyde being swollen when they came to Glasgow, the students at College, assisted by a number of other youths, took possession of the bridge, and allowing only forty to pass at a time, obliged the marauders to deliver up their plunder, and then conveyed them out at the West Port, without suffering them to enter the town. In this manner about two thousand were eased of their burdens, and the custom-house nearly filled with furniture and clothing, which were restored to their proper owners, as far as could be effected."

Yet notwithstanding all their savageness of disposition and rapacity of conduct, though they behaved like highwaymen, and gave full scope to their passions, and regarded the whole population as their victims, and spoke a language unknown to them, and feared neither God nor man, they were remarkably free from truculency and the love of blood, and are not accused of having, in even a single instance, added murder to their crimes. How astonishingly do they contrast in this way to the dragoons of Claverhouse !