

THE BARNES OF AYR.

NEAR the end of the 13th century, during the usurped and military possession of Scotland by Edward I. of England, an

encampment or temporary barrack of a portion of his forces, on the south-east side of the town of Ayr, became the scene of a very famous and very appalling exploit of Sir William Wallace. The country around Ayr had been the focus of an insurrection against the English tyranny; and was viewed by the creatures and officers of Edward with wakeful suspicion and malicious dislike. The well-affected and the ill-disposed were regarded with nearly the same feelings,—or rather, the former were either carelessly or sullenly confounded with the latter; and all persons of the upper classes, whatever might be their partisanship, their discretion, or their general character, were viewed indiscriminately as fit subjects to be victimized to the usurper's policy and bloody despotism. Under pretence of holding a Justice-Aire, all near the town were summoned to attend; and a number who appeared, including Sir Reginald Crawford, Sir Bryce Blair, and Sir Hugh Montgomerie, were treacherously made prisoners and put to death without even the formality of a trial. Wallace at the time was not far off, at the head of one of those small, fleet, flying brigades which so often surprised and confounded his enemies; and when he heard of the infamous occurrence, he determined to make a severe retaliation. Selecting fifty of his choicest men, and strengthened by a number of the retainers of the murdered gentlemen, he hastened to the temporary barracks of the English, or barns of Ayr, approached them stealthily, and surrounded them at dead of night, while their inmates were fast asleep in fancied security and after a deep carousal. He placed a cordon of men around them to prevent the possibility of escape, procured combustibles, and set fire so promptly and furiously to the pitch-covered thatch of the roofs that the whole erections were speedily in a blaze. The roused sleepers within rose and rushed outward screaming and horrified, but were everywhere confronted with the Scottish swords, and were either killed in the act of flight or driven back to die in the flames. No fewer than about five

hundred perished. Wallace, it is said, went away before the tragedy was completed; and when at an elevated spot about two miles distant, where vestiges of an old ecclesiastical ruin popularly called Burn-weel kirk still exist, he looked back to the blazing scene of his vengeance, and exclaimed to his followers, "The barns of Ayr burn weel!"

Miss Baillie has made good use of this story in her 'Metrical Legend;' and many of the romancing histories of Scotland treat it as one of the most remarkable minor incidents in the story of the war of independence; and the local traditions of Ayrshire proudly point to it as high evidence of the eminent connexion of their county with the life and achievements of Scotland's greatest hero. And though Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes, the most generally accurate of all our historians, has expressed strong scepticism respecting it, he is dealt with, on the subject, in the following effective terms, by the learned Dr. Jamieson:—"The story of the destruction of the barns of Ayr, and of the immediate reason of it, is supported by the universal tradition of the country to this day; and local tradition is often entitled to more regard than is given to it by the fastidiousness of the learned. Whatever allowances it may be necessary to make for subsequent exaggeration, it is not easily conceivable, that an event should be connected with a particular spot, during a succession of ages, without some foundation. Sir D. Dalrymple deems this story 'inconsistent with probability.' He objects to it, because it is said, 'that Wallace, accompanied by Sir John Graham, Sir John Menteith, and Alexander Scrymgeour, constable of Dundee, went into the west of Scotland, to chastise the men of Galloway, who had espoused the part of the Comyns, and of the English;' and that, 'on the 28th August, 1298, they set fire to some granaries in the neighbourhood of Ayr, and burned the English cantoned in them.'—Annals I. 255, N. Here he refers to the relations of Arnold Blair and to Major, and produces three objections to the

narrative. One of these is, that 'Comyn, the younger of Badenoch, was the only man of the name of Comyn who had any interest in Galloway; and he was at that time of Wallace's party.' The other two are; that 'Sir John Graham could have no share in the enterprise, for he was killed at Falkirk, 22d July, 1298;' and that 'it is not probable that Wallace would have undertaken such an enterprise immediately after the discomfiture at Falkirk.' Although it had been said by mistake, that Graham and Comyn were present, this could not invalidate the whole relation, for we often find that leading facts are faithfully narrated in a history, when there are considerable mistakes as to the persons said to have been engaged. But although our annalist refers both to Major and Blair, it is the latter only who mentions either the design of the visit paid to the west of Scotland, or the persons who are said to have been associates in it. The whole of Sir David's reasoning rests on the correctness of a date, and of one given only in the meagre remains ascribed to Arnold Blair. If his date be accurate, the transaction at Ayr, whatever it was, must have taken place thirty-seven days afterwards. Had the learned writer exercised his usual acumen here—had he not been resolved to throw discredit on this part of the history of Wallace—it would have been most natural for him to have supposed, that this event was post-dated by Blair. It seems, indeed, to have been long before the battle of Falkirk. Blind Harry narrates the former in his Seventh, the latter in his Eleventh Book. Sir David himself, after pushing the argument from the date given by Blair as far as possible, virtually gives it up, and makes the acknowledgment which he ought to have made before. 'I believe,' he says, 'that this story took its rise from the pillaging of the English quarters, about the time of the treaty of Irvine, in 1297, which, as being an incident of little consequence, I omitted in the course of this history.' Here he refers to Hemingford, T. I. p. 123. Hemingford says, that

'many of the Scots and men of Galloway had, in a hostile manner, made prey of their stores, having slain more than five hundred men, with women and children.' Whether he means to say that this took place at Ayr, or at Irvine, seems doubtful. But here, I think, we have the nucleus of the story. The barns, according to the diction of Blind Harry, seem to have been merely 'the English quarters,' erected by order of Edward for the accommodation of his troops. Although denominated barns by the Minstrel, and horreas by Arnold Blair, both writers seem to have used these terms with great latitude, as equivalent to what are now called barracks. It is rather surprising, that our learned annalist should view the loss of upwards of five hundred men, besides women and children, with that of their property, 'as an incident of little consequence,' in a great national struggle. Major gives nearly the same account as Blair. Speaking of Wallace, he says, 'Anglorum insignes viros apud horrea Aerie residentes de nocte incendit, et qui a voraci flamma evaserunt ejus mucrone occubuerunt.'—Fol. lxx. There is also far more unquestionable evidence as to the cause of this severe retaliation, than is generally supposed. Lord Hailes has still quoted Barbour as an historian of undoubted veracity. Speaking of Crystal of Seton, he says—

It wes gret sorow sekyrly,
 That so worthy persoune as he
 Suld on sic maner hangyt be.
 Thusgate endyt his worthynes.
 And off Crauford als Schyr Ranald wes,
 And Schyr Bryce als the Blar,
 Hangyt in till a berne in Ar.'

The Bruce, III. 260 v. &c.

This tallies very well with the account given by the Minstrel.

• Four thousand hail that nycht was in till Ayr.

In gret bernyss, biggyt with out the toun,

The justice lay, with mony bald barroun.

• *Wallace*, vii. 334.”