

CONFLICT AT THURSO.*

A.D. 1649.

THERE is a Scottish proverb, "*The better day the better deed,*" and so probably thought Donald Macallister Mullich, who is described as an "Irish captain, a powerful ferocious man," who had figured in the King's service in the campaigns of the great Marquis of Montrose, and who had mingled with the feuds between the clans of Mackay and Sutherland, in favour of the former. It happened that in the year 1649 Niel Mackay, a celebrated leader of a branch of the clan called the Abrach Mackays, entered the county of Caithness, and proceeded to pay a visit to Sir James Sinclair of Murkle, and several other friends, in the neighbourhood of Thurso. This Niel Mackay was followed to that town by Donald Macallister Mullich and some of his retainers, but it is not clear whether the latter personage wished to be near his friend Niel, or whether he repaired thither for his own convenience. Donald entertained very convenient notions of *meum* and *tuum*, and improved on the Rob Roy maxim, as expressed by Wordsworth, that

They should keep who had the power,
And they should take who can.

Donald was a personage who considered himself and his men entitled to demand a contribution for his own and their support from the inhabitants wherever he went. This, in his opinion, was his undoubted right, and he viewed it as the very quintessence of rebellion—as altogether illegal, presumptuous, and punishable, to offer any resistance, or to

* Mackay's History of the Clan Mackay; Gordon's History of the House of Sutherland.

call this assumed right in question. The notions of Donald on this subject of levying contributions were very agreeable to a set of brawny Highlanders, who loved an idle marauding life, and he had always a considerable number of retainers, or a *following*, at command.

On the present occasion Donald demanded a contribution from the lieges of the baronial burgh of Thurso, which the said lieges thought proper to resist. Irritated at their refractory conduct, which he considered an unpardonable insult, Donald resolved to maintain his authority and to revenge himself on their contumacy. As his notions of religion were as convenient as his manner of subsistence, he took the opportunity of a Sunday, while the inhabitants were attending divine service, to obtain from the houses and stores of the Thursonians those necessaries which they obstinately refused. A person to whom he communicated his intention suggested to him that he should evince some respect for the Sunday and for the ordinances of God, to which he impiously replied, "In defiance of God and the Sunday, Donald will spill blood."

Donald's project was soon made known to the inhabitants, who took up arms and resolved to act on the offensive. They not only assaulted Donald and his men, but they attacked his ally Niel Mackay and his few followers, who happened at the time to be in a house at a considerable distance from the parish church, and who were utterly ignorant of the whole affair. The Mackays defended themselves, and when joined by Donald and his men a regular conflict took place. Such was the superstitious terror in which Donald was personally held that it was believed he was proof against lead, and a servant of Sir James Sinclair cut a silver button from his master's coat, with which he loaded a pistol, and fired at the Irish captain. The pistol was so well aimed that Donald was shot through the ear,

but nothing daunted by this narrow escape he with the utmost coolness exclaimed in Gaelic—"Hoot! the fellow, he has deafened me!"

Niel Mackay was unfortunately killed shortly after the commencement of the fray, but this was unknown to Sir James Sinclair, who, alarmed for the safety of his friend, called aloud—"Let no man touch Niel Mackay." He was told that he was killed already. "Then," said Sir James, "spare none." About twenty of the Mackays and Irish were killed, and the last two of them were slain at Scrabster, about half a mile west of Thurso. The place where those two fell was marked by large stones fixed in the ground, and the others, with the exception of Niel Mackay, were buried at the principal entrance to the parish church.

The death of Niel Mackay was greatly lamented by Sir James Sinclair, who caused him to be interred in his own burying-ground opposite the Murkle aisle of the church, and placed a stone over his grave with his family arms cut on it, which is still to be seen, but the ciphering is almost effaced. The son of Niel Mackay, who was called by his father's name of *Niel*, made frequent excursions in pursuit of the man who killed his father, but that person always contrived to elude him, and he at length fled from the country. He, however, killed James Sinclair of Borlum, who had been concerned in his father's slaughter. Donald, the cause of the whole fray, was also killed in this conflict at Thurso, so disgraceful to the state of the country at that period