

## SIEGE OF DUNBAR CASTLE.\*

A.D. 1337-8.

THE castle of Dunbar, in some old records called *Earl Patrick's Strong-house*, was built, as its massive ruins still indicate, on several rocks projecting into the sea, and was anciently the stronghold of the Earls of March. It is so advantageously situated, and was so strong, that before the use of artillery it was almost impregnable. During the wars between England and Scotland, the castle and the town were often the scene of much strife and bloodshed, and the fortress was esteemed a place of such importance, that it was considered the key of Scotland on the south-east Border.

In 1314, Edward II. after his memorable defeat at Bannockburn took refuge in Dunbar Castle, from which he escaped to Berwick in a fishing-boat. It was demolished by the Earl of Dunbar (March) in 1333, who, despairing of maintaining it against the English, razed it to the ground; but Edward III. compelled the Earl to rebuild it at his own expense, and to admit into it an English garrison. In 1337, however, it was in possession of its rightful lord, and in one of the numerous expeditions of the English to subdue Scotland, it was invested and besieged by the Earl of Salisbury. The Earl of March happened to be absent when the English army encamped before the massive fortress, but his wife, the daughter of Randolph Earl of Moray, Regent of Scotland, and sister of the Earl of Moray who was killed at the battle of Durham in 1346, undertook to

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\* Douglas' Peerage; Lord Hailes' Annals of Scotland; Sir Walter Scott's Border Antiquities; Buchanan's History of Scotland; Statistical Account of Scotland.

defend the place. This Lady was, from her dark complexion, commonly called *Black Agnes*, and possessed all the heroism of her gallant race, of which she was the representative. She resolved to hold out to the last extremity, and she performed all the duties of a vigilant commander, animating the garrison by her exhortations and example, and braving every danger with the intrepidity of a Randolph.

The Earl of Arundell commanded the English forces in Scotland at this time, but the conduct of the siege of Dunbar Castle was committed to the Earl of Salisbury. The besiegers plied the massy pile with battering engines, and hurled immense stones against the battlements, yet Black Agnes remained undaunted, and in scorn ordered one of her female attendants to wipe off the dust with her handkerchief. The *sow*, an enormous machine composed of timber, and well roofed, having stages within it, and constructed for the twofold purpose of conducting miners to the foot of the walls, and of armed men to the storm of a fortress, was employed on this occasion, but the Countess beheld it with indifference. She scoffingly advised the Earl of Salisbury to take good care of his *sow*, for she would soon cast her *pigs*, meaning his men, within the fortress, and she then ordered an immense rock to be thrown down upon the machine, which crushed it to pieces. It happened that an arrow from one of the Scottish archers struck an English knight, who stood beside the Earl, through his surcoat, and piercing the habergeon, or chained mail-coat, which was below it, made its way through three plies of the acton which he wore next his body, and killed him on the spot. "There," cried Salisbury, "comes one of my lady's tire pins; Agnes's love shafts go straight to the heart."

The resistance of the garrison to all the assaults of the English was so determined and indomitable, that Salis-

bury was compelled to have recourse to stratagem. He endeavoured to bribe the keeper of the principal entrance to the Castle; and offered a considerable sum if he would leave the gate open, or at least in such a state as would enable his soldiers to enter without difficulty. The man took the Earl's money, and pretended to act according to the conditions, but he disclosed the whole transaction to the Countess. It was agreed between the English commander and the porter that a small party would be admitted, and the Earl of Salisbury resolved to be the leader. At the time appointed the gates were found open, and the Earl proceeded into the fortress, when Copeland, one of his followers, hastily passed before him. The portcullis was instantly let down, and Copeland, mistaken for his commander, remained a prisoner. Black Agnes witnessed the result of the enterprise from the battlements, and called out jeeringly to Salisbury, addressing him by his family name—"Farewell, Montague, I intended that you should have supped with us, and assist us in defending the Castle against the English."

Salisbury now turned the siege into a blockade, and resolved to starve the garrison. He closely invested the fortress by land and sea, and all communication was cut off between the besieged and their friends. Ramsay of Dalhousie, who was then concealed with a resolute company of young men in the caves of Hawthornden near Roslin, and who signalized himself by maintaining a kind of predatory warfare against the English, heard of the extremities to which the brave garrison of Dunbar and their heroic female commander were reduced, and resolved to achieve their deliverance. He proceeded to the coast with forty men, and engaged some boats, in which he and his party embarked. Taking advantage of a dark night, he contrived to elude the vigilance of the English, and entered the castle by a postern next the sea, the ruins of which are

still visible. He instantly sallied out, and attacked the advanced guards of the English, whom he completely drove back to their camp.

Disheartened by this gallant exploit and by the length of the siege, which had occupied nearly five months, the English, on the 10th of June 1338, raised the siege, and even consented to a cessation of arms. The Earl of Salisbury withdrew his forces, leaving Black Agnes in possession of her fortress. The failure of this enterprise was, considering all the circumstances, held as exceedingly disgraceful to the English, who, although they remained masters of Edinburgh, were continually annoyed by the sallies of Ramsay of Dalhousie and his devoted followers.

Dunbar Castle afterwards repeatedly changed possessors. It is memorable in Queen Mary's history as the place of her retreat after the murder of Rizzio in 1565; and in the following year, that unfortunate princess and her husband the Earl of Bothwell, then the proprietor of the castle, fled to it, closely pursued by a party of horse under the command of Lord Home. From this fortress she marched to Carberry Hill, where she was compelled to surrender herself a prisoner to the confederated nobility. In 1567, the Regent Moray laid siege to the fortress, and the governor, seeing no hope of relief, surrendered on favourable conditions. The guns in it were dismounted, and conveyed to the Castle of Edinburgh, and the fortress was ordered to be dilapidated on account of its ruinous state, its great charge to the government, and to prevent it being made at any future time a stronghold by the English. It is now a massive and interesting memorial of the olden times—"proud in its fall, impressive in decay." Several of its towers had communication with the sea, the billows of which roar with fearful commotion on its weather-beaten rocks. Under the front of the Castle is a large cavern of black and red stone. "This," observes Sir Walter Scott,

“ is said to have been the pit or dungeon for confining prisoners, and a most dreadful one it must have been.”

The heroic lady, commonly called *Black Agnes*, wife of Patrick, ninth Earl of Dunbar and March, assumed the Earldom of Moray, at the death of her brother in 1347. She died about the year 1369, leaving two sons, George, tenth Earl of Dunbar and March, and John Earl of Moray. Her husband, who is mentioned as Earl of March, commanded the left wing of the Scottish army at the fatal battle of Durham, in conjunction with the High Steward, in October 1346, and retreated in good order from that conflict, though not without considerable loss. The town of Dunbar was erected a free burgh in his favour in 1369, about which time he died.