

THE REVENGE OF HERRIES.*

A.D. 1371.

THE barony of Gilmerton, in the parish of Libberton, near Edinburgh, was anciently the property of a family named Herries, who were also proprietors of the neighbouring estate of Drum, afterwards the seat of the Lords Somerville, into whose hands it passed by the marriage of Sir Walter Somerville, baron of Linton and Carnwath, to Giles, only surviving daughter and heiress of Sir John Herries or Herryng of Gilmerton, in 1375. This gentleman had two daughters, Giles now mentioned, who was the younger, and Margaret, the elder, both, we are told, “in expectation to be sharers in a great part of their father’s estate, because he had no male children of his own body, but a brother’s son named Patrick, whom he designed to have married to his eldest daughter, and given

* *Memorie of the Somervilles, by James eleventh Lord Somerville; Account of the Parish of Libberton in the first volume of the Transactions of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.*

him the greater part of his lands after his death; but the miscarriage of his eldest daughter, which had a tragical end, frustrated all his hope and expectation that way."

This young lady, who was remarkably beautiful, fell into a melancholy mood, and secluded herself from all her friends. To perform her devotions, "in observing strictly all rites and ceremonies of religion then in use," she frequently resorted to the Cistercian Abbey of Newbattle, about three miles distant, now the property and family mansion of the Marquis of Lothian, and finely situated on the banks of the South Esk near the town of Dalkeith. In the course of those religious peregrinations she became acquainted with one of the monks—a young man of pleasing manners and handsome figure who acted as her confessor, at least he "insinuated himself much in her favour under the specious pretext of holiness, and did often converse with this lady in her most private retirements both in the Abbey and at her father's house in Gilmerton." The profession and reputed sanctity of this monk, and his representations that he was exerting himself to dispel the religious melancholy of the young lady, procured for him a ready access at all times, and he was treated with the utmost kindness by Sir John Herries, whose unsuspecting confidence he had completely secured. The abandoned ecclesiastic scrupled not to attempt the seduction of Margaret Herries, and the young lady fell a victim to his snares.

The criminal intercourse continued, and the monk, afraid that neither the Abbey of Newbattle nor the mansion-house of Gilmerton would eventually be altogether secure to carry on his intrigues, prevailed with the young lady to meet him at certain times in a farm-house called Gilmerton-Grange belonging to Sir John Herries, a short distance from the village of Gilmerton, on a road leading to Newbattle. At that time most of the ground, now finely cultivated and producing luxuriant crops, was covered with

wood. Here began the famous forest of Drumselch, a name denoting a large hill amid other little hills, which reached almost to the palace of Holyroodhouse, and much frequented in former times by the Scottish kings and their nobles for hunting. In this sequestered retreat the monk imagined he could meet his mistress without observation, and without the chance of detection and exposure.

It happened that the person residing in Gilmerton-Grange was a young widow of licentious character, who also had an intrigue with another monk of the same Abbey of Newbattle, a companion of the seducer of Sir John Herries' daughter. Becoming acquainted with each other's secret, they often met in this retreat and carried on their guilty and illicit practices. Notwithstanding their utmost caution, however, it was rumoured abroad that there was an undue familiarity between the parties. The neighbouring villagers were astonished at the intimacy which existed between Sir John's daughter and the mistress of the farm-house of Grange, considering that the latter was far inferior to her in condition, and that she was a person of very questionable character. The frequent and regular visits of the monks were also noticed, and a report was soon propagated which it was impossible to misunderstand.

When this report reached the ears of Sir John Herries, his rage was unbounded. He summoned his daughter to his presence, and being a man of a furious and irritable disposition, he solemnly declared to her that if he ever knew her to resort to the farm-house of Gilmerton-Grange again, or to associate with the woman who occupied it, he would most certainly put her to death with his own hand. The young lady promised a faithful compliance, and assured her enraged father that she would never give him any future cause of annoyance. Yet, on the ensuing evening after dark she proceeded to the scene of her assignation, and met her paramour with his brother monk

She informed him of her father's suspicions, and the terrible threatenings he had uttered against her, which, from her father's well known disposition, she had little doubt he would execute ; and she intimated amid tears that she dared not in future incur her father's resentment—that she and the monk must part for ever—and that she must now betake herself to wretchedness and misery.

A young and beautiful female, the daughter of a man of rank and influence, making such statements amid the deepest distress and anguish, could not fail to move the heart of the monk, who saw the vengeance to which her love for him had exposed her. He consulted with his companion, and both endeavoured to allay her alarms. They represented that Sir John's threatenings were merely idle words—that he dared not inflict them—that the power of the Church would protect her—and that as a punishment they would make him do penance for his suspicions. They talked of the wealth of their Abbey and the influence of their superior, assuring her that they were able to secure her from her father's resentment, and to punish him in various ways if he attempted to carry his threats into execution. These declarations calmed her fears, and she consented to remain with the monk during the evening, trusting that her father would be ignorant of her absence.

But Sir John Herries soon discovered that his daughter was not in her own apartment, and suspecting where she was, he proceeded to Gilmerton-Grange, accompanied by two domestics. He found the doors and windows of the farm-house carefully secured. Not a sound proceeded from the interior, and the silence was only broken by his assaults at the door and his loud asseverations to gain admittance. Irritated at the conduct of the inmates he seized a torch from the hands of one of his domestics, and set fire to the thatched roof of the farm-house. It happened to be a boisterous night, and the wind soon spread the flames.

In a short time the whole building was in a blaze ; escape was impossible, and his daughter, the two monks, and other six persons, were consumed to ashes.

The place where this tragedy occurred is still called *Burnt Dole*, and is well remembered in the neighbourhood. Sir John Herries incurred the vengeance of the Church, his estate was forfeited by the King, and he was compelled to save himself by exile. During his retirement he corresponded with his intimate friend, Sir Walter Somerville of Carnwath, who a short time afterwards married Giles, his only surviving daughter, and whose interest was then considerable, to procure an accommodation, and removal of the forfeiture. Sir Walter Somerville readily undertook the business, and assured Sir John that he would act as diligently as if it were his own concern, by “ employing all his interest and friendship both in the Church and Court to do him service.” He was, says the author of the *Memorie of the Somervills*, “ as good as his word, for, coming first to the abbacy of Newbattle, he deals effectually with the abbot and others of the principals of that abbey, representing to him and them how scandalous the lives of those two monks had been a long time before their acquaintance with that miserable lady, and yet their former villanies and that also were kept secret from the abbot’s knowledge, to the great reproach of their holy profession and prejudice of the abbey, which men abhorred now as the work of all abomination—women shunning the sight of the monks and friars thereto belonging as they would do that of a basilisk.—These, with sundry other reasons, used by Sir Walter of Carnwath, prevailed with the abbot and fraternity to hearken to an accommodation, provided he could move the Bishop of St Andrews to procure the absolution of the Church, seeing that Sir John Herries was excommunicated.” The whole matter was subsequently arranged by the exertions of Sir Walter Somerville, who

had by this time married the only surviving daughter of Sir John Herries, on the following conditions—"That Sir John should make over for him and his the merk land of Grange, where the murder was committed, to and in favour of the Abbey of Newbattle, claiming no right therein neither in property, superiority, nor vassalage in all time coming; and farther, that the said Sir John should, bare-headed and bare-legged, in sackcloth, crave absolution at the bishop and abbot's hands, and stand in the same manner at the principal door of St Catherine's chapel every Sabbath and holiday for one year, and paying forty pennies at every time to the poor of the parish, and one hundred merks Scots to the monks of Newbattle to pray for the souls of those that died through his transgression. These conditions were accepted and performed by Sir John, whereupon he had his pardon from the King, was restored to his estate, and had absolution from the Church."

We are told that Sir John Herries, or Herryng, as his name is also written, appears from Winton's Chronicle to have been a constant adherent and companion of the gallant Sir Alexander Ramsay of Dalhousie at a time when, although compelled to lurk in the caves at Gorton and Hawthornden, he occasionally harassed the English as far as the borders of Northumberland by unceasing inroads. It is also noticed by Winton that Sir John was present and behaved manfully at a sharp battle near Norham, in which Ramsay defeated the English in 1355. The chapel of St Catherine, at the door of which Sir John did penance "bare-headed and bare-legged" every Sunday and holiday during a whole year, and which now gives its designation to a mansion and estate in the parish of Libberton, is curious in legendary history. "At St Catherine's is a famous well, called the *Balm Well of St Catherine*. It was much frequented in ancient times, and considered as a sovereign remedy for several cutaneous distempers. It owes its

origin, it is said, to a miracle in this manner. St Catherine had a commission from St Margaret, consort of Malcolm Canmore, to bring a quantity of oil from Mount Sinai. In this very place she happened by some accident or other to lose a few drops of it, and on her earnest supplication the well appeared. When King James VI. was in Scotland in 1617 he went to visit it, and ordered that it should be fenced in with stones from bottom to top, and that a door and staircase should be made for it, that people might have the more easy access to the oily substances which always float above, and which were deemed of essential importance. The royal command being immediately obeyed, the well was greatly adorned, and continued so until the year 1650, when Cromwell's soldiers not only defaced but almost totally destroyed it. It was repaired indeed after the Restoration, but it did not appear to such advantage as before. Hard by this well a chapel was erected, and dedicated to St Margaret. St Catherine was buried in the chapel, and the place where her bones lie is still pointed out to strangers. It was observed that he who pulled down the chapel was never afterwards prosperous. The ground around it was consecrated for burying. After the nunnery at the Sciennes near Edinburgh was founded, the nuns there made an annual procession to this chapel and well in honour of St Catherine."
