

CONFLICT OF THE MACKAYS.*

A.D. 1431.

ROBERT Earl of Sutherland, by the assistance of the chief of a sept called Angus Murray, and his sons-in-law, Morgan and Niel Mackay, resolved to achieve the ruin, and possess himself of the lands, of their brother Thomas Mackay. Angus Dow Mackay, the cousin of this Thomas, was also included in the Earl's covetous projects, and various offers had been made to him to relinquish his property. At this time Angus Dow Mackay was very considerably advanced in years, and as he laboured under several bodily infirmities, he was at a loss as to the conduct he ought to exhibit towards such a powerful neighbour as the Earl ; but

* History of the Clan Mackay ; History of the Sutherlands.

his son John Mackay advised him not to yield or consent to the unjust demand, assuring him that he would undertake the defence of the property, and if necessary die in the quarrel.

A personal feud now existed between Angus Murray and Angus Dow Mackay, and the former raised a number of caterans, at the head of whom he marched into the district of Strathnaver to attack his rival. Angus Dow Mackay convened his followers, and, as he was unable to command in person, his son John Aberigh Mackay was placed at their head. The hostile caterans appeared in sight of each other at a place called Drum-na-coub, about three miles from Tongue. Before commencing the encounter, a message was sent from Angus Dow Mackay to his relatives Niel and Morgan Mackay, who were in the host of Angus Murray, offering them on certain conditions all his lands except Kintail in Strathnaver, which was refused, though the Mackays deny this statement. Both parties prepared for combat. John Mackay took up his position on an extensive heath at the north-west side of a lofty and steep mountain called Ben-Lyal, and there were only two ways by which the caterans of Angus Murray could advance against him—either by a narrow pass called Bealach-duag, on the west side of the mountain, or by the east side. The Mackays had all the advantages of situation, and could see their assailants a considerable distance before they approached. They were also well refreshed, whereas the enemy was fatigued by a long march. Angus Dow Mackay was led to the summit of a neighbouring eminence to witness the issue of the combat.

When the Sutherland men were descending the pass one of them exclaimed, when he saw the Mackays, whom he considered a small body,—“ We can shackle all these men ;” but a more experienced observer replied,—“ Take care of yourself—these calves will leap too high for

you to shackle them." This significant hint was proved by the result of the combat. When the caterans of Angus Murray had advanced near the bottom of the pass, John Aberigh Mackay sallied forth to intercept them, and before they could concentrate the attack commenced. The combat was carried on with all that ferocity characteristic of the animosities and feuds of the Highlanders, and it is said that out of twelve hundred only nine remained alive. Victory declared in favour of the Mackays. Angus Murray and his two sons-in-law being in the van, were overpowered and slain, with all who came to their assistance. Some attempted to escape by the craggy side of the west end of Ben-Lyal, but they were soon overtaken and killed, and those who fled by the pass shared the same fate. The Mackays chased the remainder of the fugitives, who fled by a long circuitous route on the east side of the mountain, a distance of about eight miles to the ford of a river running into Loch Lyal, called by the inhabitants *Aa Carrhie*, or *Carryford*, where the last of the Mackays was killed, and a large stone laid over his grave, which is alleged to be seen there at the present time. According to the statements of the Mackays they lost comparatively few men.

There was a person named Iver, or Evander, a principal follower of the Earl of Sutherland, residing at Shinness, of whom the following traditionary story is told:—"Either from the injustice of the cause, or a presentiment of its bad success, he had declined to join in this invasion, at which it is said his wife felt so indignant, that on the morning on which his countrymen set out she laid porridge for his breakfast, and when he asked why she had brought him that unusual dish, she replied, 'That was the proper food for cowards.' He started up in wrath, and having buckled on his armour told her that he would go, but that neither of them would ever enjoy peace thereafter. When he arrived at Drum-na-coub the Mackays were chasing his

countrymen, and there was none of either side on the field of battle except Angus Dow Mackay, who was leaning on a servant viewing the slain. Evander thereupon concealed himself in a bush, and shot an arrow at Angus, which killed him."

Evander fled with the utmost speed to avoid the Mackays, and succeeded in escaping by circuitous paths, but the vengeance of the sept was implacable, and after various attempts to seize him without effect, as he generally slept among the hills, and always changed his hiding places. he was at last met by William Dow Mackay, the grandson of the old chief whom he had killed. This was at the ford of a stream which Evander was compelled to cross. When in the centre of it Mackay came upon him, and exclaimed in Gaelic, "The ford is foul!"—"I see so," replied Evander, when Mackay sprung upon him. cut off his head, which he carried away, and allowed the body to be washed down with the stream. He brought the head with him to Tongue, and laid it in the presence of his caterans on a spot still designated the *Knoll of Heads*.
