

THE BATTLE OF TARA.

THE hill of Tara, in the county of Meath, is one of the most celebrated localities in Ireland, and possesses considerable interest for Scottish antiquaries, as well as prime interest for Irish ones. It is a verdant, moundish, flowingly-outlined mass, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile in length from north to south, rather less than $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile in extreme breadth,—possessing a wavy, tumulated, tabular summit,—lifting up a large, solitary standing stone or monumental pillar on the crown of one of its tumuli,—sharing with the hill of Skreen, $1\frac{3}{4}$ mile to the east, and 507 feet in altitude, the power and interest of relieving the monotony of the vast central expanse of the plain of Meath,—and commanding a panoramic, minutely featured, and warmly tinted view of that brilliant expanse,—rich, fertile, and as capable of the most finished culture and the most ornate loveliness as a garden.

Its original name was Teaghmor, "the great house," or Teaghmorreagh, "the great house of the king," and was abbreviated or vulgarized into successively Teamor and Tara. A triennial convocation of provincial kings, Druids, and bards, is usually alleged, but on very apocryphal authority, to have been held on Tara Hill, from an early period till about the end of the 6th century, for the election of a monarch or supreme ruler, and the management of the affairs of the monarchy. A supposed record, called the Psalter of Tara, or sometimes Senachasmore or "great antiquity," figures in tradition as the written depository of the decrees of the convocation, but is not known to literature as an actual record.

The famous coronation-stone which formed the palladium of the kingdom of Dalriada, at Dunstaffnage, on the shores of the Dencaledonian sea, and afterwards became the palladium of Scotland at that kingdom's coronation-ground in the vicinity of Perth, and eventually was removed to Westminster by Edward I. to be the coronation-chair of the kings of England, is alleged to have been carried to Dunstaffnage by way of Iona from the hill of Tara, to have figured in courtly belief at Tara as the pillow of stone on which Jacob slept at Bethel, and to have found its way to Tara in the course of the alleged Milesian immigrations from Spain.

The principal palace of the early monarchs of Ireland, and an university or cluster of colleges supported by their munificence, are alleged to have stood on the hill of Tara, and have been the topic alike of the most magniloquent and florid descriptions by early annalists and later credulous historians, and of the most conflicting theories, intricate investigations, and antagonist discussions, among the majority of Irish antiquaries. But whatever structures, dignified with the names of palaces, halls, and colleges, really at any time existed, were probably of a temporary and fragile character, quite unworthy to be designated architectural, and have long

ago so utterly disappeared, as not to have left a single vestige of either wall or foundation; and the only antiquities, additional to the pillar-stone, which now exist, are numerous circular earthworks, possibly enough indicating quondam places of national assembly and royal residence, yet strictly resembling in appearance and character the ordinary 'raths,' which abound in most districts of the kingdom. The present desolation of the place, as contrasted to its ancient legendary glory, forms the topic of one of the finest of Moore's melodies:—

“ The harp that once through Tara's halls
 The soul of music shed,
 Now hangs as mute on Tara's walls
 As if that soul were fled.

So sleeps the pride of former days,
 So glory's thrill is o'er,
 And hearts that once beat high for praise,
 Now feel that pulse no more.

No more the chiefs and ladies bright
 The harp of Tara swells;
 The chord alone, that breaks at night,
 Its tale of ruin tells.

Thus freedom now so seldom wakes;
 The only throb she gives,
 Is when some heart indignant breaks,
 To show that still she lives.”

We might make martial mention of Tara in connexion with a signal defeat which the Danes sustained on it in 980, —with the concentration on it of the forces of Roderick, the last native monarch of Ireland, preparatory to his attacking

the English in Dublin,—with O'Neill's assembling his followers on it, after laying waste the surrounding country, in 1589,—and, perhaps most of all, with the phantasmagorial images of feud and warfare which flit before the fancy in the most ancient Irish legends. But we write only of the wars of the Scots; and therefore have spoken of it at all only by way of introduction to a short notice of a famous skirmish upon it, fought in 1798, honourable to a small body of Scottish troops, and distinctively known as the Battle of Tara.

In May, 1798, a body of rebels, several thousand strong, assembled in the central parts of Leinster, and proposed first to march towards the north, where they expected a general rising against the government, and then to return, and form a junction with forces from the south and west, and make an overwhelming attack on Dublin, and effect there a complete revolution. A regiment of militia was despatched by the authorities in pursuit of them; but, on coming in sight, and observing their great numbers, thought it prudent to retire. The Reay Fencibles,—a regiment of Highlanders who had been raised in the north-west of Scotland in the beginning of 1795, and had been constantly on service in Ireland since a few months after that date—were at the time on their march from Cavan to Dublin, but knew nothing of the rebels, and of course had no commands or intention to seek them out or assail them. Their first division arrived at Dublin without any impediment; but a portion of baggage and ammunition between these and the second or rear division, was seized by the rebels, with the additional disaster of the death or captivity of the few men who escorted it. The rear division soon got intelligence of this, and viewed it as an affront on their regiment, and instantly resolved to punish it or die. They consisted of five companies; and, while two of these remained with the regimental stores, the other three, led by Captains Blanch and Maclean, set out in search of the rebels, and testified their alacrity at starting by a round of three

hearty cheers. Nor were they alone in the expedition; for Captain Preston, of the Meath yeoman cavalry, having got a distant view of the rebels, and aware that the Reay Fencibles were approaching, joined the latter in all haste and earnestness, and suggested to them where they would most likely find the enemy, and brought to their aid some small bodies of the local yeoman infantry.

The small army moved on to Dunshaughlin where they hoped perhaps to find the rebels, and certainly to obtain refreshment; but they were quite disappointed; for the rebels had completely pillaged the town on the preceding day, and had killed several of the principal protestant inhabitants and dragged the rest into their ranks, and had swept all the surrounding country clean of provision, and marched away in vast force with their booty. But discovery was soon made that they had gone northward by a circuitous direction; and the Reays, fired with new determination to be at them, and afraid that they might intercept the two companies who were left behind, forgot all their privations and fatigue, and wheeled about and followed them; and, after retracing their way some four or five miles, they espied the rebels on Tara, with white flags in their camp and about forty lighted fires.

The rebels amounted to about 4,000, and were very strongly posted, and had been on Tara about four hours, and were busily engaged in cooking and eating the provisions which they had carried off from the open country; and when they saw the little army of royalists approaching, they despatched a strong party in a circular course to attack their rear, and made instant preparation with their main force for repelling the direct onset in front. The royalists, including all the yeomanry, amounted only to about 400, but were provided with a six-pounder piece of ordnance, and had the advantage of a few cavalry on both their right and their left extremity, to prevent their line from being outflanked. The rebels first put their hats on the tops of their pikes, and

raised some dreadful yells, and began to make violent and wild gesticulations by way of bidding defiance to their adversaries; and then they advanced from their position, excitedly but irregularly, and fired all along as they moved. The royalists approached them with the greatest coolness, and did not fire a shot till within fifty yards of their front. The firing commenced at half past six in the evening of the 26th of May, and continued without intermission till sunset.

“The battle,” says the historian of the House and Clan of Mackay, “was hottest on the brow of the hill, where, from overwhelming numbers, higher ground, old walls, &c., the rebels possessed every advantage. But nothing could resist the resolute courage and bravery of the Highlanders, determined as they were to despise all odds, and surmount all difficulties, even though, from the circumstances in which they were placed, their ranks were soon broken. The rebel party who had been sent to attack their rear, had now speedily come forward on the same road by which the Reays had advanced to the attack, and were in a thick body close up to them; but the cannon, which had fallen to the rear, was quickly turned about when they were almost at its muzzle, and being accidentally double charged, was let fly amongst them with a most destructive effect, clearing the road so effectually, that the survivors immediately fled in all directions. Soon thereafter the valiant Highlanders having irresistibly fought their way to the top of the hill, they furiously fell upon the rebels, brought them down in crowds, and dispersed and pursued them on every side; and during the chase, the cavalry, though raw and undisciplined, did considerable execution. No less than five hundred of the rebels were reported to have been next morning found dead, amongst whom was their commander, in full uniform; and, what was next to a miracle, the killed of the Reays did not amount to thirty, only that a considerable number were wounded. The spoil which they took from the rebels,

though as might be supposed it was not much, recompensed in part the loss of the baggage which the enemy had seized; and they recovered the prisoners whom they had taken along with it." The Upper Kells infantry also had one killed and five wounded.

The pillar which now surmounts one of the tumuli of Tara originally stood on another and smaller tumulus, and was moved to its present situation to mark the spot where the bodies of the rebels slain in this skirmish were interred. "It was fixed there, however," say Mr. and Mrs. Hall, "only so recent as fifteen years ago. Its weight is prodigious; and it excited our astonishment how it could have been conveyed, without the aid of machinery, to its present destination. Upon this subject we conversed with a peasant, one 'Paddy Fitzsimmons,' who assisted at the ceremony. He stated that it was effected by no more than twenty men, who performed the work gradually an inch at a time; they sunk it about six feet into the ground, directly over the bodies of their old friends, relations, or companions; and perhaps in the world there does not exist so singular a monumental stone."