

IV.

RANDOLPH'S CAPTURE OF EDINBURGH CASTLE—WHERE DID HE CLIMB THE ROCK ? BY ERIC STAIR-KERR, F.S.A. Scot.

The story of the daring exploit by which the Castle of Edinburgh was wrested from the hands of the English the year before the Battle of Bannockburn is one of the favourite tales of Scottish history. Visitors to the northern capital love to gaze on the rugged crag and picture to themselves the fearless band of patriots scrambling up the precipice in the darkness of a moonless night. That the deed was done is an undoubted fact, but whether the escalade was made on the northern or southern front of the castle is a point which has not been made clear. It is in the charming pages of Barbour that the romantic story is told of how the party was guided up the dangerous track by a soldier who had frequently climbed down the crag in order to visit his sweetheart in the town. This poetical account by the Archdeacon of Aberdeen is the fullest description of the exploit that there is, apart from the modern renderings of the story. The darkness of the night, the pause for breath on the rocky shelf, the falling stone, and the watchman's cry are all carefully noticed by Barbour, but he does not say whether the ascent was made on the north or the south of the crag. The *Scalaonica*, written by an Englishman, Sir Thomas Gray, to relieve the long hours which he spent as a prisoner in Edinburgh Castle, refers to Randolph's daring assault. The chronicler, however, writes somewhat vaguely that the attack was made at the place where the rock was highest. If Gray had been more definite, his word would be taken as conclusive, for he lived in the castle when the famous capture was so recent as to have been most probably a favourite subject of conversation, and his father, who was present at the Battle of Bannockburn, and to whom the chronicler was indebted for many of his facts,

must often have heard the account of the seizure of Scotland's strongest fortress. The *Lanercost Chronicle*, a fourteenth-century work, gives a more minute description, specifying that Randolph's party climbed the northern face of the rock, while a feint attack was made "ad portam australem," which probably means the eastern gate.

Sir Walter Scott is responsible for the view that the ascent was made on the southern side. In the *Tales of a Grandfather* he follows in the main Barbour's account, but he takes for granted that the soldier's lady who lived "in the toun" occupied a house in the Grassmarket. Scott, however, overlooked the fact that in the reign of Robert the Bruce the town stood on the ridge to the east of the castle, and had not extended down to the valley where the Grassmarket now lies. Patrick Fraser Tytler, a trustworthy historian, relies entirely on Barbour, and so leaves his readers uninformed as to the situation of the soldier's dangerous track. Mr Andrew Lang takes as his authorities the *Lanercost Chronicle* and Barbour. Thus he writes, "Randolph scaled Edinburgh Castle rock on the side facing what is now Princes Street while a feint was made on the opposite wall." He, however, goes on to say, "But how, by descending the rock to the Nor' Loch, he came any nearer to 'ane wench here in the toun,' it is not easy to conjecture." Mr Lang apparently had in his mind Scott's idea of the Grassmarket descent, for owing to the fact that the Nor' Loch did not then exist, and that the houses lay only to the east of the castle, the lover's approach to the unwall'd town would be as easy from the north as from the south of the rock.

Two cardinal points of the compass can be neglected in endeavouring to fix upon the scene of Randolph's adventure. The attack on the castle was not made from the east or from the west, for on the former side there is no rock to scale, and on the latter the slope is comparatively gradual, necessitating only a scrambling walk, such as was undertaken by Claverhouse when he interviewed Gordon at the sally-port.

The southern face has Scott's word in its favour, but, as has been pointed out, Sir Walter drew upon his imagination when he stated that the soldier's track led to the Grassmarket. Moreover, the crag on that side, though steep and dangerous, is not so difficult of ascent as to require the guidance of an expert who had discovered the only possible way. There remains then the view, supported by the weighty authority of the *Lanercost Chronicle*, that it was the northern face of the rock that was scaled. Now, this is the side where the crag is steepest, and where the castle wall would possibly be lower than at other places, owing to the improbability of attack from that quarter. The eastern portion of this face, however, is partly hillside and partly rock, and above this place the fortress would doubtless be well guarded against assault. Towards the west there is an overhanging precipice, over which the Duke of Albany, brother of King James III., swung himself on a rope, and escaped by night to Leith. But just at the side of this cliff, near the Wellhouse Tower, there is a crevice up which a man could climb. This is probably the scene of Randolph's wonderful exploit. After picking out their footsteps on this dangerous ascent, the party would take breath on a sort of sloping platform above the precipice, where the fragmentary building called Wallace's Cradle is placed. This would be the resting-place mentioned by Barbour, and it is difficult to find in other parts of the rock a jutting crag about half way up, answering to the poet's description. Here, most likely, the patriots paused, while the watchman above tossed over the stone and exclaimed, "I see you well." Here in their anxiety they held consultation as to the advisability of pursuing or abandoning the enterprise; but deeming it as hazardous to return as to proceed, they advanced with caution to the foot of the wall. Perhaps the sentry thought he saw a moving figure, but afterwards, believing he was mistaken, continued his march round the rampart. With the aid of a short rope-ladder the assailants easily scaled the wall, and took the fortress completely by surprise. The climb both above and below

the projecting ledge must have been a difficult and dangerous undertaking ; it was not, however, an impossible feat for a picked band of warriors, eager to take part in a glorious adventure, and to strike a timely blow for the freedom of their country.