I.

ON THE TRADITIONARY ACCOUNTS OF THE DEATH OF ALEXANDER THE THIRD.

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That Alexander the Third met his death when in the prime of life, by an accident near Kinghorn, is certain, but the traditionary accounts of the circumstances which attended it vary very much. Like all such local traditions, they undergo a course of alteration and corruption from alterations by fanciful writers, and additions which grow up in the popular mind in the course of oral transmission, and I think it may not be uninteresting to the Society, when this year, being the sexcentenary of his death, is attracting notice to the subject, that I should endeavour to trace out the growth of these traditions.

There are two stories currently told of how the king came to his death. The first is, that the king had been returning on horseback at night to Glammis Tower, his castle, above Kinghorn. His horse shied, and threw him over a high cliff, which rises abruptly and almost perpendicularly from the level sand below to the height of about 150 feet, along the summit of which the path on which he was riding held its course. He fell with his head upon a rock, and died. This rock is known as the King's Stone.

The second story is, that the king was passionately fond of hunting, and rode a high-spirited horse. Thomas the Rhymer told the king that the horse would be his death, but the king would not believe him. One day an archer shot an arrow, which glanced from a tree, struck the horse, and killed it. The horse fell dead upon the Kinghorn road, and the king said to Thomas the Rhymer, "And how can your prophecy come true?" However, some months after, the king was travelling that way on another horse, which shied at the appearance of the bones of the first horse, and threw the king, who was killed in this way.

How far, then, are either of these stories borne out by historical records?

What was afterwards the Lordship of Kinghorn was originally Church lands attached to one of the old Celtic monasteries, and when it became secularised passed into the hands of the Crown, under the name of the Abthania or Abthanrie of Kinghorn. In the thirteenth century it formed part of the dowry bestowed by the Scottish kings upon their queens. Thus in the year 1221, Alexander the Second grants, by charter, to Johanna his spouse, in dower, among other lands, Kinghorn in Scotland; and provides that, should the Queen Dowager, his mother, survive him, and not wish Crail and Kinghorn to be granted to Johanna in dower, the deficiency should be made up by Alexander's heirs in the castles of Ayr, Rutherglen, and Lanark, &c., till the lands of Crail and Kinghorn are vacant by his mother's decease.[1] Kinghorn remained as a Royal manor, and was frequently the residence of the kings till the reign of king Robert the Second, when it was granted to Sir John Lyon, the ancestor of the Glammis family, as a dowry, with his wife, Janet Stuart, the daughter of King Robert by his wife Ada Mure. Traces of the successive occupation of Kinghorn can be found in the name attached to the buildings within it. Thus the name of Abthania is preserved in a corrupt form in that of Abden, situated on the east side of the bay of Kinghorn, just above the parish church, and here, no doubt, remains of the monastic buildings were to be found. On the north side of Kinghorn there is a field, termed Glammis Field, and the foundations of a building are still to be seen, termed Glammis Castle or Glammis Tower; and this, as its name implies, must have been erected by the Glammis family as their residence, while possessing the Lordship; but it is a great mistake to suppose, as is usually assumed, that the Royal castle was situated here, otherwise some trace of the name would have remained. We find, however, that the name of King's Castle was attached, as late as the end of last century, to the extreme end of the rocky promontory which juts out into the sea, close to the harbour of Pettycur; for on the 13th April 1798, the town of Kinghorn granted this portion of the promontory, where Pettycur House now stands, to the Ferry Trustees, and it is thus described in the charter:—"All and whole that part of the Rosslands (*i.e.*, promontory

[1] *Calendar of Documents*, vol. i. p. 144.

lands) of Kinghorn, being part of these portions of said lands called the King's Castle, and Rossness above the south side of the road leading from Kinghorn to Pettycur." And the boundary of the lands called King's Castle are thus given :—"Bounded by the Rosslands on the east, the sea-flood on the south, the high road leading from Kinghorn to Pettycur on the north and west." Immediately behind Pettycur House is a green hill, which still bears the name of King's Castle Hill. This situation of the Royal Castle accords much better with the incidents connected with King Alexander the Third's death, for if he was proceeding to a castle on the north side of Kinghorn, his shortest and safest route would have been by the valley which passes Whinnyhall and the loch of Kinghorn ; but if situated on the extremity of this promontory, his natural route would have been by the sea-shore.

The two oldest notices of the circumstances attending the death of Alexander the Third may both be considered as contemporary accounts, and both are derived from English sources. The first is from the Chronicle of William Rishanger, who died in 1312, at the age of sixty-two. He says that "in the season of Lent this year (1286), that is, in the beginning of Lent, when Alexander, king of Scots, wished to visit his queen, the daughter of the Count of Flanders, whom he had married after the death of Margaret, the daughter of the king of England, in a certain night, almost entirely dark, from his horse stumbling, he fell, and being severely bruised expired."[1] The other is from the *Chronicle of Lanercost*, compiled, it is believed, by a Franciscan friar, who states that he was present at the funeral of Alexander the Third. He says, under the year 1285 :—"In the course of this year Alexander, king of Scotland, was removed by a sudden death, after a reign of thirty-six years and nine months. He departed from this world on the 14th day of the kalends of April on a Monday, in the evening." The 14th day of the kalends of April fell on the 19th of March, and as the year then began on the 25th of March, this corresponds with our year 1286. The author of this Chronicle writes with a strong animus against Alexander, as he does against everything Scotch, and adds an elaborate account of the circumstances of his death, which bears marks of being coloured by his

[1] *Rish. Cron.*, p. 146.

own hostile feeling. He accuses the king of "being accustomed, without regard to time or tempest, perils of water and roughness of storm, by night as well as by day, when it pleased him, sometimes altering his dress, often accompanied by only one companion, to visit matrons and nuns, virgins and widows, *non satis honeste*." This was no doubt to lead up to the colour he puts upon the events of the night which led to his death. "On that day," he says, "the king was holding a council in Edinburgh Castle, with a large number of his nobles, to send an answer to the English ambassadors regarding the imprisonment of Thomas of Galloway. When they had gone to dinner, his countenance having brightened up, between the dishes and cups, he sent to one of the barons a plate of fresh lamprey, desiring him by a squire to sit pleasantly at meat, and that he might know that this was the day of judgment. The baron, thanking him, thus answered his facetious Lord, 'If this is the day of judgment, we shall at all events speedily rise again with full bellies.' The protracted dinner being finished, and the evening drawing on, the king would not be detained by the tempest in the air or the persuasions of his barons, but hastened to make his way to Queensferry, with the intention of visiting his newly-married spouse, the daughter of the Count de Dru, whom he had brought not long before from foreign parts, whose name was Yoleta, to his own grief and to the permanent injury of the whole province. The queen was at that time staying at Chingorn, and many say, that before her engagement, she had changed her habit in a convent of nuns beyond seas, and with the lightness of the female heart and the ambition of a kingdom, cast it behind her." I quote these passages to show the hostile feeling with which they are written. "Having arrived," the writer goes on to say, "at the village overhanging the ferry, the superintendent met him, denounced the danger, persuading him to return; but when the king asked him whether he was afraid to accompany him, he answered, 'Far be it from me, Lord! It becomes me to suffer any fatal lot with your father's son.' He came then in profound darkness to the burgh of Inverkenyn, accompanied only by three men-at-arms; and the master of his salt-work, a married man, recognising his voice, met him, and said, 'Lord, what are you doing in such weather and such darkness? I have often urged upon you that

your night journeys will not prove fortunate. Stay with us, and we shall show you the best hospitality we can till morning.' But the king, laughing, said, 'It is not necessary. Give me two experienced guides to show me the way.' Thus it was that when they had gone the distance of two miles, he and they, on account of the thick darkness, lost all knowledge of the road, except so far as the horses by a natural instinct distinguished the hard ground. When they had thus parted from each other, he taking a devious path, the men-at-arms taking the straight road, that I may state it shortly, fell from his horse, and bade farewell to his kingdom, in the sleep of Siserah,"—that is, with a fractured skull.[1]

I have quoted this passage at length, written in most barbarous Latin, to show the spirit in which it is written. It is an obvious mistake to place the accident 2 miles from Inverkeithing. It was, in fact, nearer 9 miles; and I confess it appears to me almost incredible that the king could have ridden 9 miles to Queensferry, crossed the Ferry in a great storm from the north, and ridden 9 miles in the dark on the other side, all in one evening. As the *Chronicle of Lanercost* was reduced to its present form in the year 1346, I feel some misgiving whether this is really a contemporary account, and has not been manipulated by a later hand.

The next notice we have is also from an English source, viz., the *Scala Cronica*, written in 1355. It states shortly that Alexander, king of Scotland, "came one night riding towards his queen, fell from his palfray near Kinkorne, and broke his neck, to the great disadvantage of the two kingdoms."[2]

The last notice I shall quote here from an English source, is from Knyghton's *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, written towards the end of this century. He says simply that "King Alexander rode one night in the dark towards his wife, in the sacred season of Lent, fell from his horse, broke his neck, and died."[3]

We now turn to the Scotch sources of information. The first of our Scotch Chroniclers, Fordoun, who wrote in the same century, gives no

[1] *Chron. de Lanercost*, pp. 116, 117.
[2] *Scala Cronica*, p. 110.
[3] *Twysden*, p. 2468.

particulars of his death, simply recording that "he died at Kinghorn on the fourteenth day of the kalends of April, that is the 19th of March, and was buried in state at Dunfermline."[1] A short chronicle, however, written about the same time records his death thus—"He fell from his horse in Kinghorn, and is buried in Dunfermline."[2] Bower, who continued *Fordoun's Chronicle* in the following century, and, as Abbot of Inchcolm, must have been familiar with the story then told of the king's death, gives the following account of it:—"In the same year (1286), on the 14th day of the kalends of April, the king being prevented from crossing at Queensferry till the twilight of a dark night, was advised by his people not to go further than Inverkethin, but despising their advice he hastened at a rapid pace, guarded by a military escort, towards Kingorn-regis, his horse stumbled in the sand on the western coast, close to the sea-shore, and, alas! this noble king, carelessly attended by his people, died of a broken neck.[3] In the Chronicle of Cupar, written by Bower two years afterwards, he adds, "that a stone cross was erected as a monument of the event, and is still conspicuous to passers-by at the side of the track."

The next Scotch authority to give a distinct and minute detail of the circumstances attending the king's death is Maurice Buchanan, who was treasurer to the Princess Margaret of Scotland, and compiled the *Book of Pluscarden*, based on *Fordoun's Chronicle*, in the year 1461. The following is a translation of the passage:—

"The following year King Alexander of Scotland sent a solemn embassy over to France, and had Yelando, the exceedingly beautiful daughter of the Count de Driux, brought over to Scotland in the greatest pomp, and married her with such honours, lustre, and splendour as had seldom been seen in Scotland in time past. But, alas! as Solomon hath it, the laughter of this world shall ever be mingled with grief, and mourning notes at the bottom of the joy thereof. For that same year the king, wishing to cross over to Queensferry in Lothian, was prevented by an exceeding great storm until twilight on the 14th of the kalends of April; so he changed his mind, and straightway fled on horseback to

[1] *Fordoun Annals*, lxvii.
[2] *Chron. and Mem.*, p. 306.
[3] *Scotichronicon*, p. 128.

Kinghorn, where for the time he occupied a manor. On the sea shore to the westward, however, on the sandy road, the king's horse by chance suddenly sank his forelegs in the sand, in the darkness of the night, and stumbled; and when pricked by the spur and striving to get up again, he fell more heavily, and crushed the king under him. So, for want of proper watch and ward on the part of his companions, this most noble king died of a broken neck, and lies entombed at Dunfermline, in front of the high altar."[1]

This account is substantially confirmed by the author of the *Extracta e variis Cronicis Scotiæ*, written in the reign of James the Fourth. He says that "Alexander the Third married a second time the Lady Joleta, daughter of the Count de Dreux, at Jedburgh, on St Calixtus day, in the year 1285, with great rejoicing and sound of musical instruments and singing of choirs. Among whom appeared one, of whom it was difficult to say whether he was a man or a phantom, but was seen to glide away as a shade, when he disappeared from the eyes of all, the phalanx of singers suddenly ceased. Whence, shortly afterwards the king, hindered from crossing at Queensferry, despising the advice of his people, towards Kinghorne, on the western shore, his horse stumbling on the sand, carelessly served by his people, expired from a broken neck."[2] The author also adds the important statement that, to mark the spot, a cross had been erected, which was still standing.

John Major, writing in 1521, gives shortly the same account. He says:—"In the year of our Lord 1286, Alexander, falling from his horse on the west of Kyngorne, expired from a broken neck, whose death brought no small evil upon Scotland."[3]

You will see that the Scotch accounts differ from the English, and represent the king as being on the north side of the Forth, and being prevented by the storm from crossing the Queensferry to the other side, but in all other respects they correspond very closely with the description of the accident as given by the English authorities. We have the dark night, the difficulty of finding the road, the horse stumbling, the king

[1] *Book of Pluscarden*, lib. vii. cap. xxxii.
[2] *Extracta e var. Cron.*, p. 15.
[3] J. Major, *De gentis Scotorum*, p. 156.

falling from it and breaking his neck. The scene of the accident, however, is distinctly placed by the Scotch authorities on the sea-shore, and the present aspect of the shore at this place corresponds wonderfully with the description given by those writers. At this part of the shore, under the low embankment, the sand is thrown up in ridges or furrows, now covered with coarse grass, and through it there winds a hard path, which is difficult enough to distinguish even in daylight.

We have now to trace how the idea of the king falling over a cliff or crag entered into the story, and wherever there is appearance of fable, we are led at once to Hector Boece and his school. Boece puts a different colour on the event. He says that "Alexander, having married Iolenta or Joleta, daughter of the Count de Dreux, or, as others say, of Champagne, with great rejoicings at Jedburgh, which was soon turned into grief; for in the same year, when he was riding in a boyish manner a vicious horse at Kynghorn, and goading it with certain unusual incitements, he was thrown prostrate on the ground, and having unhappily broken his neck, speedily died. He was buried at Dunfermline in the thirty-seventh year of his reign, and in the year of our Lord 1286."[1] Bellenden, who translated Boece's History, improves on the story, for he thus renders it:—"Kyng Alexander be advyse of his nobilis marryet then the Erle of Champanes doughter nemiet Joleta with gret triumphe at Jedburgh. Howbeit this triumphe indurit short time eftir, for the xviii day of Aprile quhen he was rinand ane feirs hors at Kingorn, he fell *ovir the west crag* towart the see, and brak his nek the xxxv year of his regne and wes buryet at Dunfermelyng fra the incarnation 1285 yearis."[2]

From Bellenden, who wrote in 1536, the story passed to Hollinshed, who thus narrates it in his *Scottish Chronicle*, written in 1577:—"But yet did king Alexander, by advice of his nobles, in hope of new issue marie the daughter of the Erle of Champaigne in France, named Joland. The marriage was celebrated at Jedburgh with great feasting and triumph; but that joy and blitheness indured not long after. For the same year, on the 18th of April, as he was galloping upon a fierce horse at Kinghorne, forcing him in his race somewhat rashlie, he was thrown

[1] Lib. xxi. fol. cci. [2] B. xiii. fol. liii.

over the west cliffe towards the sea by a wonderfull misfortune so rudelie, that he brake his neck, and so therewith immediately died in the 42 yeare of his reign. He was buried at Dunfermline in the year after the incarnation 1290."[1] It will be observed that the dates here are all wrong, but the west cliff having once entered the story, like King Charles's head in Mr Dick's Memorial, cannot now be got out of it again, though Buchanan does not adopt the story, for he simply says that the king being shaken off a falling horse, died of a broken neck not far from Kinghorn (p. 205).

The cross which marked the place where the accident really happened must by this time have been removed. It was probably not a monument, but a memorial stone, somewhat similar to the Sculptured Stones figured in Dr Stuart's work. It so happens that only one of these stones is shaped in the form of a cross, and a very striking one it is, viz., the standing stone of Bankhead, near Dupplin. I know of no event in that locality with which it could be connected. It bears on the face of it, as the principal figure, a king riding, and below are the figures of men-at-arms. If it were possible to suppose that this cross is as late as the thirteenth century, it might well be held to be the original cross which once stood where King Alexander was killed. Why and where this cross was removed we cannot now tell.

Of the second form of the story I can find no trace whatever, and believe it to be simply a popular fable.

[1] P. 408.