

EDINBURGH AFTER FLODDEN By William Edmondstoune Aytoun

I

News of battle! - news of battle! Hark! 'tis ringing down the street: And the archways and the pavement Bear the clang of hurrying feet. News of battle? Who hath brought it? News of triumph? Who should bring Tidings from our noble army, Greetings from our gallant King? All last night we watched the beacons Blazing on the hills afar, Each one bearing, as it kindled, Message of the opened war. All night long the northern streamers Shot across the trembling sky: Fearful lights, that never beckon Save when kings or heroes die.

II.

News of battle! Who hath brought it? All are thronging to the gate; "Warder- warder! open quickly! Man - is this a time to wait?" And the heavy gates are opened: Then a murmur long and loud, And a cry of fear and wonder Bursts from out the bending crowd. For they see in battered harness Only one hardstricken man, And his weary steed is wounded, And his cheek is pale and wan. Spearless hangs a bloody banner In his weak and drooping hand- God! can that be Randolph Murray, Captain of the city band?

III.

Round him crush the people, crying, "Tell us all - oh, tell us true! Where are they who went to battle, Randolph Murray, sworn to you? Where are they, our brothers-children? Have they met the English foe? Why art thou alone, unfollowed? Is it weal, or is it woe?" Like a corpse the grisly warrior Looks from out his helm of steel; But no word he speaks in answer, Only with his armèd heel Chides his weary steed, and onward Up the city streets they ride; Fathers, sisters, mothers, children, Shrieking, praying by his side. "By the God that made thee, Randolph! Tell us what mischance hath come!" Then he lifts his riven banner, And the asker's voice is dumb.

IV.

The elders of the city Have met within their hall - The men whom good King James had charged To watch the tower and wall. "Your hands are weak with age," he said, "Your hearts are stout and true; So bide ye in the Maiden Town, While others fight for you. My trumpet from the Border-side Shall send a blast so clear, That all who wait within the gate That stirring sound may hear. Or, if it be the will of heaven That back I never come, And if, instead of Scottish shouts, Ye hear the English drum,- Then let the warning bells ring out, Then gird you to the fray, Then man the walls like burghers stout, And fight while fight you may. 'T were better that in fiery flame The roofs should thunder down, Than that the foot of foreign foe Should trample in the town!"

V.

Then in came Randolph Murray, - His step was slow and weak, And, as he doffed his dinted helm, The tears ran down his cheek: They fell upon his corslet, And on his mailèd hand, As he gazed around him wistfully, Leaning sorely on his brand. And none who then beheld him But straight were smote with fear, For a bolder and a sterner man Had never couched a spear. They knew so sad a messenger Some ghastly news must bring: And all of them were fathers, And their sons were with the King.

VI.

And up then rose the Provost - A brave old man was he, Of ancient name and knightly fame, And chivalrous degree. He ruled our city like a Lord Who brooked no equal here, And ever for the townsmen's rights Stood up 'gainst prince and peer. And he had seen the Scottish host March from the Borough-muir, With music-storm and clamorous shout And all the din that thunders out, When youth's of victory sure. But yet a dearer thought had he, For, with a father's pride, He saw his last remaining son Go forth by Randolph's side, With casque on head and spur on heel, All keen to do and dare; And proudly did that gallant boy Dunedin's banner bear. Oh, woeful now was the old man's look, And he spake right heavily - "Now, Randolph, tell thy tidings, However

sharp they be! Woe is written on thy visage, Death is looking from thy face: Speak, though it be of overthrow -
It cannot be disgrace!"

VII.

Right bitter was the agony That wrung the soldier proud: Thrice did he strive to answer, And thrice he groaned aloud. Then he gave the riven banner To the old man's shaking hand, Saying -"That is all I bring ye From the bravest of the land! Ay! ye may look upon it- It was guarded well and long, By your brothers and your children, By the valiant and the strong. One by one they fell around it, As the archers laid them low, Grimly dying, still unconquered, With their faces to the foe. Ay! ye well may look upon it - There is more than honour there, Else, be sure, I had not brought it From the field of dark despair. Never yet was royal banner Steeped in such a costly dye; It hath lain upon a bosom Where no other shroud shall lie. Sirs! I charge you keep it holy, Keep it as a sacred thing, For the stain you see upon it Was the life-blood of your King!"

VIII.

Woe, woe, and lamentation! What a piteous cry was there! Widows, maidens, mothers, children, Shrieking, sobbing in despair! Through the streets the deathword rushes, Spreading terror, sweeping on - "Jesu Christ! our King has fallen - O great God, King James is gone! Holy Mother Mary, shield us, Thou who erst did lose thy Son! O the blackest day for Scotland That she ever knew before! O our King - the good, the noble, Shall we see him never more? Woe to us and woe to Scotland, O our sons, our sons and men! Surely some have 'scaped the Southron, Surely some will come again!" Till the oak that fell last winter Shall uprear its shattered stem - Wives and mothers of Dunedin - Ye may look in vain for them!

IX.

But within the Council Chamber All was silent as the grave, Whilst the tempest of their sorrow Shook the bosoms of the brave. Well indeed might they be shaken With the weight of such a blow: He was gone - their prince, their idol, Whom they loved and worshipped so! Like a knell of death and judgment Rung from heaven by angel hand, Fell the words of desolation On the elders of the land. Hoary heads were bowed and trembling, Withered hands were clasped and wrung: God had left the old and feeble, He had ta'en away the young.

X.

Then the Provost he uprose, And his lip was ashen white, But a flush was on his brow, And his eye was full of light. "Thou hast spoken, Randolph Murray, Like a soldier stout and true; Thou hast done a deed of daring Had been perilled but by few. For thou hast not shamed to face us, Nor to speak thy ghastly tale, Standing - thou, a knight and captain - Here, alive within thy mail! Now, as my God shall judge me, I hold it braver done, Than hadst thou tarried in thy place, And died above my son! Thou needst not tell it: he is dead. God help us all this day! But speak - how fought the citizens Within the furious fray? For, by the might of Mary, 'T were something still to tell That no Scottish foot went backward When the Royal Lion fell!"

XI.

"No one failed him! He is keeping Royal state and semblance still; Knight and noble lie around him, Cold on Flodden's fatal hill. Of the brave and gallanthearted, Whom ye sent with prayers away, Not a single man departed From his monarch yesterday. Had you seen them, O my masters! When the night began to fall, And the English spearmen gathered Round a grim and ghastly wall! As the wolves in winter circle Round the leaguer on the heath, So the greedy foe glared upward, Panting still for blood and death. But a rampart rose before them, Which the boldest dared not scale; Every stone a Scottish body, Every step a corpse in mail! And behind it lay our monarch Clenching still his shivered sword: By his side Montrose and Athole, At his feet a southern lord. All so thick they lay together, When the stars lit up the sky, That I knew not who were stricken, Or who yet remained to die, Few there were when Surrey halted, And his wearied host withdrew; None but dying men around me, When the English trumpet blew. Then I stooped, and took the banner, As ye see it, from

his breast, And I closed our hero's eyelids, And I left him to his rest. In the mountains growled the thunder, As I leaped the woeful wall, And the heavy clouds were settling Over Flodden, like a pall."

XII.

So he ended. And the others Cared not any answer then; Sitting silent, dumb with sorrow, Sitting anguish-struck, like men Who have seen the roaring torrent Sweep their happy homes away, And yet linger by the margin, Staring idly on the spray. But, without, the maddening tumult Waxes ever more and more, And the crowd of wailing women Gather round the Council door. Every dusky spire is ringing With a dull and hollow knell, And the Miserere's singing To the tolling of the bell. Through the streets the burghers hurry, Spreading terror as they go; And the rampart's thronged with watchers For the coming of the foe. From each mountain-top a pillar Streams into the torpid air, Bearing token from the Border That the English host is there. All without is flight and terror, All within is woe and fear - God protect thee, Maiden City, For thy latest hour is near!

XIII.

No! not yet, thou high Dunedin! Shalt thou totter to thy fall; Though thy bravest and thy strongest Are not there to man the wall. No, not yet! the ancient spirit Of our fathers hath not gone; Take it to thee as a buckler Better far than steel or stone. Oh, remember those who perished For thy birthright at the time When to be a Scot was treason, And to side with Wallace, crime! Have they not a voice among us, Whilst their hallowed dust is here? Hear ye not a summons sounding From each buried warrior's bier? "Up!" - they say - "and keep the freedom Which we won you long ago: Up! and keep our graves unsullied From the insults of the foe! Up! and if ye cannot save them, Come to us in blood and fire: Midst the crash of falling turrets, Let the last of Scots expire!"

XIV.

Still the bells are tolling fiercely, And the cry comes louder in; Mothers wailing for their children, Sisters for their slaughtered kin. All is terror and disorder, Till the Provost rises up, Calm, as though he had not tasted Of the fell and bitter cup. All so stately from his sorrow, Rose the old undaunted Chief, That you had not deemed, to see him, His was more than common grief. "Rouse ye, Sirs!" he said; "we may not Longer mourn for what is done: If our King be taken from us, We are left to guard his son. We have sworn to keep the city From the foe, whate'er they be, And the oath that we have taken Never shall be broke by me. Death is nearer to us, brethren, Than it seemed to those who died, Fighting yesterday at Flodden, By their lord and master's side. Let us meet it then in patience, Not in terror or in fear; Though our hearts are bleeding yonder, Let our souls be steadfast here. Up, and rouse ye! Time is fleeting, And we yet have much to do; Up! and haste ye through the city, Stir the burghers stout and true! Gather all our scattered people, Fling the banner out once more, - Randolph Murray! do thou bear it, As it erst was borne before: Never Scottish heart will leave it, When they see their monarch's gore!"

XV.

"Let them cease that dismal knelling! It is time enough to ring, When the fortress-strength of Scotland Stoops to ruin like its King. Let the bells be kept for warning, Not for terror or alarm; When they next are heard to thunder, Let each man and stripling arm. Bid the women leave their wailing, - Do they think that woeful strain, From the bloody heaps of Flodden Can redeem their dearest slain? Bid them cease, - or rather hasten To the churches, every one; There to pray to Mary Mother, And to her anointed Son, That the thunderbolt above us May not fall in ruin yet; That in fire, and blood, and rapine, Scotland's glory may not set. Let them pray, - for never women Stood in need of such a prayer! England's yeomen shall not find them Clinging to the altars there. No! if we are doomed to perish, Man and maiden, let us fall; And a common gulf of ruin Open wide to overwhelm us all! Never shall the ruthless spoiler Lay his hot insulting hand On the sisters of our heroes, Whilst we

bear a torch or brand! Up! and rouse ye, then, my brothers, But when next ye hear the bell Sounding forth the sullen summons That may be our funeral knell, Once more let us meet together, Once more see each other's face; Then, like men that need not tremble, Go to our appointed place. God, our Father, will not fail us In that last tremendous hour, - If all other bulwarks crumble, HE will be our strength and tower: Though the ramparts rock beneath us, And the walls go crashing down, Though the roar of conflagration Bellow o'er the sinking town; There is yet one place of shelter, Where the foeman cannot come, Where the summons never sounded Of the trumpet or the drum. There again we'll meet our children, Who, on Flodden's trampled sod, For their king and for their country Rendered up their souls to God. There shall we find rest and refuge, With our dear departed brave; And the ashes of the city Be our universal grave!"