

Battle of Drumclog

BY AN OFFICER IN THE PRESBYTERIAN ARMY

The Free Presbyterian Magazine – May 1930

IT was on a fair Sabbath morning, 1st June, A.D. 1679, that an assembly of Covenanters sat down on the heathy mountains of Drumclog. We had assembled not to fight, but to worship the God of our fathers. We were far from the tumult of cities. The long dark heath waved around us; and we disturbed no living creatures, save the pees-weep¹ and the heather-cock. As usual, we had come armed. It was for self-defence. For desperate and ferocious bands made bloody raids through the country, and, pretending to put down treason, they waged war against religion and morals. They spread ruin and havoc over the face of bleeding Scotland.

The venerable Douglas had commenced the solemnities of the day. He was expatiating on the execrable evils of tyranny. Our souls were on fire at the remembrance of our country's sufferings and the wrongs of the church. In this moment of intense feeling, our watchman posted on the neighbouring height, fired his carbine, and ran toward the Congregation. He announced the approach of the enemy. We raised our eyes to the Minister. "I have done," said Douglas, with his usual firmness. "You have got the theory-now for the practice; you know your duty; self-defence is always lawful. But the enemy approaches." He raised his eyes to heaven and uttered a prayer - brief and emphatic - like the prayer of Richard Cameron, "Lord, spare the green, and take the ripe."

The officers collected their men, and placed themselves each at the head of those of his own district. Sir Robert Hamilton placed the foot in the centre, in three ranks. A company of horse, well-armed and mounted, was placed on the left, and a small squadron also on the left. These were drawn back, and they occupied the more solid ground; as well with a view to have a more firm footing, as to arrest any flanking party that might take them on the wings. A deep morass lay between us and the ground of the enemy. Our aged men, our females, and children, retired; but they retired slowly. They had the hearts and the courage of the females and children in those days of intense religious

¹ Lapwing

feeling, and of suffering. They manifested more concern for the fate of relatives, for the fate of the church, than for their own personal safety.

As Claverhouse descended the opposite mountain, they retired to the rising ground in the rear of our host. The aged men walked with their bonnets in hand. Their long grey locks waved in the breeze. They sang a cheering psalm. The music was that of the well-known tune of The Martyrs; and the sentiment breathed defiance. The music floated down on the wind. Our men gave three cheers as they fell into their ranks. Never did I witness such animation in the looks of men. For me, my spouse and little children were in the rear. My native plains, and the halls of my father, far below, in the dale of Aven, were in full view, from the heights which we occupied. My country seemed to raise her voice - the bleeding church seemed to wail aloud. "And these," I said, as Clavers and his troops winded slowly down the dark mountain's side, "these are the unworthy slaves, and bloody executioners, by which the tyrant completes our miseries."

Hamilton here displayed the hero. His portly figure was seen hastening from rank to rank. He inspired courage into our raw and undisciplined troops. The brave Hackston, and Hall of Haugh-head, stood at the head of the foot soldiers, and re-echoed the sentiments of their chief. Burley and Cleland had inflamed the minds of the horsemen on the left to a noble enthusiasm. My small troop on the right needed no exhortation; we were a band of brothers, resolved to conquer or fall. The trumpet of Clavers sounded a loud note of defiance - the kettle-drum mixed its tumultuous roll - they halted - they made a long pause. We could see an officer with four file conducting fifteen persons from the ranks to a knoll on their left. I could perceive one in black; it was my friend King, the Chaplain of Lord Cardross, who had been taken prisoner by Clavers at Hamilton. "Let them be shot through the head," said Clavers, in his usual dry way, "if they should offer to run away."

We could see him view our position with great care. His officers came around him. We soon learned that he wished to treat with us. He never betrayed symptoms of mercy, nor offered terms of reconciliation, unless when he dreaded that he had met his match; and even then, it was only a manoeuvre to gain time or to deceive. His flag approached the edge of the bog. Sir Robert held a flag sacred; had it been borne by Clavers himself, he had honoured it. He demanded the purpose for which he came. "I come," he said, "in the name of his sacred Majesty, and of Colonel Grahame to offer you a pardon, on

condition that you lay down your arms, and deliver up your ringleaders.” “Tell your officer,” Said Sir Robert, “that we are fully aware of the deception he practises. He is not clothed with any powers to treat, nor was he sent out to treat with us, and attempt a reconciliation. The Government against whom we have risen refuses to redress our grievances or to restore to us our liberties. Had the tyrant wished to render us justice, he had not sent by the hands of such a ferocious assassin as Claverhouse. Let him, however, show his powers, and we refuse not to treat; and we shall lay down our arms to treat provided that he also lay down his. Thou hast my answer.”

“It is a perfectly hopeless case,” said Burley, while he called after the flag-bearer - “Let me add one word, by your leave, General. Get thee up to that bloody dragoon, Clavers, and tell him that we will spare his life, and the lives of his troops, on condition that he, your Clavers, lay down his arms, and the arms of these troops. We will do more: as we have no prisons on these wild mountains, we will even let him go on his parole, on condition that he swear never to lift arms against the religion and the liberties of his country.” A loud burst of applause re-echoed from the ranks; and, after a long pause in deep silence, the army sung the following verses of a psalm:-

“There, arrows of the bow he brake;
The shield, the sword, the war,
More glorious thou than hills of prey,
More excellent art far.
Those that were stout of heart are spoil'd,
They slept their sleep outright;
And none of those their hands did find,
That were the men of might.”

When the report was made to Claverhouse, he gave the word with a savage ferocity, “Their blood be on their own heads. Be *No quarters* the word this day.” His fierce dragoons raised a yell, and *No quarters* re-echoed from rank to rank, while they galloped down the mountain's side. It is stated that Burley was heard to say, “Then be it so - even let there be *no-quarters* - at least in my wing of the host. So, God send me a meeting,” cried he aloud, “with that chief under

the white plume. My country would bless my memory could my sword give his villainous carcase to the crows."

Our raw troops beheld with firmness the approach of the foemen; and at the moment when the enemy halted to fire, the whole of our foot dropped on the heath. Not a man was seen to remain down, when the order was given to rise, and return the fire. The first rank fired, then kneeled down, while the second fired. They made each bullet tell. As often as the lazy rolling smoke was carried over the enemy's heads, a shower of bullets fell on his ranks. Many a gallant man tumbled on the heath. The fire was incessant. It resembled one blazing sheet of flame, for several minutes, along the line of the Covenanters.

Clavers attempted to cross the morass, and break our centre. "Spearmen! to the front," - I could hear the deep-toned voice of Hamilton say- "Kneel, and place your spears to receive the enemy's cavalry; and you my gallant fellows, fire - *God and our Country* is our word." Our officers flew from rank to rank. Not a peasant gave way that day. As the smoke rolled off, we could see Clavers urging on his men with the violence of despair. His troops fell in heaps around him, and still the gaps were filled up.

A galled trooper would occasionally flinch; but ere he could turn or flee, the sword of Clavers was waving over his head. I could see him, in his fury, strike both man and horse. In the fearful carnage, he himself sometimes reeled. He would stop short in the midst of a movement, then contradict his own orders, and strike the man, because he could not comprehend his meaning. He ordered flanking parties to take us on our right and left. "In the name of God," cried he, "cross the bog, and charge them on the flank, till we get over this morass. If this fail, we are lost."

It now fell to my lot to come into action. Hitherto we had fired only some distant shot. A gallant officer led his band down to the borders of the swamp, in search of a proper place to cross. We threw ourselves before him. A severe firing commenced. My gallant men fired with great steadiness. We could see many tumbling from their saddles. Not content with repelling the foemen, we found our opportunity to cross, and attack them sword in hand. The captain, whose name I afterwards ascertained to be Arrol, threw himself in my path. In the first shock, I discharged my pistols. His sudden start in his saddle told me that one of them had taken effect. With one of the tremendous oaths of Charles II he closed with me. He fired his steel pistol. I was in front of him; my

sword glanced on the weapon and gave a direction to the bullet, which saved my life.

By this time, my men had driven the enemy before them, and had left the ground clear for the single combat. As he made a lunge at my breast, I turned his sword aside by one of those sweeping blows, which are rather the dictate of a kind of instinct of self-defence than a movement of art. As our strokes redoubled my antagonist's dark features put on a look of deep and settled ferocity. No man who has not encountered the steel of his enemy, in the field of battle, can conceive the looks and the manner of the warrior in the moments of his intense feelings. May I never witness them again!

We fought in silence. My stroke fell on his shoulder; it cut the belt of his carabine, which fell to the ground. His blow cut me to the rib, glanced along the bone, and rid me also of the weight of my carabine. He had now advanced too near me to be struck with the sword. I grasped him by the collar. I pushed him backwards; and, with an entangled blow of my Ferrara, I struck him across his throat. It cut only the strap of his head-piece, and it fell off. With a sudden spring he seized me by the sword belt. Our horses reared and we both came to the ground. We rolled on the heath in deadly conflict.

It was in this situation of matters that my brave fellows had returned from the rout of the flanking party to look after their commander. One of them was actually rushing on my antagonist when I called on him to retire². We started to our feet. Each grasped his sword. We closed in conflict again. After parrying strokes of mine enemy which indicated a hellish ferocity, I told him my object was to take him prisoner; that sooner than kill him I should order my men to seize him. "Sooner let my soul be brandered on my ribs in hell," said he, "than be captured by a Whigamore. No quarter is the word of my colonel, and my word. Have at thee, Whig - I dare the whole of you to the combat."

"Leave the madman to me-leave the field instantly," said I to my party whom I could hardly restrain. My sword fell on his right shoulder. His sword dropped from his hand. I lowered my sword and offered him his life. "No quarter," said he, with a shriek of despair. He snatched his sword, which I held in my hand, and made a lunge at my breast. I parried his blows till he was nearly exhausted; but gathering up his huge limbs, he put forth all his energy in a thrust at my heart. My Andro Ferrara received it so as to weaken its deadly

² It was on this occasion that the Laird used these words-" Bauldy Allison! let your officer settle this trifle-I never take odds to combat a foe; be he even a life-guard."

force; but it made a deep cut. Though I was faint from loss of blood I left him no time for another blow. My sword glanced off his shoulder, cut through his buff coat, and skin, and flesh; swept through his jaw, and laid open his throat from ear to ear. The fire of his ferocious eye was quenched in a moment. He reeled, and falling with a terrible clash, he poured out his soul, with a torrent of blood, on the heath. I sunk down insensible for a moment.

My faithful men, who never lost sight of me, raised me up. In the fierce combat the soldier suffers most from thirst. I stooped down to fill my helmet with the water which oozed through the morass. It was deeply tinged with human blood, which flowed in the conflict above me. I started back with horror; and Gawn Witherspoon bringing up my steed, we set forward in the tumult of the battle.

All this while the storm of war had raged on our left. Cleland and the fierce Burley had charged the strong company sent to flank them. These officers permitted them to cross the swamp, then charged them with a terrible shout. "No quarter," cried the dragoons. "Be no quarter to you, then, ye murderous loons," cried Burley; and at one blow he cut their leader through the steel cap, and scattered his brains on his followers. His every blow overthrew a foe-man. Their whole forces were now brought up, and they drove the dragoons of Clavers into the swamp. They rolled over each other. All stuck fast. The Covenanters dismounted and fought on foot. They left not one man to bear the tidings to their colonel.

The firing of the platoons had long ago ceased, and the dreadful work of death was carried on by the sword. At this moment a trumpet was heard in the rear of our army. There was an awful pause; all looked up. It was only the gallant Captain Nisbet, and his guide, Woodburn of Mains; he had no reinforcements for us, but himself was a host. With a loud huzza, and a flourish of his sword, he placed himself by the side of Burley, and cried "Jump the ditch, and charge the enemy." He and Burley struggled through the marsh. The men followed as they could. They formed, and marched on the enemy's right flank.

At this instant Hamilton and Hackstone brought forward the whole line of infantry in front. "God and our Country," re-echoed from all the ranks. "No quarters," said the fierce squadrons of Clavers. Here commenced a bloody scene.

I seized the opportunity this moment offered to me of making a movement to the left of the enemy to save my friend King and the other prisoners. We came in time to save them. Our swords speedily severed the ropes which tyranny had bound on the arms of the men. The weapons of the fallen foe supplied what was lacking of arms; and with great vigour we moved forward to charge the enemy on the left flank. Claverhouse formed a hollow square-himself in the centre; his men fought gallantly; they did all that soldiers could do in their situation. Wherever a gap was made, Clavers thrust the men forward and speedily filled it up. Three times he rolled headlong on the heath, as he hastened from rank to rank, and as often he remounted. My little band thinned his ranks. He paid us a visit.

Here I distinctly saw the features and shape of this far-famed man. He was small of stature, and not well-formed; his arms were long in proportion to his legs; he had a complexion unusually dark; his features were not lighted up with sprightliness, as some fabulously reported; they seemed gloomy as hell; his cheeks were lank and deeply-furrowed; his eye-brows were drawn down, and gathered into a kind of knot at their junctions, and thrown up at their extremities; they had, in short, the strong expression given by our painters to those on the face of Judas Iscariot; his eyes were hollow; they had not the lustre of genius, nor the fire of vivacity; they were lighted up by that dark fire of wrath which is kindled and fanned by an internal anxiety and consciousness of criminal deeds; his irregular and large teeth were presented through a smile which was very unnatural on his set of features; his mouth seemed to be unusually large, from the extremities being drawn backward and downward-as if in the intense application to something cruel and disgusting; in short, his upper teeth projected over his under lip, and, on the whole, presented to my view the mouth on the image of the Emperor Julian the Apostate.

In one of his rapid courses past us, my sword could only shear off his white plume and a fragment of his buff coat. In a moment he was at the other side of his square. Our officers eagerly sought a meeting with him. "He has the proof of lead," cried some of our men, "take the cold steel or a piece of silver." "No," cried Burley, "it is his rapid movement on that fine charger that bids defiance to anything like an aim in the tumult of the bloody fray. I could sooner shoot ten heather cocks on the wing than one flying Clavers." At that moment Burley, whose eye watched his antagonist, pushed into the hollow square. But Burley was too impatient. His blow was levelled at him before he came within its reach. His heavy sword descended on the head of Clavers' horse and felled him

to the ground. Burley's men rushed pell-mell on the fallen Clavers, but his faithful dragoons threw themselves upon them, and by their overpowering force drove Burley back.

Clavers was in an instant on a fresh steed. His bugle man recalled the party who were driving back the flanking party of Burley. He collected his whole troops to make his last and desperate attack. He charged our infantry with such force that they began to reel. It was only for a moment. The gallant Hamilton snatched the white flag of the Covenant, and placed himself in the fore-front of the battle. Our men shouted "*God and our Country*," and rallied under their flag. They fought like heroes. Clavers fought no less bravely. His blows were aimed at our officers. His steel fell on the helmet of Hackstone, whose sword was entangled in the body of a fierce dragoon who had just wounded him.

He was borne by his men into the rear. I directed my men on Clavers. "Victory or death," was their reply to me. Clavers received us. He struck a desperate blow at me, as he raised himself, with all his force, in the saddle. My steel cap resisted it. The second stroke I received on my Ferrara, and his steel was shattered to pieces. We rushed headlong on each other. His pistol missed fire - it had been soaked in blood. Mine took effect. But the wound was not deadly. Our horses reared. We rolled on the ground. In vain we sought to grasp each other. In the *melee* men and horse tumbled on us. We were for a few moments buried under our men, who's eagerness to save their respective officers brought them in multitudes down upon us.

By the aid of my faithful man, Gawn, I had extricated myself from my fallen horse; and we were rushing on the bloody Clavers when we were again literally buried under a mass of men, for Hamilton had by this time brought up his whole line, and he had planted his standard where we and Clavers were rolling on the heath. Our men gave three cheers and drove in the troops of Clavers. Here I was borne along with the moving mass of men; and, almost suffocated, and faint from the loss of blood, and knew nothing more till I opened my eyes on my faithful attendant. He had dragged me from the very grasp of the enemy, and had borne me into the rear, and was bathing my temples with water. We speedily regained our friends, and what a spectacle presented itself!

It seemed that I beheld an immense moving mass heaped up together in the greatest confusion. Some shrieked, some groaned, some shouted, horses neighed and pranced, swords rung on the steel helmets. I placed around me a

few of my hardy men and we rushed into the thickest of the enemy in search of Clavers; but it was in vain. At that instant his trumpet sounded the loud notes of retreat; and we saw on a knoll Clavers borne away by his men. He threw himself on a horse, and without sword, without helmet, he fled in the first ranks of the retreating host. His troops galloped up the hill in the utmost confusion. My little line closed with that of Burley's and took a number of prisoners. Our main body pursued the enemy two miles, and strewed the ground with men and horses.

I could see the bareheaded Clavers in front of his men, kicking and struggling up the steep sides of Calder hill. He halted only a moment on the top to look behind him, then plunged his rowels into his horse, and darted forward; nor did he recover from his panic till he found himself in the city of Glasgow. "And my children," the Laird would say, after he had told the adventures of this bloody day, "I visited the field of battle next day; I shall never forget the sight. Men and horses lay in their gory beds. I turned away from the horrible spectacle. I passed by the spot where God saved my life in the single combat, and where the unhappy Captain Arrol fell. I observed that, in the subsequent fray, the body had been trampled on by a horse, and his bowels were poured out. Thus, my children, the defence of our lives, and the regaining of our liberty and religion, has subjected us to severe trials. And how great must be the love of liberty when it carries men forward, under the impulse of self-defence, to witness the most disgusting spectacles, and to encounter the most cruel hardships of war!" - *The Advocate* (December, 1881)