

AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE TOWN OF AYR FOR THE LAST FIFTY YEARS,
WITH NOTABLE OCCURRENCES DURING THAT TIME FROM PERSONAL
RECOLLECTION. ILLUSTRATED BY NUMEROUS LOCAL ANECDOTES. BY JAMES
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CHAPTER IX.

Castlereagh's Plots—The Radical Schemes and the Spy System—The Great Radical Meeting at the Riggs—Sir Alexander Boswell and Mr Oswald of Auchincruive— False alarm and fear of the Yeomanry—Return of the Troops from their wild-goose chase.

MANY persons still living in Ayr will remember the political commotions which agitated the country in the year 1819. Connected with and largely springing from bad trade, the agitation spread widely both in Scotland and England, and had ramifications in the principal towns in both countries. Nor were the smaller and more provincial towns and villages exempt from the political epidemic; in truth, in not a few outer localities the spirit of discontent, and demand for political freedom as a cure for dull trade and low wages, was more active and sincere than in the inner localities and more densely inhabited districts. Ayr had its share of the general discontent, and was consequently not free from the more immediate results of the agitation. Like other places in the West of Scotland, this Royal Burgh was engaged in the scheme for rising, and had a Radical Association connected with the leading ones in the kingdom. This association consisted almost entirely of the working classes, and was chiefly composed of weavers and shoemakers, with a sprinkling from the other trades of the town. Nightly gatherings of the members were held in the most secluded and remote corners of the town; but scarcely meeting two nights consecutively in the same place, for fear of being surprised and taken prisoners by the military. At that time the military force in Ayr was unusually strong, showing at once the fears of Government and the extent of the conspiracy. It consisted of the 4th Royal Veteran Battalion, numbering 400 strong, two troops of Dragoons, the Ayrshire Militia staff, the Ayrshire Yeomanry, and a body of men called the "Dandies" or Volunteers. This last-named force consisted of writers, shopkeepers, and others of the middle and upper classes. Besides these regular and irregular troops, there was a body of Special Constables, denominated "The Town's Guard," who patrolled the streets nightly, and endeavoured to preserve the public peace in a more innocuous way than the military force could have done. The late Sir Alexander Boswell, of Auchinleck, commanded the Yeomanry, while the late Major Campbell, of Thornflat, parish of St. Quivox, commanded the Dandies. The uniform of the Volunteers consisted of a blue single-breasted coat, white drill trousers, and Highland bonnet, being almost identical with the uniform of the 71st Light Infantry Regiment. '

As was to be expected, from the presence of so many military, and the universal alarm and uncertainty felt by all classes, the town and neighbourhood were in a very excited condition. The working classes—the principal, if not the sole objects of suspicion—were dogged by spies and Government officials. Their houses were closely watched, and many had to flee from their homes and lurk in hiding places. When they visited their families it was in terror and by stealth, dreading lest they should be seen and apprehended. Spies joined the association and wormed themselves into office, specially as committee men, the better to secure the objects they had in view—the betrayal of their dupes, and the more to qualify themselves for their secret business of informers. One of them, named James Logan, was for some time secretary to the society. He was a notorious rascal and spy: often surprised by the military as a make-believe, taken prisoner, and after examination, liberated to pursue his abominable calling. Every time he was seized he was certain to

have in his possession some document or other pertaining to the association.

Every means was adopted and every plan tried by the authorities and their spies to entrap the simple arid unwary, that they might obtain committals on the great charge of High Treason, but happily they succeeded in none of their attempts. One cannot pass in thought some of their plans without wondering at the amount of duplicity exhibited by the officials, and the carefulness shown by the working classes. It may be worth while to mention one or two of their schemes of ensnarement. They left pikes and other weapons near the dwelling-houses of those whom they wished to inveigle, and then set a watch to see who would lift them, in order that they might make out a charge against the poor fellows. But the people soon saw through the dodge—danger always quickens the intellect;—they passed and re-passed the pikes as if they had not been there, and the outwitted magistrates had all their toil in vain. On one occasion a small barrel of gunpowder was placed on a stair-case in the Townhead, near the door of a man named Campbell, in order to entrap him to the lifting of it. Campbell was a staunch Radical, a member of committee, and otherwise a most active man among the Reformers. Campbell, however, aware of the snare set for him, took no notice of the gunpowder, and at the same time warned all his neighbours not to touch the barrel, and if possible not even to look at it. The warning given was taken and strictly adhered to—so much so, that those who had concocted the plot, observing that the baits did not take, had the gunpowder and other articles removed as stealthily as they had been placed. Woe to any poor wight or simpleton incautious enough to touch them; had any been found, it would have been such a feather in the cap of the magistrates, and such a noble text on which to dilate, by those who sought the oppression of the working classes.

A great County Radical Meeting had been appointed to take place at Ayr, in order to keep up the attention of the people to Reform, and forward the cause which many had thoroughly and earnestly at heart. The meeting was held in the Back Riggs, belonging to the Crosskeys Hostelry, between Wallace Street and Limmond's Wynd, bordering George Street and near to the Anti-Burgher place of meeting. Hustings had been erected, and every means adopted to give prominence to the speakers. Large bands of Radicals from Kilmarnock, Tarbolton, Mauchline, Stewarton, and other parts of the county, arrived at the place of meeting, in some instances considerably before the appointed hour. All the bands had banners and flags flying, on which strong revolutionary inscriptions had been placed. Their music generally consisted of drums and fifes. The party from Kilmarnock had a pole on which was elevated a cap, styled the cap of liberty,—a device borrowed probably from the French revolutionary mobs. This pole and cap was borne by a young woman, who was supported right and left by other two. The similitude between the agents employed in carrying this republican emblem consisted in nothing more than that they were females. The diabolical visages, coarse forms, vulgar speech, and brutal execrations of the continental viragos found no counterpart in the Ayrshire Radicalesses—to coin a word for the occasion ; there was nothing extraordinary in them or about them, if we except that they possessed a mind with a shade more of the masculine in it than is generally found in "Ayrshire lassies." When all had assembled on the ground, and had clustered as closely as possible round the hustings, the delegates from the various county associations took their places on the platform, and the business began. Various resolutions were proposed and speeches delivered in their favour, all of which had a revolutionary tendency; but it was remarked, that all the speakers kept on the safe side of the law. There was nothing very brilliant in the addresses, only the commonplace sentiments and platitudes about liberty and the people's rights ; good enough in their way, but hardly fitted to convince and convert antagonists.

During the time the meeting was being held, the militia staff were kept under arms, the yeomanry drawn out at a short distance prepared for action, and the other forces which

were in the town kept in readiness lest there should be a demand made for their services, but nothing occurred to warrant their employment against the crowd. **At the time the meeting was addressed by the Ayr delegate, a Mr William Adam, shoemaker, residing in George Street, Wallacetown, Sir Alexander Boswell and several of the officers of the yeomanry drew up close to the wall which divided the Riggs from George Street, and stood listening to the whole of Mr. Adam's address. On hearing some of the remarks made, Sir Alexander observed to his brother officers that the speaker, in his opinion, was a fit subject for hanging. The remark was overheard by some persons standing near, and afterwards conveyed to Mr. Adams. That individual thought it safest to leave home for some time, and remain concealed. His premises were strictly watched night and day, that he might be apprehended, should he attempt to revisit his family; but the fugitive wisely kept out of the way till the storm blew over, when he returned to his abode in peace.** As soon as the business of the meeting was over, the different parties left the ground, and took their way homewards in a quiet, orderly, and peaceable manner. The military, though held in readiness to cut down the people should the least opportunity be given to attack them, were disappointed in their expectations, and Sir Alexander Boswell did not enjoy the pleasure he is said to have promised himself a day or two before the meeting was held, of riding in Radical blood up to his bridle reins.

The movement had now, by the efforts of spies and others in Government pay, reached such a pitch that a general rising was almost hourly looked for by the deluded people. Some of the Ayr Radicals, sly chaps that they were, thought it necessary that they should be provided in advance with a commander, who would, when the time came, take the lead in the rising. A party, instigated, doubtless, by spies, who were always ready and willing to give their advice on particular matters, went to Auchencruive House, the residence of the late Richard Alexander Oswald, and asked him to become their leader in the revolutionary rising about to take place. They were the more willingly persuaded to the step they took with Mr. Oswald, because he was a gentleman of extremely liberal opinions, and an unflinching advocate of the people's rights. Mr. Oswald indignantly rejected the treasonous proposal made him. He at the same time warned them of their danger, their misguidedness, and endeavoured to convince them of the delusion under which they were lying with regard to the prospects of a general rising. He showed them that the knaves who had excited them were, in all likelihood, a set of designing villains paid for the purpose, and whose aim was to lead them to the gallows, while they kept their own necks safe. While acting thus loyally, he mingled mercy with his advice, and gave them an hour to escape, as by that time he would lodge information against them of their treasonable proposal. Accordingly, at the end of the hour, he rode into Ayr and gave the necessary information to the proper quarter. Mr. Oswald was the more readily incited to the step he took as he had reason to believe that the whole affair was a plot got up by Government spies to enable them to lodge against him a charge of high treason, which they would have done had he not acted as he did. As soon as the authorities were apprised by Mr. Oswald of the visit paid him, the yeomanry were called out, and, headed by Angus Gunn, the criminal officer, scoured the country in every direction in search of the would-be rebels. But they all eluded the pursuit made after them, having had a good start in advance, and made their escape till more peaceable times came.

On the Sabbath following this affair, Ayr was thrown into a state of the greatest alarm by the arrival of a dragoon express from Hamilton with despatches to the commanding officer of the dragoons in Ayr, to the authorities of the town, and also to the officers in command of the other troops stationed in the district. These despatches stated that the rebels had risen in Hamilton district, and further, requested that all the troops in Ayr should be immediately sent to the disaffected quarter. The alarm bells were rung, the drums beat to

arms, the churches were emptied, and the greatest consternation prevailed among the inhabitants. The streets were crowded, young and old running and crying in despair, conceiving that the general rising had taken place, and that nothing was to be looked for but slaughter and bloodshed. The town had a most warlike appearance. The trampling of horses was heard in every street, the glittering of arms and the sheen of swords were seen in every direction; the dragoons were called out in marching order, and mustered opposite the King's Arms. Immediately after the roll had been called, they were told off by threes, and, receiving the word " March," left Ayr for the seat of war, as it was termed, by four o'clock. That same afternoon the Royal Veteran Battalion, stationed in the Barracks, were called out in marching order, and followed the dragoons. Shortly after the Battalion had left, the Dandies were mustered in the Academy Square, while the magistrates and officers held a council of war as to the best course to pursue. The result was that the Dandies and the Militia staff were entrusted with the peace of the town. On Monday morning the Ayrshire Yeomanry were called out and drawn up in line before the Bank of Scotland, in Sandgate Street. Here they were each served with ammunition for their holster pistols, as they were not then armed with carbines as they are now. They were next harangued by the commanding officer, Sir Alexander, on the duties of a soldier, and told what services were expected from them, and, how they would assist Government by their bravery and courage on the field of battle, and by clearing the country of every rebel whom they met. Shortly after the address had been given and listened to, the word was given, " Right face," and they also were marched off to the supposed seat of war. It was evident from the looks of the men while they were being served with the ammunition that the whole regiment were terror-stricken and not overly fond of the job marked out for them, or quite satisfied with the near prospect held out to them of fighting for Government. They had evidently no desire to smell gunpowder even when fired at a poor Radical, and would as lief had the honour and glory of their prominent position transferred to others. A few days afterwards the military returned to their old quarters, without ever smelling powder or losing a man, if we except one belonging to the Yeomanry who deserted his colours while passing through Eaglesham Moor; and even he turned up not long after, thinking it better to be quaffing strong ale by his own fireside in the Mill Vennel than fighting the Radicals at Hamilton or Strathaven, and running the risk of getting a hole knocked through his gullet by a Radical pike. This affair so far ended the plot of the bloody Castlereagh ; the people's eyes were opened to the spy system by which they had been gulled, and the authorities utterly failed to take up any of the Ayr folk on the charge of treason.

It was not so in other parts of the county, for seizures were made at Stewarton, Tarbolton, Mauchline, and in the neighbourhood. The charges on which these individuals were apprehended were of the most frivolous nature, such as beating drums, carrying flags at Radical processions, and other similar so called treasonable acts. Three of the persons apprehended were indicted to stand trial for High Treason, and a Royal Commission was sent from London to try the rebels on the charges on which the indictment was framed. As there was not sufficient evidence to prove the charges, and the commissioners were eager to have a conviction against some one, so as to strike terror to all the country, both presently and prospectively, they made a bargain with a young man named M'Kay. This young man belonged to Stewarton, it was said, and was advised by the commissioners, the authorities, and his friends, to plead guilty to the charge of treason. He at first refused to do so, though he was assured of a free and unconditional pardon if he would only act as he was desired to do. By the influence of his father and other relations, who are supposed to have been tampered with by Government, he at last reluctantly consented to plead guilty as the only means of saving his life. The trial took place in the summer of 1820 ; the commissioners sitting in the New Church of Ayr. The prisoners were brought from the old jail, in which they had been confined, guarded by a strong escort of military, as if they had been as many Highland chieftains in 1745 taken red-hand on the Field of Culloden. There

was something truly ridiculous and puerile in the pomp and parade made about the trial of these three obscure individuals, possessing neither the ability nor influence to do more than the common herd of aspirant revolutionists, and whose actions, even at the worst, were not more treasonable than those of thousands in our own day. When they were arraigned before the court, and the jury empanelled, the indictment was read, charging them with the heinous crime of high treason against the king and the constitution. The prisoners were then called on to plead guilty or not guilty. M'Kay, to the astonishment of all present, pled guilty; his two companions in misfortune pled not guilty. To none did M'Kay's plea cause more surprise than to Mr. Grant, the counsel who had been engaged to defend him and the other two. He turned quickly round and looked the prisoner sternly in the face, as if to reproach him for recklessly throwing his life away. After the usual preliminaries in such important cases had been gone through, the two who had pled not guilty were discharged from the bar, the case against them being so utterly groundless that nothing could be made of it. Poor M'Kay was sentenced to be hanged, beheaded, and quartered, although he thought himself sure of freedom. He was escorted back to prison by the military and authorities, there to await the result, whatever that might be. His feelings of disappointment and anguish may be more easily conceived than described. Though he had been assured of a free and unconditional pardon before his trial as the reward of his pusillanimity, he gave up all hopes of it after his removal to prison, and could only look forward to dying the death of a traitor, without a single redeeming and encouraging thought connected with his trial and condemnation. In this condition of anxiety and suspense he was kept till the Sabbath before the day appointed for his execution, on which day the pardon arrived, and he was immediately set at liberty. He doubtless left prison a sadder and wiser man than he entered it, and ready to repeat the sentiments of wiser men than himself—"Put not your trust in princes, nor keep company with those who seek to stir up strife within the walls of a city." This episode concluded the melodramatic plot and spy system of the notorious Castlereagh, in so far as Ayr was concerned. It had its fruit more tragical in other places, but happily the people generally had been wise enough not to yield to the solicitations and instigations of those paid to betray them, and the result to Government was more damaging than they had conceived it possible it could be. We live in better and more liberal times, and it is not likely that the same attempts will be made to concoct a conspiracy against the powers that be and with no better foundation.