

## The Raid on Beaumes Manor, Shinfield, Berks, Good Friday, 1347.

By NORA ALEXANDER.

MARGERY DE POYNYNGES was a very rich heiress, with lands in Oxford, Berks, Wilts, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Northampton, Surrey, Sussex and Lincoln.<sup>1</sup> On her succession to these extensive properties she became the ward of King Edward III, and by him was given in marriage to Nicholas de la Beche, of Aldworth, Berks, Seneschal of Gascony, tutor of the Black Prince, and guardian of the Royal family during the King's absences upon his foreign campaigns.

Nicholas was a soldier, diplomatist and scholar. Incidentally, he wrote a beautiful hand, as evidenced by his letters in the Public Record Office; a much better one than his brother Edmund, the Keeper of the King's Wardrobe. But Nicholas was unfortunately not above seeking amusement in roystering nights and lights o' love, and on one occasion was haled from a tavern by his indignant sovereign who,

"coming out of Flanders in great wrath (by reason he had been disappointed of those monies on which he depended for carrying on the siege of Tournay) got to the Tower about midnight, where, finding no more than his own children and three servants, he confined Nicholas de la Beche in the Tower."²

Nicholas, however, was *persona grata*, and was soon removed from his dungeon and pardoned for this dereliction of duty.

His relations with Margery can only be inferred from the care with which he tied up everything in his will for her exclusive benefit, and from the fact that his gifts must have been lavish, since when she eloped with John de Dalton, she carried off either £200 worth of jewellery³ or, as another writ has it, £1,000.<sup>4</sup> Either represents a very large sum computed in modern currency.

<sup>1</sup> Cal. Pat. 22 Edw. II. m. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Cal. Close 13 Edw. III.

<sup>3</sup> Cal. Close 22 Edw. III. m. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Cal. Close 21 Edw. III. m. 13d.

When Nicholas died, some nine years after his marriage, Gerard de Lisle purchased from the King the reversionary right in Margery and her goods and chattels. It may well have been that the lady disliked the prospect of Gerard as a husband, but unless she had some previous understanding with Sir John de Dalton, it is difficult to imagine why, upon receipt of this news, Sir John should have ridden hot-foot from Lancashire to Berkshire with a band of knights and squires, gathering fresh adherents as he raced through Oxford, Warwick, Wilts and Berkshire, in order to rescue her from this threatened fate.

Possibly a long-standing romance lay behind, for it is conceivable that, in accordance with the custom of the day, Margery might have been sent to the home of the Lady Sara de Dalton to complete her education, and there have met this lady's nephew, John. However that may be, it is certain that she was known both to Lady Sara's family and to John's, and that they all aided and abetted in the scheme to carry her off from Gerard de Lisle. John's own father, Lady Sara and her husband, with their son Robert, were named among "John's confederacy," and indeed, it would seem that the gallant old lady herself took part in that wild ride to Berkshire, since she is named among the "malefactors" who,

"not permitting themselves to be brought to justice, according to law, have betaken themselves to the march of Scotland."<sup>5</sup>

John cannot have been actuated by pecuniary motives, for he must have been well aware that such a method of capturing an heiress would only leave both himself and his bride-to-be outlawed and penniless. Though one can understand the motive that may have impelled an ardent lover, it is more difficult to comprehend the one which induced sixty-six men to risk beggary and outlawry for the sake of an unknown woman. They could only have been disinterested parties to the transaction, since they had everything to lose and nothing to gain. Why then did they join in that mad escapade?

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<sup>5</sup> *Cal. Pat. 21 Edw. III. May 10.*

They were not all young and impetuous ; there were names among them well known at the day, names both of younger and older men who had done good service alike to their king, their country and their Church. John de Dalton himself, sturdy soldier and apparently faithful lover, was, as later evidence shows, highly valued by his king ; Robert de Dalton, Constable of the Tower, and founder of Burscough Priory, the last Benedictine monastery in England ; de Holand, of a famous but unfortunate family, poet and dreamer as well as swordsman, had sung the heart of a Royal Duchess out of her keeping into his own, and later, paid with his life for his loyalty to Edward's unhappy grandson, Richard II ; de Trussell, who built the little church of Shottesbrook ; Thomas de Charnels, the friend of the powerful Earl of Lancaster ; and many others held in high honour for one reason or another. And all of them were tried fighters, who had served in the French campaigns and fought on the field of Crecy, so that the loss of their services and those of their men-at-arms must have been more irritating to their king than that of the large *maritagium* for Margery due from Gerard de Lisle.

Aldworth was Margery's usual home, but she was at the manor of Beaumes when the raid took place, and the king lost no time in intimating his displeasure. Two writs were at once issued, one to John himself, ordering him

"to have Margery de la Beche, without injury to her person, before Lionel, Keeper of England and the King's Council at Westminster, with all possible speed, so that she be there on Wednesday after the quinzaine of Easter at latest, to do and receive what shall there be demanded."\*

Evidently, however, Edward had little expectation of this order being obeyed, for a second writ was issued concurrently, which left John and his followers in no doubt as to what would be "demanded." For it runs :

"March 31, 1347. Inasmuch as a scandalous outcry prevails everywhere and very grievous complaint has been

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\* *Cal. Close 21 Edw. III. m. 21d.*

made to the King that John de Dalton, chivaler, Robert de Holand, etc., etc., by force ravished Margery de la Beche united in lawful matrimony to Gerard de Lisle on the holy day of Good Friday before the dawn, at her manor of Beaumes by Redyng, where the King's son Lionel, Keeper of England, was then staying within the verge of the marshalsea of the household of the said Keeper, and abducted her against her will, whither they would, without reverence for God, Holy Church or the King, and to the terror of the said Keeper and the rest of the King's children then with him there, and all in those parts, and are now running to and fro that they may not be brought to justice for the felony, the King has appointed the said Gerard to arrest the said John de Dalton, and because Gerard fears bodily harm in the execution of the appointment from the said evildoers who are plotting to do him all the evil which they can do, he has granted special licence for him and his company to go armed in self defence. Further, he has taken him and his men into his special protection while executing the premises."<sup>7</sup>

It is only in this early writ of March 31, 1347, that Margery is described as the wife of Gerard de Lisle; in all the later ones she appears as "late the wife of Nicholas de la Beche," and it seems practically certain that John arrived before Gerard had time to execute the King's writ permitting him to marry Margery: for first, no record is to be found of this marriage or its dissolution, and secondly, she did marry John<sup>8</sup>. In the latter writ John is described as an outlaw and the husband of Margery. Moreover, Gerard received a pardon in the following September<sup>9</sup> for some unnamed offence, possibly for deceiving the King as to his legal claim upon Margery. At any rate, he drops out of the story at this point, and no further mention of him in connection with it ever occurs.

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<sup>7</sup> *Cal. Pat.* 21 *Edw. III. m.* 21d.

<sup>8</sup> *Cal. Close* 22 *Edw. III. m.* 6 and *Cal. Close* 22 *Edw. III. m.* 10d.

<sup>9</sup> *Cal. Pat.* 21 *Edw. III.*

As he did not succeed in capturing John, a further writ was issued a month later to the Sheriffs of every county in England, running as follows :—

“ Order to cause proclamation to be made that no one upon pain of forfeiture shall join, receive, maintain or have commerce with John de Dalton, and to arrest him and take him and his accomplices to the Tower of London, to be delivered to the Constable there whom the King has ordered to receive them and keep them safely until further order, as John and other malefactors have attacked by night the manor of Beaumes by Reddynges within the rod of the household of Lionel, Keeper of England, and have ravished Margery, late the wife of Nicholas de la Beche, and have slain Michael de Poynnynges ‘ le Uncle,’ Thomas le Clerke and others, and also have carried off goods and chattels to the value of £1,000 and have beaten, wounded and illtreated divers men there so that their lives are despaired of, and the said malefactors entered that bailiwick by night and by day drawing to themselves divers malefactors and committing crimes wherever they go.”<sup>10</sup>

At the same time a writ was issued to John D’Arcy, Constable of the Tower, “ to receive and keep them safely, ” etc.<sup>11</sup>

When all these writs failed to achieve their object the King was driven to appoint special “ Commissioners ” to hunt down the fugitives and bring them to justice. But he had unfortunately omitted to realise the very salient fact that “ all the world loves a lover,” so that presently he was aroused to hot indignation by the discovery that not only had sheriffs and others obligingly looked the other way when the band rode through their demesnes, but that many even went the length of aiding and abetting them in their nefarious design. For we read on June 25, 1347, and again on July 7, that

“ whereas all these are now staying and are received in divers parts of the realm and this by the maintenance and

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<sup>10</sup> *Cal. Close* 21 *Edw. III. m.* 13*d.*

<sup>11</sup> *Cal. Pat.* 21 *Edw. III. m.* 13*d.*

assent of the Commissioners themselves as the King is credibly informed, he has appointed them to follow and arrest all the persons indicted as above and the said Margery de la Beche, and he commands them upon pain of forfeiture of all that they can forfeit to do this with all the diligence and solicitude which they can, and charges all mayors, sheriffs, bailiffs and others to be assisting, obeying and attending unto them.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet still with a price upon the head of every one of them, no peasant even seems to have deigned to earn the promised reward by giving news of their whereabouts, and those of the sheriffs anxious to curry favour with the King, somehow found all their efforts frustrated, either by the wit and daring of the adventurers themselves, or by the secret aid of their well-wishers.

Four months later the King found it necessary to appoint fresh Commissioners, but with no better result.<sup>13</sup>

Since the fugitives must have come into personal contact with many of these well-wishers, it seems incredible that Margery should have had no opportunity of escaping from her captors had she wished to do so. From the fact that the journey occupied several months, we can deduce that there must have been dangers and adventures by the way.

Despite these setbacks, however, they continued to ride northward till their outraged sovereign received the unwelcome news that they were nearing that “march of Scotland,” which unfortunately lay beyond his jurisdiction. He made one last attempt to stop them by an appeal to the King of Scotland

“in no wise to admit the said John and the others named above and accomplices being of their retinue or maintenance into Scotland but to arrest them anywhere within his lordship or power, or in the King’s lands or lordship in that land, or in the marches aforesaid, and have them brought in safe custody to the Tower of London to be delivered to the Constable thereof.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Cal. Pat. 21 Edw. III. m. 18d.*

<sup>13</sup> *Cal. Pat. 21 Edw. III. m. 30d.*

<sup>14</sup> *Cal. Pat. 21 Edw. III.*

The Keeper of the Town of Berwick received a similar mandate of the same date.

The King of Scotland proved as little heedful of Edward's injunctions as the Sheriffs, Mayors and Bailiffs of England had been, and the Border was safely crossed. But once in the marches of Scotland the problem of the future had to be faced. Not only were they one and all now outlawed with their estates all confiscated, but there was still a price upon their heads, and dissevered from their gallant enterprise, folk might be less chary of turning an honest penny by betraying them. These unpleasant facts in no way deterred them from running these further risks, for now that John had no longer need of their services, they determined to make a bold bid for pardon.

Ill news proverbially travels apace, and they were greatly cheered to learn that their liege lord was hard pressed for fighters to continue his campaign in France. Relying therefore on the fact that a live soldier would be of more use to him than a dead "malefactor," and trusting to good luck to protect them on their way to him, one by one they slipped across the Border, and presumably aided by sympathisers, reached London, and there, as occasion offered, either delivered themselves up, or made their way to Dover and sought the King at Calais.

Their guilt had been so well established that their lands had either been sold for the benefit of the King, or given as rewards to other knights. It is amusing therefore to note both the effrontery of the sinners and the subtle manner in which the King proceeded in issuing pardons and restoring their estates. Thus Thomas de Arderne, the last of all to appeal, was pardoned

"in consideration of good service long rendered and for damage and loss in the service, and because the King has heard by trustworthy testimony that he is entirely guiltless of the perpetration of the felonies."<sup>15</sup>

Yet the felony had been committed on March 31, 1347, and it was June, 1350, before this testimony was forthcoming!

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<sup>15</sup> *Cal. Pat.* 24 *Edw. III.* m. 35.

The same "trustworthy testimony" was given in the case of Gilbert de Haydok, yet to secure his pardon it was necessary to add to this

"the request of divers magnates and others in attendance upon the King in parts beyond the seas."<sup>16</sup>

One doubts the "trustworthiness" of this evidence since it must either have been afforded by those who knew nothing of the matter from personal experience, or, more probably, by Sheriffs and others who lacked that predilection for strict veracity one looks for in highly-placed officials.

William de Trussel boldly asserted that "he had not yet been convicted of the said felonies," evidently resting assured that no one would come forward to contradict the statement, or offer convincing proof to the contrary,<sup>17</sup> while Robert de Dalton was forgiven

"for good service for a long time, and because he is guiltless of the principal perpetration of the felonies,"<sup>18</sup>

whatever "principal" may have implied, for he had voluntarily given himself up and spent some time in the Tower; while Thomas de Charnels, who also pleaded not guilty, obtained his pardon at the urgent request of the Earl of Lancaster.

Priests all along the trail of the adventurers, from Basildon in Berkshire to Burscough in Lancashire, were arrested and charged with complicity. The runaways must have found great difficulty in getting the seal of the Church upon their union, since not only was there the problem of whether Margery was indeed "united in lawful matrimony" with Gerard de Lisle, but even if this doubt were set at rest, priests would be chary of incurring the King's wrath and its probably disastrous consequences. It would appear that the marriage ceremony was performed either by Thomas de Litherlond, Prior of Holand,

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<sup>16</sup> *Cal. Pat. 21 Edw. III. m. 38.*

<sup>17</sup> *Cal. Close 21 Edw. III. m. 35.*

<sup>18</sup> *Cal. Pat. 22 Edw. II. m. 35.*



or John de Barneby, Prior of Burscough, since these two alone were finally ordered " to stand upon their trial " for the offence.<sup>19</sup>

These two unfortunate priests must indeed have felt that they were in a difficult situation for the founders of their monasteries were among John's followers, and it is reasonable to suppose that they would have been threatened with the withdrawal of valuable patronage should they fail to fall in with the wishes of their benefactors. On the other hand, there was an incensed monarch to be faced.

Only against John himself did the King's wrath remain unabated, and from the fact that they obtained their pardons at the same time and place, it would appear that Thomas de Arderne shared his friend's years of exile. Probably John felt that in the wild life of the Border, and with a wife to protect, he needed a trusty friend always at hand, for danger, to a woman in particular, was seldom far off.

There seems to be no trace of the lovers during those three years beyond the Border, but at the end of them John determined to risk both life and liberty rather than endure a longer exile from his country. Maybe also, Margery had found the life too hard, and the illness to which she succumbed on reaching Calais may have already been upon her. Under such circumstances one can well imagine that she would long to secure her lover's pardon and to know his future safe before death claimed her. And she may have counted on the Black Prince and beautiful but unfortunate little Princess Joanna, long in her care, to plead her cause with the King. However that may be, they crossed the Border once more, made their way to Dover, and sailed for Calais. And there, for Margery, *Finis* was written to the story.

Was John too heartbroken to care either about his pardon or his future? All we know is that he and de Arderne apparently remained inactive in Calais for eight months, when we read that John was pardoned

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<sup>19</sup> *Cal. Pat.* 23 *Edw. III.* m. 21.

“ for good service and because he has humbly submitted himself to the King’s grace in the King’s suit for the ravishment of Margery.”<sup>20</sup>

There could be no glossing over of the guilt in his case ! But was it indeed a “ ravishment ” or was that raid on the Manor of Beaumes born of a genuine and rather unique love story ? John certainly remained faithful to Margery’s memory for twenty years, only marrying, probably to secure an heir, shortly before his death, and leaving an infant son to succeed him.

To do him justice Edward’s “ pardons ” seem to have been wholehearted and generous, for he almost immediately

“ caused his hand to be amoved from all Margery’s lands ”<sup>21</sup> and at the same time he made a handsome addition to John’s yearly exchequer. And John, in return, served him faithfully to the day of his death, for we hear of no more evil deeds on his part.

After Margery’s death no one ever lived again in the de la Beche’s Aldworth Manor, where she had spent the greater part of her life as the wife of Nicholas de la Beche, and the castellated walls, on which Nicholas had prided himself, were left to crumble into ruins.

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<sup>20</sup> *Cal. Pat. 24 Edw. III. m. 15.*

<sup>21</sup> *Cal. Close 24 Edw. III. m. 10.*