



DOROTHY VERNON, WIFE OF JOHN MANNERS.

## Dorothy Vernon, Heiress of Haddon.

By G. LE BLANC SMITH.

**D**OROTHY VERNON, of Haddon, would seem but a hackneyed subject on which to write an article, especially for Derbyshire people, but the customary tale of her wild escapade requires proving, and in the following pages I shall endeavour to discover how much truth the tale contains.

The casual visitor to Haddon leaves with a mind well primed with all sorts of tales—a story of oppression, merry-making, flight, love, galloping horses, and the usual termination of such a sequence of events, a secret marriage, followed by paternal forgiveness.

The tale as now told divides itself up thus:—

- (1) Dorothy Vernon, an heiress, but second daughter only, falls in love with one John Manners, who seems to have been no uncertain or unresourceful lover.
- (2) The mutual understanding between the pair having been discovered, the lover is forbidden the house.
- (3) Manners, with the resource naturally to be looked for in the resolute and devoted lover of ancient times, disguises himself as a forester and obtains speech with his mistress.
- (4) Dorothy, oppressed by her step-mother, can endure home no longer, and during the night of the ball given in honour of her sister Margaret's marriage, flies to her lover.

(5) The pair, after an all-night ride, are duly married at Aylestone, near Leicester.

The most particular points in the story are these:— (1) Manners is denied the house; (2) Dorothy has a step-mother; (3) She escapes during the ball in honour of her sister; (4) She flies down “Dorothy Vernon’s Steps”; (5) The pair are married next day at a village in the vicinity of Leicester.

Such are the main points in the tale told daily, year after year, to the thousands of visitors to this famous old house.

Like many another story, it bears no close scrutiny, and may perhaps be traced to the fact that we know no details of the marriage of the couple, for not even the year in which it took place is known. Here, then, is an excellent foundation for the heaping up of a little romance.

But let us take the story and analyse it. (1) Manners is denied the house.—Why? He was the second son of an Earl of Rutland. Dorothy was the second daughter of a rich country squire! In what lies the cause of complaint?

(2) Dorothy has a step-mother. Had she? We know that Dorothy’s own mother died on March 25th, 1558. We also are told, in the story current at Haddon, that Dorothy fled on the night of her sister’s wedding. This also occurred in 1558. Had, then, Sir George Vernon *married a second wife between March, 1558, and the date of his daughter’s wedding in the same year?* And had this second wife in that short time driven Dorothy to flight with her lover owing to her cruelty?

Was Dorothy carrying on a secret correspondence with John Manners before her own mother’s death, or was their secret understanding the immediate result of the advent of a step-mother? It seems most improbable.

(3) Dorothy escapes during the ball in honour of her elder sister’s marriage. Here lies the whole failure of the story. We know from an Inq. Post. Mort. of 8 Eliz. that Dorothy *Manners* was found to be 20 years of age. This was in 1565, and she was married. We also know that Dorothy’s sister Margaret was married in 1558.

Now, considering these facts carefully, what do we find? If Dorothy was 20 years of age in 1565, she must have been born in 1545, consequently, if, as they say, she eloped during the ball in 1558, *she can have been only 13 years old.* This is surely sufficiently damning evidence of the total untruth of the tale.

(4) Dorothy flies by "Dorothy Vernon's Steps." This child of thirteen summers escapes, then, down a flight of steps which were built in 1650, 66 years after her decease, for the accounts relative to the building of those steps are in existence.

(5) She rides all night to Aylestone, and is there married. The idea of such a child covering about 60 miles on horseback after a dance is absurd.

Not only were the steps non-existent, but there is also considerable doubt if the actual ballroom was in existence at the time of the supposed flight. Certainly the present decorations did not exist, so either the room was a chamber with bare walls, or else John Manners stripped them of their practically new decoration, and supplied their place with oak panelling of his own design. Opinions, however, are much divided over the question of the date of this room. Lysons calls it Elizabethan; Rayner flatly contradicts him.

Now Rayner was not a native of this county when he compiled his book, and admits that much of his material was collected for him by friends. Lysons, on the other hand, was afforded every facility for knowing all about the structure, for the Duke of Rutland's architect placed at his disposal the detailed plans of the house drawn up by him for a proposed history of Haddon to be privately published by the Duke.

Mr. Henry Duesbury, the well-known architectural archaeologist, says: "In passing from the great hall to the long gallery (ballroom), we are strongly reminded of the great change society underwent *in the time of Elizabeth.* Here all is rich . . ." etc. "Large bay windows looking on to terraces; *everything* telling of the state and ceremony of the courtier and gentleman" (the italics are *miné*).

We may, therefore, consider that it was far from probable that the ballroom—at least as a habitable room—existed at the time of the imaginary elopement.

The onus of proof of this improbable tale should rest not upon him who would disprove the tale, but on those who uphold it.

Now why should this powerful country squire, Sir George Vernon, be so bitterly opposed to his youngest daughter becoming the wife of the second son of so mighty an Earl as the Earl of Rutland? As a match, viewed from the standpoint of social advantage, it was in every way desirable and excellent. The religious question has been made to take the part of whipping-boy in this controversy, but in those days difference of religious views and opinions were as much a matter of politics as of doctrine, and seldom stood in the way of a desirable marriage.

Whether Sir George Vernon's second wife bore her ill-will in later years seems to be doubtful, for we find that in her will she, Mathilda, surrendered to Margaret and Thomas Stanley, and to John Manners and Dorothy his wife, all her interest under the will of her husband in all his possessions. Enmity and hatred, if they ever existed, were then forgotten.

The old adage hath it, "Where there is smoke there is fire." Where, then, is the fire which sent forth this murky smoke, besmirching the fair name of Dorothy Vernon? History knows it not.

The first mention of the story in black and white, so far as can be ascertained, appeared in the pages of *The London Magazine* of 1822, under the title of "The King of the Peak," and the authorship of Allan Cunningham. A year later the tale appeared in the more sumptuous guise of a three-volume novel, the author of which assumed the name of Lee Gibbons. William Bennett, *alias* Lee Gibbons, declared he had the whole tale from the then custodian of the Hall, and that Dorothy fled by a window, leaving a slipper behind her in the act.

In 1860, or thereabouts, another recruit to the ranks of

Dorothy Vernon romancists was found in the person of Miss Eliza Meteyard, who wrote the tale of *The Love Steps of Dorothy Vernon* under the euphonious nom-de-plume of "Silverpen." This tale has been described as "of more than glucose stickiness and sweetness." She it was who first introduced the steps into the tale, and thereby damned the whole story. Since the days of "Silverpen," novelettes on the hackneyed subject have become legion. There is, however, no need to plunge further into the question.

Among the novelette writers, however, should be mentioned one who wrote *Sweet Doll of Haddon*, for he stoutly asserts that "the date of the birth of *Dorothy, John Manners' first child*, proves that the marriage must have taken place about the same time as that of Margaret."

The eldest child, however, by this marriage was a son—George—who, according to his existing monument in Bakewell Church, was but 64 years old in 1623. He was born, therefore, in 1569, just eleven years after the marriage of his aunt Margaret. The children of Dorothy and John Manners were, as a matter of fact, three sons, George, John, and Roger, and one daughter, Grace, *not* Dorothy.

As regards the personal appearance of the "Fair Dorothy," which has been the subject of conjecture, the accompanying illustration may be taken for what it is worth, for this representation *may* not be a truthful portrait; but the fact remains that when the Vernon chapel in Bakewell Church was restored, or, rather, rebuilt on the original lines—or something like them—the two bodies of John and Dorothy were disinterred. Both were in a wonderful state of preservation, especially that of John Manners. Dorothy's head had been at some time cut off, surgically examined, and replaced face downwards. Despite these facts, the hair and flesh were in remarkably good preservation. The former was of lovely auburn tint, and remarkably long and soft; her face, however, was not in a condition from which to deduce an opinion of her beauty.

John Manners was found to be wonderfully like his effigy

on the tomb. If this was noticeable after the lapse of so many years, surely the likeness at the time the effigy was constructed must have been even more remarkable.

Arguing from analogy, Dorothy's effigy was also a portrait, and can be duly criticised.

Enough now has surely been said to prove that Dorothy Vernon's love tale must be considered as one of romance only—one of those fables, indeed, which has grown up, as fables always will grow up, around stately homes and prominent personages.