

THE  
DOROTHY VERNON  
LEGEND

HISTORY OF THE LEGEND

FROM THE MONTHLY: NOTES AND QUERIES—  
A MEDIUM OF INTERCOMMUNICATION FOR LITERARY MEN  
AND GENERAL READERS

BY

FRANK HALLIDAY CHEETHAM

LONDON, 1906

Edited by David Trutt

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Frank Halliday Cheetham was born in 1872 and died in 1937. He was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in England. Cheetham wrote numerous architectural and historical books. They include the 1899 *Haddon Hall: Being Notes on its Architecture and History, for the use of Visitors* and the more detailed 1904 *Haddon Hall: An Illustrated Account of the Fabric and its History*.

It is of some interest that he included in the preface to his 1904 book the following lines—

“Whoso is hungry and list well eate  
Let him come to Haddon to his meate,  
And for a night and for a daye  
His horse shall have both corne and haye,  
And no man shall ask hym when he goeth away.”

This “Old Ballad” was taken from words carved into an ancient wooden cross in the Yorkshire village of Sprotbrough; Cheetham substituted ‘Haddon’ for the original ‘Sprotbrough.’ It will be left to the reader to decide if the above lines appropriately represent a poem related to Haddon Hall.

He states in one of the books—“The story of Dorothy Vernon’s wooing and flight has become so bound up in the history of Haddon Hall that some reference to it here seems necessary. It is the only bit of romance connected with the building, and as such has been carefully cherished. The story is as fresh to-day as it ever was, and no doubt it will be so for ages to come, notwithstanding the onsets of unbelieving critics who are never weary of telling us that the romance is all a myth. But the mind of the public will ever demand a romance to attach to their memory of Haddon, and will choose to believe the old tale, even should historical evidence prove it false.”

*The History of the Legend* is an article written soon after the two books. It is an attempt by Cheetham to trace the literary origin and evolution of the Dorothy Vernon elopement tale. It is appropriately read after the other books in this section; or perhaps before, as a ‘cheat sheet’ and guide to the other books. *The History of the Legend* summarizes what was known at the beginning of the twentieth century. Cheetham had the advantage of being close in time to the other writings, and having easy possession of materials which now are quite scarce. However he had the disadvantage of not having today’s library and internet search capabilities. Both aspects of his attempts to cast light on the subject are apparent in the following pages.

**HISTORY OF THE LEGEND**

Since the publication last year of Mr. J. B. Firth's *Highways and Byways in Derbyshire*, and more recently of a new book on Haddon Hall by Mr. G. Le Blanc Smith, the idea that the origin of the Dorothy Vernon legend may be traced back to Eliza Meteyard seems to have become very prevalent. This is a manifest error, but as the statement has been frequently repeated in reviews of these two books it is likely to be believed by large numbers of people.

The whole history of the Dorothy Vernon legend needs thoroughly sifting, and for some time I have been trying to get at the origin of the tradition, but without any great success. I should, however, like to put before the readers of *Notes & Queries* such information as I have gathered, with the hope that by this publicity some points in it, still obscure to me, may be elucidated.

Mr. Firth, in *Highways and Byways*, says that the vogue of the Dorothy Vernon legend "was started by a lady named Eliza Meteyard," and he goes on to quote a passage of hers wherein she "introduces into English fiction for the first time" the Dorothy Vernon door and steps. He does not actually state that Miss Meteyard invented the story, but he afterwards goes on to say that in 1822 there appeared in *The London Magazine* a short story called *The King of the Peak*, written by Allan Cunningham, and in 1823 a long novel with the same title by Mr. Lee Gibbons [William Bennet pseudonym]. The inference is that Eliza Meteyard wrote before either Cunningham or Gibbons, and later writers in the press have therefore not hesitated to say that the legend was invented by Eliza Meteyard somewhere about 1820. As Miss Meteyard, however, was not born till 1816, this is of course impossible. As a matter of fact, Miss Meteyard's story appeared nearly forty years after the two tales called *The King of the Peak*. I have corresponded with Mr. Firth on the subject, and he admits the statements in his book to be wrong, or at any rate to give a false impression. But so far as I can see Mr. Le Blanc Smith has trusted to Mr. Firth as his authority without looking further into the matter.

Although Miss Meteyard did not invent the legend, or even start its vogue (when the vogue of any story is “started” may well be a matter of dispute), Mr. Firth may, so far as I have yet been able to discover, be quite right when he says that Miss Meteyard introduced for the first time into English fiction the Dorothy Vernon door and steps. The earlier versions of the story say nothing about the door and steps, and we may therefore allow, perhaps, that Miss Meteyard “started the vogue” of the legend as it is usually current at the present time.

From the following brief summary of the literature of the Dorothy Vernon tradition it will be seen that the story is told in a variety of ways, but it may be said generally that the tale as related before 1860 is rather bare in detail compared with the later versions.

#### ALLAN CUNNINGHAM

The first mention of the legend that I can find in print is Allan Cunningham’s *King of the Peak*, a short tale which appeared in *The London Magazine* for March, 1822. It forms the third of the *Twelve Tales of Lyddalcross*, and occupies twelve pages. In the course of his introduction Cunningham mentions having heard the story of Dorothy Vernon’s elopement when he was a boy, but he also states that the custodian of Haddon Hall at that time was indignant at the old stories as told in the neighbourhood. This custodian (Dolly Foljambe) is made to speak of the “great garden entrance called the Knight’s Porch, through which Dora Vernon descended step by step to welcome her noble bridegroom Lord John Manners.”

But a “husbandman” standing by replies that Dora (she is always so called by Cunningham) “ran away in the middle of a moonlight night with young Lord John Manners and no other attendant than her own sweet self. And instead of going out regularly by a door, she leapt out of a window, and the place has ever since been called the Lady’s Leap.”

Cunningham’s version of the story follows this tale of the husbandman’s. He places the date of the occurrence as 1560. Sir George Vernon has two daughters, Margaret and Dora, but there is no mention of a wife (the stepmother of the later versions), nor is any reason given for Sir George’s disapproval of Manners as a son-in-law. Sir George knows Manners is in love with Dora, and Manners disguises himself as a minstrel and sings at a feast in the Great Hall.

Dora is in a temporary prison “nigh the cross-bow room,” which had a window “looking out on the terraced garden.” It is through this window that the lady leaps and runs off with Manners, who escorts her through the garden. The tale ends with their flight. There is no mention of a reconciliation with Sir George Vernon.

This first version of the story differs in a good many ways from those which have come after. Sir George’s second wife (a real personage) is omitted altogether, and thus we lose the cruel stepmother, who seems so necessary in the story as now told. There is no reference to the sister’s wedding, or to any other suitor for Dorothy, or to the reason of Sir George Vernon’s objection to Manners (who is called Lord John Manners), or to a ball-room, or to a flight down the well-known steps.

#### WILLIAM BENNET

In 1823, the year following the publication of Cunningham’s story, there appeared a novel in three volumes called also *The King of the Peak*. The author was “Lee Gibbons,” otherwise William Bennet, and the tale had been written by him three years previously, at the age of twenty-four [incorrect; according to Bennet, he started writing the book in 1822]. This book was revised, and reissued in 1883 by Messrs. Chapman & Hall, with an introduction by Dr. Robert Bennet, a son of the author. Lee Gibbons’s tale is pretty much on the lines of Cunningham’s, but it deals as much with the third Earl of Derby and Lancashire as with Haddon Hall and the Vernons. Edward Stanley, the third son of the Earl of Derby, is to be married to Dorothy Vernon, who is here the elder of the sisters. Edward Stanley is the principal figure in Lee Gibbons’s novel. Dorothy, indeed, makes no appearance till the middle of the second volume. Here, too, as in Cunningham’s version, the stepmother is left out, which suggests that she did not figure very largely in the old tradition. Dorothy repels the idea of flight with Manners for a long time, but yields at the very last. Rayner, in his *History and Antiquities of Haddon Hall* (1836), refers at some length to this romance by Lee Gibbons, without mentioning the author’s name, but is quite at a loss to say how much of the story is founded on fact. Lee Gibbons, however, in his dedication says:—“That the ancestor of His Grace the Duke of Rutland did gain his bride in the manner described in the following sheets the whole neighbourhood of Haddon will bear me out, at least if tradition be regarded as any evidence.”

**ELIZA METEYARD**

Eliza Meteyard's story *The Love Steps of Dorothy Vernon* comes at a long interval after the above two versions of the legend; yet so far I have found nothing between. The tale appeared in *The Reliquary* for October 1860.

[This editor has discovered that the story in *The Reliquary* is a reprint of the same story published in the December 29, 1849 issue of *Eliza Cook's Journal*. It was written under the pseudonym Dugdale the Younger.]

There we get for the first time something like the full set of persons and stage properties as at present known. We have the stepmother and the nurse (who uses such terms as "ladybird" in addressing her charge), and the escape down the steps on to the terrace. Now the question is, Did Miss Meteyard invent this escape down "Dorothy Vernon's Steps" or did she borrow it from tradition or from a previous writer? So far as I can see, Mr. Firth is justified in stating that the door and steps are here introduced for the first time into English fiction. If that is so, then it is rather curious to consider that what is now the most popular part of the story is less than fifty years old. Miss Meteyard, however, does not make Dorothy leave the ball-room to escape down the steps. She does, indeed, put the action on the night of the festivities in honour of her sister Margaret's wedding; but these take place in the Great Hall (there is no mention of the ball-room), and to make her escape by the well-known steps Dorothy goes to her chamber from the Great Hall. There the nurse is ready for her with a change of dress, and from her own chamber she makes her way through the northern apartments and state bedroom to the "garden parlour," from which she escapes by the steps to the terrace, where Manners is awaiting her.

Miss Meteyard has no other suitor for Dorothy, who is guarded by her stepmother because Sir George "had heard that the gossip about outlaws was a mere feint of some Manners, or some Eyre, or some Foljambe who wanted to sprite away the beauty and the gold of his youngest and his sweetest daughter."

John Manners's excuse to Dorothy for their clandestine meetings is that Sir George "will never yield his fair word to our troth, for he holds too ill Her Highness' laws against Papists to brook for a son one who is at favour at her court."

Here we meet for the first time the religious difficulty (the Vernons being Catholics and the Manneses Protestants) as the cause of the ineligibility of the match between John and Dorothy.

## LLEWELLYNN JEWITT

There seems to be no Dorothy Vernon fiction after Miss Meteyard for something like a score of years. At any rate, I have met with nothing till Mr. J. E. Muddock's little book called *Doll: A Dream of Haddon Hall*, published, I believe, some time in the early eighties. It has been reprinted many times since, and is still in print. Mr. Llewellynn Jewitt, however, writing on Haddon Hall in *The Art Journal* in 1871 (articles afterwards included in *The Stately Homes of England*, and separately published as an *Illustrated Guide to Haddon Hall*), thus speaks of the Dorothy Vernon legend:

“The story of her life, according to popular belief, is that while her elder sister, fortunate in an open attachment to Sir Thomas Stanley, the son of the Earl of Derby, and becoming his affianced bride, was petted and made much of, she, the younger, was kept in the background, having formed a secret attachment to John Manners, son of the Earl of Rutland—an attachment which was opposed by her father, sister, and stepmother; she was therefore closely watched and kept almost a prisoner. Her lover is said to have disguised himself as a woodman, or forester, and to have remained in hiding in the woods around Haddon for several weeks, in order to obtain stolen glances of, and occasional brief meetings with, Dorothy. At length, on a festive night consequent on the marriage of her sister Margaret, Dorothy is said to have stolen away unobserved in the midst of the merriment, and to have quietly passed out of the door of the ante-room on to the terrace, which she crossed, and having ascended the steps on the other side, or, as is also asserted, run down the steps from the terrace across the lawn, and so down to the foot-bridge, her lover's arms received her; horses were in waiting, and they rode off in the moonlight all through the night, and were married in Leicestershire the next morning. The door through which the heiress eloped is always pointed out to visitors as Dorothy Vernon's Door.”

Here, then, eleven years after Miss Meteyard's “first introduction of the door into fiction,” we find it “always pointed out to visitors.” It would be interesting to know whether it was so pointed out before 1860, and also when it began to be shown as an object of special interest. What about the Lady's Leap referred to by Cunningham? where was it? and when did it cease to be shown to visitors?



**EDWARD WALFORD**

In Mr. Edward Walford's *Tales of our Great Families* (1877) there is a chapter entitled *The Heiress of Haddon Hall*, in which the story follows the conventional lines. The opposition to the marriage was because John Manners was a younger son, and the flight is said to have taken place from the ball-room, down the steps from the ante-room on to the terrace, and from there down to the footbridge.

**JAMES MUDDOCK**

In an article in *Temple Bar* for October, 1878, called *The Story of Dorothy Vernon*, the anonymous author [James Muddock who later expands his article into *Doll: A Dream of Haddon Hall*] refers to "a whole library of poems" as having been inspired by the clandestine love and runaway marriage. Cunningham gives two such poems, but I should be glad to know where to find others. [See this editor's *Poems of Haddon Hall* and *An Afterword*.]

This writer also says:—"Dorothy's elopement has become a stock-piece with romance writers, and lady essayists like Mrs. Radcliffe, Miss Meteyard, and Mrs. Roe have followed the ruffled course of the river of Dorothy's love until it becomes a smooth and tranquil stream."

What is here the reference to Mrs. Radcliffe and Mrs. Roe? I know that Rhodes in his *Peak Scenery* speaks of Mrs. Radcliffe as often visiting Haddon Hall "for the purpose of storing her imagination with romantic ideas," but I have no note of anything written by Mrs. Radcliffe about the Dorothy Vernon story. And who was Mrs. Roe? and what did she write? I should be glad of information on these two points. I believe that a story concerning Dorothy Vernon appeared in *The People Magazine* for 1870 or 1871, but I cannot come across a copy. To call Dorothy's elopement a "stock-piece with romantic writers" in 1878 would seem to point to more printed versions of the story than I have named.

[Mrs. "Roe" was probably Roche, not Roe. Regina Maria Roche (1764-1845) was a contemporary of Ann Radcliffe. Roche is considered today to be a minor Gothic novelist who wrote very much in the shadow of Ann Radcliffe; she was, however, a best seller in her own time. The popularity of Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* (a sentimental Gothic Romance), rivaled that of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.]

Mr. Muddock's *Doll: A Dream of Haddon Hall*, before mentioned, brings us to the first of the more recent versions of the tale. The characters are Sir George and Lady Vernon, the latter proud and scornful, a typical stepmother of romance; Margaret and Dorothy, their daughters, the former affianced to Sir Thomas Stanley; Madge, the nurse, a variant of Miss Meteyard's Luce; and John Manners, second son of the Earl of Rutland. The objection to the match arises from the religious difficulty, and mention is made here, as in Lee Gibbons's version, of the proposed marriage of Dorothy to Edward Stanley. Dorothy now escapes from the ball-room, through the ante-room, and down the steps on to the terrace. John Manners waits for her on the terrace (now known as Dorothy Vernon's Walk).

In Mr. Muddock's larger book, published in 1903, called *Sweet Doll of Haddon Hall*, the dramatis personae are more numerous, but the essentials of the story are the same. The details of the escape are slightly different, and Sir George Vernon is now personally friendly to John Manners. But Mr. Muddock insists on the religious difficulty, and seeks to prove his case in a rather elaborate introduction. As no sources of information are given, however, it is impossible to follow him in his strictures on those who doubt the truth of the "sweet old love story."

**WILLIAM ELLIOTT DOUBLEDAY**

*The Heiress of Haddon*, by W. E. Doubleday, a popular shilling book sold in the district, gives yet another version of the story. When it first appeared [1889] I do not know, but the copy before me is marked "seventh edition." The author has sought to incorporate "the essence of nearly all the legends concerning not only Dorothy, but also Sir George Vernon." Dorothy's marriage is here simply regarded by her father as a matter of making the best match. Sir George is on good terms with John Manners, and actually first introduces him to Dorothy. Dorothy, however, he has arranged, is to marry Sir Henry de la Zouche; but he being killed, a husband is thought of in Edward Stanley. Manners is here described by Lady Vernon as a "soldier of fortune," and so he is out of the running. But there is no religious difficulty. The escape takes place down the steps.

**CHARLES MAJOR**

Perhaps the best of all the Dorothy Vernon romances from a literary point of view is Mr. Charles Major's *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* (1902). Here both Lady Vernon and Margaret are left out. Dorothy is the only child of her father, and has a companion, Madge Stanley, living with her at Haddon. There is a feud between the Vernons and the Rutlands, but there is no religious difficulty. John Manners is here "Sir" John Manners, and is the only son of the Earl of Rutland. And there are other and more amazing perversions of history, such as the visit of both Queen Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots, to Haddon at one and the same time. But these modern versions of the story are only interesting as showing how the legend grows and changes with each new writer. Mr. Major's Dorothy escapes from the ballroom, through the Dorothy Vernon Door, along the terrace, and down the terrace steps. Manners awaits her in the upper garden, and they fly together down the seventy steps to the footbridge.

**PAUL KESTER**

A play called *Dorothy o' the Hall* [alternately named *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall*], by Paul Kester and Charles Major—founded on Mr. Major's book, though not strictly following it—was produced at the New Theatre, by Miss Julia Neilson and Mr. Fred Terry, on 14 April last [1906].

**SULLIVAN AND GRUNDY**

In the opera *Haddon Hall*, by Sir Arthur Sullivan and Sydney Grundy, produced at the Savoy Theatre, 24 September 1892, the Dorothy Vernon legend is once more pressed into service, but the action is put forward a whole century. Sir George Vernon, Dorothy, and John Manners all find themselves living and acting in the days of the Civil War.

**THE DOROTHY VERNON LEGEND**

Regarding the truth of the legend, I think we can only adopt the attitude of the open mind. Probably there were floating legends in the neighbourhood during the eighteenth century differing considerably in detail. The tradition is certainly not clearly defined, and its age is difficult to determine. The fact that Haddon Hall has no "history," in the commonly accepted and popular meaning of that term, doubtless helped to perpetuate this sentimental and romantic story. It is significant, at any rate, that the popularity of the legend has been coincident with the popularity of Haddon Hall as a show place. The Romantic Revival created the taste for old buildings, and people going to see old buildings require a story with them. So round this central tradition of Dorothy Vernon's elopement has grown a thick crust of sentiment and fancy.

The late Mr. W. A. Carrington, who was the keeper of the Rutland manuscripts at Belvoir and Haddon, in a paper contributed to the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society's Journal in 1900 writes:—

"Whether the popular legend of the elopement has any foundation or not will probably remain an unsolved problem. It is a tradition in the family that the marriage was celebrated at Aylestone, near Leicester. If it was a clandestine marriage, it seems rather singular it should have been celebrated at Aylestone, as it was one of the Rutland manors, where John Manners would surely be known, as the family had a residence there long before that time."

The household account books, which give records of payments made in connection with the marriage of Margaret Vernon, unfortunately stop at the year 1558, and are not resumed till 1564, between which dates the marriage of Manners and Dorothy most likely took place. The fact of the wedding being at Aylestone (if it were, for this too is only a tradition) has, however, been used as an argument for the elopement story, and, indeed, can hardly be brought as evidence against it. Had everything been right and proper, Dorothy would have been married, one would have thought, from her father's house, either at Haddon or Bakewell. Still, there may have been private reasons of which we know nothing.

The Rutland family is, of course, not too ready to believe that the match was a clandestine one; and the old story that John Manners was not a sufficiently good match for the daughter of the King of the Peak must, I think, be once and for all abandoned. Many of the romance-writers who have used the story have recognized this, and the religious difficulty and the theory of a mere private quarrel between the two families have been pressed into service. A great deal has been made of the fact that John Manners was only the second son of the Earl of Rutland. But it should be remembered that Sir Thomas Stanley was, too, only the second son of an earl. Further, what seems to have been overlooked by nearly all writers on the subject, at the time the elopement is supposed to have taken place the first Earl of Rutland had been dead some years, and John Manners was either brother of the then earl, or else uncle. The first Earl of Rutland died in 1543, the second Earl (John Manners's elder brother) in 1563. If John and Dorothy were married between 1558 and 1563, which is very likely, Dorothy would be marrying the brother of the Earl of Rutland, who could scarcely be termed a mere soldier of fortune. Sir George Vernon died in 1565, and Dorothy was married before that date. If the marriage took place between 1563 and 1565, Dorothy would be marrying the Earl of Rutland's uncle. The late Duchess of Rutland wrote:—

“It is only right to say that there is no proof whatever that the tradition about Dorothy's flight is true; on the contrary, there is reason to believe that the King of the Peak was well satisfied with the alliance of the Vernons and the Manners.” And in another place she said:—“The well-known and romantic story of the elopement of Dorothy with John Manners will hardly bear the test of criticism, at all events in its details, though it may have some historical foundation.”

But to Mr. J. E. Muddock the tradition is so true that “no argument he has ever come across in the course of his research has ever seemed to be worth serious consideration.” A very few facts, however, make it difficult to receive the tale as usually told. From *Inquisition Post Mortem, 8 Elizabeth*, we know that Sir George Vernon died in 1565, and that his daughters Margaret and Dorothy were then aged twenty-five and twenty respectively. Margaret was married in 1558, when she was eighteen. If, therefore, Dorothy eloped on the night of her sister’s wedding, she must have been only thirteen at the time. If that were so, as Mr. Carrington used to remark, she was a very forward minx. Mr. Muddock says that the date of the birth of Dorothy and John Manners’s first child shows that the marriage must have taken place about the same time as Margaret’s. But Sir George Manners, who, so far as I know, was Dorothy’s first child, is described on his tomb at Bakewell as being fifty-four at the time of his death in 1623. He was therefore born in 1569, or eleven years after Margaret Vernon’s marriage. This looks more like Dorothy’s having been married at a reasonable age. And so one might go through Mr. Muddock’s arguments.

But the fact that there is a legend cannot be disputed, and such old tales generally have a central point of truth in them somewhere. What I wish to ascertain definitely is when the legend is first heard of, and whether there is any mention of it in print before 1822. Lysons’s *History of Derbyshire* (1817) is silent concerning the tradition.

[Absalom Watkin (1787-1861) kept a personal journal. It was edited and published by his great-grandson in 1920 under the title *Absalom Watkin: Extracts From His Journal 1814-1856*. The journal contains an account of his visit to Haddon Hall in May of 1817. Watkin wrote the following: “Among the pictures we saw that of the lady by whose marriage with Sir John Manners this house and the estates came from the family of Vernon into that of Rutland. We learnt that the gallant Sir John stole her away, and that the door through which she passed was fastened up and has never been opened since.”]