

TALES
OF
OUR GREAT FAMILIES

THE HEIRESS OF HADDON HALL

BY
EDWARD WALFORD

LONDON, 1877

Edited by David Trutt

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Edward Walford was born in 1823 and died in 1897. He was a scholar and journalist in London. Walford edited numerous biographical, genealogical, and topographical works. From his preface—

UNDER the title of “Tales of our Great Families,” I have ventured to publish a series of narratives relating to the families of the titled and untitled nobility of this country, in the hope of amusing my readers with materials which for twenty years I have been gleaning from various sources, and which have grown so rapidly in my hands that my only difficulty seems to lie in selecting amid such an *embarras de richesses*. If it be not literally true that every house, whether high or low, has its “skeleton in the closet,” at all events the past history of most of our ancient houses is replete with incidents which, however artlessly they may be told, will certainly make good the adage that “truth is stranger than fiction.”

In treating of these matters I wish by way of preface to remark that my readers must not always look for *novelty*. I shall often, I know, be telling a “thrice-told tale”; for in the anecdotal writings of my well-known sources, I have a constant well from which to draw supplies. It is possible, however, to recast these materials and mould them all into one harmonious whole, which, I trust, may not be found devoid of interest. I am treading on delicate ground, and I am conscious that here and there I may wound the tender susceptibilities of descendants and relatives of the personages whom I may bring upon the stage. But to these I would say that the lives of the members of our old historic houses are themselves historic, and that I have a full right to wake up the memory of what already stands recorded, unless I have reason to believe that the stories I tell are untrue.

It is apparent that Edward Walford’s purpose is to tell stories which are known or believed to be true, and are considered beyond the category of legend. Such then is his intent with “The Heiress of Haddon.”

“The Heiress of Haddon.” is a grouping together of those aspects which the public has plucked from the fact and speculation of Haddon Hall, and attributes to the history of Haddon Hall and the actions of Sir George and Dorothy Vernon, and John Manners.

HADDON HALL

Haddon Hall, viewed architecturally, is one of the most perfect specimens of the ancient baronial mansions of England, and it forms one of the chief attractions of the fair county of Derbyshire. But even Haddon in the olden time finds its interest enhanced by the well authenticated tradition, which tells us how, by a romantic attachment and elopement, its picturesque walls and terraces, and the broad lands which surround it, passed from the hands of Vernons into those of the now ducal house of Manners.

It is well observed of Haddon by Mr. Llewellyn Jewitt, in his "Illustrated Guide" to that place, that unlike many of our old baronial residences, its history has been uniformly one of peace and hospitality, not of war and feud and oppression; for that, however much its owners may have mixed up from time to time in the stirring events of the ages in which they lived, Haddon Hall has never played a part in the turmoils. It has never stood a siege like Wardour Castle or Lathom House; and though it has been a stronghold in its own way, it has been a stronghold of home and of peaceful domestic life, not of armed troops; and therefore, as it nestles in the woods that crown the banks of the Derwent, it claims an interest peculiarly its own.

We may pass by its early history in a very few lines. At a remote date it was held by the Avenels, by the tenure of knight's service, from whom, towards the close of the twelfth century, it passed by the marriage of an heiress into the hands of Richard de Vernon, a nobleman of Norman extraction, as is implied by his name, which was derived from a lordship and town in Normandy on the banks of the Seine, between Rouen and Paris, of which the family were hereditary lords, bearing the titles of Counts and Barons de Reviers, or Redvers. The direct male descendant of this Richard Vernon, Sir Henry, was made governor to Prince Arthur by Henry VII, with whom he was a great favourite. He married a daughter of the Earl of Shrewsbury, by whom he had a son, also Sir Henry, high steward of the King's Forest of the Peak under King Henry VIII, a knight whose son, Sir George, the owner of Haddon, was known far and wide through Derbyshire and the midland counties, as "the King of the Peak."

It is said on good authority that he owned thirty manors in Derbyshire alone, to say nothing of properties in other counties; and by his first wife, a daughter of Sir Gilbert Taylebois or Talbot, he had two daughters, his co-heiresses, the elder of whom married the second son of the then Earl of Derby; while the younger—whose story we are about to tell—became the ancestress of the Earls and Dukes of Rutland. Sir George Vernon was not styled “King of the Peak” without good cause; for he lived at Haddon in such a style of magnificence and hospitality as was right worthy of a prince, and would put to shame many a German potentate. It is said he was at once the most generous and the most just of men, and that, although he was given perhaps to undue severity, and inclined to indulge occasionally in a “Lynch law” of his own throughout “the Peak,” yet he lived and died in the good esteem of his neighbours. Perhaps, too, his popularity was increased among his friends by the beauty of his two youthful daughters, the Lady Margaret and the Lady Dorothy

A single tradition, briefly told by Mr. Jewitt in his pleasant pages, will serve to illustrate the firmness and decision of Sir George Vernon’s character, and vindicate his title of “King,” by showing the power which he exercised over the actions, and even over the lives and properties, of the people around him, with whom the good old feudal notions of the laird being able to do pretty well as he pleased with his own dependents were not as yet extinct.

“A pedlar, who had been hawking his wares around the neighbourhood, was one day found murdered in a lonely spot on the estates of Haddon Hall. He had been seen the evening before to enter a cottage in the neighbourhood, and he was never afterwards seen or heard of alive. As soon as the ‘King of the Peak’ became aware of the fact that the crime had been committed so near at hand, he had the body of the pedlar removed to Haddon, laid in the hall, and covered with a sheet. He then sent for the cottager to come immediately, and on his arrival, at once questioned him as to where the pedlar was who was seen to enter his house the night before. The man denied having seen him, or knowing anything about him, when Sir George uncovered the body before him, ordering that all persons present should touch the body in succession, at the same time declaring their innocence of the murder.

“The suspected man, when his turn came, declined to touch the body, and instantly rushed out of the hall and made his way, ‘as fast as his legs could carry him,’ through Bakewell towards Ashford. Sir George instantly ordered his men to mount and follow him. The murderer was caught in a field opposite the present toll-bar at Ashford, and at once hanged, and the field still bears the name of the ‘gallows acre,’ or ‘galley acre.’ Sir George is said to have been cited to London for this extraordinary piece of Lynch law, and when he appeared at Court he was summoned twice to surrender as ‘King of the Peak.’ To these he made no reply, but the third time he was called on as Sir George Vernon, when he stepped forward and acknowledged himself. ‘Here am I.’ Having been summoned as the ‘King of the Peak,’ the indictment fell through, and Sir George was admonished and discharged. Sir George Vernon is buried in Bakewell Church, where a remarkably fine and well-preserved altar-tomb bears the recumbent effigies of himself and his two wives.”

But it is time that I passed from Sir George and the dead pedlar to the lady in whom is concentrated the chief interest of my story, Miss Dorothy Vernon, the younger daughter of Sir George, and therefore, we may be sure, known all round Haddon, and Edensor, and Bakewell, and Chatsworth, as a “Princess of the Peak.”

In or about the year 1567, when Queen Bess had been only nine years on the throne, and when England was still “merrie England,” on a bright morning in May the Lady Margaret Vernon was escorted by a bevy of young bridesmaids to the altar of Bakewell Church, and there became the wife of Sir Thomas Stanley, of Winwick, in Lancashire, the second son of Edward, third Earl of Derby, and great-great-grandson of the noble and gallant Stanley who took so brave a part in the battle of Bosworth Field, where he placed the crown of Richard on the head of the victorious Richmond. Dorothy, who was one of the bridesmaids on that day, doubtless found life at Haddon rather lonely after her sister’s departure for the North. It is said—but, as there are no cartes-de-visite of the young lady now in existence, it is impossible to verify the assertion—that, of all the beautiful young women of that “period,” she was the most beautiful; and, of course, as she had no brothers, she had the best of “prospects.” The local tradition has it that, in addition to her beauty and wealth, she was blessed with so sweet a temper that she was the idol of all who knew her, far and near. If this, however, really was the case, her monument in Bakewell Church does her but scanty justice, for the sculptor who executed the effigy on her tomb has represented her as neither amiable nor attractive in outward appearance.

The story of her life, as told to me by a Derbyshire friend, will have it that she found herself obliged to play the part of Cinderella; for, while the elder sister was congratulated on all sides for having made a conquest of one of the noble house of Stanley, and becoming his affianced bride was petted and made much of by her fond and indulgent “papa,” the Lady Dorothy, though only a year or so younger, was kept in the background and treated as a child, when she had got far more than half-way through her “teens.” This treatment, no doubt, was very unwise in her case, as in that of other young ladies of “sweet seventeen”; and the result of course ensued that she resolved to secure a follower for herself. She was fortunate in her choice—John Manners, a son of the Earl of Rutland; but as he was “only a younger son,” and had no broad acres to boast of, the attachment was opposed by her father and her step-mother, and even, we are told, by her sister, who, we hope, was not actuated by any feelings of sisterly jealousy. Dorothy was therefore watched closely, and kept almost a prisoner, being entrusted to the care of a middle-aged *duenna*, who did not contrive to make Haddon Hall the happier by her presence.

Love, however, laughs at locksmiths; and, from the days of Jupiter and Danaë down to our own, there has been a succession of “Young Lochinvars” in almost every family of high rank and birth.

Julius Caesar “came, saw, and conquered,” as we all know from the day when we begin our Delectus; but, unlike that emperor, plain John Manners “came, saw, and *was* conquered.” It had been a case of love at first sight, and, in spite of the remonstrances of papa and mamma, the young lovers agreed that they would never abandon each other, or unsay the words of love that they had said. These words were destined to have an abiding influence over the proud estates of Haddon Hall—an influence which three centuries have not swept away, for Haddon is now one of the seats, not of the Vernons, but of Dorothy’s descendant in the direct line, the Duke of Rutland.

“All things,” they say, “are fair in love as in war”; and so John Manners is said to have disguised himself as a woodman, or forester, and to have remained in various hiding places in the woods around Haddon for several weeks, in order to obtain stolen glances of Miss Dorothy, and, no doubt, occasional meetings with her when the *duenna* was not “on guard.” At length, on one festive night at Haddon, perhaps at one of the merry-makings consequent on her sister’s marriage, when everybody was busy amusing the guests from the neighbourhood, Miss Dorothy is said to have quietly stolen away, unobserved, in the midst of the merriment, and to have passed out of the door of the ante-room on to the garden terrace, which still forms one of the chief features of the hall. She crossed the terrace, ran swiftly down the steps and across the lawn, and so down to the foot bridge over the Derwent, where she was speedily locked in her lover’s arms. Horses, of course, were in waiting with trusty attendants, one of whom was left behind, to put papa off the scent in case of a pursuit.

On and on they rode through the moonlight on that bright August night, and early next morning they were married at a church just across the borders of the county, in Leicestershire.

The door through which the heiress of Haddon eloped on that memorable night with “plain John Manners” is still always pointed out to all who visit Haddon as “Dorothy Vernon’s door.” It is not enriched with splendid carvings, nor is it to be distinguished from many other doorways in our old baronial halls and moated granges; but I fancy that somehow or other his Grace of Rutland can hardly look without some feeling of personal interest on the gate through which, a little more than three hundred years ago, passed not only the lovely Lady Dorothy, but with her the fine manor and its broad lands, into the noble family of Manners, who are, or ought to be, nearly as proud of Haddon as they are of princely Belvoir.

John and Dorothy Manners, it may be as well to add here, “lived happily ever afterwards.” Children were born to them, and their eldest son, Sir George Manners, added to the family fortunes by his marriage with Grace, daughter of Sir Henry Pierrepont, a near relative of the once ducal house of Kingston. The Lady Grace, as a monument in Bakewell Church informs us, “bore to her husband four sons and five daughters, and lived with him in holy wedlock for upwards of thirty years.” On her husband’s death, she caused him to be buried with his forefathers, and then placed a monument to his memory at her own expense, as a perpetual memorial of their conjugal faith, and joined the figure of his body with hers, having vowed that their ashes and bones should be laid together.

Such of our readers as care for genealogical details may be glad to know that, although Dorothy Vernon herself never wore the strawberry leaves of the coronet of a duchess, yet in the long run she became the direct ancestress of the Dukes of Rutland. Her grandson John succeeded as the eighth Earl of Rutland on the death of his cousin, in 1641; and her great-grandson, John, the ninth earl, was created Marquis of Granby and Duke of Rutland in 1703. This duke’s grandson was the celebrated commander-in-chief of the British forces who served with Prince Ferdinand of Brunswick in Germany, and whose face as the “Marquis of Granby” is so familiar on our village signboards. The “Marquis” unhappily died before his father; but his son, Charles, the fourth duke, a nobleman most popular as Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland in the days of Pitt and Fox, was the grandfather of the present Duke, who has inherited both Belvoir Castle, once the seat of the Lords de Roos, and Haddon Hall, the ancient home of the Vernons.