

THE KING OF THE PEAK

A DERBYSHIRE TALE

TRADITIONAL TALES OF THE ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH
PEASANTRY BY

ALLAN CUNNINGHAM

LONDON, 1822.

Edited by David Trutt

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Allan Cunningham (1784 - 1842) was a Scottish poet and author. In 1822, he toured Scotland and northern England for the monthly *London Magazine*. He was to collect ‘traditional tales and oral poetry’ and present them in the magazine. The third tale in the series was *The King of the Peak, A Derbyshire Tale*, and is the first known appearance of the story of the Dorothy Vernon - John Manners elopement. Publication was in the March 1822 issue of *The London Magazine*.

The story was later republished as part of *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry* (1822). It is this version which is presented here. The title of the tale, *The King of the Peak*, indicates that Cunningham thought the main interest of the story to be the ambience of Haddon Hall coupled with the larger-than-life persona of Sir George Vernon, and how John Manners successfully confronted and overcame the will of the King of the Peak. It is not until nearly thirty years later, in 1850, that Dorothy Vernon will possess the title of the story.

The external fabric in which Cunningham places his story has an ‘air of reality’ which is missing in later authors’ tales. This is most likely due to his decade of experience in visiting and writing about older landmarks for periodicals. Cunningham knew how to closely question the Haddon Hall caretaker, and elicit information to place his story in a correct historical context.

“It happened in the fifth year of the reign of his young and sovereign mistress, that a great hunting festival was held at Haddon, where all the beauty and high blood of Derbyshire assembled.” The fifth year of the reign of Elizabeth is 1563, which correctly places Dorothy at age eighteen for her marriage to John Manners. The “hunting festival” avoids a common error of later authors who place the elopement during Margaret’s wedding celebration. Dorothy’s sister, older by five years, was also married at age eighteen, in the year 1558.

Nor does Cunningham mention Dorothy’s step-mother, Maude. It is unlikely that she would play a role in an actual George Vernon - John Manners conflict. In later stories, Maude Vernon is portrayed as being bent on thwarting Dorothy’s romantic inclinations, a role for which there is no historical basis.

There is not universal agreement as to the specific objection George Vernon could have to John Manners as a son-in-law. Cunningham does not speculate, but instead has Sir George relate to a friend of Manners, “Sir Knight, thou art the sworn friend of John Manners, and well thou knowest what his presumption dares at [marriage to his daughter], and what are the letts [obstacles] between him and me.”

THE KING OF THE PEAK.
A DERBYSHIRE TALE.

What time the bird wakes in its bower,
He stood, and looked on Haddon tower;
High rose it o'er the woodland height,
With portals strong, and turrets bright,
And gardens green, with swirl and sweep,
Round rushed the Wye, both broad and deep.
Leaping and looking for the sun,
He saw the red-deer and the dun;
The warders with their weapons sheen,
The watchers with their mantles green;
The deer-hounds at their feet were flung,
The red blood at their dew-laps hung.
Adown he leaped, and awhile he stood,
With a downcast look and pondering mood,
Then made a step and his bright sword drew,
And cleft a stone at a stroke in two—
“So shall the heads of my foemen be,
Who seek to sunder my love from me.”
Derbyshire Rhyme of Dora Vernon.

Remains of the ancient frank and open-hearted hospitality of old England linger yet among her vales and mountains; and travellers are not unfrequently greeted with a patriarchal welcome, and a well-spread table, without the chilling formality of a fair-penned and prudently-worded introduction. The open bounty of hill, and wood, and vale, and sea is poured in wholesale profusion on many of the fortunate dwellers in the country; while, on those who forsake the wonders of God for the works of man—the green land and the glorious air, for the confusion of the city—nature sprinkles her favours with a sparing and a niggard hand. The city strives in vain to emulate the frank kindness of the country, and opens her doors, but opens them with a sad civility, and a constrained and suspicious courtesy. In the country, the door stands open, the table is spread, and the bidden guest is the way-wearied man or the fugitive and the wanderer. He enters, he refreshes himself, he reposes, and on the morrow he renews his journey.

It happened once in a northern county that I found myself at a farmer's fireside, and in company which the four winds of heaven seemed to have blown together. The farmer was a joyous old man; and the evening, a wintry one, and wild with wind and snow, flew away with jest, and mirth, and tale, and song. Our entertainer had no wish that our joy should subside: for he heaped the fire till the house shone to its remotest rafter; loaded his table with rustic delicacies, and once, when a pause ensued after the chanting of one of Robin Hood's ballads, he called out, "Why stays the story, and what stops the rhyme? Have I heated my hearth, have I spread my tables, and poured forth my strong drink for the poor in fancy, and the lame in speech? Up, up; and give me a grave tale or a gay, to gladden or sadden the present moment, and lend wings to the leaden feet of evening time. Rise, I say; else may the fire that flames so high—the table which groans with food, for which water, and air, and earth, have been sought; and the board that perfumes you with the odour of ale and mead—may the first cease to warm, and the rest to nourish ye."

"Master," said a hail and joyous personage, whose shining and gladsome looks showed sympathy and alliance with the good cheer and fervent blood of merry old England; "since thy table smokes and thy brown ale flows more frankly for the telling of a true old tale, then a true old tale thou shall have—shame fall me if I balk thee, as the pleasant folks say, in the dales of bonny Derby."

[The 'personage' tells the 'true old tale.']

Those who have never seen Haddon Hall, the ancient residence of the Vernons of Derbyshire, can have but an imperfect notion of the golden days of old England. Though now deserted and dilapidated—its halls silent—the sacred bell of its chapel mute—though its tables no longer send up the cheering smell of roasted boars and spitted oxen—though the music and the voice of the minstrel are silenced, and the light foot of the dancer no longer sounds on the floor—though no gentle knights and gentler dames go trooping hand in hand and whispering among the twilight groves—and the portal no longer sends out its shining helms, and its barbed steeds;—where is the place that can recall the stately hospitality and glory of former times, like the Hall of OLD HADDON?

It happened on a summer evening, when I was a boy, that several curious old people had seated themselves on a little round knoll near the gate of Haddon Hall; and their talk was of the Vernons, the Cavendishes, the Manners, and many old names once renowned in Derbyshire. I had fastened myself to the apron-string of a venerable dame, at whose girdle hung a mighty iron key, which commanded the entrance of the Hall; her name was Dolly Foljambe; and she boasted her descent from an ancient Red Cross knight of that name, whose alabaster figure, in mail, may be found in Bakewell Church. This high origin, which, on consulting family history, I find had not the concurrence of clergy, seemed not an idle vanity of the humble portress; she had the straight frame, and rigid, demure, and even warlike cast of face, which alabaster still retains of her ancestor; and had she laid herself by his side, she might have passed muster, with an ordinary antiquarian, for a coeval figure. At our feet the river Wye ran winding and deep; at our side rose the Hall, huge and grey; and the rough heathy hills, renowned in Druidic, and Roman, and Saxon, and Norman story, bounded our wish for distant prospects, and gave us the mansion of the Vernons for our contemplation, clear of all meaner encumbrances of landscape.

“Ah! dame Foljambe,” said an old husbandman, whose hair was whitened by acquaintance with seventy winters; “it’s a sore and a sad sight to look at that fair tower, and see no smoke ascending. I remember it in a brighter day, when many a fair face gazed out at the windows, and many a gallant form appeared at the gate. Then were the days when the husbandman could live—could whistle as he sowed, dance and sing as he reaped; and could pay his rent in fatted oxen to my lord, and in fatted fowls to my lady. Ah! dame Foljambe, we remember when men could cast their lines in the Wye; could feast on the red deer and the fallow deer, on the plover and the ptarmigan; had right of the common for their flocks, of the flood for their nets, and of the air for their harquebuss. Ah! dame, old England is no more the old England it was, than that hall, dark, and silent, and desolate, is the proud hall that held Sir George Vernon, the King of the Peak, and his two lovely daughters, Margaret and Dora. Those were days, dame; those were days!” And as he ceased he looked up to the tower, with an eye of sorrow, and shook and smoothed down his white hairs.

“I tell thee,” replied the ancient portress, sorely moved in mind, between present duty and service to the noble owner of Haddon and her lingering affection for the good old times, of which memory shapes so many paradises, “I tell thee the tower looks as high and as lordly as ever; and there is something about its silent porch and its crumbling turrets, which gives it a deeper hold of our affections, than if an hundred knights even now came prancing forth at its porch, with trumpets blowing and banners displayed.”

“Ah! dame Foljambe,” said the husbandman; “yon deer now bounding so blithely down the old chase, with his horny head held high, and an eye that seems to make nought of mountain and vale; it is a fair creature. Look at him! see how he cools his feet in the Wye, surveys his shadow in the stream, and now he contemplates his native hills again. So! away he goes, and we gaze after him, and admire his speed and his beauty. But were the hounds at his flanks, and the bullets in his side, and the swords of the hunters bared for the brittling; Ah! dame, we should change our cheer; we should think that such shapely limbs, and such stately antlers might have reigned in wood and on hill for many summers. Even so we think of that stately old hall, and lament its destruction.”

“Dame Foljambe thinks not so deeply on the matter,” said a rustic; “she thinks, the less the hall fire, the less is the chance of the hall being consumed; the less the company, the longer will the old hall floor last, which she sweeps so clean, telling so many stories of the tree that made it;—that the seven Virtues in tapestry would do well in avoiding wild company; and that the lass with the long shanks, Diana, and her nymphs, will hunt more to her fancy on her dusty acre of old arras, than in the dubious society of the lords and the heroes of the court gazette. Moreover, the key at her girdle is the commission by which she is keeper of this cast-off and moth-eaten garment of the noble name of Manners; and think ye that she holds that power lightly, which makes her governess of ten thousand bats and owls, and gives her the awful responsibility of an armoury, containing almost an entire harquebuss, the remains of a pair of boots, and the relique of a buff jerkin?”

What answer to this unceremonious attack on ancient things committed to her keeping the portress might have made, I had not an opportunity to learn; her darkening brow indicated little meekness of reply; a voice, however, much sweeter than the dame’s, intruded on the debate. In the vicinity of the hall, at the foot of a limestone rock, the summer visitors of Haddon may and do refresh themselves at a small fount of pure water, which love of the clear element induced one of the old ladies to confine within the limits of a large stone basin.

Virtues were imputed to the spring, and the superstition of another proprietor erected beside it a cross of stone, lately mutilated, and now removed, but once covered with sculptures and rude emblems, which conveyed religious instruction to an ignorant people. Towards this fountain a maiden from a neighbouring cottage was observed to proceed, warbling, as she went, a fragment of one of those legendary ballads which the old minstrels, illiterate or learned, scattered so abundantly over the country:

DORA VERNON.

It happened between March and May-day,
When wood-buds wake which slumbered late,
When hill and valley grow green and gaily,
And every wight longs for a mate;
When lovers sleep with an open eye-lid,
Like nightingales on the orchard tree,
And sorely wish they had wings for flying,
So they might with their true love be.

A knight all worthy, in this sweet season
Went out to Cardiff with bow and gun,
Not to chase the roebuck, nor shoot the pheasant,
But hunt the fierce fox so wild and dun.
And, by his side, was a young maid riding,
With laughing blue eyes, and sunny hair;
And who was it but young Dora Vernon,
Young Rutland's true love and Haddon's heir.

Her gentle hand was a good bow bearing,—
The deer at speed, or the fowl on wing,
Stayed in their flight when the bearded arrow
Her white hand loosed from the sounding string.
Old men made bare their locks, and blest her
As blithe she rode down the Durwood side,
Her steed rejoiced in his lovely rider,
Arched his neck proudly, and pranced in pride.

This unexpected minstrelsy was soon interrupted by Dame Foljambe, whose total devotion to the family of Rutland rendered her averse to hear the story of Dora Vernon's elopement, profaned in the familiar ballad strain of a forgotten minstrel. "I wonder at the presumption of that rude minion," said the offended portress, "in chanting such ungentle strains in my ear. Home to thy milk-pails, idle hussy—home to thy distaff, foolish maiden; or if thou wilt sing, come over to my lodge when the sun is down, and I will teach thee a strain of a higher sort, made by a great court lord, on the marriage of her late Grace. It is none of your rustic chants, but full of fine words, both long and lordly; it begins,

Come, burn your incense, ye god-like graces,
Come, Cupid, dip your darts in light;
Unloose her starry zone, chaste Venus,
And trim the bride for the bridal night.

"None of your vulgar chants, minion, I tell thee; but stuffed with spiced words, and shining with gods, and garters, and stars, and precious stones, and odours thickly dropping; a noble strain indeed." The maiden smiled, nodded acquiescence, and, tripping homewards, renewed her homely and interrupted song, till the river bank and the ancient towers acknowledged, with their sweetest echoes, the native charms of her voice.

"I marvel much," said the hoary portress, "at the idle love for strange and incredible stories which possesses as with a demon the peasants of this district. Not only have they given a saint, with a shirt of haircloth and a scourge, to every cavern, and a druid, with his golden sickle and his mistletoe, to every circle of shapeless stones; but they have made the Vernons, the Cavendishes, the Cockaynes, and the Foljambes, erect on every wild place crosses or altars of atonement for crimes which they never committed; unless fighting ankle-deep in heathen blood, for the recovery of Jerusalem and the holy sepulchre, required such outlandish penance. They cast too a supernatural light round the commonest story; if you credit them, the ancient chapel bell of Haddon, safely lodged on the floor for a century, is carried to the top of the turret, and, touched by some invisible hand, is made to toll forth midnight notes of dolour and woe, when any misfortune is about to befall the noble family of Rutland. They tell you too that wailings of no earthly voice are heard around the decayed towers, and along the garden terraces, on the festival night of the saint who presided of old over the fortunes of the name of Vernon.

“And no longer agone than yesterday, old Edgar Ferrars assured me that he had nearly as good as seen the apparition of the King of the Peak himself, mounted on his visionary steed, and, with imaginary horn, and hound, and halloo, pursuing a spectre stag over the wild chase of Haddon. Nay, so far has vulgar credulity and assurance gone, that the great garden entrance, called the Knight’s porch, through which Dora Vernon descended step by step among her twenty attendant maidens, all rustling in embroidered silks, and shining and sparkling, like a winter sky, in diamonds, and such like costly stones—to welcome her noble bridegroom, Lord John Manners, who came, cap in hand, with his company of gallant gentlemen—”

“Nay, now, dame Foljambe,” interrupted the husbandman, “all this is fine enough, and lordly too, I’ll warrant; but thou must not apparel a plain old tale in the embroidered raiment of thy own brain, nor adorn it in the precious stones of thy own fancy. Dora Vernon was a lovely lass, and as proud as she was lovely; she bore her head high, dame; and well she might, for she was a gallant knight’s daughter; and lords and dukes, and what not, have descended from her. But, for all that, I cannot forget that she ran away in the middle of a moonlight night, with young Lord John Manners, and no other attendant than her own sweet self. Ay, dame, and for the diamonds, and what not, which thy story showers on her locks and her garments, she tied up her berry brown locks in a menial’s cap, and ran away in a mantle of Bakewell brown, three yards for a groat. Ay, dame, and instead of going out regularly by the door, she leapt out of a window; more by token she left one of her silver heeled slippers fastened in the grating, and the place has ever since been called the Lady’s Leap.”

Dame Foljambe, like an inexperienced rider, whose steed refuses obedience to voice and hand, resigned the contest in despair, and allowed her rustic companion to enter full career into the debatable land, where she had so often fought and vanquished in defence of the decorum of the mode of alliance between the houses of Haddon and Rutland.

“And now, dame,” said the husbandman, “I will tell thee the story in my own and my father’s way. The last of the name of Vernon was renowned far and wide for the hospitality and magnificence of his house, for the splendour of his retinue, and more for the beauty of his daughters, Margaret and Dorothy. This is speaking in thy own manner, Dame Foljambe; but truth’s truth. He was much given to hunting and hawking, and jousting with lances either blunt or sharp; and though a harquebuss generally was found in the hand of the gallant hunters of that time, the year of grace 1560, Sir George Vernon despised that foreign weapon; and well he might, for he bent the strongest bow, and shot the surest shaft, of any man in England. His chase-dogs too were all of the most expert and famous kinds—his falcons had the fairest and most certain flight; and though he had seen foreign lands, he chiefly prided himself in maintaining unimpaired the old baronial grandeur of his house. I have heard my grandsire say how his great grandsire told him, that the like of the knight of Haddon, for a stately form, and a noble, free, and natural grace of manner, was not to be seen in court or camp. He was hailed, in common tale, and in minstrel song, by the name of the KING OF THE PEAK; and it is said, his handsome person and witchery of tongue chiefly prevented his mistress, good Queen Bess, from abridging his provincial designation with the headsman’s axe.

“It happened in the fifth year of the reign of his young and sovereign mistress, that a great hunting festival was held at Haddon, where all the beauty and high blood of Derbyshire assembled. Lords of distant counties came; for to bend a bow, or brittle the deer, under the eye of Sir George Vernon, was an honour sought for by many. Over the chase of Haddon, over the hill of Stanton, over Bakewell-edge, over Chatsworth hill and Hardwicke plain, and beneath the ancient castle of Bolsover, as far as the edge of the forest of old Sherwood, were the sounds of harquebuss and bowstring heard, and the cry of dogs and the cheering of men. The brown-mouthed and white-footed dogs of Derbyshire were there among the foremost; the snow-white hound and the coal-black, from the Scottish Border and bonny Westmoreland, preserved or augmented their ancient fame; nor were the dappled hounds of old Godfrey Foljambe, of Bakewell bank, far from the throat of the red deer when they turned at bay, and gored horses and riders. The great hall floor of Haddon was soon covered with the produce of wood and wild.

“Nor were the preparations for feasting this noble hunting party unworthy the reputation for solid hospitality which characterised the ancient King of the Peak. Minstrels had come from distant parts, as far even as the Scottish border; bold, free-spoken, rude, rough witted men; ‘for the selvadge of the web,’ says the northern proverb, ‘is aye the coarsest cloth.’ But in the larder the skill of man was chiefly employed, and a thousand rarities were prepared for pleasing the eye and appeasing the appetite. In the kitchen, with its huge chimneys and prodigious spits, the menial maidens were flooded nigh ankle deep in the richness of roasted oxen and deer; and along the passage communicating with the hall of state, men might have slid along, because of the fat droppings of that prodigious feast, like a slider on the frozen Wye. The kitchen tables, of solid plank groaned and yielded beneath the roasted beeves and the spitted deer; while a stream of rich smoke, massy, and slow, and savoury, sallied out at the grated windows, and sailed round the mansion, like a mist exhaled by the influence of the moon. I tell thee, dame Foljambe, I call those the golden days of old England.

“But I wish you had seen the hall prepared for this princely feast. The floor, of hard and solid stone, was strewn deep with rushes and fern; and there lay the dogs of the chase in couples, their mouths still red with the blood of stags, and panting yet from the fervour and length of their pursuit. At the lower end of the hall, where the floor subsided a step, was spread a table for the stewards and other chiefs over the menials. There sat the keeper of the bows, the warder of the chase, and the head falconer, together with many others of lower degree, but mighty men among the retainers of the noble name of Vernon. Over their heads were hung the horns of stags, the jaws of boars, the skulls of the enormous bisons, and the foreheads of foxes. Nor were there wanting trophies, where the contest had been more bloody and obstinate—banners, and shields, and helmets, won in the Civil, and Scottish, and Crusading wars, together with many strange weapons of annoyance or defence, borne in the Norwegian and Saxon broils. Beside them were hung rude paintings of the most renowned of these rustic heroes, all in the picturesque habiliments of the times. Horns, and harquebusses, and swords, and bows, and buff coats, and caps, were thrown in negligent groups all about the floor; while their owners sat in expectation of an immediate and ample feast, which they hoped to wash down with floods of that salutary beverage, the brown blood of barley.

“At the upper end of the hall, where the floor was elevated exactly as much in respect, as it was lowered in submission at the other, there the table for feasting the nobles stood; and well was it worthy of its station. It was one solid plank of white sycamore, shaped from the entire shaft of an enormous tree, and supported on squat columns of oak, ornamented with the arms of the Vernons, and grooved into the stone floor beyond all chance of being upset by human powers. Benches of wood, curiously carved, and covered, in times of more than ordinary ceremony, with cushions of embroidered velvet, surrounded this ample table;—while in the recess behind appeared a curious work in arras, consisting of festivals and processions, and bridals, executed from the ancient poets; and for the more staid and grave, a more devout hand had wrought some scenes from the controversial fathers and the monkish legends of the ancient Church. The former employed the white hands of Dora Vernon herself; while the latter were the labours of her sister Margaret, who was of a serious turn, and never happened to be so far in love as to leap from a window.”

“And now,” said dame Foljambe, “I will describe the Knight of Haddon, with his fair daughters and principal guests, myself.” “A task that will last thee to doomsday, dame,” muttered the husbandman. The portress heeded not this ejaculation, but with a particular stateliness of delivery proceeded. “The silver dinner bell rang on the summit of Haddon hall, the warder thrice wound his horn, and straightway the sound of silver spurs was heard in the passage, the folding door opened, and in marched my own ancestor, Ferrars Foljambe by name. I have heard his dress too often described not to remember it. A buff jerkin, with slashed and ornamented sleeves, a mantle of fine Lincoln green fastened round his neck with wolf-claws of pure gold, a pair of gilt spurs on the heels of his brown hunting-boots, garnished above with taslets of silver, and at the square and turned-up toes, with links of the same metal connected with the taslets. On his head was a boar-skin cap, on which the white teeth of the boar were set, tipped with gold. At his side was a hunting-horn, called the white hunting horn of Tutbury, banded with silver in the middle, belted with black silk at the ends, set with buckles of silver, and bearing the arms of Edmund, the warlike brother of Edward Longshanks. This fair horn descended by marriage to Stanhope of Elvaston, who sold it to Foxlowe, of Staveley. The gift of a king and the property of heroes was sold for some paltry pieces of gold.”

“Dame Foljambe,” said the old man, “the march of thy tale is like the course of the Wye, seventeen miles of links and windings down a fair valley five miles long. A man might carve thy ancestor’s figure in alabaster in the time thou describest him. I must resume my story, dame; so let thy description of old Ferrars Foljambe stand; and suppose the table filled about with the gallants of the chase and many fair ladies, while at the head sat the King of the Peak himself, his beard descending to his broad girdle, his own natural hair of dark brown—blessings on the head that keeps God’s own covering on it, and scorns the curled inventions of man—falling in thick masses on his broad manly shoulders. Nor silver, nor gold, wore he; the natural nobleness of his looks maintained his rank and pre-eminence among men; the step of Sir George Vernon was one that many imitated, but few could attain—at once manly and graceful. I have heard it said, that he carried privately in his bosom a small rosary of precious metal, in which his favourite daughter Dora had entwined one of her mother’s tresses. The ewer-bearers entered with silver basins full of water; the element came pure and returned red; for the hands of the guests were stained with the blood of the chase. The attendant minstrels vowed that no hands so shapely, nor fingers so taper, and long, and white, and round, as those of the Knight of Haddon, were that day dipped in water.

“There is wondrous little pleasure in describing a feast of which we have not partaken; so pass we on to the time when the fair dames retired, and the red wine in cups of gold, and the ale in silver flagons, shone and sparkled as they passed from hand to lip beneath the blaze of seven massy lamps. The knights toasted their mistresses, the retainers told their exploits, and the minstrels with harp and tongue made music and song abound. The gentles struck their drinking vessels on the table till they rang again; the menials stamped with the heels of their ponderous boots on the solid floor; while the hounds, imagining they heard the call to the chase, leaped up, and bayed in hoarse but appropriate chorus.

“The ladies now re-appeared, in the side galleries, and overlooked the scene of festivity below. The loveliest of many counties were there; but the fairest was a young maid of middle size, in a dress disencumbered of ornament, and possessed of one of those free and graceful forms which may be met with in other counties, but for which our own Derbyshire alone is famous.

“Those who admired the grace of her person were no less charmed with her simplicity and natural meekness of deportment. Nature did much for her, and art strove in vain to rival her with others; while health, that handmaid of beauty, supplied her eye and her cheek with the purest light and the freshest roses. Her short and rosy upper-lip was slightly curled, with as much of maiden sanctity, perhaps, as pride; her white high forehead was shaded with locks of sunny brown, while her large and dark hazel eyes beamed with free and unaffected modesty. Those who observed her close, might see her eyes, as she glanced about, sparkling for a moment with other lights, but scarce less holy, than those of devotion and awe. Of all the knights present, it was impossible to say, who inspired her with those love-fits of flushing joy and delicious agitation; each hoped himself the happy person, for none could look on Dora Vernon without awe and love. She leaned her white bosom, shining through the veil which shaded it, near one of the minstrel's harps; and looking round on the presence, her eyes grew brighter as she looked; at least, so vowed the knights, and so sang the minstrels.

“All the knights arose when Dora Vernon appeared.

‘Fill all your wine-cups, knights,’ said Sir Lucas Peverel.

‘Fill them to the brim,’ said Sir Henry Avenel.

‘And drain them out, were they deeper than the Wye,’ said Sir Godfrey Gernon.

‘To the health of the Princess of the Peak,’ said Sir Ralph Cavendish.

‘To the health of Dora Vernon,’ said Sir Hugh de Wodensley, ‘beauty is above titles, she is the loveliest maiden a knight ever looked on, with the sweetest name too.’

‘And yet, Sir Knight,’ said Peverel, filling his cup, ‘I know one who thinks so humbly of the fair name of Vernon, as to wish it charmed into that of De Wodensley.’

‘He is not master of a spell so profound,’ said Avenel.

‘And yet he is master of his sword,’ answered De Wodensley, with a darkening brow.

‘I counsel him to keep it in its sheath,’ said Cavendish, ‘lest it prove a wayward servant.’

‘I will prove its service on thy bosom where and when thou wilt, Lord of Chatsworth,’ said De Wodensley.

“‘Lord of Barley,’ answered Cavendish, ‘it is a tempting moonlight, but there is a charm over Haddon to-night it would be unseemly to dispel. To-morrow, I meet Lord John Manners to try whose hawk has the fairer flight and whose love the whiter hand. That can be soon seen; for who has so fair a hand as the love of young Rutland? I shall be found by Dunwood Tor when the sun is three hours up, with my sword drawn—there’s my hand on’t, De Wodensley;’ and he wrung the knight’s hand till the blood seemed starting from beneath his fingernails.

“‘By the saints, Sir Knights,’ said Sir Godfrey Gernon, ‘you may as well beard one another about the love of ‘some bright particular star, and think to wed it,’ as the wild wizard of Warwick says, as quarrel about this unattainable love. Hearken, minstrels: while we drain our cups to this beauteous lass, sing some of you a kindly love strain, wondrously mirthful and melancholy. Here’s a cup of Rhenish, and a good gold Harry in the bottom on’t, for the minstrel who pleases me.’ The minstrels laid their hands on the strings, and a sound was heard like the swarming of bees before summer thunder. ‘Sir Knight,’ said one, ‘I will sing ye, Cannie Johnnie Armstrong with all the seventeen variations.’ ‘He was hanged for cattle-stealing,’ answered the Knight; ‘I’ll have none of him.’ ‘What say you to Dick of the Cow, or the Harper of Lochmaben?’ said another, with something of a tone of diffidence. ‘What! you Northern knaves, can you sing of nothing but thievery and jail-breaking?’ ‘Perhaps, your knightship,’ humbly suggested a third, ‘may have a turn for the supernatural, and I’m thinking the Fairy Legend of young Tamlane is just the thing that suits your fancy.’ ‘I like the naivete of the young lady very much,’ answered the knight; ‘but the fair dames of Derbyshire prize the charms of lovers with flesh and blood, before the gayest Elfin-knight that ever ran a course from Carlisle to Caerlaverock.’—‘What would your worship say to William of Cloudesley?’ said a Cumberland minstrel, ‘or to the Friar of Orders Grey?’ said a harper from the halls of the Percys.

“‘Minstrels,’ said Sir Ralph Cavendish, ‘the invention of sweet and gentle poesy is dead among you. Every churl in the Peak can chant us these beautiful but common ditties. Have you nothing new for the honour of the sacred calling of verse and the beauty of Dora Vernon? Fellow—harper,— what’s your name? you with the long hair and the green mantle,’ said the knight, beckoning to a young minstrel who sat with his harp held before him, and his face half buried in his mantle’s fold; ‘come, touch your strings and sing; I’ll wager my gold-hilted sword against that pheasant feather in thy cap that thou hast a new and a gallant strain; for I have seen thee measure more than once the form of fair Dora Vernon with a ballad-maker’s eye.—Sing, man, sing.’

“The young minstrel, as he bowed his head to this singular mode of request, blushed from brow to bosom; nor were the face and neck of Dora Vernon without an acknowledgment of how deeply she sympathised in his embarrassment. A finer instrument, a truer hand, or a more sweet and manly voice, hardly ever united to lend grace to rhyme.

THE MINSTREL'S SONG.

Last night a proud page came to me;
Sir Knight, he said, I greet you free;
The moon is up at midnight hour,
All mute and lonely is the bower:
To rouse the deer my lord is gone,
And his fair daughter's all alone,
As lily fair, and as sweet to see,—
Arise, Sir Knight, and follow me.

The stars streamed out, the new-woke moon
O'er Chatsworth Hill gleamed brightly down,
And my love's cheeks, half-seen, half-hid,
With love and joy blushed deeply red:
Short was our time, and chaste our bliss,
A whispered vow and a gentle kiss;
And one of those long looks, which earth
With all its glory is not worth.

The stars beamed lovelier from the sky,
The smiling brook flowed gentlier by;
Life, fly thou on; I'll mind that hour
Of sacred love in greenwood bower;
Let seas between us swell and sound,
Still at her name my heart shall bound;
Her name—which like a spell I'll keep,
To soothe me and to charm my sleep.

“‘Fellow,’ said Sir Ralph Cavendish, ‘thou hast not shamed my belief of thy skill; keep that piece of gold, and drink thy cup of wine in quiet, to the health of the lass who inspired thy strain, be she lordly or be she low.’ The minstrel seated himself, and the interrupted mirth recommenced, which was not long to continue. When the minstrel began to sing, the King of the Peak fixed his large and searching eyes on his person, with a scrutiny from which nothing could escape, and which called a flush of apprehension to the face of his daughter Dora. Something like a cloud came upon his brow at the first verse, which, darkening down through the second, became as dark as a December night at the close of the third, when, rising, and motioning Sir Ralph Cavendish to follow, he retired into the recess of the southern window.

“‘Sir Knight,’ said the Lord of Haddon, ‘thou art the sworn friend of John Manners, and well thou knowest what his presumption dares at, and what are the letts between him and me. *Cavendo tutus* [safety through caution]! ponder on thy own motto well:—‘Let seas between us swell and sound’. Let his song be prophetic, for Derbyshire,—for England has no river deep enough and broad enough to preserve him from a father’s sword, whose peace he seeks to wound.’ ‘Knight of Haddon,’ said Sir Ralph, ‘John Manners is indeed my friend; and the friend of a Cavendish can be no mean person; a braver and a better spirit never aspired after beauty.’ ‘Sir Knight,’ said the King of the Peak, ‘I court no man’s counsel; hearken to my words. Look at the moon’s shadow on Haddon-dial; there it is beside the casement; the shadow falls short of twelve. If it darkens the midnight hour, and John Manners be found here, he shall be cast, fettered, neck and heel, into the deepest dungeon of Haddon.’

“All this passed not unobserved of Dora Vernon, whose fears and affections divined immediate mischief from the calm speech and darkened brow of her father. Her heart sank within her when he beckoned her to withdraw; she followed him into the great tapestried room. ‘My daughter, my love, Dora,’ said the not idle fears of a father, ‘wine has done more than its usual good office with the wits of our guests to-night; they look on thee with bolder eyes and speak of thee with a bolder tongue, than a father can wish. Retire, therefore, to thy chamber. One of thy wisest attendants shall be thy companion.—Adieu, my love, till sunrise!’ He kissed her white temples and white brow; and Dora clung to his neck and sobbed in his bosom,—while the secret of her heart rose near her lips. He returned to his guests, and mirth and music, and the march of the wine-cup, recommenced with a vigour which promised reparation for the late intermission.

“The chamber, or rather temporary prison, of Dora Vernon, was nigh the cross-bow room, and had a window which looked out on the terraced garden, and the extensive chase towards the hill of Haddon. All that side of the hall lay in deep shadow, and the moon, sunk to the very summit of the western heath, threw a level and a farewell beam over river and tower. The young lady of Haddon seated herself in the recessed window, and lent her ear to every sound and her eye to every shadow that flitted over the garden and chase. Her attendant maiden—shrewd, demure, and suspicious,—of the ripe age of thirty, yet of a merry pleasant look, which had its admirers—sat watching every motion with the eye of an owl.

“It was past midnight, when a foot came gliding along the passage, and a finger gave three slight scratches on the door of the chamber. The maid went out, and after a brief conference suddenly returned, red with blushes from ear to ear. ‘Oh, my lady!’ said the trusty maiden,—‘oh, my sweet young lady,—I here’s that poor young lad—ye know his name—who gave me three yards of crimson ribbon, to trim my peach-bloom mantle, last Bakewell fair.—An honest or a kinder heart never kept a promise; and yet I may not give him the meeting. Oh, my young lady, my sweet young lady, my beautiful young lady, could you not stay here for half an hour by yourself?’ Ere her young mistress could answer, the notice of the lover’s presence was renewed.—The maiden again went—whispers were heard—and the audible salutation of lips; she returned again, more resolute than ever to oblige her lover.—‘Oh, my lady—my young lady; if ye ever hope to prosper in true love yourself—spare me but one half hour with this harmless, kind lad.—He has come seven long miles to see my fair face, he says;—and, oh, my lady, he has a handsome face of his own.—Oh, never let it be said that Dora Vernon sundered true lovers!—but I see consent written in your own lovely face—so I will run—and, oh, my lady, take care of your own sweet handsome self, when your faithful Nan’s away.’ And the maiden retired with her lover.

“It was half an hour after midnight, when one of the keepers of the chase, as he lay beneath a holly bush listening, with a prolonged groan, to the audible voice of revelry in the hall, from which his duty had lately excluded him, happened to observe two forms approaching; one of low stature, a light step, and muffled in a common mantle;—the other with the air, and in the dress, of a forester—a sword at his side and pistols in his belt.

“The ale and the wine had invaded the keeper’s brain and impaired his sight; yet he roused himself up with a hiccup and a ‘hilloah,’ and ‘where go ye, my masters?’—The lesser form whispered to the other—who immediately said, ‘Jasper Jugg, is this you? Heaven be praised I have found you so soon;—here’s that north country pedlar, with his beads and blue ribbon—he has come and whistled out pretty Nan Malkin, the lady’s favourite, and the lord’s trusty maid.—I left them under the terrace, and came to tell you.’

“The enraged keeper scarce heard this account of the faithlessness of his love to an end,—he started off with the swiftness of one of the deer which he watched, making the boughs crash, as he forced his way through bush and glade direct for the hall, vowing desertion to the girl and destruction to the pedlar. ‘Let us hasten our steps, my love,’ said the lesser figure, in a sweet voice; and, unmantling as she spoke, turned back to the towers of Haddon the fairest face that ever left them—the face of Dora Vernon herself. ‘My men and my horses are nigh, my love,’ said the taller figure; and taking a silver call from his pocket, he imitated the sharp shrill cry of the plover; then turning round, he stood and gazed towards Haddon, scarcely darkened by the setting of the moon, for the festal lights flashed from turret and casement, and the sound of mirth and revelry rang with augmenting din. ‘Ah, fair and stately Haddon,’ said Lord John Manners, ‘little dost thou know, thou hast lost thy jewel from thy brow—else thy lights would be dimmed, thy mirth would turn to wailing, and swords would be flashing from thy portals in all the haste of hot pursuit. Farewell, for a while, fair tower, farewell for a while.—I shall return, and bless the time I harped among thy menials and sang of my love—and charmed her out of thy little chamber window.’ Several armed men now came suddenly down from the hill of Haddon, horses richly caparisoned were brought from among the trees of the chase, and the ancestors of the present family of Rutland sought shelter, for a time, in a distant land from the wrath of the King of the Peak’”