

# Vathek; An Arabian Tale



**William Beckford**

William Beckford

# Vathek; An Arabian Tale

# **PUBLISHER NOTES:**

✓ **VISIT OUR WEBSITE:**

**LyFreedom.com**

# Memoir. By William North

William Beckford, the author of the following celebrated Eastern tale, was born in 1760, and died in the spring of 1844, at the advanced age of eighty-four years. It is to be regretted, that a man of so remarkable a character, did not leave the world some record of a life offering points of interest different from that of any of his contemporaries, from the peculiarly studious retirement and eccentric avocations in which it was chiefly passed. Such a memoir would have formed a curious contrast with that of the late M. de Chateaubriand, who, born nearly at the same period, outlived but by a few years, the strange Englishman, whose famous romance forms a brilliant ornament to French literature, which even *Atala* is unlikely to outlive in the memory of Chateaubriand's countrymen. All men of genius should write autobiographies. Such works are inestimable lessons to posterity. As it is, there are few men, of whom it is more difficult to compose an elaborate and detailed history than the author of “

Vathek.” From such scanty sources as are open to us, the reader must be content with a few striking facts and illustrations, which may serve to convey some idea of the idiosyncrasy of a man, whose whole life was a sort of mystery, even to his personal acquaintances.

His great-great-grandfather was lieutenant-governor and commander of the forces in Jamaica; and his grandfather president of the council in the same island. His father, though not a merchant, as has been represented, but a large landed proprietor, both in England and the West Indies, was lord mayor of London, and distinguished himself in presenting an address to the king, George the Third,—by a spirited retort to his majesty,—who had the ill-breeding to treat discourteously a deputation which the lord mayor headed. The portraits of Alderman Beckford, and his more celebrated son, were painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds. The former died in 1770, leaving the subject of this memoir the wealthiest commoner in England.

No pains were spared on the education of the young Croesus—the lords Chatham and Camden being consulted by his father on that subject. Besides Latin and Greek, he spoke five modern languages, and wrote three with facility and elegance. He read Persian and Arabic, designed with great skill, and studied the science of music under the great Mozart.

At the age of eighteen he visited Paris, and was introduced to Voltaire. “On taking leave of me,” said Beckford, “he placed his hand on my

head, saying, 'There, young Englishman, I give you the blessing of a very old man.' Voltaire was a mere skeleton—a bony anatomy. His countenance I shall never forget."

His first literary production, "Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters," was written at the early age of seventeen. It would appear, that the old housekeeper at Fonthill, was in the habit of edifying visitors to its picture gallery by a description of the paintings, mainly derived from her own fertile imagination. This suggested to our author, the humorous idea of composing a catalogue of suppositious painters with histories of each, equally fanciful and grotesque. Henceforward, the old housekeeper had a printed guide (or rather, mis-guider) to go by, and could discourse at large on the merits of Og of Bashan! Waterslouchy of Amsterdam! and Herr Sucrewasser of Vienna! their wives and styles! As for the country squires, etc., "they," Beckford tells us, "took all for gospel."  
"Vathek,"—the superb "Vathek," which Lord Byron so much admired, and on which he so frequently complimented the author,—"Vathek," the finest of Oriental romances, as "Lallah Rookh" is the first of Oriental poems, by the pen of a "Frank," was written and published before our author had completed his twentieth year, it having been composed at a *single sitting*! Yes, for three days and two nights did the indefatigable author persevere in his task. He completed it, and a serious illness was the result. What other literary man ever equalled this feat of rapidity and genius?

"Vathek" was originally written in French, of which its style is a model. The translation which follows, is not by the author himself, though he expressed perfect satisfaction with it. It was originally published in 1786. For splendour of description, exquisite humour, and supernatural interest and grandeur, it stands without a rival in romance. In as thoroughly Oriental keeping, Hope's "

Anastasius, or Memoirs of a Modern Greek," which Beckford himself highly admired, can alone be compared with it.

Much of the description of Vathek's palace, and even the renowned "Hall of Eblis," was afterwards visibly embodied in the real Fonthill Abbey, of which wonders, almost as fabulous, were at one time reported and believed.

Fonthill Abbey, which had been destroyed by fire, and re-built during the life-time of the elder Beckford, was on account of its bad site demolished, and again re-built under the superintendence of our author himself, assisted by James Wyatt, Esq., the architect, with a magnificence that excited the greatest attention and wonder at the time. The total outlay of building



Fonthill, including furniture, articles of vertu, etc., must have been enormous, not much within the million, as estimated by the “Times.” A writer in the “

Athenæum” mentions £400,000 as the sum. Beckford informed Mr. Cyrus Redding, that the exact cost of building Fonthill was £273,000.

The distinguishing architectural peculiarity of Fonthill Abbey, was a lofty tower, 280 feet in height. This tower was prominently shadowed forth in “

Vathek,” and shows how strong a hold the idea had upon his mind. Such was his impatience to see

Fonthill completed, that he had the works continued by torchlight, with relays of workmen. During the progress of the building, the tower caught fire, and was partly destroyed. The owner, however, was present, and enjoyed the magnificent burning spectacle. It was soon restored; but a radical fault in laying the foundation, caused it eventually to fall down, and leave

Fonthill a ruin in the life-time of its founder.

Not so much his extravagant mode of life, which is the common notion, as the loss of two large estates in a law suit (the value of which may be inferred from the fact, that *fifteen hundred slaves* were upon them)

induced our author to quit Fonthill, and offer it and its contents for public sale. There was a general desire to see the interior of the palace, in which its lord had lived in a luxurious seclusion, so little admired by the curious of the fashionable world. “He is fortunate,” says the “Times” of 1822, “who finds a vacant chair within twenty miles of Fonthill; the solitude of a private apartment is a luxury which few can hope for.” . . . “Falstaff himself could not

*take his ease* at this moment within a dozen leagues of Fonthill.” . . . “The beds through the county are (literally) doing double duty—people who come in from a distance during the night must wait to go to bed until others get up in the morning.” . . . “Not a farm-house, however humble, —not a cottage near Fonthill, but gives shelter to fashion, to beauty, and rank; ostrich plumes, which, by their very waving, we can trace back to Piccadilly, are seen nodding at a casement window over a depopulated poultry-yard.”

The costly treasures of art and vertu, as well as the furniture of the rich mansion, were scattered far and wide; and one of its tables served the writer of this memoir to scribble upon, when first stern necessity, or yet sterner ambition, urged him to add his mite to the Babel tower of literature. At that table I first read “

Vathek.” I have read it often since, and every perusal has increased my admiration.

Nearly fifty years after the publication of "Vathek," in 1835, Mr. Beckford published his "Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaca and Batalha," which he had taken in 1795, together with an epistolary record of his observations in Italy, Spain and Portugal, between the years 1780 and 1794. These are marked, as he himself intimates, "with the bloom and heyday of youthful spirits and youthful confidence, at a period when the older order of things existed with all its picturesque pomps and absurdities; when Venice enjoyed her Piombi and submarine dungeons; Prance her Bastille; the Peninsula her Holy Inquisition." With none of those subjects, however, are the letters occupied—but with delineations of landscape, and the effects of natural phenomena. These literary efforts appear to have exhausted their author's productive powers; in a word, he seems soon to have been "used-up," and then to have discontinued his search after new sensations, or to have been content to live without them.

After the sale of Fonthill, our author lived a considerable time in Portugal, and hence Lord Byron, who was fond of casting the shadow of his own imagination over every object, penned the well-known lines at Cintra:

"There thou, too, Vathek, England's wealthiest son,  
Once formed thy paradise; as not aware

Where wanton wealth her mightiest deeds hath done,

Meek peace, voluptuous lures, was ever wont to shun.  
Here didst thou dwell; here scenes of pleasure plan,

Beneath yon mountain's ever beauteous brow;

But now, as if a thing  
unblest by man,  
Thy fairy dwelling is as lone as thou!

Here giant weeds a passage scarce allow

To halls deserted; portals gaping wide

Fresh lessons to the thinking bosom; how

Vain are the  
pleasaunces on earth supplied,  
Swept into wrecks anon by time's ungentle tide."

These sombre verses contrast strangely with Beckford's saying to Mr. Cyrus Redding, in his seventy-sixth year, "that he had never felt a moments' ennui in his life."

Beckford was in person scarcely above the middle height, slender, and well formed, with features indicating great intellectual power. He was exactly one year younger than Pitt, the companion of his minority. His political principles were popular, though it is recorded, that at a court ball on the Queen's birth-day, in 1782, he, with Miss North, led up a country dance. He sat in parliament, in his early years, both for Wells and Hendon, but retired on account of bad health. This, however, he overcame by careful diet and exercise, as testified by his great bodily activity almost to the last. He was a man of most extensive reading, and cultivated taste.

The last years of his life were passed at Bath—where he united two houses in Lansdown Crescent, by an arch thrown across the street, and containing his library, which was well selected, and very extensive. Not far off, he again erected a tower, 180 feet high, of which the following description was given at the time of his decease, by a correspondent of the *Athenæum*:—

"Mr. Beckford, at an early period of his residence there, erected a lofty tower, in the apartments of which were placed many of his choicest paintings and articles of vertu. Asiatic in its style, with gilded lattices and blinds, or curtains, of crimson cloth, its striped ceilings, its minaret, and other accessories, conveyed the idea that the being who designed the place and endeavoured to carry out the plan, was deeply imbued with the spirit of that lonely grandeur and strict solitariness which obtains through all countries and among all people of the East. The building was surrounded by a high wall, and entrance afforded to the garden in which the tower stood, by a door of small dimensions. The garden itself was Eastern in its character. Though comparatively circumscribed in its size, nevertheless were to be found within it, solitary walks and deep retiring shades, such as could be supposed Vathek, the mournful and the magnificent, loved, and from the bowers of which might be expected would suddenly fall upon the ear, sounds of the cymbal and the dulcimer. The building contained several apartments crowded with the finest paintings. At the time I made my inspection the walls were crowded with the choicest productions of the easel. The memory falls back upon ineffaceable impressions of Old Franks, Breughel, Cuyp, Titian, (a Holy Family), Hondekooter, Polemberg, and a host of other painters whose works have immortalized Art. Ornaments of the most exquisite gold fillagree, carvings in ivory and wood, Raphaelesque china, goblets formed of gems, others fashioned by the miraculous hands of Benvenuto Cellini, filled the many cabinets



and *recherché* receptacles created for such things. The doors of the rooms were of finely polished wood—the windows of single sweeps of plate glass—the cornices of gilded silver; every part, both within and without, bespeaking the wealth, the magnificence, and the taste of him who had built this temple in dedication to grandeur, solitariness, and the arts.”

From the summit of this tower, Mr. Beckford, and he alone without a telescope,—could behold that other tower of his youthful magnificence, Fonthill; on which he loved to gaze, with feelings which it would be difficult to describe. His eyesight was wonderful; he could gaze upon the sun like an eagle; and on the day that the great tower at Fonthill fell he missed it in the landscape long before the news of the catastrophe reached Bath.

In conclusion, we have only to add, that our author, in his life-time, had all that wealth can give, and in his grave his memory will retain that which no wealth can purchase. Whatever may have been his errors, they have died with him. His genius yet lives, and “*Vathek*,” now for the first time presented to the public in a popular form, will, whilst English literature lasts, never want readers, and, while good taste flourishes, admirers.

---

# Preface

The original of the following story, with some others of a similar kind, collected in the east by a man of letters, was communicated to the editor above three years ago. The pleasure he received from the perusal of it induced him at that time to transcribe, and since to translate it. How far the copy may be a just representation it becomes not him to determine. He presumes however to hope that if the difficulty of accommodating our English idioms to the Arabic, preserving the correspondent tones of a diversified narration, and discriminating the nicer touches of character through the shades of foreign manners be duly considered, a failure in some points will not preclude him from all claim to indulgence; especially if those images, sentiments, and passions, which being independent of local peculiarities, may be expressed in every language, shall be found to retain their native energy in our own.

---

# Vathek

Vathek, ninth Caliph<sup>1</sup> of the race of the Abassides, was the son of Motassem, and the grandson of Haroun Al Raschid. From an early accession to the throne, and the talents he possessed to adorn it, his subjects were induced to expect that his reign would be long and happy. His figure was pleasing and majestic; but when he was angry, one of his eyes became so terrible

<sup>2</sup> that no person could bear to behold it; and the wretch upon whom it was fixed instantly fell backward, and sometimes expired. For fear, however, of depopulating his dominions, and making his palace desolate, he but rarely gave way to his anger.

Being much addicted to women, and the pleasures of the table, he sought by his affability to procure agreeable companions; and he succeeded the better, as his generosity was unbounded and his indulgences unrestrained; for he was by no means scrupulous: nor did he think, with the Caliph Omar Ben Abdalaziz,<sup>3</sup> that it was necessary to make a hell of this world to enjoy Paradise in the next.

He surpassed in magnificence all his predecessors. The palace of Alkoremme, which his father Motassem had erected on the hill of Pied Horses, and which commanded the whole city of Samarah,<sup>4</sup> was in his idea far too scanty: he added, therefore, five wings, or rather other palaces, which he destined for the particular gratification of each of his senses.

In the first of these were tables continually covered with the most exquisite dainties, which were supplied both by night and by day according to their constant consumption; whilst the most delicious wines, and the choicest cordials, flowed forth from a hundred fountains, that were never exhausted. This palace was called "The Eternal, or

Unsatiating Banquet.”

The second was styled “The Temple of Melody, or the Nectar of the Soul.” It was inhabited by the most skilful musicians and admired poets of the time, who not only displayed their talents within, but dispersing in bands without, caused every surrounding scene to reverberate their songs, which were continually varied in the most delightful succession.

The palace named “The Delight of the Eyes, or the Support of Memory,” was one entire enchantment. Rarities collected from every corner of the earth were there found in such profusion as to dazzle and confound, but for the order in which they were arranged. One gallery exhibited the pictures of the celebrated Mani; and statues that seemed to be alive. Here a well-managed perspective attracted the sight; there, the magic of optics agreeably deceived it; whilst the naturalist, on his part, exhibited in their several classes the various gifts that heaven had bestowed on our globe. In a word,

Vathek omitted nothing in this particular that might gratify the curiosity of those who resorted to it, although he was not able to satisfy his own; for he was, of all men, the most curious.

“The Palace of Perfumes,” which was termed likewise, “The Incentive to Pleasure,” consisted of various halls, where the different perfumes which the earth produces were kept perpetually burning in censers of gold. Flambeaus and aromatic lamps were here lighted in open day; but the too powerful effects of this agreeable delirium might be avoided by descending into an immense garden, where an assemblage of every fragrant flower diffused through the air the purest odours.

The fifth palace, denominated “The Retreat of Joy, or the Dangerous,” was frequented by troops of young females, beautiful as the Houris,<sup>5</sup> and not less seducing, who never failed to receive with caresses all whom the Caliph allowed to approach them; for he was by no means disposed to be jealous, as his own women were secluded within the palace he inhabited himself.

Notwithstanding the sensuality in which Vathek indulged, he experienced no abatement in the love of his people, who thought that a sovereign immersed in pleasure was not less tolerable to his subjects than one that employed himself in creating them foes. But the unquiet and impetuous disposition of the Caliph would not allow him to rest there: he had studied so much for his amusement in the life-time of his father as to acquire a great deal of knowledge, though not a sufficiency to satisfy himself; for he wished to know everything; even sciences that