

# **RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD**

Henry Venn Lansdown



# Table of Contents

<u>RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD</u> .....	1
<u>Henry Venn Lansdown</u> .....	2

# **RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD**

**Henry Venn Lansdown**

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.  
<http://www.blackmask.com>

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD OF FONTHILL, WILTS;  
AND LANSDOWN, BATH :::: Henry Venn Lansdown :::: 1893

The following text, published originally in a very limited edition and only reprinted once in a limited facsimile edition, is a collection of letters from Henry Venn Lansdown to his daughter, Charlotte. Lansdown, who met with and visited Beckford on numerous occasions, writes vividly of their encounters. The letters contain detailed descriptions of not only Beckford's home in Bath, including Lansdown Tower, but also of the remains of Fonthill Abbey. The Recollections is especially detailed in regards to Beckford's collection of works of art – at times the letters read as catalogues of famous painters and artists represented in Beckford's collections.

The Manuscript of the following Letters, written by my Father, has been in my Possession fifty years. He intended to publish it at the time of Mr. Beckford's death, in 1844, but delayed the execution of the work, and sixteen years afterwards was himself called to enter on the higher life of the spiritual world.

Mr. Beckford and my Father were kindred spirits, conversant with the same authors, had visited the same countries, and were both gifted with extraordinary memories. Mr. Beckford said that he had never met with a man possessed of such a memory as my Father; and many a time has my Father told me that he never met a man who possessed such a memory as Mr.

Beckford.

If my Father had published the Reminiscences himself I think that much misconception in the public mind respecting the character of Mr. Beckford would have been prevented. For instance, I remember, when a child, being warned that this great man was an infidel. When he showed my Father the sarcophagus in which his body was to be placed, he remarked, "There shall I lie, Lansdown, until the trump of God shall rouse me on the Resurrection morn."

CHARLOTTE LANSDOWN.

8 Lower East Hayes, Bath; July, 1893. RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD.  
Bath, August 21, 1838.

MY DEAR CHARLOTTE, – I have this day seen such an astonishing assemblage of works of art, so numerous and of so surprisingly rare a description that I am literally what Lord Byron calls "Dazzled and drunk with beauty." I feel so bewildered from beholding the rapid succession of some of the very finest productions of the great masters that the attempt to describe them seems an impossible task; however, I will make an effort.

The collection of which I speak is that of Mr. Beckford, at his house in Lansdown–crescent.

Besides all this I have this day been introduced to that extraordinary man, the author of "Vathek" and "Italy," the builder of Fonthill, the contemporary of the mighty and departed dead, the pupil of Mozart; in fact, to the formidable and inaccessible Vathek himself! I have many times passed the house, and longed to see its contents, and often have I wondered how a building with so plain and unostentatious an exterior could suit the reception of the works it contains, and the residence of so magnificent a personage.

I first called by appointment on his ingenious architect, Mr. Goodridge (to whom I am indebted for this distinguished favour), and he accompanied me to the house, which we reached at half–past twelve o'clock. We were shown upstairs, passing many fine family pictures, and were ushered into the neat library, where Mr. Beckford was waiting to receive us. I confess I did at first feel somewhat embarrassed, but a lovely spaniel ran playfully towards us, licking our hands in the most affectionate [6] and hospitable manner; "You are welcome" was the silent language. I assure you I judge much, and often truly, of the character of individuals from the deportment of their favourite dogs. I often find them exactly indicative of their master's disposition. When you are

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

attacked by snarling, waspish curs is it at all wonderful if you find them an echo of the proprietor? But this beautiful animal reassured me, and gave me instantly a favourable idea of its master. My astonishment was great at the spaciousness of the room, which had in length a magnificent and palatial effect, nor did I immediately discover the cause of its apparent grandeur. It opens into the gallery built over the arch connecting the two houses, at the end of which an immense mirror reflects the two apartments. The effect is most illusive, nor should I have guessed the truth had I not seen the reflection of my own figure in the glass.

The library, which is the whole length of the first house, cannot be much less than fifty feet long. It has on one side five lofty windows, the gallery having three on the same side. You have the light streaming through eight consecutive openings; these openings, with their crimson curtains, doubled by the reflection, produce a most charming perspective. From the ceiling hangs a splendid ormolu chandelier, the floor is covered with a Persian carpet (brought I believe from Portugal), so sumptuous that one is afraid to walk on it, and a noble mosaic table of Florentine marble, bought in at an immense price at Fonthill, is in the centre of the room. Several rows of the rarest books cover the lower part of the walls, and above them hang many fine portraits, which Mr. Beckford immediately, without losing any time in compliments, began to show us and describe.

First we were shown a portrait by de Vos of Grotius; next to it one of Rembrandt, painted by himself. "You see," said Mr. Beckford, "that he is trying to assume an air of dignity not natural to him, lay throwing back his head, but this attempt at the dignified is neutralized by the expression of the eyes, which have rather too much of sly humour for the character which he wishes to give himself." To praise individual pictures seems useless when everyone you meet has excellencies peculiar to itself; in fact, whatever our ideas of the great masters may be, and we certainly do gain from prints and pictures [7] a tolerable idea of their style and different beauties (and I have myself seen the Louvre and many celebrated pictures) there is in Mr. Beckford's chef d'oeuvres something still more lovely than our imagination, than our expectation. I speak not now of the St. Catherine, The Claud [sic], The Titian, but all the pictures, whether historical, landscape, or low life, have this unique character of excellence.

You look at a picture. You are sure it is by Gaspar, but you never saw one of Poussin's that had such an exquisite tone of colour, so fresh and with such free and brilliant execution.

But I digress. I forgot that it was the library and its pictures I was attempting to describe.

Well, at the other end hangs a portrait of Pope Gregory, by Passerotti; the expression of the face Italian, attitude like Raphael. Over the door a portrait of Cosmo de Medici by Bronzino Allori, fresh as if painted yesterday. "The works of that master," I said, "are rare, but a friend of mine, Mr. Day, had a noble one at his rooms in Piccadilly, St. John in the Wilderness. The conception of the figure and poetical expression of the face always seemed to me astonishingly fine. Pray, Sir, do you know that picture?" "Perfectly, it partakes of the sublime and is amazingly fine." "Your portrait of Cosmo has the expression of a resolute, determined man, and I think it conveys well the idea of the monstrous parent, who could with his own hand destroy his only surviving son after discovering he had murdered his brother. What a horrible piece of business! The father of two sons, one of whom murdered the other, and that father is himself the executioner of the survivor." "It was dreadful certainly," said Mr. Beckford.

"However, we have the consolation of knowing that two broods of vipers were destroyed."

Mr. Beckford next showed us a Titian, a portrait of the Constable Montmorency, in armour richly chased with gold; a fine picture, but sadly deficient in intellectual expression. And no wonder, for as Mr. Beckford observed, "He could neither read nor write, but he was none the worse for that." "There is, then, before us," I rejoined, "the portrait of the man of whom his master, Henri Quatre, said: 'Avec un Connetable qui ne sait pas ecrire, et un Chancelier qui ne sait pas le Latin, j'ai reussi dans toutes mes entreprises.' It is the very por- [8] trait for which he sat." "The face," I said, "has no great pretensions to intellect, but then Titian know nothing of the refined flattery so fashionable now-a-days that throws a halo of mind and expression over faces more stupid than Montmorency's, and whose possessors never performed the chivalrous deeds of the Constable."

"Witness Sir Thomas Lawrence's fine picture of Sir Wm. Curtis, where the Court painter has thrown a poetical expression over, a personage that never in his life betrayed any predilection for anything but turtle soup and gormandizing." Mr. Beckford burst out laughing. "Well," said he, "here is a picture that will perhaps please you. Holbein hag certainly not been guilty of the refined flattery you complain of here; it is the portrait of Bishop

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

Gardiner, painted at the time he was in Holland and in disgrace. What think you of it?" "It is admirably painted, and has scarcely anything of his dry and hard manner, the hands are done inimitably, but the eyes are small, and the expression cold-hearted and brutal. It conveys to my mind the exact idea of the cold-blooded wretch, who consigned so many of his innocent countrymen to the flames." I did not express all I thought, but I certainly wondered how the effigy of such a monster should have found an asylum in this palace of taste. Smithfield and its horrors rose vividly before me, and I turned, not without a shudder, from this too faithful portrait to copies by Phillips of some family pictures in the Royal Collection, painted by permission expressly for Mr. Beckford, and looking more like originals than more copies.

But the picture of pictures in this room is a Velasquez, an unknown head, the expression beyond anything I have ever seen. Such light and shade, such expressive eyes; the very epitome of Spanish character. "Is it not amazingly like Lord Byron?" "It certainly is very like him, but much more handsome." This room is devoted entirely to portraits.

Mr. Beckford opened a door and we entered the Duchess Drawing Room; a truly Royal room, the colour of the curtains, carpet, and furniture being crimson, scarlet, and purple. Over the fireplace is a full length portrait of the Duchess of Hamilton by Phillips, painted in the rich and glowing style of that sweet colourist. It represents a beautiful and truly dignified lady. The [9] sleeves of the dress are close and small, as worn in 1810 (*Quel bonheur! d'etre jeune, jolie, et Duchesse*), go truly becoming to a finely formed woman, and so much superior to the present horrid fashion of disfiguring the shape by gigot and bishop's sleeves, which seem to have been invented expressly to conceal what is indeed most truly beautiful, a woman's arm.

We were next shown a glorious Sir Joshua, a beautiful full length portrait of Mrs. Peter Beckford, afterwards Lady Rivers, and the "Nouronchar" of Vathek. She is represented approaching an altar partially obscured by clouds of incense that she may sacrifice to Hygeia, and turning round looking at the spectator. The background is quite Titianesque; it is composed of sky and the columns of the temple, the light breaking on the pillars in that forcible manner you see on the stems of trees in some of Titian's backgrounds. The colouring of this picture is in fine preservation, a delicate lilac scarf floats over the dress, the figure is grace and elegance itself, and the drawing perfect; the general effect is brilliancy, richness, and astonishing softness. "Sir Joshua took the greatest pleasure and delight in painting that picture, as it was left entirely to his own refined taste. The lady was in ill-health at the time it was done, and Sir Joshua most charmingly conceived the idea of a sacrifice to the Goddess of Health. Vain hope! Her disorder was fatal."

There is a portrait of Mr. Beckford's mother painted by West, with a view of Fonthill in the background. Never was there a greater contrast in this and the last picture; West certainly knew nothing of portrait painting. The tout ensemble of the portrait in question is as dry and hard as if painted by a Chinese novice. There is also a portrait of the Countess, of Effingham, Mr. Beckford's aunt. On one side is the original portrait by Reynolds of the author of Vathek engraved as the frontispiece of the "Excursions to the Monasteries." The character of the original picture is much superior in expression to the print, less stout, eyes very intellectual; in fact, you are convinced it must be the portrait of a poet or of a poetical character. The face is very handsome, so is the print, but that has nothing in it but what you meet with in a good looking young man of fashion. This, on the contrary, has an expression of sensibility, [10] deeply tinged with melancholy, which gives it great interest.

On the other side of Lady Rivers's portrait is the Duke of Hamilton when a boy. A sweet child, with the hair cut straight along the forehead, as worn by children some fifty years ago, and hanging luxuriantly down his neck. On the same side of the room, behind a bronze of the Laocoon, is a wonderful sketch by Paolo Veronese, the drawing and composition in the grand style, touched with great sweetness and juiciness. Two small upright Bassans, painted conjointly by both, bearing their names; the point of sight is immensely high.

We were then led down the north staircase. Fronting us was a portrait of Mr. Beckford's father, the Alderman and celebrated Lord Mayor of London. Mr. Goodridge asked him if he knew a book, just published, denying the truth of his father's famous speech to George III. He seemed astonished, and stood still on the staircase. "Not true! What in the world will they find out next? Garrick was present when my father uttered it, heard the whole speech, repeated it word for word to me, and what is more, acted it in my father's manner." "That is the portrait of my great-grandfather, Colonel Peter Beckford. It was painted by a French artist, who went to Jamaica for the purpose, at the time he was Governor of the island." It is a full length portrait, large as life, the Colonel dressed in

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

a scarlet coat embroidered richly with gold. There is also a lovely portrait by Barker of the present Marquis of Douglas, Mr. Beckford's grandson; it was painted when Lord Douglas was twelve or thirteen years old. There is also a charming picture by Reynolds, two beautiful little girls, full length and large as life; they are the present Duchess of Hamilton and her sister, Mrs. General Ord.

We now entered the lovely dining room, which in point of brilliancy and cheerfulness has more the character of a drawing than of a dining room. Opposite the window is an upright grand pianoforte. It is the largest ever made, with the exception of its companion made at the same time, and its richness and power of sound are very great. Over the fire is what is seldom seen in a dining room, a large looking glass. The paintings in this room have been valued at upwards of £20,000.

On the right as you enter are five pictures that once [11] adorned the Aldsbrandini Palace, namely, the St. Catherine by Raphael, a Claude, a Garofalo, two by Ferrara, and several smaller ones. But bow shall I attempt to describe to you the St. Catherine! This lovely picture combines all the refined elegance of the Venus de Medici, in form, contour, and flowing lines, with an astonishing delicacy of colour, and masterly yet softened execution. The eyes are turned upwards with an expression of heavenly resignation, the neck, flesh and life itself, the bands, arms, and shoulders so sweetly rounded, while the figure melts into the background with the softness of Corregio.

And fills

The air around with beauty; we inhale

The ambrosial aspect, which beheld instils

Part of its immortality; the veil

Of heaven is half withdrawn; within the pale

We stand, and in that form and face behold

What mind can make, when Nature's self would fail.

I can only convey to you a very slight idea of the impression produced by the contemplation of this admirable painting. Such grace and sweetness, such softness and roundness in the limbs.

She seems the most beautiful creature that ever trod this earthly planet; in short it is no earthly beauty that we gaze upon, but the very beau ideal of Italian loveliness.

Eve of the land which still is Paradise.

Italian beauty! didst thou not inspire Raphael? "How different," said Mr. Beckford, "is that lovely creature from Mr. Etty's beauties. They are for the most part of a meretricious character, would do well enough for a mistress; but there," pointing to the St. Catherine, "there are personified the modesty and purity a man would wish to have in a wife, and yet Frenchmen find fault with it. Vest un assez joli tableau, say they, mais la tete manque, de l'expression; Bi elle avait plus d'esprit, plus de vivacite! Mais Raphael, il n'avait jamais passe les Alpes." We burst out laughing, and I added, "Le pauvre Raphael quel dommage, de ne savoir rien du grand. Monarque! ni de la grande nation." "Yet," I continued, "there is a painter, Stotherd, who has come nearer to the great Italian, in the grace and elegance of his women and children, than perhaps any other, and merits well the proud appellation of the English Raphael. [12] What a shame that he never met with encouragement." "But I understood that he was tolerably successful. He painted many things for me at Fonthill. You are surely mistaken." "By no means," I replied. "Latterly he seldom sold a picture, and supported himself on the paltry income of £200 a year, raised by making little designs for booksellers. Yet what a noble painting is Chaucer's pilgrimage to Canterbury." "It is indeed," said Mr. Beckford.

"But, sir, there is another painter, Howard, whose conceptions are most poetical. Do you remember his painting at Somerset House in 1824, representing the solar system, from Milton's noble lines –



## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

Hither as to their fountain, other stars

Repairing, in their golden urns draw light?"

"I remember it perfectly; 'twas a most beautiful picture." "Milton's original idea, that of the planets drawing light from their eternal source, as water from a fountain, is certainly a glorious, a golden one; but who beside Howard could have so tangibly, so poetically developed the poet's idea in colour. The personifying the planets according to their names, as Venus, Mercury, and so forth, was charming, and the splendour of the nearer figures, overwhelmed as it were with excess of light, and the gloom and darkness of the distant, were admirably managed. What a wonderful picture!" "He never painted a finer."

Mr. Beckford then pointed out his Claude. It is a cool picture, the colouring grey and greenish, the time of day, early morning just before sunrise. but words fail to express its beauties. There is a something in it, a *je ne sais quoi*. Such clearness in the colouring; the trees are all green, but so tenderly green; the sky and distance of such an exquisite tone that you are at once in imagination transported to those "southern climes and cloudless skies" that inspired Claude Lorraine. I can give no possible idea in writing of the tone of colour in this picture, except by comparing it to the semi-transparency of Mosaic, such are the clearness of the tints and pearliness of the sky and distance. As to *chiaro-oscuro*, it is breadth and simplicity itself.

Nothing but the purest ultramarine could ever produce such a green as that which colours the trees.

On the same side of the room are two small Vander Meulens, landscapes. They are very highly finished, [13] and the colouring is delicious; the trees are grouped with all the grandeur of Claude or Poussin. Above are two of the finest Vernets; they are both sea pieces. The colouring has a depth and richness I never before saw in anything attributed to him. In the Louvre are his most famous pictures, and what I now say is the result of calm and mature reflection. I had the Louvre pictures constantly before my eyes for three months. They are very large, and certainly have great merit; but had I my choice I would prefer Mr. Beckford's to any of the set.

West's original sketch for his great picture of King Lear, painted for Boydell's Shakspeare Gallery – "Blow, blow, thou winter wind." A most wonderful performance. The expression of face of the poor mad king is astonishing; the colouring rich and mellow – nothing of West's usually hard outline. The whole picture is full of energy and fire, and seems to have been struck off with the greatest ease and rapidity. "Do observe the face of Edgar," said Mr. Beckford. "Under his assumed madness you trace a sentiment of respect and anxiety for the monarch; he could not forget that it was his sovereign." "I have seen," I said, "most of West's great pictures, but there is more genius in that sketch than in anything I ever saw of his. I think he took too much pains with his sketches. The consequence was that the original spirit evaporated long before the completion of the great tame painting, where his men and women too often look like wooden lay figures covered with drapery." "Sir, did you ever see his sketch of Death on the Pale Horse? The large picture is certainly very fine, but I have heard the best judges say that the original sketch is one of the finest things in existence. The President himself considered it his best and refused £100, offered for it by the Prince Regent; yet afterwards, being distressed for money, he parted with it, I believe, to Mr. Thompson, the artist, for £50." "Is it possible? I wish I had known that he wanted to dispose of it. I should have liked it beyond anything. It was most wonderful."

Above the picture of King Lear hangs a noble picture by Titian, the composition of which reminded me much of Raphael. The Virgin's face is extremely beautiful, but it is the sort of beauty we sometimes meet with, that we sometimes may have seen. The St. Catherine is of a more elevated style of beauty, more intellectual; in [14] short, it possesses a combination of charms that has never yet fallen to the lot of any mortal. The infant is extremely fine. On this side is also a portrait of himself exquisitely coloured and finished.

Near these paintings is a Canaletti, not a real view, but an assemblage of various fine buildings; in fact, a sort of union of Rome and Venice. In the centre is the Mole of Hadrian, round which he has amused himself by

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

putting an elegant colonnade; on the right hand is a bridge. The colouring is clear, the shadows rich, and the water softly painted and extremely transparent. This is the most beautiful Canaletti I ever saw. I observed that the generality of his pictures had a hardness, dryness, and blackness that we saw nothing of here. "You are quite right," he said, "and the reason is that very few of those generally attributed to him are really genuine, but of mine there can be no doubt, as this painting and several others that I have were got directly from the artist himself by means of the English Consul at Venice; but not a quarter of the pictures that one sees and that are called his were ever painted by Canaletti." There were several very fine pictures by this master destroyed in the lifetime of Alderman Beckford at the fire which consumed the old mansion at Fonthill nearly a hundred years ago.

This Canaletti partakes of the same character of high excellence that Mr. Beckford's other pictures possess; in fact, as with so many of his pictures, you see the hand of the master, whose common works you know, but in this house you find paintings still finer, which give you more elevated and correct ideas of the style and manner of the genuine productions of the great masters. There really seems some charm some magic in the walls, so great is the similarity of colouring in these chefs d'oeuvres, the clear, the subdued, the pearly tints, a variety of delicious colour, and none of the dirty hues you see in mediocre old paintings.

Over the sofa is a constellation of beauties which we merely glanced at as we passed, but which I hope another day to examine. They are some of the rarest specimens by G. Poussin, Wouvermans, Berghem, Van Huysum, Polemberg, and others. On a small table was placed an elegantly cut caraffe of carnations of every variety of colour that you can possibly imagine.

There is nothing [15] in which Mr. Beckford is more choice than in his bouquets. At every season the rarest living flowers adorn the house.

Next to the dining room is a small salon, which we now entered. Here is a noble drawing by Turner of the Abbey, according to a plan proposed, but never carried out. The tower is conical, and would have been even higher than the one that was completed. "I have seen," I said, "a fine drawing of Fonthill by Turner, originally in your possession, but now belonging to Mr.

Allnutt, of Clapham. It is prodigiously fine. The scenery there must be magnificent. The hills and beautiful lake in the drawing give one an idea of Cumberland." "It is a very fine drawing, but rather too poetical, too ideal, even for Fonthill. The scenery there is certainly beautiful, but Turner took such liberties with it that he entirely destroyed the portraiture, the locality of the spot. That was the reason I parted with it. There were originally six drawings of the Abbey; three were disposed of at the sale, and I still have the remaining ones." "Are they going to rebuild the tower, sir? for when I was last in London, Papworth, the architect, was gone down to Fonthill to do something there." "Impossible," he said, unless it were to be made a national affair, which indeed is not very likely. It would cost at least £100,000 to restore it. But what can Papworth have done there? It must I should think be something to the pavilion. I assure you I had no idea of parting with Fonthill till Farquhar made me the offer. I wished to purge it, to get rid of a great many things I did not want, but as to the building itself I had no more notion of selling it than you have (turning to his architect) of parting with anything, with – with the clothes you have on.

On the chimney piece, protected by a glass, is a precious Japan vase. We examined it for some time under its envelope. It seemed to me (for I know nothing of Japan work) a bronze vessel, richly and most elaborately chased, and I could not help joining in the praises due to its exquisite finish. Mr. Beckford took off the glass, and desired me to take it to the window. "I am really afraid to touch it," said I, but he forced it into my hands. I prepared them to receive a massive and (as it seemed to me) very weighty vessel, when lo it proved as light as a feather. We were afterwards shown another Japan vase, the exterior of which exactly resembled the Pompeian [16] designs, elegant scrolls, delicate tracery of blue, red, green,

These colours strongly opposed as in the remains of paintings at Pompeii. Here are some other precious little pictures, a small Gerard Dow, a Watteau, a Moucheron, and a Polemberg.

He merely noticed them, and then led us into the next room.

A noble library. It is an elegant and charming apartment, very chastely ornamented. Here are no pictures; it is devoted entirely to books and ponderous folios of the most rare and precious engravings. The sides of the library are adorned by Scagliola pilasters and arched recesses, which contain the books. The interstices between the arches and the ceiling are painted in imitation of marble, so extremely like that though they touch the Scagliola it is next to impossible to distinguish any difference. The ceiling is belted across and enriched with bands of Grecian

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

tracery in relief, delicately painted and slightly touched with gold. On the walls are some gilded ornaments, enough to give to the whole richness of effect without heaviness.

Between the windows is what I suppose may be termed a table, composed of an enormous slab of the rarest marble, supported by elegantly cast bronze legs. Over this a small cabinet (manufactured in Bath from drawings by Mr. Goodridge) full of extremely small books; it is carved in oak in the most elaborate manner. The fireplace, of Devonshire marble, is perfect in design and in its adaptation to the rest of the room; in fact, everything in this lovely chamber is in unison, everything soft, quiet, and subdued.

New wonders awaited me. Next to the library is a sort of vestibule leading to a staircase, which from its mysterious and crimson light, rich draperies, and latticed doors seemed to be the sanctum sanctorum of a heathen temple. To the left a long passage, whose termination not being seen allowed the imagination full play, led for aught I know to the Fortress of Akerman, to the Montagne du Caf or to the Halls of Argenti. *Ou sont peintes toutes les createures raisonnables, et les animaux qui ont habite la terre.*

To the right two latticed doors, reminding you of Grand Cairo or Persepolis, ingeniously conceal the commonplace entrance from the Crescent. The singular and harmonious light of this mysterious vestibule is produced by crimson silk strained over the fanlight of the outer [17] door. "This place," I observed, "puts one in mind of the Hall of Eblis." "You are quite right," he observed, "this is unquestionably the Hall of Eblis." "Those latticed doors," I continued, "seem to lead to the small apartment where the three princes, Alasi, Barkiarokh, and Kalilah, related to Vathek and Nouronchar their adventures." He seemed amused at my observations, and said, "Then you have read 'Vathek.' How do you like it?" "Vastly. I read it in English many years ago, but never in French." "Then read it in French," said Mr. Beckford.

"The French edition is much finer than the English."

We mounted the staircase. Above you in open niches are Etruscan vases. The ceiling is arched and has belts at intervals. "I wished to exclude the draughts," said Mr. Beckford, "and to do away with the cold and uncomfortable appearance you generally have in staircases." The effect of the whole is so novel that you lose all idea of stairs, and seem merely going from one room to another. As you stand on the landing the vaulted and belted ceiling behind you has the appearance of a row of arches in perspective. The same solemn and mysterious gloom pervades the staircase. The architect has frequently entreated to be allowed to introduce a little more light, but in vain. The author of "Vathek" will not consent to the least alteration of the present mystical effect, and he is quite right. This warm and indefinite light produces not only the effect of air, but also of space, and makes the passage before noticed, seen through the latticed doors, apparently of lines of real dimensions.

Mr. Beckford drew aside a curtain. We entered the smaller of two lovely drawing rooms lately fitted up. Before us, over the mantelpiece, was suspended a magnificent full length portrait by Gaspar de Crayer of Philip II. of Spain. Just then my head was too full of the Hall of Eblis, of "Vathek" and its associations, for mere ordinary admiration of even one of the finest portraits painted, and on Mr. Beckford pointing out the whitefaced monarch I almost involuntarily ejaculated "Pale slave of Eblis." He burst out laughing. "Eh! eh! what? His face is pale indeed, but he was very proud of his complexion." This is a very fine group. Philip is represented dressed in a suit of black armour, elaborately chased in gold, standing on a throne covered [18] with a crimson carpet. Near him is his dwarf, dressed in black, holding the helmet, adorned with a magnificent plume of feathers, and turning towards his master (the fountain of honour) a most expressive and intelligent face. "That dwarf," said Mr. Beckford, "was a man of great ability and exercised over his master a vast influence." Lower down you discover the head of a Mexican page, holding a horse, whose head, as well as that of the page, is all that is visible, their bodies being concealed by the steps of the throne. This is a noble picture; but in my eyes the extreme plainness of the steps of the throne and the unornamented war boots of the king have a bare and naked appearance. They contrast rather too violently with the whole of the upper part of the picture. Over the steps are painted in Roman letters *Rx. Ps. 4s. (Rex Philippus quartus)*. Many who have hardly heard the painter's name will of course not admire it, being done neither by Titian nor Vandyke; but Mr. Beckford's taste is peculiar. He prefers a genuine picture by an inferior painter to those attributed to the more celebrated masters, but where originality is ambiguous, or at least if not ambiguous where picture cleaner, or scavengers, as he calls them, have been at work. In this room, suspended from the ceiling by a silken cord, is the silver gilt lamp that hung in the oratory at Fonthill. Its shape and proportion are very elegant, and no wonder; it was designed by the author of "Italy"

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

himself.

How great was my astonishment some time after, on visiting Fonthill, at perceiving, suspended from the cul de lamp, the very crimson cord that once supported this precious vessel! The lamp had been hastily cut down, and the height of the remains of the cord from the floor was probably the reason of its preservation.

Mr. Beckford next pointed out a charming sketch by Rubens, clear and pearly beyond conception. It is St. George and the Dragon, the dragon hero and his horse in the air, and the dragon must certainly have been—an African lion. Mr. Beckford called the beast, or reptile, a mumpsimus (sic). "Do look at the Pontimeitos in the beautiful sketch," said he, "there is a bit from his pencil certainly his own. Don't imagine that those great pictures that bear his name are all his pictures. He was too much of a gentleman for such drudgery, and the greatest part of such pictures (the Luxembourg for instance) are [19] the works of his pupils from his original designs certainly; they were afterwards retouched by him, and people are silly enough to believe they are all his work. But mark well the difference in execution between those great gallery pictures and such a gem as this." Mr. Beckford then showed me a "Ripon" by Polemberg, a lovely classic landscape, with smooth sky, pearly distance, and picturesque plains; the Holy Family in the foreground. "Do take notice of the St. Joseph in this charming picture," he said. "The painters too often pourtray him as little better than a vagabond Jew or an old beggar. Polemberg had too much good taste for such caricaturing, and you see he has made him here look like a decayed gentleman."

Mr. Beckford drew aside another curtain, and we entered the front drawing room, of larger dimensions, but fitted up in a similar style. The first thing that caught my eye was the magnificent effect produced by a scarlet drapery, whose ample folds covered the whole side of the room opposite the three windows from the ceiling to the floor. Mr. Beckford's observation on his first view of Mad. d' Aranda's boudoir instantly recurred to my mind. These are his very words: "I wonder architects and fitters—up of apartments do not avail themselves more frequently of the powers of drapery. Nothing produces so grand and at the same time so comfortable an effect. The moment I have an opportunity I will set about constructing a tabernacle larger than the one I arranged at Ramalhad, and indulge myself in every variety of plait and fold that can be possibly invented." "I never was so convinced," I said, "of the truth of your observations as at the present moment. What a charming and comfortable effect does that splendid drapery produce!" "I am very fond of drapery," he replied, "but that is nothing to what I had at Fonthill in the great octagon. There were purple curtains fifty feet long."

Here was a cabinet of oak, made in Bath, in form most classical and appropriate. On one side stood two massive and richly chased silver gilt candlesticks that formerly were used in the Moorish Palace of the Alhambra. "Then you have visited Granada?" I inquired. "More than once." "What do you think of the Alhambra?" "It is vastly curious certainly, but many things there are in wretched taste, and to say truth I don't much admire Moorish taste."

[20] Mr. Beckford next pointed out a head in marble brought from Mexico by Cortez, which was for centuries in the possession of the Duke of Alba's family, and was given to the present proprietor by the Duchess. "Her fate was very tragical," he observed. In a small cupboard with glass in front is a little ivory reliquior, four or five hundred years old. It was given to Mr.

Beckford by the late Mr. Hope. It is in the shape of a small chapel; on opening the doors, the fastenings of which were two small dogs or monkeys, you found in a recess the Virgin and Child, surrounded by various effigies, all carved in the most astonishingly minute manner.

The mention of Mr. Hope's name produced an observation about "Anastasius," of which Mr.

Beckford affirmed he was confident Mr. Hope had written very little; he was, he positively asserted, assisted by Spence. My companion here observed, "Had Mr. Beckford heard of the recent discoveries made of the ruins of Carthage?" "Of Carthage?" he said, "it must be New Carthage. It cannot be the old town, that is impossible. If it were, I would start to-morrow to see it. I should think myself on the road to Babylon half-way." "Babylon must have been a glorious place," observed my companion, "if we can place any reliance on Mr. Martin's long line of distances about that famous city." "Oh, Martin. Martin is very clever, but a friend of mine, Danby, in my opinion far surpasses him." I cannot agree with Mr. Beckford in this.

Martin was undoubtedly the inventor of the singular style of painting in question, and I do not believe that

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

Danby ever produced anything equal to some of the illustrations of "Paradise Lost," in particular "The Fall of the Apostate Angels," which is as fine a conception as any painter, ancient or modern, ever produced.

Mr. Beckford then, taking off a glass cover, showed us what is, I should imagine, one of the greatest curiosities in existence, a vase about ten inches high, composed of one entire block of chalcedonian onyx. It is of Greek workmanship, most probably about the time of Alexander the Great. The stone is full of veins, as usual with onyxes. "Do observe," said he, "these satyrs' heads. Imagine the number of diamonds it must have taken to make any impression on such a hard substance. Rubens made a drawing of it, for it was pawned in his time for a large sum. I possess an engraving from his drawing," and [21] opening a portfolio he immediately presented it to my wondering eyes.

Over the fireplace is a magnificent picture by Roberts, representing the tombs of Ferdinand and Isabella in the Alhambra. What I had always imagined a small chapel is, I find, really of gigantic proportions, and looks like a Cathedral in solemn grandeur and softness; the two sarcophagi are of white marble. The light streams through enormous painted windows, and at the extremity of the edifice is an altar surrounded by figures in different attitudes. "I should never have dreamt, from what Washington Irving says of the chapel of Ferdinand and Isabella, that it was such a plan as this." "Oh, Washington Irving," he replied, "is very poor in his descriptions; he does not do justice to Spain." I wished he had spoken with a little more enthusiasm of a favourite author, but I imagine that the author of the "Sketch Book" is scarcely aristocratic enough for Mr. Beckford.

On the right hand of the fireplace is a very large landscape by Lee, which Mr. Beckford eulogised warmly. "That silvery stream," he observed, "winding amongst those gentle undulating hills must be intended to represent Berkshire," or he pronounced it Barkshire. With all due deference to the taste of the author of "Vathek," and his admiration of this picture, which he compared to a Wouvermann, it is in my eyes a very uninteresting scene, though certainly strictly natural. "I don't in general like Lee's pictures," he said, "but that is an exception." In the corresponding recess is a fine sea piece by Chambers. On the opposite side of the room are rows of the most valuable books, which almost reach the ceiling. I hinted that I was really afraid we were trespassing on his leisure, as our visit was lengthened out most prodigiously. "Not at all," he replied, "I am delighted to see you. It is a pleasure to show these things to those who really appreciate them, for I assure you that I find very few who do."

We now returned through the apartments. He accompanied us as far as the dining room door, when he inquired if I had seen the Tower? On my answering in the negative he said, "Then you must come up again." He shook hands with my friend, and bowing politely to me was retiring, when stepping back he held out his hand in the kindest manner, repeating the words "Come [22] up again." We found we had spent three hours in his company.

We paused an instant before leaving the dining room to admire a lovely bit of perspective. It is a line of open doors, exactly opposite each other (never seen but in large houses), piercing and uniting the three lower rooms. The effect is vastly increased by a mirror placed in the lobby leading to the second staircase, which mirror terminated the view. "L'une perspective bien menagee charmaut la vue; ici, la magie de l'optique la trompoit agreablement. En un mot, le plus curieux des hommes n'avait rien omis dans ce palais de ce qui pouvait contenter la curiosite de ceux qui le visitait."

You may imagine I did not forget Mr. Beckford's invitation, nor cease pestering my friend till he at length fixed a day for accompanying me again to Lansdown. My curiosity to see the Tower was excited. I longed to behold that extraordinary structure, but still more to see again the wonderful individual to whom it belonged.

We proceeded in the first place to the house, and I had an opportunity of examining the pictures and curiosities in the ante-room. Here are two cabinets, containing curious china, and small golden vessels. Most of the china was, I believe, painted at S vres expressly for Mr. Beckford, as the ornaments on several pieces indicate, being formed of his arms, so arranged as to produce a rich and beautiful effect without the slightest formality. I counted in one cabinet ten vessels of gold, in the other five: these were small teapots, caddies, cups, saucers, plates. I am told that they are used occasionally at tea-time.

Over the door is a magnificent drawing of the Abbey, by Turner, taken I should imagine at a distance of two miles. The appearance of the building with its lofty tower is grand and imposing. The foreground seems to have been an old quarry. The great lake glitters in the middle distance, from the opposite banks of which the ground

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

gradually rises, and the eminence is crowned by the stately structure. Here are also a fine interior by Van Ostade from Fonthill, representing a noble picture gallery; a drawing of the interior of St. Paul's; one by Rubens, representing Christ and the two disciples at Emmaus; a fine Swaneveldt; a glorious Weeninx, game [23] and fruit; with a lovely bit by Lance, and many smaller pictures.

I was informed that Mr. Beckford intended meeting us at the Tower, and that a servant was in readiness to conduct us thither by the walk through the grounds. We therefore issued by a private door, and presently entered the spacious kitchen garden, containing, I believe, seven or eight acres. A broad gravel walk, bordered by lovely flowers and fruit trees, leads to a magnificent terrace, which bounds the northern side of this beautiful enclosure, the view from which is enchanting. This noble terrace is screened from the north by a luxuriant shrubbery, from which arises an archway of massive proportions, erected chiefly to shut out the view of an unpicturesque object. The tout ensemble reminds one of Florence. You pass this gigantic portal, and ascend the hill by a winding pathway through the fields, the grass being always kept clipped and short. At the distance of half a mile from the house we crossed a lane, and our guide unlocking a gate entered the grounds at the brow of the hill. We again ascended, till we reached a broader way between two flourishing plantations, branching off to the left, and leading by a gently winding walk to a rustic sort of bungalow, which was discovered about a quarter of a mile off. "You must walk along here," said my friend, "and behold the prospect before we mount higher, for you will find the view repay you." It did indeed repay us: the grassy pathway extends along the side of the southern brow of Lansdown, and the view from this spot is unrivalled. The whole valley of the Doon stretches beneath you. Looking towards the east you discover in extreme distance the Marlborough Downs; then somewhat nearer Kingsdown, Bathford, the hills above Warleigh, with Hampton cliffs and the neighbouring woods, where Gainsborough, Wilson, and Barker studied Nature so well, and where is shown the flat rock called Gainsborough's table, on which the first of this picturesque triumvirate so often ate his rustic meal. To the south Bladud's splendid city, with its towers and stately buildings, backed by the long line of Wiltshire hills, and Alfred's Tower is faintly traced in the clear, grey haze. The little conical hill of Englishcombe, where the unfortunate Duke of Monmouth drew up his army during his rash and fatal enterprise, awoke a thousand recollections, [24] whilst the lovely river flashed occasionally in the noontide sun. To the west are seen Newton Park, the Mendip Hills, Dundry Tower, and the Welsh hills, whilst the hazy atmosphere marked the position of another great city, Bristol. At the extreme western point, too, are seen the waters of the Bristol Channel, glittering under the glowing rays of the setting sun, and shining like a vast plateau of burnished gold.

After feasting our eyes on this lovely panorama and tracing out well known places, at one moment lost in obscurity from the shadow of a passing cloud and the next moment appearing in the full blaze of sunshine, we retraced our steps towards the path to the Tower. We again ascended the hill, and soon reached the sort of tableland on the top, which seems to me to have been once an immense quarry, and no doubt furnished stone in vast quantities for the building of the splendid city at the foot of the eminence. The remains of these quarries are most picturesque. At a little distance they seem to present the wrecks of stately buildings, with rows of broken arches, and vividly recall the idea of Roman ruins. I afterwards mentioned my impressions on seeing them to Mr. Beckford, who replied, "They do indeed put one in mind of the Campagna of Rome, and are vastly like, the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla." We were now on the brow of the hill, and soon felt the influence of the genial breezes from the Bristol Channel. We quitted the open Down, and passing under a low doorway entered a lovely shrubbery. The walk (composed of small fossils) winds between graceful trees, and is skirted by odoriferous flowers, which we are astonished to find growing in such luxuriance at an elevation of nearly a thousand feet above the vale below. In many places the trees meet, and form a green arcade over your head, whilst patches of mignonette, giant plants of heliotrope, and clusters of geranium perfume the air.

We next enter a beautiful kitchen garden, and are presented with a broad and noble straight walk fully ten feet in width and nearly four hundred feet long, between beds of flowers, and on either side beyond fruit trees and vegetables. The garden terminates with a picturesque building, pierced by a lofty archway, through which the walk passes. This garden is about eighty feet wide and about twelve feet below the level of the Down, being [25] formed in an old quarry, besides which a lofty wall on either side shelters it. One cannot describe one's sensations of comfort at finding so delicious a spot in so unexpected a place. I said to the gardener, "I understood Mr. Beckford had planted everything on the Down, but you surely found those apple trees here. They are fifty years old." "We found nothing here but an old quarry and a few nettles. Those apple trees were great trees when we

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

moved them, and moving them stopped their bearing. They blossom in the spring and look pretty, and that is all master cares about." We left this charming enclosure, passing under the archway before mentioned.

And here I must pause a moment and admire the happy idea of placing this pretty building at the end of this cultivated spot. It closes the kitchen garden, and as its front is similar on either side, it harmonizes with the regular garden we have left, as well as with the wilder spot which we next approach. This building forms a complete termination to one of that succession of lovely scenes with which we are presented on our walk to the Tower. Each scene is totally distinct in character from the others, and yet with matchless taste they are united by some harmonious link, as in the present case.

Having then passed through the archway of this building, we observed before us a grotto, into which we entered. On the right is a pond of gold and silver fish, which are fed every morning by the hands of the gifted possessor of this charming place. On the opposite side thirty or forty birds assemble at the same time to hail the appearance of St. Anthony's devotee, and chirrup a song of gratitude for their morning meal. The grotto is formed under a road, and is so ingeniously contrived that hundreds have walked over it without ever dreaming of the subterranean passage beneath. The grotto-like arch winds underground for perhaps sixty or seventy feet. When coming to its termination we are presented with a flight of rustic steps, which leads us again directly on to the Down. Looking back you cannot but admire the natural appearance of this work of art. The ground over the grotto is covered with tangled shrubs and brambles. There is nothing formed, nothing apparently artificial, and a young ash springs as if accidentally from between the stones.

[26] We pursued our way to the Tower by a path of a quarter of a mile on the Down, along a walk parallel to the wall of the public road, gently curved to take off the appearance of formality, yet so slightly that you can go on in a straight line. On our right hand venerable bushes of lavender, great plants of rosemary, and large rose trees perfume the air, all growing as if indigenous to the smooth turf. In one place clusters of rare and deeply crimsoned snapdragons, in another patches of aromatic thyme and wild strawberries keep up the charm of the place. As we draw nearer to the Tower the ground is laid out in a wilder and more picturesque manner, the walks are more serpentine. We turned a corner, and Mr. Beckford stood before us, attended by an aged servant, whose hairs have whitened in his employment, and whose skill has laid out these grounds in this beautiful manner. Mr. Beckford welcomed me in the kindest way, and immediately began pointing out the various curious plants and shrubs.

How on this happy spot specimens of the productions of every country in the world unite!

Shrubs and trees, whose natural climates are as opposite as the Antipodes, here flourish in the most astonishing manner. We were shown a rose tree brought from Pekin and a fir tree brought from the highest part of the Himalaya Mountains; many have been brought to this country, but Mr. Beckford's is the only one that has survived. Here are pine trees of every species and variety – a tree that once vegetated at Larissa, in Greece, Italian pines, Siberian pines, Scotch firs, a lovely specimen of Irish yew, and other trees which it is impossible to describe. My astonishment was great at witnessing the size of the trees, and I could scarcely believe my ears when told that the whole of this wood had been raised on the bare Down within the last thirteen years. The ground is broken and diversified in the most agreeable manner:

here a flight of easy and water worn steps leads to an eminence, whence you have a view of the building and an old ruin overgrown with shrubs, which looks as if it had seen five hundred summers, but in reality no older than the rest of this creation. On ascending the easy though ruined steps of this building, passing under an archway, the view of the Tower burst upon us, and a long, straight walk led us directly to the entrance. From this point the view is most imposing. On your right is a continuation of [27] the shrubberies I spoke of, at the end of which is a lovely pine, most beautiful in form and colour, which by hiding some of the lower buildings thus makes a picture of the whole. The effect of the building is grand and stately beyond description. The long line of flat distance and the flatness of the Down here come in contact with the perpendicular lines of the Tower and lower buildings, producing that strikingly peculiar combination which never fails to produce a grand effect. This is the real secret of Claude's seaports. His stately buildings, moles, and tall towers form a right angle with the straight horizon; thus the whole is magnificent. Nothing of the sort could be produced in the interior of a country but in a situation like the present. Who but a man of extraordinary genius would have thought of rearing in the desert such a structure as this, or creating such an oasis? The colouring of the building reminded me of Malta or Sicily, a rich mellow hue prevails; the ornaments of the Tower are so clean, so distinct, such terseness. The windows, small and few compared with modern buildings, give it the appearance of those early Florentine

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

edifices reared when security and defence were as much an object as beauty. From every part of the ground the pile looks grand, the lines producing the most beautiful effect. The windows have iron gratings, which give it an Oriental character. We entered, and immediately ascended the Tower. A circular staircase was round the wall. The proportion of the interior is beautiful; you see from the bottom to the top. From the apparent size of the three or four oopholes seen from the outside I imagined it would be dark and gloomy front within, but I was agreeably surprised to find the whole extremely light. The balustrade is Egyptian in form, and banisters bronze. On reaching the top you find a square apartment containing twelve windows, each a piece of plate glass, the floor covered with red cloth and crimson window curtains. The effect of distance seen through these apertures unobstructed by framework, contrasted with the bronze balustrade without and crimson curtains within, is truly enchanting. We were not happy in the weather. The morning was sunny and promising, but at noon clouds obscured the heavens; therefore we wanted that glow and splendour sunshine never fails to give the landscape. The height is so great that everything looks quite diminutive. The road run— [28] ning in a straight line across the Down reminds one of a Roman work, and the whole expanse of country surrounding recalls the Campagna. Two more flights of stairs, most ingeniously contrived and to all appearance hanging on nothing, lead to two other apartments, the top one lighted by glass all round, concealed on the outside by the open ornament that runs round the very top of the cupola.

On descending the staircase, the door opening showed us at the end of a small vaulted corridor a beautiful statue by Rossi of St. Anthony and the infant Jesus. At the back, fixed in the wall, is a large slab of red porphyry, circular at the top and surrounded by an elegant inlay of Sienna verd, antique border surrounding the whole figure of the Saint, and has a most rich effect; it is difficult to believe that the Sienna is not gold. The light descending from above gives that fine effect which sets off statues so much. On the left hand of the figure is a picture by Pietro Perugino, which for centuries was in the Cathedral of Sienna, having been painted for that building and never removed till Mr. Beckford (I suppose by making an offer too tempting to be resisted) succeeded in obtaining it. It is the Virgin and two pretty boys, admirably drawn, very like Raphael, and in as fine preservation as the St. Catherine. The execution is masterly, and though not so free as the Raphael still it is forcible. The figure of the left hand boy is very graceful, face beautiful and sweetly dimpled. Opposite are a Francesco Mola and a Steinwuch. The Mola is exceedingly fine, the sky and landscape much like Mr. Beckford's Gaspar Poussin in colour and execution; the Steinwuch, interior of a Cathedral, one of the most wonderful finished pictures I ever beheld. This picture was painted for an ancestor of Mr.

Beckford's. Here there is a little cabinet full of rare and curious manuscripts. We were shown a small Bible in MS., including the Apocrypha, written 300 years before printing was introduced, and a very curious Missal.

We then entered a gorgeous room containing pictures and curiosities of immense value. Its proportions seem exactly the same as the one on the floor below, and decorations with its furniture pretty similar. The windows in both are in one large plate, and the shutters of plain oak. The colour of curtains and carpet crimson. In these rooms are a portrait of the Doge out of the Grimaldi [29] Palace, purchased by Mr. Beckford from Lord Cawdor, who got it out of the Palace by an intrigue; this is a splendid portrait; he has on the Dalmatica and the Phrygian Cal) worn by the Doges on occasions of State, and two lovely Polembergs, infinitely finer and more like Claude than anything I ever saw; in fact, they were ascribed to Claude by the German Waagen, architecture grand, foliage light and elegant; the figures are by Le Soeur.

Two fine portraits by De Vos, wonderfully painted, execution and colouring reminded me of Vandyke, particularly the latter, and not unlike the Gavertius in the National Gallery. Then there is a magnificent Houdekoeta, the landscape part painted by Both most inimitably. A beautiful cabinet designed by Bernini, another with sculptured paintings, in the centre the story of Adam and Eve. Two more candlesticks from the Alhambra, in shape and execution similar to those at the house; two gold candlesticks after designs by Holbein; some curious specimens of china; an Asiatic purple glass vase, brought by St. Louis from the Holy Land, which contained at St. Denis some holy fragments; a piece of china, the centre of which is ornamented in a style totally different from the generality of china, in eight or ten compartments, and painted in such a manner that the festoon of leaves fall over and hide the fruit most picturesquely; two ivory cups, one in alto, the other in basso relievo; the latter the finer and most charmingly carved; a small group in bronze by John Bologna, "Dejanira and the Centaur," admirably done. Here are tables of the rarest marbles, one composed of a block from the Himalaya Mountains. In one of the windows is a piece of African marble brought to this country for George IV; also a small bath of



## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

Egyptian porphyry. In the lower room was a vase containing the most lovely flowers, that perfumed the apartment. In this room, from the judicious introduction of scarlet and crimson, you have the effect of sunshine. The ceilings are belted; the interstices painted crimson. It is impossible to give any idea of the splendour of these two rooms, the finishing touch being cabinet looking glasses, introduced most judiciously.

We now took leave of Mr. Beckford. His horses were waiting in the courtyard, with two servants standing respectfully and uncovered at the door, whilst two more [30] hold the horses. The stately and magnificent tower, the terrace on which we lingered a few moments, whilst this extraordinary man mounted his horse, all, all conspired to cast a poetical feeling over the parting moment which I shall never forget. I was reminded most forcibly of similar scenes in Scott's novels. In particular the ancient Tower of Tillietudleni was presented to my mind's eye, and I gazed for a moment on this gifted person with a melancholy foreboding that it was for the last time, and experienced an elevation of feeling connected with the scene which it is impossible to describe. Such moments are worth whole years of everyday existence. We turned our heads to look once more on a man who must always create the most intense interest, and I repeated those lines of Petrarch, introduced by Mr. Beckford himself in his "Italy" on a similar occasion – *O ora, o georno, o ultimo momento, O stelle conjurate ad impoverime,*

I forgot to mention a cluster of heliotrope in blossom on the Down, growing in such wild luxuriance that I could not believe it to be my little darling flower. However, on stooping down I soon perceived by its fragrance it was the same plant that I had been accustomed to admire in greenhouses or in small pots. October, 1838.

I have had another peep at the Tower. The day was auspicious. I ran up the staircase and wonderfully enjoyed the prospect. Looking through the middle window towards the west you have a delicious picture. The hills undulate in the most picturesque manner, the motion of the clouds at one moment threw a line of hills into shadow, which were the next minute illumined by the sun, the Avon glittering in the sunbeams, the village of Weston embedded in the valley, a rich cluster of large trees near the town, variegated by the tints of autumn, united to form a charming picture. The pieces of plateglass that compose the twelve windows of this beautiful room cannot be less than 5 1/2 ft. high and 18in. wide.

On descending I was struck with the lovely effect of the corridor, at the end of which is the statue of St. Anthony; on the pedestal (a block of Sienna) are engraved in letters of gold these words, "Dominus illuminatio mio." The Francesco Mola (the Magdalen in the Desert) is a lovely [31] landscape indeed; the rocks and their spirited execution, lightness of the foliage, in the foreground remind one of St. Rosa. A cluster of cherubs hovers over the bead of Mary. In the smaller room on the upper floor is the picture by West of the Installation of the Knights of the Garter. From the contemplation of this picture I entertain a higher opinion of the genius of West than I ever did before. You can scarcely believe it is his painting; there is nothing of his usual hard outline, the shadows are rich, the background soft and mellow, the lights unite sweetly, and it is touched in the free and juicy manner of the sketches of Rubens or Paolo Veronese. It is difficult to believe that this picture is not 200 years old. The head of a child by Parmigiano; a large picture by Breughel. The enameled glass vase brought to Europe by St. Louis; this must be of Arabian manufacture, for the figures on horseback have turbans. A large cabinet by Franks, the panels most highly finished, different passages in the history of Adam and Eve form small pictorial subjects. In the larger room is the cabinet by Bernini, inlaid with mosaic work in the most finished manner, surrounded by three brass figures; Bellini's two pictures of the Doges of Venice. Over Bernini's cabinet a large piece of looking glass is most judiciously introduced. In this and the lower room are two lovely crimson Wilton carpets; the ceilings of both are painted purple and red. Holbein's candlesticks are really gold! the chasing is elegance itself; an inscription states that they were made in 1800 for the Abbey at Fonthill. A fine picture of the infant St. John by Murillo; a curious one of St.

Anthony by Civoli; an exquisite interior, by Steynwich, very small, and being a night effect, the shadows are amazingly rich. In the passage leading to the garden are the two ivory cups by Frainingo. One is much better carved than the other; it is copied from an antique vase. The figures are Bacchanalian.

The effect of this lower room from the vestibule, illumined by the rays of the glorious sun, was more beautiful than anything of the sort I had ever witnessed. Nothing can be more happy than the way the colour of this apartment is managed. The walls are covered with scarlet cloth; the curtains on each side of the window being a deep purple produce a striking contrast; the colouring of the ceiling, crimson, purple and gold, is admirable. [32] In one window is a large table formed of a block of Egyptian porphyry, on which were flowers in a large vase of

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

ivory; in the other recess, or rather tribune, is the small round Himalaya block. Over the fireplace is a charming little Dietrich, and on either hand a Polemberg. On this side, of the room the two De Vos, two singularly shaped cabinets of oak finely carved; on one is a gold teapot. On the right hand of the door is a Simonini: sky and distance admirable, the colouring of two large, trees very rich and mellow, one a dark green, the other pale yellow. A picture on the other side of the door by Canaletti. On the opposite side of the room a large Pastel, ruins of foliage fine but figures lanky. I had not before to-day seen the Tower from the road entrance. The effect of the whole building is grand, and improved by the arches which support the terrace. On the left the ground is admirably broken and the foliage rich.

November 3rd, 1838.

Mr. Beckford showed me some sketches of St. Non's Sicily and harbour of Malta, forty drawings, given by St. Non himself, each bearing the name in pencil; he also showed me a MS.

"Arabian Nights." He studied Arabic very deeply in Paris, and had a Mussulman master. He read to me part of a tale never put into the ordinary edition, translated into English tersely and perspicuously. He is much indebted to Arabic MS. for "Vathek," and reads Arabic to this day.

He says Lord Byron and others are quite mistaken as to the age when he wrote "Vathek," not seventeen but twenty-three years of age. "Sir," says he, "if you want a description of Persepolis read 'Vathek.'" He laughed heartily at the different sorts of praise bestowed by Lord Byron on "Vathek," equal to Rasselas, like Mackenzie. Lord Byron tried many times to get a sight of the Eps [?], often intreated the Duchess to intercede with her father. He once called with "Vathek" in his pocket, which he styled "his gospel." Moore's "Lallah Rookh" has too much western sentimentality for an Oriental romance, the common fault of most writers of such stories. Beckford prefers Moore's Melodies, and likes the "Loves of Angels" least of all.

"Fudge Family" he thinks admirable.

Speaking of the triumph he achieved in writing as art Englishman a work which was supposed for years to be [33] by a Frenchman, he said: "Oh, my great uncle did more than me. Did you never read 'Memories of the Duke of Grammont?' Voltaire told me he was entirely indebted to my great uncle for whatever beauty of style he might possess. French is just the same as English to me. He showed me the Eps."

October 31. – Went out and accidentally met Mr. Beckford speaking in praise of his West, who painted expressly for Mr. Beckford. I said, "How did you get him to paint it so soft? I suppose you particularly requested him to do so." "Oh no. Mr. West was a man who would stand no dictation; had I uttered such a thought he would have kicked me out of the house! Oh no, that would never have done. The only way to get him to avoid his hard outline would be to entreat him to paint harder. West came one day laughing to me, and said, "All London is in ecstasy beholding the Lazarus in Sebo Deltz, painted they say by M. A. Ha! ha! they don't know it is my painting. L., who brought the picture over, came to me in the greatest distress, 'The set is ruined by the salt water; you must try and restore the Lazarus.' I was shut up for two days, and painted the Lazarus" On my asking if he believed it true, Mr. Beckford replied, "Perfectly true, for I saw it lying on the floor and the figure of Lazarus was quite gone." "Then you don't value that picture much?" "All the rest is perfect, and I offered £12,000 for that and four more. I saw in the Escurial the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca, now belonging to the Duke of Wellington. In fact, of all the pictures in the collection there is not more than one in ten that has escaped repainting. The picture given by H. Carr I cannot admire, the outline of the hill is so hard. It is just the picture Satan would show poor Claude, if he has him, which we charitably hope he has not."

November 10th, 1838.

How poor dear Mozart would be frightened (moralised Mr. Beckford) could he hear some of our modern music! My father was very fond of music, and invited Mozart to Fonthill. He was eight years old and I was six. It was rather ludicrous one child being the pupil of another. He went to Vienna, where he obtained vast celebrity, and wrote to me, saying, "Do you remember that march you composed which I kept so long? Well, I have just com- [34] posed a new opera and I have introduced your air." "In what opera?" asked I. "Why in the 'Nozze di Figaro.'" "Is it possible, sir, and which then is your air?" "You shall hear it." Mr. Beckford opened a piano, and immediately began what I thought a sort of march, but soon I recognized "Non piu andrai." He struck the notes with energy and force, he sang a few words, and seemed to enter into the music with the greatest enthusiasm; his

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

eye sparkled, and his countenance assumed an expression which I had never noticed before.

Mr. Beckford showed me some very fine original drawings by Gaspar Poussin, exceedingly delicate. On the back a profile most exquisitely finished, another just begun, and another by his brother in admirable style, sketch of a peacock by Houdekoeta. "When I was in Portugal,"

said Mr. Beckford, "I had as much influence and power as if I had been the King. The Prince Regent acknowledged me in public as his relation (which indeed I was). I had the privilege of an entrance at all times, and could visit the Royal Family in ordinary dress. Of course, on grand occasions I wore Court costume." He showed me a letter from a rich banker in Lisbon, a man in great esteem at the Palace; another letter from one of the first noblemen in Portugal, entreating him to use his influence with the Prince Regent for the reversion of the decree of confiscation of some nobleman's estate; another from the Grand Prior of Aviz (in French). Mr.

Beckford was treated as a grandee of the first rank in Germany; he showed me an autograph of the Emperor Joseph. Voltaire said to him, "Je dois tout A votre oncle, Count Anthony H. The Duchess was acknowledged in Paris by the Bourbon as Duchess de Chatelrault. On going to Court I saw her sitting next the Royal Family with the Duchess, whilst all the Court was standing. The Duchess has fine taste for the arts, quite as strong a feeling as I have. The Duke also is amazingly fond of the arts. The Marquis of D. has a spice of my character."

The Claude looked more blooming and pearly than ever. I observed that I had never seen such a tone in any Claude in existence. I know many pictures which had that hue, but they have been so daubed and retouched that they are no longer the same. He showed me the Episodes. One begins, "Mes malheurs, O Calippe sont encore plus grands que les vôtres, aussi bien que mes [35] crimes, tu a été trompé en écoutant un navis malheureux; mais moi, pour me desobir d'une amitié la plus tendre, je suis précipité dans ce lieu d'horreur."

The origin of Beckford's "Lives of Extraordinary Painters" was very odd. When he was fifteen years old the housekeeper came to him, and said she wished he would tell her something about the artists who painted his fine pictures, as visitors were always questioning her, and she did not know what to answer. "Oh, very well; I'll write down some particulars about them."

He instantly composed "Lives of Extraordinary Painters." The housekeeper studied the manuscript attentively, and regaled her astonished visitors with the marvellous incidents it contained; however, finding many were sceptical, she came to her young master and told him people would not believe what she told them. "Not believe? Ah, that's because it is only in manuscript. Then we'll have it printed; they'll believe when they see it in print." He sent the manuscript to a London publisher, and inquired what the expense of printing it would be. The publisher read it with delight, and instantly offered the youthful author £50 for the manuscript.

The housekeeper was now able to silence all cavilers by producing the book itself.

Having left an umbrella in Lansdown-crescent, I inquired of the gentleman to whom I am indebted for my introduction to Mr. Beckford if he thought it would be taking a liberty if I sent in my name when I called for it. "I really don't know what to say" was the answer, "you must do as you think proper. I will only say that for my part I am always looking out for squalls, but I daresay he will be glad to see you." I accordingly determined to make a bold stroke and call on him, remembering the old adage, "Quidlibet audendum picturis atque poetis." The weather was most delightful. A wet and cold summer had been succeeded by warm autumnal days, on which the sun shone without a cloud; it was one of those seasons of settled fair so uncommon in our humid country, when after witnessing a golden sunset you might sleep secure he'd rise to-morrow.

I therefore called at the great man's house, and found the umbrella in the exact corner in the anteroom where it had been left a fortnight before, and told the porter to [36] announce my name to his master. I waited in anxiety in the hall a few moments. The footman returned, saying his master was engaged, but if I would walk upstairs Mr. Beckford would come to me.

The servant led the way to the Duchess Drawing Room, opened the door, and on my entering he retired, leaving me alone in this gorgeous apartment, wondering what the dickens I did there. You may suppose I was not a little delighted at this mark of confidence, and spent several minutes examining the pictures till the author of "Vathek" entered, his countenance beaming with good nature and affability. He extended his hand in the kindest

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

manner, and said he was extremely glad to see me. I instantly declared the purport of my visit that I had some copies of pictures that were once in his possession, and that it would give me the greatest possible pleasure to show them to him. "I shall be delighted to see them" was the reply, "but for some days I am rather busy; I will come next week." "You have had a visit from the author of 'Italy'," I observed; "people say that you like Mr. R.'s poem." "Oh yes, some passages are very beautiful. He is a man of considerable talent; but who was that person he brought with him? What a delightful man! I suppose it was Mr. L." I replied, "I believe they are great friends."

"What an awful state the country is in (he observed)! One has scarcely time to think about poetry or painting, or anything else, when our stupid, imbecile Government allows public meetings of 150,000 men, where the most inflammatory language is used and the common people are called on to arm, beginning, too, with solemn prayer. Their prayer will never succeed. No, no, their solemn prayer is but a solemn mockery. They seemed to have forgotten the name of the only Mediator, without whose intercession all prayer is worse than useless.

Well, well (said Mr. Beckford), depend upon it we shall have a tremendous outbreak before long. The ground we stand on is trembling, and gives signs of an approaching earthquake.

Then will come a volcanic eruption; you will have fire, stones, and lava enough. Afterwards, when the lava has cooled, there will be an inquiry for works of art. I assure you I expect everything to be swept away." I ventured to differ from him in that opinion, and said I was convinced that whatever [37] political changes might happen, property was perfectly secure.

"Some reforms," I said, "would take place, and many pensions perhaps be swept away, but such changes would never affect him or his, and after all it was but a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence." "There you are right," he exclaimed. "If anything can save us 'twill be pounds, shillings, and pence," meaning, I suppose, a union of all classes who possessed property, from the pound of the peer to the penny of the plebeian. "But the present times are really very critical. Have you time to go through the rooms with me?" he demanded. I replied that nothing would give me greater pleasure. "But perhaps you are going somewhere?" I answered that I was perfectly disengaged. Passing along the landing of the stairs he paused before the Alderman's portraits and observed, "Had my father's advice been taken we should not now be in danger of starvation." I ventured to say that in those days there was more reciprocal feeling between the a poor and the rich than at present; now a-days classes are so divided by artificial barriers that there is little or no sympathy between any. "You are mistaken," he replied. "As long as I remember anything there was always discontent, always heartburning; but at the time of my father's speech dissatisfaction had risen to such a pitch that I assure you these people were on the point of being sent back to the place they came from." (He alluded to the present Royal Family).

Mr. Beckford opened the door of the great library, and on entering I immediately discovered the cause of my being so much puzzled as to its architecture. There are two doors in this magnificent room; one leads to the Duchess Drawing Room, the other to the landing, and to produce the air of privacy so delightful to a bookworm the latter is covered with imitative books, exactly corresponding with the rest of the library. I remembered on my first entering the room from the staircase, and when the servant had closed the door, there appeared but one entrance, which was that by which we left this noble room, passing thence into the Duchess's room. I puzzled my brains in vain to make out the geography of the place, but could make neither top nor tail, and should never have solved the enigma but for this third visit. "I have been to Fonthill," he said, "since I saw you. I don't think much of what Papworth has done there. I rode [38] thirty-eight miles in one day without getting out of the saddle. That was pretty well, eh?" I thought so indeed for a man in his seventy-ninth year.

---

On the 28th of October, 1844, we left Bath determined to examine the once far-famed Abbey of Fonthill, and to see if its scenery was really as fine as report had represented. The morning was cold and inauspicious, but when we reached Warminster the sun burst out through the mists that had obscured him, and the remainder of the day was as genial and mild as if had been May. We procured the aid of a clownish bumpkin to carry our carpet bag, and left Warminster on foot. About four miles from that town those barren and interminable downs are reached which seem to cover the greater part of Wiltshire. The country is as wild as the mountain scenery of Wales, and the contrast between it and the polished city we had left in the morning was truly singular. We took the road to Hindon, but a worthy old man, of whom we asked particulars, pointed out a pathway, which cut off at least a mile and a half. We followed his direction, and left the high road. Mounting the hill by a steep and chalky road we

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

reached a considerable elevation; before us extended a succession of downs, and in the extreme distance a blue hill of singular form, at least nine miles off, was crowned by buildings of very unusual appearance. Curiosity as to the place was at its utmost stretch, but our ignorant bumpkin could tell nothing about it. It surely cannot be Fonthill was the instant suggestion?

Impossible. Can we see the remains at this distance? We continued our walk for about two miles, without losing sight of this interesting edifice, and at length all doubts were cleared in the certainty that the long wished-for object was absolutely before us. It is impossible to describe the feelings of interest experienced by the sight of these gigantic remains. The eastern transept still rises above the woods, a point, pinnacle, and round tower. Descending the hill towards Hindon we lost sight of the Abbey. A most singular specimen of country life was presented by an old shepherd, of whom we inquired the way. "How far is it to Hindon?"

"About four miles." "Is this the right road?" "Yes, [39] you cannot miss it, but I haven't been there these forty years. Naa, this is forty years ago save two that I went to Hindon: 'twas in 1807."

This place, which once sent members to Parliament, and which the author of "Vathek" himself represented for many years, is not so large as the village of Batheaston! There are neither lamps nor pavement, but it possesses a most picturesque little church. It was one of the rotten boroughs swept away, and properly enough, by the Reform Bill. Here our rustic relinquished his burden to a Hindon lad, who acted as our future cicerone, and undertook to show us the way to the inn called the Beckford Arms. Soon after leaving Hindon the woods of Fonthill were reached. We mounted a somewhat steep hill, and here met with a specimen of the gigantic nature of the buildings. A tunnel about 100 feet long passed under the noble terrace, reaching from Knoyle to Fonthill Bishop, at least three miles in length; the tunnel was formed to keep the grounds private. The beech trees, now arrayed in gaudy autumnal tints, seen through this archway have a lovely effect. Emerging from the tunnel, the famous wall, seven miles long, was just in front. To the left you trace the terrace, on a charming elevation, leading to Fonthill Gardens, and here and there you have glimpses of the great lake. The ground is broken and varied in the most picturesque fashion. You pass some cottages that remind you of Ryswick, and soon come to the church of Fonthill Gifford. This church is perfectly unique in form, its architecture purely Italian; one would think it was designed by Palladio. There is a pretty portico supported by four tall Doric columns, and its belfry is a regular cupola. We at last gained the inn, and were shown into a lovely parlour that savoured of the refined taste that once reigned in this happy solitude. It is lofty, spacious, and surrounded by oak panels; it has a charming bow window, where are elegantly represented, in stained glass on distinct shields, the arms of Alderman Beckford, his wife, and their eccentric son.

The evening was most lovely. A soft haze had prevailed the whole afternoon, and as there was still an hour's daylight I determined on instantly visiting the ruins. Just without the sacred enclosure that once prevented all intrusion to this mysterious solitude is the lovely little village of Fonthill Gifford; its charming [40] cottages, with their neat gardens and blooming roses, are a perfect epitome of English rusticity. A padlocked gate admits the visitor within the barrier; a steep road, but gently winding so as to make access easy, leads you to the bill, where once stood "the gem and the wonder of earth."

The road is broad and entirely arched by trees. Emerging suddenly from their covert an astonishing assemblage of ruins comes into view. Before you stands the magnificent eastern transept with its two beautiful octangular towers, still rising to the height of 120 feet, but roofless and desolate; the three stately windows, 60 feet high, as open to the sky as Glastonbury Abbey; in the rooms once adorned with choicest paintings and rarities trees are growing. Oh what a scene of desolation! What the noble poet said of "Vathek's" residence in Portugal we may now literally say of Fonthill.

Here grown weeds a passage scarce allow  
To halls deserted, portals gaping wide.

Fresh lessons, ye thinking bosoms. how Vain are the pleasures by earth supplied,  
Swept into wrecks anon by Time's ungentle tide.

Of all desolate scenes there are none so desolate as those which we now see as ruins, and which were lately the abode of splendour and magnificence. Ruins that have been such for ages, whose tenants have long since been swept away, recall ideas of persons and times so far back that we have no sympathy with them at all; but if you

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

wish for a sight of all that is melancholy, all that is desolate, visit a modern ruin. We passed through briars and brambles into the great octagon. Straight before us stands the western doorway of the noble entrance hall; but where is its oaken roof, with its proud heraldic emblazonments, where its lofty painted windows, where its ponderous doors, more than 30 feet high? The cross still remains above, as if symbolical that religion triumphs over all, and St. Anthony still holds out his right hand as if to protect the sylvan and mute inhabitants of these groves that here once found secure shelter from the cruel gun and still more cruel dog. But he is tottering in his niche, and when the wind is high is seen to rock, as if his reign were drawing to a close.

Of the noble octagon but two sides remain. Looking up, but at such an amazing elevation that it makes one's [41] neck ache, still are seen two windows of the four nunneries that adorned its unique and unrivalled circuit. And what is more wonderful than all, the noble organ screen, designed by "Vathek" himself, has still survived; its gilded lattices, though exposed for twenty years to the "pelting of the pitiless storm," yet glitter in the last rays of the setting sun. We entered the doorway of the southern entrance hall, that door which once admitted thousands of the curious when Fonthill was in its glory. This wing, though not yet in ruins, not yet entirely dismantled, bears evident signs of decay. Standing on the marble floor you look up through holes in the ceiling, and discover the once beautifully fretted roof of St. Michael's Gallery. We entered the brown parlour. This is a really noble room, 52 feet long, with eight windows, painted at the top in the most glorious manner. This room has survived the surrounding desolation, and gives you a slight idea of the former glories of the place. Each window consists of four gigantic pieces of plate-glass, and in the midst of red, purple, lilac, and yellow ornaments are painted four elegant figures, designed by the artist, Hamilton, of kings and knights, from whom Mr. Beckford was descended. As there are eight windows there are thirty-two figures, drawn most correctly. What reflections crowd the mind on beholding this once gorgeous room! There stood the sideboard, once groaning beneath the weight of solid gold salvers. In this very room dined frequently the magnificent "Vathek" on solid gold, and there, where stood his table, covered with every delicacy to tempt the palate is now a pool of water, for the roof is insecure, and the rain streams through in torrents. On the right hand is the famous cedar boudoir, whose odoriferous perfume is smelt even here. We entered the Fountain Court, but sought in vain the stream that was once forced up, at vast expense, from the vale below and trickled over its marble bason.

For the stream has shrunk from its marble bed. Where the weeds and desolate dust are spread.

One would almost imagine Byron had written his lines in the "Giaour" describing Hassan's residence amidst the ruins of Fonthill, so striking, so tangible, is the resemblance. He says of the fountains – 'Twas sweet of yore to hear it play And chase the sultriness of day, [42] As springing high the silver dew In whirls fantastically flew And flung luxurious coolness round The air, and verdure o'er the ground.

'Twas sweet, when cloudless stars were bright, To view the wave of watery light And hear its melody by night.

But the shades of evening, now rapidly advancing, warned us to depart while there was yet light enough to trace our path through the gloomy wood. We entered its thick and umbrageous covert, and were near losing our road before we reached the barrier gate. The road was strewn with dry leaves, which reminded me of the earthly hopes of man.

He builds too low who builds beneath the skies, and he who wishes for solid happiness must rest on a broader base than that afforded by momentary enjoyment, tempting and blooming as the foliage of summer, but evanescent as its withered leaves.

The next morning was finer than our most sanguine wishes could have anticipated. We were not long dispatching our comfortable breakfast, and hastened to the barrier gate. We here met a venerable woman, whose noble features and picturesque dress would have served as a splendid model for Gainsborough or Ben Barker. Stopping to inquire a nearer road to the Abbey, as she seemed indigenous to the place, I was tempted to ask if she knew Mr. Beckford.

"I have seen him, sir, many, many times; but he is gone, and I trust—I do trust—to rest. He was a good man to the poor, never was there a better." "You astonish me; I had heard that he never gave away anything." "Good gracious, sir, who could have invented such lies? There never was a kinder friend to the poor, and when he left they lost a friend indeed. Not give away anything! Why, sir, in the winter, when snow was on the ground and firing dear, he used to send wagons and wagons for coal to Warminster, and make them cut through the snow to fetch it, and gave the poor souls plenty of firing, besides money, blankets, and clothing, too, and as for me I can

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

answer for three half-sovereigns he gave me himself at different times with his own hand." "You surprise me." "I saw him coming once with his servants. I had my baby in my arms – that's she that lives in that cottage yonder, [43] she's grown a woman now – and I was shuffling along to get out of his way, when he called out, 'What a beautiful little babe, let me look at it,' and then he smiled and made as though he would shake hands with the child, and, bless you, he slipped half-a-sovereign into my hand." I confess I was delighted at the little anecdote, and I am sure the good woman's praise was perfectly disinterested. Those who know anything of the poor are convinced they never flatter those from whom they can never again derive any benefit. I had almost expected to hear curses, if not loud at least deep.

A bailiff resides in the Abbey stables, who has charge of the place, but the "steeds are vanished from the stalls." We inquired if we could see the remaining apartments, but found the bailiff was gone to Hindon, and had taken the keys with him. Here was a difficulty indeed.

"Perhaps," said his daughter, "you can get into the great Tower staircase; I think the door is open." We proceeded thither, but alas! a ponderous door and locked most unequivocally denied all entrance. "Perhaps father has left the key in his old coat; I will run and see" said our interesting young cicerone. She scuttled off, and we waited in anxiety, till in five minutes she returned with a large bunch of keys, the passport to the extraordinary apartments still remaining. My joy was as great at bearing the lock turn as was ever "Vathek's" when he discovered the Indian at the gate of the Hall of Eblis with his clef d'or. The great circular staircase survived the shock of the falling tower. The stairs wind round a massive centre, or newel, three feet in diameter; the ascent is gentle, the stairs at least six feet broad. They form an approach light, elegant, and so lofty that you cannot touch with the hand the stairs above your head. Numerous small windows make the staircase perfectly light, and the inside is so clean that it is difficult to believe it is not continually scoured and whitened, but this I was assured was not the case. Two hundred and ten steps lead to a leaden roof, the view from which beggars description. You have here a bird's eye view of the lovely estate. Majestic trees, hanging woods, and luxuriant plantations cover the ground for two or three miles round, whilst beyond this begin those immense and interminable downs for which Wiltshire is so noted; they are dreary and barren enough in themselves, but at [44] such a point as this, where the foreground and middle distance are as verdant and richly clad with trees as cart possibly be desired, their effect is very beautiful. The absence of enclosures produces breadth and repose, and the local colour melts gradually into the grey distance in the most charming manner. Looking westward the great avenue, a mile in length, presents itself; to the south the Beacon-terrace, a green road more than two miles long, leads to a high hill, where the Alderman commenced, but never finished, a triangular tower. This road, or rather avenue, has a most charming effect; the trees that bound its sides are planted in a zigzag direction, so as to destroy the appearance of formality, whilst in reality it is a straight road, and you walk at once in a direct line, without losing the time you would if the road were more tortuous. On the south side the view is most fascinating. In a deep hollow not halfoff, embosomed, nay almost buried amidst groves of pine and beech, are discovered the dark waters of the bitter lake. The immense plantations of dark pines give it this sombre hue, but in reality the waters are clear as crystal. Beyond these groves, still looking south, you discover the woods about Wardour Castle, and amongst them the silvery gleam of another sheet of water. To the south-west is the giant spire of Salisbury, which since the fall of Fonthill Tower now reigns in solitary stateliness over these vast regions of down and desert. Stourton Tower presents itself to the north, whilst to the west, in the extreme distance, several high hills are traced which have quite a mountainous character – Naveled in the woody hills, And calm as cherished hate, its surface wears A deep, cold, settled aspect nought can shake.

The north wing of the Abbey, containing the oratory, does not seem to have suffered from the fall of the Tower, and we next proceeded to inspect it. A winding staircase from the kitchen court leads you at once to that portion of the gallery called the vaulted corridors. The ceilings of four consecutive rooms are beautiful beyond all expectation. Prepared as I was by the engravings in Rutter and Britton to admire these ceilings, I confess that the real thing was finer than I could possibly have imagined. King Edward's ceiling of dark oak (and its ornaments in strong relief) is as fresh as if just painted, and the beau- [45] tiful cornice round the four walls of this stately gallery is still preserved, with its three gilded mouldings, but the seventy-two emblazoned shields that formed an integral part of the frieze have been ruthlessly torn off. The roof of the vaulted corridor with its gilded belts is the most perfect of the series of rooms, and that of the sanctum is beautifully rich; it is fretted in the most elegant way with long drops, pendants, or hangings like icicles, at least nine inches deep. Here alas! the hands of vandals have

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

knocked off the gilded roses and ornaments that were suspended. These three apartments are painted in oak and gold is most judiciously introduced on prominent parts. But the ceiling of the last compartment is beyond all praise; it gleams as freshly with purple, scarlet, and gold as if painted yesterday. Five slender columns expand into and support a gilded reticulation on a dark crimson ground. In the centre of the ceiling is still hanging the dark crimson cord which formerly supported the elegant golden lamp I had formerly admired in Lansdown—crescent; it seemed to have been hastily cut down, and its height from the floor and its deep colour, the same as the ceiling, has probably prevented its observation and removal.

The southern end of the gallery has been stripped of its floor, and it was with difficulty, and not without danger, I got across a beam; and, standing with my back against the brick wall that has been built up at the end, where were once noble glazed doors opening into the grand octagon, I surveyed the whole lovely perspective; the length from this spot is 120 feet. The beautiful reddish alabaster chimneypiece still remains, but it is split in the centre, whet—her from the weight of wall or a fruitless attempt to tear it out I know not. The recesses, once adorned with the choicest and rarest books, still retain their sliding shelves, but the whole framework of the windows has been removed, and they are open to the inclemency of the weather, or roughly boarded up. The stove, once of polished steel, is now brown and encrusted with rust as if the iron were 500 years old. It is impossible for an architect or artist to survey the ruthless and wanton destruction of this noble wing, unscathed and uninjured but by the hands of barbarous man, without feelings of the deepest regret and sorrow. How forcibly do the lines of the noble bard recur to the mind on surveying [46] these apartments, still magnificent, yet neglected, and slowly and surely falling into ruin – For many a gilded chamber's here, Which solitude might well forbear, Within this dome, ere yet decay Hath slowly worked her cankering way.

I ran up the circular staircase and entered the noble state bedroom. The enormous plate glasses still remain; the ceiling is of carved oak relieved by gold ornaments. With what emotion did I turn through the narrow gallery, leading to the state room, to the tribune, which looked into the great octagon. A lofty door was at the extremity. I attempted to open it; it yielded to the pressure, and I stood on the very balcony that looked into the octagon.

Here the whole scene of desolation is surveyed at a glance. How deep were my feelings of regret at the destruction of the loftiest domestic apartment in the world. Twenty years ago this glorious place was in all its splendour. High in the air are still seen two round windows that once lighted the highest bedrooms in the world. What an extraordinary idea! On this lofty hill, 120 feet from the ground, were four bedrooms. Below these round windows are the windows of two of the chambers called nunneries. Landing on this balcony I quickly conjured up a vision of former glory. There were the lofty windows gleaming with purple and gold, producing an atmosphere of harmonious light peculiar to this place, the brilliant sunshine covering everything within its influence with yellow quatrefoils. From that pointed arch once descended draperies 50 feet long! The very framework of these vast windows was covered with gold.

There was the lovely gallery opening to the nunneries, through whose arches ceilings were discovered glittering with gold, and walls covered with pictures. Exactly opposite was another tribune similar to this; below it the immense doors of St. Michael's Gallery, whose crimson carpet, thickly strewn with white roses; was seen from this place, whilst far, far above, at an elevation of 130 feet, was seen the lofty dome, its walls pierced with eight tall windows, and even these were painted and their frames gilded. The crimson list to exclude draught still remained on these folding doors, but the lock was tom off! I closed the doors, not without a feeling of sadness, [47] and returning to the small gallery again ran up the Lancaster Gallery to another noble bedroom. Finding the stairs still intact I mounted them, and found a door, which opened on to the roof. We were now on the top of the Lancaster Tower. Though not so extensive as the view from the platform of the great staircase, there is a peep here that is most fascinating; it is the extreme distance awn through the ruined window of the opposite nunnery.

The glimpse I had of the bittern lake having sharpened my appetite to see it, I descended the staircase of the Lancaster turret, and marching off in a southerly direction hastened towards its shores. But it is so buried in wood that it was not without some difficulty we found it. Never in happy England did I see a spot that so forcibly reminded me of Switzerland. Though formed by Art, so happily is it concealed that Nature alone appears, and this lovely lake seems to occupy the crater of an extinct volcano. It is much larger than I anticipated. A walk runs all round it; I followed its circuit, and soon had a glorious view of the Abbey, standing in solitary stateliness on its wooded hill on the opposite side. The waters were smooth as a mirror, and reflected the ruined building; its lofty towers trembled on the crystal wave, as if they were really rocking and about to share the fate of the giant Tower



## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE WILLIAM BECKFORD

that was once here reflected. We followed the banks of the lake. Passing some noble oaks that were dipping their extended boughs in the water, we soon gained the opposite side. Here is a labyrinth of exotic plants, a maze of rhododendrons, azaleas, and the productions of warmer climes, growing as if indigenous to the soil. We passed between great walls of rhododendrons, in some places 15 feet high, and reached a seat, from whence you see the whole extent of this lovely sheet of water. What I had seen and admired so much on Lansdown was here carried to its utmost perfection; I mean the representation of a southern wilderness. In this spot the formality of gardening is absolutely lost. These enormous exotic plants mingle with the oak, the beech, and the pine, so naturally that they would delight a landscape painter. These dark and solemn groves of fir, contrasting so strikingly with the beech woods, now arrayed in their last gaudiest dress, remind me forcibly of Switzerland and the Jura Mountains, which I saw at [48] this very season. Nature at this period is so gaudily clad that we may admire her for her excessive variety of tints, but cannot dare to copy her absolutely. In this sheltered and sequestered spot the oaks, though brown and leafless elsewhere, are still verdant as July. Every varied shade of the luxuriant groves – yellow, red, dark, and light green – every shade is reflected in these clear waters. Three tall trees on the opposite shore have, however, quite lost their leaves, and their reflection in the wave is so exactly like Gothic buildings, that one is apt to imagine you see beneath the waters the fairy palace of the Naiads, the guardians of this terrestrial Paradise.

A detail from Benjamin West's portrait of Beckford's mother with a view of Fonthill Splendens in the background (1799). [Click here](#) to access this painting, today owned by the National Gallery of Art, U.S.A.