

London January Twenty four
1811

P. Jones

Esq



J. M. B. C. S. P.

E. X. M.

Dr. Bridges Cha. for plan
measurement. . . .

L. 217. 166

Balance Due c
Jones. . . .

proportion of the
in the Actin. "Sir } 3. 4. 11
Crew at Quicke" -

£ 47. 12. 1

Mess^{rs}: Norland & Co

Pay the Bearer one hundred pounds

London
22^d Jan^r 1824

Alfred Beckett

Mr Beckford presents his Compl^{ts}
to Messrs Newland Amory &
& acknowledges the receipt
of the inclosures last
forwarded

Bath 20th Nov^r 1777

WEALTHY AND ECCENTRIC.

"Man is the creature of circumstances."—OWEN.

FOR eccentricity few Englishmen of position have ever equalled William Beckford, the author of the singular "History of the Caliph Vathek," which has taken its place among works of richly luxuriant imagination.

He was born in 1761, and at an early age succeeded, by the death of his father, to immense wealth. After travelling abroad and residing for some time near Cintra, where he had a princely establishment, he returned to England, and, after selling his old house at Fonthill, began to build a magnificent residence there, the expenditure on which, spread over eighteen years, was not less than £273,000.

He pursued the objects of his wishes, whatever they were, not coolly and considerably like most other men, but with all the enthusiasm of passion. No sooner did he decide upon anything than he had it carried into immediate execution, whatever might be the cost. After the new house was commenced, he was so impatient to get it finished that he kept regular relays of men at work night and day, including Sundays, supplying them liberally with ale and spirits while they were at work, and when anything was completed which gave him particular pleasure, adding an extra five pounds or ten pounds to be spent in drink.

The first tower, of immense height, was built of wood in order to see its effect; this was then taken down, and the same form put up in wood covered with cement. This fell down, and the tower was built a third time, on the same foundation, with brick and stone. The foundation of the tower was originally that of a small summer-house, to which Mr. Beckford was making additions when the idea of the new building occurred to him, and this idea he was so impatient to realise that he could not wait to remove the summer-house to make a proper foundation for the tower, but carried it up on the walls already standing.

The extraordinary residence erected at Fonthill, together with its splendid library and paintings, he disposed of in 1822 to a Mr. Farquhar. He went then to live near Bath, where he began to build another lofty structure, and here he lived till his death, in 1844.

Not long after he went to Bath the great tower of Fonthill Abbey came tumbling to the ground, fortunately without doing serious injury to anyone. When Mr. Beckford was told of it, he merely observed that it had made an obeisance to Mr. Farquhar which it had never done to him.

There is no doubt that Mr. Beckford's enjoyments consisted of a series of violent impulses. When he wished a new walk to be cut in the woods, or any work of that kind to be done, he used to say nothing about it in the way of preparation, but merely give orders, perhaps late in the afternoon, that it should be cleared out and in a perfect state by the following morning at the time he came out to take his ride. The whole strength of the village was then put in requisition, and employed during the night; and the next day, when Mr. Beckford came to inspect what was done, if he was pleased with it, he used to give a five-pound or a ten-pound note to the men who had been employed, to drink, besides of course paying their wages, which were always liberal.

Even his charities were performed in the same manner. Suddenly he would order a hundred pairs of blankets to be purchased and given away, or he would give orders to have all the firs cut out of an extensive plantation, and all the poor who chose to take them away were permitted to do so, provided it were done in one night. He was also known suddenly to order all the wagons and carts that could be procured to be sent off for coal to be distributed among the poor.

He seldom rode out beyond his gates, but when he did, was

generally asked for charity by the poor people. Sometimes he used to throw a one-pound note or a guinea to them, and sometimes he used to turn round and give the suppliants a severe horsewhipping. When the last was the case, soon after he had ridden away, he generally sent back a guinea or two to the party who had been beaten.

In his mode of life Mr. Beckford had many singularities. Though he never had any society, yet he had his table covered every day in the most splendid style. He was known to give orders for a dinner for twelve persons, and to sit down alone to it attended by twelve servants in full dress, eat of one dish, and send all the rest away.

There were no bells in the house, with the exception of one room, occupied occasionally by his daughter, the Duchess of Hamilton. The servants used to wait by turns in the ante-rooms to the rooms which Mr. Beckford might occupy at the time.

Mr. Frith, in his "Reminiscences," gives a curious story of an adventure which happened to a cousin of his who entered the sacred domain of Mr. Beckford by stealth. He went into the gardens, where he met a man who he supposed was the gardener, but who proved to be Mr. Beckford himself. Mr. Beckford not only showed him his pictures, but kindly asked him to dinner, and then turned him out to spend the night—in a tree.

"The dinner was magnificent," says Mr. Frith, "served on massive plates—the wines of the rarest vintage. Rarer still was Mr. Beckford's conversation. He entertained his guest with stories of Italian travel, with anecdotes of the great in whose society he had mixed till he found the shallowness of it; in short, with the outpouring of a mind of great power and thorough cultivation. My cousin was well read enough to be able to appreciate the conversation, and contribute to it, and thus the evening passed delightfully away. Candles were lighted, and the host and guest talked till a fine Louis Quatorze clock struck eleven. Mr. Beckford rose and left the room. The guest drew his chair to the fire, and waited the return of his host. He thought he must have dozed, for he started to find the room in semi-darkness, and one of the solemn powdered footmen putting out the lights.

"Where is Mr. Beckford?" said my cousin.

"Mr. Beckford has gone to bed," said the man, as he extinguished the last candle.

"The dining-room door was open, and there was a dim light in the hall.

"This is very strange," said my cousin. "I expected Mr. Beckford back again. I wished to thank him for his hospitality." This was said as the guest followed the footman to the front door.

"That functionary opened it wide, and said, 'Mr. Beckford ordered me to present his compliments to you, sir, and I am to say that as you found your way into Fonthill Abbey without assistance, you may find your way out again as best you can; and he hopes you will take care to avoid the bloodhounds that are let loose in the gardens every night. I wish you good evening. No, thank you, sir; Mr. Beckford never allows veils.'

As an author Mr. Beckford is chiefly remembered by his romance of "Vathek," which was published in French at Lausanne in 1787. The English edition, issued in 1786, was a translation not made by the author, nor by his consent.

Lord Byron, a very competent judge both of the subject and the way in which it should be treated, praises "Vathek" in the highest terms. "For correctness of costume," he says, "beauty of description, and power of imagination, this most Eastern and sublime tale surpasses all European imitations, and bears such marks of originality that those who have visited the East will have some difficulty in believing it to be more than a translation. . . . As an Eastern tale even Rasselas must bow to it; his Happy Valley will not bear a comparison with the Hall of Eblis."

William
Beckford

1761-1844

Wealthy

Eccentric

Author

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