

Coleridge's account of the composition of "Kubla Khan"

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in 'Purchas's Pilgrimes:' 'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto: and thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.'¹

The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone had been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter:

Then all the charm
Is broken—all that phantom-world so fair
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,
And each mis-shape the other. Stay awhile,
Poor youth! who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes—
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon
The visions will return! And lo! he stays,
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more
The pool becomes a mirror.

[From *The Picture; or, the lover's Resolution*]

'A person from Porlock' has become one of the comic turns of English literature—used as a phrase to describe an unwelcome visitor or someone who interrupts important work with trivial demands. Porlock is, of course, the name of a small English town in near Exmoor in West Somerset. The place-name sounds so funny that it almost seems that Coleridge himself was scoffing at it and at the lowly man who came from there. We now know, however, that the man in question was a fellow scholar from whom Coleridge was seeking to acquire rare volumes of the works of Giordano Bruno, by his own account.

Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him. but the to-morrow is yet to come. As a contrast to this vision, I have annexed a fragment of a very different character, describing with equal fidelity the dream of pain and disease.

—Author's Preface to *Christabel, Kubla Khan, and the Pains of Sleep* (1816)

¹ The sentence occurs in an Elizabethan travel work by Samuel Purchas called *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions observed in all Ages and Places discovered, from the Creation unto the Present* (London, 1617). See John Livingston-Lowe, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (London 1927).