

VATHEK

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Vathek by William Beckford

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WILLIAM BECKFORD

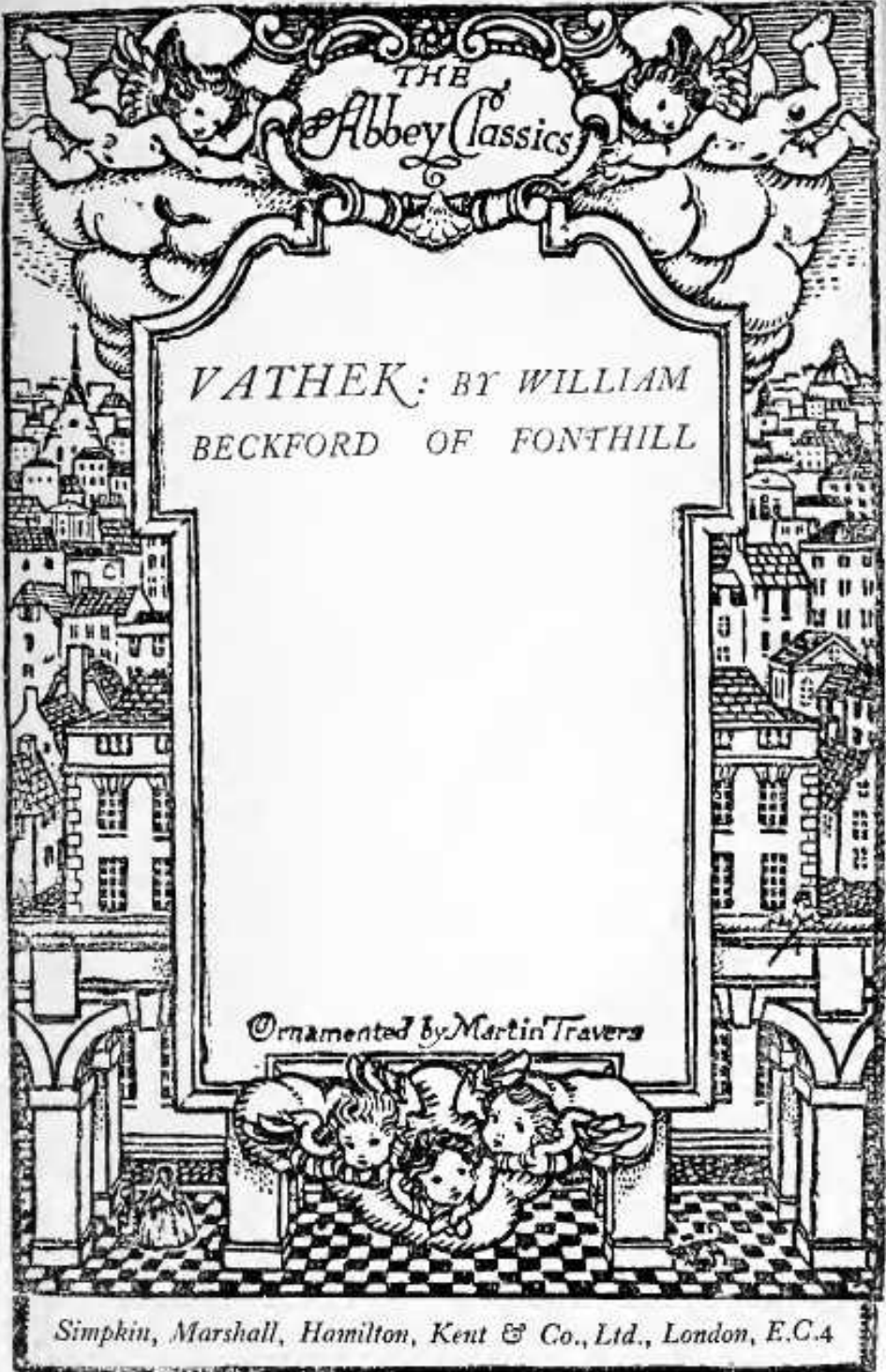
VATHEK

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THE ABBEY CLASSICS—II

THE WORKS OF WILLIAM BECKFORD
OF FONTHILL

I—VATHEK





THE
Abbey Classics

*VATHEK: BY WILLIAM
BECKFORD OF FONTHILL*

Ornamented by Martin Travers

Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., Ltd., London, E.C.4

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409
105
1702

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

WILLIAM BECKFORD, son of William Beckford, Lord Mayor of London, was born at Fonthill in Wiltshire on 1st October, 1760. On the death of his father in 1770 he inherited a vast fortune, the income of which was computed at £100,000 per annum. He was educated privately, and, among other studies, he was taught music by Mozart. At the age of seventeen he produced his first book, *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters*. As a young man he travelled abroad, and in 1784, in Geneva, married Margaret Gordon, daughter of the Earl of Aboyne, by whom he had two daughters. After her death in 1786 he returned to England, and sat as member for Wells, and later, until 1820, as member for Hindon, although his attendances at the House were few and far between. In 1796 he began to indulge in those wild extravagances of building by which he eventually dissipated the bulk of his fortune. The result of these excesses was that he was compelled to sell Fonthill for £300,000 and to retire to Bath, where, having built himself the Lansdowne Tower, he became a recluse, passing the rest of his life among his books. He died in 1844, by which time only £80,000 of his original fortune remained to him.

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4. *Modern Novel Writing* (ps.), 1796.
5. *Azemis*, a novel (ps.), 1798.
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INTRODUCTION

I

“**V**ATHEK remains,” as Harriet Martineau, with her masterly terseness, remarked ; and few who have once encountered “the baleful beauty of that Queen of Evil, Nouronihar, and the vision of the burning hearts that make their own wandering but eternal Hell,” can altogether escape the charm.

William Beckford “declared, in his seventy-sixth year, that he never felt a minute’s *ennui* in his life” ; and his keen power of enjoyment gave vitality to his work. In that life of “luxurious self-culture, apart from the cares, loves and concerns of men, he carried out exactly what Tennyson pictured in the *Palace of Art*.” It is without question, his own complete absorption in the atmosphere of the tale, that makes *Vathek* unique and inspires its strength. “I tremble,” he writes, “while relating it, and have not a nerve in my frame

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but vibrates like an aspen." He could remain motionless, "hour after hour, all his faculties absorbed by the harmony of wind instruments," or, letting his fancy wander among "ancient fables," became literally possessed by the spirit of the East. "It seems as if all the sweets of Asia are poured upon *Vathek*. It is full of glittering palaces, and temples, and towers; of jewelled halls, tables of agate, and cabinets of ebony and pearl; of crystal fountains, radiant columns, and arcades, and perfumes burning in censers of gold."

Beckford's sensuous impressions have an abandoned sincerity that forbids artifice or pose. He moves among gorgeous potentates as to the manner born, his imagination rekindling in his own person their imperious passions and disordered tastes. *Vathek* affords little scope for technical criticism or the controversies of erudition. "Its beauties are by no means of the recondite order; and inability to appreciate them is one of those innate distastes, not for the book but for the *genre*, against which expostulation is impotent."

To the genius of England, Eastern romance has been ever an exotic, rare and unfamiliar,

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if not actually an affront. Marryat, Meredith and R. L. Stevenson played, variously, with the *Arabian Nights*, from which our pantomime keeps alive the memory of certain casually selected personalities. Southey and Byron scorched their wings at many an Eastern altar ; and Disraeli, born of the East, yet betrays always the "purple patch." Our national temperament turns with something akin to scorn from all the luxuriance of a torrid zone.

There is, again, no genuine flavour of the East in Mrs. Radcliffe's delightful extravaganzas, in the solemn *Rasselas* of Dr. Johnson, or in the so-called "Gothic" *Castle of Otranto*. *The Monk* of Lewis is scarcely literature ; and if Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* shares with *Vathek* the throne of English "Terror," its power is derived from a different source.

If any of his predecessors really account for Beckford, they were obviously Voltaire and the ingenious Anthony Hamilton : though for them Orientalism only existed as a target for wit. They did but jest at the *Fantasties*, which Beckford made sublime.

The vision he felt so real carries conviction