

REFLECTIONS

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PERSONS FROM PORLOCK

In the summer of 1798 (he later said it was 1797, but he was always bad about dates) the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in poor health and living just then near the village of Porlock near Somerset, was browsing through one of the ponderous folios of Samuel Purchas' great seventeenth-century compilation of explorers' narratives, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, when sleep overtook him just as he was reading these lines: "In *Xandu* did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene *miles of plaine ground with a wall*, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant springs, delightful Streams, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of *pleasure*, which may be removed from place to place."

"Xandu," or "Xanadu" in some readings of the Purchas text, was Shang-Tu, the capital city of China when it was under Mongol rule in the thirteenth century, and "Cublai Can" is the great emperor we call Kubla Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan. Coleridge, as he drifted off to sleep musing about Kubla and his stately palace, found a poem taking shape in his mind—but let him tell it himself:

"The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep . . . during which he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines, if that indeed could 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 awaking 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 have been 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 has been cast. . . ."

He did manage to salvage the opening lines of the lost poem, and we all know it well from our school days:

* * *

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.*

* * *

And so on, following Purchas for a time ("twice five miles of fertile ground") but then drifting off into fantasy (a "woman wailing for her demon lover") and showing us the sacred river traveling through "caverns measureless to man" as it sinks "in tumult to a lifeless ocean." Then the poet shifts to a vision he had had of "a damsel with a dulcimer" singing of the mysterious Mount Abora, and then to the enigmatic cry, "Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair!"—

* * *

*Close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

And there it ends: beautiful, magical, bewildering. Whatever was to follow, and perhaps to explain, was destroyed forever by the untimely arrival of that odious person on business from Porlock.

A person on business from Porlock! That Person from Porlock has passed into literary legend as the unwanted visitor who, arriving at some inopportune moment, interrupts the creation of what would surely have been a splendid poem or story if only that jangling intrusion had not forever destroyed the concentration of the interrupted artist.

Like Coleridge, I have many times dropped off to sleep and found myself reading the manuscript of some newly written story or novel of mine. It is always a masterpiece, the best thing I have ever written, a work that would bring me the Hugo or the Nebula or perhaps the Nobel immediately upon its publication; but then I awaken and though I remember the dream, not a shred of the new work remains in my memory. (Once, for a little while, I remembered a single page of one, but it was in a language that neither you nor I can understand, and it swiftly vanished from my mind.) I needed no intruder from Porlock to destroy the masterpiece my slumbering mind had created. The mere act of awakening did it: I was my own Person from Porlock.

But many an artist has had the experience of such an interruption. It even figured in a science fiction story once: "The Person from Porlock," by Raymond F. Jones, in the August 1947 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. Jones was a capable second-tier writer in the forties and fifties, but this is, in fact, very far from his best work, a dreadful story, full of the gimmicky engineer-talk so beloved by the readers of that magazine back then ("The positive and negative peaks were equal and a scope showed perfect symmetry, but in the second stage they weren't high enough. . ."), and culminating in a plot twist that I have no hesitation in spoiling for you, because you will not want to read the story itself. The story involves Reg Stone, the chief engineer for a large corporation that is trying to develop a device for transporting freight by teleportation. He feels that he is on the threshold of success, but odd things keep going wrong, and gradually he discovers that several of his subordinates are making small but disastrous errors in their computations. These errors are accidental, Stone assumes, but in time he comes to see that they are deliberate, and that his engineering group has been infiltrated by Persons from Porlock (he knows about the Coleridge incident) who are working to block the project. Stone calls in one of his engineers and accuses him of sabotage, where upon the man blandly tells him that he is actually a member of an extraterrestrial race that has been living in disguise on Earth for many years after their spacecraft was wrecked there. Aware that Stone's teleportation gizmo would be able to transport not just freight but atomic bombs, which would be a Bad Thing, a little group of these aliens has joined his engineering group and is systematically preventing the project from succeeding. (I told you it wasn't a very good story!) Stone immediately sees the light, changes sides, and vows to work as hard as he can to keep teleportation from becoming a reality. He is now a Person from Porlock himself!

Over here in the everyday world, we don't have to worry about meddling aliens messing up our work, but Persons from Porlock do exist, and, as a writer only too well aware of the perils of interruption when in creative flight, I have taken care throughout my career to guard myself against them. My office is in a building separate from our main house, so that I'm unable to hear the doorbell ring when I'm at work. The view from my office faces a lovely garden, where something or other is in bloom all year round; but my desk is arranged so that I sit with my back to it. I have a telephone, of course, but I have rigorously trained myself not to answer it while

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I'm working.

And—avoiding the most dangerous Person from Porlock of them all—I have no modem in my office, no way of hooking my computer to the Internet. That little bell may ding for others, but I can't cut into my work to check my email and thus have my concentration shattered by incoming news, whether good or bad, even if I wanted to. Nor can I look at my Facebook page (I don't have one, anyway) or yield to the temptation to send a few tweets or do any of the million other things that writers indulge in to disrupt the smooth flow of their imaginations while they are supposedly working. We are all our own Persons from Porlock, these days. But, having learned very early on what a person on business from Porlock did to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, I have made it a point to keep all such intruders at bay. I suspect that I am one of a very few, and I shudder to think of all the masterpieces that are truncated these days by the insistent arrival of emails from Porlock.

One quick final note. In 1950, when I was still in high school and had read both Coleridge's anecdote about the Person from Porlock and the Raymond F. Jones story, I wrote a ghastly little tale called "The Sacred River," set on Venus, in which a tyrant named Kai-eb-la lives in a pleasure palace called Xen-d'u and is thinking about invading Earth. A young rebel named Mara succeeds in building a thought projector in order to warn Earth about Kai-eb-la's sinister plans, and, though the tyrant's soldiers kill him before he can complete the sending of his message, a little of it does get through to the sleeping mind of an Earthman named Samuel Taylor Coleridge—just the part that describes the beauties of Venus and Kai-eb-la's pleasure palace. Coleridge, awakening, writes down as much of the vision as he remembers. . . .

Well, I said it was a ghastly story. But, hey, I was only fifteen. And a small literary magazine called *The Avalonian* was actually willing to publish it in 1952 in its first and only issue, and to pay me something like five dollars for it—the first time anyone had paid me for a work of fiction. Not the last, though, for it has been a long and busy career over the past six-plus decades, and I suppose I owe it all to that Person from Porlock.