

David Thornley

THE ENGLISH MISTRESS

A twisted snake with a broken tale

As I lie dying — hear my whim
This thought consumes my waking mind
If Keats had done just what I told him
He'd be alive, though maybe blind
Miserable Keats — such talent wasted
Haunted — ghostlike — features pasted
Since 1812 when El Gin¹ may
The Parthenon marbles spirit away
Keats spent every waking hour
Thoughtful in that vein stoned bower
Musicians should an overture
To celebrate such scenes, so pure
Snowy mountains, young men fight
Did Keats imagine — one day might
Though pale and sick with shy cough, ski?
Poor — nay — silly twisted boy!
Saw the beauty, missed the joy
Eaten by consumptive canker
Un-Physick — metaphoric Wanker

Byron narrates from his deathbed:

10

Before Stern Hasan's turban riven
By single blow of Giaour's² blade
Byron knew, and so did Heaven
The reason why such price be paid
When Othman's son³ for Leila thirst
If truth be told, 'twas not the first!

The Second Assistant Turkish Ambassador, 20
His Swarthyness Caliph Ali Moustacha, pops
round with a newspaper; the headline reads:
**3,000 YEAR-OLD BODY FOUND BENEATH
ACROPOLIS—EIGHT GREEKS ARRESTED**

Letters remain — when memories pause
Just reach into your sister's drawers
Pil'ed high upon that oaken bench
Some letters Grecian, some letters French⁴.
Sweet Mary from the Barents Sea
Writes of characters to thee
All about child and parents, see?

Byron's Armenian cleaning lady
interrupts:

30

1 Mythical tomb robber rumoured to have plundered the ancient Greek Parth. anon.
2 Infidel.
3 Muslim
4 You know what they are.

Motherhood theories — I've another
Could Frankenstein be Mary's mother?
"Hello Byron! Clubfoot better?
Coleridge writes a preachy letter
Tinctures of Laudanum, take for pain
"Fore it wears off, take it again
Wallow not in dour dejection
Compensate with huge erection⁵
Here's a note from Percy Bysshe
Storms a risen, can't face fish!
Might go sailing in the morning
Something tragic might be dawning
Then Wordsworth wrote from Germany
We're cold and lonely, come to tea.
You know my sister, Dorothy
She's most delightful company
If thoughts of marriage in your head
She'll tend to kitchen, tend to bed.
Parish spinster, plain and simple,
No dumpling she with rosy dimple
Way you're going, it'll end in strife
My advice, Byron, take a wife
Coleridge mentioned your erection
Dorothy's decided upon reflection
Best leave us "Lakers" to each other
Nice and cosy — sister, brother.
Is Frankenstein really Mary's mother?

40

50

Ere I shuffle off this mortal coil
Hear my tale of villain royal
Bandits, brigands, robbers, thieves
This legend carries none of these
Nor wants for excess — if you please
Of graceful toy so eager sought
Ne'er lost its charm by being caught
Love rejected — passion bought
This twisted tale is all I hold
Of him so hot, and her so cold!
Listen up! And note this real
The wound that time can never heal
My words within you may excite
A flight to anger — rush to fight!
As the truth for you is dawning

Byron clipped his toenails with a Turkish
falchion, almost managing to decapitate a
60 chamber-maid in the process, and wistfully
cast his mind back to those halcyon days at
Edinburgh when he could book into a cheap
hotel and order the Tartan Room and probably
get both — for sixpence. Warily he continues:

70

5 The act of setting upright, building, constructing, establishing etc ... the state of being erected; a building a structure; the distension of a part consisting of erectile tissue, esp. the penis.

Heed me well and take this warning
For those of nervous disposition
Helmets on — this one's a Mission!

Though Pard⁶ by this time claws of rack
Would not get English in the sack
Young Hassan's Mistress proving clever
Taught him well his first word, Never!
Othman's sons daren't taste that flower
Only desert cactus, for them picks
Ten sheckles each, for half an hour
Sunburned floret, and rows of pricks
Hassan's mood was growing sour
Heart — like eyes — as black as crows
Curse the day, oh female Giaour
Protector of the English Rose
Make me man! Or send Simoom!⁷
Wicked wind of death and doom
Deadly firestorm — choking, branding
Scythe them down, leave no man standing!

By desert sun will she be cured
Her fate is sealed, of that assured
English Rose that's ne'er been plucked
If she, then you — and we'll all be ...

Young Hassan were but Pard cub still
Soft of mouth, and whiskered nil
Not yet mighty Mussulman he
Acorn yet — become the tree
Hassan's father, dreaded Pasha⁸
Deific⁹ — Merciless — slave back lasher
He who orders mortals broken
Him whose name must not be spoken
Seeing Hassan growing colder
Wiser not, but ever bolder
Sly and cruel, this most pleasing
What brains he had — needed teasing
An English Mistress brought from Rome
Palace Royal would she call home
Took by stealth in dead of night
These her options — fear or fright!
Locked within a sandstone tower

Turkish Delight Importer and Raconteur
Ali Oopla, cheekily calls out from his
rear passage, behind the shop:

80

Greek Purveyor of Porcelain Bedpans to the
aristocracy, each painstakingly hand-painted
with scenes from Hades and the River Styx,
the popular "Nether-World" series, chips in:

The Egyptian sandal maker Flip Flop,
who by "Royal Appointment" made all
the beautifully embossed straps that
Turkish prisoners bit down on when
they were flogged at the Palace, (he'd
been recommended to Byron, as the
owner of the finest collection of surgical
boots in the Mediterranean), and had
brought round a surgical tennis slipper
for a final fitting. Flip Flop, having heard
the story before, describes the scene:

100

110

6 Leopard.

7 The blast of the desert, fatal to every living thing, and alluded to in eastern poetry.

8 Turkish title of honour, usually conferred on officers of high rank, governors, etc.

9 Godlike, making divine, to adore as a god, to idolize.

Hers the teaching, his the power
Once confined to Palace splendour
Pasha's homage must she render
But no English longbow here portrayed
Whose heart secured by ir' on Locke
This weapon of the female trade
Short Musket once of Polish stock 120
Resplendent in her white symar¹⁰
Shining like some northern star
As the summer's sun grew hotter
Few would see her cag'ed grim
Fewer still those who Dorota
Espy beneath fedora's brim
Such winter's skin, nor colour seen
Or yellow hair with golden sheen
And eyes that must have been in awe
When witness to celestial lore 130
She who must obey the Pasha
Ne'er ale, nor rum, nor Bacchus¹¹ slakes
Eats not porcine, narry rasher
No man befriend, nor lover takes
Deathly pale English m'lady
Dark Mussulman, left to wonder
The nature of fair malady?

"Bismillah!¹² Bismillah!¹³ Alla Hu!¹⁴
From here atop this Minaret¹⁵
Must I wail now with regret
In Royal window saw I slaughter
Father, son and English daughter
Witness'ed what no man shiver'd
Listen'ed Mad Pasha's cries
Stretch my tongue and have it sever'd
Help me, save me, pluck my eyes!
Mad Pasha lays — still — on his bed
Reclining — resting — sleeping — dead!
Snatch'ed from this earthly plane
Victim of incestuous gain 150
Illumined by a lantern's flicker
Making heart race quick then quicker!

The Meuzzin from the Minaret taking a few days well earned rest in Missolonghi, after having a throat infection diagnosed 140 by a myopic Egyptian Proctologist, adds characteristically, in a strained whisper:

10 Shroud.

11 Roman god of wine.

12 Bismillah — "In the name of God" Opening line in the song "Bohemian Rhapsody" released in 1975 by Freddie Mercury and Queen.

13 Same as above but he sings it twice in the chorus of the song.

14 "Alla Hu!" the concluding words of the Meuzzin's call to prayer from the highest gallery on the exterior of the Minaret.

15 Lofty slender turret on a mosque, from which the muezzin summons the faithful to prayers.

If here's the body, where the head?
If incomplete — is't truly dead?
Nay follow this unfold of cloth
Tardy remnant of bloody wroth
Find the feathers froze in time
Silent witness to Hassan's crime
Staring — somnolent — hooded eyes
Display forever such surprise
If this the father, what the son?
Once this accursed deed be done

160

With face of fire, and heart of stone
Hassan knew what none had known
Blind Eunuchs took her — one, two, three,
To bury "neath a palm'ed tree
Beyond the mountains, to the east
Where Kings are David, beggars feast
Would Hassan brave the Nazarene?
To carry back reluctant Queen
But first to business — Prince and King
If power to the scorpion
Then must Mad Pasha feel its sting
Ten paces to the door beyon'
Which living men must never see
All blinded Eunuchs, must they be
That serve the Pasha and his wives
Protecting with their very lives
But none with Hassan left to plea
Blind Eunuchs took her — one, two, three,
Desart Scorpion — sting immortal
Sufficient riven for this portal
Black Hassan, who evil hearted
Moves to finish what's been started
Drags scimitar¹⁶ o'er marble floor
To live and die in gilded cage
Beyond this hour, not one hour more
His father, Pasha, will not age
From Royal Chambers there ensues
Argue — shout — and threat to kill!
Mad Pasha — life or death must choose
A cry, a gurgle, silence — still
Black Hassan now insane with grief
Wipes blooded sword on silken sheaf
Eyes yellow from this evil deed
Scorpion's loins stir blackheart seed

The Turkish Ambassador to the Court
of St. James, Abdul Mahomet Ali Pasha,
(blessings of the Almighty be upon him)
Rear Admiral (retd.) Scourge of the Greeks
Befriender of the Working Turk, Inventor
of Capitalism, Father of the Nation, Sly
Lecherous Uncle of the Convent Girls,
Professor of Women's Studies at the Open
University of Lesbos, Cousin Dad to the
Orphanage Children, always ready with a
joke and a punishment, nipped round when
he heard Byron had uncorked a rare bottle of
Woolworth's Chateau Lafitte Rosé 1811,
filled his ivory hookah with an ounce of
Noah's Mt. Ararat Rough Shag, then sat back
sousing a stuffed nightingale in a pint of
Crème de Menthe, and had this to say:

180

190

16 Turkish sword with curved blade narrowing towards the hilt.

In time Hassan became obsessed
 To lack free will, he felt oppressed
 The English Mistress at his side
 E're he walk, or e're he ride
 To spend together waking hours
 Reading poems, pressing flowers
 No other woman live or dead
 Had ever entered Hassan's head
 "Spare me torment I entreat thee
 His brooding visage spake distress
 Wanting for The English Mistress
 Arising passions — cheek by jowl
 Angel of Death! Fear midnight howl
 "Think me curs'd or leagu'd with greed
 Should Paynim¹⁷ temptress take my seed
 Thus Hassan coveted to despoil
 Black hearted Urn of rancid oil
 At this Mad Pasha raging blind
 Out of patience — out of mind
 From gilded Harem¹⁸ ordered wives
 If those ho value more their lives
 All threatened with the Promised Land¹⁹
 Must take Young Hasan firm in hand
 The English Mistress from the city
 Banished for all 'ternity
 Took by Dromedary's²⁰ burden
 Buried deep — alive — not murden!

Black Hassan "stride nigrescent²¹ steed
 Flanks red flashing — spurs that bleed
 Skeletal teeth all flecked with foam
 Wild-eyed stallion far from home
 Riding hard 'till break of day
 As sky clouds over, blue to grey
 From the Mountains black storm brewing
 The Devil — Hassan's soul — is suing
 Face black featured, soaked in blood
 Fixed in horror, this corsing flood
 Storm rages fierce against his crime
 From deep within the sands of time

Byron gingerly rests his gammy leg on an old Greek Pederast, then reaches for a bottle of Mrs Wilberforce's Miracle Hair Removal Elixir & Flatulence Tonic, (50% Opium 50% 200 Bleach,) "Treat Your Bowel and Your Bowl" however, Byron's Landlady discovered that it would bleach her top lip and had systematically consumed the entire bottle. Denying all knowledge of the theft; she had claimed that the blonde lip, now dominating her otherwise swarthy complexion, resulted from being struck by lightening. No sooner had she spoken, than three poor peasant girls dropped to their knees, crossing themselves 210 and began praying to St. Spreservus who is the Greek Saint of Irish Navigators. Hearing this, a crowd soon gathered proclaiming a miracle and petitioned "Rome" to canonise Byron's Landlady. When "Rome" decreed they could only beautify her after death, the crowd stoned her as an act of contrition. In a postscript to this, a Bull; (lead sealed edict the Pontiff issues, or ludicrous contradiction supposedly characteristic of the Irish) stated 220 they were going to de-canonise St. Byron's Landlady who, it was discovered, was a Jew (same god — better housing and education)

Three rather old, and somewhat portly, blind gentlemen of Arab persuasion (though at the time of writing I am still unsure as to who had persuaded them to become Arabs) well, they were measuring Byron for his coffin, and began to hum gently, some would say poignantly, in unison, in a manner which 230 strongly called to mind the mute choristers of the Khyber Pass singing the March of the Tongueless Devils with tympanic accompaniment on golden dribble bowls, (sung at the triumphal return of King Demonos the Most Beneficent to

17 Pagan.

18 The apartments reserved for the women in a Muslim household; the occupants of these; a Muslim sanctuary.

19 Paradise if you are English; Greece if you are Turkish; Cyprus if you are Greek; Queensland if you are a Cypriot.

20 Camel with one hump; OK I shouldn't have to tell you this but the one with two humps is a Bactrian. Just remember the number of humps in the first letter of the name. D or B.

21 You know what nigrescent means!

Victory Pyrrhic, now all is done
For headless father and loveless son
In madness hovers dragonfly
Translucent wing and bulging eye
No mouth with which to feed the brain
No dream, no hope, no god, no pain!
As Houris²² beckons her to follow
Beneath the palm'ed tree — a hollow
She, lifted from an early grave
By storm and darkness was she saved
Though English as a Christmas Cake
Perhaps her saviour more prosaic?
Skiff²³ homeward-veering o'er the sea
Blind Eunuchs took her — one, two, three,

Of English Mistress — no trace found
Slumber'd not in sandy ground
Legend grew of storm so fierce
Wind so strong, the earth did pierce
From deep below the palm'd tree
Gone! — Simoom, to be with thee
The English Mistress for thy Bride
Where passion riots in her pride
Owl must sleep with weather eye
Ever watchful of the sky
And wild-dogs wait by palm'd tree
To bury bones where thee can't see
Lowly — slowly — immortal grace
Fades English memory from this place!
Othman's sons in time forgot her
So blew Simoom — hot and hotter
When sand and wind and heat conspire
To flay thy skin on mortal Pyre
Mould the Clay of man's desire
Glaze the vessel wrought in fire
Make Greek the women of amphorae
Then drive the Turk back to Angora²⁴
Praise the Kiln of Almighty Potter
Gift of God! — Simoom! — Dorota!²⁵

Constantinople at the time of the Great Siege
around the third century AD.) As the three rather
old and somewhat portly, blind gentlemen
secured the attention of all persons present,
they spoke as one voice; softly and without 240
conviction, yet displaying great range to their
emotions, and with no small amount of feeling:

Byron looks up from a crossword puzzle 250
he has been completing, and sighs deeply.
Of all the philosophers, writers, scholars,
poets, men of letters, learned scribes and
aristocratic muses he has known throughout
his short life — none could match the finest
Greek and Turkish intellectuals with whom
it has been his privilege to share these final
hours. Stealing himself not to start blubbing,
Byron dabs away an errant tear with the hem
of the Greek Ambassador's ceremonial white 260
pleated frock and finds himself looking up his
old address and admiring the manly turquoise
Pom Poms adorning his black and white slip-on
dancing pumps, with their stylish silver buckles
and matching brocade stockings. On the merest
whim Byron glances furtively at the tiny calfskin
ammunition pouch worn by the Greek Ambassador
and secured by an elaborate off-the-shoulder strap
in slender braided silk with gold highlights, and
Byron thanks God that he has recruited 270
soldiers such as these to enjoin him in battle
with the despised, but nevertheless mighty, Turk.
Then Byron summarises the story thusly:

22 Islamic female angels

23 Small light boat to be rowed with oars.

24 Angora former name of Ankara capital of Turkey

25 Dorota — "Gift of God" girl's name originating in Poland.