

PERSON FROM PORLOCK

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The person from Porlock was an unwelcome visitor to Samuel Taylor Coleridge during his composition of the poem *Kubla Khan* in 1797. Coleridge claimed to have perceived the entire course of the poem in a dream (possibly an opium-induced haze), but was interrupted by this visitor from Porlock while in the process of writing it. *Kubla Khan*, only 54 lines long, was never completed. Thus "person from Porlock", "man from Porlock", or just "Porlock" are literary allusions to unwanted intruders who disrupt inspired creativity.

Coleridge was living at Nether Stowey (a village in the foothills of the Quantocks). It is unclear whether the interruption took place at Culbone Parsonage or at Ash Farm. He described the incident in his first publication of the poem, writing about himself in the third person:

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 has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!

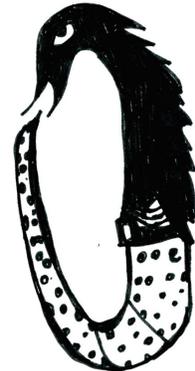
English poet and essayist Thomas De Quincey speculated, in his own *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, that the mysterious figure was Coleridge's doctor, P. Aaron Potter, who regularly supplied the poet with laudanum. This story is not universally accepted by scholars. It has been suggested by Elisabeth Schneider (in *Coleridge, Opium and "Kubla Khan"*, University of Chicago Press, 1953) among others, that this prologue, as well as the *Person from Porlock*, was fictional and intended as a credible explanation of the poem's seemingly fragmentary state as published. The poet Stevie Smith also suggested this view in one of her own poems, saying "the truth is I think, he was already stuck."

If the Porlock interruption was a fiction, it would parallel the famous "letter from a friend" that interrupts Chapter XIII of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* just as he was beginning a hundred-page exposition of the nature of the imagination. It was admitted much later that the "friend" was the author himself. In that case, the invented letter solved the problem that Coleridge found little receptiveness for his philosophy in the England of that time.

In Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, a character checks into a motel under the pseudonym A. Person, Porlock, England.

In Douglas Adams's *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, the title character saves the world, in part by time-travelling from the present day to distract Coleridge from properly remembering his dream; if Coleridge had completed the poem an alien ghost would have 'encoded' certain information within the completed work that would have allowed him to make repairs to his spaceship in the past at the cost of wiping out all life on Earth.

In Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Valley of Fear*, Sherlock Holmes is interrupted in his labours by a letter from the pseudonymous Fred Porlock, an informant within Moriarty's organization. Porlock's identity is never revealed.



In "A Maze of Death" by Philip K. Dick, Dr Milton Babble describes the Walker-on-Earth as "a sort of anti-Person-from-Porlock" due to his tendency to disrupt bad outcomes. The Walker prevents Seth Morley from choosing a faulty spacecraft for his journey to the planet Delmak-O.



KUBLA KHAN / SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

Or a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment

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.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!
A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw;
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

