

A Record of the Most Unfortunate Doings at

Castle Bash

*As Told by an Unnamed Poet who was Never
Seen Again*

as transcribed by Julian Bernick

Whistling Shade Geste Series #2



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Introduction

The odd poem in this volume was found on the editor's doorstep one late evening. There was no sign of whoever had dropped it thence, and no return address was given. The author, the time and location of its composition are unknown. My extensive scholarly research has failed to locate any "Castle Bash" or "County Bash", nor could we discover any specific analog to the castle and its environs with certainty. The language, a sort of gibbered archaic English, provides no clue, nor do the fleeting mentions of geography, history and religion.

Indeed, after much fruitless work to locate a source for this dubious work, I ponder the possibility that Castle Bash and its residents are instead the natives of a dimly seen

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fictional landscape of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Though written in verse, perhaps the narrator's countrymen are the subjects of Walpole and Radcliffe, more so even than Byron and Shelley.

Indeed, the manuscript's flaws put it more in the company of the Gothic novelists than the great Romantic poets. Its rhyme-scheme and general craft are uneven. Its plot is unclear and unlikely in the extreme. Its hero is imperfect (to say the least), and unlikable, and the other characters are barely more attractive.

Perhaps it is only fair to bid the reader to turn back. Perhaps his mysterious trifle should remain in obscurity, a piece of a puzzle lacking its other segments, the story of the author's life, his aims and origins. To do otherwise is to allow that there is some tiny measure of truth—literal, literary, spiritual or otherwise—in this profane and nihilistic work. And that would truly be a deep, vast and unrelenting horror.

- Julian Bernick

Castle Bash

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Castle Bash

Canto 1

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When Castle Bash is moonlit, crowned with snow
And all the pennons fluttering in the cold,
You'll find me on the ramparts where none go,
My collar up, the heavy cloak and stole
Of my beloved, wrapped around my throat.
Letting the wind whip wildly at my soul
While staring down at the rocks that wait below.
How beautiful the colors make this scene!
The liquid light confers a spectral glow
And adds a shimmer to the icy sheen.

I stand there, in the Hellish winter's vice,
When few things brave the tower tops and air.
No frozen armies siege us; none would dare
Lay siege from on that wretched plain of ice.
No panthers stir, no hawks command the skies,
Here all things find their warmest place—or die.
And here in Castle Bash, stands wretched I,
A bastard poet suffering great surprise
Because I cannot bring myself to die—
For who needs death when thinking of Her eyes?

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I came in Spring. The land was full of mud,
The roads washed out with winter-melted flood.
The invitation specified no terms
Upon my stay within these ancient stones.
I thought to leave by Samhain, when the worms
Revolt against the freshest, sweetest bones,
When trees let down their hair of fire and gold
And Sun finds less and less time in his fold,
And winter starts to prowl around the lands
And works his Northern will with icy hands.

How innocent came I within that gate,
That's carved with all the Countess's seals of state.
I thought this savage castle, though remote
Might occupy an enterprising poet
Who needed food and wine most every day,
And women, (if available), to play
The soft sweet tones on harpsichord or harp;
This was the lust I had then in my heart.
For wine, for girls, a plain and steady meal,
A place to write my epic, think and feel.

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The Countess welcomed me, her hair piled high,
Those tresses pitch as deepest midnight sky,
And spangled bright with jewels for tiny stars.
Her form was handsome and defied her age.
Her children? Well, such children as they are—
Aliza, a daughter, ready for marriage,
And Edwynd, belligerent blockhead of a son.
All this I'd heard, but graciously said none,
And bowed and scraped with diverse compliments.
She interviewed me for an hour and went.

I turned to old Enebius, chief of staff,
Who shaved each day his face but only half.
“White beards do not become us,” he declared,
So went each day with half a face's hair,
Or maybe he forgot to shave the rest,
For all his thought was on his cold mistress,
And often at a meal or in some speech,
He'd break off cleanly, walk away from all
To analyze a treaty for a breach
Or scrutinize an ancient protocol.

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This strange behavior was deliberate
For parties subtle, dark and disparate
Confused his lack of grooming for a sign
That sly Eneubius had lost his mind.
And having thus mistaken out for in,
His enemies were fooled, as were his friends.
And since he watched them all at some remove
And since his senile antics put them off
This venerable man so lightly loved
Had learned to turn a profit from their scoffs.

“How has she liked me?” Thus I begged the chief,
Whose blue eyes seemed to mark me for a thief.
He licked his lips and sorted sluggish thoughts
Into a stew of reason, rumor, dross.
“What was your father’s name?” this ancient asked.
Again I told him, and he raised his eyes.
“A bastard?” he inquired, to my surprise,
“For scrupulous I am in this dire task:
I know the families across the world—
The margraves, counts, the barons, dukes and earls.”

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“It’s true that I was born outside his name,
But nonetheless I’ve earned a store of fame
By pamphleteering, poetry and plays.
I’m bred to noble wit and inborn grace
And I refined these gifts in novel ways,
To say those things a nobleman can’t say.
I come here seeking patronage and peace,
To bring this distant castle some relief
From craggy storms and winter’s dark caprice!
Must ‘bastard’ always follow me like a thief?”

Enubius chortled, stroked his half-shaved chin.
“You misconstrue my interest, young man.
You look for slights! My lady here begins
To find a suitor for her daughter’s hand.”
He clasped a withered claw upon my arm,
A grip so tight I thought he’d do me harm!
And muttering to himself of names and ranks,
Retired from my presence with my thanks.
There stunned stood I, amidst her gaudy hall,
Alone inside those portrait-covered walls.

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The offer was forgotten—so I thought,
But hot meals came a-steaming from the pot.
And sweet wine served in crystal of an age
When swords and armor danced on battle's stage.
I wrote my verse when Sun lit up the room.
I ate my porridge promptly before Noon.
I had my meat and wine when Sun retired.
For several solemn weeks thus I perspired.
For company, a homely serving girl
Who served the meal and ran, her skirts awhirl.

The steward housed me in the Tower of Saints.
A drafty room, but I had few complaints
As meals were prompt and wine came by the jug.
A narrow bed, though clean, a threadbare rug,
And wooden shutters, clattering through the night.
If open, all the mountain air poured in
And cut you to the bone. The freezing wind
Was full of every ounce of nature's spite.
I memorized the castle from that height;
The opposite tower also held my sight.

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Called the Wife's Tower, it was small and narrow
But well within the shot of a well-aimed arrow,
And no one seemed to enter or withdraw
From that tall tower's single wooden maw.
But I saw gleaming lights each night and dawn
That framed the tower's windows, lit the cracks.
It rankled my fine pride for I was on
A quest to write an epic, and attack
Hypocrisies of our once-great empire;
Not to sit there gazing at the fey-lit spire.

In chapel, I inquired about this tower.
The priest droned on with all his earthly power
Inducing me to dullness and to doze.
I asked the crone who washed the castle's clothes—
“Who lives within that tower that's always lit,
And why does no one ever enter it?”
She winked and gummed herself and tapped her
head
“I won't betray her— Savior strike me dead!
We ain't supposed to talk about what's there,
As sure as I can still suck in my air!”

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“But why is it the Wife’s Tower?” I asked.
Her milky eyes stayed on her lowly task,
“The Old Count had a wife; ’twas long ago
And she cuckolded him, or some said so,
And as she was a noble born grand dame,
They cleared the tower and locked her in the same!
And there she lived and decades on, she died.
And some would like to say ‘twere suicide.
Who lives there now must be th’unwilling host
To that wronged lady’s ever-weeping ghost!”

My curiosity was not assuaged,
Knowing the story, brighter burnt the flame
Of passion for this tower, used to cage
The prisoner who now gave the place its name.
My writing stopped. My mind was not improved
By watching those dim lights; it never moved
As if a curse had settled on my soul,
And would destroy me, thwarted of its goal,
For all my dreams around that tower revolved.
At last, I went to Eubius with resolve.

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The ancient man held up his callused claw.
“My boy, this subject is against that law
Laid down by my dark lady, whom you’ve met.
To answer is no breach of etiquette,
Instead, a trespass punishable by death!
What good’s a secret, if you have no breath?
But if you wait in quiet humility,
And maintain a calm civility,
All hidden things in time will be revealed—
Now, let an old man take his toothless meal.”

So there, in Castle Bash, quite on my own,
With nothing in my pockets but dull poems,
Depending on the charity of her
Who had decreed that everyone demur
Upon this secret subject— There I stood
Divorced from feelings gracious, wise or good,
Unable to release my mind, relent
From finding that dim tower’s occupant!
So I resolved to walk the sharpest edge
And find the secret of the Tower’s hostage.

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Under cover of the dark I sallied.
On a rare and moonless night I rallied
My spirits with a draft of spirits snared
From kitchens where my meals had been prepared.
Dressed in black, I snuck across the yard
To try that wooden door, without a guard
But too secure that ancient wooden portal
Stuck in its frame—not even with a jiggle
Would it reward my struggle. Feeling mortal,
I listened—and could hear a girl giggle.

That taunting girlish laughter, so perverse!
It startled me, enthralled me so, alack!
That tiny laugh would come to haunt my verse
For many months when I remembered back
To that black night beside the wooden door,
And knew the Wife's Tower first housed a girl;
My desperate senses needed nothing more—
My young romantic heart defied the world!
Injustice! I must free this prisoned beauty!
Though bastard, 'twas a gentle poet's duty.

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A stirring on the ramparts caught my ear,
A shock of ice ran thrilling through my veins
As I was certain all the guards could hear
The giggle that had mastered my young brain.
I skulked away with shameful, shaking steps
And up my own stone tower's stair I crept
And reaching my stark room, fell on my bed
Where no sleep poured its mercy on my head.
No single other sound that night was heard
Until the far-off cries of the mountain birds.

Reflecting for days upon that girlish sound,
Not just a giggle, but a wicked scorn—
I began to wonder how the lady found
Such food and drink to keep her body warm!
No one came through the door—this I observed
(All day I watched from my chill tower's room—)
The nourishment was somehow being served
From another secret ingress, I presumed.
And then I thought, there was one that I knew
Charged with bringing various stuffs and stews,

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The gruels and soups and pies and bouillon—
My own homely stair-creeping scullion!
She lingered sometimes by my door like a shade
And blushing, bid me good day, the kind maid,
And though I know she hoped for some love letters
Even a little flirting served to flatter.
Have mercy on my blackened soul, O Savior!
I am not proud of this ill-bred behavior:
This was my mark, this naïve young woman—
Who knew the castle's many goings and comings.

I penned a letter praising her blue eyes
But found it met with nothing for replies.
I penned another, bolder this by much
Even begging for her bosom's touch!
But there was no response, and still she blushed!
Still the girl was shaking and stammering, rushed
To gather my dishes and to leave the meal.
My talents insulted, I began to feel
So helpless with my pen, despite my pride
That finally, I asked the lass inside.

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“So tell me, my girl, have you read my letters?”
She blushed hot and shook her bonneted head.
“I cannot read, such things are for my betters!”
Was her excuse, her face a shameful red.
“Ah! Then my sugared words fell on deaf ears,
I must recite them to you now, right here!”
And taking her white, trembling callused hand
Recited in that room, just as I planned,
Four sonnets, two villanelles, one pantoum
Such words as make a bride accept her groom.

Her heart was won and her innocence lost,
By me— My unstained soul the only cost.
For I took possession of that sweet young prize
Before I looked her in those azure eyes
And begged her for secrets she’d been sworn to keep:
“What happens in the Wife’s Tower, my delight?
I see its shuttered windows lit all night
How do they eat? And do they ever sleep?
And who is it lives there, as in a jail,
My dish-soap scented lovely nonpareil?”

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Her protests smothered with a bastard's kiss,
The young maid swooning in her lover's bliss
Confessed in halting cadence what she knew.
For what else did she have to please her lover?
A better man, of course, would have been true.
But at least, before I glibly threw her over
She'd had the dashing visitor poet
So foreign, handsome and so debonair.
Her belly soon enough would show it—
I greatly dreaded ending the affair.

Thus the maid, Leda, (such was her name)
After persuasions, graciously explained.
The castle was full of tunnels down below
And thus the servants ever avoided snow!
And so the tower's prisoner was fed
And thus the prisoner received supplies
Her candles and books, her needle and thread
The plain laundered clothes she so despised.
“But who?” I fairly shouted, “Who's locked away?”
The young maid sobbed, “I'm not supposed to say!”

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More protests, more kisses, and more tearful sighs
More shaking heads and more raw, red eyes.
She finally relented and she spoke.
I had been the butt of Milady's joke.
Everyone knew in the castle, save me
But would not speak it by firmest decree
Of the dreaded Countess; of course, who else?
Her daughter, mad, lovely, a countess herself
Had not consented with her mother's match.
The prisoner's name was Aliza d'Bash!