

## BB2: The night before...

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Text of **Byron Bits No.2** by Peter Gallagher available on [MadBadDangerous.com](http://MadBadDangerous.com)

In the first of my short talks on Byron, I was discussing the end of Don Juan; or at least, the last verses that Byron wrote before his death in April, 1824.

It's sad and it's irritating that the greatest comic poem in English ends with an eternal cliff-hanger. Juan sits, stranded, at a breakfast table in the English manor house where he is staying. He's the last one to come down to breakfast that morning, and his appearance betrays the fact that he'd had a wakeful night.

The previous evening, after a spooky late-night story of the spirits haunting the former Abbey attached to the house, Juan retires to his room. But before he can get to bed he hears something chilling in the dark hall outside.

CXIV

A noise like to wet fingers drawn on glass,  
Which sets the teeth on edge; and a slight clatter,  
Like showers which on the midnight gusts will pass,  
Sounding like very supernatural water,  
Came over Juan's ear, which throbb'd, alas!  
For immaterialism's a serious matter;  
So that even those whose faith is the most great  
In souls immortal, shun them tête-à-tête.

CXV

Were his eyes open? – Yes! and his mouth too.  
Surprise has this effect – to make one dumb,  
Yet leave the gate which eloquence slips through  
As wide as if a long speech were to come.  
Nigh and more nigh the awful echoes drew,  
Tremendous to a mortal tympanum:  
His eyes were open, and (as was before  
Stated) his mouth. What open'd next? – the door.

CXVI

It open'd with a most infernal creak,  
Like that of hell. "Lasciate ogni speranza  
Voi che entrate!" The hinge seem'd to speak,  
Dreadful as Dante's rima, or this stanza;  
Or – but all words upon such themes are weak:  
A single shade's sufficient to entrance a  
Hero – for what is substance to a spirit?  
Or how is 't matter trembles to come near it?

CXVII

The door flew wide, – not swiftly, but, as fly  
The sea-gulls, with a steady, sober flight, –  
And then swung back; nor close – but stood awry,  
Half letting in long shadows on the light,  
Which still in Juan's candlesticks burn'd high,  
For he had two, both tolerably bright,  
And in the door-way, darkening darkness, stood  
The sable friar in his solemn hood.

...

CXX

Juan put forth one arm – Eternal powers!  
It touched no soul, nor body, but the wall,  
On which the moonbeams fell in silvery showers,  
Chequer'd with all the tracery of the hall;  
He shudder'd, as no doubt the bravest cowers  
When he can't tell what 't is that doth appal.  
How odd, a single hobgoblin's non-entity  
Should cause more fear than a whole host's identity.

CXXI

But still the shade remain'd: the blue eyes glared,  
And rather variably for stony death:  
Yet one thing rather good the grave had spared,  
The ghost had a remarkably sweet breath.  
A straggling curl show'd he had been fair-hair'd;  
A red lip, with two rows of pearls beneath,  
Gleam'd forth, as through the casement's ivy shroud

The moon peep'd, just escaped from a grey cloud.

CXXII

And Juan, puzzled, but still curious, thrust  
His other arm forth – Wonder upon wonder!  
It press'd upon a hard but glowing bust,  
Which beat as if there was a warm heart under.  
He found, as people on most trials must,  
That he had made at first a silly blunder,  
And that in his confusion he had caught  
Only the wall, instead of what he sought.

CXXIII

The ghost, if ghost it were, seem'd a sweet soul  
As ever lurk'd beneath a holy hood:  
A dimpled chin, a neck of ivory, stole  
Forth into something much like flesh and blood;  
Back fell the sable frock and dreary cowl,  
And they reveal'd – alas! that e'er they should!  
In full, voluptuous, but not o'ergrown bulk,  
The phantom of her frolic Grace – Fitz-Fulke!

Yes, the ghost was a gal. But on that nearly climactic note the Canto ends.

Quickly we flip the page to the next Canto. Juan comes down to breakfast, as stated, takes his place the table looking a little sleepy and sheepish. Everyone else, including the Duchess is waiting for him...

Well? What happened?

Alas, we will never know.. Juan sits there still, almost two centuries later. Without a word.

#Byron/Bits