

# *The Prisoner of Chillon*

*by*  
*Byron*

*An Electronic Classics Series*  
*Publication*



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# THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

by George Gordon, Lord Byron

My hair is grey, but not with years,  
Nor grew it white  
In a single night,  
As men's have grown from sudden fears:  
My limbs are bow'd, though not with toil,  
But rusted with a vile repose,  
For they have been a dungeon's spoil,  
And mine has been the fate of those  
To whom the goodly earth and air  
Are bann'd, and barr'd—forbidden fare;  
But this was for my father's faith  
I suffer'd chains and courted death;  
That father perish'd at the stake  
For tenets he would not forsake;  
And for the same his lineal race  
In darkness found a dwelling place;

We were seven—who now are one,  
Six in youth, and one in age,  
Finish'd as they had begun,  
Proud of Persecution's rage;  
One in fire, and two in field,  
Their belief with blood have seal'd,  
Dying as their father died,  
For the God their foes denied;—  
Three were in a dungeon cast,  
Of whom this wreck is left the last.

There are seven pillars of Gothic mould,  
In Chillon's dungeons deep and old,  
There are seven columns, massy and grey,  
Dim with a dull imprison'd ray,  
A sunbeam which hath lost its way,  
And through the crevice and the cleft  
Of the thick wall is fallen and left;  
Creeping o'er the floor so damp,  
Like a marsh's meteor lamp:  
And in each pillar there is a ring,

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And in each ring there is a chain;  
That iron is a cankering thing,  
For in these limbs its teeth remain,  
With marks that will not wear away,  
Till I have done with this new day,  
Which now is painful to these eyes,  
Which have not seen the sun so rise  
For years—I cannot count them o’er,  
I lost their long and heavy score  
When my last brother droop’d and died,  
And I lay living by his side.

They chain’d us each to a column stone,  
And we were three—yet, each alone;  
We could not move a single pace,  
We could not see each other’s face,  
But with that pale and livid light  
That made us strangers in our sight:  
And thus together—yet apart,  
Fetter’d in hand, but join’d in heart,  
’Twas still some solace in the dearth

Of the pure elements of earth,  
To hearken to each other’s speech,  
And each turn comforter to each  
With some new hope, or legend old,  
Or song heroically bold;  
But even these at length grew cold.  
Our voices took a dreary tone,  
An echo of the dungeon stone,  
A grating sound, not full and free,  
As they of yore were wont to be:  
It might be fancy—but to me  
They never sounded like our own.

I was the eldest of the three  
And to uphold and cheer the rest  
I ought to do—and did my best—  
And each did well in his degree.  
The youngest, whom my father loved,  
Because our mother’s brow was given  
To him, with eyes as blue as heaven—  
For him my soul was sorely moved:

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And truly might it be distress'd  
To see such bird in such a nest;  
For he was beautiful as day—  
    (When day was beautiful to me  
    As to young eagles, being free)—  
    A polar day, which will not see  
A sunset till its summer's gone,  
    Its sleepless summer of long light,  
The snow-clad offspring of the sun:  
    And thus he was as pure and bright,  
And in his natural spirit gay,  
With tears for nought but others' ills,  
And then they flow'd like mountain rills,  
Unless he could assuage the woe  
Which he abhorr'd to view below.

    The other was as pure of mind,  
But form'd to combat with his kind;  
Strong in his frame, and of a mood  
Which 'gainst the world in war had stood,  
And perish'd in the foremost rank

    With joy:—but not in chains to pine:  
His spirit wither'd with their clank,  
    I saw it silently decline—  
    And so perchance in sooth did mine:  
But yet I forced it on to cheer  
Those relics of a home so dear.  
He was a hunter of the hills,  
    Had followed there the deer and wolf;  
    To him this dungeon was a gulf,  
And fetter'd feet the worst of ills.

    Lake Lemman lies by Chillon's walls:  
A thousand feet in depth below  
Its massy waters meet and flow;  
Thus much the fathom-line was sent  
From Chillon's snow-white battlement,  
    Which round about the wave intralls:  
A double dungeon wall and wave  
Have made—and like a living grave  
Below the surface of the lake  
The dark vault lies wherein we lay:

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We heard it ripple night and day;  
    Sounding o'er our heads it knock'd;  
And I have felt the winter's spray  
Wash through the bars when winds were high  
And wanton in the happy sky;  
    And then the very rock hath rock'd,  
    And I have felt it shake, unshock'd,  
Because I could have smiled to see  
The death that would have set me free.

    I said my nearer brother pined,  
I said his mighty heart declined,  
He loathed and put away his food;  
It was not that 'twas coarse and rude,  
For we were used to hunter's fare,  
And for the like had little care:  
The milk drawn from the mountain goat  
Was changed for water from the moat,  
Our bread was such as captives' tears  
Have moisten'd many a thousand years,  
Since man first pent his fellow men

Like brutes within an iron den;  
But what were these to us or him?  
These wasted not his heart or limb;  
My brother's soul was of that mould  
Which in a palace had grown cold,  
Had his free breathing been denied  
The range of the steep mountain's side;  
But why delay the truth?—he died.  
I saw, and could not hold his head,  
Nor reach his dying hand—nor dead,—  
Though hard I strove, but strove in vain,  
To rend and gnash my bonds in twain.  
He died—and they unlock'd his chain,  
And scoop'd for him a shallow grave  
Even from the cold earth of our cave.  
I begg'd them, as a boon, to lay  
His corse in dust whereon the day  
Might shine—it was a foolish thought,  
But then within my brain it wrought,  
That even in death his freeborn breast  
In such a dungeon could not rest.

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I might have spared my idle prayer—  
They coldly laugh’d—and laid him there:  
The flat and turfless earth above  
The being we so much did love;  
His empty chain above it leant,  
Such Murder’s fitting monument!

But he, the favourite and the flower,  
Most cherish’d since his natal hour,  
His mother’s image in fair face  
The infant love of all his race  
His martyr’d father’s dearest thought,  
My latest care, for whom I sought  
To hoard my life, that his might be  
Less wretched now, and one day free;  
He, too, who yet had held untired  
A spirit natural or inspired—  
He, too, was struck, and day by day  
Was wither’d on the stalk away.  
Oh, God! it is a fearful thing  
To see the human soul take wing

In any shape, in any mood:  
I’ve seen it rushing forth in blood,  
I’ve seen it on the breaking ocean  
Strive with a swoln convulsive motion,  
I’ve seen the sick and ghastly bed  
Of Sin delirious with its dread:  
But these were horrors—this was woe  
Unmix’d with such—but sure and slow:  
He faded, and so calm and meek,  
So softly worn, so sweetly weak,  
So tearless, yet so tender—kind,  
And grieved for those he left behind;  
With all the while a cheek whose bloom  
Was as a mockery of the tomb  
Whose tints as gently sunk away  
As a departing rainbow’s ray;  
An eye of most transparent light,  
That almost made the dungeon bright;  
And not a word of murmur—not  
A groan o’er his untimely lot,—  
A little talk of better days,

A little hope my own to raise,  
For I was sunk in silence—lost  
In this last loss, of all the most;  
And then the sighs he would suppress  
Of fainting Nature’s feebleness,  
More slowly drawn, grew less and less:  
I listen’d, but I could not hear;  
I call’d, for I was wild with fear;  
I knew ’twas hopeless, but my dread  
Would not be thus admonishèd;  
I call’d, and thought I heard a sound—  
I burst my chain with one strong bound,  
And rushed to him:—I found him not,  
I only stirred in this black spot,  
I only lived, I only drew  
The accursed breath of dungeon-dew;  
The last, the sole, the dearest link  
Between me and the eternal brink,  
Which bound me to my failing race  
Was broken in this fatal place.  
One on the earth, and one beneath—

My brothers—both had ceased to breathe:  
I took that hand which lay so still,  
Alas! my own was full as chill;  
I had not strength to stir, or strive,  
But felt that I was still alive—  
A frantic feeling, when we know  
That what we love shall ne’er be so.  
I know not why  
I could not die,  
I had no earthly hope—but faith,  
And that forbade a selfish death.

What next befell me then and there  
I know not well—I never knew—  
First came the loss of light, and air,  
And then of darkness too:  
I had no thought, no feeling—none—  
Among the stones I stood a stone,  
And was, scarce conscious what I wist,  
As shrubless crags within the mist;  
For all was blank, and bleak, and grey;

It was not night—it was not day;  
It was not even the dungeon-light,  
So hateful to my heavy sight,  
But vacancy absorbing space,  
And fixedness—without a place;  
There were no stars, no earth, no time,  
No check, no change, no good, no crime  
But silence, and a stirless breath  
Which neither was of life nor death;  
A sea of stagnant idleness,  
Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless!  
A light broke in upon my brain,—  
    It was the carol of a bird;  
It ceased, and then it came again,  
    The sweetest song ear ever heard,  
And mine was thankful till my eyes  
Ran over with the glad surprise,  
And they that moment could not see  
I was the mate of misery;  
But then by dull degrees came back  
My senses to their wonted track;

I saw the dungeon walls and floor  
Close slowly round me as before,  
I saw the glimmer of the sun  
Creeping as it before had done,  
But through the crevice where it came  
That bird was perch'd, as fond and tame,  
    And tamer than upon the tree;  
A lovely bird, with azure wings,  
And song that said a thousand things,  
    And seemed to say them all for me!  
I never saw its like before,  
I ne'er shall see its likeness more:  
It seem'd like me to want a mate,  
But was not half so desolate,  
And it was come to love me when  
None lived to love me so again,  
And cheering from my dungeon's brink,  
Had brought me back to feel and think.  
I know not if it late were free,  
    Or broke its cage to perch on mine,  
But knowing well captivity,

Sweet bird! I could not wish for thine!  
Or if it were, in wingèd guise,  
A visitant from Paradise;  
For—Heaven forgive that thought! the while  
Which made me both to weep and smile—  
I sometimes deem'd that it might be  
My brother's soul come down to me;  
But then at last away it flew,  
And then 'twas mortal well I knew,  
For he would never thus have flown—  
And left me twice so doubly lone,—  
Lone as the corse within its shroud,  
Lone as a solitary cloud,

A single cloud on a sunny day,  
While all the rest of heaven is clear,  
A frown upon the atmosphere,  
That hath no business to appear  
When skies are blue, and earth is gay.

A kind of change came in my fate,  
My keepers grew compassionate;

I know not what had made them so,  
They were inured to sights of woe,  
But so it was:—my broken chain  
With links unfasten'd did remain,  
And it was liberty to stride  
Along my cell from side to side,  
And up and down, and then athwart,  
And tread it over every part;  
And round the pillars one by one,  
Returning where my walk begun,  
Avoiding only, as I trod,  
My brothers' graves without a sod;  
For if I thought with heedless tread  
My step profaned their lowly bed,  
My breath came gaspingly and thick,  
And my crush'd heart felt blind and sick.  
I made a footing in the wall,  
It was not therefrom to escape,  
For I had buried one and all,  
Who loved me in a human shape;  
And the whole earth would henceforth be

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A wider prison unto me:  
No child, no sire, no kin had I,  
No partner in my misery;  
I thought of this, and I was glad,  
For thought of them had made me mad;  
But I was curious to ascend  
To my barr'd windows, and to bend  
Once more, upon the mountains high,  
The quiet of a loving eye.

I saw them—and they were the same,  
They were not changed like me in frame;  
I saw their thousand years of snow  
On high—their wide long lake below,  
And the blue Rhone in fullest flow;  
I heard the torrents leap and gush  
O'er channell'd rock and broken bush;  
I saw the white-wall'd distant town,  
And whiter sails go skimming down;  
And then there was a little isle,  
Which in my very face did smile,

The only one in view;  
A small green isle, it seem'd no more,  
Scarce broader than my dungeon floor,  
But in it there were three tall trees,  
And o'er it blew the mountain breeze,  
And by it there were waters flowing,  
And on it there were young flowers growing,  
Of gentle breath and hue.  
The fish swam by the castle wall,  
And they seem'd joyous each and all;  
The eagle rode the rising blast,  
Methought he never flew so fast  
As then to me he seem'd to fly;  
And then new tears came in my eye,  
And I felt troubled—and would fain  
I had not left my recent chain;  
And when I did descend again,  
The darkness of my dim abode  
Fell on me as a heavy load;  
It was as is a new-dug grave,  
Closing o'er one we sought to save,—

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And yet my glance, too much opprest,  
Had almost need of such a rest.

It might be months, or years, or days—

I kept no count, I took no note—

I had no hope my eyes to raise,

And clear them of their dreary mote;

At last men came to set me free;

I ask'd not why, and reck'd not where;

It was at length the same to me,

Fetter'd or fetterless to be,

I learn'd to love despair.

And thus when they appear'd at last,

And all my bonds aside were cast,

These heavy walls to me had grown

A hermitage—and all my own!

And half I felt as they were come

To tear me from a second home:

With spiders I had friendship made

And watch'd them in their sullen trade,

Had seen the mice by moonlight play,

And why should I feel less than they?

We were all inmates of one place,

And I, the monarch of each race,

Had power to kill—yet, strange to tell!

In quiet we had learn'd to dwell;

My very chains and I grew friends,

So much a long communion tends

To make us what we are—even I

Regain'd my freedom with a sigh.