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| **479. The Prisoner of Chillon** |
|   |
| **George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824)** |
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| --- |
|   |
| MY hair is gray, 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, | *5* |
| 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; | *10* |
| 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 | *15* |
| 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; | *20* |
| 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, | *25* |
| 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 gray, |  |
| Dim with a dull imprison’d ray, | *30* |
| 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. | *35* |
| And in each pillar there is a ring, |  |
|   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, | *40* |
| 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, | *45* |
| 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, | *50* |
| 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, | *55* |
| ’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, | *60* |
| 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, | *65* |
|   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 | *70* |
|   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— | *75* |
|   For him my soul was sorely moved; |  |
| 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 | *80* |
|   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: | *85* |
|   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 | *90* |
| 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, | *95* |
| 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: | *100* |
| But yet I forced it on to cheer |  |
| Those relics of a home so dear. |  |
| He was a hunter of the hills, |  |
|   Had follow’d there the deer and wolf; |  |
|   To him this dungeon was a gulf, | *105* |
| And fetter’d feet the worst of ills. |  |
|   |  |
|   Lake Leman lies by Chillon’s walls: |  |
| A thousand feet in depth below |  |
| Its massy waters meet and flow; |  |
| Thus much the fathom-line was sent | *110* |
| From Chillon’s snow-white battlement |  |
|   Which round about the wave inthrals: |  |
| A double dungeon wall and wave |  |
| Have made—and like a living grave. |  |
| Below the surface of the lake | *115* |
| The dark vault lies wherein we lay, |  |
| 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 | *120* |
| 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. | *125* |
|   |  |
| 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, | *130* |
| 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 moistened many a thousand years, | *135* |
| 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 | *140* |
| 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, | *145* |
| 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 | *150* |
| 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, | *155* |
| That even in death his freeborn breast |  |
| In such a dungeon could not rest. |  |
| I might have spared my idle prayer; |  |
| They coldly laugh’d—and laid him there: |  |
| The flat and turfless earth above | *160* |
| 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, | *165* |
| 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 | *170* |
| 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. | *175* |
| 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 | *180* |
| 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. | *185* |
| 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 | *190* |
| 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; | *195* |
| 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 | *200* |
| 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— | *205* |
| I call’d, for I was wild with fear; |  |
| I knew ’t was 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, | *210* |
| And rush’d to him:—I found him not, |  |
| *I* only stirr’d in this black spot, |  |
| *I* only lived, *I* only drew |  |
| The accursèd breath of dungeon-dew; |  |
| The last—the sole—the dearest link | *215* |
| 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: | *220* |
| 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 | *225* |
| 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. | *230* |
|   |  |
| 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— | *235* |
| 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 gray; |  |
| It was not night—it was not day; | *240* |
| 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, | *245* |
| 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! | *250* |
|   |  |
| 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 | *255* |
| 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; | *260* |
| 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 | *265* |
| That bird was perched, 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! | *270* |
| I never saw its like before, |  |
| I ne’er shall see its likeness more; |  |
| It seemed like me to want a mate, |  |
| But was not half so desolate, |  |
| And it was come to love me when | *275* |
| 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, | *280* |
| 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 | *285* |
| 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, | *290* |
| 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, | *295* |
| 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, | *300* |
| 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, | *305* |
| 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, | *310* |
| Returning where my walk begun, |  |
| Avoiding only, as I trod, |  |
| My brothers’ graves without a sod; |  |
| For if I thought with heedless tread |  |
| My steps profaned their lowly bed, | *315* |
| My breath came gaspingly and thick, |  |
| And my crush’d heart fell blind and sick. |  |
|   |  |
| I made a footing in the wall, |  |
|   It was not therefrom to escape, |  |
| For I had buried one and all | *320* |
|   Who loved me in a human shape; |  |
| And the whole earth would henceforth be |  |
| A wider prison unto me: |  |
| No child, no sire, no kin had I, |  |
| No partner in my misery; | *325* |
| 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, | *330* |
| 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, | *335* |
| 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; | *340* |
| 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, | *345* |
| 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. | *350* |
| 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; | *355* |
| 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 | *360* |
| Fell on me as a heavy load; |  |
| It was as is a new-dug grave, |  |
| Closing o’er one we sought to save; |  |
| And yet my glance, too much opprest, |  |
| Had almost need of such a rest. | *365* |
|   |  |
| 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; | *370* |
|   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, | *375* |
| 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: | *380* |
| 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, | *385* |
| 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 | *390* |
| To make us what we are:—even I |  |
| Regain’d my freedom with a sigh. |  |

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