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| **479. The Prisoner of Chillon** |
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| **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. |  | |