

# *The Prisoner of Chillon*

*by*

*Byron*

*A Penn State University*

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*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,

“The Prisoner of Chillon” – Byron

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:

“The Prisoner of Chillon” – Byron

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:

“The Prisoner of Chillon” – Byron

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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