

# **THE PRISONER OF CHILLON**

George Gordon, Lord Byron

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# THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

George Gordon, Lord Byron

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## ADVERTISEMENT.

When this poem composed, I was not sufficiently aware of the history of Bonnivard, or I should have endeavoured to dignify the subject by an attempt to celebrate his courage and his virtues. Some account of his life will be found below, furnished me by the kindness of a citizen of that republic, which is still proud of the memory of a man worthy of the best age of ancient freedom:

François de Bonnivard, son of Louis de Bonnivard, a native of Seysel, and Seigneur of Lunes, was born in 1496; he was educated at Turin. In 1510, his uncle, Jean-Reiné de Bonnivard, resigned to him the Priory of Saint-Victor, which adjoins the walls of Geneva, and which was a considerable living.

This great man Bonnivard is deserving of this title from his greatness of soul, the uprightness of his heart, the nobility of his intentions, the wisdom of his counsels, the courage of his actions, the extent of his learning, and the brilliancy of his wit this great man, who will ever excite the admiration of all those whom an heroic virtue can move, will always inspire the most lively gratitude in the hearts of those Genevese who love Geneva. Bonnivard was always one of its firmest supports; to protect the liberty of our republic, he never feared to lose his own; he forgot his ease, he despised his wealth; he neglected nothing to render certain to happiness of the country that he dignified by his adoption; from that moment he loved it as the most zealous of its citizens, he served it with the intrepidity of a hero, and he wrote its history with the simplicity of a philosopher, and the ardour of a patriot.

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He says in the commencement of his "History of Geneva," that, "as soon as he commenced to read the history of nations, he felt himself carried away by his love for republics, the interest of which he always advocated." It was, doubtless, this very love of liberty that made him adopt Geneva as his country.

Bonnivard, while yet young, boldly stood forward as the defender of Geneva, against the Duke of Savoy and the Bishop.

In 1519, Bonnivard became the martyr of his country; the Duke of Savoy having entered Geneva with five hundred men, Bonnivard feared presentment of the Duke; he wished to return to Fribourg to avoid the consequences; but he was betrayed by two men who accompanied him, and conducted by order of the prince to Grolée, where for two years he remained a prisoner.

Bonnivard was unfortunate in his travels. As his misfortunes had not slackened his zeal for Geneva, he was always a redoubtable enemy to those who threatened it, and accordingly he was likely to be exposed to their violence. He was met in 1530 on the Jura, by thieves, who stripped him of everything, and placed him again in the hands of the Duke of Savoy. This prince caused him to be confined in the Chateau of Chillon, where he remained without being submitted to any interrogatory until 1536; he was then delivered by the Bernois, who took possession of the Pays de Vaud.

Bonnivard, on leaving his captivity, had the pleasure of finding Geneva free and reformed. The Republic hastened to testify its gratitude to him, and to recompense him for the evils which he had suffered. It received him as a citizen of the town, in the month of June 1536; it gave him the house formerly inhabited by the Vicar-General, and assigned to him a pension of two hundred gold crowns, as long as he should sojourn in Geneva. He was admitted into the council of Two Hundred in 1537. Bonnivard did not now cease to be useful; after having laboured to make Geneva free, he succeeded in making it tolerant. Bonnivard prevailed upon the council to accord to the Calvinists and peasants a sufficient time for examining the propositions which were made to them; he succeeded by his meekness. Christianity is always preached with success, when it is preached with charity.

Bonnivard was learned. His manuscripts, which are in the public library, prove that he diligently studied the Latin classics, and that he had penetrated the depths of theology and history. This great man loved the sciences, and thought they would constitute the glory of Geneva; accordingly he neglected nothing to establish them in this rising town. In 1551, he gave his library to the public; it was the commencement of our public library. And a portion of his books are those rare and beautiful editions of the fifteenth century which are seen in our collection. Finally, during the same year, this good patriot appointed the republic his heir, on condition that it would employ his wealth in supporting the college, the foundation of which was being projected.

It appears that Bonnivard died in 1570; but this cannot be certified, as a hiatus occurs in the Necrology, from the month of July 1570 to 1571.

## SONNET ON CHILLON.

Eternal Spirit of the chainless Mind!  
Brightest in dungeons, Liberty! thou art,  
For there thy habitation is the heart  
The heart which love of thee alone can bind;  
And when thy sons to fetters are consign'd

## THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

To fetters, and the damp vault's dayless gloom,  
Their country conquers with their martyrdom.  
And Freedom's fame finds wings on every wind.  
Chillon! thy prison is a holy place,  
And thy sad floor an altar for 'twas trod,  
Until his very steps have left a trace  
Worn, as if thy cold pavement were a sod,  
By Bonivard! May none those marks efface!  
For they appeal from tyranny to God.

## THE PRISONER OF CHILLON.

### I.

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,  
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.

### II.

## THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

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,  
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,  
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 clear away,  
Till I have done with this new day,  
Which now is painful to these eyes,  
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.

### III.

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 pined 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 those 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.

IV.

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;  
And truly might it be distress  
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.

V.

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 follow'd there the deer and wolf;  
To him this dungeon was a gulf,  
And fetter'd feet the worst of ills.

VI.

Lake Lemane 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 enthralls:  
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,  
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 are 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.

VII.

I said my nearer brother pined,  
I said his mighty heart declined,  
He loathed and put away his food:  
It was not that 'twas course 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 captive's 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

## THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

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 free-born 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  
The being we so much did love;  
His empty chain above it leant,  
Such murder's fitting monument!

### VIII.

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.  
O 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

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Was as a mockery of the tomb,  
Whose tints as gently slunk 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 thus be admonished;  
I call'd, and thought I heard a sound  
I burst my chain with one strong bound,  
And rush'd to him: I found him not,  
I only stirr'd 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.

### IX.

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:

## THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

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 gray,  
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!

### X.

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 seem'd 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.

## THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

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 winged guise,  
A visitor 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 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.

### XI.

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 fell blind and sick.

### XII.

## THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

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  
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.

### XIII.

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;

## THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

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.

### XIV.

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,  
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 learned 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.