

THE CORSAIR

LORD BYRON

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THE CORSAIR

LORD BYRON

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TO THOMAS MOORE, ESQ.

My Dear Moore, I dedicate to you the last production with which I shall trespass on public patience, and your indulgence, for some years; and I own that I feel anxious to avail myself of this latest and only opportunity of adorning my pages with a name consecrated by unshaken public principle, amid the most undoubted and various talents. While Ireland ranks you among the firmest of her patriots; while you stand alone the first of her bards in her estimation, and Britain repeats and ratifies the decree, permit one whose only regret, since our first acquaintance, has been the years he had lost before it commenced, to add the humble but sincere suffrage of friendship to the voice of more than one nation. It will at least prove to you that I have neither forgotten the gratification derived from your society nor abandoned the prospect of its renewal, whenever your leisure or inclination allows you to atone to your friends for too long an absence. It is said among those friends, I trust truly, that you are engaged in the composition of a poem whose scene will be laid in the East; none can do those scenes so much justice. The wrongs of your own country, the magnificent and fiery spirit of her sons, the beauty and feeling of her daughters, may there be found; and Collins, when he denominated his Oriental his Irish Eclogues, was not aware how true, at least, was a part of his parallel. Your imagination will create a warmer sun, and less clouded sky; but wildness, tenderness, and originality, are part of your national claim of Oriental descent, to which you have already thus far proved your title more clearly than the most zealous of your country's antiquarians.

May I add a few words on a subject on which all men are supposed to be fluent, and none agreeable? Self. I have written much, and published more than enough to demand a longer silence than I now meditate; but, for some years to come, it is my intention to tempt no further the award of "gods, men, nor columns." In the present

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composition I have attempted not the most difficult, but, perhaps, the best adapted measure to our language, the good old and now neglected heroic couplet. The stanza of Spenser is perhaps too slow and dignified for narrative; though, I confess, it is the measure most after my own heart. Scott alone, of the present generation, has hitherto completely triumphed over the fatal facility of the octo-syllabic verse; and this is not the least victory of his fertile and mighty genius. In blank verse, Milton, Thomson, and our dramatists, are the beacons that shine along the deep, but warn us from the rough and barren rock on which they are kindled. The heroic couplet is not the most popular measure, certainly; but as I did not deviate into the other from a wish to flatter what is called public opinion, I shall quit it without further apology, and take my chance once more with that versification in which I have hitherto published nothing but compositions whose former circulation is part of my present, and will be of my future regret.

With regard to my story, and stories in general, I should have been glad to have rendered my personages more perfect and amiable, if possible, inasmuch as I have been sometimes criticised, and considered no less responsible for their deeds and qualities than if all had been personal. Be it so. If I have deviated into the gloomy vanity of "drawing from self," the pictures are probably like, since they are unfavourable; and if not, those who know me are undeceived, and those who do not, I have little interest in undeceiving. I have no particular desire that any but my acquaintance should think the author better than the beings of his imagining; but I cannot help a little surprise, and perhaps amusement, at some odd critical exceptions in the present instance, when I see several bards (far more deserving, I allow,) in very reputable plight, and quite exempted from all participation in the faults of those heroes, who, nevertheless, might be found with little more morality than "The Giaour," and perhaps but no I must admit Childe Harold to be a very repulsive personage; and as to his identity, those who like it must give him whatever /alias/ they please.

If, however, it were worth while to remove the impression, it might be of some service to me, that the man who is alike the delight of his readers and his friends, the poet of all circles, and the idol of his own, permits me here and elsewhere to subscribe myself, most truly and affectionately, his obedient servant,

BYRON.

January 2, 1814.

CANTO THE FIRST.

"____ nessun maggior dolore,
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice
Nella miseria, ____" Dante.

I.

"O'er the glad waters of the dark-blue sea,
Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free,
Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam,
Survey our empire, and behold our home!
These are our realms, no limits to their sway
Our flag the sceptre all who meet obey.

CANTO THE FIRST.

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Ours the wild life in tumult still to range
From toil to rest, and joy in every change.
Oh, who can tell? not thou, luxurious slave!
Whose soul would sicken o'er the heaving wave;
Not thou, vain lord of wantonness and ease!
Whom slumber soothes not pleasure cannot please
Oh, who can tell, save he whose heart hath tried,
And danced in triumph o'er the waters wide,
The exulting sense the pulse's maddening play,
That thrills the wanderer of that trackless way?
That for itself can woo the approaching fight,
And turn what some deem danger to delight;
That seeks what cravens shun with more than zeal,
And where the feeble faint can only feel
Feel to the rising bosom's inmost core,
Its hope awaken and its spirit soar?
No dread of death if with us die our foes
Save that it seems even duller than repose:
Come when it will we snatch the life of life
When lost what recks it by disease or strife?
Let him who crawls enamour'd of decay,
Cling to his couch, and sicken years away;
Heave his thick breath, and shake his palsied head;
Ours the fresh turf, and not the feverish bed.
While gasp by gasp he falters forth his soul,
Ours with one pang one bound escapes control.
His corse may boast its urn and narrow cave,
And they who loathed his life may gild his grave;
Ours are the tears, though few, sincerely shed,
When Ocean shrouds and sepulchres our dead.
For us, even banquets fond regret supply
In the red cup that crowns our memory;
And the brief epitaph in danger's day,
When those who win at length divide the prey,
And cry, Remembrance saddening o'er each brow,
How had the brave who fell exulted now!"

II.

Such were the notes that from the Pirate's isle,
Around the kindling watch-fire rang the while;
Such were the sounds that thrill'd the rocks along,
And unto ears as rugged seem'd a song!
In scatter'd groups upon the golden sand,
They game carouse converse or whet the brand;
Select the arms to each his blade assign,
And careless eye the blood that dims its shine;

THE CORSAIR

Repair the boat, replace the helm or oar,
While others straggling muse along the shore;
For the wild bird the busy springes set,
Or spread beneath the sun the dripping net;
Gaze where some distant sail a speck supplies,
With all the thirsting eye of Enterprise;
Tell o'er the tales of many a night of toil,
And marvel where they next shall seize a spoil:
No matter where their chief's allotment this;
Theirs, to believe no prey nor plan amiss.
But who that *Chief?* his name on every shore
Is famed and fear'd they ask and know no more.
With these he mingles not but to command;
Few are his words, but keen his eye and hand.
Ne'er seasons he with mirth their jovial mess,
But they forgive his silence for success.
Ne'er for his lip the purpling cup they fill,
That goblet passes him untasted still
And for his fare the rudest of his crew
Would that, in turn, have pass'd untasted too;
Earth's coarsest bread, the garden's homeliest roots,
And scarce the summer luxury of fruits,
His short repast in humbleness supply
With all a hermit's board would scarce deny.
But while he shuns the grosser joys of sense,
His mind seems nourish'd by that abstinence.
"Steer to that shore!" they sail. "Do this!" 'tis done!
"Now form and follow me!" the spoil is won.
Thus prompt his accents and his actions still,
And all obey and few inquire his will;
To such, brief answer and contemptuous eye
Convey reproof, nor further deign reply.

III.

"A sail! a sail!" a promised prize to Hope!
Her nation flag how speaks the telescope?
No prize, alas! but yet a welcome sail:
The blood-red signal glitters in the gale.
Yes she is ours a home returning bark
Blow fair, thou breeze! she anchors ere the dark.
Already doubled is the cape our bay
Receives that prow which proudly spurns the spray.
How gloriously her gallant course she goes!
Her white wings flying never from her foes
She walks the waters like a thing of life,
And seems to dare the elements to strife.

THE CORSAIR

Who would not brave the battle—fire the wreck
To move the monarch of her peopled deck?

IV.

Hoarse o'er her side the rustling cable rings;
The sails are furl'd; and anchoring, round she swings;
And gathering loiterers on the land discern
Her boat descending from the latticed stern.
'Tis mann'd the oars keep concert to the strand
Till grates her keel upon the shallow sand.
Hail to the welcome shout! the friendly speech!
When hand grasps hand uniting on the beach;
The smile, the question, and the quick reply,
And the heart's promise of festivity!

V.

The tidings spread, and gathering grows the crowd:
The hum of voices and the laughter loud,
And woman's gentler anxious tone is heard
Friends' husbands' lovers' names in each dear word:
"Oh! are they safe? we ask not of success
But shall we see them? will their accents bless?
From where the battle roars the billows chafe
They doubtless boldly did but who are safe?
Here let them haste to gladden and surprise,
And kiss the doubt from these delighted eyes!"

VI.

"Where is our chief? for him we bear report
And doubt that joy which hails our coming short;
Yet thus sincere 'tis cheering, though so brief;
But, Juan! instant guide us to our chief:
Our greeting paid, we'll feast on our return,
And all shall hear what each may wish to learn."
Ascending slowly by the rock—hewn way,
To where his watch—tower beetles o'er the bay,
By bushy brake, and wild flowers blossoming,
And freshness breathing from each silver spring,

THE CORSAIR

Whose scatter'd streams from granite basins burst,
Leap into life, and sparkling woo your thirst;
From crag to cliff they mount. Near yonder cave,
What lonely straggler looks along the wave?
In pensive posture leaning on the brand,
Not oft a resting-staff to that red hand?
"'Tis he 'tis Conrad here as wont alone;
On Juan! on and make our purpose known.
The bark he views and tell him we would greet
His ear with tidings he must quickly meet:
We dare not yet approach thou know'st his mood,
When strange or uninvited steps intrude."

VII.

Him Juan sought, and told of their intent;
He spake not but a sign express'd assent.
These Juan calls they come to their salute
He bends him slightly, but his lips are mute.
"These letters, Chief, are from the Greek the spy,
Who still proclaims our spoil or peril nigh:
Whate'er his tidings, we can well report
Much that" "Peace, peace!" he cuts their prating short.
Wondering they turn, abash'd, while each to each
Conjecture whispers in his muttering speech:
They watch his glance with many a stealing look,
To gather how that eye the tidings took;
But, this as if he guess'd, with head aside,
Perchance from some emotion, doubt, or pride,
He read the scroll "My tablets, Juan, hark
Where is Gonsalvo?"

"In the anchor'd bark."
"There let him stay to him this order bear.
Back to your duty for my course prepare:
Myself this enterprise to-night will share."
"To-night, Lord Conrad?"

"Ay! at set of sun:
The breeze will freshen when the day is done.
My corslet cloak one hour and we are gone.
Sling on thy bugle see that free from rust
My carbine-lock springs worthy of my trust;
Be the edge sharpen'd of my boarding-brand,
And give its guard more room to fit my hand.
This let the Armourer with speed dispose;
Last time, it more fatigued my arm than foes:

THE CORSAIR

Mark that the signal-gun be duly fired,
To tell us when the hour of stay's expired."

VIII.

They make obeisance, and retire in haste,
Too soon to seek again the watery waste:
Yet they repine not so that Conrad guides,
And who dare question aught that he decides?
That man of loneliness and mystery,
Scarce seen to smile, and seldom heard to sigh;
Whose name appals the fiercest of his crew,
And tints each swarthy cheek with sallower hue;
Still sways their souls with that commanding art
That dazzles, leads, yet chills the vulgar heart.
What is that spell, that thus his lawless train
Confess and envy, yet oppose in vain?
What should it be, that thus their faith can bind?
The power of Thought the magic of the Mind!
Link'd with success, assumed and kept with skill
That moulds another's weakness to its will,
Wields with their hands, but, still to these unknown,
Makes even their mightiest deeds appear his own.
Such hath it been shall be beneath the sun:
The many still must labour for the one!
'Tis Nature's doom but let the wretch who toils,
Accuse not, hate not him who wears the spoils.
Oh! if he know the weight of splendid chains,
How light the balance of his humbler pains!

IX.

Unlike the heroes of each ancient race,
Demons in act, but gods at least in face,
In Conrad's form seems little to admire,
Though his dark eyebrow shades a glance of fire:
Robust but not Herculean to the sight
No giant frame sets forth his common height;
Yet, in the whole, who paused to look again,
Saw more than marks the crowd of vulgar men;
They gaze and marvel how and still confess
That thus it is, but why they cannot guess.
Sun-burnt his cheek, his forehead high and pale
The sable curls in wild profusion veil;

THE CORSAIR

And oft perforce his rising lip reveals
The haughtier thought it curbs, but scarce conceals.
Though smooth his voice, and calm his general mien,
Still seems there something he would not have seen;
His features' deepening lines and varying hue
At times attracted, yet perplex'd the view,
As if within that murkiness of mind
Work'd feelings fearful, and yet undefined;
Such might it be that none could truly tell
Too close inquiry his stern glance would quell.
There breathe but few whose aspect might defy
The full encounter of his searching eye:
He had the skill, when Cunning's gaze would seek
To probe his heart and watch his changing cheek,
At once the observer's purpose to espy,
And on himself roll back his scrutiny,
Lest he to Conrad rather should betray
Some secret thought, than drag that chief's to day.
There was a laughing devil in his sneer,
That raised emotions both of rage and fear;
And where his frown of hatred darkly fell,
Hope withering fled and Mercy sigh'd farewell!

X.

Slight are the outward signs of evil thought,
Within within 'twas there the spirit wrought!
Love shews all changes Hate, Ambition, Guile,
Betray no further than the bitter smile;
The lip's least curl, the lightest paleness thrown
Along the govern'd aspect, speak alone
Of deeper passions; and to judge their mien,
He, who would see, must be himself unseen.
Then with the hurried tread, the upward eye,
The clenched hand, the pause of agony,
That listens, starting, lest the step too near
Approach intrusive on that mood of fear:
Then with each feature working from the heart,
With feelings loosed to strengthen not depart:
That rise convulse contend that freeze, or glow,
Flush in the cheek, or damp upon the brow;
Then Stranger! if thou canst, and tremblest not,
Behold his soul the rest that soothes his lot!
Mark how that lone and blighted bosom sears
The scathing thought of execrated years!
Behold but who hath seen, or e'er shall see,
Man as himself the secret spirit free?

XI.

Yet was not Conrad thus by Nature sent
To lead the guilty guilt's worst instrument
His soul was changed, before his deeds had driven
Him forth to war with man and forfeit heaven.
Warp'd by the world in Disappointment's school,
In words too wise, in conduct there a fool;
Too firm to yield, and far too proud to stoop,
Doom'd by his very virtues for a dupe,
He cursed those virtues as the cause of ill,
And not the traitors who betray'd him still;
Nor deem'd that gifts bestow'd on better men
Had left him joy, and means to give again.
Fear'd shunn'd belied ere youth had lost her force,
He hated man too much to feel remorse,
And thought the voice of wrath a sacred call,
To pay the injuries of some on all.
He knew himself a villain but he deem'd
The rest no better than the thing he seem'd;
And scorn'd the best as hypocrites who hid
Those deeds the bolder spirit plainly did.
He knew himself detested, but he knew
The hearts that loathed him, crouch'd and dreaded too.
Lone, wild, and strange, he stood alike exempt
From all affection and from all contempt:
His name could sadden, and his acts surprise:
But they that fear'd him dared not to despise.
Man spurns the worm, but pauses ere he wake
The slumbering venom of the folded snake:
The first may turn but not avenge the blow;
The last expires but leaves no living foe;
Fast to the doom'd offender's form it clings,
And he may crush not conquer still it stings!

XII.

None are all evil quickening round his heart,
One softer feeling would not yet depart;
Oft could he sneer at others, as beguiled
Of passions worthy of a fool or child;
Yet 'gainst that passion vainly still he strove,
And even in him it asks the name of Love!

THE CORSAIR

Yes, it was love unchangeable unchanged,
Felt but for one from whom he never ranged;
Though fairest captives daily met his eye,
He shunn'd, nor sought, but coldly pass'd them by;
Though many a beauty droop'd in prison'd bower,
None ever soothed his most unguarded hour.
Yes it was Love if thoughts of tenderness,
Tried in temptation, strengthen'd by distress,
Unmoved by absence, firm in every clime,
And yet oh more than all! untired by time;
Which nor defeated hope, nor baffled wile,
Could render sullen were she near to smile,
Nor rage could fire, nor sickness fret to vent
On her one murmur of his discontent;
Which still would meet with joy, with calmness part,
Lest that his look of grief should reach her heart;
Which naught removed, nor menaced to remove
If there be love in mortals this was love!
He was a villain ay reproaches shower
On him but not the passion, nor its power,
Which only proved, all other virtues gone,
Not guilt itself could quench this loveliest one!

XIII.

He paused a moment till his hastening men
Pass'd the first winding downward to the glen.
"Strange tidings! many a peril have I past,
Nor know I why this next appears the last!
Yet so my heart forebodes, but must not fear,
Nor shall my followers find me falter here.
'Tis rash to meet, but surer death to wait
Till here they hunt us to undoubted fate;
And, if my plan but hold, and Fortune smile,
We'll furnish mourners for our funeral pile.
Ay let them slumber peaceful be their dreams!
Morn ne'er awoke them with such brilliant beams
As kindle high to-night (but blow, thou breeze!)
To warm these slow avengers of the seas.
Now to Medora Oh! my sinking heart,
Long may her own be lighter than thou art!
Yet was I brave mean boast where all are brave!
Even insects sting for aught they seek to save.
This common which with brutes we share,
That owes its deadliest efforts to despair,
Small merit claims but 'twas my nobler hope
To teach my few with numbers still to cope;

THE CORSAIR

Long have I led them not to vainly bleed:
No medium now we perish or succeed!
So let it be it irks not me to die;
But thus to urge them whence they cannot fly.
My lot hath long had little of my care,
But chafes my pride thus baffled in the snare:
Is this my skill? my craft? to set at last
Hope, power, and life upon a single cast?
Oh, Fate: accuse thy folly, not thy fate
She may redeem thee still nor yet too late."

XIV.

Thus with himself communion held he, till
He reach'd the summit of his tower-crown'd hill
There at the portal paused for wild and soft
He heard those accents never heard too oft;
Through the high lattice far yet sweet they rung,
And these the notes his bird of beauty sung:

1.

"Deep in my soul that tender secret dwells,
Lonely and lost to light for evermore,
Save when to thine my heart responsive swells,
Then trembles into silence as before.

2.

"There, in its centre, a sepulchral lamp
Burns the slow flame, eternal but unseen;
Which not the darkness of despair can damp,
Though vain its ray as it had never been.

3.

"Remember me Oh! pass not thou my grave
Without one thought whose relics there recline:
The only pang my bosom dare not brave
Must be to find forgetfulness in thine.

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4.

"My fondest faintest latest accents hear:
Grief for the dead not Virtue can reprove;
Then give me all I ever ask'd a tear,
The first last sole reward of so much love!"

He pass'd the portal cross'd the corridore,
And reach'd the chamber as the strain gave o'er:
"My own Medora! sure thy song is sad "

"In Conrad's absence wouldst thou have it glad?
Without thine ear to listen to my lay,
Still must my song my thoughts, my soul betray:
Still must each accent to my bosom suit,
My heart unhush'd although my lips were mute!
Oh! many a night on this lone couch reclined,
My dreaming fear with storms hath wing'd the wind,
And deem'd the breath that faintly fann'd thy sail
The murmuring prelude of the ruder gale;
Though soft, it seem'd the low prophetic dirge,
That mourn'd thee floating on the savage surge:
Still would I rise to rouse the beacon fire,
Lest spies less true should let the blaze expire:
And many a restless hour outwatch'd each star,
And morning came and still thou wert afar.
Oh! how the chill blast on my bosom blew,
And day broke dreary on my troubled view,
And still I gazed and gazed and not a prow
Was granted to my tears my truth my vow!
At length 'twas noon I hail'd and blest the mast
That met my sight it near'd Alas! it pass'd!
Another came O God! 'twas thine at last!
Would that those days were over! wilt thou ne'er,
My Conrad! learn the joys of peace to share?
Sure thou hast more than wealth, and many a home
As bright as this invites us not to roam:
Thou know'st it is not peril that I fear,
I only tremble when thou art not here;
Then not for mine, but that far dearer life,
Which flies from love and languishes for strife
How strange that heart, to me so tender still,
Should war with nature and its better will!"

"Yea, strange indeed that heart hath long been changed;
Worm-like 'twas trampled adder-like avenged,
Without one hope on earth beyond thy love,
And scarce a glimpse of mercy from above.
Yet the same feeling which thou dost condemn,

THE CORSAIR

My very love to thee is hate to them,
So closely mingling here, that disentwined,
I cease to love thee when I love mankind:
Yet dread not this the proof of all the past
Assures the future that my love will last;
But O Medora! nerve thy gentler heart;
This hour again but not for long we part."

"This hour we part! my heart foreboded this!
Thus ever fade my fairy dreams of bliss.
This hour it cannot be this hour away!
Yon bark hath hardly anchor'd in the bay:
Her consort still is absent, and her crew
Have need of rest before they toil anew:
My love! thou mock'st my weakness; and wouldst steel
My breast before the time when it must feel;
But trifle now no more with my distress,
Such mirth hath less of play than bitterness.
Be silent, Conrad! dearest! come and share
The feast these hands delighted to prepare;
Light toil! to cull and dress thy frugal fare!
See, I have pluck'd the fruit that promised best,
And where not sure, perplex'd, but pleased, I guess'd
At such as seem'd the fairest: thrice the hill
My steps have wound to try the coolest rill;
Yes! thy sherbet to-night will sweetly flow,
See how it sparkles in its vase of snow!
The grapes' gay juice thy bosom never cheers;
Thou more than Moslem when the cup appears:
Think not I mean to chide for I rejoice
What other