

PARISINA

George Gordon, Lord Byron

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PARISINA

George Gordon, Lord Byron

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TO

SCROPE BERDMORE DAVIES, ESQ.,

THE FOLLOWING POEM IS INSCRIBED,

BY ONE WHO HAS LONG ADMIRER HIS TALENTS AND VALUED

HIS FRIENDSHIP.

PARISINA

ADVERTISEMENT.

The following poem is grounded on a circumstance mentioned in Gibbon's "Antiquities of the House of Brunswick." I am aware, that in modern times the delicacy or fastidiousness of the reader may deem such subjects unfit for the purposes of poetry. The Greek dramatists, and some of the best or our English writers, were of a different opinion: as Alfieri and Schiller have also been, more recently, upon the Continent. The following extract will explain the facts on which the story is founded. The name of *Azo* is substituted for Nicholas, as more metrical: —

"Under the reign of Nicholas III., Ferrar was polluted with a domestic tragedy. By the testimony of an attendant, and his own observation, the Marquis of Este discovered the incestuous loves of his wife Parisina, and Hugo his bastard son, a beautiful and valiant youth. They were beheaded in the castle by the sentence of a father and husband, who published his shame, and survived their execution. He was unfortunate, if they were guilty; if they were innocent, he was still more unfortunate; nor is there any possible situation in which I can sincerely approve the last act of the justice of a parent." — *Gibbon's Miscellaneous Works*, vol. iii. p. 47[9?].

PARISINA

PARISINA.

PARISINA

I.

It is the hour when from the boughs
The nightingale's high note is heard;
It is the hour when lovers' vows
Seem sweet in every whisper'd word:
And gentle winds, and waters near,
Make music to the lonely ear.
Each flower the dews have lightly wet,
And in the sky, the stars are met,
And on the wave is deeper blue,
And on the leaf a browner hue.
And in the heaven that clear obscure,
So softly dark, and darkly pure,
Which follows the decline of day,
As twilight melts beneath the moon away.

PARISINA

II.

But it is not to list to the waterfall
That Parisina leaves her hall,
And it is not to gaze on the heavenly light
That the lady walks in the shadow of night;
And if she sits in Este's bower,
'Tis not for the sake of its full-blown flower —
She listens — but not for the nightingale —
Though her ear expects as soft a tale.
There glides a step through the foliage thick,
And her cheek grows pale — and her heart beats quick.
There whispers a voice through the rustling leaves,
And her blush returns, and her bosom heaves!
A moment more — and they shall meet —
'Tis past — her lover's at her feet.

PARISINA

III.

And what unto them is the world beside,
With all its change of time and tide?
Its living things — its earth and sky —
Are nothing to their mind and eye.
And heedless as the dead are they
Of aught around, above, beneath;
As if all else had pass'd away,
They only for each other breathe;
Their very sighs are full of joy
So deep, that did it not decay,
That happy madness would destroy
The hearts which feel its fiery sway:
Of guilt, of peril, do they deem
In that tumultuous tender dream?
Who that have felt that passion's power,
Or paused, or fear'd, in such an hour?
Or thought how brief such moments last?
But yet — they are already past!
Alas! we must awake before
We know such vision comes no more.

PARISINA

IV.

With many a lingering look they leave
The spot of guilty gladness past;
And though they hope, and vow, they grieve,
As if that parting were the last,
The frequent sigh — the long embrace —
The lip that there would cling for ever,
While gleams on Parisina's face
The Heaven she fears will not forgive her,
As if each calmly conscious star
Beheld her frailty from afar —
The frequent sigh, the long embrace,
Yet binds them to their trysting-place,
But it must come, and they must part
In fearful heaviness of heart,
With all the deep and shuddering chill
Which follows fast the deeds of ill.

PARISINA

V.

And Hugo is gone to his lone bed,
To covet there another's bride;
But she must lay her conscious head
A husband's trusting heart beside.
But fever'd in her sleep she seems,
And red her cheek with troubled dreams,
And mutters she in her unrest
A name she dare not breathe by day,
And clasps her lord unto the breast
Which pants for one away:
And he to that embrace awakes,
And, happy in the thought, mistakes
That dreaming sigh, and warm caress,
For such as he was wont to bless;
And could in very fondness weep
O'er her who loves him even in sleep.

PARISINA

VI.

He clasp'd her sleeping to his heart,
And listen'd to each broken word:
He hears — Why doth Prince Azo start,
As if the Archangel's voice he heard?
And well he may — a deeper doom
Could scarcely thunder o'er his tomb,
When he shall wake to sleep no more,
And stand the eternal throne before.
And well he may — his earthly peace
Upon that sound is doom'd to cease.
That sleeping whisper of a name
Bespeaks her guilt and Azo's shame.
And whose that name? that o'er his pillow
Sounds fearful as the breaking billow,
Which rolls the plank upon the shore,
And dashes on the pointed rock
The wretch who sinks to rise no more —
So came upon his soul the shock.
And whose that name? — 'tis Hugo's — his —
In sooth he had not deem'd of this! —
'Tis Hugo's — he, the child of one
He loved — his own all-evil son —
The offspring of his wayward youth,
When he betray'd Bianca's truth,
The maid whose folly could confide
In him who made her not his bride.

PARISINA

VII.

He pluck'd his poniard in its sheath,
But sheathed it ere the point was bare —
Howe'er unworthy now to breathe,
He could not slay a thing so fair —
At least, not smiling — sleeping — there —
Nay more: — he did not wake her then,
But gazed upon her with a glance,
Which, had she roused her from her trance,
Had frozen her sense to sleep again —
And o'er his brow the burning lamp
Gleam'd on the dew-drops big and damp,
She spake no more — but still she slumber'd —
While, in his thought, her days are number'd.

PARISINA

VIII.

And with the morn he sought, and found,
In many a tale from those around,
The proof of all he fear'd to know,
Their present guilt, his future woe;
The long-conniving damsels seek
To save themselves, and would transfer
The guilt — the shame — the doom — to her:
Concealment is no more — they speak
All circumstance which may compel
Full credence to the tale they tell:
And Azo's tortured heart and ear
Have nothing more to feel or fear.

PARISINA

IX.

He was not one who brook'd delay:
 Within the chamber of his state,
The chief of Este's ancient sway
 Upon his throne of judgment sate;
His nobles and his guards are there, —
Before him is the sinful pair;
Both young — and *one* how passing fair!
With swordless belt, and fetter'd hand,
O Christ! that thus a son should stand
 Before a father's face!
Yet thus must Hugo meet his sire,
And hear the sentence of his ire,
 The tale of his disgrace!
And yet he seems not overcome,
Although, as yet, his voice be dumb.

PARISINA

X.

And still, and pale, and silently
Did Parisina wait her doom;
How changed since last her speaking eye
Glanced gladness round the glittering room,
Where high-born men were proud to wait —
Where beauty watch'd to imitate
Her gentle voice — her lovely mien —
And gather from her air and gait
The graces of its queen:
Then — had her eye in sorrow wept,
A thousand warriors forth had leapt,
A thousand swords had sheathless shone,
And made her quarrel all their own.
Now — what is she? and what are they?
Can she command, or these obey?
All silent and unheeding now,
With downcast eyes and knitting brow,
And folded arms, and freezing air,
And lips that scarce their scorn forbear,
Her knights and dames, her court — is there.
And he, the chosen one, whose lance
Had yet been couch'd before her glance,
Who — were his arm a moment free —
Had died or gain'd her liberty;
The minion of his father's bride —
He, too, is fetter'd by her side:
Nor sees her swoln and full eye swim
Less for her own despair than him:
Those lids — o'er which the violet vein
Wandering, leaves a tender stain,
Shining through the smoothest white
That e'er did softest kiss invite —
Now seem'd with hot and livid glow
To press, not shade, the orbs below;
Which glance so heavily, and fill,
As tear on tear grows gathering still.

PARISINA

XI.

And he for her had also wept,
But for the eyes that on him gazed:
His sorrow, if he felt it, slept;
Stern and erect his brow was raised.
Whate'er the grief his soul avow'd,
He would not shrink before the crowd;
But yet he dared not look on her:
Remembrance of the hours that were —
His guilt — his love — his present state —
His father's wrath — all good men's hate —
His earthly, his eternal fate —
And hers — oh, hers! he dared not throw
One look upon that deathlike brow!
Else had his rising heart betray'd
Remorse for all the wreck it made.

XII.

And Azo spake: — "But yesterday
I gloried in a wife and son;
That dream this morning pass'd away:
Ere day declines, I shall have none.
My life must linger on alone;
Well — let that pass — there breathes not one
Who would not do as I have done:
Those ties are broken — not by me;
Let that too pass; — the doom's prepared!
Hugo, the priest awaits on thee,
And then — thy crime's reward!
Away! address thy prayers to Heaven,
Before its evening stars are met —
Learn if thou there canst be forgiven;
Its mercy may absolve thee yet.
But here, upon the earth beneath,
There is no spot where thou and I
Together, for an hour, could breathe:
Farewell! I will not see thee die —
But thou, frail thing! shalt view his head —
Away! I cannot speak the rest:
Go! woman of the wanton breast;
Not I, but thou, his blood dost shed:
Go! if that sight thou canst outlive,
And joy thee in the life I give."

XIII.

And here stern Azo hid his face —
 For on his brow the swelling vein
 Throbb'd as if back upon his brain
 The hot blood ebb'd and flow'd again;
 And therefore bow'd he for a space,
 And pass'd his shaking hand along
 His eye, to veil it from the throng;
 While Hugo raised his chained hands,
 And for a brief delay demands
 His father's ear: the silent sire
 Forbids not what his words require.

"It is not that I dread the death —
 For thou has seen me by thy side
 All redly through the battle ride,
 And that not once a useless brand
 Thy slaves have wrested from my hand,
 Hath shed more blood in cause of thine,
 Than e'er can stain the axe of mine;
 Thou gav'st, and may'st resume my breath,
 A gift for which I think thee not;
 Nor are my mother's wrongs forgot,
 Her slighted love and ruin'd name,
 Her offspring's heritage of shame;
 But she is in the grave, where he,
 Her son, thy rival, soon shall be.
 Her broken heart — my sever'd head —
 Shall witness for thee from the dead
 How trusty and how tender were
 Thy youthful love — paternal care.
 'Tis true that I have done the wrong —
 But wrong for wrong: — this deem'd thy bride,
 The other victim of thy pride,
 Thou know'st for me was destined long.
 Thou saw'st, and covetedst her charms —
 And with thy very crime — my birth,
 Thou tauntedst me — as little worth!
 A match ignoble for her arms,
 Because, forsooth, I could not claim,
 The lawful heirship of thy name,
 Nor sit on Este's lineal throne;
 Yet were a few short summers mine,
 My name should more than Este's shine
 With honours all my own.
 I had a sword — and have a breast
 That should have won as haught a crest [2]

PARISINA

As ever waved along the line
Of all these sovereign sires of thine.
Not always knightly spurs are worn
The brightest by the better born;
And mine have lanced my courser's flank
Before proud chiefs of princely rank,
When charging to the cheering cry
Of 'Este and of Victory!'
I will not plead the cause of crime,
Nor sue thee to redeem from time
A few brief hours or days that must
At length roll o'er my reckless dust; —
Such maddening moments as my past,
They could not, and they did not, last.
Albeit my birth and name be base,
And thy nobility of race
Disdain'd to deck a thing like me —
Yet in my lineaments they trace
Some features of my father's face,
And in my spirit — all of thee.
From thee — this tamelessness of heart —
From thee — nay, wherefore dost thou start? —
From thee in all their vigour came
My arm of strength, my soul of flame —
Thou didst not give me life alone,
But all that made me more thine own.
See what thy guilty love hath done!
Repaid thee with too like a son!
I am no bastard in my soul,
For that, like thine, abhorr'd control:
And for my breath, that hasty boon
Thou gav'st and wilt resume so soon,
I value it no more than thou,
When rose thy casque above thy brow,
And we, all side by side, have striven,
And o'er the dead our coursers driven:
The past is nothing — and at last
The future can but be the past;
Yet would I that I then had died;
For though thou work'dst my mother's ill,
And made thy own my destined bride,
I feel thou art my father still;
And, harsh as sounds thy hard decree,
'Tis not unjust, although from thee.
Begot in sin, to die in shame,
My life begun and ends the same:
As err'd the sire, so err'd the son,
And thou must punish both in one.
My crime seems worst to human view,
But God must judge between us too!"

XIV.

He ceased — and stood with folded arms,
 On which the circling fetters sounded:
 And not an ear but felt as wounded,
 Of all the chiefs that there were rank'd,
 When those dull chains in meeting clank'd:
 Till Parisina's fatal charms
 Again attracted every eye —
 Would she thus hear him doom'd to die!
 She stood, I said, all pale and still,
 The living cause of Hugo's ill!
 Her eyes unmoved, but full and wide,
 Not once had turn'd to either side —
 Nor once did those sweet eyelids close,
 Or shade the glance o'er which they rose,
 But round their orbs of deepest blue
 The circling white dilated grew —
 And there with glassy gaze she stood
 As ice were in her curdled blood;
 But every now and then a tear
 So large and slowly gather'd slid
 From the long dark fringe of that fair lid.
 It was a thing to see, not hear!
 And those who saw, it did surprise,
 Such drops could fall from human eyes.
 To speak she thought — the imperfect note
 Was choked within her swelling throat,
 Yet seem'd in that low hollow groan
 Her whole heart gushing in the tone.
 It ceased — again she thought to speak,
 Then burst her voice in one long shriek,
 And to the earth she fell like stone
 Or statue from its base o'erthrown,
 More like a thing that ne'er had life —
 A monument of Azo's wife —
 Than her, that living guilty thing,
 Whose every passion was a sting,
 Which urged to guilt, but could not bear
 That guilt's detection and despair.
 But yet she lived — and all too soon
 Recover'd from that death-like swoon —
 But scarce to reason — every sense
 Had been o'erstrung by pangs intense;
 And each frail fibre of her brain
 (As bowstrings, when relax'd by rain,
 The erring arrow launch aside)
 Sent forth her thoughts all wild and wide —

PARISINA

The past a blank, the future black,
With glimpses of a dreary track,
Like lightning on the desert path,
When midnight storms are mustering wrath.
She fear'd — she felt that something ill
Lay on her soul, so deep and chill —
That there was sin and shame she knew;
That some one was to die — but who?
She had forgotten: — did she breathe?
Could this be still the earth beneath
The sky above, and men around;
Or were they fiends who now so frown'd
On one, before whose eyes each eye
Till then had smiled in sympathy?
All was confused and undefined
To her all-jarr'd and wandering mind;
A chaos of wild hopes and fears:
And now in laughter, now in tears,
But madly still in each extreme,
She strove with that convulsive dream;
For so it seem'd on her to break:
Oh! vainly must she strive to wake!

PARISINA

XV.

The Convent bells are ringing,
But mournfully and slow:
In the grey square turret swinging,
With a deep sound, to and fro.
Heavily to the heart they go!
Hark! the hymn is singing —
The song for the dead below,
Or the living who shortly shall be so!
For a departing being's soul
The death-hymn peals and the hollow bells knoll:
He is near his mortal goal;
Kneeling at the friar's knee;
Sad to hear — and piteous to see —
Kneeling on the bare cold ground,
With the block before and the guards around —
And the headsman with his bare arm ready,
That the blow may be both swift and steady,
Feels if the axe be sharp and true —
Since he set its edge anew:
While the crowd in a speechless circle gather
To see the Son fall by the doom of the Father.

XVI.

It is a lovely hour as yet
Before the summer sun shall set,
Which rose upon that heavy day,
And mock'd it with his steadiest ray;
And his evening beams are shed
Full on Hugo's fated head,
As his last confession pouring
To the monk, his doom deploring
In penitential holiness,
He bends to hear his accents bless
With absolution such as may
Wipe our mortal stains away.
That high sun on his head did glisten
As he there did bow and listen —
And the rings of chestnut hair
Curl'd half down his neck so bare;
But brighter still the beam was thrown
Upon the axe which near him shone
With a clear and ghastly glitter. —
Oh! that parting hour was bitter!
Even the stern stood chill'd with awe:
Dark the crime, and just the law —
Yet they shudder'd as they saw.

XVII.

The parting prayers are said and over
 Of that false son — and daring lover!
 His beads and sins are all recounted,
 His hours to their last minute mounted —
 His mantling cloak before was stripp'd,
 His bright brown locks must now be clipp'd.
 'Tis done — all closely are they shorn —
 The vest which till this moment worn —
 The scarf which Parisina gave —
 Must not adorn him to the grave.
 Even that must now be thrown aside,
 And o'er his eyes the kerchief tied;
 But no — that last indignity
 Shall ne'er approach his haughty eye.
 All feelings seemingly subdued,
 In deep disdain were half renew'd,
 When headsman's hands prepared to bind
 Those eyes which would not brook such blind
 As if they dared not look on death.
 "No — yours my forfeit blood and breath —
 These hands are chain'd — but let me die
 At least with an unshackled eye —
 Strike:" — and as the word he said,
 Upon the block he bow'd his head;
 These the last accents Hugo spoke:
 "Strike:" — and flashing fell the stroke —
 Roll'd the head — and, gushing, sunk
 Back the stain'd and heaving trunk,
 In the dust, which each deep vein
 Slaked with its ensanguined rain;
 His eyes and lips a moment quiver,
 Convulsed and quick — then fix for ever.
 He died, as erring man should die,
 Without display, without parade;
 Meekly had he bow'd and pray'd,
 As not disdainng priestly aid,
 Nor desperate of all hope on high.
 And while before the prior kneeling,
 His heart was wean'd from earthly feeling;
 His wrathful sire — his paramour —
 What were they in such an hour?
 No more reproach — no more despair;
 No thought but heaven — no word but prayer —
 Save the few which from him broke,
 When, bared to meet the headsman's stroke,
 He claim'd to die with eyes unbound,

PARISINA

His sole adieu to those around.

XVIII.

Still as the lips that close in death,
Each gazer's bosom held his breath:
But yet, afar, from man to man,
A cold electric shiver ran,
As down the deadly blow descended
On him whose life and love thus ended;
And, with a hushing sound compress'd,
A sigh shrunk back on every breast;
But no more thrilling noise rose there,
 Beyond the blow that to the block
 Pierced through with forced and sullen shock,
Save one: — What cleaves the silent air
So madly shrill — so passing wild?
That, as a mother's o'er her child,
Done to death by sudden blow,
To the sky these accents go,
Like a soul's in endless woe.
Through Azo's palace-lattice driven,
That horrid voice ascends to heaven,
And every eye is turn'd thereon;
But sound and sight alike are gone.
It was a woman's shriek — and ne'er
In madlier accents rose despair;
And those who heard it, as it pass'd,
In mercy wish'd it were the last.

PARISINA

XIX.

Hugo is fallen; and from that hour,
No more in palace, hall, or bower,
Was Parisina heard or seen:
Her name — as if she ne'er had been —
Was banish'd from each lip and ear,
Like words of wantonness or fear;
And from Prince Azo's voice, by none
Was mention heard of wife or son;
No tomb — no memory had they;
Theirs was unconsecrated clay;
At least the knight's who died that day.
But Parisina's fate lies hid
Like dust beneath the coffin lid:
Whether in convent she abode,
And won to heaven her dreary road,
By blighted and remorseful years
Of scourge, and fast, and sleepless tears;
Or if she fell by bowl or steel,
For that dark love she dared to feel;
Or if upon the moment smote,
She died by tortures less remote;
Like him she saw upon the block,
With heart that shared the headsman's shock
In quicken'd brokenness that came,
In pity, o'er her shatter'd frame,
None knew — and none can ever know:
But whatso'er its end below,
Her life began and closed in woe!

XX.

And Azo found another bride,
 And goodly sons grew by his side;
 But none so lovely and so brave
 As him who wither'd in the grave;
 Or if they were — on his cold eye
 Their growth but glanced unheeded by,
 Or noticed with a smother'd sigh.
 But never tear his cheek descended,
 And never smile his brow unbended;
 And o'er that fair broad brow were wrought
 The intersected lines of thought;
 Those furrows which the burning share
 Of Sorrow ploughs untimely there;
 Scars of the lacerating mind
 Which the Soul's war doth leave behind.
 He was past all mirth or woe:
 Nothing more remain'd below
 But sleepless nights and heavy days,
 A mind all dead to scorn or praise,
 A heart which shunn'd itself — and yet
 That would not yield — nor could forget,
 Which, when it least appear'd to melt,
 Intently thought — intensely felt:
 The deepest ice which ever froze
 Can only o'er the surface close —
 The living stream lies quick below,
 And flows — and cannot cease to flow.
 Still was his seal'd-up bosom haunted
 By thoughts which Nature had implanted;
 Too deeply rooted thence to vanish,
 Howe'er our stifled fears we banish;
 When, struggling as they rise to start,
 We check those waters of the heart,
 They are not dried — those tears unshed,
 But flow back to the fountain head,
 And resting in their spring more pure,
 Forever in its depth endure,
 Unseen, unwept, but uncongeal'd,
 And cherish'd most where least reveal'd.
 With inward starts of feeling left,
 To throb o'er those of life bereft;
 Without the power to fill again
 The desert gap which made his pain;
 Without the hope to meet them where
 United souls shall gladness share,
 With all the consciousness that he

PARISINA

Had only pass'd a just decree;
That they had wrought their doom of ill;
Yet Azo's age was wretched still.
The tainted branches of the tree,
 If lopp'd with care, a strength may give,
 By which the rest shall bloom and live
All greenly fresh and wildly free:
But if the lightning, in its wrath,
The waving boughs with fury scath,
The massy trunk the ruin feels,
And never more a leaf reveals.