

It was then the cricket sang.

His spontaneous joyousness burst like a bomb upon us. One by one heads were raised from books and eyes slowly gazed to the corner where the little insect was tucking his message of happiness. It seemed his tiny frame was overflowing with vibrant good will, and he, a welcome prophet of the happy days to come, delivering tidings of courage and good cheer to the unfortunate prisoners.

Down in the corner from where the cricket sang I saw the long, thin body of Bob Creighton move. I knew from long experience Bob, in common with most descendants of the Irish, was a deeply sensitive man, sometimes emotional too, and at times eloquent.

As Bob moved, I thought of all the dainty poems, the touching tales, I had wept over in childhood, wherein little beasts of the field, birds, or even insects had comforted the distress of unhappy humans, deep in the dayless gloom of dim dungeons.

I thought of the stories of prisoners who had shared with mice their humble fare of mildewed bread and cheese. How to them they had confided their hopeless hopes, fears; consulted, confessed, and drawn comfort, as from a family priest.

In particular I recalled a poem of ponderous thought and mighty moralizing from the awful pen of Byron, "The Prisoner of Chillon," wherein a little brightly plumaged bird daily visited a wretched captive, how he grew to love it and wondered if it were an adored one disguised in different shape, how it flew away and left him doubly alone.

And here was the little cricket singing to us, who undoubtedly were genuine captives, but by no means wretched. Singing to us just as urgently, just as brightly, as Byron's blessed bird.

And here was an emotional son of Ireland gazing fixedly towards the little cricket.

If the emotional poets of olden days were so perfectly attuned to the great heart of afflicted humanity, a profound, too-deep-for-tears utterance was inevitable.

I do not exaggerate when I say with parted lips and quickened heart-beat I awaited some classical and immortal remark.

It came all right.

"What a blasted uproar," said Bob. Oh, deeply sensitive man! Oh, emotional, Irishman! Oh, eloquence!

His gaze, which I in my sticky sentiment had interpreted as loving kindness intermingled with awe, was nothing more than annoyance, tempered with mild hatred.

But more was to come. Had Byron been there, he would have turned a back somersault and 'phoned an urgent call through to his publishers to delete "The Prisoner of Chillon" from the umpteenth edition of his works.

Failing to find the would-be altruistic cricket, Bob reached out a long, thin claw to lift up an empty powdered-milk tin. Crouched there was the little lad with his message of good cheer and what-ho to the imprisoned New-Zealanders.

Bob picked up a boot. He raised it aloft. There was a brief thud. The song of good cheer was abruptly and irrevocably terminated.

Bob wiped the pathetic crushed remains of the little body from the heel of his Number Niners.

Looking up, he caught my reproving eye.

"The darned thing was making so much row I couldn't read my book," he explained. Then, with a sigh of content, and with the comforting knowledge of having done a good turn to all, he returned to "Vintage Murder," by Ngaio Marsh.

