

THE BALLAD OF
READING GAOL

· OSCAR WILDE ·

<https://onemorelibrary.com>

The Ballad of Reading Gaol

by

Oscar Wilde

Thomas B. Mosher, London, Portland, 1904

In Memoriam

C.T.W.

Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards.

Obiit H.M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire,

July 7th, 1896

Presented by Project Gutenberg on the 99th Anniversary.

VERSION ONE

I. He did not wear his scarlet coat,
For blood and wine are red, And
blood and wine were on his hands
When they found him with the dead,
The poor dead woman whom he
loved, And murdered in her bed. He
walked amongst the Trial Men In a
suit of shabby grey; A cricket cap
was on his head, And his step
seemed light and gay; But I never
saw a man who looked So wistfully
at the day. I never saw a man who
looked With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue Which
prisoners call the sky, And at every
drifting cloud that went With sails
of silver by. I walked, with other
souls in pain, Within another ring,
And was wondering if the man had
done A great or little thing, When a
voice behind me whispered low,
"That fellow's got to swing." Dear
Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel, And the
sky above my head became Like a
casque of scorching steel; And,
though I was a soul in pain, My pain
I could not feel. I only knew what
haunted thought Quickened his step,
and why He looked upon the garish
day With such a wistful eye; The
man had killed the thing he loved

VERSION TWO

I He did not wear his scarlet coat,
For blood and wine are red, And
blood and wine were on his hands
When they found him with the dead,
The poor dead woman whom he
loved, And murdered in her bed. He
walked amongst the Trial Men In a
suit of shabby gray; A cricket cap
was on his head, And his step
seemed light and gay; But I never
saw a man who looked So wistfully
at the day. I never saw a man who
looked With such a wistful eye Upon
that little tent of blue Which
prisoners call the sky, And at every
drifting cloud that went With sails
of silver by. I walked, with other
souls in pain, Within another ring,
And was wondering if the man had
done A great or little thing, When a
voice behind me whispered low,
"That fellow's got to swing." Dear
Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel, And the
sky above my head became Like a
casque of scorching steel; And,
though I was a soul in pain, My pain
I could not feel. I only knew what
haunted thought Quickened his step,
and why He looked upon the garish
day With such a wistful eye; The
man had killed the thing he loved,

And so he had to die. Yet each man kills the thing he loves By each let this be heard, Some do it with a bitter look, Some with a flattering word, The coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a sword! Some kill their love when they are young, And some when they are old; Some strangle with the hands of Lust, Some with the hands of Gold: The kindest use a knife, because The dead so soon grow cold. Some love too little, some too long, Some sell, and others buy; Some do the deed with many tears, And some without a sigh: For each man kills the thing he loves, Yet each man does not die. He does not die a death of shame On a day of dark disgrace, Nor have a noose about his neck, Nor a cloth upon his face, Nor drop feet foremost through the floor Into an empty place He does not sit with silent men Who watch him night and day; Who watch him when he tries to weep, And when he tries to pray; Who watch him lest himself should rob The prison of its prey. He does not wake at dawn to see Dread figures throng his room, The shivering Chaplain robed in white, The Sheriff stern with gloom, And the Governor all in shiny black, With the yellow face of Doom. He does not rise in piteous haste To put on convict-clothes, While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and

And so he had to die. Yet each man kills the thing he loves, By each let this be heard, Some do it with a bitter look, Some with a flattering word, The coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a sword! Some kill their love when they are young, And some when they are old; Some strangle with the hands of Lust, Some with the hands of Gold: The kindest use a knife, because The dead so soon grow cold. Some love too little, some too long, Some sell, and others buy; Some do the deed with many tears, And some without a sigh: For each man kills the thing he loves, Yet each man does not die. He does not die a death of shame On a day of dark disgrace, Nor have a noose about his neck, Nor a cloth upon his face, Nor drop feet foremost through the floor Into an empty space. He does not sit with silent men Who watch him night and day; Who watch him when he tries to weep, And when he tries to pray; Who watch him lest himself should rob The prison of its prey. He does not wake at dawn to see Dread figures throng his room, The shivering Chaplain robed in white, The Sheriff stern with gloom, And the Governor all in shiny black, With the yellow face of Doom. He does not rise in piteous haste To put on convict-clothes, While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and

notes Each new and nerve-twitched
pose, Fingering a watch whose little
ticks Are like horrible hammer-
blows. He does not know that
sickening thirst That sands one's
throat, before The hangman with his
gardener's gloves Slips through the
padded door, And binds one with
three leathern thongs, That the
throat may thirst no more. He does
not bend his head to hear The Burial
Office read, Nor, while the terror of
his soul Tells him he is not dead,
Cross his own coffin, as he moves
Into the hideous shed. He does not
stare upon the air Through a little
roof of glass; He does not pray with
lips of clay For his agony to pass;
Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek
The kiss of Caiaphas. II. Six weeks
our guardsman walked the yard, In a
suit of shabby grey: His cricket cap
was on his head, And his step
seemed light and gay, But I never
saw a man who looked So wistfully
at the day. I never saw a man who
looked With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue Which
prisoners call the sky, And at every
wandering cloud that trailed Its
raveled fleeces by. He did not wring
his hands, as do Those witless men
who dare To try to rear the
changeling Hope In the cave of
black Despair: He only looked upon
the sun, And drank the morning air.
He did not wring his hands nor

notes Each new and nerve-twitched
pose, Fingering a watch whose little
ticks Are like horrible hammer-
blows. He does not feel that
sickening thirst That sands one's
throat, before The hangman with his
gardener's gloves Comes through the
padded door, And binds one with
three leathern thongs, That the throat
may thirst no more. He does not
bend his head to hear The Burial
Office read, Nor, while the anguish
of his soul Tells him he is not dead,
Cross his own coffin, as he moves
Into the hideous shed. He does not
stare upon the air Through a little
roof of glass: He does not pray with
lips of clay For his agony to pass;
Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek
The kiss of Caiaphas. II Six weeks
the guardsman walked the yard, In
the suit of shabby gray: His cricket
cap was on his head, And his step
was light and gay, But I never saw a
man who looked So wistfully at the
day. I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye Upon that
little tent of blue Which prisoners
call the sky, And at every wandering
cloud that trailed Its ravelled fleeces
by. He did not wring his hands, as do
Those witless men who dare To try
to rear the changeling Hope In the
cave of black Despair: He only
looked upon the sun, And drank the
morning air. He did not wring his
hands nor weep, Nor did he peek or

weep, Nor did he peek or pine, But pine, But he drank the air as though
he drank the air as though it held it held Some healthful anodyne;
Some healthful anodyne; With open With open mouth he drank the sun
mouth he drank the sun As though it As though it had been wine! And I
had been wine! And I and all the and all the souls in pain, Who
souls in pain, Who tramped the tramped the other ring, Forgot if we
other ring, Forgot if we ourselves ourselves had done A great or little
had done A great or little thing, And thing, And watched with gaze of dull
watched with gaze of dull amaze amaze The man who had to swing.
The man who had to swing. And For strange it was to see him pass
strange it was to see him pass With With a step so light and gay, And
a step so light and gay, And strange strange it was to see him look So
it was to see him look So wistfully wistfully at the day, And strange it
at the day, And strange it was to was to think that he Had such a debt
think that he Had such a debt to pay. to pay. The oak and elm have
For oak and elm have pleasant pleasant leaves That in the spring-
leaves That in the spring-time shoot: time shoot: But grim to see is the
But grim to see is the gallows-tree, gallows-tree, With its alder-bitten
With its adder-bitten root, And, root, And, green or dry, a man must
green or dry, a man must die Before die Before it bears its fruit! The
it bears its fruit! The loftiest place is loftiest place is the seat of grace For
that seat of grace For which all which all worldlings try: But who
worldlings try: But who would stand would stand in hempen band Upon a
in hempen band Upon a scaffold scaffold high, And through a
high, And through a murderer's murderer's collar take His last look
collar take His last look at the sky? at the sky? It is sweet to dance to
It is sweet to dance to violins When violins When Love and Life are fair:
Love and Life are fair: To dance to To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes
flutes, to dance to lutes Is delicate Is delicate and rare: But it is not
and rare: But it is not sweet with sweet with nimble feet To dance
nimble feet To dance upon the air! upon the air! So with curious eyes
So with curious eyes and sick and sick surmise We watched him
surmise We watched him day by day, day, And wondered if each one of us
day, And wondered if each one of us one of us Would end the self-same
Would end the self-same way, For way, For none can tell to what red
none can tell to what red Hell His Hell His sightless soul may stray. At
sightless soul may stray. At last the last the dead man walked no more

dead man walked no more Amongst the Trial Men, And I knew that he was standing up In the black dock's dreadful pen, And that never would I see his face In God's sweet world again. Like two doomed ships that pass in storm We had crossed each other's way: But we made no sign, we said no word, We had no word to say; For we did not meet in the holy night, But in the shameful day. A prison wall was round us both, Two outcast men were we: The world had thrust us from its heart, And God from out His care: And the iron gin that waits for Sin Had caught us in its snare. III In Debtors' Yard the stones are hard, And the dripping wall is high, So it was there he took the air Beneath the leaden sky, And by each side a Warder walked, For fear the man might die. Or else he sat with those who watched His anguish night and day; Who watched him when he rose to weep, And when he crouched to pray; Who watched him lest himself should rob Their scaffold of its prey. The Governor was strong upon The Regulations Act: The Doctor said that Death was but A scientific fact: And twice a day the Chaplain called And left a little tract. And twice a day he smoked his pipe, And drank his quart of beer: His soul was resolute, and held No hiding-place for fear; He often said that he was

Amongst the Trial Men, And I knew that he was standing up In the black dock's dreadful pen, And that never would I see his face For weal or woe again. Like two doomed ships that pass in storm We had crossed each other's way: But we made no sign, we said no word, We had no word to say; For we did not meet in the holy night, But in the shameful day. A prison wall was round us both, Two outcast men we were: The world had thrust us from its heart, And God from out His care: And the iron gin that waits for Sin Had caught us in its snare. III In Debtors' Yard the stones are hard, And the dripping wall is high, So it was there he took the air Beneath the leaden sky, And by each side a warder walked, For fear the man might die. Or else he sat with those who watched His anguish night and day; Who watched him when he rose to weep, And when he crouched to pray; Who watched him lest himself should rob Their scaffold of its prey. The Governor was strong upon The Regulations Act: The Doctor said that Death was but A scientific fact: And twice a day the Chaplain called, And left a little tract. And twice a day he smoked his pipe, And drank his quart of beer: His soul was resolute, and held No hiding-place for fear; He often said that he was glad The hangman's day was near.

glad The hangman's hands were
near. But why he said so strange a
thing No Warder dared to ask: For
he to whom a watcher's doom Is
given as his task, Must set a lock
upon his lips, And make his face a
mask. Or else he might be moved,
and try To comfort or console: And
what should Human Pity do Pent up
in Murderers' Hole? What word of
grace in such a place Could help a
brother's soul? With slouch and
swing around the ring We trod the
Fool's Parade! We did not care: we
knew we were The Devil's Own
Brigade: And shaven head and feet
of lead Make a merry masquerade.
We tore the tarry rope to shreds
With blunt and bleeding nails; We
rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the
floors, And cleaned the shining
rails: And, rank by rank, we soaped
the plank, And clattered with the
pails. We sewed the sacks, we broke
the stones, We turned the dusty drill:
We banged the tins, and bawled the
hymns, And sweated on the mill:
But in the heart of every man Terror
was lying still. So still it lay that
every day Crawled like a weed-
clogged wave: And we forgot the
bitter lot That waits for fool and
knave, Till once, as we tramped in
from work, We passed an open
grave. With yawning mouth the
yellow hole Gaped for a living
thing; The very mud cried out for

But why he said so strange a thing
No warder dared to ask: For he to
whom a watcher's doom Is given as
his task, Must set a lock upon his
lips, And make his face a mask. Or
else he might be moved, and try To
comfort or console: And what
should Human Pity do Pent up in
Murderers' Hole? What word of
grace in such a place Could help a
brother's soul? With slouch and
swing around the ring We trod the
Fools' Parade! We did not care: we
knew we were The Devils' Own
Brigade: And shaven head and feet
of lead Make a merry masquerade.
We tore the tarry rope to shreds
With blunt and bleeding nails; We
rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the
floors, And cleaned the shining rails:
And, rank by rank, we soaped the
plank, And clattered with the pails.
We sewed the sacks, we broke the
stones, We turned the dusty drill: We
banged the tins, and bawled the
hymns, And sweated on the mill:
But in the heart of every man Terror
was lying still. So still it lay that
every day Crawled like a weed-
clogged wave: And we forgot the
bitter lot That waits for fool and
knave, Till once, as we tramped in
from work, We passed an open
grave. With yawning mouth the
horrid hole Gaped for a living thing;
The very mud cried out for blood To
the thirsty asphalte ring: And we

blood To the thirsty asphalt ring:
And we knew that ere one dawn
grew fair Some prisoner had to
swing. Right in we went, with soul
intent On Death and Dread and
Doom: The hangman, with his little
bag, Went shuffling through the
gloom And each man trembled as he
crept Into his numbered tomb. That
night the empty corridors Were full
of forms of Fear, And up and down
the iron town Stole feet we could
not hear, And through the bars that
hide the stars White faces seemed to
peer. He lay as one who lies and
dreams In a pleasant meadow-land,
The watcher watched him as he
slept, And could not understand
How one could sleep so sweet a
sleep With a hangman close at
hand? But there is no sleep when
men must weep Who never yet have
wept: So we—the fool, the fraud,
the knave— That endless vigil kept,
And through each brain on hands of
pain Another's terror crept. Alas! it
is a fearful thing To feel another's
guilt! For, right within, the sword of
Sin Pierced to its poisoned hilt, And
as molten lead were the tears we
shed For the blood we had not spilt.
The Warders with their shoes of felt
Crept by each padlocked door, And
peeped and saw, with eyes of awe,
Grey figures on the floor, And
wondered why men knelt to pray
Who never prayed before. All

knew that ere one dawn grew fair
The fellow had to swing. Right in we
went, with soul intent On Death and
Dread and Doom: The hangman,
with his little bag, Went shuffling
through the gloom: And I trembled
as I groped my way Into my
numbered tomb. That night the
empty corridors Were full of forms
of Fear, And up and down the iron
town Stole feet we could not hear,
And through the bars that hide the
stars White faces seemed to peer. He
lay as one who lies and dreams In a
pleasant meadow-land, The watchers
watched him as he slept, And could
not understand How one could sleep
so sweet a sleep With a hangman
close at hand. But there is no sleep
when men must weep Who never yet
have wept: So we- the fool, the
fraud, the knave- That endless vigil
kept, And through each brain on
hands of pain Another's terror crept.
Alas! it is a fearful thing To feel
another's guilt! For, right within, the
sword of Sin Pierced to its poisoned
hilt, And as molten lead were the
tears we shed For the blood we had
not spilt. The warders with their
shoes of felt Crept by each
padlocked door, And peeped and
saw, with eyes of awe, Gray figures
on the floor, And wondered why
men knelt to pray Who never prayed
before. All through the night we
knelt and prayed, Mad mourners of a

through the night we knelt and
prayed, Mad mourners of a corpse!
The troubled plumes of midnight
were The plumes upon a hearse:
And bitter wine upon a sponge Was
the savior of Remorse. The cock
crew, the red cock crew, But never
came the day: And crooked shape of
Terror crouched, In the corners
where we lay: And each evil sprite
that walks by night Before us
seemed to play. They glided past,
they glided fast, Like travelers
through a mist: They mocked the
moon in a rigadon Of delicate turn
and twist, And with formal pace and
loathsome grace The phantoms kept
their tryst. With mop and mow, we
saw them go, Slim shadows hand in
hand: About, about, in ghostly rout
They trod a saraband: And the
damned grotesques made
arabesques, Like the wind upon the
sand! With the pirouettes of
marionettes, They tripped on
pointed tread: But with flutes of
Fear they filled the ear, As their
grisly masque they led, And loud
they sang, and loud they sang, For
they sang to wake the dead. "Oho!"
they cried, "The world is wide, But
fettered limbs go lame! And once,
or twice, to throw the dice Is a
gentlemanly game, But he does not
win who plays with Sin In the secret
House of Shame." No things of air
these antics were That frolicked

corse! The troubled plumes of
midnight shook Like the plumes
upon a hearse: And as bitter wine
upon a sponge Was the savour of
Remorse. The gray cock crew, the
red cock crew, But never came the
day: And crooked shapes of Terror
crouched, In the corners where we
lay: And each evil sprite that walks
by night Before us seemed to play.
They glided past, the glided fast,
Like travellers through a mist: They
mocked the moon in a rigadon Of
delicate turn and twist, And with
formal pace and loathsome grace
The phantoms kept their tryst. With
mop and mow, we saw them go,
Slim shadows hand in hand: About,
about, in ghostly rout They trod a
saraband: And the damned
grotesques made arabesques, Like
the wind upon the sand! With the
pirouettes of marionettes, They
tripped on pointed tread: But with
flutes of Fear they filled the ear, As
their grisly masque they led, And
loud they sang, and long they sang,
For they sang to wake the dead.
"Oho!" they cried, "the world is
wide, But fettered limbs go lame!
And once, or twice, to throw the dice
Is a gentlemanly game, But he does
not win who plays with Sin In the
secret House of Shame." No things
of air these antics were, That
frolicked with such glee: To men
whose lives were held in gyves, And

with such glee: To men whose lives were held in gyves, And whose feet might not go free, Ah! wounds of Christ! they were living things, Most terrible to see. Around, around, they waltzed and wound; Some wheeled in smirking pairs: With the mincing step of demirep Some sidled up the stairs: And with subtle sneer, and fawning leer, Each helped us at our prayers. The morning wind began to moan, But still the night went on: Through its giant loom the web of gloom Crept till each thread was spun: And, as we prayed, we grew afraid Of the Justice of the Sun. The moaning wind went wandering round The weeping prison-wall: Till like a wheel of turning-steel We felt the minutes crawl: O moaning wind! what had we done To have such a seneschal? At last I saw the shadowed bars Like a lattice wrought in lead, Move right across the whitewashed wall That faced my three-plank bed, And I knew that somewhere in the world God's dreadful dawn was red. At six o'clock we cleaned our cells, At seven all was still, But the sough and swing of a mighty wing The prison seemed to fill, For the Lord of Death with icy breath Had entered in to kill. He did not pass in purple pomp, Nor ride a moon-white steed. Three yards of cord and a

whose feet might not go free, Ah! wounds of Christ! they were living things, Most terrible to see. Around, around, they waltzed and wound; Some wheeled in smirking pairs; With the mincing step of a demirep Some sidled up the stairs: And with subtle sneer, and fawning leer, Each helped us at our prayers. The morning wind began to moan, But still the night went on: Through its giant loom the web of gloom Crept till each thread was spun: And, as we prayed, we grew afraid Of the Justice of the Sun. The moaning wind went wandering round The weeping prison wall: Till like a wheel of turning steel We felt the minutes crawl: O moaning wind! what had we done To have such a seneschal? At last I saw the shadowed bars, Like a lattice wrought in lead, Move right across the whitewashed wall That faced my three-plank bed, And I knew that somewhere in the world God's dreadful dawn was red. At six o'clock we cleaned our cells, At seven all was still, But the sough and swing of a mighty wing The prison seemed to fill, For the Lord of Death with icy breath Had entered in to kill. He did not pass in purple pomp, Nor ride a moon-white steed. Three yards of cord and a sliding board Are all the gallows' need: So with rope of shame the Herald came To

sliding board Are all the gallows'
need: So with rope of shame the
Herald came To do the secret deed.
We were as men who through a fen
Of filthy darkness grope: We did not
dare to breathe a prayer, Or give our
anguish scope: Something was dead
in each of us, And what was dead
was Hope. For Man's grim Justice
goes its way, And will not swerve
aside: It slays the weak, it slays the
strong, It has a deadly stride: With
iron heel it slays the strong, The
monstrous parricide! We waited for
the stroke of eight: Each tongue was
thick with thirst: For the stroke of
eight is the stroke of Fate That
makes a man accursed, And Fate
will use a running noose For the best
man and the worst. We had no other
thing to do, Save to wait for the sign
to come: So, like things of stone in a
valley lone, Quiet we sat and dumb:
But each man's heart beat thick and
quick Like a madman on a drum!
With sudden shock the prison-clock
Smote on the shivering air, And
from all the gaol rose up a wail Of
impotent despair, Like the sound
that frightened marshes hear From a
leper in his lair. And as one sees
most fearful things In the crystal of
a dream, We saw the greasy hempen
rope Hooked to the blackened beam,
And heard the prayer the hangman's
snare Strangled into a scream. And
all the woe that moved him so That
do the secret deed. We were as men
who through a fen Of filthy darkness
grope: We did not dare to breathe a
prayer, Or to give our anguish scope:
Something was dead in each of us,
And what was dead was Hope. For
Man's grim Justice goes its way And
will not swerve aside: It slays the
weak, it slays the strong, It has a
deadly stride: With iron heel it slays
the strong The monstrous parricide!
We waited for the stroke of eight:
Each tongue was thick with thirst:
For the stroke of eight is the stroke
of Fate That makes a man accursed,
And Fate will use a running noose
For the best man and the worst. We
had no other thing to do, Save to
wait for the sign to come: So, like
things of stone in a valley lone,
Quiet we sat and dumb: But each
man's heart beat thick and quick,
Like a madman on a drum! With
sudden shock the prison-clock
Smote on the shivering air, And
from all the gaol rose up a wail Of
impotent despair, Like the sound the
frightened marshes hear From some
leper in his lair. And as one sees
most fearful things In the crystal of
a dream, We saw the greasy hempen
rope Hooked to the blackened beam,
And heard the prayer the hangman's
snare Strangled into a scream. And
all the woe that moved him so That
he gave that bitter cry, And the wild
regrets, and the bloody sweats, None

he gave that bitter cry, And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats, None knew so well as I: For he who live more lives than one More deaths than one must die. IV. There is no chapel on the day On which they hang a man: The Chaplain's heart is far too sick, Or his face is far too wan, Or there is that written in his eyes Which none should look upon. So they kept us close till nigh on noon, And then they rang the bell, And the Warders with their jingling keys Opened each listening cell, And down the iron stair we tramped, Each from his separate Hell. Out into God's sweet air we went, But not in wonted way, For this man's face was white with fear, And that man's face was grey, And I never saw sad men who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw sad men who looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue We prisoners called the sky, And at every careless cloud that passed In happy freedom by. But there were those amongst us all Who walked with downcast head, And knew that, had each got his due, They should have died instead: He had but killed a thing that lived Whilst they had killed the dead. For he who sins a second time Wakes a dead soul to pain, And draws it from its spotted shroud, And makes it bleed again, And makes it bleed great gouts of

knew so well as I: For he who lives more lives than one More deaths than one must die. IV There is no chapel on the day On which they hang a man: The Chaplain's heart is far too sick, Or his face is far too wan, Or there is that written in his eyes Which none should look upon. So they kept us close till nigh on noon, And then they rang the bell, And the warders with their jingling keys Opened each listening cell, And down the iron stair we tramped, Each from his separate Hell. Out into God's sweet air we went, But not in wonted way, For this man's face was white with fear, And that man's face was gray, And I never saw sad men who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw sad men who looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue We prisoners called the sky, And at every happy cloud that passed In such strange freedom by. But there were those amongst us all Who walked with downcast head, And knew that, had each got his due, They should have died instead: He had but killed a thing that lived, Whilst they had killed the dead. For he who sins a second time Wakes a dead soul to pain, And draws it from its spotted shroud And makes it bleed again, And makes it bleed great gouts of blood, And makes it bleed in vain! Like ape or clown, in

blood And makes it bleed in vain!
Like ape or clown, in monstrous
garb With crooked arrows starred,
Silently we went round and round
The slippery asphalte yard; Silently
we went round and round, And no
man spoke a word. Silently we went
round and round, And through each
hollow mind The memory of
dreadful things Rushed like a
dreadful wind, An Horror stalked
before each man, And terror crept
behind. The Warders strutted up and
down, And kept their herd of brutes,
Their uniforms were spick and span,
And they wore their Sunday suits,
But we knew the work they had been
at By the quicklime on their boots.
For where a grave had opened wide,
There was no grave at all: Only a
stretch of mud and sand By the
hideous prison-wall, And a little
heap of burning lime, That the man
should have his pall. For he has a
pall, this wretched man, Such as few
men can claim: Deep down below a
prison-yard, Naked for greater
shame, He lies, with fetters on each
foot, Wrapt in a sheet of flame! And
all the while the burning lime Eats
flesh and bone away, It eats the
brittle bone by night, And the soft
flesh by the day, It eats the flesh and
bones by turns, But it eats the heart
away. For three long years they will
not sow Or root or seedling there:
For three long years the unblessed
spot Will sterile be and bare, And

spot Will sterile be and bare, And
look upon the wondering sky With
unreproachful stare. They think a
murderer's heart would taint Each
simple seed they sow. It is not true!
God's kindly earth Is kindlier than
men know, And the red rose would
but glow more red, The white rose
whiter blow. Out of his mouth a red,
red rose! Out of his heart a white!
For who can say by what strange
way, Christ brings his will to light,
Since the barren staff the pilgrim
bore Bloomed in the great Pope's
sight? But neither milk-white rose
nor red May bloom in prison air;
The shard, the pebble, and the flint,
Are what they give us there: For
flowers have been known to heal A
common man's despair. So never
will wine-red rose or white, Petal by
petal, fall On that stretch of mud
and sand that lies By the hideous
prison-wall, To tell the men who
tramp the yard That God's Son died
for all. Yet though the hideous
prison-wall Still hems him round
and round, And a spirit may not
walk by night That is with fetters
bound, And a spirit may but weep
that lies In such unholy ground, He
is at peace—this wretched man— At
peace, or will be soon: There is no
thing to make him mad, Nor does
Terror walk at noon, For the
lampless Earth in which he lies Has
neither Sun nor Moon. They hanged

look upon the wondering sky With
unreproachful stare. They think a
murderer's heart would taint Each
simple seed they sow. It is not true!
God's kindly earth Is kindlier than
men know, And the red rose would
but glow more red, The white rose
whiter blow. Out of his mouth a red,
red rose! Out of his heart a white!
For who can say by what strange
way, Christ brings His will to light,
Since the barren staff the pilgrim
bore Bloomed in the great Pope's
sight? But neither milk-white rose
nor red May bloom in prison air;
The shard, the pebble, and the flint,
Are what they give us there: For
flowers have been known to heal A
common man's despair. So never
will wine-red rose or white, Petal by
petal, fall On that stretch of mud
and sand that lies By the hideous
prison-wall, To tell the men who
tramp the yard That God's Son died
for all. Yet though the hideous
prison-wall Still hems him round
and round, And a spirit may not
walk by night That is with fetters
bound, And a spirit may
but weep that lies In such unholy
ground, He is at peace- this wretched
man- At peace, or will be soon:
There is no thing to make him mad,
Nor does Terror walk at noon, For
the lampless Earth in which he lies
Has neither Sun nor Moon. They
hanged him as a beast is hanged:
They did not even toll A requiem

him as a beast is hanged: They did not even toll A requiem that might have brought Rest to his startled soul, But hurriedly they took him out, And hid him in a hole. They stripped him of his canvas clothes, And gave him to the flies; They mocked the swollen purple throat And the stark and staring eyes: And with laughter loud they heaped the shroud In which their convict lies. The Chaplain would not kneel to pray By his dishonored grave: Nor mark it with that blessed Cross That Christ for sinners gave, Because the man was one of those Whom Christ came down to save. Yet all is well; he has but passed To Life's appointed bourne: And alien tears will fill for him Pity's long-broken urn, For his mourner will be outcast men, And outcasts always mourn. V. I know not whether Laws be right, Or whether Laws be wrong; All that we know who lie in gaol Is that the wall is strong; And that each day is like a year, A year whose days are long. But this I know, that every Law That men have made for Man, Since first Man took his brother's life, And the sad world began, But straws the wheat and saves the chaff With a most evil fan. This too I know—and wise it were If each could know the same— That every prison that men build Is built with bricks of shame, And bound with

that might have brought Rest to his startled soul, But hurriedly they took him out, And hid him in a hole. The warders stripped him of his clothes, And gave him to the flies: They mocked the swollen purple throat, And the stark and staring eyes: And with laughter loud they heaped the shroud In which the convict lies. The Chaplain would not kneel to pray By his dishonoured grave: Nor mark it with that blessed Cross That Christ for sinners gave, Because the man was one of those Whom Christ came down to save. Yet all is well; he has but passed To Life's appointed bourne: And alien tears will fill for him Pity's long-broken urn, For his mourners be outcast men, And outcasts always mourn. V I know not whether Laws be right, Or whether Laws be wrong; All that we know who lie in gaol Is that the wall is strong; And that each day is like a year, A year whose days are long. But this I know, that every Law That men have made for Man, Since first Man took His brother's life, And the sad world began, But straws the wheat and saves the chaff With a most evil fan. This too I know- and wise it were If each could know the same- That every prison that men build Is built with bricks of shame, And bound with bars lest Christ should see How men their brothers maim. With bars they blur the

bars lest Christ should see How men their brothers maim. With bars they blur the gracious moon, And blind the goodly sun: And they do well to hide their Hell, For in it things are done That Son of God nor son of Man Ever should look upon! The vilest deeds like poison weeds Bloom well in prison-air: It is only what is good in Man That wastes and withers there: Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate, And the Warder is Despair For they starve the little frightened child Till it weeps both night and day: And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool, And gibe the old and grey, And some grow mad, and all grow bad, And none a word may say. Each narrow cell in which we dwell Is a foul and dark latrine, And the fetid breath of living Death Chokes up each grated screen, And all, but Lust, is turned to dust In Humanity's machine. The brackish water that we drink Creeps with a loathsome slime, And the bitter bread they weigh in scales Is full of chalk and lime, And Sleep will not lie down, but walks Wild-eyed and cries to Time. But though lean Hunger and green Thirst Like asp with adder fight, We have little care of prison fare, For what chills and kills outright Is that every stone one lifts by day Becomes one's heart by night. With midnight always in

gracious moon, And blind the goodly sun: And they do well to hide their Hell, For in it things are done That Son of God nor son of Man Ever should look upon! The vilest deeds like poison weeds Bloom well in prison-air: It is only what is good in Man That wastes and withers there: Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate, And the warder is Despair. For they starve the little frightened child Till it weeps both night and day: And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool, And gibe the old and gray, And some grow mad, and all grow bad, And none a word may say. Each narrow cell in which we dwell Is a foul and dark latrine, And the fetid breath of living Death Chokes up each grated screen, And all, but Lust, is turned to dust In Humanity's machine. The brackish water that we drink Creeps with a loathsome slime, And the bitter bread they weigh in scales Is full of chalk and lime, And Sleep will not lie down, but walks Wild-eyed, and cries to Time. But though lean Hunger and green Thirst Like asp with adder fight, We have little care of prison fare, For what chills and kills outright Is that every stone one lifts by day Becomes one's heart by night. With midnight always in one's heart, And twilight in one's cell, We turn the crank, or tear the rope, Each in his separate Hell, And the silence

one's heart, And twilight in one's cell, We turn the crank, or tear the rope, Each in his separate Hell, And the silence is more awful far Than the sound of a brazen bell. And never a human voice comes near To speak a gentle word: And the eye that watches through the door Is pitiless and hard: And by all forgot, we rot and rot, With soul and body marred. And thus we rust Life's iron chain Degraded and alone: And some men curse, and some men weep, And some men make no moan: But God's eternal Laws are kind And break the heart of stone. And every human heart that breaks, In prison-cell or yard, Is as that broken box that gave Its treasure to the Lord, And filled the unclean leper's house With the scent of costliest nard. Ah! happy day they whose hearts can break And peace of pardon win! How else may man make straight his plan And cleanse his soul from Sin? How else but through a broken heart May Lord Christ enter in? And he of the swollen purple throat. And the stark and staring eyes, Waits for the holy hands that took The Thief to Paradise; And a broken and a contrite heart The Lord will not despise. The man in red who reads the Law Gave him three weeks of life, Three little weeks in which to heal His soul of his soul's strife,

is more awful far Than the sound of a brazen bell. And never a human voice comes near To speak a gentle word: And the eye that watches through the door Is pitiless and hard: And by all forgot, we rot and rot, With soul and body marred. And thus we rust Life's iron chain Degraded and alone: And some men curse, and some men weep, And some men make no moan: But God's eternal Laws are kind And break the heart of stone. And every human heart that breaks, In prison-cell or yard, Is as that broken box that gave Its treasure to the Lord, And filled the unclean leper's house With the scent of costliest nard. Ah! happy they whose hearts can break And peace of pardon win! How else may man make straight his plan And cleanse his soul from Sin? How else but through a broken heart May Lord Christ enter in? And he of the swollen purple throat, And the stark and staring eyes, Waits for the holy hands that took The Thief to Paradise; And a broken and a contrite heart The Lord will not despise. The man in red who reads the Law Gave him three weeks of life, Three little weeks in which to heal His soul of his soul's strife, And cleanse from every blot of blood The hand that held the knife. And with tears of blood he cleansed the hand, The hand that held the steel: For

And cleanse from every blot of
blood The hand that held the knife.
And with tears of blood he cleansed
the hand, The hand that held the
steel: For only blood can wipe out
blood, And only tears can heal: And
the crimson stain that was of Cain
Became Christ's snow-white seal.
VI. In Reading gaol by Reading
town There is a pit of shame, And in
it lies a wretched man Eaten by
teeth of flame, In burning winding-
sheet he lies, And his grave has got
no name. And there, till Christ call
forth the dead, In silence let him lie:
No need to waste the foolish tear, Or
heave the windy sigh: The man had
killed the thing he loved, And so he
had to die. And all men kill the
thing they love, By all let this be
heard, Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word, The
coward does it with a kiss, The
brave man with a sword!

only blood can wipe out blood, And
only tears can heal: And the crimson
stain that was of Cain Became
Christ's snow-white seal. VI In
Reading gaol by Reading town There
is a pit of shame, And in it lies a
wretched man Eaten by teeth of
flame, In a burning winding-sheet he
lies, And his grave has got no name.
And there, till Christ call forth the
dead, In silence let him lie: No need
to waste the foolish tear, Or heave
the windy sigh: The man had killed
the thing he loved, And so he had to
die. And all men kill the thing they
love, By all let this be heard, Some
do it with a bitter look, Some with a
flattering word, The coward does it
with a kiss, The brave man with a
sword!