The Ballad of Reading Gaol

 $\mathbf{B}\mathbf{y}$

Oscar Wilde



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 hunted 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,

The Sheriff stern with gloom,

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.

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 pine,

But he drank the air as though it held

Some healthful anodyne;

With open mouth he drank the sun

As though it had been wine!

And I and all the souls in pain,

Who tramped the other ring,

Forgot if we ourselves had done

A great or little thing,

And watched with gaze of dull amaze

The man who had to swing.

And strange it was to see him pass

With a step so light and gay,

And strange it was to see him look

So wistfully at the day,

And strange it was to think that he

Had such a debt to pay.

For oak and elm have pleasant leaves

That in the spring-time shoot:

But grim to see is the gallows-tree,

With its adder-bitten root,

And, green or dry, a man must die

Before it bears its fruit!

The loftiest place is that seat of grace

For which all worldlings try:

But who would stand in hempen band

Upon a scaffold high,

And through a murderer's collar take

His last look at the sky?

It is sweet to dance to violins

When Love and Life are fair:

To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes

But it is not sweet with nimble feet

To dance upon the air!

Is delicate and rare:

So with curious eyes and sick surmise

We watched him day by day,

And wondered if each one of us

Would end the self-same way,

For none can tell to what red Hell

His sightless soul may stray.

At last the 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 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 blood

To the thirsty asphalte 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 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 rigadoon

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 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 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 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

IV.

More deaths than one must die.

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 to 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 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 alway.

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 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 blow 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 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 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 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, 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.

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!

VERSION TWO

Ι

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 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 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

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 pine, But he drank the air as though it held Some healthful anodyne; With open mouth he drank the sun As though it had been wine! And I and all the souls in pain,

Who tramped the other ring,

Forgot if we ourselves had done

A great or little thing,

And watched with gaze of dull amaze

The man who had to swing.

For strange it was to see him pass

With a step so light and gay,

And strange it was to see him look

So wistfully at the day,

And strange it was to think that he

Had such a debt to pay.

The oak and elm have pleasant leaves

That in the spring-time shoot:

But grim to see is the gallows-tree,

With its alder-bitten root,

And, green or dry, a man must die

Before it bears its fruit!

The loftiest place is the seat of grace

For which all worldlings try:

But who would stand in hempen band

Upon a scaffold high,

And through a murderer's collar take

His last look at the sky?

It is sweet to dance to violins

When Love and Life are fair:

To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes

Is delicate and rare:

But it is not sweet with nimble feet

To dance upon the air!

So with curious eyes and sick surmise

We watched him day by day, And wondered if each one of us Would end the self-same way, For none can tell to what red Hell His sightless soul may stray. At last the 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 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

III

Had caught us in its snare.

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.

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 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 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 rigadoon

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 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 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 knew so well as I:

For he who lives more lives than one

More deaths that 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 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, And Horror stalked before each man,

And Terror crept behind.

The warders strutted up and down,

And watched 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 bones by night,

And the soft flesh by day,

It eats the flesh and bone by turns,

But it eats the heart alway.

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 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 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,

\mathbf{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 gracious moon, And blind the goodly sun: And the do well to hide their Hell, For in it things are done That Son of things 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 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 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!

THE END



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