

The Ballad Of Reading Gaol

By

Oscar Wilde

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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,
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.

The hangman's hands were near.

But why he said so strange a thing
ask: For he to whom a watcher's doom
task, Must set a lock upon his lips,
a mask. No Warder dared to
Is given as his
And make his face

Or else he might be moved, and try
console: And what should Human Pity do
Murderers' Hole? What word of grace in such a place
Could help a brother's soul? To comfort or
Pent up in

With slouch and swing around the ring
Fool's Parade! We did not care: we knew we were
Devil's Own Brigade: And shaven head and feet of lead
Make a merry masquerade. We trod the
The

We tore the tarry rope to shreds
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. With blunt and

We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones,
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. We turned

So still it lay that every day
wave: And we forgot the bitter lot
and knave, Till once, as we tramped in from work,
passed an open grave. Crawled like a weed-clogged
That waits for fool
We

With yawning mouth the yellow hole
thing; The very mud cried out for blood
asphalte ring: And we knew that ere one dawn grew fair
Some prisoner had to swing. Gaped for a living
To the thirsty

Right in we went, with soul intent
and Doom: The hangman, with his little bag,
shuffling through the gloom And each man trembled as he crept
Into his numbered tomb. On Death and Dread
Went

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
groped: 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
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 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 asphalt 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 always.

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 unreprouchful 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,

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.

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!

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 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 The kiss of
Caiaphas.

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
Had caught us in its snare.

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 rigadon Of delicate
turn and twist, And with formal pace and loathsome grace
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went on: Through its giant loom the web of gloom Crept
till each thread was spun: And, as we prayed, we grew afraid

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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
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impotent despair, Like the sound the frightened marshes hear
From some leper in his lair.

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dream, We saw the greasy hempen rope Hooked to the
blackened beam, And heard the prayer the hangman's snare
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None knew so well as I: For he who lives more lives than one
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man: The Chaplain's heart is far too sick, Or his face is
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Opened each listening cell, And down the iron stair we tramped,
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 I never saw sad men who looked With such a wistful
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They should have died instead: He had but killed a thing that
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Silently we went round and round, And through each
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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
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For he has a pall, this wretched man, Such as few men
can claim: Deep down below a prison-yard, Naked, for
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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 always.

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 unrepentant 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, And
outcasts always mourn. V

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