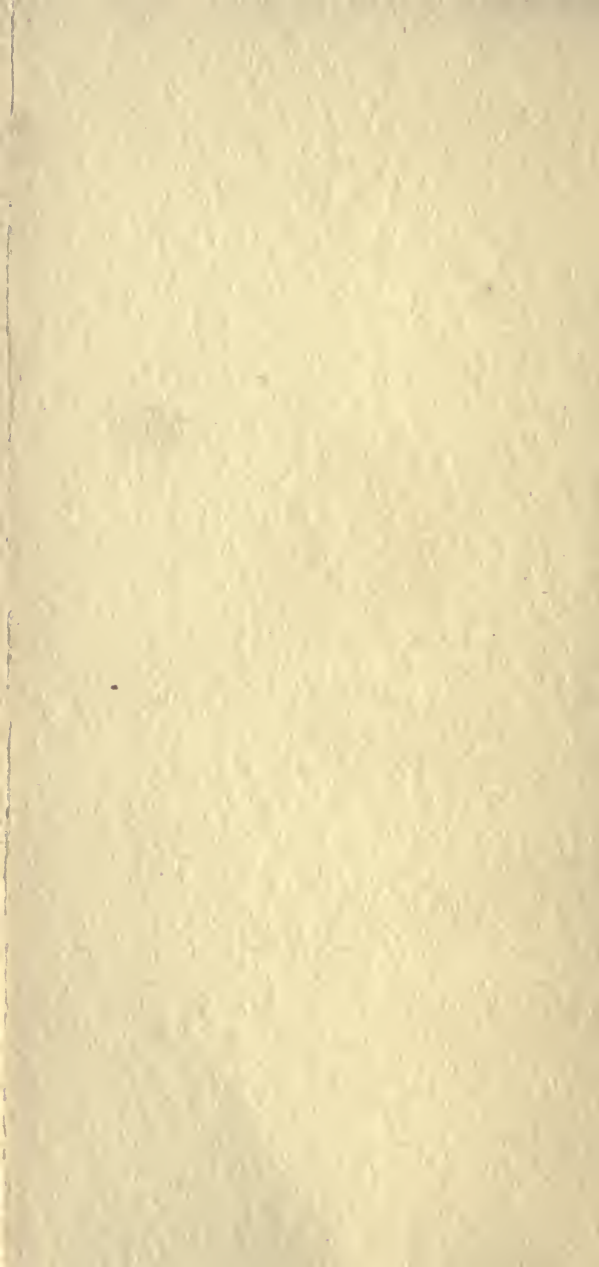


THE BALLAD OF READING
GAOL BY OSCAR WILDE

C. 3. 3.

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1916





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GAOL BY OSCAR WILDE

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PUBLISHED AND PRINTED BY JOS. ISHILL
FERRER COLONY, STELTON, N. J. 1916

IN MEMORIAM

C. T. W.

SOMETIME TROOPER OF THE ROYAL
HORSE GUARDS

OBIIT

H. M. PRISON, READING, BERKSHIRE,

JULY 7, 1896

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FOREWORD.



WHEN ASKED TO WRITE A "FOREWORD" TO A CHARMING EDITION OF "THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL" GOT UP BY Mr. ISHILL OF the Ferrer Colony of Stelton, N.J., I could not but accept though I have said nearly all I wanted to say in my book — "OSCAR WILDE; His Life and Confessions."

"The Ballad of Reading Gaol" is to me incomparably the greatest ballad in all English poetry. It is even more; it is the topmost reach of the human spirit in the whole nineteenth century, and in some sort a flag, or first indication in literature of that re-birth of religion which with the renascence of art will constitute the chief characteristic of the twentieth century. I venture to repeat here what I have said in various ways for nearly twenty years now, that Oscar Wilde's condemnation of prisons and punishment must lead directly to

their abolition. The old bad past will die and Oscar Wilde's ballad helped to kill it.

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 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.

The verses shame all of us for we know their truth. Hospitals and doctors and nurses must take the place of prisons and judges and jailors and the sooner the better. Wilde's verses sound the requiem: they remind us that only he who is without sin has any right to punish. Listen to the words:

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 gray,
And some grow mad, and all grow bad,
And none a word may say.

But I will not part from Oscar Wilde as if it
were the prophet and seer in him that I chiefly

prize: he was one of the "Shining Ones"; and he came to us with lips athirst with love of life and eyes shining with life's joy and delight, and that is how I love to think of him in these gray days of hatred and butchery.

Whenever I meet anyone who knew Oscar Wilde at any period of his life I am sure to hear a new story of him — some humorous or witty thing he said.

The other day I saw a man who had met Wilde in New York after his first lecture tour. He told him he hoped it had been a success and Oscar answered him gravely but with dancing eyes:

"A great success. I had two secretaries, one to answer my letters, the other to send locks of hair. I have had to let them both go, poor fellows, the one is in hospital with writer's cramp, and the other is quite bald."

The other day I lunched with Sir Herbert Tree at the Plaza Hotel. In speaking of my book he said:

"Oscar never came to rehearsal without saying something that set us all laughing. I think I have still got a letter from him written from

Paris in which he asks me to go there assuring me that I shall have a great reception and a tremendous success; though, he says,—

“The evening papers will persist in referring to you as Lord Beerbohm, *autrefois* si bien connu sous le nom d’Irving — for the evening papers are capable of anything because they are written in the daytime — a period at which journalists are almost invariably sober.”

And so with happy laughter on his lips I give my friend once more to the affection of men as he has been given already to their reverence and their pity.

FRANK HARRIS.





HE did not wear the 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 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 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 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.

SIX weeks our guardsman walked the yard,
 In the suit of shabby gray;
 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 the 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.

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
 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
 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 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.

I^N Debtor's 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 the 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 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 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, & 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, & 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 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 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 wen 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 savor 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, 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 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 scough 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 an 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 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 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 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 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,
And 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 day,
It eats the flesh and bone 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 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 mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.

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 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 heart 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.

I N Reading Gaol by Reading town
 There is a pit of shame,
 And in it lies a wretched man
 Eaten by teeth and 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!

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