

# WILDE OSCAR

THE BALLAD  
OF READING  
GAOL

**Oscar Wilde**  
**The Ballad of Reading Gaol**

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*The Ballad of Reading Gaol:*

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# Oscar Wilde

## The Ballad of Reading Gaol

### 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.



## II

Six weeks our guardsman walked the yard,  
In a suit of shabby grey:  
His cricket cap was on his head,  
And his step seemed light and gay,  
But I never saw a man who looked  
So wistfully at the day.

I never saw a man who looked  
With such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue  
Which prisoners call the sky,  
And at every wandering cloud that trailed  
Its raveled fleeces by.

He did not wring his hands, as do  
Those witless men who dare  
To try to rear the changeling Hope  
In the cave of black Despair:  
He only looked upon the sun,  
And drank the morning air.

He did not wring his hands nor 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 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.

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."

### III

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:



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