

THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

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The ballad of Reading gaol by Oscar Wilde

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OSCAR WILDE

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READING GAOL**

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.