**The Ballad of Reading Gaol**

By [Oscar Wilde](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/oscar-wilde)

**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 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 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