

The background of the cover is a photograph of a prison cell. On the left, there is a semi-circular window with vertical metal bars. Through the window, a glimpse of an outdoor area with some buildings and trees is visible. The wall and floor of the cell are made of a rough, textured material, possibly concrete or stone, with a warm, reddish-brown hue. The lighting is soft, coming from the window, creating a somber and confined atmosphere.

# THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

OSCAR WILDE

# **The Ballad of Reading Gaol**

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# **The Ballad of Reading Gaol**

**Oscar Wilde**

# POEMS



## **HÉLAS!**

*To drift with every passion till my soul  
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play ,  
Is it for this that I have given away  
Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control ?  
Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll  
Scrawled over on some boyish holiday  
With idle songs for pipe and virelay ,  
Which do but mar the secret of the whole .  
Surely there was a time I might have trod  
The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance  
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God :  
Is that time dead ? lo ! with a little rod  
I did but touch the honey of romance —  
And must I lose a soul's inheritance ?*

# ELEUTHERIA



## SONNET TO LIBERTY

Not that I love thy children, whose dull eyes  
See nothing save their own unlovely woe,  
Whose minds know nothing, nothing care to know,—  
But that the roar of thy Democracies,  
Thy reigns of Terror, thy great Anarchies,  
Mirror my wildest passions like the sea  
And give my rage a brother—! Liberty!  
For this sake only do thy dissonant cries  
Delight my discreet soul, else might all kings  
By bloody knout or treacherous cannonades  
Rob nations of their rights inviolate  
And I remain unmoved—and yet, and yet,  
These Christs that die upon the barricades,  
God knows it I am with them, in some things.

## AVE IMPERATRIX

Set in this stormy Northern sea,  
Queen of these restless fields of tide,  
England! what shall men say of thee,  
Before whose feet the worlds divide?  
The earth, a brittle globe of glass,  
Lies in the hollow of thy hand,  
And through its heart of crystal pass,  
Like shadows through a twilight land,

The spears of crimson-suited war,  
The long white-crested waves of fight,  
And all the deadly fires which are  
The torches of the lords of Night.  
The yellow leopards, strained and lean,  
The treacherous Russian knows so well,  
With gaping blackened jaws are seen  
Leap through the hail of screaming shell.  
The strong sea-lion of England's wars  
Hath left his sapphire cave of sea,  
To battle with the storm that mars  
The stars of England's chivalry.  
The brazen-throated clarion blows  
Across the Pathan's reedy fen,  
And the high steepes of Indian snows  
Shake to the tread of armed men.  
And many an Afghan chief, who lies  
Beneath his cool pomegranate-trees,  
Clutches his sword in fierce surmise  
When on the mountain-side he sees  
The fleet-foot Marri scout, who comes  
To tell how he hath heard afar  
The measured roll of English drums  
Beat at the gates of Kandahar.  
For southern wind and east wind meet  
Where, girt and crowned by sword and fire,  
England with bare and bloody feet  
Climbs the steep road of wide empire.  
O lonely Himalayan height,  
Grey pillar of the Indian sky,  
Where saw'st thou last in clanging flight  
Our wingèd dogs of Victory?  
The almond-groves of Samarcand,  
Bokhara, where red lilies blow,  
And Oxus, by whose yellow sand  
The grave white-turbaned merchants go:

And on from thence to Ispahan,  
The gilded garden of the sun,  
Whence the long dusty caravan  
Brings cedar wood and vermillion;  
And that dread city of Cabool  
Set at the mountain's scarpèd feet,  
Whose marble tanks are ever full  
With water for the noonday heat:  
Where through the narrow straight Bazaar  
A little maid Circassian  
Is led, a present from the Czar  
Unto some old and bearded khan,—  
Here have our wild war-eagles flown,  
And flapped wide wings in fiery fight;  
But the sad dove, that sits alone  
In England—she hath no delight.  
In vain the laughing girl will lean  
To greet her love with love-lit eyes:  
Down in some treacherous black ravine,  
Clutching his flag, the dead boy lies.  
And many a moon and sun will see  
The lingering wistful children wait  
To climb upon their father's knee;  
And in each house made desolate  
Pale women who have lost their lord  
Will kiss the relics of the slain—  
Some tarnished epaulette—some sword—  
Poor toys to soothe such anguished pain.  
For not in quiet English fields  
Are these, our brothers, lain to rest,  
Where we might deck their broken shields  
With all the flowers the dead love best.  
For some are by the Delhi walls,  
And many in the Afghan land,  
And many where the Ganges falls  
Through seven mouths of shifting sand.

And some in Russian waters lie,  
And others in the seas which are  
The portals to the East, or by  
The wind-swept heights of Trafalgar.  
O wandering graves! O restless sleep!  
O silence of the sunless day!  
O still ravine! O stormy deep!  
Give up your prey! Give up your prey!  
And thou whose wounds are never healed,  
Whose weary race is never won,  
O Cromwell's England! must thou yield  
For every inch of ground a son?  
Go! crown with thorns thy gold-crowned head,  
Change thy glad song to song of pain;  
Wind and wild wave have got thy dead,  
And will not yield them back again.  
Wave and wild wind and foreign shore  
Possess the flower of English land—  
Lips that thy lips shall kiss no more,  
Hands that shall never clasp thy hand.  
What profit now that we have bound  
The whole round world with nets of gold,  
If hidden in our heart is found  
The care that groweth never old?  
What profit that our galleys ride,  
Pine-forest-like, on every main?  
Ruin and wreck are at our side,  
Grim warders of the House of Pain.  
Where are the brave, the strong, the fleet?  
Where is our English chivalry?  
Wild grasses are their burial-sheet,  
And sobbing waves their threnody.  
O loved ones lying far away,  
What word of love can dead lips send!  
O wasted dust! O senseless clay!  
Is this the end! is this the end!



Peace, peace! we wrong the noble dead  
To vex their solemn slumber so;  
Though childless, and with thorn-crowned head,  
Up the steep road must England go,  
Yet when this fiery web is spun,  
Her watchmen shall descry from far  
The young Republic like a sun  
Rise from these crimson seas of war.

## **TO MILTON**

Milton! I think thy spirit hath passed away  
From these white cliffs and high-embattled towers;  
This gorgeous fiery-coloured world of ours  
Seems fallen into ashes dull and grey,  
And the age changed unto a mimic play  
Wherein we waste our else too-crowded hours:  
For all our pomp and pageantry and powers  
We are but fit to delve the common clay,  
Seeing this little isle on which we stand,  
This England, this sea-lion of the sea,  
By ignorant demagogues is held in fee,  
Who love her not: Dear God! is this the land  
Which bare a triple empire in her hand  
When Cromwell spake the word Democracy!

## **LOUIS NAPOLEON**

Eagle of Austerlitz! where were thy wings  
When far away upon a barbarous strand,  
In fight unequal, by an obscure hand,  
Fell the last scion of thy brood of Kings!  
Poor boy! thou shalt not flaunt thy cloak of red,  
Or ride in state through Paris in the van  
Of thy returning legions, but instead  
Thy mother France, free and republican,

Shall on thy dead and crownless forehead place  
The better laurels of a soldier's crown,  
That not dishonoured should thy soul go down  
To tell the mighty Sire of thy race  
That France hath kissed the mouth of Liberty,  
And found it sweeter than his honied bees,  
And that the giant wave Democracy  
Breaks on the shores where Kings lay couched at ease.

# SONNET



## ON THE MASSACRE OF THE CHRISTIANS IN BULGARIA

Christ, dost Thou live indeed? or are Thy bones  
Still straitened in their rock-hewn sepulchre?  
And was Thy Rising only dreamed by her  
Whose love of Thee for all her sin atones?  
For here the air is horrid with men's groans,  
The priests who call upon Thy name are slain,  
Dost Thou not hear the bitter wail of pain  
From those whose children lie upon the stones?  
Come down, O Son of God! incestuous gloom  
Curtains the land, and through the starless night  
Over Thy Cross a Crescent moon I see!  
If Thou in very truth didst burst the tomb  
Come down, O Son of Man! and show Thy might  
Lest Mahomet be crowned instead of Thee!

## QUANTUM MUTATA

There was a time in Europe long ago  
When no man died for freedom anywhere,  
But England's lion leaping from its lair  
Laid hands on the oppressor! it was so  
While England could a great Republic show.  
Witness the men of Piedmont, chiefest care  
Of Cromwell, when with impotent despair  
The Pontiff in his painted portico

Trembled before our stern ambassadors.  
How comes it then that from such high estate  
We have thus fallen, save that Luxury  
With barren merchandise piles up the gate  
Where noble thoughts and deeds should enter by:  
Else might we still be Milton's heritors.

## **LIBERTATIS SACRA FAMES**

Albeit nurtured in democracy,  
And liking best that state republican  
Where every man is Kinglike and no man  
Is crowned above his fellows, yet I see,  
Spite of this modern fret for Liberty,  
Better the rule of One, whom all obey,  
Than to let clamorous demagogues betray  
Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy.  
Wherefore I love them not whose hands profane  
Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street  
For no right cause, beneath whose ignorant reign  
Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour, all things fade,  
Save Treason and the dagger of her trade,  
Or Murder with his silent bloody feet.

## **THEORETIKOS**

This mighty empire hath but feet of clay:  
Of all its ancient chivalry and might  
Our little island is forsaken quite:  
Some enemy hath stolen its crown of bay,  
And from its hills that voice hath passed away  
Which spake of Freedom: O come out of it,  
Come out of it, my Soul, thou art not fit  
For this vile traffic-house, where day by day  
Wisdom and reverence are sold at mart,  
And the rude people rage with ignorant cries

Against an heritage of centuries.

It mars my calm: wherefore in dreams of Art  
And loftiest culture I would stand apart,  
Neither for God, nor for his enemies.

## **THE GARDEN OF EROS**

It is full summer now, the heart of June;

Not yet the sunburnt reapers are astir  
Upon the upland meadow where too soon

Rich autumn time, the season's usurer,  
Will lend his hoarded gold to all the trees,  
And see his treasure scattered by the wild and spendthrift  
breeze.

Too soon indeed! yet here the daffodil,

That love-child of the Spring, has lingered on  
To vex the rose with jealousy, and still

The harebell spreads her azure pavilion,  
And like a strayed and wandering reveller  
Abandoned of its brothers, whom long since June's  
messenger

The missel-thrush has frightened from the glade,

One pale narcissus loiters fearfully  
Close to a shadowy nook, where half afraid

Of their own loveliness some violets lie  
That will not look the gold sun in the face  
For fear of too much splendour,—ah! methinks it is a place  
Which should be trodden by Persephone

When wearied of the flowerless fields of Dis!  
Or danced on by the lads of Arcady!

The hidden secret of eternal bliss  
Known to the Grecian here a man might find,  
Ah! you and I may find it now if Love and Sleep be kind.  
There are the flowers which mourning Herakles

Strewed on the tomb of Hylas, columbine,  
Its white doves all a-flutter where the breeze

Kissed them too harshly, the small celandine,  
That yellow-kirtled chorister of eve,  
And lilac lady's-smock,—but let them bloom alone, and  
leave

Yon spirèd hollyhock red-crocketed

To sway its silent chimes, else must the bee,  
Its little bellringer, go seek instead

Some other pleasaunce; the anemone  
That weeps at daybreak, like a silly girl  
Before her love, and hardly lets the butterflies unfurl  
Their painted wings beside it,—bid it pine

In pale virginity; the winter snow  
Will suit it better than those lips of thine

Whose fires would but scorch it, rather go  
And pluck that amorous flower which blooms alone,  
Fed by the pander wind with dust of kisses not its own.  
The trumpet-mouths of red convolvulus

So dear to maidens, creamy meadow-sweet  
Whiter than Juno's throat and odorous

As all Arabia, hyacinths the feet  
Of Huntress Dian would be loth to mar  
For any dappled fawn,—pluck these, and those fond flowers  
which are

Fairer than what Queen Venus trod upon

Beneath the pines of Ida, eucharis,  
That morning star which does not dread the sun,

And budding marjoram which but to kiss  
Would sweeten Cytheræa's lips and make  
Adonis jealous,—these for thy head,—and for thy girdle  
take

Yon curving spray of purple clematis

Whose gorgeous dye outflames the Tyrian King,  
And foxgloves with their nodding chalices,

But that one narciss which the startled Spring  
Let from her kirtle fall when first she heard  
In her own woods the wild tempestuous song of summer's

bird,

Ah! leave it for a subtle memory

Of those sweet tremulous days of rain and sun,  
When April laughed between her tears to see

The early primrose with shy footsteps run  
From the gnarled oak-tree roots till all the wold,  
Spite of its brown and trampled leaves, grew bright with  
shimmering gold.

Nay, pluck it too, it is not half so sweet

As thou thyself, my soul's idolatry!

And when thou art a-wearied at thy feet

Shall oxlips weave their brightest tapestry,  
For thee the woodbine shall forget its pride  
And veil its tangled whorls, and thou shalt walk on daisies  
pied.

And I will cut a reed by yonder spring

And make the wood-gods jealous, and old Pan  
Wonder what young intruder dares to sing

In these still haunts, where never foot of man  
Should tread at evening, lest he chance to spy  
The marble limbs of Artemis and all her company.

And I will tell thee why the jacinth wears

Such dread embroidery of dolorous moan,  
And why the hapless nightingale forbears

To sing her song at noon, but weeps alone  
When the fleet swallow sleeps, and rich men feast,  
And why the laurel trembles when she sees the lightening  
east.

And I will sing how sad Proserpina

Unto a grave and gloomy Lord was wed,  
And lure the silver-breasted Helena

Back from the lotus meadows of the dead,  
So shalt thou see that awful loveliness  
For which two mighty Hosts met fearfully in war's abyss!  
And then I'll pipe to thee that Grecian tale

How Cynthia loves the lad Endymion,

And hidden in a grey and misty veil

Hies to the cliffs of Latmos once the Sun  
Leaps from his ocean bed in fruitless chase  
Of those pale flying feet which fade away in his embrace.  
And if my flute can breathe sweet melody,

We may behold Her face who long ago  
Dwelt among men by the Ægean sea,

And whose sad house with pillaged portico  
And friezeless wall and columns toppled down  
Looms o'er the ruins of that fair and violet cinctured town.  
Spirit of Beauty! tarry still awhile,

They are not dead, thine ancient votaries;  
Some few there are to whom thy radiant smile

Is better than a thousand victories,  
Though all the nobly slain of Waterloo  
Rise up in wrath against them! tarry still, there are a few  
Who for thy sake would give their manlihood

And consecrate their being; I at least  
Have done so, made thy lips my daily food,

And in thy temples found a goodlier feast  
Than this starved age can give me, spite of all  
Its new-found creeds so sceptical and so dogmatical.  
Here not Cephissos, not Ilissos flows,

The woods of white Colonos are not here,  
On our bleak hills the olive never blows,

No simple priest conducts his lowing steer  
Up the steep marble way, nor through the town  
Do laughing maidens bear to thee the crocus-flowered  
gown.

Yet tarry! for the boy who loved thee best,

Whose very name should be a memory  
To make thee linger, sleeps in silent rest

Beneath the Roman walls, and melody  
Still mourns her sweetest lyre; none can play  
The lute of Adonais: with his lips Song passed away.  
Nay, when Keats died the Muses still had left



One silver voice to sing his threnody,  
But ah! too soon of it we were bereft  
When on that riven night and stormy sea  
Panthea claimed her singer as her own,  
And slew the mouth that praised her; since which time we  
walk alone,  
Save for that fiery heart, that morning star  
Of re-arisen England, whose clear eye  
Saw from our tottering throne and waste of war  
The grand Greek limbs of young Democracy  
Rise mightily like Hesperus and bring  
The great Republic! him at least thy love hath taught to  
sing,  
And he hath been with thee at Thessaly,  
And seen white Atalanta fleet of foot  
In passionless and fierce virginity  
Hunting the tuskèd boar, his honied lute  
Hath pierced the cavern of the hollow hill,  
And Venus laughs to know one knee will bow before her  
still.  
And he hath kissed the lips of Proserpine,  
And sung the Galilæan's requiem,  
That wounded forehead dashed with blood and wine  
He hath discrowned, the Ancient Gods in him  
Have found their last, most ardent worshipper,  
And the new Sign grows grey and dim before its conqueror.  
Spirit of Beauty! tarry with us still,  
It is not quenched the torch of poesy,  
The star that shook above the Eastern hill  
Holds unassailed its argent armoury  
From all the gathering gloom and fretful fight—  
O tarry with us still! for through the long and common  
night,  
Morris, our sweet and simple Chaucer's child,  
Dear heritor of Spenser's tuneful reed,  
With soft and sylvan pipe has oft beguiled