

## Come Ye That Are Weary

*Oh Friend of all Friends who rules earth and sea,  
 Look down with a pitying eye upon me;  
 Thou'll forgive my transgressions, says the book that is best—  
 Come ye that are weary, and I'll give you rest.*

—Hilda Blake, 'My Downfall'

Liberal reformers did have rather graphic reasons to feel disenchanted with the death penalty. Prior to the 1870s the gallows, that destination of so many Victorian novels, was a scene of public strangulation, the victim's bound legs kicking as he or she struggled for air. Usually, the victim choked to death over a period of minutes. Contrary to popular belief, the introduction of the Newgate drop in 1783 and calculations of ratios between body weight and drop did not make hanging any less gruesome or less prone to misadventure. In 1894, A.S. Taylor said that 'in hanging . . . death takes place either by asphyxia or apoplexy, or by both.' The long drop, which was designed to break the spinal cord, sometimes failed to achieve its purpose, and the victim could remain conscious for minutes while the heart still beat. If the drop was too long, the victim could be decapitated. Even in 'successful' executions, the corpse always expressed the nature of the experience:

lividity and swelling of the face, especially of the ears and lips, which appear distorted: the eyelids swollen, and a blueish colour; the eyes red, projecting forwards, and sometimes partially forced out of their cavities . . . a bloody froth or frothy mucus sometimes