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1910

SABLE AND  
PURPLE

WILLIAM WATSON



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SABLE AND PURPLE

*By the Same Author*

POEMS

NEW POEMS

SELECTED POEMS



# SABLE AND PURPLE

WITH OTHER POEMS

BY

WILLIAM WATSON



NEW YORK  
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SABLE AND PURPLE



## SABLE AND PURPLE

MAY 1910

### I

I SING not Death. Death is too great a thing  
For me to dare to sing.  
I chant the human goodness, human worth,  
Which are not lost, but sweeten still the Earth ;  
The things that flee not with the upyielded  
breath,  
But, housed in sanctuary of simple hearts,  
Live undethroned when Death  
Comes to the chamber of a mighty King,  
And sheds abroad the silence of his wing,  
Then shakes his raven plumage, and departs.

## SABLE AND PURPLE

### II

HONOUR the happy dead with sober praise,  
Who living would have scorned the fulsome  
    phrase,  
Meet for the languorous Orient's jewelled ear.  
This was the English King, that loved the English  
    ways :

A man not too remote, or too august,  
For other mortal children of the dust  
To know and to draw near.  
Born with a nature that demanded joy,  
He took full draughts of life, nor did the vintage  
    cloy ;  
But when she passed from vision, who so long  
Had sat aloft — alone —  
On the steep heights of an Imperial throne,  
Then rose he large and strong,  
Then spake his voice with new and grander tone,  
Then, called to rule the State



## SABLE AND PURPLE

Which he had only served,  
He saw clear Duty plain, nor from that highway  
    swerved,  
And, unappalled by his majestic fate,  
Pretended not to greatness, yet was great.

# SABLE AND PURPLE

## III

SEA-LOVER, and sea-rover, throned henceforth  
Amid the paths and passes of the sea ;  
You that have sailed, out of our stormy North,  
And have not sailed in vain,  
To all the golden shores where now You reign,  
Through every ocean gate whereof You keep the  
key :

O may your power and your dominion stand  
Fixt on what things soever make Life fair,  
And on what things soever make men free,  
In duteous love of ordered liberty :  
So shall your praise be blown from strand to  
strand.

Your Father lies among the Kings his kin,  
Pillowed on yonder couch of silence, where  
No wandering echo of the world's loud blare  
Profanes the awesome air.

The age that bore us is entombèd there !  
With You the younger time is eager to begin.  
Let nations see, beneath your prospering hand,

## SABLE AND PURPLE

An Empire mighty in arms, its fleets and hosts  
Keeping far vigil round your hundred coasts —  
An Empire mighty in arms, but therewithal  
Nourished in mind, with noble thoughts made  
rich,

And panoplied in knowledge, lacking which  
The proudest fortress is but feebly manned  
And ever trembles to its thunderous fall.

And now to You — to Her who at your side  
Henceforward shall divide

The all but dreadful glory of a crown —

Be honour and felicity and renown !

And may the inscrutable years,

That claim from every man their toll of tears,

Weave for your brows a wreath that shall not  
fade —

A chaplet and a crown divinely made

Out of your people's love, your people's trust ;

For wanting these all else were but as dust

In that great balance wherein Kings are weighed.



KING ALFRED



## KING ALFRED

*Alfred the Great, in his Palace at Winchester,  
drawing near to his last days, talks with  
Asser the Welshman.*

ALFRED

ASSER, good bishop and well-proven friend,  
Thou find'st me changed and stricken low by mine  
Infirmities; not much of warrior left;  
Here feebly sitting, pierced with many nails  
Of pain. And in my flesh there is a voice  
That telleth me my days henceforth are few.

ASSER

Thou art not old.

ALFRED

No son of Ethelwulf  
Grows old. Nor have I held it to be aught  
A King should murmur at, if life burn down

## KING ALFRED

Untimely, whether amid toilful peace  
Or shaken with the blast and peal of war.  
But to go hence, unsure if what I wrought  
And moulded be more lasting than the abode  
Yon swallow builds, out of a little clay,  
And lines with feathers !

ASSER

King, thou hast set good trees  
In a good soil, where now with fruit they bless  
Thy planting ——

ALFRED

And anon there shall return  
The Northern storm that I have stayed awhile,  
And shatter my young woods, ev'n as the old.

ASSER

Think not so ill of ages yet to be !  
The wicked may again wax proud, but men's  
Devices stand not, against God's resolves ;  
And that which He hath helped the just to build,  
Surely He will not help the unjust to raze.



## KING ALFRED

Leave now to Him the Shall-be : the Hath-been,  
Behold it comely to look back upon —  
A tale of enemies mightily withstood,  
And dangers greatly wrestled with and thrown ;  
A tale told at the hearth on winter eves,  
And dear to earl and churl and thane and thrall  
For ever.

### ALFRED

Friend, I thank thee for thy word.  
It may be that my thoughts are not more hale  
Than this worn body. And most unmeet it were,  
If I, that have from God riches and power,  
Gave not at last, unto my Over-King,  
Aught but a joyless heart. Nay, go not yet.  
Here sit thou, where this window looketh out  
Upon the quiet world in which I end,  
Who lacked not stir of camps and din of arms.  
Yonder my city twinkles in the sun,  
Beneath the down : ev'n she whom those dim  
minds  
In shining mail, the heathen Kings, did lay  
In ashes, — there she riseth, and the light  
Gildeth her towers. And here we have sat — how  
oft ! —

## KING ALFRED

And talked of happy or of woful things  
That have befall'n my people.

ASSER

But to-day,  
Shall we not rather count the woful things  
As tares and darnel sown among the wheat, —  
Nay, as the ills that being outlived are good, —  
And talk henceforth of happy things alone?  
Such as that famous pleasantry of thine,  
When Hasting with his ships lay in the Lea,  
And thou did'st lure the stream out of his  
course —

ALFRED

Out of his ancient bed!

ASSER

His well-loved bed!

ALFRED

And brought him through strange byways to the  
Thames —

## KING ALFRED

ASSER

And left the Northman's navy high and dry.

ALFRED

Yea, bishop, 't was a goodly jest. But Thought  
Needeth no spur to bid him carry me  
Far unto rearward of the time whereof  
Thou speakest ; and when sleep is rife with dreams,  
Oft in old warfare am I tossed anew.

Then shapes come wandering from my battlefields,  
And ruthless Kings sail out of Heathendom,  
Whose keels were the swift ploughshares of the  
sea,

Who tilled not earth, save with the harrow of  
war.

Again the Dane meets me in truce, again  
Swears on his arms, and on the holy ring  
Makes covenant, pledging him to go in peace  
From out my realm that he so sore had bruised,  
And I again am fooled and he forsworn.  
And now I lurk in thickets, fade from sight  
In the rank steaming marsh, am lost to men  
Amid the tusks and antlers of the brake,  
A hunted hunter, nameless, on the isle  
Of hiding ; and there cometh thither, — borne,

## KING ALFRED

It well might seem, on some lone heron's  
wing, —

Word of the gladsome slaying of Ubba, amidst  
His hungry sea-wolves, nigh the hungry sea  
That clangs on northern Devon; and there falls  
Into our hands that thing of sorcery, made  
In likeness of their fabled Odin's bird,  
The Raven War-flag, woven to the sound  
Of old enchantments in one Christless noon  
By the three daughters born to Lodbrok, him  
Of thrice dread name and doom, whom snakes  
devoured.

Yea, and at times, swept in a hurtling dream,  
Again I smite the host at Ethandune,  
And drive them flying before me to their hold,  
With crash of battle-axe through scalp and skull,  
And hewing of great limbs as boughs lopped off  
When thunder hurls him on the cringing weald.

### ASSER

Too much the memory stirs thy frame.

### ALFRED

And yet  
The Northman's joy in battle for battle's sake

## KING ALFRED

Was never mine! Nor was I of that stuff  
The tamers and subduers of the earth  
Are made of. I had turned with a sick soul  
From their red havoc; from things and deeds  
whereat

Warriors like Alexander when he trode  
On Persia, boasting him begotten of Jove, —  
Or Genseric — or the great Hamilcar's sons —  
Or Shalmaneser and Sargon in their pride, —  
Would with a smile have gazed: the sack of  
towns;

The spear thrust through the tender breast of  
babes;

And deeds I name not, but which they that sailed  
Against me — as the gleeman singeth it,  
Over the gannet's bath and whale's domain —  
Held lighter than the moulted feather a gull  
Gives to the wind, and as the things of nought  
That in their sum were glory and conqueror's  
fame.

I ever looked beyond the sword-mown field  
To other harvest. For this is my realm,  
Which I but hold in fief and vassalage  
From One more mighty, of more ancient throne,  
A King's most King-like, most King-worthy toil  
Begins, not ends, when he hath builded him

## KING ALFRED

A bulwark 'gainst his foes. Then comes the  
task  
Of rearing for his people such a house  
That they within, for fiery love of it,  
Shall leap as a lion if enemy threat their door.  
And being athirst to see this realm of mine,  
This house and mansion that my hands have  
reared,  
Full of fair things, I sent to richer lands  
For what mine own was poor in, bearing thence  
Much honourable booty, and chief of all,  
Their wisdom, as set forth in script and scroll ;  
With divers other noble spoils of peace.  
For I did grieve to think how these rough coasts,  
That all too often have let in the foe,  
Should be so apt at keeping out the friend,  
Him that hath gifts for us, right worthy word  
And highborn thought ; or skill to raise aloft  
Minsters that usher into heaven the mind ;  
Or music, of such sort that while it peals  
In a man's breast, no baseness there can live.  
And greatly had it pleased me to have seen  
My people hotter in the love of song,  
And of that sweetest craft of song-making ;  
For they are come of them that dearly prized  
The word of the skilled makers, those old chants

## KING ALFRED

Our pagan fathers graved in runes, on what  
They in their darkness held the sacred beech.  
Perhaps another age shall more abound  
In song-fruit, when perhaps another King  
Shall have less lust of it than I. Howbeit,  
I leave my people not unfed in mind,  
Whom pinched I found, and lean ; and I bequeath  
A land healed of her wounds : where pillage  
was,  
Is tillage, and the fruit is sweet, the flower  
Is fair. But pray thou that there come not back  
The trampler of my orchard and my field,  
To fill the wheel-tracks of his wain with blood.

## ASSER

King, in my land, beyond the Severn sea,  
They tell of one, a soothsayer, that lived,  
As I conceive, betwixt that time when Rome  
Called hence the legions, and the days when sat  
Theodoric at Ravenna with his Goths ;  
And of this sage, or wizard, whom they name  
Merlin, 't is written that he prophesied  
Of thee — “ *The north wind shall against him rise,  
And blight his flowers, the west wind's fosterlings.* ”  
The dark word was fulfilled : the north wind came

## KING ALFRED

And snatched away thy blooms. Now is he  
stayed ;

Now hast thou set a bound to the north wind.  
Comfort thee, then, and be of a glad heart,  
For He is on thy side who was of old  
On Hezekiah's, when Sennacherib's host  
With thunder of chariots was come up against  
Judah, and by the mouth of Amoz' son  
The Lord spake, saying, " I will put My hook  
In his nostrils, and My bridle in his lips,  
And I will turn him back by the way he came."

[*A minstrel is heard singing.*]

Forth unto warfare  
Rode they and strode they,  
Lordly and low-born,  
Etheling and hind.

There, by the oakwood,  
Hewed they the heathen  
The north wind's brood, whose  
Nest was the sea.

There, as a reed-bed  
In west wind rustling,  
Shivered the fear-swept  
Hearts of the foe.



## KING ALFRED

Now were their wounded  
Weary and war-sad,  
Kings with their kindred  
From battle-stead borne.

Now were their spear-men  
Taken and spared not :  
Death-sickle reaped them :  
Swift fell the swathes.

Lagged not the ravens,  
Flying to flesh-fare :  
Blithe came the war-kites,  
Glad the grey wolves.

Drinkless and dry-lipped  
Had earth been at dayspring :  
Slaughter-cup slaked her,  
Long ere the eve.

## ALFRED

There, Asser, sang the sword. Nor is it for me,  
Who all my life have known no peace but such  
As ever listens for the step of war,  
To call that voice unholy. Hatred, too,  
And rage, are paths God leads us by, to ends

## KING ALFRED

We understand not. . . . But the day burns  
low,  
And the light fadeth upon turret and spire.  
Bidest thou here to-morrow?

ASSER

I depart  
To Sherborne, thy fair town that climbs about  
Its minster, where my pastoral staff now lacks  
The shepherd. There thy brother Ethelbert  
Awaiteth resurrection with the just.

ALFRED

There, also, lieth another of my house —

ASSER

Less worthy to have been of Egbert's seed.

ALFRED

His sins were great; but let him rest in  
peace . . .  
It may be we shall talk not here again.

# KING ALFRED

ASSER

It may be. For the time is not far off—  
Wherefore should I dissemble at this hour? —  
When from the prison of the body thou  
Shalt be delivered; and shalt give to earth  
That which from earth thou hadst; and yield to  
God  
That which thou hadst indeed from God alone.

ALFRED

Friend, thou didst ever serve me faithfully :  
So serve thou him that ruleth when I cease,  
Edward my son.

*[A strange light suffuses the chamber. Alfred  
sinks on his knees.]*

Behold, I see him great  
And mighty, at his feet submitted thrones . . .  
And after him another mightier yet . . .  
And then, dim forms at strife . . . beyond them,  
crown  
And crozier warring . . . and deeds of hell . . .  
and now

## KING ALFRED

Glory and power new-stablished . . . and again  
Blind welter, and the brood of dire misrule . . .  
A groaning people, a sundering realm. . . Ah,  
    Lord  
Of heaven ! in mercy show Thou me no more.

IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS



# IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

TO MY WIFE

## I

LET them not dream that they have known the  
ocean

Who have but seen him where his locks are spread  
'Neath purple cliffs, on curving beaches golden ;

Who have but wandered where his spume is shed  
On those dear Isles where thou and I were bred,

Far Britain, and far Ierne ; and who there,

Dallying about his porch, have but beholden

The fringes of his power, and skirts of his com-  
motion,

And culled his voiceful shells, and plucked his  
ravelled hair.

# IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

## II

BELOVED! the life of one brief moon hath sped,  
No more than one brief moon, since thou and I  
To chilly England waved a warm good-bye.  
On glooming tides the great ship rode,  
The great ship with her great live load.  
The famous galleons of old Spain,  
The prows that were King Philip's pride,  
Had seemed, against her mighty side,  
Things of derision and disdain.  
Out from Mersey's flashing mouth,  
In a night of cloud and dolorous rain,  
Darkly, darkly bore she south.  
In a morn of rising wind and wave  
She rounded the isle of Old Unrest,  
And out into open Atlantic drave,  
Till all the rage of all the wild south-west  
Unmasked its thundering batteries 'gainst her  
populous breast.



# IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

## III

MANY have sung of the terrors of Storm ;  
I will make me a song of its beauty, its graces of  
hue and form ;

A song of the loveliness gotten of Power,  
Born of Rage in her blackest hour,  
When never a wave repeats another,  
But each is unlike his own twin brother,  
Each is himself from base to crown,  
Himself alone as he clammers up,  
Himself alone as he crashes down ; —

When the whole sky drinks of the sea's mad cup,  
And the ship is thrilled to her quivering core,  
But amidst her pitching, amidst her rolling,  
Amidst the clangour and boom and roar,  
Is a Spirit of Beauty all-controlling !  
For here in the thick of the blinding weather  
The great waves gather themselves together,  
Shake out their creases, compose their folds,  
As if each one knew that an eye beholds.  
And look ! there rises a shape of wonder,

## IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

A moving menace, a mount of gloom,  
But the moment ere he breaks asunder  
His forehead flames into sudden bloom,  
A burning rapture of nameless green,  
That never on earth or in heaven was seen,  
Never but where the midmost ocean  
Greets and embraces the tempest in primal divine  
emotion.

And down in a vale of the sea, between  
Two roaring hills, is a wide smooth space,  
Where the foam that blanches the ocean's face  
Is woven in likeness of filmiest lace,  
Delicate, intricate, fairy-fine,  
Wrought by the master of pure design,  
Storm, the matchless artist, and lord of colour  
and line.

IV

AND what of the ship, the great brave vessel,  
Buffeted, howled at, patient, dumb,  
Built to withstand, and manned to wrestle,  
Fashioned to strive and to overcome?  
She slackens her pace, her athlete speed,  
Like a bird that checks his ardent pinion;  
She husbands her strength for the day of her  
    need,  
But she thrusts right on through her salt  
    dominion;  
She staggers to port, she reels to starboard,  
But weathers the storm and lives it down;  
And one chill morning beholds her harboured  
Under the lee of the great chill town.

## V

NEW YORK! a city like a chessboard made,  
Whereon the multitudinous pawns are swayed  
Neither by Knight nor puissant Queen,  
And bow not unto Castle or King,  
Yet hither and thither are moved as though they  
obeyed,  
Half loath, some power half seen,  
Some huge, voracious, hundred-headed thing,  
Armed with a million tentacles, whereby  
He hooks and holds his victims till they die.  
There did we tarry, dearest! But one day  
There came on us a longing to go forth,  
No matter whither, so 't were far away!  
Then from the snarl and bite of the sharp North  
To Florida's sweet orange-flaming shore,  
Through forests and savannahs vast we sped,  
And found a sea so fair and strange, we said —  
“ We have but dreamed of splendour heretofore.”  
For all the sky-line was an emerald ring  
Of such deep glow as baulks imagining;

## IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

And all the tide within it, streak on streak,  
Was one extravagant revel and freak  
Of amber and amethyst, azure and smouldering  
red,  
With every hue that is the child of these  
Dancing at noon on the fantastic seas.

VI

So for a little while we roamed  
 In a golden, gorgeous land o'erdomed  
 With throbbing and impassioned skies ;  
 A palmy land of dusky faces  
 Meek before the mastering races —  
 Ebony faces and ivory teeth,  
 And liquid, kindly, patient eyes,  
 With laughter lurking underneath.  
 Then we took ship and landed here  
 In old Havana. The old year,  
 Sinking fast, hath not yet died,  
 And here we have spent our Christmastide,  
 And once in a while can just remember  
 It is not August, but December.  
 And here last night (Canst thou believe  
 That five days hence 'twill be New Year's  
     Eve?)  
 Here, in this Yule of flaming weather,  
 Hotter than solstice on English heather,  
 There broke from out the unfathomed sky

## IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

Lightning such as thou and I  
Never beheld unsheathed in the fervour of mid-  
July.

All night long, with many an elvish antic,  
Violet fire lit up the dazzled land ;  
All this morn the weight of all the Atlantic  
Fell in thunder on the coral strand.

Come — for not yet subsides the mighty roar :  
Come — the whole sea invites us to the shore.

VII

AH, dear one! can it be  
 That thou and I have eaten of that herb  
 Whereof 't is writ that whosoever tastes  
 Can ne'er again his lust of wandering curb,  
 But day and night he hastes  
 From sea to land, and on from land to sea,  
 With vain desires that beckon and perturb  
 His heart unrestingly?  
 Nay, we have roved just far enough to know  
 That we possess too little wealth to rove,  
 Being poor in lucre, though  
 Exceeding rich in love.  
 Yet travel hath taught us lessons we scarce had  
     learned in repose;  
 Our friends have been proven our friends, and  
     our foes have been proven our foes.  
 And having seen and pondered much, some  
     visions we surrender,  
 And return a little weary, for a little taste of ease,



## IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

From tempest and from hurricane, and a land of  
light and splendour,  
And the odorous thrones of summer in the midst  
of the seas.

VEDADO, HAVANA, CUBA, December 1909

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THE THREATENED TOWERS



## THE THREATENED TOWERS

WE built them not of lath and mud,  
We based them not on sand.  
A bulwark 'gainst the fitful flood,  
To-day their ramparts stand.

Think you we reared them long ago  
For others to decree  
Their far-resounding overthrow  
Into the unknown sea ?

We shall not pull the fabric down  
By rude command of those  
Who hold as nought this realm's renown,  
And vaunt themselves our foes.

Nay, if we did in truth desire  
That what we built should fall,  
Were *theirs* the voice to bid us fire  
The roof, and mine the wall ?

## THE THREATENED TOWERS

Let the wild wave, that would submerge  
All ancient things and great,  
With hoarse and ineffectual surge  
Break on the towers of State.

The ages, pondering at their toil,  
Welded this stone and lime,  
And no rash hands of haste shall foil  
The slow, wise thoughts of Time.

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