

The Purple East

By

William Watson



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William Lukens Shoemaker

The Purple East

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A Series of Sonnets on England's
Desertion of Armenia

BY
WILLIAM WATSON



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Preface

A WORD as to the origin of these Sonnets may perhaps be expedient. The first of them, "The Turk in Armenia," was published as long ago as March 2, 1895, during the Premiership of Lord Rosebery; was subsequently included in the Author's latest volume of verse; and is here reprinted with some alteration. The occasion of the one entitled "Repudiated Responsibility" was a recent public utterance of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. This, and its companion pieces, with the exception of three, which now see the light for the first time, were contributed in rapid succession to the *Westminster Gazette*, during December and January, 1895-6; several have since undergone considerable revision. After the publication of the first

seven there appeared a reply, from the pen of the present Poet Laureate, in the shape of three sonnets, entitled a "A Vindication of England," and addressed to "To the Author of 'The Purple East.'" Their substance may with perfect truth and fairness be recapitulated in a few words of prose. The Poet Laureate assured me— Firstly, that whosoever in any circumstances arraigns this country for anything that she may do or leave undone, thereby covers himself with shame; secondly, that although the continued torture, rape, and massacre of a Christian people under the eyes of a Christian continent may be a lamentable thing, it is best to be patient, seeing that the patience of God Himself can never be exhausted; and thirdly, that if I were but with him in his pretty country-house, were but comfortably seated "by the yule-log's blaze," and joining with him in seasonable conviviality, the enigmas of Providence and the whole mystery of things would presently

become transparent to me, and more especially after "drinking to England," I should be enabled to understand that "she bides her hour behind the bastioned brine." To the Laureate's amiable effusion, with its conventional patriotism and its absolute penury of argument, pages 31-4 of this booklet are of the nature of a reply.

Passing to less personal issues, I myself have but little hope that any mere written word can bear visible fruit, while the spiritual frost lies so hard upon the land as at this time. I am indeed loth to go so far as the great Painter who suffers my pen to be ennobled by temporary association with his pencil, and who has expressed to me his belief that "nothing at this moment is possible except a national mourning." With profound veneration for the genius that has so often transferred the poet's emotion and the mystic's vision in the splendours of colour and form, I must hope that herein at least he is wrong; that something besides

lamentation alone is even yet possible: though I, too, feel that *without* it—without penitent tears for our tragic errors as the first condition of effort—nothing that is worth the doing can be done.

In the sphere of practical action, if, notwithstanding our paramount naval power, notwithstanding the moral support, and surely, in such a cause, and in eventual emergency, the material support of all the nobler elements of Anglo-Saxon civilisation throughout the world, the position of England relatively to the European imbroglio and to her own Egyptian, South African, and American complications be really such as to render hopeless any Crusade of this Empire against that Vicegerency of Hell which is acquiesced in as the Ottoman Government, then let us do what many earnest-minded Englishmen, even among those who are no enthusiastic friends of Russia, are urging as the only possible solution of a problem that cries aloud, with the tongues of thrice a hundred

thousand martyrs, to be solved. If in very truth England herself cannot move—if she must perforce sit like the victim of the wand of Comus, her nerves

“Chained up in alabaster,
And she a statue, or as Daphne was,
Root-bound, that fled Apollo”—

then let her at least abandon her selfish obstruction of those who can move and who would. And if an appeal to the national conscience is vain, let us fall back for a moment upon lower ethical considerations, and ask ourselves whether in the end it will even *advantage* us to have postponed the rescue of a dying people to our own alleged interests in the maintenance of a diabolical tyranny. To have been the accessory to a tremendous crime, whether before or after the fact, whether by direct complicity or by the passive connivance of non-intervention where effective intervention was possible, will not permanently aid a nation, any more than it would aid an individual to go about

the business of life with that inmost self-approval which can afford to ignore the adverse judgments of the half-informed, and which is more potent than any plaudits to sustain and secretly inspire. Wanting that silent ratification, unfortified by that inward sanction, a nation must needs lose vigour and assurance. Her walk grows feverish, and her rejoicings troubled, for a shadowy accuser waylays her footsteps, and haunts the background of her feasts.

WILLIAM WATSON.

The Purple East

The Turk in Armenia

WHAT profits it, O England, to prevail
In camp and mart and council,
and bestrew

With argosies thy oceans, and renew
With tribute levied on each golden gale
Thy treasuries, if thou canst hear the wail
Of women martyred by the turbaned crew
Whose tenderest mercy was the sword
that slew,

And lift no hand to wield the purging
flail ?

We deemed of old thou held'st a charge
from Him

Who watches girdled by His seraphim,

To smite the wronger with thy destined
rod.

Wait'st thou His sign? Enough, the un-
answered cry

Of virgin souls for vengeance, and on
high

The gathering blackness of the frown of
God!

Craven England

NEVER, O craven England, nevermore
Prate thou of generous effort, right-
eous aim!

Betrayer of a people, know thy shame
Summer hath passed, and Autumn's thresh-
ing floor

Been winnowed; Winter at Armenia's door
Snarls like a wolf; and still the sword
and flame

Sleep not; *thou only* sleepest; and the same
Cry unto heaven ascends as heretofore;
The guiltless perish, and no man regards;
And sunk in ease, and lost to noble pride,
Stirred by no clarion blowing loud and
wide,

Thy sons forgot what Truth and Honour
meant,
And, day by day, to sit among the shards
Of broken faith are miserably content.

The Price of Prestige

YOU in high places; you that drive the
steeds

Of empire; you that say unto our hosts,
"Go thither," and they go; and from our
coasts

Bid sail the squadrons, and they sail, their
deeds

Shaking the world: lo! from a land that
pleads

For mercy where no mercy is, the ghosts
Look in upon you faltering at your posts—
Upbraid you parleying while a people bleeds
To death. What stays the thunder in
your hand?

A fear for England? Can her pillared
fame

Only on faith forsworn securely stand,
On faith forsworn that murders babes and
men?

Are such the terms of Glory's tenure?
Then

Fall her accursed greatness, in God's name!

How Long?

HEAPED in their ghastly graves they
lie, the breeze

Sickening o'er fields where others vainly
wait

For burial: and the butchers keep high
state

In silken palaces of perfumed ease.

The panther of the desert, matched with
these,

Is pitiful; beside their lust and hate,

Fire and the plague-wind are compassionate,

And soft the deadliest fangs of ravening
seas.

How long shall they be borne? Is not
the cup

Of crime yet full? Doth devildom still
lack

Some consummating crown, that we hold
back

The scourge, and in Christ's borders give
them room? ,

How long shall they be borne, O Eng-
land? Up

Tempest of God, and sweep them to their
doom!

Repudiated Responsibility

I HAD not thought to hear it voiced so
plain,

Uttered so forthright, on their lips who steer
This nation's course: I had not thought to
hear

That word re-echoed by an English thane,
Guilt's maiden speech when first a man
lay slain,

"Am I my brother's keeper?" Yet full
near

It sounded, and the syllables rang clear
As the immortal rhetoric of Cain.

"Wherefore should *we*, sirs, more than
they—or they—
Unto these helpless reach a hand to save?"

24 Repudiated Responsibility

An English thane, in this our English air,
Speaking for England? Then indeed her
 day

Slopes to its twilight, and for Honour there
Is needed but a requiem, and a grave.

England to America

O TOWERING Daughter, Titan of the
West,

Behind a thousand leagues of foam secure;
Thou toward whom our inmost heart is pure
Of ill intent; although thou threatenest
With most unfilial hand thy mother's breast,
Not for one breathing-space may Earth
endure

The thought of War's intolerable cure
For such vague pains as vex to-day thy
rest!

But if thou hast more strength than thou
canst spend
In tasks of Peace, and find'st her yoke
too tame,

Help us to smite the cruel, to befriend
The succourless, and put the false to shame.
So shall the ages laud thee, and thy name
Be lovely among nations to the end.

A Birthday

IT is the birthday of the Prince of Peace:
Full long ago He lay with steeds in
stall,

And universal Nature heard through all
Her borders that the reign of Pan must
cease.

The fatness of the land, the earth's increase,
Cumbers the board; the holly hangs in
hall;

Somewhat of her abundance Wealth lets
fall;

It is the birthday of the Prince of Peace.
The dead rot by the wayside; the unblest
Who live, in caves and desert mountains
lurk

Trembling, his foldless flock, shorn of their
fleece.

Women in travail, babes that suck the
breast,

Are spared not. Famine hurries to her
work,

It is the birthday of the Prince of Peace.

The Tired Lion

SPEAK once again, with that great note
of thine,

Hero withdrawn from Senates and their
sound

Unto thy home by Cambria's northern
bound,

Speak once again, and wake a world supine.
Not always, not in all things, was it mine
To follow where thou led'st: but who hath
found

Another man so shod with fire, so crowned
With thunder, and so armed with wrath
divine?

Lift up thy voice once more! The nation's
heart

Is cold as Anatolia's mountain snows.

Oh, from these alien paths of base repose

Call back thy England, ere thou too de-
part—

Ere, on some secret mission, thou too start

With silent footsteps, whither no man
knows.

The Bard-in-Waiting

TREACHERY'S apologist, whose numbers rung

But yesterday, remonstrant in my ear;
Thou to whom England seems a mistress dear,

Insatiable of honey from thy tongue:
Because I crouch not fawning slaves among,
How is my service proved the less sincere?
Have not I also deemed her without peer?
Her beauty have not I too seen and sung?
But for the love I bore her lofty ways,
What were to me her stumblings and her slips?

And lovely is she still, her maiden lips

Pressed to the lips whose foam around her
plays!

But on her brow's benignant star whose rays
Lit them that sat in darkness, lo! the
eclipse.

Leisured Justice

“SHE bides her hour.” And must I
then believe

That when the day of peril is o'erpast,
She who was great because so oft she cast
All thought of peril to the waves that heave
Against her feet, shall greatly undeceive
Her purblind son who dreamed she shrank
aghast

From Duty's signal, and shall act at last,
When there is naught remaining to re-
trieve?

At last! when the last altar is defiled,
And there are no more maidens to de-
flower—

When the last mother folds with famished
arms

To her dead bosom her last butchered
child—

Then shall our England, throned beyond
alarms,

Rise in her might! Till then, “she bides
her hour.”

The Plague of Apathy

NO tears are left; we have quickly
spent that store!

Indifference like a dewless night hath come.
From wintry sea to sea the land lies numb.
With palsy of the spirit stricken sore,
The land lies numb from iron shore to
shore.

The unconcerned, they flourish: loud are
some,
And without shame. The multitude stand
dumb.

The England that we vaunted is no more.
Only the witling's sneer, the worldling's
smile,

The weakling's tremors, fail him not who
fain

Would rouse to noble deed. And all the
while,

A homeless people, in their mortal pain,
Toward one far and famous ocean isle
Stretch hands of prayer, and stretch those
hands in vain.

The Knell of Chivalry

O VANISHED morn of crimson and of
gold,

O youth and roselight and romance, wherein
I read of paynim and of paladin,
And beauty snatched from ogre's dun-
geoned hold!

Ever the recreant would in dust be rolled,
Ever the true knight in the joust would win.
Ever the scaly shape of monstrous Sin
At last lie vanquished, fold on writhing
fold.

Was it all false, that world of princely
deeds,
The splendid quest, the good fight ringing
clear?

Yonder the Dragon ramps with fiery gorge,
Yonder the victim faints and gasps and
bleeds;

But in his merry England our St. George
Sleeps a base sleep beside his idle spear.

A Trial of Orthodoxy

THE clinging children at their mother's
knee

Slain; and the sire and kindred one by one
Flayed or hewn piecemeal; and things
nameless done,

Not to be told: while imperturbably
The nations gaze, where Rhine unto the sea,
Where Seine and Danube, Thames and
and Tiber run,

And where great armies glitter in the sun,
And great kings rule, and man is boasted
free!

What wonder if yon torn and naked throng
Should doubt a Heaven that seems to wink
and nod,

And having moaned at noontide, "Lord,
how long?"

Should cry, "Where hidest Thou?" at
evenfall

At midnight, "Is he deaf and blind, our
God?"

And ere day dawn, "Is He indeed, at all?"

“If”

YEA, if ye could not, though ye would,
 lift hand—

Ye halting leaders—to abridge Hell’s reign,
 If, for some cause ye may not yet make
 plain,

Yearning to strike, ye stood as one may
 stand

Who in a nightmare sees a murder planned
 And hurrying to its issue, and though fain
 To stay the knife, and fearless, must remain
 Madly inert, held fast by ghostly band;—
 If such your plight, most hapless ye of
 of men!

But if ye could and would not, oh, what plea,

Think ye, shall stead you at your trial, when
The thunder-cloud of witnesses shall loom,
With ravished childhood on the seat of
doom,
At the Assizes of Eternity ?

A Hurried Funeral

A LITTLE deeper, sexton. You forget,
She you would bury 'neath so thin
a crust

Of loam, was fiery-souled, and ev'n in dust
She may lie restless, she may toss and fret,
Nay, she might break a seal too lightly set,
And vex, unmannerly, our ease! She must
Beneath no lack of English earth lie thrust,
Would we unhaunted sleep! Nay, deeper
yet.

Quick, friend, the cortège comes. There—
that will serve;
Deep enough now; and thou'lt need all thy
nerve,

If, in her coffin, at the last, amid
The mourners in the customary suits,
And to the scandal of these decent mutes,
This corpse of England's Honour burst
the lid!

A Wondrous Likeness

STILL on Life's loom, the infernal warp
and weft

Woven each hour! Still, in august renown,
A great realm watching, under God's great
frown!

Ever the same! The little children cleft
In twain: the little tender maidens reft
Of maidenhood! And through a little town
A stranger journeying, wrote this record
down,

"In all the place there was not one man
left."

O friend, the sudden lightning of whose pen
Makes Horror's countenance visible afar,

And Desolation's face familiar,
I think this very England of my ken
Is wondrous like that little town, where are
In all the streets and houses no more men.

Starving Armenia

Open your hearts, ye clothed from head
to feet,
Ye housed and whole who listen to the cry
Of them that not yet slain and mangled lie,
Only despoiled of all that made life sweet—
Only left bare to snow and wind and sleet,
And roofless to the inhospitable sky;
Give them of your abundance, lest they die
And famine make this mighty woe complete;
And lest if truly, as your creed aver,
A day of reckoning come, it be your lot
To hear the voice of the uprisen dead:
“We were the naked whom ye covered not,
The sick to whom ye did not minister,
And the anhungered whom ye gave not
bread.”

Last Word

AND save to mourn, is there nought left
to do,

Nought *ye* can do, O sons of England?

Yes:

Ye can arise, reclaim your manliness,
And flee the things that are unmaking you.
Still in your midst there dwells a remnant,
who

Love not an unclean Art, a Stage no less
Unclean, a gibing and reviling Press,
A febrile Muse, and Fiction febrile too.
And they it is would pluck you from this
slime

Whereof the rank miasma clouds your brain

With sloth that slays and torpor that is
crime

Till ye can feel nought keenly, see nought
plain.

Hearken their call, and heed, while yet is
time,

Lest ye be lulled too deep to wake again.

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