

Classic Poetry Series

**Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**  
2012

**Publisher:**  
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

# Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell(7 September 1887 - 9 December 1964)

Edith Sitwell was born in Scarborough, Yorkshire, the only daughter of the eccentric Sir George Sitwell, 4th Baronet, of Renishaw Hall; he was an expert on genealogy and landscaping. Her mother was the former Lady Ida Emily Augusta Denison, a daughter of the Earl of Londesborough and a granddaughter of Henry Somerset, 7th Duke of Beaufort. She claimed a descent through female lines from the Plantagenets.

## <b>Childhood </b>

Sitwell had two younger brothers, Osbert (1892-1969) and Sacheverell Sitwell (1897-1988) both distinguished authors, well-known literary figures in their own right, and long-term collaborators. Sacheverell married a Canadian woman, Georgia Doble, in 1925 and moved to Weston Hall in Northamptonshire.

Her relationship with her parents was stormy at best, not least because her father made her undertake a "cure" for her supposed spinal deformation-- involving locking her into an iron frame. In her later autobiography, she said that her parents had always been strangers to her.

## <b> Adulthood</b>

In 1912, 25-year-old Sitwell moved to a small, shabby fourth-floor flat in Pembroke Mansions, Bayswater, which she shared with Helen Rootham (1875-1938), her governess since 1903.

Edith never married. However, it is claimed that in 1927 she fell in love with the homosexual Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew. The relationship with Tchelitchew lasted until 1928; the same year when Helen Rootham underwent operations for cancer, eventually becoming an invalid. In 1932, Rootham and Sitwell moved to Paris, where they lived with Rootham's younger sister, Evelyn Wiel. Rootham died of spinal cancer in 1938.

Sitwell's mother died in 1937. Sitwell did not attend the funeral because of her displeasure with her parents during her childhood.

During World War II, Sitwell returned from France and retired to Renishaw with her brother Osbert and his lover, David Horner. She wrote under the light of oil

lamps when the lights of England were out of service. She knitted clothes for their friends who served in the army. One of the beneficiaries was young Alec Guinness, who received a pair of seaboot stockings.

The poems she wrote during the war brought her back before a public. They include *Street Songs* (1942), *The Song of the Cold* (1945) and *The Shadow of Cain* (1947), all of which were much praised. *Still Falls the Rain*, about the London blitz, remains perhaps her best-known poem (it was set to music by Benjamin Britten as *Canticle III: Still Falls the Rain*).

In 1943, her father died in Switzerland, his wealth depleted. In 1948, a reunion with Tchelitchev, whom she had not seen since before the war, went badly.

In 1948 Sitwell toured the United States with her brothers, reciting her poetry and, notoriously, giving a reading of *Lady Macbeth's* sleepwalking scene. Her poetry recitals were always occasions; she made recordings of her poems, including two recordings of *Façade*, the first with Constant Lambert as co-narrator, and the second with Peter Pears.

#### <b>Later Life and Death</b>

Tchelitchev died in April 1957. Her brother Osbert died of Parkinson's disease, diagnosed in 1950. Sitwell became a Dame Commander (DBE) in 1954. In 1955, Sitwell converted to Roman Catholicism.

Sitwell wrote two books about Queen Elizabeth I of England, *Fanfare for Elizabeth* (1946) and *The Queens and the Hive* (1962). She always claimed that she wrote prose simply for money and both these books were extremely successful, as were her *English Eccentrics* (1933) and *Victoria of England* (1936).

Around 1957 she was confined to a wheelchair. Her last poetry reading was in 1962. She died of cerebral haemorrhage at St. Thomas's Hospital on December 9, 1964 at the age of 77.

Sitwell's papers are held at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

# Aubade

JANE, Jane,  
Tall as a crane,  
The morning light creaks down again;

Comb your cockscomb-ragged hair,  
Jane, Jane, come down the stair.

Each dull blunt wooden stalactite  
Of rain creaks, hardened by the light,

Sounding like an overtone  
From some lonely world unknown.

But the creaking empty light  
Will never harden into sight,

Will never penetrate your brain  
With overtones like the blunt rain.

The light would show (if it could harden)  
Eternities of kitchen garden,

Cockscomb flowers that none will pluck,  
And wooden flowers that 'gin to cluck.

In the kitchen you must light  
Flames as staring, red and white,

As carrots or as turnips shining  
Where the cold dawn light lies whining.

Cockscomb hair on the cold wind  
Hangs limp, turns the milk's weak mind . . .

Jane, Jane,  
Tall as a crane,  
The morning light creaks down again!



# Bells Of Gray Crystal

Bells of gray crystal  
Break on each bough--  
The swans' breath will mist all  
The cold airs now.  
Like tall pagodas  
Two people go,  
Trail their long codas  
Of talk through the snow.  
Lonely are these  
And lonely and I ....  
The clouds, gray Chinese geese  
Sleek through the sky.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# By The Lake

ACROSS the flat and the pastel snow  
Two people go . . . . 'And do you remember  
When last we wandered this shore?' . . . 'Ah no!  
For it is cold-hearted December.'  
'Dead, the leaves that like asses's ears hung on the trees  
When last we wandered and squandered joy here;  
Now Midas your husband will listen for these  
Whispers--these tears for joy's bier.'  
And as they walk, they seem tall pagodas;  
And all the ropes let down from the cloud  
Ring the hard cold bell-buds upon the trees--codas  
Of overtones, ecstasies, grown for love's shroud

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Came The Great Popinjay

CAME the great Popinjay  
Smelling his nosegay:  
In cages like grots  
The birds sang gavottes.  
'Herodiade's flea  
Was named sweet Amanda,  
She danced like a lady  
From here to Uganda.  
Oh, what a dance was there!  
Long-haired, the candle  
Salome-like tossed her hair  
To a dance tune by Handel.' . . .  
Dance they still? Then came  
Courtier Death,  
Blew out the candle flame  
With civet breath.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Clowns' Houses

BENEATH the flat and paper sky  
The sun, a demon's eye,  
Glowed through the air, that mask of glass;  
All wand'ring sounds that pass

Seemed out of tune, as if the light  
Were fiddle-strings pulled tight.  
The market-square with spire and bell  
Clanged out the hour in Hell;

The busy chatter of the heat  
Shrilled like a parakeet;  
And shuddering at the noonday light  
The dust lay dead and white

As powder on a mummy's face,  
Or fawned with simian grace  
Round booths with many a hard bright toy  
And wooden brittle joy:

The cap and bells of Time the Clown  
That, jangling, whistled down  
Young cherubs hidden in the guise  
Of every bird that flies;

And star-bright masks for youth to wear,  
Lest any dream that fare  
--Bright pilgrim--past our ken, should see  
Hints of Reality.

Upon the sharp-set grass, shrill-green,  
Tall trees like rattles lean,  
And jangle sharp and dissily;  
But when night falls they sign

Till Pierrot moon steals slyly in,  
His face more white than sin,  
Black-masked, and with cool touch lays bare  
Each cherry, plum, and pear.

Then underneath the veiled eyes  
Of houses, darkness lies--  
Tall houses; like a hopeless prayer  
They cleave the sly dumb air.

Blind are those houses, paper-thin  
Old shadows hid therein,  
With sly and crazy movements creep  
Like marionettes, and weep.

Tall windows show Infinity;  
And, hard reality,  
The candles weep and pry and dance  
Like lives mocked at by Chance.

The rooms are vast as Sleep within;  
When once I ventured in,  
Chill Silence, like a surging sea,  
Slowly enveloped me.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Eventail

Lovely Semiramis  
Closes her slanting eyes:  
Dead is she long ago,  
From her fan sliding slow  
Parrot-bright fire's feathers  
Gilded as June weathers,  
Plumes like the greenest grass  
Twinkle down; as they pass  
Through the green glooms in Hell,  
Fruits with a tuneful smell--  
Grapes like an emerald rain  
Where the full moon has lain,  
Greengages bright as grass,  
Melons as cold as glass  
Piled on each gilded booth  
Feel their cheeks growing smooth;  
Apes in plumed head-dresses  
Whence the bright heat hisses,  
Nubian faces sly,  
Pursing mouth, slanting eye,  
Feel the Arabian  
Winds floating from that fan:  
See how each gilded face  
Paler grows, nods apace:  
'Oh, the fan's blowing  
Cold winds.... It is snowing!'

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Four In The Morning

Cried the navy-blue ghost  
Of Mr. Belaker  
The allegro Negro cocktail-shaker,  
"Why did the cock crow,  
Why am I lost,  
Down the endless road to Infinity toss'd?  
The tropical leaves are whispering white  
As water; I race the wind in my flight.  
The white lace houses are carried away  
By the tide; far out they float and sway.  
White is the nursemaid on the parade.  
Is she real, as she flirts with me unafraid?  
I raced through the leaves as white as water...  
Ghostly, flowed over the nursemaid, caught her,  
Left her...edging the far-off sand  
Is the foam of the sirens' Metropole and Grand;  
And along the parade I am blown and lost,  
Down the endless road to Infinity toss'd.  
The guinea-fowl-plumaged houses sleep...  
On one, I saw the lone grass weep,  
Where only the whimpering greyhound wind  
Chased me, raced me, for what it could find."  
And there in the black and furry boughs  
How slowly, coldly, old Time grows,  
Where the pigeons smelling of gingerbread,  
And the spectacled owls so deeply read,  
And the sweet ring-doves of curded milk  
Watch the Infanta's gown of silk  
In the ghost-room tall where the governante  
Gesticulates lente and walks andante.  
'Madam, Princesses must be obedient;  
For a medicine now becomes expedient--  
Of five ingredients--a diapente,  
Said the governante, fading lente...  
In at the window then looked he,  
The navy-blue ghost of Mr. Belaker,  
The allegro Negro cocktail-shaker--  
And his flattened face like the moon saw she--  
Rhinoceros-black (a flowing sea!).

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Heart And Mind

SAID the Lion to the Lioness-'When you are amber dust,-  
No more a raging fire like the heat of the Sun  
(No liking but all lust)-  
Remember still the flowering of the amber blood and bone,  
The rippling of bright muscles like a sea,  
Remember the rose-prickles of bright paws  
Though the fire of that sun the heart and the moon-cold bone are one.'

Said the Skeleton lying upon the sands of Time-  
'The great gold planet that is the mourning heat of the Sun  
Is greater than all gold, more powerful  
Than the tawny body of a Lion that fire consumes  
Like all that grows or leaps...so is the heart

More powerful than all dust. Once I was Hercules  
Or Samson, strong as the pillars of the seas:  
But the flames of the heart consumed me, and the mind  
Is but a foolish wind.'

Said the Sun to the Moon-'When you are but a lonely white crone,  
And I, a dead King in my golden armour somewhere in a dark wood,  
Remember only this of our hopeless love  
That never till Time is done  
Will the fire of the heart and the fire of the mind be one.'

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Interlude

Mid this hot green glowing gloom  
A word falls with a raindrop's boom...

Like baskets of ripe fruit in air  
The bird-songs seem, suspended where

Those goldfinches--the ripe warm lights  
Peck slyly at them--take quick flights.

My feet are feathered like a bird  
Among the shadows scarcely heard;

I bring you branches green with dew  
And fruits that you may crown anew

Your whirring waspish-gilded hair  
Amid this cornucopia--

Until your warm lips bear the stains  
And bird-blood leap within your veins.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Poetry

Enobles the heart and the eyes,  
and unveils the meaning of all things  
upon which the heart and the eyes dwell.  
It discovers the secret rays of the universe,  
and restores to us forgotten paradises.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Portrait Of A Barmaid

Metallic waves of people jar  
Through crackling green toward the bar

Where on the tables chattering-white  
The sharp drinks quarrel with the light.

Those coloured muslin blinds the smiles,  
Shroud wooden faces in their wiles —

Sometimes they splash like water (you  
Yourself reflected in their hue).

The conversation loud and bright  
Seems spinal bars of shunting light

In firework-spurting greenery.  
O complicate machinery

For building Babel, iron crane  
Beneath your hair, that blue-ribbed mane

In noise and murder like the sea  
Without its mutability!

Outside the bar where jangling heat  
Seems out of tune and off the beat —

A concertina's glycerine  
Exudes, and mirrors in the green

Your soul: pure glucose edged with hints  
Of tentative and half-soiled tints.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Scotch Rhapsody

Do not take a bath in Jordan, Gordon,  
On the holy Sabbath, on the peaceful day! '  
Said the huntsman, playing on his old bagpipe,  
Boring to death the pheasant and the snipe —  
Boring the ptarmigan and grouse for fun —  
Boring them worse than a nine-bore gun.  
Till the flaxen leaves where the prunes are ripe,  
Heard the tartan wind a-droning in the pipe,  
And they heard Macpherson say:  
'Where do the waves go? What hotels  
Hide their bustles and their gay umbrelles?  
And would there be room? —

Would there be room?  
Would there be room  
for  
me?

There is a hotel at Ostend  
Cold as the wind, without an end,  
Haunted by ghostly poor relations  
Of Bostonian conversations  
(Like bagpipes rotting through the walls.)  
And there the pearl-ropes fall like shawls  
With a noise like marine waterfalls.  
And 'Another little drink wouldn't do us any harm! '  
Pierces through the Sabbatical calm.  
And that is the place for me!  
So do not take a bath in Jordan, Gordon,  
On the holy Sabbath, on the peaceful day —  
Or you'll never go to heaven, Gordon Macpherson,  
And speaking purely as a private person

That is the place  
— that is the place  
— that is the  
place  
for  
me!

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Solo For Ear-Trumpet

The carriage brushes through the bright  
Leaves (violent jets from life to light);  
Strong polished speed is plunging, heaves  
Between the showers of bright hot leaves  
The window-glasses glaze our faces  
And jar them to the very basis —  
But they could never put a polish  
Upon my manners or abolish  
My most distinct disinclination  
For calling on a rich relation!  
In her house — (bulwark built between  
The life man lives and visions seen) —  
The sunlight hiccups white as chalk,  
Grown drunk with emptiness of talk,  
And silence hisses like a snake —  
Invertebrate and rattling ache....  
Then suddenly Eternity  
Drowns all the houses like a sea  
And down the street the Trump of Doom  
Blares madly — shakes the drawing-room  
Where raw-edged shadows sting forlorn  
As dank dark nettles. Down the horn  
Of her ear-trumpet I convey  
The news that 'It is Judgment Day!'  
'Speak louder: I don't catch, my dear.'  
I roared: 'It is the Trump we hear!'  
'The What?' 'THE TRUMP!' 'I shall complain!  
.... the boy-scouts practising again.'

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# Still Falls The Rain

Still falls the Rain---  
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss---  
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails  
Upon the Cross.

Still falls the Rain  
With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer-beat  
In the Potter's Field, and the sound of the impious feet

On the Tomb:  
    Still falls the Rain

In the Field of Blood where the small hopes breed and the human brain  
Nurtures its greed, that worm with the brow of Cain.

Still falls the Rain  
At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross.  
Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us---  
On Dives and on Lazarus:  
Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.

Still falls the Rain---  
Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's wounded Side:  
He bears in His Heart all wounds,---those of the light that died,  
The last faint spark  
In the self-murdered heart, the wounds of the sad uncomprehending dark,  
The wounds of the baited bear---  
The blind and weeping bear whom the keepers beat  
On his helpless flesh... the tears of the hunted hare.

Still falls the Rain---  
Then--- O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune---  
See, see where Christ's blood streames in the firmament:  
It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree

Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart  
That holds the fires of the world,---dark-smirched with pain  
As Caesar's laurel crown.

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of man  
Was once a child who among beasts has lain---  
"Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee."

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

## The Dancers: (During A Great Battle, 1916)

The floors are slippery with blood:  
The world gyrates too. God is good  
That while His wind blows out the light  
For those who hourly die for us –  
We still can dance each night.

The music has grown numb with death –  
But we will suck their dying breath,  
The whispered name they breathed to chance,  
To swell our music, make it loud  
That we may dance, - may dance.

We are the dull blind carrion-fly  
That dance and batten. Though God die  
Mad from the horror of the light –  
The light is mad, too, flecked with blood, -  
We dance, we dance, each night.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# The Fan

LOVELY Semiramis

Closes her slanting eyes:

Dead is she long ago.

From her fan, sliding slow,

Parrot-bright fire's feathers,

Gilded as June weathers,

Plumes bright and shrill as grass

Twinkle down; as they pass

Through the green glooms in Hell

Fruits with a tuneful smell,

Grapes like an emerald rain,

Where the full moon has lain,

Greengages bright as grass,

Melons as cold as glass,

Piled on each gilded booth,

Feel their cheeks growing smooth.

Apes in plumed head-dresses

Whence the bright heat hisses,--

Nubian faces, sly

Pursing mouth, slanting eye,

Feel the Arabian

Winds floating from the fan.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# The Lady With The Sewing-Machine

Across the fields as green as spinach,  
Cropped as close as Time to Greenwich,

Stands a high house; if at all,  
Spring comes like a Paisley shawl —

Patternings meticulous  
And youthfully ridiculous.

In each room the yellow sun  
Shakes like a canary, run

On run, roulade, and watery trill —  
Yellow, meaningless, and shrill.

Face as white as any clock's,  
Cased in parsley-dark curled locks —

All day long you sit and sew,  
Stitch life down for fear it grow,

Stitch life down for fear we guess  
At the hidden ugliness.

Dusty voice that throbs with heat,  
Hoping with your steel-thin beat

To put stitches in my mind,  
Make it tidy, make it kind,

You shall not: I'll keep it free  
Though you turn earth, sky and sea

To a patchwork quilt to keep  
Your mind snug and warm in sleep!

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# The Web Of Eros

Within your magic web of hair, lies furled  
The fire and splendour of the ancient world;  
The dire gold of the comet's wind-blown hair;  
The songs that turned to gold the evening air  
When all the stars of heaven sang for joy.  
The flames that burnt the cloud-high city Troy.  
The mænad fire of spring on the cold earth;  
The myrrh-lit flame that gave both death and birth  
To the soul Phoenix; and the star-bright shower  
That came to Danaë in her brazen tower...  
Within your magic web of hair lies furled  
The fire and splendour of the ancient world.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

# When Cold December

WHEN cold December  
Froze to grisamber  
The jangling bells on the sweet rose-trees--  
Then fading slow  
And furred is the snow  
As the almond's sweet husk--  
And smelling like musk.  
The snow amygdaline  
Under the eglantine  
Where the bristling stars shine  
Like a gilt porcupine--  
The snow confesses  
The little Princesses  
On their small chioppines  
Dance under the orpines.  
See the casuistries  
Of their slant fluttering eyes--  
Gilt as the zodiac  
(Dancing Herodiac).  
Only the snow slides  
Like gilded myrrh--  
From the rose-branches--hides  
Rose-roots that stir.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell