

Edith Maida Sturges

Selected Poems



Edith Maida Sturges

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[Known as a love cult, Helios was the Jazz Age creation of Edith Maida Lessing, who presided over a ramshackle compound of tents and shacks in Glassell Park that she called Mount Helios. Lessing declared free love would replace marriage, believed in communal ownership of property, and boasted that she had control over more than 1,000 men. She was imprisoned in 1922 for sending obscene material through the mail.]

Insurrection and Other Poems. San Diego: Silver Gate Press, 1905.

Insurrection

What does this Life amount to after all,
We love or hate and then grow old and die,
And thus unsatisfied, escape the thrall,
That holds us prisoners here, we know not why.

We plan and dream, and dream and plan again,
And watch both dreams and plans escape and pass,
Brief as the rainbow, glittering in the rain.
Brief as summer dew, upon the grass.

'Tis such a little while we linger here;
We barely learn to live or love our life,
Ere we like soldiers on the battle field,
Are cut down in the midst of battle strife.

Miserable puppets of a Master hand,
Made to smirk and smile, and weep and rage,
Held in subjection by Divine command,
We storm and strut about our mimic stage.

What futile buffetings of Fate are we,
What thistle down, tossed by the restless wind.
What miller's chaff what dust what nothingness!
Seeking a hope, we do not dare to find.

Some of us who hunger for the sea,
Must inland live, land bound on every side,
And never know its glad waves tumbling free,
Its windswept shore, nor hear its murmuring tide.

And those of us who crave the distant plain,
With wealth of prairie, wide and wild and lone,
Vast, grand, immutable, must live entombed,
By four grim walls, of mortar, brick and stone.

And there are we who love the city mart,

Crowded, noisy, restless, guilt and sin,
And these awake to find themselves, for life,
In little sleepy country towns, shut in.

Some of us long for glory swift and sweet,
And live a life of pain, and die unknown,
And some for love do cast our every die,
And find ourselves betrayed, wrecked left alone.

Some sit with idle, loveless, empty, hearts,
And crave a child to play about our door,
Envyng the brawling beggar who,
May count his dozen half-starved brats or more.

And thus we tread our little measured track,
Like pawns about a chess board, moved and set,
We must go on we do not dare go back,
We long to cease and end it all, and yet

And yet the pitiless power that placed us here,
Will leave us not until the game is done,
A game too deep for us to comprehend,
Or even know the pieces lost and won.

Always the same, we have no power nor will,
We can but drift upon a mighty tide,
Until a Voice shall say to us "Be Still,"
And once more in oblivion we abide.

Always the same the same since guilty Cain,
Crept out of sight to hide his shame's despair,
We spring like fungus grown up in a night,
And like fungus, useless anywhere.

Always the same we grasp but Dead sea fruit,
The soul's mute call, no answer hears nor can,
There is a God whom we do never reach,
By Him forgotten, in the world's great plan.

What are we for? Each in his little rut,
Does grind and grind, and walk his weary round,
And wait for better things, defying Fate,
Until at last effaced from sight and sound.

And this is the sum content a piteous farce,
Fame a delusion Hope a sad defeat;
And Love, a thing to fool us mortals with,
A game where two must play and both shall cheat.

The Race

Come fill up your flagon there's plenty here.
Drink to the winner's name,
See! there he stands in his purple robes
Another draught to his fame!
But the weary wretch who creeps along,
Curse him nor count the cost,
Jostle him out give him a blow,
Not a tear for him who lost.

Bring on your garlands heap them high
Fling cut the rose of Love,
For Beauty stands in servile grace,
As timid as a dove.
The rose of Love to the vanquished goes?
No crush it nor count the cost
Better dead 'neath the victor's feet,
Than to be flung to him who lost.

Praise the winner and shout his name,
Smile in his greedy face.
Cower and tremble low at his knee,
And praise his coveted place.
Sneer at the vanquished crowd him out,
Crush him at any cost,
Bubble oh, wine, for the winner's lips,
There's nothing for him who lost.

Love's Garden

Love wants no precept, of rod or priest.
Love yields a lifetime, in one brief hour.
And that one hour were more at least,
Than a thousand life-times, without its power.
Love wants no chains, but its own desire.
No bonds to hold no prison-cells.
At the thought of restraint, Love chafes and flies.
As morning dew that the sun dispells.

Touch your butterfly to confine,
And its broken wings, from your finger fall.
Imprison the Luccioles, wanton light,
And the wandering firefly dies to all.

Love wants no answer, but love-sweet eyes,
No music but whisper of soul, and smile.
No hope but the quickening that comes but once,
And makes crucifixion well worth while.

No eloquence, but the lingering kiss,
Warm and silent, and passion-fraught,
Beside whose exultant, awakening thrill,
Speech were vacant and words were naught.

Love wants no walls, but crimson aisles,
Of dreaming lillies, to wander by;
No light but that of the throbbing stars;
No roof, but the night's tender canopy.

And in Love's garden the thorns are hid,
By the flush of poppies blood-red glow.
A garden of passion, and hopes and dreams,
And bitter-sweet longing that all must know.
Here peace bends low o'er the water's edge,
When comes as a whisper from gods on high,
Laden with the breath of a thousand flowers,

“The touch of Eros, in passing by.

In its fairness, to some, is the lost mirage
And deep in its melodies madness creeps,
And hid in its cold, white magnolia blooms,
The dark dread, death-stinging aspics sleeps.

And having once dreamed, for an hour here,
The heart rebels, at the rugged plain,
For the spell of the garden's poisoned sweets,
Ever comes haunting the soul again.
Ay, the soul rebels at the rugged plain,
Through the fire of hate and the stab of pride,
And ever in longing, looks back, and wails
“Unsatisfied, unsatisfied.”

Moonlight

Oh, give me a draught of the moonlight wine,
Poured out white, from her heart to mine;
Oh, never was quaffing of port or Rhine,
That could blot out my life's despair
Like this subtle sense so deep so thrilling
As sad as death, and as sweet and chilling,
That steeps all my soul, by its splendor stilling-
The smile of the moon so fair.

Oh, give me a draught of the moonlight wine,
When friends grow cold and creditors whine
Like perfume from hidden crypt or shrine
It steals to my heart and brain,
Till I swoon to her kiss the world forgetting,
Nor ruin, nor wreck, nor love, regretting,
Nor the tangled skein that my Fate is netting,
With the sable threads of pain.

O, give me a draught of the moonlight's wine,
Let me be drowned in its power divine,
Let me bathe in it, lave in it mine, all mine!
Till my soul be soothed and still,
What is the world and its empty madness,
Its running and cunning and wanton badness,
It's surfeits of sin or its wails of sadness,
When the white moon works her will.

You

I wonder, sometimes, why I hate you,
 Why my heart, when you go by,
Quickens its beating within my torest,
Like the ocean's ceaseless mad unrest,
 Why do I hate you why?

I hated you first, when you passed me,
 'Twas chill and growing late;
Though I knew you not, nor yet your name,
Your dusky eyes set my heart aflame,
 With the maddening thirst of hate.

I hate your red lips smiling,
 And I burn with enkindled wrath;
And a look in your eyes, as they meet mine,
Brings a memory back, I cannot define,
 That you once have crossed my path.

Your face is as pure as the haw-buds,
 That sweet in the springtime blow.
But your windswept gown, and flying feet,
When you pass me by in the noisy street,
 Makes the hate in my heart to glow.

Can it be that in some past ages,
 'Neath a tropical, foreign, sun,
We battled together you and I,
For something desired, in days gone by,
 And I the defeated one?

