

The Rio Grande

Sacheverell Sitwell

By the Rio Grande

They dance no sarabande

On level banks like lawns above the glassy, lolling tide;

Nor sing they forlorn madrigals

Whose sad note stirs the sleeping gales

Till they wake among the trees and shake the boughs,

And fright the nightingales;

But they dance in the city, down the public squares,

On the marble pavers with each colour laid in shares,

At the open church doors loud with light within.

At the bell's huge tolling,

By the river music, gurgling, thin

Through the soft Brazilian air.

The Comendador and Alguacil are there

On horseback, hid with feathers, loud and shrill

Blowing orders on their trumpets like a bird's sharp bill

Through boughs, like a bitter wind, calling

They shine like steady starlight while those other sparks are failing

In burnished armour, with their plumes of fire,

Tireless while all others tire.

The noisy streets are empty and hushed is the town

To where, in the square, they dance and the band is playing ;

Such a space of silence through the town to the river

That the water murmurs loud -

Above the band and crowd together;

And the strains of the sarabande,

More lively than a madrigal,

Go hand in hand

Like the river and its waterfall

As the great Rio Grande rolls down to the sea.

Loud is the marimba's note

Above these half-salt waves,

And louder still the tympanum,

The plectrum, and the kettle-drum,

Sullen and menacing

Do these brazen voices ring.

They ride outside,

Above the salt-sea's tide.

Till the ships at anchor there
Hear this enchantment,
Of the soft Brazilian air,
By those Southern winds wafted,
Slow and gentle,
Their fierceness tempered
By the air that flows between.