

SIEGFRIED SASSOON: BY MARGUERITE WILKINSON



WHEN the Roman soldiers were about to crucify Christ they offered him wine mingled with myrrh to drink,— a cup of comfort before the agony. It is recorded that Christ refused it. The incident is symbolic. Each one of us, coming to his own Calvary, must choose his way of meeting suffering. We may drink the mingled draught of illusion and glamour, if we wish, so that our power to realize suffering is lessened. Or we may refuse the cup of comfort and go down into the depths with nerves attuned to feel every subtle vibration of pain, with eyes wide open to look agony full in the face and know it for what it is. This is what only the strong can do, and it may be that spiritual anaesthetics are still terribly necessary in our very imperfect world. And yet, although those who accept the wine and myrrh suffer less than those who refuse it, it is probable that they learn less. And when their hour of pain is over they turn away from Calvary, eager to forget. But those who will not drink do not forget, for they come, little by little, nearer to an understanding of suffering. Sometimes they can wrest from it a fiery and redemptive wisdom.

Such wisdom is the shining power in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon. To read it is to come face to face with indelible memories of unspeakable anguish. No palliatives are offered. The truth about warfare is told, as Mr. Sassoon understands it, with a vigor and insight that inhibit even the euphemisms of our own thoughts while we read. It is told by a poet who has refused to be blinded and benumbed by glamour and illusion, who will not describe as noble and beautiful that which was only horribly necessary. It is told by a man, a soldier, who will never forget this Calvary of the youth of our generation.

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz—
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on
parapets?

Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench—
And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
Do you ever stop to ask, "Is it all going to happen again?"

* * *

*Have you forgotten yet? . . .
Look up, and swear by the green of the Spring that you'll never
forget.*

With this devotion to verity, which is the passion of the realist, Mr. Sassoon's poetry unites an intellectual poise and rectitude that

belong to idealism. That, I believe, is why his presentation of the facts and emotions of warfare can be made with such acrid irony. He has found it necessary to set side by side with the hell of a young man's life in war the Paradise of a young man's visions. For this reason, he has become, to many of us, the chief interpreter of the meanings of the great war.

WHEN his first widely-circulated book, "The Old Huntsman", was published in 1917, many poets and nearly all journalistic versifiers were writing about the war. Here and there, and usually one by one, good poems appeared. But most of what was written said the same old things in the same old way, with the same old rhymes and the rhymths supposedly martial. Men and women at the front wrote what they felt in the heat of excitement, without waiting to "recollect in tranquillity". Men and women at home, who had never heard a gun or smelt powder, wrote what they thought people ought to feel at the front, or what they thought would please those at home. There was much sentimentalism, honest and dishonest, and almost unlimited metrical propaganda. Then came Siegfried Sassoon with his poetry, strong as a gust of fresh wind, bringing both bitterness and fragrance. The bitterness was to be found in such sharply thought-out and exquisitely felt studies of the war as "They", "At Carnoy", "Special-Constable", "The Hero", "Blighters", and "The Kiss", probably the finest poem in the book. The fragrance was to be found in poems not about the war, such brief and lovely lyrics as "A child's Prayer" and "Wonderment".

But the bitter lyrics are the unforgettable ones. Take, for example, these lines from "Blighters":

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or "Home, sweet Home,"—
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

Or consider these lines from "The Kiss", addressed to "Sister Steel" and sharp with anger against the thing that can only be made endurable by anger:

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:
That in good fury he may feel
The body where he sets his heel
Quail from your downward darting kiss.

Following "The Old Huntsman," in 1918 came "Counter Attack," Mr. Sassoon's second book, with an introduction by Robert Nichols, who bids us read it again and again because it was written

“for mankind’s sake.” In this introduction Mr. Nichols takes occasion to tell how much “The Old Huntsman” meant to the men who read it while they were still fighting in France.

In “Counter Attack” we find only war poetry. The fullness of realization has come to Mr. Sassoon, and he has little to say of the fragrant things of home and Paradise. The language is somewhat less smooth and fluent, nearer to the rough speech of the men with whom he suffered. Many of these poems are sketches, made in a few words, of happenings at the front, little stories about his friends. But they keep the same irony that stings consciousness in “The Kiss.” In “How to Die” he says:

But they’ve been taught the way to do it
Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
And shuddering groans; but passing through it
With due regard for decent taste.

Or we may consider these lines from “The Effect”:

*“How many dead? As many as ever you wish.
Don’t count ‘em; they’re too many.
Who’ll buy my nice fresh corpses, two a penny?”*

The following lines from “What Does It Matter?” remind one of the impertinently platitudinous consolations frequently offered:

Does it matter?—losing your sight? . . .
There’s such splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be kind,
As you sit on the terrace remembering
And turning your face to the light.

Simultaneously with his appearance in this country as a lecturer we are offered an opportunity to read Mr. Sassoon’s third book, “Picture-Show,” fresh from the press. In it are to be found a number of his finest poems. There is no relaxation of spirit or technique, and, if there be any change in quality, it is in his increasing conciseness and lucidity, his growing power to use natural rather than literary rhythms. “I Stood With the Dead” has a grim directness and reality that only the profoundly felt rhythms of natural speech can give:

I stood with the Dead, so forsaken and still:
When dawn was grey I stood with the Dead.
And my slow heart said, “You must kill, you must kill:
Soldier, soldier, morning is red.”

