

# THE BOOKMAN

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MEMOIRS OF A FOX-HUNTING MAN  
*by Siegfried Sassoon* (COWARD-MCCANN; \$2.50)

Who does not remember those savage and fastidious poems which came from Siegfried Sassoon, in a bitter trickle as from some deep mental wound, soon after the end of the war? A few years later than Rupert Brooke and the product of a much sadder, more self-searching mind, they were a symbol of the spiritual erosion which took place between the Byronic glories of the war's first years and the utter weariness and despair toward its end.

During the war something was lost to Englishmen which they can recapture in nostalgic memories but never recover in fact. This strange novel of Sassoon (it must be largely autobiographical) reminds one of the faintly faded colors and old-fashioned security of English sporting prints. *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*—it sounds comfortable, out-of-doors, Victorian; it seems to belong on a favorite shelf in a library hung with pictures of beloved horses; it does not suggest the Sassoon of 1917 and 1918. And yet, when you have read it, read between its idyllic lines, smelling of leather and horses and the damp earth of early winter, you realize that Sassoon has performed an extraordinarily subtle and restrained feat. Without saying so in as many words, he shows you, through the absorbed eyes of the fox-hunting man who is to some extent himself, "this happy breed of men, this little world" suddenly sucked into the larger world as one rain-drop trembles into others on a window pane. That line of verse on the title-page is almost the only generalization, the only hint, that Sassoon was painting us a picture of something that can never be again.

It is a charming, sober-hued book, full of the peaceful solidities of days spent with ploughed fields, sweating horses and simple friendly men for whom the fox and the hound are all that life holds most worth while. Very quietly, with a tight rein on a rich sharp-edged vocabulary, Sassoon gives us a handful of magnificent portraits, portraits which at first do not strike the eye, but accumulate vitality and grow upon one as would an old family portrait in a dark corner of the room.

There are dullnesses in it, too, and flat, featureless fields of pleasant prose, but one feels it is all done on purpose and that Sassoon avoided a livelier pace because he wanted, above all, to give us the healthy, tingling monotony of the enchanted world where men with red cheeks and small incomes have no desires that are separate from horses and dogs.

There are not many books in which the author has subordinated fact and interest and baits for the shy reader to the maintenance of a single key or mood and, in a minor mode, this is one of the most successful of them.

After many tranquil chapters never very far from the stirrups, the war swallows up our fox-hunting man. But he remains calm to the end, which is hardly an end, but more like a semi-colon. Somehow the healthy weariness, the outdoor magic of those years of fox-hunting persist even under bombardment.

There is one astonishingly real character, built up ever so slowly, with hardly a trace of the writer's self-consciousness—that of Denis Milden, M. F. H.

Altogether a singular and a strangely beautiful book.

ROBERT LITTELL