

Epitaph for the Edwardians

THE SCARLET TREE. By Osbert Sitwell.
Macmillan and Co., Ltd.

THIS second volume of the autobiography of Sir Osbert Sitwell yields everything which was portended by the rich promise of the first—*Left Hand, Right Hand*. In spite of the rather self-conscious artifice of some of the descriptive passages, this is a refreshingly honest book. No-one who writes about himself can ever be entirely free from self-pity, but Osbert Sitwell's is far from maudlin. He relates his misfortunes philosophically, even at times with a certain relish.

Whatever class Osbert Sitwell had been born into, he would, one imagines, have suffered much of the discomfort that overwhelms the sensitive in a world that is made for, and by, the insensitive. But he did suffer in an unusual degree the depredations of the dreadful schooling given in England in many a "fashionable place of internment for the sons of the rich." "I had gone there," he writes of his first school, "a tall, well-made boy, with a strong temper, high

spirits, and, although of a nervous temperament, possessed of a naturally sociable disposition . . . in return for the large fees received, the school restored to my parents a different boy, unrecognisable, with no pride in his appearance, no ability to concentrate, with health impaired for many years, if not for life, secretive, with no love of books and an impartial hatred for both work and games, with few qualities left and none acquired, save a love of solitude and a cynical disbelief, firmly established, in any sense of fair play or prevailing standard of humane conduct." From this school he escaped by illness.

Later, at Eton, he found it equally hard to fit into a society which, contemptuous altogether of the intellect and of art, he can commend only on the ground that it did little to alter a boy's character. In after years he paused to consider "how it was possible that these boys could be the sons, grandsons, heirs of generations of men of attainments, often of intellect, at any rate of strong character, possessing in the highest degree powers of decision, qualities singularly lacking in their descendants before me." However, he was surprised

only two years later to find what "brave, generous, loyal and often lovable companions these young bores, dullards, and bullies" of his schooldays turned out to be, some "wonder of Nature" being enacted which caused the mob (always evil) to break up into its component individuals.

But his school experiences are only an interlude in a much more personal chronicle. In his descriptions of the large house-parties of his relatives, Osbert Sitwell shows us another, different side to his growing up. The rich, inside their vast country houses, could live in a tribal fashion denied to families of narrower means. "The family" came to be something much larger, more diffuse than the biological family, these thronging hordes of pleasant, well-mannered, self-confident beings, with their horse-play and practical jokes, or their religion and haunting favourite clergymen, constituting an older, perhaps more primitive pattern of life than existed at lower social levels. Throughout these descriptions Osbert Sitwell is able to give us simultaneously the peculiar flavour of a household and the character of its individual members.



SIR OSBERT SITWELL
Nature was wonderful

The achievement of this autobiography indeed lies in the crowding abundance of firmly-drawn, memorable characters. The chief of these is the writer's father, an eccentric of the type that only England could produce, preoccupied with the mediaeval and the Gothic, clever, exacting, tiresome, imaginative, subtle and impractical. An ill-health which did not hinder him living beyond 80 obliged Sir George Sitwell to spend



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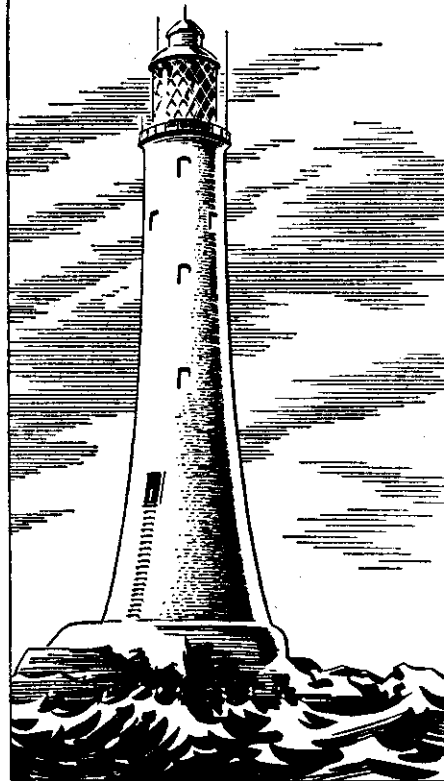
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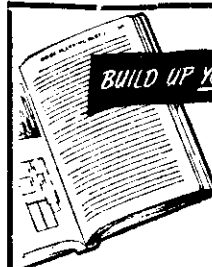
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