

## CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

### *Sussex Doom*

**W**ITHIN a very few weeks now *Cold Comfort Farm*, by Stella Gibbons, will be published in this country by Longmans, and all readers of English fiction are hereby advised not to miss it. For *Cold Comfort Farm* is a book the like of which we very seldom see, since it belongs, and not remotely, with such books as *Jonathan Wild*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Zuleika Dobson*, and with that skit of Stephen Leacock's of which at the moment we can only recall that the hero leapt to his horse and rode off in all directions.

It would be far easier to quote half the book than to give any idea what it is like. Perhaps it most resembles a genial nightmare brought on by intensive reading of current fiction; for while it is first and foremost a parody of those great grim novels of life on Sussex farms, it also contains innumerable telling shots at D. H. Lawrence, Brontë biographers, novels of London's Bohemia, and the stream-of-consciousness school. You will find in it overtones of Hardy, Sheila Kaye-Smith, May Sinclair, Julian Green, V. Sackville-West, Eden Phillpotts, and the brothers Powys.

But this is a paltry list. In 307 pages, Miss Gibbons goes after almost all the contemporary poses and pulverizes them. Her heroine is one Flora Poste, an orphan who, shortly after the death of her parents, takes refuge with a branch of her family, the Starkadders, who live on Cold Comfort Farm, near the village of Howling on the Sussex downs.

Flora has been an intensive reader of novels, and she knows what to expect, but the Starkadders ("There have always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort Farm" rings like a refrain throughout the book) exceed the wildest expectation. There is an old mad matriarch in an upper room (who saw something nasty, never identified, in the woodshed before she was two); her daughter Judith, moody and wild; and countless male Starkadders of every degree of relationship, of whom one is a religious fanatic, another the elemental male who seduces every girl in the countryside, and others simple-minded; and there is a shy child of nature, Elfine, who darts about the downs like a wild thing.

Now Flora, although romantic, has one quality rarely found in any character in a novel of today: commonsense. She is undeterred by the sententious and ungrammatical country proverbs which are always being shot at her, "Curses like rookses come home to rest in bosomses and barnses" and "When apples grow on the sukebind ye may see lust buy hissen a wedding garment" interest her, but do not blind her to the fact that few of the sinister aspects of Cold Comfort Farm could remain sinister if subjected to the light of reason. So the slavey who is brought to bed of a child whenever the sukebind (strange, fatal flower!) blooms hears from Flora the gospel according to Stopes; Seth, the mindless, elemental male, is sent off to become a talkie-star; Elfine, the little wildflower of the downs, dressed and coiffed by experts in London, is led to the altar instead of deserted there; Aunt Ada Doom gets a

psychoanalyst, and catalogues from travel agencies. In short, there is no grim, sad situation that does not dissolve before Flora's bright commonsense like a ghost before the sunrise.

Not content with clearing up most of the traditional novel-dilemmas, as all of us, pushed too far, have yearned to do from time to time, Miss Gibbons offers a number of other novelties no less sensible. When she dives into a paragraph of fine writing as, in conscientious imitation of her models, she frequently does, she generously takes care that we shall not overlook it—prefacing it, according to her estimation of its excellence, by one, two or three asterisks. As an instance of this technic:—

. . . Flora gazed up searchingly at the windows of the farmhouse. \* \* \* They were dead as the eyes of fishes, reflecting the dim, pallid blue of the fading west. . . . The livid silver tongues of the early stars leaped between the shapes of the chimney-pots, backwards and forwards, like idiot children dancing to a forgotten tune.

It is fatal to begin to quote. Here is the history of Cold Comfort Farm in brief:—

The farmhouse was a long, low building, two-storied in parts. Other parts of it were three-storied. Edward the Sixth had originally owned it in the form of a shed in which he housed his swineherds, but he had grown tired of it, and had had it rebuilt in Sussex clay. Then he pulled it down. Elizabeth had rebuilt it with a good many chimneys in one way and another. The Charleses had let it alone; but William and Mary had pulled it down again and George the First had rebuilt it. George the Second, however, burned it down. George the Third added another wing. George the Fourth had pulled it down again.

And then there are the thoughts of Aunt Ada Doom, thoughts like drowsy yaks rubbing against the walls of her room:—

You told them you were mad. You had been mad since you saw something nasty in the woodshed, years and years and years ago. If any of them went away . . . you would get much madder. It was unfortunate in some ways but useful in others. . . . The woodshed incident had twisted something in your child-brain, seventy years ago.

And seeing that it was because of that incident that you sat here ruling the roost and having five meals a day brought up to you as regularly as clockwork, it hadn't been a bad break for you, that day you saw something nasty in the woodshed.

Strengthened and purged by *Cold Comfort Farm*, we can face with fortitude another half-century of novels of the English countryside. Never again will the sad fate of country girls in the springtime overwhelm us. We shall be able to murmur to ourselves: "The first of May brought a burst of summer weather. All the trees and hedges came into full leaf over-night; and from behind the latter, in the evenings, cries could be heard of: 'Nay, doan't 'ee, Jem', and 'Nay, niver do that, soul', from village maidens who were being seduced."

### *Mr. Galsworthy's England and Mr. Lewis's America*

THE award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Mr. Galsworthy has been passed over by the British Press with singularly little comment. Whether this is because his latest novel, *Flowering Wilderness*, has received only lukewarm appreciation in London (its motivation depends in part on an Englishman's loss of caste when at the pistol's point he forswears Christianity for Mohammedanism); or because he has been talked of so often for the Prize that the actual award came as something of an anticlimax; or simply because he is less popular in his own