

# Flem Snopes and His Kin

*THE HAMLET.* By William Faulkner. New York: Random House. 1940. 421 pp. \$2.50.

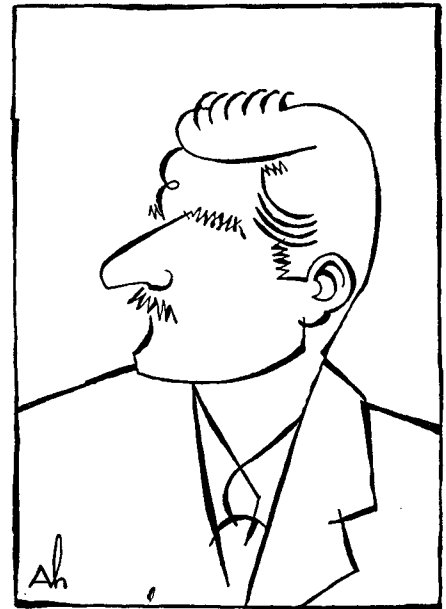
Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

**I**N the Snopes family, Mr. Faulkner has created what is probably the finest sub-human species in contemporary American literature. Compared to the Snopes, the Joads are the country-club set and Jeeter and his brood folks of high social consciousness, well adjusted to their environment. To create a set of characters with the acquisitiveness of the gypsy-moth and the morality of the swamp-moccasin, and to watch them writhing and squirming in their environment with blind ferocity of maggots, is in itself an achievement. It is an even greater achievement that the dark magic of Mr. Faulkner's style makes these creatures continuously interesting. Mr. Faulkner may be a great many things—he is seldom, if ever, dull. He can be clotted and confused, but his writing, at its best, has an hallucinative power which keeps one reading, like a man in the toils of nightmare, till the last page is turned. In "The Hamlet," his peculiar power is at its best. There are fewer of the long, winding sentences that strangle themselves to death in their own subordinate clauses—there is all of the earthy force that Mr. Faulkner can summon, like a spirit out of the ground, when he chooses to do so. Reading "The Hamlet" is like listening to the gossip of a country store, with its cruelty, its extravagance, its tall stories, and its deadly comment upon human nature—but a gossip translated, heightened, and made into art. It is, I suppose, an unpleasant book; it will be a repellent book to many readers. It is also, not always but frequently, superbly written. Nor is "unpleasant," the first adjective this particular reviewer would think of. Mr. Faulkner is too good for that.

The story of "The Hamlet" is the story of the gradual sucking dry of Frenchman's Bend by Flem Snopes and his endless kin. In the rich, river-bottom country, Frenchman's Bend had been the original site of a vast pre-Civil War plantation. Used to a tradition of violence and to names like Armstid and Doshey, names "which could have come from nowhere since certainly no man would deliberately select one of them for his own," even to Frenchman's Bend the Snopes were a surprise and a portent. The big family in the country had been the Varners, corrupt enough but merry—lazyish overlords. They look impor-

tant, but they had about the same resistance to the sucking acquisitiveness of Flem Snopes that the flesh of a squirrel has to the germs of tularemia. There was Flem and Mink and I. O., Ike the idiot, and the hideously untouched boy called Wallstreet Panic. They came out of nowhere, they settled on Frenchman's Bend and the Varneys like wasps on a burst pear, they got the store and the big house, the money and the women. They fought among themselves with the obscure brutality of bacilli—but, when they were through, it was time for Flem Snopes to move on to Jefferson, for he had eaten the heart out of Frenchman's Bend. I doubt if a more appalling portrait of the mean poor-white has ever been drawn. Yet it is drawn, particularly in the last section and the fantastic incident of the Texas ponies, with horrible veracity but also with the raw humor of the frontier. It may be observed that there is one man of relative good-will in the book, the sewing-machine-salesman, Ratliff. He doesn't, it is true, get anywhere in particular, but his disillusioned comment represents the defeated virtues of civilization—at least by comparison with the Snopes.

It would be easy to point out that Flem Snopes and his breed might well stand for the new barbarism we are all afraid of—as easy as it is inadequate. I don't think that was Mr. Faulkner's point. He has drawn Flem Snopes and his bindweed family and



Mr. Faulkner produces the sub-human Snopes.

done it in a way that you will remember. The book contains one first-class murder, an extraordinary tour-de-force in the portrait of the idiot, Ike, a mad treasure-hunt, a heroine, Ella Varner, so mammalian that she is practically a gland, a highly interesting sketch of a young man on the make, and other oddments and excitements. And all this material, the violence and the laziness, the nightmare and the tropic warmth of the deep South, is brought together and orchestrated by a masterly hand. Peasant humor and peasant horror—both are there. And, first, last, and always, Mr. Faulkner is a writer.

## Your Literary I.Q.

By Howard Collins

Despite Mark Twain's statistics on the subject of dying peaceably in bed, fiction characters are inclined to expire in a somewhat more spectacular manner. From the brief descriptions of their passing, can you identify the ten characters listed below? Score 5 points if you can name the character, and another 5 if you can remember the book in which he or she appeared and its author. A score of 70 is par, 80 is good, 90 or better is excellent. Answers on page 18.

1. Her husband smothered her with a pillow.
2. In his hurry to get away from the scene of a robbery he had just committed, he slipped into an abandoned quarry and was drowned.
3. A cigarette soaked in plague germs killed her.
4. He was electrocuted for accidentally drowning the girl he had planned to murder.
5. Because he was bribed with the gift of a watch to betray a fugitive, this boy was shot by his father.
6. Police found her mutilated body stuffed up a chimney.
7. She committed suicide by stepping in front of a train.
8. He drowned while trying to save from a wrecked ship the man who had betrayed his fiancée.
9. Hoping that the sound would warn her lover of his imminent capture, she shot herself.
10. He was mortally wounded when his axe was deflected as he was chopping down a tree.

# Hitler Wouldn't Have a Chance

*THE PROVINCIAL LADY IN WARTIME.* By E. M. Delafield. New York: Harper & Bros. 1940. 249 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

ALTHOUGH I have had the pleasure of knowing Elizabeth Delafield for a good many years, I have never asked her precisely how she is related to the Provincial Lady. Their experiences have always been oddly identical . . . they even grow old and keep young together, and the Provincial Lady's children bear in number and age a curious resemblance to Elizabeth's: but no one who knows that author can possibly believe that she and her admirably produced Lady are the same. If they were is it conceivable that Elizabeth Delafield (it is true that she can, in applying for work, use her married name of Dashwood . . . but even so!) would ever have been allowed near any kind of community war-work? The Provincial Lady is different, rather silent (except after two glasses of sherry), easily intimidated, slow to retort, meek, even a little mouselike, nervous about her clothes, her appearance, her competence. Miss Delafield—well she proved what she could do in the way of sardonic criticism of silly women, self-important in war-work, in her novel about voluntary workers in the war of 1914-1918; and here, with less acerbity, more in amusement than in anger, she skins them again.

There is a female commandant of a canteen in the Adelphi who, now that this book is published, can really do nothing except live permanently gas-masked in a friendly air-raid shelter, while the elderly charmer of sixty-five, Pussy Winter-Gammon or Granny Bo-Peep, will regret that she was the life and soul of the party quite so vociferously, will be sorry that she was quite so boastful of her intimacy with the great.

From this it may be guessed that black-outs, air-raid alarms, income-tax, government inefficiency, Jacks and Jills in office, have failed to curb the spirit of the Provincial Lady. If Hitler comes to England, he had better avoid Devonshire, where, in the Provincial Lady's village, the general opinion is that "we've got to show him"; and he will get no further into Londoner's hearts when the cleaner of the Adelphi canteen sums up the Cockney opinion in the judgment "the trouble with Hitler is that he's such



From "The Provincial Lady in Wartime."

"The Provincial Lady tells of the queer people she met."

a fidget." Certainly the provinces and London, all England's conduct of the war so far as the Provincial Lady sees it, would give Hitler worse fidgets than ever. She is not at all afraid to expose firmly the muddle many things are in, or were. She first heard that when Hugh Walpole offered his services as an author, he was asked to fill in a form, to state "his qualifications, where educated, to which periodicals he had contributed, also names of any books he may ever have had published"; it is said that this form was sent to Sir Hugh by an official of the Ministry of Information who had, before September 1929, earned a modest pittance as a literary agent in London. The Provincial Lady had luck with her "dumplings," as children sent from the great towns to the country have been called; so when Aunt Blanche invited herself to stay, the Lady left her to look after Robert and the house, and came to seek work in London. "Ah! . . . well you can Stand By"—was the standard answer; so she stood, with Serena Browne and other friends and acquaintances, and, amid under unceasing blare of radio, phonographs, and female chat, fed soldiers and constables and nurses in the great caverns under the Savoy. And here, in a running account from September to November, the Provincial Lady tells us of the queer people she met, the odd things she saw, the toilsome visits to pompous officials in labyrinthine buildings, and her success, at last, in getting work, in being told on the 21st of November that "her services as a writer are required."

Well, in this book she has already done a very good bit of war-work: for it displays the good-temper, the determination, and the humor of a people whom even their own officials can't rattle: so what chance has Hitler?

# Young Barbarians

*WINTER TERM.* By John Harriman. New York: Howell, Soskin & Co. 1940. 373 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THIS is an American boarding-school novel, from the point of view of an intelligent young Master, and also from the point of view of the Third Formers in dormitory and common room. The author went to St. Marks. It might be St. Marks; St. Pauls, Concord; St. George's; Groton, any of the swank and snobbish prep schools. No matter what kind of school they go to, boys are apt to develop the same propensities. They can be about as loathsome at a certain age in any environment. But the kind of loathsomeness differs. Always the bullying and persecution of the weak has its place. A boy as dictator would giggle at the rights of small nations. In Mr. Harriman's story there are two principal butts. One of them, a physical weakling, is persecuted by the most gross insults being leveled at his mother. The other is thought to be a Jew, and almost starts an anti-Semitic riot. The boys genially endeavor to crucify him.

That sounds quite horrible. It is not so horrible as it sounds, because of the witless and random manner in which boys go about these things. They have very little realization of what they are actually doing. Some thing just occurs to them. The problem of the Masters is to prevent these things, while they know very little about what is really going on. The prejudices of the parents, in this case moneyed parents of a not very high grade of intelligence, condition the conduct of the boys.

Every man can recall the kind of thing that went on at school. Mr. Harriman does not exaggerate the picture. He has a remarkable grasp of boy nature, how boys think and how they feel. He knows the various types. He is a realist who writes of what he knows, and endeavors not to load the dice. He has written one of the best stories of American schoolboy life, with an entirely adult approach, that I, for one, have ever read. Never has the misery of a persecuted boy been better described, and the humors of the tale—such as Sturgis's flier into literature—are memorable. The terrifying thing about the book does not lie, after all, with the young barbarians. It is what such a school makes of the Masters, who should really be doing something with the minds and temperaments of the foolish young, that is quietly appalling. Because it seems so entirely natural that they do less than nothing at all.