

tions to meet an invasion, for secrecy was one of their most valuable weapons at that desperate juncture. Although by grace of the "miracle of Dunkirk" the greater part of the British Expeditionary Force had been brought home, it was disorganized and virtually unarmed.

So a brief but extraordinary chapter in the history of Britain passed almost unnoticed by the world at large. Mr. Fleming has exhumed it from the records and memories in which it lay buried, and with great skill has enabled us to relive the halcyon days of the Home Guard, when the Mid-Devon Hunt, armed with shotguns and proudly sporting the brassards signifying their military status, patrolled the moors to guard against airborne invaders; when church bells were silent and road signs vanished; and when the British tried, without much success, to set the sea on fire.

On the German side, Mr. Fleming's account is based largely on the captured military documents concerning *Seelöwe* (Sealion), and the diaries and postwar writings of some of the surviving participants such as General Franz Halder, at that time Chief of the Army General Staff. Especially enlightening are the chapters on Hitler's conceptions and outlook after the Fall of France, as it dawned on him that the British were not going to capitulate, and he confronted the knotty problem of what he should do next.

EXCELLENT as these sections are, Mr. Fleming does not paint the German picture with the sure touch that is so manifest in his treatment of the British scene. Perhaps this is the necessary result of the book's boundaries in time and space. The British side of the story is, after all, much the simpler. After Dunkirk and the French capitulation, the British leaders faced no agonizing strategic issues, for their resources were so small that they had no range of choice. They could only steel themselves to endure the blows that were about to fall.

For the Germans, in contrast, everything depended on decisions of ultimate strategy. How could the powerful but ill-balanced Wehrmacht be used to induce or force Britain to make peace, and thus bring the war to a successful conclusion? "Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war," said Churchill to the Commons on the day France sued for an armistice. But Hitler faced that fact with the greatest reluctance; for months he toyed with rosy hopes of a capitulation. This self-indulgence may well have been the salvation of England and the

Allied cause, for it stayed Hitler's hand and gave the British a breathing spell at the moment when they were most vulnerable.

ILL-INFORMED, emotional, desultory, and prone to wishful thinking, Hitler was incapable of strategic leadership. Nor did any Great Captains emerge from among the professionally competent generals, for their range of vision was too limited. The Germans were unprepared for an invasion of England, because no one had ever thought about it. In 1937, Goering and Udet had decided to do without long-range four-motored bombers. The Navy had always been a poor relation, and half of it was lost in Norway before the main campaign in the West began. The British Army was allowed to escape from Dunkirk. Despite all these blunders, there were a few weeks in June and July of 1940 when the British were so weak that the Germans might have been able to get a foothold in the islands and, once ashore, there would have been nothing to stop them.

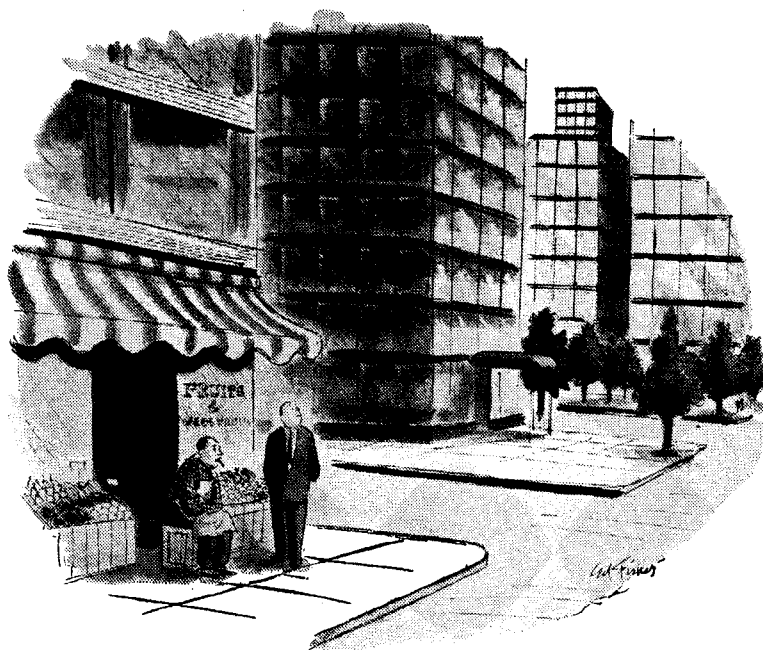
In a book about a planned military operation which was never undertaken, the might-have-beens are perforce the climax of the story. "No one can say for certain that Hitler would have won the war if he had carried out the invasion, or that his failure to carry it out made his defeat inevitable," Mr. Fleming cautions us, but he concludes that this failure "left in the hands of his enemies the tools with which they laid the foundations of his ruin, and without those tools, even though it is possible to

proclaim a blind faith in Hitler's ultimate downfall, it is not possible to reconstruct the circumstances in which it could have been brought about."

In that summer of 1940, Hitler was on the verge of conquests the undoing of which would have taken years and, if Allied resistance had continued, would have extended World War II deep into the atomic age. We are indeed fortunate that the consequences remain in the realm of speculation.

DULY NOTED: "At Whatever Cost," by R. W. Thompson (Coward-McCann, \$3.50), uses official records, including von Rundstedt's report to Hitler, to reconstruct a narrative of the Dieppe raid, which cost more than 65 per cent British casualties. Full of personal reminiscences of the combatants, Mr. Thompson's story reads like a highly dramatic novel, yet presents the tactical details with exceptional clarity. —THOMAS E. COONEY.

"The O.S.S. and I," by William J. Morgan (Norton, \$3.75), offers an almost complete armchair course in the technique of spying, sabotage, and waging guerilla warfare. The author, a Ph.D. in psychology from Yale, tested and screened candidates in a British spy school, then wangled an assignment for himself with the Maquis in France, organizing and commanding a bunch of cut-throat saboteurs and ambushers at the time of the Normandy invasion. He tells his story with verve and reasonable (Continued on page 38)



"I'm licked in this neighborhood—everyone's growing his own!"

FICTION



—From the book.

"A man examines his life and seeks to explain himself to himself."

A Look in the Mirror

"Coup de Grace," by **Marguerite Yourcenar** (translated by Grace Frick and the author. Farrar, Straus & Cudahy. 151 pp. \$3), a novel by the author of *"Hadrian's Memoirs,"* is the autobiographically told story of a young soldier who finds it impossible to return a girl's love.

By Ben Ray Redman

AMERICAN readers of Madame Yourcenar's *"Hadrian's Memoirs,"* so beautifully translated by its author and Grace Frick, will take up *"Coup de Grace"* with lively expectations. But, if they come to it with the hope of matching the literary experience provided by the earlier translation, they will be disappointed. *"Coup de Grace"* is a far less substantial book than *"Hadrian's Memoirs."* It is less ripe in wisdom, less mature in expression, less subtle and various in its psychological insights, less rich in narrative interest, less comprehensive in its scope.

All this may be due, in part, to the fact that in the one book the author is probing the mind of a great and fascinating Roman emperor, who inherited an empire that was a world, while in the other book she is probing the mind of a young man, unknown to history, who is shallow,

egotistical, even repellent. But more important, as a key to the differences between these two works of fiction, is the fact that *"Coup de Grace,"* although it has just now been put into English, was actually written more than ten years before *"Hadrian's Memoirs."* During those years Marguerite Yourcenar developed greatly, and elegantly, as a literary artist.

Yet it is obvious that these "autobiographical" narratives are from the same hand, for they exhibit likenesses as well as differences. In each a man examines his life and seeks to explain himself to himself—and to others. Hadrian, feeling that he is nearing the end of the road, begins to write a letter to his adopted grandson, Marcus Aurelius; the letter turns into "the written meditation of a sick man who holds audience with his memories."

ERICK VON LHOMOND, wounded in Franco's service during the Spanish Civil War, finds himself at five o'clock one rainy morning in the railway station at Pisa, waiting with some companions for the train that will take him back to Germany; he begins to tell the story of his experience while fighting with the White Russians against the Bolsheviks in the Baltic province of Kurland, and his story becomes a revelation of the kind of man he is.

Erick, like Hadrian, is given to restraint and understatement; when he deals with passion he does so dispassionately. His manner, like Hadrian's, is grave. His story, like the Roman's, has the classic virtues of sobriety and economy, and a remarkable evenness of emphasis. Indeed, the modulations of the narrative tone are hardly perceptible.

In *"Hadrian's Memoirs,"* it will be remembered, there was no dialogue at all; in *"Coup de Grace"* there are only a few lines of conversation. Finally, while we are looking for similarities, it is interesting to note that both Hadrian and Erick are homosexuals. The one loves Antinous, the Bithynian. The other loves his cousin, Conrad, heir to the Baltic Counts of Reval.

It is because Erick loves Conrad that he is unable to return the passionate love of Conrad's sister, Sophie; and it is upon the hinge of Erick's inability to love Sophie that the tragedy of *"Coup de Grace"* revolves.

The scene of the drama is Conrad's ancestral home, Kratovitsy, "in a backwoods region of Kurland, near what used to be the old frontier between Russia and Germany." Here Erick and Conrad have spent many happy boyhood days; here, after the end of the First World War, in which they were just too young to fight, they find themselves together once again.

The old, vast house has become a command post for the White forces, but Sophie and an aged aunt are still living there, two women among many men. In the midst of sporadic clashes between Whites and Reds Sophie's passion flowers, and is bitterly blighted by Erick's act of rejection. The final act of the tragedy would be insufferably melodramatic, were it not for the gravity of the author's treatment of it.

In a prefatory note Madame Yourcenar says that *"Coup de Grace"* "relates a true story, derived from the oral account of the principal character concerned," and that in it she has wished to present "a self-portrait, as it were, of a certain type of soldier of fortune; international, and such as is known in our time." What she has done, coldly, dryly, is to draw the likeness of an absolute egotist whose character has been warped by sexual inversion. In Erick we can believe; it is harder to believe in Sophie, while Conrad is only a name. Interesting as it is for its own sake, *"Coup de Grace"*—an almost pure example of the *roman démeublé*—is even more interesting as a precursor of *"Hadrian's Memoirs."*