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## Talk With Mr. Phillips

By LEWIS NICHOLS

**D**ESPITE warming up pitches by a couple of hurricanes bearing pretty names, the telephone connection with Kossuth, Miss., was clear. Yes, said a quiet, leisurely voice, it guessed its owner could be called a "Southern novelist," but hoped that insular term wouldn't last forever. No, although Oxford is but eighty miles away, the sage of Yoknapatawpha County had been met but once, that briefly.

Yes, the publication day of a new book might well find any novelist in New York, but this time important local politics intervened. No, there wasn't much of interest to report except maybe—very tentative, this—the best beagle pack in northern Mississippi has as co-owner and co-trainer, Thomas Hal Phillips.

To get on with the book in order to work the dogs, "The Loved and the Unloved" is Mr. Phillips' fourth novel—fifth, if you count one published in England, not yet here. He is a little mournful about this locally missing member, for it is long, and writing it consumed much time, and a Guggenheim fellowship. All five have been about the South, however, thus giving their cue to dust jacket *litterateurs*, and to Mr. Phillips a slight crick in the neck.

"Sure, they've all been set here," he said. "But I don't think of people being Southern or Northern or Western at all.

"Probably a 'Southern novel' is a matter of exaggerated setting. But conditions down this way are changing, thus so will the setting. There have been great changes in the last two years. The Supreme Court decision [desegregation of schools] has had a very great effect, and there've been other things. Eventually people will have to quit calling us 'Southern novelists,' and I'll be pleased. It's too limiting, let alone being incorrect."

**R**EGARDLESS of trade descriptions, Mr. Phillips, himself, definitely can be called of the South. Now 35, he was born on the farm where he lives. Kossuth is near Corinth and has a population of either 238 or 226, pending on whether you take its citizen's word or that of the commercial atlas. It is in Alcorn County, near the Tennessee border, or a bit northeast of Mr. Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha.

Following high school—"played football there, but no one ever heard of me"—Mr. Phillips went to Mississippi State and then into the Navy. Afterward he got his master's degree at Alabama, and from

'48 to '50 taught creative writing at S. M. U. Two novels were written there—"The Sitterweed Path" and "The Golden Lie." A Fulbright Fellowship yielded "Search For a Hero," '50-'51; "Kangaroo Follow" (this is England's own) came from the Guggenheim; "The Loved and the Unloved" emerged from the Kossuth study.

As to a writer basing books on experience, Mr. Phillips says not in this late case anyway. In the novel, the figure of the executioner sounds like someone who perhaps stalked the halls of the Alcorn County jail. Not at all. Mr. Phillips once had a list of executioners' fees, but lost his notes, thereby losing even that last touch with definite actuality. The executioner is a creation, so, as it inadvertently turned out, are his wages.

"IT'S all fiction, I'm afraid," he said. "Remember Max (leading character) wants to be a pitcher for the Giants? Strictly fictional. Myself, I'm a Cardinal fan and go to St. Louis when I can to see them play. Giants—second choice at best."

The study has been mentioned. Every author should have a view from the window and this is what Mr. Phillips sees—"a field of cotton, one of corn, a pasture for beef cattle, maybe 80 acres all told, two tenant houses, all seen from a knoll in rolling country."

From this study, too, he lately has been fraternally engaged in politics. His brother, Rubel L., has been campaigning for nomination as Public Service Commissioner of the state's Northern District, with a run-off primary scheduled for Aug. 23. Since the book's publication date was the 24th, the returns and reviews should have been coming in at about the same time, making an interesting day of it at Kossuth.

"The Republicans? They had their primary," Mr. Phillips observed.

Now, to the beagles. There are thirty-eight in the pack, and Mr. Phillips and a neighbor own them together. They are trained for hunting, and down the wire went a typical damyankee gaffe—"rabbits?"

"Deer," corrected Mr. Phillips quietly. "In winter, we go a couple of times a week. There're good places 100 miles one way, 150 the other. But to make up for time off, I have to work pretty hard the rest of the year. I'm working on a book now. Setting—I'm not sure. Maybe the South, maybe not. But working."

So that beagles and Southern novelists can go out in the winter-day sun . . .



Thomas Hal Phillips.