

ture I really don't know." This is not self-abasement but simply a refusal to dupe or be duped by herself or others. She is suspicious of all myths and most of all of the Sagan myth. Her stardom leaves her cold, and when she said recently that she didn't care whether or not her latest novel was a success she really meant it.

In this mixture of lucidity and indifference Miss Sagan is most closely akin to her characters. They are not apathetic, but they demand little from life and know from the start that love, friendship, "etc." are mere interludes disturbing the normal state of solitude. They dislike big words, and the future holds little for them. In a recently published "Letter from Switzerland" Miss Sagan wrote that she would probably go right on for the next forty years shuttling annually between Paris, the sea, Normandy, and Switzerland. "It's trivial, but it's very comforting."

Fortunately, she has one thing her characters lack: a typewriter. And for all her diffidence she cannot conceal her deep love for her craft. Others of her generation have tried to convey the same emptiness, but Miss Sagan has found a style that fits. The restraint, the absence of color, the simplicity of detail, the preference for the general word, for *fleur* rather than any particular flower, all the more negative traits of the classical French style she has borrowed to create that muted tone, so unmistakably hers.

Miss Sagan has finished her first play, "Un Château en Suède," now in rehearsal at the Atelier Theatre. It is a departure after her four novels, and Paris will soon decide whether "la petite Sagan" is capable of a dramatic style. Does she care?

—L. C. BREUNIG.

#### FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 873

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 873 will be found in the next issue.

OLD MCDBLD WHY, PAY

QCRWY RYEYDCBSPF

SH C BSOYHCQYD.

—RYLDRY CKY.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 872  
Most of us spend a great deal of time just letting off esteem.

—AUTHOR UNKNOWN.

## To Comprehend if Not Condone

**"Ritual in the Dark," by Colin Wilson** (Houghton Mifflin. 442 pp. \$4.95), a first novel by the young British author of "The Outsider" and "Religion and the Rebel," is a crime story with a philosophical difference. David Dempsey, novelist and reviewer, is a frequent contributor to the Saturday Review.

By David Dempsey

COLIN WILSON has written an absorbing, somewhat puzzling novel about a modern Jack the Ripper who, legally guilty, is psychologically the victim of a compulsion to kill. To what extent shall he be held morally accountable for his acts?

This, in brief, is the question which the author, after unraveling his story for 435 pages, answers on page 436. The answer, of course, is the one we have known all along, but it is to Mr. Wilson's credit as a dialectician that he is able to keep us continually interested, and a bit annoyed: "Ritual in the Dark" is a slippery sort of book which, in the end, leaves us reassuringly in command of the obvious.

Like all good dilemmas, the one posed here is well equipped with horns: Gerard Sorme, a young English writer, comes to know three men, each of whom could conceivably be the sex murderer who is terrorizing London. One is the batty old man upstairs in the rooming house; another, an impoverished artist, has a penchant for drawing little girls; the third is an admitted homosexual with sadistic tendencies. Like Sorme and a girl friend (a Jehovah's Witness), they are outsiders who "want to isolate the modern sense of dispossession. The sense of being left in the cold. Of not having enough of life."

On this sentiment Mr. Wilson invites us to comprehend, if not condone, the compulsion-motivated killer. "Consider that it is better to feel yourself a sinner than to feel as if you have no identity," one of the characters remarks. And again: "Crime becomes a gesture of disgust, an act of defiance, but it could spring out of a deeper perception than most men possess." Young Sorme is about to buy this bill of goods (it is part

of the romantic rationale which sees neurotic protest as a special form of insight) when the full horror of the crime is brought home by the sight of one of the mutilated victims. The killer becomes known to him. Even so—and this is the moral crux of the action—Sorme is willing to become an accessory after the fact. He arranges to have the murderer committed to an institution, to satisfy humanity rather than society; to *finesse* the situation, so to speak, so that in the showdown, although the dilemma remains, everyone sits a little more comfortably on his own horn.

Despite its faults (they are chiefly matters of contrivance) the book is well worth reading for anyone who wants to see what can be done by cross-breeding suspense fiction with the novel of purpose. In finishing the book, however, I found myself compulsively addressing Mr. Wilson with three questions of my own: (1) Do the English still drink as much tea as the characters in his novel? (2) Has he ever met a live Jehovah's Witness? (3) Does he really believe that "X" was capable of committing all those murders?

**LABOR PAINS OF THE UNIONS:** Two determined and calculating men are the protagonists of "Sir Boss" (Faversham House, \$5), Ralph Bushnell Potts's fictional documentary in which some characters recall certain labor leaders, a U.S. Senator, as well as politicians and businessmen in Washington State. One of them, Henry Spilk, a descendant of the Pioneers (who are comparable with the First Families of Virginia), is disbarred for tampering with a child witness in a bastardy case. A sensitive person, this scars him for life. He becomes a bitter ascetic, indifferent and contemptuous of the world around him, and—at the dawn of the New Deal—a Roosevelt hater. He cannot practise law, but he becomes an expert in the early legislation that stimulated and encouraged a rash of unions in the early Thirties.

It amuses him to toy around with these laws. His interest is not in trade unionism, but rather in a mischievous exploitation of them. But he needs a front man, a tough guy, an enforcer; and, luckily, the unwed mother turns up with an iceman who has been an amateur boxer. Vic Rock is shrewd, learns

his lessons, and finds his way around very quickly. With Spilk's coaching he undertakes the job of organizing the goon squads and muscle men who go through Seattle beating up the drivers, forcing them into a union, and then turning upon the employers to wreck their establishments unless they sign contracts with the Teamsters Union.

Spilk is capable of destroying Rock at any time, but it suits his perverse sense of humor to push him onward and upward—to observe him as he becomes a public figure, associating with the best people, exploiting the union, dealing with the Chamber of Commerce and the Taxpayer's Association, looked upon as one of Seattle's leading citizens. Spilk even rigs it so that his boxer is invited to the White House.

Republican Old Guard readers will chortle at Ralph Bushnell Potts's description of the Era of Wonderful Nonsense, both in Washington, D.C., and Washington State, when a rash of labor unions breaks out across the country.

Spilk cannot resist meddling in the Seattle Newspaper Guild strike. A union leader, he imports union longshoremen and dock workers to break both the strike and the heads of the strikers—one of the meanest and most miserable episodes in the book. Despite the author's disclaimer that this is presented as truth told in the form of fiction, Guildsmen will burn at the double cross in which a big union was used to wipe out a new and struggling one for the benefit of publishers, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Taxpayer's Association.

The author knows his way around labor laws, old and new. He writes with authority. In addition to his presentation and analysis of the disgraceful era when labor was enduring the pains of birth and unions were cutting each other down, Potts has written a good novel. His characters, whether fictional or real, are interesting and entertaining.

—JOSEPH F. DINNEEN.

**MAKE-BELIEVE IN ELBA:** Every worthwhile novel should be an entertainment but it should be something besides entertainment. For seven-eighths of its length Oriol Malet's *"The Horses of the Sun"* (Putnam, \$3.95) is an excellent entertainment; then it becomes something more and we see why the author, though writing at different levels of seriousness, has kept it mainly on a light note, for the storms which make the climax—the meteorological one and the emotional—would be much less effective without the preceding sunshine.

The sunshine, which is one of the chief characters in the book, is that of the island of Elba, where the Contessa di Montefiore has two villas in

which to indulge the unpredictable caprices of her temperament. We have met her in fiction before: the rich woman who is a law unto herself—rude, shrewd, hot-tempered, fascinating, by turns a fairy godmother and a tyrant; but Miss Malet makes her more amusing if not more credible, than such people usually are.

The Contessa employs as her secretary the English ex-mistress of an Italian conjurer, now dead. Their nine-year-old daughter, Liz, is not exactly the juvenile delinquent so dear to the popular imagination of today; but she, no less than the Contessa, lives in a world of private fantasy in which fetishistic objects play a large part, and she has learned from her conjurer-father the technique of taking people's possessions, their wrist-watches, etc., without their observing. This she practises as an art, but the nuns of the convent in Florence call it stealing and send her back to her mother (already in the Contessa's employ) with a stiff letter. The Contessa undertakes to exorcize Liz—who is as emotional and mercurial as herself—by means of an ingenious game which helps to give the story its air of unreality, of playing at life. This, if it does not charm, may irritate the reader until he discovers that in Elba, at any rate, such goings-on are not condoned, and conventional morality demands its sacrifices.

There are a good many characters: Connie, Liz's mother, who though by no means strait-laced, is upset by her

daughter's thieving ways; a professor once dear to the Contessa, and his son Pascal, who is very dear to Liz (I thought that her passion for him, besides being precocious, wasn't quite convincing). There is also a beautiful, cold English girl, who engages Pascal's affections; a visiting Canadian professor and his wife, who are great fun, as well as various natives of Elba, who behave in an uninhibited Latin fashion—like Ine Alfonso's donkey, who is sick after eating 150 geraniums. Puck is busy distributing love charms during this Midsummer Night's Dream.

The story is well constructed, well written, and well told, unless the epilogue, which ties up too many threads neatly but rather improbably, is a mistake. The tragi-comic, inconclusive ending with its corollary that life, after all, is not a game of make-believe, would have been esthetically more satisfying. But, for all its occasional irresponsibility and descent into farce, the book is rich in human nature (Pascal's reaction to the loss of the Contessa's boat is a good example), and its evocation of the Elba scene is, to say the least, captivating and nostalgic.

—L. P. HARTLEY.

**ITALIAN AFTERIMAGE:** Evocations of an Italian boyhood and youth comprise *"Our Last Family Countess & Related Stories"* (Harper, \$3.75). Of their genesis the author, Antonio Barolini, now settled in this country, says: "Because I  
(Continued on page 74)



## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

### CALLING ALL CALLINGS

Novelists and playwrights in their choice of titles frequently identify the leading character by telling what he is or does and letting it go at that. Helene Nitzsche of Maquoketa, Iowa, has selected a group of these label-titles and asks you to assign the correct authors. Answers on page 26.

- |                         |                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| (1) Ben Jonson          | ( ) "The Riding Master" |
| (2) Anne Powers         | ( ) "The Ironmaster"    |
| (3) Joseph Caruso       | ( ) "The Professor"     |
| (4) H. C. Branner       | ( ) "The Alchemist"     |
| (5) Bessie Breuer       | ( ) "The Financier"     |
| (6) Gabrielle Roy       | ( ) "The Dollmaker"     |
| (7) James Aldridge      | ( ) "The Diplomat"      |
| (8) Harriette Arnow     | ( ) "The Mapmaker"      |
| (9) F. M. Dostoevsky    | ( ) "The Cashier"       |
| (10) Charlotte Brontë   | ( ) "The Gambler"       |
| (11) Theodore Dreiser   | ( ) "The Actress"       |
| (12) Matthew G. Lewis   | ( ) "The Juggler"       |
| (13) Anthony Trollope   | ( ) "The Priest"        |
| (14) Michael Blankfort  | ( ) "The Warden"        |
| (15) Frank G. Slaughter | ( ) "The Monk"          |