

Evil Deeds Shrouded in Silence

"The Sins of the Fathers," by **Christian Geissler**, translated by **James Kirkup** (Random House. 266 pp. \$3.95), follows a young German physicist's attempts to learn the fate of the Jewish family that once owned the villa housing his laboratory. Joseph P. Bauke teaches German literature at Columbia University and is assistant editor of the *Germanic Review*.

By JOSEPH P. BAUKE

"WE ARE searching for fathers who will think with us about their past ways and the ways we are to go in the future," says Klaus Köhler, the angry young protagonist of this novel, which caused a lively debate when it was published in Germany. Christian Geissler is one of the few German writers to take up the problem of guilt in the massacre of the Jews, and he goes about his probing of the murderers with a sense of commitment depressingly rare in contemporary German fiction. Unfortunately, good intentions alone do not produce good novels, and it is easy to find fault with Geissler's writing. The dialogue is often strained, the characters too black and white, and the plot improbable. The translation, too, could stand improvement. But somehow the propelling ardor of the youthful author triumphs over these shortcomings, and the book, with its frequent references to actual incidents in postwar Germany, is as convincing as a prosecutor's account.

The hero is a physicist determined to find out what happened to the Jewish family that owned the villa in which his research institute is now housed. Confronting townspeople from all walks of life with his searching questions, he has to cut through a dross of sentiment, self-pity, and arrogance which covers the memories of evil deeds and has led to a complete repression of guilt. *Autobahn* and Iron Crosses are the only links to the past, and the material comforts of a flourishing economy are lulling even the new generation into a state of mental apathy similar to that from which Hitler sprang. It is this chaotic situation

with which the book is most concerned.

As perturbing as the silence of the many is the attitude of one who talks. He is Köhler's colleague Steinhoff, a Communist who has no qualms whatever about the violent death of the Jews. Their murder, he argues, was only a grisly interlude preceding the general *Götterdämmerung* of capitalism. The Jews were as bourgeois as their Aryan neighbors, and history ordained their fate. Perhaps Herr Geissler should have let his hero look for less patrician victims.

The ending is symbolic, if heavy-handed: Köhler finds that the leader of the SA bullies who did away with the owners of the villa now lives in the same apartment house as he. Another tenant, the only surviving son of the destroyed family, has married a gentile and assumed an alias.

Forced into hiding under the Nazis, he continues to live away from the mainstream of events after the war is over. He too is silent, unable to cope with the past.

Silence, according to Herr Geissler, is the worst sin of the fathers. This book should provoke them to speak. The sons, wherever they are, will also profit by reading it.



Christian Geissler—"propelling ardor."

The Little Joys of a Party Girl

"The Wonderful Clouds," by **Francoise Sagan**, translated by **Anne Green** (Dutton. 128 pp. \$3), sketches the jealous scenes and recumbent reconciliations of a philandering young woman and her masochistic husband. Laurent LeSage is professor of French literature at Pennsylvania State College.

By LAURENT LESAGE

WHEN this novel came out in France last year, Siné summed up its action in a series of exceedingly funny cartoons (*L'Express*, June 16). Josée, of "Those Without Shadows," has separated herself from her idle-rich companions of the Sixteenth Arrondissement to marry Alan, an idle-rich American, very handsome and very neurotic. Particularly he is fiercely jealous. Siné's first drawing shows them on the Florida beach with another couple. Alan is masochistically trying to provoke a situation between Josée and Brandon. Josée thwarts her husband's plan but deceives him with a sailor. Emotional scene followed by reconciliation in bed.



Francoise Sagan—"world weariness."

Returning to New York, Josée runs into Bernard, an ex-lover. Alan very ugly about Bernard, but the two men get drunk together while Josée hops a plane to spend ten days alone in an unheated château in Normandy. Then Paris and the old round of parties, at one of which Alan turns up. Reconciliation at the Ritz, in bed. Alan becomes an overnight success as a painter while he has

Josée followed by a private detective. At the party given by his patroness, Josée runs into another former lover. Brief retirement together to their hostess's bathroom. Josée tells Alan all about it. Scene and reconciliation. As Siné puts it, "Ouf!"

I have no doubt that Siné's ridicule is a healthy reaction, and it helps one bear the thought of the thousands of people who will buy this book just to live vicariously. It helps, too, when one thinks of how seriously Miss Sagan herself seemingly takes these characters and of how uncritical most of her critics have been. Yet, although the situations often appear unintentionally ludicrous, the characters wooden, and the language stilted, the book is nevertheless significant and interesting. Moreover, its flaws help make it so.

Françoise Sagan is still a very young writer, and the vision of the world she has is deep-dyed in that world-weariness that afflicts each new generation. Apparently humorless, cynical, obsessed by self, sex, and the meaning of life, she projects, in each of her works, a mood that is eternally adolescent. Only a young person could see Alan and Josée as tragic figures, this weak and moping pair who, in spite of wealth, health, and beauty, find relief from *taedium vitae* only in mutual cruelty and sex. Only a young person could



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write such a beautifully sad statement of their lot on earth: "frail collections of bone, blood and gray matter that snatched little joys and little sorrows from one another before disappearing. . . ."

Miss Sagan has been considered a powerful spokesman for her age: Life can have no meaning lived under the threat of atom bombs. But she speaks more for her age-group than for the age in which she lives. Writers of other times—Chateaubriand, Benjamin Constant, Maurice Barrès—have recorded a precocious disabusal in brief novels of self-analysis alternating with lyrical effusions. Perhaps "The Wonderful Clouds" is not unworthy of being listed with these classics of the *mal du siècle*, which it resembles. Its ring is authentic, with even its naïvetés and gaucheries helping to make it a true expression of youth's view of life. And we can imagine what a parody Siné could have done on any one of its predecessors.

USA

Anti-Buncombe and Humbug

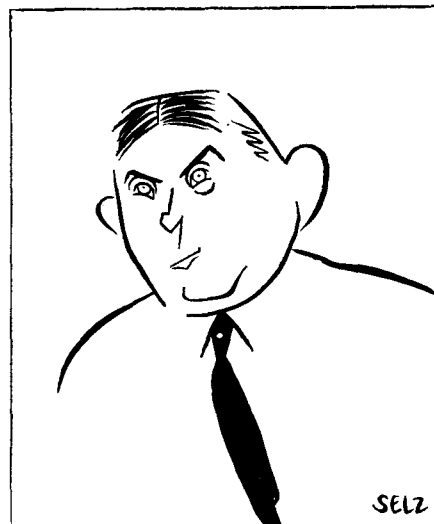
"H. L. Mencken and the American Mercury Adventure," by M. K. Singleton (Duke University Press. 246 pp. \$6), chronicles the ten years during which the most famous of debunkers conducted his war against the "booboisie" in the pages of his own amazing magazine. SR Managing Editor Richard L. Tobin was a staff member of the New York Herald Tribune for nearly a quarter of a century.

By RICHARD L. TOBIN

THE FIRST issue of the fabulous *American Mercury* went to press early in December 1923 and was dispatched to 3,033 founder-subscribers. By Christmas, Henry Louis Mencken, its co-editor, could proudly see on almost any good newsstand the first of the 120 numbers he was to edit during the next decade. The *Mercury* sold at the high price of 50¢ a copy, or \$5 a year: a handsome, worth-while investment for any reader. Its Paris green cover, Elmer Adler's attractive marginal decorations in black, red, and blue, and the new sewn construction that allowed the magazine to open out flat like a book fixed its format for the remainder of Mencken's term. There were 128 pages in the first issue, and in all succeeding issues for the next twelve years.

By January 1924 the small staff was jubilant. Everywhere there were sell-outs and clamorings for more, and Mencken wrote happily to Philip Goodman: "We have word this morning that the subscription department is 670 subscribers behind—that is, behind in entering them up. Knopf has bought 30 new yellow neckties and has taken a place in Westchester County to breed Assyrian wolfhounds." A second, then a third printing were necessary to assuage thirsty readership, and about 15,000 first copies were sold. Eighteen months later the circulation of this remarkable publication was four times that of its initial issue. There it stayed through most of Mencken's long and fruitful editorship; the magazine dwindled to a cliché after he left.

M. K. Singleton's lively work appears to do justice to the Great Man and to the literary mouthpiece that is an ir-



H. L. Mencken—an Iron Chancellor.

revocable part of his legend. However, most un-Menckenlike mistakes occur. (Walter Lippmann's name is misspelled "Lippman" throughout; other editorial boo-boos involve such familiar snares as the "*Ladies' Home Journal*," and "harass" seems to be permanently fixed with two r's just a little bit north of South Carolina.) But over all there is excitement here, beautifully documented and well planned to explain to new generations precisely why the *Mercury* was the brightest star in the golden decade of debunkers. Partly because of Mencken's running attack on "wowers," "Pecksniffs," and "snouters," and partly because of his amazingly vivid vocabulary, the co-editor and his opus were a smash from the start. Mr. Singleton is able to explain why in this rather brief volume—no mean feat a couple of sophisticated generations later.

Mencken was co-editor only until his bitter fight with George Jean Nathan, which ended with Nathan's demotion to the Siberia of "Contributing Editor" quite soon after the *Mercury* was launched. Mencken was intensely German, an editorial Iron Chancellor (he was related to Bismarck) who felt a magazine should be "a dictatorship . . . [It cannot] be run by a committee or a board of editors. A board of editors only means that [it] satisfies the least civilized on the board, generally a woman or a former minister."

While Mencken believed that the