

Filled with Sawdust and Sadness

By Granville Hicks

ALTHOUGH she is only thirty-one, Shirley Ann Grau has fashioned a shapely career. Her work began to appear in magazines almost ten years ago, and in 1955 she published a volume of stories, "The Black Prince," which received and deserved more attention than collections of short stories ordinarily get. In 1958 came "The Hard Blue Sky," a long novel, loose in structure but held together by her ability to create atmosphere. Now in "The House on Coliseum Street" (Knopf, \$3.50) she has produced a short, tightly organized novel that makes its point with great precision.

In "The Hard Blue Sky" Miss Grau portrays a rather primitive people who live by a code that has been handed down to them by tradition. In "The House on Coliseum Street" she is dealing with sophisticated characters who have no code whatever.

The central character is a twenty-year-old girl, Joan Mitchell, who lives with her mother and a slightly younger sister in the house on Coliseum Street, which is located in what was once a wealthy section of New Orleans. The mother, Aurelie, we are told, has had five husbands and a daughter by each of them. (A later statement seems to contradict these statistics, but that doesn't matter.) The three younger daughters are away at school or camp during most of the novel, and hence don't clutter up either Aurelie's life or the story. Aurelie's present husband, who is husband in name only, is drinking himself to death, for the most part very quietly, in an apartment of his own on the third floor. Her first husband, Joan's father, was the son of Italian immigrants, and, having become wealthy in some dubious fashion, he made a generous settlement on Aurelie and also left Joan some money.

Aurelie has a considerable concern for appearances, but it is clear that she has lived and intends to go on living exactly as she pleases. Doris, the second daughter, doesn't give a damn for appearances. She likes tennis, dancing, drink, and sex, and indulges her tastes with complete abandon. Joan, on the other hand, is moody and self-pitving, but she is no less egocentric than Doris. Doris speaks of "a house full of bitches," and she has reason. Joan, incidentally,

suggests that Doris is a good deal less happy than she tries to appear to be, and this is probably true.

In the opening section of the book we realize that Joan is recovering from an abortion, and Miss Grau then goes back to tell what happened. Joan had a steady, a lawyer by the name of Fred Aleman, but, as she told her inquiring mother, they were careful. But then there was Michael Kerr, a college instructor, who was one of her sister's many boy friends. Joan's first date with him was unsatisfactory, but later they met casually and unexpectedly, and they were not careful. Aurelie arranged the abortion with her usual efficiency.

After the abortion Joan becomes more self-centered and self-destructive than ever. She broods over the child she might have had, and at one point she even tries to become pregnant again, this time by Fred Aleman. But all the while she is thinking about Michael, and she becomes obsessively jealous, shadowing him and his girl friends. Finally, when she discovers that he is again having an affair with Doris, she takes her revenge.

Early in the story a tramp wanders onto Coliseum Street, and all the housewives, including Aurelie, close their windows and look out from behind the curtains. Joan, on the contrary, watches and listens from an open window. The tramp collapses, and she tries to hear what he is muttering. She watches until the police come for him, and then she goes to look at the place where he had fallen. At the end, after she has done the thing that will destroy Michael, she finds herself at that place, and she thinks of the tramp. What has happened to him? And what will happen to her?

WE HAVE had many novels in recent years about desperate, purposeless young men: for instance, James Leo Herlihy's "All Fall Down," Edward Hoagland's "The Circle Home," and John Updike's "Rabbit, Run." Now Miss Grau has shown us a desperate, purposeless young woman. Her Joan Mitchell is very different from Sabrina Castro in Wallace Stegner's "A Shooting Star" (SR, May 20). Sabrina's values have collapsed, and that is why she is involved in catastrophe. Joan has never had any values, and at the age of twenty she has taken the path

of self-pity and self-destruction. Miss Grau is not concerned to explain Joan's condition, though at least partial explanations do not seem far to seek; she simply wants to show it, and she does show it in all its abysmal horror.

These studies of empty young lives are always depressing, for they raise agonizing questions about the quality of contemporary civilization. In so far, however, as they merely depress, they do not long engage our attention; we feel about them, as we feel about case studies, that they are merely evidences of a problem of whose existence we have always been aware. Miss Grau goes deeper than that. She holds out no hope of redemption for Joan, as Stegner does for Sabrina, and she does not try to make Joan a sympathetic character. She simply renders Joan's state of mind so accurately that we know what it is like to live in her kind of hell.

A few weeks ago (SR, May 13), in writing about Joan Williams's "The Morning and the Evening," I com-



mented on her conscious avoidance of Gothic trappings. Miss Grau, except in one or two early short stories, has also avoided the Gothic mood. "The Hard Blue Sky," to

the extent that it needs to be classified, belongs to the old-fashioned school of regionalism. "The House on Coliseum Street" could be Gothic but isn't: little is made of the house itself, ancestral mansion though it may be; the stepfather on the third floor is a pathetic fellow, with nothing of either terror or mystery; there is no dwelling on the abortion. The book is not Gothic, and it is not even specifically Southern. It is full of the sights and sounds and smells of New Orleans and the surrounding country; that is the kind of writer Miss Grau is. But its essential action could take place anywhere.

To me "The House on Coliseum Street" is not so exciting as "The Hard Blue Sky," but it is a good book for Miss Grau to have written at this point in her career. Her control is perfect, and there isn't a scene that doesn't count. Her senses are acute, and, as I have said, they make their contribution to the texture of the novel, but there are no descriptions for the sake of description. The writing, as always, is wonderfully firm. Miss Grau is not exploring new territory, as she was in some of her stories and in "The Hard Blue Sky," but she has done admirably what she wanted to do, and she has left us with a picture of a young woman that it will be hard to forget.

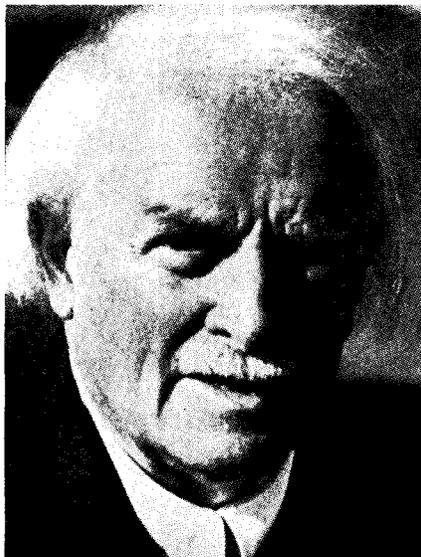
Wonderful Wizard of Wales

"My Father, Lloyd George," by **Richard Lloyd George** (Crown, 240 pp. \$4), discloses in intimate detail the unorthodox private life of the great statesman from Wales. John Clive teaches modern English history at the University of Chicago.

By John Clive

THIS is a strange and sad book. The subject? One of the great British statesmen of this century, the Welsh wizard who played a role analogous to Churchill's in an earlier world war, infusing government and country with energy and the will to victory. The author: Lloyd George's eldest son. One's first thought might well be that here is a belated act of filial piety, nostalgic reminiscences by a devoted son of his father's colorful and heroic exploits and personality. And, indeed, this is certainly one of the threads running through the book: Lloyd George reading "King Lear" by flashes of lightning; Lloyd George producing Biblical quotations "like a squid squirting ink"; Lloyd George galvanizing munitions manufacturers into effective action during World War I; Lloyd George on the golf course, in his orchard, breakfasting with the great at Ten Downing Street, and so forth. All very pleasant and entertaining—but little that is really new and no memorably fresh views of the great figures with whom Lloyd George shared the stage of history. Moreover, the author himself informs us with disarming candor that his facts may be wrong, his places and dates confused.

What, then, was the point of writing the book? "I have tried," the author writes, "to concern myself with truth, with the essence of things, and with those strange, wayward and subtle meanings behind facts." That truth, that essence of things, turns out to be that the author's father was a born and incorrigible philanderer: "He had only one form of recreation, which he followed all the years of his adult life." And the book is largely concerned with the documentation of this statement: from the hushed-up scandal of the child he fathered on a charming widow in Caernarvon while his own wife was expecting her second baby (this would almost certainly have cost him his first



—From the book.

Lloyd George — "He had only one form of recreation."

election to Parliament, had it become known); to the affairs with the "very stylish, perhaps a little flamboyant"

Welsh draper's wife in London and with "Dolores" in Buenos Aires; on to other affairs and other extramarital children until we reach the years of his premature retirement when he surrounded himself with a seraglio of female retainers, including a Hollywood actress who kept making expensive telephone calls to the United States. Lloyd George's wife, in many ways the real heroine of this book, finally left him, having borne with him patiently for many years. And when her gentleness and endurance came to an end, the family broke up as well.

It is really a pathetic story; and one which, making due allowance for the author's justified bitterness and less justified archness of tone, has the ring of truth. Future historians and biographers will have to take account of the revelation of this dimension of Lloyd George's personality, will have to use it in their estimate of the character and achievements of the man whom Lord Keynes described as "this goat-footed bard, this half-human visitor to our age from the hag-ridden magic and enchanted woods of Celtic antiquity." The author may well be right when he calls Lloyd George "probably the greatest natural Don Juan in the history of British politics." Nonetheless, one cannot help being somewhat taken aback at finding a septuagenarian son cast in the role of Leporello.

Commentary on the Commentator

"Don't Let Them Scare You: The Life and Times of Elmer Davis," by **Roger Burlingame** (Lippincott, 341 pp. \$5.95), commemorates a great reporter whose perceptive comments gave meaning to the news. Veteran Washington correspondent Ernest K. Lindley claims two things in common with Davis: birth in Indiana and a Rhodes scholarship.

By Ernest K. Lindley

AS ONE of the most civilized and civilizing publicists of our time, Elmer Davis deserves to be perpetuated, with all of his sanity, salt, and courage. His legions of admirers, who must include almost every subscriber to the *Saturday Review*, will rejoice in this biography. Roger Burlingame gives us the flesh and blood as well as the spirit of Davis probably as well as could be done in the printed word.

Davis should live through his own inimitable words. But those were scattered among hundreds of articles, essays, reviews, broadcasts, and letters (plus novels and short stories). Most were topical. Mr. Burlingame has placed a judicious selection of Davis's observations against the background that makes them meaningful. Happily, these include quotations from Godfrey G. Gloom, the most delightful political diagnostician since Mr. Dooley, as well as from Davis's writings for *Harper's*, the *Saturday Review*, and other magazines in the Twenties and Thirties, the broadcasts starting in September 1939, which broadened his influence, his postwar editorial broadcasts, and the two slender volumes which were his powerful final testaments: "But We Were Born Free" and "Two Minutes Till Midnight." The author has also dug into Davis's life, with the help of family, friends, and professional associates, and come up with interesting facts that are new to this reviewer, and probably