A BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL STUDY

OF

RING LARDNER

by

Herman Rudolph Struck

A THESIS

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PREFACE

This study of Ring Lardner has four purposes: to supply a more complete biographical account of him than has been published; to put in one volume the main points of the most important critical estimates of his work; to indicate Lardner's position in the American stream of humor; and to show the contrast between his fiction and his non-fiction.

The biographical section has possibly the most value, inasmuch as the published material on his life seems to have been derived from newspaper articles written immediately after his death. The articles, with perhaps certain exceptions in the Niles Daily Star, uniformly ignore much of his early life. In this study the standard material on Lardner has been considerably supplemented by the personal recollections of his sister, Miss Lena Lardner, by information from the scrapbook she has kept, and by letters and verses Lardner sent to her. In addition, the material available in the Fort St. Joseph Historical Museum and in the Niles library has been used.

As in the case of most humorists, Lardner's recognition as an important literary figure came slowly, and it is not only helpful to students to know who

wrote what about him, but it is also interesting to note the tendency of critics to get on a literary bandwagon in a hurry, whether it is playing the entire tune, or merely the main bars.

Determining Lardner's position in American writing has the value of showing the possible influences in his work. It is obvious that he owed something, if not much, to early purveyors of misspelled humor.

The reason for including a new appraisal of his work is that the critical estimate of Lardner has been based mainly on his fiction; as a consequence, his reputation as a satirist in the tradition of Swift has been firmly set. This convenient neglect of his nonfiction obscures a large part of Lardner's work, and fosters a partially erroneous view of a section of his writing. The following study attempts to remedy that.

Acknowledgement is made to Niles residents for their cooperation, and their willingness to reminisce. Special acknowledgement is also due Miss Lena Lardner, Ring Lardner's sister, whose scrapbook, letters, and personal knowledge of Lardner provided most of the material for the biographical section.

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CHAPTER ONE

BIOGRAPHY

The life of Ringgold Wilmer Lardner was, in many ways, a contrast to the usually accepted estimate of his work. The majority of critics, basing their verdict mainly on his fiction, label Lardner a misanthrope, a savage satirist of people. Clifton Fadiman even goes so far as to say that he hated himself as well as the people he wrote about.[1] Yet much of Lardner's work, and certainly his letters, the harmony of his family life, and the concern which he showed for his four sons, point to a kind, strong, witty personality.

Lardner was born March 6, 1885, in the Lardner house on Bond Street, in Niles, Michigan.[2] He was the youngest of five children, all of whom were talented in either writing or music. His birthplace stands across from the high bank of the St. Joseph river, a pleasant setting that reminds one of vacation days, of cool shade and muddy river banks.

His education was gained by means of tutoring

1. "Ring Lardner and the Triangle of Hate," The Nation, CXXXVI (March 22, 1933), 315.

2. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, Twentieth Century Authors (New York: Wilson, 1942), 790.

until the age of twelve. His tutors were Harry Mansfield, a well-known Niles teacher, and his mother, Lena Bogardus Phillips Lardner. The effect of Lardner's mother on him can hardly be over-estimated. She was gifted in both music and writing, and was an extremely well-read woman, with interests that included the religious and historical as well as the musical and literary. Two published volumes of verse and prose reveal her profound religious feelings, balanced by a light humor. She had the same facility in verse that Lardner had, and the same aptitude for puns that Lardner exhibited in his work. "This Spray of Western Pine," the first of her volumes, tells of a dream in which she visits the dwelling of dead authors:

> 'Ella !' called loud a Philistine;
> But she was not in sight --
> 'I thought it had Ben Hur, I ween
> Your footsteps are so light
> Wallace !' The Sage of Crawfordsville
> Replied 'Just Wheel-er here,
> Hubbard -- she's half way up the hill. . . .[3]

The lines on Theodore Roosevelt, in the same poem, also reveal her punning:

> Till 'Teddy' came, with hasty stride,
> And reached out for his gun;
> 'Oh ! I forgot,' he said (and sighed),
> 'My strenuous life is Dunne.'[4]

The foreword to his mother's second book, Sparks

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3. (New York: Broadway, 1903), p. 4.
4. Ibid.

from the Yule-log, shows the smooth versifying:

> Dreamily watching the firelight's glow
> Weaves my fancy its web of rhyme;
> Blent together the colors grow
> Of Christmas season and summer time.[5]

At the age of twelve the tutoring was abandoned, and Ring entered Niles High School. He took the "Latin Course" and was graduated on June 14, 1901, with a class of sixteen.[6] Apparently his versifying abilities were well-known, because he was chosen to write the class poem. It will be noticed that he was punning respectably even at the age of sixteen:

> Up Learning's ladder, round by round
> We've climbed with many a fall;
> But, through the toil, companionship
> Has made amends for all.
>
> Now from our giddy heights we glance,
> With calm thoughts and serene,
> Once more at those we leave today --
> Our class of sweet sixteen.
>
> I want to take you with me through
> The ranks of our small crowd;
> And, if you'll listen carefully,
> You'll know why we are proud.
>
> Grace, as our goodly president,
> Has served her second year;
> In singing, speaking, poetry,
> She stands without a peer.
>
> Blanche is the sunshine of our class,
> She drives dull care away.
> Her laughing eyes, her smiling face,
> Have gladdened many a day.
>
> Alice, the calm, the dignified,

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5. (New York: Broadway, 1904).

6. From the Lardner collection in the Fort St. Joseph Historical Museum. It includes his high school diploma.

I know we'll ne'er forget;
Her views are wide -- but, best of all,
She is the teacher's pet.

.....

Ruth is a clever, pretty girl,
So everyone remarks,
Yet lives in constant danger -- what ?
The danger of her 'Sparks.'

Will is the pride of all the girls,
The slave of every teacher,
When someone wants a window closed,
She calls on 'Jube,' poor creature.

Clayt is the lad who's in to win,
He is the teachers' boy.
And though at times his face is sad,
His heart is full of 'Joy.'

Gertie has made a record proud,
She seldom failed in class.
She studied hard these last four years
And well deserved to pass.

Bertha, the singer of our class,
How diligent she's been !
She did her share of whispering,
But then that's not a sin.

Bess is the class historian.
That office, well, she'll fill.
She's 'Sortore' set in all her way,
And has an iron 'Will.'

Lawrence is the one who thinks,
He's been our comrade long;
His favorite stone, an 'Opal' bright
He's blest with an 'Arm strong.'

Sweet Genevieve has worked and toiled,
Her honor's justly won,
And every teacher in our school
Will say her work's well 'Dunn.'

And now there's only one remains,
He should have come before;
His name is John, his hopes all lie
In a corner grocery store.

And now, I've mentioned everyone,
I hope no one feels slighted,
But if one does, let him approach,
His wrongs will soon be righted.

At last your poet ends his lay,
He's nothing more to tell,
But leaves the class of nineteen-one
With blessings and farewell.[7]

Except for his education, his boyhood was not unusual. He liked sports, but a slight malformation of one foot made it impossible for him to participate as fully as he would have liked. His primary sport interest was baseball, but his sister states that he also liked tennis and football. At night the recreation was often singing; Ring had a good baritone and liked to use it, and the group he went with would gather at someone's house or on the street and render the popular songs of the day. Judging from his article "What I Ought to of Learnt in High School," the musical street excursions were often received with a minimum of enthusiasm by the neighbors.[8]

His interest in music, which toward the end of his career overshadowed even his interest in writing, was always strong. He was a member of the American Minstrels, a troupe of Niles residents that put on their performances in the city's opera house. The Fort St. Joseph Historical Museum still has the program for the comic opera Zanzibar, a gaudy book

7. Niles Daily Star (June 14, 1911).
8. American Magazine, (November, 1923), 11.

printed in blue letters against a yellow background. The opera was performed on April 14, 1903, and was apparently well-supported, since the program carried a good deal of advertising. The complete performance was a combination minstrel show and comic opera:

Grand Spectacular First Part
Painted Especially for this Production by
A. M. Foerster

The Popular Conversationalist, Harry B. Schmidt

BONES	TAMBOS
George Dougan	Bert Brown
Tom Swain	Ring Lardner
Carl Schmidt	Clarence Oberlin

Vocal Contingent

Earl Wood, Ed Wurz, Fred Eaglesfield, Worth Landon Rex Lardner, Paul Foerster and Fran Wurz.

Knott's Orchestra, under the leadership of Prof. Fred Ingersoll, accompanied by the popular pianist, Mrs. Earl Wood.

PROGRAM

Opening Chorus of Popular Selections by the company.
First edition of end men.
TOM SWAIN and RING LARDNER

I Could Never Love Like That.....
I'm a Jonah Man.....Ring Lardner
The Land of the Cane and the Corn.....
A Soldier of Love Am I.....Worth Landon
The Poo-Bah of Blackville Town.....Carl Schmidt
Arrival of the Premier Comedians.
GEORGE DOUGAN and BERT BROWN
In the Valley of Kentucky.....Fred Eaglesfield
Eva.....George Dougan
I Love You More Than Ever.....Ed Wurz
I Sing a Little Tenor.....
Trouble.....Bert Brown

Loraine.....Earl Wood
Finale of operatic airs by the company
Song of the Toreador.....Trotere
Mr. Lawrence Davis[9]

This impressive program was followed by Zanzibar, "A Comic Opera in Two Acts. Book by Harry B. Schmidt. Lyrics and Music by Ring Lardner."[10] The songs Lardner wrote were "The Belles of Zanzibar," "Evah Dahkey is a King," "Ujji," "In the Isle of Zanzibar," "The Tale of the Cow," "I'm Leader of the Zanzibarin Army," "He Did it so Politely," He also wrote the following two choruses: "Ki-yi-yi" and "Hail the Sultan."[11]

The Minstrels were well organized. They had an executive staff that included a manager, treasurer, musical director, stage manager, master of properties, stage carpenter, and electrician.

According to his friends, in high school Lardner was rather silent, and his infrequent forays into conversation were marked by a dry wittiesm, delivered then, as later, without expression. He had many friends. The Lardners were always hospitable; the house was big, and it was a favorite gathering point.

Although the land surrounding the house was hardly large enough to be termed a farm, his father

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9. From the program in the Fort St. Joseph Historical Museum.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

kept horses, cows, and chickens. Sometimes the work was too much for the single hired man, and the milking and other chores had to be done by one of the boys of the family. In Niles the story is told that when Ring finished milking, he invariably carried in the milk pail by way of the front door. This tendency to dignify the unexalted in a humorous way was echoed in the story Grantland Rice, one of his intimate friends, told of Lardner:

> . . . A southern colonel, after a mint julep or two, had been addressing a small audience in New Orleans concerning his distinguished family origins. His grandfather, it seemed, had been Governor of South Carolina; His uncle was, currently, the Governor of Virginia; his father had been Mayor of New Orleans; his mother's grandfather had introduced Louisiana to horse-racing, et cetera, et cetera. When he had at last trickled out, Lardner -- who was preternaturally dark and tragical in appearance -- stood up and introduced himself; 'My name is Lardner. I was born in Niles, Michigan, of respectable colored parents !'[12]

Probably the best brief account of Lardner's activities from 1901 to 1907 is the autobiography he wrote for the Chicago Tribune in 1920, and which it reprinted after his death:

> ' 'White. Married. American. College: One semester at Armour Institute. Graduated from Niles High School in 1901. Came to Chicago that summer to get job. Got job as office boy in McCormick Harvester offices. Fired after two weeks at $5 per week. Loafed

12. Magazine article in Miss Lardner's scrapbook. It was probably written in September or October of 1933.

two weeks. Went to work for Peabody, Houghteling & Co. as office boy and telephone girl; $4 per week. Fired in two weeks.

'Went back to Niles. Got a job in fall of 1901 as clerk in freight house. Sent a pound of butter to Jackson that should have gone to Battle Creek and was fired. Salary of this position was $1 a day while hustling freight and nothing per day while clerk in the office.

'Came to Armour Institute for a mechanical engineering course. Took rhetoric and mechanical drawing and shop work. Passed in rhetoric and quit school by request. This was winter of 1901-1902. Stayed in Niles and did nothing for nearly a year.

'Passed civil service examination as postoffice clerk and carrier and carried mail in Niles as a substitute at odd times. In 1903, got job as bookkeeper in Niles gas company's office. Held this job till landed with South Bend Times.'

'Gas company job started at $5 per week and was raised to $6 the second year. Job on South Bend Times was sporting editor, baseball writer, general sporting writer, dramatic critic, society reporter and court house reporter.

'My brother Rex and I arranged our vacations in the fall so we could take in the world's series between Cubs and Detroit. Series started in Chicago. Got an introduction to Hugh Fullerton, who was then on the Examiner. Asked him if he knew of any jobs. Said he thought so. Made date to meet him in Detroit at a series game, and there met Duke Hutchinson, who signed me for the Chicago Inter-Ocean. Record:

Jobs.	Fired	Per Cent.
22	5	.288[13]

Lardner's use of practical jokes, which he often employed in his stories, is still remembered in Niles.

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13. Chicago Tribune (September 26, 1933).

One incident is reminiscent of "My Roomy," his story of a ball player who was slightly crazy. Lardner at one time worked in Buchanan, a near-by town, and usually came back to Niles on weekends. Occasionally he would write his friends that he would be unable to make the trip the following weekend, and would sign the note with the name of a well-known Niles half-wit.

A more detailed record of his activities includes the story of his final departure from Niles:

> '. . . I met a representative of the "South Bend (Ind.) Times," who had come up to Niles to sign up my brother Rex. I knew that he was tied up in contracts with "The Niles Sun" and "The Kalamazoo Gazette," so I stole the job. I got $12 a week and worked there for two years.
>
> 'My first assignment was to cover the wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Clement Studebaker, of the automobile family, which formed the backbone of South Bend's social existence. I amazed my editor by coming back with exactly five lines of news. He didn't fire me, but assigned me to cover a musical show that opened that evening. Instead of giving the entertainment the boost customary and expected of all small town theatrical critics, I roasted the piece to death.
>
> 'This brought an avalanche of criticism down on my head from the owner of the theater, Joseph E. Howard, who also owned and wrote the show. I survived the storm, however, and the boss put me to work covering the state league ball games.
>
> 'Altogether I had a lovely time on that paper. In the morning I covered the police stations and courts. Then I would drop over to the Circuit Court to get the divorce news.

In the afternoon I went to the ball park. The press box was a little sewing table right out on the field and I had a grand time ducking foul balls. When fouls were few the players would come up and abuse me for not praising them enough in my stories. In the evenings I covered shows. Then I would go to the office to write the day's events.

'. . . I got a job [on the Inter-Ocean] at $17.50 a week and wrote football. One of my first assignments was to cover the Carlisle Indians, who were running through signals at Lake Forest in preparation for a game with Chicago the following Saturday. I was standing on the field with Glenn Warner, their coach, when we heard some girls behind us talking. One said, "He must have some white blood in him." They were talking about me.

'After a while I was offered $25 by the "Chicago Examiner" to go South with the White Sox for the spring training. That was in 1908. I sent back some comic sketches of the ball players which the sports editor threw away. I don't blame him. They were terrible. I admit it. After that I went with the "Chicago Tribune."

'In 1911 I married Miss Ellis Abbott of Goshen, Ind., and found a job with a weekly in St. Louis called "The Sporting News," so I wouldn't have to work nights or go out of town.

'After that I worked on "The Boston American" as copy reader. My copy reading days ended when I printed a story that Tom Shevlin was dead. It later developed that it was Shevlin's father who had passed on. After a brief spell on "The Chicago Herald-Examiner" I went to the "Chicago Tribune," where from 1913 to 1919 I conducted the "In the Wake of the News" column.[14]

Lardner's "In the Wake of the News" replaced Hugh E. Keogh's sport column "By Hek" when Keogh

14. New York Herald Tribune (September 26, 1933).

died. Since Keogh's column "was considered the best thing of its kind in the country," Lardner's assignment to it was an unqualified recognition of his ability as a sports writer.[15]

> 'While on "The Tribune" I met a ball player who couldn't read or write and used to bring me letters from his wife to read and answer. The fellow was a great alibi artist and always had an excuse for not sending the money she continually pleaded for and most likely needed.
>
> 'We had a lot of fun kidding him on dining cars during the out-of-town trips the team made. He was a terrible eater, but never knew what to order, as he couldn't read the menus. He'd wait for us to order and then say, "I'll take the same." When we knew he was starving we'd wait till he was seated at the table and then decide not to order anything.'[16]

The New York Times noted that originally Lardner used from necessity the sort of material that later made him the country's leading humorist:

> It was in an effort to turn out seven columns a week that Lardner hit upon the method which was to make him famous. In hotel lobbies, clubhouses, dugouts, he had been listening to talk among the ball players -- using slang and singular nouns and plural verbs mixed together. One day in an effort to fill out his piece he wrote a short dialogue supposedly between two players engaged in a Pullman car poker game. It was the mixture as noted above, with shrewd touches of character and the natural speech of the lowbrow.
>
> The innovation was favorably received. In the world's series he invented a left-handed pitcher of the Giants, who reported the games

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15. New York Times (September 25, 1933).
16. New York Herald-Tribune (September 26,1933).

> in the Lardner style. Fans began asking who the author was, and a friend, the late Charles E. Van Loan, advised him to send some of his work to the Saturday Evening Post. He did so, and a check and a call for more came back.
>
> For the next six years Lardner continued to fill his column on the Chicago Tribune and to write magazine stories. In 1919 he left the paper to join a newspaper syndicate [Bell] and moved to Great Neck, L. I. In the period before coming East he published a number of books -- 'Bib Ballads,' 1915; 'You Know Me, Al,' 1915; 'Gullible's Travels,' 1917; 'Own Your Own Home,' 1917; 'Treat 'Em Rough,' 1918; 'The Real Dope,' 1918; 'My Four Weeks in France,' 1918; and 'The Young Immigrants [Immigrunts],' 1919.[17]

At this point in his career Lardner was tremendously popular. A spectacular demonstration of this came at the Democratic convention of 1920 in San Francisco, where the Missouri delegation cast one-half vote for him.[18]

According to the New York Times Lardner had only one reason for preferring New York to Chicago:

> His coming to New York was . . . for no other reason than to be near the headquarters of the theatre. His weekly sketch for the syndicate could be written in Chicago as easily as in New York. Morris Gest, on a visit West had 'gambled' and had given him a five-year contract -- but that impresario did not like Ring Lardner's plays. Other managers refused them also.
>
> In 1923 Walter Huston appeared in 'Elmer the Great.' This was satire, making the thick-headed pitcher the butt of more than a passing joke. And then, a year later, came . . . 'June Moon,' which was suggested to George

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17. New York Times (September 27, 1933).
18. New York Herald-Tribune (September 26,1933).

> S. Kaufman and Mr. Lardner by one of the latter's short stories. He wrote the songs for it, also.
>
> Also in his period of the theatre belong Mr. Lardner's sketches and lyrics. Back in 1922, in the Ziegfield Follies of that year, was a Lardner baseball scene, with none other than Will Rogers as the veteran pitcher. A bit later in the season he was represented in 'The 49ers,' his contribution being an epic of three fishermen well out beyond the three-mile limit. There were several sketches by him in 'The Nine Fifteen Revue' of 1930, and a number of lyrics in 'Smiles' of the same year.[19]

An article on his song writing, incidentally, was the only one of Lardner's writings ever rejected. The story of its rejection reveals Lardner's ironical attitude:

> . . . It was ordered by the late John Siddall, editor of 'The American Magazine,' which at the time specialized in 'success stories. As he had not conveniently come up from the gutter, Lardner decided that he would write on 'My Success as a Song Writer.' Computing his time as worth 10 cents an hour, he figured that he had lost something like $4,300 in attempting to compose songs. Siddall . . . sent it back.[20]

Songs, sketches, and a weekly radio column constituted his last pieces of work. His campaign against pornographic songs was a high light of the radio column, which appeared in The New Yorker.

No matter how melancholy his work may appear to be, Lardner himself was a charming person. He had

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19. New York Times (September 27, 1933).
20. New York Herald-Tribune (September 26,1933).

few close friends, but he kept them. Even after he left Niles permanently he never forgot the people there. The following excerpt from a letter written to a former Niles acquaintance at Christmas time during his early days in Chicago shows his thoughtfulness and charm:

> I am in my boarding house and next door to me a young married pair are having the loudest quarrel I ever did hear. She claims he left her downtown without carfare and he claims she is a liar. Whereupon she claims he is much more of a liar. I gather two morals -- never let your wife go downtown and never board. . . .
>
> 'Twas the night before Christmas,
> And all through the house
> A creature was squealing
> So loud like a mouse.
> Her husband had left her
> Without the carfare
> To bring her from downtown
> Where she had been <u>there</u>.
> The lie it was passed
> In two voices immense
> And the cause of it all
> Was the sum of five cents.
> The moral of this
> I will tell <u>you</u> <u>alone</u> --
> Be sure that your wife
> Has some sense of her own.[21]

His letters to his sister, Miss Lena Lardner, show his great regard for her. At Christmas time it was an amusing habit of his to send her the season's greetings in verses of his own making. In 1918 and 1926, for example, he sent the following lines:

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21. From a letter in the Lardner collection, Fort St. Joseph Historical Museum.

A CHRISTMAS WISH

That Lena Lardner, Niles, Mich.,
May never stick her nose in a pickle dish.

A Christmas just reeking with joy and smiles
And anything else there is in Niles.[22]

Among the bits of verse she received is a parody of The Rosary:

The hours I looked for thee, dear sox
Are as a constant pang to me,
I sort them over in my stocking box,
My Hosiery

Each heel a hole, each toe a tear,
Which hurt the feet most awfully.
I find one which looks good, and there
A vacancy.

Oh, memories of breakfast passed,
Oh, cup of tea and tender rolls,
I grab a pair and strive right hard, at last,
To miss the holes, sweetheart,
To miss the holes.

According to his sister, Lardner was exceedingly generous with his friends. An article in the New York Herald-Tribune also testified to Lardner's generosity:

> . . . when he achieved affluence he continually spent large sums backing unsuccessful plays and musical comedies, . . . paying for the education of struggling musicians, and helping out almost any one who approached him.[23]

Lardner died at East Hampton, New York, September 25, 1933. The funeral rites were extremely simple:

There was no minister, no eulogy, no

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22. From Miss Lardner's scrapbook.
23. (September 26, 1933).

flowers. The little group of close friends met at his home at 2 p. m., entered the house and locked the door.

Fifteen minutes later they came out and accompanied the body of the famous humorist to Middle Village, Queens, where it was cremated.[24]

24. Detroit Free Press (September 29, 1933).

CHAPTER TWO

THE POSITION OF RING LARDNER IN THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF HUMOR

The favorite type of humorist in America has been, at least until recently, the homely, straw-chewing rustic exemplified by the late Will Rogers. In the early days of the country, even before these humorous sages were created on paper, the oracle-style humorist promised to become a national institution. One of the early portrayers of the Yankee comic spirit was the actor George Handel Hill. He traveled over the country giving monologues, and was well-received everywhere, particularly in New England, where he gained most of his knowledge of his character. "His Yankees, quiet and low-voiced . . . whittled a great deal and talked quite as much, but never very loud."[1] So accurate in his portrayal of the native American that during a performance in Maine one of the Yankee farmers "thought that Hill had failed to arrive and that the part was being taken by one of his own neighbors." Hill "was full of simple satire, and gave many a sly thrust at New England pride before his native audiences, even touch-

1. Constance Rourke, American Humor, p. 19.

ing on the character of the original Pilgrims, whom he appeared to regard with bored irreverence."[2]

During the late 1820's, about the same time that Hill was revealing the Yankee on the stage, Seba Smith was creating a similar character in a Portland, Maine newspaper. The character was Jack Downing. "The Downing papers . . . were as Yankee as the mock lectures of Hill, and read as though they were spoken or drawled. . . . in them the Yankee emerged in a new role, as oracle."[3]

Then, as later, the topics of attack were politics and war:

> During the Mexican War Jack Downing reflected, 'Some think the business [of annexation] isn't profitable; but it's only because they haven't ciphered into it fur enough to understand it. Upon an average, we get at least ten to one for our outlay, any way you can figure it up -- I mean in the matter of people. Take, for instance, the City of Mexico. It would cost us only two or three thousand men to annex it . . . and we get at least one hundred and fifty thousand in that city. . . . Some find fault with the quality of people we'd get in this country, jest as if that had anything to do with the merits of the case. They ought to remember that in a Government like ours, where the people is used for voting, and where every nose counts one, it is the number we are to stan' about in annexin' and not the quality. . . .'[4]

After Downing came Sam Slick, who first appeared in 1835. Although he was the creation of a Canadian, Thomas C. Haliburton, Slick's fundamental characteris-

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2. Rourke, op. cit., pp. 19-20.
3. Ibid., p. 23.
4. Ibid., p. 24.

ties were determined to a great extent by his Yankee newspaper predecessor. "He possesses all that shameless opportunism of the earlier Jack [Downing], with the sententious wisdom of a Franklin."[5] His subject matter included "internal improvements, slavery in the states, relations between the colonies and the mother country, the foibles of womankind, the virtues of a provident farmer."[6]

Downing and Slick were followed by Lowell's versifying Hosea Biglow in 1846. Many of the qualities that ensured the popularity of Downing and Slick were also present in Lowell's character:

> Like Slick and Downing, Hosea . . . was an unschooled Yankee with wise and amusing things to say about politics. Like Downing, he inaugurated his career as a writer whose efforts were appreciated and printed by a newspaper editor. Laughable turns of Yankee speech and illiterate spelling, portraits of politicians which had the amusing quality of well-executed caricatures, crackerbox wit and political commentary attracted readers.[7]

The number of misspelling humorists in the crackerbox tradition increased. "For forty years or more after Jack Downing's first appearance, the country was never without a Yankee oracle or even half a dozen."[8] Among the oracles was Artemus Ward, whose "slow still arrows . . . struck deep into

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5. Jenette Tandy, Crackerbox Philosophers, p. 39.
6. Ibid., p. 41.
7. Walter Blair, Native American Humor, p. 47.
8. Rourke, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

social and political absurdities."[9] There was Petroleum V. Nasby, who, like Ward, mixed politics and mispelling with a fine art:

> 1st I want a offis
> 2nd I need a offis
> 3d A offis wood suit me; therefore
> 4th I shood like to hev a offis.[10]

Following the steady line of such purveyors of homespun wisdom as Ward, Nasby, Josh Billings, Bill Nye, Bill Arp, Eli Perkins, and countless others, Finley Peter Dunne created the Irish-oracle, Mr. Dooley, who kept the nation amused and enlightened for well over twenty years. More recently, the comic monologue in the crackerbox tradition was used on the radio and stage by Will Rogers.

Lardner was in this tradition, with a difference. To appreciate this difference fully, it must be noted that the satire of the tradition was at bottom kindly. Its keynote was that while the world and its denizens needed a verbal scolding now and then because of too-frequent backslidings, on the whole things were going along fairly well. In 1911 Mr. Dooley could comment on the country's illogical thirst for a better order in this manner:

> Oh, f'r a Moses to lead us out of th' wilderness an' clane th' Augeeyan stables an'

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9. Rourke, op. cit., p. 221.
10. Ibid., p. 222.

> steer us between Silly an' What's-it's-name an' hoist th' snow-white banner iv civic purity an' break th' feathers that bind a free people an' seize th' hellum iv state fr'm th' piratical crew an' restore th' heritage iv our fathers an' cleanse th' stain fr'm th' fair name iv our gr-reat city an' cure th' evils iv th' body pollytick an' ery havic an' let loose th' dogs iv war an' eaptain th' uprisin' iv honest manhood agin th' cohorts iv corruption an' shake off the collar riveted on our necks by tyrannical bosses. Where is Moses ?[11]

It will be noted that the philosophy inherent in this is that while the situation is bad, it is not hopeless; it might, with help, even improve. That same feeling was a part of Will Rogers' charm. It is the charm of being able to laugh at the human race without despising it, without bitterness, or despair.

This was what Lardner, at least in the main body of his fiction, was incapable of doing. He lacked optimism. Unable to see the social order in any other period than his own money-grabbing, materialistic age, where every family had a stock-market chance of becoming wealthy without effort, and having only contempt for the status quo, he pilloried both his contemporaries and his times, apparently not pausing to consider whether people had always been as self-centered and morally dishonest as he saw them, or whether society might con-

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11. Mark Sullivan, Our Times, vol. 4, p. 124.

ceivably change by worshipping some other god than the dollar. He knew the self-satisfied people of his own era too well. His knowledge came from what he saw, and what he saw his eye fixed on without shifting:

> Was there need for a nobler view of man's activity ? What could be more inspiring than Chrysler's glistening tower ? If you wanted new feelings, you voyaged to new vistas, with General Motors. What institution was solider than Prudential Life, with its Rock of Gibraltar embedded in mortuary statistics ? At the identical moment American Tel and Tel could line your purse and transmit your joy to the four corners of the universe. It was the playtime of streamlining capitalism. . . .[12]

Lardner's tragedy -- if it was one -- was that he could see more clearly than any of his contemporaries, but could not reason beyond his sight. He could penetrate the muddy current of existence that people fouled with their cheap ideals, but his searching eye always halted where the spiritual filth was deepest, and, to him, bottomless.

It was here that Lardner left tradition and took a lonely bypath. Where those who had gone before him had "caught the scattered life of the time not realistically but with preposterous inflation," his own sharper ear and eye used language to catch more accurately than any one before him the nuances of American speech, and, more important, the real

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12. Maxwell Geismar, Writers in Crisis, p. 5.

character of the people using it.[13] Instead of becoming the urbane, kindly critic, he "became the mordant chronicler of a moribund social order."[14] Constance Rourke speaks of this quality in Lardner:

> Like the characters of the early comic tales, his people are nomads. They have just moved into a neighborhood and are soon to move away; they lack backgrounds, they are seen only in pairs or trios, seen without families often, or only with a boresome friend. Old couples out of their native habitats sun their bones among other old couples just as homeless along the curbs or in the parks of Florida's winter resorts. Even those tales which have to do with a group are projected against a void, or against some transitory scene like a hotel, a train, a baseball park. Here indeed are familiar subjects, familiar turns of story-telling, with intensifications of mood and a considerable difference in the effect of final character and the sense of character. . . . These people might be the final product of a humor that had worn away idiosyncrasies, taking with it all the edged elements of character. They are American; they are nothing but American, and essential to all parts of the country.[15]

Lardner, Miss Rourke notes, retains the comic basis, but his final effect is destruction, not laughter:

> All his stories turn on humor; practical jokes make the substance of many situations as in an earlier day, but in the end the brutality which underlies them is exposed. That innocence which once was made a strong strain in American portrayals is seen uncombined with shrewdness and revealed as abysmal stupidity. . . . Lardner has pushed the monologue to an ultimate revelation by a series of negations; his tie is with that Yankee art

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13. Rourke, op. cit., p. 223.
14. Geismar, op. cit., p. 3.
15. Rourke, op. cit., pp. 292-93.

which gained its effects by negation and a pervasive theme. Derision becomes an outward shell covering a multitude of submerged emotions, rage, fear, bewilderment, an awkward love; the blank formula takes on intensity; emotion is still inarticulate, as earlier under the comic sway, but it surges toward the surface.16

16. Rourke, op. cit., pp. 293-94.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CRITICISM OF LARDNER

The tardy recognition of Lardner for what he was, a satirist first and a humorist second, is evidence that the opinions of critics are not always to be taken at face value. There were, however, many reasons for the universal misunderstanding of Lardner's work; the fact that he came into the literary world wearing the motley of misspelling, usually the garb of the humorist; the dumbness of his busher hero, Keefe; the fact that his first stories dealt with baseball, a background which previously had never been used for serious writing; and, lastly, the sheathing of humor that covered his tales. It was undoubtedly the humor that deluded the magazine readers; what deluded the critics is anyone's guess. At any rate, Lardner was not given any critical consideration until H. L. Mencken recognized the artistry beneath the misspelling.

In 1920, after speaking disparagingly of the middle layer of American literature, contained in popular magazines and best-seller books, Mencken said:

> . . . a great deal of it -- for example, the work of Mrs. Rinehart, and that of Corra

> Harris, Gouverneur Morris, Harold MacGrath and the late O. Henry -- shows an unmistakable technical excellence, and even a certain civilized sophistication in point of view. Moreover, this literature is constantly graduating adept professors into something finer, as witness Booth Tarkinton, Zona Gale, Ring W. Lardner, and Montague Glass.1

In 1922 Sherwood Anderson wrote a very impressionistic estimate of Lardner. It was hardly an analysis; it was rather a eulogy and an apology, and it merely skirted the underlying intent of Lardner's writing. Anderson felt that Lardner had "more understanding of life, more human sympathy," than Sinclair Lewis, and that he had as much knowledge of the man in the street as Mark Twain. But because of Lardner's super-sensitiveness and fear of being hurt, Anderson stated, the sympathy was not revealed in his stories.[2]

In 1923 Carl Van Doren stated:

> . . . Mr. Lardner, in his books at least, gives no sign of any esthetic or intellectual concern. He laughs at affectation; he is jovial toward foolishness; he portrays dullness without anger. His instincts for the facts of life and for the comedy of facts is too strong for him to feel obliged to bring his more serious reading of existence into his accounts. As his hard-boiled heroes take their look at the world, uninfected by its novelty or by its complexity, he forgets how thick-skinned they are, because they tickle him so much by their self-reliance.[3]

At the time this was written Lardner's busher stories had been running in The Saturday Evening Post

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1. Prejudices (2nd series), p. 33.
2. "Four American Impressions," New Republic, XXXII (October 11, 1922), 171-73.
3. "Beyond Grammar," Century, LXXXIV (July, 1923), 474.

since 1914 and had come out in book form; Gullible's Travels had been published, along with Own Your Own Home. In reading those, at least now, it is difficult to agree with the statement that Lardner "forgets how thick-skinned" his characters are. Lardner never forgets the armor-like ego of his heroes; on the contrary, he proves its indestructability by his constant attacks on it. After Fred Gross -- and the name seems to be significant -- in Own Your Own Home gets his house built and finished his dealings with the bank and the architect and the landscapers and the plumbers, the humor of the story also ends. The rest of the story is a recital of the practical jokes that Gross plays on his next-door neighbor, and the jokes can be classed only as moronic. Even Martin, supposedly a more intelligent person than Gross, although the latter is a detective, hangs black crepe on Gross' door to keep his guests away, and gets the fire department to flood the first floor of Gross' house. It is hard to believe that Lardner was "tickled" by characters of that kind.

More accurately, I believe, Mr. Van Doren goes on to say:

> . . . All of Mr. Lardner's characters have the short memories of the comic strip, as they have their lack of personal dignity, undisturbed by the figure they cut when buffeted or tumbled about. And this is because, like the

> characters of farce, they give the impression of living in space, but not in time. In the world of reality and of realistic art the people who live there are forever growing, becoming. They cannot stand still, like puppets ready to be dressed up for any plot or like weathervanes revolving with whatever wind may blow. It is Mr. Lardner's failure to perceive this, or to act upon the perception if he has it, that excludes him from the rank to which his capacities should admit him. He has created convincing characters; he has put convincing words into their mouths; he has set them going in a convincing dance of life. But there he has stopped, too often content to play old tricks until the action seems mechanical and his audience wonders whether his characters are convincing, after all. He has still to rid himself of the ephemeral qualities both of the sporting page and of the comic strip.[4]

Lardner never wholly lost the "comic strip quality referred to; the reason, apparently, lay in the fundamentally pessimistic quality in himself. It is clear, at least in his more purely satirical work, that Lardner had no faith that the average American "grows". To say that he was contemptuous of his fellow men would probably be too strong a statement, but if he saw them without contempt, he also saw them accurately, and they remained forever the same in his eyes: small-souled, egotistical, dollar-loving. His characters lacked substance because people themselves were mere voids, mouthing inanities and banalities consistently and endlessly. A close study of the petty ideals of the characters

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4. "Beyond Grammar," Century, 475.

in Gullible's Travels, of Keefe the busher, reveals the vacuum-like personalities of Lardner's people.

Gilbert Seldes, speaking of Lardner's gift for reproducing American speech, asked: "What is the use of Babbitt in five hundred pages if we have Lardner in five hundred words ?"[5] Seldes further commented that "It may shock Mr. Lardner to know that he has done in little what Mr Joyce has done on the grand scale in Ulysses."[6]

Seldes speaks of Lardner's satire in more detail:

> Indeed I feel that there must be hidden parody in the earlier writings of Mr Lardner, too, because he is so clean in his handling it now. Satire in detail he had -- there is a dictionary of it in his one word 'he-ll.' Elsewhere, in a series later than You Know Me, Al he has described a half-futuous, half-hardheaded roughneck dragging his silly and scheming wife and sister-in-law through the hotels and apartments of the backwash of society, and the story grew more and more sardonic, more and more entertaining; little of the aimless, sickly, trivial life of the merely prosperous escaped him.[7]

In 1925, in a review of What of It ? by "D. R.", Lardner was termed the reigning jester, and the accent was still on his funniness.[8] In 1926, Lardner's "Haircut" was called by Robert Littell "a complete, rather sardonic, rather touching story. .

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5. The Seven Lively Arts, p. 116.
6. Ibid., p. 117.
7. Ibid.
8. "The Reigning Jester," The Independent, CXIV (May 23, 1925), 590.

. ."[9] Littell went on to say that "his humor is native . . . but it is not light, frivolous; rather does it seem weighted with the realization that men are men and women women, tragic and comic all at once. . . ."[10] Such literary evasiveness is a good example of what happens when a writer obviously changes colors but is still regarded in the light of the original valuation. Lardner started with the reputation of a humorist, and most of his critics and reviewers were reluctant to relinquish their first, and easier, evaluation of his work.

In 1927, Stuart Sherman wrote:

> . . . This picturesque, garrulous, slovenly speech which he imputes to most of his persons is not a mere transcription of the vulgar tongue, it is an artful selection from the popular speech, craftily employed in the business of evisceration.[11]

In 1928, Wyndham Lewis said of Lardner:

> . . . He is colossal without being dull -- that is what he aims at and that is what he achieves. If he does not spell properly, well, the Fathers of English Literature [an ironic reference to Ezra Pound's championing of a literary cult that writes by "instinct"] couldn't either; and if he can spell, but won't, well, then he's like a lot of other people. My money is on Lardner for being read longer than his competitors. . . .[12]

In 1929, T. S. Mathews wrote:

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9. ". . .And other Stories," New Republic, XLVIII (September 29, 1926), 148.
10. Ibid.
11. The Main Stream, pp. 170-71.
12. Time and Western Man, p. 46.

> . . . He writes for money -- as what sensible author does not -- but he has often been able to twist the pattern of his stories into a really artistic form, and still, strangely enough, make the stories salable. Angels can do no more. Shakespeare could do no more. But the sale of art is too much regarded nowadays as a miracle, or a scandal.[13]

Referring to Round Up, Mathews went on to say:

> . . . The popular and the anti-popular are curiously mingled in his latest book. In some of these stories he has undoubtedly gone too far for his original public. It would be interesting to know, for instance, what editor first accepted 'The Champion' or 'The Love Nest,' or 'A Day with Conrad Green' -- more interesting, perhaps, to know what editors refused to print them.[14]

In another review of Round Up in 1929, Allan Nevins stated:

> . . . If not precisely an urbane satire, it is nearly always kindly. There is nothing sardonic, mordant, or superior about it. . . . When he goes deepest, you find that his note is rather amused pity than scornful amusement.[15]

Comment of this kind, even for a book review, is almost inexcuseably bad. "Champion," one of the stories printed in Round Up, is completely savage and merciless. The portrait of Midge Kelly is that

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13. "Lardner, Shakespeare and Chekhov," New Republic, LIX (May 22, 1929), 36.

14. Ibid. The question raised by Mr. Mathews was answered in part by an article in the New York Herald Tribune September 26, 1933. It stated: "'The Saturday Evening Post' . . . turned down 'Harmony,' 'The Golden Honeymoon' and 'Champion,' but the first two were eagerly snapped up by Ray Long, then editor of 'The Cosmopolitan'. . . . "

15. "The American Moron," Saturday Review of Literature, V (June 8, 1929), 1089.

of a person without one saving grace; he starts his career by robbing and hitting his crippled brother; by striking his mother and then leaving home. He deserts his pregnant wife after he has been forced to marry her; he accepts a bribe to throw a bout early in his boxing career; he ignores, while a champion, all appeals from his family for financial help; he breaks a verbal agreement with a manager who has guided him to the championship; he throws over a girl he has been keeping, and steals his new manager's wife. There is certainly nothing kindly about that satire. "A Day with Conrad Green" is in the same vein. Green, a theatrical producer, welshes on a bet; he underpays his employees; he uses other men's ideas for scenes after he has refused to consider them worth buying; he is unfaithful to his wife. The only thing a person can be sure of about Green is that he will break his word. "Amused pity" is hardly an accurate description for stories like that.

Much more accurate is Clifton Fadiman's review of Round Up:

> . . . essentially he is not a humorist at all. I can laugh at P. G. Wodehouse and A. A. Milne, but I drew only one real guffaw from 'Round Up'. Mr. Lardner is the deadliest because the coldest of American writers. Unlike Sinclair Lewis, he is without a soft streak. He really hates his

> characters, hates them so much that he has ceased to be indignant at them. There is almost no emotion left. His satire is absolutely negative; that is why it will never cause a revolution in American manners, as 'Main Street,' in its minor way, did. . . . I speak here, of course, only of those half dozen really amazing stories that have issued from the deepest layer of Mr. Lardner's mind: Haircut, Champion, A Day with Conrad Green, The Love Nest, The Golden Honeymoon, and My Roomy (which, superficially a Four Marx Brothers comedy, is really one of the most coldly horrible stories ever written).16

The critical opinion of Constance Rourke has been expressed in a previous chapter. Her American Humor was published in 1931, and she, like Sherman and Fadiman, noted the brutality contained Lardner's work. Fadiman's analysis of Lardner is perhaps the most uncompromising:

> The special force of Ring Lardner's work springs from a single fact: he just doesn't like people. Except Swift, no writer has gone farther on hatred alone. I believe he hates himself; more certainly he hates his characters; and most clearly of all, his characters hate each other. Out of this integral-triune repulsion is born his icy satiric power.17

Speaking of Lardner's mimicry of American speech, Fadiman is equally positive:

> . . . he uses [American conversation] as a prime means of showing up, without comment, the fuzzy, flat, miserable mind of the American boob. . . . Lardner never wastes a word; each twisted idiom, each horrible neologism, is a

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16. "Roundup," The Nation, CXXVII (May 1, 1929), 537.

17. "Ring Lardner and the Triangle of Hate," The Nation, CXXXVI (March 22, 1933), 315.

stab, an expression of his fascinated hatred.

> To see how implemental, how purposive is his style it is only necessary to note the twist he lends to our traditional humor of exaggeration. When Mark Twain exaggerates, it is to procure an effect of comic absurdity; but when Lardner says, 'he give her a look that you could pour on a waffle,' the mad metaphor has the power to fill us with an instantaneous horror of all sentimental affection.[18]

18. "Ring Lardner and the Triangle of Hate," The Nation, 313.

CHAPTER FOUR

LARDNER'S WORK

Lardner produced three fairly distinct kinds of writing. One was pure and merciless satire, and is contained almost wholly in his fiction; the second, more characteristic of his non-fiction, was also satire, but much more humane and kindly; the third was wildly extravagant nonsense reminiscent of Carrol's Alice in Wonderland. In critical appraisals of Lardner's work the first kind, the clearly brutal satire, has been emphasized most, usually at the expense of the other two. For that reason, the following chapter will consist of a comparison of the satire of his stories and the satire of his non-fiction, with a final comment on his farcicality, a quality in Lardner that seemed so at variance with the savagery of his fiction. By using the method of side-by-side comparison, it is hoped that a more rounded picture of Lardner's writing can be obtained.

I

Satire on Men

Lardner's chief object of attack was man's ego. There are many stories that reveal this. The plot

of "The Maysville Minstrel" is based on a practical joke that temporarily convinces a gas company worker that he is another Eddie Guest, a conviction made possible by the man's belief that writing poetry is fairly easy. "A Caddy's Diary" also reveals it, in the naive assumption of the caddy that writing "is a nag" that can be acquired without too much trouble. Probably the most direct and constant revelation of ego is in Lardner's stories of Jack Keefe.

On his way to France, Keefe writes Al: "Between you and I Al what I am scared of most is that Florrie's mind will be affected if anything happens to me . . . ."[1]

Every girl who looks at him or speaks to him, for whatever reason, is considered by Keefe as having a crush on him:

> Well they was 3 janes on the job [in the Red Cross] and 2 of them would be safe anywheres you put them but the other one is Class A . . . and the minute we blowed in she didn't have no eyes for only me. . . . I smiled back at her and after that Carson might as well of been mowing the lawn out in Nobody's Land.[2]

The harder he tries to avoid an affair, the more certain he is to become involved:

> But it does seem like fate or something that the harder I try and not get mixed up in a flirtation I can't turn around you might say

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1. The Real Dope, p. 20.
2. Ibid., pp. 43-4.

but what they's some gal popping up on my trail. . . .[3]

Keefe is positive that his personality is as irresistible to the men as to the women:

> . . . I and Alcock are on speaking turns again and I am glad to not be scraping with him because I don't never feel right unless I am pals with everybody but they can't nobody stay sore at me very long and even when some of the boys in baseball use to swell up when I pulled 1 of my gags on them it wouldn't last long because I would just smile at them and would half to smile back and be pals. . . .[4]

In exchanges of repartee with his buddies Keefe's answers are remarkable only for their unoriginality, but in his opinion they are always devastatingly brilliant. He describes one of them to Al, with the usual results:

> Well we was kidding back and fourth about winning meddles today and one of the smart alex in our Co. a bird named Johnny Alcock that is always trying to kid somebody all the time he said to me 'Well I suppose they will half to build more tonnages to carry all the meddles you will win back to the states!' So I said 'Well I guess I will win as many of them as you will win.' That shut him up for a wile but finely he says 'You have got enough chest to wear a whole junk in it.' So I sa said 'Well I am not the baby that can't win them.' So he says 'If you ever happen to be snooping around the bosh trenchs when Fritz climbs over the top you will come back so fast that the Kaiser will want to know who was that speed merchant that led the charge and decorate you with a iron cross.' So I said 'I will decorate you right in the eye one of these days.'

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3. The Real Dope, p. 51.
4. Ibid., p. 101.

> So he had to shut up and all the other boys give him the laugh.[5]

His belief that he is one of the greatest ball players in history is unassailable. He is forever leaving whatever topic is under discussion and launching into his baseball exploits. He is a hero in all his stories, and when a game he is pitching is lost, it is always because some team member let him down, or the wind "creates havioc" with fly balls, or else the umpire suddenly has paralysis of the right arm and calls nothing but balls. Keefe tries to create the impression that he speaks of his baseball experiences only with the greatest reluctance, but invariably he reveals his true character in the process:

> . . . the boys is putting on a entertainment over to the Y. M. C. A. . . . and they asked me would I give them a little talk on baseball and I said no at first but they begged me and finely I give my consent but you know how I hate makeing speeches and etc, but a man don't hardly feel like refusing when they want me so bad. . . .[6]

Keefe not only gives the speech, but, with the same reluctance, writes an article for the company paper on "War and Baseball 2 games where brains wins." After the article is printed Keefe's fellow-soldiers send him a letter which is signed "Black Jack

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5. The Real Dope, pp. 65-66.
6. Ibid., p. 51.

Pershing, Folies Bergere, Paris, France." In it Keefe is requested to supply Pershing with any "strategy" in baseball that might apply to warfare. Keefe is an easy victim and writes several letters, and to the end believes that Pershing would have seen him personally except for the fact that he missed rifle practice on the day the general inspected the company.

The main safeguard for Keefe's ego is his short memory. It is this characteristic which Van Doren referred to as "the comic strip quality of Lardner's characters." During the first part of the trip Keefe had told Al that he has a hunch that the convoy will go down, leaving Florrie a widow. As they near port, however, his attitude changes:

> Well old pal . . . we are out of the danger zone and pretty near in port . . . and I guess the boys feels a whole lot better then when we was out there where the subs could get at us but between you and I Al I never thought about the subs all the way over only when I heard somebody else talk about them. . . .[7]

Al apparently does not answer many of Keefe's letters. Keefe's explanation is probably wide of the truth, but it is true to character: ". . . I know why you don't write much because you haven't got nothing to write staying there in Bedford. . . ."[8]

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7. The Real Dope, pp. 26-27.
8. Ibid., p. 36.

In the same letter he adds: "But of course its different with a man like I because I am always where they is something big. . . ."[9]

In contrast, Lardner's non-fictional satire is more pointedly humorous, as well as more kindly. The barbed point is still present, but the emphasis is on the laugh, and the feeling imparted is a more tolerant one. His "In Conference" brings out the ludricousness of business conferences. A Mr. Harvey Hester attempts to see Mr. Lansing, and the latter's secretary informs him that Mr. Lansing is in conference, and it is against the rules to disturb company officers while they are in conference. The "conference" is a discussion of what to do about an unstamped letter which the company has received notice is waiting for them at the post office. The main question is whether the letter is worth the time and expense of sending for it. The talk soon turns to what the conference members were doing fifteen years ago, to poetry, to home life, to mutual acquaintances, to baseball, to Scotch and light wines and beer. In the meantime, Mr. Hester gets impatient:

> 'Please have Mr. Lansing's secretary come out here again,' he said.
> 'A. M. or A. T. ?' asked the girl.
> 'A. T.,' said Hester.
> The secretary came out.

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9. The Real Dope, p. 36.

'Listen,' said Hester. 'If I can't see Mr. Lansing right this minute it'll be too late.'

'I'm sorry, but I can't interrupt him when he's in conference.'

'All right,' said Hester. 'Will you please give him this message ? You've got my name. Mr. Lansing and I were in school together and were more or less friendly. Well, I was tipped off this morning -- I don't need to tell you how -- I was tipped off that Mrs. Lansing is leaving for Chicago on the 12:05 train. And she isn't leaving alone. She's eloping. I thought Mr. Lansing might want to try to stop her.'

'What time is it now ?"

'Seven minutes of twelve,' said Hester. 'He can just make it.'

'But he's still in conference,' said the secretary.[10]

Describing the attempts men make to quit when ahead in poker, Lardner lists the following:

Like for inst. I was amongst the heavy sugar men in a so-called friendly stud game 2 or 3 weeks ago and one of the other boys was also behind and I was setting almost opp. him and I never seen nobody so wide awake and finely he win 5 pots in succession and was more winner than he had been loser and all of a sudden he was ceased with a attack of sleeping sickness though it could not of been more than 4 o'clock and when he yawned you could of thrown a basketball down his throat and they had to dash ice-water in his face when it was his turn to deal.

So he had to cash in and go to bed and the only wonder was that he could make such a accurate count of his checks wile praetally unconscious.[11]

II

Satire on Women

In Lardner's story-world husbands do not enjoy

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10. What of It ?, pp. 86-87.
11. First and Last, pp. 91-92.

their wives; they merely endure them. There are few admirable women in his gallery of portraits. Lardner almost invariably accented the worst in them: their financial greediness, exemplified by Grace in "Champion"; by Helen in"June Moon"; by Ella in "Big Town"; their narcissus natures (true of most Lardner characters, but brought out most frequently in his women), such as that of Florence of "Ex Parte", Bess of "Water Cure"; their cattiness, as in Mr. Martin, of Own Your Home, "the Missus" of Gullible's Travels, Miss Gillespie of "Some Like Them Cold", and Miss Lyons, the nurse of "Zone of Quiet;" their social-climbing urge, best revealed by the Missus in Gullible's Travels and Ella in "Big Town." In addition, Lardner satirizes their stupidity, their heartlessness, their inane conversation -- practically every unlovable quality they possess.

Grace, in "Champion," has been kept by Kelly from the time he has gained a name for himself in boxing. The emphasis is that she is a blood-sucker attached to Kelly's bankroll, which is considerable, because he is a headliner in his class. The first indication of Grace's financial sense comes when she writes Kelly on the eve of a bout. She says:

> Well hon I will send you a telegram Saturday and I almost forgot to tell you I

> will need some more money, a couple hundred say and you will have to wire it to me as soon as you get this. You will won't you hon.[12]

Kelly's manager remonstrates when Kelly tells him to wire Grace the amount, recalling that he sent her three hundred a week ago, but she gets the money. In order to get more money, Grace convinces Kelly that he should break his verbal agreement with Haley, his manager, who takes twenty-five per cent of his earnings. Kelly does this, and the result is shown when Grace returns from a shopping trip:

> 'Well ?' she said.
> 'Well,' said Midge, 'I got rid of him.'
> 'Good boy !' said Grace. 'And now I think you might give me that twenty-five per cent.'
> 'Besides the seventy-five you're already gettin' ?' said Midge.
> 'Don't be no grouch, hon. You don't look pretty when you're grouchy.'
> 'It ain't my business to look pretty,' Midge replied.
> 'Wait till you see how I look with the stuff I bought this mornin'.'
> Midge glanced at the bundles on the lounge.
> 'There's Haley's twenty-five per cent,' he said,'and then some.'[13]

Eileen in June Moon, the successful Broadway play written by Lardner and George S. Kaufman, has been the mistress of a well-known theatrical producer. When the play opens, however, she is in the discard and looking about for the next best opportunity.

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12. Round Up, pp. 120-21.
13. Ibid., p. 122.

A young and promising lyric writer seems a possibility. One of his songs is accepted, and Eileen immediately inveigles him into a promise of marriage; after that she persuades him to ask for advance royalties, until he has borrowed more money than the song will probably earn. She also persuades him into planning a honeymoon trip to Europe.[14]

Neither Ella nor Kate of "Big Town" can lose money without verbal fireworks. This is in spite of the fact that each of them is worth about seventy-five thousand dollars. Accompanied by her husband, Ella attempts to get her sister Kate a husband. They meet Daley, a wealthy sportsman who owns a string of race horses. Daley is infatuated with Kate and supplies the three with several money-making tips on the races. All goes well until he advises them to bet twelve hundred dollars on his best horse. His jockey double-crosses him and the horse loses. Ella's husband tells the result:

> We come back to our table. The gals sunk down in their chairs. Ella was blubbering and Kate was white as a ghost. Daley finally joined us, looking like he'd a stroke. He asked for a drink and I give him my flask.
>
> 'I can't understand it !' he says. "I don't know what happened !'
>
> 'You don't !' hollered Kate. 'I'll tell you what happened. You stole our money ! Twelve hundred dollars ! You cheat !'[15]

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14. June Moon, pp. 51 ff.
15. Round Up, p. 543.

Cold-blooded greed is evinced by Kate when she is being courted by Codd, a famous young aviator who has invented a new airplane that promises millions. In demonstrating it he is killed. The accident, however, does not upset Kate:

> Wile I and Ella was getting ready for supper I made the remark that I s'posed we'd live in a vale of tears for the next few days.
> 'No,' said Ella. 'Sis is taking it pretty calm. She's sensible. She says if that could of happened, why the invention couldn't of been no good after all. And the Williamses probably wouldn't of give him a plugged dime for it.'[16]

One of the major motivations of Lardner's women is their self-love. The girl in "Who Dealt ?" has acquired a husband because of an unfortunate love affair of his. Because he knews he has been drinking too much, he promises her he will quit, stating that if she sees him take another drink she will know that he no longer cares for her. The story is a monologue of the wife's, told while she and her husband are playing bridge with the girl her husband lost, and the girl's husband. The wife's chatter reveals her husband's attempts to rebuild his life in spite of the wife he has chosen, and how he has catered to all of her unreasonable demands. In the end her garrulousness proves her undoing; in telling everything -- and everything in

16. Round Up, pp. 521-22.

her estimation is proof of her husband's devotion to her -- she breaks down his determination to keep the surface of the marriage happy, and he starts drinking.[17]

Florence of "Ex Parte" has a phobia for Early American furniture. Her husband, not knowing this, buys an expensive new house with modern furnishings. When he shows Florence the house, ". . . she acted all the while as if she were playing the title role at a funeral."[18] It doesn't matter to Florence that her husband doesn't like renovated barns, or that he has bought the house to please her. They visit some friends of Florence's and Florence is ecstatic over their "period" house and furnishings. When they return home there is a week of feminine silence, after which the husband finally rebels:

> At lunch on Saturday I said: 'You know I like the silent drama one evening a week, but not twenty-four hours a day every day. What's the matter with you ? If it's laryngitis, you might write me notes.'
>
> 'I'll tell you what's the matter !' she burst out. 'I hate this house and everything in it ! It's too new ! Everything shines ! I loathe new things ! I want a home like Mildred's, with things in it that I can look at without blushing for shame. I can't invite anyone here. It's too hideous. And I'll never be happy here a single minute as long as I live !'[19]

As a result of this, the husband gets drunk on

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17. Round Up, pp. 317-326.
18. Ibid., p. 214.
19. Ibid., p. 219.

some "Early American rye" and comes home armed with a blow torch and an axe and begins to "antique" the dining room. Florence leaves him.

Self-love is further demonstrated by Bess in "Water Cure". She is assisted in her search for a husband by her sister, but the sister's husband, foreseeing that if Bess is successful he will have her as a neighbor the rest of his life, does his best to prevent the match. Bess's suitor does not like water, so a boat trip is arranged, the main idea being that if Bess and her suitor are thrown together with only each other for amusement, any love they have will die from the effects of over-acquaintanceship. The plan is successful, and Bess states the reason: "I never cared nothin' for him and he never cared nothin' for me, because he's incapable o' carin' for anything -- only himself."[20] The reason for her outburst is that her swain pays less and less attention to her, and whenever a man in Lardner's stories does that to one of the pursuing women, he is self-centered, worthless, and no longer considered a member of the human race.

Cattiness is present in Lardner's women in many stories. Mrs. Martin, who "dresses as good is a

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20. Gullible's Travels, p. 205.

course girl," has Fred Gross and his wife Grace as guests. Gross states the conversation that took place:

> She took quiet a shine to Grace right a way and ast her did she sew her own close or where did she get them and Grace says no in deed she hadent had no time to sew her own close sence 3 yrs. a go when little Ed was born and Mrs. Martin says she thot may be the close was made beffore that and the reason she thot Grace must of made them was on acct. of she never seen nothing like them in the stores wile she was shopping.[21]

Later Gross says that Mrs. Martin is ". . . after Grace to leave her borry 1 of her dresses and ware it to a mask raid."[22]

"The Missus" in Gullible's Travels wants to go to Palm Beach to meet "real people." She says:

> 'We ain't swelled on ourself,' she says; 'but I know and you know that the friends we been associatin' with ain't in our class. They don't know how to dress and they can't talk about nothin' but their goldfish and their meat bills. They don't try to get nowheres, but all they do is play rummy and take in the Majestic. I and you like nice people and good music and things that's worth w'ile. It's a crime for us to be wastin' our time with riff and raff that'd run round barefooted if it wasn't for the police.'[23]

Miss Lyons, the nurse in "Zone of Quiet," also demonstrates cattiness. She comments to her patient about her girl friend's engagement to a man she has tried unsuccessfully to steal:

> '. . . She told me about it night before

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21. Own Your Own Home, p. 93.
22. Ibid., p. 104.
23. Gullible's Travels, p. 84.

> last. I told her congratulations. Because I wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world ! But heavens ! what a mess she's going to be in, married to that dumb-bell. But of course some people can't be choosey. And I doubt if they ever get married unless some friend loans him the price of a liscense.'[24]

Mabelle Gillespie, of "Some Like Them Cold," is also a hard loser. Corresponding with a song writer she has met in a railroad station and spoken to for half an hour, she has been doing her best to build up her matrimonial chances with him by a constant emphasis on her fondness for home life, her thriftiness, her sense of humor, and other good qualities of a wife. Finally she gets a letter from Lewis informing her that he is engaged to another girl, who, he tells Mabelle, has agreed to marry him under the following conditions:

> . . . that she would not have to be a slave and work round the house and also I would have to take her to a show or somewheres every night and if I could not take her myself she would 'run wild' alone.[25]

Miss Gillespie's answer is brief:

> Allow me to congratulate you on your engagement to Miss Sears and I am sure she is to be congratulated too, though if I met the lady I would be tempted to ask her to tell me her secret, namely how she is going to 'run wild' on $60.[26]

Lardner is harsh toward the feminine social-climbing urge. "The Missus" of Gullible's Travels

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24. Round Up, p. 74.
25. Ibid., p. 372.
26. Ibid., p.373.

is at Palm Beach for the purpose of getting acquainted with the best society. She and her husband are sitting in their hotel room:

> The Missus complained of it bein' hot and opened the door to leave the breeze go through. She was sittin' in a chair near the doorway, pretendin' to read the Palm Beach News. All of a sudden she jumped up and kind o' hissed at me.
>
> 'WhatIs the matter ?' I says, springin' from the lounge.
>
> 'Come here !' she says, and went out the door into the hall.
>
> I got there as fast as I could, thinkin' it was a rat or a fire. But the Missus just pointed to a lady walkin' away from us, six or seven doors down.
>
> 'It's Mrs. Potter,' she says; 'the Mrs. Potter from Chicago !'
>
> 'Oh !' I says, puttin' all the excitement I could into my voice.
>
> And I was just startin' back into the room when I seen Mrs. Potter stop and turn round and come to'rd us. She stopped again maybe twenty feet from where the Missus was standin'.
>
> 'Are you on this floor ?' she says.
>
> The Missus shook like a leaf.
>
> 'Yes,' says she, so low you couldn't hardly hear her.
>
> 'Please see that they's some towels put in 559,' says the Mrs. Potter from Chicago.[27]

Lardner satirizes women's conversation caustically in "Dinner". Harry Barton, a handsome bachelor, accepts a dinner invitation reluctantly, and as a reward is put between the two girls who are the guests of honor. Miss Bell, a human phonograph whose ears have apparently atrophied, speaks

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27. Gullible's Travels, p. 150.

first:

'Grace tells me you're a great bridge player,' Miss Bell said.

'No, but I like ----'

'Which do you consider the greatest authority, Lenz or Works or Whitehall ? I don't know anything about it myself, but I hear people arguing about it at home, I mean I live in Chicago. I belong to a bridge club there and I was just getting so the others didn't laugh at me when somebody introduced this horrible contract and I simply gave up. That's the game, you know, where you don't bid anything but slams and I just haven't the nerve, I mean in bridge. I don't want you to think I'm a coward in everything.'

'I -----'

'Because I'm not. I made a flight with Lindbergh in Washington. It was arranged through Congressman Burleigh. He's a great friend of my father's. You know, Burleigh the paint people in South Chicago. Oh, it was too thrilling for words ! But I felt just as safe as if I'd been in a car, safer because once I was in a terrible smash-up out in Lake Forest and the doctor said I was lucky to escape without at least a few broken ribs.

'I was a little bit scared when we first started, but then I thought to myself this is the man who flew from Detroit to Paris and why should anybody be frightened just flying twenty minutes over Washington with him at the wheel. Have you ever been up ?'

'Yes, I -----'

'Then you don't know what a real thrill is. Honestly, it just makes you gasp, like the first time you dive in Lake Michigan. I really dive and swim awfully well and some of the men say I swim awfully well for a girl. There's one man in Chicago, Lee Roberts -- he and his wife are our best friends, I mean my brother's and mine -- Lee calls me Gertrude Ederle; you know she's the girl who swam across the English Channel and back.'[28]

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28. Round Up, pp. 141-42.

Miss Coakley, the other guest of honor, has a different delivery, but the effect is even more wearing:

> 'Mr. Burton, I was just telling Mr. Walter about ----- I don't know whether you'd be interested or not -- maybe you don't -- but still everybody I've told, they think -- it's probably ------'
>
> 'I'm sure I'd like to hear it,' said Harry.
>
> 'I hate to bore people with -- you know how it is -- you'd be too polite to -- and this is so awfully -- well, it isn't a thing that -- it's just interesting if you happen -- people in Baltimore -- though we've only lived there a few ------'[29]

Lardner's non-fictional satire of women is noticeably softer:

> Wives is people that always wants to go home when you don't and vice versa.
>
> Wives is people that ain't never satisfied as they are always too fat or too thin. Of all the wives I ever talked to I never run acrost one yet that was just right.
>
> Wives is people that thinks 2 ash trays should ought to be plenty for a 12 rm. house.
>
> Wives is people that aks you what time the 12:55 train gets to New York. 'At 1:37,' you tell them. 'How do you know ?' they ask.
>
> Wives is people that you ask them to go to a ball game and they act tickled to death. So along about the 7th. innings you look at them and they are fast asleep and you remind them with a delicate punch in the ribs that they are supposed to be excited. 'Oh, yes,' they say. 'I love it.' So you ask them what is the score and they 'St. Louis is ahead, ain't they ?' 'Well,' you say, 'I don't know if St. Louis is ahead or ain't ahead, but the game you are watching is between Boston and New York.[30]

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29. Round Up, p. 142.
30. First and Last, pp. 51-52.

III

Satire on Marriage

On this subject Lardner is merciless in his fiction, particularly in "The Love Nest" and "The Golden Honeymoon." The first story is a highly emotional tale of a wife who intends to drink herself to death to avoid thinking about what marriage has done to her. The second is a quietly told story of the mental degradation that results from an endless succession of quarrels and boring pastimes. Another story, "Now and Then," is an example of the slow dissolution of affection brought on by the proximity concurrent with marriage. "Who Dealt ?", like the rest, reflects the unhappy possibilities inherent in marriage. For the reason that most of the stories mentioned are already well-known, they will not be treated in detail.

Lardner's non-fiction reveals an entirely different attitude. In regard to a certain Doc Crane's advice on how to make a success of marriage, Lardner said, "I have all ready got the proposition mastered without no doctor's prescription. . . ."[31] His own rules for a successful marriage are both simple and funny:

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31. First and Last, p. 57.

1.

The marital twain should ought to be opp. sex if possible and somewheres near the other one's age. For inst. when a man of 15 gets marr[illegible]ed to a gal of 45 why it may pan out all right for the time being but don't never forget that when the groom is nearing the century mark and wants to know where they's a clean bath towel, why he can't find out without leaveing Thurston the magician into the secret.

2.

The ideal marr[illegible]ed life is for the 2 belligerents to live in the same town so as when they feel like a brawl they won't be no toll charges.

3.

The bride should ought to have at lease as much money as the groom and a salary of her own so as when she feels like she has got to buy something she don't want she will know that it's her money being throwed away. All women hates to feel like they was sponging off of their husbands but the most of them is such a good actress that you wouldn't never guess how it hurts them.[32]

In "Symptoms of Being 35" he says:

. . . at 35 you spell [home] with a big H. Its where you can take off your shoes. Its where you can have more soup. Its where you don't have to say nothing when they's nothing to say. Its where they don't wait till the meal is all over and then give you a eye dropper full of coffee raw. Its where you don't half to listen. Its where they don't smear everything with cheese dressing. Its where you can pan everybody without it going no further. Its where they know you like doughnuts and what you think about a banana.

When you was 29 you didn't care for the band to play Home sweet Home. It was old stuff and a rotten tune any way. Now you hope they won't play it neither. Its a pretty tune but it makes you bust out crying.[33]

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32. First and Last, pp. 57-58.
33. What of It ?, p. 267.

IV

Satire on Neighborliness

In Lardner's stories neighborliness turns out to be a demonstration of egotism. Bridge games turn into squabbles, visits into exchanges of insults. Fred and Grace Gross of Own Your Own Home are entertaining the Carrys at cards one evening. The Grosses have received an invitation to a society dance by mistake, and Grace, who is ignorant of the fact that it is an error, mentions the invitation. The Carrys state that there must be some mistake. This starts an altercation. Fred recounts it in a letter to his brother Charley:

> . . . Grace flew up & says your sore because wear going to the dance and your not ast & then Carry & his wife & Grace & I all lost our temper & we had it hot & heavy & . . . we dident get none the worst of it. So finely I told them to go home and they says you dont half to tell us to go home & whats more you wont see no more of us & I says I lived 45 yrs. & got pretty fat before I ever seen you & thats about all that was said & they beat it and wear threw with them.[34]

The husband in "Three Without, Doubled," is at his first bridge party, and the evening is a mixture of bridge and pure venom. The husband knows absolutely nothing about the game, and that fact is soon discovered and commented on. However, the husband, the "I" of the story, is not at all abashed, even

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34. P. 56.

when he is playing against Mrs. Garrett, the best player in the club:

> 'Two no trump,' says Messenger, and my pardner says 'Pass' once more.
> 'You'll get a sore throat sayin' that,' I told her. 'Don't you never hold nothin' ?'
> 'It don't look like it,' she says.
> 'Maybe you don't know what's worth biddin' on,' I says.
> 'Maybe she better take a few lessons from you,' says Mrs. Garrett.
> 'No,' I says, kiddin' her, 'You don't want no more female experts in the club or you might have to buy somebut glass once in a w'ile instead o' winnin' it.'[35]

Later Mrs. Garrett, who is in the lead for the prize, becomes his partner. By some exceptionally stupid bidding he leaves her with a contract that with his hand is impossible to make. Mrs. Garrett explodes:

> . . . She slammed her hand down on the table, face up.
> 'I won't play it !' she hollers. 'I won't be made a fool of ! This poor idiot deliberately told me he had spades stopped, and look at his hand !'
> 'You're mistaken, Mrs. Garrett,' I says, I didn't say nothin' about spades.'
> 'Shut your mouth !' she says. 'That's what you ought to done all evenin'.'[36]

In the non-fictional "Welcome to our Suburb" the tolerance is easily discernible. His advice is on how to get rid of guests:

> People makes a big mistake in giving their country homes names that is too cordial and seductive. Like for inst. a name like

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35. Gullible's Travels, p. 245.
36. Ibid., pp. 248-49.

Shady Nook may sound innocent enough to the the owner of the place but the passer bys reads it or hears it mentioned and it listens so nice and cozy that they can't resist from paying you a call. Think how much more impossible it is then if you have gave your joint some such sobriquet as Kum Inn, Uwanta Kumback, Dew Drop Inn, Well Kum and etc. If you have to nickname the place at all, pick out something neutral like any of the following:

Stayaway, Keepaway, Knot Inn, Nobody's Home, Nolicker, Key Pout, No Add Mittens, and etc.[37]

He ends his article in the same humorous attitude:

Ten-thirty is late enough to stay up and at that time you remark to the guest that you are going to bed and you would advise him to do the same as everybody in the house must be up by 6 so as the hired gal can get the beds made and catch the 7:10 for Port Washington where she is going to spend the day with her niece. Then you show the guest to his room which has previously been arranged for him by removing the bulb from the only electric light.

For breakfast the next morning you serve him (1) No. 3 egg and a ½ cup of some good coffee substitute.

If it happens to be Sunday you read him all the comical pictures out loud and then take him to church.

Don't make no mention of food or drink all day long and if the guest starts talking about them, just laugh it off.

It takes a good game guest to stick it out 24 hrs. in the face of this kind of cordiality. The most of them makes their excuses long ere time for the evening meal and when they go they go for good. And as they genally always rush off to tell what happened to all the rest of your friends, why it is very seldom nessary to give the last named a course of the same treatment.[38]

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37. What of It ?, p. 161.
38. Ibid., pp. 163-64.

V

Satire on Sentimentality

Lardner attacks sentimental thinking in both his fiction and his non-fiction. "The Love Nest" and "The Golden Honeymoon" could be considered attacks on the sentimental attitude toward marriage; "Ex Parte," although much less emphatic in this respect, might be similarly classified. "Reunion," although not dealing with marriage, and softer in tone, nevertheless is an unmasking of the sometimes fallacious idea of brother and sister attachment. In this case the brother and sister have not seen each other for twenty years, and because they both feel they really ought to make an effort, the brother and his wife travel to Long Island for a visit. The interim of twenty years has left an unbridgeable gap of divergent tastes, and the story is a tale of dead spots in the conversation, no compatibility in amusements, and, finally, efforts on the part of both brother and sister to cut short the visit.

Whether "The Young Immigrunts" is fiction or non-fiction is debatable, but its sharp stab at the sickliness of sentiment is more characteristic of his fiction. A young bride and groom are taking a boat ride to Buffalo:

> Some night said the young glum are you warm enough.
> I am perfectly comfertible replid the fare bride tho her looks belid her words what time do we arrive in Buffalo.
> 9 oclock said the lordly glum are you warm enough.
> I am perfectly comfertible replid the fare bride what time do we arrive in Buffalo.
> 9 oclock said the lordly glum I an afrade it is too cold for you out here.
> Well maybe it is replid the fare bride and without further adieu they went in the spacius parlers.[39]

His description of a man's reactions to sentiment after reaching the age of thirty-five is basically the same, but the tone is more bland and kindly:

> For some reason another its necessary to find some old papers and in going through the trunk the patient runs acrost a bunch of souvenirs and keep sakes like a note a gal wrote him in high school, a picture of himself in a dirty football suit, a program of the 1907 May festival in South Bend and etc. 'Why keep this junk' he says and dumps them all in the waste basket.[40]

Later in the same article he points out his attitude toward possible romances:

> He sets down after breakfast to read the paper. The mail man comes and brings him 3 letters. One of them looks like it was a gal's writeing. He reads the paper.[41]

VI

General Non-Fictional Satire

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39. What of It ?, p. 234.
40. First and Last, p. 11.
41. Ibid., p. 12.

Lardner's non-fictional work included satire on a variety of subjects not dealt with in his fiction: prohibition, politics, numerology, chain letters, newspapers, royalty, table manners, etiquette, and animals. A close study of this section of Lardner's work will reveal, under the thin mask of humor, a frequently sharp irritation with the constant demonstrations of doltishness evidenced by the country in its fads, beliefs, gullibility, and general silliness. The section also shows his kinship with the crackerbox tradition formed by Downing, Slick, Ward, Nye, Dooley and others.

His attitude toward prohibition is invariably negative, as it probably had to be for him to maintain his humorous appeal. Nevertheless, the tone often idicates that he was against it personally as well as publicly. He comments:

> ... . It has given lucrative employment to a great many men that did not have nothing before only their courage. It has cemented the friendship between the U. S. and Canada. It has give gals and women a new interest in life and something to talk about besides hair and children. And it has made our govt. appreciate the enormous extent of our coast line and how tough it would be to defend same vs. invasion.[42]

He notes regretfully that in high school he

". . . passed up chemistry as useless. Nobody had

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42. What of It ?, pp. 197-98.

heard of Volstead at that time."[43] In his personal political platform he says:

> As far as the 18th amendment is concerned, I would pledge the party to a continuation of the strict enforcement methods that has been so effective in the past, but if at the end of a couple of yrs. there was still a clamor for beer and light wine, I would put same on sale for a month or so, long enough to convince everybody once and for all that they can get quicker and outer results under prohibition.[44]

His analysis of the Republican and Democratic platforms shows complete impartiality; there is, in fact, little or nothing in Lardner's writing that reveals his own political beliefs. It is conceivable, of course, that he abstained from airing his own political ideas merely avoid risking his popularity, but this is certainly no more than a possibility. At any rate, in 1928 he found the platforms revealed the following facts:

> The Democrat party is the part of Thos. Jefferson and Little Lord Fauntleroy while the Republican party is the part of Jesse James and Al Capone.
> Republicans are down on the farm.
> In 1917 the Democrats passed a law forbidding the Mississippi River to have any more floods so last year's floods certainly wasn't their fault.
> Everybody should ought to have a radio.
> There shouldn't be no more war.
> Coal is afuel.
> On the other hand, the Republican platform tells that:
> Everybody ought to have a radio.

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43. "What I Ought to of Learnt in High School," American Magazine, (November, 1923), 80.
44. First and Last, p. 226.

> The party will investigate the report that there is a 18th amendment and if so will try and enforce it.
>
> Last year's Mississippi floods stopped after a severe reprimand by a Republican Administration, and it ain't likely they will try it again for a while.
>
> Negroes shouldn't be lynched.
>
> Farmers are having a tough time.[45]

International politics were discussed by him during the disarmament conference of 1921:

> There may be some of my readers that is dumb enough to not know what this conference is all about. Well friends it has been called together to see if they ain't some way of stopping war and that is what the league of nations was supposed to do but the league has been to bat five or six times and ain't even got a foul.
>
> So the idear is to find a substitute for the league and a lot of the boys figures that the disarmament scheme will do the business so the object of this meeting is to get all the different nations to quit building war ships and making ammunitions and etc. and it looks now like they would all agree to the proposition provided they's an understanding that it don't include they themselfs.
>
> They's no question but what the United States would be tickled to death to see all the ships sank and all the guns and bombs and brick bats throwed in the ash can. That would leave every nation in the same position, namely nothing to fight with except their fists. And we have got Dempsey.
>
> Joking to one side this country goes into the conference in dead earnest and fully prepared to cripple ourselves from a fighting standpoint provided the other nations does the same and as a evidents of good faith President Harding is planning a public bonfire at which he will burn his niblick.[46]

In spite of his uniformly satirical tone on this question, Lardner, like the majority of people,

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45. "Just Politics," Collier's, LXXXII (September 15, 1928), 12.

46. First and Last, pp. 182-83.

honestly hopes that the conference will accomplish its object. His feelings in this are motivated by his attachment to his children. The end of the article uncovers this funamental feeling:

> Seriously speaking, I am for secret sessions if secret session is going to accomplish what the boys has set out to accomplish. They's nobody in this country or anywheres else that is pulling harder for war to be stopped than this native son of Berrien county, Mich. Because I have got a little male quartette in my home which in 20 yrs. from now they will all be draft age at once and it ain't on the cards that the whole four of them will be lucky like their dear old dad and have falling arches.[47]

The science of numerology he satirizes with a fine disregard for everything except the basic silliness of the fad:

> A person can amuse themselfs a whole evening figuring out what different persons names should really ought to be according to their birth number. For example we found out that Judge Landis by birth is a 7. A 7 'denotes self-satisfaction and poise, but is not likely to bestow glory or renown.' Then we went ahead and figured that the Judge could overcome this and maybe get himself some glory and renown by changing his name to Paula Landis.[48]

His views on chain letters are more disparaging. They contain little humor except the misspelling, and his impatience with the mass foolishness of the fad is stated with, for him, surprising feeling:.

> Well friends as I say this business has

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47. First and Last, p. 184.
48. Ibid., p. 251.

been going on since about the 1 of September and up to date I ain't said nothing and have kept my mouth shut and took things as they come in the hopes the storm would blow over like the nullo fad in bridge whist but it begins to look now like this thing is libel to develop into a permanent plague unless somebody steps forward and puts the quietus on it and wile I don't pretend to have influence enough with the gen. public to influence them one way way or the other still and all I feel like I wouldn't be doing my duty was I to remain in silents and not state my stand in regards to the matter of these here endless letter chains.

Well then friends anybody that wants one of these here letters to go one time around the world to say nothing of three times around the world is going about it in the wrong way when they mail one of them to me because as far as one of these letters is conserned I am what you might call a terminus. When one of these letters reaches my house the conductor may as well get up and holler this is as far as we go, all out and don't forget your packages and umbrellas.[49]

During a national paper shortage he states his opinion of newspapers very trenchantly:

From everywheres comes the cry to save white paper and in my letters only recently I all ready mentioned about the props. of all the big newspapers in the country held a meeting in New York City and disgust the shortage and promised they wouldn't use no more of it then was nessary but from all as I can see the papers is till comeing out daily and Sun. as big as life and all the paper they been saveing wouldn't make a night gown for a cigarette and a outsider might think they had give their promise as a practical joke and with no intentions of carrying them out.[50]

In most of Lardner's work it is clear that he

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49. First and Last, pp. 233-34.
50. Ibid., p. 239.

was contemptuous of "society". Often this feeling is expressed indirectly by a cold satire of social climbers, as in his short novel "Big Town"; in other parts of the same story, his unflattering pictures of society women, whose major interests are dogs and bridge and minor interests their husbands, are head-on attacks. His non-fictional satire of society is more often pointed directly at his object, but the presence of humor removes some of the sting, as the following description of a new deal in society will show:

> Well a little wile ago, along sometime last summer a select group of our best ineludeing the queen Kleagle of the Colonial Dames of America got together and decided that it was time for a general shake-up which they would get rid of the vermin once and for all and make society look something it used to forty years ago and 400 come into being. At that time a prominent butcher's granddaughter-in-law or something give a party and left the inviteing to a gent friend that had the family history of everybody in America at both ends of his tongue. He issued just a even 400 invitations and made the remark that anybody not included in his list might consider themself permanently barred from organized society. The 400 and their assigns carried along the burden until a short time bac, when as I say some brother Elks and Mooses begin to horn their way in and spoil the party.
>
> Last summer the committee of chosen people consisting almost entirely of women of the opp. sex made up their mind to change the limit from 400 to 500 so as to let in a few families that had sold out their meat markets and livery barns and turned square since the last beef shuffle.[51]

51. First and Last, pp. 249-50.

Discussing table manners, he labels the soup rule ridiculous:

> They ain't no man or woman liveing that can pick up all their soup from a flat lie useing only a spoon and the result is that from 1/10 to a ½ inch is always left laying in the bottom of the dish which plane waste as the most ecomical Jap in the world cannot do nothing with left over soup only throw it in the ash can.[52]

Since, in the words of someone, it is a common fault to "gall the back of a thesis with hard riding," it would be unwise to consider Lardner's treatment of etiquette more than a random shot from a galloping horse. For him it is merely an opportunity, and he makes the most of it:

> Personly however I have been introduced to many a dame that must have thought I was holding out my hands so she could admire the callouses or something and I been humiliated so many times along these lines that now days when they's a dame being introduced to me I always pretend like I was unloosening my belt or looking through my vest pocket for a tooth pick.
>
> It is well to remember then when the party who is makeing the introduction says, "Mr. Bolling, shake hands with Mrs. Galvin,' that don't neserally mean that you got to shake hands. The introducer ain't any authority to designate the mode of caress and irregardless of whatever he says you are free to put your arm around Mrs. Galvin or slap her face or ignore her entirely.[53]

A student of Lardner could easily believe that, like Shakespeare, Lardner was not a lover of dogs,

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52. First and Last, pp. 253-54.
53. Ibid., pp. 258-59.

or any other animal. Nor, apparently, did Lardner believe in the deep-rooted idea that if a man is kind to dumb brutes it is automatic proof that he isn't all bad. Lardner comments at considerable length on this piece of folklore, but the following is a good summation of his attitude:

> . . . personly if I had a daughter and she wanted to get marred and I asked her what kind of a bird the guy was and she said she don't know nothing about him except that one day she seen him kiss a leopard, why I would hold up my blessing till a few of the missing precincts was heard from.[54]

VII

Lardner's Pure Humor

Some of the best examples of uninhibited, farcical flights of the imagination are in Lardner's parodies. "Red Riding Hood" contains a scene that few golfers can read and maintain their dignity. In it Lardner substitutes a police dog for the wolf, has the grandmother a gin addict, and makes Miss Hood's father a golfer. At the point this excerpt begins the dog has already eaten the grandmother:

> So then the dog jumped out of bed and went after Red and she screamed.
>
> In the mean w'ile Red's father has been playing golf for a quarter a hole with a couple of guys that conceded themselfs all putts under 12 ft. and he was $.75 looser coming to the 10th. tee.

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54. First and Last, pp. 261-62.

The 10th. hole is kind of tough as your drive has to have a carry of 50 yards or it will fall in a garbage incinerating plant. You can either lift out with a penalty of two strokes or else play it with a penalty of suffocation. Red's old man topped his drive and the ball rolled into the garbage. He elected to play it and made what looked like a beautiful shot, but when they got up on the green they found that he had hit a white radish instead of a golf ball.

A long argument followed during which the gallery went home to get his supper. The hole was finely conceded.

The 11th. hole on the course is probably the sportiest hole in golfdom. The tee and green are synonymous and the first shot is a putt, but the rules signify that the putt must be played off a high tee with a driver. Red's father was on in two and off in three more and finely sunk his approach for a birdie eight, squaring the match.

Thus the match was all square coming to the home hole which is right close to grandmother's cottage. Red's father hooked his drive through an open window in his mother-in-law's house and forced his caddy to lend him a niblick. He entered the cottage just as the dog was beginning to eat Red.

'What hole are you playing, father ?' asked Red.

'The eighteenth,' says her father, 'and it is a dog's leg.'

Where-at he hit the police dog in the leg with his niblick and the dog was so surprised that he even give up the grandmother.

'I win, one up,' says Red's father and he went out to tell the news to his two opponents. But they had quit and went home to dress for the Kiwanis Club dance.[55]

Almost on a par with this is his version of "Cinderella":

[Cinderella] was a pip, so both her stepmother and the two stepsisters [Pat and Mike] hated her and made her sleep in the ashcan. Her name was Zelda, but they called her Cin-

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55. What of It ?, pp. 67-69.

derella on account of how the ashes and clinkers clang to her when she got up noons. . . .

Well, Pat and Mike started for Webster Hall in a bonded taxi and they hadn't much sooner than went when a little bit of an old dame stepped out of the kitchen sink and stood in front of Cinderella and says she was her fairy godmother.

'listen,' says Cinderella: 'don't mention mother to me ! I've tried two different kinds and they've both been a flop !'

'Yes, but listen yourself,' says the godmother: 'wouldn't you like to go to this here dance ?'

'Who and the h--l wouldn't !' says Cinderella.

'Well, then,' says the godmother, 'go out in the garden and pick me a pumpkin.'

'You're pie-eyed,' was Cinderella's criticism, but anyway she went out and got o pumpkin and give it to the old dame and it turned into a big, black touring car like murderers rides in.

Then the old lady made Cinderella go to the mouse-trap and fetch her six mice and she prodded them with her wand and they each became a cylinder. Next she had her bring a rat from the rat trap and she turned him into a big city chauffeur, which wasn't hardly any trouble.[56]

Lardner's plays, which sometimes include bits of zany verse, are fine examples of his buffonery. Clemo Uti -- The Water Lilies, is one of his craziest:

ACT I

(The Outskirts of a Parchesi Board. People are wondering what has become of the dises. They quit wondering and sit up and sing the following song.)

Chorus

What has become of the discs ?

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56. What of It ?, pp. 58-60.

> What has become of the discs ?
> We took them at our own risks,
> But what has become of the discs ?
>
> (Wama enters from an exclusive waffle parlor. She exits as if she had had waffles.)[57]

In much of this part of his work Lardner exhibits an unrestrained love for pure fun that stands out in remarkable relief against his emotionless dissections of the human race. Lardner has been compared often to Swift, but his pure humor, which so much resembles Lewis Carroll's, has received little notice in late years. Like Carroll's humor, Lardner's gives the impression of a spontaneous boiling-over process. Not all of it has that exuberance, unfortunately; in some passages it is fairly easy to see the mechanics of his wit; but his best humor is on a par with Carroll's. The setting of "I Gaspiri," a nonsense play, has this spontaneity:

> A public street in a bathroom. A man named Tupper has evidently just taken a bath. A man named Brindle is now taking a bath. A man named Newburn comes out of the faucet which has been left running. He exits through the exhaust. Two strangers to each other meet on the bath mat.[58]

A burlesque of the late O. O. McIntyre's newspaper gossip column is also in this vein of foolishness. The funniness of this, of course, is dependent upon a familiarity with the original, so an excerpt from

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57. First and Last, p. 367.
58. Ibid., p. 371

McIntyre's column is quoted:

> So breakfasting . . . in our new chambers, the black dishes as pretty as ever I saw, and at the moment wonder how I endured living in hotels so many years. Finished my stint and sat watching iron-mongers on the new Waldorf cater-cornered from my window.
>
> In the evening came upon C. N. Landon, the art editor, and we for a spin in charabanc through the park, discussing, pool and the high enthusiasm of Ray Long! Stopped at the Algonquin to pick up H. N. Swanson and, seeing Frank Case, praised his floating island, but he unmoved. So home, very hungry.[59]

Lardner's burlesque follows:

> Diary of a Modern New Yorker: Up and out five hours before dawn, and by scooter to the Hermitage Hotel, where the big Seminole Indian Chef, Gwladys, cooked me a flagon of my favorite breakfast dish, beet root and wrestlers' knees. Hallooed to Lily Langtry and we fell to arguing over the origin of the word 'breakfast,' she contending that it was a combination of 'break' and 'fast', derived from a horse's instructions to a starter in a six-furlong race, and I maintaining that it was five furlongs. We decided to leave it to Percy Hammond, the philatelist, but his nurse told us he was out shoplifting.
>
> Home for a moment to slit my mail and found invitations from Mussolini, Joan Crawford, Joan of Arc, President Buchanan, Joe Walcott, and Louisa M. Alcott. Then answered a pleasant long-distance call from Gwladys, the little French chef in the Cafe des Trois Outfielders in Sydney, her voice as plain as if she were in Melbourne. She had heard I had a cold, she said, and was worried! It was gratifying to hear her whimpers of relief when I assurred her the crisis was past.
>
> Breaking bread in the evening at the office of J. P. Morgan & Company and sat between Bernie Shaw, H. J. Wells, Charlie Dickens, Lizzie Barrett, Will Thackeray, Lottie Bronte, Paul Whiteman, and Bill Klem. Chatted for a moment after dinner with Who's

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59. Lansing State Journal, August 18, 1930.

Who and, finding a heavy rainstorm outside, dismissed my driver, Gwladys, and pirouetted to the lower West Side, where I sat on the New York Central tracks till dawn, watching the operations of a switch engine. I have always been a sucker for a New York Central switch engine in a heavy rainstorm.60

60. First and Last, pp. 313-14.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In all probability time will not be kind to Lardner's work, and the most logical guess is that only a small part of it will survive. This judgment is based chiefly on Lardner's choice of subject matter, his viewpoint, and his use of misspelling.

That portion of Lardner's writing that employs misspelling and similar means to convey the American language will undoubtedly mingle with the backwash of literature. For his own literary durability, too much of his writing was done in this characterisitic style of the crackerbox tradition; nor will it matter much that Lardner used it for legitimate literary purposes and placed it on a higher status than any of his predecessors. Judging from the past, this unorthodoxy alone would remove any chances for survival of this section of his writing. No one, with a few scholarly exceptions, reads Mr. Dooley now. And Nasby, Ward, Nye, and the rest of the misspelling writers, once famous in their day, are even more remote from contemporary consideration, if this is possible, than such a recent figure as Mr. Dooley.

Some of Lardner's purely humorous pieces may,

with luck, retain their grip on life. His burlesque of O. O. McIntyre may be one of these, and one or two of his plays may also last -- the best possibility among the latter is probably "I Gaspiri". But this is an optimistic prophecy, for several reasons. Not misspelling, this time, but brevity and a small output will work against his humor. His plays, especially, are short, and few in number; his burlesques and parodies are longer, but again lack quantity. Also, as time goes by, Lardner will suffer the fate similar to that of many other writers who have had a variety of talents obscured by one talent: he will be neatly but inaccurately pigeonholed in the slot of the satirist. Finally, humor has a peculiar habit of dying unless it is stored in a body of work that is not primarily humorous.

His baseball stories will also cease to be read. The majority of them, and especially those that gained most of his early reputation for him, are no longer representative; their truthfulness to a type had, in fact, disappeared even in Lardner's time. The dumb busher from a whistle stop hamlet that Lardner wrote about was replaced some time in the twenties by a more worldly-wise and better educated player, and when Lardner's busher appears now it is probably due more to a reporter's inventiveness than to his veracity.

This fact, and also the unorthodox spelling used in most of Lardner's baseball stories, erases all chance for their survival.

It is that part of Lardner's fiction that is written without the detracting influence (from the standpoint of immortality) of dialect and misspelling that stands the best chance of lasting. "Haircut," because of its insight into the heart of a small town, and because of its artistry and economy of style, may easily become a minor classic. "Champion" has less chance, because its subject -- a boxing champion -- is restricted in interest and touches too small a reader group; in addition, the truth of the story, startling at the time of publication, has now lost its force through repetition of the same theme in hundreds of less meritorious magazine and newspaper stories and articles.

The fate of "The Love Nest" will probably be similar to that of "Champion," and for somewhat identical reasons. Its basic situation -- a movie actress using marriage in the hope of furthering her career -- has become a staple American joke. The difference now is that the number of husbands per actress has increased, and children seem to be no bar to either a career or another marriage. In fact,

the present generation of readers would very likely wonder why Lardner's lady was so weak-willed that she permitted a few children to block her return to celluloid. At the very least, contemporary readers would be tempted to classify her psychologically as a person having a weak drive in the direction of the theater, and lightly dismiss the whole story.

"Golden Honeymoon" seems to have a better chance for survival. Since it is a picture of trite minds, and since trite minds are always with us, it may be that it will last. On the other hand, the very fact that it is an accurate portrayal of uninteresting people may make it uninteresting and lead to its disappearance. Possibly a fair prediction is that if it survives the survival will be due to an exceedingly small group of exceedingly acute readers.

The four stories mentioned are the ones most frequently cited for possible survival. Yet it seems to me that Lardner's "There Are Smiles" has as much if not more likelihood of weathering time than any of them except "Haircut." Besides the lean style, the background of humor, and fast and exact characterizations in the story, it shows a striking resemblance to some of the best present day short stories. It is less a story -- in the old sense of a completely

finished tale -- than a report of an incident. In this respect it bears a strong resemblance to many stories in The New Yorker magazine, a publication well known for its "reporter style" fiction.

Other and better reasons for forecasting a long life to "There Are Smiles" is the fact that its motivation pivots rather delicately on sex, and that its poignant note at the end instills a warm sympathy for humanity. Both these qualities are eternal in their appeal. The story, it should be noted, is remarkable for Lardner; although it is superficially cynical -- it has been construed by Maxwell Geismar, for example, as an exposé of ego -- not too far below the surface there runs a compassion for people who have been grasping at something intangible but worthwhile, only to lose it ultimately. It is remarkable also in that both the chief characters evoke the reader's sympathy. And even more singular is the presence in a Lardner story of a woman like Edith Dole; of all Lardner's many women characters, none have her fine appeal. The combination of all the qualities mentioned, plus Lardner's effortless manner of telling the story, leads me to think that this will survive.

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