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**The**  
**Best Short**  
**Stories of**  
**Ring**  
**Lardner**

HAIRCUT THE GOLDEN HONEYMOON  
CHAMPION ALIBI IKE HORSESHOES  
and 20 other stories

OMNIBUS



VOLUME

*The Best Short Stories*  
*of*  
RING  
LARDNER

*CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS · NEW YORK*

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## THE MAYSVILLE MINSTREL

MAYSVILLE was a town of five thousand inhabitants and its gas company served eight hundred homes, offices and stores.

The company's office force consisted of two men—Ed Hunter, trouble shooter and reader of meters, and Stephen Gale, whose title was bookkeeper, but whose job was a lot harder than that sounds.

From the first to the tenth of the month, Stephen stayed in the office, accepted checks and money from the few thrifty customers who wanted their discount of five percent, soft-soaped and argued with the many customers who thought they were being robbed, and tried to sell new stoves, plates and lamps to customers who were constantly complaining of defects in the stoves, plates and lamps they had bought fifteen or twenty years ago.

After the tenth, he kept the front door locked and went all over town calling on delinquents, many of whom were a year or more behind and had no intention of trying to catch up. This tiring, futile task usually lasted until the twenty-seventh, when Hunter started reading meters and Stephen copied the readings and made out the bills.

On the twenty-ninth, Hunter usually got drunk and Stephen had to hustle out and read the unread meters and hustle back and make out the rest of the bills.

When Townsend, the Old Man, who owned the business and five other gas businesses in larger towns, paid his semimonthly visit to Maysville, Stephen had to take a severe bawling out for failing to squeeze blood from Maysville's turnips and allowing Hunter to get drunk.

All in all, Stephen earned the \$22.50 per week which he had been getting the eight years he had worked for the gas company.

He was now thirty-one. At twelve, he had been obliged to quit school and go to work as a Western Union messenger boy. His father was dead and his mother, who established herself, without

much profit, as a dressmaker, easily could use the few dollars Stephen drew from the telegraph company. Later on he had jobs as driver of a grocery wagon, soda clerk in a drug store and freight wrestler at the Lackawanna depot.

The \$22.50 offer from the gas office was manna from somewhere; it topped his highest previous salary by seven dollars and a half.

Stephen's mother died and Stephen married Stella Nichols, to whom lack of money was no novelty. But they had a couple of children and soon fell into debt, which made Stephen less efficient than ever as a collector of the company's back bills. He couldn't blame other people for not settling when he was stalling off creditors himself.

All he could do was wish to heaven that the Old Man would come across with a substantial raise, and he knew there was as much chance of that as of Stella's swimming the English Channel with a kid under each arm.

The Gales were too poor to go to picture shows; besides, there was no one to leave the children with. So Stephen and Stella stayed at home evenings and read books from the town library. The books Stephen read were books of poetry.

And often, after Stella had gone to bed, he wrote poetry of his own.

He wrote a poem to Stella and gave it to her on one of her birthdays and she said it was great and he ought to quit the darn old gas company and write poetry for a living.

He laughed that off, remarking that he was as poor now as he cared to be.

He didn't show Stella his other poems—poems about Nature, flowers, the Lackawanna Railroad, the beauties of Maysville, et cetera—but kept them locked in a drawer of his desk at the gas office.

There was a man named Charley Roberts who traveled out of New York for an instantaneous water-heater concern. For years he had been trying to sell old Townsend, but old Townsend said the heater ate up too much gas and would make the customers squawk. They squawked enough as it was. Roberts was a determined young man and kept after Townsend in spite of the latter's discouraging attitude.

Roberts was also a wise-cracking, kidding New Yorker, who, when at home, lunched where his heroes lunched, just to be near them, look at them and overhear some of their wise-cracks which

he could repeat to his fellow drummers on the road. These heroes of his were comic-strip artists, playwrights and editors of humorous columns in the metropolitan press.

His favorite column was the one conducted by George Balch in the Standard and when he was in the small towns, he frequently clipped silly items from the local papers and sent them to George, who substituted his own captions for Charley's and pasted them up.

Charley had a tip that Old Man Townsend would be in Maysville on a certain day, and as he was in the neighborhood, he took an interurban car thither and called at the gas office. Stephen had just got back from a fruitless tour among the deadheads and was in the shop, behind the office, telling Ed Hunter that Mrs. Harper's pilot-light wouldn't stay lighted.

Roberts, alone in the office, looked idly at Stephen's desk and saw a book.

It was a volume of poems by Amy Lowell. A moment later Stephen reentered from the shop.

"Hello there, Gale," said Roberts.

"How are you, Mr. Roberts?" said Stephen.

"I heard the Old Man was here," said Roberts.

"You've missed him," said Stephen. "He was here yesterday afternoon and left for Haines City last night."

"Will he be here tomorrow?"

"I couldn't tell you. He's hard to keep track of."

"He's hard to sell, too. But I'll run over there and take a chance. I notice you've been reading highbrow poetry."

"I got this from the library."

"How do you like it?"

"I'm not strong for poetry that don't rhyme," said Stephen.

"I guess it's easier to write," said Roberts.

"I don't believe so. It isn't much trouble rhyming if you've got it in you. Look at Edgar Guest."

"How do you know he doesn't have trouble?"

"His works don't read like it," said Stephen, and after a pause: "Besides, I've tried it myself."

"Oh, so you're a poet, are you?" asked Roberts.

"I wouldn't exactly claim that, but I've written a few verses and it was more like fun than work. Maybe other people would think they were rotten, but I get pleasure writing them just the same."

"I'd like to read them, Gale," said Roberts eagerly.



"I don't know if I'd like you to or not. And I don't know if I've saved any. I wrote a poem to my wife on her birthday three years ago. She thought it was pretty good. I might let you read that, only I don't know if I've got a copy of it around here."

He knew very well he had a copy of it around there.

"See if you can find it," said Roberts.

Stephen looked in two or three drawers before he unlocked the one that contained his manuscripts.

"It's just a little thing I wrote for my wife on her birthday. You'll probably think it's rotten. It's called 'To Stella.' That's my wife's first name."

Charley Roberts read the poem:

*Stella you today are twenty-three years old  
And yet your hair is still pure gold.  
Stella they tell me your name in Latin means a star  
And to me that is what you are  
With your eyes and your hair so yellow  
I rate myself a lucky fellow Stella.  
You know I cannot afford a costly gift  
As you know it costs us all I make to live  
And as you know we are already in debt,  
But if you will stay well and healthy  
Until I am rich and wealthy  
Maybe I will be more able then to give you a present  
Better than I can at present.  
So now Stella good-by for the present  
And I hope next year I can make things more pleasant.  
May you live to be old and ripe and mellow  
Is my kind birthday wish for you Stella.*

"Do you mean to tell me," said Roberts, "that it was no trouble to write that?"

"It only took me less than a half-hour," said Stephen.

"Listen," said Roberts. "Let me have it."

"What do you want with it?"

"I can get it published for you."

"Where at?"

"In the New York Standard. I've got a friend, George Balch, who would run it in his column. He doesn't pay anything, but if this was printed and your name signed to it, it might attract attention from people who do pay for poetry. Then you could make a lot of money on the side."

"How much do they pay?"

"Well, some of the big magazines pay as high as a dollar a line."

"I forget how many lines there is in that."

Roberts counted them.

"Seventeen," he said. "And from what I've seen of old Townsend, I bet he doesn't pay you much more a week."

"And it only took me less than a half-hour to write," said Stephen.

"Will you let me send it to Balch?"

"I don't know if I've got another copy."

"Your wife must have a copy."

"I guess maybe she has."

He wasn't just guessing.

"I'll mail this to Balch tonight, along with a note. If he prints it, I'll send you the paper."

"I've got one that's even longer than that," said Stephen.

"Well, let's have it."

"No, I guess I'd better hang onto it—if your friend don't pay for them."

"You're absolutely right. A man's a sucker to work for nothing. You keep your other stuff till this is published and you hear from some magazine editor, as I'm sure you will. Then you can sell what you've already written, and write more, till you're making so much dough that you can buy the Maysville Gas Company from that old skinflint."

"I don't want any gas company. I want to get out of it. I just want to write."

"Why shouldn't you!"

"I've got to be sure of a living."

"Living! If you can make seventeen dollars in half an hour, that's thirty-four dollars an hour, or—— How many hours do you put in here?"

"Ten."

"Three hundred and forty dollars a day! If that isn't a living, I'm selling manicure sets to fish."

"I couldn't keep up no such pace. I have to wait for inspiration," said Stephen.

"A dollar a line would be enough inspiration for me. But the times when you didn't feel like doing it yourself, you could hire somebody to do it for you."

"That wouldn't be square, and people would know the difference anyway. It's hard to imitate another man's style. I tried once to write like Edgar Guest, but it wouldn't have fooled people that was familiar with his works."

"Nobody can write like Guest. And you don't need to. Your own style is just as good as his and maybe better. And speaking of Guest, do you think he's starving to death? He gives away dimes to the Fords."

Stephen was wild to tell Stella what had happened, but he was afraid this Balch might not like the poem as well as Roberts had; might not think it worth publishing, and she would be disappointed.

He would wait until he actually had it in print, if ever, and then show it to her.

He didn't have to wait long. In less than a week he received by mail from New York a copy of the Standard, and in George Balch's column was his verse with his name signed to it and a caption reading "To Stella—A Maysville Minstrel Gives His Mrs. a Birthday Treat."

For the first time in his career at the gas office, Stephen quit five minutes early and almost ran home. His wife was as excited as he had hoped she would be.

"But why does he call you a minstrel?" she asked. "He must have heard some way about that night at the Elks."

Stephen told her the rest of the story—how Roberts had predicted that the poem would attract the attention of magazine editors and create a demand for his verses at a dollar a line. And he confessed that he had other poems all ready to send when the call came.

He had brought two of them home from the office and he read them aloud for her approval:

*"1. The Lackawanna Railroad.*

*"The Lackawanna Railroad where does it go?*

*It goes from Jersey City to Buffalo.*

*Some of the trains stop at Maysville but they are few*

*Most of them go right through*

*Except the 8:22*

*Going west but the 10:12 bound for Jersey City*

*That is the train we like the best*

*As it takes you to Jersey City*

*Where you can take a ferry or tube for New York City.*

*The Lackawanna runs many freights*

*Sometimes they run late*

*But that does not make so much difference with a freight*

*Except the people who have to wait for their freight.*

*Maysville people patronize the Interurban a specially the farmers*

*So the Interurban cuts into the business of the Lackawanna,*

*But if you are going to New York City or Buffalo*

*The Lackawanna is the way to go.  
Will say in conclusion that we consider it an honor  
That the City of Maysville is on the Lackawanna.*

*"2. The Gas Business.*

*"The Maysville Gas Co. has eight hundred meters  
The biggest consumer in town is Mrs. Arnold Peters  
Who owns the big house on Taylor Hill  
And is always giving parties come who will.  
Our collections amount to about \$2600.00 per month  
Five per cent discount if paid before the tenth of the month.  
Mr. Townsend the owner considers people a fool  
Who do not at least use gas for fuel.  
As for lighting he claims it beats electricity  
As electric storms often cut off the electricity  
And when you have no light at night  
And have to burn candles all night.  
This is hardly right  
A specially if you have company  
Who will ask you what is the matter with the electricity.  
So patronize the Gas Company which storms do not effect  
And your friends will have no reason to object."*

Stella raved over both the poems, but made a very practical suggestion.

"You are cheating yourself, dear," she said. "The poem about the railroad, for instance, the way you have got it, it is nineteen lines, or nineteen dollars if they really pay a dollar a line. But it would be almost double the amount if you would fix the lines different."

"How do you mean?"

She got a pencil and piece of paper and showed him:

*The Lackawanna Railroad  
Where does it go?  
It goes from Jersey City  
To Buffalo.*

"You see," she said, "you could cut most of the lines in half and make thirty-eight dollars instead of nineteen."

But Stephen, with one eye on profit and the other on Art, could only increase the lines of "The Lackawanna" from nineteen to thirty and those of "The Gas Business" from seventeen to twenty-one.

Three days later a special delivery came for Stephen.  
It said:

DEAR MR. GALE:

On September second there was a poem entitled "To Stella" in the New York Standard. The poem was signed by you. It impressed me greatly and if you have written or will write others as good, our magazine will be glad to buy them, paying you one dollar a line.

Please let me hear from you and send along any poems you may have on hand.

Sincerely,

WALLACE JAMES,  
EDITOR, "*James's Weekly*,"  
New York City.

Stephen had never heard of "James's Weekly" and did not notice that the letter was postmarked Philadelphia and written on the stationery of a Philadelphia hotel.

He rushed to his house, addressed and mailed the railroad and gas verses, and after a brief and excited conference with Stella, decided to resign his job.

Old Man Townsend, dropping into Maysville the following morning, heard the decision and was not a bit pleased. He realized he never could get anyone else to do Stephen's work at Stephen's salary.

"I'll raise you to twenty-four dollars," he said.

"I'm not asking for a raise. I've got to quit so I can devote all my time to my poetry."

"Your poetry!"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you mean to say you're going to write poetry for a living?" asked the Old Man.

"Yes, sir."

"You'll starve to death."

"Edgar Guest is still alive."

"I don't care if he is or not," said the Old Man. "It's the twelfth of the month and Hunter can tend to his job and yours both for a couple of weeks. If you want to come back at the end of that time, I'll raise you to twenty-three dollars."

It was Stephen's intention to polish up some of his older poems and write one or two fresh ones so his supply would be ready for "James's" demand.

But he found it next to impossible to write while the fate of the two verses he had sent in was uncertain and, deciding to leave

the old manuscripts as they were, he was able to make only a feeble start on a new one:

*The Delaware River*

*Not a great many miles from Maysville is the Delaware River  
But there is no fish in this part of the River.  
The upper part of the River is narrow and shallow  
But they claim it is much wider near Philadelphia.*

On the twentieth the envelope containing "The Lackawanna Railroad" and "The Gas Business" was returned from New York. There were several inscriptions stamped and written on it, such as "Not Found" and "Not in Directory."

And it dawned on Stephen that he was the victim of quite a joke.

To the accompaniment of Stella's sobs, he proceeded to tear up all his manuscripts save "To Stella," which she had hidden away where he couldn't find it.

"Mr. Townsend came in on the eight-thirty interurban," he said. "I'll have to go see him."

"All right," said the Old Man when Stephen walked into the office. "I'll take you back at your old salary, but don't let's have no more foolishness. Get out now and try and coax a little money out of that Harper woman. She ain't paid a nickel for eight months."

"I wanted to speak to you about those instantaneous water-heaters," said Stephen.

"What about them?"

"I was going to advise you not to buy them. They eat up too much gas."

"Thanks for your advice, but I ordered some from Roberts in Haines City. I told him to send half a dozen of them here," said the Old Man.

"Will he be here to demonstrate them?" asked Stephen grimly.

"He said he would."

"I hope he will."

But even as he spoke, Stephen realized there was nothing he could do about it.



## I CAN'T BREATHE

*July 12*

I AM staying here at the Inn for two weeks with my Uncle Nat and Aunt Jule and I think I will keep a kind of diary while I am here to help pass the time and so I can have a record of things that happen though goodness knows there isn't lightly to anything happen, that is anything exciting with Uncle Nat and Aunt Jule making the plans as they are both at least 35 years old and maybe older.

Dad and mother are abroad to be gone a month and me coming here is supposed to be a recompence for them not taking me with them. A fine recompence to be left with old people that come to a place like this to rest. Still it would be a heavenly place under different conditions, for instance if Walter were here, too. It would be heavenly if he were here, the very thought of it makes my heart stop.

I can't stand it. I won't think about it.

This is our first separation since we have been engaged, nearly 17 days. It will be 17 days tomorrow. And the hotel orchestra at dinner this evening played that old thing "Oh how I miss you tonight" and it seemed as if they must be playing it for my benefit though of course the person in that song is talking about how they miss their mother though of course I miss mother too, but a person gets used to missing their mother and it isn't like Walter or the person you are engaged to.

But there won't be any more separations much longer, we are going to be married in December even if mother does laugh when I talk to her about it because she says I am crazy to even think of getting married at 18.

She got married herself when she was 18, but of course that was "different," she wasn't crazy like I am, she knew whom she was marrying. As if Walter were a policeman or a foreigner or something. And she says she was only engaged once while I have been engaged at least five times a year since I was 14, of course it really



isn't as bad as that and I have really only been really ~~what I call~~ engaged six times altogether, but is getting engaged ~~my fault~~ when they keep insisting and hammering at you and if you didn't say yes they would never go home.

But it is different with Walter. I honestly believe if he ~~had not~~ asked me I would have asked him. Of course I wouldn't ~~have~~, but I would have died. And this is the first time I have ~~ever been~~ engaged to be really married. The other times when they talked about when we should get married I just laughed ~~at them~~, but I hadn't been engaged to Walter ten minutes when he brought up the subject of marriage and I didn't laugh. I ~~wouldn't~~ be engaged to him unless it was to be married. I couldn't ~~stand~~ it.

Anyway mother may as well get used to the idea because it is "No Foolin'" this time and we have got our plans all ~~made and~~ I am going to be married at home and go out to California and Hollywood on our honeymoon. December, five months ~~away~~. I can't stand it. I can't wait.

There were a couple of awfully nice looking boys ~~sitting together~~ alone in the dining-room tonight. One of them ~~wasn't~~ so much, but the other was cute. And he——

There's the dance orchestra playing "Always," what they ~~played~~ at the Biltmore the day I met Walter. "Not for just an ~~hour not~~ for just a day." I can't live. I can't breathe.

*July 13*

This has been a much more exciting day than I expected ~~under~~ the circumstances. In the first place I got two long night ~~letters~~, one from Walter and one from Gordon Flint. I don't ~~see how~~ Walter ever had the nerve to send his, there was everything ~~in it~~ and it must have been horribly embarrassing for him ~~while the~~ telegraph operator was reading it over and counting the ~~words to~~ say nothing of embarrassing the operator.

But the one from Gordon was a kind of a shock. He ~~just got~~ back from a trip around the world, left last December to ~~go on it~~ and got back yesterday and called up our house and Helga ~~gave~~ him my address, and his telegram, well it was nearly ~~as bad as~~ Walter's. The trouble is that Gordon and I were engaged ~~when he~~ went away, or at least he thought so and he wrote to ~~me right~~ along all the time he was away and sent cables and things ~~and~~