THE RING LARDNER READER

Edited by Maxwell Geismar

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Edited by *MAXWELL GEISMAR*

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Introduction

I

The present volume is a gathering-in of Ring Lardner's best work in the area of fiction and non-fiction; in prose, verse and drama; in mordant satire and hilarious comedy and brilliant nonsense. All of Lardner's famous stories are here (so the present editor believes), as well as many articles, essays, parodies and songs that are not so well known, and presented for an audience which knows Ring Lardner perhaps least well of all those celebrated talents of the nineteen twenties who are now familiar names in the capitals of the world.

To many of these readers Ring Lardner is still a popular sports writer of that period; at best a newspaper columnist or Broadway entertainer. To a smaller circle of intellectuals, Lardner is better known as one of the most savage and merciless satirists and social critics of his period who dissected Babbitt before Babbitt was born; who anticipated the despairing American critique of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* while Dos Passos was still a sophomore at Harvard; who created a new American language that made Hemingway's look like parlor conversation.

Well, both of these opposing views of Lardner are true in their way, and neither of them is quite true enough. Somewhere between them, this enigmatic artist and remarkable folk poet, Ring Lardner himself—this suffering, silent and dark spirit of the popular entertainment world—somewhere between these "theories" of his art, Lardner's spirit still hovers, ambiguous, ironic and sardonic. He had very little use for art as an abstraction; he must have secretly smiled at Scott Fitzgerald's youthful preachings to him. He wrote about the world he knew as truthfully and carefully as he could—and in his best things not a line can be changed.

But there are still some missing lines, too, and not even the solid body of personal information which Donald Elder's recent biography, *Ring Lardner,* presents to us, quite gives the answer as to the nature of Lardner's talent and his torment alike. He was born in

Niles, Michigan, as Ringgold Wilmer Lardner on March 5, 1885 —"of respectable colored parents," as Lardner once told a Southern gentleman. Actually the Lardners were eminently respectable, prosperous, cultivated middle-westerners of that earlier, old-fashioned, leisurely and graceful provincial culture whose true spokesman was the early Booth Tarkington. Ring was brought up with all these graces; these native good-manners; this code of decency, honor, loyalty within an affectionate and close family circle—and perhaps he never quite met this again in the later and very different American scene which he lived in and wrote about.

Until he was eleven he wore a brace for a deformed foot, which perhaps already had set him apart from the general. His mother, a charming creature with cultivated talents and cultural aspirations, also set her children apart from the town life, and even the public education of the period; though Ring's exuberant youthful spirit gravitated naturally to the first area, and avoided the second. He barely got through high school, while he already had a solid background of classical music and literature alike, and a pronounced talent for popular songs and satirical verse. He had the unique distinction, as he said, of entering Armour Institute in Chicago in January, and leaving in the spring—faster than any other student in the dean's memory. By 1902, the year of this debacle, the Lardner family fortune had collapsed, too, in the new epoch of land and mining speculation which was transforming our solid, older midwestern society.

Ring's earliest passions were baseball, music and the stage; and he already knew the friendly social life of the small-town bars, a haven for provincial rebels and outcasts. He went to work as a sports writer for the *South Bend Times* in 1905; he wrote for other newspapers in Chicago, St. Louis and Boston; he came back to the *Chicago Tribune* as a feature sports writer and then took over, in 1913, the daily column, "In the Wake of the News." Perhaps this dubious personal career (in his own mind), perhaps his family's disintegrating financial and social status, perhaps some yet deeper temperamental insecurity, contributed to the tone of the love letters to his future wife, the beautiful, charming, rich and college-educated Ellis Abbott of Goshen, Indiana. Lardner was in turn witty, affectionate, yearning in these letters; and curiously anxious, self-deprecatory and

humble. Yet he was determined to marry this upper-class western girl, and to support her in the grand style to which she had been accustomed—the style perhaps of his own early youth, too, rather than of his present circumstances. It was he, again, rather than Ellis, who was determined to get to New York, for New York was "where the money was." It was his financial need, quite as much as his literary aspirations which impelled him to write the first Busher stories for *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1914.

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You Know Me Al brought Lardner into the national consciousness. The ball-player Jack Keefe is still a remarkable figure of folk poetry—the figure who is the original matrix and source for all of Lardner's later portraits of the average American citizen, or Mr. USA.

The section I have used here is the Busher's first adventures in New York, and the whole point of this fabulous provincial is the tremendous Bush-League Ego which converts all outward experience —people as well as places—into his own ignorant, rigid and infantile fantasy of life: a "life" which is of course centered around his own needs and demands rather than concerned with any objective reality. This is the core of that American "individualism" which the later Lardner was to scourge with the relentless lash of his wit; but here it is viewed with more geniality, warmth and comedy simply because the Busher is not merely a four-flusher but a flop. New York itself—the "Enfabled Rock" of a Tom Wolfe's similar provincial pilgrimage —is simply another hick town to Jack Keefe where they charge him more for the same things. The Busher's universe is run by a kind of Hick God who has singled out Jack Keefe, rather than a useless sparrow, for His special care. In New York the Busher's stinginess is more evident and appalling, his ignorance more pronounced, his credibility and his prejudices more obvious. Since he has no idea of human relations—or of human beings outside of himself—he is perfectly capable of carrying on his double romances (by post cards) with only the regret that "I wish they was two of me" to take care of his two girls.

The girl he loses is worthless, obviously. The girl he wins is always worth two of the girl who has jilted him—which is about right. He

has the gift of crushing repartee which renders his opponents speechless; he always has a double—sometimes a triple—alibi for his own slight errors of judgment—his obvious boners. He is the small-town boy who makes good by the simple process of never admitting, never even recognizing, the large areas of life where he has made bad. But if a sublime ignorance, an immutable self-confidence, carry the Busher a long way, his "passion"—and that is to say, his passion for himself—eventually destroys him, as when he beans the ball-player who has stolen his girl (i.e., "gotten his goat")—with bases full. Keefe is a marvellous example of what some esoteric critics have called "primitive virtue," but which they never would recognize on a local baseball diamond. And the pages of *You Know Me Al* are filled with the glow of an earlier and rural American scene.

One almost hates to leave the Busher indeed, when Lardner, just like his aspiring provincial protagonist, must have had his own hopes and ambitions for the major leagues—the Big Town and the Dream of Success. If Jack Keefe is used in the present volume as a symbol, or a figurehead, of "Provincial Life," rather than of "Sports" or of the Lardnerian commentary on the other "Popular Arts," it is because he transcends the narrow limits of baseball itself—just as Lardner's talent could make all these sports interesting to readers who might know little, and care less, about them. Wasn't the anonymous "Mr" of *Gullible's Travels,* in 1917, a partial extension of the Busher? He is the "Wise-Boob" from the sticks who is being taken for a ride by a social system whose primary aim was "mobility upwards"—which was converting all these ignorant or innocent farm boys (and small-town souls) into a "lower middle class"; which was elevating this social stratum, in turn, to a "middle class," and then—by the simple instrumentality of instant cash in the Teens and Twenties—into a new American and social "aristocracy." These were the omnipotent "Bourjoyces" of Sinclair Lewis's work; the American "booboisie" of Mencken's; the "high polloi" of Lardner's.

This bit of social history—or this seachange of the older American destiny whereby our provincial order—our mixed economy of farms, towns and cities—was transformed into a new American Empire, standardized, mechanized, conformist, urban and abstract—was implicit in Lardner's work as early as *Gullible's Travels* and *The Big Town* (1921). The "Mr. Gullible" of the second volume (for he is

the same hero in effect, the same anonymous Mr. USA) is living on his deceased father-in-law's "quick returns"—his war profits. Unfortunately, however, this inheritance belongs to Gullible's wife and her sister Katie. These ambitious, grasping, vain and materialistic midwestern women never let Gullible forget where the real power (the money) is. Curiously enough, Lardner's pervasive and vitriolic scorn for the American woman as a type seems to stem from the fact that She—far more than his typical American man—was eager to accept all the lures and blandishments, the illusions and traps, of a society on the make. Or at least She had taken over enough of these new social values in the post-World-War-I period to make the American male miserable, when he is not odious.

Gullible, his wife and unmarried sister are out to "travel," to get "culture," to find "pleasure;" to establish themselves in what Lardner called the "cesspools of society." In the Big Town—Chicago, Miami, New York—the earlier Lardner hero, if he is that, goes along with all this "sophistication" as a reluctant, though sometimes a highly destructive spectator. Their gilded "vacations" are an inferno of social snobbery, boredom, and wasted money. There is no pleasure to be found in these "pleasure resorts," just as the idea of pleasure, or even comfort, is never visible in their home life; for what they are seeking so desperately is just what they are incapable of enjoying. Just so, the American landscape itself becomes a reflection of their inner aridity. "Speaking o' the scenery, it certainly was somethin' grand. First we'd pass a few pine trees with fuzz on 'em and then a couple o' acres o' yellow mud. Then they'd be more pine trees and more fuzz and then more yellow mud. And after a w'ile we'd come to some pine trees with fuzz on 'em and then, if we watched close, we'd see some yellow mud."

This is just as good as T. S. Eliot's magniloquent Waste Land, any day; and it is real, not lit'ry. The element of the Grand Dada was present in Lardner from the start (nor did he have to seek out Hemingway's exotic Spanish "Nada"), only here it is still funny, in this desolate native scene. But already the American husband of these volumes has found one steady source of solace, escape and oblivion: drinking. Just drinking; solitary drinking. There is no sexual pleasure ever hinted at in the lower middle class Lardnerian literary cosmos—I beg your pardon, the rising middle class!—just as

there is no pleasure, period. When these American wives dissolve into tears (or hysterics) it is simply to get their own benighted, self-destructive way. The only defense of the Lardnerian husband is the wise-crack and the liquor bottle. The only cure for "true love," so this native American artist also suggested, was to allow the two lovers to get to know each other—if they ever could. The only true human bond (as Henry James had also proclaimed, if more elegantly and voluminously) was the cash nexus. What really comes out, through all the elaborate, expensive southern vacation resorts in *Gullible's Travels* itself, is the high cost of torture. "After supper we said good-bye to the night clerk and twenty-two bucks."

But what beautiful sentences, with their lack of logic and their faithfulness to the human mind and tongue; what an original midwestern native language Lardner had already mastered here. There is Mr.'s fifty cent tip, "legal and tender." There is the young Floridian bathing queen: "one little girl, either fourteen or twenty-four." There are also the society acquaintances of these chronicles whose chief delight is to snub you or ignore you—but who, when you do get to know them, you wish you hadn't. There is the gay social life provided by these expensive hotel resorts. "We dance, but we don't never change partners." There is the notable sister-in-law of these tales who: "You couldn't look at her without a slight relapse. She had two complexions—A.M. and P.M." But of course Mr. USA hasn't much use for any in-laws. "You're bound to get tired of one person, no matter how much they sparkle." And his in-laws never sparkle much. Like Dreiser, Lardner used all the clichés of his culture, and all his culture's humorous clichés, but what he did with them was something altogether fresh.

At his best, the long-suffering Mr. Gullible develops an absolute frenzy to destroy, to obliterate the pillows o' society—or all the social climbing, social pretense, social snobbery which marked the American rising middle class in the big money profiteering and speculation of the 1920's. In the present volume, "Three Without, Doubled" is an absolutely savage and hilarious tale of a provincial lout amidst the "upper class" amenities. The society bridge club is called "Sans Souci." The hostess happens to own the building in which the hero pays too much rent; so that he takes every occasion to complain to his "landlady," who of course has nothing to do with such sordid

matters. The other guests? Well, "my pardner was a strappin' big woman with a name somethin' like Rowley or Phillips." Who cares about names, or about personalities, in this fabulous new arena of our vaunted individualism, when the purpose of getting to "know" people is to be able to use them, and to rise above them—when it may not be convenient, or even wise socially, to know those people tomorrow whom you have just met today. In this story, Gullible is just about the world's worst guest. He has indeed almost a pathological fury to destroy not only the whole fashionable bridge-club society, but himself along with it. But his social companions, his upper class acquaintances, are the most terrible hosts in the world. At the conclusion, or the debacle of "Three Without, Doubled," Mr. USA goes home to his own inferior apartment quite triumphant. He has accomplished his own ruin. And: "The Missus was pleasant company, just like a bloodhound with the rabies."

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Yes, I know that the "Categories," or Sub-titles for the different sections of this Lardner Reader are mainly for the sake of convenience in presenting the material itself. Some of these stories, articles, sketches and plays could be placed elsewhere. Some of them combine two or three of Lardner's dominant themes. But the section headings do have the merit of corresponding generally to Lardner's own career, and of describing the historical and social development of his period. Lardner could describe this period so accurately and so brilliantly—so purely in its own terms—just because he belonged so completely to it. Or at least part of him, the outward part, did, while he went through all the painful rituals and public ceremonies of the Twenties en route to becoming one of the most popular and highly paid "entertainers" of the period. The period was *all* entertainment, it seemed—and Lardner was leading that gay and fashionable upper class life, on wealthy, suburban Long Island, whose fundamental corruption of human values, whose triviality and emptiness, he had already seen through.

No wonder the young Scott Fitzgerald, who was just then climbing up the same chimerical ladder of popular "success," even though he possessed a broader intellectual horizon than Lardner (which he but imperfectly understood; while Lardner simply scorned it), and had

more serious literary values—no wonder Fitzgerald, drinking as heavily as Lardner, spending perhaps even more money for *his* Long Island estate which became a sort of hostelry for visiting guests and endless parties, may have appeared to the older man as a kind of precocious, enchanting child of the age whom Lardner admired, adored even—along with the fabulous Zelda—and yet could not take seriously.

What is curious, however, in the sequence of Lardner's career, is that despite all his aversion to the new-rich industrial-commercial-financial social scene of the Twenties, his stories of provincial life in the raw ("Haircut," "The Maysville Minstrel," "The Facts," "Anniversary") are hardly more flattering. Unlike a Sherwood Anderson, another small-town western writer who also distrusted what was happening to modern American life, Lardner had no sense of alternatives. He was a man caught between two worlds, who went along with "what was," rather like his own Mr. USA, complaining like crazy, but finding no recourse except in "liquid stimulus"—or perhaps for a while in that beautiful native language which at times seemed to be Lardner's only source of catharsis. Was Niles, Michigan, historically, like Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, or the early Sinclair Lewis's Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, the true capital of our older western agrarian culture? "There's only one place . . . New York City," says the Ella of *The Big Town*. "I've heard of it," says her sardonic husband—but he is going there, too; even though all these Lardnerian protagonists are already spending more money than they have, and their "great world" itself exists on the edge of bankruptcy.

They are buying new apartments, new cars, new furniture, new dresses, new parties, new vacations, in their desperate search for sensation and status. The Long Island hotel in "Lady Perkins" is one of Lardner's most brilliant evocations of this new American social scene, where "the men get up about eight o'clock and go down to New York to Business. They don't never go to work." And where: "Saturday nights everybody puts on their evening clothes like something was going to happen. But it don't"—while:

"Sunday mornings the husbands and bachelors gets up earlier than usual to go to their real business, which is golf. The women-folks are in full possession of the hotel till Sunday night supper and wives and husbands don't see

one another all day long, but it don't seem as long as if they did. Most of them's approaching their golden-wedding jubilee and haven't nothing more to say to each other that you could call a novelty. The husband may make the remark, Sunday night, that he would of broke one hundred and twenty in the afternoon round if the caddy hadn't of handed him a spoon when he asked for a nut pick, and the wife'll probably reply that she's got to go in Town some day soon and see a chiropodist . . ."

In the same story there was another Lardner parody of a Broadway play and one of its typical songs—

> "But my most exclusive token
> Is a little hangnail broken
> Off the girl from Gussie's School for Manicures."

He was beginning to experiment more boldly in this vein for which he had always had a natural bent, and the volume called *First and Last* carried not only such classical pieces as "The Young Immigrunts" and "Symptoms of Being 35" (both of which had been written in the early Twenties) but other brilliant satires and sketches. In *What of It?* Hemingway's addiction to bullfighting was described in five pages of pure acid. "A Close-Up of Domba Splew" was a surrealist satire on literary fame and high-class poetry. The Lardnerian laughter was playing over the whole range of "make-believe" values in the great age of make-believe; and the upper ranges of "art" and thought in the Twenties were not to be excluded. What a great comic view Lardner took, at his best, of an epoch that was in itself a kind of deliberately artificial musical comedy—whose chief personages usually spoke, like the later characters in Sandy Wilson's *The Boy Friend,* to an imaginary audience rather than to each other. In a similar vein, in the sketch called " 'In Conference,' " Lardner showed the workings of big business. In all these areas the newly swollen American Ego was his main target; the "me-centered world" of all the big-shots who, ignorant, ambitious, avaricious, had become the "kings" of a brash, vulgar, boundless (so it seemed) and wholly commercial middle class empire.

Was there really any difference between Lardner's American boob, the Busher or Mr. Gullible, and these new Titans of Sports, Entertainment, Finance, not to mention the gambling and racketeering

which flourished during the "Big Drought," or even, as Lardner believed, the high arts themselves? Any difference, that is, except that between failure and success on a purely materialistic level? In a series of classic tales written during this period—"Champion," "The Love Nest," "A Day with Conrad Green," "Mr. Frisbie,"—Lardner took them all off, while his own personal accent became increasingly sardonic, merciless and cold. If you want a picture of American womanhood, there are such tales as "I Can't Breathe" or "Zone of Quiet." If you want a picture of American children, there is "Old Folks' Christmas." If you want a picture of the most sacred of all American superstitions, a happy marriage which extends into lovable old age, there is "The Golden Honeymoon."

The ultimate paradise for all these typical Lardnerian figures was suburban life. They came from the sticks and the small western towns; they came to Chicago and New York to make their fortunes and get somewhere in "society;" to lead the dream-life of American success. What could be a better sign of their whole new status—financially insecure as it always was; a life above their means, always trembling on the edge of disaster, just as, indeed, the whole period finally collapsed into the abyss of the Depression—than the Connecticut or Long Island "mansion," the chauffeur, the governess, and the supporting cast of servants; and then the "big parties," as in Fitzgerald's *Gatsby,* which were simply intended to demonstrate that you could give big parties. Lardner made an ignominious inferno of this suburban life, too, in stories like "A Caddy's Diary" or "Liberty Hall" or "Ex Parte."

Most of these stories, written in the early or mid-twenties appeared in two famous volumes, *How to Write Short Stories* (1924) and *The Love Nest* (1926). But in the first of these books Lardner, as if reacting in some intensely personal way to the Big Ego of American success—and rather like Mark Twain who insisted on including himself in the "damned human race" which he, too, had scoured in a vain attempt to clean up its sins and frailties—Lardner also insisted on describing his own best work in curious terms of disparagement. "The Facts," for example, was a sample story of life in the Kentucky mountains—

"An English girl leaves her husband, an Omaha policeman, but neglects to obtain a divorce. She later meets the man she loves, a garbage inspector

from Bordeaux, and goes with him 'without benefit of clergy.' This story was written on top of a Fifth Avenue bus, and some of the sheets blew away, which may account for the apparent scarcity of interesting situations."

"Some Like Them Cold," another hard-bitten tale of an ambitious young Broadway entertainer—not unlike the "Pal Joey" of the stage—was an example of a story written from a title—

"the title being a line from Tennyson's immortal 'Hot Cross Buns.' A country-bred youth, left a fortune, journeys to London 'to become a gentleman.' Adventures beset him, not the least of them being that he falls out of a toy balloon."

"The Golden Honeymoon" was "a story with sex appeal." "Champion" was an example of the mystery story. "The mystery is how it came to get printed." "My Roomy," one of Lardner's stories with the greatest psychological depth, where the "eccentric" becomes the perverse and the pathological, and the comic mood turns to cruelty and madness; this story, so Lardner said, took place in "a house party in a fashionable Third Avenue laundry." And: "The predicament of a hero who has posed as a famous elevator starter forms the background of this delightful tale of life in the Kiwanis Club." "A Frame-Up" was "a stirring romance of the Hundred Years' War, detailing the adventures in France and Castile of a pair of well-bred weasels. The story is an example of what can be done with a stub pen." "Harmony" was, according to the literary editor of the United Cigar Stores Premium Catalogue, "the love story, half earthly, half spiritual, of a beautiful snare drummer and a hospital interne; unique for its word pictures of the unpleasant after-effects of anaesthesia." "Horseshoes" was the kind of story "which the reader can take up at any point and lay down as soon as he feels like it. A trail of vengeance, ruthless and sinister, is uncovered to its hidden source by a flat-footed detective."

Well, this is great nonsense in itself, of course—and not altogether nonsense. But what writer except Lardner, and Lardner even more brutally than Twain, would direct this ridicule at his own best work? And that "flat-footed detective" had become a leading, a symbolic personage in Lardner's inner creative world. The second of these major collections of short stories, *The Love Nest,* omitted the "introductions" to his tales; but included a "preface" by Sarah E.

Spooldripper, who announced that "the Master is gone," and the next question was, who will succeed him. "Perhaps some writer still unborn. Perhaps one who will never be born. That is what I hope."

It almost appeared that this was what Ring Lardner hoped.

4

He was at the peak of his literary fame, both financial and intellectual. He was earning from $50,000 to $60,000 a year as a syndicated columnist, a short story writer who got away with murder in the slick magazines, a playwright on the edge of the Broadway hit which Lardner always yearned for, and, with the exception of *June Moon*, never achieved. He was the friend not only of Scott Fitzgerald and the glamorous Zelda; but of the Grantland Rices of F.P.A., Herbert Swope of the New York *World*, Paul Lannin the composer, Bert Williams, George Cohan, George Kaufman. He was an intimate of the Algonquin set; and, even more important, of the Broadway theatrical crowd.

The large house on East Shore Road, Great Neck, Long Island, had its own chauffeur, governess and other servants. The Lardner sons were in the best eastern preparatory schools and colleges. Ring had everything that the small-town boy from Niles, Michigan—with a great, a unique talent for entertainment—could have desired; what was wrong? He was a journalist meeting a deadline; his work had become all "copy" and no fun, so Scott Fitzgerald declared at least. He had resolved to speak "only a small portion of his mind," and "to withhold what was most deeply personal." "He felt vulnerable enough with self-revelation," so his recent biographer, Donald Elder, also tells us. But there were constant financial troubles, too. Lardner quit his syndicated column at last, in order to devote himself to "serious work" and the stage; he had to return to journalism shortly, on an even more strenuous schedule. He began to repeat the Busher stories less effectively; his mock "autobiography," *The Story of a Wonder Man*, was a tired, flat satire.

It is a horrible thing to be a professional "funny man," as Mark Twain declared; and Twain at least had freed himself from the daily ordeal of copy for copy's sake. Lardner, who always drank in order to sleep, now slept little and drank more. He was in the same trap of "Success" that Jack London had been in—as the highly paid fic-

tioneer of the period just preceding Lardner—and he used the same opiates with the same sense of despair. By 1924, just when Lardner was publishing his best collections of short stories, and was being accepted at last as a serious literary figure, the trap had closed on him. At the peak of his success, he was beginning to disintegrate; and the rest, the last seven years of pain and torture, was as inevitable, as inexorable as a Greek tragedy, but with no *deus ex machina,* and no catharsis.

Like Eugene O'Neill, Lardner went out on those inexplicable binges, for hours, or for days, or sometimes weeks. Seeking what? Escape, oblivion, rather than any sort of pleasure. There were no women in these escapades; a woman might have saved him from the solitary, frozen, silent, desperate drinking bouts. But Lardner had always been puritanical (for a good writer) about sex. He thought there was too much of it in Hemingway and Dreiser; he was still shocked at the evening clothes—or lack of evening clothes—which eastern women wore to their parties. One of his last "crusades" in the columns of *The New Yorker* was waged against off-color songs, including "Tea for Two." Perhaps this odd strain of prurience in Lardner's temperament was responsible, as it was in the similar cases of William Dean Howells and Henry James, for his passionate yearning for the "stage" itself, as the very antithesis of puritanical inhibition. But in any case Lardner's dramatic career was almost as disastrous as James's was; and unlike O'Neill, Lardner could never return to the support and refuge which serious literary work always is for a serious writer—the solace as well as the bane of a writer's life; and his only durable reason for existing.

He had contracted an incipient tuberculosis which kept him away, in his concern and his fastidiousness, from his own children during these years. He took no real care of this disease except his periodic sojourns at the hospital. At his peak Lardner had contracted with the *Cosmopolitan* editor, Ray Long, for twelve short stories, one every forty-five days, at $3500 each—something few writers would dare to do to their own talent. And the real price for these jobs came out of his own temperament and health. Sleeping became even more difficult for him; drinking became easier; and after his jags the smell of paraldehyde would mark his return to reality—to work. (The story in the present volume called "Sun Cured" is a gruesome

account of such drinking bouts.) At 41 Lardner was worn out, sick and defeated; and he had already anticipated this state in his "Symptoms of Being 35," which, marvellous comedy that it is, almost reads like the symptoms of being 65. Perhaps he, even more than Fitzgerald, had the "age complex," not only of a social period which was essentially adolescent in its values, but of some deeper inner sense of life's brevity, fragility. Perhaps even more than Fitzgerald, Lardner was the real, and doomed, *enfant terrible* of the Twenties.

June Moon, with Kaufman's professional stage sense, *was* a hit in 1929—and Lardner went on a three-month spree, ending up again in the hospital. During his recuperation, and his suicidal fantasies, he had decided, as he wrote to Fitzgerald, that the only crime was "not to keep on going." But it was too late; and the "going" was now mainly the sheer moral and physical determination of an exhausted organism. There were still those touching, if fragmentary, recurrences of Ring Lardner's warmth, affection, and humor. His wife Ellis, so he also wrote the Fitzgeralds, "had two babies this summer. They are both girls. . . ." Yet the self-depreciating strain in Lardner's work from the beginning—that strain which had in itself made him such an acute and merciless critic of a period which was so opulent, bloated and crass, and so full of vanity, selfishness and pride—had become a kind of self-loathing. Maybe he felt all the sins of the "damned race" in himself. Maybe, like Swift, he could no longer stand the smell of human beings; and he was one of them, one of the worst of them. Perhaps all he really cared about now was the life-insurance which would provide for the family which he had in fact taken care of so generously, at the expense of his own talent and health, but which in his secret heart he felt his own vices and weaknesses had betrayed.

He sometimes signed those late and touching letters to his sons and nephews as "A Cadaver." He deliberately classed himself with the second-rate American humorists such as Bill Nye, Artemus Ward, Finley Peter Dunne, George Ade, or even Will Rogers, whom he despised. He now had a heart ailment; his legs and feet were swollen. Yet he went back, through sheer need of money, and waning talent, and slackening prices for his material, to a daily letter for the Bell Syndicate; almost to his journalistic beginnings. The early Thirties were a nightmare for Ring Lardner, just as they were