

LAGUARDIA OF HARLEM

BY DUFF GILFOND

THE HON. FIORELLO H. LAGUARDIA, LL.B., the peppery gentleman from the twentieth New York district, is a splotch of color on a gray scene. After a day in the stuffy chamber of the House of Representatives, with the members' favorite adjective, "great," ringing in my ears, I find refreshment in LaGuardia's untidy office, Room 150 of the House Office Building, where "great" is deposed and "lousy," the Harlem member's pet, is unloosed.

"Lousy" may not be a pretty word, but it is so rare on the panegyric tongue of a Congressman that, when it is heard, it somehow pleases. To the blunt, skeptical New Yorker it is indispensable. It serves to describe agricultural year-books, Prohibition, censorship, the immigration law, caucuses, military appropriations, White House invitations, and the Congressional Directory. Mr. LaGuardia or "the Major," as he is known in Washington, has flouted all these great American institutions. White House invitations he gives away as souvenirs to children, and the Congressional Directory, wherein the other Honorables tell the world their children's names and by how many votes they beat their opponents (if they beat them badly), he dismisses with a mere insertion of his name. In revenge the Directory blazes him forth, in the list of Representatives, with the denunciatory italic capitals accorded Socialists: a kind of scarlet letter.

But LaGuardia is not a Socialist, except congressionally: the Socialists wouldn't have him as their candidate in the last election. But to the Babbitts in Congress Socialist is an evil word that designates any man who has laughed at them. On the

floor LaGuardia is chided as the man with two parties or with no parties, and as the one-man party (this from the gabby Mr. Blanton of Texas). He has come to Congress as a Republican, on a Fusion ticket, and as a Progressive indorsed by the Socialists. In the last election no party would lend itself to such a fickle son, and so he decided to run as an Independent. But the Republican candidate gave up before the fight, and the Grand Old Party reconciled itself to accepting him. Interested in the end rather than the means, LaGuardia acquiesced, was elected—and, as usual, his election is now being contested.

It is well that he has been returned to Congress. Not that he will ever be a momentous legislator. His interests are entirely too diverse. He refuses to specialize in any one subject, insisting that everything concerns Harlem. He will never become chairman of an important committee. Every time he misbehaves and defies his party he loses his rank in the seniority system and the chance of a higher place on a more important committee. In December he returns, not, to be sure, as a helpless congressional fledgling, but nevertheless with less influence than a second-term regular Republican.

LaGuardia, however, has his function in the House. "Keep me off any committee you wish," he told the party leaders when, as a Progressive, he was ousted by the Republican party in 1924, "but you can't keep me out of the Committee on the Whole." Nor can they keep him quiet. He is irrepressible in the face of what he thinks is bad legislation—and most of it seems to him to be bad. Short, spry and

round, he bounces in and out of his seat, waking the somnolent gentlemen about him in his efforts to catch the Speaker's eye. His arm waving frantically for recognition, he seems like a grown-up school-boy trying to answer teacher's question. He offers as many, if not more, amendments to pending legislation than any member of the House. He has an astounding acquaintance with a great variety of legislation, and a way of seeing points that most men miss.

But what LaGuardia really contributes to the dull scene more than any other man is dash, color, temperament. It is something the rest of them lack, even the few rebels. With Italian æstheticism, he hangs a portrait of the immortal Valentino on his office wall, where everybody else, even Democrats, features scowling Calvin. In contrast to the surrounding offices, in which droning legislators dictate long and ingratiating letters to their constituents, his is ever in a hubbub. He is excitedly explaining something in Yiddish or Italian, to the accompaniment of his hands, to a constituent; posing for the perspiring photographers who try to attenuate him in the lens; rattling off an article for a bad newspaper or reviewing the day's events for the radio; mimicking his colleagues to his secretary or anybody who happens to drift in. Even his secretary differs from the other girls in the building: she works.

Most Congressmen love the errands their constituents give them, and prefer their offices to the reverberating chamber to which they go only for roll-call. But it is almost as hard to find LaGuardia in his office as the Congressmen who week-end at home. He hates errands, and rushes through his mail, flipping half of it into the basket, with such laconic comments as "Bunk!", "We appreciate his respect", and "Something for Jesus? Nice boy, Jesus!" Impatiently he awaits the peal of the convening gong which to him means that the fight is on. Delayed on the way over, he tears down the House corridors on his short convex legs like a student

late for class. He remains in the chamber or within earshot until adjournment, eating peanuts, audibly, when he might miss an opportunity for objection if he went out to lunch. His *sotto voce* comments can be heard in the gallery and are inordinately shocking to Congressmen who believe that visiting constituents should be impressed with their dignity. In the first session of the last Congress he publicly made beer with a kick, and in the recess joined the striking garment-workers in picketing.

Whatever may be said about him he is never dull. When the price of meat took a forbidding jump in New York last year, he wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Jardine for assistance. Mr. Jardine responded with a bulletin which, to LaGuardia's indignation, was entitled: "The Economical Use of Meat in the Home." Exhibiting the bulletin in the House, he drew from his vest pocket a diminutive lamb chop selling for thirty cents in New York. From other pockets he extricated a roast and a steak, tempting enough, but so prohibitive in price that Jardine's bulletin would have been as useful to a Harlem housewife as a belt to the President.

II

Next to the garrulous Blanton of Texas, LaGuardia probably talks more than any other man in the House. The congressional Babbitts who despise him always flaunt that fact with satisfaction. Nobody condemns talk more—or indulges in it more—than Congressmen. But the erasure of LaGuardia's speeches and witticisms from the *Record* would deprive it of much of its sparkle. The Babbitts also find consolation in the character of his constituency. "After all," a Maine colleague once said, "he's from New York, where there are few real Americans. He has the commonest of all foreigners for his constituents—Italian wine-bibbers who have sent him to Congress to recover for them their lost beverage." One Dr. James Empringham once announced, to the horror of the righteous,

that the Episcopal Temperance Society favored the modification of the Volstead Act. The blasphemy reached the ears of Representative Browne of Wisconsin and set them burning. Running to Congress with this slander, he found sympathy in the protecting Blanton.

"A number of our colleagues here in the House are Episcopalians," said the gentleman from Texas. "Does the gentleman from Wisconsin know of a single one of them who indorses the sentiment of the defunct secretary in New York?" [The unfortunate Dr. Empringham.]

"No," replied Mr. Browne, comforted.

But the you-see pause was broken by an unexpected "I can name one" from the effervescent LaGuardia.

"Which one?" [Blanton, incredulously]

"Myself!" [LaGuardia, simply]

"The gentleman from New York is the only one I have ever heard of, and coming from New York, I am not surprised."

LaGuardia, alas, gets little encouragement from the clerical profession. One of the letters he received following his attack on Federal Judge Cooper of New York, whom he charged with conspiracy in entrapping Prohibition violators, came from the Rev. Willis R. Ryder, pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Ellenburg Center, N. Y. It ran:

LaGuardia:

You ought to be ashamed of yourself, persecuting a man a thousand times your superior. Your wet propaganda must be a losing card or you would not stoop to such mean, despicable business. You'll only be a laughing stock for your friends in the end. Call it off and be a *man*.

But at retaliation the Major is expert: he gets such good practice in the House. He wrote:

I have received your most unkind letter. Had it come from any other source I surely would have believed that Prohibition is not being enforced in your part of the country. Coming from you, though, I know that is not the case. I have never claimed to be anyone's superior. My Christian bringing-up has taught me humility. I am sure that if you knew all the facts you would not write such an abusive letter. Of course I forgive you. In your spare moments do read St. Luke's gospel. I am sure you will get a lot of comfort from it.

LaGuardia is so short, little if any over five feet, and his face is so big and fat in proportion, that he reminds one of a nice, harmless baby. Sometimes the big boys in the House, tired of ragging him, resort to bullying, but it never works. He can hold his own with them. He once told a boy constituent who was undecided whether to be a Congressman or a prize-fighter that it was best to combine the two.

In the first session of the last Congress he nearly came to blows with one of the big, handsome boys. Mr. Wingo, of Arkansas, whose physique deserves the pride he takes in it, tried to intimidate the little Major. He was denouncing a public buildings bill, recently passed, as pork-barrel legislation, and, opposed by LaGuardia, he recalled another bill making a \$385,000 appropriation for the façade of a building in New York.

"Does the gentleman from New York know what a façade is?" he asked scornfully.

"Of course he does. Does the gentleman from Arkansas?"

"Yes; it is the same thing to a building that a snout is to a hog; it is the front part of it, and a pork-eater ought to know what a façade is."

This was tart. Every eye in the House rolled round to LaGuardia and every ear was pricked up for his reply. It came:

"If the gentleman from Arkansas was less interested in his façade and more in the inside of his head he'd be a better legislator."

Nothing could have stung the Congressional Adonis more. In his rage he accused LaGuardia of parading around Italy in uniform during the war. LaGuardia reminded him that he was, nevertheless, 3000 miles nearer the front. Blanton interposed, in the way of all pugnacious people, to admonish the wranglers. "It will take more than the ingenious gentleman from Texas," roared Wingo, "to quiet me when a thing like that——"

This was too much, even for the House. One may accuse a colleague of anything

so long as one refers to him as a gentleman from somewhere. But when he is called a thing the dignity of the members is touched. So the beautiful Wingo was ordered to withdraw his remarks, and the whole exchange has been denied to posterity by its expunction from the censored *Record*.

On another occasion Mr. Begg of Ohio, one of the other big boys, attempted to squelch Harlem's hero. LaGuardia was at issue with his own party in favoring a modification of the rules. His election was being contested then, too, and taking advantage of this fact, Begg threatened him with expulsion if he persisted in his course. Nobody would vote for him, he warned, when his contest came before the members, neither the men of his own party nor the Democrats.

"I expect my contest to be decided upon its merits," LaGuardia flashed back, "and whether it is or not, I shall act in this House as long as I am a member according to my conscience and judgment, and you can put me out if you want to."

Like Mrs. Gummidge he repeatedly refers to his lone position, but he is never lorn. Reveling in his ostracism, he probably would be distressed by any offer of aid. "It does seem strange," he said, in opposing the naval appropriation for additional cruisers, "that when an occasion presents itself that I can support the Republican President and the Republican administration I find the Republican party not back of him. So I guess I am doomed to live in a hopeless minority for most of my legislative days."

III

When things are not made hot enough for him LaGuardia forestalls boredom by making them hot himself. He is always brewing something. Last June he brewed beer. Placed on the Alcoholic Liquor Traffic Committee because it was so dead, he forced a meeting after four years of inactivity by producing a man who testified

that the bankers were aiding the bootleggers. Representative Hudson of Michigan, chairman of the committee, was incensed thereby, and alleged loudly that he had no personal knowledge that the dry law was being violated. LaGuardia caused an uproar by volunteering to show how easily it could be done. Two days later he appeared before the committee to keep his promise, but the other members all ran away. The event had been advertised in the newspapers, however, and an eager public and press were on hand. LaGuardia did not disappoint these seekers after light. Leading them to his office, he produced several bottles of a malt extract, containing 3.76% of alcohol, sold for medicinal purposes, and added to it lesser quantities of near beer. Thus he produced the various flavors of Pilsener, Würzburger and stout. "You needn't feel anxious, gentlemen," he assured the crowd. "There will be at least a little for all of us." A former brewer had been invited to pass on the palatableness of the beverage.

The Anti-Saloon League, with headquarters only a few blocks away, at once denounced him for violating the sacred Volstead Act, but Brigadier-General Lincoln C. Andrews, the chief Prohibition enforcement officer, refused to have him arrested. It was not good beer, he said, and the public wouldn't like it. But the chief of the Prohibition Unit in Albany announced that anybody caught making it would be arrested. LaGuardia took his word for it and promised to make more in New York as soon as Congress adjourned. "Of course," he said, "certain officials and the Anti-Saloon League are always seemingly irritated when the public can obtain anything legally, which naturally hurts the bootleg trade—if you get what I mean."

Reminding Prohibition Director Mills of New York just before the event, he selected a drug-store at Lenox avenue and 115th street, in the heart of his district, as the scene of his crime. The crowd all drank while a policeman sauntered by. A

few weeks later LaGuardia, thwarted also in this second effort to be arrested, joined a picketing party of garment workers, against whose picketing a temporary injunction had been issued. Unfortunately, as he was huddled into the patrol-wagon, he was recognized and, despite his protest, released by the *Polizei*. The poor man had to summon a taxi to take him to the police-court.

His disclosures in the *Record* of the undercover system, by which blacklegs in the employ of the government operate saloons to entrap violators of the Volstead Act, read like chapters out of a dime-novel. LaGuardia plays that game with the gusto of a boy in the rôle of detective. One of his unholy revelations was that one of the government's ace investigators, who had helped run down the Remus ring, was now bootlegging the whiskey he had confiscated. The Department of Justice and the Treasury had prided themselves on this seizure and LaGuardia's exposure was like telling a mother her favorite child was a thief.

He plays only a few of his cards at once, keeping a reserve for the next propitious occasion. It may not come for a long time, and the fearful drys sigh with relief so long as he holds his peace. But other opponents, emboldened by his silence, sometimes venture to make a counter-move. Zip! LaGuardia explodes again, to the dismay of all his enemies. He did not reveal that 350 cases of confiscated whiskey were removed from the Federal Building in Indianapolis and bootlegged, although he knew it for months, until the drys of Indianapolis went after him. He has the dramatic sense and makes the most of every situation.

How he obtains his information has often puzzled the Dr. Watsons of Washington. After the Indianapolis disclosure a colleague argued that he ought to reveal the source of his facts. LaGuardia obediently produced a clipping from an Indianapolis newspaper, several months old, giving them. They had been hushed up, and all

LaGuardia had to do was to check them up and get the details.

His purpose, of course, is to show the impossibility of Prohibition enforcement. He has incensed all the Congressional drys by his dauntless attacks on public officials connected with the farce. In his attack on Federal Judge Cooper of New York points of order were made and distracting remarks thrust at him to take him off his feet. "Some gentlemen," he said, "seem to be very much and unduly exercised as to the facts I am about to bring out. Now, gentlemen, interrupt me as much as you please, I am not going to stop. I am a member of this House just as much as any other member is." Secretary Mellon received his exposures with the following characteristic warmth: "This announces the receipt of your communication of the fifteenth." But LaGuardia will not ingratiate anybody, if he has to suffer defeat by it. In the following discussion on Prohibition between him and Blanton—the *Congressional Record* is sprinkled with their testy dialogues—he refused, as usual, to make the orthodox concession to congressional "greatness."

LA GUARDIA: Who is the member who is guilty of evasion, the outstanding wet who seeks to modify the law or the advocate of the drys who violates the law every day of his life here and in his own community?

BLANTON: I think we ought to run that kind of dry out of the public service of the United States. No Senator or Congressman should violate the fundamental law of his country which he is under oath to uphold and obey, and when they break the law we ought to put them out of the service.

LA GUARDIA: Then we would not have a quorum here.

BLANTON: I think that is an unfair accusation against the gentleman's colleagues. I have been here nearly ten years. I can count on the fingers of my two hands the colleagues during that time upon whose breath I have smelled liquor.

LA GUARDIA: That is not the only test, I will say to the gentleman.

BLANTON: Oh, it is the acid test. When you see smoke there is always some fire. And when there is whiskey around the tell-tale fumes are easily detected.

LA GUARDIA: Does the gentleman go around every morning after a call for a quorum has been made and smell every member's breath as he comes into the Chamber?

BLANTON: You cannot find 435 men in any other group in the whole United States who are as sober and free from liquor drinking as are the 435 mem-

bers of this House [*applause, of course*] and you know it. There is much wet talk around here, but most of it is influenced by politics and comes from a very small gang.

LaGUARDIA: I will concede that, and I will say that there is the same percentage of drinking men in any other group of 435 gentlemen in the United States. We are no different in this House from any other group of 435 men, whether they be judges, district attorneys, or anything else. [*No applause.*]

IV

LaGuardia spent his boyhood in the army barracks at Prescott, Arizona, where his father was leader of the band. In 1902, at the age of twenty, he entered the government service as clerk to the consul-general at Budapest. Made consular agent at Fiume in 1904, he quickly succeeded in offending both one of the big English steamship companies and Archduchess Marie Josepha of Austria. The company reported him to the State Department because he insisted on a medical examination of immigrants prior to their sailing for this country. It was better business to convey unexamined immigrants here and then transport the deported sick ones back home. The government agreed with the company until 1924, when the present system of preexamination was adopted.

The Archduchess requested LaGuardia's removal because he refused to have immigrants cooped up several days before sailing, so that her Royal Highness might see them on the day she was visiting Fiume. Realizing that he was out of place, LaGuardia then left the consular service. But his aversion to titled personages remained, and has been recently aggravated by the American prostration before them. He saw the Grand Duchess Victoria Feodorovna dined and wined by Washington society and the Archduchess Cyril acclaimed with curtseys and hand-kissing. So when the arrival of Grand Duke Boris was announced, in January, 1925, he wrote to Secretary of Labor Davis as follows:

I believe that the same rigid application of the Immigration Law that is generally applied to arriving aliens should be applied to these repudiated, unemployed and shiftless Dukes and Arch-

dukes, who come here to collect funds to destroy organized governments and to prey upon the credulity of social climbing dupes.

When the 106th Infantry made Queen Marie its honorary colonel he filed a protest with Secretary of War Davis. It was bad enough to take Mitchell out of the army without putting Marie in!

But to return to LaGuardia out of work twenty years ago. He became an interpreter at Ellis Island and so paid his way through New York University Law School. In 1916 he came to Congress; but carried away by the glamor of the war to end war he soon left Washington to join the Aviation Corps. His disillusionment has flavored all his subsequent public speeches. As president of the New York City Board of Aldermen and an ex-major in the Aviation Corps, he was invited to address the New York County Republican Committee on the first anniversary of the signing of the Armistice. To make war unpopular, he said wealth ought to be conscripted as well as men. He then proceeded to expatiate upon the futility of war, but the secretary of the committee handed him a note reading "Drop this and tell of your experiences abroad." LaGuardia might have told how a contract for structurally weak planes was not canceled until he had threatened to come home and report it to Congress, but he probably didn't think of it at the moment.

As president of the Board of Aldermen of New York he denounced the State Legislature for expelling the Socialists and offended the law-makers so deeply that they passed an act raising every alderman's salary but his. The borough presidents were raised to \$10,000, but his \$7500 remained the same until he went out of office, when it was doubled. In protest against the high cost of living he presided over the Board of Estimate and Apportionment in a khaki shirt, thus offending many members of the board.

Recently he also offended that apostle of refinement: the Western Union Telegraph Company. Indignant because he had

not received tickets for the Army-Navy football game after sending a check for them, he telegraphed to some one that the "lousy" speculators in New York got all the tickets, while he, a member of Congress, was neglected. Soon after the message was filed, his telephone rang.

"Would the gentleman take a word out of the telegram?"

"What word?" snapped LaGuardia.

"The word that describes the New York speculators."

"No, damn it, it's the right word!"

The Western Union was blushing obliged to comply.

Two New York stenographers once took offense at LaGuardia's answer to a letter they had sent him and were gallantly defended by the New York *Evening Mail*. The girls, who wrote that they were stenographers for the New York Child Labor Committee, requested him to withdraw his strenuous opposition to the Mellon tax reduction bill in the Sixty-eighth Congress. LaGuardia replied that he was once a stenographer himself and remembered how worried he was about incomes over \$200,000 a year, and that they might show his letter to the gentleman who asked them to sign the other. In an editorial the sympathetic *Evening Mail* joined in their protest. It said:

Is a stenographer to take no interest in the fundamental business of government because she does not enjoy a rich man's income? Does Mr. LaGuardia deny to her the right to form her opinion on tax measures, especially when, as in this case, her opinions happen to coincide with those of the ablest fiscal experts?

A stenographer employed by a great welfare organization is in a position of special vantage to have an opinion on the Mellon plan. She knows that unnecessary taxes have eaten up much of the money which philanthropists would have given for the uplift of their less favored fellow men and women. It is a healthy and praiseworthy

desire on her part to see more money available for an agency so worthy of support as the Child Labor Committee, which lives by the generosity of those who are anathema to persons like Mr. LaGuardia. His battle cry seems to be "Hit the rich, no matter whom you may hurt."

But despite the diffusion of his attacks LaGuardia still has some friends. Of course they don't belong to Washington society, but its glitter never attracted him. Only once, when he first came to Washington, did he accept an invitation to a White House reception. Wretched in his frock coat, he arrived at the Pennsylvania avenue entrance, and there caught himself. "What the hell am I doing here?" he demanded. Then he hid in a nearby movie-parlor.

He enjoys the movies and at a public hearing on the Upshaw-Swope bill providing for a Federal censorship he defended them. Mr. Upshaw had denounced them as unclean, what with their incessant kissing. "There is nothing unnatural about kissing," said LaGuardia. "If some husbands would learn from the stage and the pictures just how to kiss, and then go home and practice on their wives, there would be happier homes and fewer divorces."

Cooking is another of his hobbies. Breezing into his boarding-house in Q street with his friends, he puts on a baker's cap and apron (much better suited to his round figure than a frock coat!) and prepares the spaghetti of his ancestors. He plays the trombone, and uses his landlady's novels to put him to sleep. "The House of the Seven Gables" served him throughout the Sixty-ninth Congress. His landlady likes him, though he lately abandoned his sleeping-porch and put a bed in her living-room. "Some people think he's noisy," she said (probably the neighbors), "but I think he's just hearty."

EDITORIAL

HAVING lost, in the October of my days, my old gift for prophecy, I decline formally to name the next President of the United States, but on one prediction, at least, I feel it safe to venture: that the neck and knees of the distinguished and fortunate gentleman will be well limbered before he lands the job. All the fates, indeed, conspire to make the contest one between another Harding and another Cox (or, if you choose, between another Davis and another Coolidge), which is to say, between a hero with a rubber backbone and one with a rubber soul. In the two fields of candidates, to be sure, there are several men who are not thus of caoutchouc all compact, but they must either learn how to bend and snap their vertebræ before the battle is joined, or resign themselves to being elbowed out by men who have the art by nature. It is, indeed, an instructive and exhilarating fact that in precise proportion as a statesman is seen to be strong as a man he is felt to be weak as a candidate. If he has friends skilled in the political mystery, they are all urging him, in these days of preliminary skirmishing, to be careful. The main thing is to offend no one. He must raise no antagonisms, and those that exist he must try to allay. His business, if he would remain in the running, is to keep himself resilient and well-greased, that he may slip through when the time comes without scratching anyone.

There is surely no lack of men among us who would make intelligent, conscientious and even brilliant Presidents. I heave a brick at random, and after hitting Glenn Frank, Litt.D., president of the University of Wisconsin, it bounces from him to kiss Daniel Willard, LL.D., president of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. I heave it

again and it strikes James Branch Cabell, A.B., of Virginia, and then caroms upon Captain William G. Stayton, LL.M., U.S.N., ret., founder and president of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment. (In the case of Cabell, perhaps I should omit the word conscientious from the service, but let it go.) I give the brick another swing and it knocks off Justice Louis D. Brandeis, of the Supreme Court, and J. McKeen Cattell, Ph.D., LL.D., editor of *Science*.

Here are six highly intelligent and industrious men, each of them adept at some difficult art, science or craft, and all of them beyond the slightest whisper of corruption. They have dignity, sense, information, courage. They are all what, for want of a better word, is called gentlemen. It would be as impossible to imagine them concealing their views of this or that public matter, in order to avoid any private disadvantage, as it would be to imagine a Coolidge or a Harding stating his. They are everything that Dr. Coolidge is not. They even differ from him anatomically, for they are all singularly handsome dogs, and would be wows in the films. But in exact ratio as they differ from him they are hopeless as candidates for the Presidency. The specifications for the post, in terms of practical politics, make sins of all their virtues. Save by some fantastic and improbable act of God, comparable almost to the refusal of a bribe by a Prohibition agent, it cannot go next year to any man who is intelligent, courageous, unpurchasable and his own man. It must go to some trimmer who knows how to duck and dissemble, to some evasive, disingenuous and unconscionable fellow. It must go to a Coolidge, either under that name or another.