



RING LARDNER

JAMES MONTGOMERY FLAGG

Introduction

ONE of the many names I am called in the appended article is "a stickler for accuracy." If ever I am asked to write an article about the writer of this one, you may rest assured I will not call him that. His anecdote concerning Hugh Fullerton and me is true in every respect except that it happened to two other fellows. And the one about Eddie Collins never taking a drink—well, the answer to that is that the Collins boy lives in Lansdowne, a suburb of Philadelphia, where even Baby's first bottle comes from the Haig Brothers' dairy.

I could go on and point out a dozen other trivial errata, but the article itself seems long enough without being aggravated by a comprehensive introduction. In fact, when she to whom, when we are alone, I refer as Mrs. Lardner for lack of a more poignant name—when she, I say, read the manuscript, she suggested that it would be less of a strain on subscribers if Collier's were to run it serially.

What I will, and do, call Mr. Wheeler is redundant. You take, for example, the sentence where he refers to a "half-stewed comic artist." Aren't there twice as many words there as necessary? Has anyone ever heard of a comic artist who wasn't—but I too am getting verbose.

RING LARDNER.

RING LARDNER scares most of the people who meet him. Usually it is his countenance, of polished Syracuse limestone, Numidian marble, and onyx—one of the finest examples of the early Egyptian dynasties. But sometimes it isn't.

A friend of Ring's collects celebrities. One Sunday afternoon Ring stepped in and was rushed up to the head of the receiving line. The introduction was made.

"This is Prince Jazzbo of Jazzbonia."

"What of it?" replied Lardner, without changing his expression.

Yet I have seen a half-stewed comic

artist scare Lardner, so what match-maker is going to figure that out?

He went to the Mardi Gras in New Orleans not long ago and found himself backed into a corner by a Southerner. This gentleman had climbed hand over hand to the top of his family tree before Ring got a word in edgeways. When he did he began, without haste or passion:

"If you would be interested in my family, I was born in Niles, Mich., of colored parents—"

Houdini never got out quicker.

Lardner was an important member of a quartet which existed and even flourished in the old Cubs, and he wrote

He is a stickler for accuracy always. The second song he mentions was composed in the 1919 world series—the one that had a slight smell about it.

Dear Sir:

On the night of June 30, 1919, the night before the first Volstead law went into "effect," the correspondents who were in Toledo for the Willard-Dempsey "fight" were entertained at the home of Herman Saxon, a Toledo theatre owner. He had a bar and a piano and everything.

That night I made up words and music of a song refrain called Toledo Blues (we were pretty tired of the assignment by that time), and it was learned and sung by a chorus composed of Tad, Tiny Maxwell, Jimmy Isaminger, Harry Witwer, Rube Goldberg and all the rest of the stews. The words were:

*I guess I've got those there Toledo Blues,
About this fight I simply can't enthuse,
I do not care if Dempsey win or lose,
Owing to the fact I've got Toledo Blues.*

But here is another one you may remember, written by me, in collaboration with Jim Crusinberry, Tiny Maxwell, and Nick Flatley, to the tune of "I'm

*That's why I don't care.
I'm forever blowing ball games,
For the gamblers treat me fair.*

Three of the Cincinnati players were in our party and seemed to enjoy the song. R. W. L.

The Ring and the Pug

ONCE a magazine editor requested an article by Lardner on Success, and Ring produced a piece showing how he had undertaken to be a song writer and, figuring his time at fifty cents an hour, had lost something like \$10,000. That is one of the few things Lardner has ever done that got a rejection.

Since his great success as a writer the highbrows have taken up Lardner, and he is invited to all sorts of literary and social functions, some of which he likes and some of which bore him to death. He is a curious mixture of the intellectual and the highly human; many of his best friends have been and are lowbrows, ball players, bartenders and prize fighters, active or retired—the bartenders being most retired.

Maybe you have heard of Ring as a humorist.

Well, if you meet him, don't expect him to grab you by the lapel and begin: "Did you hear the one about the Scot who was learning the Charleston?"

Ring hates funny stories, sincerely and deeply. If you make the mistake of saying to him, "Did you hear the one about—" he will reply, "yes," at that point. It generally stops the story.

He is funny, but you have to listen closely to get it. "Why," I asked, "do you detest funny stories?" And he came back with: "Because most of them are so old and most of them aren't funny and most people are rotten story-tellers."

So many people expected funny stories from Lardner that he worked up a long, rambling story about two little girls named Pat and Mike who had a Lithuanian nurse. In this he was aided and abetted by Joe Farrell, a member of Comiskey's kitchen cabinet. At prearranged places Farrell would burst into roars of laughter and clap people on the back. Ring, without change of expression, would go on with the yarn.

The climax was when the house caught fire; Pat and Mike and the nurse were burned to death. Of course there was at no point anything to laugh at, but the audience always laughed for fear of being considered stupid.

In one of his newspaper articles Lardner was discussing a ham-and-egg fighter loudly touted by his manager as a heavyweight prospect. Ring outlined the fighter's daily routine:

"Young Dorval is in training all the time. From 6 to 7 in the A. M. he does road work for a paving concern. From 7 to 12 he eats his breakfast, usually a wolf or bear and the inevitable sweet (Continued on page 44)



Ring Lardner and she to whom he refers as Mrs. Lardner "when they are alone"

songs. He heard a song called "I'm a Little Prairie Flower" and formed a quartet of White Sox players. They sang it so feelingly on the way back to Chicago in the world series in 1917 that Mrs. Collins thought Eddie was drunk, although she knew he never took a drink.

I asked Ring to tell me something about the songs he has written. In his reply, notice the exact date he gives.

Forever Blowing Bubbles" and sung at a roadhouse in Bellevue, Ky., just outside of Cincinnati, during the 1919 world series:

*I'm forever blowing ball games,
Pretty ball games in the air.
I come from Chi.,
I hardly try,
Just go to bat and fade and die.
Fortune's coming my way,*

Sea Gold

The story of an old salt who dreamed of owning a chicken farm

By COREY FORD

Illustrated by
AUSTIN
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THE sun did things to your eyes. It laid flat flakes of gold upon the uneasy sea, and the leaping, jagged waves against the horizon glittered like a heap of metal slag. In the white distance the light glinted on the wings of a flock of gulls, and they flashed into sight and out of sight mysteriously as they skimmed and traced the tiny bobbing peaks. The planes of gold continuously shifted in the path of the noon sun like sliding coins.

Aldo Pratt sucked his pipe with a comfortable bubble, spat, and shifted it in his teeth as he turned the wheel. He blinked. Damn sun got in his eyes. He squinted at the far horizon, and his face creased into weathered lines. Bright enough to blind a fellow today. Damn sea shining as if it was gold. It hurt his eyes, by gorry! His eyes wasn't what they used to be. He wasn't so young as once, for a fact. Time a fellow like him thought of settling down. He removed his pipe, scraped the back of a hand like a hard shell across his stained mustache, and wiped it dry upon his sweater. High time he quit the sea, by gorry! Nothing but sun in his eyes.

Them gulls, now. Unconsciously his hand shifted the wheel a degree or so in their direction, and two crow's-feet of wrinkles sprang at the corner of either eye. Them gulls reminded him of jest one thing. Jest one thing them gulls suggested to him, and that was chickens. Chickens, by gorry! Leave this damn life at sea, and get him a nice comfort-

able farm somewhere and raise chickens. Somewheres in Connecticut, maybe. Nothing to do but raise chickens; no sun in his eyes, no wind and rain, nothing only sit on his porch and watch them lay eggs one after another. Think of having a farm of his own instead of sailing up and down the coast year in, year out, all kinds of weather. A chicken farm. There was a thing.

"Tell you, Jo," he mused to his mate, "a chicken farm would be mighty nice for a feller, like, wouldn't it?"

"Still on them chickens," grinned Jo. "You been talkin' raisin' chickens for ten years, Al."



"I'd give up my job in a minute to be in your shoes"

"Well, it would be a mighty nice thing, just the same," insisted Aldo. "Just to retire on to a farm, like, and buy a lot of chickens..."

He was getting too old to go to sea, anyhow. Time he settled down. Jo was right. Ten years he'd been planning that chicken farm. No, sir, longer than that, by gorry: twenty years! 'Long as he could remember, he'd always wanted to leave the sea and settle down somewhere. High time he quit. He was getting on. Sixty was time a fellow started thinking. Sixty was time for a man to take up something steady, like chickens. Funny how them gulls kep' rememberin' him of chickens. He drummed out the bowl of his pipe absently on the wheel.

"Jo," he remarked, "notice how them gulls is hangin' together so close? Pretty fur out for them, ain't it?"

"Prob'ly a dead codfish or somethin' or other."

"Gulls don't act like that over no dead codfish. I'll ease her over a mite; you take the wheel and I'll run up for'd and have a look. It might be somethin'."

"It ain't nothin', only a lump of somethin' yellow."

"Heave to, anyhow, till I get this net." Aldo busied himself with strands of whitened rope. "It won't hurt none to have a look at it."

"Looks like wax," said Jo curiously. "An' it prob'ly smells. Better chuck it back, if I was you, Aldo."

"I'll just haul it up and see," Aldo drawled, swinging the net far over the side. "Don't it look like gold, almost? Funny if it *was* somethin'..."

WHEN the lump of ambergris was brought ashore and weighed, it was discovered to total over twenty-five pounds, a record haul for that part of the sea. Its actual value was a burning question in the little coastal town where the Martha Tolle lay patiently at anchor. From the gray-bearded circle about the stove in the general store vague rumors of a fabulous price spread rapidly, gathering momentum as they ran, and arriving at last, swollen and distorted beyond recognition, at the fountainhead whence they had sprung.

It was worth \$100 a pound, Lawyer Parsons had said. It was worth \$500 a pound. Aldo would be a fool to take a cent less'n a thousand. A wealthy perfume manufacturer from Perth Amboy was hurrying south on the heels of a night letter to Aldo—the telegraph operator himself was responsible for this information—with an offer of \$5,000—\$10,000—\$50,000 and a partnership in the business. There were stories of a vaudeville contract. Two reporters had been down from the city. A photograph of Aldo, his left hand resting on the precious lump and his glassy eyes staring straight into the camera, had appeared the day before in a New York City tabloid—the postmaster was said to have a copy—above the startling caption: Aged Seaman Finds Fortune in Ambergris: Sea Gulls Reveal Sperm Whale's Secret. And through it all, day after day, Aldo sat solemnly beside his treasure in a waterfront bar, his pipe gargling in fitful puffs, his dazed eyes staring out to sea.

Jo replaced the tarpaulin carefully about the lump of ambergris, rose, and dusted his (Continued on page 56)