

In the Vernacular

THE LOVE NEST AND OTHER STORIES.

By Ring W. Lardner. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1926. \$1.75.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

"HE was forever blowing bubbles. It amounted to a whim." Thus Miss Sarah E. Spooldrigger, of the late Mr. Lardner, in her introduction to his last book of short stories. I am sorry Mr. Lardner is dead because he was a good guy when he had it.

To try and be serious, even in the face of the introduction to "The Love Nest," I know you'll laugh, but the fact is that Mr. Lardner is still alive. I read something by him in last Sunday's *World*. Of course,—but there are other proofs.

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Let us discuss the stories. The title story and the story called "Haircut" are perfect and terrible. I didn't say perfectly terrible. They are two of the most satisfactory short stories I have read for a long time. They bite like acid. And they display Mr. Lardner's marvelous command of vernacular. So does "Zone of Quiet." Things like this:

(The Great Man speaking): She certainly was! And she is yet! I mean she's even prettier, but of course she ain't a kid, though she looks it. I mean she was only seventeen in that picture and that was ten years ago. I mean she's twenty-seven years old now. But I never met a girl with as much zip as she had in those days. It's remarkable how marriage changes them. I mean nobody would ever thought Celia Sayles would turn out to be a sit-by-the-fire. I mean she still likes a good time, but her home and kiddies come first. I mean her home and kiddies come first.

(The Barber speaking): Well, they asked him if he was in earnest and he said he was and nobody could think of nothin' to say till Jim finally broke the ice himself. He says, "I been sellin' canned goods and now I'm canned goods myself."

You see, the concern he'd been workin' for was a factory that made canned goods. Over in Carterville. And now Jim said he was canned himself. He was certainly a card!

(Miss Lyons speaking): I haven't read it yet. I've been busy making this thing for my sister's birthday. She'll be twenty-nine. It's a bridge table cover. When you get that old, about all there is left is bridge or cross-word puzzles. Are you a puzzle fan? I did them religiously for a while, but I got sick of them. They put in such crazy words. Like one day they had a word with only three letters and it said "A e-longated fish" and the first letter had to be an *e*. And only three letters. That couldn't be right! So I said if they put things wrong like that, what's the use? Life's too short. And we only live once. When you're dead, you stay a long time dead.

That's what a B. F. of mine used to say. He was a caution! But he was crazy about me. I might of married him only for a G. F. telling him lies about me. And called herself my friend! Charley Pierce.

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Such are the bubbles blown by Mr. Lardner. It may look easy. The amazing locutions ripple along so naturally. You can hear voices. Some writers have what has been called the "photographic mind." People, and scenes leave an indelible visual memory,—all the small details that others never see. They can reproduce everything in precise description, at will. Mr. Lardner has, on the other hand, a remarkable ear for ordinary speech. No *nuance* escapes him. His aural memory is perfect. He could never possibly tag a character with the wrong "line."

It is, of course, all in the American language; there is no other form of English like it. But it is not a literary "stunt." Mr. Lardner is not doing dialect. Nor is he concocting fiction. He is remembering voices, playing by ear. The stories one can overhear, if one knows how to listen!

In the true humorist is always implicit the tragic ironist. Mr. Lardner is labelled and put away in all the editors' pigeonholes as "Humorist." He is "as funny as a crutch." The discerning know that this may often be taken literally. A crutch is funny, in a way,—of course, anyone falling down and breaking their leg (or their heart) is awfully funny. Awfully funny is substantially correct. Mr. Lardner knows that. He is acquainted with the Parcae and the Eumenides, and with a lot of other people from those small Middle-Western towns. Beside Conrad Greens and ball-players and song-writers and trained nurses and city folk.

But then he's an awful kiddier. The nine stories in this book aren't going to turn your hair white.

You'll have many a merry laugh. Don't let me put you off. The irony may have entered his soul, but he is also just too nonsensical. He's really terribly comic.

War as It Is

TOWARD THE FLAME. By HERVEY ALLEN. New York: George H. Doran Co. 1926.

Reviewed by THOMAS BOYD

Author of "Through the Wheat"

AN account of The World War that would satisfy every soldier who took part in it, will probably never be written. More than one officer is asked whether his men ever felt any nervous tremors in making an attack would say sternly and rebukingly, "My soldiers were never afraid!" Another eyewitness would have you believe that the wit and humor of the average dough-boy was always on tap, that he could say something laughable and spicing even if he stood knee-deep in blood and corpses. Opposed to this optimist is the former soldier who saw nothing but bickering, hate, and iron-heeled militarism from the moment he put on a uniform until he finally removed it for once and, to be hoped, for all.

It is notable that Hervey Allen had experiences worth the telling. There is one place in his book, near the end, where he describes in flashingly vivid prose one of the most sensational adventures in war that could ever have happened to anybody. The kind of scene which burns itself in the memory, that holds the essence of the stupidity, chicanery, and futility of war, it is made finer still by the challenge to mortality which is in it. This all takes place on the banks of the Vesle between Fismes and Fismettes. Hervey Allen, a lieutenant in the Twenty-Eighth National Guard Division, is ordered with his platoon to make an attack from Fismes. The story of this, which has its explanation in the Memoirs of General Bullard, makes one of the ghastliest chapters of the war.

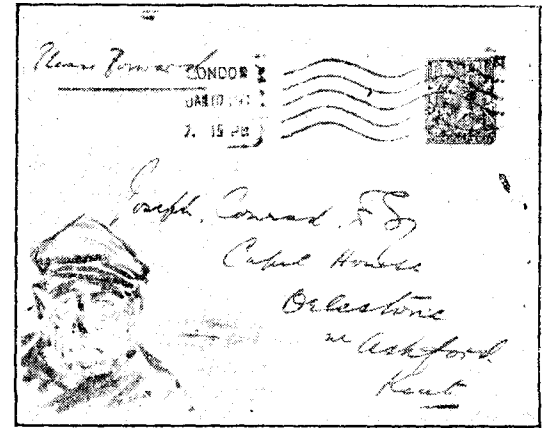
"Toward the Flame" is written in admirable and simple prose throughout, though the tempo and quality of the second part of the narrative are very different from what they are in the first part. This is easily accounted for in that Mr. Allen wrote the first part five months after he had been sent to the hospital from the attack at Fismettes in which his company assaulted a German division, and that the second part was written several years afterward. While the beginning of the narrative is smooth and agreeable enough, it shows that the author was still a little under the influence of wartime mental taboos, and that he had not fully realized what had happened. The second half is more mature, deliberate, and impassioned. The whole constitutes an important record of a type of American which is scarcer than it should be.



Conrad's Skill as an Artist

THIS little sketch was made by Joseph Conrad and was his own conception of his character, old Peyrol. Few of his friends were aware of his habit, or even ability to portray with a few strokes of his pen or pencil, the image of some being conceived in his own mind. I think it must have been because of this that he objected so intensely to his work being illustrated. I mean with very, very few exceptions. I came upon him one day towards the end of his work on the "Rover" sitting quietly back in his favorite big-armchair, and with a tender smile on his face, a smile I had grown accustomed to know portended some thought or inspiration he had captured to his entire satisfaction. Sometimes that capture would be too fleeting for him to give expression to in words and I would not venture to obtrude my interest, by a word or even a look. This time he looked up quickly and then pushed towards me an old envelope, in the corner of which appeared a small sketch in ink, not yet dry. Only a face, the face of an old "shell-back" as he would fondly have called it, weather

beaten and rugged. I took it in my hands and said quickly, "Old Peyrol." My husband was delighted. "Yes! Jess, but I hope they will not want illustrations. I wonder what they would make of it if they do? Some dam' smooth faced landlubber I suppose!"



Another sketch, made over thirty years ago and discovered by me in the first few weeks of our married life. How well I recall that blustery evening on Ile Grande in the little peasant's house where we began our lives together. That afternoon when we returned from one of our little cruises round the island, somewhat earlier than was our wont, we found standing patiently before the front door, M. Bacadoua, a friendly neighbour—this man owned the greater part of the big stone quarries round the island and was considered by the other inhabitants as well to do. From pure friendliness he would always insist on carrying our baggage to and from the little landing stage when we made one of our frequent little jaunts to the mainland. He would never accept a gratuity but always solemnly shook hands with us. This evening he stood by our door patiently supporting a metal explorer's trunk which had been sent from England. I could see that his interest was aroused by the unusual nature of the box and his eyes became very round when my husband explained to him that it was fire-proof. This box contained besides a very tall oil lamp on a massive pedestal, some discarded duck trousers, a pair of binoculars attached to an old leather boot lace, a police whistle, two discolored cotton pillow cases and a bundle of papers. My gaze fastened itself on the latter but I said nothing. J. C. rummaged among the contents and rose to his feet holding the glasses and dangling the whistle by its string. "This whistle, Jess," he said holding it out toward me, "saved my life on the Congo!" With a shudder I recalled the incident of which he had spoken more than once.

He had sent his boys ashore to cut wood one evening after he had tied up to the bank. After a time he heard shots and sounds of quarreling. Seizing his rifle—and his whistle, which he hung round his neck, he started to look for them. Almost before he had gone ten yards from the bank his feet sank into a deep bog, he fired all his cartridges without attracting any attention from the two men left on board the steamer, and sank steadily deeper and deeper. He was already as deep as his armpits, when he bethought himself of the whistle. At the third shrill note he saw two men running towards him with boughs and he swooned. His next recollection was finding himself strapped to a chair on the bridge and the steamer already underway. This was undoubtedly the main cause of his terrible illness, and his subsequent malaria.

The bundle of papers lay for two days on the top of the miscellaneous collection in the half-open trunk. I had suggested more than once that I should finish unpacking it—and also that he should examine the pile of papers. The next thing I knew was the thud of the heavy roll falling close to the fire-place and I guessed rather than understood his direction to the maid to light the fire with "that perass" a favorite word of his. That evening when he was deep in a book I slipped from the room and rescued the roll. This I carried to the big loft over the top of the house to await my next free moments. In this loft I spent many hours watching the waves washing high all round the coast line. It was here I retired when the need of some outlet for my spirits grew too strong to be resisted. I was one of a family of nine, not very old when I was married and at times desperately in need of my kind. I used to feel sometimes the strain of being circumspect and dignified—as became the wife of Joseph Conrad. Several days passed before I was able to carry out

my plan of examining those papers. J. C. had declared them to be only discarded pages of the MS of *Almayer's Folly* so I had no scruples as to the papers being of a private nature. There was in that room, which was horribly draughty being open to the rafters of the roof, a full sized bed with a big box spring on it, covered with canvas. Here armed with a packet of pins I spent several hours wading through the mass of paper. I used to pin the pages firmly to the covering of the mattress spring and in that way I pieced together the whole of the MS of *Almayer's Folly* and the "Out-cast of the Islands" and the few pages of "The Sisters." Then almost at the finish, among some crumpled scraps I found the little sketch in red and black ink "Nina" and scribbled in the corner of the



other half sheet of paper "for 'Almayer's Folly.'" I did not confess for a long time that I had still the papers in my possession, or that I had put them all in order. When I did tell him he laughed rather vexedly and said sharply, "If it hadn't been for that tourist coming in when he did I would have burnt them there and then, dam' rubbish!"

The little sketch of "Dona Rita" which J. C. did many years later is the only one he did under my eye, so to speak: I remember in this case his asking me one afternoon after a long silence, "If you had to choose the illustration for this book, which would you choose?"



My prompt answer disconcerted him rather, and he showed his irritation in the most characteristic fashion by flinging away the cigarette he had lighted only the moment before. I had suggested the first meeting between Henry Allègre and Dona Rita, when he discovered her in his own garden sitting on a stone, a fragment of some old balustrade. My suggestion had evidently not pleased him, and I sat silent while he paced the room restlessly, then flinging himself into a chair he said quite quietly, "I am surprised, my dear, that you should make such a conventional suggestion, no, that won't do! Most emphatically it won't do. I will show you. . . ."

He left the room and returned in a few moments with a single sheet of note-paper in his hand. "There, that's my choice, the only illustration I would consent to have in the book!"

This sketch I append to this article. No doubt he was right. My suggestion was certainly much more conventional.

JESSIE CONRAD.

The BOWLING GREEN

An Examination

I WAS reading the examination papers set by the State of New York for librarians. It struck me that there might well be examination papers for those anxious to enter the publishing and book-selling business. There is no trade that requires, of those who are really ambitious, a more curious and complex fund of information, sophistry, and rumor. If I were a publisher and had to choose among a number of applicants for my staff, I would weed them out by setting them a paper such as follows. I would, however, be discreet enough not to make it public, and to keep the answers to myself.

Some of these questions, I'm afraid, are jocular; yet they all tenderly lift a corner of the shroud that drapes actual publishing problems. There is no prize offered for answers.

AN EXAMINATION PAPER FOR PUBLISHERS AND BOOKSELLERS

1. What do you consider the most misleading jacket-blurb among novels published this spring?
2. What novelist has lately published a modernization of the plot of "Macbeth?"
3. If you were a publisher and one of your authors offered you a MS for which he had two alternative titles, "The Comedy of Errata" and "Six Who Pass While the Gentiles Boil," which title would you believe to be more salable?
4. If at a dinner party you were unexpectedly and simultaneously introduced to Elizabeth Bibesco and Ring Lardner, what would you say?
5. Give, if possible, some reasonable explanation for the fact that 785,000 copies of "In Tune With the Infinite" have been sold.
6. Write a brief essay on the effect of active contemporary criticism and editorship upon the life and thought of professors of literature. Illustrate with at least two examples.
7. If you were chairman of the "entertainment" committee of a Woman's Club, and had an opportunity (and funds) to arrange a lecture by any one of the following, which would you choose, and why? Christopher Ward, William McFee, Carl Sandburg, W. L. Phelps.
8. Write a letter, not more than 100 words, subtly adapting it to the frailties of the recipient, to any one of the following, asking for an autograph: Rev. S. Parkes Cadman, Theodore Dreiser, Charles G. Norris, Carl Van Vechten, Naomi G. Royde-Smith.
9. If you had simultaneous luncheon invitations from Horace Liveright, Blanche Knopf, Mitchell Kennerley, Eugene Saxton, Edward Bok, Alison Smith, and Arthur Brisbane, which would you believe the most amusing to accept? Choose only one.
10. Identify, briefly, Bonamy Dobree, Gabriel Wells, Marguerite Mooers Marshall, R. H. Mott-ram, Clem Hawley, Sarah Spooldrigger, I. M. P., Jake Falstaff, Fred Melcher, The Magnificent Idler, Clara Tice, J. Storer Clouston, The Abbey of Theleme, The Portrait of Zélide, Rachel Marr, Herbert Swope.
11. If you were working in a bookstore and the following came in to ask you for something recent that they really ought to read, what would you advise as being stimulating (or corrective) to their personal idiosyncrasies: Will Hays, Michael Arlen, Bishop Manning, John Erskine, Calvin Coolidge, Countess Cathcart.
12. If you were a young author, and the publisher of your first novel told you that the jacket of your book could carry an enthusiastic salute from any two of the following, which two would you prefer to have—and why? Heywood Broun, William Allen White, William Lyon Phelps, Harry Hansen, Burton Rascoe, George Santayana, Logan Pearsall Smith, H. L. Mencken, Anita Loos.
13. Who was the Earl of Rochester and why has the Nonesuch Press edition of his works been refused admittance to this country by the U. S. Customs?
14. If Frank Harris returned to America would he be detained at Ellis Island, and would The New York World succeed in habeasing his corpus?
15. If a bookseller found in his basement clean

copies of the first editions of the following, what prices would it be reasonable to put on them: "Moby Dick," "The Scarlet Letter," "Leaves of Grass," "The Amenities of Book Collecting," "The Four Million," "Figs from Thistles," "Jurgen," "Ventures Into Verse," "Wounds in the Rain."

16. Write jacket-copy for an imaginary novel by J. B. Cabell as it would be done by Doubleday, Page & Company, Alfred A. Knopf, Frederick A. Stokes Company, Boni & Liveright, E. P. Dutton & Company, and The Oxford University Press.

17. A customer shows you the following quotation written on a piece of paper: "Having no profession or means of subsistence he necessarily became an author."

Who wrote it? If you don't know, how would you try to find out? Which of the following do you think is most likely to have said it: Voltaire, Mark Twain, Dr. Johnson, Jay House, Elmer Davis, Oliver Goldsmith?

18. With what cities do you associate these book-sellers: Marcella Burns Hahner, A. S. W. Rosenbach, Paul Elder, Rumana McManis, Richard F. Fuller, Meredith Janvier, Isaac Mendoza?

19. What American publishing house or houses do you consider the most likely to give durable assistance to finer literature in the United States in the next ten years, and why?

20. If a MS were offered to you, by a prominent writer, one-half of which was extraordinarily able and the other half a distinct and lamentable failure (a thing that often happens in the publishing business) would you insist on the author re-writing it, at the risk of losing him, or would you accept it as is? Comment briefly on a publisher's editorial responsibility toward his authors.

21. If an English author, here for the first time, were spending one week in New York, and you wanted to give him an idea of the esoteric humors of our publishing world, how would you plan his schedule?

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

The Publisher's Function

(Continued from page 695)

ferring, as we have stated, to the editorial department of the publishing house. It should be composed of gentlemen—and ladies—exceedingly alert, of people possessing literary background and a genuine critical faculty. Editing in a publishing house is not—or should not be—a mere routine job, proceeding according to rule of thumb. The editorial department should be full of imagination and suggestion. Here should toil adepts at the structure of novels, the proportion of biographies, etc.,—students of book-making, not in the sense of mechanical manufacture, but in the sense of the power of the written word and the organic proportion of any particular work.

Our demands are not altogether Utopian, for here and there in the publishing business just such editors do exist, literary advisers who may even work as mere "readers," but who furnish valuable suggestions concerning books "worth saving" or books that display merely an easily eradicable flaw here and there. We have a great respect for many such an arbiter in the publishing profession. Some evince the greatest tact and skill in dealing even with the touchiest authors, and truly coöperate with them in the excision of the second-rate from an otherwise first-rate book. But, alas! there are other glaring examples of book-making (in the sense in which we are discussing it) that show only too plainly where coöperation was not forthcoming, where the proper editorial care and acumen were hopelessly in abeyance.

Regarding publishing for the moment merely as a business, the first consideration should be that the "product" be as perfect as it is possible to make it. All things, of course, are not possible. And, over and above that, in a business where the products are so diversified and where the mind must constantly be open to appreciate variants on old technique, literary experimentation, and so on, the task of passing truly helpful judgment in advance on any book is greatly complicated. Yet, that is the task before the publisher! We are convinced that if today the editorial departments of publishing houses functioned with an efficiency comparable to that of, say, the advertising and manufacturing departments, there would be fewer meretricious books, fewer botched books, a higher publishing standard in general.