

Three Stories a Year Are Enough for a Writer

Ring W. Lardner, Humorist, Who Makes Fiction Out of Life of Baseball Players, Thinks Fewer and Better Short Stories Needed

WHO is the greatest living humorist? Chicago, the city of momentous literary judgments, the city whose courts readily solve such problems as that of the Bacon-Shakespeare dispute, has an answer for this question. Ring W. Lardner says that the greatest living humorist is Elinor Glyn.

But perhaps Mr. Lardner was not delivering Chicago's verdict when he paid Elinor Glyn this unexpected tribute. He was giving his own judgment in the matter, and he explained that the humor of the author of "Three Weeks" was of the unconscious variety—that its charm lay in the fact that it was intended to be taken seriously. To Mr. Lardner, Elinor Glyn is funniest when she is most in earnest.

Perhaps Chicago would refuse to support Mr. Lardner's decision on the ground that he is not a native Chicagoan. His home is in Chicago, and for The Chicago Tribune he writes every day. But he was born not in Illinois but in Michigan—in the town of Niles.

Ring W. Lardner is not the boisterous, slangy person one might imagine him to be from his "You Know Me, Al," stories. He is a very tall, thin young man, with black hair, high on his forehead, and a scholarly, rather melancholy air. He has a low voice, and speaks deliberately, seldom using any slang or heterodox English.

To a TIMES reporter Mr. Lardner recently talked about his boyhood and his literary apprenticeship, and said some interesting things about books and their makers.

"I was born," he said, "in Niles, Mich. I wanted to be a civil engineer, so I came to Chicago to study. I studied civil engineering for a year, and at the end of the year found that I had passed in rhetoric. So I went back to Niles.

"For a while I hustled freight in Niles. Then I was bookkeeper in the local gas office. My brother worked on a local paper. One day the editor of The Times of South Bend, Ind., came to Niles to get my brother to go to South Bend and work for him. By mistake he saw me instead of my brother. I knew that my brother was tied up with a contract to the Niles paper and could not go to South Bend, so I took the job.

"So I became police reporter, society reporter, baseball reporter, and dramatic critic (reviewing fourth company shows) on The South Bend Times. My hours were from 8 o'clock in the morning until midnight.

"Later I came to Chicago and worked on a paper as football, basket ball, and baseball reporter. I was a baseball reporter for a year. My stuff was signed, but it wasn't signed with my name. The paper for which I reported baseball signed all that work with a name it had used for many years. A great many people think that the bearer of that name must be the greatest living expert on baseball because that signature has been appearing for so long a time. It wouldn't be ethical for me to tell you the name under which I wrote, for that name is still in use. The first fiction I ever sold was taken by The Saturday Evening Post."

"Mr. Lardner," said THE TIMES reporter, "most successful writers seem to want to do a sort of work different from that with which their names are associated. They seem to grow tired of the sort of writing that brings them fame. How is it with you? Do you still enjoy writing about baseball players?"

Mr. Lardner gave a melancholy smile. "No," he said, "I'm tired of this sort of writing. I'd give anything to be able to stop writing dialect stories. And I'm tired of writing in the first person. I'd like to write in the third person."

"Do you think," the reporter asked, "that it is good for a fiction writer to have regular employment, such as your newspaper work? Or do you think he

would do better work if he had nothing else to do?"

"Writers ought not to do anything but write," said Mr. Lardner. "The necessity of working for a living at something besides writing inevitably robs a writer of much of his energy, and causes his work to deteriorate."

"But you," said the reporter, "get material for your stories out of your daily work, do you not?"

"Well," said Mr. Lardner, thoughtfully, "I got the material for my baseball stories by traveling with a team. But I'd like to do nothing but write fiction, and fiction of an entirely different sort from that which I write now."

"Your fiction must be successful," said the reporter, "since it made it possible for you to go to Palm Beach."

"I went to Palm Beach," said Mr. Lardner, "as an investment. The investment paid dividends, but I'm not sure how Florida would welcome me if I went back. Palm Beach would be all right, but I don't know about the rest of the State!

"Recently I saw an interesting clipping from The Miami Dispatch. The Dispatch's Fort Pierce correspondent said that Fort Pierce was building a new hotel. The present hotel at Fort Pierce, said the correspondent, was savagely criticised in a story by Harry Lauder.

"But at any rate," said Mr. Lardner, "Harry Lauder's story wasn't in Scotch dialect."

Mr. Lardner is not one of those who pay unstinted homage to the memory of Mark Twain. To a question as to the name of the greatest humorist that America had produced, he said:

"Well, I wouldn't consider Mark Twain our greatest humorist. I guess that George Ade is. Certainly he appeals to us more than Mark Twain does because he belongs to our own time. He writes of the life we are living, and Mark Twain's books deal with the life which we know only by hearsay. I suppose my forebears would say that Mark Twain was a much greater humorist than George Ade.

"But I never saw one of Mark Twain's characters, while I feel that I know every one about whom George Ade writes. You see, I didn't travel along the Mississippi in Mark Twain's youth, so I don't know his people. Harry Leon Wilson is a great humorist, and Finley Peter Dunne is another. But I'll bet Finley Peter Dunne is sick of writing Irish dialect!"

"But as to Mark Twain," said the reporter, "you admire his 'Huckleberry Finn,' don't you?"

"Yes," said Mr. Lardner, "but I like Booth Tarkington's 'Penrod' stories better. I've known Booth Tarkington's boys and I've not known those of Mark Twain. Mark Twain's boys are tough and poverty-stricken and they belong to a period very different from that of our own boys. But we all know Penrod and his friends.

"No, I certainly don't believe that Mark Twain is our greatest American humorist. Some of his fun is spontaneous, but a great deal of it is not."

"Do you think," asked the reporter, "that short stories of our time are better than those of bygone years?"

"No," said Mr. Lardner, "I don't think that they are. The trouble is that our magazine writers are doing too much work. I think that if the magazines paid a flat rate of \$25 a story our writers would do better work. The magazines pay such big prices that the authors overwork themselves in order to pile up money. Our fiction would be better if our writers would limit their production to three stories each a year. It would greatly benefit American fiction for our magazines to agree to pay more for three stories a year than they would for twelve.

"I suppose that our short stories would be better if there were fewer magazines competing for the work of popular writers. Now the demand is

greater than the supply, and so the writers get all the money they can and send out inferior work.

"Henry Sydnor Harrison is a good example of a short-story writer who doesn't overwork. He seems to take pains with his writing, and I doubt if his output is more than two stories a year. I think that I would call him our best short-story writer.

"I greatly enjoy the stories of W. L. George, and some of those of H. G. Wells. And I enjoy the books of St. John Ervine. They are humorists in a different sense of the word than what I intended when I called Elinor Glyn the greatest living humorist. Elinor Glyn's humor is unconscious—like the humor of

Conan Doyle and the humor of Harold Bell Wright.

"I think that American humor in the theatres has improved. We wouldn't laugh at the things that amused our mothers and fathers. But the improvement is more in the way in which the things are presented than in the material itself.

"And in speaking of the real humorists—as distinct from the unconscious humorists—I mustn't forget Edward Lear. I think he is as good as any of the humorists who have written in English. I have to read books to my children, and I find that the ones I best enjoy reading are those of Edward Lear and those of Lewis Carroll."