LARDNER TELLS SOME NEW ONES

By Thomas Boyd

WHY we laugh is of little moment so long as we do laugh, but the cause of our contemplative mood is, perhaps, of more importance. For laughter is a nervous reaction whereas contemplation employs the mind. Therefore, it would be of greater interest to discover why we are silent and thoughtful after we have read Ring Lardner's recently published volume than to seek out the reason for our mirth.

Each Sunday Mr. Lardner amuses millions of people; critics have praised the accuracy of his American vernacular, the sharpness of his satire, and the spontaneity of his humor. But scant attention has been given the bearing these qualities have upon his stories. People ask: "Does Ring Lardner talk like that? Is he always such a circus?" The critics say: "Yes, he has satire, but it is often misdirected; he hasn't complete control of it." And Mr. Lardner, whose own grammar is faultless and whose manner is shy, serenely continues to write of the things he hears and sees and feels and to make his readers share these experiences.

By itself, his practised illiteracy is

unimportant except as it contributes to the wealth of Americanisms. But in clothing his stories this vernacular creates a perfect style, less melodious than Moore's, less colorful than Cabell's, less conscious than Doughty's, yet fully as agreeable and perhaps not so tiresome as that of the last two named. For Mr. Lardner takes his characters from the great mass in which he, himself, is rooted. Each is a sharp separate entity to him, not representative of a type but of humanity. He understands his people as Galsworthy understands the English upper middle class. And instead of their minds' becoming his the condition is reversed and the flow and stem of those curious, misspelled, misapplied words round out his creations marvelously. Thus he is enabled to write such a story as "The Golden Honeymoon" in which every word, every abbreviation is a revelation of this old man — past seventy — who goes south for the winter with his wife. It is a simple and unique story, having a complete existence in itself. A lifetime is summed up in those few pages which would be barren if written in any other way; those short sentences, added as though they were afterthoughts; that record, so minutely kept, of the arrival and departure of the train; and the confession, "I used to pitch a pretty fair shoe myself, but ain't done much of it in the last twenty years."

Then there is "Some Like Them Cold" with its boastful beginning and the sure tapering down to the end, enshadowing abandoned hopes and dulled desires. Not literally, it tells of a man and a girl on a treadmill, seeking to rise from it, but being drawn more firmly to it in their attempt to escape. It evokes a greater feeling of the uncertainty of existence and of active sympathy than all of Charlie Chaplin's pathetic shoes.

Save one, all of the stories are amusing. That is "The Champion" and it reads as if it had been born under a cloud of indignation. Like Arthur Morrison's "Mean Streets" it strikes too rudely upon the senses. It is veracious enough, but that very honesty results in a lack of verisimilitude at the close. This objection may be only the posture of "seeing life steadily and whole" over again but yet, as in O'Neill's "All God's Chillun", the raw stuff of the study is so offensive to inherent prejudice that a sense of drama is bound to follow even if the author, toward the end, had his characters throwing custard pies. But "Horseshoes", "A Frame Up", "The Facts", "Alibi Ike" and, assuredly, "Some Like Them Cold" are for laughter as they are being read; though they leave you silent and thoughtful long after the merriment is gone.

How to Write Short Stories (With Samples). By Ring W. Lardner. Charles Scribner's Sons.