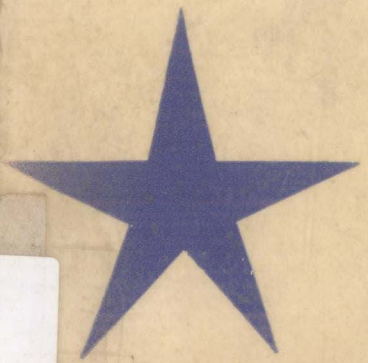
The American Century



SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

Briefly,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THE AMERICAN CENTURY is the third short-story anthology which Maxim Lieber has edited. The first, *Great Stories of the World,* was published in 1925 in collaboration with Barrett H. Clark. The second, *Great Stories of All Nations,* was edited in 1927 in collaboration with Dr. Blanche Colton Williams, late head of the English Department of Hunter College in New York City. As the director of the publishing department of Brentano's in New York, Mr. Lieber's contact with current American literature has been considerable. As a literary agent, he was associated for over twenty years with some of the outstanding authors in the United States.

Outstanding authors in America fall into two groups: Those famous for the best-sellers they have written and those who have devoted their talents to writing an honest picture of American life. It is the latter whose tales Maxim Lieber has put into his aptly titled anthology, THE AMERICAN CENTURY.

Briefly,

ABOUT THE BOOK

Most collections of short stories conform to no particular pattern; but in editing THE AMERICAN CENTURY, Maxim Lieber would seem to have been guided by two principle points: 1) Is it a good story? 2) Does it mirror life in the United States as it is, actually, or has been within recent times?

Seven Seas Books believes each of the tales in this collection is an outstanding example of the short-story form as it has been developed in the United States. Each is a powerful depiction of American life - not the American life of the Hollywood films, or boasted of in propaganda writings and broadcasts, but the life that millions have been and are living in the United States, today.

THE AMERICAN CENTURY marks the first time that a collection of stories such as these has been bound into one volume. It is not only an anthology of fine stories, it is also a document of courage in Art...

THE AMERICAN CENTURY

A COLLECTION OF AMERICAN SHORT STORIES
REFLECTING THE NATURE OF SOCIETY
IN THE UNITED STATES

Edited, with a Postscript,
by
MAXIM LIEBER

SEVEN SEAS PUBLISHERS BERLIN

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THOMAS BELL

who wrote

THE MAN WHO MADE GOOD IN AMERICA

was born in 1903 in Braddock, Pennsylvania, the son of an immigrant steel worker. His mother, although born in the United States, was also of Slovak ancestry. His education did not go beyond the first year of high school. At fifteen, he went into the steel mills as an apprentice electrician. Later, he worked as a construction laborer; as a repairman in a railroad shop; as a seaman, and, for a while, in a second-hand bookstore. He is the author of six novels, including ALL BRIDES ARE BEAUTIFUL, OUT OF THIS FURNACE, THERE COMES A TIME.

In THE MAN WHO MADE GOOD IN AMERICA, *the author dips into the album of his childhood for the people and the milieu he pictures in his story.*

*

IN THE SPRING of 1910, three men were sitting in a grimy courtyard, talking. All were Slovak steelworkers, fair, solidly-built men in their late thirties. The oldest, Mike Dobrejcak, was wearing slippers and a long-sleeved undershirt; he had got out of bed only an hour or so before, and would soon be going off to a night's work in the blast furnaces. The others, his brother Joe and his best friend Steve Bodnar, were clean-faced and clean-shirted, notice to all the small world of a steel town that they weren't working. Times were bad; not as bad as they had been during the panic three years before, but bad enough.

The courtyard, its paving gritty with mill dust, was closed in by the brick row in which Mike lived, by the fire-escaped back of a Washington Street saloon, and by the board fence against which Bodnar had tilted his chair. Two doors down the row several men were playing cards, their table an old box, and at the far end of the yard, in the corner formed by the communal outhouse and another fence, a loom had been set up and some women were weaving carpets from old rags.

It was a fine May afternoon; the three men could feel the warmth of the smoke-hazed sun penetrating their clothes. The saloon-keeper's hired girl, who had entertained them briefly by coming out on the fire escape above them to wash a window, had clambered back inside, taking her ankles with her, and now the men were talking, like a good many other people in Braddock, about Andy Toth.

On a bleak New Year's Eve many years before, about midway in time between the Braddock lockout with which Carnegie began his war on the steelworkers' union, and the Homestead lockout with which he finished it in 1892, there had been serious trouble at the mill gate in Braddock. The workers had asked for New Year's Day off and the company had refused, whereupon the day men gathered before the gate and tried to keep the incoming night men from going to work. Foremen and mill cops intervened, and very shortly a small riot was raging up and down Thirteenth Street.

When it was over there were a number of broken heads on both sides and one man, an Irish foreman, was dead.

Andy Toth, a laborer in the blast furnaces who'd just recently come to America, married, and the father of two boys, was arrested and tried for murder. He admitted participating in the fighting but denied that he'd struck the foreman. He was nevertheless convicted and sentenced to hang, a sentence that was later commuted to

life imprisonment. Still protesting his innocence, he disappeared into the state penitentiary, and after a while people stopped talking about him; and after another while everybody except his family—and perhaps the family of the dead foreman—had forgotten him.

Now people were talking about him again, for after all these years it turned out that he was just as innocent as he'd always claimed to be. It seemed that a man in the old country, convinced he was dying, had confessed to the crime for which another man had already spent nearly twenty years in prison. His name was Steve Toth but he was no relation. The name was a common one. Toth was the Hungarian word for Slovak.

Contrary to his expectations, the repentant Steve Toth didn't die. Meanwhile, however, the village notary, perhaps wondering if Steve Toth had been in his right mind when he told his fantastic story, had written to Braddock; and after a suitable interval Andy Toth's sons, now grown men, journeyed to Europe.

Assured that he was safe as long as he didn't return to America, Steve Toth talked freely. He hadn't meant to kill anyone, he said. Everyone was fighting, and that he rather than someone else had struck the fatal blow, that it had proved fatal at all, was pure chance. He'd left Braddock at once and returned to the old country. When he heard that the police, to whom one immigrant laborer named Toth was apparently as good as another, had arrested Andy Toth, he had been afraid to reveal the truth. But he was glad, he said, to get it off his conscience at last.

What Andy Toth's sons felt or thought as they listened to him was not known. They returned to Braddock laden with affidavits and documents and set about getting their father out of jail.

There was a picture of him in the newspapers on his release, a stout, white-haired, dazed-looking man. He carried a rosary and he was quoted as saying that he'd

always known he would be freed some day because he had prayed every night and his faith in God's goodness had never wavered. Several priests took his words, his history, for a text the following Sunday.

Andy Toth did not breathe the free air of America long; almost as soon as it could be arranged, he went back to the old country. His wife, who had taken in boarders to support herself and her family, had died while he was in prison. His sons were American citizens with wives and American-born children. Andy Toth went back to the old country—to die, he said; a sentiment everyone understood and no one took literally.

What made First Ward gasp, however, was the report that the steel company, in an unprecedented manifestation of generosity and remorse, had given him a check equal to all the wages he would have earned if he'd been working in the mill during his long years in prison.

People never get tired of talking about money.

"How much do you think he got?" Joe asked.

"It should be easy to figure out," Mike replied. "Fourteen cents an hour, twelve hours a day, seven days a week."

"For twenty years."

"Ah."

"That sounds like a lot of money."

A breeze rustled the drying leaves of the Pentecostal linden branches nailed over Mike's doorway, as over most of the doorways in the row. In Twelfth Street, on the other side of the board fence, a huckster was crying his chant of potatoes, cabbages and onions, and small boys with nothing better to do were echoing him, mockingly.

"You know how to figure, Mike. See what it comes to."

Mike smiled tolerantly, not unwilling to show off his learning. "If you like." He leaned around the corner of the doorway and called into the kitchen, where Mary was getting his supper and packing his lunch bucket. "Marcha! See if you can find me a pencil and paper."

She came to the door, a small, tired woman in a soiled dress, a year-old baby in her arms. The baby was gnawing gummily on a piece of bacon rind hung from a string around its neck.

"What do you want with pencil and paper?" she asked. Like the men, she spoke in Slovak.

"We want to find out how much money the company gave Andy Toth."

"Ach, you men! You'd do better to start getting ready for work."

But she brought him what he wanted, a brown paper bag and a stubby pencil.

Mike flattened the bag on his knee and wet the pencil with his tongue. "Fourteen cents an hour, twelve hours a day." He put the figures down and multiplied carefully. "One dollar and sixty-eight cents."

"I could have told you that," Bodnar said.

"Seven days a week—" Another pause. "It comes to eleven dollars and seventy-six cents."

"What about the long turn?" Joe asked. "That's twelve hours more every other week."

"Yes, but how do we know the company figured in the long turns?"

"If he'd been working he would have had to put them in, like everybody else. And they say the company paid him just as though he'd been working. What do you think, Stefan?"

Bodnar said it sounded reasonable to him. But that, he went on drily, made it almost certain the company would think differently.

"If you start figuring it so exactly you'll need a better man with figures than I," Mike said. "What about the times they cut wages?"

"And don't forget they weren't paying any fourteen cents an hour in those days," Bodnar said. "I went into the mill for seventy-five cents a day."

"And shutdowns and layoffs," Joe agreed, nodding.

"God knows we've had more than enough of those in the last twenty years."

Mike protested, "The more you talk the harder you make it."

They thought it over. One of the card players rose and crossed the yard to the outhouse, making some remark to the women at the loom as he passed and laughing as he shut himself inside.

"Let's keep it simple," Mike said. "A straight twelve hours a day, seven days a week, with no wage cuts or layoffs."

Bodnar grunted. "I'd like a job in a mill like that. Where is it?"

"In heaven, maybe," Joe suggested.

Bodnar turned his face and spat. "Or in hell."

"Be quiet," Mike said, "or I'll be here all day." He was putting down figures again. "Fifty-two times eleven-seventy-six—" He multiplied and added. "It comes to six hundred and eleven dollars and fifty-two cents a year," he announced.

"That much?"

"In twenty years it should make a nice piece of money," Joe observed reflectively.

"Now I know why bankers enjoy their work." Mike was staring at the paper. "You put down some figures, add them up and there you are, rich."

"How much in twenty years?" Bodnar asked.

"One minute. It comes to—" Again Mike's pencil moved, while the others watched it, absorbed.

"*Bohze moj'!*"

"Well? Well? Don't just sit there. Tell us."

"As God is my judge, it comes to twelve thousand, two hundred thirty dollars and forty cents exactly."

They stared at him blankly.

"How much did you say?"

Mike repeated the figure.

"Twelve thousand!"

Mike nodded. "In one piece, cash money."

"Jezus! Twelve thousand dollars!"

"I don't believe it."

"There are the figures."

The immensity of the sum overwhelmed them. Speechless, they stared at the paper on Mike's knee.

"Good God!" Bodnar exclaimed. "When I heard they were giving him some money I wished him joy of it. I didn't think much about it. I supposed it would come to a few hundred dollars more or less, little enough for what he suffered. But twelve thousand dollars!"

"It's a lot of money," Mike admitted.

"It's a fortune! And for what?"

Mike glanced at his friend. "Do you begrudge him the money?"

Bodnar stared at the paper on Mike's knee and then struck a match and re-lit his pipe, emotion making him suck on it with loud, smacking noises. "If I do, then may God forgive me. But what I'm thinking is that I was working in the mill when they took him off to jail, and so were you for that matter, and we're working still. And do we have any twelve thousand dollars to show for it? Twelve thousand dollars? Twelve thousand turds!"

"We didn't sit in jail for twenty years."

"Devil take me if I wouldn't be glad to sit in the strongest jail they have for that kind of money!"

"Twenty years in jail is a long time, Stefan."

"Twenty years in that God-damned mill is a long time too, my friend!"

"Yes. Yes, it is."

"And what have we to show for it? Who's the better off today? Look at us!" He gestured abruptly, taking in themselves, the mean yard, the card-player reappearing in the door of the outhouse, sliding his thumbs up and down under his suspenders. "I ask you, who's the better off? Toth, gone back to the old country with a fortune in his pocket and the rest of his life to do as he likes—or

we, breaking our backs in the blast furnaces to keep body and soul together?"

Mike didn't reply. Joe shrugged slightly, one hand holding his pipe near his mouth, the other cupping an elbow.

Mary called, "Mihal, it's getting late!"

In some upstairs bedroom a melancholy boarder, far from home, was hunched over an accordion and singing about a girl whose lover from over the wooded mountains never came to see her anymore, though once they had made love every hour, every minute, every day of the week including Saturday: *Za hory, lesy, Ma mila kde si*... The mills and blast furnaces were a low rumble on the other side of the housetops, and of his song.

"Mihal!"

After a while he got slowly to his feet. "Toth could make a pretty good speech when he gets back to his village," he said.

Bodnar grunted, still seething. Joe looked up at his brother. "A speech?"

Mike nodded, and a far-away look came into his eyes and his voice took on the formal tone appropriate to oratory.

"I was thinking he could stand up before the people who had gathered to welcome him home and he could say to them, 'My friends, in my youth I went to America to make my fortune, as the saying is. I dreamt of some day returning here rich and famous. Money in my pocket, maybe even my picture in the papers. You all know what thoughts will come into a young man's head when he is going to America. So off I went and now I've come back, and here I am. Rich and famous.'"

Mike stood above them for a moment, a faint, twisted smile on his lips. "Rich and famous," he repeated quietly.

Then he shook his head, as a man will when he finds something too much for him, and went inside to get ready for work.

JOSEPH NORTH

who wrote

COUNTY PAPER

spent his childhood in an industrial city in Pennsylvania. As a schoolboy, he worked in a textile mill and in the shipyards. He became a newspaperman when still very young, and joined the working class movement soon afterward to help save the lives of the textile strikers who had been arrested and framed up on murder charges in Gastonia, North Carolina. He worked to save the lives of the Scottsboro Negro boys and many others. He was a founder of the weekly NEW MASSES *and served as its editor for many years. He spent almost two years in Spain for the* DAILY WORKER *and the* NEW MASSES. *He is at present completing a book of reportage, and has begun work on a biography of Robert Minor, the late Communist leader and eminent American artist. Simultaneously, he is the cultural editor of the* SUNDAY WORKER.

COUNTY PAPER *is the American short story form at its trenchant best. With a few quick strokes, the author indelibly draws a period (the American boom years of the late '20's), tells the heart-warming story of a young reporter who comes of age, and depicts a verity of American life: the union of Politics and Big Business and the illegitimate offspring it begets, the "Free Press".*

*

THE RIVER BIRDS cried along the waterfront, a world apart as they had been for centuries since William Penn's schooners came up from the Atlantic seas. Wheeling, dipping, they ignored the puffing freighters as they had the white, spanking sails of the Quaker.