

TWENTY GRAND
★ GREAT AMERICAN SHORT STORIES ★
20

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MARJORIE KINNAN RAWLINGS

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AS "HERE WE ARE" BY SCHOLASTIC MAGAZINE

Y 8702896 I 712.4
TWENTY GRAND
GREAT
AMERICAN
SHORT STORIES

Originally published under the title
HERE WE ARE

Stories from
SCHOLASTIC MAGAZINE

Edited by ERNESTINE TAGGARD with an
Introduction by DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER



BANTAM BOOKS

TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

TWENTY GRAND: GREAT AMERICAN SHORT STORIES
Originally published under the title HERE WE ARE
A Bantam Book / published by arrangement with
Dodd, Mead & Company

PRINTING HISTORY

Bantam edition / October 1947
2nd printing ... August 1951
3rd printing ... October 1952
New Bantam edition / December 1954
2nd printing . November 1956
3rd printing . December 1957
4th printing . November 1958
5th printing . November 1959
10th printing ... October 1962
6th printing . September 1960
7th printing . November 1961
8th printing ... January 1962
9th printing April 1962
Bantam Pathfinder edition / February 1963
12th printing . October 1963
13th printing March 1964
14th printing . October 1964
15th printing July 1965
16th printing . January 1966
17th printing . September 1966
18th printing ... August 1967
26th printing ... September 1974
19th printing . September 1968
20th printing . November 1968
21st printing . November 1969
22nd printing . February 1971
23rd printing . November 1971
24th printing . September 1972
25th printing ... January 1973
Bantam edition / August 1976
28th printing . December 1978
29th printing . December 1979
32nd printing ... September 1984
30th printing ... January 1981
31st printing . September 1982

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ISBN 0-553-24849-9

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79 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Foreword

WE ALMOST called this book *The Young in Heart*. All the really important people you will meet in these twenty short stories have the spirit of adventure. Most of them are boys and girls. A few, like Young Man Axelbrod and Gran'ther Pendleton, retain the precious spark.

Young people actually chose these twenty grand short stories. They are the favorites of readers of *Scholastic Magazines*, national high school weeklies.

These stories were collected by *Scholastic's* Literary Editor, the late Ernestine Taggard, and published in a cloth-bound book called *Here We Are*. Now the adventurous young friends of these stories can be as close to you as your pocket or your pocketbook. They won't mind if you laugh with them (or at them). You can share both their triumphs and their tears. Their creators are the cream of modern American authors.

Condensation has become a great American appetite in recent years. *Scholastic* doesn't approve the appetite—doesn't encourage it. But sometimes space has demanded that the longer stories be cut to fit. Most of the stories in this representative volume are printed here as they appeared in *Scholastic*.

The Editors of *Scholastic Magazines*

Introduction

MY GRAY hairs are honored by being asked to write an introduction for this volume of young stories for young people. The tales are by young authors too. Half, or almost, of the excellent stories in this volume were written by people in their twenties and thirties. Pushed far back under the eaves of the attic lie the photographs which hung on the classroom walls of my school days—the venerables, bald or bearded in white, who, to the young folks of that period represented literature. That I am old enough to remember those photographs of Hawthorne, Longfellow, Whittier and Lowell, makes me a better person to write this introduction than any of the brilliant younger people whose names are in the table of contents.

For it is only set in the perspective of time that the value of such a collection of fiction for high school-age young people can be seen. One must be old enough to compare *Scholastic Magazines* with the magazine reading of adolescents forty years ago, to appreciate what it means. I'm not referring only to the fact that these are well-written tales of fine literary quality. It's not just a question of furnishing young folks with good, as well as readable, fiction. Something far more vital to our country's civilization is involved. This collection, and the five hundred tales as good as these, published in *Scholastic*, from which these were chosen, are a part of an epic change in the English teaching given to our teen-age boys and girls. A sinister barrier is being broken down which, in earlier generations, cut young people off from any notion that literary art might be a factor in their own lives, might be part of the raw material of understanding themselves and their nation.

The "classics" were the only forms of fiction recognized as literature by the school authorities of my long-ago youth. By definition a classic is a production the value of which is proved by its having passed through the sieve of public opinion and taste during several generations. Hence the subject matter of classics is the life of a period left behind in the past. It is far away from the exciting new day to which every young person opens his eyes every morning.

Fifty and forty years ago, high school-age young folks (I refer of course to the majority of them) read stories of good literary quality in order to pass their English examinations.

When they read for fun or pleasure or to be moved, they expected as a matter of course, as an inevitable result of the nature of things, to read trash, or stories which would seem very mild, superficial and childish to the mid-teens of today. The stories of college life which were written for my generation to read in the year or so before we expected to go to college would now to the keener ear of modern, pre-college-age boys and girls sound trivial, false or idiotically romantic. The stories about college life in this collection are, comparatively speaking, as rawly realistic as Zola's novels to his contemporaries. They attempt to tell something of the truth about college life. Compared to these portrayals of real human beings, struggling in college as everywhere else with material difficulties and with the complexities of human nature, the football-hero and pretty-girl romance of my youth was a shiny-paper, come-on prospectus, illustrated with posed and much retouched photographs of actors and actresses. Yet the enchantingly foolish romanticism of Saroyan's story in this collection shows that honesty in fiction does not exclude young love. We young readers could have found a poignant portrayal of early adolescent emotion such as that in "Sixteen"—and of course richer, deeper and more various—but only if we read *War and Peace*, which, believe me, we did not at sixteen, most of us. "Stories for young folks" always ended cheerfully in those days, with everything coming out all right for everybody. Not for us was the harsh bite of reality as in Ruth Suckow's beautiful story in this collection. This little masterpiece—for I think it no less—paints a picture as startling in its truth to each small detail of a familiar scene as a Dutch genre painting. But unspoken, implied, written between the lines with invisible ink which leaps clear and black to the eye by the end of this soberly realistic picture of a nice, every-day, ordinary, pleasant American home, is the beginning of the process of turning a whole, natural human being into a member of the "lower classes." In my youth the idea that our American democracy was not perfectly realized in every aspect was never even mildly suggested to us in any story—let alone one wringing the heart with remorseful sorrow like "A Start in Life." Publishers then expected authors to write cheerful stories with happy endings for young folks. Yet young folks were then, as now, as always, shaken to the heart by the fevers, the exaltations, despairs, joys, aspirations of adolescence. They were perfectly aware that the fairy tales written for their consumption had no connection with their own inner, or outer, lives.

Now this separation of the material of art from the stuff of

daily life is the basis of the philistine attitude toward art in the most poisonous and dangerous meaning of the word. It cuts the ordinary people of the general reading public off from living art, portraying the actual life of the present; and while this is rather hard on ordinary people, it is fatal to art, for only feeble tendrils can sprout from an art-stem not rooted in acceptance by humanity.

Such a collection as this is a door cut through a stone wall which used to separate ordinary reading Americans from contemporary writing of good literary quality. People who, in their teens, have acquired the habit of getting their reading pleasure not from sentimental or sensational hokum, but from honest, vivid, thoughtful interpretations of American life and American character, cannot but form a public vastly more favorable to the development of seriously practiced literary art than were preceding generations.

The stories in this book, moving, satiric, gay, sad, romantic, realistic, the constant presentation in *Scholastic* of fiction of this quality and the work done in general by the best English teaching in our high schools—they are all milestones along a new road, undreamed of half a century ago. It leads ahead into a future, which, to my elderly eyes, looks remarkably like a golden age of writing.

And one reason I feel confident of such a golden age is that I know the kind of writing high school students themselves are capable of turning out. For years *Scholastic* has been conducting its Literary Awards—a remarkable and highly rewarding annual competition for the purpose of encouraging talent among high school students interested in creative writing. I have served as one of the judges in the short story division of the Awards and, along with the other judges, have been amazed year after year at the quality of those stories. (If you have your doubts, turn to Maureen Daly's "Sixteen" in this volume. That story won first prize in its year—and Maureen was sixteen when she wrote it!) Today these young people are reading the best that's being written; tomorrow they will write the best that's being read.

DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER

Arlington, Vermont

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Jerry, whose heart couldn't lie

A Mother in Mannville

MARJORIE KINNAN RAWLINGS

THE ORPHANAGE is high in the Carolina mountains. Sometimes in winter the snowdrifts are so deep that the institution is cut off from the village below, from all the world. Fog hides the mountain peaks, the snow swirls down the valleys, and a wind blows so bitterly that the orphanage boys who take the milk twice daily to the baby cottage reach the door with fingers stiff in an agony of numbness.

"Or when we carry trays from the cookhouse for the ones that are sick," Jerry said, "we get our faces frostbit, because we can't put our hands over them. I have gloves," he added. "Some of the boys don't have any."

He liked the late spring, he said. The rhododendron was in bloom, a carpet of color, across the mountainsides, soft as the May winds that stirred the hemlocks. He called it laurel.

"It's pretty when the laurel blooms," he said. "Some of it's pink and some of it's white."

I was there in the autumn. I wanted quiet, isolation, to do some troublesome writing. I wanted mountain air to blow out the malaria from too long a time in the subtropics. I was homesick, too, for the flaming of maples in October, and for corn shocks and pumpkins and black-walnut trees and the lift of hills. I found them all, living in a cabin that belonged to the orphanage, half a mile beyond the orphanage farm. When I took the cabin, I asked for a boy or man to come and chop wood for the fireplace. The first few days were warm, I found what wood I needed about the cabin, no one came, and I forgot the order.

I looked up from my typewriter one late afternoon, a little startled. A boy stood at the door, and my pointer dog, my companion, was at his side and had not barked to warn me. The boy was probably twelve years old, but undersized. He wore overalls and a torn shirt, and was barefooted.

He said, "I can chop some wood today."

I said, "But I have a boy coming from the orphanage."

"I'm the boy."

"You? But you're small."

"Size don't matter, chopping wood," he said. "Some of the big boys don't chop good. I've been chopping wood at the orphanage a long time."

I visualized mangled and inadequate branches for my fires. I was well into my work and not inclined to conversation. I was a little blunt.

"Very well. There's the ax. Go ahead and see what you can do."

I went back to work, closing the door. At first the sound of the boy dragging brush annoyed me. Then he began to chop. The blows were rhythmic and steady, and shortly I had forgotten him, the sound no more of an interruption than a consistent rain. I suppose an hour and a half passed, for when I stopped and stretched, and heard the boy's steps on the cabin stoop, the sun was dropping behind the farthest mountain, and the valleys were purple with something deeper than the asters.

The boy said, "I have to go to supper now. I can come again tomorrow evening."

I said, "I'll pay you now for what you've done," thinking I should probably have to insist on an older boy. "Ten cents an hour?"

"Anything is all right."

We went together back of the cabin. An astonishing amount of solid wood had been cut. There were cherry logs and heavy roots of rhododendron, and blocks from the waste pine and oak left from the building of the cabin.

"But you've done as much as a man," I said. "This is a splendid pile."

I looked at him, actually, for the first time. His hair was the color of the corn shocks, and his eyes, very direct, were like the mountain sky when rain is pending—gray, with a shadowing of that miraculous blue. As I spoke a light came over him, as though the setting sun had touched him with the same suffused glory with which it touched the mountains. I gave him a quarter.

"You may come tomorrow," I said, "and thank you very much."

He looked at me, and at the coin, and seemed to want to speak, but could not, and turned away.

"I'll split kindling tomorrow," he said over his thin ragged shoulder. "You'll need kindling and medium wood and logs and backlogs."

At daylight I was half wakened by the sound of chopping.

Again it was so even in texture that I went back to sleep. When I left my bed in the cool morning, the boy had come and gone, and a stack of kindling was neat against the cabin wall. He came again after school in the afternoon and worked until time to return to the orphanage. His name was Jerry; he was twelve years old, and he had been at the orphanage since he was four. I could picture him at four, with the same grave gray-blue eyes and the same—independence? No, the word that comes to me is “integrity.”

The word means something very special to me, and the quality for which I use it is a rare one. My father had it—there is another of whom I am almost sure—but almost no man of my acquaintance possesses it with the clarity, the purity, the simplicity of a mountain stream. But the boy Jerry had it. It is bedded on courage, but it is more than brave. It is honest, but it is more than honesty. The ax handle broke one day. Jerry said the woodshop at the orphanage would repair it. I brought money to pay for the job and he refused it.

“I’ll pay for it,” he said. “I broke it. I brought the ax down careless.”

“But no one hits accurately every time,” I told him. “The fault was in the wood of the handle. I’ll see the man from whom I bought it.”

It was only then that he would take the money. He was standing back of his own carelessness. He was a free-will agent and he chose to do careful work, and if he failed, he took the responsibility without subterfuge.

And he did for me the unnecessary thing, the gracious thing, that we find done only by the great of heart. Things no training can teach, for they are done on the instant, with no predicated experience. He found a cubbyhole beside the fireplace that I had not noticed. There, of his own accord, he put kindling and “medium” wood, so that I might always have dry fire material ready in case of sudden wet weather. A stone was loose in the rough walk to the cabin. He dug a deeper hole and steadied it, although he came, himself, by a short cut over the bank. I found that when I tried to return his thoughtfulness with such things as candy and apples, he was wordless. “Thank you” was, perhaps, an expression for which he had had no use, for his courtesy was instinctive. He only looked at the gift and at me, and a curtain lifted, so that I saw deep into the clear well of his eyes, and gratitude was there, and affection, soft over the firm granite of his character.

He made simple excuses to come and sit with me. I could