

BOOTH TARKINGTON

7 BEST SHORT STORIES BY

TACET BOOKS

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Booth Tarkington

EDITED BY

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Author

Booth Tarkington was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, the son of John S. Tarkington and Elizabeth Booth Tarkington. He was named after his maternal uncle Newton Booth, then the governor of California. He was also related to Chicago Mayor James Hutchinson Woodworth through Woodworth's wife Almyra Booth Woodworth.

Tarkington attended Shortridge High School in Indianapolis, and completed his secondary education at Phillips Exeter Academy, a boarding school on the East Coast. He attended Purdue University for two years, where he was a member of the Sigma Chi Fraternity and the university's Morley Eating Club. He later made substantial donations to Purdue for building an all-men's residence hall, which the university named Tarkington Hall in his honor. Purdue awarded him an honorary doctorate.

Some of his family's wealth returned after the Panic of 1873, and his mother transferred Booth from Purdue to Princeton University. At Princeton, Tarkington is said to have been known as "Tark" among the members of the Ivy Club, the first of Princeton's historic Eating Clubs. He had also been in a short-lived eating club called "Ye Plug and Ulster," which became Colonial Club. He was active as an actor and served as president of Princeton's Dramatic Association, which later became the Triangle Club, of which he was a founding member. According to Triangle's official history,

Tarkington made his first acting appearance in the club's Shakespearean spoof Katherine, one of the first three productions in the Triangle's history written and produced by students. Tarkington established the Triangle tradition, still alive today, of producing students' plays. Tarkington

returned to the Triangle stage as Cassius in the 1893 production of a play he co-authored, *The Honorable Julius Caesar*. He edited Princeton's *Nassau Literary Magazine*, known more recently as *The Nassau Lit*. While an undergraduate, he socialized with Woodrow Wilson, an associate graduate member of the Ivy Club. Wilson returned to Princeton as a member of the political science faculty shortly before Tarkington departed; they maintained contact throughout Wilson's life. Tarkington failed to earn his undergraduate A.B. because of missing a single course in the classics. Nevertheless, his place within campus society was already determined, and he was voted "most popular" by the class of 1893.

In his adult life, he was twice asked to return to Princeton for the conferral of honorary degrees, an A.M. in 1899 and a Litt.D. in 1918. The conferral of more than one honorary degree on an alumnus(a) of Princeton University remains a university record.

While Tarkington never earned a college degree, he was accorded many awards recognizing and honoring his skills and accomplishments as an author. He won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction twice, in 1919 and 1922, for his novels *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Alice Adams*. In 1921 booksellers rated him "the most significant contemporary American author" in a poll conducted by *Publishers' Weekly*. He won the O. Henry Memorial Award in 1931 for his short story "Cider of Normandy". His works appeared frequently on best sellers lists throughout his life. In addition to his honorary doctorate from Purdue, and his honorary masters and doctorate from Princeton, Tarkington was awarded an honorary doctorate from Columbia University, the administrator of the Pulitzer Prize, and several other universities.

Many aspects of Tarkington's Princeton years and adult life were paralleled by the later life of another writer, fellow Princetonian F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Tarkington was an unabashed Midwestern regionalist and set much of his fiction in his native Indiana. In 1902, he served one term in the Indiana House of Representatives as a Republican. Tarkington saw such public service as a responsibility of gentlemen in his socio-economic class, and consistent with his family's extensive record of public service. This experience provided the foundation for his book *In the Arena: Stories of Political Life*. While his service as an Indiana legislator was his only official public service position, he remained politically conservative his entire life. He supported Prohibition, opposed FDR, and worked against FDR's New Deal.

Tarkington was one of the more popular American novelists of his time. His *The Two Vanrevels* and *Mary's Neck* appeared on the annual best-seller lists a total of nine times. The *Penrod* novels depict a typical upper-middle class American boy of 1910 vintage, revealing a fine, bookish sense of American humor. At one time, his *Penrod* series was as well known as *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. Much of Tarkington's work consists of satirical and closely observed studies of the American class system and its foibles. He himself came from a patrician Midwestern family that lost much of its wealth after the Panic of 1873. Today, he is best known for his novel *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which Orson Welles filmed in 1942. It is included in the Modern Library's list of top-100 novels. The second volume in Tarkington's *Growth* trilogy, it contrasted the decline of the "old money" Amberson dynasty with the rise of "new money" industrial tycoons in the years between the American Civil War and World War I.

Tarkington dramatized several of his novels; some were eventually filmed including *Monsieur Beaucaire*, *Presenting Lily Mars*, and *The Adventures and Emotions of Edgar Pomeroy*, made into a serialized film in 1920 and 1921. He also collaborated with Harry Leon Wilson to write three plays. In 1928, he published a book of reminiscences, *The World Does Move*. He illustrated the books of others, including a 1933 reprint of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as well as his own. He took a close interest in fine art and collectibles, and was a trustee of the John Herron Art Institute.

Tarkington was married to Louisa Fletcher from 1902 until their divorce in 1911. Their only child, Laurel, was born in 1906 and died in 1923. He married Susanah Keifer Robinson in 1912. They had no children.

Tarkington began losing his eyesight in the 1920s and was blind in his later years. He continued producing his works by dictating to a secretary. Despite his failing eyesight, between 1928 and 1940 he edited several historical novels by his Kennebunkport, Maine, neighbor Kenneth Roberts, who described Tarkington as a "co-author" of his later books and dedicated three of them (*Rabble in Arms*, *Northwest Passage*, and *Oliver Wiswell*) to him.

Tarkington maintained a home in his native Indiana at 4270 North Meridian in Indianapolis. From 1923 until his death, Tarkington spent summers and then much of his later life in Kennebunkport at his much loved home, Seawood. In Kennebunkport he was well known as a sailor, and his schooner, the *Regina*, survived him. *Regina* was moored next to Tarkington's boathouse, *The Floats* which he also used as his studio. His extensively renovated studio is now the Kennebunkport Maritime Museum. It was from his home in Maine that he and his wife Susannah established their relation with nearby Colby College.

Tarkington made a gift of some his papers to Princeton University, his alma mater, and his wife Susannah, who survived him by over 20 years, made a separate gift of his remaining papers to Colby College after his death. Purdue University's library holds many of his works in its Special Collection's Indiana Collection. Indianapolis commemorates his impact on literature and the theatre, and his contributions as a Midwesterner and "son of Indiana" in its Booth Tarkington Civic Theatre. He is buried in Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis.

In the 1910s and 1920s, Tarkington was regarded as the great American novelist, as important as Mark Twain. His works were reprinted many times, were often on best-seller lists, won many prizes, and were adapted into other media. *Penrod* and its two sequels were regular birthday presents for bookish boys. By the later twentieth century, however, he was ignored in academia: no congresses, no society, no journal of Tarkington Studies. In 1985 he was cited as an example of the great discrepancy possible between an author's fame when alive and oblivion later. According to this view, if an author succeeds at pleasing his or her contemporaries — and Tarkington's works have not a whiff of social criticism — he or she is not going to please later readers of inevitably different values and concerns.

In an essay titled "Hoosiers: The Lost World of Booth Tarkington", appearing in the May 2004 issue of *The Atlantic*, Thomas Mallon wrote of Tarkington that "only general ignorance of his work has kept him from being pressed into contemporary service as a literary environmentalist — not just a 'conservationist,' in the TR mode, but an emerald-Green decrier of internal combustion":

The automobile, whose production was centered in Indianapolis before World War I, became the snorting,

belching villain that, along with soft coal, laid waste to Tarkington's Edens. His objections to the auto were aesthetic—in *The Midlander* (1923) automobiles sweep away the more beautifully named "phaetons" and "surreys"—but also something far beyond that. Dreiser, his exact Indiana contemporary, might look at the Model T and see wage slaves in need of unions and sit-down strikes; Tarkington saw pollution, and a filthy tampering with human nature itself. "No one could have dreamed that our town was to be utterly destroyed," he wrote in *The World Does Move*. His important novels are all marked by the soul-killing effects of smoke and asphalt and speed, and even in *Seventeen*, Willie Baxter fantasizes about winning Miss Pratt by the rescue of precious little Flopit from an automobile's rushing wheels.

In June 2019, the Library of America published *Booth Tarkington: Novels & Stories*, collecting *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *Alice Adams*, and *In the Arena: Stories of Political Life*.

National Prosperity and Art

In "Literature in the Making" by Joyce Kilmer^[1]

Mr. Booth Tarkington never will be called the George M. Cohan of fiction. His novel, *The Turmoil*, is surely an indictment of modern American urban civilization, of its materialism, its braggadocio, its contempt for the things of the soul.

It was with the purpose of making this indictment a little clearer than it could be when it is surrounded by a story, that I asked Mr. Tarkington a few questions. And his answers are not likely to increase our national complacencies.

In the first place, I asked Mr. Tarkington if the atmosphere of a young and energetic nation might not reasonably be expected to be favorable to literary and artistic expression.

"Yes, it might," said Mr. Tarkington. "There may be spiritual progress in America as phenomenal as her material progress.³⁶

"There is and has been extraordinary progress in the arts. But the people as a whole are naturally preoccupied with their material progress. They are much more interested in Mr. Rockefeller than in Mr. Sargent."

The last two sentences of Mr. Tarkington's reply made me eager for something a little more specific on that subject.

"What are the forces in America to-day," I asked, "that hinder the development of art and letters?"

Mr. Tarkington replied: "There are no forces in America to-day that hinder the development of individuals in art and letters, save in unimportant cases here and there. But there is a spirit that hinders general personal decency, knows and cares nothing for beauty, and is glad to have its body dirty for the sake of what it calls 'prosperity.'

"It 'wouldn't give a nickel' for any kind of art. But it can't and doesn't hinder artists from producing works of art, though it makes them swear."

"But do not these conditions in many instances seriously hinder individual artists?"

Mr. Tarkington smiled. "Nothing stops an artist if he is one," he said. "But many things³⁷ may prevent a people or a community from knowing or caring for art.

"The climate may be unfavorable; we need not expect the Eskimos to be interested in architecture. In the United

States politicians have usually controlled the public purchase of works of art and the erection of public buildings. This is bad for the public, naturally."

"I suppose," I said, "that the conditions you describe are distinctively modern, are they not? At what time in the history of America have conditions been most favorable to literary expression?"

Mr. Tarkington's reply was not what I expected. "At all times," he said. "Literary expression does not depend on the times, though the appreciation of it does, somewhat."

I asked Mr. Tarkington if he agreed with Mr. Gouverneur Morris in considering the short story a modern development. He did not.

"There are short stories in the Bible," he said, "and in every mythology; 'folk stories' of all races and tribes. Probably Mr. Morris's definition of the short story would exclude these. I agree with him that short stories are better written nowadays."

"But you do not believe," I said, "that American³⁸ literature in general is better than it used to be, do you? Why is it that there is now no group of American writers like the New England group which included Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Emerson, and Thoreau?"

"Why is there," Mr. Tarkington asked in turn, "no group like Homer (wasn't he a group?) in Greece? There may be, but if there is just such a modern group it would tend only to repeat the work of the Homeric group, which wouldn't be interesting to the rest of us.

"The important thing is to find a group unlike Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Emerson, and Thoreau. That is, if one accepts the idea that it is important to find a group."

Mr. Tarkington's criticisms of the modern American city have been so severe that I expected him to tell me that all writers should live in the country. But again he surprised me. In reply to my question as to which environment was more favorable to the production of literature, the city or the country, he said:

"It depends upon the nerves of the writer. A writer can be born anywhere, and he can grow up anywhere."

There has recently been considerable discussion—Professor³⁹ Edward Garnet and Gertrude Atherton have taken a considerable share in it—on the relative merits of contemporary English and American fiction. I asked Mr. Tarkington if in his opinion the United States had at the present time novelists equal to those of England.

"That is unanswerable!" he answered. "Writers aren't like baseball teams. What's the value of my opinion that *The Undiscovered Country* is a 'greater' novel than *A Pair of Blue Eyes*? These questions remind me of school debating societies. Nothing is demonstrated, but everybody has his own verdict."

Until I asked Mr. Tarkington about it I had heard only two opinions as to the probable effect on literature of the war. One was that which William Dean Howells tersely expressed by saying: "War stops literature," and the other was that the war is purifying and strengthening all forms of literary expression.

But Mr. Tarkington had something new to say about it. "What effect," I asked, "is the war likely to have on American literature?"

"None of consequence," he answered. "The poet will find the subject, war or no war. The sculptor doesn't depend upon epaulets."⁴⁰

Mr. Tarkington is so inveterate a writer of serials, and his work is so familiar to the readers of the American magazines, that I desired to get his expert opinion as to whether or not the American magazines, with their remarkably high prices, had harmed or benefited fiction. His reply was somewhat non-committal.

"They have induced many people to look upon the production of fiction as a profitable business," he said. "But those people would merely not have 'tried fiction' at all otherwise. Prices have nothing to do with art."

Mr. Tarkington had some interesting things to say about that venerable mirage, the Great American Novel. I asked him if that longed-for work would ever be written; if, for example, there would ever be a work of fiction reflecting American life as *Vanity Fair* reflects English life. He replied:

"If Thackeray had been an American he would not have written a novel reflecting American life as *Vanity Fair* reflected the English life of its time. He would have written of New York; his young men would have come there after Harvard. The only safe thing to say of the Great American Novel is that the author will never know he wrote it."⁴¹

Mr. Charles Belmont Davis had told me that a writer who had some means of making a living other than writing would do better work than one who devoted himself exclusively to literature. I asked Mr. Tarkington what he thought about this.

"I think," he said, "that it would be very well for a writer to have some means of making a living other than writing. There are likely to be times in his career when it would give him a sense of security concerning food. But I doubt if it would much affect his writing, unless he considered writing to be a business."

Mr. Tarkington's answer to my next question is hereby commended to the attention of all those feminine revolutionists who believe that they are engaged in the pleasant task of changing the whole current of modern thought.

"How has literature been affected," I asked, "by the suffrage movement and feminism?"

Mr. Tarkington looked up in some surprise. "I haven't heard of any change," he said.

The author of *The Turmoil* could never be accused of jingoism. But he is far from agreeing with those critics who believe that American literature is merely "a phase of English literature."⁴² I asked him if he believed that there was such a thing as a distinctively American literature.

"Certainly," he replied. "Is *Huckleberry Finn* a phase? It's a monument; not an English one. English happens to be the language largely used."

The allusion in Mr. Tarkington's last reply suggested—what every reader of *Penrod* must know—that this novelist is an enthusiastic admirer of Mark Twain. So I told him that Mr. T. A. Daly had classed Mark Twain with Artemus Ward and Q. K. Philander Doesticks, P.B., and had said that these men wrote nothing of real merit and were "the Charlie Chaplins of their time."

Mr. Tarkington smiled. "Get Mr. T. A. Daly to talk some more," he said. "We'd like to hear something about Voltaire and Flo Ziegfeld. Second thoughts indicate that 'T. A. Daly' is the pen name of Mr. Charlie Chaplin. Of course! And that makes it all right and natural. I thought at first that it was a joke."

The Fascinating Stranger

Mr. George Tuttle, reclining at ease in his limousine, opened one eye just enough to perceive that daylight had reached his part of the world, then closed that eye, and murmured languidly. What he said, however, was not, "Home, Parker," or "To the club, Eugene;" this murmur of his was not only languid but plaintive. A tear appeared upon the lower lid of the eye that had opened, for it was a weak and drowsy eye, and after hours of solid darkness the light fretted it.

Moreover, the tear, as a greeting to the new day, harmonized perfectly with Mr. Tuttle's murmur, which was so little more than a husky breathing that only an acute ear close by could have caught it: "Oh, Gosh!" Then he turned partly over, shifting his body so as to lie upon his left side among the shavings that made his limousine such a comfortable bedroom.

After thousands of years of wrangling, economists still murder one another to emphasize varying ideas of what constitutes the ownership of anything; and some people (the most emphatic of all) maintain that everybody owns everything, which is obviously the same as saying that nobody owns anything, especially his own right hand. So it may be a little hasty to speak of this limousine, in which Mr. Tuttle lay finishing his night's sleep, as belonging to him in particular; but he was certainly the only person who had the use of it, and no other person in the world believed himself to be its owner. A doubt better founded may rest upon a definition of the word "limousine;" for Mr. Tuttle's limousine was not an automobile; it had no engine, no wheels, no steering-gear; neither had it cushions nor glass; yet Mr. Tuttle thought of it and spoke of it as his limousine, and took some pleasure in such thinking and speaking.

Definitely, it was what is known as a “limousine body” in an extreme but permanent state of incompleteness. That is to say, the wooden parts of a “limousine body” had been set up, put together on a “buck,” or trestle, and then abandoned with apparently the same abruptness and finality that marked the departure of the Pompeiian baker who hurried out of his bakery and left his bread two thousand years in the oven. So sharply the “post-war industrial depression” had struck the factory, that the workmen seemed to have run for their lives from the place, leaving everything behind them just as it happened to be at the moment of panic. And then, one cold evening, eighteen months afterward, the excavator, Tuttle, having dug within the neighbouring city dump-heap to no profitable result, went to explore the desert spaces where once had been the bustling industries, and found this body of a limousine, just as it had been abandoned by the workmen fleeing from ruin. He furnished it plainly with simple shavings and thus made a home.

His shelter was double, for this little house of his itself stood indoors, under a roof that covered acres. When the watery eye of Mr. Tuttle opened, it beheld a room vaster than any palace hall, and so littered with unaccountable other automobile bodies in embryo that their shapes grew vague and small in the distance. But nothing living was here except himself; what leather had been in the great place was long since devoured, and the rats had departed. A night-watchman, paid by the receiver-in-bankruptcy, walked through the long shops once or twice a night, swinging a flashlight; but he was unaware of the tenant, and usually Mr. Tuttle, in slumber, was unaware of him.

The watery eye, having partly opened and then wholly closed, remained closed for another hour. All round about, inside and outside the great room, there was silence; for

beyond these shops there were only other shops and others and others, covering square miles, and all as still as a village midnight. They were as quiet as that every day in the week; but on weekdays the cautious Tuttle usually went out rather early, because sometimes a clerk from the receiver's office dawdled about the place with a notebook. To-day was Sunday; no one would come; so he slept as long as he could.

His reasons were excellent as reasons, though immoral at the source;—that is to say, he should not have had such reasons. He was not well, and sleep is healing; his reasons for sleeping were therefore good: but he should not have been unwell; his indisposition was produced by sin; he had broken the laws of his country and had drunk of illegal liquor, atrocious in quality; his reasons for sleeping were therefore bad. His sleep was not a good sleep.

From time to time little manifestations proved its gross character; he lay among the shavings like a fat grampus basking in sea-foam, and he breathed like one; but sometimes his mouth would be pushed upward in misdirected expansions; his cheeks would distend, and then suddenly collapse, after explosion. Lamentable sounds came from within his corrugated throat, and from deeper tubes; a shoulder now and then jumped suddenly; and his upper ear, long and soiled, frequently twitched enough to move the curl of shaving that lay upon it. For a time one of his legs trembled violently; then of its own free will and without waking him, it bent and straightened repeatedly, using the motions of a leg that is walking and confident that it is going somewhere. Having arrived at its destination, it rested; whereupon its owner shivered, and, thinking he pulled a blanket higher about his shoulders, raked a few more shavings upon him. Finally, he woke, and, still keeping his eyes closed, stroked his beard.

It was about six weeks old and no uncommon ornament with Mr. Tuttle; for usually he wore either a beard or something on the way to become one; he was indifferent which, though he might have taken pride in so much originality in an over-razored age. His round and somewhat oily head, decorated with this beard upon a face a little blurred by puffiness, was a relic; the last survival of a type of head long ago gloriously portrayed and set before a happy public by that adept in the most perishable of the arts, William Hoey. Mr. Tuttle was heavier in body than the blithe comedian's creation, it is true; he was incomparably slower in wit and lower in spirits, yet he might well enough have sat for the portrait of an older brother of Mr. Hoey's masterpiece, "Old Hoss."

Having stroked his beard with a fat and dingy hand, he uttered detached guttural complaints in Elizabethan monosyllables, followed these with sighing noises; then, at the instigation of some abdominal feeling of horror, shuddered excessively, opened his eyes to a startled wideness and abruptly sat up in his bed. To the interior of his bosky ear, just then, was borne the faint religious sound of church bells chiming in a steeple miles away in the centre of the city, and he was not pleased. An expression of disfavour slightly altered the contours of his face; he muttered defiantly, and decided to rise and go forth.

Nothing could have been simpler. The April night had been chilly, and he had worn his shoes; no nightgear had to be exchanged for other garments;—in fact no more was to be done than to step out of the limousine. He did so, taking his greenish and too plastic "Derby" hat with him; and immediately he stood forth upon the factory floor as well equipped to face the public as ever. Thus, except for several safety-pins, glinting too brightly where they might least have been expected, he was a most excellent specimen of the protective coloration exhibited by man; for man has this

instinct, undoubtedly. On the bright beaches by the sea, how gaily he conforms is to be noted by the dullest observer; in the autumnal woods man goes dull green and dead leaf brown; and in the smoky city all men, inside and out, are the colour of smoke. Mr. Tuttle stood forth, the colour of the grimy asphalt streets on which he lived; and if at any time he had chosen to rest in a gutter, no extraneous tint would have hinted of his presence.

Not far from him was a faucet over a sink; and he went to it, but not for the purpose of altering his appearance. Lacking more stimulating liquid, it was the inner man that wanted water; and he set his mouth to the faucet, drinking long, but not joyously. Then he went out to the sunshine of that spring morning, with the whole world before him, and his the choice of what to do with it.

He chose to walk toward the middle part of the city, the centre of banking and trade; but he went slowly, his eye wandering over the pavement; and so, before long, he decided to smoke. He was near the great building of the railway station at the time, and, lighting what was now his cigarette (for he had a match of his own) he leaned back against a stone pilaster, smoked and gazed unfavourably upon the taxicabs in the open square before the station.

As he stood thus, easing his weight against the stone and musing, he was hailed by an acquaintance, a tall negro, unusually limber at the knees and naïvely shabby in dress, but of amiable expression and soothing manners.

"How do, Mist' Tuttle," he said genially, in a light tenor voice. "How the worl' treatin' you vese days, Mist' Tuttle? I hope evathing movin' the ri' way to please you nicely."

Mr. Tuttle shook his head. "Yeh!" he returned sarcastically. "Seems like it, don't it! Look at 'em, I jest ast you! *Look* at

'em!"

"Look at who?"

"At them taxicabs," Mr. Tuttle replied, with sudden heat.

"That's a nice sight fer decent people to haf to look at!" And he added, with rancour: "On a Sunday, too!"

"Well, you take them taxicabs now," the negro said, mildly argumentative, "an' what hurt they doin' to nobody to jes' look at 'em, Mist' Tuttle? I fine myse'f in some difficulty to git the point of what you was a-settin' you'se'f to point out, Mist' Tuttle. What make you so industrious 'gains' them taxicabs?"

"I'll tell you soon enough," Mr. Tuttle said ominously. "I reckon if they's a man alive in this here world to-day, I'm the one 't can tell you jest exackly what I got against them taxicabs. In the first place, take and look where the United States stood twenty years ago, when they wasn't any o' them things, and then take and look where the United States stands to-day, when it's full of 'em! I don't ast you to take my word fer it; I only ast you to use your own eyes and take and look around you and see where the United States stands to-day and what it's comin' to!"

But the coloured man's perplexity was not dispelled; he pushed back his ancient soft hat in order to assist his brain, but found the organ still unstimulated after adjacent friction, and said plaintively: "I cain' seem to grasp jes' whur you aiminin' at. What you say the United States comin' to?"

"Why, nowhere at all!" Mr. Tuttle replied grimly. "This country's be'n all ruined up. You take and look at what's left of it, and what's the use of it? I jest ast you the one simple question: What's the use of it? Just tell me that, Bojus."