

# The ORIOLE

By  
BOOTH TARKINGTON

Illustrations by  
Irwin Myers

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By the end of October, with the dispersal of that foliage which has served all summer long as a pleasant screen for whatever small privacy may exist between American neighbors, we begin to get our autumn high tides of gossip. At this season of the year, in our towns of moderate size and ambition, where apartment houses have not yet condensed and at the same time sequestered the population, one may secure visual command of back yard beyond back yard, both up and down the street; especially if one takes the trouble to sit for an hour or so, daily, upon the top of a high board fence at about the middle of a block.

Of course an adult who followed such a course would be thought peculiar; no doubt he would be subject to undesirable comment, and presently might be called upon to parry severe if, indeed, not hostile inquiries; but boys are considered so inexplicable that they have gathered for themselves any privileges denied their parents and elders; and a boy can do such a thing as this to his full content, without anybody's thinking about it at all. So it was that Herbert Illingsworth Atwater, Jr., aged thirteen and a few months, sat for a considerable time upon such a fence, after school hours, every afternoon of the last week in October; and only one person particularly observed him or was stimulated by any mental activity by his procedure. Even at that, this person was affected only because she was Herbert's relative, and of an age sympathetic to his—and of a sex antipathetic.

In spite of the fact that Herbert Illingsworth Atwater, Jr., thus seriously disporting himself on his father's back fence, attracted only this audience of one (and she hostile at a rather distant window) his behavior really should have been considered piquantly interesting by anybody. After climbing to the top of the fence he would produce from interior pockets a small memorandum book and a pencil; seldom putting these implements to immediate use. His expression was gravely alert, his manner more than businesslike; yet nobody could have failed to comprehend that he was enjoying himself, especially when his attitude became tense—as at times it certainly did. Then he would rise, balancing himself at adroit ease, his feet aligned one before the other on the inner rail, a foot below the top of the boards, and with eyes dramatically shielded beneath a scowling palm, he would gaze sternly in the direction of some object or motion which had attracted his attention; and then, having



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satisfied himself of something or other, he would sit again and decisively enter a note in his memorandum book.

He was not always alone; he was frequently joined by a friend, male, and, though shorter than Herbert, quite as old; and this companion was inspired, it seemed, by motives precisely similar to those from which sprang Herbert's own actions. Like Herbert, he would sit upon the top of the high fence, usually at a little distance from him; like Herbert he would rise at intervals, for the better study of something this side of the horizon; then, also concluding like Herbert, he would sit again and write firmly in a little notebook. And seldom in the history of the world have any sessions been invested by the participants with so intentional an appearance of importance.

That was what most injured their lone observer at the somewhat distant back window, upstairs at her own

place of residence; she found their importance almost impossible to bear without screaming. Her provocation was great; the important importance of Herbert and his friend, impressively maneuvering upon their fence, was so extreme as to be all too plainly visible across four intervening broad back yards; in fact, there was almost reason to suspect that the two performers were aware of their audience and even of her gazed condition; and that they sometimes deliberately increased the outrageousness of their importance because they knew she was watching them. And upon the Saturday of that week, when the notebook writers were upon the fence at intervals throughout the afternoon, Florence Atwater's fascinated indignation became vocal.

"Vile things!" she said. Her mother, sewing beside another window of the room, looked up inquiringly.

"What are, Florence?"

"Cousin Herbert and that nasty little Henry Rooter."

"Are you watching them again?" her mother asked.

"Yes, I am," said Florence, tartly. "Not because I care to, but merely to amuse myself at their expense."

Mrs. Atwater murmured deprecatingly, "Couldn't you find some other way to amuse yourself, Florence?"

"I don't call this amusement," the inconsistent girl responded, not without chagrin. "Think I'd spend all my days starrin' at Herbert Illingsworth Atwater, Junior, and that nasty little Henry Rooter, and call it amusement?"

"Then why do you do it?"

"Why do I do what, mama? Florence inquired as if in despair of Mrs. Atwater's ever learning to put things clearly.

"Why do you spend all your days watching them? You don't seem able to keep away from the window, and it appears to make you irritable. I should think if they wouldn't let you play with them you'd be too proud—"

"Oh, good heavens, mama!"

"Don't use expressions like that, Florence, please."

"Well," said Florence, "I got to use some expression when you accuse me of wantin' to 'play' with those two vile things! My goodness mercy, mama, I don't want to 'play' with 'em! I'm more than four years old, I guess; though you don't ever seem willing to give me credit for it. I don't haf to 'play' all the time, mama; and, anyway, Herbert and that nasty little Henry Rooter aren't playing, either."

"Aren't they?" Mrs. Atwater inquired. "I thought the other day you said you wanted them to let you play at being a newspaper reporter, or editor, or something like that, with them, and they were rude and told you to go away. Wasn't that it?"

Florence sighed. "No, mama. It certainly wasn't."

"They weren't rude to you?"

"Yes, they certainly were!"

"Well, then—"

"Mama, can't you understand?" Florence turned from the window to beseech Mrs. Atwater's concentration upon the matter. "It isn't 'playing'! I didn't want to 'play' being a reporter; they ain't 'playing'—"

"Aren't they playing, Florence?"

"Yes'm. They're not. Herbert's got a real printing press; Uncle Joseph gave it to him. It's a real one, mama, can't you understand?"

"I'll try," said Mrs. Atwater. "You mustn't get so excited about it, Florence."

"I'm not!" Florence turned vehemently. "I guess it'd take more than those two vile things and their old printin' press to get me excited! I don't care what they do; it's far less than nothing to me! All I wish is they'd fall off the fence and break their vile ole necks!"

With this manifestation of impetuous calmness, she turned again to the window; but her mother protested. "Do find something else to amuse you, Florence; and quit watching those foolish boys; you mustn't let them upset you so by their playing."

Florence moaned. "They don't 'upset' me, mama! They have no effect on me by the slightest degree! And I told you, mama, they're not 'playing.'"

"Then what are they doing?"

"Well, they're having a newspaper. They got the printing press and an office in Herbert's ole stable and everything. They got somebody to give 'em some ole banisters and a railing from a house that was torn down somewheres, and then they got it stuck up in the stable loft, so it runs across with a kind of a gate in the middle of these banisters, and on one side is the printing press, and the other side they got a desk from that nasty little Henry Rooter's mother's attic; and a table and some chairs, and a map on the wall; and that's their newspaper office. They go out and look for what's the news, and write it down in ink; and then they go through the gate to the other side of the railing where the printing press is, and print it for their newspaper."

"But what do they do on the fence so much?"

"That's where they go to watch what the news is," Florence explained morosely. "They think they're so grand, sittin' up there, pokin' around. They go other places, too; and they ask people. That's all they said I could be!" Here the lady's bitterness became strongly intensified. "They said, maybe I could be one o' the ones they asked if I knew anything, sometimes, if they happen to think of it! I just respectfully told 'em I'd decline to wipe my oldest shoes on 'em to save their lives!"

Mrs. Atwater sighed. "You mustn't use such expressions, Florence."

"I don't see why not," the daughter objected. "They're a lot more refined than the expressions they used on me!"

"Then I'm very glad you didn't play with them."

But at this, Florence once more gave way to filial despair. "Mama, you just can't see through anything! I've said anyhow fifty times they ain't—aren't playing! They're getting up a real newspaper, and people buy it, and everything. They have been all over this part of town and got every aunt and uncle they have, besides their own fathers and mothers, and some people in the neighborhood, and Kitty Silver and two or three other colored people besides, that work for families they know. They're going to charge twenty-five cents a year, collect-in-advance because they want the money first; and even papa gave 'em a quarter last night; he told me so."

"How often do they publish their paper, Florence?" Mrs. Atwater inquired somewhat absently, having resumed her sewing.

"Every week; and they're goin' to have the first one a week from today."

"What do they call it?"

"The North End Daily Oriole. It's the silliest name I ever heard for a newspaper; and I told 'em so. I told 'em what I thought of it, I guess!"

"Was that the reason?" Mrs. Atwater asked.

"Was it what reason, mama?"

"Was it the reason they wouldn't let you be a reporter with them?"

"Pooh!" Florence exclaimed airily. "I didn't want anything to do with their ole paper. But anyway I didn't make fun o' their callin' it the North End Daily Oriole till after they said I couldn't be in it. Then I did, you bet!"

"Florence, don't say—"

"Mama, I got to say some'm! Well, I told 'em I wouldn't be in their ole paper if they begged me on their bent knees; and I said if they begged me a thousand years I wouldn't be in any paper with such a crazy name; and I wouldn't tell 'em any news if I knew the President of the United States had the scarlet fever! I just politely informed 'em they could say what they liked if they was dying; I declined so much as wipe the oldest shoes I got on 'em!"

"But why wouldn't they let you be on the paper?" her mother insisted.

Upon this Florence became analytical. "Just so's they could act so important!" And she added, as a consequence: "They ought to be arrested."

Mrs. Atwater murmured absently, but forbore to press her inquiry; and Florence was silent, in a brooding mood. The journalists upon the fence had disappeared from view, during the conversation with her mother; and presently she sighed and quietly left the room. She went to her own apartment, where, at a small and rather battered little white desk, after a period of earnest reverie, she took up a pen, wet the point in purple ink, and without any great effort or any critical delayings, produced a poem.

It was, in a sense, an original poem; though, like the greater number of all literary offerings, it was so strongly inspirational that the source of its inspiration might easily become manifest to a cold-blooded reader. Nevertheless, to the poetess herself, as she explained later in good faith, the words just seemed to come to her—doubtless with either genius or some form of miracle involved; for sources of inspiration are seldom recognized by inspired writers themselves. She had not long ago been party to a musical Sunday afternoon at her great-uncle Joseph Atwater's house where Mr. Chantry, that amiable and robust heartiness, sang some of his songs over and over again, as long as the requests for them held out. Florence's poem may have begun to coagulate within her then.

THE ORGANIST  
By Florence Atwater

The organist was seated at his organ in a church, In some beautiful woods of maple and birch, He was very weary while he played upon the keys, But he was a great organist and always played with ease, When the soul is weary, And the wind is dreary, I would like to be an organist seated all day at the organ, Whether my name might be Fairchild or Morgan, I would play music like a vast amen, The way it sounds in a church of men.

Florence read her poem over seven or eight times, the deepening pleasure of her expression being evidence that repetition failed to denature the work, but, on the contrary, enhanced an appreciative surprise at its singular merit. Finally she folded the sheet of paper with a delicate carelessness unusual to her, and placed it in her skirt pocket. Then she went downstairs and out into the back yard. With thoughtful and determined eyes she obliged her gaze over the intervening fences to the repellent skyline formed by the too-simple profile of her cousin Herbert's father's stable. Her next action was straightforward and anything but prudish; she climbed the high board fence, one after the other, until she came to a pause at the top of that whereon the two journalists had lately made themselves so odiously impressive.

Before her, if she had but taken note of them, were a lesson in history and the markings of a profound transition in human evolution. Beside the old frame stable was a little brick garage, obviously put to the daily use intended by its designer. Quite as obviously the stable was obsolete; anybody would have known from its outside that there was no horse within it. Here, visible, was the end of the pastoral age, it might be called, from the Heidelberg jawbone to Marcon, The new age begins with machines that do away with laboring animals and will proceed presently to

machines doing away with laboring men, although it is true that cows may remain in vogue for some time. In spite of the fact that they are already milked by electricity, the milk itself must yet be constructed by the cow.

All this was lost upon Florence. She sat upon the fence, her gaze unfavorably, though wistfully, fixed upon a sign of no special aesthetic merit above the stable door:

THE NORTH END DAILY ORIOLE.  
ATWATER & ROOTER OWNERS AND PROPRIETORS.  
SUBSCRIBE NOW 25 CENTS.

The inconsistency of the word "daily" did not trouble Florence; moreover she had found no fault with "Oriole" until the "Owners and Proprietors" had explained to her in the plainest terms known to their vocabularies that she was excluded from the enterprise. Then, indeed, she had been reciprocally explicit in regard, not only to them and certain personal characteristics of theirs which she pointed out as fundamental, but in regard to any newspaper which should deliberately call itself an "Oriole."

The partners remained superior in manner, though unable to conceal a natural resentment; they had adopted "Oriole," not out of sentiment for the distant city of Baltimore, nor, indeed, on account of any orthologic interest of their own, but as a relic from an abandoned club, or secret society, which they had previously contemplated forming, its members to be called "The Orioles" for no reason whatever. The two friends had talked of their plan at many meetings throughout the summer, and when Herbert's great-uncle, Mr. Joseph Atwater, made his nephew the unexpected present of a printing press, and a newspaper consequently took the place of the club, Herbert and Henry still entertained an affection for their former scheme and decided to perpetuate the name. They were the more sensitive to attack upon it by an ignorant outsider and girl like Florence, and her chance of ingratiating herself with them, if that could be now her intention, was not promising.

It would be inaccurate to speak of her as hoping to placate them, however; her mood was inscrutable. She descended from the fence with pronounced inelegance, and, approaching the old double doors of the "carriage-house," which were open, paused to listen. Sounds from above assured her that the editors were editing—or at least that they could be found at their place of business. Therefore, she ascended the cobwebby stairway to the loft, and made her appearance in the printing room of the North End Daily Oriole.

Herbert, frowning with the puerile of composition, sat at a table beyond the official railing, and his partner was engaged at the press, painfully setting type. This latter person, whom Florence for several months had named not once otherwise than as "That nasty little Henry Rooter," was of strangely clean and smooth fair-haired appearance, for his age. She looked him over.

His profile was of a symmetry he had not himself yet begun to appreciate; his dress was scrupulous and modest; and though he was short nothing outward about him explained the more sinister of Florence's two adjectives. Yet she had true occasion for it, because on the day before she began its long observance he had made her uneasy lest an orange seed she had swallowed, should take root and grow up within her to a size inevitably fatal. Then, with her cousin Herbert's stern assistance, Florence had realized that her gullibility was not to be expected in anybody over seven years old, after which age such legends are supposed to be encountered with the derision of experienced people.

Her fastidiousness aroused, she decided that Henry Rooter had no business to be talking about what would happen to her insides, anyhow; and so informed him at their next meeting, adding an explanation which absolutely proved him to be no gentleman. And her opinion of him was still perfectly plain in her expression as she made her present intrusion upon his working hours. He seemed to reciprocate.

"Here! Didn't I and Herbert tell you to keep out o' here?" he demanded, even before Florence had developed the slightest form of greeting. "Look at her, Herbert! She's back again!"

"You get out o' here, Florence," said Herbert, abandoning his task with a look of pain. "How often we haf to tell you we don't want you around here when we're in our office like this?"

"For heaven's sake!" Henry Rooter thought fit to add. "Can't you quit running up and down our office stairs once in a while, long enough for us to get our newspaper work done? Can't you give us a little peace?"

The pinkness of Florence's altering complexion was justified; she had not been near their old office for four days. She stated the fact with heat, adding: "And I only came then because I knew somebody ought to see that this stable isn't ruined. It's my own uncle-and aunt's stable, and I got as much right here as anybody."

"You have not!" Henry Rooter protested hotly. "This isn't, either, your ole aunt and uncle's stable."

"It isn't!"

"No, it is not! This isn't anybody's stable. It's my and Herbert's newspaper building, and I guess you haven't got the face to stand there and claim you got a right to go in a newspaper building and say you got a right there when everybody tells you to stay outside of it. I guess!"

"Oh, haven't I?"

(Continued Next Week.)

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(Continued Next Week.)

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