

"US"—By Booth Tarkington



Booth Tarkington

Winner of the Pulitzer \$1000 prize awarded by Columbia University for the novel best presenting the wholesome atmosphere of American life. At fifty-two he is producing more and better stories than ever in his career. He says he sometimes works twenty-two hours a day. Here is his latest short story. It has never been published before. You'll be delighted with its simple charm and telling humor. This is the first of the series of twenty-three new short stories based on little episodes of married life, by the biggest modern American fiction writers, one of which will appear each Saturday



And his reply, so unexpected by his questioner, sent a thrill of coming triumph through her. "My mother called my father a worm"

"HIGHLAND PLACE" was one of those new little cross-streets in a new little bosky neighborhood, "grown up over night," as we say, meaning grown up in four or five years; so that when citizens of the older and more solid and soiled central parts of the city come driving through the new part of a Sunday afternoon in spring, they say: "My goodness, when did this happen? Why, it doesn't seem more'n a year or so since we used to have Fourth of July picnics out here! And now just look at it—all built up with bride-and-groom houses!"

"Highland Place" was the name given to this cross-street by the speculative land company that had "developed" it, and the only reason they had not named it "Waverly Place" was that they had already produced a "Waverly Place" a block below. Both "Places" were lined with green-trimmed, small white houses, "frame" or stucco; and, although the honeymoon suggestion was architecturally so strong, as a matter of fact most of the inhabitants held themselves to be "settled old married people," some of the couples having almost attained to a Tin Wedding Anniversary.

The largest of the houses in "Highland Place" was the "hollow-tile and stucco residence of Mr. and Mrs. George M. Sullender." Thus it had been defined, under a photographic reproduction, with the caption "New Highland Place Sullender Home," in one of the newspapers, not long after the little street had been staked out and paved; and since the "Sullender Home" was not only the largest house, but the first to be built in the "Place," and had had its picture in the paper, it naturally took itself for granted as being the most important.

Young Mrs. William Sperry, whose equally young husband had just bought the smallest but most conspicuously bride-and-groom cottage in the whole "Place," was not so deeply impressed with the Sullender importance as she should have been, since the Sperrys had not yet been admitted to its intimacies and might well have displayed a more amiable deference to what is established. "No," Mrs. Sperry told her husband, when they got home after their first experience of the "Place's" hospitality, a bride party at the Sullenders, "I just can't stand those people, Will! They're really awful!"

"Why, what's the matter with 'em?" he inquired. "I thought they were first rate. They seemed perfectly friendly and hospitable and—"

"Oh, yes; lord-and-lady-of-the-manner entertaining the tenantry! I don't mind being tenantry," young Mrs. Sperry explained, "but I can't stand the lord-and-lady-of-the-manner style in people with a nine-horse house and a one-car garage!"

"One-car it may be," her husband laughed, "but it has two stories. They have a chauffeur, you know; and he lives in the upstairs of the garage."

"So that entitles the Sullenders to the manor style?"

"But I didn't notice any of that style," he protested. "I thought they seemed right nice and cordial. Of course, Sullender feels that he's been making quite a success in business and it naturally gives him a rather condescending air, but he's really all right."

"He certainly was condescending," she grumbled, and went on, with some satire: "Did you hear him allude to himself as a 'realtor'?"

"Well, why shouldn't he? He is one. That's his business."

"My lord, the realtor!" Mrs. Sperry cried mockingly. "There ought to be an opera written, called 'El Realtor,' like the one there used to be with the title 'Il Janitor.' Those are such romantic words! 'Realtor,' 'Realtor,' 'Humidor'—"

"Here, here!" her husband said. "Calm down! You seem to have got yourself worked up into a mighty sarcastic mood for some reason. Those people only want to be nice to us and they're all right."

MRS. SPERRY looked at him coldly.

"Did you hear Mr. Sullender saying that his company had sold seven 'homes' this month?" she inquired.

"Oh, you can't expect everybody to know all the purist niceties of the English language," he said. "Sullender's all right and his wife struck me as one of the nicest, kindest women I ever—"

"Kind!" Mrs. Sperry echoed loudly. "She doesn't stop at being 'kind.' She's a caressingly tender, so angelically loving that she can't possibly pronounce a

one-syllabled word without making two syllables of it! Did you notice that she said yay-yus for 'yes' and 'no-oh' for 'no'? I do hate the turtle-dove style of talking, and I never met a worse case of it, Mrs. Sullender's the sweetest sweet-woman I ever saw in my life, and I'm positive she leads her husband a dog's life!"

"What nonsense!"

"It serves him right for his reitoring, though," Mrs. Sperry added thoughtfully. "He ought to have that kind of a wife!"

"But you just said she was the sweetest—"

"Yes, the sweetest sweet-woman I ever saw. I do hate the whole clan of sweet-women!"

The young husband looked perplexed. "I don't know what you're talking about," he admitted. "I always thought—"

"I'm talking about the sweet-woman type that Mrs. Sullender belongs to. They use intended sweetness. They speak to total strangers with sweetness. They wear expressions of saintly sweetness. Everybody speaks of a sweet-woman with loving reverence, and it's generally felt that it would be practically immoral to contradict one of 'em. To be actually sassy to a sweet-woman would be a cardinal sin! They let their voices linger beautifully on the air and they listen, themselves, to the lovely sounds they make. They always have the most exquisitely self-sacrificing reasons for every action of their lives; but they do just exactly what they want to do, and everybody else has to do what a sweet-woman wants him to. That's why I'm sure Mr. Sullender, in spite of all his pomposity, leads a dog's life at home."

"Of all the foolish talk!" young Sperry exclaimed. "Why everybody says they're the most ideally married couple and that they lead the happiest life together that—"

"Everybody says!" she mocked him, interrupting. "How often have you known what 'everybody says' turn out to be the truth about anything? And besides, we don't know a thing about any of these people, and we don't know anybody else that does! Who is this 'everybody' that's told you how happy the Sullenders are?"

"No matter. You're wrong this time, Bella. The Sullenders—"

But Bella shook her pretty young head, interrupting him again. "You'll see! I do hope there won't have to be too much intimacy, but you can't live across the street from people very long, in a neighborhood like this, without getting to know the real truth about 'em. You wait and see what we get to know about the Sullenders!"

"Yes, I'll wait," he laughed. "But how long?"

"Oh, I don't know; maybe a year maybe a month—"

"Let's make it a month, Bella," he said, and put his arm about her. "If we don't find out in a month that the Sullenders are miserable together, will you admit you're wrong?"

"No I won't! But you'll probably have to admit that I'm right before that long. I have a sense for these things, Will, and I never go wrong when I trust it. Women know intuitively things that men never suspect. I know I'm right about Mrs. Sullender."

HER husband permitted the discussion to end with this, wisely fearing that if he sought further to defend his position Bella might plausibly accuse him of "always insisting upon the last word." And so, for that night, at least, the matter was dropped from their conversation, though not from the thoughts of Mrs. Sperry. Truth to tell, she was what is sometimes called an "obstinate little body," and also she appreciated the advisability of a young wife's building for future and lifelong use the foundations of infallibility. That is to say, she was young and therefore inexperienced, but she had foresight. Moreover, she had attentively observed the matrimonial condition of her parent and aunts and uncles. Many and many a time had she heard a middle-aged husband speak to his wife of like years somewhat in this manner, "No, Fannie, you're wrong again."

Thus, young Mrs. Sperry, looking to times far ahead, had determined to be wrong about nothing whatever during these early years of her matrimony. Moreover, since argument had arisen concerning the Sullenders, she had made up her mind to be right about them, and to "prove" herself right, "whether she really was or not," and that is why, on the morning after her arraignment of sweet-women generally, and of her gra-

acious neighbor particularly, the pretty newcomer in "Highland Place" found herself most pleasurably excited by the naive but sinister revelations of a stranger eight years in age.

At a little before nine o'clock, Mr. William Sperry had departed (in a young husband's car) for his place of business, some five miles distant, in the smoky heart of the city; and not long afterward the thoughtful Bella, charmingly accoutered as a gardener, came forth with a trowel to uproot weeds that threatened a row of iris she had set out along the gravel path between the tiny white veranda and the white picket gate. Thus engaged, she became aware of a small presence fumbling at the latch of this gate, and she changed her position from that of one on all fours, who gropes intently in the earth, to that of one upright from the knees, but momentarily relaxed.

"Do you want to come in?" she inquired, looking out from the shade of her broad hat to where the little figure in blue overalls was marked off into stripes of sunshine and shadow by the intervening pickets of the gate. "Is there something you want here, little boy?"

He succeeded in operating the latch, came in, and looked attentively at her excavations. "Have you found any nice worms?" he asked.

"No, I haven't found any at all," she said, somewhat surprised by his adjective. "But I don't think there are any 'nice' worms anywhere. Worms are all pretty horrid."

"No, they ain't," he returned promptly and seriously. "There's lots o' nice worms."

"Oh, I don't think so."

"Yes, there is."

"Oh, no."

"There is, too!" he said stubbornly, and with some asperity. "Everybody knows there's plenty of nice worms."

"Where did you get such nonsense in your head?" Bella asked a little sharply. "Who ever told you there are nice worms?"

"Well, there is!"

"But what makes you think so?" she insisted.

"Well—He hesitated, then said with a conclusive air, settling the question: "My mother. I guess she knows!"

Bella stared at him incredulously for a moment. "What's your name?"

"My name's George. My name's George, the same as my papa," he replied somewhat challengingly.

"Don't you live just across the street?" she asked.

"Yes, I do." He turned and pointed to the "George M. Sullender residence," and Bella thought she detected a note of inherited pride in his tone as he added, "That's where I live!"

"But, George, you don't mean," she insisted curiously; "you don't mean that your mother told you there are nice worms? Surely not!"

"My mother did," he asserted, and then with a little caution, modified the assertion. "My mother just the same as did."

"How was that?"

And his reply, so unexpected by his questioner, sent a thrill of coming triumph through her. "My mother called my father a worm."

"What?"

"And if he's a worm," George went on, stoutly, "well, I guess he's nice, isn't he? So there got to be plenty nice worms if he's one."

"George!"

"She calls him a worm most every little while these days," said George,

expanding, and he added, in cold blood: "I like him a great deal better than what I do her."

"You do?"

"She hit him this morning," George thought fit to mention, upon this.

"What?"

"With a clove's brush," he said, dropping into detail. "She hit him on the back of the head with the wooden part of it and he said, 'Ooh!'"

"But she was just in fun, of course?"

"No, she wasn't; she was mad and said she was goin' to take me with her and go back to my gran'paw's. I won't go with her. She's mad all the time, these days."

BELLA stared, her lips parted, and she wished him to continue but remembered her upbringing and tried to be a lady. "George," she said severely, "you shouldn't tell such things. Don't you know better than to speak in this way of what happens between your poor papa and your mother?"

The effect upon George was nothing; for even at eight years of age a child is able to understand what interests an adult listener, and children deeply enjoy being interesting. In response to her admonition, he said simply, "Yesterday she threw a glass o' water at him and cut him where his ear is. It made a big mark on him!"

"Georgie! I'm afraid you're telling me a dreadful, dreadful story!" Bella said, though it may not be denied that in company with this suspicion there arrived a premonitory symptom of disappointment. "Why, I saw your papa yesterday evening, myself, and there wasn't any mark or anything like—"

"I don't show," George explained. "It took him a good while, but he got it fixed up so it didn't show much. Then he brushed his hair over where it was."

George looked across. "Yes'm?" he shouted.

Mrs. Sullender nodded smilingly to Bella, and called: "Georgie, you dear little naughty thing! Didn't I tell you half an hour ago to come indoors and play with poor, dear little Natalie? She's been waiting and waiting so patiently—"

Bella remained upon her knees, staring violently at the "Sullender Home," but her thoughts were centered upon her husband.

"Just wait till he gets home!" she thought.

Booth Tarkington's Outlook on Modern Life

[From a recent interview with the author in his Indianapolis home]

To Youth

Play, frolic, flirt and make love—it is the way of youth—but keep within the accepted bounds of decorum.

To Lovers

Kiss—but not as if you were screen stars nonchalantly rehearsing a public performance.

To Girls

Dress as prettily and nattily as you know how—in short skirts or in long skirts, in bobbed hair or long tresses—but always in good taste and in manner becoming American young womanhood.

To Parents

If our morals have deteriorated, I feel sure father and mother are as much to blame as son and daughter.

On Today's Practices

One hears terrible stories about the loose habits, the flip speech, the indiscreet adventures of modern youth. I think they are speeding up a bit, but I refuse to agree that the whole world has gone to the bow-wow.

curious. It was like having the front of their house taken off the way a curtain rolls up at the theatre and shows you one of those sordid Russian plays, for instance.

"There was the whole sickening actual life of that dreadful family laid bare before me: the continual petty bickerings that every hour or so grow into bitter quarrels, with blows and epithets—and, then, when other people are there as we were last night, the assumption of suavity, the false, too sweet sweetness and absurd pomposities—oh, what an ugly revelation it is, Will! It's so ugly it makes me almost sorry you were wrong about them—as you're rather likely to be in your flash judgments, you poor dear!"

BELLA (who was "literary" sometimes) delivered herself of this speech with admirable dramatic quality, especially when she made her terse little realistic picture of the daily life of the Sullenders, but there was just a shade of happy hypocrisy and covert triumph in the final sentence, and she even thought fit to add a little more on the point, "How strange it is to think that only last night we were arguing about it!" she exclaimed, "and that I said we'd not need to wait a month to prove that I was right! Here it is only the next day and it's proved I was a thousand times righter than I said I was!"

"Well, perhaps you'll enlighten me—"

he began, but she complied so willingly that she didn't let him finish his request.

She gave him Georgie's revelation in detail, emphasizing and coloring it somewhat with her own interpretations of many things necessarily only suggested by the child's meager vocabulary; and she was naturally a little indignant when, at first, her husband declined to admit his defeat.

"Why, it's simply not believable!" he said. "Those people couldn't seem what they seemed to be last night, and be so depraved. They were genuinely affectionate in the tone they used with each other and they—"

"Good gracious!" Bella cried. "Do you think I'm making this up?"

"No, of course not," he returned hastily. "But the child may have made it up."

"About his own father and mother?"

"Oh, I know, but some children are the most wonderful little story tellers; they tell absolutely inexplicable lies and hardly know why themselves."

But at this Bella looked at him pityingly. "Listen a moment: There was all the sordid daily life of these people laid out before me in the poor little child's prattle; a whole realistic novel, complete and consistent, and I'd like to know how you account for a child of seven or eight being able to compose such a thing—and on the spur of the moment, too! When children make up stories they make 'em up about extraordinary and absurd things, not about the sordid tragedies of everyday domestic life. Do you actually think this child made up what he told me?"

"Well, it certainly does seem peculiar."

"Peculiar? Why, it's terrible, and it's true!"

"Well, if it is," he said gloomily, "we certainly don't want to get mixed up in it. We don't want to come into a new neighborhood and get involved in scandal—or even as gossiping about one. We must be careful not to say anything about this, Bella."

She looked away from him, thoughtfully. "I suppose so, though, of course, these people aren't friends of ours—hardly acquaintances."

"No, but that's all the more reason for our not appearing to be interested in their troubles. We'll certainly be careful not to say anything about this, won't we, Bella?"

"Oh, I suppose so," she returned absently. "Since the people are really nothing to us, though, I don't suppose it matters whether we say anything or not."

"Oh, but it does," he insisted, and then, something in her tone having caught his attention, he inquired: "You haven't said anything to any one about it, have you, Bella?"

"What?"

"You haven't repeated to any one what the child told you, have you?"

"Oh, no," she said lightly. "Not to any one that would have any personal interest in it."

"Oh, my!" William exclaimed, dismayed. "Who'd you tell?"

"Nobody that has the slightest interest in the Sullenders," Bella replied, with cold dignity. "Nobody that cares the slightest thing about them."

"Oh, yes, then, what in the world did you tell 'em for?"

"Why, to pass the time, I suppose," Bella said, a little offended. "Cousin Ethel dropped in for a while this afternoon and the whole thing was so extraordinary I just sketched it to her. What are you making such a fuss about?"

"I'm not," he protested feebly. "But even if the thing's true, we don't want to get the name of people that gossip about their—"

"Oh, my!" she sighed impatiently. "I've told you Cousin Ethel hasn't the slightest personal interest in these people and besides she'll never repeat what I told her."

"Well, if she doesn't it'll be the first time."

"Will, please!"

"Golly, I hope it won't get back to the Sullenders!"

"Such horrible people as that, what difference would it make?" Bella demanded impatiently. "And how could it get back? Cousin Ethel doesn't move in Sullender circles. Not precisely."

"No, but her close friend, Mrs. Howard Peckles, is the aunt of Mrs. Frank Deems and Frank Deems is Sullender's business partner."

"Oh, a realtor, is he?" Bella said, icily.

WILLIAM returned to the lounge, but did not recline. Instead, he sat down and took his head in his hands. "I do wish you hadn't talked about it," he said.

Bella was sensitive; therefore, she began to be angry. "Do you think it's very intelligent," she asked, "to imply that I only know enough not to make trouble? Only

last night you were sure that you were right and I was wrong about what sort of people these Sullenders are. Already the very next day, you've had to confess that you were utterly mistaken and that your wife is wholly in the right. I suppose you may feel a little depressed about that and want to change the question to something else and claim I'm in the wrong about that. But don't you think it's a little bit childish of you, Will? It's not you that think that way you're taking your defeat is just a little bit—small?"

He was hurt, and looked up at her with an expression that showed the injury. "I'd hardly have expected you'd call me that," he said. "At least, not so soon after our wedding trip!"

"Well, I might have expected you wouldn't be accusing me of gossiping harmfully," she retorted. "Not quite so soon!"

Young Mr. Sperry rose again. "Do you think that's as bad as using the epithet 'small' to your husband?"

"Epithet?" she echoed. "You charge me with using 'epithets'?"

"Well, but didn't you?"

"I think I'll ask you to excuse me!" Bella said, with an aspect of nobility in suffering. And she proudly betook herself from the room.

It was a tiff. Next day they were as polite to each other as if they had just been introduced, and this ceremonial formality was maintained between them until the third evening after its installation, when a calamity caused them to abandon it.

After a stately dinner in their hundred square feet of dining-room, Bella had gone out into the twilight to refresh her strips of iris with fair water from the garden hose, and William reclined upon his lounge, solitary with a gloomy pipe. Unexpectedly, he was summoned; Bella looked in upon him from the door and spoke hastily. "Oh—Mr. and Mrs. Sullender," she said, "Oh—"

and as hastily withdrew.

Perturbed, he rose and went out to the little veranda, where, with a slightly nervous hospitality, Bella was now offering chairs to Mrs. George M. Sullender and her husband, Mrs. Sullender smilingly, and in her angelic voice, declined the offer.

"Oh, no," she said. "We came in a moment to admire your lovely irises at closer range; we're just passing on our way to some friends in Waverly Place."

"We'd be so glad—"

"No, no, no," Mrs. Sullender murmured caressingly. "We've only a moment—I'm sorry you disturbed your husband—we're just going over for bridge. I suppose you know most of the people in Waverly Place?"

"No, I don't think I know many."

"Well, of course, we don't think it compares to Highland Place," Mrs. Sullender said, with a little deprecatory laugh. "I'm afraid it's rather—well, gossipy."

"Oh—"

"I'm afraid so," the genteel-mannered lady returned. "Of course, that's a great pity, too, in such a new little community where people are bound to be thrown together a great deal. Don't you think it's a great pity, Mrs. Sperry?"

"Oh, naturally," Bella acquiesced. "Yes, indeed."

"I knew you would. Of course, it's just thoughtlessness—most of the people who live there are so young, but we heard a really dreadful story only yesterday. It came from a very young newly married couple, and my husband and I were so sorry to hear they'd started out by telling such dreadful things about their neighbors. Don't you think it's most unwise, Mrs. Sperry?"

Mrs. Sullender's voice, wholly unfringed, and as undeniably tender as ever, gave no intimation that she spoke with a peculiar significance; but William Sperry was profoundly alarmed, and with a sympathy that held no triumph in it, he knew that Bella was in a similar or worse condition.

"Yes—"

"Of course I do."

"I know you would feel that way," said Mrs. Sullender, soothingly. "It's unwise because gossip travels so. It nearly always goes straight back to the people it's about. In fact, I don't believe I ever knew of one single case where it didn't. Did you, Mrs. Sperry?"

"I—I don't—that is, well, no—"

Bella stammered.

"No, it's so unwise," Mrs. Sullender insisted. "It's like the case of the tenantry. Then she took the arm of her solemn and silent husband, and they turned together toward the gate, but paused. "Oh, I meant to tell you, Mrs. Sperry—"

"Yes?"

"That dear little boy Georgie—the little boy you were chatting with the other morning when I called him in to play with my little girl—"

"Yes," Bella gasped, "remember, Mrs. Sperry?"

"I thought you made such friends with him you'd be sorry to know you won't see him any more."

"No."

"No," Mrs. Sullender cooed gently. "Poor little Georgie Goble!"

"Georgie Goble," said Mrs. Sullender, "he was Goble, our chauffeur's little boy. They lived over our garage and had quite a distressing time of it, poor things! The wife finally persuaded Goble to move to another town where she thinks chauffeurs pay a higher salary. I was sure you'd be sorry to hear the poor dear little boy had gone. They left yesterday. Good-night, Good-night, Mrs. Sperry."

WITH that, followed by somewhat feeble good-nights from both the Sperrys, she passed through the gate with her husband and a moment later disappeared in the clean dusk of Highland Place.

Then Bella turned to her troubled William. "She—she certainly made it plain!"

"Yes," he said. "But after all, she really let us down pretty early."

"Yes," the young wife defended herself. "Did you say 'us'?"

"Yes," he answered. "I think she let us down about as easy as we could have expected."

Bella instantly threw herself in his arms. "Oh, William, do always say 'us'!" she cried. "Do be the kind of husband that won't throw this up at me when we're fifty and fifty. William, promise me, say to ways say 'us' when I get us in trouble!"