

Parable Of The Orange Trees

by John White

I dreamed I drove on a Florida road, still and straight and empty. On either side were groves of orange trees. As I turned to look at them from time to time, line after line of trees stretched back endlessly from the road, their boughs heavy with round yellow fruit. This was harvest time. My wonder grew as the miles slipped by. How could the harvest be gathered?

Suddenly I realized that for all the hours I had driven (and this was how I knew I must be dreaming), I had seen no other person. The groves were empty of people. No other car had passed me. No houses were to be seen beside the highway. I was alone in a forest of orange trees.

But at last I saw some orange pickers. Far from the highway, almost on the horizon, lost in the vast wilderness of unpicked fruit, I could discern a tiny group of them working steadily. And many miles later I saw another group. I could not be sure, but I suspected that the earth beneath me was shaking with silent laughter at the hopelessness of their task. Yet the pickers went on picking.

The sun had long passed its zenith, and the shadows were lengthening when, without any warning, I turned a corner to see a notice, "Leaving NEGLECTED CONUTY—Entering HOME COUNTY." The contrast was so startling that I scarcely had time to take in the notice. I had to slow down, for all at once the traffic was heavy. People by the thousands swarmed the road and crowded the walks.

Even more startling was the transformation in the orange groves. Orange groves were still there, and orange trees in abundance. But now, far from being silent and empty, they were filled with the laughter and singing of multitudes of people. Indeed it was the people I noticed rather than the trees. People—and houses.

I parked the car at the roadside and mingled with the crowd. Smart dresses, classy shoes, expensive suits and starched shirts made me a little conscious of my work clothes. Everyone seemed so fresh and poised, so happy.

"Is it a holiday?" I asked a well-dressed woman with whom I fell in step.

She looked a little startled for a moment, and then her face relaxed with a smile of gracious condescension.

“You’re a stranger, aren’t you?” she said, and before I could reply, “This is Orange Day.”

She must have seen a puzzled look on my face, for she went on, “It is so good to turn aside from one’s labors and pick oranges one day of the week.”

“But don’t you pick oranges every day?” I asked her.

“One may pick oranges at any time,” she said. “We should always be ready to pick oranges, but Orange Day is the day that we devote especially to picking.”

I left her and made my way further into the trees. Most of the people were carrying a book. Bound beautifully in leather, edged and lettered in gold, the book bore on its spine the title “Orange Picker’s Manual.”

By and by I noticed that around one of the orange trees seats had been arranged, rising upward in tiers from the ground. They were almost full—but, as I approached the group, a smiling well-dressed gentleman shook my hand and conducted me to a seat.

There, around the foot of the orange tree, I could see a number of people. One of them was addressing all the people on the seats and, just as I got to my place, they all rose to their feet and began to sing. The man next to me shared his song book with me. It was called *Songs of the Orange Groves*.

They sang for some time, and the song leader waved his arms with a strange and frenzied abandon, exhorting the people in the intervals between the songs to sing louder.

I grew steadily more puzzled.

“When do we start to pick oranges?” I asked the man who had loaned me his book.

“It’s not long now,” he told me. “We like to get everyone warmed up first. Besides, we want to make the oranges feel at home.” I thought he was joking—but his face was serious.

After a while a rather fat man took over from the song leader and, after reading two sentences from his well-thumbed copy of the Orange Picker’s Manual, began to make a speech. I wasn’t clear whether he was addressing the people or the oranges.

I glanced behind me and saw a number of groups of people similar to our own group gathering around an occasional tree and being addressed by other fat men. Some of the trees had no one around them.

“Which trees do we pick from?” I asked the man beside me. He did not seem to understand, so I pointed to the trees round about.

“This is our tree,” he said, pointing to the one we were gathered around.

“But there are too many of us to pick from just one tree,” I protested. “Why, there are more people than oranges!”

“But we don’t pick oranges,” the man explained. “We haven’t been called. That’s the Chief Orange Picker’s job. We’re here to support him. Besides we haven’t been to college. You need to know how an orange thinks before you can pick it successfully—orange psychology, you know. Most of these folk here,” he went on, pointing to the congregation, “have never been to Manual School.”

“Manual School,” I whispered. “What’s that?”

“It’s where they go to study the Orange Picker’s Manual,” my informant went on. “It’s very hard to understand. You need years of study before it makes sense.”

“I see,” I murmured. “I had no idea that picking oranges was so difficult.”

The fat man at the front was still making his speech. His face was red, and he appeared to be indignant about something. So far as I could see there was rivalry with some of the other orange-picking groups. But a moment later a glow came on his face.

“But we are not forsaken,” he said. “We have much to be thankful for. Last week, we saw *three oranges brought into our baskets*, and we are now completely debt-free from the money we owed on the new cushion covers that grace the seats you now sit on.”

“Isn’t it wonderful?” the man next to me murmured. I made no reply. I felt that something must be wrong somewhere. All this seemed a very roundabout way of picking oranges.

The fat man was reaching a climax in his speech. The atmosphere seemed tense. Then, with a dramatic gesture, he reached for two of the oranges, plucked them from the branch, and placed them in the basket at his feet. The applause was deafening.

“Do we start picking now?” I asked my informant.

“What in the world do you think we’re doing?” he hissed. “What do you suppose this tremendous effort has been made for? There’s more orange-picking talent in this group than in the rest of Home County. Thousands of dollars have been spent on the tree you’re looking at.”

I apologized quickly. “I wasn’t being critical,” I said. “And I’m sure the chief must be a very good orange picker—but surely the rest of us could try. After all, there are so many oranges that need picking. We’ve all got a pair of hands, and we could read the Manual.”

“When you’ve been in the business as long as I have, you’ll realize that it’s not as simple as that,” he replied. “There isn’t time, for one thing. We have our work to do, our families to care for, our homes to look after. We...”

But I wasn’t listening. Light was beginning to break on me. Whatever these people were, they were not orange pickers. Orange picking was just a form of entertainment for their weekends.

I tried one or two other of the groups around the trees. Not all of them had such high academic standards for orange pickers. Some held classes on orange picking. I tried to tell them of the trees I had seen in Neglected County, but they seemed to have little interest.

“We haven’t picked the oranges here yet,” was their usual reply.

The sun was almost setting and, growing tired of the noise and activity all around me, I got in the car and began to drive back again along the road I had come. Soon all around me again were the vast and empty orange groves.

But there were changes. Something had happened in my absence. Everywhere the ground was littered with fallen fruit. And as I watched it, it seemed that before my eyes the trees began to rain oranges. Many of them lay rotting on the ground. It was all so strange, and my bewilderment grew as I thought of all the people in Home County.

Then, booming through the trees came a voice: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers...”

Then I awakened.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” – Matthew 11:15