

The ORIOLE

By **BOOTH TARKINGTON**

Illustrations by **Irwin Myers**

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SYNOPSIS.

PART ONE.

Proud possessor of a printing press, and equipment, the gift of Uncle Joseph to his nephew, Herbert Illingsworth Atwater, Jr., aged thirteen, the fortunate youth, with his cousin, Henry Rooter, about the same age, begins the publication of a full-sized newspaper, the North End Daily Oriole. Herbert's small cousin, Florence Atwater, being barred from any kind of participation in the enterprise, on account of her intense and natural feminine desire to be "boss," is frankly annoyed, and instead of looking on in sympathy, she writes a poem for her, which is accepted for insertion in the Oriole, on a strictly commercial basis—cash in advance. The poem suffers somewhat from the inexperience of the youthful publisher in the "art preservative." Her not altogether unreasonable demand for publication of the masterpiece, with its beauty unmarred, are scorned, and she is rebuffed by Miss Atwater and the publishers of the Oriole. The Sunday following the first appearance of the Oriole, Florence's particular chum, Patty Fairchild, pays her a visit. They are joined, despite Miss Atwater's openly expressed disapproval, by Master Herbert Atwater and Henry Rooter. Not at all disconcerted by the company of her reception, the visitors and Miss Fairchild indulge in a series of innocent Sunday games. Among them is one called "Truth," the feature of which is a contract to write a question and answer, both to be kept a profound secret. The agreement is duly carried out.

Excitingly enthusiastic participants in the game, Florence is plucked by Miss Fairchild's open denunciation of the enemy, her erstwhile bosom friend apparently enjoying herself immensely in the company of the visitors and leaving with them.

(Continued from last week.)

Almost from his babyhood he had been a child of one purpose: to increase by ghastly burlesque the sufferings of unfortunate friends. If one of them wept, Wallie incessantly pursued him, yelping in horrid mimicry; if one were chastised, he could not appear out-of-doors for days except to encounter Wallie and a complete rehearsal of the recent agony. "Quit, papa; pah-puh, que-yet! I'll never do it again, pah-puh! Oh, lemme alone, pah-puh!"

As he grew older, his insatiable curiosity enabled him to expose unnumbered weaknesses, indiscretions and social misfortunes on the part of acquaintances and schoolmates; and to every exposure his noise and energy gave a hideous publicity; the more his victim sought privacy the more persistently he was sought out by Wallie, vociferous and attended by hilarious spectators. But above all other things, what most stimulated the demoniac boy to prodigies of satire was any tender episode or symptom connected with the dawn of love.

Florence herself had suffered exorbitantly at intervals throughout her eleventh spring, because Wallie discovered that George Beck sent her a valentine; and the humorist's many, many squawking of that valentine's affectionate quaintly finally left her unable to decide which she hated the more, Wallie or George. That was the worst of Wallie; he never "let up"; and in Florence's circle there was no more sobering threat than, "I'll tell Wallie Torbin!" As for Henry Rooter and Herbert Illingsworth Atwater, Jr., they would as soon have had a head-hunter on their trail as Wallie Torbin with anything in his hands that could incriminate them in an implication of love—or an acknowledgement of their own beauty.

The fabric of civilized life is interwoven with blackmail; even some of the noblest people do favors for other people who are depended upon not to tell somebody something that the noble people have done. Blackmail is born into us all, and our nurses teach us more blackmail by threatening to tell our parents, if we won't do this and that—and our parents threaten to tell the doctor—and so we learn! Blackmail is part of the daily life of a child; displeased, his first resort to get his way with other children is a threat to "tell"; but by-and-by his experience discovers the mutual benefit of honor among blackmailers. Therefore, at eight it is no longer the tinker to threaten to tell the teacher; and, a little later, threatening to tell any—It at all is considered something of a breakdown in morals. Notoriously, the code is more liable to infraction by people of the physically weaker sex, for the very reason, of course, that their inferiority of muscle so frequently compels such a sin, if they are to have their way. But for Florence there was now no such temptation. Looking toward the demolition of Atwater & Rooter, an exposito before adults of the results of "Truth" would have been an effect of what might be accomplished by a careful use of the catastrophe Wallie Torbin.

found cake, and perhaps a pitcher of clear new cider; apples were always a certainty.

This evening was glorious; there were apples and cider and cake and walnuts, perfectly cracked, and a large open-hearted box of candy. Naturally, these being the circumstances, Herbert was among the guests; and, though rather at a disadvantage, so far as the conversation was concerned, not troubled by the handicap. The reason he was at a conversational disadvantage was closely connected with the unusual supply of refreshments; Uncle Joseph and Aunt Carrie had foreseen the coming of several more Atwaters than usual, to talk over the new affairs of their beautiful relative, Julia. Sedition have any relative's new affairs been more thoroughly talked over than were Julia's that evening, though all the time by means of various symbols, since it was thought wiser that Herbert and Florence should, not yet be told of Julia's engagement, and Florence's parents were not present to confess their indiscretion, Julia was referred to as "the traveler," and other makeshifts were employed with the most knowing caution; and all the while Florence merely ate insouciantly. The more sincere Herbert was as placid; such foods were enough for him.

"Well, all I say is, the traveler better enjoy herself on her travels," said Aunt Fanny finally, as the subject appeared to be wearing toward exhaustion. "She certainly is in for it when the voyaging is over and she arrives in the port she sailed from, and has to show her papers. I agree with the rest of you; she'll have a great deal to answer for, and most of all about the shortest one. My own opinion is that the shortest one is going to burst like a balloon."

"The shortest one," as the demure Florence had understood from the first, was her ideal—none other than the noble girl who sat with her back against a plaster of the mantelpiece. "Uncle Joseph," she said—"I was just thinking. What is a person's reason?"

The fat gentleman, rosy with freight and cider, finished his fifth glass before responding. "Well, there are persons I never could find any reason for 'em at all. 'A person's reason'—what do you mean, 'a person's reason'?"

"I mean like when somebody says, 'They'll lose their reason,'" she explained. "Has everybody got a reason, and if they have, what is it, and how do they lose it, and what would they do then?"

"Oh, I see!" he said. "You needn't worry. I suppose since you heard it, you've been hunting all over yourself for your reason and looking to see if there was one hanging out of anybody else, somewhere. No; it's something you can't see ordinarily, Florence. Losing your reason is just another way of saying 'going crazy!'"

"Oh," she murmured, and appeared to be somewhat disturbed.

At this, Herbert thought proper to offer a witticism for the pleasure of the company.

"You know, Florence," he said, "it only means acting like you most always do." He applauded himself with a burst of changing laughter which rang from a bullfrog croak to a collapsing soprano; then he added: "Especially when you come around my and Henry's newspaper building! You certainly 'lose your reason' every time you come around that place!"

"Well, course I haf to act like the people that's already there," Florence retorted, not sharply, but in a musing tone that should have warned him. It was not her wont to use a quiet voice for repartee. Thinking her humble, he laughed the more raucously.

"Oh, Florence!" he besought her. "Say not so! Say not so!"

"Children, children!" Uncle Joseph remonstrated.

more about how to run newspapers than anybody alive; but there's one thing she's goin' to find out; and that is, she don't have anything more to do with my and Henry's newspaper. We wouldn't have another single one of her old poems in it, no matter how much she offered to pay us! Uncle Joseph, I think you ought to tell her she's got no business around my and Henry's newspaper building."

"But, Herbert," Aunt Fanny suggested, "you might let Florence have a little share in it of some sort. Then everything would be all right."

"It would?" he demanded, his voice cracking naturally, at his age, but also under strain of the protest he wished it to express. "It woo-wud? Oh, my goodness, Aunt Fanny, I guess you'd like to see our newspaper just utterly ruined! Why, we wouldn't let that girl have any more to do with it than we would some horse!"

"Oh, oh!" both Aunt Fanny and Aunt Carrie exclaimed, shocked.

"We wouldn't," Herbert insisted. "A horse would know any amount more how to run a newspaper than she does; anyway, a horse wouldn't make so much noise around there. Soon as we got our printing press; we would right then that we made up our minds Florence Atwater wasn't ever goin' to have a single thing to do with our newspaper. If you let her have anything to do with anything she wants to run the whole thing. But she might just as well learn to stay away from our newspaper building, because after we got her out yesterday we fixed a way so's she'll never get in there again!"

Florence looked at him demurely. "Are you sure, Herbert?" she inquired.

"Just you try it!" he advised, with hearty sarcasm; and he laughed tauntingly. "Just come around tomorrow and try it; that's all I ask!"

"I certainly intend to," she responded, with dignity. "I may have a slight surprise for you."

"Oh, Florence, say not so! Say not so, Florence!"

At this she looked full upon him, and already she had something in the nature of a surprise for him; for so powerful was the still baffledness of her glance he was slightly startled.

When Florence left, he impulsively accompanied her, maintaining a nervous silence as they compassed the short distance between Uncle Joseph's front gate and her own. There, however, he spoke.

"Look here! You don't haf to go and believe everything that ole girl told you, do you?"

"No," said Florence heartily. "I don't haf to."

"Well, look here," he urged, helpless but to repeat. "You don't haf to believe whatever it was she went and told you, do you?"

"What was it you think she told me, Herbert?"

"All that guff—you know. Well, whatever it was you said she told me."

(Continued next week.)

"I might say not so," she said—"If I was speaking of what pretty eyes you know you have, Herbert."

It staggered him. "What—what—You mean?"

"No, no," Mr. Atwater interrupted. "Let Florence tell us, Florence, what was it about Herbert knowing he had pretty eyes?"

Herbert attempted to continue the drowning out. He bawled, "She made it up! It's somepin she made up herself! She—"

"Herbert," said Uncle Joseph—"if you don't keep quiet, I'll take back the printing press."

Herbert substituted another gulp for a continuation of his noise.

"Now, Florence," said Uncle Joseph, "tell us what you were saying about how Herbert knows he had such pretty eyes."

Then it seemed a miracle befell. Florence looked up, smiling modestly. "Oh, it wasn't anything, Uncle Joseph," she said. "I was just trying to tease Herbert any way I could think up."

"Oh, was that all? A hopeful light faded out of Uncle Joseph's large and inexpressive face. "I thought perhaps you'd detected him in some indiscretion."

Florence laughed. "I was just teasin' him. It wasn't anything, Uncle Joseph."

Herbert resumed a confused breathing. Dazed, he remained uneasy, profoundly so; and gratitude was no part of his emotion. He well understood that Florence was never susceptible to impulses of compassion in conflicts such as these; in fact, if there was warfare between them, experience had taught him to be wariest when she seemed kindest. He moved away from her, and went into another room where his condition was one of increasing mental discomfort, though he looked for a while at the pictures in his great-uncle's copy of "Paradise Lost."

These illustrations, by M. Gustave Doré, failed to aid in reassuring his troubled mind.

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(Continued next week.)

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