

# The ORIOLE

by Booth Tarkington

Illustrations by Irwin Myers



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(Continued from Last Week.)

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 balefulness of her glance he was slightly startled.



It Staggered Him. "What—What—You Mean?"

"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?"

"Oh, nothing," she replied, airily. Herbert began to be distrustful of the solid earth. Somewhere there was

a fearful threat to his equipoise. "What you think about?" he said, with an effort to speak scornfully; but his sensitive voice almost failed him.

"Oh, nothing," said Florence. "Just about what pretty eyes you know you have, and Patty's being anyway as pretty as yours—and so you're glad maybe she thinks yours are pretty, the way you do—and everything!"

Herbert visibly gulped. So Patty had betrayed him; had betrayed the sworn confidence of "Truth."

"That's all I was talkin' about," Florence added. "Just about how you knew you had such pretty eyes. Say not so, Herbert! Say not so!"

"Look here!" he said. "When'd you see Patty again between this afternoon and when you came over here?"

"What makes you think I saw her?"

"Did you telephone her?"

"What makes you think so?"

Once more Herbert gulped. "Well, I guess you're ready to believe anything anybody tells you," he said, with a palsied bravado. "You don't believe everything Patty Fatchchild says, do you?"

"Why, Herbert! Doesn't she always tell the Truth?"

"Her? Why, half the time," poor Herbert babbled, "you can't tell whether she's just makin' up what she says or not. If you've gone and believed everything that she's said, you haven't got even what little sense I used to think you had!" So long we are under strain, sometimes—so long when our good name is threatened with the truth of us! "I wouldn't believe anything she said," he finished, in a stilly voice. "If she told me fifty times and crossed her heart!"

"Wouldn't you if she said you wrote down how pretty you knew your eyes were, Herbert?"

"What's this about Herbert having 'pretty eyes'?" Mr. Joseph Atwater inquired; and Herbert shuddered. Uncle Joseph had an unpleasant reputation as a joker.

The nephew desperately fell back upon the hopeless device of attempting to drown out his opponent's voice as she began to reply. He became vociferous with scornful laughter badly checked in the throat. "Florence got mad!" he shouted, mingling the purported information with loud cackles. "She got mad because I and Henry played games with Patty! She's tryin' to make up some'n to get even. She made it up! It's all made up!"

"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 some'n 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 had been in no complimentary frame of mind, however, when he devised the obstructions, nor was he now in such a frame of mind. He was deeply pessimistic in regard to his future, and also embarrassed in anticipation of some explanations it would be necessary to make to his partner. He strongly hoped that Henry's regular after-school appearance at the newspaper building would precede Florence's, because these explanations required both deliberation and tact, and he was convinced that it would be almost impossible to make them at all if Florence got there first.

He understood that he was unfortunately within her power; and he saw that it would be dangerous to place in operation for her exclusion from the building this new mechanism contrived with such hopeful care, and at a cost of two dollars and twenty-five cents, or nine annual subscriptions to the Oriole out of a present total of thirty-two. What he wished Henry to believe was that for some good reason, which Herbert had not yet been able to invent, it would be better to show Florence a little politeness. He had a desperate hope that he might find some diplomatic way to prevail on Henry to be as subservient to Florence as she had seemed to demand, and he was determined to touch any extremity of unvarnished truth rather than permit the details of his answer in "Truth" to come to his partner's knowledge. Henry Rooter was not Wallie Torbin; but in possession of material such as this he could easily make himself intolerable. Here was a strange human thing, strange yet common to most minds brooding in fear of publicity. We seldom realize that the people whose devotion we fear may have been as imprudent as we have been.

Therefore, it was in a hurried state

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

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

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

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

"I didn't," said Florence. "I didn't say she told me anything at all."

"Well, she did, didn't she?"

"Why, no," Florence replied, lightly. "She didn't say anything to me. Only I'm glad to have your opinion of her, how she's such a story-teller and all—if I ever want to tell her, and everything!"

But Herbert had greater claims than this, and the greater obscured the other. "Look here," he said. "If she didn't tell you, how'd you know it, Herbert?"

"How'd I know what?"

"About that little story about my ever seeing Henry?"—he gulped again—"pretty eyes."

"Oh, about that?" Florence said, and swung the gate shut between them.

"Well, I guess it's too late to tell you tonight, Herbert; but maybe if you and that nasty little Henry Rooter do every single thing I tell you to, and do it just exactly like I tell you from this time on, why maybe—I only say 'maybe'—well, maybe I'll tell you some day when I feel like it."

She ran up the path, up the steps, and crossed the veranda, but paused

"Oh, About That!" Florence Said, and Swung the Gate Shut Between Them

before opening the door. Then she came back to the waiting Herbert.

"The only person I'd even think of telling about it before I tell you would be a boy I know," she coughed, and added as by an after-thought, "He'd just love to know all about it; I know

of mind that Herbert waited; and when his friend appeared, over the fence, his perturbation was not decreased. He even failed to notice the unusual gravity of Henry's manner.

"Hello, Henry; I thought I wouldn't start in work till you got here. I didn't want to haf to come all the way downstairs again to open the door and haf our good ole plank up again."

"I see," said Henry, glancing nervously at their good ole plank. "Well, I guess Florence'll never get in this good ole door—that is, if we don't let her, or something."

This final clause would have surprised Herbert if he had been less preoccupied with his troubles. "You bet she won't!" he said mechanically. "She couldn't ever get in here again—if the family didn't go intafering around and give me the dickens and everything, because they think—they say they do, anyhow—they say they think—they think—"

He paused, disguising a little choke as a cough of scorn for the family's thinking.

"What did you say your family think?" Henry asked absently.

"Well, they say we ought to let her have a share in our newspaper."

Again he paused, afraid to continue lest his hypocrisy appear so barefaced as to lead toward suspicion and discovery. "Well, maybe we ought," he said, his eyes cast upon his toe, which slowly lifted the ground. "I don't say we ought, and I don't say we oughtn't."

He expected at least a burst of outraged protest from his partner, who, on the contrary, pleasantly astonished him. "Well, that's the way I look at it," Henry said. "I don't say we ought, and I don't say we oughtn't."

(To be continued.)

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