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The ORIOLE

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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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 noblest 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 ticket to threaten to tell the teacher; and, a little later, threatening to tell any adult 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 exposure before adults of the results of "Truth" would have been an effect of the sickliest pallor compared to what might be accomplished by a careful use of the catastrophic Wallie Torbin.

All in all, it was a great Sunday for Florence. On Sunday evening it was her privileged custom to go to the house of her fat, old great-uncle, Joseph Atwater, and remain until nine o'clock, in chatty companionship with Uncle Joseph and Aunt Carrie, his wife, and a few other relatives who were in the habit of dropping in there on Sunday evenings. In summer, lemonade and cake were frequently provided; in the autumn, one still 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. Seldom 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 inscrutably. 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 Noble Dill. Now she looked up from the stool where she sat with her back against a pillar of the mantelpiece. "Uncle Joseph," she said—"I was just thinking. What is a person's reason?"

The fat gentleman, rosy with fire-light 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,' Florence?"

"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 all ways do." He applauded himself with a burst of changing laughter which ranged from a buffrog croak to a collapsing soprano; then he added: "Especially when you come around my end Henry's newspaper building! You certainly 'lose your reason' every time you come around that ole 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 reproof. Thinking her humble, he laughed the more raucously. "Oh, Florence!" he brought her. "Say not so! Say not so!"

"Children, children!" Uncle Joseph remonstrated.

Herbert changed his tone; he became seriously plaintive. "Well, she does act that way, Uncle Joseph! When she comes around there you'd think we were runnin' a lunatic asylum the way she takes on. She hollers and bellers and squawks and squawks. The least little teeny thing she don't like about the way we run our paper, she comes flappin' over there and goes to screechin' around, you could hear her out at poorhouse farm!"

"Now, now, Herbert," his Aunt Fanny interposed. "Poor little Florence isn't saying anything impolite to you—not right now, at any rate. Why don't you be a little sweet to her just for once?"

Her unfortunate expression revolted all the consoling manliness in Herbert's bosom. "Be a little sweet to her?" he echoed, with poignant incredulity, and then in candor made plain how poorly Aunt Fanny inspired him. "I just exactly as soon be a little sweet to an alligator," he asserted; such was his bitterness on this subject.

"Oh, oh!" said Aunt Carrie. "I would!" Herbert insisted. "Or a mosquito. I'd rather, to either of 'em, because, anyway, they don't make so much noise. Why, you just ought to hear her," he went on, growing more and more severe. "You ought to just come around our newspaper building any afternoon you please, after school, when Henry and I are tryin' to do our work in, anyway, some peace. Why, she just squawks and squawks and squ—"

"It must be terrible," Uncle Joseph interrupted. "What do you do all that for, Florence, every afternoon?"

"Just for exercise," she answered dreamily; and her placidity the more exasperated her journalist cousin. "She does it because she thinks she ought to be runnin' our own newspaper, my and Henry's; that's why she does it! She thinks she knows 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 ole 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 said 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 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 heartiest 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! Say not so!"

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.

"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—what?"

"Oh, nothin'," she replied, airily.

Herbert began to be mistrustful of the sold earth. Somewhere there was a fearful threat to his equipoise.

"What you talkin' about?" he said, with an effort to speak scornfully; but his sensitive voice almost failed him.

"Oh, nothin'," 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 Fairchild 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 just makin' up what she says or not. If you've gone and believed everything that ole girl told you, you haven't got even what little sense I used to think you had!"

So base when our good name is threatened with the truth of us! "I wouldn't believe anything she said," he finished, in a sickish 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 cracked in the scorn. "Florence got mad!" he shouted, mingling the purported information with loud cacklings. "She got mad because I and Henry played games with Patty! She's tryin' to make up some'm to get even. She made it up! It's all made up! She—"

"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'm 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."

Hereupon, 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 Dore, failed to aid in reassuring his troubled mind.

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 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 alarms than this, and the greater obscured the lesser. "Look here," he said, "if she didn't tell you, how'd you know it, then?"

"How'd I know what?"

"That—that big story about my ever sayin' I knew I had"—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 passed



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

before opening the door. Then she called 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 he would. So, when I tell anybody about it I'll only tell just you and this other boy."

"What other boy?" Herbert demanded.

And her reply, thrilling through the darkness, left him paralytic with horror. "Wallie Torbin!"

The next afternoon, about four o'clock, Herbert stood gloomily at the main entrance of Atwater & Rooter's newspaper building, awaiting his partner. The other entrances were not only nailed fast, but massively barricaded; and this one (consisting of the ancient carriage-house doors, opening upon a driveway through the yard) had recently been made effective as an instrument of exclusion.

A long and heavy plank leaned against the wall, near by, ready to be set in hook-shaped iron supports fastened to the inner sides of the doors; and when the doors were closed, with this great plank in place, a person inside the building might seem entitled to count upon the enjoyment of privacy.

Therefore, it was in a flurried state 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 h'ist 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

except in case of earthquake, tornado, or fire. In fact, the size of the plank and the substantial quality of the iron fastenings, could be looked upon, from a certain viewpoint, as a heart-felt compliment to the energy and persistence of Florence Atwater.

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 unceremoniousness 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 derision we fear may have been as imprudent as we have been.

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she won't!" he said mechanically. "She couldn't ever get in here again—if the family didn't go into aftering 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 guiltily upon his toe, which slowly scuffed 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."

And he, likewise, stared at the toe of his own right shoe, which was also scuffing the ground. Herbert felt a little better; this subdivision of his difficulties seemed to be working out with surprising ease.

"I don't say we will and I don't say we won't," Henry added. "That's the way I look at it: My father and mother are always talkin' to me; how I got to be polite and everything, and I guess maybe it's time I began to pay some 'tention to what they say. You don't have your father and mother for always, you know, Herbert."

Herbert's mood at once chimed with this unprecedented filial melancholy. "No, you don't, Henry. That's what I often think about, myself. No, sir, a fellow doesn't have his father and mother to advise him our whole life, and you ought to do a good deal what they say while they're still alive."

"That's what I say," Henry agreed gloomily; and then, without any alteration of his tone or of the dejected thoughtfulness of his attitude, he changed the subject in a way that painfully startled his companion. "Have you seen Wallie Torbin today, Herbert?"

"What?"

"Have you seen Wallie Torbin today?"

Herbert swallowed. "Why, what makes—what makes you ask me that, Henry?" he asked.

(To Be Continued)

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