

The ORIOLE

by Booth Tarkington
Illustrations by Irwin Myers

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," Julia's tone was cold, and she drew herself up haughtily, though the gesture was ineffective, so far as Noble was concerned, in the darkness of the quivering interior. The quivering stopped just then, however, as the taxicab halted before her house.

"What I meant in the taxicab?" he echoed. "Oh, Julia, Julia!"

She frowned, first at the fire, then, turning her head, at Noble. "You

"Will you come in with me a moment, please?" Julia said as she got out. "There are some things I want to ask you—and I'm sure papa hasn't come home from downtown yet. There's no light in the front part of the house."

There was no light in any other part of the house, either, as they discovered after abandoning the bell for an excursion to the rear. "That's disheartening to a hungry person," Julia remarked; and then remembered that she had a key to the front door in her purse. She opened the door, and lighted a hall luster while Noble brought in her bags from the steps where the taxicab driver had left them.

"There's nobody at home at all," Julia said thoughtfully.

"No. Nobody," her sad companion agreed, shaking his head. "Nobody at all, Julia. Nobody at all." Rousing himself, he went back for the golf tools, and with a lingering gentleness set them in a corner. Then, dumbly, he turned to go.

"Wait, please," said Julia. "I want to ask you a few things—especially about what you've got 'all down in black and white' in your pocket. Will you shut the door, if you please, and go into the library and turn on the lights and wait there while I look over the house and see if I can find why it's all closed up like this."

"It's chilly. The furnace seems to be off," she said. "I'll— But instead of declaring her intentions, she enacted them; taking a match from the little white porcelain trough on the mantelpiece and striking it on the heel of her glittering shoe. Then she knelt before the grate and set the flame to excelsior beneath the kindling and coal. "You mustn't freeze," she said, with a thoughtful kindness that killed him.

"I'm Robinson Crusoe, Noble," she said, when she came back. "I suppose I might as well take off my furs, though." She did so, first unfastening the great bouquet she wore and tossing it upon a table. Noble was standing close to the table, but moved away from it hurriedly. This revulsion she failed to notice; and she went on to explain, as she dropped her cloak and stole upon a chair. "Papa's gone away for at least a week. He's taken his ulster. It doesn't make any difference what the weather is, he never wears his ulster in this town, but when he's going away for a week, or longer, he always takes it with him, except in summer."

"I suppose," said Noble huskily, "I suppose you'll go to some of your aunts or brothers or cousins or something."

"No," she said. "My trunk may come up from the station almost any time, and if I close the house they'll take it back. The servants are having a holiday, not expecting me back."

"You needn't bother about that Julia, I'll look after it."

"How?"

"I could sit on the porch till it came," he said. "I'd tell 'em you wanted 'em to leave it." He paused painfully. "I could wait out on the porch with it, to see that it was safe, until you came back tomorrow morning."

She looked full at him, and he plaintively endured the examination.

"Noble!" She had undoubtedly a moment's shame that any creature should come to such a pass for her sake. "What lovely nonsense!" she said; and sat upon a stool before the crackling fire. "Do sit down, Noble—unless your dinner will be waiting for you at home?"

"No," he murmured. "They never wait for me. Don't you want me to look after your trunk?"

"Not by sitting up all night with it on the porch," she said. "I'm going to stay here myself. I'm not going out; I don't want to see any of the family tonight."

"I thought you said you were hungry."

"I am; but there's enough in the pantry. I looked."

"Well, if you don't want to see any of 'em," he suggested, "and they know your father's away and think the house is empty, they're liable to notice the lights and come in—and then you'd have to see 'em!"

"No; you can't see the lights of this room from the street, and I lit the lamp at the other end of the hall. The light near the front door," Julia added, "I put out."

"You did?"

"I can't see any of 'em to-night," she said resolutely. "Besides, I want to find out what you meant in the taxicab before I do anything else."



Julia's Eyes Grew Dangerous—"The Little Fiends!"

seem to feel quite reproachful about something," she observed.

"No, I don't. I don't feel reproachful, Julia. I don't know what I feel, but I don't feel reproachful."

She smiled faintly. "Don't you? Well, there's something perhaps you do feel, and that's hungry. Will you stay to dinner with me—if I go and get it?"

"What?"

"You can have dinner with me—if you want to?—and stay till ten o'clock—if you want to? Wait!" she said, and jumped up and ran out of the room.

She came back and called softly to him from the doorway, half an hour later; and he followed her to the dining-room. "It isn't much of a dinner, Noble," she said a little tremulously; being for once (though strictly as a cook) genuinely apologetic—but the scrambled eggs, cold lamb, salad and coffee were quite as "much of a dinner" as Noble wanted. To him everything on the table was hallowed, yet shredded through and through with an excruciating melancholy.

"Now we'll talk!" said Julia, when she had brought him back to the fire again, and they were seated before it. "Don't you want to smoke?" He shook his head dismally, having no heart for what she proposed. "Well, then," she said briskly, but a little ruefully, "let's get to the bottom of things. Just what did you mean you had 'in black and white' in your pocket?"

Slowly Noble drew forth the historic copy of the North End Daily Oriole; and with face averted, placed it in her extended hand.

"What in the world!" she exclaimed, unfolding it; and then as its title and statement of ownership came into view. "Oh, yes! I see! Aunt Carrie wrote me that Uncle Joseph had given Herbert a printing press. I suppose Herbert's the editor?"

"And that Rooter boy," Noble said sadly. "I think maybe your little niece, Florence, has something to do with it, too."

"Something to do with it?" She usually has all to do with anything she gets hold of! But what's it got to do with me?"

"You'll see!" he prophesied accurately.

She began to read, laughing at some of the items as she went along; then she suddenly became rigid, holding the small journal before her in a transfixed hand.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh, oh!"

"That's—that's what—I meant," Noble explained.

Julia's eyes grew dangerous. "The little fiends!" she cried. "Oh, really, this is a long-suffering family, but it's time these outrages were stopped!"

"She jumped up. 'Isn't it frightful?'" she demanded of Noble.

"Yes, it is," he said, with a dismal fervor. "Nobody knows that better than I do, Julia!"

"I mean this!" she cried, extending the Oriole toward him with a fine sweep of gesture. "I mean this dreadful story about poor Mr. Crum!"

"But it's true, though," he said.

"That's what hurts me, Julia!"

"Noble Dill!"

"Julia!"

"Do you dare to say you believed it?"

He sprang up. "It isn't true?"

"Not one word of it! I told you Mr. Crum is only twenty-six. He's not been out of college more than

three or four years, and it's the most terrible slander to say he's ever been married at all!"

Noble dropped back into his chair of misery. "I thought you meant it wasn't true."

"I've just told you there isn't one word of it—"

"But you're engaged—to him," Noble gulped. "You're engaged to him, Julia!"

She appeared not to hear him. "I suppose it can be lived down," she said. "To think of Uncle Joseph putting such a thing into the hands of those awful children!"

"But, Julia, you are engaged—"

"Noble!" she said sharply.

"Well, you are engaged—"

Julia drew herself up. "Different people mean different things by that word," she said with severity, like an annoyed instructor. "There are any number of shades of meaning to words; and if I used the word you mention in writing home to the family, I may have used a certain shade and they may have thought I intended another."

"But, Julia—"

"Mr. Crum is a charming young man," she continued, with the same primness. "I liked him very much. I liked him very much indeed. I liked him very, very much. I liked him very—"

"I understand," he interrupted. "Don't say it any more, Julia."

"No; you don't understand. At first I liked him very much—in fact I still do, of course—I'm sure he's one of the best and most attractive young men in the world. I think he's a man any girl ought to be happy with, if he were only to be considered by himself. I don't deny that I liked him very much indeed, and I don't deny that for several days after he—after he proposed to me—I don't deny I thought something serious might possibly come of it. But at that time, Noble, I hadn't—hadn't really thought of what it meant to give up living here at home, with all the family and everything—and friends—friends like you, Noble. I hadn't thought what it would mean to me to give all this up. And besides, there was something very important. At the time I wrote that letter mentioning poor Mr. Crum to the family, Noble, I hadn't—I hadn't—"

She paused, in some distress. "I hadn't—"

"You hadn't what?" he cried.

"I hadn't met his mother!"

Noble leaped to his feet. "Julia! You aren't—you aren't engaged?"

"I am not," she answered decisively.

"If I ever was, in the slightest, I certainly am not now."

Poor Noble was transfixed. He struggled; making half-formed gestures, speaking half-made words.

"Julia—Julia—"

He choked. "Julia, promise me something? Julia—promise to promise me something."

"I will," she said quickly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Give me your word," he said, still radiantly struggling. "Give me your word—your word and sacred promise, Julia—you'll never be engaged to anybody at all!"

At six minutes after four o'clock of the second afternoon following Julia's return, Noble Dill closed his own gate behind him as he set forth upon the four-minute walk that would bring him to Julia's. He wore a bit of indoor geranium in the buttonhole of his new light overcoat.

Passing the foot of an alley which debouched upon the street, he was aware of a commotion, of missiles hurled and voices clashed.

Casting a glance that way, Noble could see but one person; a boy of thirteen or fourteen who looked through a crack in a board fence, steadfastly keeping an eye to this aperture, and as continuously calling through it, holding his head to one level for this purpose, but at the same time dancing—and dancing tauntingly, it was conveyed—with the other parts of his body. His voice was now sweet, now piercing, and again far too dulcet with the overkindness of burlesque; and if, as it seemed, he was unburdening his spleen, his spleen was a powerful one, and gorged. He appeared to be in a torment of tormenting; and his success was proved by the pounding of bricks, and rocks of size, upon the other side of the fence.

"Oh, dolling!" he wailed, his tone poisonously amorous. "Oh, dolling Henery! Oh's dot de mos' booful eyes in a dray bid nasty world, Henery! Oh, has I dot booful eyes, dolling Pattywatty? Yes, I has! I has dot pretty eyes!" His voice rose to an unbearably piercing climax. "Oh, what prettiest eyes I dot! Me and Herb'e Atwater! Oh, my booful eyes! Oh, my booful—"

But even as he reached this apex, the head, shoulders and arms of Herbert Atwater rose momentarily above the fence across the alley, behind the tormentor. Herbert's expression was implacably resentful, and so was the gesture with which he hurled an object at the comedian pre-occupied with the opposite fence. This object upon reaching its goal, as it did with more a splash than a thud, was revealed as a tomato, presumably in a useless state. The taunter screamed in astonishment, and after looking vainly for an assailant, began necessarily to remove his collar, as Noble went on his way.

How blindly we walk our ways! As Noble flourished down the street there appeared a wan face at a prison window and the large eyes looked out upon him wistfully. But Noble went on, as unwitting that he had to do with this prison as he was that he had to do with Master Torbin's tomato.



The Taunter Screamed in Astonishment.

The face at the window was not like Charlotte Corday's, nor was the window barred, though the prisoner knew so since in wondering if she did not suggest that famous picture. For all purposes, except during school hours, the room was certainly a cell; and the term of imprisonment was set at three days. Florence had finally been obliged to face questions awaiting her; and it would have been better for her had she used less imagination in answering them.

Yet she was not wholly depressed as her eyes followed the disappearing figure of Noble Dill from over the fence of the yard whence she had ventured for a better view of Noble, thereby risking a heavier sentence.

Noble passed from her sight, but nevertheless continued his radiant progress down Julia's street. Life stretched before him, serene, ineffably fragrant, unending. He saw it as a flower-strewn sequence of calls on Julia, walks with Julia, talks with Julia by the library fire. Old Mr. Atwater was to be away four days longer, and Julia, that great-hearted bride-not-to-be had given him her promise and sacred word.

Blushing, indeed divinely, she had promised him, upon her sacred word, never, so long as she lived, to be engaged to anybody at all.

(THE END.)

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