

OLIVER OCTOBER

By George Barr McCutcheon

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—Oliver October Baxter, Jr., of a fine old family, is the son of a prominent social and spiritual life of the town of Rumley. His father was proprietor of the hardware store. The night that Oliver October was born a gypsy queen reads his father's fortune and tells him what a wonderful future his son has before him, but after the reading, the gypsy becomes angry and leaves the house in a rage after telling Mr. Baxter that his son will never reach the age of thirty, that he will be hanged for a crime of which he is not guilty.

CHAPTER II—Ten years elapse and Oliver's father is the owner of a business block in the town. Mrs. Baxter died when Oliver was nearing seven. Josephine Sage, wife of the minister, causes a sensation when she leaves Rumley to go on the stage. She becomes a "star" and later goes to London, where she scores a hit. Her daughter Jane and young Oliver become greatly attached to one another. After finishing college, young Oliver accepts a position in Chicago with an engineering company. He goes to China on an important mission for his firm. Upon his return he enlists in the Canadian army.

CHAPTER III—The war is over. Oliver returns to Chicago and tries to find an employer that his services are no longer required. He returns home. He hears Jane is in love with Doctor Lansing. Jane and Oliver meet again. Oliver is reprimanded by his father for not getting another position. Oliver threatens to leave home.

CHAPTER IV—Despite Mr. Baxter's pleading to Oliver to remain in Rumley, Oliver decides to accept a position in Chicago. Mr. Baxter accompanies Oliver through a swamp on the way to the Sage home. On the way they quarrel over Oliver's refusal to stay in Rumley. Mr. Sage tells Oliver his father fears the thing the gypsy predicted and wants his son to stay home, where he can watch over him. Oliver decides not to leave him. Mr. Baxter fails to return home and is believed by some to have perished in the swamp. Oliver tells the authorities of the quarrel with his father, but they do not accuse him of having anything to do with his father's disappearance. Oliver takes charge of his father's business. Three months remain of the year allotted to Oliver by the gypsy queen. Uncle Horace Gooch announces himself as a candidate for state senator. Friends start a boom for young Oliver as candidate for state senator against old man Gooch. Jane forces Oliver to enter the race against his Shylock uncle.

CHAPTER V—Oliver employs ditch diggers to drain part of the swamp where his father is supposed to have disappeared. Mr. Gooch's campaign managers urge him to withdraw from the race for senator, as they realize that Oliver is the most popular candidate. Mr. Gooch refuses to quit. Reverend Sage is happy when his actress-wife cables him that she is sailing for home. Mr. Sage and his daughter go to New York to meet her. Mr. Gooch, convinced he would lose the election to Oliver, plans to try and intimidate him by demanding a thorough investigation into the disappearance of Oliver's father.

CHAPTER VI—Hundreds of persons are at the depot in Rumley to greet Mrs. Josephine Sage after an absence of 23 years. Jane notices Oliver is not in the throng at the station and is told by Sammy Parr that something of a political nature must have kept him away. Oliver goes to the Sage home.

CHAPTER VII—The sheriff unwillingly serves papers on Oliver after the prosecutor refused to lay the matter of Mr. Baxter's disappearance before the grand jury as requested by old man Gooch, but accedes to his demand for an unofficial investigation. A few hours in the town talk of tar and feathers for Mr. Gooch. The detectives start digging in the swamp for Mr. Baxter's body.

It was the fourth week in September when the detectives arrived in Rumley. The city editor of the Dispatch interviewed Detective Malone, the chief operative in charge of what the newspaper man was jealously inclined to classify as the "expedition."

"Where do you intend to begin excavating, Mr. Malone?" inquired the editor, notebook in hand.

Mr. Malone was very frank about it. "In China," said he. "We're going to work from the bottom up. If you'll go out to the swamp tomorrow and put your ear to the ground you'll hear men's voices but you won't understand a word they say. They'll be speakin' Chinese."

The editor eyed him in a cold, inimical manner. "Umph!" he grunted, flogging his notebook shut. "It's a good thing you've got your Chinese army, because you won't be able to get anybody to work for you in this town."

"I guess that's up to the authorities," said the editor coolly. "I'm here to boss the job, that's all."

That afternoon the sheriff and the prosecuting attorney stopped electioneering long enough to pay a hasty visit to Oliver.

Half an hour later they left. Detective Malone and his partner, who had joined the county officials at the Baxter house, remained behind. They were smoking Oliver's cigars.

"How long do you figure it will take you, Mr. Malone, to finish up the job?" inquired the young man.

Malone squinted at the tree-tops. "Our instructions are to work slowly and surely it may take six or eight weeks."

"In other words, you are not expected to be through before election day."

"Unless we find what we are after before that time, Mr. Baxter," said the other. "It's a big job, as you can see for yourself. Like looking for a needle in a haystack, eh, Charlie?"

His partner nodded his head in silent assent.

swamp. He has done odd jobs for us since I can remember. He also does most of the drinking for the estate," he concluded dryly.

"A souse, eh?"

"I've never known him to be completely sober—and I've never heard of him being completely drunk."

"By the way, have you ever seen me before today?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Well," said Malone, with a twinkle in his eye. "I've been hanging around this burg since last Monday—five days in all. I'm the fellow that sold Mrs. Grimes the beautiful illustrated set of Jane Austin's works day before yesterday. I also sold an unexpurgated set of the Arabian Nights to Mr. Samuel Parr. He tells me your father carried a \$15,000 life policy. I tried to sell a set of Dickens to Rev. Mr. Sage, and succeeded in having a long talk with his daughter. I've had dealings with Mr. Sikes and Mr. Link, Banker Lansing, John Phillips and a number of other citizens, male and female." He laughed quietly. "Of course, the books will never be delivered, Mr. Baxter. Shall we stroll down to the swamp, Mr. Baxter, or would you rather wait a day or two? We're in no hurry, you see."

"This is obvious," said Oliver, curtly. "I must notify you, Mr. Malone, that if you or any of your workmen slip into one of those pits of mire out there and never come up again, I am not to be held accountable."

"Right-o!" said Malone cheerily. They were well around the corner of the house on their way to the swamp road before Oliver spoke again.

"You are at liberty to go as far out as you please, Mr. Malone."

"I shall," said Malone crisply. "I am an old hand at this business. I don't believe such things exist as a bottomless pit. Now, just where was it that you and your father parted company that night? As I understand it, you and he sat for some time on that log there. It was a clear night and the road was very dusty. There had been no rain in over three weeks. Am I right?"

Oliver stared at him in amazement. The other detective had turned down the slope and was striding off toward the nearest ditch.

"You seem to be pretty well posted," said Oliver, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, I am an inquisitive sort of cuss," drawled Malone. "And I'm not what you'd call an idle person."

"Who told you we were sitting on that log. We did sit there for ten or fifteen minutes. That was before we began to quarrel. Then we got up and walked on a little farther down the road. We stood there arguing for nearly half an hour. But who told you we sat on that log?"

"If you don't mind, I'll not answer that question," said Malone.

"You asked me a while ago if I had seen Pete Hines that night. Was it Peter Hines?"

Malone hesitated. "Well, it was Pete Hines who is supposed to have seen you, Mr. Baxter, but it was not he who told me about it."

CHAPTER VIII

A Blow for Sammy

MALONE changed the subject abruptly. "That's a great fish story they tell about the gypsy prophesying you'd be hung before you were thirty."

"If you will excuse me, Mr. Malone, I must be getting back to the house. It's nearly seven o'clock, and I am expecting people to dine with me," said Oliver a little coldly.

"I'm sorry I've detained you," said the detective apologetically. "I'll stroll back with you, if you don't mind."

"Where is your partner?" inquired Oliver, looking out over the swamp.

"Charlie? Oh, he'll be along directly. He is seeing about how long it would take a man to walk out to the edge of the mire and back," said Malone coolly.

Oliver looked at him sharply. "So that's the idea, eh?" he remarked, after a moment.

"We intend to conduct this investigation in an open and above-board manner, Mr. Baxter."

"And I shall be open and above board with you, Mr. Malone," said Oliver, a trace of irony in his voice. "I hope, therefore, that you won't take it amiss if I suggest that the sensible thing for your man to do would be to make his calculations at night, when progress would naturally be a great deal slower and infinitely more hazardous."

"I've taken that into account," announced the detective, looking straight ahead. "I was about to say that it's going to take a good deal of tight squeezing, Mr. Baxter, to get you indicted, tried and executed inside of the next thirty days. The time is pretty short, eh?" He laughed jovially.

Oliver turned on him. "I'll knock your d-d head off, Malone, if you make any more cracks like that. Remember that, will you?" he cried hotly.

Malone was genuinely surprised. He went very red in the face.

"Yes," he said thickly. "I'll be sure to remember it."

Oliver apologized to Malone as they were on the point of separating in front of the house. They had traversed the hundred yards or more in silence.

"I'm sorry I spoke to you as I did, Mr. Malone. I hope you overlook it."

Malone held out his hand. "I've been spoken to a good bit rougher than that in my time, Mr. Baxter, and never turned a hair," he said good-naturedly. "I don't blame you for calling me down. I guess I was fresh. But I assure you I didn't mean to be."

A little later on Oliver sat on his front porch, waiting for his guests to arrive. Mrs. Grimes, in her snug-fitting black silk dress, rocked impatiently nearby. The guests were late.

"It's Josephine Sage," she observed crossly, breaking a long silence. "She's the one that's making 'em late."

He looked at his watch. "It's only 7:30, Aunt Serepta. I've been losing my temper again," he said gloomily. "Probably made an enemy of that detective Malone."

"What difference does that make? He's not a voter in this county," said the old lady composedly. "Here they

come. Goodness! The way that Parr boy drives! He ought to be locked up for—"

But Oliver was at the bottom of the steps waiting for the automobile. It swung around the curve in the drive and came to an unbelievably gentle stop.

"The best trained automobile in America," said Sammy, with his customary modesty. "Kindness is what does it."

"So sorry to be late," said Mrs. Sage, as Oliver ceremoniously handed her out of the car.

"What is that I hear, Oliver?" said the minister as he stepped out of the car. Jane and Mrs. Sammy had preceded him. "Is it true the detectives are here and expect to start that ridiculous search tomorrow?"

"They're here, all right," replied Oliver. "One of them tried to sell you a set of Dickens the other day."

"What!" cried Jane, gripping Oliver's arm. "What, that man a detective?" She was startled.

"No less a person than Mr. Sherlock Hawkshaw Malone, the renowned sleuth," said Oliver, smiling.

"At any rate," said Mr. Sage complacently, "he did not succeed in selling us a set of Dickens."

Jane started to say something, but, instead, abruptly turned away and joined the other women on the porch. A queer little chill of misgiving stole over her.

"Hey, Oliver!" called out Sammy from down the drive where he was parking the car. "Come here a minute, will you? Say," he went on, lowering his voice as Oliver came up. "I've just picked up something rich. Fellow came in day before yesterday and showed me a volume of the 'Arabian Nights,' absolutely unexpurgated—"

"I know. And you fell for it, didn't you?"

"Sh! Not so loud. My wife doesn't know a thing about it. But say, who told you about it?"

Then Oliver told him. Sammy leaned against the mudguard and swore softly.

"Say, I wish I could remember what I said to the gyp about—about your father. Lord, he had me talking a blue streak. Darn my folk eyes! You'd think I'd have sense enough to— Oh well, go ahead and kick me, Ollie, right here. Just as hard as you like."

"Come on. They're waiting for us. You needn't worry, old boy."

Sammy and Oliver entered the sitting room. Mrs. Sage was standing almost directly under the chandelier, talking to dumpy Mrs. Grimes, who nevertheless bravely stood her ground and faced comparison with all the hardihood of the righteous.

Mr. Sage, with a distinctly bewildered and somewhat embarrassed expression, keeping company with the proud and doting smile that seemed to be stamped upon his lean visage, stood across the room with his daughter and Mrs. Sammy.

"Do you mean to tell me, Oliver, that those blighters intend to begin digging up your place tomorrow?" Josephine asked incredulously.

Oliver laughed. "I think we'll all rather enjoy the excitement, Aunt Josephine," he said. "I suppose they'll begin prying up the kitchen floor tomorrow, or digging trenches in the cellar, or tearing up the flowerbeds."

She looked at him narrowly. "What under rot! Do they expect to find your father buried in the cellar, or under the kitchen door?"

"They don't expect to find him at all," replied Oliver, with unintentional shortness.

He glanced over his shoulder at Jane. Their eyes met and their gaze held for some seconds. He detected the clouded, troubled look in hers and was suddenly conscious of what must have seemed to her a serious intensity in his own. He knew that he was in love—that he always had been in love with her. He compressed his lips and fought against the strange, mad impulse to shout that he was in love with her, that she was his—all his—and that no man should take her way from him.

And she? She was thinking of that dry, hot night when he came to see her, after leaving his father, out of breath, his shoes covered with fresh black mud. There had been no rain for weeks. The roads were thick with dust. And Lansing, too, had noticed that his shoes were muddy. He had spoken to her about them, he had wondered where Oliver had been to get into mud up to his shoe tops! And she, herself, had never ceased to wonder.

Oliver was strangely restless during the dinner, and immediately after the company rose from the table at its conclusion he asked Jane to come with him for a little stroll in the open air.

"I want to speak to you about something," he urged. "Better throw something over your shoulders. The night air—"

"Ought you to go off and leave the others, Oliver?" she began, a queer little catch, as of alarm, in her voice. "Muriel and Sammy—"

"Come along," he pleaded. "They won't mind. I must see you alone for a few minutes, Jane."

"I will get my wrap," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "It may be chilly outside."

"Why, you're shivering now, Janie," he whispered anxiously as he threw her wrap over her shoulders. "Are you cold?"

She did not reply. He followed her out on the porch and down the steps. No word passed between them until they had turned the bend in the drive and were outside the radius of light shed from the windows. He was the first to speak.

"See here, Jane," he blurted out. "I'm—I'm terribly troubled and upset." That was as far as he got, speech seemed to fail him.

She laid her hand on his arm. "Is it about—about the detective, Oliver?" she asked tremulously.

"No," he answered, almost roughly. "It's about you, Jane. You've just got to answer me. Are you going to be married?"

"Yes," she said, her voice so low he could scarcely hear the monosyllable.

They walked in silence for twenty paces or more, turning down the path that led to the swamp road.

"I—I was afraid so," he muttered. Then fiercely: "Who are you going to marry?"

She sighed. "I am going to marry the first man who asks me," she replied and, having cast the die, was instantly mistress of herself. "Have you any objections?" she asked, almost mockingly.

If he heard the question he paid no heed to it. She felt the muscles of his strong forearm grow taut, and she heard the quick intake of his breath. She waited. She began to hum a vagrant air. It seemed an age to her before he spoke.

"Jane," he said gently and steadily. "If you were a man in my place—I mean in my predicament—would you go so far as to ask the girl you love better than anything else in the world to marry you?"

"There couldn't be any harm in asking her. She could refuse you, you know."

"There's the gypsy's prophecy," he murmured thickly. "It—it may come true, Jane."

"It—it cannot come true," she said. "It cannot, Oliver."

"Still, it is something to be considered," he said heavily and judicially. His hand closed over hers and gripped tightly. "If you were in my place would you hesitate about inviting her to—to become a widow?"

"Oh, I love you, Oliver, when your voice sounds as if it had a laugh in it," she whispered.

"In a month I will be thirty," he went on, his heart as light as air. "I might ask her to give me a thirty-day option, or something like that."

"You goose!"

He pressed her arm to his side, and was serious when he spoke again, after a moment's pause.

"I have never asked a girl to marry me, Jane. Never in all my life. Do you know why?"

She buried her face against his shoulder. A vast, overwhelming thrill raced through him. His arms went about her, and drew her close.

"I never realized it, Jane—I never even thought of it till just a little while ago—but now I know that I have always loved you."

Her arm stole up about his neck, she raised her chin.

"I began calling myself your wife, Oliver, when I was a very little girl—when we first began playing house together, and you were my husband and the dolls were our children."

He kissed her rapturously. "Oh, my God!" he burst out. "You'll never know how miserable I have been these last few weeks—how horribly jealous I've been."

She stroked his cheek—possessively. "I haven't been very happy myself," she sighed. "I—I wasn't quite sure you would ever, ever ask me to be your wife."

"That reminds me," he cried boyishly. "Will you marry me, Miss Sage?"

"Of course I will. Didn't I say I would marry the first—what was that?"

As she uttered the exclamation under her breath, she drew away from him quickly, looking over her shoulder at the thick, shadowy underbrush.

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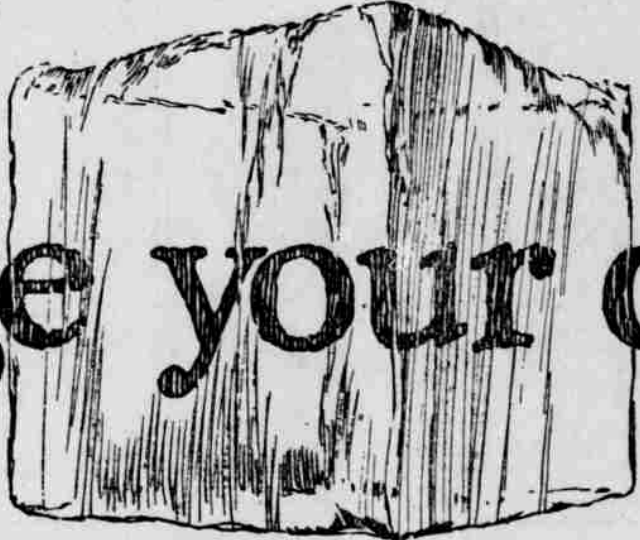
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