

OLIVER OCTOBER

By George Barr McCutcheon

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—Oliver October Baxter, Jr., was born on a vile October day. His parents were prominent in the commercial, 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 is told by his employers 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 last 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. He is overjoyed 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 gathers 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 hotheads in the town talk of tar and feathers for Mr. Gooch. The detectives start digging in the swamp for Mr. Baxter's body.

CHAPTER VIII—Oliver threatens to strike Malone if he ever insinuates again that he had anything to do with the disappearance of his father. At a recent election given at Oliver's home Oliver tells Jane that he loves her. She promises to marry him. What she can't tell them they hear mysterious footsteps. Oliver tells Jane Peter Hines boarded up his cabin in the swamp and had skipped town. They see a light in the cabin. Jane's engagement to Oliver is announced at the reception.

CHAPTER IX—Oliver May Withdraw.

The ensuing three weeks were busy ones for Oliver. He was off "electioneering" by day and out speechmaking by night in district schoolhouses, in town halls and at mass meetings held at the county seat. The opposition press, stirred to action by the harassed Mr. Gooch, printed frequent reports of their search for old Oliver Baxter. They made sensation out of two or three minor discoveries—such as the finding of an old straw hat in one of the pools and the unearthing of a stout spade handle at the edge of the swamp not far from where the old man and his son had parted company.

Malone and his gang of Italian laborers were conducting the quest leisurely. The chief operative was bored—admitted it to Oliver and Mrs. Grimes and Lizzie Meggs and to the high heavens besides.

Mid-afternoon of a windy day in October—it was the nineteenth, to be exact—he sat in the shelter of the kitchen wing, his chair propped against the wall, reading a book. He yawned frequently and seemed to be having great difficulty in keeping his pipe going. From time to time he dozed.

His partner, Charlie What's-his-name, was out in the swamp directing the efforts of eight or ten men who were sounding the scattered "mud-holes" with long poles or digging at random in sections where the earth was sufficiently solid to bear the weight of man or beast. These men were now far out, beyond the wire fence, within a hundred yards or so of the pond.

Mr. Malone's rest was disturbed shortly before three o'clock by the arrival of Oliver October. The two had become quite good friends.

"Say, Malone, would you mind calling off those gravediggers of yours for half an hour or so? I am expecting a committee here at three o'clock."

"Sure," said Malone. He got up slowly. "Hey!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Come out o' that! Knock off! It's four o'clock. In New York, he added in an aside to Oliver. "Mr. Baxter, it's all d—d foolishness digging up your place like this."

"Mrs. Grimes says the house is likely to fall down on our heads any minute," said Oliver. "She notified

me this noon that our hired girl, Lizzie Meggs, has decided to give up her place unless your men fill up some of the graves they've dug in my cellar."

"I'll have 'em put some planks over those holes," said the detective. "That reminds me. Now that they've stopped work under the porch, you might call off your watchdog. Give the old boy a little much-needed rest."

Oliver walked to the corner. Joseph Sikes was sitting on the back steps, his coat collar turned up about his throat, his sagged back bent almost double, his chin resting on the mitted hands that gripped the head of his cane, his wrinkled face screwed up into a dogged scowl.

"Better step into the kitchen, Uncle Joe, and ask Lizzie for a cup of coffee. Work's over for today."

"The h—! it is," growled Mr. Sikes, without changing his position. "Let him alone," said Malone good-naturedly. "He's hatching out some new trouble for me. As for Fink, he's down there in the swamp from morning till night, supervising the whole blamed job."

"They are the best friends I've got in the world, Malone," said Oliver earnestly.

"Well, we'll clear out so's you can have your committee meeting in peace," said the detective. "I have put it up to the county headquarters, Malone," said Oliver in an emotionless tone, "as to whether I should stay in the race or withdraw."

"What do you mean, withdraw?" asked the detective sharply. "Well, it's only fair to give them a chance to put someone else on the ticket in my place if they feel—"

"Come off! You've got old Gooch licked to a standstill, so what the devil's got into you? We're not going to find your father's body, my boy."

"How do you know you are not going to find it?" was Oliver's surprising question. Malone started. "What has caused you to change your tone like this, Baxter?"

"It's getting on my nerves, Malone—I don't mind saying so," said the younger man, frowning. "I get you," said Malone, sympathetically. "It does give a fellow the shivers. But now about this getting off the ticket. Don't you do anything of the sort, Baxter?"

"Malone, I can feel it in the air that a great many people believe I know what became of my father."

Mr. Sikes, who had shuffled around the corner, overheard the remark. He fairly barked: "It don't make a particle of difference what they believe, provided nobody is able to find the corpus delicti. They've got to dig up your father's corpse before—What in thunder are you laughing at, sir?"

Malone, to whom this question was addressed in Mr. Sikes' most aggressive manner, put his hand to his mouth and succeeded in replying with as straight a face as possible: "I've been reading an awfully funny book, Mr. Sikes. It's about detectives."

There is no telling what Mr. Sikes would have said to Mr. Malone about detectives in general if the delegation from headquarters had not arrived at minute or two later.

CHAPTER X

The Corpus Delicti.

THE automobile came swinging up the drive on the tail of Mr. Malone's defensive explanation. Oliver hurried to greet the occupants of the car. Mr. Sikes hobbled along in his wake. Malone refilled his pipe as he strode across the stable yard. In the lee of the barn he scorching his fingers. His gaze was fixed on the swamp. Far out in the "danger zone" a group of men were compactly grouped. A solitary figure was running toward the Baxter house, while from the main highway to the right the slough a dozen or more scattered people were picking their way gingerly across the intervening space. The detective dropped the charred match and started briskly down to meet the runner. He was no longer bored. He was an alert, vital, keen-sensed hunter of men.

Mrs. Grimes stood on the front porch as the three committeemen entered the house. Mr. Sikes ambled up as they disappeared through the door. He stopped short in the gravel walk just below where Mrs. Grimes was standing. He felt that it was necessary to lower his voice.

"We've only six more days to go, Serepty," he said. "This is the nineteenth."

"Yes. He will be thirty on the twenty-fifth. I hope you'll be satisfied, Joe Sikes."

He pondered gloomily. "Setting back there on the kitchen steps I got to thinkin' about the last time I was up here before old Ollie disappeared. I wonder if you remember what he said to me and Silas, setting right here on this porch."

"I remember the poor old thing saying he couldn't go to sleep nights because he was afraid a mob would come up to the house and take Oliver October and hang him for something he'd never done."

"I guess maybe that was it. And another thing: Didn't he say he would not blame Oliver if he up and beat his brains out for letting that gypsy queen lift the veil and cause all this worry?"

"What are you trying to get at, Joe Sikes?"

"Oh—nothin' particular. I just thought I'd warn you not to say anything about our talk that night, specially what he said about Oliver, beatin' his brains out. I mean," he added sternly, "that you and me and Silas never heard him say anything like that—then or any other time."

"I'm just giving you a few instructions, Serepty, in case anything does happen. You're so darned good and conscientious, as the saying is, that I've worried myself sick over you. I mean about swearing to a lie."

"Come in and have a cup of coffee, Joe," said she.

She came down from the porch and together they started for the rear of the house.

"Look out yonder, Joe—in the swamp," she cried suddenly, pointing through the fringe of trees. "There's a crowd—"

"Serepty!" he moaned. "They—they have found something out yonder. I feel it in my bones. The corpus delicti. I guess I won't have any coffee. I'll just mosey out there and see what's happened."

"Wait a minute. Isn't that Silas Link coming across the swamp?" They stood and waited. In due time Silas panted his way up the incline and came shuffling toward them. Mr. Sikes stalked forward, followed by Mrs. Grimes.

"Well!" demanded the former. "They—fished—up—a—carcass," puffed Mr. Link.

Absolute silence—except for the painful wheezing of the last speaker. "Ollie's?" asked Mr. Sikes at last. "No telling. Unrecognizable."

"It must have had clothes on," put in Mrs. Grimes stoutly. "Wouldn't you know Ollie Baxter's clothes if you—"

"Hasn't got any clothes on."

"No clothes on?" demanded Mr. Sikes. "Then it can't be Ollie. He had a new suit on."

Mr. Link hesitated. "That detective says the chances are that whoever did the killing stripped the body and burnt the clothes," he said slowly, wearily.

A weighty silence then before. Mr. Link's listeners seemed turned to stone. Finally Mr. Sikes moistened his stiff lips.

"What do you mean, Silas, by—by killing?"

"If you feel sort of squeamish, Serepty," began Mr. Link, considerately, "maybe you'd better—"

"I'm not squeamish," retorted the redoubtable little woman. "Go on."

"The top of the skull is smashed in—split wide open," announced the newswearer, in a hushed, sepulchral voice. Then, apparently eager to get it over with, he hurried on: "Couldn't have died a natural death. Couldn't have committed suicide. Somebody hit him on the head with a heavy instrument. Most likely an ax or hatchet. Buried six or eight feet deep in a mudhole. They pulled up a hand first with one of them poles with a hook on it. Then they set to work scooping out the hole with shovels. Wasn't long before they got down where they could—"

"Don't tell any more—don't tell any more!" quaked Mrs. Grimes.

"Lean on me, Serepty," said Mr. Sikes, who, if anything, was weaker than she.

"They sent for the police and for my men," went on Mr. Link. "And they're telephoning for the sheriff and coroner and everybody else. Look at the automobiles rushing down that way—and people running on foot—and—oh, Lord, Joe! If it should turn out to be Ollie it will—it will look mighty bad for Oliver October!"

The news spread like wildfire. Before nightfall everyone in Rumley knew that the body of Oliver Baxter had been found and that he had been foully murdered.

With darkness came the inevitable gathering of excited, bewildered people in the downtown streets. Groups of men conversing in lowered, guttural voices, discussing the astounding and unexpected discovery. Women and children hung about the edges of these groups or hurried from one to the other, drinking in the varied comments and opinions. They listened to men putting two and two together; they heard them connect seemingly unimportant details and weld them into convincing facts—for on all sides men were recalling once vague impressions and giving them the value of convictions.

They were talking of Oliver October's muddy shoes, of his strange behavior on the Lansing porch, of his unwillingness to allow the ditchers to go beyond a certain point in the swamp, of the rumor that Peter Hines had heard the violent quarrel between father and son, of the notebook found in the grass on the slope leading down into the slough, of the broken spade handle (they scowled with the thought of a blow forcible enough to splinter a stout hickory handle) and of the

singular and significant fact that the heavy metal portion of the spade had never been found.

And then came the startling rumor that old man Baxter had gone to his safety deposit box in the vaults of the bank three days before his disappearance and had removed five \$1000 Liberty bonds! Rumor, pure and simple, yet accepted as fact by those who roamed the streets. A grave, unanswerable question, too, had to do with the money so lavishly spent by young Oliver—several thousand dollars in cash. Where had it come from? Simple as rolling off a log! There wasn't much doubt as to where and how Oliver got his ready cash! But to split his own father's head open with a spade, and throw him into a supposedly bottomless pit, and burn his clothes!

For now all those who thronged the streets were saying that Oliver October has murdered his father.

The street leading to the Baxter residence was alive with people—curious, silent, awestruck men and women who stared intently at the windows.

The sheriff had returned to the county seat after cautioning Oliver to keep his head and await developments.

"It looks mighty bad for you, Baxter," he said at the end of a long interview, "but there's only one thing for you to do. People don't want to believe you killed your father, and that's a big advantage. So it is up to you to stand your ground and face whatever comes. Don't talk. Keep your trap closed. I called your uncle up on the telephone just before I came here this evening. He is com-

ing over tomorrow morning to see if he can identify the body. Of course he can't. You seem to be dead sure that it isn't your father. So is Mr. Sikes and Undertaker Link. You all claim that your father was shorter by several inches and had lost several of his teeth. But your lawyer will look after all these points. Just sit tight, Baxter, and keep cool. Don't leave town. Understand?"

The company in Oliver's sitting room included the redoubtable and venerable Messrs. Sikes and Link, Judge Shortridge, Mr. and Mrs. Sage and Jane, Doctor Lansing and Mrs. Grimes. Sammy Parr was expected. He was to bring in the news of the street.

Oliver, a trifle pale, but with a stubborn frown on his brow, listened calmly to the animated conversation that went on around him. He sat beside Jane on the sofa in the corner of the room.

"I don't see how you can be so unmoved, so calm, Oliver, dear," whispered Jane in her lover's ear. "Just think what they are talking about—and as if you were not here at all!"

He stroked her hand. "I've been thinking of something else, Jane."

"Of me, I suppose, and the silly notion that you have to release me from my promise."

"I do release you, dear."

"I refuse to release you—so that's that, as mother says. I am ready and willing to have father marry us to-night, Oliver."

"We will have to wait, dear," he said rather wistfully.

(Continued next week)



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